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LISHEEN

By Rev. P. A. SHEERAN, D.D. Author of "My New Carols," "Lisheen," "Lisheen," "Gleanings," etc.

CHAPTER XIII A NEW SAINT

The acquaintance, thus auspiciously commenced, ripened into something like intimacy. The two men, who had called the old priest away from his presbytery which did not see him installed by that residue, or wandering for a leisure hour or more about the grounds which Hamilton had now laid out with great taste and in little expense.

And different as these two men were in temperament and education, they seemed to have some affinity with each other. Perhaps each supplied the other's defects. Perhaps Hamilton saw in this guileless man the simple, unsophisticated, disinterested character he had so long sought for in vain in the world of London.

And to the priest there was quite a novel attraction in this strange being, who seemed to his simple mind to have been dropped from another planet, so different were his habits, thoughts, principles from everything to which the priest had been accustomed. And although sometimes the latter shrank from expressions that seemed to him irreligious and even blasphemous, he imputed the evil to ignorance or inexperience; and here under his eyes were ample compensations for the crudities and irregularities that seemed part of Hamilton's education. For now "the desert had blossomed like a rose."

There were a few years ago was a barren and blighted landscape wintry looking even in a summer, and fronting a cold and barren sea, was now a smiling upland, gay with the colors of many flowers, and feathered with the plumes of handsome trees. And where there had been but wretched hovels, mud-walls, and a ditch, was now a garden, and surrounded with putrid pools of green, fetid water, were now neat cottages, stone-built, red-tiled, each bright in front with carpets of flowers, and glowing in the rear with all kinds of fruit and vegetables, and a day long to the sound of the sea rang the clink of steel upon marble; and the hiss of the steam which swung the huge derricks around rose like the fall of the surf on the shingle and sand beneath. Tourists, rushing by to Glenhugh or Waterville, stopped their cars, and rubbed their eyes, and asked incredulously: "Is this Ireland?"

And many a pale faced and withered and shrunken man, and many a woman, with her hair, bade farewell with tears in her eyes to this little paradise; and looked across the darkening ocean with dread forebodings in her heart of the life that was before her in the ghettos of Pittsburg or Chicago.

Claire Moulton, too, was a bright and peculiar feature in this picture. Scarcely emerged from childhood, she retained a certain willfulness of character, a kind of independence, which gave her unquestioned power over these primitive people, who feared her for her imperiousness, loved her for her goodness, smiled at her impetuosity, so very like their own impulsive and emotional ways. She endeared herself to them more particularly, because she never stood aloof from them, but walked into their cottages with the familiarity of an equal; gave her little impetuous orders, which she helped to execute; and she was right. The poor fellow came shame-faced to the hall door in the evening, and made a most abject apology.

It was this vein of impetuosity in her character that made Hamilton somewhat anxious about her. A firm believer in the inviolable laws of heredity, he knew there was an oblique line somewhere in this very beautiful and perfect picture; and sometimes he caught himself watching her, as she read or wrote by the fireside at night, or stooped over her manuscripts, copying or inditing strange, wild verses, that to him seemed incantations.

She was often, too, the subject of much intimate conversation between Hamilton and his new friend. For, although the latter was absolutely guileless and ignorant of the world and its ways, there was a shrewd power of discernment in his character—a kind of intuition which makes children look instinctively who are enemies and who might be friends. Hence, Hamilton spoke often to the priest about the girl; and as she grew more womanly, and all the strong features of her character became more pronounced and developed, his anxiety increased, and she became a more frequent subject of conversation.

The Sunday evening on which Bob Maxwell had driven up the cattle to the glen in the hills, the three, Father Cosgrove, Hugh Hamilton, and Claire, were seated around the fire in the library. The weather was cold and drizzling without, and although there was no cold within, the sight of the fire in the dark evenings was cheerful. They had been talking of many things; and just then the name of General Gordon turned up, as having come in some more prominent way than usual before the British public.

"Voilà un homme!" said Hamilton, enthusiastically. "Yes, Mr. Cosgrove, Gordon does not bring me around to your optimism, but the existence of one such man redeems the race. Look now, if Gordon were in your Church, you'd have the whole tribe of pious Catholics running after him; and you would canonize him, and call him St. Gordonius, and put him into stained-glass windows, and turn him into marble statues, with a helmet and sword and breastplate, with satan wriggling beneath his feet, and representing all the d—d money-grubbers, through the world. Yes, your Church is a wise Church, and honors her best men; and honors them, Macaulay was generally silly; but he was right there."

"I don't know," said Father Cosgrove, meekly. "Some of our saints were never discovered until years after their death. And some got pretty rough handling during their lives. But that is only as it ought to be."

"How is that? I don't understand," said Hamilton. "Neither do I," said the priest, who was always most willing to understand religious matters with a man whose training had not fitted him to understand them. "What does Miss Moulton think?"

"I have met one here and one hero—son of St. Clair, and they bear your contention, Father. General Gordon and Joan of Arc. We English burned the latter. She was troublesome and they turned her into bone-ashes. As to Gordon, we built probably erect a statue to him, if we can find a niche somewhere between tall-chandlers and soap-manufacturers."

"There, there," said Hamilton. "Claire must say something spicy. By the way, you never met Gordon?" said Hamilton to the priest.

"Oh, never, never," said Father Cosgrove. "I was never out of Ireland."

"No, but Gordon was here," said Hamilton. "He was around here, I suppose; but he kept his eyes open, and he saw many more things than fifty purblind English statesmen would perceive in twenty years. Where have you put this picture?"

"I have put it over a table, and picked up a scrap-book, in which she had pasted every little picture or poem or extract she deemed interesting."

"Read it for us, Claire," said her guardian.

And Claire read slowly and with emphasis that famous letter of General Gordon's, containing his bitter comments on the agrarian system of Ireland; and suggesting remedies which only now, and slowly and with reluctance, are being adopted. She read over twice, as if to imprint the words on the memory of her hearers, the lines:

"In conclusion, I must say, from all accounts and from my own observation, that the state of our fellow-countrymen in the parts I have named is worse than that of any people in the world, let alone Europe. No better are the Chinese, and Indians are better than many of them are. The priests alone have any sympathy with their sufferings; and naturally alone have a hold over them."

When she finished, Hamilton was looking steadily into the fire, a deep frown on his handsome features. Father Cosgrove was softly crying. She took the scrap-book over and laid it aside on the table.

"The mark you," said Hamilton, as if he were arguing against an adversary, "that's no partisan, no politician. But we have seen the thing with our own eyes—'man's inhumanity to man'—injustice and cruelty legalized."

"Well, no matter, no matter," said the priest. "Blessed are they that suffer persecution!—there, I forget the rest!"

"I have no patience with that kind of thing," said the English. "But you seem to me you wrong yourself. You are not the man you have painted. I saw you the other day take up in your arms and kiss the child of that unhappy woman—Nell—illegitimate. A bad man you are, and I care for that!"

"I didn't say I was bad," replied Hamilton. "In fact, there is no good or bad."

"And you must admit your affection for Miss Moulton. At least, there is no self there."

"Right. None, absolutely none. And hence, when I see Claire happy beyond question I shall obliterate self and blot it out forever."

"I shall do all in my power to thwart every attempt at having Miss Claire settled. The cost would be too great."

"If I tell Claire—Miss Moulton—'This is beyond your power or mine. Behind blind Nature is the blinder force called Fate. If it is Claire's destiny to marry, the mighty wheel of Fate will turn round slowly and blindly, and place at her feet the man she is to go with. She cannot escape him, nor can he escape her. And it isn't you, my dear friend, that can grasp the spokes of that wheel and stop it, or turn it back."

"A safe offer," said the priest. "That is an impossible condition, an impossible condition, and he waived it away."

"I think I would marry that man," said Claire, laughing. "That is if the fellow came out of the ordeal alive."

"Who is he, by the way?" asked Hamilton.

"The landlord of a large district many miles from here," said the priest. "He has a bad name; but we don't know; we don't know."

"The old priest dropped into silence, as Claire Moulton left the room. Hamilton noticed that he had shivered when Claire uttered the word 'marry,' and had looked towards the girl, as if hesitating. He understood well the emotion and the look; and he closed the door carefully, and came over, and laid his hand on the old priest's arm.

"Fear not!" he said. "All will come right. Claire will never marry, and I—"

"How do you know? How can you know?" said the old priest, passionately.

"Where, now don't be disturbed," said Hamilton, soothingly. "You'll find all will be right in the end."

"It cannot be right. It must be wrong, all wrong," said the priest, still in the passionate tone that contrasted so patently with his usual meekness. "Oh, how can you think of it—you who are so good, so good—whose life is so perfect before God?"

"There is no God," said Hamilton, solemnly. "And I am not good."

"But you are, you are," reiterated the priest. "You cannot deceive me. Cannot we see your goodness around us everywhere?"

"The work of your hands. And you, you," he cried emphatically, "to even think of such a thing?"

"Listen!" said Hamilton, sitting down and speaking slowly. "I appreciate your kindness and your good opinion; but you do me wrong. You impute to me virtues which I do not possess, which I never possessed. I have money, more than I know what to do with. I could have gratified myself one way by purchasing a yacht and fooling around the world; but I had no taste for seasickness and tarred ropes and danger. I could have travelled; but I had no fancy for being packed into the narrow compartments of Continental trains, separated between sweating women, who would not allow the eighth of an inch of a window to be raised in the dog days. I could have spent my money on rioting and dissipation; but I had no fancy to be racked by the gout; and, thanks to my dead mother, I abominate uncleanliness, physical or moral, in every form. What does that mean here? I create a certain beauty out of a certain ugliness. It pleases my taste, which is fastidious; I admit, by placing certain pretty pictures before my eyes, where I can see the beauties of a poet, a maker of things. I can now look from my window, and enjoy the beauty of that harbour and those sands and cliffs, and that sea, without having the prospect marred by rotting roofs, and capping mid-walls, and ragged babies, and I have made these men decent workers out of drunken loafers. I like to hear the creak of the chisel, and the hiss of the steam, and the creaking of the derrick. But I am not such a fool as to call all this virtue. I know it is nothing but the selfishness of the ordinary parasites of society under another form. All this altruism is but self disguised in an ignoble form."

He stopped, and remained for some time buried in deep thought. Father Cosgrove was silent. These were psychological positions, never before presented to his mind. Hamilton continued:

"Believe me, my dear friend, self is the only God—egoism is the only religion. All the great deeds of the world, that are beyond my comprehension, are done by selfish impulses. Scavola putting his arm into the flames—was that this pride, or vanity—the desire of that most contemptible thing called fame? Sidney giving the drink of water to the dying gladiator—was this? The same impulse of self that made him build yonder cottages. And all our patriots, statesmen, churchmen, masquerading in their rags and tinsel before the world—each rogue or fool, admitting to his valet or his looking-glass that he is but an actor—why, he is not even that. He is but a poor puppet in the hands of that mysterious thing, called Nature, which keeps up little lights in its little lanterns, through the selfish impulses of these marionettes."

"I cannot follow you, I cannot follow you," said the priest. "These things are beyond my comprehension. But it seems to me you wrong yourself. You are not the man you have painted. I saw you the other day take up in your arms and kiss the child of that unhappy woman—Nell—illegitimate. A bad man you are, and I care for that!"

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"Listen!" said Hamilton, sitting down and speaking slowly. "I appreciate your kindness and your good opinion; but you do me wrong. You impute to me virtues which I do not possess, which I never possessed. I have money, more than I know what to do with. I could have gratified myself one way by purchasing a yacht and fooling around the world; but I had no taste for seasickness and tarred ropes and danger. I could have travelled; but I had no fancy for being packed into the narrow compartments of Continental trains, separated between sweating women, who would not allow the eighth of an inch of a window to be raised in the dog days. I could have spent my money on rioting and dissipation; but I had no fancy to be racked by the gout; and, thanks to my dead mother, I abominate uncleanliness, physical or moral, in every form. What does that mean here? I create a certain beauty out of a certain ugliness. It pleases my taste, which is fastidious; I admit, by placing certain pretty pictures before my eyes, where I can see the beauties of a poet, a maker of things. I can now look from my window, and enjoy the beauty of that harbour and those sands and cliffs, and that sea, without having the prospect marred by rotting roofs, and capping mid-walls, and ragged babies, and I have made these men decent workers out of drunken loafers. I like to hear the creak of the chisel, and the hiss of the steam, and the creaking of the derrick. But I am not such a fool as to call all this virtue. I know it is nothing but the selfishness of the ordinary parasites of society under another form. All this altruism is but self disguised in an ignoble form."

He stopped, and remained for some time buried in deep thought. Father Cosgrove was silent. These were psychological positions, never before presented to his mind. Hamilton continued:

"Believe me, my dear friend, self is the only God—egoism is the only religion. All the great deeds of the world, that are beyond my comprehension, are done by selfish impulses. Scavola putting his arm into the flames—was that this pride, or vanity—the desire of that most contemptible thing called fame? Sidney giving the drink of water to the dying gladiator—was this? The same impulse of self that made him build yonder cottages. And all our patriots, statesmen, churchmen, masquerading in their rags and tinsel before the world—each rogue or fool, admitting to his valet or his looking-glass that he is but an actor—why, he is not even that. He is but