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THE MURDERED PEDLER.

A TALE OF THE SOUTH OF IRELAND.

"It grieves me," said an eminent poet once to me, "it grieves and humbles me to reflect how much our moral nature is in the power of circumstances. Our best faculties would remain unknown even to ourselves did not the influences of external excitement call them forth like animalculæ, which lie torpid till awakened into life by the transient sunbeam."

This is generally true. How many walk through the beaten paths of every-day life, who, but for the novelist's page, would never weep or wonder; and who would know nothing of the passions but as they are represented in some tragedy or stage piece? not that they are incapable of high resolve and energy; but because the finer qualities have never been called forth by imperious circumstances; for while the wheels of existence roll smoothly along, the soul will continue to slumber in her vehicle like a lazy traveller. But for the French revolution, how many hundreds—*thousands*—whose courage, fortitude and devotedness, have sanctified their names, would have frittered away a frivolous, useless, or vicious life in the salons of Paris! We have heard of death in its most revolting forms braved by delicate females who would have screamed at the sight of the most insignificant reptile or insect; and men cheerfully toiling at mechanic trades for bread, who had lounged away the best years of their lives at the toilets of their mistresses. We know not of what we are capable till the trial comes;—till it comes, perhaps, in a form which makes the strong man quail, and turns the gentler woman into a heroine.

The power of outward circumstances suddenly to awaken dormant faculties—the extraordinary influence which the mere instinct of self-preservation can exert over the mind, and the triumph of *mind* thus excited over physical weakness, were never more truly exemplified than in the story of "The Murdered Pedler."

The real circumstances of this singular case, differing essentially from the garbled and incorrect account which appeared in the newspapers some years ago, came to my knowledge in the following simple manner. My cousin George C., an Irish barrister of some standing, lately succeeded to his family estates by the death of a near relative; and no sooner did he find himself in possession of independence than, abjuring the bar, where, after twenty years of hard struggling he was just beginning to make a figure, he set off on a tour through Italy and Greece, to forget the wrangling of courts, the contumely of attorneys, and the impatience of clients. He left in my hands a mass of papers, to burn or not, as I might feel inclined; and truly the contents of his desk were no bad illustration of the character and pursuits of its owner. Here I found abstracts of cases, and on their backs copies of verses, sketches of scenery, and numerous caricatures of judges, jurymen, witnesses, and his brethren of the bar—a bundle of old briefs, and the beginnings of two tragedies; with a long list of Lord N.'s best jokes, to serve his purposes as occasion might best offer. Among these heterogeneous and confused articles were a number of scraps carefully pinned together, containing notes on a certain trial, the first in which he had been retained as counsel for the crown. The intense interest with which I perused these documents, suggested the plan of throwing the whole into a connected form, and here it is for the reader's benefit.

In a little village to the south of Clonmel lived a poor peasant named Michael, or as it was there pronounced, Mickle Reilly. He was a laborer, renting a cabin and a plot of potatoe ground; and, on the strength of these possessions, a robust frame which feared no fatigue, and a sanguine mind which dreaded no reverse, Reilly paid his addresses to Kathleen Bray, a young girl of his own parish, and they were married. Reilly was able, skillful, and industrious; Kathleen was the best spinner in the country, and had constant sale for her work at Clonmel; they wanted nothing; and for the first year, as Kathleen said, "There wasn't upon the blessed earth two happier souls than themselves, for Mickle was the best boy in the world, and hadn't a fault to speak of—barring he took a drop now and then; and why wouldn't he?" But as it happened, poor Reilly's love of "the drop" was the beginning of all her misfortunes. In an evil hour he went to the fair of Clonmel to sell a dozen hanks of yarn of his wife's spinning, and a fat pig, the produce of which was to pay half a year's rent, and add to their little comforts.—Here he met with a jovial companion, who took him into a booth and treated him to sundry potations of whiskey, and while in his company his pocket was picked of the money he had just received, and something more; in short, of all he possessed in the world. At that luckless moment, while maddened by his loss and heated with liquor, he fell into the company of a recruiting sergeant. The many-colored and gayly

fluttering cockade in the soldier's cap shone like a rainbow of hope and promise before the drunken eyes of Mickle Reilly, and ere morning he was enlisted into a regiment under order for embarkation, and instantly sent off to Cork.

Distracted by the ruin he had brought upon himself, and his wife, (whom he loved a thousand times better than himself) poor Reilly sent a friend to inform Kathleen of his mischance, and to assure her that on a certain day, in a week from that time, a letter would await her at the Clonmel post-office; the same friend was commissioned to deliver her his silver watch, and a guinea out of his bounty money. Poor Kathleen turned from the gold with horror, as the price of her husband's blood, and vowed that nothing on earth should induce her to touch it. She was not a good calculator of time and distance, and was therefore rather surprised that so long a time must elapse before his letter arrived. On the appointed day she was too impatient to wait the arrival of the carrier, but set off to Clonmel herself, a distance of ten miles; there, at the post-office, she duly found the promised letter; but it was not till she had it in her possession that she remembered that she could not read; she had therefore to hasten back to consult her friend Nancy, the schoolmaster's daughter, and the best scholar in the village. Reilly's letter, on being deciphered with some difficulty even by the learned Nancy, was found to contain much of sorrow, much of repentance, and yet more of affection; he assured her that he was far better off than he had expected or deserved; that the embarkation of the regiment to which he belonged was delayed for three weeks, and entreated her, if she could forgive him, to follow him to Cork without delay, that they might "part in love and kindness, and come what might, he would demane himself like a man, and die easy," which he assured her he could not do without embracing her once more.

Kathleen listened to her husband's letter with clasped hands and drawn breath, but quiet in her nature, she gave no other signs of emotion than a few large tears which trickled slowly down her cheeks. "And will I see him again?" she exclaimed; "poor fellow! poor fellow! I knew the heart of him was sore for me! and who knows, Nancy dear, but they'll let me go out with him to the foreign parts? Oh! sure they wouldn't be so hard hearted as to part man and wife that way!"

After a hurried consultation with her neighbors, who sympathized with her as only the poor sympathize with the poor, a letter was indited by Nancy and sent by the carrier that night, to inform her husband that she purposed setting off for Cork the next blessed morning, being Tuesday, and as the distance was about forty-eight English miles, she reckoned on reaching that city by Wednesday afternoon; for as she had walked to Clonmel and back (about twenty miles) that same day, without feeling fatigued at all, "to signify," Kathleen thought there would be no doubt that she could walk to Cork in less than two days. In this sanguine calculation she was, however, overruled by her more experienced neighbors, and by their advice appointed Thursday as the day on which her husband was to expect her, "God willing."

Kathleen spent the rest of the day in making preparations for her journey; she set her cabin in order, and made a small bundle of a few articles of clothing belonging to herself and her husband. The watch and the guinea she wrapped up together, and crammed into the toe of an old shoe, which she deposited in the said bundle, and the next morning, at "sparrow chirp," she arose, locked her cabin door, carefully hid the key in the thatch, and with a light, expecting heart, she commenced her long journey.

It is worthy of remark, that this poor woman, who was called upon to play the heroine in such a strange tragedy, and under such appalling circumstances, had nothing heroic in her exterior: nothing that in the slightest degree indicated strength of nerve or superiority of intellect.—Kathleen was twenty-three years of age, of a low stature, and in her form rather delicate than robust; she was of ordinary appearance; her eyes were mild and dove-like, and her whole countenance, though not absolutely deficient in intelligence, was more particularly expressive of simplicity, good temper, and kindness of heart.

It was summer, about the end of June: the days were long, the weather fine, and some gentle showers rendered travelling easy and pleasant. Kathleen walked on stoutly towards Cork, and by the evening she had accomplished, with occasional pauses of rest, nearly twenty-one miles.—She lodged at a little inn by the road side, and the following day set forward again, but soon felt stiff with the travel of two previous days: the sun became hotter, the ways dustier; and she could not with all her endeavors get farther than Rathcormack, eighteen miles from Cork. The next day, unfortunately for poor Kathleen, proved hotter and more fatiguing than the preceding one. The cross road lay over a wild

country, consisting of low bogs and bare hills.—About noon she turned aside to a rivulet bordered by a few trees, and sitting down in the shade, she bathed her swollen feet in the stream; then, overcome by heat, weakness, and excessive weariness, she put her little bundle under her head for a pillow, and sank into a deep sleep.

On waking she perceived with dismay that the sun was declining; and on looking about her fears were increased by the discovery that her bundle was gone. Her first thought was that the good people (*i. e.*, the fairies) had been there and stolen it away; but on examining farther she plainly perceived large foot prints in the soft bank, and was convinced it was the work of no unearthly marauder. Bitterly reproaching herself for her carelessness, she again set forward; and still hoping to reach Cork that night, she toiled on and on with increasing difficulty and distress, till, as the evening closed, her spirits failed, she became faint, foot-sore and hungry, not having tasted anything since the morning but a cold potatoe and a draught of buttermilk. She then looked round her in hopes of discovering some habitation, but there was none in sight except a lofty castle on a distant hill, which, raising its proud turrets from amidst the plantations which surrounded it, glistened faintly through the gathering gloom, and held out no temptation for the poor wanderer to turn in there and rest. In her despair she sat down on a bank by the road side, and wept as she thought of her husband.

Several horsemen rose by, and one carriage and four attended by servants, who took no farther notice of her than by a passing look; while they went on their way like the priest and the Levite in the parable. Poor Kathleen dropped her head despairingly on her bosom. A faintness and torpor seemed to be stealing like a dark cloud over her senses, when the fast approaching sound of footsteps roused her attention, and turning, she saw at her side a man whose figure, too singular to be easily forgotten, she recognised immediately: it was Halloran, the Pedlar.

Halloran had been known for thirty years past in all the towns and villages between Waterford and Kerry. He was very old, he himself did not know his own age; he only remembered that he was a "tall slip of a boy" when he was one of the — regiment of foot, and fought in America in 1778. His dress was strange, it consisted of a woollen cap, beneath which strayed a few white hairs, and this was surmounted by an old military cocked hat, adorned with a few fragments of tarnished gold lace; a frieze great coat with the sleeves dangling behind, was fastened at his throat, and served to protect his box of wares which was slung at his back; and he always carried a thick oak stick, or *kippeen*, in his hand. There was nothing of the infirmity of age in his appearance: his cheek, though wrinkled and weather-beaten, was still ruddy; his step still firm, his eyes still bright; his jovial disposition made him a welcome guest in every cottage, and his jokes, though not equal to Mr Lord Norbury's, were repeated and applauded through the whole country. Halloran was returning from the fair of Kilkenny, where apparently his commercial speculations had been attended with success, as his pack was considerably diminished in size. Though he did not appear to recollect Kathleen, he addressed her in Irish, and asked her what she did there? She related in a few words her miserable situation.

"In troth, then, my heart is sorry for ye, poor woman," he replied, compassionately; "and what will ye do?"

"An' what *can* I do?" replied Kathleen, disconsolately; "and how will I ever find the ford and get across to Cork, when I don't know where I am this blessed moment?"

"Musha, then, it's little ye'll get there this night," said the pedlar, shaking his head.

"Then I'll lie down here and die," said Kathleen, bursting into fresh tears.

"Die! ye wouldn't!" he exclaimed, approaching nearer; "is it to me, Peter Halloran, ye spake that word; and am I the man that would leave a faymale at this dark hour by the wayside, let alone one that has the face of a friend, tho' I cannot remember me of your name either, for the soul of me. But what matter for that?"

"Sure, I'm Katty Reilly, of Castle Conn."

"Katty Reilly, sure enough! and so no more talk of dying! cheer up, and see, a mile farther on, isn't there Biddy Hogan's? Was, I mane, if the house and all isn't gone; and it's there we'll get a bite and a sup, and a bed, too, please God. So lean upon my arm, marourveen, it's strong enough yet."

"So saying, the old man, with an air of gallantry, half rustic, half military, assisted her in rising; and supporting her on one arm, with the other he flourished his kippeen over her head, and they trudged on together, he singing Cruiskeenlawn at the top of his voice, "just," as he said, "to put the heart into her."

After about half an hour's walking, they came to two crossways, diverging from the high road:

down one of these the pedler turned, and in a few minutes they came in sight of a lonely house, situated at a little distance from the wayside.—Above the door was a long stick projecting from the wall, at the end of which dangled a truss of straw, signifying that within there was entertainment (good or bad) for man and beast. By this time it was nearly dark, and the pedler going up to the door, lifted the latch, expecting it to yield to his hand; but it was fastened within: he then knocked and called, but there was no answer.—The building, which was many times larger than an ordinary cabin, had once been a manufactory, and afterward a farmhouse. One end of it was deserted, and nearly in ruins; the other end bore signs of having been at least recently inhabited. But such a dull hollow echo rung through the edifice at every knock, that it seemed the whole place was deserted.

Kathleen began to be alarmed, and crossed herself, ejaculating, "O God preserve us!"—But the pedler, who appeared well acquainted with the premises, led her round to the back part of the house, where there was some ruined out-buildings, and another low entrance. Here, raising his stout stick, he let fall such a heavy thump on the door that it cracked again; and a shrill voice from the other side demanded who was there? After a satisfactory answer, the door was slowly and cautiously opened, and the figure of a wrinkled, half-famished, and half-naked beldam appeared, shading a rush candle with one hand. Halloran, who was of a fiery and hasty temper, began angrily:—"Why, in the name of the great devil himself, didn't you open to us?" But he stopped suddenly, as if struck with surprise at the miserable object before him.

"Is it Biddy Hogan herself, I see?" he exclaimed, snatching the candle from her hand, and throwing the light full on her face. A moment's scrutiny seemed enough, and too much; for, giving it back hastily, he supported Kathleen into the kitchen, the old woman leading the way, and placed her on an old settle, the first seat which presented itself. When she was sufficiently recovered to look about her, Kathleen could not help feeling some alarm at finding herself in so gloomy and dreary a place. It had once been a large kitchen or hall: at one end was an ample chimney, such as are yet to be seen in some old country houses. The rafters were black with smoke or rottenness; the walls had been wainscoted with oak, but the greatest part had been torn down for firing. A table with three legs, a large stool, a bench in the chimney propped up with turf sods, and the seat Kathleen occupied, formed the only furniture. Everything spoke utter misery, filth, and famine—the very "abomination of desolation."

"And what have ye in the house, Biddy, honey?" was the pedler's first question, as the old woman set down the light. "Little enough, I'm thinking."

"Little! It's nothing, then—no, not so much as a midge would eat here I in the house this blessed night, and nobody to send down to Ballygowna."

"No need of that, as our good luck would have it," said Halloran, and pulling a wallet from under his loose coat, he drew from it a bone of cold meat, a piece of bacon, a lump of bread, and some cold potatoes. The old woman, roused by the sight of so much good cheer, began to blow up the drying embers on the hearth; put down among them the few potatoes to warm, and busied herself in making some little preparations to entertain her guests. Meantime the old pedler, casting from time to time an anxious glance towards Kathleen, and now and then an encouraging word, sat down on the low stool, resting his arms on his knees.

"Times are sadly changed with ye, Biddy Hogan," said he at length, after a long silence.

"Troth, ye may say so," she replied, with a sort of groan. "Bitter bad luck have we had in this world, any how."

"And where's the man of the house? And where's the lad, Barney?"

"Where are they, is it? Where should they be? May be come down to Ahnamoe."

"But what's gone to Barney? The boy was a stout workman, and a good son, though a devil-may-care fellow, too. I remember teaching him the soldiers exercise with this very blessed stick now in my hand; and by the same token, him doubling his fist at me when he wasn't bigger than the turf-kish yonder; ay, and as long as Barney Hogan could turn a sod of turf on my lord's land, I thought his father and mother would never have wanted the bit and sup while the life was in him."

At the mention of her son, the old woman looked up a moment, but immediately hung her head again.

"Barney doesn't work for my lord now," said she.

"And what for, then?"

The old woman seemed reluctant to answer—she hesitated.

"Ye didn't hear, then, how he got into trouble

with my lord; and how—myself doesn't know the rights of it—but Barney had always a bit of wild blood about him; and since that day he's taken to bad ways, and the old man's ruled by him quite entirely and the one is glum and fierce like, and t'other's bothered: and, oh! bitter's the time I have 'twixt 'em both!"

While the old woman was uttering these broken complaints, she placed the eatables of the table; and Kathleen, who was yet more faint from hunger than subdued by fatigue, was first helped by the good-natured pedlar to the best of what was there: but, just as she was about to taste the food set before her, she chanced to see the eyes of the old woman fixed upon the morsel in her hand with such an envious and famished look, that from a sudden impulse of benevolent feeling, she instantly held it out to her. The woman started, drew back her extended hand, and gazed at her wildly.

"What is it then ails ye?" said Kathleen, looking at her with wonder; then to herself, "hunger's turned the wits of her, poor soul." "Take it—take it, mother," added she aloud "eat, good mother; sure there's plenty for us all, and to spare," and she pressed it upon her with all the kindness of her nature. The old woman eagerly seized it.

"God reward ye," said she, grasping Kathleen's hand convulsively, and retiring to a corner, she devoured the food with almost wolfish voracity.

While they were eating, the two Hogaes, father and son, came in. They had been setting snares for rabbits and game on the neighboring hills; and evidently were both startled and displeased to find the house occupied; which, since Barney Hogan's disgrace with "my lord," had been entirely shunned by the people round about. The old man gave the pedlar a sulky welcome. The son, with a muttered curse, went and took his seat in the chimney, where, turning his back, he set himself to chop a billet of wood. The father was a lean, stooping figure, "bony, and gaunt and grim;" he was either deaf, or affected deafness. The son was a short, brawny, thick-set man, with features not naturally ugly, but rendered worse than ugly by an expression of lurking ferocity disgustingly blended with a sort of stupid drunken leer, the effect of habitual intoxication.

Halloran stared at them awhile with visible astonishment and indignation, but pity and sorrow for a change so lamentable smothered the old man's wrath; and as the eatables were by this time demolished, he took from a side pocket a tin flask of whisky, calling to the old woman to boil some water "screeching hot," that he might make what he termed "a jug of stiff punch—stiff enough to make a cat spake." He offered to share it with his hosts, who did not decline drinking; and the noggin went round to all but Kathleen, who, feverish with travelling, and, besides, disliking spirits, would not taste it. The old pedlar, reconciled to his old acquaintances by this show of good fellowship, began to grow merry under the influence of his whisky-punch: he boasted of his late success in trade, showed with exultation his almost empty pack, and taking out the only two handkerchiefs left in it, threw one to Kathleen, and the other to the old woman of the house: then slapping his pocket, in which a quantity of loose money was heard to jingle, he swore he would treat Kathleen to a good breakfast next morning; and he threw a shilling on the table, desiring that the old woman would provide "strabour for a dozen," and have it ready by the first light."

Kathleen listened to this rhodomontade in some alarm; she fancied she detected certain suspicious glances between the father and son, and began to feel an indescribable dread of her company. She arose from the table, urging the pedlar good-humoredly to retire to rest, as they intended to be up and away so early next morning: then concealing her apprehensions under an affectation of extreme fatigue and drowsiness, she desired to be shown where she was to sleep.—The old woman, lighted a lantern, and led the way up some broken steps into a sort of loft, where she showed her two beds, with an old curtain, reaching half-way across the room, between them,—an arrangement quite common among the poorer classes in Ireland, and which will possibly be objected to by a less virtuous people,—one of which she intimated was for the pedlar, and the other for herself. Wishing her "a sweet sleep and sound, and lucky dreams," the old woman put the lantern on the floor, for there was neither chair nor table, and left her guest to repose.

Kathleen said her prayers, only partly undressed herself, and lifting up the wornout coverlet, lay down upon the bed. In a quarter of an hour afterward the pedlar staggered into the room, and as he passed the foot of her bed, bid God bless her, in a low voice. He then threw himself down on his bed, and in a few minutes, as she judged by his hard and equal breathing, the old man was in a deep sleep.

(To be concluded in our next.)