

A FAIR EMIGRANT

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CHAPTER VII

ACQUAINTANCES

When lying awake in her berth that night, Bawn, reflecting on the swiftness and pleasantness with which her day had flown by in the society of the person in the blue cap, acknowledged to herself that she had very foolishly departed from her original plan of making acquaintance with no one on board, allowing no one to intrude upon her privacy. She was running a great risk in permitting herself a friendly intercourse with this individual. True, she had been very careful, had given him no clue to her identity. He did not know her name—not even the name she had chosen to bear during her stay in Ireland—and she now made a firm resolve that she would not betray it to him. He had certainly not shown any curiosity, though on one occasion she fancied he had given her an opening to mention her name, possibly wishing to know it as a matter of convenience. She was well aware that she had passed over the opportunity, and that he had noticed it, and it hurt her that she had been forced to be so secretive. But then had she not entered on a course which would necessitate the utmost secretiveness? Bawn sighed as she thought of how ill she was in this respect fitted by nature to play the part she had undertaken, but reflected that she must make up by determination for what she lacked in other ways. In arranging her plans she had never calculated on the likelihood of her caring much for what others might think of her, being fully persuaded that the loneliness and singleness of her own purpose would be sufficient to carry her through every difficulty. And now already she winced because she had not been able to be perfectly frank with an acquaintance of forty-eight hours.

"Well," she thought, "the only way to avert this danger is to keep him at a distance. It will be but a matter of a few days. To-morrow I must begin by staying away from deck all day."

And, having settled the affair in this way, she slept profoundly.

When the morn arrived it was hard to keep to so unpleasant a line of conduct as that on which she had decided. The sun shone, the breeze was pleasant, and down stairs she felt in the places inaccessible to gentlemen. She appeared at table in her place beside the captain, and at lunch her friend of the blue cap hoped she had not been ill, and told her how delightful it was on deck to-day. Her friend looked surprised.

"You are not ill now," he said. "I never saw any one look more healthy, more radiant than you. But if you begin to stay downstairs you will make yourself ill."

"I hope not," said Bawn, serenely, and passed into the cabin to which she had been confined. The day passed wearily. All the unpleasantnesses of the sea now forced themselves upon her. Her companions were sick, or unmanageable children who could not be trusted long on deck, and a few of those women who, no matter how good the passage, are always grievously ill on a voyage. She tried to pass the time by making herself useful and agreeable, but when evening came she felt jaded and depressed for want of the abundance of fresh air to which she had been always accustomed. As soon as it was quite dusk, she concluded that she must breathe freely for a little while before settling to rest for the night, and went boldly up on deck.

It is too late for "Hiawatha," at any rate, she thought, as she leaned over the ship's side and rejoiced in her freedom. The stars twinkled on one, the phosphor tracks gleamed on the water, the breeze was wild and fresh, and the watery world boundless around her. Her heart widened within her, and her nervous little fears took to themselves wings and fled away into the night. How foolish she had been to feel afraid of any creature! A certain power within her—that power of heart and brain which gave her temper its buoyancy and strength—had been suffering cramp all day, and now recovered its vigour, so that she was able to turn with a quiet smile on hearing the now well known and important voice at her side.

"I ask your pardon," said the Blue Cap, "for trying to interfere with your good resolves this morning. I had no idea you were sacrificing yourself for the benefit of others. I heard one lady singing your praises to another just now, telling how you had been active as a sister of mercy all day."

"I did not stay for the sake of others, I am sorry to say," she answered quickly; "I was thinking only of myself."

"I fear I bored you yesterday with 'Hiawatha.'" His tone was penitent, but Bawn's quick ear detected a something which suggested that there was a gleam of humour in his eyes as he spoke. It seemed that he was making matters worse. Not having been clever enough to pretend to be ill, nor yet to allow it to be supposed that charity towards the sick had altogether influenced her, she had led him to suspect the truth, and to imagine himself formidable enough to frighten her out of his presence.

"No," she answered, "you did not bore me," thinking how very much pleasanter yesterday had been than today, and how ungrateful she certainly was.

"Thank you. After that I may venture to ask you to take a turn up and down the deck. A little exercise before sleeping will be quite as good as a little air."

"I dare say it will," said Bawn readily, and, feeling as if she was making some amends for her bad treatment of a friend, she accepted his arm, and threaded with him the groups of other passengers, feeling unaccountably at home with this stranger in the crowd.

"How clear the stars are to-night!" he said. "That is one of the best things about being at sea, one gets such a fine view of them all round; and if one only had a powerful telescope—"

"Yes," said Bawn, gladly, "how I wish we had!" And by the sound of her voice her companion knew that his choice of a subject of conversation was a lucky one. It had not been made without deliberation, and had been selected among others that occurred to his mind as being furthest off from this world of cares and dangers, secrets and sorrows, and less likely to scare away his reticent fellow-traveller from his side. That this lonely girl, with the frank, true eyes, had some good reason for wishing to keep her own counsel and to pass unknown through the crowd was evident to him; and though he wished to cultivate her acquaintance, and, if possible, make her voyage more pleasant for her, he was anxious also that she should not feel embarrassed by his companionship. Therefore he did not ask her where she had been and whether she was going, how much she had seen of this beautiful and interesting world, and what particular part of it she was now expecting to see, but suddenly placed a ladder of escape from such questioning at her feet, and mounted boldly with her to the stars.

"I suppose you understand something of astronomy," he said. "I used to know a little, but I confess I am beginning to forget it."

"I don't know much more than the names of the planets. I am a farmer's daughter, and astronomy can hardly be expected of me. Some of the constellations seem like old friends when I look at them."

The Blue Cap here overcame a temptation to draw out the farmer's daughter a little, even to the extent of ascertaining what portion of this wide earth her father farmed, and he felt that he had gained a victory over her distrust of him when he heard her make even so vague a statement as to her circumstances. "When I was a youth," he said, "I used to think I would like to have a star of my own, a country house among the cool fields above, and a sort of celestial estate, which I could manage in my own way, without so much trouble as one is obliged to take thanklessly enough here."

"Rather a solitary state of grandeur to live in."

"Oh! I did not mean to be there alone, I know a little, but I confess I am beginning to forget it."

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"I did not stay for the sake of others, I am sorry to say," she answered quickly; "I was thinking only of myself."

"You have guessed rightly; I should look for some return. But then a very small fragment of your thought would purchase a large proportion of mine."

"Well then," said Bawn, "part of my thought—not the whole nor even a large share of it—was this: I wondered to perceive how two utter strangers like you and me could become so friendly, enjoy each other's company, exchange thoughts, and all the while remain perfectly ignorant of each other's lives, past and future, and content to be so; and that, having made acquaintance, we should immediately afterwards pass out of sight of each other and be thought of no more. You see I have not met many strangers, or I suppose such a thought could not have dwelt on my mind."

"Life has often been compared to a journey," said the Blue Cap, "for the reason that people meet and part thus at all points, exactly like fellow travellers. Now, my thought was simpler than yours; for I was trying to—merely trying to—think of you as a farmer's daughter, and, for the life of me, I could not do it."

"I told you the truth," said Bawn, quickly.

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"

"Not the whole truth. My statement was correct, and that is all."

"What an extraordinarily beautiful radiance has that phosphorescence upon the water!"

"Yes; but I am tired. It is time for me to go below."

He turned at once, and led her slowly to the top of the stair. As Bawn stood on the steps and looked up to bid him good-night, her face appeared fairer than ever in the fresh twilight of the starry night.

"By what you said just now," he said looking at her attentively, "did you mean to hint that perfect oblivion of each other must necessarily descend upon us once we touch our mother earth again? Why should the sea be so kind and the land so harsh? Is there any reason why we should not continue to be friends?"

"Every reason," said Bawn, decidedly, as she disappeared out of the starlight into the well of shadow gaping for her.

CHAPTER VIII

FRIENDS

The next morning Bawn made up her mind that she would not be a coward any longer. She fancied she had given the gentleman to understand that she wished to remain unknown, and therefore might feel herself secure. After what had passed he could never press her for information about herself. Upon these terms she was willing to be friendly and might accept the pleasure of his companionship occasionally.

"Going on deck, she found that he had already prepared a comfortable seat for her, and he soon installed himself at her feet.

"Shall we return to the Indians?" he said, looking about for "Hiawatha."

"No," said Bawn, fearing that this might lead to more personal talk concerning her home and native State.

"You dislike the Indians?"

"I have known much about them that is noble," she answered evasively, and then closed her lips and fastened her eyes upon her work.

"I suppose you have been to Paris?" said Bawn, suddenly, raising her head and looking at him calmly. She had made up her mind to dash into any subject that would lead far from her own future and past. Paris would do. A man would be sure to have plenty to say about Paris.

"She is going there, perhaps," thought the Blue Cap, "and I wonder in what capacity? American women sometimes make the Grand Tour alone, and I have heard that even charming young creatures will do so in case they have no male relations to travel with. Perhaps she is going to be a governess there; but no, in that case she would have professed more knowledge of astronomy. She may be a princess in disguise travelling to meet her friends, who will bring her out in Paris to the delight of their world. She has been warned to avoid all young men as dangerous, and therein lies her mystery. Yes," he said, pushing back his blue cap and showing that broad forehead, the uncovering of which increased the look of strength and reliability which belonged to his face—"yes, I do know Paris as well as most foreigners of my age. And for one who has friends there, what a charming place it is! You will find it a delightful entrance to the European world."

Bawn bit her lips to prevent words of explanation crossing them. Why should she tell him that she was not likely to see Paris or to mix with any gay world? If he persisted in disbelieving that she was a farmer's daughter, and chose to think of her as a young lady debutante on her way to Paris, why, let him do so, and it would be all for the best. That she should be himself a frequenter of gay cities seemed to lessen the chances of their meeting again.

"I wonder how I hit the mark?" thought the Blue Cap, watching furiously the humorous smile that gleamed in Bawn's eyes as she solved to mislead him. "What affair is it of mine that I should trouble myself about it? If I were only sure that her circumstances were safe and happy, and that a pleasant future lay before her, I certainly should not let curiosity disturb the serenity of my mind."

The breeze was fluttering round Bawn, ruffling the hair about her temples and ears, bringing a rosy

colour to her face, and sometimes carrying her cheeks of silk a little way out of reach, to be captured and returned to her hand by her watchful companion. It happened that a small white handkerchief also fluttered forth from her lap and was whirled into the Blue Cap's face. He caught it as it made a sudden wheel round and he was about to return it to its owner when a very distinct word of four letters caught his eye, embroidered in the corner. "Bawn" was faintly and flowerly stitched on the delicate bit of cambric in the place where ladies mark their names.

"Is it your Christian name?" he asked eagerly. "Come, there is no confidence in that. I will forget it for you. But let me know it for a few moments. What a curious, uncommon name! Bawn! Perhaps the famous Molly Bawn was your ancestress?"

"Yes," said Bawn placidly. Yesterday she would have been distressed at this slight accident, but, having accepted the rôle of a debutante on her way to Paris, she was rather pleased than otherwise at having been detected as the owner of a lady's pocket-handkerchief. It was testimony to the fact that she was a wealthy and socially travelling (unavoidably) alone to France, where her friends waited to receive her, and behaving with proper reserve towards their acquaintances by the way. This was precisely the impression which the sight of the bit of embroidered cambric produced on the Blue Cap's mind, and as Bawn, after a stolen glance at his reflecting face, assured herself of the fact, a sense of the humour of the situation grew on her, and a sly, repressed smile curved her lips.

Her companion saw it and fancied it told him she was not sorry to be found out, after all; that she had been willing to tease him. And now he felt willing to tease her.

"Now that I know your Christian name," he said, "I am bound to tell you mine. It is Somerled—almost as strange a one as yours. After this we shall be more comfortable. It is a great advantage to have a name to call one's friend by."

"Strangers do not call one another by their Christian names, especially when one is a man and the other a woman."

"But we are hardly strangers, are we? On board ship friendships spring up so rapidly. And then you and I, being each solitary, are thrown upon one another more than in an ordinary case. However, this is, of course, subject to your approval. I will not pronounce that pretty name of yours without your leave, not even with a 'Miss' before it—for you see I have come to the conclusion that you are not married."

"No, I am not married," said Bawn, with a look of extreme surprise that the question could have occurred to any one.

"I thought so by your fingers," said Somerled, smiling with great satisfaction. "It is always pleasant to know that one has guessed aright. I do not like to think of how I should have felt had I been told that I must address you as 'Miss Bawn.'"

"What difference could it have made, after all?" said Bawn demurely.

"Ah! who knows? What difference could it have made? It is impossible to answer such a question. Somehow I should like to think that when I meet you again in Paris there will be no devoted husband hovering round me. I would like that our open-air, breezy friendship might continue undisturbed by any new element."

"Why do you think we shall meet in Paris?"

"Because I have friends there, and I sometimes visit them. I know I shall find you out, radiant in satins and laces, perhaps with your head already turned by flattery. Indeed, I shall then perhaps have only the past to live upon. For I shall find so many newer friends gathered round you that I shall scarce get a word."

Bawn was silent, suddenly carried back to the evening when Dr. Ackroyd had concluded that she was bent on coming out in Paris as an American heiress. "What do you want to do with your fortune?" he had said.

Trip away to Paris, and all the rest of it?—delecting the French capital to be the gayest and prettiest place for her. Suppose she had been able to put all memory of her father's wrongs out of her mind, and to do as the good doctor and his wife had thought but natural she should do? She might have been now really on her way to the pleasant city in the world, under suitable protection, and likely to meet this young man, as he expected, in those brilliant salons of which she had so often heard tell. And suppose that after months and years he were to prove that he really valued her friendship as much as he now appeared, perhaps pretended to do, and suppose, and suppose! For a few moments she saw herself surrounded with these fair circumstances, and thought that, had they been realised, she could have been glad at the prospect of meeting this blue-capped Somerled again. Such a position, which had been so possible to her and was now so impossible, appeared to her for a minute summed up by such happiness as she had never yet imagined. But it was only for an instant. The dark forests of her old home rose sombre and forbidding in the well-known leaf-strewn hollow which they shaded she saw the lonely grave that held all that had been dear to her in life, and which appealed from its solitude and silence

to the fidelity of her nature. Those dazzling scenes which were so familiar to her new friend, and which she could imagine so well, were not for her; that gay and brilliant Bawn whom she had seen just now moving light hearted through the crowd was only a phantom of herself, an impersonation of the most volatile side of her nature. No, the world of Paris must live on without her, as it had always done, and alas! it was but too well able to do. She had bound herself to live on the shady side of life, under the gloom of mountains, in the shadow of concealment, with the sorrow and wrong-doing of the past always present to her mind.

"Do not look so grave," said Somerled. "Have I been too familiar in my manner of talking to you? If you are displeased, tell me, and I will vanish for the day."

"No," said Bawn, brightening. "You need not go. I fear I should now feel lonely if altogether left to myself."

This speech was the result of her reflections, which had just proved to her how completely apart their future paths must lie, and how utterly unlikely it was that they should ever meet again in this world.

He glanced at her gratefully, with that bright smile which always looked so good as well as gay.

"And what about the cross children and the sick ladies?" he asked. "With them you could not have been lonely."

"It is far pleasanter here."

"Even with me as a drawback?"

"Even with you as a drawback."

"For the life of me I cannot bring myself to be sorry I missed the boat I ought to have sailed by, though for your sake I ought to regret it. I have seen several charming persons gazing at you with benevolence, and looking daggers at me. That old gentleman with the flowing beard, for instance, is dying to oust me from my position as your right and to step into my shoes. Had I not been here he would have spread your rags and carried your camp stool."

"That prey old gentleman who worries the captain with questions all dinner-time?"

"The very man. I see you might have found him almost as much a nuisance as myself."

And so the day wore away, and the Blue Cap, as he walked up and down deck that evening at dusk, told himself that the gold-haired young woman with the broad brow and firm mouth, whose peculiar look of strength, humour and sweetness had fascinated him, was really surrounded by no unpleasant mystery, but was only as reticent and dignified as maidens ought to be.

He wished he could ask her plainly to tell him her name antecedents, and real position in the world. At first he had fancied that she had a downright fear of his acquiring any such information concerning her, but now it seemed to him that she only took a sly delight in withholding it. He concluded that it did not matter to him at present how silent she might be, but resolved that before they left the steamer he would persuade her to be more communicative. He remembered with a little vexation that she had shown an utter want of interest in his affairs and no curiosity even to learn his name. That they should part in this state of ignorance and indifference was not to be thought of. Three days of almost hourly companionship with this girl had done him more good than he had not wanted to lose sight of her matter to him at present how silent she might be, but resolved that before they left the steamer he would persuade her to be more communicative. 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