

LORD KILGOBBIN.

By CHARLES LEVER.

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

CHAPTER XXI.—Continued.

While the beer was being brought, a solemn silence ensued, and a less comfortable party could not easily be imagined.

When the interval had been so far prolonged that Kearney himself saw the necessity to do something, he placed his napkin on the table, leaned forward with a half motion of rising, and, addressing Miss Betty, said: "Shall we adjourn to the drawing-room, and take our coffee?"

"I'd rather stay where I am, Maurice Kearney, and have that glass of port you offered me awhile ago, for the beer was flat. Not that I'll detain the young people, nor keep yourself away from them very long."

When the two girls withdrew, Nina's look of insolent triumph at Kate betrayed the tone she was soon to take in treating of the old lady's good manners.

"You had a very sorry dinner, Miss Betty, but I can promise you an honest glass of wine," said Kearney, filling her glass.

"It's very nice," said she, sipping it, "though maybe, like myself, it's just a trifle too old."

"A good fault, Miss Betty, a good fault."

"For the wine, perhaps," said she, dryly; "but maybe it would taste better if I had not bought it so dearly."

"I don't think I understand you."

"I was about to say that I have forfeited that young lady's esteem by the way I obtained it. She'll never forgive me, instead of retiring for my coffee, sitting here like a man—and a man of that old hard-drinking school, Maurice, that has brought all the ruin on Ireland."

"Here's to their memory, any way," said Kearney, drinking off his glass.

"I'll drink no toasts nor sentiments, Maurice Kearney; and there's no artifice or roguery will make me forget I'm a woman and an O'Shea."

"Faix, you'll not catch me forgetting either," said Maurice, with a droll twinkle of his eye, which it was just as fortunate escaped her notice.

"I doubted for a long time, Maurice Kearney, whether I'd come over myself, or whether I'd write you a letter; not that I am good at writing, but, somehow, one can put their ideas more clear, and say things in a way that will fix them more in the mind; but at last I determined I'd come, though it's more than likely it's the last time Kilgobbin will see me here."

"I sincerely trust you are mistaken, so far."

"Well, Maurice, I'm not often mistaken. The woman that has managed an estate for more than forty years, been her own land steward and her own law-agent, doesn't make a great many blunders; and, as I said before, if Maurice has no friend to tell him the truth among the men of his acquaintance, it's well that there is a woman to the fore who has courage and good sense to go up and do it."

She looked fixedly at him, as though expecting some concurrence in the remark, if not some intimation to proceed; but neither came, and she continued:

"I suppose you don't read the Dublin newspapers?" said she, civilly.

"I do, and every day the post brings them."

"You see, therefore, without my telling you, what the world is saying about you. You see how they treat 'the search for arms,' as they head it, and 'the Maid of Saragossa.' Oh, Maurice Kearney! Maurice Kearney! whatever happened the old stock of the land, they never made themselves ridiculous."

"Have you done, Miss Betty," asked he, with assumed calmness.

"Done! Why it's only beginning I am," she cried. "Not but I'd bear a deal of blackguarding from the press; as the old woman said when the soldier threatened to run his bayonet through her, 'Devil thank you, it's only your trade.' But when we come to see the head of an old family making ducks and drakes of his family property, threatening the old tenants that have been on the land as long as his own people, raising the rent here, evicting there, distressing the people's minds when they've just as much as they can, to bear up

with—then it's time for an old friend and neighbor to give a timely warning, and cry 'stop.'"

"Have you done, Miss Betty?" and now his voice was more stern than before.

"I have not, nor near done, Maurice Kearney. I've said nothing of the way you're bringing up your family—that son in particular—to make him think himself a young man of fortune, when you know in your heart you'll leave him little more than the mortgages on the estate. I have not told you that it's one of the jokes of the capital to call him the Honorable Dick Kearney, and to ask him after his father the viscount."

"You haven't done yet, Miss O'Shea?" said he now, with a thickened voice.

"No, not yet," replied she, calmly; "not yet: for I'd like to remind you of the way you're behaving to the best of the whole of you—the only one, indeed, that's worth much in the family—your daughter Kate."

"Well, what have I done to wrong her?" said he, carried beyond his prudence by so astounding a charge.

"The very worst you could do, Maurice Kearney; the only mischief it was in your power, maybe. Look at the companion you have given her! Look at the respectable young lady you've brought home to live with your decent child."

"You'll not stop?" cried he, almost choking with passion.

"Not till I've told you why I came here, Maurice Kearney; for I'd beg you to understand it was no interest about yourself or your doings brought me. I came to tell you that I mean to be free about an old contract we once made—that I revoke it all. I was fool enough to believe that an alliance between our families would have made me entirely happy, and my nephew, Gorman O'Shea, was brought up to think the same. I have lived to know better, Maurice Kearney: I have lived to see that we don't suit each other at all, and I have come here to declare to you formally that it's all off. No nephew of mine shall come here for a wife. The heir to O'Shea's Barn shan't bring the mistress of it out of Kilgobbin Castle."

"Trust me for that, old lady," cried he, forgetting all his good manners in his violent passion.

"You'll be all the freer to catch a young aid-de-camp from the Castle," said she, sneeringly; "or maybe, indeed, a young lord—a rank equal to your own."

"Haven't you said enough?" screamed he, wild with rage.

"No, nor half, or you wouldn't be standing there wringing your hands with passion, and your hair bristling like a porcupine. You'd be at my feet, Maurice Kearney—ay, at my feet."

"So I would, Miss Betty," chimed he in, with a malicious grin, if I was only sure that you'd be as cruel as the last time I knelt there. "Oh, dear! oh, dear! and to think that I once wanted to marry that woman!"

"That you did! You'd have put your hand in the fire to win her."

"By my conscience, I'd have put myself altogether there, if I had won her."

"You understand now, sir," said she haughtily, "that there's no more between us."

"Thank God for the same!" ejaculated he, fervently.

"And that no nephew of mine comes courting a daughter of yours?"

"For his own sake, he'd better not."

"It's for his own sake I intend it, Maurice Kearney. It's of himself I'm thinking. And now, thanking you for the pleasant evening I've passed, and your charming society, I'll take my leave."

"I hope you'll not rob us of your company till you take a dish of tea," said he, with well-feigned politeness.

"It's hard to tear one's self away, Mr. Kearney; but it's late already."

"Couldn't we induce you to stop the night, Miss Betty?" asked he, in a tone of insinuation.

"Well, at least you'll let me ring to order your horse?"

"You may do that if it amuses you, Maurice Kearney; but, meanwhile, I'll just do what I've always done in the same place—I'll just go look for my own beast and see her saddled myself; and as Peter Gill is leaving you to-morrow, I'll take him back with me to-night."

"Is he going to you?" cried he, passionately.

"He's going to me, Mr. Kearney, with your leave, or without it, I don't know

which I like best." And with this she swept out of the room, while Kearney closed his eyes and lay back in his chair, stunned and almost stupefied.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CONFIDENTIAL TALK.

DICK KEARNEY walked the bog from early morning till dark without firing a shot. The snipe rose almost at his feet, and, wheeling in circles through the air, dipped again into some dark crevices of the waste, unnoticed by him. One thought only possessed, and never left him, as he went. He had overheard Nina's words to his sister as he made his escape over the fence, and learned how she promised to 'spare him,' and that if not worried about him, or asked to pledge herself, she would be 'merciful,' and not entangle the boy in a hopeless passion.

He would have liked to have scoffed at the insolence of this speech, and treated it as a trait of overweening vanity: he would have gladly accepted her pity as a sort of challenge, and said 'Be it so: let us see who will come safest out of this encounter,' and he felt in his heart he could not.

First of all, her beauty had really dazzled him, and the thousand graces of a manner of which he had known nothing captivated and almost bewildered him. He could not reply to her in the same tone he used to any other. If he fetched her a book or a chair, he gave it with a sort of deference that actually reached on himself, and made him more gentle and more courteous for the time. 'What would this influence end in making me?' was his question to himself. 'Should I gain in sentiment or feeling? Should I have higher and nobler aims? Should I be anything of that she herself described so glowingly, or should I only sink to a weak desire to be her slave, and ask for nothing better than some slight recognition of my devotion? I take it that she would say the choice lay with her, and that I should be the one or the other as she willed it, and though I would give much to believe her wrong, my heart tells me that I cannot. I came down here resolved to resist any influence she might attempt to have over me. Her likeness showed me how beautiful she was, but it could not tell me the dangerous fascination of her low liquid voice, her half-playful, half-melancholy smile, and that bewitching walk, with all its stately grace, so that every fold as she moves sends its own thrill of ecstasy. And now that I know all these, see and feel them, I am told that to me they can bring no hope! That I am too poor, too ignoble, too undistinguished, to raise my eyes to such attraction. I am nothing, and must live and die nothing.'

"She is candid enough, at all events. There is no rhapsody about her when she talks of poverty. She chronicles every stage of the misery, as though she had felt them all; and how unlike it she looks! There is an almost insolent well-being about her that puzzles me. She will not heed this, or suffer that, because it looks mean. Is this the subtle worship she offers to wealth, and is it thus she offers up her prayer to Fortune?"

"But why should she assume I must be her slave?" cried he, aloud, in a sort of defiance. "I have shown her no such preference, nor made any advances that would show I want to win her favor. Without denying that she is beautiful, is it so certain it is the kind of beauty I admire? She has scores of fascinations—I do not deny it; but should I say that I trust her? And if I should trust her, and love her too, where must it all end in? I do not believe in her theory that love will transform a fellow of my mold into a hero, not to say that I have my own doubt if she herself believes it. I wonder if Kate reads her more clearly? Girls so often understand each other by traits we have no clew to; and it was Kate who asked her almost in tone of entreaty, 'to spare me,' to save me from a hopeless passion, just as though I were some peasant-boy who had set his affection on a princess. Is that the way, then, the world would read our respective conditions? The son of a ruined house or the guests of a beggared family leaves little to choose between! Kate—the world—would call my lot the better of the two. The man's chance is not irretrievable, at least such is the theory. Those half dozen of fellows, who in a century or so contrive to work their way up to something, make a sort of precedent, and tell the others what they might be if they but knew how.

"I'm not vain enough to suppose I am one of these, and it is quite plain that she does not think me so." He pondered long over this thought, and then suddenly cried aloud: "Is it possible she may read Joe Atlee in this fashion? is that the stuff out of which she hopes to make a hero?" There was more bitterness in this thought than he had first imagined, and there was that of jealousy in it, too, that pained him deeply.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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