

THE EARL'S DOOM.

A LEGEND OF ST. NECTAN'S BELL.

"O, grip me, bands of the sturdy grip.
That have bled for me and mine.
And deeply dip each loyal lip
In a mighty cup of wine.
My last stout cup—ay, mine eye is bright,
And my heart beats full and free;
Yet I know that the dawn of to-morrow's light
Shall bring no light to me."
Hark to the notes that sink and swell!
Hark to the toll of St. Nectan's bell!

"St Nectan's bell in the western tower—
The ringless, ropeless bell—
Self-awakened, it pealed in my natal hour:
Self-awakened, it hath tolled my knell.
This windless eve, 'twixt the light and dark,
Like a soul that parts in pain,
It moaned in mine ear, it groined—O, hark,
Those iron sobs again!
Hark to the notes that sink and swell!
Hark to the toll of St. Nectan's bell!"

They gripped his hand with a sturdy grip.
They gazed with misty eyes,
And deep was the dip of each bearded lip
In the earl's great cup of wine.
He held it high, and he drained it dry.
Then forward drooped his head,
And, with never a word and never a sigh,
He fell on his face stone-dead.
Hark to the notes that sink and swell!
Hark to the toll of St. Nectan's bell!"

ONE TOO MANY FOR HIM.

V.

"FOR EVER AND EVER, DEAREST."

"Madge, my darling!"

She stands before him demurely, dressed in a neat, sober, outdoor costume that becomes her wonderfully. Her eyes look a little red as if she had been weeping; but she gazes up at him with quiet assurance.

"Shall we walk, Mr. Darrell?" she says, composedly. "Down the avenue, if you like."

He follows her mechanically, as she leads the way to the front of the house, and then into the drive in silence. His whole soul is on fire, and the words that rise to his lips seem tame and inapt.

He loves her at this moment, he knows, desperately, blindly, as if life depended on it. Yet there is a repose, a dignity about her, which lets him feel that matters are not now as they have been between them.

They walk side by side, without speaking, a few minutes. Then she says, with the faintest possible tremor in her low tones, "I think, Mr. Darrell, if you wish to say anything, it had better be understood first on what ground we meet again. We can never be quite strangers to each other; yet by-gones must be by-gones. We must meet as if for the first, and most probably for the last, time. Is this agreed?"

As she glances up, the evening sunlight is streaming in broad bands through the arching foliage overhead, and touches his pale, quivering features ruddily. His lips are tightly compressed, and there is a wild light deep in his blue eyes.

"Let us go from here," he says, thickly, without looking at her. "I have something to hear that means life or death for me. I can't stay here, where everybody may watch us."

She makes no reply. They pass from the drive, across an open, sunlit glade, and into the red woodlands.

Here Mr. Turnbull's barbarian ingenuity cannot leave its mark—at least, it has not been able to do so far. What he threatens with this grand old timber, which he seems to view only in the light of a small gold mine, will take time. They wander on together. Presently Archer pauses before a hoary monarch of the wood, throned on a grassy knoll.

"Shall we sit here?" he says. "You will not fear taking cold?"

She seats herself, and leans back against the noble tree-trunk. On the soft turf beside her he lies, and the minutes go silently by. The long red lines steal more slantingly between the branches; then fade out. The world grows colder, more hushed, and like a soothing spell the twilight stillness comes upon them—

"Solemn and silent everywhere!
Nature with folded hands stood there,
Kneeling at her evening prayer!"

Archer rouses himself. Madge will not speak, it seems. He must.

"Madge, I have been very foolish. Will you forgive me?"

It is better to go to the point at once. This suspense is fearful.

"I do not think I have anything to forgive, Mr. Darrell," she says, very softly. "If I have, it is long since forgiven."

"Don't play with me, Madge. I have suffered fearfully for this folly. Will you—can you—"

"Stay, Mr. Darrell! I said by-gones must be by-gones. It is impossible I can listen to—"

"Never, Madge!" he interrupts, passionately. "I won't hear it! Your heart does not speak there, unless—unless you have ceased to love me. Is this, then, so?"

"Please listen to me a minute. I think you forget when you speak of your sufferings for what you term your 'folly,' that there may have been other sufferings. I may have endured as much, or even more. I believe they say women are more liable to that sort of thing than men. And now that my wound has perhaps healed

over, why should you ruthlessly lay it bare again to no purpose?"

"Oh, Madge, if you will but listen—if you will but be your old self, it shall be to some purpose. I love you more now—ah! more than I can tell. I can only curse myself for a brute for having bruised your gentle, winning, true little heart as I did! It would serve me right if you had forgotten me—if you hated me! But I have had bitter experience. You must see how I have been through the fire. I never pleaded in those other days like this—so humbly, so abjectly; not for love, even!"

She sits with her face bent low, so that he cannot see it where he lies. But he knows by the tremulous movement of the little hands that she is affected.

"Do you—have you found this out, Mr. Darrell, since you have learned that I am not the wealthy woman you thought me?" she asks, with a kind of half-sob.

"No, Madge! If I had met you sooner as I meet you now, I could not have restrained myself. Honestly, I am glad to hear the property is not yours in one way, though sorry in another. But what does it matter? I am rich, my love—so rich! It's like a fairy story or a chapter of miracles. My father's cousin—whom we were talking of on that fatal Sunday—is dead, and has left me twenty thousand pounds. Madge, darling, it's all yours; and I'm yours, if you will have me. Say you will, Madge!"

He is kneeling beside her, and clasps her little white hands in his own. He bends over to get a peep at the downcast face, which she still keeps from him.

"For—how long?" she asks, in a voice in which tears and archness are struggling for mastery.

"For ever and ever, dearest!" Being held at bay still.

"But you are a rich man, and I am a poor woman; and—and I could never marry a rich husband. What would the world—"

"My saucy, dear love!" and he folds her in his arms. "Oh, Madge, you have given me new life!"

She says nothing to this lover-like assurance. Now that her restraint is thrown to the winds, the tears keep coming up faster and faster, until they well over. She lays the dainty little head down on his shoulder, and lets them have their way. And so they sit, while the twilight deepens, and the stars come out and take sly peeps at them between the leaves from the dark-blue vault above. With one hand she smooths the dark, wavy hair fondly, and murmurs of love and constancy that ought to be as eternal as the twinkling glitter above them.

Presently she whispers from his shoulder, half-archly, "And you will not grumble again, Archie, if I should become a rich woman—if I should succeed to a fortune?"

"Never! Long before that event happens we shall be married, I hope. And, Madge, can we not marry soon—very soon? Why not next month? I have already given notice to leave the Academy."

"You forget, dear, Mr. Turnbull may—"

"Oh, these Turnbulls again! What does it all mean, love? I was never more thunder-struck than when I heard about this fresh will. Is it genuine? Has it been properly attested, or can my suspicions be correct? Have they been defrauding you?"

"You had better ask Mr. Turnbull, Archie," with her low, musical laugh. "I should have thought you were glad enough to be rid of the property on any terms."

"So I am; but not for a man like Turnbull to come with a rignarole story, and desecrate a glorious old place like this. Upon my honour, Madge, I think the matter ought to be legally investigated, to see if the will is genuine."

"Hadin't you better wait till we are married, Archie?" she asks, with a slight touch of humour.

He replies with a laugh and a kiss, to which she makes no objection.

"But, Madge, how is it you are here? Surely you don't wish to stay with them?"

"Archie, I have been so miserable since—since you mustn't ask questions, sir!—that I have cared for nothing but to keep out of the world's way. So I have stayed here, and have done as I was told to do."

"My darling," he whispers, tenderly, "how could I? But you shall leave here at once—to-morrow—and go somewhere where you will be quite comfortable."

"Where can I go to, Archie? I have no friends I can stay with till we are married."

"Mrs. Audley has been a kind friend to you," he rejoins, after a moment's thought. "If I called on her, and told her how matters were, would she not make you welcome, love?"

"Yes, I'm sure she would. But, do you know, Archie, now I think about it, I fancy Mr. Turnbull has some reason for keeping me here. He has not pressed me to stay, simply because I have not wanted to go; but he looks after me very sharply. I wonder he hasn't been to see where I am before this. He has padlocked the gates, you know, and keeps the keys himself."

"So I found, to my surprise."

"And if he does wish to keep me, it will be a difficult to get away."

"Not in the least. I'd come and demand you, and make him give you up, or know the reason why," exclaims Archer, feeling very fierce. "You're your own mistress."

"But that might make a scene; and I would rather not have that. He was very good to me after poor mamma died."

"Yes; and it's wonderful to me how he has

altered. I never saw wealth spoil a man so quickly. It doesn't seem to have made him up-pish so much as vulgar. I can't understand it." At this instant, the soft silence of the summer night is disturbed by a hoarse bellow, "Peggy, Peggy!" followed by a further roar, of which the only distinguishable word is "Jupiter!" "There he is!" exclaims Madge, starting from her lover's arm. "I must run back to the house, Archie, and you meet him and tell him I have gone in. You can't get out except with this key."

"Nonsense!" mutters Archie, wrathfully. "Come with me, love, and confront him. I'll pretty soon let him know that he can't interfere with my property!"

"But I'm not your property yet, Archie!" she whispers, clinging to his arm as they walk towards the avenue. "Mr. Turnbull may say he has the greatest right to me at present. Besides, I could not leave here to-night; and if you and he were to quarrel, it would be very unpleasant for me afterwards."

"Well, then, little love, I shall come here to-morrow to arrange about—"

"No, Archie; don't come! It might excite Mr. Turnbull's suspicion. Write to me by post, and disguise your hand as much like a woman's as you can. He hasn't stopped my letters as yet, thank goodness!"

"And if I devise a scheme for getting you away without braving Mr. Turnbull's rage, you will come, Madge?"

"I will, dear Archie; that is, if it doesn't mean scaling park railings, or any adventures of that sort. See; there he is, rushing up and down the avenue like a madman! I must go, love!"

He takes her in his arms while they yet linger in the shadow of the dark woodlands, and kisses her again and again, and then she darts away lightly in the direction of the house.

Archer stands watching her for a moment, and then joins Mr. Turnbull. He finds that worthy man not looking so amiable as usual, having succeeded in roaring himself nearly voiceless.

"Well, young man," he demands, huskily; "do you call this respectable conduct, keeping a young woman out in a wood till this hour of the night! A precious fine job for me to have to go tearing about the place tearing after her, by Jupiter!"

"I'm sorry you troubled yourself, Mr. Turnbull, says Archer, carelessly. "Miss Grey has gone in some little time."

"Sorry, are you? Then, by Jupiter! you may move off the premises, and you needn't trouble yourself to move on to them again this side of Christmas!"

Mr. Turnbull is in a towering passion, and might say more if he could find any more breath to say it with. As it is, Archer puts a strong curb on his own temper for Madge's sake, and walks down the avenue without a word of retort, which only seems to make the ex-contractor, who follows, more furious. He flings open the side-gate, and slams it behind Archer, with a series of wild grunts, the only means left him of expressing his wrath.

"Mr. Turnbull's time will come," soliloquizes Archer, when he is on the Hambleton high-road again. "I'm sure there's some villainy going on there!"

But for all that, the young lover steps along with a very much lighter heart than when he came that way some hours ago.

VI.

Ding-dong! ding-dong! ding-dong!

Three days have elapsed, and the hour is ten p.m., when Mr. Turnbull's own original "front gate bell" booms out this tremendous peal on the darkness and the stillness of the night.

Three vigorous tugs has Archer Darrell given to the bell handle to produce this result.

"Aha!" he chuckles to himself. "I hope old Turnbull has just settled down cosily with his slippers and his pipe. It'll serve the old rascal—Hullo! it's started these horses!"

The sounds of a horse stampede came through the darkness from further down the road. Nothing can be seen. Archer steps out into the middle of the road, and in a minute all is quiet again. He gives a faint whistle, which is responded to by a cautious, "All right!"

"A confounded nuisance if those brutes had bolted!" he mutters, as he goes up to the side-gate again, and peers through the bars. "Not a light to be seen. If old Turnbull has taken it into his head to go to bed early, I shall have to give him another dose of bell. Madge is sure to have received my letter. She's ready and waiting to follow him, I'll wager. The trick will be to lure the wily old rogue out here. Once through this gate, and she'll have time enough to slip out. Ha! those are his footsteps! No mistaking them. Now for it!"

Archer crouches down a few yards from the gate in the ditch which skirts the park palings, and which is fortunately dry. Here he commences preliminaries by producing an intense prolonged groan.

"That ought to work him, if he has a spark of human feeling," comments Archer, privately.

He renews the groan rather more loudly as the footsteps reach the gate.

"Who the deuce is there?" comes Mr. Turnbull's voice, in a tone of great aggravation, through the bars.

A more dire and prolonged groan is produced for Mr. Turnbull's especial benefit.

"By Jupiter! this is 'orrible!" continues

Mr. Turnbull. "How many of you are there? Can't any of you speak?"

He pauses for a reply, but receives only groans.

"Orrible! It gets worse and worse! At one's own front gate, too!" And poor Mr. Turnbull groans in sympathy. "Somebody has been set on and killed! Jupiter! if I go out I shall be accused of it. I'd better go back."

As this brilliant thought strikes him, the groans are suddenly reduced in volume and quality.

"Well, I don't know! He's either getting worse or better. I think I'll wait. If I could only see something."

There is a pause. Mr. Turnbull is evidently trying to satisfy curiosity through the bars; but as the ditch is nearly flush with the gate, and the darkness prevails extensively, his efforts are not crowned with success.

"Dear me, it seems nearly all over. I think I'll—I'll venture out. There's only one, that's clear, and looking can't hurt."

Thereupon Archer hears the padlock shot back, and the gate creak on its iron hinges; then Mr. Turnbull emerges cautiously.

Archer gives a very faint moan, and crouches down closer. Mr. Turnbull, after gazing furtively round, advances along by the ditch.

At this moment something takes place which would astonish Archer considerably if it were not that he is so out of sight that he can see nothing.

A dark-robed, fairy figure glides almost noiselessly through the gate into the road.

That this should be so is the dearest wish of Archer's heart. But how staggered he would be if he could only perceive Mr. Turnbull silently blowing huge kisses to this pretty figure, which stands an instant to return them with interest, and then flits away down the road in the direction of Hambleton. Archer, so securely concealed in his ditch, loses all this by-play.

"I wonder," pants Mr. Turnbull, in a very disconcerted tone, "wherever the party who groaned can be! Very strange, but there's no sign of—by Jupiter, I—see it!"

A sharp, sudden whistle, like a signal, rings out at that instant from further along the road.

Mr. Turnbull is creeping carefully towards where he can dimly discern the outline of Archer's back in the ditch, when that young practical joker springs up with a loud burst of exulting laughter, and bounds off in the darkness the same way that the darkly-robed figure has taken.

Again would Archer be sorely puzzled if he could be a witness of Mr. Turnbull's demeanour. That worthy man, instead of being alarmed or surprised, crams as much of his handkerchief into his mouth as he can, and goes stamping about in an immoderate laughing fit.

"Ho, ho! This beats play-acting, by Jupiter!" he gasps, as he hears carriage wheels rolling away in the distance. "If this isn't the very funniest job I ever had in hand in all my born days! 'Pon my honour, I must tell the missis and the young 'uns! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Quite safe, my darling!" whispers Archer, springing into the vehicle, which rattles away towards Hambleton.

No answer is necessary as she nestles to him—behind the driver, of course—and he bends and kisses her.

"Fancy that old curmudgeon to-morrow!" he laughs, triumphantly. "Didn't I take him in nicely? I'd give anything to see his countenance when he finds it out, my love!"

Madge joins him in his laugh right merrily, and Archer rejoices to find her in such capital spirits.

They arrive in Hambleton, and Mr. and Mrs. Audley make Madge very welcome. While with them before she has been dear to them, and they treat her now with almost parental kindness.

A month later the wedding takes place in the principal church in Hambleton. It is a very joyous affair. Madge is given away by Mr. Audley, the Misses Audley are the bridesmaids, and the sun shines brightly, as it ought to do, on such a beautiful bride. Archer, of course, is in an ecstasy of delight.

Nothing has been seen or heard of Mr. Turnbull during this time. Madge has extracted a promise from Archer not to interfere with the present possessor of Aspern Court until after they have been married awhile.

Archer wishes to buy and furnish a house before they are married; but Madge suddenly develops such fastidious taste that, though they look at every empty dwelling-place near Hambleton, she will not be satisfied with any, and the month slips away, and nothing is done.

So it is arranged that when they come back from the honeymoon they shall stay at the Audley's large house until they make up their minds where to settle down.

Archer doesn't exactly relish the plan, but it seems to suit Madge perfectly.

VII.

"AM I FORGIVEN, ARCHIE?"

"Now, then, Archie, for our visit to Aspern Court and its master!" exclaimed pretty Mrs. Darrell, six weeks after their marriage.

"You seem very anxious to beard the lion in his den, my love."

"It will be such fun," she returns, gaily.

"Do you know, Archie, I'm not sure that I shan't have to appease the lion with a kiss! I