

LUKE DELMEGE.

BY THE REV. P. A. SHEEHAN, AUTHOR OF "MY NEW CURATE," "GEOFFREY AUSTIN: A STUDENT," "THE TRIUMPH OF FAILURE," "CITHARA MEA," ETC.

CHAPTER III.

THE SAGACITIES OF AGE.

As the young priest made his way hastily across the fields, already yellowing to the harvest, he became aware of a deep feeling of despondency glooming down upon him, although he was in the high zenith of youth, with all its prophetic promise, and the heavens were clear above his head. That engagement to dine was an ugly ordeal to be encountered; but, after all, what did he care? It was a couple of hours' agony, that was all. What then? Where did all this dismal anxiety and foreboding come from? He was fond, as has been said, of analyzing—a dangerous habit: and now, under the hot sun, he was striving to reconcile two or three things, the mystery of which to himself he already declared to be insoluble. "A respectable career," "honors and emolument," "a stall in the cathedral," these words jarred across the vibrant emotions of the young priest, and made him almost sick with their dismal and hollow sounds. Good heavens! was this the end of all—the heaven-sent aspirations, all the noble determinations, all the consecrated ideals that had peopled when the mind only a week ago, when the old was met by his hands, and he trembled as he touched the first time the chalice of the Blood of Christ? How paltry every human ambition seemed then; how ragged the tinsel of kings; how cheap and worthless the pinbeck of earthly thrones! How his soul burned to emulate the heroism of saints—to go abroad and be forgotten by this world, and to be remembered only by Christ, to live and die among the lepers and the insane—to die with, one swift stroke of the dull sword of the executioner in China or Japan, to his immortal crown! Why, it was only the prayers of his aged mother made him tear up that letter he had written to the Bishop of Natal, asking as a favor to be deputed as chaplain in Robbin Island, where the outcasts and refuse of humanity were located, so that his life might be from that day on a glorious holocaust in the sight of God! And now there remains, after all the glory, the gray ashes of a "respectable career,"—a comfortable home, honors and emoluments, and, as a crown of old age, a parish and a prebend! What an anticlimax! Luke groaned and took off his hat, and wiped the hot perspiration from his forehead.

But a sharper shock was behind. It all this was a shock and a surprise, what was he to think of all his ambitious labors for the last six years? Had he one single idea before his mind but self-advancement, glory, the praise of men, the applause of his fellow-students, except on that holy morning when the intoxication of divine dreams and hopes lifted him on the highest altitudes of the Holy Mount? And he said to his soul amid its sobbing and tears: "Uam petii a Domino: hanc retriem: et in habitum in domo Domini ambulabo: et in viciis eius ambulabo: et in viciis eius ambulabo: et in viciis eius ambulabo." "Faith, 'tis true for you. I'll let it alone. I'm better engaged. Mary, have that bit of mutton ready when I ring."

And so, amidst bantering, joking, story telling, from the lips of these genial and kindly men, Luke soon forgot his introspection; and his nerves cooled down and were soothed by the totally informal and delightful conversation that shot, as if by web and wool, across the flowers and the viands. Then, when these contemptible dishes were removed, and they settled down to a quiet evening, Father Tim, crossing his legs comfortably, and sneezing with the dexterity begotten of habit, the lemon to his glass, began to philosophize. He was slow of speech, unlike his dear friend, the host of the evening, and Spartan almost in his utterances, which he ground out slowly from the mills of thought.

"There's one advice I'd give you, Luke, my dear boy; and 'tisn't now, but in twenty years time, ye'll thank me for the same. Harden your head in time."

"I beg pardon, Father," said Luke, wondering.

"For what, my boy?" said Father Tim.

"I didn't quite understand you," said Luke, timidly. "You said something—"

"I said," replied Father Tim, dropping in a tiny bit of sugar, "and I repeat it, harden your head in time."

Let the boy alone, said Father Tim, "don't mind his nonsense, Luke."

surges came mournfully to his ears, there in the brilliant sunshine; and as he turned away from his reverie and the sight of the restless but changeless ocean, he thought he heard the rebuke upborne—Be ashamed, O Sion, said the Lord.

"Begor, I thought you were petrified into a stone statue, Luke," said the voice of the good-natured curate. "I have been watching you, and whistling at you for the last half-hour; but I might as well be whistling to a mile stone, and my breath is not now so strong either. The Canon has turned him into ice, I said to myself, 'he's a regular patented refrigerator, even on this awful day.' Phew! there's no living at all this weather. Come along, The Murphrees are waiting; and so are two of the hungriest fellows you ever saw. But are you really alive? Let me feel you."

So they passed into the humble parlor of the aged curate; and, as Luke sank wearily into a horsehair arm-chair, very much the worse for the wear, dinner was ordered by a few robust knocks on the kitchen wall. "Gomin," said a far-away voice, like that of a ventriloquist. "You know Father Tim, Luke? And this is my old friend, Martin Hughes, the greatest rascal from this to Cape Clear. Come along now, boys, we're late, you know. Bless us, O Lord, Amen. You'll take the liver wing, Luke. You've a good right to it. They're your own. Ah! you've the good mother."

"And I venture to say," said Father Tim, digging the carver with his left hand into the juicy recesses of the ham, "that this fellow came from the same quarter. Ah! this is a parish where men buy nothing but a scrap of butcher's meat."

"I suppose you've got your eye on the Tim. You've no chance, my dear fellow. Read up Valay and the Manual of Etiquette. You unmanly fellow, what a chance you have of upsetting a polite young man like me. Take the potatoes over there to Father Delmege, Mary. I suppose now you're tired of the Queen's mutton? And you tell me they don't give the students beer now? Well, that's bad. What'll you take now? Try that sherry. No! A little water?" he echoed in a tone of ineffable disgust.

"I think Father Delmege is right such a day as this," said Martin Hughes, a kindly, soft-faced priest, who was generally silent, except when he had a gentle or encouraging word to say. "And, indeed," he added, "that beer was no great things. It was a good day for Ireland when they did away with it."

"Well, of course, every one knows you're a queer fellow. But Luke, old man, are you really alive?"

"Alive and doing fairly well," said Luke, laughing. "Ab actu ad esse volui consecutio. And if this is not acutely I'd like to know what is."

"There now for you," said the host; "he has the dust of the desks in his mouth yet. Begor, I suppose now I could hardly remember to translate that."

"Don't try," said Father Tim; "nothing disturbs the digestion so much as serious thought."

"Faith, 'tis true for you. I'll let it alone. I'm better engaged. Mary, have that bit of mutton ready when I ring."

And so, amidst bantering, joking, story telling, from the lips of these genial and kindly men, Luke soon forgot his introspection; and his nerves cooled down and were soothed by the totally informal and delightful conversation that shot, as if by web and wool, across the flowers and the viands. Then, when these contemptible dishes were removed, and they settled down to a quiet evening, Father Tim, crossing his legs comfortably, and sneezing with the dexterity begotten of habit, the lemon to his glass, began to philosophize. He was slow of speech, unlike his dear friend, the host of the evening, and Spartan almost in his utterances, which he ground out slowly from the mills of thought.

"There's one advice I'd give you, Luke, my dear boy; and 'tisn't now, but in twenty years time, ye'll thank me for the same. Harden your head in time."

"I beg pardon, Father," said Luke, wondering.

"For what, my boy?" said Father Tim.

"I didn't quite understand you," said Luke, timidly. "You said something—"

"I said," replied Father Tim, dropping in a tiny bit of sugar, "and I repeat it, harden your head in time."

Let the boy alone, said Father Tim, "don't mind his nonsense, Luke."

"I beg pardon, Father," said Luke, wondering.

"For what, my boy?" said Father Tim.

"I didn't quite understand you," said Luke, timidly. "You said something—"

"I said," replied Father Tim, dropping in a tiny bit of sugar, "and I repeat it, harden your head in time."

Let the boy alone, said Father Tim, "don't mind his nonsense, Luke."

"Maynooth is the world," said Father Tim, laconically. "Men are always on probation till they pass their final, beyond the grave."

This was so good, so grand an inspiration that Father Tim gave up the next ten minutes to a delightful inward and inaudible chuckle of self-congratulation, intensified by Luke's frightened solemnity. Then he related,

"Don't mind an old cynic, Luke," he said. "Diogenes must grow from his tub sometimes."

"By the way, Luke," said Father Martin, "you are mighty modest. You never sold us your triumphs at the last exam. He swept everything before him," he said, in an explanatory tone to Father Pat, the host. The latter was embarrassed for a moment but only for a moment.

"Did you expect anything else from his mother's son?" he asked. "Why, that's the cleverest woman in the three parishes. Mike Delmege wouldn't be what he is but for her to-day. But Luke—did you see all his prizes?" he suddenly asked. "Ah! my dear fellow, if Luke had six years more, he'd have a library like Trinity College."

"Did you top the class in everything, Luke?" said Father Martin.

"Everything but Hebrew," said Luke, blushing. "You know that there—"

He was about to enter into elaborate explanations of his comparative failure there, and a good deal of Misoretic and Syro Chaldaic philology was on his lips; but somehow, he thought of the whole thing now without elation, nay even with a certain well-defined feeling of disgust. That little reverie there above the sea, in which he saw, as in a mirror, the vanity and futility of these transitory and worthless triumphs, had well-nigh cured him of all his pride between the vibrations of pleasure and disgust, at the eccentricities of men, now regarding his academical triumphs with contemptuous indifference, and again attaching to them an importance which his common sense told him was not altogether the vapors of mere flattery. In fact, men and their ever-varying estimates of human excellence were becoming so enigmatic; and, to his own mind, therefore, their instability proved the very worthlessness of the things they praised and applauded.

"You are all right now for life, my boy," said Father Martin, timidly. "You have made your name, and it is as indelible as a birthmark. All you have got to do now is to look down calmly on us poor fellows, who never got an Aque." (The lowest college distinction.)

"That's true," said the venerable host. "Why, when his time comes for a parish, we must build a town for him. There will be nothing in this diocese fit for him."

They'll make him Vicar Apostolic or Bishop, or something over there," said Father Martin. "He'll become a regular John Bull. If any fellow attempts to examine you for faculties, tell him you are a gold-metallist and he'll collapse."

"Or pitch Cambrensis Eversus at his head," said Father Pat.

"Well, I'm commencing well, whatever," said Luke, entering into the fun.

"So you are, my boy, so you are," said the host, encouragingly. "If you'd only look to the wine of the profession."

"I'm dining with the Canon on Sunday," said Luke, demurely.

"What?" cried all in chorus. "Had you the courage?"

"There's no end to the impudence of these young fellows!"

"My God!" said Father Tim, solemnly and slowly.

"The next thing will be your asking him down to dine at Linnalee," said the host.

"And why not?" said Luke, flushing angrily. "What discredit is there in dining under the roof of an honest man?"

"And why not?" said Father Pat, musingly.

"And why not?" said Father Tim, as from afar off.

"And why not?" said Father Martin, looking down mournfully on the young priest. Then the latter began to put a lot of turbulent and revolutionary questions to himself. Am I not a priest as well as he? Why should he not meet my mother and sisters, as well as I am expected to meet his relatives, if he has any? Who has placed him down at the table between the two Lazarus and Lazarus, narrow-minded, this infernal, century conservatism that is keeping us so many years behind the rest of the world. Could this occur in any other country? And who will have the courage to come forward and pulverize forever this still, rigid formalism, built on vanity and ignorance, and buttressed by that most intolerable of human follies—the pride of caste?

"By Jove, I'll ask him," said Luke, aloud.

"No, my boy, you won't. Don't practice that most foolish of gymnastics—knocking your head against a stone wall."

ness with flying colors, when some evil spirit put it into my head to pick up a few little things that lay upon my plate. Now, I didn't want them, but the old boy put them there. I put my fork gently upon one. It jumped away like a grasshopper. Then I tried Number Two. Off he went like a ball of quicksilver. Then Number Three. The same followed, until they were gyrating around for all the world like cyclones on a cinder track. Then I got mad. My Guardian Angel whispered: 'Let them alone. But my temper was up; and there I was chasing those little beggars around my plate, for all the world like the thimble-riggers at a fair. Now, I firmly believe there's something wrong and uncanny about peas; else, why does the conjurer always get a pea for his legedemain; and that's the reason, you know, the pilgrims had to put peas in their shoes long ago as a penance, and to trample them under foot. Well, at last, I said: 'Conjurer or die!' I looked up and saw the Canon engaged in an engrossing conversation with a grand lady. Now or never, I said to myself. I quietly slipped my knife under these green little demons and gobbled them up. I daren't look up for a few seconds. When I did, there was the Canon glowing on like a regular Rhadamantus. I knew then I was done for. He said nothing for a few days. Then came the thunder-clap. 'I could forgive,' he said, in his grandiose way, 'your solecisms—ha—of speech; your ungrammatical and—unrecognized pronunciations; but to eat—peas—with—a—knife! I didn't think that such a dread mortification could be inflicted from that day to this—for which I say, with a full heart, Deo Gratias. But Luke, old man, look sharp. Let me see. Give him a few hints, Tim! Martin, try and brush up your etiquette."

"Tell me," said Father Tim, in his own philosophical way, "tell me, Luke, could you manage to hold a wine-glass by the stem?"

"Certainly," said Luke.

"And hold it up to the light?"

"Of course," said Luke.

"Could you, could you, bring yourself to sniff the wine, and state over so little a drop, and say: 'Ha! that's something like wine! That Chateau Yquem, sir, is the vintage of '75. I know it, and I congratulate you, sir, upon your cellar!'"

"I'm afraid not," said Luke, despondently.

"If you could, you were a made man for life," said Father Tim.

"Do you know anything about flowers?" he asked after a long pause.

"I think I know a daisy from a buttercup," said Luke, laughing.

"Could you bring yourself—you can if you like—to give a little start of surprise, somewhere about the middle of dinner, and gasp out in a tone of choking wonderment: 'Why, that's the Amaranthus Durandii! I was always persuaded that that was in Ireland, and that was in the Duke of Leinster's conservatory at Carton!'"

Luke laughed and shook his head negatively.

"You lack the esprit, the courage of your race, my boy," said Father Tim. "Tis the dash that gains the day; or, shall I call it, he said looking around with impudence?"

After a long pause, he resumed: "Did ye ever hear of a chap called Botticelli?"

"Never!" said Luke, laughing.

"Why, my dear fellow, your education has been shockingly neglected. What were you doing for the last six or eight years that you never heard of Botticelli?"

"Somehow, I managed to get on without him," said Luke. "What was he—a cook?"

"No use," said Father Tim, shaking his head; "he'll be turned out ignominiously, and we'll all be disgraced."

"I'm afraid," said Father Martin, "'tis too late now, Tim, give him lectures on botany or the old masters; we must be satisfied with telling him what not to do."

"I suppose so, go on, Martin," said Father Tim, resignedly.

"Don't eat out of the front of the spoon!" said Father Martin.

"Don't make any noise when eating; no more than would frighten a rabbit," said Father Pat.

"As you value your soul, don't put your hands on the table between the dishes," said Father Tim.

"You're a teetotaler, aren't you?" said the host.

But Luke had vanished.

"What are these professors doing in these colleges, at all, at all?" said Father Martin, when the trio returned mournfully to the table. "Why do they turn out such raw young fellows, at all, at all?"

"Why, indeed?" said Father Tim. "Hard to say," said Father Pat.

CHAPTER IV.

DIES MAGNA, ET—AMARA.

"Father Luke, if you please, Miss," said Mrs. Delmege to her youngest daughter, Margery. I regret to say that that young lady was an incorrigible sinner in this respect; and this maternal correction was required at least ten times a day during the brief happy days that Luke was now spending at home. It was "Luke," "Luke," "Luke," all day long with Margery; and the mother's beautiful pride in her newly-ordained son was grievously shocked.

"You think he's no more than the rest of ye," said Mrs. Delmege, "but I tell you he is. He is the anointed minister of God; and the biggest man in the land isn't aqual to him."

But how could Margery help the familiarity in her sisterly anxiety that Luke should make a glorious debut, and secondly—and I regret to say that I fear it was deemed more important—at the Canon's dinner-table on Sunday evening?

"Sure I'd rather he was home with us on the last Sunday he'll spend in Ireland," said Mrs. Delmege. "And sure Father Pat could come up, and we could have a nice little dinner for 'em. But, after all, when the Canon asked him, it would never do to refuse. Sure it's just the same as the Bishop himself."

"I know that horrid Mrs. Wilson and her grand, proud daughter will be there, and that they'll be looking down on poor Luke—"

"Father Luke, Miss! How often must I be telling you?"

"Very well, mother. Be it so. But Luke and I are always playmates, and it sounds more familiar."

"But you must remember that Luke—ahem! Father Luke is no longer a gossip. He's a priest of God, and you must look on him as such."

"Of course, of course, mother, but I know they'll make him uncomfortable with all their airs and nonsense. To see that Barbara Wilson walk up the aisle on Sunday is enough to make any one forget what they're about. You'd think it was the Queen of England. I wonder she doesn't go into the pulpit and preach to us."

"Wisha, chin, her mother was poor and low enough at one time. I remember well when the Canon was only a poor curate, like Father Pat, God bless him! and when his sister was—well we mustn't be talking of these things, nor placing our neighbors. Perhaps, after all, there's a good heart under all their grandeur."

"I wouldn't mind," said Margery, stitching on a button on the grand new stock she was making for Luke, "but Father Martin said the other night that Luke—"

"There again," said the mother.

"Could teach half the diocese theology. But what do those people care? I know they look down on him, and he's so sensitive. He won't stand it, I tell you, mother."

So the sisterly anxieties ranged over every possible accident to her idol until Sunday morning came. Ah! that was a great day at Linnalee. They were going to see their best beloved the altar of God. And Luke was going to celebrate, there on the predella, where he had knelt thirteen years ago, and raised with fear and awe, the very vestments he was going to wear to-day. And there at the same wooden rails, had he received for the first time his Holy Communion; the first of the many times, as child, student, minor, subdeacon, deacon, he had knelt amongst the poor and lowly, Sunday after Sunday, during his happy vacations. It was all over now. Never more would he kneel there with the congregation. "Friend, w up higher." He had heard the word and henceforth he was to stand on high as a mediator and teacher, where hitherto he had been the suppliant and the pupil. The little ochreous crowd, and the deacon, and when Luke appeared in the chalice in his hands, a thousand eyes rested in his youthful face. He had just had a brief but animated debate in the sacristy.

"Was he to read the 'Acts'?"

"Certainly."

"And the 'Prayer before Mass'?"

"Of course."

"He never could do it."

But Luke drew the line there. Trembling, half from joy, half from fear, rigid as a statue, he went slowly and reverently through the sacred ceremonies, with what raptures and ecstasies, God only knows! Once, and only once, had Father Pat ("a proud self to interfere," as he described himself) to interfere. It was just at that sublime moment called the "Little Elevation," when Luke held the Sacred Host over the chalice, and raised both to God the Father, and murmured, "Omnia honor et gloria." Just then a tear rolled down the cheek of the young priest, and Father Pat had to say:

"Hold up man; 'tis nearly all over now."

But it took some minutes before he could compose his voice for the Pater Noster; and ever after, no matter what other distractions he might have had in celebration, he never repeated that "Per ipsum, et cum ipso, et in ipso" without remembering his emotions at his first Mass.

Father Pat had provided for the young priest a modest breakfast in the sacristy. It was a wise provision, for he had serious work before him—no less than to impart a priestly blessing to each and all of the vast congregation. It was a touching and impressive sight. There they knelt on the hard shingle—young and old, rich and poor, all reduced by their common faith to a dead level of meekness and humility; and the poor beggarwoman or bodach, who cringed and whined during the week at some farmer's house, now felt that here was neutral ground, where all had equal rights, and where no distinction as acknowledged. And so the brilliant sunshine, gleamed through the whispering leaves, and fell on gray hairs, or the rich auburn tresses of some young girl, or the fair gold of some child; and through the green twilight the young priest passed, uncovered and full of emotion, as he laid his hands on some old playmate or school-fellow, or some venerable village-teacher to whom he had been taught to look up with veneration from his childhood. And the little children doubled around trees, and shot down to the end of the queue to get a second blessing, or even a third; and many were the boasts heard in school that week of the many times some curly-headed youngster had stolen the young priest's blessing. But was it all sunshine and music? Well, no. You see it never is. There must be gray clouds to bring out the gold of the summer sun; and there must be a discordant note to emphasize the melodies that sing themselves to sleep in the human heart. And so, just a wee, wee whisper blotted out for the moment all this glory, and hushed the music that was kindling into a full-throated oratorio in the breast of the young priest.

He was pushing his way gently through the crowd that was jammed at the narrow gate which led into the chapel yard, when he heard just in front of him, and so near that he touched the rough frieze coat of the speaker, these words:—

"But it is sure that he has to go on the farrin' mission. Sure, 'tis only him that can't pay for theirselves in college that has to go abroad."

"How do we know? Perhaps, after all, Mike Delmege is not the strongest man we tuk him to be."

"And I hard that Ben Dwyer's son, over there at Altamount, is goin' into the college to be a Dane, or something' grate intirely."

"And sure they wint to college together. And if this young man—he threw his thumb over his shoulder—"is the great scholar intirely they makes him out to be, why isn't he sent into the college instid of goin' abroad?"

"Well, Father Pat, God bless him says that Luke had no aqual at all, in Manute."

"I suppose so. Mike Delmege has a warm corner; and sure I see a fine flock of tuikeys in the barn field. Wan or two of 'em will be missin' soon, I'm thinkin'."

"I suppose so. Did ye notice how narrow the young priest was at the 'Acts'? Why, my little Terry could do it better. And what did he want bringing in the Queen for?"

"He's practisin'. He's goin' to England, I understand; and he mast pray for the Queen there."

"Begor, I thought the Church was the same all over the wurld. Wan Lord—wan Faith—wan Baptism—"

"Sh!" said his neighbour, nudging him; and Luke went home with a very bitter sting in his chalice of honey.

It was not exactly the unkind allusions made to these ignorant cottiers, or the ill-concealed sarcasm about his own dearest ones, that nettled him. These things, indeed, were ugly, irritating facts; and to a proud spirit they doubly galling on such a day of triumph. But the Bishop had ignored him and his successes, and kept at home and placed in a position of honour in his native diocese a student who never had distinguished himself in college, or even appeared amongst the successful alumni at the great day of distribution.

What was all this? Had not the Bishop smiled on him, and congratulated him, and told him how he reflected honour on his diocese? And now he should go abroad for six or seven years, whilst his junior, a distinctly inferior man, was lifted over the heads of thirty or forty seniors, and placed at once in a responsible position in the Diocesan Seminary! Luke was choking with chagrin and annoyance. He put his hand to his forehead mechanically, and thought he found his laurel crown no longer the glossy, imperial wreath of distinction, whose perfume filled the world, but a poor, shabby corona of tinsel and tissue paper, such as children wear for each other around the Maypole of youth.

He was very morose in consequence; and, when he entered the house, and found all gathered for the mid-day meal, he looked around without a word, and without a word passed the threshold again, and moved down toward the sea.

"Poor boy!" said the mother, affectionately; "that last Mass was too much for him, entirely, and sure I thought the people would to him."

But Margery, with the affectionate instinct of a sister, saw deeper, but only said:

"'Tis this great dinner this evening that's troubling him. I wish he were left at home with us."

Luke crossed the fields rapidly, and then lightly jumping over a stile, found himself in one of those unfenced fields that slope down to the sea. A few sheep, nibbling the burnt grass lazily, scampered away; and Luke, jumping the rugged stones of a rough wall, found himself in a fisherman's cottage. The family were at dinner, and Luke, taking off his hat, said cheerily in the Irish fashion:

"God bless the work! and the workmen too!"

"Wisha, thin, God bless you, Master Luke, and 'tis you a thousand times welcome? Mona, get a chair for the priest."

"And this is my little Mona," said Luke, affectionately, she is grown!"

"And she's growing!"

"Wisha, thin, Master Luke, she's grown!"

"And wasn't she?"

"Lucky she is!"

"Lucky she is!"