

fection. What interest had he in Kilsheelan Castle now? What were these flames doing but saving it from pollution by a stranger? Effacing what could only be a monument of disgrace? Accomplishing an honourable climax of destruction? Bravo, flames! higher and fiercer! The shades of the dead applaud you grimly from Kileary! Why should he assist to preserve Kilsheelan for Sir Albin Artslade—he whose father's heart was broken, whose life poisoned, whose house doomed? Why help to repair the revenge of events?

Ah! But—

“But what will be said of me? No sign of me while Kilsheelan burns to the ground! Oh, impossible! What could they think?”

“That is exactly what I would impress on you. They will think and say—”

“What?”

“That you have done this yourself!”

“I!”

“My dear lad, do not enrage yourself. It is what a heartless world will say, who only reflect you have motives for revenge.”

“Then I will certainly go. It is only a justice to myself.”

“And expose yourself to the insults of a man who will not believe you.”

“Not believe me!” This with bitter scorn.

“Gerald, you do not know the world. They will think that the loss of Kilsheelan killed your father and beggared you—that it was slipping away into the hands of another—that you were absent when this fire took place—they will think of everything, in fine, but that you have a noble heart. How could you clear away suspicion of this kind? Sir Albin Artslade would ask himself: Who else could have done it? and he would sneer at your explanations.”

The priest's counsel was beginning to have the victory. Humiliate himself before Sir Albin Artslade! Have doubts thrown on his honour, and contempt on his vindication of it! Yet the character of skulking incendiary pleased him less!

“I have no explanation to make—that would be a stigma on my honour—but it is cowardice to avoid an empty suspicion.”

“Nay, it is prudence betimes. Remember you have only ten years to win back Kilsheelan. Sir Albin Artslade is powerful, and may be vindictive: once get yourself in his power, and who knows what troubles for you he may found on this accusation? There are wicked men whose perjury might support it: your best years might be wasted in fighting with suspicions

which would be suspicions still. Trust me it is your duty not to expose yourself to such chances.”

“Now, sir, you convince me. My first duty is not to myself—It is to save Kilsheelan.”

“What interest have you in what they say or think of you? You are going to leave Ireland and their opinions won't follow you. Truth need not always be a prancing cavalier. Beside, when you are gone, I will say all you could say for yourself to those whose opinion most concerns you—the fond old people.”

Gerald wrung his hand heartily.

“You are right, sir. Let them think as they please—I will not put my success in peril.”

“That's right, my lad. And see! what can man do to staunch those flames.”

“Nothing—nothing!” Gerald O'Dwyer sighed gloomily, as his eye traversed the fearful scene.

The flames made holiday grandly in the Castle. They rolled up fiery columns of smoke into the sky; they leaped through the windows, clasped the turrets round with fire, struggled over the massive battlements, bounded high into the heavens to proclaim their victory: the while the valley lay spell-bound at the sight, and the air seethed with a sort of vague unrest. One wing alone, the uninhabited western wing, escaped the fire: in every other part of the building only the stout old walls gave resistance.

With a curious fascination, Gerald followed the flames as they engulfed now one, now another of the dear associations of his youth. Now they were in the great central hall swallowing up all the ancestral trophies: anon in the dining-hall, feeding ravenously on the old panneling O'Dwyer Garv loved so well, gathering chairs, tables, every ancient relic, into their fiery maw: sweeping through the high corridors, exploring, seizing and devouring, as though they would efface every symbol of what had been.

Now he could see the terrified villagers collected around their cabin doors, looking helplessly up where the Castle lay in its last agony. He even thought he could see figures moving about in the immediate circle of the fire—doubtless Sir Albin Artslade was among them, cursing the strange chance that deprived him of triumph even in its first fruition.

Suddenly there was a crash: the roof had fallen in, dragging the floors and all the heavy woodwork into the furnace. The flames roared jubilantly, and sprang high into the air, licking the black skeleton walls as if in horrid wantonness. The sacrifice was nearly consummated.