

AN IRISH CATHOLIC NOVELIST.

II.

Unlike many novelists of higher calibre, such as Dickens and George Eliot, Rosa Mulholland has not fallen into the error of believing that she has a great "mission" to fulfil. Had she made this mistake, her chosen "sphere" would probably be to point out to her fellow-countrymen their political duties, perhaps to rouse them to armed resistance of coercion by stirring tales of former glories. Are we wrong in believing that no writer of fiction would be successful in this task? Irish Nationalists have other work to do than reading novels; and the literature furnished by *United Ireland* is more serviceable to their cause than all the romances which ever emerged from the brain of genius. There is little to be learned from the history of previous national movements except to avoid the rocks on which they wrecked.

Yet it is possible that a novelist, without making it the aim of his book, and without rudely forcing anyone's opinions, should expose some crying wrong, and excite his readers' indignation thereat. This is precisely what Rosa Mulholland has done, notably in the novel entitled "*Marcella Grace*," (New York: Harper & Bros.)

"*Marcella Grace*" is not a political pamphlet under the guise of a novel. It is, like the others we have mentioned, a simple, tender story of the affections. Yet, quietly and unobtrusively, without any of that passionate rhetoric, which, if it sometimes carries us away, oftener puts us on guard against surprise, there are some statements made in this book, which must lead English readers to think that, after all that has been said to the contrary, Irish tenants may have some grievances, and that the law, as administered under a Coercion Act, may frequently bring forth an abortion instead of justice. A glance at the history of Mrs. T. O'F. O'Kelly shows how a good-hearted and well-meaning landlord may bring misery upon tenants through wrong-headedness and mental strabismus. The whole root of the land evil is exposed to view, and the sad story of the serfs who owned the mistress of Crane's Castle as their liege-lady, is told so calmly, and in language so devoid of ornament, that the reader cannot believe it exaggerated.

Miss Mulholland has no love for the Fenians, yet she makes clearly understood how it is that they constantly recruit their ranks from those whom a sense of cruel oppression, and not unfrequently the fierce pangs of bodily hunger, drives into the arms of the societies which declare themselves able to regain the peasants' lost rights.

The trial and conviction of Bryan Kilmorey is but a sample of the results which follow from what John Mitchel bitterly called "the fraudulent sham of law," from the base system which accepts the testimony of the vilest wretches who have everything to gain by perjury, as sufficient warrant for compassing the legal murder of honourable men. In caustic but true words is described the slight sensation, the less than nine days' wonder, that ensues when, as frequently happens, the innocence of a man thus punished is afterwards proved.

The affair is made the subject of a two or three line comment in an obscure corner of some great newspaper, and a couple of anonymous correspondents waste ink and paper discussing the good and evil of the "informer" system.

When Bryan's life sentence is shortened to the term of twenty years, his wife, who has hitherto borne up bravely, is now almost crushed.

"Strange that the fixed term of twenty years seemed to her more intolerable than the vagueness of a lifetime. The idea of the lifetime had been hard to grasp, and all sorts of shapeless possibilities were felt to float through its measureless hours like unseen stars through space. But twenty years made a comprehensible period, sickeningly long, calculably ruinous in its workings, with a sharp set limit that in its very assertion seemed to annihilate any shorter limitations which an extravagant imagination might conjure up."

In the heroine of this story, whose name is on the title page, are combined all the delicacy and tenderness of a true woman with an almost masculine firmness of character. We see her first as the poor sewing girl of the "Liberties" of Dublin, "picking her way through the gutters and seeing the day break over the squalor of the streets," as she goes to "the church where she was accustomed to carry all her sorrows and temptations, leaving them at the foot of the altar." A little later she

is the stately and gracious Miss O'Kelly, of Crane's Castle, and yet she is not changed. She was as really a lady amid her poor surroundings as in her present rich abode. Marcella loves with all her passionate nature Bryan Kilmorey, a most noble type of manhood; and her love for him almost leads her to commit a grave sin in the hope of saving him from his enemies. But her great strength of mind carries her through the crisis, and a keen sense of her obligations as a landlord gives occupation to a brain almost unhinged by sorrow.

In her endeavours to ameliorate the condition of the poor, fever-stricken peasants she has the guidance and advice of Father Daly, a beautiful specimen of the Irish *soggarth aroon*.

The portrait of Mrs. Kilmorey is true to nature. The depths of a mother's love are fathomed for us, that love so self-sacrificing and at the same time so selfish, self-sacrificing in that it willingly gives up life itself for the sake of the beloved child, selfish because the mother sees nothing beyond the interests of her boy. The pathetic workings of this grand nature are well exhibited in this powerful novel.

One of the most beautiful word-pictures in "*Marcella Grace*" is the description of Ireland's climate, to which the nature of the people bears such a resemblance.

"We have one moment a royal richness of ambers, purples, crimsons and golds of every variety and lustre, all spread at our feet like Aladdin's treasures, and the next we are swathed in a winding sheet of gruesome gray, and move through a world, poor, cold, wind-swept and rain-beaten. Even in the unbroken weather of a summer's day, our aerial changes are so swift and ceaseless that the land we move through seems alive with motion; what was quite near is suddenly far away, and what was distant comes as rapidly smiling towards us. So much of our landscape is made up of lakes, rivers, bays, linked together by wet, verdant vegetation, and so constantly does each moss-girdled lakelet, pool with torn fringes, and strip of widening and narrowing stream, snatch at the clouds above and hold a piece of the blue sky forever in its breast, that half our earth is literally heaven, and we often seem to walk through a sort of mid-air region, with moonrise and sunset, not only over our heads, but under our feet."

The subject matter of this novel gives abundant scope for pathos, but very little for humour. Yet Goldsmith himself does not more playfully satirize the national weakness for "words of learned length and thundering sound," than does Rosa Mulholland when she makes a poor woman entreat Father Daly to visit her husband, for "though I don't mane rightly to say he doesn't love God, still he doesn't pay high encomiums to him the way he used to do, yer riverence, an' he doesn't insinuate afther him."

In taking leave of "*Marcella Grace*" we say to all those who have followed us, read it; read everything of Rosa Mulholland's you can lay your hands on, and be sure you will not regret it. Do not say that you cannot afford to buy the books because Catholic publishers charge such high prices. This excuse, valid unfortunately in too many cases, does not hold in this, for "*The Wild Birds of Killeevy*" and "*Wicked Woods of Tobereevil*," are published in Hickey's "Vatican Library" at twenty-five cents each, and "*Marcella Grace*" has been issued in "Harper's Handy Series," at the same price.

As to "*A Fair Emigrant*," which appeared as a serial in the *Catholic World*, we believe it has not yet been published in book form. But it is in no way inferior to the previous works of its author, and may, in some respects, be considered even superior. Bawn Desmond, Roderick Fingall, Gran, Shana and Rosheen, are people whom one meets with pleasure, and parts from with regret. The Adares, of Shane's Hollow, give ample proof of Miss Mulholland's dramatic ability, and the lady-killing Major Batt, of her humour. The peasantry are treated with the tenderness invariably shown them by this author; and, in short, the book is one of the brightest, cleverest, and most charming pieces of fiction that has been produced in our century.

It may be urged by some pious persons that Rosa Mulholland does not deserve the title of Catholic novelist, that her stories are not a whit more Catholic in tone than those of Annie Keary or of May Laffan. This is an opinion which we are prepared to controvert. It is very true that the novels we have been speaking of are not Catholic in the sense that "*Geraldine*," and "*Rome and the Abbey*," are Catholic.