

LORD KILGOBBIN.

By CHARLES LEVER.

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

CHAPTER XXXV—Continued.

"Is not that our village yonder, where I see the smoke?"

"Yes; and there on the stile sits your little groom awaiting you. I shall get down here."

"Stay where you are, sir. It is by your blunder, not by your presence, that you might compromise me." And this time her voice caught a sharp severity that suppressed reply.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE EXCURSION.

The little village of Cruhan-hawn, into which they now drove, was, in every detail of wretchedness, dirt, ruin, and desolation, intensely Irish. A small branch of the well-known bog-stream, the "Brusna," divided one part of the village from the other; and between these two settlements so separated there raged a most rancorous hatred and jealousy, and Cruhan-beg, as the smaller collection of hovels was called, detested Cruhan-bawd with an intensity of dislike that might have sufficed for a national antipathy, where race, language, and traditions had contributed their aids to the animosity.

There was, however, one real and valid reason for this inveterate jealousy. The inhabitants of Cruhan-beg—who lived, as they said themselves, "beyond the river," strenuously refused to pay any rent for their hovels; while "the cis-Brusnaites," as they may be termed, demeaned themselves to the condition of tenants in so far as to acknowledge the obligation of rent, though the oldest inhabitant vowed he had never seen a receipt in his life, nor had the very least conception of a gale-day.

If, therefore, actually, there was not much to separate them on the score of principle, they were widely apart in theory, and the sturdy denizens of the smaller village looked down upon the others as the ignoble slaves of a Saxon tyranny. The village in its entirety—for the division was a purely local and arbitrary one—belonged to Miss Betty O'Shea, forming the extreme edge of her estate as it merged into the vast bog; and, with the habitual fate of frontier populations, it contained more people of lawless lives and reckless habits than were to be found for miles around. There was not a resource of her ingenuity she had not employed for years back to bring these refractory subjects into the pale of a respectable tenantry. Every process of the law had been "canted," and themselves—a last resource—cursed from the altar; but, with that strange tenacity that pertains to life where there is little to live for, these creatures survived all modes of persecution, and came back into their ruined hovels to defy the law and beard the Church, and went on living—in some strange, mysterious way of their own—an open challenge to all political economy, and a sore puzzle to the Times commissioner when he came to report on the condition of the cottier in Ireland.

At certain seasons of country excitement—such as an election or an unusually weighty assizes—it was not deemed perfectly safe to visit the village, and even the police would not have ventured on the step except with a responsible force. At other periods the most marked feature of the place would be that of utter vacuity and desolation. A single inhabitant here and there smoking listlessly at his door—a group of women, with their arms concealed beneath their aprons, crouching under a ruined wall, or a few ragged children, too miserable and dispirited even for play, would be all that would be seen.

At a spot where the stream was fordable for a horse, the page Larry had already stationed himself, and now walked into the river, which rose over his knees, to show the road to his mistress.

"The bailiffs is on them to-day," said he, with a gleeful look in his eye; for any excitement, no matter at what cost to others, was intensely pleasurable to him.

"What is he saying?" asked Nina. "They are executing some process of law against these people," muttered Donogan. "It's an old story in Ireland;

but I had as soon you had been spared the sight."

"Is it quite safe for yourself?" whispered she. "Is there not some danger in being seen here?"

"Oh, if I could but think that you cared—I mean ever so slightly," cried he, with fervor, "I'd call this moment of my danger the proudest of my life!"

Though declarations of this sort—more or less sincere, as chance might make them—were things Nina was well used to, she could not help marking the impassioned manner of him who now spoke, and bent her eyes steadily on him.

"It is true," said he, as if answering the interrogation in her gaze. "A poor outcast as I am—a rebel—a felon—anything you like to call me—the slightest show of your interest in me gives my life a value and my hope a purpose I never knew till now."

"Such interest would be but ill-bestowed if it only served to heighten your danger. Are you known here?"

"He who has stood in the dock as I have is sure to be known by some one. Not that the people would betray me. There is poverty and misery enough in that wretched village, and yet there's not one so hungry or so ragged that he would hand me over to the law to make himself rich for life."

"Then what do you mean to do?" asked she, hurriedly.

"Walk boldly through the village at the head of your pony, as I am now—your guide to Croghan Castle."

"But we were to have stabled the beast here. I intended to have gone on foot to Croghan."

"Which you cannot now. Do you know what English law is, lady?" cried he fiercely. "This pony and this carriage, if they had shelter here, are confiscated to the landlord for his rent. It's little use to say you owe nothing to this owner of the soil; it's enough that they are found among the chattels of his debtors."

"I cannot believe this is law."

"You can prove it—at the loss of your pony; and it is mercy and generous dealing when compared with half the enactments our rulers have devised for us. Follow me. I see the police have not yet come down. I will go on in front and ask the way to Croghan."

There was that sort of peril in the adventure now that stimulated Nina and excited her; and as they stoutly wended their way through the crowd, she was far from insensible to the looks of admiration that were bent on her from every side.

"What are they saying?" asked she; "I do not know their language."

"It is Irish," said he; "they are talking of your beauty."

"I should so like to follow their words?" said she, with the smile of one to whom such homage had ever its charm.

"That wild-looking fellow, that seemed to utter an imprecation, has just pronounced a fervent blessing; what he has said was: 'May every glance of your eye be a candle to light you to glory!'"

A half-insolent laugh at this conceit was all Nina's acknowledgment of it. Short greetings and good wishes were now rapidly exchanged between Donogan and the people, as the little party made their way through the crowd—the men standing bareheaded, and the women uttering words of admiration, some even crossing themselves piously, at sight of such loveliness as, to them, recalled the ideal of all beauty.

"The police are to be here at one o'clock," said Donogan, translating a phrase of one of the bystanders.

"And is there anything for them to seize on?" asked she.

"No; but they can level the cabins," cried he, bitterly. "We have no more right to shelter than to food."

Moody and sad, he walked along at the pony's head, and did not speak another word till they had left the village far behind them.

Larry, as usual, had found something to interest him, and dropped behind in the village, and they were alone.

A passing countryman, to whom Donogan addressed a few words in Irish, told them that a short distance from Croghan they could stable the pony at a small "shebeen."

On reaching this, Nina, who seemed

to have accepted Donogan's companionship without farther question, directed him to unpack the carriage and take out her easel and her drawing materials. You'll have to carry these—fortunately, not very far, though," said she smiling, "and then you'll have to come back here and fetch this basket."

"It is a very proud slavery—command me how you will," muttered he, not without emotion.

"That," continued she, pointing to the basket, "contains my breakfast, and luncheon or dinner, and I invite you to be my guest."

"And I accept with rapture. Oh!" cried he, passionately, "what whispered to my heart this morning that this would be the happiest day of my life?"

"If so, fate has scarcely been generous to you." And her lip curled half-superciliously as she spoke.

"I'd not say that. I have lived amidst great hopes, many of them dashed, it is true, by disappointment; but who that has been cheered by glorious day-dreams has not tasted moments at least of exquisite bliss?"

"I don't know that I have much sympathy with political ambitions," said she, pettishly.

"Have you tasted—have you tried them? Do you know what it is to feel the heart of a nation throb and beat—to know that all that love can do to purify and elevate can be exercised for the countless thousands of one's own race and lineage, and to think that long after men have forgotten your name some heritage of freedom will survive to say that there once lived one who loved his country?"

"This is very pretty enthusiasm."

"Oh, how is it that you, who can stimulate one's heart to such confessions, know nothing of the sentiment?"

"I have my ambitions," said she, coldly—almost sternly.

"Let me hear some of them."

"They are not like yours, though they are perhaps just as impossible." She spoke in a broken, unconnected manner, like one who was talking aloud the thoughts that came laggingly; then, with a sudden earnestness, she said: "I'll tell you one of them. It's to catch the broad bold light that has just beat on the old castle there, and brought out all its rich tints of grays and yellows in such a glorious wealth of color. Place my easel here, under the trees; spread that rug for yourself to lie on. No—you won't have it? Well, fold it neatly, and place it there for my feet: very nicely done. And now, Signor Ribello, you may unpack that basket and arrange our breakfast, and when you have done all these, throw yourself down on the grass, and either tell me a pretty story, or recite some nice verse for me, or be otherwise amusing and agreeable."

"Shall I do what will best please myself? If so, it will be to lie here and look at you."

"Be it so," said she, with a sigh. "I have always thought, in looking at them, how saints are bored by being worshipped—it adds fearfully to martyrdom, but happily I am used to it. 'Oh, the vanity of that girl!' Yes, sir, say it out: tell her frankly that if she has no friend to caution her against this besetting wile, that you will be that friend. Tell her that whatever she has of attraction is spoiled and marred by this self-consciousness, and that just as you are a rebel without knowing it, so should she be charming and never suspect it. Is not that coming nicely?" said she, pointing to the drawing. "See how that tender light is carried down from those gray walls to the banks beneath, and dies away in that little pool, where the faintest breath of air is rustling. Don't look at me, sir, look at my drawing."

"True, there is no tender light there," muttered he, gazing at her eyes, where the enormous size of the pupils had given a character of steadfast brilliancy, quite independent of shape, or size, or color.

"You know very little about it," said she, saucily; then, bending over the drawing, she said: "That middle distance wants a bit of color; you shall aid me here."

"How am I to aid you?" asked he, in sheer simplicity.

"I mean that you should be that bit of color, there. Take my scarlet cloak and perch yourself yonder on that low rock. A few minutes will do. Was there ever immortality so cheaply purchased! Your biographer shall tell that you were the figure in that famous sketch—what will be called, in the cant

of art, one of Nina Kosalergi's earliest and happiest efforts. There now, dear Mr. Donogan, do as you are bid."

"Do you know the Greek ballad, where a youth remembers that the word 'dear' has been coupled with his name—a passing courtesy, even so much, but enough to light up a whole chamber in his heart?"

"I know nothing of Greek ballads. How does it go?"

"It is a simple melody, in a low key." And he sang in a deep but tremulous voice, to a very plaintive air:

"I took her hand within my own,
I drew her gently nearer,
And whispered almost on her cheek,
'Oh, would that I were dearer.'
Dearest; No, that's not my prayer:
A stranger, e'en the merest,
Might chance to have some value there
But I would be the dearest."

"What had he done to merit such a hope?" said she, haughtily.

"Loved her—only loved her!"

"What value you men must attach to this gift of your affection, when it can nourish such thoughts as these! Your very willfulness is to win us—is not that your theory? I expect from the man who offers me his heart that he means to share with me his own power and his own ambition—to make me the partner of a station that is to give me some pre-eminence I had not known before, nor could gain unaided."

"And you would call that marrying for love?"

"Why not? Who has such a claim upon my life as he who makes the life worth living for? Did you hear that about?"

"I heard it," said he, standing still to listen.

"It came from the village. What can it mean?"

"It is the old war-cry of the houseless," said he, mournfully. "It's a note we are well used to here. I must go down to learn. I'll be back presently."

"You are not going into danger?" said she, and her cheek grew paler as she spoke.

"And if I were, who is to care for it?" "Have you no mother, sister, sweetheart?"

"No, not one of the three. Good-bye."

"But if I were to say—stay?"

"I should still go. To have your love, I'd sacrifice even my honor. Without it—" he threw up his arms despairingly and rushed away.

"These are the men whose tempers compromise us," said she, thoughtfully. "We come to accept their violence as a reason, and take mere impetuosity for an argument. I am glad that he did not shake my resolution. There, that was another shout, but it seemed in joy. There was a ring of gladness in it. Now for my sketch." And she reseated herself before her easel. "He shall see when he comes back how diligently I have worked, and how small a share anxiety has had in my thoughts. The one thing men are not proof against is our independence of them." And thus talking in broken sentences to herself, she went on rapidly with her drawing, occasionally stopping to gaze on it, and humming some old Italian ballad to herself. "His Greek air was pretty. Not that it was Greek; these fragments of melody were left behind them by the Venetians, who, in all lust of power, made songs about contented poverty and humble joys. I feel intensely hungry, and if my dangerous guest does not return soon I shall have to breakfast alone—another way of showing him how little his fate has interested me. My foreground here does want that bit of color. Why does he not come back?" As she rose to look at her drawing, the sound of something running attracted her attention, and turning, she saw it was her foot-page, Larry, coming at full speed.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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