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ELLEN AHERN; OR, THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

'Christ be merciful to her!' (Nora,) said the old man, lifting his trembling hands towards heaven, and give her eternal rest. That was a royal funeral pyre for old Nora and her boys, a *suilsh!*

It was some time before Ellen Ahern had courage to look again, and when she did, she saw that a crowd of people had gathered around the scene of the conflagration, and she could distinctly see Lord Hugh Maguire and Fahey, rushing to and fro, to direct the efforts of those who were engaged in removing a pile of lumber out of reach of the flames.

'It is well to let the dead rest,' said Sir Eadna, after an interval of silence. 'I suppose old Nora, with the cunning of craziness on the alert ever since the remains of her sons were moved along with her miserable dwelling, watched her opportunity to do this. But I am afraid, *Ailcen a suilsh!*, this will fall heavily on the innocent. Fahey knows, and so does his lordship over there, by this time, that a poor lunatic, irresponsible to God or man for her acts; whose smouldering reason was scourged by a cruel act to a desperate deed, and whose life has already paid a dreadful penalty, is the perpetrator of this incendiary, but what will that avail? Nothing. It will only be a plausible excuse for fresh outrages; but see, *acushla machree!* how the fire tinges with glory the ould towers of the O'Donnell, and covers with splendor the ould arches and tombs of *Catha guira!*'

'And look, cousin Eadna, how the stream goes shining and dashing along like a torrent of fire, as if exulting that its sacred waters were not to be applied to the vile uses of a factory. It were almost worth the worry one has had in seeing that building go up, to have so magnificent an illumination—only poor old Nora! But for her, I think I could clap my hands and rejoice, for how dare this recreant Maguire desecrate a sacred place to gratify his unholy avarice? But see—there is now only a heap of smouldering ruins—the last rafter has fallen, and now you must come away, and go quietly back to your bed,' said Ellen Ahern, as she put her arm about the old man and led him back to the room.

Lord Hugh Maguire was enraged by an event which not only involved loss of time, but a great waste of money. The cause of the fire was apparent to all, and it was clear to the duldest perception, that if the bones of old Nora's sons had been left quiet, where they had been resting almost the third of a century, his property would not have been consumed. This consideration mingled self-reproach with his disappointment and sense of loss, and excited within him a frantic degree of rage which he made no effort to control. He swore and raved like a madman; threatened the obsequious Fahey with his horse-whip; and was in the act of inflicting a severe blow with its loaded handle on an old man, who was trying in vain to lift a heavy piece of machinery which he had ordered him to remove.—His arm was upraised, and the whip's handle was about descending on the white, bowed head, when he felt his arm suddenly seized in an iron grasp, and held as in a vice. Infortunate, he writhed around, and met the calm, commanding countenance of Don Enrique Giron.

'By what right do you dare?' he stormed. 'By the right of humanity, Lord Hugh Maguire, and a natural repugnance for the class to which we both belong to be disgraced by a foul and cowardly act.'

'You shall answer to me for it, at another time. Meanwhile, I desire to know by what authority you presume to address me in so arrogant a way?' said Lord Hugh with concentrated rage.

'The authority which all sane minds hold over those that are not sane. You are either not sane, my Lord, or you have a nature worthy of Caligula. I prefer thinking that the ungovernable excitement you are in, has rendered you for the instant irresponsible,' said Don Enrique, in that quiet tone of command which seemed habitual to him.

'Your insolence, Spaniard, is only equalled by your audacity!' exclaimed Lord Hugh, now absolutely white with passion. 'You shall learn to-morrow what it is to insult a gentleman!'

'To-morrow, my Lord, all that is the gentleman in you will thank me for having saved you the disgrace of inflicting a deadly blow on the white head of a defenceless old man—but let us waste no more words. I undertake to save your machinery with the aid of these noble fellows around me—do you go and direct your men in their movement yonder,' replied Don Enrique, pointing to a crowd of men who were vociferating and giving contrary orders to those under them, which very naturally resulted in nothing being accomplished.

'I would rather lose all than place myself under an obligation to an adventurer like yourself!' vociferated Lord Hugh, with a great oath.

'Do not consider it an obligation. I am doing it for the sake of my own manhood, and some old-fashioned notions I have learned from religious precepts, therefore leave me to my will, and consider yourself free to act as you please to-morrow,' replied Don Enrique, with a bow, which puzzled his lordship to decide was one of mockery or courtesy; but he had no time to retort, as at that instant a loud outcry from the group of men to which Don Enrique had directed him, and a crash, called him with all speed to the spot, where, as if to add to his misfortunes, he found that a ponderous piece of lumber had fallen on his Factor, crushing his feet, which had been caught under it when it fell from the pile.

'I wish it had fallen on his thick head,' exclaimed Lord Hugh, fairly maddened by this new disaster, while he gave vent to a volley of profane oaths, which he must leave to the imagination, being unwilling to defile our pen with a repetition of them.

While he was thus engaged, Don Enrique ordered some of them to construct a litter, while he knelt beside the wounded man, who was groaning piteously, and poured a small quantity of brandy at intervals into his mouth, which prevented his sinking under the pain he suffered.—When the litter was ready, he assisted in lifting the helpless Factor on it, and was as much concerned to see him comfortable as if he had been a life-long friend, instead of a perfect stranger; and when everything was ready, he directed the men to convey him to the public-house—the Maguire Arms it was called—and sent one of their number immediately up to request Sir Eadna Ahern to come down, to examine and dress his wounded limbs.

The fire had by this time subsided, after having consumed everything within its reach, leaving only a heap of charred wood and smouldering embers, from which at times a pale light quivered fitfully, as if the fire demon, like a child who had spent its strength at play, had fallen asleep, and was laughing in its dreams; and when the gray dawn arose, the scene was deserted except by one or two men, who remained to search for the body of old Nora; but their search was in vain, not a vestige or fragment of her humanity was left.

Two days afterwards, warrants for new evictions were sent down to Fahey, to be put into execution. Lord Hugh was sullen and morose, and Lady Fermangh high and disagreeable in her manner, especially towards Ellen Ahern, whose timid civilities she invariably repulsed with an air and gesture of insufferable haughtiness.—Amidst all this, Felice went buzzing to and fro, endeavoring to impress on the minds of every living being who would listen to her jargon of French and bad English, that she thought 'Prelaudé' was fit only for savages to live in;—and that she expected to be murdered, or burnt up, or carried on by ghosts or robbers, every day that she stood. Sir Eadna Ahern remained at Father McMahon's, that he might more conveniently attend his patient, whose wounds exhibited some symptoms of inflammation, and required constant watchfulness. It was understood that Lord Hugh's loss was considerable, tidings which Father McMahon hoped would result in the end to the advantage of his flock, as should his lordship be pressed for money, he would be more inclined to accede to his proposition about the lands; but he kept his own counsel, not knowing how the affair would terminate.

If sorrow and distress had seemed to have taken up their grim abode amongst these distressed people before, none seemed to be spared now; where only a few had suffered from the tyranny and injustice that had been dealt out to them so liberally, many now fell under the same systematic cruelty. There was weeping on every hearthstone, for homes despoiled—for kindred driven out into the wide earth to abide its charities—and for the wreck of many a humble household, where human hearts, living and warm, had throbbed and loved; had prayed and suffered; had wept and endured! Fahey declared that his lordship did not feel safe without a set of incendiaries about him, and wished to get rid of them, one and all. There was no help for them, all resistance would have been useless and unavailing; and the utmost that their entreaties and tears could gain, was a few days respite ere they went forth; they knew not whether. While things were in this state, Don Enrique presented himself at the hall door, and, having written something with his pencil on a card, handed it to Felice, who had opened the door for him, and directed her to place it in Lady Fermangh's own hands.—Charmed at the idea of a visitor of any kind to break the tedious monotony, which was insupportable to the vivacious Frenchwoman; and especially, as from the sentence on the card, which was written in a language which she could not understand, she suspected something of an intrigue, she tripped along with it into Lady Fermangh's room, and gave it to her with an air as if she was assured she was doing some thing that would prove extremely agreeable.

'What is this, Felice—here is no name—who left this card?'

'A gentilhomme, vis a vot you call him on bees back, miladi. *Vous plait-il de les dis gentilhomme?*'

'Why did you admit him—but what is this?' said Lady Fermangh, turning the card over, and reading the inscription which was Spanish.—'*Fiel Pero Desdichado.*' 'Merciful God!' she muttered, while her lips trembled and grew white. 'Can it be that my suspicions are correct?'

'Will miladi see the gentilhomme?' asked Felice, pretending not to notice.

'I must see him—there is no help for it—' as, added her ladyship, suddenly remembering herself, 'he comes on business. Give me my crimson cashmere shawl, Felice, and my vial of drops. Where is this person?'

'In ze salon, miladi,' replied Felice, as she arranged the magnificent crimson shawl around Lady Fermangh's shoulders, and handed her the vial containing her drops.

The interview between herself and Don Enrique—for it was he—was long. No mortal ear heard what passed between them; no human being suspected that they had ever met before; or, that he held within himself a dark secret, which gave him almost absolute power over her. Ellen Ahern was passing through the hall when they came out of the drawing-room, and distinctly heard Don Enrique say, in his clear, low tones, 'Remember, I demand a strict compliance. To fail would be perilous to both,' and she saw Lady Fermangh, usually so cold and proud, bow her head with an appearance of abject submission. It had all occurred in less time than it takes to read it; a mere glimpse had sufficed; and, frightened at what she had seen and heard, she tried to fit past them without being seen, but in vain—Don Enrique held out his hand, and came towards her with the same frank, manly smile that he usually wore but Ellen saw there was a deeper glow on his cheeks, and a more fiery light glittering in his eyes than she had ever seen there before. She was bewildered by the mysterious words she had overheard, and still more by Lady Fermangh's abject demeanor, and, for the first time, her heart shrunk away from Don Enrique; so, merely touching his hand with the tips of her fingers, she bowed without speaking, and hurried up to her apartment. The next day, much to her astonishment, Lady Fermangh sent her a message, desiring to see her. It was the first time she had exhibited the slightest evidence of kindly feeling, or disposition to cultivate a friendly intercourse, and her true, warm and unsuspecting heart received it cordially. She made some little change in her apparel; smoothed down her rebellious curls, and hastened to obey the summons.

Lady Fermangh received her with an effort to be courteous, and even kindly; hoped she had suffered no inconvenience from the night of the fire; spoke of Lord Hugh's losses, and how the sudden interruption of his plans had irritated him; in short, she exhibited all those fascinations of manner, which none had at greater command than she, to win the confidence of Ellen Ahern, and do away with any suspicion that she might entertain in relation to her interview of the previous day with Don Enrique, whom she knew she had seen, and feared she had heard.

'I fear Miss Ahern,' she added, 'that there is much suffering down in the hamlet. I have not given myself any trouble heretofore concerning the poor on this estate, because I expected so soon to leave the country—but I must make amends, for really I had no idea of the destitution amongst them, until I heard it from one who has witnessed it. I must speak to my son about them.'

Surprised beyond measure, Ellen Ahern's heart bounded with joy; she thought her prayers were about being answered, and her reply was full of warm gushing feeling, and an eloquent delineation—pointed in the graphic terms of unvarnished truth—of the privations, difficulties and sufferings of the poor at Fermangh. But could she have seen under the mask of that calm, proud face; could she have read the heart which throbbed in strong revolt against all that those false lips had uttered, she would have fled frighted from her presence, wondering how such deception could exist; as it was, she relied on appearances, and, in her simple credulity, almost shed tears when Lady Fermangh, laying a five pound note in her hand, said; 'be my almoner, Miss Ahern; you know who stands in need of aid. Distribute this as you think best for me.'

'I shall take great pleasure in complying with your wishes,' said Ellen earnestly, 'but I shall let them know, that they have found a friend where they most hoped to.'

'I will do more for them if they will only remain peaceable: tell them so if you please. I have been expecting my son all day to see me,' said her ladyship, 'have you met him, Miss Ahern?'

'I have not,' replied Ellen, the smile on her countenance giving place to the shadow; and asking Lady Fermangh to excuse her, she hastily retreated, lest he should come while she was there, and flying to her room, put on her walking habiliments to go down to Father McMahon's, for the purpose of imparting to him and Sir Eadna, the new and pleasant turn affairs had taken. Soon after she had left Lady Fermangh, Lord Hugh came in.

'I understand,' he said abruptly, while he tossed his cap on a chair, 'you had a visitor this morning.'

'Miss Ahern has just gone away,' she said evasively.

'Miss Ahern! Humph! But what brought Miss Ahern here? Have you been quarrelling with her?'

'No. I was simply tired with the ceaseless chattering of Felice, and had no books but such as I had read threadbare, and wanted somebody to talk to,' she replied with assumed carelessness.

'Well, I'm glad to hear it,' he said after a moody silence; 'but was not that hump-backed Don here to-day—the Spaniard I mean?'

'Yes.'

'Who and what did he want?'

Her ladyship was silent, but it was evident that strong and bitter emotions were struggling at her heart, for a shade of unspeakable anguish wrung her proud handsome features—but it was only for an instant; her habitual self command came to her aid, and she was about making him some reply, when he broke out with:—

'I say, mother, did he seek me. If he did, the meddlesome scoundrel, I am ready to chastise him!'

'Chastise him! Come nearer, boy; let me whisper something in your ear, which sooner or later you must know,' said Lady Fermangh, while the pallor of death settled on her face, and her hand sought to press down the tumultuous throbbing of her heart. 'Chastise that man—you do not know what you say!' And, leaning towards him until her face was close to his, she told him something in a low undertone, which made him start as if stung by an adder, and exclaim: 'I do not believe it; it is a cunning imposture.'

'So I pretended to believe—so I hoped it was—but in vain. It is true; and I tell you that nothing but a different course from the one you are pursuing, will save you from disgrace and beggary,' said her ladyship sternly. 'We are like birds taken in a snare, and must be wary.'

L'Abbe McMahon sent her compliments to milord,' said Felice, who came in at this juncture with Father McMahon's card.

'Begone, and tell your Abbe to go to the devil!' exclaimed the excited man.

'Stay, Felice. Say that his lordship will be there in a few moments. Are you mad, boy?' said her ladyship after the Frenchwoman went out. 'I tell you, it would have been better had you perished in the flames at Cathaguira, the other night, than to exasperate that terrible man!'

'But this is the old snivelling priest. I declare, mother, I believe you are insane.'

'Hugh, my son, I entreat you, forbear!' cried Lady Fermangh in tones of anguish. 'I have perilled my honor and soul for you, and I demand of you forbearance. I tell you, that by the power of the dreadful secret in his possession, that man holds me answerable for the treatment of every hind on this estate, from the old beggar who subsists on our bounty, down to the ragged urchins who play in the mud with their pigs. So then—feign a kindly interest in their disgusting affairs—soothe them with promises, which cost nothing. Everything depends on you.'

'I'll put an end to this. A bullet will be a sure quietus to a babbling tongue,' muttered Lord Hugh, as he went down to the drawing-room, where Father McMahon awaited him.—The venerable man was arrayed in his best cassock, which was rusty, and his finest linen band, which was worn thin. His small-clothes were fastened at the knees with small silver buckles, and his shoes were polished to the highest degree of which leather is capable. His white hair was combed back from his face, and it was evident that he had taken more than ordinary care with his toilet for the occasion. Besides him on the floor stood the antique, worn eaten chest containing the handwork of Benvenuto Cellini, which two men who were waiting outside, had brought up from St. Fiubar's.

'To what cause am I indebted for the honor of this visit?' said Lord Hugh, after having exchanged salutations with Father McMahon.—'And what have we here?' he asked, nodding towards the chest. The good old priest, who trusted for the success of his plan to the immor-

tal fame of Cellini, and, forgetful that every man was not a virtuoso, had never once allowed himself to think really that his proposal could be unconditionally rejected; felt now like a beggar, and was as awkward and embarrassed before the haughty young nobleman, as if he had come to ask a personal benefit; and opened his business in so confused a way—now branching off in a eloquent panegyric on Cellini—all so interspersed with Latin, technical phrases, and an estimate of the relative value of metals, that his lordship stared and felt quite bewildered—being altogether ignorant of Art—and began to think that he was deranged. But when the faithful old shepherd began to mix up with his rhapsody, vivid sketches of the need and pitiable sufferings of his flock, his tongue was loosened: he forgot all about Cellini, and the heartlessness of the man in whose presence he stood, and he plead for them—h—argued, he entreated, he wept—until Lord Hugh Maguire, stung, rebuked and enraged, rudely interrupted him, and in abrupt terms informed him, that it was a subject on which he allowed no dictation whatever; nor would he listen to another word—these tenants were a set of lazy, mischievous vagabonds, who deserved neither sympathy nor assistance.

'Well, well, my Lord, let that pass,' said Father McMahon, recalled to himself, and endeavoring to be very patient, 'I did not come hither to argue the point with you, but to offer you, for a fair price, the *chef d'œuvre* of Benvenuto Cellini.' And Father McMahon stooped, and unlocked the lid of the chest, revealed his treasure. 'Buy these, my Lord, to enrich your collection of rare articles. I prize them more than anything on earth—they are my all—and they are priceless.'

'Really, most venerable *Pater Noster*, I am too poor to indulge in such luxuries. My coffers are almost empty—I must leave such rare possessions as these to churchmen,' replied his lordship with mocking gravity.

'I do not desire money,' said Father McMahon, eagerly; 'though they are worth their weight in gold. I will exchange them willingly for that tract of waste land beyond Cathaguira.'

'And for what purpose do you wish to become a landlord, most Rev. Fisher of men?'

'That is nothing to the purpose, my Lord. Will you or will you not exchange with me the barren acres I speak of for this *chef d'œuvre* of Cellini's? Why any one of these pieces would fetch a thousand pounds in England,' said the enthusiastic old man.

'Take them, then, where you will find a purchaser. I have no taste for such things, and if I had, I would not barter away my lands to be colonized by beggars. Ah! *Pater Noster*, you thought yourself cunning, but you see I am as clever as you are. So take them away.'

'Take heed, my Lord; these beggars of whom you speak so scornfully, and whom you have burdened with a weight of misery, will one day or other judge you, for *certus omnia Deus vindet*. There's a great day approaching, when *Dirus* shall be hurried—stripped of his purple and fine linen—from the high places and luxurious feasts, to the depths of hell; while Lazarus, who has laid mourning and covered with sores at his gate, with no friends but the dogs that licked them, and no food but the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table will be taken up into the Kingdom of God and throned in an everlasting inheritance, from whence he shall not be permitted to come to administer a drop of water to him who, having once refused him mercy, now prays to him for help. Consider, my Lord that by an inexorable decree, you must on the last day account for your stewardship, and I—aye, even I—shall have to witness against you, for you have beaten the king's servants—you have cast them out—you have ground their faces and stripped them instead of clothing them. Look ye to it for, as for me, I snuff the dust of your house from off my feet.'

'As I am not a believer in such fables, most excellent *Pater Noster*, your threats fail to terrify me. Good day,' said Lord Hugh, in a cold sarcastic tone, and walked away, leaving Father McMahon alone with his treasures. With a deep sigh the aged priest locked the chest, and having called in the two men from the terrace, directed them to take it back to St. Fiubar's, he following close after them as if to guard the precious burden.

CHAPTER IX.—THE HIDDEN SNARE.

'Thanks be to the Man above, it's safe back!' said Father McMahon's housekeeper, as she shoved the chest containing the antique silver service, back into the closet from whence it had been taken that morning, and turning the lock with a sharp click that denoted satisfaction; 'and I think your Reverence is more lucky than wise, bedad, in getting off so easy.'

'Woman alive! will you never learn to hold your tongue?' said Father McMahon, who, crest-fallen at the result of his fruitless expedition, had thrown himself into his great chair, where he sought, under the mystery of silence, to bring into subjection the roused elements of his nature, but which efforts Bridget's talkativeness rendered unavailing.

'It's no thanks at all I expects from your Reverence, that I've served so faithful for forty year and upwards; but it's no reason I shouldn't feel a material interest in you, that's no more capable of taking care of yourself than a *boocum* (soft, innocent person); and would a come to want long ago, but for my seraphim, and manin', and usag economy that's worn threadbare?' said Bridget, with an air of injured innocence; 'and don't all for them that don't care a pig's whistle for the same.'

'There—there—that will do. It's all true except the last. I do care, my excellent woman, and value your faithful services, and will not have you interfering in what don't concern you. Do what you please with my linen, my