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A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER VII.—MURDER AND MYSTERY.

Mrs. Esmond was slow in recovering from her swoon, and even when consciousness did return, strength was sadly wanting. Mind and body were prostrated, as if by some violent shock, and when her attendants proposed to her to retire to her chamber for a little while, she passively consented, whereupon two of them supported her up the stairs. They could not induce her, however, to lie down; throwing herself on her knees beside her bed she bowed her head upon it in silent prayer, and so remained till the girls, fearing that she had fainted again, gently touched her arm. She looked up with a wintry smile on her pale features.

'Never fear, Peggy, I'm not dead!' The words came out, as it were, with a spasmodic effort, and a dreary emphasis on the pronoun I. 'Oh! girls, let us pray, let us all pray together.' And they did pray, the girls awed by the strange composure—the unnatural calmness of their mistress, at a moment when they could hardly restrain themselves from rushing out to join the search which they felt was going on.

Half an hour might have passed thus, when the door-bell rang. Mrs. Esmond started to her feet gasping for breath—strove to speak, but unable to utter a word pointed to the door. The girls understood her—one of them hurried down stairs, but did not return. Strange sounds were heard in the hall, as if of heavy feet shuffling along, and whispering voices, and stifled groans and sobs. Still Mrs. Esmond moved not, though the fitting color on her cheek, and the fearful intensity with which her eyes rested on the door, showed the awful struggle between fear and hope that was going on within.

'Ma'am, dear,' said the remaining servant, 'what can it be, at all?—will I go and see?'

'Go!' The word escaped from between the firmly compressed lips, as though the speaker were scarcely conscious of its import. The girl darted off like a lap-wing, and she had hardly time to descend the stairs, when a piercing scream echoed through the corridor. 'Ha! that's Nora's voice. I knew it,' said Mrs. Esmond to herself; 'my God! I knew it,' and she fell senseless on the floor.

When she again opened her eyes on surrounding objects, all the women servants of the household were around her, engaged in various efforts for her recovery, one slapping the palms of her hands, another bathing her temples, whilst a third had her almost choked, holding burnt feathers under her nose. Her first look of wild inquiry was answered with a chorus of sorrowful ejaculations that confirmed her worst fears. It was but the work of a moment to spring out of bed, and dash the officious attendants to one side and the other.

'Where is Harry?' cried the half-crazed wife; 'where is my husband?—dead or alive, let me see him.'

No one spoke, but on the instant came from the adjoining room the most sorrowful death-cry that ever thrilled mourner's heart. Guided by the sound, Mrs. Esmond flew to the door, which was closed—but paused before she attempted to open it, her face like that of a sheeted corpse, and the cold dew oozing from her pallid brow.

'Ma'am, dear, don't go in,' whispered one from behind; 'for God's sake, don't.'

A scornful laugh was the answer, the door was flung open, and Mrs. Esmond stood in the presence of her husband, but not as she parted from him some hours before. Dead and cold he lay, in the clothes he had worn all day, the blood slowly trickling from a bullet wound in his temple, showing all too plainly the manner in which he had met his death. At the foot of the bed sat mad Mabel, chanting her song of woe, and rocking her body to and fro, in dismal accordance with the wild strain she sang so piteously. Mulligan and two or three other men who were in the room drew back as the door opened; they need not have done so, for their presence was unheeded by her whose soul was that moment crushed, as by an avalanche.

Mrs. Esmond stood beside the bed, looking down on the heap of clay that was her husband, but no sigh, no sound escaped her. Every faculty of her being seemed paralyzed, every limb, every feature, as it were, petrified. Her silence at such a moment was something wholly inexplicable to the simple hearts around, and the stony rigidity of her living features was more awful to their eyes even than the ghastly presence of death. People held their breath as though fearful of disturbing a silence that yet was terrible to all. Looks of pity were exchanged, and gestures of horror, but not a word spoken. Even Mabel had ceased her wailing and sat looking very earnestly at the motionless figure on the bed

—from that her eyes wandered to the strangely-altered face of Mrs. Esmond—all at once she rose softly from her seat, glided like a spirit to her side, and, throwing her arm round her neck, began to pat her cheek with her cold hand, saying at the same time in a tone of tender pity: 'Cry, now—why don't you cry? Poor thing, poor thing.'

As if Mabel's voice had broken the mighty spell that kept her senses in thrall, Mr. Esmond started into sudden life, threw up her arms wildly, and uttered a scream so piercing, so full of anguish, that it rang in the ears of those who heard it for many a long day after. Disengaging herself from Mabel's encircling arm, she threw herself on the body of her husband and wildly called upon his name, kissing his cold lips again and again as though hoping to restore their warmth. In vain, in vain. Then she laid her hand on his heart, but no—no—all was still—still as death could make it. Yet she could not, would not, believe that death *was* there. How could she realize it to herself that the stark form before her was that of her young husband, who had left her but a few short hours before in all the buoyancy of youth, and health, and happiness? Harry dead! Harry Esmond dead!—no no—no—it could not be—it must be a dream, a horrible dream.

Turning for the first time, with her hand still on Esmond's heart, her eye ran round the room till it rested on the blank, terror-stricken face of Mulligan. In low cautious tones, as if fearing to awaken the sleeper, she said with frightful calmness:

'Mulligan!—he is not dead—he cannot be dead—go directly for Dr. O'Grady and Dr. Hennessy.'

'They'll be here presently, ma'am,' said the poor fellow, trying hard to keep in the tears that were choking his utterance; 'there's two messengers gone for them before we—we—brought the poor master home.'

Again Mrs. Esmond bent down and touched the lips of her beloved, and laid her trembling hand on his heart—then took up the hand that hung down over the bedside and felt for a pulse—when all this was done, the last spark of hope seemed to die in her heart—with the stiff cold hand pressed to her bosom, she turned again to Mulligan, and cried in a tone of heart-piercing anguish:

'Oh, Mulligan, Mulligan! who had the heart to kill him?'

This was the signal for a general outburst of lamentation; the grief and pity so long restrained now broke out in tears and sobs.

'Ay, you may well cry,' said Mrs. Esmond, 'you have all lost a good friend. But oh, Harry, Harry—what is any one's loss to mine?—And, starting to her feet, she wrung her hands in anguish. No tear escaped her burning eye lids, and she felt as though her brain were all on fire. 'Mulligan,' cried she again, with a wildness that alarmed every one, 'Mulligan, I asked you before whose work is this? Where did you find your master?'

'Oh, God pity me that has to tell it,' said Mulligan, 'sure we found him'—here a burst of tears interrupted the sad tale—sure we found him lying on the road side about half-way between here and the Lodge. As for them that done the deed—well, God knows—God knows!'

'It's little matter to me,' said Mrs. Esmond, dreadingly, as she wiped away with her handkerchief the blood that disfigured poor Harry's dead face—that face late so comely and so cheering.—'A time will come for all that—now it is enough for me to know that I am a widow—and my children orphans this dismal night—that I have lost the dearest and best of husbands—and my children the best of fathers—oh, Harry, Harry, is that you that lies there so stiff and cold?—you that gave life and light to all around you—oh no, no, it cannot be you, and raising his head on her arm, she looked with piteous earnestness on his face. Alas! yes, it is Harry Esmond—it is my husband, but you cannot be dead, Harry—oh no, you cannot be dead—speak to me, Harry—oh, in mercy, speak to me—or I cannot—cannot live.'

'You must get her away—at once,' said Dr. O'Grady, who with Dr. Hennessy just then appeared at the door, both panting with excitement, and pale with horror. 'Oh, Maurice, what a sight! he whispered to his friend, 'poor, poor Harry! I fear there is little chance of our doing any good—but come now; be a man, and brace yourself up. That we may at least, do what we can.'

The servants were all in motion in an instant, and the sound of the doctor's familiar voice aroused the unhappy lady. Turning round with a ghastly smile on her parted lips said:

'Come in—come in—you'll not disturb him. O Dr. O'Grady—Dr. Hennessy—look what they have done to poor Harry—he never met you without a friendly smile, and a kind word—but he'll never smile again—he'll never reach the hand of welcome any more—look here; and

pointing to the wound on the temple, from which only an occasional drop of blood now oozed thick and dark, she fell fainting on the body of her husband.

'It is just as well,' said the elder practitioner; 'now take her to her own room as gently as you can, and lay her on the bed.'

It was no easy task to unwind her arms from around the body, but it was at length done, and the doctors proceeded to discharge their melancholy duty, having first cleared the room of all but Mulligan.

A very few moments served to convince the doctors that Harry Esmond was, indeed, no more.

'That bullet did its work well,' said Hennessy, as the two stood beside the bed looking mournfully down on the dead. 'The Lord have mercy on your soul, Harry Esmond. I didn't think that you had an enemy on earth. Merciful Heaven, O'Grady, who could have done such a deed?'

'Mulligan,' said Dr. O'Grady, turning to that faithful servant, 'they tell me you found him.'

'Wisha, then, I did, sir; ochone, ochone! I did!'

'Where? and how?'

Mulligan described the place exactly, and the position in which he found the body.

'And was there no trace of the murderer? Is there no clue to guide us—I mean the law—in bringing the wretch to justice?'

Mulligan was silent, but the next moment he said, musingly, as if to himself—'How did he come to leave the roan behind, I wonder?'

'What's that you say, Mulligan?' said Hennessy quickly; 'was it not his own horse he rode?'

'Well that's what I'm not able to tell you, sir; but I know it was one of old Mr. Esmond's horses—the steel grey—that galloped up to our stable this night without a rider—and it was our own roan mare that the master took with him.'

Hennessy and O'Grady looked into each other's eyes, as if each sought to read the other's thought.

'Has Uncle Harry been sent for?' asked O'Grady.

'No, sir.'

'Send Pierce off immediately, then.'

'Pierce, sir! is it Pierce?' and Mulligan began to rub his elbow.

'Yes, Pierce! you cannot go—you are wanted here, as the oldest servant of the family.'

'Well, but, docthor dear! I can't send Pierce—for Pierce isn't in, or hasn't been since half-past four or five.'

There was something in the tone of these words that made the gentleman start, and look fixedly at the groom. Mulligan's eyes sank consciously beneath their gaze. All at once, Dr. O'Grady's hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

'Mulligan! there is something on your mind that you do not care to tell. But you need not fear to tell us, for you will have to tell all in a Court of Justice, and that before long. Tell me now, had this man Pierce any grudge against Mr. Esmond?'

'Not against my master, sir. Oh Lord, no, sir, I'll take my oath he hadn't. There was no one had any grudge against him—vo, vo, how could they?'

'And yet they shot him,' said Hennessy with stern emphasis; 'they have killed one of the best landlords in Tipperary—one of the best friends the poor had—after that, who can ever say a word in their behalf? My poor, poor Harry! I thought you could travel the county over by night or day, without any one touching a hair of your head—and to think that others who did oppress the poor are alive and well, and you lying there—dead—shot down like a dog in the flower of your youth—my noble, generous, whole-souled Harry—you that always stood their friend when they most needed one.'

'Well, gentlemen,' said Mulligan, wiping away his tears with the sleeve of his jacket, 'it does look very bad—very, very bad at this present time—and if any one done that deed a purpose I mane if they knew who was in it—I'd disown Tipperary for ever and a day.'

Both gentlemen turned at this and fixed their eyes on Mulligan. There was a deep meaning in his eyes, no less than in his words.

'So you think, Mulligan,' said O'Grady slowly and thoughtfully, 'that there might have been a mistake—a fatal mistake, if so?'

'I'd lay my life on it, sir,' said the groom with honest warmth, 'I wouldn't believe the bishop—no, nor the Pope himself if he said it, that my master was shot a purpose. No, sir; it's bad enough, God knows, but it isn't as bad as that.'

'Well, well, it makes little difference, after all, how he came by his death: he is dead, God help us all this night. May the Mother of Sorrows comfort his poor wife, and protect his poor orphan.'

O'Grady's voice faltered as he thus spoke, and it was only after clearing his throat several times that he said to his brother doctor—

'Of course, nothing can be done here till the inquest is over. We must send at once to notify the coroner; and he raised his handkerchief to his eyes. Professionally cold and calm as O'Grady was on ordinary occasions, he was here a child.

Mulligan was accordingly dispatched with the awful intelligence to the coroner of Mr. Esmond's murder—awful, indeed, for Dr. ———, then coroner for that district of the county Tipperary, was himself a personal friend of the deceased gentleman.

When the doctors found themselves alone together, Hennessy laid his hand on O'Grady's arm and said:

'Tell me, O'Grady, what is your opinion of all this?'

O'Grady lowered his voice to a whisper as he replied—'My opinion is that—' he did not finish the sentence, for the door opened and Uncle Harry made his appearance. Without speaking a word, but, merely nodding to the doctors, the old man approached the bed, and looked long on the lifeless form of his nephew. No outward sign gave token of what passed within, but those who watched with intense interest the bearing of that stern man under so terrible a trial, did see what they never forgot, the mighty workings of a hard, proud heart, writhing under the lash.—The face was only partially seen to them, but even that partial view was not needed for the swollen and throbbing veins on the great thick neck, and the bearing of the broad chest, sufficiently indicated the storm of passion that was raging within.

At last he turned and looked from one doctor to the other with heavy, bloodshot eyes, glaring fiercely from under his bushy brows.

'So they've killed poor Harry,' he said in a hoarse guttural voice.

'So it appears, Mr. Esmond,' sadly said O'Grady.

'Well, there's what it is to be a good landlord! There was a fierceness of sarcasm in these words that cannot be described. 'If it was I now that lay there instead of Harry, people would say, I suppose, that I deserved what I got—ah, the villains, the black-hearted, cowardly villains, it's little I regard them.'

'Take care, Mr. Esmond—take care,' said Hennessy, 'with that sight before you, how can you speak so?'

'And why not?' said Esmond fiercely.

'Because, Mr. Esmond,' said Hennessy, drawing near to him, and looking him steadily in the face, 'because that bullet may have missed its mark. No man ever meant to shoot young Harry Esmond!'

The old man started as if an adder had stung him. A ghastly paleness overspread his face, and a brighter glare flashed in his eyes. Dr. Hennessy's face stammered out, 'what do you mean?'

'I mean just what I said,' replied the doctor slowly and emphatically, 'that my poor friend never incurred the fearful penalty he has paid. Excuse me,' said the doctor to O'Grady, 'I will go and see how poor Mrs. Esmond is.'

'You are impatient, sir—you forget yourself,' hissed the old man between his teeth.

'No, sir; I do not forget myself or you either; and saying, Hennessy left the room. As he passed along the corridor to the remote apartment whither Mrs. Esmond had been conveyed, he encountered more than one group of the servants with certain women of the neighborhood whom the news had already reached. Every soul of them was in tears, and their groans and lamentations attested the sincerity of their sorrow. Some had stories to tell of dreams they had dreamed of the poor dear master, or the mistress, God save her, or of great trouble and confusion about the big house. And sure they knew well there was something going to happen; others had been favored with warnings of divers other kinds, all of which were now interpreted in the awful death of 'the master' so dearly beloved by all. The cook was trying hard to make herself intelligible through the sobs and tears that choked her voice, while she set forth her claims to supernatural enlightenment.

'Sure, didn't I know ever since Hol'ere night that something or another was going to happen.'

'Wisha, how is that, Molly dear? and all the rest dried their eyes, and held their breath to listen to one so well entitled to speak.

Molly then told, with sundry additions, the affair of the ring—the wedding-ring, and the clay. When Molly had enjoyed sufficiently the simple wonder of her auditors, she proceeded to cap the climax with her own experience.—'But there was something more than that,' said she, 'that nobody seen barring myself and Nancy there!'

'The Lord save us, Molly, acree, what was it?'

'After they wor all gone to bed that night, myself an' Nancy being the last in the kitchen, we thought we'd rake the ashes smooth to see if

there 'id be any feet coming or going. We waited to try salt, too, so we put a thimbleful fornest every one in the house, standing on a plate in a cool place, and off we went to bed.'

'Well, Molly, an' come of it?'

'As true as I'm a livin' woman this night, and the master a dead man, Lord receive his soul in glory—there was the mark of a foot in the ashes—a man's foot, too, and for all the world like his and it turned to't the door!'

'The Lord between us an' harm!'

'An' when we went to look at the salt, behold you, there was one thimbleful broken down, and melted like, and the others all standin' as straight as when we left them. Now that's as thrue as you're all standing there, an' if you doubt my words there's Nancy Kenny can tell you the same.'

Nancy groaned in corroboration, and another took up the dismal theme of the warnings. It was very remarkable, however, that in all their grief for the good master they had lost, little was said of the manner of his death, and nothing whatever of the perpetrator of the deed—whoever that might be.

When Dr. Hennessy knocked at the door of the room where Mrs. Esmond was, it was opened by Mrs. O'Grady, and he found within Mrs. Esmond, senior, and Aunt Winifred, all three having come with Uncle Harry. Mary Hennessy, it appeared, was so overcome by the dreadful shock, that she was utterly unable to follow the dictates of her heart in hastening to the side of her so awfully bereaved friend.

To the doctor's inquiry of how she found herself, Mrs. Esmond replied, in low, faint accents—'Oh! there is no fear of me—I am well enough—too well—but Dr. Hennessy,' she added with sudden animation, raising herself from her reclining posture in a large arm-chair, 'Dr. Hennessy, do tell me has that man Pierce yet returned?'

'I believe not—but why do you ask—did you want him?'

'Want him? Mrs. Esmond repeated with a visible shudder; 'oh no, no, no! The sight of him would be death—death! and moaning piteously, she fell back again in the chair.

'Why, surely, Mrs. Esmond,' said the doctor, 'you cannot suspect him—what motive could induce him—or, indeed, any one else, to commit so black a crime?'

'I know not, doctor, I know not; but,' and the unhappy lady paused, gasping for breath, 'but from something he said to me just before leaving the house—and after my poor—my poor Harry was gone—I fear—oh! I am almost certain that he had—at least—something to do with it!'

'The horror of this announcement blanched every cheek, and the ladies were, for once, struck dumb. It was only for a moment, however, for, long before the doctor could make up his mind as to what he should say, Aunt Winifred broke out with:

'La me! we might have known there was something bad about the fellow; don't you remember the voice we heard on Hollow-eye night?'

'Yes, and that sad affair of the ring, my dear Mrs. Esmond,' subjoined Mrs. O'Grady; 'you know I told you that you should not have given your wedding-ring for such a purpose; my dear, it was very thoughtless of you to do it—indeed, indeed it was. My! my! my! who could have foreseen this?—though I must say that I had a sort of presentiment that night that something very bad was going to happen. Poor dear Harry! and taking out her handkerchief, the sympathizing friend buried her face in its snowy folds. The elder Mrs. Esmond, who sat quietly with her niece's hand clasped in hers, here made a sign to the doctor to get the others out of the room.

'My dear Mrs. Esmond,' said Dr. Hennessy anxious himself to rid her, if possible, of these Job's comforters, 'had you not better lie down on the bed, and remain quiet a while. I see you are completely exhausted—Aunt Martha will stay with you, and Mrs. O'Grady and Aunt Winifred can go down stairs and attend to the household affairs. The people are already crowding in, and the house will be full of guests before morning.'

The proposal was eagerly accepted by the two active ladies, who immediately retired brimful of importance; it was hard, however, to persuade Mrs. Esmond to remain where she was.

'Oh, Doctor Hennessy!—oh, Aunt Martha!' she sobbed, 'how can I stay here—and Harry so near me—dead?—oh, no, no!—I cannot—cannot stay!—and she rose from her seat, notwithstanding the gentle efforts of Aunt Martha to prevent her. 'Now, Aunt Martha, do not—do not ask to keep me!' she faltered out in tones of piteous entreaty—'he will not be long with me—let me look upon him while I can—while I can! oh Aunt Martha! Aunt Martha, what will I do at all?'

'The Lord save us, Molly, acree, what was it?'

'After they wor all gone to bed that night, myself an' Nancy being the last in the kitchen, we thought we'd rake the ashes smooth to see if

there 'id be any feet coming or going. We waited to try salt, too, so we put a thimbleful fornest every one in the house, standing on a plate in a cool place, and off we went to bed.'

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