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A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER II.—HALLOW-EVE AT ESMOND HALL.

We will now take the liberty of introducing the reader to the drawing-room of Esmond Hall on that same Hallow-eve night, where the 'young mistresses' so gratefully and often mentioned by Bryan and Cault was entertaining with modest, though lively grace, a numerous circle of visitors, all more or less connected with the family.—Nothing could be more cheerful than the aspect of the spacious and lofty room, with its bright coal fire, and its crystal chandelier shedding down a flood of warm light on the gay company, the bright-lit velvet carpet, the handsome modern furniture, rose-wood and marble of the latest Dublin style, the piano—one of Broadwood's grand—with its showy key-board open to view, and near it a harp which could be set down for no other—even without hearing its silvery tones—than one of 'Erard's best.' A beautiful dog of the King Charles breed lay on the soft rug outside the fender, his long silken ears, of glossy black, reflecting the bright glow from the massive grate.

The crimson curtains were closed over the tall windows, hanging in heavy folds to the floor, and the lofty mirrors flashed back the gay scene with its richly-varied hues, its light and life and beauty. The 'wind of the winter night' howling without, served but to increase the luxurious sense of comfort within, and its plaintive cadences and loud fierce swells were little heeded by the company assembled in Mrs. Esmond's drawing-room.—And yet some of the guests were grave and far from young. One in particular—a stout, portly man, with short neck, square shoulders and large globular head—would have given you the impression of a harsh, stern man, as he looked at you from under his protruding brows with a glance half inquisitive, half defiant. This personage, attired in top-boots and knee-breeches of drab cassimere, with a bottle-green frock coat, black velvet vest, and scrupulously white neck-tie, occupied the seat of honor, a large Gothic arm-chair near the fireplace, with cushions of crimson velvet. He was addressed by both the lovely young hostess and her frank-looking, handsome husband, as 'Uncle Harry,' and his presence on that occasion seemed somehow to be regarded as a very special favor. Then there was his wife, a rather favorable specimen of the Irish lady of the last generation; though somewhat stiff and formal, there was nothing forbidding in her long, thin features, and she seemed to listen with complacency, if not with any great degree of sympathy, to the joyous *badinage* of her younger relatives. This lady was 'Aunt Martha.'

Then there were sundry cousins, male and female, comprising a young attorney, a physician whose diploma was dated within the year, and another of some ten or twelve years' standing in the good city of Cashel. The last named gentleman, Dr. O'Grady, had a fair-faced little wife in that goodly company, and the former, Dr. Hennessy, a sister, some years younger than himself, a gay, light-hearted brunette, whose saucy, though good-natured repartees contributed largely to the general amusement. Mary Hennessy was a bright-eyed, handsome girl, with an inexhaustible fund of good humor, and her presence was everywhere greeted as heaven's sunshine—warm, genial, and enlivening. Two other young ladies were there, connections though not relatives of the Esmonds, one of whom, Bella Le Poer, was a distant relation of the elegant Lady Blessington, and the other, Harriet Markham, a pale and rather interesting girl, a recent convert to Catholicity, belonging to an old but much-reduced Queen's County family. This young lady was engaged as governess in the family of a certain noble lord whose princely mansion rises but a short distance from Cashel, almost in the shade of old Killough. There was, too, a vinegar-faced old maid, the sister of Uncle Harry, familiarly called 'Aunt Dolly,' whose natural acerbity of temper acted as a whetting-stone to the lively humor of the youngsters, and gave them no small entertainment.

Altogether it was a pleasantly-constituted party, each one marked by strong peculiarity of one kind or another, the ages and characters and professions happily assorted, and, to crown all, each known to the other in all their prominent traits of character.

Tea had been served in the drawing-room, and as the Hallow-eve sports were to come off before supper, the matter now in hand was the order to be observed. After some good-humored discussion the company all adjourned to the ball-room, the smooth oaken floor of which better suited that evening's entertainment than the rich carpet of the drawing-room. The youngsters were all in a state of excitement, that was, in itself, happily, though all far superior to the superstitious belief of the peasantry in the fateful char-

acter of Hallow-eve, or the possibility of obtaining on that particular night a glimpse of life's untrodden path, they all, as a matter of course, assumed the greatest anxiety to 'try their luck, in accordance with the spell that ruled the hour. Every face was brimful of serio-comic importance, under which each contrived to manifest a laughing incredulity, that reduced the power of Fairy-dom to a mere myth, and the Hallow-eve observances to a pure frolic.

First came the melting of the lead in a gristle, and the pouring thereof through the wards of a key by each unmarried person in succession. This ceremony gave rise, as usual, to the most unbounded merriment, on account of the ludicrous combinations presented by the charmed lead in the various shapes it assumed falling into a shallow dish of water through the ring aforesaid. Truth to tell, the shapes were of that non-descript kind which might be construed into anything, and in that consisted the charm, for each one's lot was, therefore, predicted from the lead in the way most likely to promote the general amusement. Thus Mary Hennessy's 'cast' was interpreted by all present into a tailor's scissor!—Bella Le Poer's, a printing press!—and Harriet Upton's, a ship's rudder! It is to be remarked that the Hallow-eve lead is much more given to emblems of handicraft than any other; it seldom mingles with the professions, though once in a while, by way of variety, perhaps, a pen, or a compass, perhaps a telescope, is discovered amongst the motley forms into which it resolves itself in its passage through the key.—Much amusement was afforded the young people on that particular night by the result of Aunt Dolly's experiment, which was declared, after a minute and most careful investigation, to be a fiddle, indicating either a dancing-master or an itinerant performer on that favorite instrument.

This announcement was received with unbounded applause and followed by the most uproarious mirth.

'Aunt Dolly is going to have a fiddler—good gracious! good gracious!' cried Mary Hennessy, 'then we shall do nothing but dance all the year round!'

'Uncle Harry, do you hear that?' said Bella, in the good-natured expectation of bringing a smile to the face that even then was grave.

'I am not surprised,' was the answer, 'I always thought that Dolly had a decided turn for music.'

'Bravo! bravissimo!' cried the young men clapping their hands, while the fair girls around made the roof ring with their light-hearted laughter. Even Aunt Martha, Uncle Harry's staid and sober helpmate, smiled condescendingly at the odd conceit, but Aunt Dolly herself was highly offended, and said she deserved no better for allowing herself to be made a fool of. The very curls on either side of her high narrow forehead—they were barrel-curls of fair rotundity—seemed to swell in sympathetic indignation, and her long, thin nose assumed an alarmingly sharp point as she rose from her seat and declared her intention of returning to the drawing-room as people there didn't know how to conduct themselves.

The angry spinster was, with no small difficulty, prevailed on by the host and his gentle wife not to break up the party. 'For you know, Aunt Dolly,' said Mrs. Esmond in her sweetest tones, 'we could never think of remaining here, any of us, and let you sit alone in the drawing-room,—on a night like this, too,' she sportively added, 'when the Fairies are all on the alert to catch unwary mortals.'

'Nonsense, Henrietta,' said her husband gaily, 'Aunt Dolly wants only a little coaxing. Come, come, my fair aunt, I will take you under protection for the rest of the evening,' and drawing her arm within his he led her back to her seat with a half smile on her face and a look of heroic determination on his as though meaning to convey to all concerned the strength and firmness of his purpose. A suppressed titter went round in acknowledgment of Harry's comic powers, and the lead having gone its rounds another ordeal was instituted for the trial of each one's fate.—Four plates were set on a table, one of which contained clean, another muddy water, the third some fresh clay, and the fourth a ring, drawn from the taper finger of Mrs. Esmond. The ring, in being handed to Doctor Hennessy, who arranged the plates, dropped by accident into the clay, whereat Mrs. Dr. O'Grady uttered an exclamation of horror. All eyes were immediately upon her, and every one asked what was the matter.

'Oh, nothing, nothing at all,' said she in a faint languid tone, looking quite overcome at the same time, 'but, dear me, Doctor Hennessy, how could you be so awkward? You ought to have known better; I really cannot forgive you.'

'Forgive me for what, madam? I would willingly ask your pardon if I only knew the head and front of my offending. Will you have the goodness to enlighten me thereupon?'

'Some other time I will, but not now. Mrs. Harry Esmond, if I were you I would not have given the ring off my hand for any such purpose—and—' here she stopped, and after glancing at the fair hand and then at the ring, turned up her eyes, and raised her hands, with a gesture that said ever so plainly, 'Well, anything to equal that!'

It was now Mrs. Esmond's turn to inquire somewhat earnestly, 'What do you mean, Mrs. O'Grady?'

'Mean! why I mean that you did very wrong to give your wedding-ring for such a purpose.—Any other would have done as well.'

'And pray, where's the difference?' laughed Mrs. Esmond, but her voice trembled a very little; 'what harm does it do the ring?'

'No harm to the ring, child, but—but—I wouldn't have done it, that's all!'

This trifling episode was little heeded by any of the others, and Harry, if he had noticed it, would doubtless have quizzed Mrs. O'Grady unmercifully for her old-world notions, but somehow the ill-timed remark of that sharp-sighted lady made an impression on the mind of her to whom it was addressed, which her reason strove in vain to combat. The impression was not weakened by the succeeding incidents of that evening.

The sports went on. Each of the young people was, in turn, led blind-folded to the table, and shouts of laughter greeted their groping efforts to make for the clean water and the ring. The clay, emblematic of death, and the muddy water of marriage with a widow or widower, as the case might be, were, as a matter of course, anxiously avoided.

Some did happen on the muddy water, and that was the signal for increased merriment.—The Attorney was one of them, whereupon the other young men clapped their hands and cried simultaneously, 'the widow Gartland—the widow Gartland—by Jove!' added Harry Esmond, 'you're a lucky dog, after all, Phil Moran.'

'That's to be tried,' said Dr. O'Grady with emphasis; 'money is not always luck, and there's many a bitter curse on that same money of old Gartland's. I'd rather work my own way in life and trust to Providence than start on a fortune that was wrung from the heart's blood of the poor.'

'That's because you're a fool,' said Uncle Harry, sententiously; 'money is money, and what is more, money is power. If I were a young fellow like Moran, with a fair chance of success, I'd go in for Gartland's houses and lands—and money, too—with a heart and a half,—as for the curses?—he smiled scornfully.—'I'd take them by way of mortgage!'

Uncle Harry was a privileged person in the circle, and was tolerated, on account of his age, in a latitude of tongue according to no one else. The Doctor contented himself, therefore, with a smile of peculiar meaning, whilst Moran laughed and said it was time enough to balance the *pro* and *con* of that question when one had an interest in it, which, on his honor, was not his case.

'Mary! Mary! take care! now burst from the eager circle round the table—Mary Hennessy was trying her fortune, and her hand was hovering near the plate which contained the fateful clay. Old and young gathered round, for Mary was the favorite of all—every eye followed the motions of her fingers as though Fate indeed hung in the balance—again and again was the warning given, half jest, whole earnest, to take care—yet still Mary's hand, slow and wary, and moved away for a moment, would return to the forbidden spot—all at once, Harry Esmond extended his hand, playfully crying, 'Nonsense, Mary, that's not the plate for you!' but instead of drawing her hand away as he intended, it so happened that his and hers both came down together on the damp, dark earth, and Mary's cry of terror, whether real or assumed, was echoed, by Mrs. Esmond—Harry was at her side in a moment, laughing at her childish folly, and shaking his finger at Mary Hennessy who was herself a shade paler than usual, he declared it was all her fault, giving it, moreover, as his opinion that she had managed to see under the bandage, and, with her usual love of mischief, persisted in choosing the clay just to frighten them all.

'Upon my honor, Harry Esmond,' cried Mary shaking back her long curls and looking at him with a saucy smile, 'you are not improving in politeness since your marriage. To accuse me—Mary Hennessy—of practising deceit in a matter, positively, of life and death. Come, come, now, I think we have all had our turn at the plates.'

'All but Aunt Dolly,' put in Moran slyly.

'Aunt Dolly wants no more turns—she thanks you,' was the ancient maiden's tart rejoinder, and she drew herself up in her fullest rigidity.—'Every one hasn't your luck, Phil Moran, in regard to the muddy water,—or the rusty gold the doctor was speaking of a while ago.'

This speech was loudly applauded, the more so as it made the lawyer look a little sheepish—and much mollified by the success of her well-aimed shaft, Aunt Dolly smiled a vinegar smile and nodded her head several times with great self-complacency.

Perhaps gentle Mrs. Esmond was not sorry that supper was announced at that particular moment, and she took Uncle Harry's offered arm with right good will, while Harry, ever free and easy, followed with that gentleman's grave helpmate, and Moran went up with a dancing step to make his salaam to Mary Hennessy, with whom he joined the order of march to the tune of 'The Rakes of Mallow,' humming at the same time loud enough for all to hear—

"Beating, bolting, dancing, drinking
Lived the Rakes of Mallow."

'What a grave and reverend signor—for a lawyer!' said sprightly Mary Hennessy; 'do you ever expect to wear the ermine, or cover those locks of yours with wig judicial?'

'Undoubtedly, fair lady; thicker heads than mine have worn that venerable *coiffure*. Only you take the taming of me,' he said, lower his voice to a half whisper, 'and you shall see me grave enough for anything.'

'Oh! you incorrigible scion of the law,' said Mary with her clear musical laugh, 'what a left-handed compliment you pay me. Let me have the taming of you and you would be grave enough for anything—angels and ministers of grace, heard any unfortunate damsel ever the like of that?'

'Well, but yes or no?'

'No, decidedly—I leave you to old Gartland's gold—the Lord forgive me!' she added with sudden seriousness, 'for naming the dead so lightly.'

'Who were you naming, then?' said her brother from behind as they entered the spacious dining-room where supper awaited them. 'Will Gartland, or who?'

'What a good guess you are, Maurice!' said his sister evasively; 'you should have been born in New England instead of Old Ireland.'

Mary Hennessy raised her eyes as she said this, and encountered the stern gaze of Uncle Harry, who had just taken his seat near the head of the table at the right hand of the youthful lady of the mansion. She blushed consciously without knowing why, and the man of law, seeing the blush, and mistaking the cause, interpreted the same in his own favor.

A regular Hallow-eve supper graced the well-spread board. Some of the dainties there were common to rich and poor that night, whilst others were only to be seen on the tables of the rich, though proper to a festival celebrated in every homestead from Cape Clear to Fair Head. Of the former class was the indispensable dish of 'caulcannon,' the plates of oaten cake, thin, and white, and crisp, and the tall crystal fruit stands filled with magnificent apples, the orchard's pride. To the latter class belonged the Hallow-eve goose, cooked to its highest perfection, and the rich variety of nuts, walnuts, filberts, almonds, which the poor scarce knew even by name, with the delicately flavored hazel-nut so common in Irish woods. This is, after all, the Hallow-eve nut, *par excellence*, for it alone borrows a charm from the fated night, and indicates—or is supposed to do so—the secret motions of lover's hearts when placed in couples on the hearth within burning reach of the heat from the fire. The Hallow-eve nuts, and the rosy-cheeked apples wherein the curious damsel stuck her ten new pins—throwing the tenth one away—to place it under her pillow, hoping to dream of the fated one who was to tread life's path with her—oh, who that grew to manhood or womanhood in 'dear old Ireland, gay old Ireland,' land of love and of all things good, that has not watched with eagerness the capricious movements of those Hallow-eve nuts, as they sat side by side on the well-swept hearth before a clear turf fire, representing two of the company present, or just as often, two who were absent—what a host of bright illusions rise before the world-weary heart as memory touches on those festive hours with the harmless mirth, the gleeful sport that youth alone can know in perfection. What troops of loved ones, dead or distant, rise before the dreaming eye of the Irish readers at thought of the Hallow-eve sports—some—oh many! to be seen no more on earth—brightest and gayest and fondest, too—others whom Time and the cold, harsh world have changed almost to stone—we ask ourselves have these scenes all passed away, are we, indeed, in a new world, with an ever-yawning gulf between us and the past—the storied, poetical, old world past?

Such thoughts as these were all unknown to the gay party round the Esmond supper-table that Hallow-eve night, for the sports and the joys of the Past were still present with them—even the oldest there had not outlived the joyous celebration of the 'year's stepping-stones,' as some one has quaintly called the old festivals. During supper the conversation turned again,

by some singular chance, on old Will Gartland who had, in his day, enjoyed the unenviable character of being 'the worst landlord in the country—or, at least, in the barony,—for, truth to tell, few of the landlords of Tipperary County were, in that day, remarkable as good ones.

For some cause known to himself,—and, it might be, to some of the others, too,—this disparagement of the departed spouse of the rich widow was particularly distasteful to Uncle Harry. Some contemptuous allusion having been made by Doctor Hennessy to the defunct individual who he styled 'the oppressor of the poor,' Uncle Harry filled his glass to the brim, and standing up, said with angry vehemence,—turning his scowling glance on Hennessy,

'I drink to the memory of that much-calumniated man—he was my friend and neighbor for nigh thirty years—we all knew him—all shared his hospitality—I give, then, the memory of William Gartland!'

He drained his glass to the bottom, but no one followed his example—every glass save his own either stood untasted, or was turned down empty.

'So none of you will drink my toast?' said Uncle Harry, with a heightened color on his face. 'Will not you, Harry Esmond?'

'Excuse me, uncle,' replied the nephew, his handsome face flushed with generous indignation, 'I had no respect for the man when living, nor have I for his memory when dead. The best thing you can do for one like him is to leave his memory where his body lies—unwept, unremembered—in the earth on which his soul grovelled during life.'

'Bravo, Esmond!' cried Hennessy and Moran, clapping their hands, while Dr. O'Grady, less demonstrative, slapped the table gently two or three times with his right hand by way of approval, with a quiet 'Hear, hear.'

'Upon my honor, gentlemen,' said Uncle Harry, with difficulty restraining his passion, 'upon my honor, I take this conduct of yours as very unkind,—very disrespectful to the dead, and certainly not complimentary to the living,—as far as I'm concerned.' Then, as if hoping to soften the matter he added, 'Ladies, what say you?'

The ladies, as if by tacit consent, left the answer to Mary Hennessy, who was not slow in giving her opinion. 'For once, I entirely agree with the gentlemen. I'd as soon drink—old Chadwick's memory as old Gartland's—sooner, indeed, of the two, inasmuch as Gartland being, or professing to be, a Catholic, was the more inexcusable for his cruel oppression of his Catholic tenantry. I have myself seen too many of the victims of his pound-of-flesh exactions not to hold his memory in somewhat very like abhorrence. I tell you, sir, the whole world will one day cry out shame on the cruelty and injustice of—some Irish landlords.'

'You do not include all in your fierce anathema,' observed Uncle Harry with forced composure.

'Certainly not, Mr. Esmond!—she usually called him, like the others, Uncle Harry.—'God forbid I did—under this roof!' and she looked with moistened eyes at the young master of Esmond Hall, who was famous throughout the country as one of the best landlords in it.—Harry blushed like a young maiden at this delicate allusion to his well-known standing with the people, whilst his uncle prepared to astonish the company by an out-and-out defiance. 'Well!' said he, after drawing another glass, and setting it down with most convincing energy, 'well, good people, once for all, I tell you this—I despise the people too much to regard what they say of me, and I'd just as soon have their bad word as their good word any day in the year.—I know they look on the landlords as their natural enemies, and, like cowards as they are, conspire in secret to injure them all they can, even where they don't go the length of murder. Now, there's myself, for instance—you all know that I'm not a bad landlord—never was—though I don't say what I will be. Well, you know how often my cows have been haggard, my haggard burned, and various other outrages of a similar nature perpetrated on my property. How can I speak well of my tenantry? What kindness do I owe them. I tell you I hate them—hate them all—man, woman, and child!'

'And maybe they don't hate you?' said a deep hoarse voice not heard before at the table. It certainly came from none of the guests, and all eyes were turned on the butler, the only servant in the room, but he was pouring out a glass of water for Mrs. Esmond, so it could not possibly be him. Still Uncle Harry was determined to try.

'Do you hear, you fellow!—I say, niece,

'Mr. Chadwick, the agent of a large estate in Tipperary, was shot a few years before in broad daylight near the ruins of Holy Cross Abbey, while superintending the erection of a police-barrack, which his own heartless tyranny, and that of others in his position, alone rendered necessary.'