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THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK.

A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER XXIII.—MORE VISITORS TO THE ROCK—THE CONJURER.

The days were gliding on swiftly towards the auspicious one that was to make Harriet Markham Countess of Effingham, when one fervid noon, the Earl surprised his lady-love in close colloquy with no less a person than the Old Man of the Rock, in a shady part of the avenue, not far from the Castle.

'How now, fair lady,' he smiling said, 'I did not expect to see you abroad at this sultry noon-tide hour.'

'That is because your lordship is not acquainted with my peculiar habits—I have been walking some time to and fro in this refreshing shade—'

'Musing slow, a la 'saint or moralist,' n'est-ce pas?'

'I know not that, my lord, but musing or not, when our good hermit here made his appearance with an invitation to visit the Rock this evening for a very special purpose.'

'And what may the purpose be?'

'That he will tell you himself,' said Harriet, as she took the earl's arm, and returned his beaming smile.

'I shall be glad to hear it,' was the gracious reply, 'but first I would have you put on your hat, Bryan, even under this leafy screen the dog-star is not to be trusted.'

'Many thanks to your lordship for your mighty great condescension,' Bryan returned with a very low, and, indeed, a very polite bow, 'but I could not rest contented with my hat on, and the best of quality to the fore. Neither sun nor wind ever does our old Bryan Cullenan any harm.'

'Well, then, be so good as to let me hear why it is that you wish Miss Markham to visit the Rock this evening.'

'Oh, that's easy done entirely, your lordship, another low bow, 'sure it's in regard of a fine old gentleman from foreign parts somewhere, that on the Rock most all day—I declare to your lordship he's one of the finest old gentlemen I ever laid eyes on, and all the time I'm on the Rock, and all the ladies and gentlemen I see there in my time. It does my old heart good, so it does, to hear him talk about the place, and I declare he knows more about it himself than I do, and he told me things concerning it that I never knew myself.'

'Is it possible?'

'It's truth I'm telling your lordship, and I could Miss Markham the same before.'

'Yes, Bryan, but you have not told Lord Effingham what your private opinion is in relation to this remarkably fine old gentleman.'

Here Bryan hesitated. 'Well! you know, Miss Markham, I'm not sure about that, and maybe it isn't right for me to say it.'

'Let me say it for you then!—You must know my lord? turning to Lord Effingham with that look of arch intelligence that at times lit up her features, 'you must know my dear lord, our friend here can in no other way account for this unknown old gentleman's wonderful knowledge of matters appertaining to Cashel, save only by the supposition that this knowledge is supernatural. He, therefore, concludes that he must be some great conjurer or another from beyond the sea.'

'And he wishes you to see him?'

'Precisely, my lord?'

'And you purpose going?'

'I do—on one condition,' the last words in a lower tone, 'that is, provided your lordship will summon courage to brave the awful presence of the conjurer.'

'Doubt not that, lady mine!' the Earl returned in the same tone, 'no more solitary rambles now—even on the sacred Rock! Happiness, you know, was born a twin, so I claim my share of your enjoyments.'

'At what hour do you think we will be likely to see your old gentlemen, Bryan?' said Harriet with grave composure.

'Oh beaded, Miss, you can't go wrong for the hour, for I'll go and you'll find him on the Rock, go when you will. Sure he was there early this mornin' with a company of ladies and gentlemen, and then he came back again all alone by himself, and spent as good as three hours with me, lookin' at everything, and huntin' every hole an' corner, sometimes talkin' to himself, sometimes to me, and more times sayin' nothing at all to any one, but standin' leanin' on a staff he has, or sittin' down on a big stone, lookin' at the arches, an' pillars, an' the old ancient carvin' that's on the stones, till you'd think he'd never take his eyes off o' them. Dear knows, I don't know what to make of him, an' still my heart warms to him if he was fifty conjurers on account o' the great conceit he has in the old walls and things.'

'Very well, Bryan! we shall make it a point to see your conjurer some time this evening. Good morning,' And taking Lord Effingham's arm, Harriet said in a low voice, as they turned their faces towards the Castle—'I think I know the precise time when we shall be sure to meet this new acquaintance of Bryan's. If he be as I suspect, some enthusiastic antiquarian, after spending most of his day upon the Rock, when

the gay beams of lightsome day Gild but to float the ruins gray, he will most probably desire to visit it by the pale moonlight.'

'We shall have no difficulty, I think, in inducing Lady Pemberton to go with us.'

'Not the smallest, I will answer for it,' said Lord Effingham with a pleasant smile, 'Caroline is a true woman in the quality for which good mother Ere was most remarkable. Say nothing of it, though to Mrs. Pakenham, who, entre nous, is never any very great acquisition—least of all to an exploring party. But to! here she comes, stately of dowagers, and a thunder cloud on her brow, I protest! Let us turn up this path—I do not think she has seen us?'

Harriet was silent wondering in her own happy heart at the sportive gait which now marked Lord Effingham's manner in his intercourse with her, whilst to others he was still the same. Then she thought of his early characteristics, as described by his sister, and her heart swelled and her cheek glowed at the thought that she alone had the key to the inner nature of one so calm and cold and passionless to the outer world.

As Lord Effingham had expected, Lady Pemberton was delighted with the account of Bryan's mysterious visitant, and all anxiety to get a sight of him. In the flush of this new excitement, trifling as it was, her usual listlessness vanished quite, and her brother remarked with a smile, half sad, half tender—'My poor Caroline, I see you are still the same after all that is come and gone.'

The sun's last rays had faded from the parched earth that July evening when the Effingham carriage stopped at the gate leading to the ruins, and our party of three ascended the steep and rugged way to the Cathedral door, where guided thence by the sound of voices to Cormac's Chapel, where they found a lady and gentleman busily engaged in examining the quaint, rude sculpture round the arch of the portal, consisting of a double line of bead and zig-zag mouldering—if that term can be applied to stone. It was easy to see by the wondering look on old Bryan's face, as he stood silent and obsequious a few paces in the rear of his visitors, that the tall old man with his fine massive head, sparsely covered with silver gray hair, and shaggy brows of the same color protruding far over eyes that twinkled like stars with the changeful emotions of the mind, was no other than 'the conjurer.' Who the lady might be, or whether she had been summoned from the aerial world by his potent art, to give record to the men and women of other times, was of course beyond the power of speculation. Truth to tell if she had been brought into existence by the magician's wand, he might have summoned a fairer shape to hold commune with on the solemn Rock, amid the shadows of the past.

The strangers were not long unaware of the new arrivals, for Bryan, feeling a little nervous about his position, as the evening shadows thickened, began to look anxiously for the coming of the expected visitors whose presence might protect him from any malpractices on the part of the conjurer.

'Well, I declare,' quoth Bryan, 'that's great!'

'What is great, my friend?' said the old gentleman.

'Why, your honor, if here isn't Lord Effingham himself, and his sister, a grand lady, too, and Miss Markham. Well, to be sure, isn't it the greatest of luck that brought them now, just in time to have a talk with yourself, sir, and this elegant fine lady.'

With the dignified ease and courteous familiarity with which well-bred persons are wont to make acquaintance, the parties exchanged salutations, smiling all round at Bryan's odd introduction. The ice of formality was not there to be broken, for each saw at a glance that the others were of their own order, and probably of their own peculiar tastes in a greater or lesser degree. No introductions took place at first on either side, save the characteristic one of old Bryan, but all were prepared to be pleased with the others, and pleased they were. The conversation before confined to the strange lady and gentleman, with an occasional word from Bryan, at once became general, and the supposed conjurer resumed the thread of his observations:

'I was just observing, my lord,' he said, addressing Lord Effingham, 'that this chapel cannot be so old by a century or so, as Irish antiquarians would make it appear. I do not think that the King-bishop, Cormac MacCullenan, could have been its founder.'

'Indeed? and what grounds have you for dis-

puting a fact so generally received as I believe that is?'

'That I will soon show you,' and moving round to the lateral door, he pointed to a half-effaced, yet still plainly discernible sculpture on the lintel. It was that of an archer in the act of drawing his bow—the old English cross-bow.

'Your lordship sees that rudely-sculptured figure—know you that such was the cognizance of Stephen of Blois?'

'I have read that such it was, but I should not have remembered it in this connection.'

'That is because your lordship has not studied with attention the chronicles which Time has traced on mouldering walls. Now we know that Stephen of England ended his mortal career in the year of grace, 1101, or thereabouts, whereas Cormac of Cashel departed this life on the bloody battle-field of Moylong in the year 903, nearly two hundred years before.'

Here was heard from old Bryan that indescribable sound emitted by Irish mouths amongst the peasantry when anything strange or marvellous falls under their senses. It is enunciated by striking the tongue sharply but slightly against the roof of the mouth.

'Thy, thy, thy!—well, if that doesn't bate all ever I heard.'

'So you infer from this heraldic device,' said Lord Effingham, 'that the name Cormac's Chapel is a misnomer?'

'Not exactly, it might have been built by another Cormac, though not, I am persuaded, by the great Cormac to whom it is popularly attributed. That it is no older than the days of good King Stephen I am entirely of opinion.—Be that as it may, however, it is a rare gem of mediæval art. It is, in all respects, one of the most interesting architectural remains I have anywhere seen, as the entire group exceeds in diversity of interest anything of the kind in these islands.'

'I am glad to hear you say so,' said Harriet Markham, her face expressing the joy of her heart.

'And why so, my dear young lady?' the old man asked, regarding her with a look of kindly scrutiny from under his half-closed eye-lids.

'Why because, in the first place, I see your tastes are antiquarian, that you speak from knowledge, and—are not an Irishman.'

'You are right, young lady, in both surmises. I have devoted some attention to the lore of ancient days, and I have not the honor of being a native of your beautiful island, yet I am fain to declare that I hold it in high esteem, for very many good reasons. Cashel I have long desired to visit, though I honestly confess I had no adequate idea of what it really is.'

'I told you so,' said his lady-friend, 'and I saw you were somewhat skeptical about it. For my part, I have no very great affection for ruins—of any kind.'

'Of course not, of course not,' said the cheerful old man, 'nobody ever accused you of such a weakness. My good friend here, Lord Effingham, and ladies, though a very worthy person in the main, has no respect whatever for other people's hobbies, though between ourselves, she mounts on herself of an odd time, and ambles off at the quietest pace imaginable. Her hobbies are all agricultural and—shall I say it, utilitarian? Is it not so, my fair friend?'

'It is; if to live in the present, and for the present, be utilitarianism, then I am a utilitarian, and I only wish I could get more of my countrymen and countrywomen to live less in the past, and in the future, and more in the realities of the present.'

'Yes, yes, more of political economy, and less of poetry. We know you, *cherie amie*, most amiable of philanthropists that you are.'

'Permit me one remark,' said Harriet Markham, 'before you dismiss the subject. A thoroughly Catholic people, like a race that inhabits this island, can never be taught political economy in the sense you speak of, because they cannot, if they would, concentrate their thoughts on the present. They must in the past, and in the future, for the past is their pride, the future their hope, whilst the present is with them but as the connecting link between them.'

'Very true, my dear, very true,' said the old gentleman with an approving nod and smile, 'I don't think a Malthus or a Harriet Martineau would ever find favor in this old-world country of yours. Eh, Maria?' and he looked at his friend with a humorous smile.

That bustling little parsonage, already moving away, made answer, 'Possibly not but perhaps worse doctrines than theirs may prevail in this same *Insula Sanctorum*. Nay, young lady, you needn't look at me so—I do not mean religious, but only social and political doctrines.—But come, to her friend, 'let us be moving, unless, indeed, you propose remaining all night, me ditating like Harvey amongst the tombs.'

'And that I would not mind doing,' he replied, 'would this good hermit of ours but keep me

company.'

'The lord in heaven forbid!' said Bryan with such simple fervor that everyone laughed.

'Why, how is that?' said the old gentleman, 'I am told it is nothing new for you to spend the night here as well as the day.'

'Do you not know that he takes you for a conjurer?' whispered Lord Effingham.

'I should not be surprised if it were so,' the other replied in the same tone, 'he is a glorious old fellow—quite a study in himself.'

'A second Old Mortality?' asked the Earl with a significant look, whereupon the stranger laughed, and said—'Almost, but not quite'—then nodded and turned again to the examination of the architectural details before and around him. For some time the party walked on in silence—each one lost apparently, in their own reflections; at last the supposed conjurer, having stumbled over a fragment of stone, stooped and pecked it up, then examining it by the clear light of the full moon, he said to Bryan:

'This is a piece of that tomb in the chancel within—Archbishop McGrath's.'

Bryan eagerly pounced on the precious fragment, expressing his wonder that it came to be outside the walls, and muttering to himself a 'Christ save us!' as he glanced furtively at the dreaded stranger whose knowledge of the place so far exceeded his own—at least so he thought.

Meanwhile, the unconscious object of his terror went on discoursing of all he saw, and of all he thought, admiring, explaining, expatiating, and delighting his wondering auditors.

'Now, my Lord Effingham,' said he, stepping in a place which commanded a view of the entire group of buildings, 'can anything on earth be grander or more solemn than this? Said I not well that nothing within the British seas compare to it—Tona of the Hebrides, perhaps, excepted. Look, my lord, at the group as it stands!—look at the diversity, yet completeness of the whole, the court, the fortress, the abbey-precincts, the graveyard, the bishop's see, all in one enclosure, perched in isolated grandeur on the summit of this singular rock. See there stands the palace, where the brave Dalcaisan princes of Munster ruled with right royal sway;—there minstrels swept the sounding string in praise of beauty and of valor—the Hall of the minstrels still is there, though its voices are now but the mournful sighing of the wind through the ivy that drapes its walls. Hushed is the harp of the youthful Gal in the palace of their kings. Yonder is the Hall of the Vicars-choral, erected by the good Archbishop O'Hedon, for the prebends of his Cathedral; there is the Cathedral itself, majestic even in decay, its altar gone, its glory vanished for ages, only death and ruin within and around it, where stately prelates and stolid priests ministered of old, and men and women wept and prayed and were forgiven; where the banners of the blessed Saints waved over long processions round the aisles and along these paths, nought now is seen but broken wall and clustering ivy, and the dreariness of desolation—'

'Year after year his crumbling, And heavily the loose stones fall, Long grass and fern hang clustering Above the tombs without the wall.'

'Then yonder is Cormac's peerless Chapel, sheltered by the arm of the Cathedral transept, and bidding defiance to the stern warfare which Time wages ever on the works of man; safe in the solidity of its quaint masonry it escapes the ruin that is falling deeper year by year on the stately edifice which has so long sheltered it from wind and weather. Then the little Church of the Apostle, smaller still than Cormac's Chapel, with the twelve venerable figures rudely yet not unskillfully carved on its dilapidated stone work—and as if to crown the interest of the group—to close the solemn record—this mysterious pillar-tower rising over all, pointing back to the very night of time, to a period long anterior to Christianity, and to a race of men whose history has perished from the land, except in so far as the lone cairn on the green hill-side, or the spectral tower bears record of their passage.'

'And the Abbey,' suggested Harriet, when the old man paused, 'you would not willingly omit the cloisters ponder from your enumeration?'

'If I did,' the stranger replied with his benignant smile, 'it were like leaving the Colosseum out of a description of Rome, or the Temple of the Sun out of Palmyra. That Abbey has occupied a good part of the time I have spent on the Rock, for independent of the interest attached to it as the home of generations of good and holy men, Cistercians and Dominicans (for I find it belonged successively to both) I was endeavoring to find the entrance to the subterraneous passage which is said to have connected it with Eborac Abbey, yonder in the vale.'

'And did you succeed?' inquired Lord Effingham.

'Alas! no, my lord?' and he shook his head; 'such good fortune is not for me, and seeing that this worthy man whose days and years are spent

amongst the ruins has never been able to discover it, I am bound to believe that such passage never did exist, save the legends of the country.'

'I'll not give in to that, anyhow,' said Bryan stoutly, his ire a little roused at this attack on one of the standing traditions of the place;—'since the memory of man, or long before it, nobody ever said the likes o' that, for sure every one knows the passage is in it, only we can't happen to light on it, an' sure maybe there's good reasons for that same,' he added significantly.

'And what do you suppose the reasons to be?' inquired the old gentleman.

'Why, then, maybe it's there where the old monks hid away all their gold and treasures at their off-goin', and then don't you think but they'd build up the open' to keep your boot from findin' it out? Another reason Bryan had, which he chose to keep to himself, deeming it unfit to make the Sassenach quite as wise as himself in the matter, and that was that the passage was closed by powers supernatural to reserve it as a hiding-place for the persecuted Catholics of the neighborhood in some of those desperate emergencies to which the finger of prophecy—local and legendary prophecy—points for ages awaiting the oft-tried children of the soil.'

'What wonder is it,' said Lord Effingham, after a short silence, 'that the Catholic people of Ireland are so wedded to their own religious belief. With such monuments as these ever before them how could they forget the faith of their fathers, associated as it is with all the past, and interwoven with the history of their race?'

'And with all their hopes for the future, my lord?' added Harriet quickly, 'were it not for this one ray of light, shining ever from the veiled future through the portals of religion, how could they have journeyed so patiently through the darkness of many ages of suffering and desolation. Faith alone it is that have cheered their dreary path of life—given them strength to live, and courage to die when life itself was a sighing death, and death the last act in a life-long tragedy.'

'I believe you are right, young lady,' said the old gentleman, and a thoughtful, even melancholy look settled on his features. 'It may be that the possession of this strong, hopeful faith more than counterbalances the many hardships which have fallen to the lot of the Irish people.'

'Hardships, ha! put in Bryan almost indignantly, 'taken only by them maybe so many would not go to heaven, and when they get there, isn't it all past?—Mum's out the hardships, an' 'tis less—doesn't every one know that no one can get to be ever without sufferin', and sure the blessed and holy Scriptures itself tells us that—'It is not the will of God, do you think England could ever have kept us down as she has done, starting centuries off the face of the earth when there's full and plenty for them to eat, and giving them only the night of bad usage when a body 'd think that it 'd be for her own good to have them better off. God knows what's best for us, and He can change His hand in His own good time, and rise up them that suffered so much for His sake, and bring England as low maybe as she ever brought poor Ireland. He has great power, the God we serve, praise and glory to His name for ever?'

And Bryan went on in defiance of the others, shaking his head defiantly and muttering to himself, 'Sure God loves them! He loves them—the whole world know that!'

The old gentleman stood looking after him with a good-natured smile on his large features—'What a glorious old fellow that is,' said he, turning with a smile to his lady friend, then lowering his voice he added, 'I have had the richest treat all day in his company. He is an antiquarian by nature, if you can understand what that is, devoting his life to the care of these magnificent ruins, yet actuated chiefly by pious veneration for the sacredness of the place. He is to this Catholic necropolis what Old Mortality was to the graves of the Scottish Covenanters?'

The last remark was overheard by Miss Markham as she and Lord Effingham came up close behind. 'What a pity it is,' said she, 'that Ireland has no Scott to make her natural beauties or her ancient monuments classic as that great master has made those of Scotland! The same elements of romance are here—the same legendary lore—the same loveliness of lake and river, wood and mountain—the same diversity of races in her history—the same intestine-

'And a much more poetic temperament in her people!' added the stranger earnestly. 'In all and each particular, Ireland presents as rich a mine for the novelist as ever did Scotland, and I marvel much that no great national writer of fiction has yet arisen above your horizon. Why this Cashel alone would furnish material for a first class historical tale. A world of romance lies sleeping amongst these ruins, were the dry bones but imbued with life by the wand of wa-