

CARROLL O'DONOGHUE

CHRISTINE FABER  
 Author of "A Mother's Sacrifice," etc.  
 CHAPTER II.  
 A SINGULAR MEETING

In one of the loveliest spots of Ireland, where lofty mountains looked protectively down on a green valley that wound about them, and in the distance, the white line of a broken and rock-girded coast gleamed in the sun, stood one of the better class of country cottages. Its white-washed exterior, and the care and taste shown in the garden surrounding it, bespoke for its interior unusual neatness and thrift.

An English officer, sauntering with careless gait, though his face would seem to betray the existence of anxious and perplexing thought, paused as he neared the cottage, and looked admiringly on the tasteful surroundings. Thence his eyes wandered to the picturesque scene beyond—the mountains, the shore. A short distance away, on the other side of a narrow stream, stood a large dark stone building; it looked strange and isolated, and its apparent massive strength, together with its shape, would give something of the impression of a deserted castle.

With his curiosity aroused, the officer walked more briskly, and, arriving at the cottage, he found the door broadly open. Within, an attractive looking, Irish girl was spinning her back to the entrance at which stood the interested spectator, and she was singing as she worked. It was a simple ditty, but one so plaintive, and trilled out in such an exquisitely sweet voice, that the soldier feared to make a motion lest he should interrupt the strain.

When it ceased he knocked, but so timidly that the girl did not hear him. He ventured to repeat the sound; she turned shortly, without, however, pausing in her work, and bade him enter.

"Pardon my intrusion," he began, "but I wished so much to know the name of this charming spot, that I have ventured to enter."

The name of this charming spot, with an amusing mimicry of his own words, "is Drommacochol." She still continued her work, not even glancing at him, and somewhat embarrassed by her indifference, he hesitated a moment before he said:

"I want to go to Cahirciveen, but I confess to some curiosity to learn a little of this romantic-looking place before I am directed thence."

"If you will take my place at the spinning-wheel, I will bring some one to you who will answer your questions."

She stopped her work and looked at him now, but in a provokingly defiant manner, her dark eyes brimful of suppressed mischief, and her mouth curving into a half sarcastic smile.

The officer was completely non-plussed; he glanced at his hands for an instant, without knowing why he did so; they were white and dainty compared with her red, but small and shapely ones.

The Irish lass was growing every instant more tantalizing.

"Don't," she said, observing his hasty glance at his hands; "it might put them out of shape."

In sheer desperation he attempted to work the spinning-wheel as he had seen her do, but peal after peal of merry laughter greeted his awkward attempts. Her Majesty's officer was never in such a trying position—better could he have borne the fire of a dozen muskets than the taunting mirth of this provoking girl, half-mad though he suspected her to be. His face flushed, and the perspiration rolled from his forehead, yet fear of more severe ridicule prevented him from resigning the humiliating task.

"Go and tell your mistress," he said, "that I would like to see her."

"My mistress! umph!" she repeated; and what name shall I give to my mistress?" with provoking emphasis on the last word.

"Captain Dennier, of her Majesty's—Regiment," he said.

"Captain what?" with an air of amusing stupidity, as if the name was too difficult for her pronunciation. Almost irritated, he was about to repeat it, but she interrupted:

"Don't trouble yourself to say it again—I shall describe you to my mistress, and that will do."

What that description of him would be, and especially what it would be of him as he appeared in his present position, the aristocratic captain too well knew; and as his vivid imagination pictured the mirth which perhaps another provoking Irish girl would have at his expense, he was tempted to crouch to the fate that had led him to Drommacochol, and his own folly that had placed him in such a position.

"He mistakes me for the servant," muttered the girl, laughing to herself, as she hastily repaired to an upper chamber.

There, engaged in graceful needle-work, sat a young woman some years the senior of her who so hurriedly entered, but so fair in face and form that she seemed out of place amid her neat though homely surroundings.

"Oh, Nora!" burst out the newcomer, "I have the funniest sight in the world to show you—one of Queen Victoria's officers spinning our linen."

"What!" was the almost affrighted exclamation; and the young lady addressed as Nora dropped her work and stared almost agast.

"He mistook me for the servant, and he wanted to be directed somewhere, and to learn something of this beautiful spot; and he was so elegant-looking, and so courtly, that the thought just popped into my head to put him at the spinning-wheel, for a bit of revenge, you know; so I told him I'd bring my mistress to him, and she would answer all his questions. He gave me his name, Captain Dennier, of her Majesty's—Regiment. Oh, Nora! he makes the drollest sight at the wheel!"

"Now, Clare! how could you do such a thing; it was positively unkind!" and the lovely speaker looked reprovingly at the laughing girl.

"How could I do such a thing?" was the reply, in a tone that increased in spirit with every word. "I could heap confusion and shame upon every one of them who left us as we are, who took from us the hope and comfort of our lives; but the English, I hate them, and I could crush them."

She looked the personification of her ardent and bitter feeling; her slight, small form drawn to its full height, her cheeks flaming, and her dark eyes alight with all the fire of passionate emotion.

Nora rose, and putting her arm about the angry girl drew her to her.

"Hush, Clare; did not you promise Father O'Connor, only the other day, that you would strive to quiet these bursts, that you would be more Christian, more forgiving?"

"I know it," half sobbed Clare, "but I cannot help it; the very sight of that man as he stood in the doorway seemed to rouse my most bitter feelings."

"Then we shall go down immediately, and apologize to him for the indignity to which he has been subjected," said Nora, quietly.

"Never!" vehemently answered Clare, withdrawing from the arm which still clasped her; "if you will have so little spirit, Clare O'Donoghue shall not forget that she is one of the trampled and out-raged Irish."

A sigh was the only response from Nora, and flinging about her a white shawl which had dropped from her shoulders on rising from her seat, she prepared to descend to Captain Dennier. Clare dried her eyes, shook down her curls, which had been fastened in a massive twist at the back of her head, unpinned her dress, that had been gathered about her for greater convenience in her work, and followed.

The captain had ceased his awkward attempt to spin, but he remained standing by the wheel, with one hand resting upon the latter. The absence of his messenger seemed unaccountably long, and in much trepidation he watched the door by which Clare had gone for her mistress.

A rustle of a garment, and the loveliest woman he thought he had ever beheld stood before him; a woman so fair and fragile-looking that for an instant one might deem her some supernatural visitant. The white shawl draped gracefully about her was hardly whiter than her face, but the transparent hue was not that of disease, but a complexion that had never been touched by a foreign sun. Her jet-black hair twisted in heavy bands about her head and her large, black, pensive eyes rather increased the ethereal look of her countenance.

The officer, in his surprise at this unexpected vision, remained standing by the spinning-wheel, and did not recover his self-possession till the lovely new-comer, advancing to him, said in a sweet, low voice:

"Captain Dennier, I presume, one of her Majesty's officers; permit me to apologize for the prank which my mischievous companion has played upon you in requesting you to spin."

Clare had arrived in time to hear the apology, and standing on tiptoe behind Nora, who was considerably taller, so that her face, charming in its setting of short, clustering brown curls, looked over the latter's shoulder, she interposed:

"And permit me, Captain Dennier to introduce to you my mistress, Miss McCarthy, and to say that it is against my will that any apology has been made to you."

Nora's hand was over Clare's mouth, and Nora herself was blushing till her forehead and neck were scarlet.

Captain Dennier, with an effort, recovered his self-possession. Bowing low, he said with persuasive grace of manner:

"Pardon, ladies, my apparent intrusion, but the beauty of this charming spot tempted me to enter, in order to inquire about the interesting objects I saw, as well as to ask my way to Cahirciveen. I should particularly like to know about that building which stands out so picturesquely before us."

He pointed through the open window to the dark, solitary edifice which had attracted his attention before entering the cottage.

"That," answered Nora, sadly, "was once our home, but the estate becoming encumbered by debt has passed from our possession; it is now in the market to be sold."

"Yes," spoke up Clare, at the same time withdrawing from Nora so that the latter's hand might not restrain again her impulsive speech, "and tenacious, it stands a memento of that oppression which would take from the Irish even the shelter of the poorest home. We, to whom each spot of the old house

is so dear, cannot now pass its threshold."

A shade of sadness crossed the officer's face, as if some cord had been struck in his own heart which responded to the wounded and bitter feelings he had aroused in Clare. He advanced to her, saying gently:

"Let not the wrongs my country may have done your land be a reason for enmity between us as individuals. We at least may not hate each other, and I assure you on my word of honor as an officer that I admire and revere the virtues of many of your country people."

Clare retorted quickly: "And yet you are down here on her Majesty's commission, to capture and to bound to death many of those whose virtues you say you admire and revere; how consistent are your remarks!"

"Pardon me," he broke in, now warmly desirous of establishing himself in her good opinion, "and listen to me. I cannot disapprove the putting down of rebellion by my country, however much I may deplore the suffering it entails on the poor victims of foolhardy patriotism."

"Enough, sir!" answered Clare, her eyes flashing, and her lip curling with scorn; "you have suffered contamination by coming here; my brother is one of the victims of foolhardy patriotism, and for it he is now a penal convict in Australia."

She turned away, her anger giving place to a passionate burst of tears, and they could hear her sobbing as she ascended to her own apartment.

"Good heavens! what have I done?" and the captain's unfeigned distress was pitiable. "Plead for me," he said to Nora; "tell her I did not mean to wound her feelings; tell her that I crave a thousand pardons."

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The little lady came close to the musician and spoke to him, but he did not seem to hear. Then, deliberately, she took away the flowers. He glanced at her then reproachfully.

"Let them stay, please, until the end," he said wistfully.

The "Flower Lady," placed a chair beside the couch and seated herself, holding the vase in her lap. The flowers compelled him to look at her, and recalled her identity to him. He remembered she had sent them to him.

"I suppose you have heard," he told her calmly, "that I am about to die?"

"Nonsense!" scoffed the little lady. "Do you think you are fit to die?"

"Not exactly," he answered, smiling, "for it was not natural for the 'Flower Lady' to speak unkindly, 'but the question is—will I become more fit by living?'"

"Why of course," Mrs. Gray responded, confidently. "Besides there is your work. Do you suppose some one else will complete it for you?"

"Complete it for me?" he repeated, wistfully. "Do you think I am so mad as to dream that my work is what it should be? Always it rings untrue to the ideal. Music at best is a prisoned spirit of heaven forever beating her wings against the iron bars that hold her. My work—what does it matter what it is worth? Stronger mine can take up what I have laid aside, for in the world's universe of workers there are no vacancies. A man drops out, another steps into his place, and the worker is not even missed."

"Believe me, it is not so," the woman answered, with deep interest. "No worker lives who ever truly takes another's place. Personality, life itself, goes into work like yours. Can another think your thoughts, dream your dreams, and set them to music as you can?"

"I had not thought of it in that way," the musician responded wistfully. "To me it seemed that God would have put aside my work, to prepare for death."

"Oh, do not say that," the visitor entreated. "Aside from your work, life is worth fighting for as a thing most precious. I who have lived so long and have seen so many hopes and joys fade and perish, and so much of good will beneath the blight of evil—yet I do not claim that life is worth living. Not perhaps for the sake of its joys, though I know it has joys sweet and true, even as I have sorrows, but even for the sake of the evil that lives."

Grave, questioning eyes were turned upon her, while hope thrilled the "Flower Lady's" heart. Could she continue to hold his interest thus, the time of the dreaded stupor might pass.

"Yes, for the sake of the evil," she repeated, "in order to fight it. Oh, there are so few who fight it strongly, so many who falter and go down forever before it. Only a few strong ones, 'the chosen few,' out of thousands, conquer it. You, I know, are one of these. Yet you would give up your life without a struggle."

"To be strong once does not mean to be strong always," the man warned, "and surely it is good to die with your armor on, in the stress of the battle, when you have not strayed far from your Leader."

"But it is not so with you," the other accused, earnestly. "You would drop out of the battle just because you are tired."

The musician stirred uneasily.

"Dear Flower Lady," he said, gently, "in truth I am very tired, yet you ask me to struggle for life. Your flowers give me a different message. They told me that when their lives were ended, my life would end. Which shall I believe, your message of life or theirs of death?"

With swift comprehension the little woman looked down at the flowers, and saw in startled horror that one had already faded, though the other was fresh and beautiful.

"My poor flowers, they could not have given such a message," she faltered, desperately.

"They seemed to," the man replied his gaze on them once more. "You might take away the withered rose and leave me just the one now."

Slowly Mrs. Gray lifted both blossoms from the vase, fearing that in removing the withered flower she might injure the other, and gazed anxiously at that other. Suddenly a light of triumph came into her face, and she held the white rose close to him.

"Oh, friend of mine, behold there the old message, the old miracle of life. Look close. You have often helped me plant my roses. You have seen the slips placed in water and have watched the tiny fibres that later became the roots form on the stem. See how they have formed on this stalk. I must have cut it at just the right place. It means to live, many years perhaps, when it is properly planted. Is there no lesson for you here? A flower that strives to live?"

The man saw the truth of the claim.

"I, too, will strive then," he assured her, smiling, "and with all the strength that is in me. But I must remember always, though life is to be fought for as God's gift of infinite value, not the less death to be accepted thankfully—if death should be God's will."

So the stupor did not come that morning. Through the day the watchers waited in trembling hope.

TWO MELODIES

It was a beautiful and precious life that was ebbing away, quietly, serenely, despite the fierce paroxysms of pain that again and again racked the emaciated form. Though none had told him, he knew there was no hope. But somehow it did not seem to matter, for he was so weak that life with its stress of work and struggle held nothing of worth for him now. His gaze was fixed on the great Beyond, while fear and peaceful in his eyes shone the light of love and faith, the light that burning in some eyes, some faces, speaks to those who understand the message of the Sanctuary Lamp.

Presently the sufferer's sister entered the room and approached his couch, holding a great bunch of fragrant roses.

"Mrs. Gray brought them, the sweetest and loveliest in her garden," she explained.

"His feverish hand passed over the fragrant petals caressingly, and for the time he was roused from the dangerous stupor into which he had been sinking. It was feared that one might come at last from which it would be impossible to rouse him. He did not care himself, for holding so fair a vision of eternity, life to him seemed a thing of faded dreams and broken promises. Because of the innate kindness of his nature it occurred to him now that all who loved him might console his true friend who had brought the roses that he had remembered her in his last illness.

"If she comes again, soon, you might ask her if she cares to see me," he said, and fell to thinking of her tenderly.

His thoughts were no distraction to his visions of heaven, for many things of heaven had this sweet lady taught him. "The Flower Lady," he had called her from childhood, for she lived with flowers, cherishing, cultivating them, and for her loved church, others for her friends, both living and dead. So often had she laid them in the cold hands of those of her own name that now she was alone, though never lonely—her treasures were in heaven and her heart had followed there.

Close beside the dying musician the "Flower Lady's" gift continued to hold his interest. But for all their glowing beauty they spoke to him a message of death. Already, for she was coughing a little, from the heat of the room and one full blown crimson rose had dropped some of its bright petals. The sick man was sinking into unconsciousness now, but the glowing blossoms held him to a half-dreaming wakefulness. And in that state it was not strange to him that a sweet, mournful voice seemed to speak from the heart of the flowers.

"When the last of us have perished (the words sounded as if they were his own), perfect music, when our green rooms are thrown aside, withered lifeless, know that it is the time when your life, too, shall end."

It was evening when the musician came out of the stupor into which he had sunk, and his first look was at the flowers beside him. He told himself that the voice had been only a fancy of his diseased imagination. Yet he noticed that the full blown blossoms had withered now, and believing himself to be near death, he thought it was not unlikely that when the last one perished his life would end. His sister, glad she would take away the withered one and give the others fresh water. But as she lifted them a shower of petals fell to the floor and two more of the bright-hued flowers had died.

A few days later the "Flower Lady" gave his message to her. He was very weak this morning, though the morning was usually his best time. His mind was always quite clear early in the day. Later would come the stupor. If he sank into one today it was feared he would never rally again.

Could it possibly harm him to see her? questioned the "Flower Lady," anxiously.

His sister smiled sadly.

"If he notices you at all, it will be more than he has done with any one else for some time," she said, hopefully. "If you could interest him—even to startling him—you might possibly save his life."

The patient was lying on the couch when Mrs. Gray entered the room, his dreamy eyes fixed intently on some flowers, in a vase beside him. Only two were there now, and one of these was already fading, but the other that at first had only been a half-blown bud had this morning opened its white petals and disclosed its heart of gold.

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