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ANNIE LESLIE.

A TALE OF IRISH LIFE.

CHAPTER II.—(CONTINUED.)

The next morning Leslie's family received a visit from the agent to the surprise of Annie and her mother, who welcomed him with much civility, while the farmer's naturally independent feelings struggled stoutly with his interests.

"Ye'r house is always nate and clane, Mrs. Leslie," said Maley, "and ye'r farm does ye credit, master; I'm sorry it's out of lease, but my duty to my employer obliges me to tell you that a new lease, if granted, must be on more advantageous terms to his lordship."

"And if it please ye, sir," said the good dame, "when his lordship was down here he made us a faithful promise, on the honor of a gentleman, that he'd renew the lease on the same terms, in consideration of the money and pains my husband bestowed on the land."

The agent turned his little grey eye sharply on the honest creature, and gave a grunt, that was less a laugh than a note of preparation for one, observing, "Maybe he's lost his memory; for there, Mr. Leslie, is the proposal he ordered me to make (he threw a sheet of foolscap on the table), so you may take it or leave it."

He was preparing to quit the cottage, when his eye glanced on a basket of turkey eggs, that Annie had arranged to set under a favorite hen. "What fine eggs!" he exclaimed; "I'll take two or three to show my wife." And, one after another, he deposited all the poor girl's embryo chickens in his capacious pockets.

Leslie, really aroused by the barefaced impudence of the act, was starting forward to prevent it, when his wife laid his hand on his arm; not that she did not sorrow after the spoil, but she had a point to gain.

"May-be, sir, ye'd jist tell me the laird's present address; Annie, put it down on that bit paper."

"Tell his address!—anything ye have to say must be to me, good woman. And so ye write, pretty one; I wonder what is the use of teaching such girls as you to write; but ye're up to love-letters before this; ay, ay, ye'll make the best of ye'r black eyes, my dear!" With this insulting speech, the low man in power left the cottage.

Bitter was the anguish of that little party.—The father sat, his hands supporting his head, his eyes fixed on the exorbitant demand the agent had left upon his table; large tears passed slowly down Annie's cheek; and, if the poor mother suffered less than the others, it was because she talked more.

"Danna be cast doon, Robert?" said she at last to her husband; "ye have nae reason, even if he ask sae much monee as ye say, as a premium, forbye other matters; why, there are as gude farms elsewhere, and landlords that look after their tenants themselves. Oh, that wicked, wicked wretch!—to see him pocket the eggs, and his speech to my poor Annie!"

"My darling girl!" exclaimed the father, pressing his daughter to his bosom, where he held her long and anxiously.

It was almost impossible for Leslie to accede to the terms demanded: four pounds an acre for the farm, a heavy fine, and both duty-work and duty-provisions required in abundance.

"Dinna think o't, Robert," repeated the dame; "we'll go elsewhere, and find better treatment. If we keep it at that rate we shall all starve." But the farmer's heart yearned to every blade of grass that had grown beneath his eye; he hoped to frustrate the intended evil, and yet keep the land. His crops had been prosperous, his cattle healthy; then his neighbors, when, through Alick's agency, they found how matters

stood, had, with the genuine Irish feeling that shines more brightly in adversity than in prosperity, come forward, affectionately tendering their services.

"Sure, the cutting the hay need niver cost ye a brass fardin," said the kind-hearted mower; "I'm half my time idle, and I may jist as well be doing something for ye as nothing for myself; so don't trouble about it, sir, dear; we like to have ye among us."

Then came "Nelly the Picker," as the spokeswoman of all her sisterhood. "Don't think of leaving us, Mrs. Leslie, ma'am; sure every one of us 'll come as usual, but widout tee or reward, except the heart-love, and do twice as much for that as for the duty money; and I go bad the prates will be as well picked, and the corn as well reaped, bound, and stacked as iver. Sure, though we didn't much like ye at first, hasn't Miss Annie grown among us, born as she is on the sod, and a credit too, God be praised."

These were all very gratifying instances of pure and simple affection: indeed, even Arthur Furlong forgot his somerset in the cabbage-bed, and posted down to the farm with his stocking full of gold and silver coins, of ancient and modern date, which were all at Leslie's service, to pay the premium required by the agent for the renewal of the lease. This last favor, however, the worthy farmer could not even hear of; he therefore sold a great part of his stock, and, to the annoyance of the agent, obtained the lease. From this circumstance, he might be said to triumph over the machinations of his enemy; but matters soon changed sadly; the family was as industrious as ever; the same steady perseverance on the farmer's part; the same bustle and unwearying activity on that of the good dame; and, though poor Annie's cheeks were more pale, and her eyes less bright, yet did she unceasingly labor in and out of their small dwelling.

Notwithstanding all these exertions, the next season was a bad one; their sheep fell off in the rot, their pigs had the measles, their chickens the pip, two of their cows died in calf. Never did circumstances in the little space of six months undergo so great a change: Leslie's silence amounted almost to sullenness; his wife talked much of their ill fortune; Annie said nothing; but her step had lost its elasticity, her figure its grace, and her voice seldom trolled the joyous, or even the mournful songs of her native land in the elder-bower, that, before the departure of James McLeary, had rung again and again with merry laughter and music. James never returned after that unfortunate evening; and his mother had only twice heard from him since his absence: his letters were brief—"He had gone," he said, "to sea, to enable him to learn something and to forget much." His mother and younger brother managed the farm with much skill and attention during his absence. No token, no word of her whom he had doatingly loved, appeared in his letters. It was evident that he tried to think of her as a heartless, jilting woman, unworthy to possess the affections of a sensible man; but there must have been times when the remembrance of her full beauty, of her frank and generous temper, of her many acts of charity (and in those she was never capricious) came upon him; then the last scene at the cottage was forgotten, and he remembered alone her sweet voice, and sweeter look, in the hay-meadow, when he cut off the curling braid, which doubtless rested on his bosom in all his wanderings.

And then he refreshed memory by gazing on it in the clear moonlight, during the night-watches, when only the eye of heaven was upon him. Let not any one imagine that such love is too refined to throb in a peasant's bosom; trust me, it is not. The being who lives amid the beauties of nature, although he may not express, must feel, the elevating gentle influence of herb and flower and tree. Many a time have I heard the ploughman suspend his whistle to listen to that of the melodious blackbird; and well do I remember the beautiful expression of one of my humblest neighbors, when, resting on his hay-fork, he had silently watched the sun as it set over a country glowing in its red and golden light, "It is very grand, yet hard to look upon," said he; "one can almost think it's God's holy throe."

The last letter that reached our sailor friend contained amongst others of similar import, the following passages: "Ye'll be sorrow to hear, James, (though it's nothing to ye now) that times are turned bad with the Leslies; there has been a dale of underhand work by my lord's agent;—and the girl's got a cold dismal look. My heart aches for the poor thing; for her mother is set upon her marrying Andrew Furlong, which she has no mind in life to."

CHAPTER III.

Gale-day (as the rent-day is called in Ireland) had come and gone, and much sorrow was in the cottage of Robert Leslie. In the gray twilight he sat in a darkened corner of his little parlor, the very atmosphere of which appeared clouded; the dame stood at the open casement, against which Annie reclined more like a stiffened corpse

than a breathing woman. Andrew Furlong was seated also at a table, looking earnestly on the passing scene.

"Haven't ye seen," said the mother, "haven't ye seen, Annie, the misery that's come upon us, entirely by my advice not being minded? And are ye goin' tamely to see us turned out o' house and hame, when we have na the means of getting anither? I, Annie," she continued, "am a'most past ony labor; ah, my bonny bairn, it was for ye we worked—for ye we toiled; ye'r father an' me had but the one heart in that;—and if the Lord Almighty has pleased to take it frae us, it's na reason why ye should forget how ye were still foremost in ye'r parents' love."

Annie answered nothing.

"Speak to her, Robert," said Mrs. Leslie;—"she dinna mind me noo."

Annie raised her eyes reproachfully to her mother's face. The farmer came forward; he kissed the marble brow of his pale child, and she rested her head on his shoulder. As he turned towards her she whispered, "Is all indeed as bad as mother says?"

"Even so," was his reply; "unless something be done, to-morrow we shall have no home. Annie, it is to shield you I think of this; my delicate, fading flower, how could ye labor as a hired servant? And—God in His mercy look upon us!—I should not be able to find a roof to shelter my only child."

"My bairn," again commenced Mrs. Leslie, "sure the mother that gave ye birth can wish for naething sae much as ye'r well-doing. And sure she can as Maister Furlong could nae fail to make ye happy. All the goud ye'r father wants he will gie us noo, trusting to his bare word; to-morrow, and it will be too late;—all these things said,—the sneers of that bitter man—the scorn (for poverty is aye scorned) of a cauld world—and, maybe, ye'r father in a lanely prison; eh, child—what could ye do for him, then?"

"Mother!" exclaimed the girl, starting with convulsive motion from her father's shoulder;—"say no more; here—a promise is all he wants to prevent this—here is my hand—give it where ye please." She stretched out her arm to its full length,—it was rigid as iron. Furlong advanced to take it, and whether Leslie would have permitted such a troth-plight or not cannot now be ascertained, for the long form of Alick, the traveller, stalked abruptly into the room.

"Asy, asy, for God's sake!—put up ye'r band, Miss Annie, dear; keep your state, I beg, Mr. Furlong; no reason in life for ye'r rising; all of ye be asy. Will nobody quiet that woman, for God's sake?" he continued, seeing that the dame was, naturally enough, angry at this intrusion; "first let me say my say and be oil, for sorra a minute have I to waste in ye. Robert Leslie, by name, didn't I, onst upon a time, tell ye truth?—and a sore hearing it was, sure enough. Well, then, I tell ye it again, and if it's not true, why ye may hang me as high as Howth; don't let ye'r daughter munn herself away after that fashion. Mister Furlong, ye'r a kind-hearted man, so ye are, and many a bit an' a sup have ye bestowed upon me and the baste—thank ye kindly for that same—but yarra a much sense ye have, or ye wouldn't be looking after empty nuis—what the devil would be the good o' the hand o' that cratur, widout her heart? And that y'll niver have. Mistress Leslie, ma'am, honey, don't be after blowing me up;—now jist think—sure I know that ye left the bonny hills and the sweet scented broom of Scotland, to marry that Englishman. And ye mind the beautiful song that ye sing far before any one I ever heard—about loving in youth, and thin climbing the hill, and thin sleeping at the fut of it—John Anderson, ye call it; wouldn't ye rather have ye'r heart's first love, though he's ould and gray now, than a king upon his throne? Ay, woman, that touches ye. And do ye think she hasn't some o' the mother's feel in her? Now, Mister Leslie, don't—don't any of ye make her promise to-night; ye'll bless me for this, even you, Mister Andrew, by to-morrow's sun-set; promise, Robert Leslie!"

"Ye told me truth before," said the bewildered man, "and I have no right to doubt you now—I do promise." Alick strode out of the cottage. Andrew followed, like an enraged turkey-cock, and the family were left again in solitude. The words of the fisherman had affected Mrs. Leslie deeply; she had truly fancied she was seeking her child's happiness; and, perhaps for the first time, she remembered how miserable she would have been with any other husband than "her ain gude man."

The little family passed the night almost in the very extremity of despair. "Such!" said Leslie afterwards, "as I could not pass again; for the blood now felt as if frozen in my veins—now rushing through them with fearful rapidity—and, as my head rested on my poor wife's shoulder, the throbbing o' my bursting temples but echoed the beating o' her agitated heart."

The early light of morning found Annie in a heavy sleep; and the mid-day sun glowed as brightly as if it illuminated the pathway of prin-

ces, on three or four ill-looking men who entered the dwelling of the farmer. Their business was soon commenced—it was a work of heart-sickening desolation. On Annie's pure and simple bed sat one of the officials, noting down each article in the apartment. Leslie, his arms folded, his lips compressed, his forehead gathered in heavy wrinkles over his brow, stood firmly in the centre of the room. Mrs. Leslie sat, her face covered with her apron—which was soon saturated by her tears, and poor little Phillis crouched beneath her chair; Annie clung to her father's arms; her energies were roused as she feelingly appealed to the heartless executors of the law. What increased the wretchedness of the scene was the presence of Mr. Maley himself, who seemed to exult every the misery of his victims. He was not, however, to have it all his own way; several of the more spirited neighbors assembled, and forgot their own interests in their anxiety for the Leslies. One young fellow entered, waving his shillelah, and swearing in no measured terms, that he'd spill the last drop of his heart's blood afore a finger should be laid on a single scrap in the house."

The agent's scowl changed into a sneer as he pointed to the document he held in his hand. This, however, was no argument to satisfy our Irish champion; and in truth matters would have taken a serious turn, but for the prompt interference of an old man, who held back the arms of the young hero. The door was crowded by the sympathizing peasantry; some, by tears, and many by deep and awful execrations, testified their abhorrence of the man "dressed in a little brief authority."

"Oh!" ejaculated Mrs. Leslie, "oh! that I had never lived to see this day of ruin and disgrace. Oh! Annie, you let it come to—"

"Hold, woman!" exclaimed her husband;—"remember what we repeated last night to each other; remember how we prayed, when this poor child was sleeping in the sleep of death; remember how we both bethought of the fair names of our parents; how you told me of the men of your kin who fought for their faith among your native Scottish hills; and my own ancestors, who left their possessions and distant lands for conscience sake? Oh, woman, Janet, remember the words, 'I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.'"

Doubtless Mrs. Leslie felt in their full force these sweet sounds of consolation; again she hid her face and wept. It is in the time of affliction that the words of Scripture pour balm upon the wounded spirit; in the world's turmoil they are often unhapplily forgotten; but in sorrow they are sought for, even as the hart seeketh for the water-brooks.

The usually placid farmer had scarcely given vent to this extraordinary burst of feeling, when there was a bustle outside the door, which was speedily accounted for. A post-chaise, rattling down the lane, and stopping suddenly opposite the little green gate; from off the crazy bar, propped upon two rusty supporters in front of the creaking vehicle, sprang our old friend, Alick the traveller—"Huzza! huzza, boys! Ould Ireland for ever. Och, but the bones of me are in smuttreens from the shaking. Huzza for justice. Boys, dear, won't ye give one shout for justice?—'tisn't often it troubles ye—Och, stand out o' my way, for I'm dancing mad. Och, by St. Patrick!—Stand back ye pack of beg-trotters, till I see the meeting. Och! love is the life of a nate—Och! my heart's as big as a whale!"

Whilst honest Alick was indulging in these and many similar exclamations, capering, snapping his fingers, jumping (to use his own expression) "sky-high," and shouting, singing and swearing, with might and main, two persons had descended from the carriage. One, a tall, slight, gentlemanly man, fashionably enveloped in a fur travelling cloak; the other a jovial sailor, whose handsome face was expressive of the deepest anxiety and feeling.

The sailor was James McCleary; the gentleman—but I must carry my story decorously onward.

Poor Annie! she had suffered too much to coquet it again. Whether she fainted or not I do not recollect; but this I know, that she leaned her weeping face upon James's shoulder; and that the expression of his countenance varied to an almost ludicrous degree;—now heaving with lore and tenderness as he looked upon the maiden—now speaking of "death and destruction" to the crest-fallen agent. The gentleman stood for a moment wondering at everybody, and everybody wondering at him. At last, in a firm voice, he said, "I stop this proceeding; and I order you (and he fixed a withering glance upon Maley)—I do not recollect your name, although I am perfectly acquainted with your nature—I order you, sir, to leave this cottage; elsewhere you shall account for your conduct."

Maley sank into his native insignificance in an instant; but then impudence, the handmaid of knavery, came to his assistance; pulling down

his wig with one hand, and holding his spectacles on his ugly red nose with the other, he advanced to where the gentleman stood, and peering up to his face, while the other eyed him as an eagle would a vile carrion crow, inquired, with a quivering lip, that ill assorted with his words' bravery,

"And who the devil are you, sir, who interferes in what doesn't by any manner of means concern you?"

"As you wish to know, sir," replied the gentleman, removing his hat and looking kindly around on the peasants, "I am brother to your landlord!"

Oh, for Wilkie, to paint the serio-comic effect of that little minute!—the look of abashed villainy—the glorious feeling that sullied the honest farmer's countenance—the uplifted hands and ejaculations of Mrs. Leslie—the joyous face of Annie, glistening all over with smiles and tears—the hearty, honest, shout of the villagers—and even the merry bark of little Phillis; then Alick, striding up to the late man of power, his long back curved into a humiliated bend, his hand and arm fully extended, his right foot a little advanced, while his features varied from the most contemptuous and satirical expression to one of broad and gratified humor, addressed him, with mock reverence:

"Mister Maley, sir, will ye allow me (as the gentry say) the pleasure to see ye out o' your turn now, ould boy, though ye don't know a fluke from a jacksy-dorey."

"Sir—my lord," stammered out the crest-fallen villain, "I don't really know what ye mean. I acted for the best—for his lordship's interest."

"Peace, man," interrupted the gentleman;—"I do not wish to expose you; there is my brother's letter; to-morrow I will see you at his house, where his servants are now preparing for my reception."

The man and his minions shrunk away as well and quietly as they could; and the Leslies had now time to wonder how all this strange had been brought about; the neighbors lingering around the door, with a pardonable curiosity, to see the last of it."

"Ye may thank that gentleman for it all," said James; "besides being brother to the landlord, I had the honor to serve under him, in as brave a ship as ever stept the sea; and ye mind when matters were going hard here, Alick (God for ever bless him for it) turned to at the pen and wrote me every particular, and all about the agent's wickedness; and—may I say it, Annie, now—ye'r love for me; and how out o' divilment he sent the ould man to make love to you that sorrowful evening—when I went away—and then put me up to catch him; little thinking how the jealousy would drive me mad; well, his honor, the captain, had no pride in him."

"Stop, my brave lad, towards you I could have none," exclaimed the generous officer;—"where the battle raged the most, you were at my side; and when, in boarding the Frenchman, I was almost nailed to the deck, you—ye rushed forward, and amid death and danger bore me, sadly wounded, in your arms, back to my gallant ship."

He extended his hand to the young Irishman, who pressed it respectfully to his lips.

"To see the like o' that, now," said Alick;—"to see him shaking hands with one as good as a lord."

"I held frequent conversations with my brave friend," continued the captain, "and at length he enlightened me as to the treatment of my brother's tenants experienced from the agent, and I came down to see justice done to all, who I regret to find have suffered from the ill effects of the absentee system. Miss Leslie, I am sorry to lose so good a sailor, but I only increase my number of friends when I resign James McCleary to his rightful owner."

"Och, my dear," exclaimed Alick, "it's as good as a play—a beautiful play; and there's honest Andrew coming over; don't toss him in the cabbage-bed, James, honey, this time. And, James dear, there's your ould mother running up the face—well, ould as she is, she bates Andrew at the step. Och, Miss Anne, don't be looking down after that fashion. And, sir, my lord, if ye'r honor plases, you won't forget the little bit of ground for the baste?"

"Every thing I have promised I will perform," said the young man, as he withdrew; an example that I must follow, assuring all who read my story that, however strange it may appear, Annie made an excellent wife; never flirted the least bit in the world, except with her husband; and practically remembered her father's wise and favorite text:—

"I have been young and now an old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." (Concluded.)

Simplicity of manner, as of dress, is a charm that a woman generally admires in another more than in herself.