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### A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER XIII.—A SUNDAY EVENING AT ESMOND HALL.

The young May moon was shedding her mild radiance into the spacious parlor, or rather saloon, in Esmond Hall, where the family were assembled one fair Sabbath evening with nearly the same party of friends as we first saw together there on Hollow-eve night some six or seven months before. Uncle Harry and his wife and Aunt Winifred had dined at the Hall, and Moran, and the Hennessys, and the O'Grady, having all dropped in during the afternoon, had willingly accepted Mrs. Esmond's invitation to remain for the evening. Harriet Markham was there, too; indeed, she made it a rule to spend part of every day with Mrs. Esmond, whose grief, never violent or demonstrative, had now assumed the form of gentle melancholy which those who knew her best expected to continue during her life. It was touching to see the meek, uncomplaining sadness that marked her look, and voice, and manner, yet she seldom or never recurred to the subject of her loss, and when the kind friends around strove to cheer and amuse her, she smiled her appreciation of their kindly efforts. But it was easy to see that sorrow had set its seal on her whole nature, mind and heart and all, and, as it were, dried up the well-springs of life, and hope, and joy. Yet she loved to have her friends around her, and listened with apparent interest to all they had to say.

The day was fading into night, and the moonbeams mingled faint and fair with the light of parting day, gradually dispelling the shadows of the twilight and ushering in the starry hours.—Harriet Markham and Mary Hennessy had been giving an account of their meeting on the Rock some months before on St. Bridget's Day, and the lively fancy of the young ladies had vividly portrayed, to the great amusement of the company, the meeting of two extremes in Bryan and Mr. Goodchild. The gentlemen laughed heartily at Bryan's caustic replies to the bland, smooth chaplain.

"That was very good," said Moran, "but not quite so good as the same gentleman's encounter with the fairy-woman."

"How was that?" said Maurice Hennessy.

"Why, did none of you hear of it? No, none of them had."

"Well, it seems the old dame manifested a touch of humanity some three weeks since when somebody's child died in her vicinity under circumstances of great misery. She came down from her perch late at night to beg what was necessary for laying out the corpse."

"I remember the night well," said Aunt Martha, "it was the child of that poor man Phil Murtha that was dead, and she died of misery and want, as the old woman told me."

"Nonsense, Martha," said her husband angrily, "I think you ought to know that Murtha better than to believe all you hear of his destitution.—He's a lazy, good-for-nothing vagabond, that's what he is—if he were not, would he take the bag on his shoulder, and go begging from door to door, as I hear he does? If I happen to get my eyes on him, upon my honor, I'll hand him over to the police as a vagrant!"

"Shame, shame, Harry!" said his wife, "do not for pity's sake, talk so wildly—why, to hear you, one would think that you were the greatest tyrant in the whole country."

"And, begging your pardon, madam, what do I care for what one thinks?"

"Well, well, Mrs. Esmond, don't mind," cried Moran, "pray continue. What more were you going to say?"

"Oh nothing, Mr. Moran, nothing, only that the old woman came to our house one evening late, as you say, and telling me what had happened, asked me for a sheet and a shroud in which to lay out the poor child."

Here her husband started angrily to his feet. "And you gave them, of course?"

"Certainly I did, would you have me to refuse such a petition?"

"Then, madam, you did what you had no right to do, knowing the feelings with which we are all regarded by those wretched creatures.—I forbade you before to give anything whatever to these people, and I think I had a right to expect that my command would have been obeyed!"

"Not where Christian charity is concerned Harry—assuredly not—you know yourself as well as I do that neither you nor any one else has a right to command anything contrary to the law of God and the law of nature."

"Why, Aunt Martha," said Hennessy, adopting the common appellation by which she was known in the Esmond family, "I gave you credit

for more penetration than I see you have.—Now don't you see that Uncle Harry is only joking?"

"Joking," repeated the old man with his wonted vehemence when excited; "joking, did you say, Hennessy? A pretty subject for joking, truly. Now my wife, knows as well as I do how much cause we all have to love these wretched people, who, after all their hypocritical lamentations for our murdered Harry, will not give up his murderer to justice!"

"Stop, stop, for God's sake!" cried Dr. O'Grady; "see what you have done now! and following the direction of his finger all eyes were turned on young Mrs. Esmond who had fallen back fainting in her chair."

"I don't care," said the harsh old man; "she'll get over her hysterics—but I tell you all, over and over again, that if the people about here weren't as bloodthirsty as himself, Jerry Pierce would be long ago in the hands of justice."

The ladies would fain have persuaded him to retire, fearing the effect that the very sight of him might have on Mrs. Esmond when she began to recover, but not one inch would the old Trojan move.

"Humph!" said he, "one would think I had Medusa's head on my shoulders. Henny is not such a puling baby as to be frightened at my old pliz."

"Oh, you shocking man!" cried Aunt Winifred as she knelt in front of the death-like figure of the young hostess holding a bottle of sal-volatile to her nose, while Mary Hennessy and Mrs. O'Grady rubbed her temples and hands with *eau de Cologne*; "oh, you very shocking bad man! you grow worse and worse every day; you'll be the death of us all—as you were of poor Harry!" she added letting her voice fall a very little.

"What's that you say, Winny?"

"She says, my dear," said his wife, with an admulatory glance at her sister-in-law, "she says we had better all keep quiet till Henny recovers."

"She does, eh?—why doesn't she keep quiet herself, then, by way of good example?"

The doctors thought it the better way to have Mrs. Esmond removed to her own room till such time as she had thoroughly recovered, naturally fearing the effect of Uncle Harry's harsh and careless brusquerie. In a few minutes the ladies all returned with the exception of Mary Hennessy, bearing Mrs. Esmond's compliments to the gentlemen that she hoped to meet them all at tea, if they could only continue to pass the intervening time agreeably.

"In that case, Moran," said Hennessy, "let us hear how the fairy-woman served Parson Goodchild. Did she practice her spells on that portly person?"

"You shall hear. It so happened that on the night to which reference has been made, the reverend gentleman being homeward bound from the rector's, where he had been dining, was riding along at a brisk pace towards the Castle, his mind probably full of the tales of blood and murder he had heard from the sapient rector and his guest who were always sure, to be the truest of 'true blue,' in other words, staunch haters of Popery, and pillars of the new Reformation established some years before by the far-famed Lady Farnham on the double basis of blankets and fat bacon. As young Douglas says in the play:—

"You moon which rose last night round as my shield, Had not yet filled her horn, when by her light' stepped forth from the shadow of the tall white-thorn hedge, 201

"A band of fierce barbarians from the hills' but a decrepid old hag wrapped and hooded in a red cloak. The horse was a little startled, perhaps so was his rider, but he managed to keep the animal in subjection, and was fain to continue his way; such, it appeared, was not the intention of the ancient dame who, suddenly extending her stick towards him, croaked out the remarkable words:

"Stop, I command you!"

All aghast and bewildered the chaplain stopped, wondering much what was to follow. Perhaps he had some misgivings that he had before him a robber in disguise.

"My good old woman," said he, "what is your purpose? What do you want?"

"I want some money for creatures that's almost dead with hunger and want."

"Oh, certainly," quoth the chaplain much relieved, "it is at all times a pleasant duty to relieve the wants of our fellow-creatures—and out of his vest-pocket he took a silver six-pence and handed it to the old woman, saying with a smile that he probably thought worth another six-pence at least:

"Now go, my poor old woman, and provide what is needful for your suffering friends, or relatives! I rejoice in the opportunity you have given me this night of alleviating, in some measure, the sorrows of the poor." He pulled the

reins and was moving on when the hag hobbled after him and again commanded him to stop, which he did, as it were, mechanically.

"An' is this what you're going to give me, after all the talk?" said she, looking up in his face.

"My good old woman, that is really all the small change I have got."

"Why, then, the curse o' Cromwell on you, you ould stall-fed bullock, isn't it great good that 'd do any one?" cried the dame much excited; "keep it, an' make much of it—I'd scorn to take it!" and she flung the coin up in his face.

"Old woman!" said the parson, surprised out of his bland acquiescence, "how dare you thus insult a minister of the Gospel?" A scornful laugh cackled in the hag's throat. "Minister of the Gospel, magh! You mane the devil's Gospel, if there is such a thing! You talkin' of relievin' the poor. I'll go bail it's not much one of you'll give to the poor barrin' you want to buy their souls like cattle, at so much a head! then you'd find small change, and large change, too! Oh, you set of schamin' vagabonds! it's little pace or comfort there ever was in the country since the first of you came into it! Go your ways, now, and may God give you the worth of your charity here an' hereafter!" The biting sarcasm with which these words were uttered is beyond my power to convey, but the chaplain felt it keenly, I can tell you, and his feelings are easier imagined than described when he heard the hoarse, asthmatic laugh with which the crone greeted his departure as she stood in the middle of the road, looking after him. She was not long alone in her merriment, for a person who happened to come within ear-shot during the colloquy, but had purposely kept out of sight, just then stepped out on the road, and slapping the victorious emulator of Biddy Moriarty approvingly on the back, laughed right heartily at the parson's defeat, and gave the rough but good-hearted old dame a trifle of change that proved a more acceptable offering than that of the extra-generous and more than charitable churchman."

"And the person?"

"The person, Maurice, was Phil Moran, your humble servant to command."

"And pray how came you there?"

"I have half a mind not to answer you, my good fellow, but on second thoughts I will, being duly mindful of the maternal legacy of Mother Eve to her daughters, some of whom I like the honor to address. Know, then, that I, like the Rev. Mr. Goodchild, was on my return from a dinner party, and having but a short distance to go, and the weather being fine, both went and came on foot. I had Sam Elliott with me till he turned off at his own avenue, and while I stood a few moments admiring the fine effect of the moonbeams falling through the arching branches of the trees that lined the short avenue I heard the clatter of hoar's feet coming up the road; it proved to be the portly chaplain; and so it was that I, being myself in the shade of the oaks that guard the Elliott gate, saw and heard what I have had the honor and happiness of relating for the entertainment of this worshipping company. Now, Miss Markham, what do you think of my old woman as compared with your old man?"

Harriet, like all the others, had been much amused by Moran's droll description of the encounter, as he called it. "Really, Mr. Moran," she said, laughing, "your old woman beats my old man hollow, and I think between the two they have given our worthy chaplain a thorough understanding of what it is to 'play with edged tools.' Had she only the traditional blanket instead of the red cloak, your dame, as you describe her, might very possibly be the identical old woman who, once upon a time was 'going to sweep the cobwebs off the sky.'"

"If she didn't sweep the cobwebs of the sky," laughed Dr. Hennessy, "I'm entirely of opinion that she swept them off Goodchild's brain.—Upon my honor she must have knocked his wits into a cocked hat. Excuse me the vulgarism, ladies, but the fact is, that vulgarisms are confoundedly convenient at times to a fellow like me, whose thoughts are often gone a wool-gathering, just when he wants to use them."

"If I had my will," said Mr. Esmond, "I'd make short work of that same fairy-woman, as they call her. I'd have her sent to Botany Bay or fairy land—I would! It's positively a disgrace to the country to tolerate such old bedlam as she in their nefarious practices—trading on the besotted prejudices and blind credulity of the people. I wish I had only been in Goodchild's place; I'd have whipped her within an inch of her life, the ill-conditioned hag."

Before any one had time to answer this characteristic speech, a request was sent up from Mulligan that his honor, Mr. Esmond, would be pleased to step out to the stables to see the poor roan that had something the matter with her, the creature and the farrier was there, and he'd

like to speak to his honor about the beast before he went. Therefore Mr. Esmond hurried off in much anxiety for the health and safety of poor Harry's favorite saddle-horse, which was, of course, highly prized by all the family. His wife took the opportunity of his absence to express her fear that sooner or later something bad would come of his tyrannical treatment of the poor, and his harsh, overbearing manner.

"Now I am going to tell you all," she said lowering her voice, "what I would not dare to tell him, knowing that it would but exasperate him the more against these miserable creatures.—You heard how he blamed me for giving those things to that old woman for the laying out of Tim Murtha's child,—well, he little knows, and I trust he will never know, that the man tore that shroud and that sheet from off his dead child, when he learned who it was that gave them."

Exclamations of horror were heard on every side, and the ladies all, but especially Mrs. O'Grady and Aunt Winifred spoke loud in execration of the unnatural deed.

"But how did you come to know this, my dear Mrs. Esmond?" inquired Harriet Markham. "Or have you reason to believe that it really did occur?"

"I cannot possibly doubt it," was the reply, "seeing that the old woman brought back the things I had given her next day, and told me what had taken place. You may be sure I was dreadfully frightened, and, indeed, I cannot get the thoughts of the thoughts of it out of my mind ever since. It was so very awful—and gives one such an idea of the man's ferocity—I am sure, sure that the man who did that is capable of any atrocity."

"If it were that horrible Pierce, now, that did it, one would not be so much surprised," said Aunt Winifred, "but I really didn't there were two such human fiends to be found in all Tipperary. Oh dear, what is going to become of us if such men are prowling at large—no one's life will be safe, after a while."

"Bless me," sighed Mrs. O'Grady, "who would have thought that the doom foretold on Hollow-eve night would have fallen with such crushing weight, and so very soon."

"Doom, indeed," repeated her husband, "now do you mean to say, Mrs. O'Grady, that you really were or are so foolish as to put faith in those childish superstitions practised by the young on Hollow-eve, or any other eve? If you do, you're made of a fool that I ever took you to be."

"Well, doctor, I really wonder at you to talk so," rejoined the wife, "after seeing what we have all seen since that memorable night."

"Memorable fiddlestick! would you have us believe, now, that it was because poor Harry Esmond put his hand in the plate of clay that night that he was killed?"

"Not because, Edward—oh, of course not because of his doing so, but you cannot deny that it looked very much like a warning of what was to happen."

"I do deny it, Mrs. O'Grady; for if it was a warning for Harry, it was also one for Mary Hennessy, and what harm has come to her?"

"Humph," said Maurice Hennessy, turning from a window where he and Moran had been standing in earnest conversation, "I'd be much obliged to you, ma'am, addressing Mrs. O'Grady if you'd keep those dreary notions to yourself. Now to my knowledge your dreary suggestions on that same Hollow-eve night rankled so in poor Mrs. Esmond's mind that she felt miserably depressed at times from that night forth, to an extent, indeed, that injured her health considerably the more so as she tried to conceal what she now believes to have been a presentment."

"Dear me, Dr. Hennessy, what a thing for you to say," said Mrs. O'Grady, averting her head with a slight shudder, while her husband clasped his hands and cried, "hear, hear, bravo Hennessy!"

"Now, I must request, my dear Mrs. O'Grady went on Maurice, "that you never mention that silly affair again, for if Mary be once put in mind of it there is no knowing but she might begin to fancy herself doomed, and take on to moping and pining which might eventually accomplish your fairy warning—or what shall I call it?"

"Why, my dear doctor," exclaimed Mrs. O'Grady, very innocently, "you needn't be the least afraid of Mary pining away on that account for I give you my word, I've been trying ever since Harry's death to convince her that we had a forewarning of it that night—and if you'll believe me, she only laughs at me."

"Well, well," cried Hennessy, more annoyed than he cared to show, "after that, I need say no more. That beats Banagher, and Banagher beats we know who."

"Dr. O'Grady and Moran laughed heartily at the blank amazement visible on Hennessy's face, and the former gentleman subsequently told him, with as much gravity as he could assume, that there was more than that in his 'little wife' for

the taking out. "If you press her a little," said he, "you would be apt to find out that there is not a thing occurs to herself or any one she knows of which she hasn't had warning one way or another. If you know it often occurs to me that she must have some sort of telegraphic communication with the other world. It was only the other day, when I was sent for to Father Maguire below, for a bad cold he got, that she told me she knew something was going to happen to poor Father Maguire, and that she was sure he'd never leave his bed."

"Well?" said more than one of the listeners with ludicrous anxiety.

"Well, a hot bath and a good active cathartic falsified Mrs. O'Grady's prediction, and placed my reverend friend on his legs as stout and staunch as ever. I'm afraid the telegraph wire was broken that time—eh, Susan?"

The laugh that followed drove Mrs. O'Grady fairly from the room. She made her exit in double quick time on the pretence that she was going to see how Mrs. Esmond was.

"Well, now," said Aunt Winifred, rising her eye-brows very high, and straightening her long back to the most perfect perpendicular possible, "well, now, you needn't laugh so much after all about Mrs. O'Grady's 'warnings.' I tell you they are warnings given, and I've hid them myself before our dreadful misfortune came upon us."

"Is it possible, Miss Esmond," said Harriet with assumed earnestness, while the others exchanged looks and smiles.

"Yes, indeed, my dear, it is both possible and true. For many nights before poor dear Harry's death, I heard a drop falling—falling—just outside my room-door. And then the death-watch—why, I used to hear it night after night at my bed-head just as plain as if my watch were there, which it was not, you know, for I always leave it in the watch-stand on the toilet-table."

"Well, that is really astonishing," said Harriet, endeavoring to keep from smiling, Aunt Winifred's predominating acid being now too well known in the circle to permit any jocose liberties in her regard. The gentlemen suddenly remembered that Uncle Harry was in the stables, and thought they would go seek him there, as the tea-bell had just rung, and Mrs. Esmond and the other ladies were descending the stairs, Mary Hennessy's pleasant voice being heard in a tone of playful remonstrance.

"The gentlemen had not yet returned from the stables when Dr. O'Grady was summoned to a patient some miles towards Kilkenny, and having to go home for something he required, Mrs. O'Grady preferred going with him, feeling probably a little sore from the wound that had been inflicted on her oracular dignity.

Very sad and very pale was Mrs. Esmond when she took her place that evening at the tea-table, but looking round on the kind dear friends whose faces expressed the sympathy they did not choose to speak, she smiled and made an effort to appear cheerful, that the shadow of her grief might not fall on them.

Uncle Harry was unusually silent during the earlier part of the meal, and at last the young men began to rally him on his taciturnity.

"May I venture to ask what are you thinking of, Mr. Esmond?" said Hennessy, "the advance on fat cattle, or the next presentment before the Grand Jury—eh?"

"Or the chances of getting the 'bang-beggars' banished to parts unknown?" said Moran looking with sly merriment first at Uncle Harry, then at his wife.

"The bang-beggars?" repeated the doctor, catching the expression of Moran's face;—"why, what should Mr. Esmond have to do with them?"

"Oh, we know that ourselves," replied the lawyer "don't we, Aunt Martha?" Mrs. Esmond smiled her acquiescence, but her husband was in no humor for smiling.

"Now, I tell you what it is, Phil Moran!" said he, setting his cup down in the saucer with a force that much endangered the safety of that particular piece of Mrs. Esmond's fine old Dresden, "I'd thank you to crack your jokes on proper subjects, and that is not one, whatever you may think to the contrary. I consider it a very serious business—very serious, indeed, involving, as it does, the very lives of the landowners of this county."

"Not a doubt of it, Mr. Esmond! not a doubt of it," said Morgan very gravely, "and for that very reason I naturally supposed you might be occupied in devising ways and means to get rid of a fraternity so dangerous to the community."

"You were mistaken then," said Uncle Harry gruffly, "I was just thinking of poor Henny here."

"Of me, uncle! and, pray, what were you thinking of me?"

"Why, I was just thinking that you will never have peace or rest in your mind until that wretch, Pierce, has paid the penalty of his crime."