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ELLEN AHERN;

OR,

THE POOR COUSIN.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

The old man staggered and would have fallen if he had not thrown his arm around a pillar near him—his face grew so white that it looked like marble under his white locks—but his eyes emitted a fierce sparkle, that told how passion had survived all else in his worn out physique. Had the insult come from any other source, it would not have stung so deeply; but inflicted as it was by the son of that ancient friend from whom he had never met aught else but respect and confidence; coming as it did from the child, who in days gone by he had held in his arms, and prayed that Heaven would implant in his nature germs of nobleness whose fruition would be the salvation of his people, if he ever came to the inheritance of his father's title and estates; receiving the blow from this, the last of the Maguires, and his own kinsman, it was more than he could bear. There was about this noble old man a heroic generosity, which was ever ready to rise superior to all the strong resentments which are incident to hasty natures; and it was his wont to 'possess his soul in patience,' but on this occasion it failed him, and a tempest of grief and passion swept over him, leaving him weak and tottering after it passed away. With slow and faltering steps, he retraced his way to his own room, to seek a forgetfulness of self, and the miseries which he could neither ameliorate or remove, in those studies which he so much delighted in;—which carried him away, as it were, from the present to the past, when the 'sword of the Lord and of Gideon' were one; when the Church had her military orders as well as her cloistered ones, who in defence of the weak made themselves feared by the enemies of virtue and religion, and became a word of terror to Tyrants. Could he have seen the Orders of St. John and of Malta revived, he would have commended his loved country to them, and departed in peace. And so he used to dream, until his dreams became like realities, and realities like dim, sorrowful dreams.

That evening he did not appear at dinner, but no one missed him until Don Enrique inquired particularly after him. Ellen Ahern had not seen him since breakfast, and thought he was at Father McMahon's, whither he had intended to go to spend the day; and requested that a servant might be sent to his room to ascertain if he had come. But the man returned saying that Mr. Ahern was 'not well, and desired to be excused.' Uneasy and uncomfortable, Ellen Ahern would gladly have left the table to go to him, but she was seated between Lady Fermanagh and Don Enrique, and could not do so; she, however, arranged his dinner on a plate, and handed it to a servant to take to him, with a message; 'to be sure' and 'try to eat it.' Conversation was dull. Lady Fermanagh was barely civil.—Don Enrique appeared much absorbed in thought, and Lord Hugh, after a few remarks, and some awkward compliments to Ellen Ahern, relapsed into formal silence. The moment the dessert was removed and the wine brought on, Ellen glided unobserved from the room, and hastened up to her old friend, whom she found sitting alone in his room, his head leaning on his hand, and his dinner still untasted beside him. The fire flickered low among the embers, and the twilight made everything look shadowy and indistinct, and he did not know she was so near him until she stole her arm about his neck, and said with tender playfulness:—

'Tis will never do, Sir Eadna Ahern! You are not a true ally to leave me to meet the foe single handed. But I verily believe you are asleep.'

'No, caen bry deilish, not asleep, but dreaming,' he said, rousing himself.

'Here is your dinner untouched. Antoine, his lordship's French cook, would expire with chagrin, if he knew that the dinner, which he regards as the chef d'œuvre of his art, was so little appreciated. Come, try some of these new fangled things, for really they are very nice.'

'Light the lamp and stir up the fire, a *suilish machree*,' uttered the old man, whose almost frozen heart always melted under her genial influences; 'then I will eat and drink, after which you must return to the drawing-room.'

'After which,' said Ellen Ahern, with determination in every feature, 'I shall sit just here beside you, and sing, read aloud, or play a game of whist with you, if you prefer it. What have I in common with the people down there? It is very humiliating, Sir Eadna Ahern, to be only a poor cousin. I don't altogether relish it.'

'Who is down there?'

'Lady Fermanagh, Lord Hugh and the Don. The Don!'

'Yes; and he made particular inquiries after your health. I like that stranger. I wonder what on earth brought him to this remote region? Perhaps he is a spy?' said Ellen Ahern,

filling a goblet with wine for her aged relative. 'He'll not carry back the report of the fatness of the land that Caleb and Joshua did, if he is,' said the old man with a bitter smile. 'But I do not think he is a spy. There is something about him which bespeaks confidence; a truthful frankness—a steadfast, unclouded glance, and a quiet decision in all that he says and does, that commands involuntary respect. His letters to Father McMahon are satisfactory, and speak of him as a gentleman of wealth and respectability, who is travelling at leisure for his own gratification. But why do you like him, Aileen? He is deformed, and not one to win the regard of a romantic girl?'

'No; his personal attractions are few, but if I am not mistaken, there is a great and glorious soul hidden within. I know it, because I have seen flashes of it. Do you know that he makes Lord Hugh Maguire wince now and then; and I observed her ladyship eyeing him once or twice at dinner, with strange and eager interest. How did she behave to him?' asked the old man with interest.

'She said but little. I should think she was troubled with her nerves to day. But let us forget them all and enjoy ourselves. Shall I read to you?'

'No; I believe the rubber of whist will be the best for me. I am used to it, and everything seems out of joint when I miss it.'

He did not tell her of his encounter with Lord Hugh Maguire that morning, but considerably forebore, thinking but too truly, that she had enough to think of, and bear in her own person, without being made heart sore with his trials;—and when she remarked that she had heard from Judith, that Patrick McGinness and others had been up to see his lordship that morning, he told her, 'yes, but that their application for justice had been as fruitless as he anticipated it would.'

'I rode down to the shore this morning, and suppose I was away when they came,' said Ellen Ahern sadly. 'I wish I had been here to plead for them.'

While they were talking together, the party down stairs had adjourned to the drawing-room; where Lord Hugh, missing the presence of Ellen Ahern, turned to his mother, and asked her abruptly where she was?

'I really cannot enlighten you. Miss Ahern seems to be a very erratic person. I thought she left the table when I did,' replied her ladyship haughtily.

'Do you know where Miss Ahern is, William?' said his lordship to the footman, who came in at the moment to replenish the fire.

'I heard her asking about the old gent, my Lord, and they told her he wern't very well, and it's more'n likely she's with him, for they're mighty 'tached to each other, them two.'

'Go with my compliments to Miss Ahern, and say we shall be glad to see her in the drawing-room,' said Lord Hugh.

But the man soon returned, saying that, 'Miss Ahern was playing whist with Sir Eadna, who was not well enough to leave his room, and begged they would excuse her.'

'We can't do without her. Mother, send and request Miss Ahern to favor us with her company. I am anxious to hear her sing,' insisted Lord Hugh.

'Go back, William, and tell Miss Ahern that Lady Fermanagh claims the promise she made her a few days ago,' said her ladyship, who had her own reasons for yielding so readily to the wishes of her son.

When the messenger went back the second time, Ellen was relating her harrowing escape in the Ravine to the old man, who was listening to the recital with eager interest.

'I cannot leave him this evening,' she said in a low voice to the servant, for whom she had opened the door.

'Go, a *suilish*—you have cheered me and done me good, and I will not have you stay another moment. You are young, and have need to propitiate the world. I simply defy it,' said Sir Eadna, who had overheard her.

'Go, then. I will be there presently,' she said to the man as she closed the door; 'but remember, thou inexorable old man, that I shall come back here as quick as I can; so don't begin to wander in dream land again.'

Lord Hugh Maguire met her as she entered the room, and led her to a chair near his mother, with whom Don Enrique had been attempting ineffectually to carry on a conversation. Her replies indicated that her thoughts were 'otherwhere,' and her manner, although extremely haughty, hurried and uneasy. She seemed glad when Ellen Ahern's entrance gave her an opportunity to put an end to the conversation, and with something like cordiality thanked her for coming, and had the grace to inquire how her old friend was. The conversation then became general; and Ellen, animated by the desire to win on her relatives, for the good of others, as well as to make friends of them for her own sake, talked well and agreeably, and related

many touching incidents, which exhibited the noble characteristics of the peasantry around them, and illustrated by the same facts, how a little fostering care, a few kind words, and even-handed justice, would develop their true worth and extraordinary energies. Don Enrique listened with admiration, and eloquently supported her theories by arguments that were unanswerable. Lord Hugh grew restive—he could only oppose words devoid of ideas to what was said; and, begging a truce to all such conversation, he grasped Ellen Ahern's hand before she could withdraw it, and leading her to the piano, insisted on her singing.

'You have brought me here a captive,' she said, 'and like the captives of old, who sat by the waters of Babylon, I will only sing the strains of my own land.'

'Anything short of treason, Miss Ahern,' he replied, turning over a pile of music.

'I am an arch traitor,' she replied, laughing, while she preluded with a brilliant touch, and began the sweet air of 'Savourneen deilish,' singing in clear plaintive tones:

'Tis gone and forever, the light we saw breaking, Like Heaven's first dawn o'er the sleep of the dead.'

While her soul, full of the theme, imparted richness and volume to her voice, which swelled and soared in notes of bewildering sweetness on the ear. Lady Fermanagh sat with her hand pressed over her heart, cold and stern in her silence, though as her hand indicated, suffering from some pang or throb, or perhaps some sharp recollection in her heart. Don Enrique, his pale clear eyes lit up with strange lustre, stood motionless beside her as she sang, and Lord Hugh Maguire, who loved music as much as Nero did, sat listening entranced to the sounds, even while the words of the song curled his lips with a sneer.

'That is heart music, Miss Ahern,' said Don Enrique, when she finished.

'To me it is,' said Ellen Ahern sadly, as she left the piano. 'But,' she added, 'it is so different in its style from your soft, sweet Castilian music, that I am surprised at your liking it.'

'Perhaps I like it better for that very reason. I am not Spanish by birth.'

'I say, Miss Ahern, can you sing any French songs,' interrupted Lord Hugh.

'I have forgotten those I knew,' she replied; then turned to Don Enrique, saying, 'not Spanish. What country do you claim then, as Fatherland?'

'I scarcely know myself which I have a right to claim, Miss Ahern,' said Don Enrique, in his clear, penetrating tones. 'My earliest recollections are of wandering in the snow, along a wild and unfrequented pass of the Sierra Morena.'

A half stifled cry burst from Lady Fermanagh's lips, and she snuck back, pressing both hands on her heart, pale and gasping. Ellen Ahern sprang to her side to assist her. 'Go,' she whispered, 'tell my maid to bring my drops. I am subject to these spasms.' Lord Hugh and Don Enrique stood over her, both anxious to do something for her relief, while Ellen opened the door leading into the picture gallery, to go across it in order to reach her ladyship's apartment more rapidly. Don Enrique snatched a candle from the mantel piece, and with rapid steps overtook her in the midst of the dim, deserted gallery, through which the wind sighed in fitful gusts, stirring the torn canvas of the portraits and the tattered, dust covered banners that hung over them.

'Thank you—but it was unnecessary. I know every inch of the way,' she said, hurrying on. 'You may be needed perhaps; pray return.' At that instant a bat fluttered hovering around their heads, and by a single dash of his wings, extinguished the light; while suddenly there arose a shrill, piercing, terrible cry, so prolonged and eerie in its note that it penetrated every part of the house, and rang echoing out along the ruined walls in sharp reverberations.—Ellen Ahern had never heard it before, although she knew its tradition, and she stood breathless and terrified, grasping Don Enrique's arm unconsciously, as long as it continued; and so numb with horror, that the purpose which led her to cross the gallery was forgotten. In a little while it died away, and she hastened to Lady Fermanagh's room, where she found the servants who, terrified out of their senses, had fled thither.

'Her ladyship is ill, and wants her drops, Marguerite.'

'Oh, Mademoiselle vot vas dat *diable* sound I hear. I expire viz fright.'

'Come, Marguerite, fetch the drops. I am waiting,' said Ellen. 'Did you never hear an owl shriek before?'

'I could not go to save my life,' said the trembling abigail, taking a vial out of a case, which she handed to Ellen Ahern, who said,

'I will take it; stay where you are, and send these people back to the kitchen against Lady Fermanagh comes to her room.' Then she

hurried back by another way to the drawing-room, but she was too late. Lady Fermanagh lay perfectly unconscious in the arms of her son with no sign of life about her, except a spasmodic motion of her limbs at intervals. Don Enrique stood leaning against the mantel piece, looking down on her white, rigid features, with a stern, thoughtful gaze, softened now and then by a gleam of pity. Sir Eadna Ahern came in with feeble steps, while an expression half wild, half triumphant, lit up his brow, pinched features, as he approached the group.

'Come, cousin Eadna, do something for Lady Fermanagh,' said Ellen Ahern. 'Trust him; there is not a better physician in the world,' she added to Lord Hugh. He felt her pulse, and, lifting the lid of her closed eye, peered into it. 'There's a pressure of blood on the brain: bring that vase here, a *suilish*—toss the flowers into the fire—loosen her clothes—hold the vase under her arm, she must lose blood.'

CHAPTER VII.—THE BONFIRE.

It was evening. Rain had been falling all day, and masses of heavy gray clouds were drifting slowly along before the cold, easterly wind, which dispersed every now and then drenching showers in their flight. Everything around Fermanagh looked dismal and cheerless, while the torrent in the ravine, swelled by the storm, dashed with a moaning sound through its rocky channel. Lady Fermanagh, who had been indisposed ever since the eventful evening described in our last chapter, and confined to her chamber, reclined on a sofa near the fire. She was wrapped in a loose *sacque* of crimson cashmere, which formed a strong contrast to the whiteness of her complexion. Her black, glossy hair, streaked here and there with threads of white, was thrown carelessly from her face and gathered up at the back of her head. Her cheek rested on one of her long, thin hands, from which the sleeve having fallen, the symmetrical outline of a fair and still handsome arm was revealed. There was just enough of her splendid beauty left amidst the fading and waning, to give one an idea of what it had been in its prime; but the spirit of pride and ambition, which that beauty had veiled as with a rare and costly drapery, was still there, strong indomitable and full of vigor, only more repulsive from being less concealed. There was a startled look and feverish brightness in her large black eyes, and a restless motion of her slippers foot, and at intervals, a quick, gasping sigh, that told of deeds being stirred in her heart, and unvoiced emotion, that had some graver cause for perturbation than mere nervousness. The painful associations connected with Fermanagh; the wild, elfin cry that had rung out like a knell of doom on the night; and strange, shadowy presentiments that the sun of her life, which she had imagined was buried in mystery and lost in the past, was about 'finding her out,' terrified and kept her on the rack: to all of which, the open admiration of her headstrong son for Ellen Ahern, his poor cousin, led her to fear that her plans for his aggrandisement were on the eve of being frustrated. While thus lost in painful reverie, some one without suddenly turned the knob of the door to come in, when she started up with a half smothered shriek, and clasping her head with her hands, she fell back again on her pillows, gasping and trembling in every limb.

'How is my lady mother now?' said Lord Hugh Maguire—for it was he—coming round to the sofa.

'I am better this evening,' she replied, recovering her composure by a strong effort.

'I expected to find that this dismal weather had made you rather worse. It has put back my plans confoundedly,' he said, throwing himself into a chair.

'How so?'

'Well, you see, those fellows down there at Cathagira can't get on without their building. They did but little yesterday except move a few graves, that might as well have been built over as not, only I had not the heart to hold out against the superstitious vagabonds that were weeping and wailing around me. There was an old half crazy hag there, that would have torn my eyes out if my people had not bound her hand and foot, while the work was going on about the graves. They're hardly human, these Irish!' said Lord Hugh, with emphasis; forgetting that he, like the wolf in the fable, had troubled and muddled the stream, even while he charged the lamb with the fault, and tore and mangled him on the false pretence. 'But where is Miss Ahern, mother?' he asked; 'I have not seen her for a day or two.'

'I am sure I cannot inform you. You seem to think I am Miss Ahern's keeper.'

'No I don't, madam; but hang it, I see no harm in being civil to her, and she your guest. She has been to see you to-day?'

'No. I wished to be quiet, and did not admit her,' she replied.

'Miss Ahern is quiet. I should think the society of so intelligent a person as she is, would

be agreeable to you in this dreary solitude, mother?' said Lord Hugh petulantly.

'The company of Miss Ahern would not contribute to my comfort at any time,' was the curt reply.

'And why in the deuce, not? She is all that is womanly and beautiful,' he asked, in a sort of blank amazement.

'Simply because I am too well versed in the ways of the world to be deceived by appearances. Once for all, I do not like Miss Ahern, and will not have her forced on me,' replied her ladyship haughtily. 'Have you discovered the cause of that strange sound the other night?'

'One of my Scotchmen, to whom I was speaking, says that it was caused by a strong eddy of wind in some passage that was too narrow for its volume; the rest say it was the Banshee crying, and that it is prophetic of all sorts of evil and disaster to me. I think it was an owl. But, see here, mother—about Miss—'

'It seemed like Pandemonium to me,' said her ladyship, interrupting him without ceremony; 'and the recollection of it makes me shudder.—Where did you pick up that bumpbacked adventurer? And why invite him here?'

'My noble mother, he picked me up. He wished to buy those Abbey lands, but his anxiety convinced me more than ever, that there are resources there which will more than pay for the trouble and expense of developing them; and which I have no idea of relinquishing to a stranger. I invited him up here merely to sound him for my own benefit, but I might have spared myself the trouble, as I learned nothing.'

'I have a presentiment that he will work you evil yet. I think I know him, and if my suspicions are correct, woe unto us. Years and years have passed since I saw him last,' mused her ladyship, 'and there is a dark secret in his keeping—he must be humored awhile—it he is the same—then he must be got out of the way, or we be beggared.'

'Halloa, mother! Do you want your drops?' exclaimed Lord Hugh starting upright in his chair; 'your mind is surely wandering.'

'Yes—ring for Felice—I am dreadfully shaken,' said her ladyship, suddenly recalled to herself, and alarmed at her own imprudent speech. 'But there are other snares lying in wait for you, against which you must guard.'

'My dear mother, you seem to think that you are in the castle of an enchanter. Am I in danger of being transformed into beast or bird, think you?'

'The snare I allude to, may transform you into something far more base—even a dishonorable man. Beauty is a potent enchantress when united with artfulness and ambition.'

'Ahem! you refer now to Miss Ahern!—Your warning is not amiss, for I confess I am already half in love with her,' replied the young man, laughing, as he turned to leave the room. 'Shall I send you anything from below?'

'Nothing—but stay one instant. How much longer are we to remain here?'

'It is uncertain, and depends entirely on circumstances. I anticipate troublesome work with these Papistical rascals, who seem to defy me, or are at least sullen and dissatisfied, and I am determined at all risks to finish what I have begun,' he said as he went out.

As Lord Hugh crossed the hall, the door opened, and a figure muffled from head to feet in dark wrappings, came in, who, as she approached the lamp light, he discovered to be Ellen Ahern, drenched and dripping with rain; her face pale as with fatigue, and her eyes heavy and drooping. She would have passed him, but he advanced, and taking her hand ere she perceived his intention, insisted on her going in to the drawing-room fire, to lay off her wet wrappings.

'I can reach my room in a moment, my Lord,' she said gravely; 'and I prefer laying them off there. Allow me to pass.'

'Not so easily, my pretty cousin. Remember I am the head of the family, and am entitled to obedience. You are as shy of me as if I were a stranger.'

'My Lord, release me!'

'You are my captive, and possession, you know, is nine-tenths of the law,' he said; 'besides which, a due regard for your health constrains me.'

'It is a pity that your philanthropy has not a wider range,' she said, as no longer resisting, she entered the drawing-room with him, and throwing off her wet cloak, stood erect and proud, while she disentangled her hair from the strings of her hood.

'It is better to concentrate all valuable essences, instead of diffusing them. But look amiable, and tell me where in the name of Noah, you have been to-day? Poo my honor, you might as well be in England, I see so little of you. I am dying with *ennui*, without succor, and you, on whom I depended, cloister yourself like a nun.'

'Do you really wish to know where I have