



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIII. MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MAY 15, 1863. No. 40.

THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK.

A TALE OF CASHEL.

BY MRS. J. SADLER.

CHAPTER IX.—UNCLE HARRY HAS AN ADVENTURE.

At the Chapel-door in Cashel on the following Sunday, there was a crowd gathered, after last Mass, discussing, of course, the murder of young Mr. Esmond. There generally is a crowd after Mass, I am forced to confess, at every Church and Chapel-door, discussing all manner of topics, but on the day in question the crowd was even greater than usual, and there was no diversity in the subjects under discussion—all were chattering away for dear life on the one engrossing theme of the murder—all the more engrossing for being horrible, and, moreover, mysterious. Many were the wild and strange rumors already afloat in relation to the murder and its probable causes, for people will have causes for everything, and where there are none on hand, they will make them to order. Some would have it that Pierce had an old spite against Master Harry since one day long ago he was out following the hunt as a game-boy, and the young master said or did something to him that was rankling in his mind ever since, till he got the chance of being revenged. Others always knew, they said, that there was something very bad in that Jerry Pierce, whilst others went farther still, and said, with a sagacious wink, or a shake of the head, that there was 'a bad drop in them Pierces, altogether.' This capped the climax, the more so as it was something entirely new, for the Pierces, though poor cottiers from father to son, had always been in good repute with their neighbors, and this was the first actual blemish on their fair fame. But there are always people ready, on such occasions, 'to help the lame dog over the stile,' as they say in Ireland, which means in plain English, to speed an ill story on its way. 'When a man's down, down with him,' is the common order of things, and that in more countries than our dear Celtic Ireland. There are lame dogs in every country, and charitable people in abundance to 'help them over the stile.' But to our story.

The Dean himself had spoken for a full hour after Mass on the awful crime just committed in their midst, the disgrace of which fell, he said, on the whole community, until such time, at least, as the murderer was brought to justice. He had warned the people against aiding or assisting in concealing him from the officers of the law, saying that his crime was of the most revolting character, without one extenuating circumstance to lessen its enormity in the sight of God or man. He had paid an affectionate tribute to the virtues of the deceased gentleman, and spoke even with tears of the loss he was to the whole country both as a landlord and a magistrate. 'When young Harry Esmond,' said he, 'was on the bench, the poor man always knew he had a friend that would see justice done him; and, as a landlord, said he, 'where will you find his equal?—which of you, his tenants, ever went from his office-door with anything but a blessing on your heads? Well, he is gone—this upright magistrate—this kind, easy landlord—this honorable, noble-hearted gentleman is gone from amongst us—cut down in the pride of his manhood, in the bloom of his youth, like a young tree lightning-blasted. And alas! alas! that I should have to say it!—cut down by the hand of violence—the red hand of murder—oh horrible, most horrible it is to think of, for if people slay their friends and benefactors, what can be said in their favor? Nothing, nothing, they close the lips of their friends, and make their name odious to those who know them not. Murder is always abominable in the sight of God, and on no account justifiable. There are times, however, when people will pretend to make excuses, and soften down the horror of the crime by alleged provocation of one kind or another—but here, as you all know, there is, or can be no palliation of a deed which stands out in the calendar of crime as a black and brutal murder. As for the perpetrator of the deed, may God convert him, and bring him to a sense of his wickedness before justice overtakes him, as it surely will, even in this world, if there be a just God in heaven! And mark well my words—the man or woman that has acted or part in concealing that unhappy man from the officers of justice will be accountable for it before God and the laws of his country.'

This discourse, as may well be supposed, had made a deep impression on the minds of all, and, in fact, closed every heart against the murderer.

And so, as I said before, every tongue was loud in condemnation of the crime, and in showing cause for its commission. All at once a little old woman in a red cloak, with the hood drawn over her face, stumped out from the midst of the crowd, and stood on the open green with both hands resting on her stick, regarding the

different speakers with a strange expression of scorn on the only part of her face that was visible beneath the hood. After listening a few moments longer, she broke out into a shrill, desirous laugh that immediately drew all eyes to her strange figure, and stranger attitude, and it so happened that the clatter of voices ceased at once, and a hush fell on the so-lately noisy crowd.

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed the hag again, 'much you all know about it—just as much as the crows that are makin' game of you up yonder in the trees. Ugh, ugh, ugh! go home about your business, I'd advise you, and let the poor boy alone that never done you any harm!—Ugh, ugh, ugh! isn't it funny to hear people talkin' of what they know nothin' about? But I tell you again—and she raised her stick, and pointed it at the crowd—let Jerry Pierce alone, or ye'll not be thankful to yourselves.'

Away she hobbled, leaving her hearers bewildered and confused, for a whisper had run thro' the crowd while she spoke—'It's the fairy-woman of the hill! Christ between us and harm.'

A heavy shower of rain could not have dispersed the crowd more quickly than the sound of that woman's voice, but as they scattered in all directions through the town and the adjoining country, groups might be seen here and there with their heads together, and in low, cautious tones might also be heard as the parting salutation—'So it's best take care, anyhow, and not anger her.'

In the course of that Sunday afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Esmond of Rose Lodge paid a visit to their widowed niece with whom Aunt Winifred had been staying ever since the fatal night that had quenched in blood the light of Esmond Hall. Mary Hennessy and Bella Le Poer were also there, to Mrs. Esmond's greater consolation, for their tender and judicious kindness was balm to her bruised and broken heart. No visitors were as yet admitted, save only the nearest relatives, and the house, late so full of life and animation, was gloomy as a funeral vault. The very servants, as they glided around in their deep mourning costume, were grave and sad as mutes at a funeral, and the merry voices of the children were hushed and silent. As for the fair mistress of the mansion, no smile had yet crossed her visage, and but few words escaped her bloodless lips, as she lay from day to day in her high-backed chair, a pale drooping flower, fading slowly away in the sight of the two devoted friends who watched her with more than sister's love. As on that first dreary night, the presence of Uncle Harry seemed somehow to discompose her; tho' she evidently strove to hide her disquiet, fearing, doubtless, to give him pain. But her tell-tale features refused to keep the secret, and the old man's keen eye speedily detected the emotion she vainly sought to repress. Declining Mrs. Esmond's faint invitation to remain for dinner, he rose abruptly, saying to his wife:

'Come, Martha, it will be night before we get home.' He glanced at the timepiece over the mantel. 'Why, how is that, Henrietta—your clock is not going?'

'No,' said Mrs. Esmond, with more energy than she had of late manifested; 'it stopped, I suppose, when Harry's heart did, and it shall never go again—at least, while I am its owner.'

'What! do you mean to say it stopped at that hour, on that night?' and he pointed to the hands.

'My eyes saw it.'

'Great God! it was about the very moment—and the old man leaned on the back of a chair for support, his eyes still fixed on the timepiece.

'You think so, uncle?'

'There is not a doubt of it,' said Aunt Martha, her face pale as ashes. 'It was about eight o'clock when he left our door, and half an hour would likely have brought him to—the fatal spot.'

'True—most true,' murmured Uncle Harry, as if to himself.

'But tell me, uncle,' said Mrs. Esmond, with a spasmodic effort, 'how it happened that it was your horse my poor fellow rode—at the time—instead of the roan mare he took from here?'

'Oh! that, my dear, is easily explained,' Uncle Harry carelessly replied. 'The roan got lame with him on the way, and when my groom came to examine how it was, he found that a nail in one of the fore-shoes had pierced the hoof, and the animal was in downright pain, so we had to send directly for the blacksmith to take off the shoe, and a hard job it was to get it off. Of course Harry had nothing for it but to leave her behind, and take one of my horses.'

'Dear me,' groaned Aunt Winifred, 'it was most unfortunate.'

'What was?' said her brother snappishly.

'Why, the change of horses, brother—you know there is such a thing as luck after all, and I do think that gray of ours was unlucky to poor Harry—I shall never go out with her again—never. But, mercy on us! you needn't look so cross; one would think you meant to bite my nose off.'

'No danger of that, Winny,' said her brother maliciously; 'my chance of getting you off my hands is small enough now without taking so unnatural a means of spoiling your beauty. Good-bye, Henry, my poor child, try and keep up your heart as well as you can.'

'I will, sir,' was the dreamy, listless answer, as the mourner received and returned Aunt Martha's kind farewell greeting. As for Miss Esmond, she stiffened herself to the rigidity of a colossal poker, and, not deigning to notice her brother's parting nod, extended the long fingers of her right hand to her sister-in-law, saying as she did so:

'Well, Martha, my dear! though he's my brother, I must say that you have got the greatest bear of a husband in all Tipperary. You have indeed.'

At another time this little manifestation of temper on the part of Aunt Winifred would have given much amusement, but there was none to notice it then, and in grave silence the party separated.

The early night was already close at hand when Mr. Esmond stepped into the gig where his wife was already seated. As he took the reins from Mulligan, he placed a half-crown in his hand, which Mulligan acknowledged by a very low bow and a 'Long life to your honor, and safe home, sir.' Then lowering his voice, he added—'I'd make the bay step out, your honor, if I was you—there do be ghosts and things abroad after dusk, and you're a lonesome bit of a road before you! Safe home, sir!' he said aloud, and making a sign to Mr. Esmond to say nothing, he hurried off to open the gates, then bowed again as the gig rolled out on the high road, and distinctly uttered the words—'Take care!'

'What did Mulligan say, my dear?' asked Mrs. Esmond when they were fairly started.

'He said to-morrow would be a fine day,' replied her husband with characteristic gruffness, as he leaned forward to apply the whip to the shining flanks of his horse, though the animal needed no such hint to make haste home.

Mrs. Esmond made no further attempt at conversation, and the ill-matched pair were whirled along for a mile and better through the chilly air of the winter evening, without again exchanging words. Both were wrapt apparently in their own thoughts, and gloomy thoughts they were, too, for neither could forget that about the same hour less than a week ago, one near and dear to them left his home in happy unconsciousness that he was to see it never more.

As the evening shades fell colder and darker on the wintry landscape, the sense of loneliness began to press on the stout heart of Mr. Esmond, and he was glad to break the silence that he now felt oppressive. He addressed some trifling observation to his wife, but had not yet received an answer when the horse, slyly at some object on the road-side, turned up his ears, tossed his head, and began to prance in a backward direction that was anything but safe, seeing that a gravel pit full of yellow muddy water bounded the road at that particular spot.

Mrs. Esmond's scream of terror frightened the animal still more—back—back he went, notwithstanding the desperate efforts made by the strong arm that was urging him forward—back—back he reared till the wheels of his gig were within a foot of the water edge—Mrs. Esmond, crying, 'Holy Mary! Mother of God! pray for us!' was about to throw herself out of the gig, at all hazards, when a tall man appeared at the horse's head, laid hold of the bridle, and with one jerk, and a soothing 'Wo! wo!' drew the frightened animal out on the road, the gig lumbering heavily at his heels.

The fervent thanksgiving that escaped from Mrs. Esmond's ashy lips was for once echoed by her husband, with a hearty acknowledgment of the timely assistance that had saved them both from an awful death.

'You have saved our lives this night,' said he.

'Udner God, sir, udner God,' put in the tall man, stooping to pick up a bag he had thrown from his shoulder.

'Oh! of course—of course—that's understood. But who and what are you? tell me that before you go, for if I live I'll reward you well.'

'I'm not goin' yet,' was the answer; 'I'll walk a little ways farther with you, for fear the baste might shy again, or something.'

'But who are you? what is your name?'

'Well! my name isn't worth your honor's knowin', but I'm the poor man that asked charity from you there back o' the hill, and didn't get it.'

'My God!' murmured Mrs. Esmond in an audible whisper, and she pressed close to her husband as the tall beggarman appeared at her side of the vehicle.

'Don't be afeard, ma'am!' said he in a voice that sounded as if it came from a barrel, 'any company's, better than none, sometimes—especially on a lonesome road of a dark night.'

Mrs. Esmond said no more, and the sturdy beggarman trudged along, staff in hand, by her side, keeping pace with the horse even at a brisk trot. The few belated stragglers who passed along one way or the other, exchanging a brief salutation with the self-appointed guide, passed cheerily on, most of them whistling some lively air as if to counteract the sombre influence of the hour.

On and on went the gig, and on went the tall beggarman beside it, bag on back and staff in hand. The one half of Mr. Esmond's homeward road was already passed, when the horse turned up his ears again, glanced fearfully at one side of the road where stood an old limekiln, its rude masonry partly concealed by the overhanging branches of a huge alderbush. In an instant the beggarman had hold of the bridle and his strong arm speedily brought the scared animal to subjection. A slight noise was heard as it were in the kiln—a dark form was visible for a moment, one word issued from the throat of the man at the horse's head—the word was 'Remember!'—in the twinkling of an eye the figure vanished, and the horse sped lightly on his way. Mrs. Esmond breathed more freely, she knew not why.

A little farther on, the beggarman stopped, and laid his hand on the rein. 'You'll soon be at home now, Mr. Esmond,' said he, in his deep guttural tones; 'the baste won't shy any more, I'm thinkin', so I'll be biddin' you good night, and it's one advice I'll give you, never refuse a poor man or a poor woman a charity when they ask it for God's sake—an' listen to what I'm goin' to say, your honor,—he leaned over the wheel, and spoke in a whisper—'you're the last man in Tipperary that ought to be out after nightfall. Now go your ways!'

'But, my very worthy fellow,' said Mr. Esmond, 'will you not tell me to whom I am so deeply indebted this night?'

'Maybe you wouldn't thank me if I did,' said the man gruffly; 'ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies. Go on now, as fast as you can, or maybe there's worse than a quarry before you—an' mind what I tell you—be merciful to the poor, or their curse 'll fall on you where I can't save you.'

Bounding like an antelope over the ditch, he disappeared, and it is hardly necessary to say that Mr. Esmond's bay flew home at a gallop.

The first act of Mr. Esmond after reaching home was to send post-haste for the Dean and Attorney Moran. Pending their arrival dinner was served, but seldom was meal less honored at the well-appointed table of Rose Lodge. The old gentleman was far too much excited to think of eating; with his bushy brows knit together, and his sharp grey eyes fixed in moody thought, he sat leaning back in his chair, scarcely deigning to answer the repeated entreaties of his wife to eat something.

At last, seeing that the lady had finished her very slight repast, he said, pushing back his chair with characteristic brusquerie—'If you're done now, Martha, I wish you would have those things removed. I wonder how people can eat under such circumstances.'

Mrs. Esmond made no reply—she was indeed a most submissive wife, at all times; the dishes were removed, and fruit and wine placed on the table. The old gentleman drank off a glass of Madeira, then looked at his wife and said—

'That was a confoundedly queer chap, that beggarman—didn't you think so, Marth?'

'I really can't say, my dear, what I thought of him, or of anything else at the time, I was so frightened.'

'What?' said the husband ironically, 'at the prospect of a cold bath? Well, I own it was not over inviting such a night as this. But you know that chilling prospective was only for a moment.'

'Was there no other danger but that of the quarry?' said Mrs. Esmond pointedly.

'Oh, true—there was the limekiln—but that needn't have shocked your weak nerves, seeing that there was no fire in it. They couldn't roast you, you know, without fire—ha, ha, ha!'

A second and a third glass of the sparkling Madeira had somewhat exhilarated the old man's spirits though his humor was still bitter.

'I am sorry, my dear,' said Mrs. Esmond quietly, 'that I can't compliment you on your wit. Now I think I wasn't the only one whose nerves, weak or strong, were shocked on this occasion!'

'Of course not, my dear; there was the horse—'

'Well, what was it that frightened the horse first and last?'

'I'm sure I can't tell—except it was a ghost—horses, you know, can see a spirit where human optics are at fault.'

The cool sarcasm of Mr. Esmond's tone and manner did undoubtedly ruffle his wife's temper not a little. 'That amiable gentleman took sufficient pains on all occasions to show his unbounded contempt for female understanding generally,

which he was wont to epigrammatize by grammatical comparison as weak—weaker—weakest.—But for reasons sufficiently clear to herself, Mrs. Esmond was more than usually susceptible to his pointless sarcasm.

'Harry,' said she, with much earnestness of look and tone, 'if I were alone, I, for one, would not have been afraid of either the living or the dead.'

'Zounds, madam, what do you mean by that?' cried her husband fiercely.

'No blustering, Harry, no blustering!' said his wife calmly but firmly, 'what I mean to say is this, that my fears were for you—drawing back, and pointing at him with her finger—not for myself. I feared that the blow might fall this time where it was meant to fall before!—You understand—I see you do—I will, therefore, leave you to your own thoughts, which may, in your case, be the best companions, commending to your further attention the old adage—"it is all paying with edged tools."'

Before Mr. Esmond had recovered the effect of this stunning blow, the door-bell gave intimation that one or both of the anxiously-expected visitors had arrived, and Mrs. Esmond vanished by another as the Dean and the man of law entered at another.

Mr. Esmond, recovering by a violent effort from the stunning effect of his wife's home-thrust advanced with outstretched hand to greet his guests.

'Well, Mr. Esmond,' said the Dean, when having warmed his hands over the fire, he turned and faced his host, 'you see we have promptly obeyed your summons, though, as regards myself, I would rather have waited a little, seeing that I had but just returned from a sick call, some three miles away.'

'I'm very sorry, indeed,' said Mr. Esmond, 'but my business is very urgent, and would not by any means wait.'

'Well, what is your business?' and the Dean exchanged a significant glance with Moran, who had coolly taken his place at the table for the refreshment of his inner man, 'what is your business, sir? It must be of grave importance when you send in all haste for the priest and the lawyer.'

'It is of grave importance—the very gravest importance. Dean M'Dermott?' emphatically said Mr. Esmond, as he threw himself back in his chair opposite the Dean, and looked first in his face, then in Moran's, to see how they took this startling announcement. 'Do you know that I have discovered the existence of a conspiracy?'

'A conspiracy, Mr. Esmond?' cried his hearers simultaneously.

'Yes, a conspiracy—a conspiracy against me—Harry Esmond, of Rose Lodge—a conspiracy to take away my life—to murder me!'

'Bless me, Mr. Esmond, you astonish me,' said the Dean. 'What Moran would have said we know not, for it so happened that he was seized just then with a troublesome fit of coughing that made him very red in the face, and obliged him to apply his handkerchief to his eyes very suspiciously often.'

'I thought I should astonish you,' went on Mr. Esmond, wholly absorbed in his own ideas. 'But you will be more astonished when I tell you that I have a strong suspicion, almost amounting to certainty, that my poor nephew fell a victim to this same diabolical agency.'

'Ah, indeed, and what reason have you to think so?' The half credulous look vanished from the Dean's massive features, and Moran's cough suddenly ceased to trouble him.

'Sit down, Dean, and I'll tell you all about it, then let you and Moran judge for yourselves.'

The details of the evening's adventures were listened to with much interest by the two gentlemen, a glance of surprise being exchanged between them at certain points of the narrative.

'Now what do you think of that?' said Mr. Esmond in conclusion. 'Am I, or am I not justified in thinking that there is a conspiracy footed to murder me, as my nephew has been murdered, in cold blood—in fact, to exterminate the Esmonds? What say you, Dean? what say you, Moran?'

The priest shook his head and replied that he did not see how that followed from the premises.

'You would have much trouble to make out your case, my dear sir, in a court of law,' said Moran. 'For my part I see no proof, whatever, of a conspiracy in what you have been telling us.'

'Indeed? well, I must say that your faculties are more obtuse than I ever supposed they were. And you, Dean, I am astonished that you do not see farther into this affair. Now, what is your opinion of that beggarman?'

'Why, upon my word, Mr. Esmond,' the Dean replied in the caustic tone he could well employ at times, 'upon my word, I think him a very fine fellow, and that, on your own showing,