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THE RIVALS.

By Gerald Griffin.
CHAPTER XV.

Esther was standing near the cottage window, and looking out upon the storm-lit lake, when her husband hurried into the apartment, exhausted from his late adventure, and from the speed with which he had hurried downwards from the glen. He disguised the cause of his agitation from Esther, and was occupied in quiet converse with her, when they were surprised by the entrance of a servant, to say that there were three Pealers outside bearing a wounded gentleman in a cloak, who had come to request a lodging for the night.

"Not here! not here!" said Francis, in deep agitation.

"Not here, Francis?" echoed Esther, in surprise.

"He is ravin' mad, sir," said the servant; and the man say his head is touched some way."

"Masther Frank," said Lenigan, thrusting his head into the room, "he's abroad an' a' most dead. If it's a bleeder he wants, I have a lancet here in my pocket, an' I'll do the business in a minute."

Francis paused for a moment in deep thought, and then, suddenly turning to the servant, he bade the strange gentleman be carried into the little room which lay on the far end of the cottage, and desired that Davy should instantly attend with his lancet, while one of the horsemen rode off for a more experienced medical attendant.

"And now, Esther," said Francis, closing the door after the servants, "what's to be done?—This gentleman is an old friend of your's."

"Of mine, Frank!"

"Aye, of yours. And not the least esteemed, nor the least successful amongst them, neither. This man is Lacy."

"Oh, Francis," exclaimed Esther, suddenly clasping his shoulder, and looking in his face with an expression of mingled pity and alarm, "I hope he is not hurt to danger."

"I hope so too—heaven knows, I hope so too," said her husband, with sincere emphasis. "He received the injury from me, in an effort which I made to save myself from an assault that was made by him upon my life."

Very soon after, Davy re-entered, to say that the magistrate had received but a very slight injury, and that he would, had it not been for the urgency of his attendants, have got on horseback once more with the view of returning to his own abode. Riordan then gave Esther a detailed account of the occurrence which had taken place at the fall.

"He is beneath my roof!" he exclaimed, as he concluded, standing erect, and lifting his hand into the air—"He is beneath my roof, and therefore let him take his rest in peace! He is helpless and a stranger, and therefore let his million crimes be covered, while he stays. For this, I speak not of his causeless hate—his unremitting wiles against my fame and life—his bloody practices upon my poor dependants—my own long exile from my native soil—the agony of my return—the loss of the best years of my existence—all these, and this last treacherous effort at my life, must be forgiven for this night. To-night he is your guest, Esther."

He left the house, after cautioning Esther to avoid the eyes of the strangers, and hurried off to a neighboring cottage, inhabited by the family of one of his servants. Esther, in the mean time, remained in the cottage in deep perplexity of mind.

Two or three times before midnight, Francis returned on some pretext or another, and Esther thought that at each time there was something paler and sterner in his aspect than before. She questioned him on many subjects, but his answers were vague and absent. He asked hastily some questions concerning Lacy, paced gloomily up and down the little apartment, and, at length, turning hastily to Esther, said:

"Is it not hard that one should be forced to play the cony about one's own house to avoid this Lacy?"

"Well, but for one night, Francis."

"How the wind howls yet! 'Tis a horrid night!"

"His attendants say that he will by no means consent to remain longer than the night."

"Indeed?"

"And it was with difficulty they prevented his sudden departure on the instant."

"I would that they had let him go," said Francis, in a deep tone, and if unconscious of being heard.

"And wherefore Francis?"

He did not answer the question, but continued for a long time to gaze in deep abstraction on the window.

"Esther," said he, I have changed my mind. I will not sleep out to-night."

From some undefinable cause, Esther felt a sudden alarm at this new resolution. She imagined that her husband had formed the intention

of visiting Lacy, in his chamber, and she could form no idea of any desirable termination to such a meeting. After vainly endeavoring to sound her husband's purpose, she resolved to baffle it at all events, by a course of action which had something in it scarcely less hazardous than the recourse which she feared.

Returned fully to the consciousness of his condition, Richard Lacy passed the night in an agony of mental torture, in the comparison with which the physical suffering that he endured was trivial. Stretched upon the rack of passion, and stung by the assaults of the direst species of remorse, the sense of guilt intended and attempted, not enjoyed, his imagination magnified the miseries of his condition and awoke within his heart the first thought of fear which he had entertained for many a day.

He believed that his hurt was likely to be productive of more serious effects than were anticipated by his attendants, and many hours were consumed in gloomy meditation on the nature of the change which death might bring to him.—He pictured to himself the spirit of Esther Wilderming reposing in that paradise, in the existence of which, the course of his early education and the movements of his reason taught him to believe, and he referred, with a wild uneasiness, to the character of his own life, and its probable retribution.

While he thought of these things, sitting dressed in an arm-chair, he heard one of the servants, an old woman, sing, in a low voice, an Irish song, of which the following is a translation. It struck him forcibly, at the time, as it represented a kind of sorrow for which he had often given occasion—the grief of a mother for a perished son:

My darling, my darling, when silence is on the moor,
And, lone in the sunshine, I sit by our cabin door;
When evening falls quiet and calm over land and sea,
My darling, my darling, I think of past times and thee!

Here, while on this cold shore I wear out my lonely hours,
My child in the heavens is spreading my bed with flowers.
All weary my bosom is grown of this friendless clime:
But I long not to leave it, for that were a shame and crime.

They bear to the church-yard the young in their health away,
I know where a fruit hangs more ripe for the grave than they;
But I wish not for death, for my spirit is all resigned,
And the hope that stays with me gives peace to my aged mind.

My darling, my darling, God gave you to my feeble age,
A drop for my faint heart, a stay in my pilgrimage:
My darling, my darling, God takes back his gift again;
And my heart may be broken, but ne'er shall my will complain.

When the song was ended, and while Lacy lay indulging the reflections to which it gave occasion, a slight noise, on one side of his bed, made him turn round and gaze in that direction. His attendants were sleeping on pallets in the kitchen, after having been plentifully supplied with drink from the parlor, and a deep silence fell on all the house.

Some person had pushed in the door, but seemed unwilling to enter. After waiting for a few moments in suspense, Lacy demanded to know who was there, but received no reply.—He waited for a little time and repeated the question, still without effect. A third time, after a long pause, he renewed the query, with some little anxiety of mind, and a third time it remained unanswered. He turned away, rather annoyed, and in the action thought he could discern the flitting of a white dress across the threshold of the door. He turned again, and saw, indeed, a figure completely attired in white, and with a head-dress which fell down so far over the forehead as to conceal every feature except the chin from observation, and that was paler than the drapery through which it appeared. Even this single indication was sufficient to freeze the blood of Lacy with a terrific recognition, and he sat up in the chair in an access of sudden horror. It needed not the approach of that slow-moving figure; it needed not the lifting of the rigid hand; it needed not the removal of that heavy veil; and the sight of the long pale features, and glassy eyes that were beneath, to convince the frightened invalid that he was, in the presence of the shade of Esther Wilderming.

For a time, his terror swallowed up every other feeling, and he could do nothing but pant and gape and stare upon the figure, while he leaned forward on both his hands, his eyes dilated, and his parted lips drawn downward at the corners with an expression of deep-seated horror. His brow became in one minute white, red, moist, and glistening; now cold as earth, and now burning with a sudden fever. The light seemed to change its color; the objects in the room dilated and grew indistinct, the sounds,

that were before so gentle that the silence of midnight scarcely served to make them audible, seemed now to have acquired a strange and preternatural loudness, and the sense of feeling became so painfully acute, that the floating atoms in the air were felt distinctly as they settled on his brow.

"Esther," he hoarsely murmured, after several vain efforts to articulate the word, "what is it that troubles you?"

She raised her hand as if with a cautionary action.

"Speak to me!" said Lacy, still in deep agitation, "speak to me, though you loved me not in life. Oh, Esther, speak at once—if you are ill at ease, and there be anything in Lacy's power to give you peace, make him blessed by telling it."

As he raised his voice, in the vehemency of his adjuration, the figure slowly repeated the former action. Lacy started back, in sudden terror, at every movement of the spectre, and felt a difficulty in mustering his spirits again to address it.

"The innocent," he said at length, in a low and earnest voice, "the innocent, it is said, fear ye not. I have not that security. The blood of many victims, the sufferings of youth, the tears of age, the groans of severed hearts, and homes bereaved of joy, the memory of passions long indulged, and feasted upon crime and human woe, all these surround me in this fell extremity, and tear away my trust in days gone by. I have not the security of innocence, and yet behold, my Esther, I fear not you! All terrible as you are, wrapt in the pomp of death, and clothed in all the horrors of the grave, I fear you not! though my limbs tremble, and my nerves are dragged to agony, though my eyes wander, tho' my speech grows hoarse, and though the blood is thickening at my heart, I fear you not, I love you through my fears! Oh, by these trembling limbs, this scared and terrified, yet doating heart, these eyes that you have long bereft of light, I pray you Esther, speak to me! Come nearer, though it be to blast me—Come!—I will not believe that you would injure me, for you were ever gentle and forbearing, and where is the hand that could inflict a pain upon the heart that loves it? But whether you be come in anger or love, in mercy or in vengeance, yet welcome to my presence, Esther Wilderming. In life or death, there still is rapture in your company."

He paused suddenly, as the figure again, elevated one hand and seemed about to speak.—Still as a statue he remained, with his eyes riveted upon the parted lips of the appearance, while the words came forth, distinct and low, and almost without a motion of the feature.

"Hear me!" said Esther.

The first accents of her voice made Lacy shrink quickly down, like one who is startled by a sudden and terrific sound.

"I am your friend, and come to warn you," continued the figure. "Arise, and leave this house."

"Wherefore?"

"You are in danger. Wait not one other hour. Depart in silence and with speed."

"Who is my enemy?"

"That must not be revealed. But you have many. I would not leave you in the danger of any one's revenge."

"I am guarded, Esther."

"Do not trust to that. Silence and the night are fearful accessories against you. Revenge can use the noiseless pace of Murder. It grows in secret, it walks in silence, it glides to its design as rapidly, it strikes as deadly and as deep."

"And you are come then, kind and gentle shade, to save a life so worthless as my own?"

"I never wished you ill, and do not now.—Richard, if ever you valued my entreaties, refuse not to comply with this. Arise with secrecy and diligence, and leave this house at once."

"Behold, I obey you on the instant, Esther. Yet stay!"

"Hark! some one stirs!"

"The house is silent."

"Speak quickly, then, and low."

"Tell me if you are happy?"

Esther sighed.

"Oh, hide not from me any thing of your condition, Esther. Tell me by what strange toils, what prayers, what sufferings, I yet may hope to meet you in a happier world. Tell me, and tho' you bid me to surrender all my earthly schemes of glory, though you should bid me shake Ambition off, and cease to dream of power and wealth and honor; though you should make my path in life a waste, teach me to curb my fiery impulses;—I will cast all away upon the second and be a humble, passionless and self-tormenting penitent, wasting my noons and nights in prayer and agony; and only living on the hope of meeting you in peace and happiness. Where dwell you, in what land, for there must be the limit of my wanderings?"

"Vain man!" said Esther, after contemplating

the enthusiast for some moments with an expression of mingled pity and severity, "Mistaken man, how passion has eaten up your understanding. It is not by a motive such as this, so earthly-born, so self-interested, that you can ever hope with justice to influence your fate in the hands of Him who is to judge you. Dismiss from your remembrance all thought of these intemperate passions, to which you have sacrificed so much of your own and others' happiness, repair the wrong you have inflicted, redress the misery you have occasioned, dry up the tears that you have caused to flow, light up the hearths you have made dark and lonely, and do all this, not for the love of earth and earthly passions, but for the sake of virtue and its Author."

"You speak, alas! to one," said Lacy, "insensible to such a motive, insensible to all except that one absorbing passion which has diffused itself throughout his whole existence, and become, indeed, himself. The time has long gone by when I could think so anxiously of death. Its terrors have grown stale upon my fancy, and now, my conscience seldom hurts me that way. If I cannot be virtuous for your sake, I never can be for my own."

Here the figure started slightly, as if in alarm, and assumed for a moment the attitude of close attention.

"I must depart," were the next words of Esther; "farewell, delay not long beneath this roof; and oh, remember my injunctions."

"Hold!" cried Lacy, aloud, and springing suddenly to his feet, "you have not answered yet my single question."

"I cannot now."

"Ah, Esther, leave me not unsatisfied. You shall not pass!" he added, with a rapid wildness of manner, as the figure glided toward the door. She raised her hands and laid one finger close upon her lips as if enjoining silence. Lacy obeyed the signal, but would not abandon his place between her and the door. At that moment a sudden noise in the next room made him start and look around. When he again assumed his former attitude, the apparition had fled. He saw only the shimmer of a white dress through the darkness, and in the next instant was alone.

Exhausted by the exquisite degree of excitement to which his feelings had been just wound up, he sunk down, powerless, into a chair, his arms hanging drearily to the ground, and his head depending on his shoulder. In this condition he was once more startled by the entrance of one of his men, who had occasioned the noise already mentioned. In so feverish a state the slightest appeal to an external sense, acted on his frame with an electric violence. He leaped up once more from his seat, confronted the intruder, who was no other than his creature Tobin, and, finding his terror vain, burst suddenly into rage.

"Ruffian!" he said, "how dare you break so rudely on my presence? Who are you? What's your business?"

"Ha!" said the intruder, "ruffian, Mr. Lacy! That's a strange word to apply to a person of respectable connexions."

"Ah, Tobin, I knew you not."

"What is the matter, sir?"

"This house!" said Lacy, abstractedly, "what danger? from what hand?"

"I heard a noise in the room, and I thought I'd just step in to see whether you wanted anything."

"Tobin, come hither."

"Here's Tom Tobin, ever ready at a call.—What's your will?"

"Who is the owner of this house?"

"A Mr. Johnson, I think; some fellow of low English extraction, I suspect. A fellow of no family. And yet 'tis such fellows that live in such little elysiums as this, while the Blakes, the O'Donnells, the Fitzgeralds, the Butlers, the O'Shaughnessys, the O'Tooles, the O'Lones, the O'Donoghues, the McCarthys, the McGillicuddy's, and all the cream and top of the old Irish nobility are scattered over the country, hedging and ditching, and tilling, as hired laborers, the lands which their ancestors won in fight, and held from father to son at the point of the sword.—But so it is:

Since every Jack became a gentleman, There's many a gentle person made a Jack.

"Tobin, I did not know you when you entered."

"Enough said: gentle blood is quickly up, but gentle speech will soon allay it, sir."

"I must leave this place to-night."

"To-night?"

"This very instant."

"And your hurt?"

"It is almost well. It need be no obstruction. Let us begone silently and with secrecy, for there is danger in the place. Away!"

Silencing the remonstrances of Tobin, Lacy pressed forward into the room where his attendants were sleeping in the chairs around the fire, and waked them up with caution. Signifying his wishes rather by actions than by words, he

made them comprehend his intention of departing instantly. The servant who had received directions as to his conduct from some sufficient quarter, appeared among them at the moment, and assisted in getting their horses ready, and making all preparations for their departure. A few minutes only elapsed before the echoing of their horses' hoofs had ceased to clatter along the lake and against the opposite mountain.

In returning to the house, the servant encountered his master, standing on the kitchen floor, and apparently in stifled agitation.

"Where are the strangers?" he said, in a low and subdued voice, while his eye was fixed with an expression of sternness upon that of his servant.

"They are gone, sir," said the latter.

"Who bade them go?"

"Themselves, sir, to come an' call for their horses an' be off."

Francis paused for a considerable time.

"Where's your mistress?" he asked at length.

"She is within, sir, readin' in the parlor."

"What did that gentleman say at parting?"

"Nothin' to me, sir."

"Go, go to your bed."

The servant left the place.

"It is better as it is," Francis muttered to himself, after a long pause. "I wished to have some conversation with him in his mood of suffering, but I am glad that it has happened otherwise."

CHAPTER XVI.

About a fortnight after this event, Francis was returning late in the evening through the village of Roundwood, when a sudden and heavy descent of rain compelled him to take shelter at an inn on the right hand. There had been a fair in the neighborhood, and the house was full of guests. The light, from the windows and the open door, streamed across the street, making the rain drops sparkle as they fell into its beams. The sound of mirth was loud within the house, and the uproar was but slightly diminished when Francis made his appearance. Wrapped in a white great coat, and with his hat drawn low upon his brow, he passed unrecognised among the crowd, and gained a distant corner, shadowed by the projecting porch of the fire-place, whence he might contemplate all the company, without incurring the observation of any.

The landlord was busy in his shop. A large fire sent light and heat through the room, and shone on many a merry countenance. On one side of the fire-place were a number of young men and girls, laughing loudly, while on the other sat a number of middle aged men, who were carrying on a graver conversation in which, nevertheless, many appeared highly interested.—The usual centre of attraction, in such scenes, a table and vessels for drink, was not forgotten here, though many preferred to sit apart, each with his own brown fount of inspiration, and worship Bacchus in Montmelic Ale.

"No Saint Patrick!" exclaimed one old man in a tone of surprise, while he gently moved the liquor in his pewter drinking vessel, "that's a droll thing."

"Why then it is," said another, "an' I heard it, for all. I heard Mr. Damer, over, prove it out of a book, that there wasn't such a man at all there, nor no talk of him, at the time."

"What's that you're sayin', Phil?" asked a hoarse voice from the corner.

"That Saint Patrick was never there at all, he's sayin'," replied the old man, turning round with a smile, as if in hope of finding some successful counter-argument.

"Saint Patrick, eroo?"

"Iss, then."

"Erra howl!"

"Faix, I'm in airnest."

"An' what's more, I believed him too," continued the retailer of the paradox, "until I was talking of it, after, to Mither Lenigan, the Latin teacher, an' he made light of it, in a minute, for sure, says he, if there was no Saint Patrick, what did they build the old ruins for? an' if they were built by any body, might'nt it as well be Saint Patrick as any body else?—Eh, now, Jerry?"

"It stands to reason, what you say."

"Erra, I wouldn't mind a word one o' them, convathers would be sayin' to me," said a young man, "they have arguments that would bother the Danes, an' you'd think the world couldn't gainsay what they'd tell you, an' when you'd be listenin' to the Priest, after, before two minutes, he wouldn't lave 'em worth a button."

"Well, it's all one," said an old flax dresser, in a corner, "these convatters—"

"Perverts, you should call 'em," interrupted a new voice, which was no other than that of Lenigan, "tisn't converted, they are, but perverted, the heavens look down upon 'em."

"Perverts, then, if it be perverts," I say there isn't one o' them but what comes round again in the latter end. When the world is slippin' away from under us, heaven save us, it is then the truth will break out for all."

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