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LISHEEN

By Rev. P. A. SHEERAN, D. D. Author of "My New Curate," "Lisheen," "Lisheen," etc.

CHAPTER XXXVII

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

When Darby did see the "masher," he wrapped himself up in that cloak of mystery that used to be exasperating, but was now only amusing to Maxwell.

"Where were you last evening, Darby?" he said. "You never returned after dinner."

"Such a thing!" said Darby. "I suppose the attractions of home life and Noney are too much for you?"

"The queerest thing yer 'anner ivir hard of," said Darby. "I'll dock you a quarter's wages in future if you don't mind your business."

"This recalled to practical life, Darby commenced his narrative. "I was going down the hill," said he, "saying my prayers, because Noney had been complaining that I do so long at 'em that I keeps the supper cooling, while, to and behold you, I saw the punt on the lake. 'Who the devil are out coolin' their selves at this hour of night?' sez I to meself. 'They must be the quare people out an' out to boating at such an hour.' So I watched 'em; an' begogs I aimed me watchin' well."

Maxwell grew attentive. It was so like something he had formerly seen, and which had changed the whole course of his life.

"Here!" he said, flinging a cigarette to Darby, who now got into the full swing of his narrative.

"There was a lady an' gentleman, he pullin' an' she steerin' the boat, until they got out of the rough waters and pulled into the shallows where we hooked the salmon."

Maxwell nodded.

"Well, there they were, talkin' an' coo'raulin' an' they niver see the wind come down from the hills, an' risin' the lake like mad. This I halloed to 'em; an' they d'dn't hear me, they were so occupied with 'atet other. I halloed agin. This, the gentleman saw his danger; an' he pulled out. But the wind was too much for him, and the waters were too strong. Have you a light about you, yer 'anner?" he cried, suddenly stopping, and addressing Maxwell.

Maxwell flung him a box of wax vestas, and waited. He knew from experience there was no use in hurrying Darby.

Darby smoked placidly; and then resumed, pausing between each puff of smoke.

"Hat, begogs, he could handle the oar well. 'Twas a pity, out an' out . . . I could him hold her head to the says . . . for she was bobbin' like a cork . . . an' he did me a grand sight of a walk, and came home drenched. I feared she would be ill, as she is not used to this changeable climate."

Satara smiled, showing her white teeth, and passed on with the perambulator.

"Who are these?" asked Maxwell. "Anglo-Indians," said Mabel, with a little shudder. "They came on here only yesterday."

"And that is a native, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes. A native nurse, who has become attached to them."

"I suppose you will return home at once," Mabel said kindly. "I fear there is but little use in your remaining here."

"I should like to remain," she said, "while there is still a little hope."

"After a pause, she said: 'Ralph was about to visit you yesterday afternoon, partly in courtesy, partly on business. Can you imagine what it was?'"

"I suppose about that wretched ring, Outram attached a superstitious importance to the thing."

"I wonder would it have saved him?" she said musingly. "He often said, 'I wish I had it back! I should not have parted with it.'"

"I don't know!" said her cousin. "Perhaps I should have sent it to him. It was useless to me. But you know, Mabel, he had a way of setting you up against him by the manner in which he asked, or demanded a favour. He was so peremptory. I suppose it was his Indian training."

"I suppose so," she said meekly. "Well, in case you decide to leave for home, that is when you are assured that all hope is abandoned, you'll send for me, won't you?"

"Certainly, I shall claim your help." Then, after a pause: "I haven't asked after your wife. She's well?"

"Yes, indeed. But I haven't heard for a few days."

"Then, there was no truth in the newspaper report about your father-in-law?"

"What?" he cried. "What report?"

"I shouldn't have mentioned it. But there was a paragraph a day or two ago in the paper that Mr. Hamberton—"

"That the name—was killed in a heroic attempt to save some children from drowning?"

"My God! I never heard it. This comes from my hatred of newspapers. What paper was it, Mabel? Wonder Claire never wrote me."

"I think it was some local paper," she replied. "I'm sorry I told you. There seems to be some 'Fate pursuing' us."

Horried at the thought of Hamberton's death, Maxwell soon forgot all about Outram. He had to make his own preparations for leaving home; and he gave orders to have his tent struck, and all arrangements made for departure.

All that weary day, Mabel kept her room, venturing out but once or twice to send a messenger to take a telegram or send a message to her father. She was quite prepared to see in the catastrophe the hand of Fate. It did not come quite unexpected. Strange histories had strangely, and a career of duplicity, if not of crime, could only termin-

"Then keep it close," said Maxwell. "If all you say is true, there's a mystery somewhere, and you may get by my way, and did you tell anyone about the ducking Outram gave you?"

"Divil a wan," said Darby. "Oyeb, what am I saying? Yarra, sure I could half the parish and could em too that I'd be even wid him was day."

"Precisely. Now, take care, and keep a silent tongue in your head; or that may come against you. Many a man has been hanged for less."

Darby's tongue on that subject for ever.

He called down to the hotel in the afternoon, inquired and found that Outram and Mabel were registered as guests, asked to see them, and saw Mabel alone.

She was anxious and terrified enough; and made no secret of the cause. Outram had dined, and gone out. There had not been seen since. He had been so frightened and disturbed these last days—why, Mabel could not conjecture.

He had been anxious to change from place to place; and appeared to be haunted by a great fear, and she didn't know. She feared to utter what she thought.

The hotel was in commotion. The shadow of a great fear was over the place. Something had happened. There was one being at least in terrible distress; and she the proudest and haughtiest, who would not deign to speak to anyone. It was interesting, and the guests gathered here and there in little knots and nooks, and whispered, and pointed, and conjectured, as is the way with these creatures, when one of their class is in trouble.

Then a search party was organized, with Maxwell at their head. And they had not gone far when they found the shattered punt amongst the sedges that lined the lake, and later on, the oars floating, and later on, a man's felt hat, which was unquestionably Outram's. And Maxwell had to tell Mabel the sad news there in the very portico of the hotel, where barely twelve months ago Outram was showing his taitisau to an admiring group, and which he knew only too well as the scene of his own fair courting over.

He was uttering the usual commonplaces, "the vacant chaff well meant for grain," that are said on such occasions, when a lady appeared, and just behind her came a perambulator, pushed by a dark young girl clothed in white but for a red sash around her waist, and a red veil in her hair. The lady stopped to speak a word of sympathy to Mabel; the perambulator stopped also; and Maxwell had an opportunity of studying the dark, immobile features of Satara. The girl looked around her in a cool, impassive way, resting her great eyes solemnly on Mabel, and just glancing inquisitively at Maxwell. He was so absorbed in his study of her that he was quite oblivious of the conversation between the ladies, until he heard the words:

"Yes! it was a sudden and dangerous squall. My ayah was out also for a walk, and came home drenched. I feared she would be ill, as she is not used to this changeable climate."

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All that weary day, Mabel kept her room, venturing out but once or twice to send a messenger to take a telegram or send a message to her father. She was quite prepared to see in the catastrophe the hand of Fate. It did not come quite unexpected. Strange histories had strangely, and a career of duplicity, if not of crime, could only termin-

ate consistently in a weird and tragic manner. Yet the new-born love that Mabel bore towards her husband made his unhappy death doubly painful. The woman's soul was disappointed of its ambition to consecrate and make happy a life that she had rescued from worse than a death, she thought, and therefore, noble sadness that weighed her down, a sense of lost opportunities,—of a life, which she might have enjoyed, but snatched from her hand by Death. Fortunately, however, Outram was natural and manly. Outram had not gone down in disgrace, nor by his own hand, nor under dark circumstances. A sudden mountain squall, unforeseen and unaided; a frail boat, and that in all its gear, and the lynx eyes of society could see nothing there. There could be no room for scorn in the pity that met her from so many eyes.

One thing seemed to embarrass her, as the evil day wore on towards night. She found that she never left her room but that that Indian girl was somewhere in her path. In the corridor, on the stairs, everywhere she met, there was that strange girl, sometimes playing with the children, sometimes alone and crooning some old Indian rhyme about her gods; sometimes knitting, as those dregadil tricotouses on their dreagadil feet, and sometimes, as if in time in the Terror; but always there, and always rolling round her great eyes, and letting them fall and burn on the white, beautiful face that was trying to conceal its grief. During the day, she was gradually uneasy. Towards night, she became fascinated and alarmed. She didn't know what to make of it. Once, in the course of the evening, she was coming down the stairs, and she saw a man, who she later stood aside and stared. A strong light fell from a window on the face of the girl. Mabel noticed that he looked odd, strangely odd,—that she was a woman, although at a distance she was a child. And there was always that strange, inquiring, half-triumphant stare as of one who could be despised, but could not be put aside, as of one who seemed to claim a right to be taken into account. It was as if she were a woman, although her position would not allow her to presume to express it.

As the evening advanced towards night, the idea sprang up in Mabel's mind that in some mysterious manner, this girl was connected with her husband's death; and it was almost with a gasp of pain that she remembered the words: "My ayah, too, was out for a walk, and came home drenched."

What could take that girl, who shivered under the sunshine, out under the evening's chill?

But then the idea of connecting her husband with this Indian servant was preposterous, and Mabel began to fear that she was over-imaginative and anxious; perhaps her own imagination was conjuring her reason. But there is that curious subter-fuge, or intuition, or whatever you wish to call it, in some minds that anticipates all kinds of revelations, and jumps at its own conclusions with a sure and certain foot. And Mabel could not shake aside the fear that, if the mystery of her husband's death were ever unravelled, it would be found that this girl was not altogether unconnected with it.

Haunted by the thought, she was proceeding slowly upstairs, just about 11 o'clock, as the oil-lamps in the hotel-lobby were being relit, when she was, when, on turning a narrow step, she stumbled against the girl. She drew back with a certain loathing, which the girl was not slow to notice; and just then a door opened on the next corridor, and a lady's voice cried, in a suppressed way:

"Satara! Satara! be quick! The lights are being put out; and you must make your way back in the darkness!"

Mabel started, and she was alone, one hand; and placed the other over her beating heart. The girl saw the gesture and smiled, showing her white teeth, and also two deep lines around the mouth, which made her, Mabel's eyes, an old and hag-like woman.

She had barely strength to reach her room, and fling herself, in a kind of paralysis of fear, on an arm-chair.

The next morning, Maxwell had a tiny note to say that his cousin had all preparations made for her journey to Killynery to catch the up-mail to Dublin. "Poor Bob," the old Major called him, as all his arrangements had been made, merely warning Darby that, as he valued his life and his future prosperity, he should keep a closed mouth about all that he had witnessed.

They travelled by the stage-coach to Killynery, scarcely exchanging a word by the way. And without a word Maxwell saw his cousin into her compartment, provided all necessities for her personal comfort, ordered dinner at 10 p. m. in the dining-car, etc. Then as he said good-bye, his eyes lingered a moment on the stony, impassive face. He was not surprised to see the tears silently gather and fall. And he knew that the tears of a proud woman are treacherous tears.

They never met again.

After a few weeks of suffering, and longing once more to see the face of "Bob," Maxwell was gathered into his rest.

Mabel went abroad. And sometimes, in the great hotels at Vevey, Montreux, Cap Martin, etc., the guests amused themselves by watching the stately, silent figure of the girl, whose hair was prematurely gray, and who walked so silently and gravely from the dining-room, never exchanging a word with themselves. And it helped to pass pleasantly the winter evenings, when someone proposed, as a kind of charade, the conjecture as to whether she "had a story."

Hugh Hamberton was not killed by his fall from the cliff. But when the fisherman, who had pulled in furiously to save the children, had leaped from their boat, and placed the girls in safety, they found the mother in raising him from the waters that now were seething around him. He was quite unconscious; and all they could do was to raise him up, and take him beyond the rescue of the waves, until his carriage would arrive from Brandon Hall. But they lifted him tenderly and reverently as a hero, who had probably given his life to save little children from a terrible death.

And when the news of the event had reached the village, all hands struck work, and hastened to assist in every way the brave man who was now, and forevermore, enshrined in their hearts. Around the cottage freeds for many a night, the tale was told, and every circumstance gone over again and again, as if it were a story of the day. The people—the cry of the fisherman, the people—the call of the child to come down and play, the cheery response of the grave Englishman, whom no adult dare approach or address without deference, the cry of the fisherman, the screams of the girls, the gallant manner in which Hamberton had attempted to rescue them, his fall, etc., etc., all were narrated with some poetical exaggeration that only enhanced its reputation, and sent it far and wide.

Claire Maxwell was terribly shocked and grieved; but kept her feelings to herself under an appearance of calm composure. She would have written or wired to her husband, but she could not obtain the doctor's verdict. That was soon ascertained. No danger to life, but probably hopeless paralysis from spinal injury. It was terrible, but it might be worse; as it was some as of world's taken in battle in some glorious, if impossible, enterprise.

After some days, Maxwell returned, and Hamberton recovered consciousness. For some time his recollection of things that had happened, and his succession of ideas and events ranged themselves solemnly before him, and gave him much food for thought during the weary hours that dragged themselves along through the sick man's chamber.

Father Cosgrove was one of the first to call and offer his sympathies. He was elated at the idea that his friend, who was always denying and protesting against his duties, had been so truly and so gloriously manner. Father Cosgrove had preached to his own congregation a sermon on the event, taking for his text:

"Greater proof of love no man can give, than that a man should lay down his life for his friend."

And he drew tears from the eyes of his people by his picture of the glorious usefulness of this man, rich, powerful, and with all the accessories of happiness in his days, who had sacrificed all to save the lives of little children. And a mighty torrent of love and admiration surged around the lonely couch in Brandon Hall, where the invalid was now, and for many a long day to be improved.

The interview between Father Cosgrove and his friend was very touching. They silently grasped each other's hands, and said but little; the little on that, which was the most precious of all the popular applause and tumult about nothing.

"Look here," he feebly stammered, holding up the many newspaper notices that had been written about him, "what foolish man made me of themselves. Now, there is how reputations are made. It is the entirely hopeless imbecility of men—the eternal tomfoolery of the world."

But Father Cosgrove would only shake his head.

"I'm sure now," Hamberton would continue, "if all the great names and great deeds of the world were examined, and put to the test, as they are, they would be found to be bubbles as thin as soap-bubbles, and unless he is a fool no one has such a poor opinion of a man as himself."

"That is quite right!" Father Cosgrove was leaving the room, he called him back, and said:

"Don't be too proud at what I'm going to say."

"Then, after a pause, he added: 'After all, there is a God!'"

When the first shock was over, and all that medical skill could effect, was done for Hamberton, Maxwell thought the time had come when he might visit his friends at Lisheen. He was safe now. The report of his munificence and generosity toward these poor people had been waited far and wide; and by degrees, the imagination of the people, so slow to disentangle itself from its preconceived ideas, began to revolve around and finally settle down to the fact that verily, and indeed, and without doubt, Robert Maxwell, Esq., was the man who had served as saviour and labourer in their midst; and that for the noble and humane purpose of ascertaining their condition with a view to its betterment. It was like a fresh dawn of hope in the growing dusk of a nation's despair; for as yet the man acts of the legislature, that have revolutionized the condition of the tenant farmers of Ireland, had not been placed on the statute-book.

If Maxwell were one of those dwarfed souls who are the objects of popular applause, and the sound of fiddle drums and still more futile cheering, he could have had an ovation that would have made any of the leading politicians green with envy. But he shrank from such things as delicate and somewhat absurd; and he felt even a kind of shyness at the thought that he would have to face these poor people, and receive their honest thanks.

They had seen that everything that was done for the comfort and ease the loneliness of the poor invalid had been done, and in a quiet hour of a still autumn afternoon Claire and Maxwell drove over, after luncheon, to Lisheen.

They chose the road which Maxwell had travelled the night that he quitted in shame and remorse the humble roof that had given him shelter; and as they went he pointed out to his wife the places where he had stopped, the thoughts that passed through his mind; the very spot where he was going to throw all up in despair, and creep in amidst the bracken, and lie down and die; and the lake that glittered in the starlight, the river that murmured on his right hand and directed his course, the labourer's cottage where he had obtained a little food. It is a pleasant thing to prosperity to retrace the footsteps of adversity, and recall, with all the delight of the contrast, the mournful thoughts that seemed to make these footsteps in blood.

It was five o'clock when they turned in from the main road, and drove slowly up along the boren that led to the dwelling-house, Maxwell still pointing out each spot with its own association.

"I can tell you I was footsore and weary and hungry enough the evening I came along here," he said, "and I had many a time to think that I thought the dog would be set loose on me here. Look, there I lay down to gather my little together, and pluck up a little courage."

They reached the yard; and a great brown collie came out to challenge them, and demand their business.

Maxwell whistled, and the angry dog came whining and whispering and fawning upon him.

"You remain here a moment, Claire," he said, counting, "I should like to enter alone."

Claire remained on the trap, holding the reins loosely, and Maxwell entered the old salutation:

"Exactly the same as twelve months ago, there was no one there but the old rant, and she was crouching half-asleep over the wood and turf-fire, that was now dying down into white ashes, although the pungent fragrance of it filled the entire kitchen."

"God save you kindly!" she said, rising up, with that air and stone of respectful welcome that belong to these Irish women.

"Wish, this, yer 'anner, I suppose they're up among the pratties still. The days are drawn in," an' they must hurry."

"I don't know me!" he said, anxious to break the spell of mystery that hung around him.

"Wish, this, yer 'anner," she replied, peering closely at him through the bars of the kitchen, "you have the advantage of me, but shure yer're welcome, whoever you are!"

"You said the same words twelve months ago to a poor tramp that came to your door," he said.

"I did this; an' a sure 'twas God brought me on my way, and shure 'twas well he repaid us!"

"'Twas a quare thing," he replied, dropping into the country patois, "that a man could be six months under your roof, and that you don't recognize him!"

"Oh, holy mother o' God! An' it's yer 'anner that's shakin' to me? Oh, wish, this, a thousand welcomes; and 'tis well you deserve it, for shure all we have is you."

And rubbing her hand in her cheek apron, she timidly held it out to him.

"He grasped it in his own; and something like a sob came into his voice, as he said: 'I'm sure now, if I were a man, I'd give you a good shake, but shure I'm not a man, I'm a woman.'"

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'tis all a dhrame; an' somebody has put the comether on us. And thin we have to go out an' see ev'rythin' agin all over—the new house, the barns, the shooek, the crops, the walls an' hedges an' ditches; an' thin we comes back to go on our knees and thank the Lord and ax him to pour down blessings on yer 'anner an' on yer 'anner's wife all the days of yere lives."

And so with all mute and spoken deference and gratitude, these poor people poured out their souls to their benefactor; and Maxwell felt that he had been more than amply recompensed for his outlay, just as he felt that he had grown in all mental and moral stature by reason of the sharp experience he had passed through there in that humble home.

"I suppose I could hardly keep it up," he thought, "nor would I care to repeat it. But it was a gift of the gods. I feel that I am moving on, and that I am getting on my feet."

The one drawback was Debbie's stubborn refusal to make friends. And yet Maxwell was not sorry. He pitied the girl; but he knew well that far down beneath her rude and defiant exterior there was a heart that was as true as steel.

"Only one thing is wanting now to your happiness," said Maxwell, as they rose to go, "you must get Pierry here married as soon as possible. No house is rightly blessed unless the faces of little children are here. Isn't that true, Owen?"

"'Tis thrue, yer 'anner; and I begs and begs the Almighty to bless our way. But,"—he dropped his voice to a whisper, and pointed with his thumb to the room where Debbie was hiding, "she's thinkin' of yer 'anner over to her sisters in America in the spring; and she'll be sure to settle her there for life."

The old people shook their heads.

Pierry had got out the trap, and was stroking down the pony and handling the fresh brown harness with all an Irish boy's love for such things, and they were instantly getting under way.

The old man came out to say good-bye, but drew Maxwell aside. Then gulping down his emotion and nervousness, he said:

"I said a hasty word to yer 'anner the day of the eviction. God knows it is breakin' me heart, night an' day, since, an' sometimes I can't shut me eyes on account of it—Ay yer 'anner could manage to forget—"

"Now, look here, Owen," said Maxwell, grasping the rough, horny hand, "if I hear any more of that nonsense, I'll recall all that I have done for you. Don't I know what a hasty word is as well as any man? And to tell the truth, I give reason enough for it. Here come and say good-bye to my wife. Pierry, my boy, I have someone in my eye for you. It must not go beyond shrove at any cost!"

"All right, yer 'anner; God bless you!" said Pierry. Then, in his unbounded admiration of the trap and harness and pony, he subjoined:

"Isn't she a beauty?"

They drove merrily homewards; chatting gaily, about the people, their ways, their gratitude, their trials. Their hearts were light, because they had the consciousness of having done noble work. Every smallest sacrifice, every reaps its reward even in this world.

"What utter and unforgivable idiots we Irish landlords have been!" said Maxwell. "Here, at our feet, were the most loyal, generous, and faithful people on earth, who would follow us to death with joy. And we have trampled them into sullen and disloyal slaves, with hate and vengeance storming their hearts against us. Talk of 'lost opportunities.' We have flung to the winds our best interests—our country, our race, our happiness!"

"Is it too late?" asked Claire.

"Yes," her husband said, "in the sense that the dogs never can be whipped into submission. But there may be a chance of redress as yet. The people are forgiving and generous. But can the leopard change his spots?"

They had mounted the hill, beneath which the lake shone in the starlight, and the river ran down to the sea, when Claire suddenly started, and pointing to the horizon, said:

"That cannot be the rising moon, down there in the Southwest. I have been watching it for a few minutes, and it seems not to change."

"'Tis a big blaze," said Maxwell, alarmed, pushing on the pony.

"It seems in the direction of Cahers," she said.

"No, it is more southward," he said, though he did not believe it. "I expect some farmer's rick is on fire. Those threshing machines sometimes throw out sparks, and are dangerous."

But he whipped the pony onward; and with eyes fixed on the far-off blaze, which showed so terribly against the darkness of the night, they both fell into silence. When they dipped into the valley, the hills shut out the view of the fire. But in a quarter of an hour they reached the level plain again; and soon perceived to their horror that it was not a rick of hay or straw, but houses perhaps the whole village of Cahers that was being wiped out by the terrible element.

TO BE CONTINUED.