

THE CATHOLIC RECORD.

THE HALF SIR

By GERALD GRIFFIN

CHAPTER I

A gentleman that lives no noise—The Silent Woman

The Wren boys of Shanagolden, a small village in the south-west of Ireland, were all assembled pursuant to custom on the green before the chapel door, on a fine frosty morning, being the twenty-sixth of December, or Saint Stephen's day—a festival yet held in much reverence in Munster, although the Catholic Church has for many years ceased to look upon it as a holiday of obligation.

After proceeding along the road for about half a mile, the little rustic procession turned aside into a decent avenue, which led, in the antique fashion (that is to say, by a line so direct, that if you rested a musket on the lock of the gate, you could put a bullet in the very centre panel of the hall door) to a house no less quaint in its form than its approach—a square-built pile, standing bolt upright on the top of a hillock, with a plain rough cast front, in which were two rows of small square windows, and a hall-door with two steps leading up to it—presenting, in short, such a facade as children are accustomed to out of paper—flat, so regular, and unquarrelly. A line of soldier-like looking elms ran along the avenue wall on either side, and flled off with the most unexceptional precision to the rear of the building, taking the kitchen-garden in flank, and falling into a hollow square about the paddock and haggart.

Before the hall door was a semi-circular gravel plot, in which the avenue lost itself, as a canal terminates in its basin. Around this space the procession formed, and the Wren-boy, elevating his bush, gave out the opening stave of the festive chant, in which the whole rout presently joined:

"The Wren! the Wren! the king of all birds St. Stephen's day was caught in the furze; Although he's little, his family's great; Cut up fair hair, and give us a treat. Oh! if your trade be of the bush, In heaven we hope your soul will rest!"

As the din of the chorus died away, one of the lower windows was thrown up, and two of the "fair ladies" appeared to present themselves to the praises and blessings of the admiring rustics. One of them could scarcely have justified the epithet—she was of a dark-brown complexion, and a slight shadowing across the forehead would have led a person not disposed to argue favorably of the indication, to suppose that she had already declined, and yet not much, into the vale of years. Fairly or two and thirty might have brought the change. There was, moreover, a proud fiery lustre in her eye which would account perhaps for many of the invidious lines. The smile, nevertheless, which she instantly accorded to the villagers, showed that her pride was not the defect of her heart or disposition, but the accident of a conscious superiority either of rank or of mind. Her companion was a pretty lively girl, with health and spirits, and mirth and laughter in her eye—and nothing more.

"Which of the two is Miss O'Brien?" asked one of the mummies, in a whisper, to his companion.

"Can't you know the real lady?" was the reply. "Don't you see it in her eye, and in her smile. There she is—the dark one."

"Come, please your honor, ladies, gather about me out to the Wren. He comes a long way to see you, Mister Falabee! The Wren thank you, sir," as a half-crown, flung by an elderly gentleman who made his appearance at the window, jingled on the gravel-walk.

"And another (Good spouse) to you, Miss Mary, and that before the frost is off the ground; we are gone to call on Mister Charles himself next."

The younger of the ladies blushed deep crimson.

"Say until Davy gives you a drink, lads," said Mr. Falabee.

A new uproar of thanks, and "long lives," and sundry other benedictions, followed this invitation, in the midst of which old Davy made his appearance, at the hall-door with a tin-can full of cider of his own brewage and a smile on his wrinkled face that showed with how much good will he fell into the hospitable humour of his master. The lads swarmed about him as flies do about a lump of sugar.

"Have you been at Mr. Hammond's yet, lads?" inquired Mr. Falabee.

"Aw! not we sir. It's always the way with the Wren to pay his compliments to the real gentleman first."

"Why—?" said the worthy but flattered host, with an ill-suppressed smile, "is not Mr. Hammond a real gentleman?"

property as there is in the barony." "O, we don't mean to dispute that, sir. But himself, you see, he's nothing. What is he but a bit of a half sir?"

"A what?" exclaimed the elder lady.

"A half sir, ma'am," turning toward her with great respect, and giving his forelock a drag which seemed to signify that had he got such a thing as a hat on, he would have taken it off to her honor.

"What do you call a half sir?"

"A man that has not got any blood in him, ma'am."

"A man that has got no blood in him!"

"No; any more than myself. A sort of a small gentleman, (tho' singlings are the first running of spirits in the process of distillation) as it were. A made man—not a born gentleman. No; great, all out, nor poor, that way entirely. Botax and betune, as you may say. Neither good potato nor yet strong whiskey. Neither best nor vale. Castle Hamond! What! Castle Hamond to me, as long as the master wouldn't conduct himself proper! A man that wouldn't go to a hunt, nor a race-course, nor a cock fight, nor a hurlen-match, nor a dance nor a fence-bout, nor any one born thing. Sure that's no gentleman! A man that gives no parties, nor was never known yet to be drunk in his own house. O poh!—A man that has never seen to put his hand in his pocket on frosty mornen and say to a poor man, 'Hoy, hoy! my good fellow, here's a tin penny for you, and get a drop of somethin' warm and comfortable again the day! A man that was never by any means overtaken in liquor himself, not the cause of anybody else being so, either. Sure such a man as that has no heart?"

"Tell me, my good lad," said the lady with much seriousness, "is this Mr. Hamond a miser?"

"O dear, no, ma'am," exclaimed his accuser, "nobody has anything to charge agen him on that score, I'm sure."

"Does he ever assist the poor in his neighborhood?"

"Indeed that he does; there's no gainsaying that any way."

"Is he ever found in the cottages of the sick and the distressed?"

"There's no doubt o' that. He is indeed. The time the fever was raging last winter he was like a priest or doctor, gone about from bedside to bedside, ordering wine here and blankets there, and paying for every thing out of his own purse. I declare ma'am, the speaker continued, warming with his subject so as totally to forget his late invective, "I would be an admiration to you to know the eighth o' money he laid out in that way."

"And tell me, did the racing, and cock-fighting and hunting gentlemen do a great deal more? The real gentleman, I mean."

"Is it they? no—nor half as much, the whole put together."

"But Mr. Hamond has no heart for all that?"

"O—oh?—heart—the man repeated in a puzzled tone. 'He has religion, ma'am—religion and charity—that's what he has.'"

"Then what you mean by 'heart' is, I suppose, drunkenness, prodigality, gambling—all, in short, that is opposed to religion and charity?"

"Why then—?" after a pause, "heaven forgive us, I believe that's the man we put upon it."

"And Mr. Hamond has none of that?"

"No, indeed, ma'am."

"I'm satisfied," said the lady, retiring from the window, and leaving the young man a-gape to comprehend her meaning.

In a few minutes the whole procession was again in motion, drumming, squeaking, shouting, and laughing down the avenue. After they had fairly seen them off, Mr. Falabee and his daughter returned to the breakfast table.

"Ho! ho! where is Miss O'Brien gone?" said the old gentleman.

"I declare, I don't know," said an old grandmama, who sat in an arm-chair by the fire side; "she only took one cup of coffee, and there it her spoon in her saucer—so she wasn't done."

"Has anybody done anything to offend her to-day?" said Mr. Falabee, laying an emphasis on the word, as if the taking offence were a matter of not unfrequent occurrence.

"I—I'm sure not I, at any rate," said Miss Falabee; "I don't know what to make of her. May be 'twas something the wren boy said."

"Best send for her," said the old gentleman. "Nelly, go and see what keeps your mistress."

In a few minutes Nelly returned. Her mistress had done breakfast, and was preparing to ride out. She wished to know whether Mr. Falabee would accompany her in the direction of which they had been speaking the day before.

"Oh, certainly," was Mr. Falabee's reply; "unless she is afraid of meeting the Blood-mare (Analogous to Green-sleeves in England) of the hills, for our road lies by Castle Hamond. He'd eat us up in one bit for being of real gentlemanly race, I suppose; or having blood in our veins, as Terry Lenigan says. They say he hates anybody that has a decent coat on his back, and detests any bony—especially in the fair sex," he added, glancing satirically at the gold chain and cross which encircled the neck of his daughter, "as much as sin itself."

Lenigan himself said about his conduct to the poor in his neighborhood, during the fever that raged last summer."

Miss Falabee's reply was cut short by the appearance of a dashing young horseman before the windows. He curbed in the animal gracefully, as he came on the gravel plot—made a flourishing salute with his hazel switch, as he passed the window at a pratty, mincing trot, and finally dismounted at the hall door.

"There goes another gentleman," said Mr. Falabee; "the Wren boys were mistaken in supposing they should find Mr. Charles at home. Come, prepare your smiles and your graces now, Mary."

"For shame, papa—you make one blush so! I wish you'd speak to him, gran'ma."

The door was opened before the old dowager could have complied, and in walked a tall, sharp-faced, long nosed, foolish handsome young man, looking like a preserved London street-dandy, and carrying the similitude into his manner and accent; which last was a strange compound of the coarsest Munster brogue, and the most oriental cockney dialect—the latter being superadded during a residence of a few years at the house of a friend who possessed a wharf somewhere between the Minories and Wapping. And, however, passed from the punt-attic among his home friends, and was very instrumental in gaining him the heart of the simple young maiden who rose with al, the pretty, panting, palpitating eagerness of unbounded admiration, to receive him.

"How! how aw ye, Mistaw Falabee? How d'd you ma'am? Haw, Mary, he added, extending his hand, and his shrinking, and smiling, love, with an air of patronage and encouragement and twice shaking the tips of her fingers, "how d'do, my girl? Be seated, pray." Then throwing himself into an easy chair, extending his legs to their furthest limit on the carpet, pulling up his peaked and polished shirt-collar, to the imminent danger of the tip of his nose, smoothing down his lofty black silk coat, and his whisking some dust from the lapel of his green waist-coat with the fingers of his glove—"A fine, smart mawven, Mistaw Falabee," he proceeded, "I just called in to ask if you were all alive here."

"Going to course, I suppose?"

"Waay, yes—o' b'leve—though the ground is rawther hard. No m'at'aw! switching his boots, and in the twinkling drawing the red, and in the twinkling of an eye, he had an inch of Mary's blue eyes. "O'jill go aisy enough—I'm cocked."

"Cocked or no, Charles, I wish you would stay with us to-day. I have a great deal to do, and Miss O'Brien wants some person to squire her about."

The long countenance of Mr. Charles Lane became still longer at this quest; for, by some unaccountable means, this worthy lady had acquired a strange and disagreeable influence over him—the influence which all persons of rank and elegance at all times possess over the vulgar pretender to fashion. The young dandy Munsterman found that a spell was cast upon him the moment he entered Miss O'Brien's presence. His "aws," and his asinine side pockets—stole the flaming yellow silk handkerchief out of sight—and in a word, kept the dandy as much in the background as possible. In vain did he make many strenuous efforts to shake off this secret yoke which the good lady had, quite unconsciously, cast upon him; his struggles (like those of his country) served only to make him feel the weight of his fetters the more severely. 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