LORD KILGOBBIN.

By Charles Lever.

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CHAPTER I.

KILGOBBIN CASTLE.

Some one has said that almost all that Ireland possesses of picturesque beauty is to be found on, or in the immediate neighborhood of our seaboard; and if we except some brief patches of river scenery on the Nore and the Blackwater, and a part of Lough Erne, the assertion is not devoid of truth. The dreary expanse called the Bog of Allan, which occupies a high table-land in the centre of the island, stretches away for miles flat, sad colored, and monotonous, fissured in every direction by channels of dark-tinted water, in which the very fish take the same sad color. This tract is almost without trace of habitation, save where at distant intervals, utter destitution has raised a mudhovel undistinguishable from the hillocks of turf around it.

Fringing this broad waste, little patches of cultivation are to be seen—small potato-gardens, as they are called, or a few roods of oats, green even in the late autumn: but, strangely enough, with nothing to show where the humble tiller of the soil was living, or often, any visible road of these isolated sports of culture. Gradually, however—but very gradually—the prospect brightens. Fields with inclosures, and a cabin or two, are to be met with; a solitary tree, generally an ash, will be seen; some rude instrument of husbandry, or an ass cart, will show that we are emerging from the region of complete destitution, and approaching a land of at least struggling civilization. At last, and by a transition that is not always easy to mark, the scene glides into those rich pasture-lands and well-tilled farms that form the wealth of the midland counties. Gentlemen's seats and waving plantations succeeded, and we are in a country of comfort, and abundance.

On this border-land, between fertility and destitution, and on a tract which had probably once been part of the bog itself, there stood—there stands still—a short, square tower, battlemented at top, and surmounted with a pointed roof, which seems to grow out of a cluster of farm-building, so surrounded is its base by roofs of thatch and slates. Incongruous, vulgar, and ugly in every way, the old keep appears to look down on them—time-worn and battered as it is—as might a reduced gentleman regard the unworthy associates with whom an altered fortune has linked him. This is all that remains of Kilgobbin Castle.

In the guide-books we read that it was once a place of strength and importance, and that Hugh de Lacy—the same bold knight "who had won all Ireland for the English from the Shannon to the sea"—had taken this castle from a native chieftain called Neal O'Caharney, whose family he had slain, all save one; and then he adds: "Sir Hugh came one day, with three Englishmen, that he might show them the castle, when there came to him a youth of the men of Meath—a certain Gilla Naher O'Mahey, foster brother of O'Caharney himself—with his battle-axe concealed beneath his cloak, and while De Lacy was reading the petition he gave him, he dealt him such a blow that his head and body being afterward buried in the ditch of the castle.

The annals of Kilronan farther related that the O'Caharneys became adherents of the English—dropping their Irish designation, and calling themselves Kearney: and in this way were restored to a part of the lands and the Castle of Kilgobbin—"by favor of which act of grace," says the chronical, "they were bound to raise a becoming monument over the brave knight, Hugh de Lacy, whom their kinsman had so treacherously slain; but they did no more of this than one large stone of granite, and no inscription thereon; thus showing that at all times and with all men, the O'Caharneys were false knaves and untrue to their word."

In later times, again, the Kearneys returned to the old faith of their fathers and followed the fortunes of King James; one of them Michael O'Kearney, having acted as aid-de-camp at the Boyne, and conducted the king to Kilgobbin, where he passed the night after the defeat, and, as the tradition records, held a court the next morning, at which he thanked the owner of the castle for his hospitality, and created him on the spot a viscount by the style and the title of Lord Kilgobbin.

It is needless to say that the newly created noble saw good reason to keep his elevation to himself. They were somewhat critical times just then for the adherents of the lost cause, and the followers of King William were keen at scenting out any disloyalty that might be turned to good account by a confiscation. The Kearneys, however were prudent. They entertained a Dutch officer, Van Straaten, on King William's staff, and gave such valuable information besides, as to the condition of the country, that no suspicions of disloyalty attached to them.

To these succeeded more peaceful times, during which the Kearneys were more engaged in endeavoring to reconstruct the fallen condition of their fortunes than in political intrigue. Indeed a very small portion of the original estate now remained to them; and of what once had produced above four thousand a year, there was left a property barely worth eight hundred.

The present owner, with whose fortunes we are more immediately concerned, was a widower. Maurice Kearney's family consisted of a son and a daughter, the former about two-and-twenty, the latter four years younger, though, to all appearance, there did not seem a year between them.

Maurice Kearney himself was a man of about fifty-four or fifty-six—hale, handsome, and powerful; his snow-white hair and bright complexion, white his full gray eyes and regular teeth, giving him an air of genial cordiality at first sight which was fully confirmed by farther acquaintance. So long the world went well with him, Maurice seemed to enjoy life thoroughly; and even its rubs he bore with an easy jocularity that showed what a stout heart he could oppose to fortune. A long minority had provided him with a considerable sum on his coming of age, but he spent it freely, and when it was exhausted, continued to live on at the same rate as before, till at last, as creditors grew pressing, and mortgages threatened foreclosure, he saw himself reduced to something less than one-fifth of his former outlay and though he seemed to address himself to the task with a bold spirit and a resolute mind, the old habits were too deeply rooted to be eradicated; and the pleasant companionship of his equals, his life at the club in Dublin, his joyous conviviality, no longer possible, he suffered him self to descend to an inferior rank, and sought his associations among humbler men, whose flattering reception of him soon reconciled him to his fallen condition. His companions were now the small farmers of the neighborhood and the shop-keepers in the adjoining town of Moate, to whose habits and modes of thought and expression he gradually conformed, till it became positively irksome to himself to keep the company of his equals. Whether, however, it was that age had breached the stronghold of his good spirits, or that conscience rebuked him for having derogated from his station, certain it is that all his buoyancy failed him when away from society, and that in the quietness of his home he was depressed and dispirited to a degree; and to that genial temper, which once he could count on against every reverse that befell him, there now succeeded an irritable, peevish spirit that led him to attribute every annoyance he met with to some fault or shortcoming of others.

By his neighbors in the town and by his tenantry he was always addressed as "my lord," and treated with all the deference that pertained to such difference of station. By the gentry, however, when at rare occasions he met them, he was known as Mr. Kearney, and in the village post-office the letters with the Maurice Kearney, Esq., were perpetual reminders of what rank was accorded him by that wider section of the world that lived beyond the shadow of Kilgobbin Castle.

Perhaps the impossible task of serving two masters is never more palpably displayed than when the attempt attaches to a divided identity—when a man tries to be himself in two distinct parts in life, without the slightest misgiving of hypocrisy while doing so. Maurice Kearney not only did not assume any pretension to nobility among his equals, but he would have felt that any reference to his title from one of them would have been an impertinence, and an impertinence to be resented; while at the same time, had a shop-keeper of Moate, or one of the tenants, addressed him as other than "my lord," he would not have deigned him a notice.

Strangely enough, this divided allegiance did not merely prevail with the outer world, it actually penetrated within his walls. By his son, Richard Kearney, he was always called "my lord:" while Kate as persistently addressed and spoke to him as papa. Nor was this difference without signification as to their separate natures and tempers.

Had Maurice Kearney contrived to divide the two parts of his nature, and bequeathed all his pride, his vanity, and his pretensions to his son, while he gave his light-heartedness, his buoyancy and kind ness to his daughter, the partition could not have been more perfect. Richard Kearney was full of an insolent pride of birth. Contrasting the position of his father with that held by his grandfather, he resented the downfall as the act of a dominant faction, eager to outrage the old race and the old religion of Ireland. Kate took a very different view of their condition. She clung, in deed, to the notion of their good blood, but as a thing that might assuage many of the pangs of adverse fortune, not increase nor imbitter them; and "if we are ever to imerge," though she, "from this poor state, we shall meet our class without any of the shame of a mushroom origin. It will be a restoration, and not a new elevation." She was a fine, handsome, fearless girl, whom many said ought to have been a boy; but this was rather intented as a covert slight on the narrower nature and peevish temperament of her brother—another exchanged conditions.

The listless indolence of her father's life, and the almost complete absence from home of her brother, who was pursuing his studies at the Dublin University, had giving over to her charge not only the household, but no small share of the management of the estate—all, in fact, that an old land steward, a certain Peter Gill, would permit her to exercise; for Peter was a very absolute and despotic grand vizier; and if it had not been that he could neither read nor write, it would have been utterly impossible to have wrested from him a particle of power over the property. This happy defect in his education—happy so far as Kate's rule was concerned—gave her the one claim she could prefer to any superiority over him and his obstinacy could never be effectually overcome except by confronting him with a written document or a column of figures. Before these, indeed, he would stand crestfallen and abashed. Some strange terror seemed to possess him as to the peril of opposing himself to such inscrutable testimony—a fear, be it said, he never felt in contesting an oral witness.

Peter had once resource, however, and I am not sure that a similar stronghold has not secured the power of greater men and in higher functions. Peter's sway was of so varied and complicated a kind; the duties he discharged were so various, manifold, and conflicting; the measures he took with the people whose destinies were committed to him where so thoroughly devised, by reference to the peculiar condition of each man—what he could do, or bear, or submit to, and not by any sense of justice—that a sort of government grew up over the property full of hitches, contingencies, and compensations, and of which none but he who had invented the machinery could possibly pretended to the direction. The estate being, to use his own words, "so like the old coach harness, so full of knots, splices, and entanglement, there was not another man in Ireland could make it work; and if another were to try it, it would all come to pieces in his hands."

Kate was shrewed enough to see this; and in the same way that she had admiringly watched Peter as he knotted a trace and supplemented a strap there, to strengthening a weak point, and providing for casualties, even the least likely, she saw him dealing with the tenantry on the property; and in the same spirt that he made allowence for sickness here and misfortune there, he would be as promp to screw up a lagging tenant to the last penny, and secure the landlord in the share of any season of prosperity.

Had the Government Commissioner, sent to report on the state of land tenure in Ireland, confined himself to a visit to the estate of Lord Kilgobbin—for so we like to call him—it is just possible that the Cabinet would have found the task of legislation even more difficult than thy have already admitted it to be. First of all, not a tenant on the estate had any certain knowledge of how much land he held.

"It will be made up to you," was Gill's phrase about everything. "What matters if you have an acre more or an acre less?" Neither had any one a lease, or, indeed, a writing of any kind. Gill settled that on the 25th March and 25th September a certain sum was to be forthcoming, and that was all. When the lord wanted them there were always to give him a hand, which often meant with their carts and horses, especially in harvest-time. Not that they were a hard-worked or hard-working population; they took life very easy, seeing that by no possible exertion could they materially better themselves: and even when they hunted a neighbor's cow out of their wheat, they would excuse the eviction with a lazy indolence and sluggishness that took away from the act all semblance of ungenerousness.

They were very poor, their hovels were wretched, their clothes ragged, and their food scanty; but, with all that, they were not discontented, and very far for unhappy. There was no prosperity at hand to contrast with their poverty. This was, on the whole, pretty much as they always remembered it. They would have liked it to be "better off" if they knew how, but they did not know if there was a "better off"—much less how to come at it; and if they were, Peter Gill certainly did not tell them of it.

If a stray visitor to fair or market brought back the news that there was an agitation abroad for a new settlement of the land, that popular orators were proclaiming the poor man's rights and denouncing the cruelties of the landlord, if they heard that men were talking of repealing the laws which secured property to the owner and only admitted him to a sort of partnership with the tiller of the soil, old Gill speedily assured them that these were changes only to be adopted in Ulster, where the tenants were rack-rented and treated like slaves. "Which of you here," would he say, "can come forward and say he was ever evicted?" Now as the term was one of which none had the very vaguest conception—it might, for aught they knew, have been an operation in surgery—the appeal was an overwhelming success. "Sorra doubt of it, but ould Peter's right, and there's worse places to live in, and worse landlords to live under than the lord." Not but it taxed Gill's skill and cleverness to maintain this quarantine against the outer world; and he often felt like Prince Metternich in a like strait—that it would only be a question of time, and, in a long run, the newspaper fellows must win.

From what has been said, therefore, it may be imagined that Kilgobbin was not a model estate, nor Peter Gill exactly the sort of witness from which a select committee would have extricated any valuable suggestions for the construction of a land code.

Anything short of Kate Kearney's fine temper and genial disposition would have broken down by daily dealing with this cross-grained, wrong-headed and obstinate old fellow, whose ideas of management all centred in craft and subtlety—outwriting this man, forstalling that—doing everything by halves so that no boon came unassociated with some contingency or other by which he secured to himself unlimited power.

As Gill was in perfect possession of her father's confidence, to oppose him in anything was a task of no mean difficulty; and the mere thought that the old fellow should feel offended and throw up his charge—was a terror Kilgobbin could not have faced. Nor was this her only care. There was Dick continually dunning her for remittance, and importuning her for means to supply his extravagances. "I suspect how it would be," wrote he once, "with a lady paymaster. And when my father told me I was to look to you for my allowence, I accepted the information as a heavy percentage taken off my beggarly income. What could you—what could any young girl—know of the requirements of a man going out into the best society of a capital! To derive any benefit from associating with these people, I must at least seem to live like them. I am received as the son of a man of condition and property, and you want to bound my habits by those of my chum Joe Atlee, whose father is starving somewhere on the pay of a Presbyterian minister. Even Joe himself laughs at the notion of gauging my expense by his.

"If this is to go on—I mean if you in-