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ELLEN AHERN;

OR,

THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

“Don’t mind me, Miss—” said Mrs. Wardell. “Ellen—call me Ellen,” replied Ellen Aherne. “Well, don’t mind me. Any little thing brings the palsy on me. I suppose you are very accomplished, and can do more than any fifty women of my time could do, or know anything about.” “I do not know or pretend to anything extraordinary, Madam,” said Ellen, with a virtuous expression flashing in her eyes. “You’ll have a tough time with the child there. She’s been very much neglected.” “I find Therese, if not far advanced, very docile and attentive.” “Oho! It’s your business to say so whether she is or not,” said Mrs. Wardell, coarsely. “I do not consider it a part of my business to compromise the truth in the slightest degree, Madam,” replied Ellen Aherne, with a flush of indignation surmounting her cheeks. “I assure you she deserves what I say of her.” “Well, I’m glad to hear it. She was like a wild colt, but it was all for the want of training—for the want of training.” “I am trying, grandmama, trying very hard to learn something, and now that I can go to Church, I am trying to be good too.” “Oho! to Church? And what Church do you attend pray?” “The Catholic Church.” “Are you a Catholic?” asked Mrs. Wardell, nodding to Ellen. “Yes, Madam,” replied Ellen firmly. “And does her father know it?” “Assuredly he does, Madam, and he requested me to see that Therese has religious instruction. He wishes her to be a Catholic, because her mother was one.” “Poor Bernard! Poor Bernard!” said the pained old woman, laughing until she nearly shook herself out of her chair, and ending with a cry, “he’s like me, he can’t forget. He can’t forget!” “Grandmama, you used to make me sing for you. Should you not like to hear Miss Aherne sing?” interposed Therese, anxious to divert the aged invalid’s thoughts. “Can you sing, Adeem—Ellen, I mean. Can you sing?” “Sometimes,” replied Ellen Aherne, startled by her pronunciation of her name, and pained as well as disgusted by the scene. “Sing, then?” was the command, given with an imperative wave of her staff, which forcibly reminded Ellen of the tale she used to read when a child, of magnificent old ladies and their wands; and she no longer wondered that Therese’s imagination was so imbued with demoniac lore and visions of the unreal. “What shall I sing, Madam? A hymn?” “No. What have I to do with hymns. Sing me a song.” And Ellen, knowing no other, except some French songs, began to warble in strains clear and thrilling, one of Moore’s imitable ballads, when she was interrupted by a wailing, sobbing cry from Mrs. Wardell, who wrung her hands together and exclaimed: “Hush it up! Hush it up! You needn’t sing any more; I’d rather hear the cats on the roof when the moonshine makes ’em mad. Go away, now. I wonder where you learned that song, to come singing it to me, as if it wasn’t bad enough for me never to forget.” “I’ve heard the servants say that she’s childish, whatever that is, Miss Aherne,” whispered Therese, lifting Ellen’s hand gently to her lips. “Do not feel pained at what she says, she does not mean it.” “I will not sing it again, Mrs. Wardell; I am extremely sorry that I thought of it. These old songs touch very tender chords sometimes,” observed Ellen Aherne, more moved by pity than displeasure. “Aye, child, aye! It was like stirring up a pool where the dead lie hidden!” she said, shaking violently all over. “Go away now, and don’t come again unless I send for you. I don’t like strangers. They agitate me.” “May I not come sometimes and read to you? I think I might cheer you up, Mrs. Wardell.” “I’ll see. I’ll see. You’ve got a quiet way and a soft voice. Perhaps, if I want you, I’ll send,” replied Mrs. Wardell, waving her staff towards the door. “Is she often so, dear?” inquired Ellen, after they had left the room. “She’s much worse sometimes,” replied the child sadly, “then nobody sees her except my father and the nurse.” But day after day passed by, and no message came from the aged invalid for Ellen Aherne to repeat her visit, which was quite a relief to her, for the recollection of the one she had paid her already, haunted her recollection with a distinct-

ness and weirdness that sickened her, although she would not have shrunk or hesitated a moment about going again, if the summons had come, because she would have considered it a simple duty of Christian charity. Meanwhile, the antique, faded furniture and threadbare carpets had been removed from the drawing room, which was now hung with pale, rose-colored paper, and re-furnished with rich tapestry carpeting and costly furniture covered with dark crimson velvet.—Every thing in this strange house was so well ordered and systematically attended to that the whole of its domestic economy seemed to progress without human agency. The two old negro servants had been so many years plodding over the same routine, that if they had been wound up like clocks, they could not have performed their tasks with greater regularity.—Ellen Aherne and Therese seemed to have the house to themselves, for they had not seen Mr. Wardell since the morning he had whirled her off to purchase a new piano. It was a quiet, tranquil way of living, and left Ellen much time and frequent opportunities to write letters home, and think of the sudden and strange vicissitudes that had overtaken her within the past year, as well as to visit Father Weston, for the purpose of attending to her pious duties and Mrs. Harverly’s, where she had boarded for some months, and where Thelma was—much against his will—domesticated. Therese was progressing slowly in her studies—her mind had never been disciplined, and the drudgery of learning was almost intolerable; but she was patient and attentive to her irksome tasks, although she would willingly have devoted her whole time to music, of which she was passionately fond, if Ellen had allowed it.—She had all along needed companionship—poor child—a gentle, sympathizing, cheerful friend, whose fostering care and tenderness would develop the good and beautiful gifts of heart and mind, with which God had endowed her, all of which she found in Ellen Aherne, whom she grew to love with a clinging, reverent and confiding affection—such as a child might feel for its mother; and exerted herself indefatigably to deserve her approbation and win a return of love. Notwithstanding the ease and comfort which surrounded her, and the deference with which she was treated, Ellen Aherne’s heart very often grew faint, and weak in its longings for the familiar faces and scenes of home. She felt starving at times for a breath of the sea air that used to come sweeping up over the fern covered hill sides to Fermanagh every morning; and for the sound of the musical dash of the torrent as it rushed and trickled over the rocks in the ravine below, on its swift way to the ocean. Therese had often told her about the beautiful view to be had from her aerial lookout on the roof; and further, one evening, Ellen Aherne proposed going. The weather was mild for the season, and wrapping their shawls about them, they ascended to the garret, and clambered up the steep narrow steps that led to the opening in the roof, which was protected by a low parapet. It was impossible for them to get any further—they were obliged to stand on the upper step and look over it to the broad and splendid view beyond. The sun was setting in regal splendor, and tinted the distant waters of the bay and its innumerable sails with hues of crimson and gold—while the scudding clouds over head, which came floating up like messages of joy from the sunset shore, reminding Ellen Aherne of the smiles, the loving words, and sweet counsels of the beloved whose life sun had set for ever. Then she thought of the quiet mossy graves at Cathaguir, on which the last sun-rays used to slant down between the quartz peaks a bright and narrow pathway from them to heaven; and memories of all she had loved and known in that wild and secluded spot came thronging into her mind—forcing the hot tears to her eyes, and dimming the splendid prospect outspread so gloriously around her, until it was forgotten. And with these visions of the past, intruded the memory of one whom she was schooling her heart to forget—not because of any thought of unworthiness in him—but from sheer maidenly reserve which shrunk from the bestowal of an unsought preference. And was it the reflected crimson of the sunset clouds that so suddenly deepened the rose tints on her cheeks, and diffused that soft pensiveness over her countenance, as the image of the Senor Giron came again and again unbidden to blend itself with her musings? We cannot tell—for she uttered no word, but leaned her elbow on the low parapet around the opening, and yielding herself for the moment to reverie in which the fair Angel, Hope, whispered words of prophecy. She did not observe that the sun had disappeared, and that twilight crowned with her lone and lustrous star, and clothed in her soft purple draperies, was brooding like a solemn angel over sea and shore, until the deep-toned bell of the Cathedral pealed out over the city the ‘Angelus Domini,’ which, after blessing herself, Ellen Aherne recited aloud with devout fervor.

“Dear Therese, I fear that you are quite chilled. I did not know that it was so late.—I was thinking of friends and of scenes far away, and so forgot time.” “I knew it,” said Therese, clinging to her hand as they descended the dark, narrow steps, for when I looked into your eyes, Miss Aherne, they were gazing at something far beyond my seeing. I did not know, but I thought it might be into heaven, for they were very bright.” “I am not so privileged as that, dear one,” replied Ellen Aherne, although I love to think often of that Land far away, and of those who have been gathered into its realms of joy.” “Oh, how dark and close it is in this garret, Miss Aherne. Do you not feel afraid?” “Afraid? Not in the least. Only hear how the mice are scampering away at the sound of our footsteps. If we could only see them, how ridiculous it would be,” said Ellen, with a mischievous laugh. “Somehow, Miss Aherne, I don’t feel so timid and so fearful of being alone since I know for true that I have an angel, a fair and holy angel, whose business it is to watch over and guard me, always beside me. It makes me very happy to think of it, and I should be so very sorry to do anything to grieve or offend my heavenly associate.” “It is indeed a consoling thought, dear child. Oh, if we could only see now anxiously and incessantly these pure sons of God watch over our life and its ways; with what joy they carry up to heaven a good report, and the solemn shadow that veils their celestial face when going thither with tidings of faithfulness and sin; we should all, methinks, be more circumspect in thought, word and action. It is a great honor when one thinks of it right, and a marvellous condescension in Almighty God to give to our feeble being a stay to our halting and wandering steps, an Angel Friend so glorious, that if our human eyes could behold the dazzling splendor of his presence, we should fall adoring and bereft of life, at his feet.” “I would rather not see my guardian angel, Miss Aherne, unless I could behold him in a dream—because I should be afraid,” said Therese softly. “Yes, it is best so,” said Ellen Aherne, who, strangely enough, had been thinking all the time they were feeling their way down through the dark passages and winding stairways, of the night of her escape through the subterranean path, from Fermanagh, and the evil designs of Lord Hugh Maguire. Had not her angel sent the Senor Giron to her succor, and had not he guarded them well through the unseen perils of their flight. “Miss Aherne, there is the tea bell. I expect uncle Cato thinks we have run off—look at him below there—he cannot see us. Here peep over the balustrade, Miss Aherne. He rings the bell a little while, then he looks down into the hall; ting-a-ling, a-ling—now he goes on tip toe to the drawing door and listens; now he goes along as silently as a lord, and waits at the schoolroom door. He don’t know what in the world has come to pass, that tea is kept back ten minutes. I’m afraid it will give him a turn,” whispered Therese, laughing, as she drew Ellen Aherne towards her, and pointed to the spot where the venerable Major Domo stood irresolute. “A turn, what is that, Therese? It seems like a wrong word,” said Ellen Aherne, who could not accustom herself to Therese’s Americanisms. “It means being sick.” “Well, we must not tease him; he is too old and respectable, and, withal, too faithful a servant. And then we have Catechism to study after tea. Have you forgotten what is to be done to-morrow morning?” “No indeed, Miss Aherne. I am frightened half out of my wits at the idea of confession,” said Therese, gravely. “And yet, dear child, it is only by good confession that we can fit ourselves for companionship with our angel friend, give him joy, and win the approval of Almighty God. It is a remedy whose bitterness is much sweetened by the thought of the healing it brings. Some of those days you will know it better. Here we are, uncle Cato, you must excuse us for making tea wait.” “I was only afraid, young Missis, that the muffins would get heavy, dats all,” said the old man, touching his white wool, somewhat after the fashion of a military salute, as the young ladies went by him into the dining room. While they were partaking of a nice tea, and conversing pleasantly on various topics of interest, the door swung open and Mr. Wardell came in. He had either just returned home, or was going out, for he had on his ample cloak and collar of Siberian fur. His hat he held in his hand. “That looks pleasant. How do you do, Miss Aherne?” “I am well, sir, I thank you. Will you not sit down and take tea with us?”

“Tea, the mischief! I should starve on tea and muffins. I’d as lief be shut up in a cage and fed on bird seed and cake. Have you no kiss for me this evening, Therese? I have not seen you.” But before he could finish the sentence, Therese, who was only waiting for some sign from him, had sprung upon a chair, thrown her arms about him, and kissed him fondly. “There—there! Child, you are like a gatorter—see, you have squeezed tears into my eyes,” said Mr. Wardell, wiping from his eyes two genuine tears, which he—man like—was ashamed of. “I’m sorry, papa. I won’t hug so hard the next time. You know I don’t see you often,” said Therese, deprecatingly. “Never mind, child, I have survived it, you perceive. Miss Aherne, if you are not going out to-morrow, there will be company to see you.” “To see me, sir. I have no acquaintances in the city,” said Ellen surprised at the announcement. “That is no reason why you should not have some. It stands to reason that you must be lonesome, mewed up here from day to day, with no one but Therese to talk to, and moping for ever over lessons and books, so I told two or three of my Catholic friends—who are merchant princes, by the way—that my daughter had a friend staying with her, who I should be glad to have their wives and daughters call on.” “I hope, sir, you told them also that the young lady is your daughter’s governess,” said Ellen Aherne, shrinking sensitively from a false position yet grateful for this new instance of Mr. Wardell’s incessant regard for her well being and comfort. “No. I gave them to understand that you are a disguised princess. Don’t be uneasy, Miss Aherne, I shall invite no one to see you who cannot afford to value you for yourself. I would not select narrow minded, parse-proud people as associates for one who is entrusted with the cultivation of my daughter’s mind. These ladies know that you have been good enough to undertake the training of a motherless little girl. Do you trot her to church?” “Therese goes to Mass with me every morning, sir, and is receiving instruction from Father Weston,” replied Ellen Aherne, not knowing whether to laugh or look dignified at his strange way of talking. “That’s right; good night.” And off he went as suddenly as he came, banging the hall door after him. Ellen Aherne understood and appreciated Mr. Wardell’s motive in wishing her to be known and visited by persons of her own sex whose wealth and standing in the community at once defined the position of those with whom they associated, or paid attention to. She would have preferred seclusion, but she felt that she had no right to dictate in this matter. She could easily keep out of gaiety and away from the follies of worldliness—for which she was quite unfitted by education as well as by inclination—it any such temptations awaited her. She thought, perhaps, that situated as she was at Mr. Wardell’s, it would shelter her from much gross curiosity and many silly speculations, to have a few lady friends whose intercourse with her would stamp her residence there with the strictest propriety. And the ladies he had invited were Catholics! This was another proof of the kindly interest he took in her; and she could not help feeling surprised as well as grateful, that this man, seemingly so indifferent to domestic pleasures and social amenities, and so immersed in business and its cares as to have but little time to think of anything beyond its vortex, should take so much trouble to make her position in his house at once easy and independent. It was not certainly the way of the world, and she felt puzzled to account for it. The only solution of the problem that she could work out, was, that under his rough and undisciplined nature and uneducated mind, there lay some germs of natural refinement and noble feeling, which parental love was fostering and developing, and she concluded it was best to enjoy the sunshine, and, for the sake of Therese, do nothing to repulse or chill their manifestations. She did not understand or know how—could she—that this man’s life was one of expiation. That was its mystery, but it was kept chained and fretting in the depths of his own heart—the world only saw the fruits of it in strange, eccentric and munificent acts of charity, which were simply looked upon as the princely doings of a man who was at a loss how to dispose of his gold. And then there were times when Ellen Aherne, notwithstanding all this kindness, felt a chill stealing over her in this strange house, which she could neither repress nor account for, but which she endeavored to get rid of as something disloyal and ungrateful towards Mr. Wardell, and unworthy of herself. The next morning, having partaken of an early breakfast, Ellen Aherne and Therese went up to the cathedral to be present and assist at

the eight o’clock Mass, after which Therese was to make her first confession. It was a great trial to the young girl, the greatest she had ever encountered, but she had learnt from her catechism, and the instructions of Father Weston, now necessary it was for Christians to comply with this obligation. It was fully apparent to her mind, through these teachings, that the Son of God would never have endowed His disciples, and through them those who came after them, with the awful power to remit sins, if He had not intended that penitence and confession were to be the conditions of forgiveness. It was, as she now realized, a difficult portal to approach and pass through, but she saw beyond all the other glories and life-giving Sacraments overflowing with the magnificent graces which their Divine founder had so liberally bestowed when He instituted them; and knew how impossible it is to attain or partake of them without a compliance with the obligation of sacramental confession. This was clear to her, through the lucid explanations in her catechism. She had naturally an intelligent, as well as an analytical mind, and these questions had engrossed much of its attention. It was good reasoning, and so clear that she never hesitated an instant to doubt it. How could she when she had the authority of Christ Himself, for the truths now submitted to her reason. She was not learned in theology or in the mystic questions of the schools, but what of that? She believed in God, and having this as the foundation and keystone of her simple faith, she did not, could not, dare not doubt His Divine Word. He had therefore established Confession and had made in His Divine Wisdom magnificent provision in His Church for a compliance with it. It was, she plainly saw, essential to salvation, and without it, she felt that her soul must starve and perish. Miss was over, and fearful and faint-hearted Therese released Ellen Aherne’s hand, which she had been holding tightly clasped in hers, and with slow, timid steps approached the tribunal of Penance, just as one might sever himself from every cherished tie to plunge into an unknown sea, overhurling by a curtain of cloud. This was her first essay up the steep and rugged way, and the priest into whose ear she was going to reveal the imperfections, sins, and errors of her nature and life was a comparative stranger. Had it been Father Weston she would not have been so agitated. She lifted the curtain of the confessional, and sinking on her knees, in confusion and trembling, she bowed down her head and wept. This was nothing new to the man of God who sat there to counsel, and absolve penitent souls, and waiting a few moments until the first gust and flurry of emotion had subsided, he spoke so soothingly and encouragingly to the young neophyte, and led her on so usefully and sweetly to the feet of Jesus, that ere she knew it, she had poured out her whole soul’s history to him. Its annals were simple and but little defiled by sin, but his experienced eye saw the usual natural obstacles entrenched around its citadel. Pride, self-will, human respect, and other evil propensities, not yet conscious of power, or given to harmful stature, had as yet done but little mischief, and he thanked God in his inmost soul, that these mortal Upas evils were not to be left neglected and unchained to ravage and finally destroy His kingdom in that fair young soul. Opposed to these, he discerned a tender conscience, easily moved to compunction and shrinking from venous sin, and a natural tendency to devotion, and veneration towards sacred things. Impressive, and of ready, earnest faith—the girl she had received in Baptism—Therese almost felt the holy absolution descending like a refreshing dew into her heart, which grew wonderfully calm and peaceful, and yet, she had scarcely emerged from the confessional ere she began to think that the ordeal through which this peace had to be won was fearful, and to wonder if she should ever have the courage to go again, or if she were to commit some grievous sin, how would it be possible for her to reveal it. These thoughts—or rather temptations—disturbed her tranquility, but failed to destroy it; it was only the beginning of the conflicts of her spiritual life, and the initiatory lesson of that experience, which was to teach her throughout that “The rapture of pardon is mingled with fears. And the cup of thanksgiving with penitent tears.” There were to be no lessons that day except Music. Ellen Aherne thought it best to leave Therese to quiet meditation, if she was that way inclined, instead of fatiguing her mind with study when it was relaxed by the trial it had undergone; and if not, to converse cheerfully with her on some instructive and agreeable topic. About two o’clock visitors were announced by Cato, who handed in their cards on a silver waiter—Messdames Talbot and Gaston, with their daughters had called to see Miss Aherne. Ellen’s toilet was simple, but elegant and becoming, and the expectation of meeting strangers gave her a