



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK.

A TALE OF CASHEL.

BY MRS. J. SADLER.

CHAPTER VI.—A DAY AT ESMOND HALL.

Two days before Christmas, the inmates of the cabins at the foot of the Rock were thrown into a state of commotion by the sight of the Esmond carriage stopping at Bryan Cullenau's door.

Mrs. Esmond herself was in the carriage, looking ever so pretty in her cottage-bonnet and black lace veil, with her two beautiful children, a boy of four, and a girl of two years old.

But alas! there was nothing to be gathered from what took place. The footman knocked at the door; Cauth came out and dropped her curtsey; Mrs. Esmond leaned forward, smiled graciously, and said something in a low voice, whereupon Cauth curtsied again, and the carriage rolled away.

Mrs. Esmond had appointed four o'clock that afternoon for Cauth's visit, and, punctual to the moment, Cauth was in waiting, not in the kitchen, which she carefully avoided, but on the gravel walk that swept up in two segments of a circle from the gates to the hall-door, around a smooth sward, in spring and summer of velvet sheen, tastefully interspersed with the choicest flowering shrubs.

But the turf was brown and bare that winter day, and the shrubs and plants were carefully covered to protect them from the blighting effect of the frost. The trees in the surrounding copse, too, were leafless all and bare, except where the dark green of the fir and the still darker holly stood out here and there from the sylvan desolation with the cheerless and sombre effect of light glimmering through the darkness.

But hush! here comes Mr. Esmond—I hear his step on the gravel-walk.

'Then, listen to me, ma'am,' said Cauth, standing up, and placing her head close to that of Mrs. Esmond, 'there's them of the name that has need to keep in-doors after dark—you know who I mane! Hush now! not a word, for God's sake!—you don't know the risk I'm runnin' in sayin' so much—not a word to any one, barrin' the master, and let him give a hint where you know as fast as ever he can—but God love you, and don't bring my name in, one way or the other.'

And with a warning gesture to Mrs. Esmond, who seemed to have lost the power of speech, Cauth drew her hood over her face once more, and passed out with a low curtsey and a 'God save your honor!' to Mr. Esmond whom she met on the threshold.

Harry Esmond came in brimful of a stepple-chase that was to come off next day a few miles from Cashel, but when he looked at his wife, wondering at her unusual silence, the ruddy hue faded from his cheek, seeing the unwonted paleness of hers and the agitation visible on every feature.

'Why, Henrietta, my love, what's the matter?' and taking her hand tenderly he drew her into the parlor. 'Is that old woman a fortune-teller, or has she been predicting evil things for you? Sit down and tell me what means this agitation so unusual with you?'

'Harry,' said his wife as the color came slowly back to her cheek, 'that woman is no fortune-teller, but she has spoken words that have a strange and awful meaning.'

'Indeed!' said Harry with a somewhat incredulous air, 'and what were they, pray?—or are you at liberty to repeat them?'

'I am—to you! They are these: 'There's them of the name that has need to keep in-doors after dark—you know who I mane,' the woman added, and 'let him,' meaning you, 'give a hint where you know as fast as ever he can.' Those were the words, Harry! what do you think of them?'

'I think of the whole affair this, that my dear Henrietta is more of a simpleton than I ever took her for. Who is this woman?'

'That I am not at liberty to tell you,' said Mrs. Esmond, smiling at the word 'simpleton,' as her husband supposed she would. 'But, Harry, I cannot view this matter as you do—you and I both know that the person evidently meant has enemies, and, what is worse, deserves to have them; believe me, then, this warning is not to be slighted, inasmuch as it must be kindly meant, and I must insist on your going this very day to give the hint as desired.'

'Nonsense, child, how could I bring myself to convey such a message? You know the supreme contempt he has for the country-people generally, and I should only get laughed at for my pains—perhaps told to mind my own business.'

'And what if you do?—consider the possible alternative—think how you would reproach yourself if anything did happen, which you, by this trifling act, might have prevented. Harry, you will not refuse me this favor?' and taking his two hands, she looked up so beseechingly in his face that he could no longer resist.

'Well, I will go after dinner—it is now half-past four.'

'Nay, you shall go now—you can dine at the Lodge—they dine at five, too, you know.'

'Well, I must say you are a provoking little sample of womankind,' said Harry with his habitually gay laugh, 'but if it be so, why it must, that's all,' and he rang the bell.

The tall butler appeared so very suddenly that his master said with some surprise: 'Why, Pierce, where the deuce did you come from?'

'Oh, sure I was just on my step to the hall-door, your honor. Didn't the door-bell ring first?'

'Not that we heard. You had better go and see if any one is there.'

Pierce went accordingly, opened the hall-door, and looked out, then returned with a face of artless innocence.

'Well, Pierce,' said his master laughing, 'did you see any one?'

'Wisha no, your honor!' and he rubbed his elbow after a fashion he had, and looked as foolish as might be; 'still, I'd take my book oath on it that I heard the big door bell ringin' ever so loud; but sure it must be in my own ear it was—ochoone! maybe it's a dead-bell! I heard.'

Why should words like these make Mrs. Esmond start? That she could not explain even to herself, yet so it was, and by some strange association, came into her mind the mysterious voice heard at the supper-table on Hallow-eve night. But none of these thoughts or fancies troubled the bright surface of Harry Esmond's soul, as he said to Pierce:

There is a very common superstition amongst the lower classes in Ireland that the sound of a bell within the ear denotes an approaching death in the family.

'Tell Mulligan to get the roan mare saddled as fast as possible.'

'The roan mare, sir? I will, your honor!—she'll be out in a jiffy.' And Pierce moved away as rapidly as his natural sluggishness of motion permitted.

The roan mare, however, was not 'out in a jiffy,' but was, on the contrary, so long in making her appearance that Mr. Esmond, good-humored as he was, began to lose patience, and, opening the door, went out on the steps, just as Mulligan, the groom, hove in sight from the rear with the handsome roan.

'What the deuce kept you, Mulligan?' said the master, slightly annoyed; 'here I have been waiting full twenty minutes.'

'Twenty minutes!' cried Mulligan, a loud-spoken, red-faced man, yet fresh and honest-looking withal; 'twenty minutes, your honor! O then, wait till I lay my eyes on that lazy Larry,' meaning Pierce. 'Why, your honor, it's not over five minutes since he came to me with the word.'

'And what was he about ever since I sent him?'

'Slingin' about, I suppose, as usual. He said he was 'lookin' for me around the stables, but if he looked in the right way he needn't have looked long.'

'Well, well, let it pass now!' said Mr. Esmond; 'every one is not so smart as you, Ned—it doesn't matter so much after all. Good-bye, Henry!' and vaulting into the saddle he kissed his hand to his wife who stood at the door watching him with a mixture of pride and fondness in her soft eyes.

'So you'll dine at the Lodge, Harry?'

'Of course I must, although I shall be half an hour late—'importe—I fly on my lady's errand, dinnerless, as becomes a knight sans peur et sans reproche. Farewell, sweetheart!'

'Now, be home early, Harry,' called the sweet voice from the door as he rode away.

'Nine o'clock, or never!' was the strange answer that came clearly back on the evening breeze.

The dinner was served, as usual, that day at the Hall, and Pierce in his waiting-jacket of blue striped jean, was, of course, in attendance. His mistress felt the loneliness of the table weighing upon her like a nightmare, and, anxious to be alone with her loneliness, she dismissed Pierce, with the first course. But Pierce still lingered, on one pretence or another, arranging and disarranging the glasses and plate on the sideboard, placing and displacing chairs, &c., till, at length, Mrs. Esmond said again:

'That will do, Pierce, that will do—you can go now.'

'If it 'd be pleasin' to you, ma'am,' said Pierce, 'I'd make bowld to say a few words to you.'

'On what subject, Pierce?' said his mistress, looking up in surprise.

'Well, ma'am,' said Pierce in his sheepish way, 'it's about Tim Murtla's people—I know you wor kind and good to them when their trouble was the sorest.'

'But what of them now, Pierce?—I heard to-day that they had left the neighborhood.'

'Well, it's so said, ma'am.'

'Do you know where they're gone to?'

'Oyeh, is it me? Sure it's take to the road they did, for Tim wasn't able to work or want, you see, and they couldn't be always livin' on charity.'

'Of course not, Pierce; but it is to be hoped that poor Tim may soon be able to work again. There was no need, whatever, of their 'taking to the road,' as you say, and I am very sorry, indeed, to find that they have done so.'

'God bless you, ma'am, and it's Tim that knows your goodness well—but sure he couldn't stay in the place, at all, ma'am—he was warned off,' and Tim's voice grew husky.

'Warned off, Pierce—what do you mean by that?' said Mrs. Esmond much surprised.

'Why, I mane, ma'am, that Mr. Esmond of the Lodge, that's their landlord, ma'am, sent for Tim about a week ago, but Tim wasn't able to go, so he sent him word by his Scotch steward that if he didn't clear off from about Cashel altogether before the week was at an end, he'd have him put in a tight place. Poor Tim wanted to know the reason, but Sawney was mighty short, and would only tell him that for the reason he ought to know it best himself.'

'My God!' murmured Mrs. Esmond, and she raised her tearful eyes to heaven. 'But surely, Pierce, Tim was not the fool to heed such a warning as that. He was not latterly on Mr. Esmond's property.'

'In course he wasn't, ma'am.' Pierce paused a moment, then suddenly added: 'Tim is a mighty peaceable man, ma'am; and he thought for quietness sake he had better do as he was bid. He's a quiet, harmless creature, Mrs. Esmond, that 'd do anything at all—anything at all for pace.'

There was something in the tone of the man's

voice as he spoke these words that drew Mrs. Esmond's eyes to his face, and she could not help noticing its singular expression. The usually stolid features were gleaming with a lurid light, a fierce intelligence that vanished as quickly as it came even whilst the lady gazed in silent wonder. Somehow her heart sunk within her, but she strove to appear calm.

'Are you any relation of Tim's?' asked Mrs. Esmond, partly to break the silence, which she felt painful.

'Is it me, ma'am? O the sorra drop's blood I'm to him; that I mayn't sin if I an; but he's a fellow-creature you see, Mrs. Esmond, and we were neighbor boys, too, reared at the door with one another, and it goes hard on me to see him thrated like a dog, or worse—a dog, inagh,' he added with a bitter laugh that sounded strangely hollow; 'oh bedad, it isn't the one way the gentlemen uses their dogs and their tenants.'

'Pierce,' said his mistress, 'I am surprised to hear you talk so. What have 'the gentlemen' ever done to you that you should speak so hard of them?'

'Not to me, ma'am. O no, I declare they never done me either hurt or harm, but that's becase I fell in with the right sort. If they were all like the maslher here they might thravel the country night or day without any one hurtin' a hair o' their heads. It's little need there 'd be for police-barracks, an' all sich things—oh no, ma'am; if there wasn't Chadwicks there 'd be no Graces—or, either, if there was law for the likes o' Tim Murtla—which there isn't—then creatures wouldn't have to take the law in their own hands, for, Mrs. Esmond! and he drew so near her, and spoke so low, that she shrank back affrighted, 'Mrs. Esmond, ma'am, it's the last thing with one of us—I mane the poor—when we think of shedding blood, or takin' away the life that we can't give back.'

Awed by the solemnity of the man's tone and manner, Mrs. Esmond sank almost fainting in her chair, and, covering her eyes with one hand, motioned him with the other, to leave the room.

'I'm goin' ma'am,' said Pierce, 'but before I go, be pleased to let me say one word more. If I thought I had offended you by what I said I'd go down on my knees to ax forgiveness, for it's you that has the good wish of the poor, an' the good word, an' the maslher, too, Lord's blessing be about him!'

'Then why speak those horrid words to me?' said Mrs. Esmond faintly.

'For a reason I have, ma'am, that I can't tell you now; but don't be scared Mrs. Esmond; don't now, an' you'll oblige me; for if all Tipperary was swimmin' in blood, you and yours 'd walk dry-shed! I'm goin' now, ma'am, as you bid me, an' all sorts of luck attend you till I see you again! Don't fear for Mr. Esmond—that's the maslher, ma'am!'

'Fear!' cried Mrs. Esmond, starting up, 'why should I fear for him?'

There was none to answer the question.—Pierce was gone, and Mrs. Esmond felt sick at heart, oppressed with strange and gloomy forebodings. She was roused by a sad sweet voice singing without, the sound evidently approaching the house:

'Come all ye fair maids that do pass by,  
Help me to mourn for my sailor boy.'

Mrs. Esmond went to the window, glad of anything that might change the current of her thoughts, though the words that were sung were too much in unison with them to be at all cheering.

'I shouldn't wonder if that were poor Mabel,' she said to herself with tender pity. It was Mabel, now sitting on the lowermost step, singing like a lark:

'And still I'll bunch my violets,  
And tie them with the locher, O.'

Oh, the exquisite music of that old air, as it gushed from the unconscious heart of the maniac, but anon it was changed for another far more sorrowful, but still more touchingly beautiful—one that is on every lip in Upper and Lower Munster:

'Shule, shule, shule agragh,  
Time, alas, cannot ease my woe,  
Since the lad of my heart from me did go.'

'Gone! Aye, sure enough, he's gone!' muttered the forlorn wanderer, 'but he said he wouldn't be long—that he'd only go down a start to Holy Cross Abbey where some one was going to be hung—'

'Och, oft I've sat on my love's knee,  
And many a fond story he told to me—  
He said many things that ne'er will be—  
Shule, shule, agragh.'

'An' didn't he tell me about the shooting, too—ha, ha, in course he did—but he said it was old Chadwick, you know, and they said it was old Esmond!'

Here Mrs. Esmond opened the door with a face of ashy paleness—

'Who said so, Mabel? Come in, my poor

girl,' Mabel came accordingly. 'Now tell me who said it was old Esmond?' using her own phraseology.

'Why, the men in the Abbey that dark night—don't you remember?—the dead were a-listenin' to them as well as the living, but I wasn't living, you know,' she added confidentially; 'they bung me that time with Patrick.'

'Indeed?'

'Ay did they, an' I'm walking, walking ever smes, an' will till the day o' judgment—och, I'm tired walking, that's what I an.'

'You had better go to the kitchen, Mabel, and get some dinner.'

'I will, ma'am,' and away she went singing:—

'Och, I'm the girl that make the air  
From Cork along to Skibberreen—'

Mrs. Esmond looked after her with a smile of ineffable pity, and then hastened to procure some warm clothing for the poor creature, saying to herself as she did so, 'If she would only keep it; but, of course, she will not. I believe I have covered her a half a dozen times. However, she must not go shivering from this door on a winter's day.'

The servants were ordered to bring Mabel up stairs when she had her dinner, which being done, Mrs. Esmond's own fair hands clothed her from head to foot in comfortable winter garments. Mabel appeared to watch the progress of her toilet with great complacency, and when it was done, Mrs. Esmond said:

'You feel better now, Mabel, don't you?' A smile was Mabel's answer. 'What do you say to me for dressing you in these nice warm clothes, Mabel?' said the lady with a view to ascertain whether she felt or understood the change.

Mabel looked at her earnestly—very, very earnestly—as though she were trying hard to arrange her thoughts for utterance—then said slowly and distinctly:

'That no one belongin' to you may ever be hanged or shot!' she added as if correcting herself. Mrs. Esmond, with a cry of horror, told the servants to take her away, and to keep her over night, if possible.

'God bless you, ma'am; you're a purty face, anyhow!' said Mabel with a low courtesy as the girl took her arm gently to lead her away. The next moment she broke out into the wild death-song of the peasantry, clasping her hands and bending forward as if over a corpse. It was a positive relief to Mrs. Esmond's over-wrought mind when the unhappy creature was removed from her sight, but dolefully came back to the lady's ears the sad strain she sung in Irish as she paced the long and echoing hall:

'Fast flowing tears above the grave of the rich man  
are shed,  
But they are dried when the cold stone shuts in his  
narrow bed.'

'May the Lord preserve him, anyhow!' sighed Mrs. Esmond, half ashamed of the fears that were gathering shape and form within her heart, at all times painfully susceptible of impressions from without. Then, as the fire-light danced and flickered amongst the shadows on the wall in the darkening room, officious memory brought back the cabalistic sports of Hallow-eve—the play and the ring—her wedding-ring—and the gloom that then, for the first time, fell on her spirits, like a funeral pall. Anxious to dispel these sombre fancies, that were preying like vampires on the springs of life, and exciting her brain beyond endurance, she started up and hastened to the nursery, hoping to find in the cheerful prattle of her little ones, the peace that solitude denied. She was not disappointed, for, after spending the evening with the children, and printing a farewell kiss on the rosy lips of each as they were laid for the night in their little cribs, she descended to the parlor with a lighter heart and a more hopeful spirit.

It was past eight o'clock, and she rang to order supper for half-past nine, saying to herself as she pulled the bell: 'That will be time enough, for I know he dined late at Uncle Harry's.'

The housemaid appeared, received the order for the cook, and also for the butler.

'I'll set the table myself, ma'am,' replied the girl, 'for Pierce isn't within.'

'Not within! and where is he?'

'Not a know I know, ma'am, but he went out just after coming down from you that time, and he never came back sence. We all thought you had sent him off an errand, maybe.'

'I did not,' said Mrs. Esmond, relapsing into her so lately overcome disquietude, 'and I wonder he would think of going out without so much as asking permission. Well, go down, Jane, at all events, and set the table, and tell Besy to make haste, so that supper will be ready just to the moment.'

The girl curtsied and withdrew. Mrs. Esmond took up a book and tried to read, but read she could not; listlessly she turned over the leaves of a London magazine, till she came to some fine lines of John Malcolm's on 'Presentiment of Death.' There she stopped and read