

LORD KILGOBBIN.

By CHARLES LEVER.

Author of "Harry Lorrequer," "Jack Hinton the Guardsman," "Charles O'Malley the Irish Dragoon," etc., etc.

CHAPTER XXII.—Continued.

Had she preferred either of the two Englishmen to himself, he could have understood, and, in a measure, accepted it. They were, as he called them, "swells." They might become, he knew not what. The career of the Saxon in fortune was a thing incommensurable by Irish ideas; but Joe was like himself, or, in reality, less than himself in worldly advantages.

This pang of jealousy was very bitter; but still it served to stimulate him and rouse him from a depression that was gaining fast upon him. It is true, he remembered she had spoken slightly of Joe Atlee. Called him noisy, pretensions, even vulgar; snubbed him openly on more than one occasion, and seemed to like to turn the laugh against him; but with all that, she had sung duets with him, corrected some Italian verse he wrote, and actually made a little sketch in his note-book for him as a souvenir. A souvenir! and of what? Not of the ridicule she had turned upon him, not the jest she had made upon his boastfulness. Now which of these two did this argue? Was this levity, or was it falsehood? Was she so little mindful of honesty that she would show these signs of favor to one she held most cheaply, or was it that her distaste to this man was mere pretence, and only assumed to deceive others?

After all, Joe Atlee was a nobody; flattery might call him an adventurer, but he was not even so much. Among the men of the dangerous party he mixed with he was careful never to compromise himself. He might write the songs of rebellion, but he was little likely to tamper with treason itself. So much he would tell her when he got back. Not angrily, nor passionately—for that would betray him and disclose his jealousy—but in the tone of a man revealing something he regretted—confessing to the blemish of one he would have liked better to speak well of. There was not, he thought, anything unfair in this. He was but warning her against a man who was unworthy of her. Unworthy of her! What words could express the disparity between them? Not but if she liked him—and this he said with a certain bitterness—or thought she liked him, the disproportion already ceased to exist.

Hour after hour of that long summer day he walked, revolving such thoughts as these; all his conclusions tending to the one point, that he was not the easy victim she thought him, and that, come what might, he should not be offered up as a sacrifice to her worship of Joe Atlee.

'There is nothing would gratify the fellow's vanity,' thought he, 'like a successful rivalry of him. Tell him he was preferred to me, and he would be ready to fall down and worship whoever had made the choice.'

By dwelling on all the possible and impossible issues of such an attachment, he had at length convinced himself of its existence, and even more, persuaded himself to fancy it was something to be regretted and grieved over for worldly considerations, but not in any way regarded as personally unpleasant.

As he came in sight of home and saw a light in the small tower where Kate's bedroom lay, he determined he would go up to his sister and tell her so much of his mind as he believed was finally settled, and in such a way as would certainly lead her to repeat it to Nina.

'Kate shall tell her that if I have left her suddenly and gone back to Trinity to keep my term, I have not fled the field in a moment of faint-heartedness. I do not deny her beauty. I do not disparage one of her attractions, and she has scores of them. I will not even say that when I have sat beside her, heard her low soft voice, and watched the tremor of that lovely mouth vibrating with wit or tremulous with feeling, I have been all indifference; but this I will say, she shall not number me among the victims of her fascinations; and, when she counts the trinkets on her wrist, that records the hearts she has broken—a pastime I once witnessed—not one of them shall record the initial of Dick Kearney.'

With these brave words he mounted the narrow stair and knocked at his sister's door. No answer coming, he

knocked again, and after waiting a few seconds he slowly opened the door and saw that Kate, still dressed, had thrown herself on her bed, and was sound asleep. The table was covered with account books and papers: tax receipts, law notices, and tenants' letters lay littered about, showing what had been the task she was last engaged on; and her heavy breathing told the exhaustion which it had left behind it.

'I wish I could help her with her work,' muttered he to himself, as a pang of self-reproach shot through him. This certainly should have been his own task rather than hers; the question was, however: Could he have done it? And this doubt increased as he looked over the long column of tenants' names, whose holdings varied in every imaginable quantity of acres, roods, and perches. Besides these there were innumerable small details of allowances for this and compensation for that. This one had given so many days' horse-and-car hire at the bog; that other had got advances 'in seed potatoes'; such a one had a claim for reduced rent, because the mill-race had overflowed and deluged his wheat crop; such another had fed two pigs of 'the lord's' and fattened them, while himself and his own were nigh starving.

Through an entire column there was not one case without its complication, either in the shape of argument for increased liability, or claim for compensation. It was make-shift everywhere, and Dick could not but ask himself whether any tenant on the estate really knew how far he was hopelessly in debt or a solvent man. It only needed Peter Gill's peculiar mode of collecting the moneys due, and recording the payment by the notched stick, to make the complication perfect; and there, indeed, upon the table, amidst accounts, and bills, and sale-warrants, lay the memorable bits of wood themselves, as that worthy steward had deposited them before quitting his master's service.

Peter's character, too, written out in Kate's hand, and only awaiting her father's signature, was on the table—the first intimation Dick Kearney had that old Gill had quitted his post.

'All this must have occurred to-day,' thought Dick: 'there were no evidences of these changes when I left this morning. Was it the backwater of my disgrace, I wonder, that has overwhelmed poor Gill?' thought he; 'or can I detect Miss Betty's fine Roman hand in this incident?'

In proportion to the little love he bore Miss O'Shea, were his convictions the stronger that she was the cause of all mischief. She was one of those who took very 'utilitarian' notions of his own career, and he bore her small gratitude for the solicitude. There were short sentences in pencil along the margin of the chief book in Kate's handwriting which could not fail to strike him as he read them, indicating as they did her difficulty, if not utter incapacity, to deal with the condition of the estate. Thus:

'There is no warranty for this concession. It cannot be continued.'—'The notice in this case was duly served, and Gill knows that it was to papa's generosity they were indebted for remaining.'—'These arrears have never been paid; on that point I am positive!'—'Malone's holding was not fairly measured; he has a just claim to compensation, and shall have it.'—'Hannigan's right to tenancy must not be disputed, but cannot be used as a precedent by others on the same part of the estate, and I will state why.'—'More of Peter Gill's conciliatory policy! The Begans, for having been twice in jail, and once indicted, and nearly convicted of Ribbonism, have established a claim to live rent free! This I will promise to rectify.'—'I shall make no more allowances for improvements without a guarantee, and a penalty besides on non-completion.'

And last of all came these ominous words:

'It will thus be seen that our rent-roll since '64 has been progressively decreasing, and that we have only been able to supply our expenses by sales of property. Dick must be spoken to on this, and at once.'

Several entries had already been rubbed out, and it was clear that she had been occupied in the task of erasure on that very night. Poor girl! her sleep was the heavy repose of one utterly exhausted; and her closely clasped lips and corrugated brow showed in what frame of intense thought she had sunk

to rest. He closed the book noiselessly as he looked at her, replaced the various objects on the table, and rose to steal quietly away.

The accidental movement of a chair, however, startled her; she turned, and leaning on her elbow, she saw him as he tried to move away. 'Don't go Dick; don't go. I'm awake, and quite fresh again. Is it late?'

'It's not far from one o'clock,' said he, half roughly, to hide his emotion; for her worn and wearied features struck him now more forcibly than when she slept.

'And are you only returned now? How hungry you must be! Poor fellow—have you dined to-day?'

'Yes, I got to Owen Molloy's as they were straining the potatoes, and sat down with them, and ate very heartily, too.'

'Weren't they proud of it? Won't they tell how the young lord shared their meal with them?'

'I don't think they are as cordial as they used to be, Kate; they did not talk so openly, nor seem at their ease, as I once knew them. And they did one thing significant enough in its way, that I did not like. They quoted the county newspaper twice or thrice when we talked of the land.'

'I am aware of that, Dick; they have got other counselors than their landlords now,' said she mournfully, 'and it is our own fault if they have.'

'What, are turning nationalist, Kitty?'

'I was always a nationalist in one sense,' said she, 'and mean to continue so; but let us not get upon this theme. Do you know that Peter Gill has left us?'

'What, for America?'

'No! for O'Shea's Barn. Miss Betty has taken him. She came to-day to—have it out—with papa, as she said; and she has kept her word. Indeed, not alone with him, but with all of us—even Nina did not escape.'

'Insufferable old woman! What did she dare to say to Nina?'

'She got off the cheapest of us all, Dick,' she said, laughing. 'It was only some stupid remark she made about looking like a boy, or being dressed like a rope-dancer. A small civility of this sort was her share of the general attention.'

'And how did Nina take the insolence?'

'With great good temper, or good-breeding, I don't know exactly which covered the indifference she displayed, till Miss Betty, when taking her leave, renewed the impertinence in the hall by saying something about the triumphant success such a costume would achieve in the circus, when Nina courted, and said: "I am charmed to hear you say so, madam, and shall wear it for my benefit; and, if I could only secure the appearance of yourself and your little groom, my triumph would be, indeed, complete." I did not dare to wait for more, but hurried out to affect to busy myself with the saddle, and pretend that it was not tightly girthed.'

'I'd have given twenty pounds, if I had it, to have seen the old woman's face. No one ever ventured before to pay her back with her own money.'

'But I give you such a wrong version of it, Dick. I only convey the coarseness of the rejoinder, and I can give you no idea of the ineffable grace and delicacy which made her words sound like a humble apology. Her eyelids drooped as she courted, and when she looked up again, in a way that seemed humility itself, to have reproved her would have appeared downright cruelty.'

'She is a finished coquette,' said he, bitterly; 'a finished coquette.'

Kate made no answer, though he evidently expected one; and after waiting awhile he went on. 'Not but her high accomplishments are clean thrown away in such a place as this, and among such people. What chance of fitting exercise have they with my father or myself? Or is it on Joe Atlee she would try the range of her artillery?'

'Not so very impossible this, after all,' muttered Kate, quietly.

'What! and is it to that her high ambitions tend? Is she the prize she would strive to win?'

'I can be no guide to you in this matter, Dick. She makes no confidences with me, and of myself I see nothing.'

'You have, however, some influence over her.'

'No; not much.'

'I did not say much; but enough to

induce her to yield to a strong entreaty, as when, for instance, you implored her to spare your brother—that poor fellow about to fall so hopelessly in love—'

'I'm not sure that my request did not come too late, after all,' said she, with a laughing malice in her eye.

'Don't be too sure of that,' retorted he, almost fiercely.

(To be continued.)

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