

LORD KILGOBBIN.

By CHARLES LEVER.

Author of "Harry Lorrequer," "Jack Hinton the Guardsman," "Charles O'Malley the Irish Dragoon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNWELCOME VISIT.

If Maurice Kearney had been put to the question, he could not have concealed the fact, that the human being he most feared and dreaded in life was his neighbor Miss Betty O'Shea.

With two years of seniority over him, Miss Betty had bullied him as a child, snubbed him as a youth, and opposed and sneered at him ever after; and to such an extent did her influence over his character extend, according to his own belief, that there was not a single good trait of his nature she had not thwarted by ridicule, nor a single evil temptation to which he had yielded that had not come out of sheer opposition to that lady's dictation.

Malevolent people, indeed, had said that Maurice Kearney had once had matrimonial designs on Miss Betty, or, rather, on that snug place and nice property called "O'Shea's Barn," of which she was sole heiress; but he most stoutly declared this story to be groundless, and in a forcible manner asseverated that had he been Robinson Crusoe and Miss Betty the only inhabitant of the island with him, he would have lived and died in celibacy rather than have contracted dearer ties.

Miss Betty, to give her the name by which she was best known, was no miracle of either tact or amiability, but she had certain qualities that could not be disparaged. She was a strict Catholic, charitable, in her own peculiar and imperious way, to the poor, very desirous to be strictly just and honest, and such a sure foe to everything that she thought pretension or humbug of any kind—which meant anything that did not square with her own habits—that she was perfectly intolerable to all who did not accept herself and her own mode of life as a model and an example.

Thus, a stout-bodied copper urn on the teatable, a very uncouth jaunting-car, driven by an old man, whose only livery was a cockade, some very muddy port as a dinner wine, and whisky-punch afterward on the brown mahogany, were so many articles of belief with her, to dissent from any of which was a downright heresy.

Thus, after Nina arrived at the castle, the appearance of napkins palpably affected her constitution; with the advent of finger-glasses she ceased her visits, and bluntly declined all invitations to dinner. That coffee and some indescribable liberties would follow, as post-prandial excesses, she secretly imparted to Kate Kearney, in a note, which concluded with the assurance that when the enormities arrived, O'Shea's Barn would be open to her as a refuge and a sanctuary: "but not," added she, "with your cousin, for I'll not let the hussey cross my doors."

For months now this strict quarantine had lasted, and except for the interchange of some brief and very uninteresting notes, all intimacy had ceased between the two houses—a circumstance, I am loath to own, which was most ungallantly recorded every day after dinner by old Kearney, who drank, "Miss Betty's health, and long absence to her." It was, then, with no small astonishment Kate was overtaken in the avenue by Miss Betty on her old chestnut mare Judy, a small boy mounted on the croup behind, to act as groom; for in this way Paddy Walsh was accustomed to travel, without the slightest consciousness that he was not in strict conformity with the ways of Rotten Row and the "Bois."

That there was nothing "stuck up" or pretentious about this mode of being accompanied by one's groom—a proposition scarcely assailable—was Miss Betty's declaration, delivered in a challenge to the world. Indeed, certain ticklesome tendencies in Judy, particularly when touched with the heel, seemed to offer the strongest protest against the practice; for whenever pushed to any increase of speed, or admonishing in any way, the beast usually responded by a hoist of the haunches, which invariably compelled Paddy to clasp his mistress around the waist for safety—a situation which, however repugnant to maiden bashfulness—time, and perhaps necessity, had reconciled her to. At all events, poor Paddy's

terror would have been the amplest refutation of scandal, while the stern immobility of Miss Betty during the embrace would have silenced even mal-evilence.

On the present occasion, a sharp canter of several miles had reduced Judy to a very quiet and decorous pace, so that Paddy and his mistress sat almost back to back—a combination that only long habit enabled Kate to witness without laughing.

"Are you alone up at the castle, dear?" asked Miss Betty, as she rode along at her side; "or have you the house full of what the papers call distinguished company?"

"We are quiet alone, godmother. My brother is with us, but we have no strangers."

"I'm glad of it. I've come over to 'have it out' with your father, and it's pleasant to know we shall be to ourselves."

Now, as this announcement of having "it out" conveyed to Kate's mind nothing short of an open declaration of war, a day of reckoning on which Miss O'Shea would come prepared with a full indictment, and a resolution to prosecute to conviction, the poor girl shuddered at a prospect so certain to end in calamity.

"Papa is very far from well, godmother," said she, in a mild way.

"So they tell me in the town," said the other, snappishly. "His brother magistrates said that the day he came in, about that supposed attack—the memorable search for arms—"

"Supposed attack! but, godmother, pray don't imagine we had invented that. I think you know me well enough and long enough to know—"

"To know that you would not have had a young scamp of a Castle aid-de-camp on a visit during your father's absence, not to say anything about amusing your English visitor by shooting down your own tenantry?"

"Listen to me for five minutes."

"No, not for three."

"Two, then—one, even—one minute, godmother, I will convince you how you wrong me."

"I won't give you that. I didn't come over about you nor your affairs. When the father makes a fool of himself, why wouldn't the daughter? The whole country is laughing at him. His lordship, indeed! a ruined estate and a tenantry in rags; and the only remedy, as Peter Gill tells me, raising the rents—raising the rents where every one is a pauper!"

"What would you have him do, Miss O'Shea?" asked Kate, almost angrily.

"I'll tell you what I'd have him do. I'd have him rise of a morning before nine o'clock, and be out with his laborers at daybreak. I'd have him reform a whole lazy household of blackguards, good for nothing; but waste and wickedness. I'd have him apprentice your brother to a decent trade or a light business. I'd have him declare he'd kick the first man who called him 'My lord'; and for yourself—well, it's no matter—"

"Yes, but it is, godmother, a great matter to me at least. What about myself?"

"Well, I don't wish to speak of it, but it just dropped out of my lips by accident; and perhaps, though not pleasant to talk about, it's as well it was said and done with. I meant to tell your father that it must be all over between you and my nephew Gorman; that I won't have him back here on leave, as I intended. I know it didn't go far, dear. There was none of what they call love in the case. You would probably have liked one another well enough at last; but I won't have it, and it's better we came to the right understanding at once."

"Your curb-chain is loose, godmother," said the girl, who now, pale as death and trembling all over, advanced to fasten the link.

"I declare to the Lord, he's asleep!" said Miss Betty, as the wearied head of her page dropped heavily on her shoulder. "Take the curb off, dear, I may lose it. Put it in your pocket for me Kate; that is, if you wear a pocket."

"Of course I do, godmother. I carry very stout keys in it, too. Look at these."

"Ay, ay. I like all that, once on a time, well enough, and used to think you'd be a good thrifty wife for a poor man; but with the viscount, your father, and the young princess, your first cousin, and the devil knows what of your fine brother, I believe the sooner we part good friends the better. Not but if you like my plan for you, I'll be just as ready as ever to aid you."

"I have not heard the plan yet," said Kate, faintly.

"Just a nunnery, then—no more nor less than that. The Sacred Heart at Namur, or the Sisters of Mercy here at home in Bagot street, I believe, if you like better—eh?"

"It is soon to be able so make up one's mind on such a point. I want a little time for this, godmother."

"You would not want time if your heart were in a holy work, Kate Kearney. It's little time you'd be asking, if I said will you have Gorman O'Shea for a husband?"

"There is such a thing as insult, Miss O'Shea, and no amount of long intimacy can license that."

"I ask your pardon, godchild. I wish you could know how sorry I feel."

"Say no more, grandmother, say no more, I beseech you," cried Kate, and her tears now gushed forth, and relieved her almost bursting heart.

"I'll take this short path through the shrubbery, and be at the door before you," cried she, rushing away; while Miss Betty, with a sharp touch of the spur, provoked such a plunge as effectually awoke Paddy, and appraised him that his duties as groom were soon to be in request.

While earnestly assuring him that some changes in his diet should be speedily adopted against somnolency, Miss Betty rode briskly on, and reached the hall door.

"I told you I should be first, godmother," said the girl; and the pleasant ring of her voice showed she had regained her spirits, or at least such self-control as enabled her to suppress her sorrow.

CHAPTER XX.

A DOMESTIC DISCUSSION.

It is a not infrequent distress in small households, especially when some miles from a market-town, to make adequate preparation for an unexpected guest at dinner; but even this is a very inferior difficulty to that experienced by those who have to order the repast in conformity with certain rigid notions of the guest who will criticise the smallest deviation from the most humble standard, and actually rebuke the slightest presentation to delicacy of food or elegance of table equipage.

No sooner, then, had Kate learned that Miss O'Shea was to remain for dinner, than she immediately set herself to think over all the possible reductions that might be made in the fare, and all the plainness and simplicity that could be imparted to the service of the meal.

Napkins had not been the sole reform suggested by the Greek cousin. She had introduced flowers on the table, and so artfully had she decked out the board with fruit and ornamental plants, that she had succeeded in effecting by artifice what would have been an egregious failure if more openly attempted—the service of the dishes, one by one, to the guests, without any being placed on the table. These, with finger-glasses, she had already achieved, nor had she in the recesses of her heart given up the hope of seeing the day that her uncle would rise from the table as she did, give her his arm to the drawing-room, and bow profoundly as he left her. Of the inestimable advantages, social, intellectual, and moral, of this system, she had been cautious to hold forth; for, like a great reformer, she was satisfied to leave her improvements to the slow test of time, "educating her public," as a great authority has called it, while she bided the result in patience.

Indeed, as poor Maurice Kearney was not to be indulged with the luxury of whisky-punch during his dinner, it was not easy to reply to his question: "When am I to have my tumbler?" as though he evidently believed the aforesaid "tumbler" was an institution that could not be abrogated or omitted altogether.

Coffee in the drawing-room was only a half success so long as the gentlemen sat over their wine; and as for the daily cigarette Nina smoked with it, Kate, in her simplicity, believed it was only done as a sort of a protest at being deserted by those unnatural protectors who preferred pooten to ladies.

It was, therefore, in no small perturbation of mind that Kate rushed to her cousin's room with awful tidings that Miss Betty had arrived and intended to remain for dinner.

"Do you mean that odious woman with the boy and bandbox behind her on horseback?" asked Nina, superciliously.

"Yes, she always travels in that fashion; she is odd and eccentric in scores of things, but a fine-hearted, honest woman, generous to the poor, and true to her friends."

"I don't care for her moral qualities, but I do bargain for a little outward decency, and some respect for the world's opinion."

"You will like her, Nina, when you know her."

"I shall profit by the warning. I'll take care not to know her."

"She is one of the eldest, I believe the oldest, friend our family has in the world."

"What a sad confession, child! but I have always deplored longevity."

"Don't be supercilious or sarcastic, Nina, but help me with your own good sense and wise advice. She has not come over in the best of humors. She has, or fancies she has, some difference to settle with papa. They seldom meet without a quarrel, and I fear this occasion is to be no exception; so do aid me to get things over pleasantly, if it be possible."

"She snubbed me the only time I met her. I tried to help her off with her bonnet, and, unfortunately, I displaced it if I did not actually remove her wig, and she muttered something 'about a rope-dancer not being dexterous lady's-maid.'"

"Oh, Nina, surely you do not mean—"

"Not that I was exactly a rope-dancer, Kate; but I had on a Greek jacket that morning of blue velvet and gold, and a white skirt, and perhaps these had some memories of the circus for the old lady."

"You are only jesting now, Nina."

"Don't you know me well enough to know that I never jest when I think or suspect, I am injured?"

"Injured!"

"It's not the word I wanted, but it will do; I used it in its French sense."

"You bear her no malice, I'm sure?" said the other, caressingly.

"No," replied she, with a shrug that seemed to deprecate even having a thought about her.

"She will stay for dinner, and we must, as far as possible, receive her in the way she has been used to here—a very homely dinner, served as she has always seen it—no fruits or flowers on the table, no claret-cups, no finger-glasses."

"I hope no table-cloth; couldn't we have a tray on a corner table, and every one help themselves as he strolled about the room?"

"Dear Nina, be reasonable for this once."

"I'll come down just as I am, or better still, I'll take down my hair and cram it into a net; I'd oblige her with dirty hands, if I only know how to do it."

"I see you only say these things in jest; you really do mean to help me through this difficulty."

(To be continued.)

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