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NEILL O'DONNELL; OR, THE MISER'S HEIR.

CHAPTER V.

Nance's rhetoric having completely silenced any compunctious visitings in Neill, he, after partaking of a comfortable meal, sallied out to purchase a dress for the ball, which had particularly struck his fancy the preceding day.

Provided with a large cloak to conceal his person, he passed unnoticed through the streets, and arrived at Vernon House. Jest and jibe, jeer and repartee, keen and pointed, were showered in profusion at him by the mob who assembled outside, amused themselves by guessing at the persons, and criticising the various characters as they stepped from their respective vehicles.

'Arra, clear the way, wid yees all, make way for the General! Whorror! yer honor's the first that come on the trotters, so pay yer footin' now, and give us something to drink.'

'Blood alive! who's that slasher? Fax! I dunno rightly; but I suppose it's the Lord Leftenant, barru he happened to forget his horses.'

'Fortunes told—fortunes told, To the young, to the old, To the brave, to the fair, Every fate I declare.'

'These words, chanted in a rich, musical voice beside him, struck like a familiar chord upon Neill's heart; he turned, and beheld a figure attired in the gay and becoming costume of a gitana or Spanish gipsy, the upper part of the face was concealed by a half mask of black velvet similar to those worn by the ladies of the court of Henri Quatre, leaving visible only a pair of ruby lips, a row of pearly teeth, and a chin and throat fairer than usually fall to the lot of a gipsy.'

'Oertes, fair ladies, show your hands, I'll promise you husbands, and titles, and lands; I'll promise you pleasures rich and rare; I'll promise you children brave and fair; Then ladies, fair ladies, the price is small, For the fifth of a crown I'll promise you all.'

'Ha!' said the gipsy, archly, 'does the follower of the gallant Charles wish me to foretell his destiny? Fear not to show your hand noble cavalier—'

'Deep skilled am I in cabalistic lore And oft the witch's wand and spell have bore.' Come, I have scarce presaged aught but happiness to-night, and many a noble heart and gentle bosom has throbb'd higher and happier from my auguries.'

With a thrill of delight Neill surrendered his hand. The gitana perused its complicated lines with mysterious gravity, then sung—

Many a line Doth here entwine; Fortune's fretwork In future's network; Love has crosses, Gains have losses.

'In plain English,' said the fair Sybil, laughing at Neill's, puzzled air, 'your star is in the ascendant; the line of life is strong and vigorous. Fortune smiles, and Venus is propitious; but, beware; you are a daring archer, and may fly your arrow too high.'

The latter words were said in a lower voice, and the gitana abruptly turned away. The music struck up its inspiring strains, and the greater number of the gay company were soon treading the fantastic mazes of the dance. Neill looked eagerly around for the gitana, but she had suddenly disappeared. After a vain search, he threw himself, somewhat vexed and disappointed, into a seat beside the door, and continued watching the giddy evolutions of the motley figures on the floor.

A faint sigh near him suddenly startled him, he looked round and beheld the object of his search leaning in a listless attitude against a marble column, at a little distance from him. Neill eagerly petitioned for her hand for the ensuing dance. The laugh which broke from the gipsy, had something of mockery in its musical tones.

'First, tell me, do you dance well, gentle Cavalier?' said she, after a pause, 'during which she stripped a tall candelabrum, beside her, leaf by leaf, of its wreath of evergreens.'

'Dance! I could dance to eternity if you were my partner,' whispered Neill, in his softest and most insinuating tones, at the same time slightly pressing the hand of the gipsy; 'and, as for dancing well never fear but I can dance in first rate style, my dear, that is if the touch of this little white hand don't bewilder me.'

Neill had not overrated his Terpsichorean powers, for though all unskilled in the elegant minuet and nice formalities of the drawing-room, with the exception of a few odd blunders, such as entangling himself now and then with his sword, and once tearing the scarf of the lady with the peaked toe of his boot, he acquitted himself to admiration both in dancing and in his subsequent attendance on his fair partner.

Laugling, chatting, and in his elevation of his spirits, even tossing off some of his French and Spanish gibberish, at which the gitana laughed heartily; he exerted his utmost powers to please during the occasional pauses in the dance. In the height of his glee he was startled by an abrupt exclamation from the gipsy. Leaning against the opposite wall he saw a tall figure dressed in the garb of a Cossack or Tartar who appeared intently watching their movements. But observing that his scrutiny had excited observation, he suddenly moved away amid the crowd. The lady now appeared tired, and Neill led her to a sofa, and in compliance with her invitation seated himself beside her. Neill's felicity was now complete, for he more than suspected who sat beside him, but to add to it, the gipsy complained of heat, and taking off her mask disclosed the lovely countenance of Miss Lilly Vernon. This proceeding encouraged Neill, who took off his also, which, to tell the truth, he had all along felt very uneasy in. An affected start, a slight pout, and an arch smile, betrayed the lady's recognition of her handsome admirer.

Neill forgot all his uneasiness and the hours passed like minutes. They spoke of Ireland; Miss Vernon had never been in it since a child, but she loved it, she said, better than any other land beneath the broad canopy of heaven. Neill could have knelt and worshipped her for the words. Here was a theme he was master of—from boyhood he had been familiar with her history. How oft had he listened with delight to his uncle when in some happier mood the old man would dilate upon the ancient glories, or relate some of the old heroic legends of the past. In speaking of these Neill seemed changed into a new being, no trace of the confusion or embarrassment of ignorance was perceptible in his manner; his mind rose to the natural elevation of his thoughts, and triumphing over the defects of education, lent a fervid and almost poetic eloquence to his language. The lady seemed struck, and listened with wrapt attention, not a gesture interrupted, nor a smile derided the ardent enthusiastic, as with glowing cheek and kindling eye he spoke of the past glories of his native land.

He told of her ancient fastnesses, bristling castles, and battlemented courts, of the legendary loves of gentle damsels, and gallant chieftains, who had done startling deeds of 'high emprise,' and fought whole armies of invaders for one glance of their bright eyes; then of the virtues, wisdom and dauntless prowess of her olden heroes, of the wise Cormac, and him of the hundred battles; of the valiant Fionn, the great Fenian, illustrious Brian, and renowned Malchi; of the heroic chiefs Tyrone, O'Donnell, the wild O'Sullivan Beare, princely O'Donohue, and fierce MacCarthy More, the stern champions of her rights against Sannach and Dane. Last, he spoke of the once proud destiny of his own race, of their subsequent decay and poverty, and of his own orphan years and neglected childhood, until tears dimmed the bright eyes of his auditor.

He was still speaking when a sudden start and exclamation from the lady made him pause abruptly. He looked round and saw the form of the Cossack leaning with folded arms in a recess of an opposite window, sternly regarding them. Neill's first impulse was to start up and demand the reason of his scrutiny; but a glance at the agitated face of Miss Vernon prevented him, and at that moment the individual, perceiving that he was noticed, moved slowly away.

Supper was over, the dancing had ceased and the guests were departing, ere Neill could tear himself away from what had appeared to him a fairy scene. He descended to the hall, and, receiving his cloak from a servant, was in the act of flinging it round his shoulders when he perceived the figure of the Cossack standing beside him. He turned quickly round and beheld the stern face of young Vernon pallid from suppressed passion.

Moved by an impulse of shame, he could scarcely define, Neill fastened his mask more securely, and hastily pulling his hat over his eyes, he sprang down the steps. He had just turned into a narrow street which led to Nance's abode, when he heard the tread of several feet in rapid pursuit behind him. He listened and distinctly heard the voice of young Vernon urging them on. He stopped.

'Is it me you're looking for?' said he, sternly, to the foremost as he came up.

Without answering, the man aimed a blow at him. Neill skilfully avoided it, and, seizing him in his arms, they grappled violently together.—The rest of the party now came up.

'Ho! pull him to the ground, Jones,' said young Vernon; 'trample the vile dog!' and rushing between them, he struck Neill several severe blows of a heavy stick over the head and shoulders.

'Down base-born catiff!' said he; 'take that, kennel hound, and let it teach you never again to presume to thrust your vile presence into honorable company.'

The street was a dark and obscure one, so that Neill was unable to discover the number of his assailants, who now attacked him front and rear. Even with all the nervous strength of young and vigorous manhood, he found he could not prolong the unequal contest many minutes longer, so, making a desperate effort, he shook off two of the most powerful of his foes, and skilfully tripping up the heels of a third, he dashed down the narrow street. After the lapse of some minutes, he heard the whole party in hot pursuit behind, but his accurate knowledge of the obscure alleys and intricate windings of the town, and the darkness of the night, soon enabled him to set them at fault. Panting and breathless, he found himself at length alone. He seated himself on one of the landing steps of the old Custom House. The cold wind blew chill upon his heated frame, and a shudder crept over him.—His thoughts were one wild chaos; the stinging words of young Vernon had fallen like iron on his soul, and caused a complete revulsion of his nature. A painful, humiliating consciousness of his insane imprudence in forcing himself into the society of a class whose social position was so infinitely above him—but, above all, a maddening sense of shame, and a fierce desire to revenge the wrong that had been inflicted on him was paramount in his breast. He had received a blow, and, rude, untutored as he was, all the fierce proud blood of his mother's race fired in his veins at the insult;—no, not even from the brother of her he loved would he tamely bear it. He buried his face in his hands, and a hundred passionate schemes and wild, revengeful thoughts crowded into his brain.

Hours passed away, ere he rose from his dark and lonely resting place by the water's side. He left it an altered being—a chasm of years seemed filled up in the space: one rude touch had worked the crude elements of his character into strong and vigorous action, and the gay, warm and volatile feelings of youth, were suddenly exchanged for the grave thoughts, deep passions and decisive energy of matured manhood. With a prouder step and a sterner air he slowly retraced his way. The winter's night had been

long, yet the grey dawn was slowly breaking when he reached Nance's abode. But the kind, faithful creature was already up and preparing something for his refreshment.

'Welcome, welcome, darlin'; erra how did ye like the ball?—illegant to be sure; didn't myself go down to Vernon House to see the fun, an alliu! if id didn't dazzle my ould eyes—ivery windy stramin wid light, and such a sight of grand quality rowlin up in their carriages every minnit to the door. An, fax, id was the ladies that looked beautiful, but as for the gentlemen, och, that I mightn't sin if I saw one of 'em that could compare to my own curly headed darlin.'

Nance was so much engaged at first in her descriptive harangue, as not to observe that anything peculiar had happened Neill. But she started with dismay as a sudden flash from the fire revealed his face and torn and disordered garments. In answer to her anxious enquiries, Neill briefly and sullenly related the night's adventure.

'Ochone, wirrasthree, I tould ye how it ud be, avic deelsish,' said the old woman, wringing her hands; 'but ye wouldn't be said by me; and he struck you, did he, and another holdin ye? My curse light hot and heavy on the proud, cowardly Sannach; dear forgive me for sayin so; what blood there's in him, inagh; that's the bad blind, the devil's drop—molour, shure the likes of his whole seed, breed an generation wouldn't be fit to hold a candle to an O'Donnell any day.'

Regardless of the flood of invective which the old woman poured forth with all the bitterness of a warm and hasty temper, Neill threw himself on a pallet in a corner of the room and buried his face in the clothes. Nance, shortly after, took up her water picher, and softly latched the door after her, and he was left alone. In spite of his fatigue, he could not sleep, and the weary moments were spent in weaving plans and prospects for the future. At last he struck on one which he determined to follow. He concluded that a duel was the only resource left by which he could resent the wrong done him: he was ignorant of the mode of handling a sword or using a pistol, but he was master of sufficient funds to get himself instructed. He would go then to a foreign country, practice diligently for a month, and, at the expiration of that time, return and compel Vernon to give him satisfaction. This wild project infused new vigor into him, and, on Nance's return, he rose and imparted it to her. She was horror-stricken, and tried in vain to dissuade him from it. He continued firm and inflexible.

'Say no more, Nance,' said he, 'my mind is made up. I'll leave you what money will keep you above want, and, for my sake, nurse, forget any differences you had with my uncle, and when I'm gone, see that the old man does not want; he is looking worse than usual these late days, and sadly wants a little care and attention.— Promise me, Nance, that you won't neglect him, and I'll go away happy.'

Neill's firm and sorrowful manner awed and melted poor Nance completely. Bursting into tears, the affectionate creature flung her arms round his neck and blubbered out her incoherent intreaties for him to remain.

'Erra chora machrae, light of my eyes, shure id isn't going to lave yer ould nurse ye are; what'll I be widout hearing the light laugh and the merry voice that was music to my heart, and the poor ould man, shure it's he'll be lone and desolate widout ye! I'll do yer bidding to him, for I never had the ill-will agen the O'Donnell but on the 'count of fretting for you, darlin', that ever made me say a hot word agen him.— Ochone, ochone, jewel darling, think bether of id, and put them wild idals out of yer head.— Leave id all in the hands of God, and He'll see ye righted in the end.'

All the old woman's remonstrances were vain. That day Neill departed, and all she could learn of his destination was that he had taken passage in a small French vessel that happened to be off the coast.

At the expiration of a month Neill returned home. Nance was delighted to see her darling again, though she trembled when she found the stern purpose of his soul was still unbent, for her heart boded no happy result from a contest with one of the Vernons. But a marked change had come over young O'Donnell, and his nurse now felt too much in awe of him to venture her former homely remonstrances.

Neill's first step was to send for the only friend he could apply to in such an emergency; and this, strange to say, was an attorney of the name of McDermott. He possessed the entire confidence of the elder O'Donnell, and was the only person that transacted business for him; no slight proof of his merit, as the old gentleman was somewhat sceptical in his ideas of the honor and integrity of the gentlemen of the law, firmly believing, an opinion by the bye, entertained by many, that the entire profession could not produce one honest man. This anomaly was certainly found in the person of McDermott; for a

more honest, hospitable, good natured fellow never existed. He was much attached to Neill; and on his occasional visits to his uncle invariably slipped him some pocket money; he had once even ventured to hint to the O'Donnell the propriety of doing something for his nephew, but had received such a rebuff that he never repeated the attempt. Having heard of Neill's mysterious disappearance, he was surprised and delighted to receive a summons to attend him as speedily as possible, and was still more astonished to behold in the grave, self-possessed young man before him, the wild, ragged boy whose arch wit and droll sayings had so often provoked his laughter. But the good attorney's amazement reached its climax when Neill recounted to him the cause of his flight and his present business with him, which was to stand his friend in the intended meeting. McDermott had a most legal horror of firearms, cold steel, and all the other appliances for destroying, cutting, maiming or wounding his Majesty's lieges; so he tried hard to reason with O'Donnell, hinting that an application to young Vernon might be attended with an apology. This suggestion met with a prompt and unqualified refusal from the hot-headed youth; and he declared in no measured terms, his determination to obtain satisfaction for the insult he had received, and likewise his resolution not to allow McDermott to leave the room without his solemnly promising to act as his second. Half coaxed, half intimidated by threats, for bravery was not one of the cardinal virtues he possessed, the affrighted attorney sat down, quaking with trepidation, to write at Neill's dictation—a letter couched in calm but sorrowful and indignant terms. As he did so a host of legal penalties for writing hostile and threatening missives calculated to provoke one of his Majesty's subjects to commit a breach of the peace, floated before his eyes.

'To think,' muttered, or rather growled, he, 'that I, Denis McDermott, who have lived as peaceful as a child in Galway these thirty years and over, should be dragged by a wild scapegrace into a duel with a member of one of the most wealthy and respectable families in it! faith, he's as mad as his uncle: it must run in the family. Devil take me, what luck I had to come near him; and the good man scratched his bald head and literally shook as if laboring in an ague fit.'

CHAPTER VI.

The challenge having been signed, sealed and dispatched, Neill waited with some impatience for an answer. To his supreme satisfaction, and the mingled terror and astonishment of his legal friend, a messenger, after the lapse of an hour returned with a note which simply stated that the writer, Lieut. Vernon, would be ready to meet him at the appointed time. This having been arranged, the remainder of the evening was spent in chatting the news and relating O'Donnell's adventures. Under the potent influence of the potheen that Nance provided, McDermott, who loved a jovial glass, forgot his fear; and even grew so valiant before they parted for the night, as to declare he had not the slightest objection to the intended meeting and had rather a strong notion of calling out that puppy Vernon himself, on account of his having nearly ridden his horse over him at the races the preceding week, and laughed most impudently at his falling in the mud in his haste to get out of his way.

Having seen McDermott comfortably ensconced in Nance's bed, for Neill was by no means so confident in his professions of valor as to trust him out of his sight, he inquired how his uncle had taken his desertion, a question he had hitherto been too eager and excited to ask before.

'Faikes, alanna,' replied Nance, 'I had to make a stretch of a lie on the 'count of id. Och, that I mightn't sin if I didn't think he'd ate me the mornin' I went to him. I tould him you happened to meet wid a friend who had got you some employment in Dublin, an' that you had barely time to lave word wid me, as the man was just steppin' into the coach; an' I sed that you'd be sure to send him some money to make him comfortable; this quieted him finely, asthore, an' he tuk it quite aisy. Bad, dear knows, darlin' I don't think O'Donnell is long for this world, he's ever an' always moanin' and mutterin' to himself, and he's got the bad sign of prickin' an' pullin' everything near him; them that's got that's not expected; an' sure I brought him the finest mate and broth an' gev him the best of usage while you was away; indeed, give him his due, he forgot ould scores an' clung to me so close that he couldn't bare to lave me out of his sight; beia'lonely, darlin'; the crature was cravin' widin for something to cling to. An' hadn't I Miss Lilly in here, every mornin'; she used to come in to rest herself after her walk. Och, but she's the rare beauty, an' small blame to you to love her, an' such a sweet, gentle way wid her; too, that you'd fairly go on your two knees to serve her—no ways, like her grand, proud brother. And, 'deed, she said, she missed you, an' sed you to know how you was; but when I sed you was in