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NELLIE NETTENVILLE;

OR,

ONE OF THE TRANSPLANTED.

By the author of 'Wild Times,' 'Blind Agnes,' etc.

CHAPTER X - (Continued)

Roger had lowered the sail while speaking, and he now began sculling the boat round a low sandy point which had the harbor from their view. While he was occupied in this manner, Nellie, chancing to turn her head in the direction of Clare Island, perceived another corragh fast following in their track, and rowed by a boy, who was evidently working might and main in order to overtake them. She mentioned the matter to Roger, who instantly seized his oar, and turned round to reconnoitre.

'It is Paudeen,' he said at once. 'What, in Heaven's name, has sent him to us here?'

The boy saw that he was observed, and without stopping a moment in his onward course, made signs to them to wait his coming.

Roger did as he was desired, and in a few minutes more the two corraghs were lying together side by side, and so close that their respective occupants could have conversed easily to a whisper.

'What is it, Paudeen?' asked O'More; 'have you any message for me, or is there anything the matter that you have followed us so far?'

'It's Mistress Hewitson who is wanting to see you,' said the boy. 'She was prevented leaving as soon as she intended, and she sent me on before to ask you not to quit the island until she had spoken to you. You were gone, however, before I could get there; so guessing well enough where you would most likely be upon Sunday morning, I followed you down here.'

'But if you came straight from the mainland, how is it that I did not meet you on the way?' asked O'More suddenly, a strange suspicion of even Paudeen's simple faith passing rapidly through his mind.

'Because I didn't come from it at all, at all,' the boy answered curtly. 'It is yonder there're staying now,' he added, pointing to Achill Island; 'and they do say in the house that Clare Isle will be the next to follow.'

'And is it to tell me this that Mistress Hewitson is about to honor me with a visit?' Roger answered bitterly. 'The formality, methinks, was hardly needed, considering all that her father has robbed me off already.'

'Sorrow know I know what she will be wanting; but this, at all events, I know for certain, that it is for nothing but what is good and kind,' said Paudeen; adding immediately afterward in a moving tone, 'though how she can be what she is, considering the black blood that is running in her veins, it needs greater wits than I can boast of to be able to discover.'

'Well, well,' said Roger, 'I believe you are about right there, Paudeen. So now go back at once, and say to Mistress Hewitson that she shall be obeyed, and that I will return to Clare Island in time to receive her at the landing place.'

'Let me go back also,' said Nellie in a smothered voice. 'If I and my grandfather have brought this danger to your door, it is only just that we should share it with you.'

'Share it, Mistress Netterville? Nay, but you would double it!' cried O'More vehemently. 'In the face of anything like real, present danger, I should infallibly lose my life in anxiety for yours. In point of fact, however,' he added seeing that she still looked distressed and anxious, 'in point of fact, the danger (whatever it is) cannot be immediate, since it is evident that Mistress Hewitson expects her intended visit to give me such information as may enable me to evade it. Possibly she has heard further details concerning those plans of the old man, her father, at which yesterday she obscurely hinted. It may even be, as Paudeen seems to think, that they intend to put an English garrison on the island, and she may hope to soften matters for me by giving me this previous notice. Any way, I entreat you not to be over anxious; for though I acknowledge that we live in perilous times and places, yet still, and if only for that very reason, it behoves us to keep our common sense intact, and not to allow it to be scared away by every passing cloud that seems to threaten us with storm.'

After such words as these, Nellie felt there was nothing for it but to land the moment the boat reached shore, and Roger helped her out with a sort of graceful tenderness, which seemed intended tacitly to ask forgiveness for the constraint he had been compelled to put upon her inclinations.

Then he pointed to a scarcely discernible path among the brushwood, and said hastily:

'That path will take you straight to the church. If any one ask you any questions, the watchword is, 'God, our Lady, and Roger

O'More.' Farewell! Get as near the altar as you can; tell them not to wait for me, but I will be back in time to fetch you.'

He waited one moment to make sure that she understood him, then pushed the boat out into deep water, and without even venturing to look back, pursued his way diligently homeward.

The breeze had died away, so that he would be known, he infinitely longer in returning to Clare Island than he had been in coming from it. As he passed Paudeen, he had half a mind to hail him; but reflecting that he would probably lose more time by the stoppage than he could gain by the boy's assistance, he changed his mind and went on his way alone. It was hot and weary work, but he put all his strength and will to it, and did it in a shorter time than he had expected. Not, however, before his presence was apparently sorely needed; for just as he neared the harbor, the deep, angry bay of the wolf-dog Maida reached his ear. This was followed by a woman's voice, endeavoring probably to soothe the dog, and thus again by a long shrill whistle which came like a cry for aid across the waters. Thus urged, O'More pulled with redoubled energy, and next moment was in the harbor. A corragh, ownerless and empty, was lying loose beside the pier, and a few yards from the landing-place he saw a girl standing motionless as a statue, one hand raised in an attitude of defence, confronting Maida, who, with head erect and bristling hair, seemed to bid her advance further at her peril. Had she attempted to retreat, had she shown even a shadow of timidity or of yielding, the dog would undoubtedly have torn her into pieces; but, with wonderful nerve and courage, she had so far stood her ground, and, rebuked by her stillness and unyielding attitude, Maida, up that moment, had fortunately contented her sense of duty by keeping a close watch upon her proceedings. Horrified at the sight, and dreading lest Maida might mistake even the sound of his voice for a signal of attack, Roger hastily leaped on shore. Henrietta heard him, and without even daring to turn her head in his direction, whispered softly:

'Call off your dog—for God's dear sake, call her off at once!'

Roger made no reply, (for, in fact, he did not dare to speak) but he made one bound forward and placed himself between her and her foe. Maida instantly abandoned her threatening look to greet her master, and for one half-moment he employed himself in caressing and calming down her fury. Then he turned eagerly to Henrietta.

'How is this, Mistress Hewitson? For God's sake, speak! The dog has not injured you I trust?'

Henrietta did not at first reply. She was as white as ashes, and her eyes glittered with a strange mingling of courage and of desperate fear. 'Send away the dog,' she cried at last; 'send away the dog. I cannot bear to see her, and then burst into tears.'

Roger said one word, and Maida instantly flew toward the castle. He was about to follow in the same direction in order to procure some water, but the girl caught him by the arm, and held him so that he could not move.

'Calm yourself, I entreat you,' he said, fancying she was still under the influence of terror. 'No wonder that even your high courage has given way. Let me call Nora. She will help you to compose yourself.'

'Call no one,' Henrietta gasped. 'Call no one; but tell me, is there not a priest and some other outlaws in hiding on the chieftain's rock?'

'What then?' he asked, the blood suddenly rushing to his heart as he thought of Nellie.

'What then?' she repeated fiercely; 'because (oh! that I had known it but an hour ago!) because death is there, and treachery and woe!—But whither are you going?' she cried, as he broke suddenly from her grasp, and began to retrace his way towards the pier.

'Whither? whither?' he answered, like one in his sleep. 'There, of course. Where else?—My God, that I should have left Nellie there!'

'The girl!' cried Henrietta; 'and you have been there already, and I have had time to row all this way back? My God, then it will be too late to save her. The church must be in flames ere now!'

O'More made no reply, but leaped at once into the boat. 'What do you want?' he asked almost savagely, as Henrietta followed him.

'What do you want here—you, the child of her assassin?'

'I want to save her, and, still more, to save my father, if I can, from this most fearful guilt,' she answered promptly. Roger made no further opposition. Once fairly out of harbor, he rowed with all the energy of despair, and Henrietta helped him nobly. They were obliged to trust entirely to their oars, and the delay was maddening. Roger never cast a single glance toward the spot where all his soul was centred, but Henrietta could not resist a look once or twice in that direction.

Suddenly she cried out:

'What is it?' he asked nervously; 'what is it?'

'They have fired the church!' she said, in a smothered tone. 'There is a cloud of smoke; and now—my God!—a jet of flame going through it to sky!'

He made no reply, but he bent to the oar until the bead drops of mingled agony and toil stood thick upon his brow.

'God help them! They must be trying to escape,' she muttered yet again, as something like a shot or two of musketry reached her ear.

Easter he rowed, and faster. The boat leaped like a living thing along the waters. They were close to the cliff at last. Overhead the sky was hidden by a canopy of heavy smoke, with here and there a streak of fire flashing like forked lightning athwart it. Underneath the water lay black as ink in the reflection of the clouded heavens, as the boat rushed through it. One more effort, and they were in the cove—another, and they were flung high and dry upon the beach. Roger jumped out without a word.

'Was he in time? or was he not? His whole soul was engrossed in that fearful question. 'What are you going to do?' asked Henrietta uncertain as to what her own share in the enterprise was to be. He had been searching in the bottom of the boat for something, but he looked up then with a kindling eye and said:—

'Will you be true to the end?'

'So help me God, I will!' she answered in that quiet tone which tells all the more of steady courage that it has no touch of bluster in it. He had found what he wanted now—a cutlass and a coil of rope—and answered rapidly:

'Take the boat out of this, then, and wait beneath the cliffs. Wait till I come, or until yonder tower falls, as fall it must, and soon. After that, you may go home in peace. Yes, peace! For happen what may, your soul, at any rate, will be guiltless of this day's murder.'

He shoved the boat back into deep water as he finished speaking, and then, without even looking back to see if Henrietta followed his directions, strode rapidly up the cliffs.

CHAPTER XI.

Happily unconscious of the peril by which her own life was so speedily to be placed in jeopardy, Nellie stood for a few minutes after Roger left her, watching his progress through the water, and speculating anxiously upon the nature of the summons which had been delivered to him by Paudeen. In spite of his apparent coolness, there had been something in the way in which he had almost forced her to leave him—something in the haste with which he had given her his last directions—something (if it must be confessed) in the very fact of his having rushed off without even a parting word or look, which made her suspect the danger to be more real and immediate than he wished her to suppose it. And now, as she watched him bending to the oar as if his very life depended on his speed, suspicion seemed all at once to grow up into certainty, and she bitterly regretted the shyness which had prevented her insisting on returning with him to the island. Regrets, however, were now in vain, and remembering that, if she delayed much longer, she would in all probability be too late for mass, and so lose the only object for which she had remained behind, she turned her face resolutely toward the path pointed out by Roger.

It was less a path indeed than a mere narrow space left by the natural receding of the rocks loose boulders, which lay scattered about in all directions. Such as it was, it led Nellie in a zigzag fashion upward toward the cliffs, turning and twisting so suddenly and so often, that she could hardly ever see more than a yard or two before her, while the boulders on either side being generally higher than her head, and the intervals between them filled up with tall heather and scrubby brushwood, she might as well, for all that she could have seen beyond, have been walking between a couple of stone walls. The congregation had in all probability already reached the church, or else they were coming to it by another path; for not the sound of a footstep either before or behind her could she hear, though she paused occasionally to listen. Once indeed, but only once, at a sudden opening among the boulders, she fancied she saw something like the glistering of a spear in the brushwood underneath, and a minute or two afterward the air seemed tremulous with a low sighing sound, as if some one were whispering within a few yards of her ear. Nevertheless, when she paused again in some trepidation to reconnoitre, everything seemed so lonely and so still around her, that she was obliged to confess that her imagination must have been playing her sad tricks. The light which she had seen was, in all probability, a mere effect of sunshine on some of the polished rocks, while the sound and sigh of the waters, as they lapped quietly on the beach below, might easily have assumed, in that distance and in the calm summer air, the semblance of a human whisper. Once she had satisfied

herself upon this point, she resolved not to be frightened from her purpose by any nervous fancies, and, stimulating her courage by the reflection that, if an enemy really were lurking near, her best chance of safety would be the church, in which her countrymen and women were already gathered, she toiled steadily upward until she reached the platform upon which it was erected. A sudden turn in the path brought her face to face with it almost before she fancied that she was near, and she only comprehended how heartily she had been frightened on the way, by the sense of relief which this discovery imparted. It was a low, mean-looking edifice enough, with the hermit's cell built against the wall, and forming in fact a kind of porch, through which alone it could be entered. From the moment it first came in sight, the path had narrowed gradually until there was barely room at last for the passing of a single person; and while it appeared to Nellie to descend, the rocks on either side rose higher, slanting even somewhat over, so as partially to impede the light. From this circumstance she was led to fancy that both cell and church had been built originally below what was now the present surface of the land—a fact which, joined to its desolate, ruinous condition, might easily have pointed it out to Roger as a fitting place for the concealment of his friends. The low door of the porch was closed and fastened upon the inside, so that she was obliged very reluctantly, to knock on it for admittance. A moment afterward she heard the sound of footsteps, the door was drawn back an inch or two, and some one from behind it whispered in Irish, 'Who are you, and for whom?'

'For God, our Lady, and Roger O'More,' Nellie promptly answered.

'Enter, then, in the name of God,' the voice replied; and a strong hand being put forth, she was drawn within the building as easily and unresistingly as if she had been a child, and the door was again closed behind her. The cell into which she had been thus unceremoniously introduced was very dark, and she could only just perceive that the person who had played the part of porter was a tall, soldierly looking fellow, and therefore, she concluded, one of the outlaws of whose residence in the building Roger had informed her.

'You have been long a-coming,' said the man. 'Why is not the chieftain with you?'

'How do you know that he brought me hither?' asked Nellie, startled by the knowledge he seemed to have of her proceedings.

'We keep a good look-out seaward upon Sunday mornings,' he answered significantly. 'Why did he go back?'

'A message—a summons from the island, said Nellie; not well knowing how much or how little it would be prudent to communicate. 'It was nothing of any consequence, I believe, and he said you were not to wait. He will probably be here before all is over.'

'Good,' said the man; 'then follow me.' He went on as he spoke, Nellie stumbling as well as she could after him in the dark, until they reached the thick matting of dried grass which separated the church from the porch outside. Here the descent became so sudden that she would inevitably have been precipitated face foremost into the midst of the congregation, if her conductor had not caught her by the arm in time to prevent this catastrophe, and landed her safely on the other side. The interior of the building, as Nellie saw it in that dim light, had a much nearer resemblance to a ruinous barn than to a place of Christian worship. As Roger had already told her, it had been so long dismantled and forgotten as a church that the people had come to look upon it simply as a storehouse for their winter firing, a fact amply attested by the piles of drift and brushwood which rose in all directions, blocking up the narrow windows, and forming a gigantic stack against the wall behind the altar. This latter was of stone, facing the door by which she had just entered, and so placed that there was a considerable distance between it and the wall beyond.

In this desolate-looking building about twenty or thirty people were assembled, most of them women and young girls, with a sprinkling of old men and half a dozen younger ones, in whom Nellie fancied she recognized the outlawed soldiers of the Royal army. Two or three of these last stole a curious glance upon her as she moved onward toward the altar; but the greater part of the congregation were so absorbed in earnest and loudly-uttered prayer, that they seemed absolutely unconscious of the entrance of a stranger. Passing quietly, so as not to disturb them in their devotions, Nellie made her way to a spot from whence she had a full view of the priest as he sat, a little on one side, engaged in hearing the confessions of those who presented themselves for that purpose. He was in truth a hero in Nellie's eyes—the best of all heroes—a Christian hero. He had stood by that brave old bishop who had gone to death for an act of

patriotism which, in the old heroic days of Rome, would have set him as a demi-god upon pagan altars. Quiet and self-possessed, he had knelt, amid the thunders of the battle-field, to hear the confessions of the wounded soldiers. He had plunged into the fell atmospheres of plagues and fever, braving death in its worst and most loathsome forms in the exercise of his ministerial functions. He had buried the dead—he had consoled the widow and orphan, made such by the reckless cruelty of man—and now, when he had exhausted all the more heroic forms of service to his Lord, he had come hither, like that Lord himself—like the good Shepherd of the Gospel—to gather up the young lambs in his arms, and to comfort a conquered and stricken people—to pour the consolations of religion upon hearts wrung and disconsolate in human sorrow—to preach of heaven to men forsaken of the earth, and to teach them, hopeless and hapless as they were, to lift up those eyes and hands, which had been lifted in vain to their brother man for mercy, higher and higher still, even to that Almighty Father to whose paternal heart the life of the very least of His little ones was of such unspeakable and unthought of value that not a hair might fall from one of their heads without his express permission. Thoughts like these passed rapidly through Nellie's mind as she watched the old man bending reverently and compassionately to receive, in the exercise of his ministerial functions, each new tale of sin or sorrow which, one after another, the poor people around him came to pour into his sympathizing ear.

We have called him 'old,' for his hair was white and his face was ploughed into many wrinkles; yet Nellie could not help suspecting that the look of wearied, patient age upon his features was less the effect of years, than of the toil and suffering by which those years had been utilized and made fruitful in the service of his Master. Altogether she felt drawn toward him by a feeling of reverent admiration, which would probably have found vent in words, if he had not been so completely occupied in his ministerial duties, as to make it simply impossible to interrupt him. For in a congregation, deprived, as this had been, of a pastor for many months, there was of course much to be done ere the commencement of the Sunday service. There were confessions to be heard, and infants to be baptized, and more than one young couple—who had patiently awaited the coming of a lawful minister for the reception of that sacrament—to be united in holy wedlock. At last, however, all this was over, and Nellie had just made up her mind to go and speak to him in her turn, when, to her infinite annoyance, he rose from his place and commenced robing himself at the altar. Kneeling down again, therefore, she endeavored to withdraw her thoughts from all outward things, in order to fix them entirely upon the coming service. In spite, however, of her most earnest efforts, she felt nervous and unhappy at the prolonged absence of O'More, and she could not help envying the people round her as, with all the natural fervor of the Celtic temperament, they abandoned themselves to prayer; prostrating, groaning, beating their breasts, and praying up aloud with as much naive indifference to the vicinity of their neighbor, as if each individual in presence there imagined that he and his God were the sole occupants of the church. Poor Nellie could obtain no such blest absorption from her cares. Her eyes would glance toward the door for the coming of Roger, and her ears would listen for his footsteps; once or twice indeed she felt quite certain that she heard him moving quietly behind the screen of matting, which shut in the church from the porch outside, and became, in consequence, nervously anxious to see him lift it and take his promised place beside her. He never came, however; yet the sounds continued, accompanied at times by a slight waving of the screen, as if a hand had accidentally touched it; and this occurred so often that Nellie began at last to be seriously alarmed. She thought of Paudeen's mysterious message to his chieftain, and her own half extinguished fancy of having seen a spear among the brushwood recur vividly to her mind. What if she had seen rightly after all? What if an enemy were really lurking in the neighborhood; or, worse still, crouching behind that terrible screen, ready to massacre the congregation as they passed through it to the open air after service? The thought was too terrible for solitary endurance, and she was just about to lessen the burden by imparting it to her nearest neighbor, when she found herself forestalled by a heavy, stifling cloud of smoke, which rolled suddenly through the church and roused every creature present to a sense of coming danger. There was a rustle and a stir, and then they all stood up, men and women and little children, gazing with wild eyes and whitened faces on each other, uncertain of the 'how or from whence' of the threatened peril.

The priest alone seemed to pay no attention