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ELLEN AHERN; OR, THE POOR COUSIN. CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

‘Letters from home!’ said Ellen Ahern softly, as she turned them over, and after a tender, lingering glance at the seal, which she longed to break at once, and at the handwriting on the outside which gave her promise of much heart-felt pleasure, she laid them aside until Therese’s grammar lesson was got through with, that they—long expected and gladly welcomed as they were—might not tempt her to neglect her duty. But at length, Therese—who detested grammar—after a dull and imperfect lesson, which it required no little patience on Ellen’s part to explain, and make her comprehend, was over. With a sigh of relief, the child closed her book and laid it away in her desk, wishing in her heart, that all the grammars in the world were burnt up, when the bell rang for luncheon.

‘Come, Miss Ahern. There is something very nice to-day.’

‘I do not think I shall take luncheon to-day, dear.’

‘Shall I fetch you something?’ said Therese, lingering at the door.

‘Thank you, no,’ replied Ellen Ahern, and the next moment she was alone with her letters, for which she had been hungering and thirsting for weeks, and had grown heavy-hearted and sad, because they did not come. And now that they were here, in her grasp, a strange revulsion of feeling made her shrink from making herself acquainted with their contents.

‘I’ll trust to Providence,’ she said, closing her eyes, and mixing the letters together; then selecting one, she broke the seal and unfolded it, before she opened them to see from whom they came. It was from Sir Eadna Ahern, and overflowing with affectionate inquiries regarding herself, her place, and her position, mingled with his usual characteristic and keen sarcasms on Lord Hugh Maguire, and his acts. He wrote ‘that he was well, and living with Father McMahon. They were both too old to require much feeling, and contented themselves once and a while with a Barmacidean repast at which they generally amused themselves by building *chateaux d’Espagne*, which if not profitable served to direct their thoughts into some other channel than the bitter one of their poverty and griefs. They were like two eremites who could do nothing but sustain each other, and hold up each other’s hands when a weary with what seemed fruitless prayers for relief—not for themselves—but for others. Lord Hugh Maguire had pushed things to such an extremity that the Catholics of the barony could not even purchase the necessaries of life—there was a ban upon them, and whoever was known to sell them food or fuel became banned and outcast with them. There had never been such misery—though God knows there had been suffering enough—witnessed in Fermanagh before. The Scotchmen were there still, and a few days ago, to gratify his lust for oppression and power, and in revenge for the burning of his factory, Lord Hugh Maguire had issued orders for the time honored and sacred arches at Cathagaura to be pulled down, stoned by stone, and to furnish material to build up another.’

‘The miserable wretch!’ exclaimed Ellen Ahern, as she thought flitted through her mind of the tramping of rough feet over her mother’s grave, and the tearing down of the violets and sweet fern under their iron heels.’

‘And no one!’ went on the letter, ‘dare utter a remonstrance. This would be to me most intolerable, a *suissh*, so intolerable, that if my life paid the forfeit I should go to that degenerate and cruel man, and endeavor to shame him by such eloquence of scorn and strength of remonstrance as my indignant feelings might suggest, but that there is something stirring, which under God’s providence will bring his career to a close, and I am willing to spare myself the pollution of an interview with him, and *huz* the sin of striking down a white-haired and aged man, as no doubt he would do, without hesitation, if I attempted such a thing. Even Fahey, with all his obsequiousness, and giving into his plans, is so continually bullied and exasperated by him, that he’s afraid to go into his presence, for it’s but seldom that he escapes without threats and taunts which take down his consequence more than is agreeable to him. Of course, his baffled designs in relation to you, a *lanma voght*, gave a fresh impetus to his cruel nature; but we heard nothing for weeks, and weeks, after your escape, for all intercourse between the castle and hamlet was interdicted. Father McMahon and I were aware, however, that Lord Hugh had his spies about, hence we were doubly on our guard.—Gradually, a report was whispered by one and another of our people that you had been foully dealt with—some said you had disappeared—others, that you were in close confinement in a cell of the turret—some, that you had thrown yourself from the oriel window in the portrait

gallery, to escape dishonor, and was dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks, that jut out thro’ the tangled vines and stunted firs that grew a-down the precipice on that side; and then it was declared that the banshee’s cry was heard ringing through every room and gallery in the castle that night, and that you had been spirited away. No one could tell, for no one except Father McMahon and myself, knew how it was. It is said that the sentries at the Pass of Rocks narrowly escaped with their lives on suspicion of having aided your escape, but they were fortunately able to give his lordship such indubitable proofs of having been true to their post, that, although maddened with fury at the unexpected frustration of his plans, he contented himself with hurling his loaded pistols at their heads, which they adroitly dodged and took to their heels, the pistols doing no worse mischief than going against the wall, and sending the people, who were crowding into the room to hear what was going on, helter and skelter in every direction, screaming and falling over one another, until they were clearly out of the house. He had the castle to himself in a short time, and finding no menial at hand on whom to vent his rage, he suddenly remembered his mother’s remonstrances, and rushed into her room accusing her of having facilitated your flight in such violent and insulting terms, that she fell in convulsions to the floor.—Upon which he gave orders that I should be sent for to assist her, and locked himself in his room, where he drank until he became intoxicated. I remained no longer than Lady Fermanagh required, which was not for several hours, and having given her a sedative, and the poor French woman a composing draught, I stole quietly back to St. Eubar’s. Of course, we two old men, Father McMahon and I, shook in our shoes lest we might be entrapped into saying something we ought not to, or let out, unwittingly, something which would give a clue to your whereabouts, as our joy at your safety would allow us, a *suissh*, although—Christ pity us—we have enough else to make us greet sorely. The day following, as we sat at dinner—a few boiled potatoes and a cheese paring—in stroling Lord Hugh Maguire and taxed us in round terms of having abducted you.

‘I thank God, Lord Hugh Maguire,’ said I to him, ‘that by whatever means she has escaped—*if escaped she has*—that she is beyond the reach of your power.’

‘If she has escaped! What do you mean?’

‘I mean, that you have given me no proof that she is not concealed in some of the dungeon nooks at Fermanagh—there are plenty of them. When men seek evil to women, there are a thousand stratagems to which they can resort to conceal their guilty intentions.’

‘And how do you know, miserable man that you are, that you have not driven that defenceless child to seek her own destruction, though God forbid!’ said Father McMahon, boldly.

‘Why not search the precipitous rocks about your castle instead of coming here to waste valor and words on two aged men, as defenceless as the poor child so cruelly lost to us?’

‘Come up to Fermanagh, old dotard, and I’ll toss you over the battlements to explore them yourself!’ he replied fiercely.

‘Remember, Lord Hugh Maguire,’ I added in a solemn tone, ‘that however high a haul you carry with us, and with your menials, there is a human power to which you are amenable, and which you recognise. I mean the Law, which, when cognizant of the strange disappearance of Ellen Ahern, your kinswoman as well as mine, from your roof, will hold you responsible for her. It is known positively, and can be legally proved, that you held her in durance and conspired against her honor. She was last seen under your roof, and there is evidence to prove that the place was so effectually guarded as to prevent either ingress or egress, and I forewarn you, miserable man, that you are in peril on her account.’

Upon which, although his cheek paled, he laughed derisively and swore that but for my age he would strike me across the face; then turned on his heel and left the house. And so things stand, a *suissh*. The weather is bitter and inclement—want and poverty are the great spectres that dwell beside the Castle of Fermanagh; but be comforted, there are many of your old friends beyond their power; they sleep sweetly beneath the sod at Cathagaura, and their souls—Christ grant—are forever at peace in that land where forever more, all that are wiped away. Alice Rierdan and her girls were taken up, and committed to prison for poaching. They were tried at the late assizes, and there seemed not the shadow of a hope but that they would be transported, when at the moment the Judge was charging the jury in walked their cat with a dead rabbit in her mouth, and laid it down demurely at his feet. She could not get into the enclosure where Alice and her daughters stood awaiting their sentence, on account of the crowd, hence her choice of the Judge as the recipient of her unlawful booty. Of course, there was a shout of uproarious laughter, in which his Honor joined, and it ended in an acquittal. It is said they have gone south. Fahey has grown thin and weak since. He will never hear the last of that cat. He never appears in public, that ‘scat’ is not shouted at him, in shrill tones, byurchins who take good care to keep out of sight, and many a broad joke is thrown in his teeth by people who bear him no good will. Thus, with Lord Hugh Maguire’s furious and exacting temper, is wearing the wretch out. I had a letter yesterday from the Senor Giron. He writes despondingly, having failed to obtain the slightest clue to the two persons,—Mary Ward and her son,—whom he is seeking. He enclosed a letter for you in a blank envelope, which I direct to your address. If its contents are what I hope, do not decide without consideration, for of all the world—child of my heart—there is no man to whom I would so willingly confide your happiness. Your absence has added a weight of many years to my age. Shall I ever see you again? Alas! but let us hope. In the knowledge that Desmond Maguire really lives, I see a glimmering of better things. Father McMahon sends his blessing and his love in which I write. Yours, until death,

EADNA AHERN.

Ellen Ahern wiped off the fast-falling tears, glanced once more at the familiar hand-writing, kissed the honored name of her kinsmen, and folded the letter slowly and deliberately laid it away in her portfolio. What should she find in the Senor Giron’s letter? Her fingers trembled, and a warm glow flushed her face as she broke the seal. What did she hope, yet fear to read? Calm, respectful, and tender, as if written by an elderly brother to an absent sister, the writer hoped that she was well and happy; that her voyage had been speedy and pleasant, and that she had found such friends as her virtues merited. Then he informed her of his safe arrival in Spain, and of frequent interviews with his friend, Desmond Maguire, who never wearied of talking about his fair kinswoman, and questioning him concerning her. The theme was a pleasant one to him, he said, and so truthful had been his delineations that his kinsman declared his intention of seeking her favor, and laying his inheritance, name, title, and estates at her feet if Providence blessed him with success in regaining them. In this design, he wrote ‘I encourage him. My feelings towards you are too unselfish to desire it to be otherwise, and if, dear Miss Ahern, at some future day I shall see you the wife of that chief of your house, and the possessor of ample wealth, which I know so well would be worthily applied, I shall feel that I have not loved in vain. Let me then, as the best reward I can ask for any little service that I may have, under Providence, been able to render you, implore you to think of Desmond Maguire with feelings which, when you come to know him better, will easily ripen into love. As to myself, deformed and without any of these blandishments so winning to the female heart, what have I to look forward to, except to a life of loneliness and isolation, debarred by my misfortune from those sacred and sweet associations, without which *ada’s* life is barren. And yet methinks I see the flash of your eye, and hear you exclaim in your own lofty and earnest way, ‘Barren! Find a fruition of happiness in living for others.’ I obey. I will, with God’s help, live for others. I am even now living, struggling, hoping for others through my love for one; and although thus far unsuccessful, I will not despair. Ere you receive this, I shall be again in Ireland.—My friend thinks—perhaps with good reason—that the two persons whom we are seeking, and on whose testimony depends his restoration to his name, title, and fortune—are living under an assumed name somewhere in the North. I shall endeavor, for his sake and yours, to find them.—I shall see Lady Fermanagh again, and use the knowledge I possess in restraining the excesses of her son. Thank God, dear Miss Ahern, that you are pleasantly situated in your new home.—I hope it will not however be long when Desmond Maguire, re-established in his rights, will seek to win you back to Ireland—to Fermanagh.

Ever yours,

ENRIQUE GIRON.

‘And so,’ said Ellen Ahern, as the letter dropped from her hand, ‘the dream is over; my first, fair, noble dream! From henceforth he must be nothing to me. Desmond Maguire! He thinks, does he, because I am a poor cousin that I am to be won by his sovereign will. Not so. I shall be glad, nay, I will be thankful if he recovers his inheritance, but not sufficiently so to say ‘yes’ to his wooing, because he consents to think it would be a proper and judicious thing to unite the two branches of an ancient house. And Senor Giron calmly urges his claim; seems to think it not only practicable but desirable, and tells me that his deformity cuts him off from the love of woman kind. That is his meaning.—

What is deformity to a nature so lofty and beautiful as his? Simply a tool which makes the splendid worth of the real man, the indwelling purity of his nature, and the excellence of his attributes more apparent. I shall write this day and let him know that my kinsman need entertain no such plans. I have no desire to marry. I am willing to labor. I shall spend my life for the good of others. But no; I cannot write.—Some untoward word, some unpremeditated expression, might convey to him a meaning, which now I must forever conceal—a secret which I must never cease to guard while life lasts.’

And as these thoughts rose and fell with every heart-throb, Ellen Ahern’s countenance grew rigid and stern, and tears flashed in her eyes, but did not fall. Until then she did not know how imperceptibly she had learned to love Don Enrique, and now in the self-same hour she was taught how utterly hopeless such love was.—Founded on the noblest and purest basis, it was no common love, and now that sentence of death had been passed on it, what to do with the strange, bitter brief, that must follow, she could not tell. It came down into her heart riving like a thunder-bolt, and she felt only conscious of the wild waste it had suddenly made of her secretly-blossoming womanly hopes. Then a something iudly suggested sacrifice, and with the thought came the recollection of how Abraham offered Isaac, the child of his prayers, and the precious blossom of his old age; and how Jephtha offered Miriam, when crowned with roses and gers she came forth dancing to the sweet sounds of music, to welcome and congratulate him on his victories. Why then should not she offer this, her first-born beautiful love, purified by humility and sanctified by suffering, unto Him Who had created the heart, which through this love was so grievously wrong. And thus she sat pondering, when Therese came back to resume her lessons. She stooped down and picked up the letter which had fallen at her feet, and folding it up, placed it in her portfolio beside the other, feeling all the while as if a shadow had come down over her life. She assisted Therese in her lessons, explained and illustrated whatever was obscure in them to her, and went through the usual afternoon routine as calmly and patiently as if nothing had happened to interrupt the serenity of her life. She felt that henceforth her life was one of duty; it would require patience, but most of all, grace, to perform her part well and patiently, and she thanked God that work was at hand for her in the education and training of the motherless child, Therese. She would, out of her own blighted life, make that—as far as she could—fair and beautiful; guard its purity, develop its germs of goodness, guide its instincts and be patient and unweary in the eradication of its faults. She would not seek for or expect reward in this life, she would only use her disappointment as a spur to her energies, and efforts to overcome herself. These were her heroic resolves; such the refuge that she sought, and thus the sought by elevated aims to forget the thorns, and dreariness of the narrow path she had chosen. The conflict was sharp and brief, and left her very pale; the pallor was like the grave shadow of death, and her eyes were heavy and leaden.—Therese did not at first observe it, but on looking up to answer some question of Miss Ahern, she saw the change, and throwing aside her book, she stole up to her side, and timidly passing her arm about her neck, inquired if she was ill?

‘Not ill, dear Therese, only oppressed here,’ she replied, laying her hand on her breast, ‘I shall be better by and by.’

‘I have been very stupid, Miss Ahern,’ said Therese, leaning her head down on Ellen’s shoulder, ‘I will be more attentive in future.’

‘Dear child,’ said Ellen Ahern, kissing the bowed head, and wending her arm closer about her, ‘you have done, ought to grieve me. Do not think it. I am perhaps a little home sick.’

‘Then I know you will go away from me.—Oh do not leave me, Miss Ahern. I will try to make this, my—our—your home, pleasant to you, by doing all that you desire. Only think how friendless and lonely I shall be if you go away,’ sobbed Therese.

‘I shall not leave you, Therese,’ said Ellen Ahern firmly. ‘You console me, dear child. I should not know what to do without you. I shall not leave you. Come, we will go into the drawing-room; the music lesson must not be neglected. All I ask is, that whenever you may chance to notice that I look ill, do not question me. Quiet and thought are the only antidotes that are efficacious.’

‘Only love me, and stay with me, Miss Ahern, and I will keep secret, although it will make me very sorrowful to see you looking ill and troubled,’ replied Therese. Ellen Ahern’s temples throbbed, and ached painfully during the time that Therese was playing over her long and difficult lesson, but every false note was corrected, every awkwardness in fingering and position observed as usual, and then she sat down at

the piano, when Therese finished, and played the piece over once or twice to give her a better idea of how it ought to be done. This brought them to dinner time, after which followed the afternoon walk, which terminated the evening at St. Stephen’s, then home again; tea—the study hours afterwards, and at last rest and solitude. It had been a long, weary day to Ellen Ahern; the hours had seemed to drag themselves more slowly along than she ever known before; she almost fancied that the sun had stood still, but it was over now—darkness and quiet had come down over the earth like the caress of a dying mother to her sorrowing child, and in the seclusion of her own room she sat down to look into the face of the sudden grief that had stricken her. She opened and read once the letters she had that morning received.

‘Deformed!’ she repeated, bitterly. ‘Did I ever tell him that he was deformed, or shriek from him on account of it, that he should make a parade of it now? With that magnificent head, and that glorious face, impressed so gradually with the image and likeness of his Creator, in which every lineament expresses the majesty of intellect and the truthfulness of the soul within, how dare he speak of deformity? Alas! to be so great and yet so little—to demean his own innate nobleness and beauty, his strength and grace of mind, his lofty and pure qualities, by making it subservient as it were to a solitary misfortune, which will make his life solitary and fruitless.’ And then a tender pity stole into her heart and thought that her earthly hopes could have aspired no higher than companionship for life, with the strong, earnest, high-toned nature of Senor Giron. But she felt that such dreams were useless and hopeless now. She did not know to what an extent she had cherished them, until they were wrecked. And as she sat thinking how she should remedy the evil, she knew there was no doubt but that these fair and broken hopes, these dreams of the past, would recur again and again; she was only human she did not expect to annihilate them, but she also knew that their sweetness would more and more diminish, until a beautiful, soul-strengthening bitterness would predominate in her choice, and she would in the end look back on it all as a discipline her life had needed; a lesson that her inexperienced heart required. Such struggles are nothing new. While some few find favor with God and are chosen the original labor of heaven, those who are left are subject, amongst other ills, to those heart trials which in a peculiar manner embitter the life of woman. There are not many living who could not tell a history of recent pain and struggle akin to the one we are relating, and who, but for that, would never have won the heroic endurance with which they bear the burdens and ills of after life. One of these sharp conflicts strips life of much of its cheater, and teaches precious lessons of wisdom to those who are called to suffer in this way. Ellen Ahern did not attain the power of renunciation at once—that would have been a miracle—but she no sooner discovered the strait she was in, than like a true, pure-minded woman, she established an aim, which, by steadily pursuing it, would not only extricate her from it, but discipline her mind and soul. She was a stranger to sentimentality and supineness, and there was something heroic in her nature which, even if she had been a pagan, would have taught her how to suffer and grow strong, but now guided by higher and holier than earthly motives she sought to make the fruit of her sufferings an ‘offering worthy heaven,’ and consecrate the strength that they might impart to the honor and glory of God.

This was the result of that midnight cogitation, she would have to think of it over and over again, become accustomed to it, and define it clearly, until the path of her duty was distinctly marked out and beaten down before her; then she would begin to hope for peace, and not until then expect to think of her disappointment as a dream. Tenderly reverent and sweetly subdued she sought the Sacraments the next morning to strengthen herself in her good resolves, and console her in her weakness, for well did she know that earth has no antidote for earth-born sorrows; no healing or building up for the hope it has demolished; and she deemed herself blessed and highly favored in knowing that it was her privilege to fill up with Heaven those uselessly rents that had disfigured her heart and broken the harmony of her natural life. How differently did she feel at this Mass from any that she had ever assisted at before.—How much more intimate and direct seemed the union between herself and Him, Who, concealing the fullness of His Divinity under the Sacramental veil, came forth from the Tabernacle to become her food and guest, now that like a little helpless child bereft of all natural ties and buffeted by some untimely sorrow, she came confidently to his footstool, dependant on His protection and help, and having no one else on whom to lean! Other sorrows and griefs she had encountered, but none that had so shorn her of her strength as this, and cast her so helpless on the assistance of Heaven.