

The Project Gutenberg eBook of Grey Town

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: Grey Town

Author: Gerald Baldwin

Release date: July 12, 2008 [eBook #26034]
Most recently updated: January 3, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Nick Wall, Martin Pettit and the Online
Distributed Proofreading Team at <https://www.pgdp.net> (This
file was produced from images generously made available
by The Internet Archive/American Libraries.)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREY TOWN ***

GREY TOWN

**J ROY STEVENS, Print.,
1-7 Knox Place, Melbourne**



She raised the oar, and brought it down smartly across his knuckles.—
(See [page 190](#)).

GREY TOWN

An Australian Story

BY

GERALD R. BALDWIN

Author of "Dr. Pat Cassidy," etc.



Wholly set up and printed in Australia.
Registered by the Postmaster-General for transmission through the
post as a book.

"MESSENGER" OFFICE, ST. PATRICK'S COLLEGE
MELBOURNE

1922

Contents

CHAPTER

- [I.](#) THE PRESBYTERY
 - [II.](#) MICHAEL O'CONNOR
 - [III.](#) THE QUIRKS
 - [IV.](#) PROMOTION
 - [V.](#) DENIS QUIRK
 - [VI.](#) READJUSTMENT
 - [VII.](#) "THE OBSERVER" DIES
 - [VIII.](#) JOHN GERARD
 - [IX.](#) DAYS OF STORM AND STRESS
 - [X.](#) RUMOUR, HYDRA-HEADED
 - [XI.](#) TEMPTATION
 - [XII.](#) SYLVIA JACKSON
 - [XIII.](#) DENIS REFUSES TO SPEAK
 - [XIV.](#) "AND ONE OTHER!"
 - [XV.](#) DESMOND GOES UNDER
 - [XVI.](#) THE VIRTUE OF GREY TOWN
 - [XVII.](#) FATHER HEALY'S MISSION
 - [XVIII.](#) THROUGH THE GORGE
 - [XIX.](#) "THE FREELANCE"
 - [XX.](#) GREAT IS THE TRUTH
 - [XXI.](#) THE BISHOP'S SOLUTION
 - [XXII.](#) A LINK BROKEN
 - [XXIII.](#) A SICK CALL
 - [XXIV.](#) DENIS QUIRK'S HOMECOMING
 - [XXV.](#) A PROPOSAL
 - [XXVI.](#) GOOD AND EVIL
- [POST SCRIPTUM](#)

Grey Town.

[Pg 7]

An Australian Story.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRESBYTERY.

Grey Town looks down on the river and the ocean, its streets climbing up the small hill upon which the town has been built. It is a pleasant place in which to live, where, in winter, the air is warm, and in summer a cool breeze from the ocean tempers the hottest day. At the feet of the town the ocean beats restlessly on the narrow strip of beach that fringes the shore. On the distant horizon one may often see the black smoke, sometimes the hull, shadowy and indistinct, of some passing steamer. But only the smaller steamers or ships can enter the bay, for there are reefs and sand-spits, to touch which would mean destruction. Beside the town, the River Grey enters the ocean. When the tide is high, and the river swollen by heavy rains, there is a turmoil of waters at the bar, ocean and river contending for mastery. Then the river, banked up at its exit, overflows the low lands that lie to the east of the town, turning a green valley into a muddy lake. At other times the Grey valley is green and pleasant, excepting where the masses of grey rock from which it has its name jut out over the river.

At the highest summit of the town stands the Catholic church, the presbytery beside it. Years ago, when Father Healy came to his new parish, he found an acre block, vacant and forlorn, the very summit of the highest hill above the town.

[Pg 8]

"This has been destined for my church. In accordance with precedent, I shall build here," said the priest.

The agent to whom he made the remark laughed doubtfully. He knew Grey Town, man and woman, intimately; the peculiarities of Ebenezer Brown, owner of this plot of land, were well known to him.

"You can whistle for this site. It belongs to Ebenezer Brown," he said.

"Ebenezer Brown has his price, I presume," remarked Father Healy.

"He will sell this land—to an ordinary man—for twice its real value. To you he will not sell at any price."

"He shall have his price—from you. It will be worth four times its real value in a few years. Go and buy the land."

Thus was the site acquired, to the great indignation and consternation of the late owner.

"I might have named my own price if I had known who wanted it," he growled.

"You named your price, exactly double the true value," answered the agent.

"I could have got four times, six times, the real value, if you had dropped a hint. I have been robbed."

"Robbed!" cried the agent. "That would be a reversal of the ordinary routine. You old villain!" he added, as Ebenezer Brown walked out of his shop.

The old man was wealthy, and a miser, each of which characteristics may be corollary to the other. He made money by saving it; he saved it because he loved it. Many things he had achieved by strategy. The "Grey Town Observer," at one time the property of Michael O'Connor, was now Ebenezer Brown's, won by usury. The late owner, a careless man, was content to continue as editor, and thus serve the man who had robbed him. He was sufficiently shrewd to recognise his employer's character, yet at once too easy going and honest to prove other than a good servant. But he held, and always expressed, a heartfelt contempt for his master.

[Pg 9]

St. Mary's Church at Grey Town is large and commodious, built of bluestone, with a square tower. Over the porch is a statue of the Blessed Virgin, and from that position She appears to look down upon and bless the town.

When the church was built, many, both friends and enemies, declared that it was too large.

"It's all church, and no congregation," asserted Wise, the bootmaker, whose custom it was to address a few disciples in the Public Gardens every Sunday.

This remark was repeated to Father Healy, and smilingly he answered:

"The congregation will grow, but the church can't do that. Mr. Wise has a larger church, and a smaller congregation, all said and done."

And, sure enough, the congregation increased, until there was barely standing room for many at the early morning Mass.

In front, St. Mary's looks down on St. Paul's, the Anglican place of worship; below it, on the further slope of the hill, stands the Presbyterian chapel. On Sundays the three bells clang a loud discord. Throughout the week, however, Mr. Green, of St. Luke's, and Mr. Matthews, the Presbyterian minister, frequently visited Father Healy to discuss any subject but religion.

Saving for Wise, chief Ishmaelite of Grey Town, and opposed to every religious and political belief, peace prevailed in Grey Town. Father Healy came to the town desiring concord, and, after a short and natural estrangement, first Mr. Green, the Anglican clergyman, and later the other ministers of the town, had offered him the hand of friendship. There were, in fact, no greater friends and truer admirers than Father Healy and Mr. Green. When the priest had built his school, and invited the Bishop to lay the foundation stone, Mr. Green was present to offer his congratulations. Many an evening the two sat at bridge with Clarke, the solicitor, and Michael O'Connor to make the table complete.

[Pg 10]

"Let Grey Town be an object lesson to Australia," laughed Father Healy. "Here we value one another as citizens, and overlook each other's religious misbeliefs."

To this Mr. Green replied smilingly:

"You only need one thing to be a perfect man, Father."

"And that is to pull you over the wall beside me," cried the priest.

If St. Mary's Church were large and imposing, the presbytery was old and diminutive. Father Healy had bought the land and the house as it stood on a block beside the one for church and schools, and he had made no attempt to enlarge or improve the house.

"Time enough to build when I am dead," he remarked in answer to a deputation of his parishioners.

"But it is a disgrace to us to see you living in a ramshackle building, half in and half out of doors," said the spokesman.

"I have built church and schools, and I am content," replied the priest. "Let the next man erect a presbytery. What there is, is enough for me, and who is to grumble, if not I?"

Therewith he dismissed the deputation kindly, and returned to his study, the bow window of which looked out on the garden, a quiet solitude, where the priest often walked to say his Office. It was like the soul of good Father Healy, a peaceful spot, filled with sweet-smelling, simple flowers.

[Pg 11]

This garden was the pride of Dan, who acted as general factotum at the presbytery, and laboured and whistled the day through, with a smiling recognition for all comers.

"'Tis the finest piece of garden in Grey Town," he was wont to declare. "Give me the old wallflower, the rose, violet, and carnation, and let others be stocking their beds with dahlias and chrysanthemums, which have no smell to remind you of the old country."

There were few idle moments in his life. He scrubbed the presbytery verandah, and cleaned the windows, groomed and doctored the priest's horses, fed the fowls, and spent his leisure in an attempt to keep the school children out of the presbytery garden and orchard. In the last of his tasks he succeeded with all the scholars but Tim O'Neill. But Tim had respect for no one, not even Dan. Yet Father Healy prophesied good things of Tim.

Mrs. Maggie Gorman was housekeeper at the presbytery, a woman whose sour face concealed a kindly heart. She and Dan were for ever disputing, yet each held the other in profound respect. Let anyone traduce Mrs. Gorman, and Dan was bristling all over like an indignant porcupine. Say one word disrespectful of Dan before Mrs. Gorman, and you might wish that one word unspoken. Molly Healy, the priest's sister, declared that they quarrelled, yet loved, one another, as if they had been sister and brother.

Molly Healy herself spent a large part of her life in a struggle for precedence with Mrs. Gorman. But the housekeeper contrived to hold her position of authority.

"A child like you," she remarked, "to be troubling herself with the grocer and butcher! When you are as old as myself, I shall let you have your own way all the time." [Pg 12]

To this Molly acquiesced of necessity; there was no appeal to her brother.

"Now, peace! peace!" he would say. "I am here to look after the souls of the parish, and you must not trouble me about the affairs of the flesh. Let Mrs. Gorman take care of the meat, since it pleases her. If you don't, she will be poisoning us."

Molly Healy was a notability in Grey Town. Saving the school children, no one called her any other title but "Molly," or "Molly Healy." If a friend had chanced to do so, it would have caused Molly bitter pain, for she was a kindly soul. Plain, yet not unpleasing, she had a superabundance of bright Irish humour, and a quickness of repartee that amused all, but offended none.

"It's only Molly Healy," people were accustomed to say, "and she's the sweetest, kindest creature, that wouldn't hurt a fly, of intention."

When she first came to Grey Town the girl had been desperately home-sick, and many the longing glance she had cast at the ocean, wishing that it might carry her back to dear old Ireland. But now she was content to live in the bright, friendly land that was so kindly a foster-mother to her. And there were a multitude of duties, mostly self-imposed, to keep her mind and body busy.

In the presbytery grounds there was a veritable menagerie of animal pensioners dependent on her—two dogs, three cats, with a numerous progeny of kittens; a cockatoo and magpie, marvellously gifted in slang; two seagulls, kept for the benefit of the snails that infested the garden; an aviary of small, brightly-coloured birds; and, lastly, a miserable sheep, rescued from death by the roadside to live in an asthmatic condition of semi-invalidism. [Pg 13]

Then there were the human pensioners, men and women of any belief, who came periodically for food. They worshipped Molly Healy. But her kingdom was over the ragamuffins and rapsallions of the town, with whom she stood on the friendliest terms.

"Sure, I am reforming the imps," she was accustomed to say.

But it was a notorious fact that her young proteges rarely developed into moral perfection.

Such was the presbytery of Grey Town and its inmates in the days of which I am writing.

Father Healy was eating a perfunctory dinner in the dining-room, Mrs. Gorman and Dan wrangled in the kitchen, but Molly sat in the playground of the school, with Tim O'Neill, the culprit, facing her, and a circle of grinning children's faces as a background.

Tim had the face of a cherub, if we can conceive a cherub with an habitual grime on his countenance. Curly yellow hair, innocent blue eyes, for ever twinkling, a dimple in each cheek; add to these a dilapidated suit of clothes, and a sorely battered hat, and you have Tim O'Neill, the scourge of Grey Town.

"You will confess now, Tim O'Neill," said Molly Healy, with an assumed severity.

"It's to the Father I'll be confessing," replied the boy.

"No, Tim; it's to me. The Father is too gentle, and you know it. Didn't I see you with my own eyes?"

"Where's the need of me telling you, then?" asked the unabashed Tim, careful the while to keep beyond the reach of her hands.

At this retort the audience giggled. They admired the audacity of Tim, although most of them were model children. For, as his distracted mother often said, in excuse of her own leniency, "Tim has such a way with him. You couldn't help but smile, even when he is at his wickedest." [Pg 14]

"I saw you stealing the apples," cried Molly, disregarding his rejoinder. "Do you know that it's a big sin to steal the priest's apples? It's"—she hesitated for a moment, anxious to leave a lasting impression—"it's sacrilege."

The corners of Tim's mouth dropped, and his face became grave.

"Is it, miss?" he asked soberly.

"Now, listen to me, Tim, and I will teach you logic. Of course you know what logic is?"

"Is it a pain here?" asked Tim, pointing to the region below his waistcoat, the twinkle returning to his eye. Molly sternly repressed a tendency to giggle.

"No, logic is the art of reasoning," she replied, gravely. "Is that the presbytery, Tim?"

"What else?" asked Tim, scornfully.

"And to whom does it belong?"

"To the Father, to be sure."

"No, Tim; you are wrong."

Mrs. Gorman hailed the group from the kitchen door.

"Is Miss Molly there? Then send her to her dinner."

"I am busy, teaching logic. Sure the dinner can wait," replied Molly. "Now, Tim, and whose is it?"

"Is it the bishop's, Miss?"

"Wrong again. It belongs to the Church, and to steal from the Church is sacrilege. That's a big sin for a little boy to carry on his conscience, Tim O'Neill."

"It was only for a lark I took them, miss. Joe Adams there dared me to do it." And, his face brightening at the thought, "I have them in my pocket."

"Have you tasted them, Tim?"

"They have been bitten—by someone, miss," replied Tim, feeling in his pocket as if to assure himself of the fact. [Pg 15]

"Let me see them," said the relentless Molly.

"There is not much left to see."

"Was it you that tasted them?"

"Me and Joe, miss. He was hungry."

"Then you and Joe will die, Tim," cried the tormentor in a melancholy voice.

Tim's face became gloomy, while Joe Adams rubbed his eyes with his knuckles.

"No, miss. Don't be saying that," sighed Tim, now thoroughly repentant.

"Yes, you will—and so will I—and the doctor, too."

"I really am ashamed of you, Molly. This is persecution of an innocent boy."

The big, gaunt man, with deeply-lined face and iron grey moustache, who had paused to smile at the conversation, feigned an expression of disapproval as she looked up smilingly into his face.

"Persecution! For shame, Doctor Marsh, to be making such a suggestion. It's logic I'm teaching Tim—the apples, Tim, the apples!"

"They're not apples, miss," replied Tim.

"What are they, then?"

"They're cores, miss."

This reply was greeted with a shout of laughter, often repeated as Tim produced the remains of four apples, one by one.

"There you are, doctor. Now, what would you do to Tim," asked Molly.

"Tell him to take what he wants and change him from a criminal to a law-abiding citizen."

"There you are, Tim. Do you see the doctor's watch—it's a fine gold repeater. Take it, if you are wanting a watch!"

Tim riveted his eyes on the doctor's watch-chain, and the latter put his fingers on it to assure himself of its safety. [Pg 16]

"Run away, Tim, and don't be stealing again," he cried. "And you come inside with me, Molly, and eat your dinner. It will do you more good than a ton of logic. I have business with Father Healy."

The children scattered in all directions, saving for a group around Tim O'Neill. To these he

related an amended version of the late conversation.

"'D'you know what sacrilege is?' says she.

"'Sacrilege!' says I, scratching my head. 'Will it be telling lies?'

"'It may be, and it may not be,' says she.

"'Then I think it is sacrilege you're after, yourself. To be telling lies with a brother a priest is sacrilege, sure enough.'

"With that she wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. I think it's shamed she is." A burst of laughter rewarded the young sinner, and he darted off for home to gobble down a cold dinner.

"Is Michael O'Connor worse?" asked Molly, anxiously.

"He is dying," replied the doctor.

"What will Kathleen and Desmond do?"

"Desmond can battle for himself, but Kathleen's future needs consideration."

"Why not go to the Quirks, at Layton?"

"I would not allow Kathleen O'Connor to go to everybody. I must discuss the matter with Father Healy," replied Doctor Marsh.

CHAPTER II.

[Pg 17]

MICHAEL O'CONNOR.

Michael O'Connor died placidly, as he had always lived. An improvident man, as the world uses the term, he undoubtedly had been, but this arose from a defect of character. He never could refuse to give when asked to do so; his failing sprang from an excess of generosity.

A clever man, brilliant in his own chosen career of journalism, opportunities to make money had not been wanting; and money had been made and spent. He had founded "The Grey Town Observer," now a valuable property, but the paper had passed into the hands of Ebenezer Brown, with Michael O'Connor as editor; for Ebenezer Brown recognised that no other man could better fill the position. But the proprietor was careful to make the utmost of his employee's lack of worldly wisdom, offering him the very lowest salary that ever an editor worked for. The consequence was that Michael O'Connor lived and died an impecunious man, whose only legacy to his children was the record of a virtuous life.

Yet no fear had troubled the man as life slowly slipped from him. He had wronged none: to the poor he had given generously; staunch to his friends, loved by his children, and always faithful to his religion, why should he have any regrets? "Father," he said to Father Healy, "I am not afraid to die, for God is good; He will provide for Kathleen and Desmond, as He has provided for me, always a child. Father, always a child, as my father told me I would be."

"Just a child," said Father Healy, as he looked at the peaceful face of the dear friend, "as innocent and helpless as a child. God will reward him for what he has done for others."

[Pg 18]

Death was very near Michael O'Connor at that moment; it hovered over his bed, waiting every moment with thin, outstretched hands to snatch him away. On his bed he lay, his face waxen in colour and emaciated, while the white hands clasped the crucifix. Yet even then one might realise that the dying man had at one time been called "handsome Mike O'Connor." In the prime of his manhood—tall, broad-shouldered, and always cheerful—no other man in the district could look anything but insignificant beside him. But many a one from among the Irish farmers knew that he came of a line always noted for beauty. Men and women, the O'Connors had rarely failed in good looks, and as rarely succeeded in keeping their money. The dying man was, after all, the inheritor of his ancestors' virtues and failings.

The candles were lighted by the bedside. Father Healy, with Kathleen and Desmond, knelt on the floor reciting the prayers for the dying. The children were crying, Kathleen impulsively and without restraint, Desmond secretively, as men are accustomed to weep. The sick man's breathing came more slowly and weakly, his lips framed an occasional act of contrition which he was too feeble to utter. When the end came, it was a gentle transition from life to death. Through it all the old clock on the bedroom mantelpiece, dark-stained, and of a quaint design, ticked on as it had done ever since Desmond could remember. Symbolic it seemed of the world, that heeds not death; but moves, always onwards, replacing each one as he dies.

They clothed him in the brown habit, and placed him in the coffin, with the crucifix on his breast. There his many friends came to pray for him—men, women, little children, among them the good nuns, to whom he had always been a benefactor. It may safely be said that Michael O'Connor had not left one enemy behind him. If his life had been something of a failure, the man's death was a complete success.

[Pg 19]

But there were the children to think of, Kathleen and Desmond, inheritors of his good looks, but of nothing beyond that. Left young in the hands of a careless, happy-go-lucky father, who had always religiously applied the text of Scripture, "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," what were they to do for themselves? Desmond could draw and paint; he had the usual smattering of knowledge to be obtained in an ordinary school. Beyond these accomplishments and his father's gift for writing, the big, handsome, curly-haired fellow, half man and half boy, had nothing wherewith to fight the world.

"Writing for him, I suppose?" suggested Father Healy, as he and Dr. Marsh drove out in the doctor's gig to interview the O'Connors.

Dr. Marsh grunted, as was his way. He never had paid much attention to Desmond O'Connor. His opinion of the boy was that a battle with the world would do him nothing but good.

"Whatever he can get. If he does that well, he may begin to pick and choose," he said. "But Kathleen needs consideration."

Kathleen O'Connor was undoubtedly the doctor's favourite. She was such a sweet girl, beautiful in face, gentle in her manners. In her black dress she had looked so fragile and broken with grief on the day of her father's funeral. Vainly trying to maintain composure, yet shaken constantly by an involuntary sob, she had marvellously affected the tough old doctor, to whom female beauty appealed, although he affected to scorn it.

"The girl is beautiful," he said, "and it's a dangerous gift with weakness."

"The O'Connors always were beautiful," replied Father Healy. "Michael's father was the finest man in Ireland. They were born to be kings, and spent their money as if they had been emperors, while the money lasted. The boy is as grand as the girl, and I am fearful for him." [Pg 20]

"Oh, there is good and bad in the boy, as there is in every man of us."

He and the priest were sworn friends and allies, although they argued on every question that ever arose local or general—the doctor because he liked it, and Father Healy to humour a friend. At the gate of "Avoca," as Michael O'Connor had called his house, the doctor reined his horse in, and the two men scanned the dilapidated gate and unpainted fence, part of the general decay of what had been a pleasant villa and garden in the good days.

"It's like poor Michael," sighed the priest. "He only troubled himself about one thing, his soul. Well! that's saved, please God."

"Hem!" grunted the doctor, "that won't help Kathleen."

"It's a consolation to her, and always will be. To have had a good father is of as much value as a fortune," replied the priest.

"From your point of view, perhaps. There is only one thing you people value—the soul. The poor body may look after itself, and often gets more kicks than ha'pence."

The priest smiled significantly.

"You flatter us," he said.

"Rubbish!" replied the doctor. "Why don't you look after yourself; aren't you of more value than the people you are killing yourself for?"

Father Healy laughed, for he was a stout, rubicund man.

"I wonder whether you or I look the better nourished," he asked, surveying the doctor's attenuated form. [Pg 21]

"Some day you will drop down dead," replied the other.

"Death comes to all sooner or later," said his companion.

"Avoca" had at one time been a fine property; now over everything lay the mark of decay. A broad drive, covered with grass and weed; the remains of beds, where thistles and docks were destroying the flowers and lawns, knee-deep in the over-growth.

"And mortgaged for more than its value," sighed the priest.

"Do you approve of this?" asked Dr. Marsh, with a comprehensive wave of the hand.

"I do not. But better this than order and iniquity. I would like the property neat, tidy and unencumbered, with a fortune in the bank for Kathleen. But," Father Healy added with a sigh, "one can't have everything exactly as he wishes."

"It is the fault of your system," growled the doctor; "you are too strong on Eternity."

"I could not be too strong on that. But I always preach prudence and thrift."

"Bah! The presbytery is a sanctuary for all the loafers in Grey Town."

"You had better discuss that with Molly. She is almsgiver at the presbytery. But she tells me," the priest continued, with a twinkle in his eye, "that she doles out the food and money prudently, and lectures once a week on the virtues of total abstinence and hard work."

Even the doctor could not refrain from a dry chuckle at this aspect of Molly Healy's almsgiving.

"Then the lectures are as fruitless as your sermons," he said. "If Michael O'Connor had copied Joe Sheahan——."

"Ah, there you are! Didn't I teach Joe worldly prudence myself?" cried the priest, hastily. "I am proud of Joe, a good honest man, for all his money." [Pg 22]

They drew up in front of the house, and Desmond came running down the steps to take the doctor's horse. He was a big, bright-faced fellow, though he still bore the marks of the recent sorrow in the black band on his arm.

"Let me take the mare to the stable," he said.

Priest and doctor slowly descended from the gig and entered the house side by side, noting that here, too, were signs of decay and of neglect.

Kathleen emerged from the dining-room to greet them. In her face she still bore traces of recent tears, for she was a woman, and grief was not so easily forgotten by her as by her brother.

"Mr. Brown is waiting for you in the dining-room," she said, after the first greetings.

"Ebenezer Brown?" said the doctor, as if to turn back. "What brings him here?"

"Just the same errand as yours," cried a harsh voice from the dining-room. "To mourn over the man you killed."

A dry cackle followed the speech. But no one heeded what Ebenezer Brown said, so notorious was he in the town for a love of money and a bitter tongue. The doctor accepted the speech as a challenge, and entered the room defiantly, while Father Healy followed him.

"You didn't expect to find me here," said the old man, who sat in an armchair, a thin, stooped figure, with a pallid face and white hair.

"We did not," replied the priest.

The doctor murmured something about vultures and the dead.

"Eh?" asked the old man, feigning a convenient deafness, "I might expect you and the priest; the one generally prepares the way for the other." [Pg 23]

"I am expecting it will be a difficult meeting," murmured the priest.

Dr. Marsh, however, made no reply to the remark. He was awaiting a convenient time to lunge at his enemy, and he sat down opposite Ebenezer Brown, regarding him critically. After a moment's pause, he asked:

"Are your affairs in order, Brown?"

"Mind your own business, sub-dividing men into small allotments," snapped the other.

"I should arrange everything if I were you. Your money won't buy you a passport," said the doctor. "Increase your subscription to the hospital from threepence to sixpence, and lower your rents to twice what they should be, before it is too late. Your time will come before long."

"You won't get a penny of my money, living or dead," replied Ebenezer Brown.

"That shows you have a little wisdom remaining, for I would poison you, and believe I was performing an act of public utility."

"Let us get to business," cried the priest, anxious to terminate the wrangle. "Dr. Marsh and I am here to discuss what is to be done with Michael O'Connor's children."

"I am here to help the children," said Ebenezer. "Not with money," he added hastily, "but with sound advice."

"The only thing you ever gave away," commented the doctor.

"Eh? Yes; it is more valuable than money," said Ebenezer, relapsing into deafness. "Now, Desmond there will have to work. He has been idle too long."

To this remark Kathleen replied hastily:

"My father thought——."

"You must speak up if you expect me to hear, young lady," growled Ebenezer. "Your father was improvident." [Pg 24]

"A noble and generous man," replied the doctor, hotly.

"No doubt you think so. He lined your pockets, I believe."

Dr. Marsh could stand this no longer. He rose, pale with fury, but Father Healy gently pushed him back into his seat.

"Don't be paying attention to the old man," he said.

The two older men glared at one another across the table; the doctor growled out "Miser," Ebenezer muttered "Quack." But, fortunately, Desmond O'Connor entered the room at that moment, and distracted the attention of the company.

"Well, Desmond," cried Ebenezer Brown, "I need an office-boy; how would you like the billet?"

Desmond paused in the door, his face flushing crimson. He was 18, and to be termed an office-boy sounded like an insult. Father Healy, noting his shame and anger, went to the boy and placed a hand kindly on his shoulder.

"Take the rungs one by one if you would be at the top, Desmond," he said.

"He will be a long time getting there," sneered Ebenezer Brown.

Father Healy offered no reply. He had not come to quarrel, and where was the use? But Dr. Marsh answered quickly:

"You may sneer now, Ebenezer Brown—it is easy to do that—but the day will come when you will be asking Father Healy to help you, for he is as certain to be saved as you to be lost."

This defence came as a surprise to everyone present, perhaps most of all to the priest. The doctor was accustomed to scold and taunt him; this unexpected championship almost took his breath away. Ebenezer Brown was too greatly annoyed even to retort, but he glanced vindictively at the doctor.

[Pg 25]

"And now for Kathleen. Mrs. Quirk would like to have her at Layton as a companion and friend," said the priest.

"Friend!" grunted the doctor. "Quirk was a grocer."

"And where is the harm in that?" asked Father Healy, "if he were honest?"

"Honest?" commented Ebenezer Brown. "There never was an honest grocer; they all put sand in their sugar, and sell their second-rate goods as the best quality. I know them."

"Set a thief to catch a thief," cried the doctor. "How did you make your money?"

"Honestly! Not as you did, by poisoning your rich patients after they have left you a legacy," replied Ebenezer Brown.

"Honestly! You caught poor Harris drunk, and swindled him out of his land," retorted Dr. Marsh.

"Peace! Peace!" sighed Father Healy, attempting to take the doctor away by force.

"And you murdered Mat Devlin, as you've murdered a host of others," cried Ebenezer Brown.

Dr. Marsh broke from his friend's arm and went round the table where Ebenezer Brown sat. Shaking his fist in the old man's face, he cried:

"If I had one per cent. of your sins on my shoulders, I would never sleep again. I am tempted to give you the little blow that would be the end of you; but I don't like to rob you of your small hope of repentance."

CHAPTER III.

[Pg 26]

THE QUIRKS.

A splendid house, extravagantly furnished, green lawns, gardens bright in colours, and rich pasture lands around. Inside the house a crotchety old man and a lonely woman. Such was Kathleen O'Connor's new home at "Layton."

The name, "Samuel Quirk, Grocer," had reposed over the front of a small shop in a small street of Collingwood for many years. The grocer was known to the district as a shrewd tradesman on a small scale, and a keen politician. He had a limited connection with certain well-trying customers, and a number of irregular clients who came and went. In the neighbourhood where he lived, the grocer must assuredly have gone under had he not conducted a cash business. As it was, he kept his head above water and lived a quiet life, respected by his neighbours.

One day the postman brought a letter that completely altered the Quirks' scheme of life. It came from Boston, bringing news of a brother's death, and the gift of a great fortune to the Quirks. Such an unexpected event brought confusion into the orderly life of the old people.

"What shall we do with all the money?" the grocer asked his wife.

She was sitting over her knitting at the time, for her nimble fingers were seldom idle.

"Why not ask Father Healy?" she answered at once; for Father Healy was her one idea of wisdom. Years ago the priest had been a curate in Collingwood, and had there entwined himself about many hearts, Mrs. Quirk's among the number. Even now she wrote to him when her heart was troubled.

[Pg 27]

"Father Healy! And why ask him?" replied the old man.

He always began by disputing his wife's suggestions, but generally ended by putting them into practice.

"He is the good, wise man," replied Mrs. Quirk. "Did he ever tell me anything I should do that was not the only thing to do?"

Samuel Quirk grunted disbelievingly. "Oh, he's right enough for the soul, but what would Father Healy know about the body?" he asked.

Mrs. Quirk having placed the yeast in his mind, left it to ferment. She well knew that in a few days' time a letter would be despatched to the Presbytery at Grey Town. And this happened as she anticipated. In due course, too, the answer came back to them.

"Why not buy 'Layton' and settle down on the land? It will give you something to do, and lengthen your own and Mrs. Quirk's life," the priest wrote.

Samuel Quirk read the letter to his wife, commenting unfavourably on it the while.

"Buy a farm? What would I be doing on a farm?" he asked.

"Why not go down to Grey Town and see the place for yourself?" suggested Mrs. Quirk.

After a prolonged argument, the old man again accepted her advice. It was something of an adventure to him to journey so far by train, and to spend a night away from home. But it was far worse for the old woman, as he always termed her, to be alone in the shop for thirty-six hours. She missed her husband's rough voice, the heavy shuffling tread, above all the rare endearments that she valued for their infrequency. When Samuel Quirk returned he was received as if his absence had lasted twelve months.

[Pg 28]

"Well? Are we to go?" she asked.

"It's done. The place is bought and sold, and it's mine—and yours," he answered.

"Is it a grand place?" she questioned.

"It's as grand as the Governor's house," replied the old man. "I couldn't count the rooms, and the gardens are amazing."

A sigh came from her lips as she cast her eyes around the small sitting-room where every object was familiar.

"Can we take our things with us?" she asked.

"Take these!" he replied scornfully. "I've bought furniture, cows and horses, everything. What would we do with these?"

He was a man, and she a woman, whose heart was devoted to these old familiar, useful friends. A few of them she took with her, and placed in her own room at the new home, among them the old cane chair where her husband had sat, night after night, to smoke his pipe.

In the new home, Samuel Quirk soon found work and pleasure in supervising the employees. Of agriculture and horticulture he knew nothing, but he gathered knowledge speedily as he stood over his workers. He bore the transplanting well, and thrived in the new soil, while Mrs. Quirk was lonely and sad. There were none of her old cronies with whom to discuss small gossip over the counter or in the back room behind the shop. She missed the noise of the great city; the house was so large that it frightened her. When Kathleen O'Connor came, the old woman put her arm lovingly around her and said:

[Pg 29]

"Sure you will be coming to stay, Honey?"

"I hope so," replied the girl.

"Now, don't be calling me Mrs. Quirk; just call me Granny, as all the girls did in Melbourne. It was: 'How are ye, Granny?' and 'How are the rheumatics, Granny?' I miss the bright girls now."

Kathleen realised that here was a lonely soul, and found all the expected strangeness in the new life vanish from her.

She set herself to the purpose of making Mrs. Quirk happy, devising a hundred means to accomplish this. In the house she interested the old lady in reading, with fancy work, and, above all, with the artistic arrangement of the rooms.

"There is no reason why things should not be pretty," she said. "Let us begin with your own room, and gradually transform the house. It is so ugly now."

"Ugly!" cried Mrs. Quirk; "to my mind it's grand—far too grand for a plain woman like me. But you're an O'Connor, Honey, and 'tis natural you would know more about these things than me. Didn't I know your grandmother? Didn't I work for her myself? But don't be telling the old man I told you. It is strange having you in my house."

[Pg 30]

Kathleen turned the conversation into another channel. But she could not help reflecting upon the vicissitudes of life. A few years ago and Mrs. Quirk was a servant in her grand-parents' house;

now she, by a quick reversal of the wheel of fortune, found herself practically a servant to Mrs. Quirk.

But her employer never permitted such a thought to enter her own mind; it seemed almost as unthinkable as a heresy against her Faith.

"You are my friend," she told the girl; "though it is hard even to call you that. Look at my hands and yours; mine that have scrubbed the floor and been in the wash-tub, and yours that were just made to look at."

Kathleen took one of the old lady's hands and kissed it.

"And which are the better in the sight of God?" she asked; "the ones that have done the work they were made to do, or those that are merely objects of vanity? But I have worked with mine, too; scrubbed and washed, like you."

"Tis a wicked fate that made you have to do it; more shame to me for calling what is done by Providence wicked. But it's a strange world, Kathleen, this one; no one seems to be in their proper place. There's Father Healy, him that should be a Bishop, still a priest."

"Why not a Cardinal, or the Holy Father himself?" laughed Kathleen.

"And why not? It's a wise Pope the Father would make," answered Mrs. Quirk. "Not that I am finding any fault with the Holy Father," she added quickly; "he is a great man, the greatest in the whole world, and the wisest." [Pg 31]

Kathleen O'Connor exercised a remarkable influence on the old lady. Mrs. Quirk had needed a companion, and an interest in her new life; these she found in Kathleen. Together they slowly transformed the house, Samuel Quirk grumbling and protesting at each innovation, while he aided them the while with his purse. In a phaeton drawn by a quiet old pony, they travelled about the district, never missing a daily visit to the Catholic Church.

"I go out to visit my friends. Shall I miss calling on the best Friend ever I had?" Mrs. Quirk asked Kathleen. "In Collingwood I never missed the morning Mass, nor the afternoon visit. Here it is too far to go to Mass every day, but the Good Lord would miss me if I did not come once in the day to see Him."

"If I am not good, it will not be your fault," laughed Kathleen.

"It will be nobody's fault but your own; but you couldn't help being good. Didn't Father Healy tell me—."

"Hush!" cried Kathleen; "you must not give Father Healy's secrets away."

At the church gates they held a daily conference with Molly Healy. She had interested Mrs. Quirk in her gamins, and was accustomed to draw upon the old lady's purse when the Presbytery funds were low, or Father Healy obdurate to her appeals. [Pg 32]

Molly Healy acted as sacristan in the church, and Father Healy was accustomed to say:

"If you attended to everything as you do to the Altar, you would be a treasure to the husband that came seeking you."

"It's not many are doing that," replied the girl. "I could not count them on my fingers—because, even I can't count what does not exist."

"How many would you be expecting at eighteen? You are but a child," he answered. "Well, the Altar is a credit to you. You make the brass shine as if it were gold."

"Gold it would be, if I had my way, and the glass precious stones. But I do the best with what there is," replied Molly.

She dearly loved to hear a word of praise in return for her labours. This Kathleen knew well, and she encouraged Mrs. Quirk to admire the flowers and other decorations. The old lady readily did this, for she was typically Irish in finding it far easier to give a generous measure of encouragement than to blame the actions of another.

"It is you, Molly," she would say—at first, until corrected by the girl, it had been Miss Molly—"that can put the flowers in their proper places! It is a pleasure to come into the church and find the altar so beautiful. Those carnations, now, they remind me of Heaven."

"It is dahlias they are, Mrs. Quirk," Molly would reply; "and out of your own garden."

"Is it dahlias? Well, I am getting a little blind, Molly; but the beauty is there, whatever the flowers may be." [Pg 33]

Thus encouraged, Molly would speak of her proteges.

"Joe McCarthy told me the same, and he thinks more praise is due to you than me. You send me the flowers every day."

"And why not? What better use for them? But which is Joe McCarthy?" Mrs. Quirk might answer.

"Don't you know Joe? Such a good boy, but unfortunate. He was with Regan, driving the cart,

when the horse ran away and broke himself and the cart into small pieces. It was a mercy Joe was not in the cart," Molly would continue.

"Poor lad! And that was a misfortune. Is he badly hurt?" Mrs. Quirk would ask.

"Not hurt in his body, but dispirited. Regan discharged him without a character. I went to him myself; it's a surly man he is. 'Why not give the boy a testimonial?' I asked. 'It's the whip I will give him,' he answered. That was all I got from Regan."

"And why was the man so heartless?" asked Mrs. Quirk.

"After all, Regan lost his horse and cart. You can scarcely blame him," Kathleen would explain.

"And hasn't he plenty of money to buy another? I have no patience with Regan. And there is Joe, with a mother depending on him, out of work, and with no testimonial to help him to another," Molly would reply.

The result would be a few shillings from the old lady's purse, which Joe would probably spend on "a good thing," that would just fail to secure a race, as "good things" so often do. But Molly Healy was never discouraged by such trifles as these. [Pg 34]

"What did you do with the money, Joe?" she would ask.

"It was Harry Price told me to invest it on Blue Peter."

"I told you to take it home to your mother. Shame on you, Joe, to be wasting her food on horses."

"It was like this. 'Would you be making a fortune?' Harry asked me. And who wouldn't, Miss Molly, not you nor I. 'Blue Peter is a cert,' said he; 'my brother Bill will be riding.' Could you resist that?"

"Hem!" Molly would reply; "and did he win?"

"If his neck had been as long as Smoker's he would have won," Joe would explain.

After a few days he would return to favour, and continue a pensioner until he found work for a short time. But ill-luck ever dogged Joe's footsteps, and his periods of work were ever briefer and briefer, until he threatened to relapse into chronic idleness. Then, to her own surprise, and that of all who knew her, Molly suddenly compelled Joe to reform.

"I have a place for you, Joe, and the last you will ever be getting," she said. "It's a disgrace to me you are, and everyone saying I have spoiled you. Mr. Quirk will take you on, and he is a slave-driver. He stands over his men with a whip. It was hard work I had to get you the place—milking the cows, and helping in the garden. But I told the man you were a hard worker. If you don't work hard, Joe, it is the whip I will give you with my own hands." [Pg 35]

Whether it was this threat, a fear of Mr. Quirk, or the effects of the mission cannot be clearly said, but Joe McCarthy clung to his work until he eventually became overseer at "Layton." With his change in habits, Joe also acquired a self-respect that led him to dress neatly, and to sign the pledge. Thenceforward Molly Healy quoted him as the proof of her powers as a reformer when taunted because of the rabble over whom she reigned.

"There was Joe McCarthy, that would not work until I persuaded him," she would say. "Leave the boys to me; I am correcting them."

Yet only Mrs. Quirk had absolute confidence in the girl's vocation as a reformer. The old lady was never told of a good-for-nothing son or husband but she would cry:

"Send him to Molly Healy. If there is any good in him, Molly will bring it out."

Her hearers, knowing of Molly's long succession of failures, naturally smiled at these commendations.

CHAPTER IV.

PROMOTION.

"You can run round to the meeting in the Town Hall to-night and see what sort of a fist you make of it," said Cairns, the man who now sat in the editorial chair of "The Grey Town Observer," to Desmond O'Connor, just one month after the young man had been admitted to the office.

"Thank you, sir," said Desmond, springing to his feet in his excitement.

"It's a chance," said the editor. "Don't be too diffuse, but see that you miss nothing. What is that paper in front of you?" He took the paper from Desmond O'Connor's hands and held it at arm's length, while a sardonic smile held possession of his face.

"Shall I let the old man see it?" he asked. "Mr. Brown would like to see himself as you see him, under the title of 'Old Eb.' By the way, if you could catch Martin smiling to-night, and Langridge

in tears, it would help your report. You appear to bring out the salient features of a handsome face, even if you accentuate them. Martin's teeth and Langridge's nose are striking objects. Let us have them for to-morrow."

Desmond returned to his type-writing with a sigh of satisfaction. In this meeting he saw a road to promotion.

[Pg 37]

Meeting Molly Healy on his way to luncheon, he paused to make her sharer in his good fortune, for Molly and he had always been good comrades.

Molly was in a tearing hurry at that moment. One of her dogs had strayed, and she was beating the town to find him; but she paused to listen to his tale.

"Going to the meeting! Is it to speak?" she asked.

"No," he replied contemptuously, "to report what the beggars say."

"Just to write down the words of a lot of windbags. That's nothing! If I were Ebenezer Brown, you would be in Mr. Cairns' place. But, good luck to you, Desmond. I will set all the old women praying for you. Some day you will be owning a paper yourself, if I can help you."

"Thank you, Molly," he cried.

The girl cast a wistful glance after him as he left her, for no one admired Desmond O'Connor more than she. But the vision of a black dog vanishing around a distant corner caused her to start in a hurried pursuit. Round the corner she ran, straight into the arms of Constable McSherry, who was coming sedately along the footpath in an opposite direction to her own.

"What would my wife say if she saw this?" he asked, as she cannoned into him; "a young lady running into my arms?"

"Don't be talking nonsense," she replied, laughingly. "Did you see a dog?"

"It's nothing but dogs," he answered. "Which was the one you were after?"

"A black-and-tan collie with a blue-ribbon round his neck, and a saucy look on his face."

[Pg 38]

"A blue ribbon around his neck? It wouldn't be the one I saw going into the public-house, then?"

The constable paused to consider, while Molly suddenly whirled down the street and pounced on the errant collie. Seeing this, Constable McSherry turned to continue his leisurely course of inspection.

As Desmond returned from his hurried meal, he again met Molly, towing her unwilling captive home. She signalled to Desmond to stop.

"I have been thinking that you might take me to the meeting," she said.

Desmond shook his head.

"Not to-night, Molly. You would have me laughing all the time. There's a circus coming next week; will you come to that?"

"Do you think I am never serious?" the girl asked. "I would not so much as smile."

"It can't be done, Molly. I shall be sitting at a table writing for all I am worth."

"Then I will sit just behind you and torment you all the while," she remarked vindictively.

And such was her purpose when she induced Dr. Marsh to accompany her to the Town Hall that evening.

"You don't know what you are doing!" he protested. "I shall go to sleep, I know. Did you ever hear me snore? They tell me it's like the grunt of a boar when he is hungry after a seven days' fast."

"Let me hear you do it now!" she laughed. "I am going there to-night just to tease Desmond O'Connor. He refused to take me."

[Pg 39]

"What is Desmond doing there?" asked the doctor.

"Taking notes of the speeches. It won't be many notes he will take to-night," she answered.

"For shame, Molly. This is the boy's chance of promotion. If I take you, we shall sit at the back of the hall."

"Among the boys?" asked Molly. "Then you shall take me to enjoy the fun. I'll ignore Desmond to-night; but I will be even with him for this."

A political meeting, with two picked speakers to leaven a number of dull and uninteresting harangues. It was not a very exciting entertainment. But there were "the boys," vociferous, intolerant, sometimes amusing, to enliven proceedings for Molly; while Desmond snatched up the salient features in shorthand and with pencil. Samuel Quirk was a keen politician, and he had transferred the scope of his energy from Collingwood to Grey Town. Unlike many men, he had not changed his politics with the change in his fortunes. He it was who had organised the opposition. At his word a storm of protest, a roar of ironical laughter, or a volley of interjections

harassed the speakers on the platform. And it was Samuel Quirk who asked the first questions at the close of the meeting. Straightway Desmond transferred the old man to his note-book, to appear on the following morning as "The Interjector in Chief," in company with Martin and Langridge.

"You have scored a bullseye," cried Cairns, when he had read Desmond's report, and had glanced at the sketches. "You are promoted to the reporting staff. Keep your observant faculties keen and your pencil sharp, my boy, and we will make the old "Observer" boom."

[Pg 40]

Samuel Quirk smiled when he saw himself in the morning's paper.

"See here, old woman, what they have been doing to me!" he cried, as he banged "The Observer" down in front of his wife at breakfast.

With trembling hands, she adjusted her glasses, fully anticipating that her husband had been sentenced to some heavy penalty for his political creed. But when she saw him on the front sheet of the paper, with the bellicose features of his face exaggerated, Mrs. Quirk was moved to anger.

"And who has been doing this?" she asked. "It is time something should be done to put an end to this. It is an outrage— Does he call himself an artist?" she questioned, after studying the picture.

"I think it's a very fine picture; perhaps the nose is a little large, and the mouth, too. But it's quite a pleasant picture," said Samuel Quirk complacently.

"If I knew the man that had done it, sure I would make it quite unpleasant for him," said Mrs. Quirk.

"'Tis a sign of fame to be made a sketch of," said Samuel Quirk. "They know that I have organised the boys, and this is the way they try to have revenge."

Therewith he went out to talk politics to his employes while he watched them at work.

"'Tis but eight hours you will do, lads, but it will be an honest eight hours' work you will give me for the decent wages I pay you," he was accustomed to say.

[Pg 41]

Kathleen O'Connor recognised Desmond's hand in the sketch when Mrs. Quirk showed it to her. She, however, considered it prudent not to mention the artist's name, for she could see that Mrs. Quirk was deeply hurt at what she regarded as an insult to the old man. Fortunately, however, an event occurred during the day that entirely diverted Mrs. Quirk's attention from the picture of her husband.

It was one of Kathleen's duties to read to Mrs. Quirk the few letters that came for her.

"My sight is leaving me," the old lady remarked in excuse for her lack of education, "and these spectacles don't appear to improve it."

Therefore, Kathleen opened a letter, addressed in a man's bold handwriting to "Mrs. Quirk, 26 Rainey-street, Collingwood," and forwarded from that address. It had come from the United States, and had evidently been delayed in transit, for the letter was dated three months before it was received.

"My dearest old mother," Kathleen began to read.

"It's from Denis!" cried Mrs. Quirk. "Denis, that I believed was dead! Call Mr. Quirk, my dear! Oh, this is too much joy! God is good, far too good, to an undeserving old woman like me."

Kathleen went out into the gardens and found Mr. Quirk, spade in hand, busily instructing a raw recruit how to work.

"There's no art in it," he remarked contemptuously. "'Tis merely a matter of muscle. You won't do for me!"

[Pg 42]

"Mrs. Quirk wants you in the dining-room," said Kathleen.

"Wants me? And what for?" he asked.

"She has a letter from your son."

Mr. Quirk laughed contemptuously. But he paused in his work to reply.

"My only son is dead these ten years. Is she mad?"

"No, she is not," replied the girl indignantly. "I opened the letter myself, and it is from your son."

"I will come and see it. It is probably some idle vagabond that is playing a trick on her," growled Samuel Quirk. "Here," he cried to the labourer, "take the spade, and let me see what you can do."

Kathleen was always annoyed by the old man's assumed contempt for his wife. Samuel Quirk recognised the fact, and was secretly amused at it. He feigned a greater intolerance and disrespect before the girl, just to increase her indignation. Now, as she moved away, the picture of resentment, he called out:

"Tell her I am coming to expose the scamp. She is too soft. Every idle fellow makes use of her."

Kathleen found the old lady holding the opened letter upside down, vainly attempting to decipher the writing, while the tears of joy dropped from her eyes upon the pages.

"Mr. Quirk does not believe it is from your son," said Kathleen.

"Who but Denis would call me mother?" she asked. "But himself was just saying that to annoy you; don't be taking too much notice of him. Read it, dearie. Let me hear my boy speaking to me again."

[Pg 43]

"I have prospered and made a fortune in America. I am coming home to look after you and the father. Prepare to pack up and come with me to a better home than the old one in Collingwood. I have been wanting all these years to have the old mother, who sacrificed herself for me, beside me."

"And why not sacrifice myself for him? Wasn't he my only child? And a dear boy—and good. Didn't my heart all but break with joy when I first saw him serving the good priest's Mass! It was Father Healy's himself, no less. Does he say anything about the Faith?" asked Mrs. Quirk.

"I shall buy a fine home, with the church not half a mile away. You can make the church your second home, as you did in Collingwood," read Kathleen.

Samuel Quirk marched relentlessly into the room, his face showing the most determined incredulity it could assume.

"Let me see the letter," he said, calmly taking it from Kathleen.

"Could Denis write like this?" he asked.

"And who better?" cried Mrs. Quirk. "Wasn't he the smartest boy at school? Do you remember the day he won all those prizes?"

A smile of pride overspread the old man's face for one moment, then he remorselessly subdued it.

"I am thinking it is some scamp that has heard how soft you are," he remarked, as he read the letter. "Hem! I wonder how much money that will be? And when will he be here?"

[Pg 44]

As if in answer to his question, the sound of wheels was heard on the avenue. Mrs. Quirk flew to the window, while the old man followed more sedately.

"It is himself!" cried Mrs. Quirk. "Let me be the first to bid him welcome."

She almost ran to the front door in her excitement, to find the strong arms of a man around her.

"Glory be to God! And is it Denis?" she sobbed.

"Who else would it be?" answered the newcomer.

CHAPTER V.

[Pg 45]

DENIS QUIRK.

Cairns was compounded of energy, his policy to snatch from the hands of progress all that was good, and make the uttermost use of it. "Try all things," he would say. "Throw away the rubbish, and keep that which is enduring." Under his management, "The Observer" advanced from a second-class country paper to one but little inferior to the metropolitan organs.

One man whom he found on the staff he classified as hopeless.

"Worse than this," he added, speaking to Desmond O'Connor, to whom he unburdened himself, "'Gifford will never learn. He believes himself to be a journalistic planet. I don't mind an ordinary honest fool that knows it is a fool, but a fool that regards its own inane folly as the final thing in wisdom is hopeless. Gifford must go."

Here, however, Cairns found himself opposed to his employer. Ebenezer Brown had so high a respect for Gifford that he had been sorely tempted, after the death of Michael O'Connor, to place the sub-editor in the editorial chair. For this promotion Gifford was fully prepared, and only a very small incident preserved Ebenezer Brown from ruining his paper. It had so chanced that the editor of a leading metropolitan paper had come to the funeral of his former colleague, Michael O'Connor. Meeting Ebenezer Brown after the funeral, he had asked:

[Pg 46]

"Who will succeed O'Connor?"

"I am thinking of promoting Gifford," replied the old man.

"Gifford!" cried the editor, under whom many a journalist had graduated. "Are you quite mad?"

"Are you?" retorted Ebenezer Brown, hotly.

"Many people say I am. But I was sane enough to shoot Gifford out the first chance I had of ridding the paper of him."

"You sent him to me with a yard of testimonial," growled Ebenezer Brown.

"Diplomacy, my dear sir. I never make an enemy unless I find myself compelled to do so in self-defence. You needed a new sub-editor, I a new reporter, and I merely shuffled the cards and dealt them again. In your case Gifford seems to have proved a success."

"How do you know that?" asked the old man, rudely.

"You are anxious to promote him."

"On your recommendation. 'A brilliant journalist' you called him," cried Ebenezer Brown.

"And he has been with you six months. Surely you know him by this time?"

"Perhaps you know a better," suggested the old man.

"I know few worse, and I know one man the very man for 'The Observer'; but I doubt if he will come to you," said the editor. [Pg 47]

"Why not?" asked Ebenezer Brown.

"Because you sweat your employes. No man but O'Connor would have worked as editor for the pittance you paid him. Cairns certainly will require a fair salary and a free hand before he gives 'The Observer' a chance."

Ebenezer Brown recognised the truth of what the editor said. His chief regret was that Michael O'Connor had not lived for ever. However, after prolonged negotiations, he accepted Cairns on the latter's own terms.

It was another matter, however, when the editor demanded a more capable lieutenant than Gifford. Here he found Ebenezer Brown inexorable, for the sub-editor was linked to him by the triple bonds of flattery, usefulness, and influence. He made it a rule to regard Ebenezer's every action as perfection; outside the office he assisted the old man in his business affairs; and he brought influence to bear in buttressing his position against the assaults of his chief. The consequence was that he remained as nominal sub-editor, while Cairns deputed Desmond O'Connor to do the work. Gifford, recognising the slight, bore his chief and subordinate no love, but, being unable to injure Cairns, bent himself to take his revenge from the reporter.

It was in his power to make his subordinate's life unpleasant, and this he accomplished to the utmost limit of his capability. But he was not satisfied with this; his purpose in life was to ruin Desmond. He sowed the seeds of dislike in Ebenezer Brown's mind—an easy thing to accomplish when one was so careless as Desmond O'Connor. [Pg 48]

Sketches he left lying about, and verses of poetry which were like pointed barbs in the flesh of Ebenezer Brown. But when the old man turned to Cairns suggesting the dismissal of the reporter, he received small encouragement from the editor.

"O'Connor is careless; I grant that. He is still a boy, and he acts on impulses, often mistaken ones. He is very clever with his pencil, and does not care a hang whom he caricatures. He has even had the cheek to sketch me. I saw it.

"And me, too," growled Ebenezer.

"I saw that, too. I suppose Gifford exhibited it to you?" said Cairns.

"Never mind how I saw it. It is impudence, insubordination, ingratitude," replied the old man.

"Hem!" coughed the editor, dubiously.

"Look what his father owed to me."

"And you to O'Connor," suggested Cairns. "I should put the ingratitude on one side. O'Connor can go if you like, and I shall also retire."

"Oh, nonsense, Cairns! You have a good billet cried Ebenezer.

"No better than I deserve, I assure you. The long and short of it is that I will not allow the petty jealousy of Gifford to deprive me of an invaluable assistant. This is an ultimatum." [Pg 49]

Ebenezer Brown retired, grumbling to himself, while Cairns sought Desmond O'Connor.

"You are a hopeless young dog," he said, picking up a sketch. "A racehorse! I presume you bet?"

"Just a trifle now and again," replied the reporter, carelessly. "I won a tenner over that horse."

"Knowing the prejudices of your chief, I am surprised at you. Ebenezer Brown detests racehorses."

"It runs in the blood, sir. My father was worse than I. He would have owned this paper but for a horse and jockey. The horse would have won the Melbourne Cup but that it did not fall in with the jockey's plans. The governor turned to Ebenezer Brown for assistance, and mortgaged 'The Observer,' The old man should be eternally grateful to racehorses."

"And here am I for ever fighting your battles. Why don't you help me? If Ebenezer Brown knows that you gamble, he will shoot you out," remonstrated Cairns.

"He knew the governor's besetting sin, and never so much as remonstrated with him," said Desmond.

"Because your father was invaluable to him, and cheap, neither of which qualifications you possess. There is another matter against you—in fact, several other matters. You dabble in theatricals."

Desmond O'Connor laughed.

"Do you object to theatricals?" he asked.

"Not in the least, excepting from a humanitarian point of view. My only charge against your company is that you contemplate the mutilation of 'As You Like It.'" [Pg 50]

"Better to aim high," suggested Desmond O'Connor, "than to be content with second-rate melodrama. We have a capable instructor, and we are very humble, I assure you. Our attitude is one of deprecation; be merciful our prayer."

"Do you deserve mercy," asked the editor, "rendering none? But let that pass. You at least, I am told, are among the passable players. But Ebenezer Brown abhors plays and players; he detests billiards and cards; strong drink is anathema to him. How can you expect to keep your position—an actor, a billiard player, exponent of bridge, and one who shouts and is shouted?"

"I can only rely upon your support. All these things are harmless," said the reporter.

"Undoubtedly harmless in moderation. But the owner of this paper regards horses, cards and billiards merely as media for gambling; he cannot discriminate between cards as a pleasant relaxation and as a method for playing 'beggar my neighbour.' Plays and strong drink he associates with other vices. If you were a good and prudent young man, you would hide your vices under a pious exterior—for home consumption."

"Hypocrisy!" cried Desmond O'Connor. "I would rather be anything than a hypocrite. What right has old Ebenezer Brown to come dictating to me and preaching piety? Have you heard his history?"

"Snatches of it," said Cairns. "It is the history of many other successful men."

"He is a robber, a mere bird of prey. He has built on the ruins of widows and orphans.' The whole town knows what he is, and he deceives no man, excepting Gifford and himself. Does he expect to deceive the Almighty?" [Pg 51]

A sound behind them, half a cry and half a curse, caused the two men to turn towards the door. There stood Ebenezer Brown, his accustomed pallor changed to an unhealthy purple.

"Go!" he cried, barely able to articulate the word in his rage, as he pointed an attenuated finger towards the door. "You are an insubordinate young dog! Go at once!"

"One minute, Mr. Brown. I warned you that no one should dismiss my subordinates but I. If O'Connor goes, I follow him."

"As you please," gasped the old man. "There are others as clever as you, and infinitely less expensive. You ungrateful young scapegrace!" he added, turning on Desmond, "I have been a friend to you and to your family. But for me you would have starved."

With this he stalked out of the office, leaving the other men smiling broadly in each other's faces at this outburst of impotent rage.

"I am a stubborn sort of person," said Cairns, "and I rather like this locality. Shall we stay in Grey Town and fight him?"

Desmond eyed his superior with an unaffected surprise.

"Fight him? But how?" he asked.

"Come round to me to-night—no, to-morrow night, young man. I must see one or two men of business in the town. After my interviews we will discuss the best means of fighting Ebenezer." [Pg 52]

"Shall we take the old man at his word, and leave him in the lurch? Do you think he could run 'The Observer' for himself?" asked Desmond.

"No, Desmond; here I stay until he finds a successor. I love the old 'Observer,' and I am responsible for it while I remain on the staff. After I go, I may take my revenge out of the ancient sinner."

That day the work proceeded as usual. During the course of it a man came into the office and asked for Desmond O'Connor. He was a big man, with a good-humoured, ugly face, surmounted by curly black hair. He was tanned by the sun, and his blue-grey Irish eyes peeped out from the reddish-brown surroundings of his face. He had a determined mouth and chin, a jaw that spoke of a struggle with the world, and of success in that battle.

"You are O'Connor?" he asked Desmond when he appeared. "I am Quirk, the long lost and recently returned. Did Miss O'Connor speak of me?"

"She did," replied Desmond, "and of your adventures. Could you favour me with a brief recital of

your career?"

"For copy? No, my lad; I am reserving that for my own paper. Any chance for another paper here?" he asked, casually.

"You had better not ask me. I am still an employe of The Observer."

"Still? Do you anticipate a move?" asked Quirk, leaning half over the counter.

[Pg 53]

"I do. I have my marching orders."

"Been playing up, eh? Well, I was a holy terror at your age. I made the old dad's life a torment to him, and sowed a bushel of grey hairs in the mother's head. Is the boss in?"

"Cairns? Yes, I think so."

"Approachable?" asked Quirk.

"Sometimes," replied Desmond.

"What sort of forecast to-day—stormy?"

"Knock at his door, and let him answer for himself."

"Right. I will see you as I go out."

He went to the editor's door, and knocked violently. There was no response, and he knocked again—more violently. Then the door opened suddenly, and Cairns confronted him in a white fury.

"Now, what the dickens, sir," cried the editor, "brings your big battering ram of a fist in contact with my door? Nature provides earthquakes in these parts without your assistance, you noisy devil!"

"Who are you shouting at?" answered Quirk, in an equal fury. "Can't a man tap gently—."

"Tap gently! What sort of a disturbance happens when you knock loudly? What do you want with me?"

"Nothing now. I came to speak to a man, and I find a grizzly bear. Can't a man who has come from the other side of creation call on a local celebrity but he must have his nose snapped off? Good-day to you, sir!"

[Pg 54]

Cairns' sense of the humorous saved the situation. Recovering quickly from his irritation, he burst into a roar of laughter. This, for the moment, only added to the other man's indignation.

"Are you laughing at me, sir?" he asked.

"No, I was laughing at myself. I apologise to you; but you came at a moment when I was hopelessly busy," replied Cairns.

Quirk's face relaxed into a grim smile. He regarded the thin, humorous face of the editor attentively. Satisfied with his survey, he said:

"Well, I won't bother you just now. I know what it is to be in a tearing hurry. I ran a newspaper myself in the States; you have to be here, there, and everywhere to do that. Can't trust to anyone but yourself, can you?"

"Not a living soul. But I will give you five minutes if you slip inside."

Quirk entered the editor's office, and the door closed. In half an hour's time it opened again, and the two men came out together.

"Five minutes!" laughed Quirk as he shook Cairns' hand at the door.

"You are such a fascinating man that the minutes have slipped away unnoticed. You will be at my room to-night?"

"Of course I will. Hard at it, young man?" he asked, with a friendly nod to Desmond.

"A twopenny-ha'penny report of a twopenny-ha'penny meeting," replied Desmond, contemptuously.

[Pg 55]

"Make it spicy; touch it up with a little humour. That's the way to make journalism attractive. Cover a commonplace incident with the mantle of merriment, and make the world laugh. Lord, how we love a good honest laugh!"

With this he went briskly out of the office, and Desmond turned to his task with a renewed interest. There was a point here and a sentence there that might be made humorous. When the speakers read his report of what they had spoken, they discovered that there was, after all, a latent wit in them hitherto quite unsuspected. Those who had been privileged to hear them discovered that remarks had been made at which they had laughed, and that the speakers were not such prosy old fossils as they had suspected.

"That man Quirk knows the secret of the new journalism," said Cairns to Desmond. "It is not truth, or even a make-believe truth; it is to arouse your readers' interest. Tickle them with

humour; stuff them with the sensational; let everything be brand-new. We will make the old 'Observer' gallop to beat us."

Desmond raised his eyebrows and waited to hear more, but Cairns turned on his heel, saying:

"In a short time I may satisfy your curiosity, O'Connor; but there's a lot to be done first."

CHAPTER VI.

[Pg 56]

READJUSTMENT.

For weeks after Denis Quirk's homecoming Kathleen O'Connor was uncertain as to her feeling towards him.

He was ugly and abrupt, somewhat inquisitive, with none of those gentler qualities that we term polish. He spoke his mind, and spoke it bluntly, regardless of the feelings of others. Self-reliant and perfectly satisfied with himself, he sometimes irritated the girl to the verge of anger. But he was rarely angry, or, if he blazed out into sudden passion, returned speedily to his customary imperturbability, and he was always humorous. His mother he worshipped, and with her he was gentle as a woman; his father he jested with in an affectionate manner. Kathleen realised that he was a good son, while she resented his attitude to herself. His abrupt questions, his curious searching looks led her to believe that he was for ever testing her to discover the strength and weakness of her character. This caused the girl to adopt an attitude of defence, and to meet his inquisitive questions with replies that almost bordered on discourtesy.

Just a fortnight after his arrival, as she sat writing in the breakfast-room at Layton, pausing now and again to watch the gambols of Mrs. Quirk's Persian kitten, Denis Quirk marched into the room. He picked up the kitten, and seated himself with it near the door.

[Pg 57]

"Writing?" he asked, abruptly.

His manner of questioning her, indicating to her mind a desire to know as to whom and of what she was writing, aroused an immediate resentment in the girl.

"Yes, I am," she answered, shortly.

He smiled at her manifest annoyance, and continued to play with the kitten.

"Fire away then and get it all off your chest," he said.

Kathleen felt that writing was an impossibility under the circumstances, but she was determined that he should not recognise her embarrassment. Her nib flew relentlessly over the sheets, but the letter was disconnected and dry. At last she gathered her writing materials together, and rose to leave the room.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Never mind that," she replied. "I have never been asked to give an account of my actions, and I do not intend to."

Denis Quirk smiled yet more broadly. It was evident that her irritation amused him. This did not make her the better pleased.

"Sit down and talk to me," he suggested.

"I have other and better things to do," she answered.

He whistled the long-drawn note of surprise. His chair was across the door, but he made no attempt to move it.

"Angry?" he asked.

"Will you please move your chair?" she replied.

[Pg 58]

"Why should I? I am quite comfortable. Just sit down for five minutes and talk about the old people. I have any number of questions to ask you," he said.

"You always have; but I have no time to answer them. Please move your chair."

"Do you always have your own way?" he asked.

"Always—with gentlemen," she answered.

"Then you shall have it this once with Denis Quirk, who neither professes nor has the slightest wish to be—a gentleman."

He rose and put his chair on one side.

"Thank you," she said, as he held the door open for her. But, while she went up the stairs to Mrs. Quirk's room, the eternal question was repeating itself to her: "What do you think of this man?"

She found old Mrs. Quirk in her room, arranging a series of photos. There was Denis from infancy until the period when he had left his home—ugly, but smiling from infancy to manhood.

"What do you think of Denis? Isn't he grown into a fine man, and as full of fun as if he were a boy? And doesn't he love his old mother?" asked the fond old mother.

"Why shouldn't he?" asked Kathleen. "I love her as if she were my own mother."

"God bless you, child. I believe you do. Did you see what he has brought me? Brooches and shawls! But what good is jewellery to me? You must take them."

"No, no!" cried Kathleen, hastily. "You must keep them for Mr. Quirk's wife."

[Pg 59]

A smile lit up the old lady's face as she looked at the brooch in her hand and then at Kathleen.

"I just will do that same," she said.

A peremptory knock at the door, and Denis himself entered. He smiled as he noted the array of photographs.

"Which is the uglier," he asked Kathleen, "the picture or the original? Fire away, mother, and tell Miss O'Connor every detail of my life. Cut my first tooth when I was seven days old; spoke—or did I swear—at three months, fought my first fight on my first birthday, and I've been fighting ever since."

"Oh, Denis, Denis, you are as much an omadhaun as ever," sighed Mrs. Quirk. "But he was a fine boy, Kathleen!"

"And into a fine man he has grown, mother!" laughed Denis. "But what could you expect with such a mother? Father alive, Miss O'Connor?"

The abruptness of the question was quite disconcerting to Kathleen.

"No," she replied; "my father is dead."

"Sorry I asked," said Denis.

"God rest his soul! They do say he was a great man; but what could you expect, and him an O'Connor?" said Mrs. Quirk.

"Hem!" began Denis, but he checked himself and asked: "Any relations living, Miss O'Connor?"

"There's her brother Desmond, as handsome as herself," said Mrs. Quirk.

"Anything like me? But that's not to be expected. Where does he work?"

[Pg 60]

"My brother is a reporter at 'The Observer' office," replied Kathleen. Had it not been for Mrs. Quirk's presence she would have checked his questions once and for all.

"I must look him up to-day. I start operations in Grey Town this afternoon. Did it ever strike you that this place needs stirring up? It's been sleeping ever since it was born. I have come here to make things hum, I tell you that."

Kathleen laughed at the thought of Grey Town humming. All her life she had known it as a gentle, quiet town, to which excitement was unknown and undesired.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked.

"Everything," he answered. "See here, in twelve months' time you will scarcely know Grey Town. There will be squalls, of course, and plenty of fighting. But when I get to work I'll make the old place boom. Ran a paper in the States, and divided the town into friends and enemies. I was just over the last libel action brought against 'The Firebrand' by the last enemy on my list when I sold out. The paper went like wildfire, and the town all but doubled itself in my time. Nothing like a little mustard and pepper if you want to make things go."

"I prophesy that Grey Town will subdue even you. This is a very sleepy atmosphere. No man remains vigorous for over six months; you will soon be slumbering like the rest of us."

"I shall be dead first," he answered. "You don't know me."

[Pg 61]

"Nor you Grey Town. You are not our first reformer; we have had numbers of them, and we have destroyed them without remorse," said Kathleen.

From the window of the room they could look across fields now green in the freshness of early summer, across the racecourse and park, to where Grey Town climbed irregularly towards St. Mary's Church. There it lay, a town whose streets were only partly made; where sanitation had halted in its most primitive stages; where little attempt had been made to assist the beauties of nature. Yet Grey Town was, in the distance, a pretty spot, embowered in green trees, the blue smoke resting over it, and in the distance the great blue ocean. Large buildings and small hovels, well-cared for gardens and filthy back yards, imposing factories and dilapidated shops—there was surely work here for an energetic reformer. But Kathleen knew the strength of vested rights, the strength of contented indolence; above all, the bitter tongue of scandal that was ever ready to destroy a prophet. Others had fought with Grey Town and failed; why not Denis Quirk?

"No," he answered, reading her thoughts. "Grey Town has been waiting for me, and to-morrow I

start on Grey Town. See here! This town should be a city. We need a few more cities, and Grey Town shall be one of the first. Given half a dozen factories and an improved system of railways —."

"Factories!" laughed Kathleen, her eyes straying towards the town and its open sea-front, where only a small peninsula of rock protected the bay from the south-west gales. "You are dreaming, Mr. Quirk?"

[Pg 62]

"Nothing is impossible nowadays. Why no factories in Grey Town? Shall Melbourne possess all the good things? Let us provide for ourselves and for other people, and bring money to the town. Factories Grey Town must have to make agricultural implements, to turn our wool into blankets, our wheat into flour, our milk into butter. Factories and an up-to-date paper."

Mrs. Quirk had listened in a dazed manner to this conversation. It delighted her to sit and listen to her son, just as it did on those rare occasions when her husband talked to her. But she never quite realised what the topic under discussion was, although she nodded or shook her head as she believed was necessary to the occasion.

"Another paper?" cried Kathleen.

"And why not?" asked Mrs. Quirk. "Denis knows what he is saying and doing. Why not another paper if Denis wants it? And what colour would it be, Denis?"

Denis Quirk laughed heartily at his mother's misapprehension, but he threw his arm around her and stooped to kiss her.

"Black and white," he replied; "a newspaper, old lady, up to date and go-ahead, like the old 'Firebrand.'" Then he turned again to Kathleen. "You don't know me," he said. "You imagine I am nothing better than a talker; just wait for three months before you judge me."

[Pg 63]

Therewith he swung out of the room. A few minutes later Kathleen saw him striding rapidly down the avenue on his way towards Grey Town. But she had other things to do besides thinking of Denis Quirk. No sooner was he out of sight than she had settled Mrs. Quirk comfortably in an easy-chair on the balcony, and was reading to the old lady until the latter fell into a peaceful sleep.

It was a quiet and monotonous life for a young girl. Mrs. Quirk was now so dependent upon her that she must have Kathleen always by her side. This was not due to selfishness on the old lady's part. She did not understand that young people need a certain amount of amusement and pleasure to make their lives complete. Kathleen, being wholly unselfish in her nature, considered it her sole duty to look after the old lady. Mr. Quirk, too, had made Kathleen his secretary and accountant. When she was not with Mrs. Quirk, the girl was generally to be found surrounded by accounts and business letters.

It was thus that Denis Quirk found her on his return from the town.

"Do you ever go out?" he asked her, imperatively.

"Every day," she answered.

"To theatres and dances?" he asked.

"I have no time for such frivolities," she answered, laughingly. "I am a working woman now, with every moment occupied."

"Pshaw!" he answered, impatiently. "You need readjusting; you all need readjusting. Life was never intended to be a mere drudgery."

[Pg 64]

At tea—the Quirks still clung to the old scheme of meals of the Collingwood days—as they sat around the large table, he suddenly asked his father:

"Why don't you buy a motor, Dad?"

Samuel Quirk glared at his son for some moments in speechless surprise. Then he answered:

"What would I be doing with a motor?"

"Enjoying the beauties of Australia, and giving the mother a little pleasure," replied Denis.

"Pleasure! I would die in a motor," cried Mrs. Quirk.

"Just as well die there as in a phaeton. If you once ride in a motor, you will never ride in anything else, unless it's an aeroplane. If the Dad doesn't buy you a motor, I will."

"A motor! What would the boys say to see me in a motor?" growled Samuel Quirk.

"Confound the boys! If the boys object to a motor, they are fools. Motors mean the circulation of money. What is the difference between a motor and a house, a motor and a horse, a motor and a coat? Don't they all represent money to the working man? Don't bother yourself about the boys, or the jackasses either!"

Already there were signs of political differences between father and son. Samuel Quirk had clung to his Labour political creed all his life; now, in his time of prosperity, he refused to resign his early principles. Denis, a Democrat at heart, was something of a freelance, inclined to tilt

[Pg 65]

indiscriminately at both parties. This, however, was the first occasion since his homecoming on which he had openly opposed his father, and Samuel Quirk resented it.

"I have two legs to travel on, and they are good enough for me," he growled.

"Just hear him, and he calls himself a Progressive. It's a Conservative he is. Where's the use of science, if you refuse to make use of its gifts?" cried Denis.

Kathleen recognised that Denis was irritating his father and grieving his mother, not of intention, but simply because he did not realise that Samuel Quirk could not tolerate opposition.

"Well, I have a proposal to make. You shall hire a motor," she suggested. "Mr. Quirk and Granny shall ride in it, and see how they like it. Then, perhaps, Mr. Quirk may be induced to buy one."

"Never!" growled Samuel Quirk. "Them noisy, dusty, smelling inventions of the——!"

"Hush!" cried Mrs. Quirk. "The devil never invented anything good."

"And where's the good of them?" asked her husband.

"They make a long and hard journey short and pleasant. But Miss O'Connor is right. You shall try what a motor is like, and if you don't take to it I will buy one for the mother myself," said Denis.

It was an exciting moment in the house when he drove up the following day in a large car. Mrs. Quirk, if very nervous, was anxious to experience the new sensation of travelling in a motor; Kathleen was keenly desirous that Denis' plan might succeed; Samuel Quirk feigned contempt and indifference, but he was in his heart as excited as his wife.

[Pg 66]

"Now, come along, mother, and you, too, Miss O'Connor. Will you try a short spin, Dad?" said Denis.

Samuel Quirk strolled over to and eyed the motor even more contemptuously than before.

"What's that?" he asked the chauffeur.

"That's the throttle," replied the latter.

"Humph! I suppose you can drive the noisy thing?"

The chauffeur nodded; he was too insulted to reply in words.

"Can you stop it?" asked the old man.

"In a few yards," said Denis. "Step inside, Dad, and see for yourself."

Grumbling and growling, Samuel Quirk followed his wife and Kathleen into the tonneau. From the front seat Denis directed the driver.

"Easy at first, until they find their legs; then intoxicate them with the sensation of flying," he half whispered.

To Kathleen it was pure joy from the first; but Mrs. Quirk, and, to tell the truth, Samuel Quirk, were for half an hour very nervous.

"Can you stop her?" the latter asked as they flew down a steep hill.

In answer to the question, the chauffeur brought the car to a standstill. Thus assured, Samuel Quirk became confident, and before they returned home he was urging the chauffeur to increased speed.

[Pg 67]

"Do you call this fast?" he asked; and when the car began to race along the road a pleased smile lighted up his face. He even waved his hand pleasantly to those he passed on the road, and when the car stopped in front of the house the old man asked the chauffeur:

"How much do you want for it?"

"You don't think of buying this old car?" cried Denis. "You want a new one, and right up to date."

"Would it go as fast as this one?" asked Samuel Quirk.

"You shall have one out in a few days and try it."

Only a fortnight later a large twenty-horse-power car and a chauffeur were added to the equipment of "Layton." Samuel Quirk was the most enthusiastic admirer of, and the most frequent passenger in, the car. He was curious as to the machinery and the method of driving. Probably this was the most satisfactory thing that his wealth had brought him.

Mrs. Quirk, too, after her first nervousness, found great pleasure in the motor; but to Kathleen it was the first of a series of new enjoyments, for Denis Quirk hurried his mother on from one dissipation to another—concerts, theatres, even dances. Hesitatingly, Mrs. Quirk accepted his advice to try them; but, having once found pleasure in the evident enjoyment they gave Kathleen, she willingly went wherever Denis advised her. In this way the household at "Layton" received the necessary readjustment, with excellent results to all the inmates.

"THE OBSERVER" DIES.

Dr. Marsh was in his surgery, skimming the contents of a medical journal in search of the newer methods of treatment. Now and again he glanced from the printed pages out of his window at the asphalt path leading from the gate to his front door, not so much because he expected a patient as from mere habit. It was an off day in Grey Town, and his surprise was keen when he chanced to see, not one, but three men approaching the house.

It had become a custom with him to scan a patient and diagnose a complaint at long range, and to subsequently confirm or disprove his first opinion more intimately at closer quarters. Being a shrewd and observant man, he not infrequently hit a bull's-eye at the first shot. Scrutinising the three who were coming up the path, he muttered:

"Cairns, Desmond O'Connor, and the ugliest beggar I ever saw! But which is the patient? Cairns has dyspepsia, I swear; Desmond could not be sick if he tried; the ugly beggar suffers from nothing worse than his face, and that is a chronic condition."

Commenting half-audibly in this manner, he hastened to the door and cried:

"Are you all patients?"

[Pg 69]

Cairns shook his head sorrowfully. "No such luck, doctor! Beyond a little discomfort after meals, we are hopelessly sound."

"Are you a deputation, then, come to ask me to represent you in the Federal Parliament?" asked the doctor.

"It may come to that," said Cairns. "If Burrows does not speedily do something for Grey Town, we shall need a new member. May I introduce Mr. Quirk, a new resident and a live citizen?"

Denis Quirk and the doctor shook hands, each regarding the other curiously the while.

"An insurance agent," said the doctor in the half-audible tone he sometimes adopted.

To this the others replied with a laugh.

"No fear, doctor!" cried Cairns. "Am I the man to take a mean advantage of you? We have come here to consult you—not professionally, but as one who knows this district, alive and dead."

"None better," said Dr. Marsh.

They followed him into a cosy and orderly surgery, and sat down at his bidding. For his part, the doctor leaned up against the mantelpiece, one elbow resting on the marble and one arm free.

"Now, then, what is it?" he asked.

"We are contemplating a venture," said Denis Quirk—"a newspaper in opposition to 'The Observer.'"

Dr. Marsh shook his head emphatically, frowning the while at Denis Quirk.

"Mental, decidedly mental," he growled. "You have delusions."

[Pg 70]

Denis Quirk laughed uproariously at this remark. The doctor was a man after his own heart.

"You don't give it a chance?" he asked.

"Not a thousand to one hope! What do we want with two papers?"

"Precisely!" cried Denis Quirk. "But supposing we were to shoulder 'The Observer' out of Grey Town?"

"Is Cairns a mutineer?" asked the doctor.

"I am a cast-off. Old Ebenezer Brown has given me marching orders, and I am looking for a new master," replied Cairns.

Dr. Marsh's face brightened, for he had a consuming hatred for the owner of 'The Observer.' Even the faintest hope of wounding Ebenezer Brown was a reason for joy to him.

"It might be done?" he said. "Are you a newspaper man?" he asked Denis Quirk.

"In the past, and, I hope, in the future. I am tempted to risk a battle with 'The Observer.' With Cairns and O'Connor, myself, and one or two others—yourself, for instance, doctor—we might make the old rag gallop, possibly even beat it, eh?"

"Stop a minute. Do any of you drink?" asked the doctor.

The other men shook their heads.

"Too early," said Cairns. "If we started now, where would we end?"

"Very well, then. Let me have some details before I decide. Who is to finance the paper?"

[Pg 71]

"I shall do that, with your help, if you like, leaving the public to pay us principal and interest when we have destroyed Ebenezer Brown and his organ," said Denis Quirk.

"Cairns will be editor, I suppose?" asked the doctor.

"Cairns editor, O'Connor a reporter, myself manager, and Tim O'Neill printer's devil."

"Tim O'Neill!" laughed the doctor. "Where did you discover that rascal? Molly Healy introduced you to him, I swear."

"I forgot Molly Healy in mentioning the staff. She is to write a series of articles dealing with the seamy side of Grey Town life and her methods of reforming the riff-raff. Yes; it was she who brought Tim to me. 'Here you are!' she cried. 'Tis the wickedest boy in Grey Town. Make him something useful, and you will be doing a public service to me and to the town and district.' I engaged him as printer's devil on that recommendation."

After half an hour of facts and figures, the doctor dismissed his visitors. He was satisfied that this was not an impossible scheme, and he even went so far as to accept a portion of the financial burden. This argued well for the newspaper, for the doctor was a shrewd man.

Ebenezer Brown firmly believed in vested interests when those interests were his own. Until he was actually faced by "The Mercury," he had regarded opposition to "The Observer" as impossible. When confronted by the strong staff of Denis Quirk's paper, he at first began to whine over the treachery of opposition; then he straightened his back to fight.

[Pg 72]

Gifford, the sub-editor, had hailed the resignation of Cairns as promotion to himself; and so it might have proved, but Ebenezer Brown was far too shrewd to oppose Gifford to Cairns.

"We must find a new editor," he remarked to the former when the rumour of opposition reached him.

Gifford, with a half promise of the editorial chair in his mind, smiled blandly.

"You will not forget——," he began.

"I forget everything," snapped Ebenezer Brown, "when I have to fight. I am going to Melbourne to find a strong editor. After this opposition is crushed I intend to sack him and place you in charge," he added more gently, for he liked Gifford, if he really cared for any man.

But the fight was not to end so simply and speedily as the old man imagined. "The Mercury" dawned on Grey Town, strong, cynical, and up to date. There were initial troubles with the Cable News Agency, but Cairns managed to adjust these, against the determined opposition of Ebenezer Brown. Then came splendid days for the advertising public, when both newspapers brought down their scale of charges to the very lowest price. Keen, too, was the demand for copy when Desmond O'Connor and his junior reporter found themselves opposed to men almost as keen as they. Grey Town fairly throbbed with excitement, and daily searched the rival papers to discover which one had outwitted the other. In the office of "The Mercury" Denis Quirk and Cairns sat together planning new features to place their paper in advance of its rival. Their first success was the nobbling of "The Observer's" senior reporter. For this Tim O'Neil was responsible.

[Pg 73]

Tim was errand boy, printer's devil, and messenger for "The Mercury," and he firmly believed that the newspaper's success was due to his exertions. All the ingenuity of which he was capable, the boy employed on behalf of his employers. When the State member came to Grey Town to make his election speech, Tim O'Neill recognised an opportunity. It was a notorious fact that "The Observer's" new reporter was addicted to drink, and, after reporting the speech in full, he slipped into the "Royal Hart" Hotel, as was his custom, for a glass of whisky, his shorthand report in his pocket. After him, cautiously, went Tim O'Neill, and abstracted his notes from his pocket, substituting for them a spurious copy. Where Tim had secured this false shorthand report history does not relate, but they were cleverly done, so like and yet so unlike the original as to be ridiculous. It was this report that appeared in "The Observer" next morning. In his fury the editor discharged the chief reporter, and when he went out to re-engage him found that Cairns had been before him.

"Tim O'Neill, you deserve a sound thrashing," said Denis Quirk when he heard of the boy's escapade. "But your wages are raised, not as an incentive to further crimes, but because you have a future before you. Do you ever study?"

[Pg 74]

"Just a little. Miss Molly is teaching me," said Tim.

"I must arrange with Burnside to give you a few hours every week. You will be an editor some day, Tim, if you avoid the rocks," said Denis Quirk.

That very day Tim came in to Desmond O'Connor, his face the picture of anxiety. Noting this, Desmond eyed the youth in surprise: then he burst out in a shout of laughter.

"What are you doing that for?" asked Tim, furiously.

"I never saw you so melancholy before, Tim. What particular sin have you committed? Or have you lost a far-distant cousin? Confess your guilt, Tim."

"I suppose you think you're funny?" cried Tim. "I've half a mind to go and give myself to 'The

Observer,' and ruin this blessed old paper."

Desmond O'Connor's shout of laughter brought Cairns from his room, anxious to share the joke.

"Let us have it at once," he cried. "In this strenuous life a joke is too precious an event to be wasted. Who made it, you or Tim?"

"Tim is acquiring a high sense of humour," said Desmond. "Tell Mr. Cairns your awful threat, Tim."

"Yah!" cried Tim, vindictively, "I'll tell Mr. Cairns what I came to tell you, and leave you to wish you knew it."

Therewith he drew the editor into his room, and closed the doors carefully.

"They're going to strike, sir, on both papers, for higher wages," he said in a low voice.

[Pg 75]

"Who do you mean, Imp?" asked Cairns, addressing the boy by the name he had especially devised for him.

"The compositors. To-night they're going out to stop both papers."

"Tim O'Neill, you are a perfect mine of information. Providence was determined to bless 'The Mercury' when it sent us Tim O'Neill. Just run away now and ask Mr. Quirk if I can see him."

Denis Quirk was at once a diplomatic and a determined man. On hearing the newest development, he hurried away to interview the prospective strikers.

"Lay your grievances before me," he said. "If I can put them right with justice to the proprietors of this paper, it shall be done."

It was the usual story—higher wages and shorter hours, a larger staff, better paid, with less work to do individually. Denis Quirk offered a compromise, but this was refused. After half an hour's discussion, he suddenly broke out into a white heat of anger.

"Do you fancy I can't do without you?" he cried.

The men replied with a burst of ironical laughter.

"I began life as a compositor, and I have not forgotten my trade," he said. "You can go, every one of you that wants more. But 'The Mercury' will appear to-morrow, take my tip for that."

Sullenly the men withdrew, to hang about outside the office, watching to see who would take their places. But no one came from outside, while in the printing room all was bustle.

[Pg 76]

"Now, throw off your coats," cried Denis Quirk, "every one of you. You too, Cairns, and do what I tell you. You, Tim O'Neill, take this telegram to the post office. We will have a new staff to-morrow, and men I can rely upon."

In this way "The Mercury" was printed under the greatest difficulties, but the rival newspaper failed to appear. Ebenezer Brown was stubborn, and when his editor brought him the news of the threatened strike he refused to concede anything.

"Not one penny more, and not one second less, will they get from me. Let them strike," he growled.

"But you must come to terms," said the editor. "You can't afford to miss one issue of 'The Observer.'"

"I am paying fair wages, and they may fish for a rise," replied Ebenezer Brown.

The following day, like its rival, "The Observer" was manned again and working smoothly, but its prestige was hopelessly impaired. Thenceforward "The Mercury" advanced daily at the expense of the older paper, until, six weeks after the beginning of the campaign, Ebenezer Brown went to Denis Quirk to effect a compromise.

Denis was sitting in his shirt-sleeves, his collar off and neckband loosened, when Ebenezer Brown entered.

"Sit down, Mr. Brown. I will attend to you in five minutes. We are so confoundedly busy that I must put this through at once."

Ebenezer Brown mumbled something inarticulate and sat down, watching the pile of papers on the desk in front of the man he hated. After a few minutes Denis Quirk swung round on the office stool to face him.

[Pg 77]

"Well, sir, what is it?" he asked. "An advertisement or an obituary notice of 'The Observer?'"

Ebenezer Brown was rendered speechless with indignation for the moment.

"I didn't come here to be insulted," he growled.

"Then why did you come? Haven't you been throwing insults at me from the columns of your rag these six weeks past? A man doesn't walk into the lion's den to have his hand licked by the lion."

"And how have you treated me?" cried Ebenezer Brown. "First you stole my reporter's copy, then

you stole my reporter."

"Stole, sir!" Denis Quirk rang his bell, and Desmond O'Connor entered. "Kindly take down this gentleman's words, Desmond. Now, Mr. Brown, please repeat your statement."

"You are an unscrupulous person!" growled the old man.

"You have that down, Desmond? Continue, Mr. Brown," said Denis Quirk.

"Robber! Forger!" cried the old man, roused to fury. "You have neither manners nor honesty."

Therewith he rose and rushed into the street, and the burst of laughter that he heard as he went did not tend to make him better pleased or satisfied.

"Do you intend to prosecute?" asked Desmond O'Connor.

[Pg 78]

"Prosecute! No, my lad, I only defend actions for libel. If he had used every term of reproach in every dictionary, I would not be tempted to a prosecution. I am highly flattered. It proves that I have succeeded in making the old man uncomfortable, and satisfies me. Just write a humorous sketch on the little skirmish, but don't give any names. The town will understand who is the principal character if you manage your article dexterously and with humour. Bring it to me to touch up when the sketch is completed."

For two weeks longer "The Observer" struggled on; then Ebenezer Brown sent an intermediary, in the person of a lawyer, to make terms.

"There is only one possible arrangement—"The Observer" goes out," said Quirk. "How much does Ebenezer Brown ask?"

"His proposal is to buy 'The Mercury,'" replied the messenger.

"Hopeless! I have started 'The Mercury' as a financial investment and something more. It is to be a literary battery to galvanise Grey Town into energy. I really don't care a hang for 'The Observer.' That organ is dying rapidly; in a few weeks it will be dead. But I am prepared to pay for a more speedy ending to a useless life," replied Denis Quirk.

"How would a limited proprietary suit you?" asked the lawyer.

"With Ebenezer as a shareholder? Impossible! 'The Mercury' intends to shoot at old Eb. and his sort. These are the men who are holding back the wheels of progress. He is a landlord who keeps his premises in a shocking state, charges big rents, refuses to make repairs, refuses to build, opposes reasonable rates, and holds one half of the council under his domination. Ebenezer Brown represents stagnation and corruption, the last things I intend to countenance."

[Pg 79]

"Shall I tell him your objection?" laughed the lawyer.

"If it will encourage him to prosecute for libel, I say yes; but you may use your own discretion. Tell him I will buy 'The Observer' right out for a sum to be settled by arbitration—buy it out or destroy it."

Thus did it come to pass that "The Observer" disappeared into oblivion, and in its place came that fiery paper, "The Mercury," respecter of neither person nor position.

It was "The Mercury" that first breathed on the smouldering ashes of municipal discontent, and roused the ratepayers of Grey Town to organise for protection and advancement. Thus was accomplished the first act in a drama, and thus was fought the initial battle of a long and fierce campaign.

CHAPTER VIII.

[Pg 80]

JOHN GERARD.

Cairns and Denis Quirk were working post haste in "The Mercury" office. "We must make 'The Mercury' a go-ahead, up-to-date paper," said Cairns.

"That's it, my man," replied Denis Quirk.

"We want to consider our readers' amusements," said Cairns.

"Tickle them, and make them laugh, and they will put their arms round the old 'Mercury's' neck and love her," cried Denis.

"Racing is the first and most important amusement in Australia. You need a sporting editor."

"Good old Cairns! With you and Tim O'Neill I have the finest stuff in Victoria. A sporting editor you shall have, sonny. What about Desmond O'Connor?"

Cairns shook his head doubtfully.

"Couldn't stand it," he answered. "He's too fond of Dame Chance already, and inclined to be one

of the good-natured 'have-a-drink-with-me' crowd. Desmond needs watching."

"I'll tell you what he wants—to get right away from here, and fight the world alone," said Denis.

"You and I," cried Cairns, "are the men to found a new party with a new Australian policy. Mere parochialism must go, sir, if Australia is to have a destiny. I have my eye upon Desmond as a disciple." [Pg 81]

"Don't hurry, Cairns. Reform Grey Town first, then turn your mind to Australia. There is plenty to be done here. Have you prepared that article on the municipal omissions?"

Cairns handed a proof to Denis Quirk, and the latter ran his eye over it.

"Good!" he cried, approvingly. "Slash it into them! 'Too much of a hole and corner system.' 'Too many surprises sprung upon a too-confiding public.' That's the way to make things hum. I must give Wilde a retainer to defend us in our libel actions. I see them coming, Cairns. To-morrow rake it into Ebenezer Brown for the state of his premises in Chester Street; on Saturday draw attention to the insanitary condition of the best residential part of the town. Keep things moving, and we will make Grey Town a live community. Then we will turn our attention to Australia."

Now, the first sporting editor of "The Mercury" was a handsome man, clean-shaven and well-dressed, who presented himself to Denis Quirk in answer to an advertisement in a Melbourne paper.

"Mr. James Gerard," read Cairns from the card that Tim O'Neill handed to him that morning. "Have you any idea who Mr. Gerard is?"

"He says he's 'Trafalgar,' sir; not the battle, sir, but the horse. I fancy he's dotty, Mr. Cairns; he looks more like a donkey than a horse."

"Show him in to Mr. Quirk; I have no time for lunatics," said Cairns. [Pg 82]

Mr. James Gerard was accordingly shown into the managers' room. Denis Quirk was at the moment preparing a speech, for he had already decided to contest a vacancy on the council. He received his visitor abruptly.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I am 'Trafalgar;' perhaps you have heard of me," said the newcomer.

"Never!" replied Denis.

"Hem! I thought you might have seen my nom de plume in the 'Sporting Chronicle.'"

"Never heard of it. What do you want?"

"You advertised for a sporting editor. I have come after the place."

"Do you know anything about horses?" asked Denis.

"No one better; I have studied them all my life," replied Gerard.

"That doesn't say you can write about them. How much do you ask?"

"Salary is no object to me. Racing is my hobby. I have an income of my own, and I write as an employment and a pleasure."

"If you come to me you will have to accept a salary, much as it may pain you. You will be a servant, and do exactly as I ask. Are you prepared for that?" said the manager.

"Naturally! Why would I be here if I were not prepared for that?"

"Very well, then. You will begin at £4 a week, to be increased if you suit us; if you don't suit, out you go. When are you prepared to begin?" [Pg 83]

"To-day, if you like."

"To-morrow you can go to Melton and report the meeting. See that you are spicy; we expect spice on this paper."

"Trafalgar's" first report did not satisfy the manager.

"See here, Mr. Gerard," he said, entering the outer office, where "Trafalgar" was already fraternising with Desmond O'Connor, "'The Mercury' is out to put down fraud and hypocrisy wherever it is to be found. I sent you to Melton to draw public attention to irregularities. Why did Caprice run last in the Melton Cup?"

"Not quite fit," replied the sporting editor glibly. "I was talking to Carter—."

"Talking to her trainer and asking his opinion! That's not what we want here. Last week Caprice started at 6 to 4 on and won the Welter Handicap at Balnogan; yesterday she was quoted at 5 to 1, and ran last in the Melton Cup. Sit down and mention those two facts together, leaving the readers to draw their own deductions, as I do."

"Are you looking for libel actions?" asked "Trafalgar," innocently.

"Not looking for them, but quite prepared for them in a just cause. Did you read my speech last night?"

"I have not found time," stammered the sporting editor, while Desmond O'Connor sat listening with a broad smile on his face. [Pg 84]

"Oblige me by reading it. It represents my policy, and the policy of this paper. We call a spade a spade on 'The Mercury.' Just read that speech, and then sit down and write about Caprice. You can mention the running of Bailiff in the Hurdles at the same time. If the stewards won't do their duty, 'The Mercury' will point it out to them."

In this manner was Gerard introduced to the policy of Denis Quirk and his paper. He was, however, a smart man, quite capable of grasping a situation when it was demonstrated to him. In a few weeks' time the clever division began to read the accounts of their acts of brigandage with fear and trembling; obsequious stewards became more alert, and less timid in dealing with glaring acts of fraud, while threats were openly indulged in, and actions for libel suggested. But Denis Quirk and his paper went on their prescribed course, regardless of threats, and awaiting libel actions that failed to come.

There was no lack of excitement in Grey Town in those days. Men did not go about wearily, and sigh because there was nothing in the papers. There were times of stress and battle in the town when Denis Quirk and "The Mercury" fought with sloth, indifference, and vested interests; times when he was rarely at home with the old people, because he had many and important things to do, to say, and to write about in the town.

But Gerard dropped quietly into a position of family friend and confidential adviser at "Layton." He was introduced by Denis Quirk, and, being a man of comparative leisure, it became his habit to spend a part of his leisure at the house, and to accompany Mrs. Quirk and Kathleen O'Connor when they went out to find amusement. To this Denis Quirk readily assented, for he was more at ease among the men and women who worked than among those who played. Desmond O'Connor, too, was shouldering the burden of stern responsibility, and someone had to look after Mrs. Quirk and Kathleen. Who could better do this than Gerard, a harmless and pleasant man in Denis Quirk's eyes? [Pg 85]

This was the first male friendship of Kathleen O'Connor. Here was a man who told her the history of his lifetime, not discursively, but in fragments dropped here and there. There is pleasure, entertainment, and pathos in every man's life, no matter who he may be. Gerard had lived more adventurously than many others. He was a man who could make love charmingly, one who had been liberally educated. There were many pleasing reminiscences, many sad incidents in his past, and he had a happy method of speaking of such events.

This is the manner in which love sometimes comes to man and woman, not, as it is often pictured, as a sudden passion, but slowly and in stages. Gerard loved easily and lightly; he had already had his grand passions, and the current of his life ran none the less pleasantly because of them. To make love to a pretty girl was nothing to him, merely another passing incident. But a man was an event to Kathleen O'Connor, an admirer something hitherto unknown. She had laughed and flirted with boyish admirers, as girls do; but such events are mere ripples on the surface of passion. The love and admiration of a man are to such things a vast upheaval of the depths of the ocean. [Pg 86]

There was at this time one person who cordially disliked Gerard, probably the only one in Grey Town. This was Molly Healy, and she had great difficulty to find a reason for her antipathy to the sporting editor of "The Mercury." After her first meeting with Gerard, she expressed her sentiments to Kathleen O'Connor unreservedly, as was her way.

"I couldn't bear to have that man near me," she said.

Kathleen was, in those days, perfectly unbiassed in her opinion of Gerard. He was to her merely a new acquaintance, but she found him pleasant and well-informed. Laughingly, she asked:

"Why not?"

"He is too spick and span for me," said Molly, "and altogether too smiling. He has got no soul."

These sentiments she cherished doggedly, and expressed on every occasion, to his face and behind his back. As the romance began to take possession of Kathleen, she found it hard not to resent Molly's criticism. Mrs. Quirk went so far as to scold Molly relentlessly for her expressions of dislike, but the girl only laughed at her:

"Sure, you are too young and innocent. You don't know the wickedness there is in the world. But I have been taking lessons from every guttersnipe and old good-for-nought in the town. There's wickedness in Gerard's eye, and in his nose too." [Pg 87]

Desmond O'Connor was a particular friend of his brother scribe, but the acquaintance was not for the boy's good. Gerard taught him to drink more than he should, and to gamble for money that he could not afford to lose. While these facts were unknown in the semi-retirement of "Layton," they speedily came to Molly Healy's ears. She acted with a customary impulse that was imprudent with such a nature as Desmond O'Connor's. One morning on his way to "The Mercury" office he was stopped by Molly.

"Desmond," she said, "what is this I am hearing of you?"

Desmond met her laughingly, for he seldom took Molly Healy seriously.

"Something wonderful?" he said.

"Something you should be ashamed of! Look there at old Mason."

She pointed to where an old man was crossing the road, a dilapidated wreck of humanity, for Mason was the champion drunkard of Grey Town.

"It is such an old man as that you will become," said Molly.

Desmond flushed crimson at her words, and he turned in repressed fury on her.

"Mind your own business," he said. "Reform your old age pensioners, and kindly allow me to look after myself."

Therewith he went on his way, leaving her to look after him with tears in her eyes.

[Pg 88]

"Wouldn't I give my life for Desmond!" she thought, as she watched him until he turned a corner. For his part, indignation overcame every other feeling. He was sufficiently young to resent interference, and to forget for the moment the bonds of friendship that bound him to Molly Healy.

Turning to climb upwards to the Presbytery, the girl met Denis Quirk. Like Kathleen O'Connor, Molly Healy was not quite sure how she regarded the manager of "The Mercury." He was always brusque and unapproachable, yet she infinitely preferred his attitude to the polish of Gerard.

"Looking at Desmond?" he laughed.

"And why not? Isn't it a pleasure to look at a handsome man?" she answered.

"I hope you gave him a good talking to. My mother says that Molly Healy is the one that can do that," he said.

"Wait until you are standing for Parliament, and then you will see what Molly Healy can do," she replied. "But you should look after that boy, or he will get into mischief so deep that there will be no getting him out."

"I have an eye on him, never fear," he said, and left her abruptly, to her infinite amusement.

"Denis Quirk has no manners, but he doesn't mean any harm," she told her brother. "It is only his way; a hard crust, but a good wholesome crumb."

That very morning Denis Quirk summoned Desmond into his room.

[Pg 89]

"See here," he said, "we are not teetotal on this paper, but we know where to stop. It's time you stopped. Make a note of that."

"Perhaps I had better go," cried Desmond in a passion.

"I don't actually say that, for there's good stuff in you, but if you can't behave, you can't go too soon," said Denis.

Cairns was standing near the door, and he heard these exchanges. He had a very kindly feeling for Desmond, and when the reporter came from Denis Quirk's room Cairns drew him into his own.

"Quirk is blunt, but he is true," he said. "He sees that you are going the way of many another real good fellow, and he wants to pull you up short. Don't ruin a promising life, Desmond. Give Gerard a wide berth; he's a bad companion for a man like you."

"Gerard is a good fellow. What have you against him?" cried Desmond.

"He is altogether too good a fellow for a penniless reporter that has a place to win in the world," said Cairns.

"He is the only white man in Grey Town!" said Desmond.

Remonstrance was thrown away on the boy. One night he staggered into the office in a half-drunken condition, and the following day he disappeared into the dark oblivion that we term "the world," taking with him a letter of recommendation from Cairns to the editor of a metropolitan paper.

[Pg 90]

"I recommend you for your talent, not for your bad habits. See that you cure them, or Smythe will shoot you out as Quirk has done," said Cairns.

But he gave the boy five pounds to help him while he was looking for work.

Desmond O'Connor was the first victim to the friendship of John Gerard. There were other young men who owed their downfall to him, not that he bore any one of his victims malice; he was merely a man with a full purse, and a lover of good-fellowship. "Let the young beggars look after themselves. All that I ask is good company. It is not my place to teach men morals," he said to one who remonstrated with him.

In the same spirit he continued to court Kathleen O'Connor, enjoying placidly the game of love, and perfectly regardless as to the result.

CHAPTER IX.

[Pg 91]

DAYS OF STORM AND STRESS.

It was during breakfast at "Layton" that Kathleen O'Connor attacked Denis Quirk on the subject of his treatment of Desmond. Mrs. Quirk was breakfasting in bed; her husband had scrambled through his meal, and rushed out to superintend the making of a drain, leaving Denis alone with the girl. He had noticed her silence and aloofness, sure signs of displeasure, and, as was his way, he calmly faced her in the moment of bitter resentment.

"You are angry with me?" he asked abruptly.

"Why should I be? I have no claims upon your kindness," she answered.

"He had to go, for his own sake," he said, going straight to the point without explanation. "It was the only hope of saving him."

She did not answer, but her eyes filled with tears, vainly though she tried to repress them. Denis Quirk feigned not to see them.

"In Grey Town he must be ruined," he said, not unkindly.

"And what will he do alone in a great city, with no one to advise him?" she cried.

"Fight it out and win, if he is made of the stuff I believe to be in him. He had enemies here who were ruining him, body and soul." [Pg 92]

"He had one friend at least in Mr. Gerard," she said.

"We had better not discuss Gerard," he replied, rising quietly.

"Mr. Gerard has told me——," she began.

"Never believe a hostile witness until he has safely stood the fire of cross-examination," he remarked, oracularly.

"Oh, it was cruel not to give the boy just one chance!" she cried. "My heart is breaking for him!"

Therewith she rose and left the room. Denis took out his pipe and filled it. Then he went to "The Mercury" office, smoking thoughtfully. The first person to meet him on his arrival was John Gerard.

"What do you want with me?" asked Denis Quirk, abruptly.

"Just to hand in my resignation. I have other schemes on hand, and cannot find the necessary time to your work," replied Gerard.

Denis Quirk noted the absence of the customary suavity and deference in the way in which Gerard addressed him.

"Right you are! Come to me in five minutes for your cheque. You have saved yourself dismissal," he said.

"Are you dismissing the whole staff?" asked Gerard.

"Only the useless ones," replied Denis quietly, as he entered the room.

"Your cheque—and the door, you durned skunk!" he said, five minutes later. Gerard was on the point of retorting furiously, but one look at the strong, ugly face and sturdy figure convinced him of the wisdom of silence until he was actually on the doorstep of the office. Then he said: [Pg 93]

"You will have to deal with me yet, Mr. Denis Quirk."

"I am quite capable of doing that," replied Denis, smilingly.

Thus did "The Mercury" lose its first sporting editor.

In the quiet of his office Denis Quirk sat for fully five minutes thinking, a most unusual thing for him to do, and, more unusual still, thinking of a woman. He checked himself abruptly with the half-muttered words:

"Well, she must battle through alone: I can't help her."

Then he began to write a letter to a friend in Melbourne:

"The Mercury,' Grey Town.

"January 17, 19—.

"Dear Jackson,—There is a young fellow now in Melbourne, one Desmond O'Connor, a wild, harum-scarum, but of good stuff. You will find him at Mrs. Tippet's, 102 The Grove, Upper Hawthorn. Look him up, if you still love me, and take him under your care. Find him a place in your office; he has the necessary qualifications. He is a journalist, but I foresee ruin in that line for Desmond. Supply his immediate needs, and draw upon me, but invent some pious fiction to account for the capital—a dead maiden aunt or any other apocryphal person you like. If he thinks that the money comes from me, ten to one he will have none of it. Make him keep himself as far as possible by his own brains, and never offer the boy whisky. If you do this for me, I shall recognise that you are the same good old Jackson, whom I am proud to call a friend.—Yours sincerely,

[Pg 94]

"DENIS QUIRK."

As he closed the note and handed it to Tim O'Neill, Molly Healy entered the office. Like Kathleen O'Connor, she resented Denis Quirk's treatment of Desmond, and she had come to express her sentiments openly.

"Are you busy?" she asked.

"Not more so than usual; a pile of advertisements and correspondence, a few proofs to glance at, and a council committee at ten. I can spare you five minutes," he answered.

"I have not come to talk gently to you," said Molly. "I think you should be ashamed of yourself for your treatment of Desmond O'Connor."

"Now, Miss Molly, have you considered this question carefully? Just sit down for five minutes, and hear me explain it to you."

Molly Healy took a chair reluctantly, her face expressing a determination not to be convinced.

"Desmond O'Connor," he said, and all the while he was stamping and closing envelopes, "came under the influence of a man——." [Pg 95]

"Gerard!" she cried, interrupting him.

"John Gerard. If he had remained here that influence must have ruined him."

"And could you not separate the two?" she asked.

"Not I, nor you; not even Father Healy. Desmond was gambling, he was beginning to drink; he would have degenerated into an habitual drunkard——."

"I as much as told him that myself," said Molly Healy.

"Outside there," he pointed to the window towards the east, "in Melbourne, lies the boy's chance. It was not for my sake I sent him packing. That boy was useful to me, and I can never replace him; but better 'The Mercury' should suffer than he and Kathleen O'Connor."

"Well, you're not a bad sort of man," she remarked. "Your heart's better than your face."

Denis Quirk laughed heartily at her remark.

"You don't like my face?" he remarked. "Haven't I been called the ugliest man in Grey Town? And proud I am of it."

"Good-day!" cried Molly Healy. "I will not ruin your paper, after all, as I had intended doing. But my heart is sore for poor Desmond—out there."

She, in turn, pointed towards the east before she left the office.

This day was spent by Denis Quirk in fighting. In the council committee he came into conflict with the man whom he regarded as the greatest opponent to the progress of Grey Town. This was Councillor Garnett, and he was not above the suspicion that he made use of his privileges to further his own ends. Apart from this, he was at once narrow-minded and obstinate. For such men as he Denis Quirk had no mercy. [Pg 96]

The council of Grey Town was not unlike other municipal councils—its members honest for the greater part, but many of them men who followed old traditions, and believed that quiet things should not be moved. For many years they had lived under a system of accepting the imperfect, and never attempting to make it more perfect. Of these easy-going, self-satisfied gentlemen Councillor Garnett was the chief.

This special meeting of the council had been summoned to consider the condition of the roads in the town. Year after year the council had spent less money on the roads than they deserved, and year after year the roads had degenerated. At this time they were deplorable, and Denis Quirk had compelled his fellow-councillors to take action. After a drive around the town, they met to discuss ways and means, and then occurred a scene that was the first skirmish in a fierce campaign.

At this time Denis Quirk stood practically alone. Opposed to him was a body of resolute Conservatives; between the two factions, a few who hesitated, favouring Denis Quirk rather than Councillor Garnett. The debate began gently, but it ended in such a storm as the municipal council chamber had never witnessed before.

The mayor, a kindly man, was at his wits' end to keep the peace. Again and again he called the two parties to order, until finally the meeting broke up, Denis Quirk having been defeated. [Pg 97]

But he was the last man to accept defeat. From the municipal chambers he hurried round the town to convene an indignation meeting for the following week. Meanwhile he laid his case before the public in the columns of "The Mercury." This accomplished, he turned home to "Layton."

Councillor Garnett was hand in glove with Ebenezer Brown, and the latter was, above all things, a good hater. He had little cause to love Denis Quirk, and he possessed not a little power in the town, gained by illicit means. In those days there were factions in Grey Town, as there always will be where progress confronts stagnation. The skirmishes and battles were fought over mere trifles, but they were fought none the less bitterly for that reason. Day after day Denis Quirk found himself defeated; yet day after day he gained strength, a member here and there from the doubtful councillors, and public approbation abroad.

But at home in "Layton" he was not happy, for he recognised relentless hostility on the part of Kathleen O'Connor, and he realised that John Gerard was too intimate with the girl. It was not for him to remonstrate with her. He had no right to speak, no reasons to advance against Gerard, beyond an unreasoning antipathy. In his heart of hearts he believed that Gerard, now an agent in the town, was a worthless fellow, but such unproven beliefs are useless. He could only look on hopelessly, and trust that time would put things straight. [Pg 98]

Desmond O'Connor paid a flying visit to "Layton" in the summer. He came quite unexpectedly, and surprised Kathleen one afternoon when she was reading to Mrs. Quirk out in the garden. Molly Healy was there, too, cutting flowers for the church, returning every now and again to interrupt the reading.

Desmond O'Connor came walking up the avenue, lined by trees and shrubs, and paused to look at the group on the green lawn under the shade of a large elm tree. He looked fresh and bright in his face, although it had lost some of the tan associated with country life. His eye was clear, and his step free; there was the dignity of self-respect in the way in which he carried himself.

Molly Healy was the first to see him. Shading her eyes with her hand to avoid the glare of the sun, she took one look at him. Then she dropped her basket of flowers, and hurried towards him, crying:

"It is Desmond himself!"

Kathleen sprang up and dropped her book. The two girls hastened to meet him.

"Take him away to your room, Kathleen," said Mrs. Quirk, when she had welcomed Desmond. "I can look after myself, and you have much to talk about."

"Let me look after you, Granny," cried Molly Healy; but she cast a regretful eye at Kathleen and Desmond.

"No, Molly; you can come with us and hear what he has to say for himself," said Kathleen. [Pg 99]

"May I, then? But I would only be in the way," suggested Molly.

"Not one bit, Molly. Come and listen to my wonderful tale of adventure—a story of robbers slain, wild animals subdued, good fairies and witches," said Desmond.

"I hope you are minding your soul. It is a dangerous place for young men, is Melbourne," said Mrs. Quirk.

"Oh, that's all right," replied Desmond, airily. "I am not on the side of the saints or the sinners."

Molly Healy noted this reply, but she abstained from commenting on it. She was shrewd enough to recognise that the man who boasts of lukewarmness is generally something less than tepid.

"You will be coming to see the Father?" she suggested.

"You must make my excuses, Molly. I am here to-day and back in Melbourne to-morrow. I have fallen on my feet. Where do you think I am working?" he asked Kathleen as they walked towards the house.

"On a paper," she suggested.

"No; in an advertising agency, the biggest in Melbourne, drawing posters for them, and helping in the business. I shall be a partner before long. Jackson, the boss, has been a good friend to me, and Mrs. Jackson might be a mother, and Sylvia—a sister."

The hesitation that preceded the latter part of this speech was not lost upon Molly Healy. It caused her a spasm of pain that was sharp, if it was only short-lived, for she was a girl, if a sensible and healthy one, and she always had greatly admired Desmond O'Connor. [Pg 100]

In the dining-room they sat down close together.

"I am glad you have such good friends? How did you find them?" asked Kathleen.

"I can't for the life of me discover that. Jackson came to see me and offered to help me. I rather

fancy Gerard must have sent him."

"Gerard!" cried Molly Healy, scornfully. "Do you fancy he would take so much trouble? It is 'out of sight as good as buried' with Gerard."

Kathleen O'Connor flushed up at these words, but refrained from reply. Desmond answered banteringly:

"You will hate to the end, Molly?"

"Sure, my hates are as enduring as my loves," said Molly. "You can always know how you will find Molly Healy."

"I don't think you are quite fair to Gerard," said Desmond.

"Now, tell us about—Sylvia Jackson, Desmond," said Kathleen, anxious to terminate the discussion.

"Sylvia Jackson," he answered, with an assumed carelessness, that was in itself suspicious to the critical ears of Molly Healy. "Why are you so anxious to hear about her?"

"Is she pretty?" asked Kathleen.

Molly Healy watched him curiously, and noted a certain embarrassment in his face.

[Pg 101]

"That is a question of taste. Some people consider her pretty," he answered.

"And why not say that Desmond O'Connor is one of those people? Of course she is pretty, Kathleen, and charming and kind to Desmond. Didn't he say so? Are you kind to her, Desmond?" cried Molly.

"Kind to her?" he replied, with a species of horror in his voice, as if one of his most sacred convictions had been criticised. "One cannot be kind to a girl like Sylvia Jackson."

"And why not kind?" asked Molly.

"I admire and respect—in fact, I almost reverence—her. She is so"—he paused for a suitable word—"so ethereal. She is more like a spirit than a piece of common human nature."

Molly Healy was with great difficulty attempting to restrain a giggle. She recognised that to give her amusement full play would be to grievously annoy him. For this reason she turned to look out of the window, thrusting her handkerchief into her mouth the while.

"Does she play?" asked Kathleen.

"She plays and sings divinely. She does everything well. To dance with her—is—."

He ended abruptly, not being capable of giving full expression to his sensations when dancing with Sylvia Jackson.

"Denis Quirk!" cried Molly Healy, and climbed through the window. It was a relief to her to give her mirth full vent.

[Pg 102]

"Ethereal! Poor Desmond! I wonder will he recover?" she laughed.

"You will not be rude to him?" Kathleen asked her brother anxiously.

He laughed unrestrainedly. All resentment against Denis Quirk was long forgotten, for his anger was short-lived.

"I regard him as a benefactor. He has released me from the thralldom of Grey Town and introduced me to the larger life," he answered.

"Whatever you do, don't speak to him of Sylvia, or I shall laugh," cried Molly on meeting Denis Quirk.

"You are speaking Dutch puzzles, Miss Molly. Who and what are he and Sylvia?" he answered.

"Desmond O'Connor is him, and Sylvia a spirit, just a woman that's ethereal and a spirit. I am thinking poor Desmond is love sick."

Desmond followed Molly through the window, and came with outstretched hand to meet his former chief. Kathleen O'Connor, watching from the window, admired her brother's magnanimity. She would herself have unbent to Denis long ago had it not been for Gerard's influence, and for the dread lest her brother should be lost in the darkness of the great city life.

Denis took the proffered hand and wrung it cordially. One glance at the open face convinced him that his plan had proved successful; the drink fiend had been exorcised.

"And how is Melbourne treating you?" he asked.

"Better than I deserve. I have found good work and good friends," replied Desmond.

[Pg 103]

"I knew you would come out all right, lad," said Denis, kindly. "What is your work—papers or politics?"

"Nothing so grand; just advertising."

"Then you are at the very top, for advertising is the great power these times. You will make and unmake kings and emperors of commerce."

Kathleen O'Connor was that evening kinder and more gracious to Denis Quirk than she had been since Desmond had gone away. Mrs. Quirk, who had noted their estrangement with wondering sorrow, smiled placidly as she heard them laughing, while Molly Healy and Desmond exchanged jests together.

"You are not cross with Denis now, Honey?" she asked the girl after the two men had left the house—Denis for his office, and Desmond for the hotel. "He is good at heart, if sometimes quick in his temper."

Molly Healy, who was preparing to drive home in Father Healy's jinker, cried out:

"Denis is a great man! His heart is as big as your own, Granny!"

Kathleen kissed the old lady as she answered:

"I could not long be cross with anyone whom you loved."

"God reward you, Honey, for your kindness to an old woman," said Mrs. Quirk, lovingly.

CHAPTER X.

[Pg 104]

RUMOUR, HYDRA-HEADED.

Ebenezer Brown lived a lonely life in an old house on the outskirts of the town, the large garden surrounded by a high stone wall. There was always a feeling of gloom about the house, no sound of voices, for Ebenezer Brown was a bachelor, with no relations to care for him, and only one elderly female to provide for his comfort. A venturesome relation had on one occasion taken advantage of the old man's sickness to attempt to secure a footing in his house; but no sooner was the old man out of his bed than the relative was to be seen driving to the station with her luggage. Warned by her fate, no other relation, male or female, dared to enter the house.

It was seldom that lights were seen to gleam from the windows of the house. Still more uncommon was it to find visitors assembled there. The old man had a place of business in the town, and anyone wishing to see him might find him there. He discouraged visitors, for visitors suggested hospitality, and hospitality represented the expenditure of money, the one and only thing that the old man valued.

Lights were, however, twinkling from Ebenezer Brown's dining room out into the night a few evenings subsequently to Desmond O'Connor's visit to Grey Town. A meagre attempt at hospitality had been made for the visitors, a scanty supply of water biscuits, a few apples of an antique appearance, with a bottle of limejuice and water. But not one of the guests was sufficiently hungry or thirsty to taste of the good things provided for them.

[Pg 105]

They sat around the large, bare table, Ebenezer Brown and his three guests, Garnett, Gifford and Gerard—the three G's, as Denis Quirk had nicknamed them. Ebenezer Brown half leaned on the table, his face peculiarly white and eyes very bright in the light of an incandescent gas burner.

"Every man has a past, if you can unearth it. The greater the saint, the worse his past. Eh, Garnett?" he asked.

It was noticeable that Garnett refrained from any direct answer; possibly even he had had a past.

"That play," continued Ebenezer. "What did you call it?" he asked Gerard.

"Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde."

Ebenezer Brown's hearing was exceptionally acute to-night.

"That's the one!" he cried; "and it's true to nature. There's good in a few and bad in all. Eh, Gifford?"

"Unhappily there is," sighed Gifford.

"This man, Quirk," cried the old man, vindictively, "has a past, if we can discover it. We must rid ourselves of him; he's a public nuisance, a dangerous, meddlesome fellow. Always poking his nose into something; always making things unpleasant. Quirk must go!"

[Pg 106]

"Quirk," said Garnett, in the slow and sententious manner he adopted, "is a radical and a demagogue, a positive scourge to the town. As you say, Quirk must go!"

Ebenezer Brown turned to Gerard this time and asked him:

"Are you prepared to make the necessary enquiries for us?"

"Certainly, if you are prepared to pay the necessary expenses," replied Gerard, carelessly.

Ebenezer Brown winced at this, but his hatred of Denis Quirk was an absorbing passion now.

"Garnett and I will share the expenses."

Garnett protested feebly, but the old man overbore him triumphantly.

"Garnett and I will pay," he said.

"Let me have it in writing," said Gerard, producing a typewritten paper from his pocket.

Ebenezer Brown read it through carefully; then, after one or two protests as to the amount, he prepared to sign it, but he paused, saying:

"No evidence; no pay?"

Gerard looked the old man full in the face, and answered:

"You can add that. I promise you full and convincing evidence."

The deed was signed and witnessed to by Gifford and the old housekeeper, aroused from her sleep for the purpose. A few minutes later the three G's were leaving the house. As they emerged from the gate the bright head lights of a motor picked them out distinctly, before the car swept by, leaving a blacker darkness behind it.

[Pg 107]

"Did you see those three, Cairns?" asked Denis Quirk, who was racing towards "The Mercury" office in company with his editor. "There's mischief on foot when you see insects like those together."

"Ebenezer Brown has been having a card party," laughed Cairns. "Cards and wine."

"And light talk? It's a pity there is no law for the destruction of vermin of the human sort!"

"Did you see who was in the car?" Garnett asked Gerard.

"I think it was Quirk himself and Cairns," replied Gerard. "Probably they have been writing an article about you; something hot and strong. Quirk knows where to strike, and he hits hard."

Garnett's comment was hurled into the surrounding darkness; but his companions heard it and laughed.

"I expect to return in six months' time," said Gerard; "possibly sooner. Another six weeks later, and 'The Mercury' will probably need a new proprietor. Why not buy it yourself and make me the editor, with Gifford under me? You might do worse."

Outside the first hotel he suggested a drink. Gifford refused to enter the bar, and went on towards his home; the others walked into the private bar and called for whisky and soda.

"Did you ever see such a miser as Ebenezer Brown?" Gerard asked. "Dry biscuits, dry apples, and that sour stuff! It makes me sick to see a man like him, with all his money. He won't enjoy it here—nor hereafter, if there is a hereafter," he added.

[Pg 108]

Garnett, a strict Calvinist, winced at the remark, but passed it over. Gerard was too useful a man to quarrel with.

And so these two worthies walked home, laughing together, while Denis Quirk and Cairns were preparing fresh powder and shot for the campaign against reaction. When Councillor Garnett read the leading article in "The Mercury" on "Ways and Means," after the first irritation he smiled grimly.

"This can't go on for ever. We shall wear them out," he remarked to his wife.

There was yet another question in the town, about which the feeling ran high and bitterly. The council was desirous of building a more imposing town hall, and the land they desired belonged to Ebenezer Brown. Naturally, he asked twice the just value for it, and, as was now the commonly accepted course of events, Councillor Garnett supported him. Denis Quirk and the councillors, who now followed him, set resolutely to work to prevent this spoliation. Had Denis not been there, the public would have grumblingly accepted the purchase of the land. As it was, he roused them to such a pitch of resentment that the price was slowly reduced until it finally remained at one and a quarter times the rightful value of the block. At this price the council purchased it.

During the conflict party feeling ran high, and personalities were indulged in. It was at this time that the scandal was first whispered.

[Pg 109]

Who originated it, no one knew, but it flew from mouth to mouth, and it was not the less grim for the constant repetition. Denis Quirk had a past—an evil past—so evil indeed that his wife had divorced him in the States. At this time the story had no substance; it was merely an ugly rumour. Strange to say, it did not reach Denis Quirk's ears, because his enemies repeated it among themselves, while his friends refused to insult him by mentioning the story.

Father Healy, on hearing it, lost for once his accustomed kindness.

"Would you be bringing such tales to me, a priest?" he asked. "Denis Quirk is a man who goes to his duties; not by any means a saint, but a good, honest Catholic. Tell the next man or woman who speaks about it that scandal and detraction are steps in the ladder down to the devil's

kingdom. There are more souls lost that way than you can count."

The narrator, a well-meaning gossip, left the presbytery in consternation, and forbore from further repetition of what was to her a "bonne bouche." But not even Father Healy could keep the tale from growing in magnitude and increased offensiveness.

The story came to Kathleen O'Connor's ears, and, curiously enough, she strongly discredited it. Not that she cared for Denis Quirk, but she had a strong sense of justice and of probability. She could not believe that Denis Quirk, whom she regarded as an honourable man, could be guilty of that of which he was accused. He was a hard man, rugged and deficient in manners, but, seeing him constantly, she recognised that he was not the sort of man to commit the crimes of which he was accused.

[Pg 110]

For this reason she was kinder to him than ever she had previously been. Denis Quirk, although he appreciated the fact, never attributed it to any absurd reason, such as a younger and more conceited man might have done. In the matter of women he was absolutely humble and wanting in vanity, for he regarded himself as hopelessly ugly and deficient in the qualities that charm the female sex.

But poor old Mrs. Quirk had a romantic idea in her mind that the two persons she loved best, after her husband, should make her happy by marriage. She noted the kindlier feeling between them, and one evening she spoke to Kathleen, most diplomatically as she believed.

"You are beginning to understand Denis, honey. The more you know him the better you will like him."

It was an autumn evening, and the air was beginning to turn chilly. Mrs. Quirk, who felt the cold, sat near a wood fire. Kathleen was beside the window. Presently she would slip out to say a few words to Gerard, for thus far had their intimacy gone that he frequently came and talked to her in the avenue near the house. And these meetings were unknown to Mrs. Quirk, who dozed in her chair, or to Samuel Quirk, smoking in his den. There was nothing in their *têtes-a-têtes*, no word spoken, no action done, that was wrong; but there was danger to the girl because of her very innocence. She was this night working and watching. Outside a bright moonlight lay on the trees and gardens, making the shadows darker by the contrast. Gerard, who lurked in the shadow, would presently call her from one of these.

[Pg 111]

"Mr. Denis Quirk is an honourable man, and I respect him," she said.

"It is near my heart—," Mrs. Quirk began. Then she paused.

"Yes?" asked Kathleen.

"Never mind, honey. If it is God's will, He will work it. It is difficult to arrange things for Providence."

A low whistle from a deep shadow, like the note of a bird. Mrs. Quirk fancied it was a bird, but Kathleen rose and slipped out.

"I shall be gone only a few minutes," she said.

CHAPTER XI.

[Pg 112]

TEMPTATION.

Kathleen O'Connor was walking slowly in the deep shadow of the avenue with Gerard beside her. There was a stillness everywhere save for the droning of flying beetles as they hurried past, apparently careless as to where they might go. Beyond the avenue lawns, gardens, and trees were distinctly outlined in the bright moonlight. From the pines and from shrubs and flowers a sweet perfume arose, enervating, intoxicating, but this was as nothing to the intoxicating power in the words of Gerard. Never before had he or any man spoken to Kathleen as he did on this night; never had she felt the same strange thrill as now. Not that his words were evil or suggestive of evil; they were merely a powerful appeal to the girl's affections. They appeared to come straight from his heart, and they had a compelling effect upon her.

"I am going away from Grey Town to-morrow, Kathleen," he began.

Her heart sank at these words, for already his visits had come to assume an important part in her scheme of life.

"For a long time?" she asked him.

"For six months. Will you come with me?"

"I can't leave Mrs. Quirk," she faltered. "Not yet. Wait until you return."

[Pg 113]

"I may never come back," he urged.

"Surely you cannot expect me to come with you, like this, at a moment's notice?" she pleaded.

He put his arm around her, the first time he had touched her, and she did not shrink from him.

"You love me, Kathleen. I am sure of it. I cannot wait until I return. Come with me to Melbourne—now, at once. We shall be married there," he said, in a low voice.

"But I can't leave Mrs. Quirk like this. It would be so horribly ungrateful," she protested.

"You must!" His arm was more firmly around her. She had the feeling that she was in his power, that he was exercising some influence over her, hitherto unknown to her. "I need you more than she."

"I can't," she answered, more faintly. "Why should we steal away clandestinely, without telling Mrs. Quirk?"

"Because I am compelled to go, and I cannot go without you. I will take you to America, and give you a chance of seeing the world. We shall be happy together, you and I. Come, Kathleen!"

They had strolled back along the avenue, and were not far from the house.

"Kathleen! Honey!"

Kathleen could hear Mrs. Quirk's voice calling to her from the house.

"I must go inside," she urged.

"No! You must come with me, now, to-night! There is the night express, and I have a cab waiting for us outside the gate," he answered. There was mastery in his voice, and she felt that she could not resist. [Pg 114]

"Kathleen! Honey!" cried the voice again. Looking up at the window, she saw Mrs. Quirk framed in the light as she peered out.

"I must go! I will!" she said.

"Come with me," he answered, and began to lead her towards the gate. As she went the voice became fainter and fainter: her resisting power weaker.

They were half-way down the avenue when they heard a man's steps, rapid and firm. A moment later they could see the figure, though indistinctly, in the shadow. For one moment Gerard hesitated, then with an oath he sprang behind a thick shrub, leaving her free. Immediately she was running towards the house, her heart palpitating, her breath coming and going in gasps. She felt that she must get away from the temptation.

In the drawing-room she found Mrs. Quirk still peering anxiously out into the garden. The old lady did not hear the girl's entry, nor did she know that Kathleen was present, until the latter went and touched her on the shoulder; then she turned quickly.

"I had a dream, honey, a fearsome dream," she said, "that someone was taking you away from me. Sure, I thought it was," she added, lowering her voice to a whisper, "the devil! I could see him leading you down the avenue there, and I awoke calling out to you in terror. When you did not answer me I went to the window to peer out." [Pg 115]

"No one shall take me away from you," said the girl. "I will stay with you while you need me."

She led Mrs. Quirk back to her chair, and placed a cushion behind her. Then she remained beside her, gently stroking the old lady's hand and singing to her in a low voice. Thus did Denis Quirk find them when he entered.

Little did he know how closely she had approached to destruction. Nor was he aware that a man crouching behind the shrubs had viewed him with the acute hatred of disappointment in his heart. Gerard had clenched his fist in impotent rage, and cursed the man he regarded as an enemy. "I will be even with you for this, Denis Quirk!" he had muttered to himself as he went down the dark avenue, after waiting in the vain hope that Kathleen might return to him.

Of all this Denis Quirk was ignorant. He had fancied he saw figures as he came up the avenue, but even of this he was doubtful. Entering the room, and seeing Kathleen occupied with his mother, his voice became almost gentle as he said:

"Miss O'Connor, you are very nearly an angel."

Kathleen appreciated the kindness of his words and tone, but she did not look up nor answer him. She had not yet recovered from the scene in the garden; to speak at this moment might have proved too much for her.

Denis was, where women are concerned, quite ignorant and simple. Men he understood, but the female mind was like a strange, unexplored territory to him. He had a vast respect for women, a respect that bordered on fear. To conceal this he made use of a brusquerie of speech and manner that was merely a cloak to his real nervousness. Kathleen O'Connor he regarded as an ideal of womanly perfection: he placed her on a pedestal, and paid her his homage secretly. For her part, Kathleen was beginning to realise that the rough exterior concealed a character truthful, and not ungentle. Realising this, she had laid aside her attitude of resentment, and adopted a friendly camaraderie such as may exist between brother and sister. [Pg 116]

To-night, finding his remarks unanswered, Denis turned to his mother.

"I have a plan for to-morrow, old lady," he said—"a day off. What do you say to a boating excursion up the river?"

Mrs. Quirk was still influenced by the vivid effect of her dream. It had been peculiarly real, and had left a marked impression on her mind.

"Will Kathleen be coming?" she asked.

"Kathleen has not been asked," said the girl in a low voice.

"Miss O'Connor was included in my plan," said Denis.

"And will you come, honey? Sure, if I must be drowned, I would like to have you beside me," said Mrs. Quirk.

Denis laughed at the reply, and Kathleen could not forbear from a smile.

"We will all go down together, and lie twined up in the bottom of the river. It will make the fishes smile to see us," he laughed. "Be prepared to-morrow, ten sharp." [Pg 117]

Kathleen was sorely tempted to ask his advice in regard to Gerard. Indeed, she went so far as to call him back as he was leaving the room, but, when he turned, she asked:

"Have you any news of Desmond?"

"The best," he answered. "He is doing well. Did I do right to send him away?"

"You did," she said; "but I could not foresee. Shall I thank you now?"

"No need to do that. I am always at your service."

"Denis meant that; every word of it all," said Mrs. Quirk, when her son's footsteps had died away. "He is true to his friends, that boy is."

"I am sure that he is," replied Kathleen.

All night she lay between waking and sleeping, the events in the garden returning constantly to disturb her. She still regarded Gerard as something more than a friend; to-night she had stood on the threshold of love. But she was afraid of him; the strange influence he exerted over her had terrified her. What should she answer when he asked her to marry him on his return, and what would she do without his companionship while he was away? The morning found her still wearied with her night's combat. It brought her a note from Gerard, written prior to his departure. In it he urged Kathleen to join him in Melbourne, but all the desire to do this had now left her. Last night in the garden she had struggled almost vainly against his power, now she was able to realise the folly and danger of that which he suggested. [Pg 118]

The quiet party up the Grey River, with Denis Quirk rowing and Mrs. Quirk beside her, while she steered, was soothing to the girl's tired spirit.

As they wound in and out of the river bends, now between the frowning grey rocks that jutted out on each side of the river, and now through green meadows, where the cows were contentedly browsing, the quiet and stillness of the day was a sedative to her. Here and there they would pause to explore a cave, its interior, moist and covered with moss, extending far into the rocky hill, away out towards the ocean. Now and again they could obtain a distant view of Grey Town, a blue smoke hanging about its roofs and church towers.

Denis Quirk rowed steadily, but without undue exertion, and Kathleen allowed one hand to trail in the water as she steered with the other. It was a still day, and the river reflected the sky and the rocks as they passed; even the cattle standing to drink in places knee deep in the water were reduplicated. In silence the girl drank in the peacefulness of the scene, while Denis Quirk cast an occasional remark at his mother and her.

About mid-day they drew the boat up on a patch of sand, while they picnicked on a piece of green meadow land. When that was ended they drifted slowly down the stream, and returned in the motor to "Layton."

"Now," cried Denis, when he had assisted his mother and Kathleen out of the car, "after a day of peace to return to war and strife. Don't you feel better for the day off. Miss O'Connor?" [Pg 119]

"Much better. Why is not every day like to-day?" Kathleen asked.

"We should not appreciate it properly. Work and play in thin slices makes life an appetising sandwich. Good-night, and pleasant dreams."

He turned to the chauffeur and told him to drive him to the "Mercury" office. There he flung off his coat, and directed the staff with an energy that was almost superhuman. With Denis Quirk and Cairns to control the paper, it was not to be marvelled at if the Grey Town people boasted of their daily paper.

Sometimes Ebenezer Brown, smarting over an exceptionally vigorous attack, vowed that he would start his old paper in opposition; but a short reflection showed him the hopelessness of such an undertaking.

"Wait until Gerard returns!" he said, rubbing his thin hands together. "Then we shall see Quirk crumble up and fall into pieces. Take away a man's reputation and you destroy him here in Grey Town."

CHAPTER XII.

[Pg 120]

SYLVIA JACKSON.

"Marry? Why should I? I am perfectly happy as I am. My father dotes on me and gives me everything I ask for. I know at least a score of men who regard me as the last thing in feminine perfection. I am perfectly content to remain as I am."

Sylvia Jackson, fair haired, ethereal, as Desmond O'Connor had described her, with large, rather sleepy, blue eyes, looked at Kathleen O'Connor in surprise.

"But you may fall in love," suggested Kathleen.

"Love? I really don't know what it means. I have always liked to have a few men about me and know that they will do whatever I ask, even to destroying themselves. But the passion is on their side."

The two girls were sitting in Kathleen's room, in evening dress, as they had come from the annual club ball in Grey Town. There was a fire in the grate, a lamp in a corner of the room was lighted and half turned up, but it shed a very subdued light on the room.

Kathleen remembered that Desmond had done his utmost at the ball to monopolise Sylvia Jackson, that they had disappeared for a considerable portion of the evening. She could still see her brother's flushed face and sparkling eyes as he returned from some dark corner with Sylvia on his arm. She had hoped to hear an avowal of love from Mrs. Quirk's guest.

[Pg 121]

"I fancied——," she began in a disappointed voice.

"Of course I like Desmond," said Sylvia Jackson, divining her thought. "He is so fresh and unconventional that we all like him at home. He is the very nicest boy I know; but I am like a mother or an elder sister to him. Why, I am centuries older than Desmond, not in actual years, but in knowledge of the world. I shall find him a charming girl-wife, like you are, but I shall always expect him to remain on my staff."

"After he is married?" cried Kathleen.

"Why not? It is a recognised thing, I assure you. But I suppose we must go to bed. What an ugly man Mr. Denis Quirk is! Really, he is the ugliest man I ever met!"

"That is because you don't know him. Mr. Quirk's face is the worst part of him," said Kathleen.

"I have a dread of ugly men. I select my staff with particular attention to good looks. What queer old people those Quirks are! The old woman should be in the kitchen; I am sure she would feel more at home there."

Now, if there was one subject upon which Kathleen felt keenly, it was the virtues of Mrs. Quirk. She well knew that the old lady was laughed at and derided behind her back; but no one had dared hitherto to speak disrespectfully of her to Kathleen's face. Reddening slightly, she answered:

"Mrs. Quirk is the best and kindest woman I know; if you really wish to be friends with me, don't say a word against her. I shall quarrel with anyone who does that."

[Pg 122]

"Don't quarrel with me, please! I am far too lazy for that. I always agree with everybody, and for your sake Mr. Denis Quirk shall be handsome, and Mrs. Quirk as refined as she is rich."

It had been Mrs. Quirk's suggestion that Sylvia Jackson should be invited to "Layton," and Sylvia, being at the time rather hipped at home, accepted the invitation readily. Desmond O'Connor, on hearing of her intended visit, managed to obtain a few days' holiday, and arrive in Grey Town in time for the club ball. There he had her undivided attention, an impossible thing to achieve in Melbourne. But the fact did not make her less elusive. She laughed at him when he became too tender, allowed him a certain degree of liberty to check him when he approached the question of love. She was always gracious and kind to him, as to every other man; in this way she prevented her staff from deserting her; but, while she loved to be admired, she had expressed her true sentiments to Kathleen as they sat together after the ball.

For his part, Desmond O'Connor lived in a fever heat of passion. To hint that Sylvia was not perfection was to make him an implacable enemy. She so far encouraged him as to make him believe that the barrier between them was the most fragile and easily broken affair, and that at any moment it would be shattered by his great love. Relying on this hope, he came and went at her bidding, filling to perfection the duties of an obedient staff officer.

[Pg 123]

On the morning after the dance, Kathleen met Sylvia in a somewhat hostile spirit. She resented Desmond's devotion to the girl, and she had been hurt by the allusions to Mrs. Quirk; but Sylvia

did her utmost to dispel this feeling.

"I am sure you are cross with me," she said, "and I want you to like me. I think you are the most charming girl I have ever met. For your sake I intend to cultivate even Mr. Denis Quirk, and to make love to that dear old woman."

This programme she began to carry out scrupulously. To Mrs. Quirk she was most attentive, and on Denis she exercised her fascinations, to his intense surprise.

"Do you walk into town?" she asked him.

"Sometimes I do. It depends on the state of my liver. When I feel in a desperate temper and inclined to destroy the whole world, myself included, I walk into town; at other times I ride in the car."

"Are you walking to-day?" she asked him.

"I am," he answered.

"Then I intend to walk with you, if I may," she said.

"You won't enjoy it a bit. It is all that I can do to prevent myself from snapping my own nose off," said Denis.

"Oh, that does not matter a bit. You couldn't make me angry if you tried. Will you come with us, Kathleen?"

"I am afraid I can't leave Mrs. Quirk. But I will meet you in town, and we will have lunch together," said Kathleen. [Pg 124]

"Come with us," said Denis Quirk, almost despairingly. "The mother will get on for once without you."

"I flatter myself that Mrs. Quirk will be quite miserable without me," she answered, laughingly. "I have a very good opinion of myself, Mr. Quirk; I feel that I am necessary to one person in the world."

But she watched them as they walked down the avenue, wondering what they were laughing about, perhaps a little bit annoyed at Sylvia Jackson's presumption in forcing herself on Denis Quirk.

Sylvia Jackson was very adaptable, where men were concerned. She rarely found any great difficulty in securing the attention of a man, old or young, when she desired so to do. It was her way to find out where a man's special vanity lay. If he were so singular as to have no particular vanity, she would discover wherein his interests were centred and attack him through that avenue. So skilful was she, so insinuating in her flattery and in her questions, that she rarely failed to secure admiration as a woman of singular penetration. She had the gift of being able to listen with apparent interest to a conversation, throwing in the necessary question here and there. When it was necessary to talk, she could change her tactics and make conversation for the shy, reserved man.

They had not gone far to-day before Denis Quirk said to himself: "This is a clever woman." He was not far wrong in this appreciation, for Sylvia Jackson was undoubtedly clever. Before they had come to Grey Town the two were laughing and joking with one another as though they had known each other for years. For a woman to arrive at such intimate relations with Denis Quirk in a short time was a triumph. [Pg 125]

Desmond O'Connor was awaiting Sylvia outside "The Lounge," as the big emporium in Gressley St. was called. Seeing her approach with Denis Quirk, his brows contracted slightly, but he met them smilingly.

"You call this punctuality?" he asked.

"I call it feminine punctuality. If a woman fails to keep an appointment by not more than half an hour, she is a model woman. I promised to meet you at nine, and it is now barely twenty-five minutes past. Mr. Quirk, could any woman achieve more than that?"

"My acquaintance with women is so limited that I must refuse to arbitrate. If I were Desmond, I should swear," answered Denis.

"Have you been swearing, Desmond?" she asked.

"If so, I have forgotten it. I am now the most supremely contented man in the world," answered Desmond.

"Well, good-bye, children!" cried Denis.

He was surprised at himself for this speech; it was a frivolity that he had never before been guilty of. But with Sylvia Jackson there were no restraints, nor was his remark in the slightest degree extraordinary to her. She called out after him as he went:

"Don't forget our appointment after lunch."

"You have charmed the grizzly bear," said Desmond. "I believe you could teach him to dance." [Pg 126]

"I intend to do that. Before I go away he shall dance to my music, the dear old grizzly," she answered. "I intend to drop you handsome men and cultivate the ugly ones. Denis Quirk is charming!"

"I believe he is a good sort," said Desmond, who was above the pettiness of deprecating a possible rival.

"I am sure that you are the very best of good sorts. Now, what are we to do?" she answered.

"Walk along the cliffs, and see the grandest sight in Nature—the eternal war between the ocean and the land," he answered.

And Sylvia Jackson, who was artistic and emotional to an extreme degree, fully agreed with him when she stood on the cliffs that tower over the sea just two miles beyond the town.

A strong wind was blowing from the south, the sun shining through a sky dappled with fleecy broken white cloudlets. The spray sparkled in the bright light before it broke into a rainbow of changing colours. Above the big rollers the cliffs rose in broken perpendicular columns; there was a constant roar in the ears as breaker after breaker hurled itself on the rocks. Sea-birds wheeled about overhead. In the far distance the ocean stretched out, to where a bank of clouds rested on the distant horizon, in slopes and peaks, a perfect copy of snow-clad mountains.

"Don't stand so close to the cliffs!" cried Desmond.

She laughed at him mockingly.

"You need have no fear for me. I am an ethereal spirit, a thing of vapour," she answered.

[Pg 127]

"I wouldn't dare stand where you are; I should be drawn down. Good heavens!"

As he watched her she became suddenly pale and giddy. Seeing this, he sprang and seized her in his arms, drawing her back, shaking and trembling in every limb.

"It was just in time," she said. "Another second and I was lost. Suddenly a giddiness came over me, as if someone seized me and was pulling me over the cliff. Take me away from this dreadful place."

There were tears in her voice and in her eyes. She continued to sob until they were remote from the sea. Then she suddenly asked, laughingly:

"Do you still imagine I am in danger that you continue to hold me?"

"It was an opportunity I could not miss. Sylvia—," he said, sinking his voice to the sentimental key.

"Now, you must stop at once. Remember our compact. Once you become too sentimental our friendship ends. Drop your arms by your side. That will do. Now you may smile pleasantly and talk to me like a sensible man."

It was a repulse, but it sounded rather as an invitation to continue the siege in a less impulsive manner. So did Desmond construe what she had said, and his spirits reflected the satisfaction which the belief afforded him. When she joined them at lunch Kathleen found the two as full of spirits as if they had been children. Their laughter and jests were an offence to many who were lunching in the same room as they. To these simple country folk the manners and style of the new school, to which Sylvia Jackson belonged, were something as yet strange and disagreeable. But the new school pays no attention to other people, and rejoices in causing a sensation and outraging old-fashioned ideas.

[Pg 128]

It was immediately after luncheon that Sylvia Jackson suggested:

"We will go and visit Denis Quirk, and turn his office upside down."

"I don't think you know Quirk," replied Desmond. "He's a martinet in 'The Mercury' office."

"Oh, nonsense!" she cried. "Denis Quirk and I are like brother and sister."

She shot a quick glance at Kathleen to note the effect of this remark, but Kathleen showed no sign of concern.

"You will come with us, Kathleen," she continued, "and take a lesson from me on the taming of bears. I positively love wild animals of the human sort; they afford a natural tamer like me such a fund of pleasure."

"Oh, yes, I will come," Kathleen replied.

She was vaguely surprised at the welcome they received. Denis Quirk was a new personality to her; for the moment he threw away his accustomed gravity and joined with his guests in their frolics. He led them around the office, introducing them in turn to each employe, from Cairns right down to Tim O'Neill, now promoted to office boy and occasional reporter. He explained the mysteries of the printing room, and retailed a score of newspaper anecdotes. Finally, he insisted on taking them to a tea-room, and there ordering tea for the whole party.

[Pg 129]

When he had parted from them to return to "The Mercury," Sylvia Jackson asked:

"What do you think of the martinet now? Can you suggest any other man in Grey Town whom I can transform into something human?"

"Ebenezer Brown," laughed Desmond O'Connor. "Why, there he comes, the old rascal!"

It was done in a moment. As the man came slowly up the street, Sylvia Jackson dropped her purse in his path. It fell with a clink, and this it probably was that caused Ebenezer Brown to stoop and pick it up.

As he handed it back to her, Sylvia Jackson gave him a most gracious smile.

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Brown!" she said.

Ebenezer paused for a moment to ask:

"You know me, young lady?"

"You would not remember me, but I met you once, years ago. My name is Sylvia Jackson."

"Jackson?" grunted the old man. "Don't remember the name, but I shouldn't forget you if I had met you once."

He went along the street, chuckling in his throat in a dry, disagreeable fashion he affected when amused.

"You took a great risk in allowing old Eb. to hold your purse. How he resisted an inclination to pocket it I can't for the life of me understand," said Desmond O'Connor.

"Are there no other impossible men in Grey Town?" asked Sylvia Jackson. "I feel so exalted by my two successes that I would love to discover a really hardened woman-hater, and convert him to more humanitarian principles." [Pg 130]

"Be content with what you have achieved, and devote your gifts to me," said Desmond.

Kathleen recognised that she was the unnecessary third, but they protested that she must walk home with them, and managed to ignore her presence entirely as they followed the dusty road to "Layton."

CHAPTER XIII.

[Pg 131]

DENIS REFUSES TO SPEAK.

Martin, the postman, was the most deliberate man in Grey Town. He never hurried, and he never made a mistake. If he had twenty letters to deliver at the same address, he would carefully read the address of each one before taking the responsibility of handing it over to the recipient. This accounted for the fact that Martin, the postman, was invariably late.

To Molly Healy, anxiously waiting at the Presbytery gate for the weekly letter from Ireland, Martin was a constantly recurring cause of sin. So keenly did she resent his leisurely methods that her indignation had changed to anger, her anger almost to hatred, when she resolved to check herself.

"It must be stopped," she remarked to Mrs. Quirk, "or one day I will be running at him with the pitchfork, and it would never do for the priest's sister to be pursuing the postman through the town to destroy him."

"Sure, then, if I was you I would be praying for the man, returning good for the evil he was doing you," said Mrs. Quirk.

"But he doesn't mean it, and that is the worst of Martin. His conscience is so big that it takes him all his time to carry it round. He's a poor, good man, but it is murder I sometimes contemplate," cried Molly. [Pg 132]

At last she hit upon the device of giving Martin half an hour's grace before expecting him.

"I will be lenient with the man, and not expect him until he has arrived," she said. "But it would do my heart good to pinch him."

The half-hour had been prolonged to an hour, and Molly Healy was in a white heat of fury when Martin arrived.

"And what has kept you to-day?" cried Molly Healy. "You are the slowest man in Grey Town, for sure, and that is saying you are phenomenally slow."

"You are angry," said Martin, in his most deliberate fashion.

"Angry! I am just quivering with ungovernable temper. I could shake you!"

"You require your letters delivered by a twenty horse-power auto-motor," replied Martin.

Therewith he began to run through the letters with a deliberation that was almost cruel.

"When you have done shuffling the cards, perhaps you will give me the one you have in your hand," cried Molly.

"Patience, young lady. I have a duty to perform—."

"Your duty is to give me my letter. If you only knew how near you were to sudden death you would be in haste to get away from me."

"There you are, five letters—one for you. Let me see; is it for you?" Martin began to read the address over. [Pg 133]

"Oh, the Lord forgive you! You are an occasion of sin to me."

"Patience, Miss Molly! Here you are, and good-day to you. The Lord send you a better temper!"

Martin delivered the letters, and proceeded placidly on his path of duty. Molly Healy watched him until he had turned a distant corner.

"The man will never get to heaven—he is too slow; and he will prevent me getting there unless Providence removes him to another round."

She carried the letters to Father Healy, and then proceeded to shut herself in her room, and there absorb the news from Ireland. In laughter and in tears she read her letter, and then re-read it, determined to lose not one word of the contents.

Dr. Marsh was with Father Healy when the letters came.

"May I read them?" the priest asked.

"Certainly! Why not?" replied the doctor in his brusque manner. "I will digest a slice of theology."

He took a book from the table and opened it.

"I hope it will agree with you," laughed Father Healy, as he tore the first letter open.

"Humph!" grunted Dr. Marsh. "When I am dying I will send for you; meanwhile I am quite content to remain a sinner."

Father Healy did not reply. He had become keenly interested in his letter. Twice he read it, and then he asked:

"Where was it that Denis Quirk told you he was editing that paper of his?" [Pg 134]

"The Firebrand?" asked Dr. Marsh, who had become absorbed in the book he was reading.

"Yes! yes!" cried the priest.

"I don't exactly remember. I fancy it was Goldenvale. You had better ask Denis. Now, I can't agree with this," said the doctor, referring to something he had just read.

"I will controvert with you in due season. Just now I am worried. You are a safe and reliable man. Read this."

Father Healy handed the letter to Dr. Marsh, who having glanced at it, became deeply interested in the contents.

"Goldenvale! Do you know this man?" he asked.

"How should I?" replied the priest, almost irritably. "Could you expect me to know every priest in America? But I could find out if there were such a man."

"I would take this letter to Denis Quirk, and allow him to deny it. It's a lie, a palpable lie. I am sure of that."

"And so am I; but lies are more readily credited in Grey Town than the truth. I will see Denis Quirk at once. Will you come with me?" asked Father Healy.

"Not to 'The Mercury' office, but a part of the way. Put your hat on while I finish what I was reading."

Denis Quirk was in the outer office as Father Healy entered. He was inditing a letter to Tim O'Neill, who now claimed, among his other qualifications, a certificate as a typewriter. [Pg 135]

"Good-day, Father Healy!" cried Denis Quirk. "What can I do for you? A paragraph to encourage your congregation to build the new school?"

"Not at present, Mr. Quirk. If you will give me five minutes, I will ask no more."

"Then come into my room. Finish that, address it, and post it, Tim."

"Yes, sir. And might I then go down to the hall and report that meeting?"

"Certainly, Tim. This is the keenest man on my staff, Father."

Tim O'Neill beamed all over at this praise, and he settled himself resolutely to his task. Meanwhile Denis Quirk's office door closed with a bang on Father Healy and himself.

"I should like you to read this," said the priest, as he handed the fateful letter to Denis Quirk.

The latter took it and read it frowningly. Then he leaned back in his chair, and regarded the priest with a composed face.

"Well?" asked Father Healy.

"Well?" responded Denis.

"You will, of course, deny the calumny?"

Denis Quirk shook his head.

"The writer is a good man and a priest. As for the accusation, let time be the judge. I shall neither acknowledge nor deny it. There are others concerned besides myself."

Father Healy was for the moment bereft of the power of speech. He could not understand Denis Quirk's attitude. At last he cried: [Pg 136]

"You are accused of being a divorced man!"

"If I am, the action was not from me. I then adopted the attitude I now propose to adopt. I merely sat quiet. There are persons concerned in this whom I refuse to injure."

"And what do you intend to do?" asked Father Healy. "There will be a horrible scandal in Grey Town."

"I shall do what I did in the States—just live it down and wait. Time will put everything straight," said Denis Quirk.

"Your wife has married again?" the priest asked.

"I believe she has. Father Healy, all that I ask of you is your confidence and trust. There is certain to be a storm, but I am strong enough to stand it. I don't wish to lose my friends, you least of all. Will you believe in me?"

Father Healy looked in the man's eyes, and Denis Quirk met his gaze unflinchingly. He was particularly ugly that day, but Father Healy could read human nature, and he believed that Denis Quirk was honest.

"I would have preferred you to have proved yourself innocent," he said.

"I cannot do that; others can. It is for them to speak, not me," replied Denis.

"I promise that I will hold to you," said the priest.

"Thank you, Father. If you will do that—you, the old mother, and one other—I am content," he said.

As the good priest left "The Mercury" in a particularly dejected frame of mind, he found Dr. Marsh waiting for him. [Pg 137]

"Well?" he said. "A canard, I suppose?"

Father Healy made no reply.

"You don't mean to tell me—," cried the doctor.

"I believe he is a wronged man, but he refuses to speak."

"I must speak to him myself. Don't wait for me, Father. Just get away home, and pray that a miracle may put this straight."

Denis Quirk was still sitting as the priest had left him when Dr. Marsh burst in upon him, and plumped down on the chair that had been vacated by Father Healy.

"See here, Quirk," he began, without further explanation, "I am a man of the world, and I know the utmost capabilities of human wickedness. I don't believe you are a real libertine. But I know Grey Town. Many a dog has been hanged here because of his bad name. You must disprove this."

"No, doctor. If you knew my story you would recognise the strength of my position. I must trust to time to put things straight."

"They will start another paper and fight you."

"Let them. That is what I want, a good fight," replied Denis. "Someone whom I can hit—hard!"

"And what if I withdraw my capital?"

"You won't do that, doctor," replied Denis, with a quiet smile. "I know you."

"Well, Quirk, I'll tell you what I think of you—a clever, Quixotic fool. But I will stand by you to the end. I am a sort of Ishmaelite; nothing pleases me better than an exchange of hard blows." [Pg 138]

The two men shook hands in silence, and Dr. Marsh went out to find Father Healy waiting for him.

"We are a pair of idiots, you and I," said the doctor. "We ought to unite in hooting Denis Quirk out of Grey Town, but we shall fight for him to the finish. He is too ugly to be hopelessly wicked," he added, after a pause.

"Then you and I are not altogether bad," laughed the priest.

They walked in silence to the doctor's gate.

"Won't you come in?" he asked, as they paused to say good-bye.

"No, thank you. It is a strange thing I should have received the Bishop's letter to-day," said Father Healy, reflectively.

Dr. Marsh could not grasp the meaning of this remark, so he refrained from comment on it.

"The Bishop wishes me to take a six months' holiday," continued the priest.

"You have earned it by hard work. A most reasonable suggestion. Take a rest before you die suddenly," said the doctor.

"And he suggests that I return to the old home in County Cork," added Father Healy.

"Naturally. Where would you go but to Ireland?"

"Why not America? It is a great country, and cousins of my own in every city. It might be I would find a cousin in Goldenvale itself."

"Goldenvale! Father Healy, you are a strange man, a many-sided man, but I don't think you are the best fitted person I would select to be discovering other men's secrets." [Pg 139]

"Denis Quirk won't help himself. I intend to help him," said the priest.

"And if you prove him guilty?"

"No man need know but that I went to Cork, after all. But something tells me I shall find him innocent."

"I am prepared to lay 6 to 4 on that myself. Well, Providence go with you, for you deserve it; and if you require money——," said Dr. Marsh.

"Not one penny. I have a small income of my own, inherited from my mother, God rest her soul! Molly shall go to the Finns, in Brunswick. The change will do her good. And no one need know but that I am in Cork."

"In Cork you shall be, if I have to perjure my soul to prove it!" cried Dr. Marsh. "No man shall come near me when I come to die but you, for you are the best man living."

CHAPTER XIV.

[Pg 140]

"AND ONE OTHER!"

The Grey River was in flood. It came down the valley a torrent of yellow water, rushing madly between the rocks where the channel was narrow, spreading out far and wide over the low-lying meads, bearing with it the trunks of trees and other debris snatched up along its course. It had overflowed the lower bridge, and rendered it impassable to traffic; the upper bridge was threatened by the turbulent river.

There had been storms far up among the mountains, where the Grey takes its origin, and rains all down the valley. From every small stream and gully a volume of clay-coloured water flowed into the main stream. But the day was bright and sunny after the rain. The sunshine glittered on the yellow surface of the stream, and on the green fields sloping upwards from it. Viewed from the distant hills, the Grey valley was a shining, sparkling amber, encased in an emerald setting.

Kathleen O'Connor had viewed the flood with concern. On the further bank of the river was Mrs. Sheridan's small cottage, where a poor widow struggled to keep a large family by milking on the share system. Kathleen knew that one of the children was seriously ill, and that the mother, always living from hand to mouth, but always carrying a brave face, would be seriously encumbered by Michael's sickness. She feared, too, that the flood waters might even reach to the little cottage, with disastrous results. [Pg 141]

"Shall I ride over and see how Mrs. Sheridan is?" she asked, when the heavy rain had ceased, and sunshine was raising a warm vapour from the sodden earth.

"Why not?" replied Mrs. Quirk. "It will do you good—and Sylvia, too."

Sylvia Jackson still remained at "Layton." She had come prepared to spend a monotonous fortnight at Grey Town, because she was tired of the city. But she had remained at "Layton" day after day, accommodating herself to the inhabitants and to the routine of the house. No one resented her presence, nor did anyone desire her departure, for she had made herself pleasant to

all. In Mrs. Quirk's eyes she stood second only to Kathleen. Samuel Quirk regarded her as chief critic and adviser on the estate, and to Kathleen she was a cheerful, madcap companion, who reminded her that she was yet young. Denis Quirk's sentiments in regard to the girl he carefully concealed from the outside world, even from Sylvia herself. He was polite and deferential, yet humorous, with her; but she would have liked him to demonstrate clearly that he had enrolled himself among her bodyguard. She had given him abundant opportunities so to do, walking almost daily into the town with him, paying flying visits to "The Mercury" office, and playing dreamy music while he smoked his evening pipe. But Denis Quirk made no sign.

[Pg 142]

When Kathleen O'Connor proposed to ride round and see the Sheridans, Sylvia was painting. She was an adept at every variety of artistic work. Of any of the arts she might have made a success had she been content to devote her talent solely to that one; but she was too versatile to be completely successful, and while everything was good, nothing was perfect.

"I would love to go with you," she cried.

"And I will meet you at the lower bridge and ride home with you," said Denis Quirk.

In accordance with this arrangement, the two girls rode towards Mrs. Sheridan's after breakfast. Kathleen O'Connor was a perfect horsewoman. Sylvia Jackson, on the other hand, was unused to horses, and very nervous; but she was too proud to confess the fact. Kathleen, while recognising Sylvia's lack of capacity was too charitable to comment upon it. She had protested once, when her friend asked to be allowed to ride a rather high-spirited horse, but when Sylvia retorted hotly, Kathleen offered no further opposition. Thus it came about that Sylvia rode in constant dread, and made a nervous, fidgety horse a thousand times more irritable.

The road towards the upper bridge that crosses the Grey at Swynford is bordered by stretches of green grass. Along this the two girls rode at an easy canter, saving when Dr. Marsh's car rushed past, the doctor driving furiously, as was his way. This incident upset Sylvia's horse for a considerable time, but he quietened down into an easy canter in the deserted bye-road that leads from Swynford, along the farther bank of the Grey, to Mrs. Sheridan's.

[Pg 143]

At a rise in the road they paused to look down on the cottage. It stood surrounded by pine trees, with a small garden around it. It was a demonstration of Mrs. Sheridan's perpetual industry that she found time to keep the garden in order, despite her numberless other duties. A bright little patch of gay colours she had made of it, and behind it she had cultivated a neat kitchen garden.

"The river has not done any harm to Mrs. Sheridan's cottage," cried Kathleen, with great relief, as she viewed the flood waters, still several feet below the level of the garden.

"Can you understand anyone living in such a poky, ramshackle little hovel?" asked Sylvia. "I would rather be dead and buried than live there."

"Mrs. Sheridan cannot choose; she must live there or die. She is a great woman," said Kathleen.

Mrs. Sheridan met them at the gate, clean, tidy, and talkative. She was noted throughout the district for her loquacity, but, if she spoke at great length, she always spoke kindly.

"Is it you, Miss O'Connor?" she cried. "Sure, it was like yourself to be thinking of me and Michael. Michael and me, we was thinking of you. Only last Sunday I said to the boy, 'Miss Kathleen will be going to Mass,' the which I couldn't do myself, and more is the pity; but when Dan was down with the chickenpox, Father Healy himself, no less, the Lord bless the good man! told me it was my duty to be with Dan. 'The Lord will excuse you from the chapel,' he said to me, 'and you can read the Mass to Dan.' The which I did to Michael here, and him listening to me as if he understood it all, every word. But won't you come inside, you and the young lady? You will be excusing the house, miss; and if you would be taking a cup of tea or a glass of milk, there's no spirits in the house to be offering you, for I think it is putting temptation in the way of some that's too fond of it."

[Pg 144]

"Yes, we will come inside and see Michael," cried Kathleen. "And if we might have a cup of tea —"

"Not for me," Sylvia whispered; "I couldn't drink tea in a place like this."

"To be sure," cried Mrs. Sheridan, not hearing Sylvia's comment. "Michael will be pleased to see you. Doesn't he call you 'Pretty Miss Kathie'? But you will excuse the liberty in a boy. He is recovering, the doctor says, which himself was here to-day, and the car stuck out there in the mud, and the doctor swearing! Michael could hear him in his bed, which it wasn't good for the boy to hear. But the doctor is too kind, for sure, to mean any harm, even to the car, and Michael and me pretended not to hear him, nor to know that he was angry. The Lord will overlook the words he used to the car and the council that should be taking care of the roads."

Kathleen hitched her own and Sylvia's horse to the fence, and entered a small, but wonderfully clean, room, that served as a kitchen and general sitting-room for the family. Here they found Michael, a boy of four, the baby of a family of nine. The other children had gone, as a troop, to the State school at Swynford. There they would remain all day, to return and assist at the milking, such of them as were capable.

[Pg 145]

Kathleen sat down beside the boy, and began to entertain him. In a few minutes the two were laughing together, as became old friends. Kathleen had brought sundry gifts with her, among

them a sovereign, which she slipped under his pillow, to be discovered after she had gone.

Sylvia sat rigidly on her chair, absorbing the scene with her apparently sleepy eyes; while Mrs. Sheridan bustled about, talking unceasingly, as she spread a clean table cloth and prepared the tea for her guests.

"Did you ever hear such a rain? And the wind! The Lord preserve us; it was praying Michael and me was, the others fast asleep, that the cottage might not be blown away, and us in it. It was like the night himself died. I was sitting here beside him, watching to see him flicker out. He died as peaceful as a child—just one smile for me, and he was gone. An' me alone in the house with him. Mrs. Smith that would have been beside me—she's dead herself now, God rest her soul, for she was a good neighbour—the rain and wind prevented her and many another. And there I sat beside him, as I sat beside Michael, listening to the rain beating on the window and roof, and the trees groaning as if in mortal anguish, and the house creaking, and outside the river and sea roaring. It was praying I was for the morning, for the night makes the storm more fearsome. Now, sit down, Miss O'Connor, and you, miss; the tea is made. It's only bread and butter I can offer you, but it is all I have, and welcome you are to it."

[Pg 146]

Kathleen sat down, but Sylvia Jackson, to Mrs. Sheridan's intense concern, refused to eat or drink.

"Thank you, I am not hungry," she said.

Kathleen was hurt by what she regarded as a want of courtesy. Everything was scrupulously clean, if poor, and the widow willingly gave all that she possessed. To make amends for her friend's refusal, Kathleen drank more tea and consumed a larger amount of bread and butter than she had ever done before. Then, after a chat on the affairs of Grey Town, which Mrs. Sheridan made a kind of prolonged solo, Kathleen and Sylvia rose to go.

Mrs. Sheridan followed them to the gate, talking vigorously. As they rode away her voice might still be heard as she chanted Kathleen's praises to Michael.

"What a dreadful woman!" said Sylvia.

Kathleen was already deeply hurt by her friend's conduct, and she fired up into intense indignation at this remark.

"Dreadful!" she cried. "Mrs. Sheridan is a good, honest woman. She has given her life for her children, and she is the soul of good nature."

Sylvia laughed good-humouredly at this championship.

"A very excellent person, no doubt," she said, "but an ungovernable tongue. She never ceased talking while we were there. No wonder himself died peacefully. How he must have longed for death—and peace!"

[Pg 147]

"You don't understand—," Kathleen began.

"I don't profess to understand. I belong to another school to you. My set detests the prosaic and commonplace; we must have the clever and original. Platitudes are detestable to us, unless they come clothed in a brilliant metaphor. Homely virtues I neither pretend to understand or admire. I much prefer eccentricity, even clever vice."

Kathleen laughed tolerantly, recognising that further argument or expostulation was vain.

"Shall we try the lower bridge?" she asked.

"Of course we must. Denis Quirk is to meet us, and I wouldn't disappoint him for anything. Now, there is a man after my own heart, strikingly ugly, so ugly as to be beautiful, and wonderfully clever, sometimes so rude as to be quite original, full of a sardonic humour—an absolutely unique type. Denis Quirk is the sort of man I might condescend to love, and if ever I do love it will be like that river in flood down there."

The road ran high above a rocky gorge, through which the Grey was rushing in a turbulent torrent of water. It roared as it went, and leaped up angrily at the rocks on either side, foaming and bubbling, swirling into small whirlpools, as if in an impotent passion at the constraint.

Kathleen looked at the flood, and then at Sylvia's sleepy face and dreamy eyes.

"I wonder if you could love?" she asked.

"I wonder, too. Sometimes I scoff at the very thought of such a thing, and sometimes I believe that I could be as wild and turbulent as the river is to-day."

[Pg 148]

Beyond the gorge the river widens out into a broad estuary before it enters the sea. It is across this estuary that the lower bridge has been built. Just below it is the bar, where river and sea were battling in a wild confusion.

When Kathleen saw that the bridge was half submerged, and that the current was still strong, though not to be compared in violence with the maelstrom that poured through the gorge, she reined her horse in.

"We must turn round and ride home the way we came," she said.

"Turn around? Why should we? I intend to cross. I can see Denis Quirk on the farther bank."

"And he is warning us to turn back," said Kathleen.

"The more reason to go on. Follow me if you dare."

Seeing that Sylvia was determined to cross, Kathleen urged her own horse alongside of Sylvia's, and seized her friend's rein.

"You shall not go on!" she cried.

"Let go of my reins!" said Sylvia.

Kathleen recognised the note of anger in the voice, and saw that the customarily sleepy eyes were flashing, and that there was a line of determination on the usually smooth forehead. But this did not influence her.

"No. I will not let go," she replied.

Sylvia Jackson raised her whip. Once it fell smartly on Kathleen's hand, leaving a red wheal; still Kathleen held on. But when the blow was repeated more viciously than before, with a cry of pain she released the rein. [Pg 149]

"Do you imagine you can stop me, with Denis Quirk on the other side?" Sylvia asked, and urged her horse on to the flooded bridge. I have already said that Sylvia was not an expert rider; her horse realised the fact, and faced the water with a snort of terror. The handrail of the bridge alone appeared above the muddy stream; even this was submerged occasionally as a wave rolled up from the turbulent bar, barely one hundred yards below the bridge.

The horse began to rear in terror, threatening every moment to plunge over the rail of the bridge into the stream. Kathleen, behind, could do nothing but follow, while from the further bank a small collection of men and women watched in a panic that prevented action. But Denis Quirk was quick of thought and prompt to do; he sprang from his horse and dashed along the flooded bridge towards Sylvia.

"Sit still!" he cried. "Keep your rein loose, and get your feet free from the stirrups."

Scarcely realising what she was doing, Sylvia obeyed him. He attempted to seize the horses' rein, but the animal was maddened with terror, and kept turning away from him. At last, however, Denis managed to throw his arm around Sylvia and drag her from the saddle. Immediately after, whether still further frightened by his action or bewildered by the water, the horse reared over the handrail into the flooded river. He was washed almost to the bar, but managed to reach the further shore, and gallop home to his stable at "Layton." [Pg 150]

Denis Quirk carried Sylvia across the bridge, followed by Kathleen, whose horse went quietly through the flood secure in his rider's composure. On reaching the farther side, Denis realised that Sylvia had fainted. There was, however, a small hotel close at hand, and here Denis left the girl, safe in a kindly landlady's care.

He found Kathleen dismounting from her horse, her face very pale from the anxiety that Sylvia's danger had caused her.

"Why did you allow her to do such a foolish thing?" he asked, abruptly.

Kathleen held her hand, with the marks of the whip still on it, out of his sight. It was not for her to tell him how her attempts to restrain Sylvia had been received.

"It was against my wish that she crossed the bridge," she answered.

"Even for you it was a madcap thing to do," he said. "You can never trust a horse in such a flood as this. I have telephoned for the motor; you and she had better go home in it, while I take charge of your horse. You have caused me a terrible anxiety."

He turned away, leaving Kathleen scarcely able to control her mortification and annoyance. Denis Quirk had, she told herself, disregarded her danger, and spoken to her like a disobedient child. By what right did he lecture her or hold her responsible for Sylvia's wilfulness? When the landlady came to ask if she would come to her friend, it was on the tip of her tongue to refuse but she restrained herself by a great effort, and went into the room. [Pg 151]

Sylvia was sitting on a couch, very pale, but smiling placidly. As Kathleen entered, tears came into her eyes, and she asked in a penitent voice:

"Can you ever forgive me? I can't forgive myself for striking you. But no one has ever attempted to prevent me from having my own way, and I was resolved to go on. I have been sufficiently punished."

"Never mind about it now," said Kathleen. "You did not realise the risk."

"I shall never forget it! Let me look at your hand. Did I do that? Oh, how cruel of me to strike you! You won't tell Denis Quirk that I did it?"

Kathleen, who had begun to feel her anger slowly evaporating, became suddenly as indignant towards Sylvia as she had been prior to the latter's apology. It was evident to her that it was not

because of the injury Sylvia had done her, but lest she should complain to Denis Quirk, that Sylvia was asking forgiveness.

"I have no intention of telling Denis Quirk," she answered, coldly.

"Now, don't be angry, Kathleen—please. I am a spoiled girl, I know. Everybody has conspired to spoil me. I am impulsive and passionate, but no one has checked me. Let that be my excuse."

She put her arm around Kathleen and drew her down on the couch beside her.

"Kiss me," she said, "and say you forgive me. There, that's a dear! Now tell me exactly what happened. It is a blank to me." [Pg 152]

Kathleen told her exactly what had taken place, Sylvia listening with intense interest.

"Isn't he brave?" she asked. "And he took me in his arms, and never thought of you! What if your horse had gone over the bridge after mine?"

"Denis Quirk knows that I can ride 'Douglas' anywhere," Kathleen answered.

"I suppose so," said Sylvia; "but he might have made sure of the fact. I think he is splendid. All those other men stood gaping on the bank, and he was the only one to act. It is a moment like that that proves a man. Scores of admirers have told me what they would do for me, but only one man has done—only one," she added, dreamily.

That evening Kathleen was restless; the day's adventure had disturbed her more than she was aware of. After tea, having made Mrs. Quirk comfortable, she slipped on a thin lace shawl and went quietly into the garden. Walking about in the evening stillness, her accustomed composure returned to her. Presently she slipped into a summer-house, and sat down to think placidly.

As she sat there, she heard voices, and, to her surprise, Denis Quirk and Sylvia paused directly in front of the summer-house. The very thought of eavesdropping was repugnant to her, but they were speaking so quickly and earnestly that she had heard part of their conversation before she could interrupt it. Remembering Sylvia Jackson's passion, possibly fearing an outburst of malice, Kathleen kept very quiet, resolved never to give a sign of what she knew. [Pg 153]

"You saved my life," Sylvia said, "and I could refuse you nothing. Ask anything of me in return."

"Nonsense!" Denis answered, laughingly. "You exaggerate what I have done."

"You say that because you are brave. Brave men laugh at their own courage, as you do. But I know, and I worship you!"

The last words were spoken almost in a whisper, and in the tender voice that Sylvia Jackson was mistress of. But for once the words rang true. Kathleen held her breath, wondering what any man could do when so spoken to by such a woman as Sylvia.

Denis answered curtly, almost rudely:

"My dear young lady, please don't weave any absurd romances about me. I am an ordinary and very commonplace man, not accustomed to soft words from pretty women. Take my advice and go home to your parents; forget about me as quickly as you can. I have no intention of ever marrying, and I don't pretend to be a lady's man. Now, go inside, like a good girl, and forget to-day."

"Forget!" Kathleen noted a change in Sylvia's voice. "I shall never forget to-night."

Their voices and steps grew fainter, until they were finally lost to Kathleen's ears. After a few minutes she also went towards the house. Denis Quirk stood higher in her estimation than ever he had done before. He had been severely tempted, and had put the temptation behind him. Sylvia Jackson was what is termed a man's woman, but Kathleen could realise the fascination she was mistress of. She had been courted by many men; to-night she had thrown herself at Denis Quirk's feet, and he had resisted where other men might have succumbed. With these thoughts in her mind, Kathleen greeted Denis Quirk kindly when he met her near the house. [Pg 154]

"I am afraid I was rude to you to-day," he said, without preamble. "I spoke without thinking. I want you to excuse me."

"I do," she answered, simply.

"Naturally, you were hurt," he said. "Believe me when I say that I would rather offend anyone than you. I place very few women among the heroines, but you are one of them. For any other I would have been afraid in the flood; I knew that you were safe. That was the reason why I offered you no help. My fears were for your friend. I am fully forgiven?"

"Fully," she answered.

"Thank you! That is all I want. Good-night!"

He turned on his heel, and went down the avenue on his way to "The Mercury" office.

DESMOND GOES UNDER.

In the period of pique and disappointment, when she realised that Denis Quirk was impervious to her attractions, Sylvia Jackson suddenly awoke to a new interest in life. At the moment she was hesitating between an interesting decline and a fearful vendetta. But this did not deter her from attending the Grey Town Intellectual Society's lecture on Art and Artists, which was delivered by George Custance, R.A., nor did it prevent the lecturer from fascinating the impressionable girl.

Until that moment Grey Town was unaware that Custance existed. A few of the townspeople had occasionally noticed a man in a grey suit, who was living at the "Fisherman's Retreat," near the mouth of the Grey River. They had seen him handling a rod from the banks of the river, and had sometimes observed him with a sketch-book in his hand, transferring a view of the coast to paper.

But he was so quiet and unobtrusive that few persons paid any great attention to him. It was indeed entirely by chance that the Intellectual Society secured his services. The secretary wrote to an artist friend in Melbourne, suggesting a lecture; the answer was short and concise: "Sorry I cannot find time to amuse you. Try Claude Custance; he knows more about art than any other man in Australia."

[Pg 156]

"Try Custance! Who the dickens is Custance?" the secretary asked the president.

"Blessed if I know. Ask Gurner; he is sure to know," the president answered.

In the club Gurner was nicknamed the Grey Town Directory. He was regarded as a local Burke, who could fire off the pedigrees and performances of every family in the district.

The secretary discovered him in the club, taking a novice down at billiards.

"Do you know a man of the name of Custance?" the secretary began.

Gurner prided himself on his knowledge. To be unable to point out the identity of any person in the town was to ruin a reputation. He paused abruptly from the stroke he was contemplating.

"Custance, did you say?"

"Yes; Custance, an artist."

"There is a grey man of that name at the 'Fisherman's Retreat.' He is a bit of an artist, they tell me. I will ask Cowley," he said.

A few days later he found the secretary in his office.

"I have found out all about that artist man," he said.

"Custance? Does he know anything about art?"

"Do you know anything about law? He's a classic winner, the very deuce of a top-notch. He's been hung over and over again. You can't teach him anything about art," replied Gurner.

"I wonder if he would lecture for us?"

[Pg 157]

"Leave him to me. A nice fellow; we fraternised over fishing, with a whisky and soda to wash it down. He began to tell me tall stories, and I added six inches to everyone he produced. I will secure him for you."

This he did the following day, for Custance was quite an obliging man, and a personal friend of the artist who had refused the invitation.

The news spread, as it usually does in a country town, and interest in the lecture became phenomenally keen. The intellectuals had for once secured public support. They promptly raised their charge for admission from sixpence to one shilling, with an additional sixpence for booking. They advertised the attraction in capital letters and created a furore. The consequence was that the learned and those who assumed the virtue combined to fill the hall to overflowing.

Custance was an ideal lecturer. He took possession of the platform and audience in an easy, unassuming manner, and delivered an address amusing and learned, yet understandable. And well he might, for he was not a mere painter, but one who had lectured on art to select audiences, and had sold pictures at fabulous prices. At this very moment London was asking, "Where is Custance?" and here he was in Grey Town.

The town would have made much of him had he permitted it. But he was there for work and quiet. A shoal of invitations were fired at him and refused; he preferred to lapse into obscurity. A few of the more obtrusive attempted to force their society on him: to these he was frankly rude. The more tactful fell in with his humour, and were content to nod to him.

[Pg 158]

Sylvia Jackson was introduced, but beyond a passing glance of admiration Custance relegated her to forgetfulness. She was, however, determined to know him, and she engineered a second meeting with her usual diplomacy.

"A picnic to the beach would be ideal," she suggested. "Not to the frequented part, but to that

quiet little beach near the mouth of the Grey. Just ourselves, Mrs. Quirk, you and Kathleen, and I."

She knew that Custance was sketching a seascape not far from that spot.

"Why not?" asked Mrs. Quirk. "What more should we want? You and Kathleen are all I need—with Denis to come to tea, if he has the time."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Denis Quirk, "but I must be at the office all day. Cairns is away on holiday, and not a man with any initiative but Tim O'Neill to support me."

Denis Quirk's absence was a great relief to Sylvia Jackson. She still entertained a tender admiration for him, but, as he continued to resist her fascinations, she preferred that he should not be present to frustrate or ridicule her plans. Mrs. Quirk and Kathleen were easily duped, but she feared the penetration of Denis Quirk. Nevertheless she made pretence of a great disappointment.

"We counted on you," she remarked in an agonised voice.

[Pg 159]

"Never count on a paper man. We are the most unreliable people in the world," he answered. "Make the old mother happy, and don't keep her out too late."

With these words he went down the avenue whistling the air of a melody that Kathleen had sung the night before.

Sylvia had studied her plans with the greatest care, and she put them into action when they were safely arrived at the strip of beach that lies beyond the river bar.

"You and Granny prefer to be alone," she told Kathleen. "I intend to take my sketch book and see what I can do with the view round the point."

Therewith she sauntered away, giving them no time to protest. The spot she had chosen for her sketch is one of the most magnificent on the coast.

It is a small patch of sand, terminated towards the east by black precipitous rocks, against which the sea is perpetually pounding in great breakers. On this day the sea was a wonderful dark blue, and very peaceful, save where it thundered at the base of the cliffs. On the horizon a bank of grey clouds rested on the water like a remote island crowned with mounts and peaks. The smoke of a distant steamer rose in an almost straight line upwards; nearer the shore a small fishing boat was moving gently backwards and forwards, its sails barely filled by the gentle breeze. There was a sense of rest in the scene, as if the ocean were slumbering after the strife of a few days previously.

[Pg 160]

Here Sylvia found the artist, working quietly at a picture that he had almost completed. He had caught the vivid colouring of the ocean, the grey bank of clouds and the distant smoke, and had transferred them to his canvas.

Sylvia approached and stood behind him, but he did not recognise her presence, for he was absorbed in his work.

"How do you contrive—," Sylvia began.

Custance turned towards her with a quick start, for, like other artists, he had nerves that were peculiarly sensitive and reacted acutely to impressions. Seeing that the questioner was a beautiful girl, he regarded her with a kindly smile.

"Forgive my rudeness," said Sylvia, "the question was almost involuntary."

"The question is not yet completed. How do I contrive—?" he asked.

"How do you contrive to snatch up the colours of nature and place them on your canvas?"

"I have all the colours there," he said, pointing to his palette, "and so has every painter; but some of us approach nearer to Nature. I have never yet succeeded in quite pleasing myself. I have the deep blue of the sea, but not the representation of infinite depth and infinite power."

"You approach very closely to it," she answered. "Now sit down and paint, and let me watch you. I am a painter myself; not an artist like you, but one who dabbles a little in an amateur fashion."

[Pg 161]

"May I see your sketch book?" he asked, and took it from her hand. "Very good!" he cried. "Shall I tell you what I think?"

"Please do!"

"You might be an artist, if you were content with that alone; but you are too versatile. Am I right? The result is great possibilities that will never be realised unless you concentrate your power on one thing."

"Let me watch you," she said, "and I will resolve to do nothing but paint."

She sat on a sand bank behind him, and he painted his picture, turning occasionally to speak to her.

At last she rose unwillingly.

"I must go, or my friends will fancy I am lost. May I come here again and take a few more lessons?"

"Certainly, if you will. I shall be delighted. But when this picture is completed I pack up my effects and go. It is a pity you do not live in Melbourne," he added regretfully.

"But I do," she answered.

"Then you must come to me and study the finishing touches of your art. You need only a few more details and you will be an artist."

"Oh, you are too kind!" she cried.

"Not at all. It is a privilege to encourage talent," he answered. Nevertheless had she not been an attractive woman, he would not have offered his assistance so willingly.

"I suppose your parents will not object?" he asked. "You can assure them I am a most trustworthy young man." [Pg 162]

"My parents allow me to do exactly what I wish," she answered. "You see, they can trust me," she added, smilingly.

"Naturally. Then it is a promise."

This was their first meeting. Subsequently it became her custom to ride out alone after breakfast. She chose the morning, when Kathleen was busy and could not accompany her, and she took her sketching book; but most of her time was spent in watching Custance, and absorbing his art.

When her teacher left Grey Town she suddenly realised that her parents and friends in Melbourne needed her society, and, after an affectionate parting from Kathleen and the Quirks, was carried out of Grey Town life by the train that is termed an express.

In Melbourne, an indulgent father and mother, who fondly believed that she was perfect, readily consented to her improving her talent under the teaching of the great artist, and she made rapid progress in her art. But this was not the chief result of her lessons. Slowly she became infatuated with the personality of Custance, while he, having begun to play the game of love simply for the excitement it afforded him, finally found himself involved in a grand passion. This he declared to her in language suggested by his artistic temperament, and she responded in a similar strain.

Then came a pause, when he asked himself: "Is it fair that any woman shall link her fate to mine?" He looked at the small syringe on the mantelpiece and the tiny little bottle beside it. He thought of the marks on his arm, of the passing inspirations he thus found, and of the subsequent fits of remorse. [Pg 163]

The following day, while they were working in the studio, Sylvia painting and he criticising her work, he asked:

"If I were a drunkard, would you still care for me?"

She did not so much as turn while she answered:

"Whatever you are, I have given myself to you."

"There are worse things than drink," he said, as if communing with himself. "There are drugs that enslave and debase a man; drugs that lead him into the gardens of pleasure and raise him to the heights of delight, so that he believes himself to be a superman, and," he almost groaned, "lower him to the uttermost depths. Supposing—."

She turned to face him smilingly. "I refuse to suppose," she answered. "I have resigned myself to you, and I am ready to accept and condone everything. I love you, and that is sufficient for me."

What could a man such as he, who had never denied himself anything, do under these circumstances? He threw his scruples to the winds and made love in a feverish manner, regardless of the cost. Sylvia introduced him to her parents, and he was made welcome by the hospitable and kindly old people. At last he offered himself to Mr. Jackson as a husband for Sylvia. But here he met with a check, for the old man had a strange antipathy for artists; his capable, matter-of-fact business mind mistrusted the emotional, and he firmly believed that artists were governed by the emotions. He was willing that Custance should be a friend; he refused him as Sylvia's husband. [Pg 164]

Custance was prepared to accept this as an adverse judgment, and to bow to Mr. Jackson's decision; for he was a man of honour. But, when he announced his intention to Sylvia, she refused to accept it.

"By what right," she asked, "does my father take my happiness in his hands? I can best judge the husband I need, and I refuse to give you up. It is too late for him to interfere now."

"You must remember—," he began.

"I will remember nothing but that I love you, and that you have told me you love me. That is the only thing that counts. You do love me, Claude?" she answered.

"Love you! I worship you," he answered, "but your father has done so much for you—."

"I grant that. There is no father like him. If he had stopped me in the beginning I would have accepted his commands. Now it is too late. I can't obey him now."

"I feel myself bound by honour——," he said.

"You are bound by honour to me. My father has no right to tell me who I shall marry. I refuse to be treated as a child; I am a woman, capable of choosing my own husband."

Thus did she urge him on against his better judgment, and one day they were missing. For better or worse Sylvia Jackson was married to Claude Custance, brilliant, erratic, a slave to morphia. For his sake she forgot her duty to her parents, the love and kindness they had lavished on her. The day that she left them a cloud came and rested over their home. For her, marriage proved a cruel and bitter disillusionment, for no woman can ever rival that deadly mistress, morphia. [Pg 165]

The night before Sylvia's elopement, Desmond O'Connor had dined with the Jacksons. Mr. Jackson had hoped to displace Custance with the handsome young fellow whom he loved, and Sylvia had made use of Desmond to conceal her infatuation for the artist. They had sat together out on the verandah, and she had given him a rose.

"A rose for constancy," she said, as he held it in his hand and inhaled the perfume. "You deserve it."

"Shall my constancy be rewarded?" he asked eagerly.

"What a handsome boy you are!" she laughed. "I wonder will it be rewarded?"

"Why do you tease me?" he asked. "If you could read my heart——?"

"I can read it in your eyes. I know every word they say. Come inside and sing to me."

In his fine tenor voice he sang, at her request, Tosti's "Good-bye." That was his farewell to Sylvia Jackson.

The following morning Mr. Jackson failed to appear at business. This was an almost unprecedented event, and caused quite a flutter of excitement in the office; but it was not until the afternoon that Desmond learned the reason. He was summoned into the Chief's office to find Mr. Jackson, grey-faced and worn, a broken man. [Pg 166]

"I have ill news, my boy," he said very kindly to Desmond. "Sylvia has run away with Custance."

Desmond made no reply. Suddenly the world had altered for him; he had passed out of the light into an impenetrable blackness. He sat with his head bent down, changed in a moment from a light-hearted boy to a despairing man.

"I want you to come home and fill the place that she had. Mrs. Jackson and I love you, and we need a child." Mr. Jackson continued.

"I can't do it," cried Desmond. "I should be thinking of her all the time. I have lost all faith."

And so the world believed; for Desmond O'Connor, while he eschewed the coarser vices and worked relentlessly, renounced for a period the religion that his father's life should have made dear to him, and went on his way a professed disbeliever.

CHAPTER XVI.

[Pg 167]

THE VIRTUE OF GREY TOWN.

The City Fathers who governed the municipality of Grey Town were not unlike the councillors in other towns and cities. They laid no claim to a pre-eminence in wisdom, professing to be merely ordinary men of business, of sound common sense, and strictly honest for the greater part.

Councillor Garnett was perhaps the single exception to this rule of honesty. The other councillors worked from a sense of duty, possibly urged by a worthy ambition. Councillor Garnett occasionally dipped his hand in the municipal purse, and brought from it as many golden guineas as he could clutch. Yet he had led the Council for many years, and was still regarded by the Conservative element as a worthy leader. In all probability he would have continued to rule the civic affairs of Grey Town had not Denis Quirk come to the town to turn things upside down and sweep away certain municipal cobwebs.

The question as to the purchase of a block of land in the town for the erection of Council stables and cart houses was made a test question by both parties as to who should control the future destinies of Grey Town.

It had already been decided to erect the necessary buildings. Councillor Garnett had then moved that a certain vacant section in one of the streets should be purchased, when Denis Quirk rose to his feet. [Pg 168]

Immediately there was a certain electrical excitement in the Council Chambers, that was reflected in the alert faces of the councillors. They sat attentively with expectant ears as he

began to speak.

"Sir," he said, "I am here to oppose anything that approaches municipal corruption."

"I object to that word," growled Garnett.

"You object to the word and I object to the deed," Denis replied, quietly. "We are not here to line our own pockets, or, if we are here for that purpose, we are in the wrong place. Our purpose should be to act as watch-dogs for the ratepayers, to guard their interests. What if the dogs start to worry the sheep? I accuse Councillor Garnett in this matter of abusing his position as a councillor. I accuse him of disingenuousness that borders on fraud."

"Oh, come, come," said an elderly councillor, who was constantly scandalised by Denis Quirk's want of municipal decorum. "Fraud is an unpleasant word."

"Undoubtedly," Denis continued. "But it amounts to that. Councillor Garnett is directly interested in the land that he is urging the Council to purchase at a false price."

The words were spoken quietly, and with a certain deliberation that was impressive.

"That is a lie!" cried Councillor Garnett, now aroused to fury.

"Order! Order!" cried the Mayor. "I ask Councillor Garnett to withdraw that word."

"Let Councillor Quirk withdraw his accusation first," suggested another councillor.

[Pg 169]

"I intend to prove it," answered Denis. "Will Councillor Garnett tell me who is George Haynes?"

"How should I know?" replied Councillor Garnett, doggedly thrusting his hands in his trousers pockets and tilting his chair backwards.

"Who should know better than you? George Haynes is a dummy, a former clerk in your office, who has been made to appear the owner of this land to cover you in this transaction. I have the copy of a deed here that directly proves my statement."

"How did you obtain it?" asked Garnett, when someone plucked his sleeve and thrust a paper in to his hands.

"Turn the tables on him. Ask him why he left Goldenvale; has he been divorced; and what about the funds of the Goldenvale Investment Society which he was accused of embezzling?" he read; but, when he turned to see the messenger, the latter had vanished.

"Never mind how I obtained it. May I read it?" Denis asked the Mayor.

"One minute first. Let us have the credentials of this reformer before we listen to his accusation. I refuse to be judged by a dissolute ruffian, a divorced man and one accused of embezzling the funds of an investment society. Why did Councillor Quirk leave Goldenvale?" cried Councillor Garnett, triumphantly.

This accusation came as a thunderbolt to the Council, when those who were friendly to Garnett were pondering how they should act in view of Denis Quirk's charges; and those who stood opposed to Garnett were rejoicing in his discomfort. To the former his counter charges came as a relief; to the latter they brought doubt and consternation. Only one man seemed perfectly composed and he was the person accused.

[Pg 170]

"My past history does not concern the Council if I can prove my present statement," he said very quietly.

"It concerns the Council vitally. How can we believe a man with your reputation?" asked Garnett.

"The latter part of that charge is false."

Again a paper was thrust into Garnett's hand. This time Denis Quirk noted the action, and the face of Gerard, the messenger. He smiled grimly.

Garnett glanced at the paper and read the heading.

"Quirk in Court. Accused of misappropriating the funds of the Investment Society. Case part heard."

"Does Councillor Quirk know this paper?" he asked. "The 'Goldenvale Investigator?'"

"I used to know it. It was a rival of my own paper, 'The Firebrand,' and a most unscrupulous paper."

"Perhaps you remember this?"

Garnett handed the paper across the table to Denis.

Denis read the heading aloud to the Council, ending with the last lines: "Case part heard."

"Have you the next issue of this rag?" he asked. "If so, you will find that the result of this case was a complete vindication. I was triumphantly acquitted. A month later you will find an abject apology from 'The Investigator.' This was a trumped-up affair, the work of my enemies. Tomorrow I shall publish the full details in 'The Mercury.'"

But the Council were determined that he should no longer be heard. When he asked again:

[Pg 171]

"May I read this document?" the Mayor replied:

"I do not think it is in order."

"I intend to read it," cried Denis.

"I rule you out of order," answered the Mayor.

Denis began to read slowly and deliberately, but the opposing councillors prevented him with a babel of cries. The meeting finally broke up in great disorder, after Denis had attempted to make himself heard and had been escorted from the Council Chambers by the Town Clerk.

The following day he began his battle with Grey Town, a fight in which all fair-minded and right-thinking men conceded him a victory. He published the full account of the proceedings in the Goldenvale Court, ending in a triumphant acquittal, and the subsequent apology in "The Investigator." He also published the document purporting to be signed by George Haynes. It was an acknowledgment of the loan of a sum of money, equivalent to that which Haynes had paid for the land under offer to the Council, and a promise to repay the money at an exorbitant rate of interest to Garnett. Very few impartial men doubted the real meaning of the transaction.

But Garnett knew Grey Town. It was not a particularly moral town, but there were periods when it arose in virtuous indignation to punish the evil-doer, and it generally selected as its victim the man who was the least guilty. Denis Quirk was made the object of one of these outbursts of public morality. He was a man of dissolute morals, divorced under peculiar circumstances. Denis Quirk must be booted out of Grey Town.

[Pg 172]

The Quirks were at breakfast on the day that followed the scene in the Council Chambers; only Denis was absent. Samuel Quirk was reading "The Mercury" when his son's name caught his eye.

"What is this about Denis?" he cried; but as he read he wished he had not spoken, for he loved and respected his wife, notwithstanding his professed scorn for her.

"And what is it?" she asked.

"Never you mind. Denis can fight for himself," he answered.

"Just read it to me," she urged.

"What for would a woman be wanting to hear such things?" he answered, and thrust the paper in his pocket as he went out.

But Mrs. Quirk was determined to know. She had noted the frown on her husband's face, and gathered from it that he was reading ill news.

"Just slip out, Honey, and ask Joe for his copy. I must know the worst," she said to Kathleen.

"Mr. Quirk does not wish you to know," Kathleen suggested.

"Not knowing is worse than the very illest news. I will be in a fever until I hear. Just run away and do what I ask of you."

Kathleen recognised that Mrs. Quirk was determined, and wisely obeyed without further hesitation. But when she saw the nature of the charges she paused before reading them aloud to the old lady.

[Pg 173]

Denis Quirk, with his customary straightforwardness and honesty, had printed the account of the scene in the Council Chambers word for word. There it stood—his own accusation and the counter-charges urged against him. He had attempted neither palliation nor excuse. But in the same issue of "The Mercury" he had reproduced the account of the proceedings in the Golden Vale Court, that had ended in his acquittal. More than this, he had reprinted the apology of "The Investigator," as it had appeared in that paper.

But to Kathleen and to Mrs. Quirk the account of the divorce proceedings was the most serious indictment against Denis, and here he offered neither denial nor excuse. Both women held firmly to the belief that marriage is sacred and irrevocable, and that no human power—nothing short of death—can annul the bond uniting man and wife.

Fearing to hurt her old friend, Kathleen attempted to avoid this part of the accusation. But she was a bad dissembler, and Mrs. Quirk very keen.

"There is something more, Honey. Let me hear all that those backbiters found to say," she urged.

When she had learned the full account of the charges, she burst out into lamentation.

"To think of it!" she cried. "Denis, the apple of my eye, to be in that Divorce Court! It is, for sure, the wickedest place ever invented by man—and him there!"

[Pg 174]

"But he did not appear," said Kathleen.

"And them saying all those things against him! Where was he, then, if not giving them back the lie? I don't believe it, not one word of it all. He has his enemies, and they have invented this. Oh, why isn't Father Healy here to advise me?"

"Why not go and ask Denis?" suggested Kathleen. "He will tell you the truth."

"Do you believe he did what they say of him?"

Kathleen looked out at the bright sky flecked with white clouds, at the green lawns, and the masses of colour in the flower-beds. The sun was shining brightly, scores of birds uniting in melody, music, brightness and peace everywhere.

"I would almost as soon believe that this world was not created by Almighty God," she answered, without disrespect, for she had a profound trust in Denis Quirk.

"God bless you, Honey! Then why should I be doubting him? I will go and speak to the boy. Sure, he never yet lied to me. If he has sinned, the Lord forgive him. And what am I to judge him?"

The motor was ordered at once, and in a short space of time it carried Mrs. Quirk and Kathleen to "The Mercury" office. Tim O'Neill was in the outer office, bright-faced and very busy, as was his custom. He welcomed the ladies with a smile.

"Is Denis in?" asked Mrs. Quirk.

"Mr. Quirk? Yes, he is in. Were you wanting to see him?" Tim replied.

[Pg 175]

"Who else?" said Mrs. Quirk.

"I will stay here and talk to Tim," suggested Kathleen. "That is, if Tim can spare the time."

Tim was a gallant youth, and he answered blushing that it was an honour and pleasure to speak to Miss O'Connor. Meanwhile Mrs. Quirk entered her son's room.

Denis Quirk was reckoning up the consequences of the last night's proceedings, and considering the best method of carrying on the campaign. As his mother entered he looked up with a frown, that changed into a smile when he saw who his visitor was.

He had constantly urged her to inspect the office, but she had always refused to come.

"Sure, you are busy; and what would you be doing with an old body like me?" she was accustomed to say.

"So you have come to visit me at last?" he cried.

"I have come to talk to you, because I could not wait until you had come home," she answered. "What is this in the paper?"

He had hoped that she might not hear of his trouble, knowing how seldom she interested herself in the contents of a paper.

"Who has been telling you?" he asked.

"Who but himself at first, and when he would not satisfy me I ordered Kathleen to read it to me," she answered. "Oh, Denis, the shame of it! That anyone should dare say that you were a divorced man!"

"It's the truth, mother," he answered through his teeth.

[Pg 176]

"You, the son I was always proud of, to be going into a place like that! It is a shame that there should be such iniquitous places in a Christian land!" she cried.

Denis put his hand very gently on her shoulder in a caressing manner that was out of keeping with his accustomed attitude.

"See here, mother," he answered, "a man can only be judged in the light of the Eternal Truth. In that light I am innocent."

"Then why not prove them liars that have spoken these things against you?" she asked.

"Someone had to suffer, and I could best bear it. I am a man, a strong, hard piece of humanity, and well able to stand a few bad names. But there are others, weak and frail, who would be destroyed by the scandal of bitter tongues. Better the world should abuse me than them. Some day I shall stand innocent in the eyes of the world as in the sight of God."

"Then it is all lies?" she asked, looking into his brave, ugly face.

"It is true that I was divorced, and true that I am innocent," he answered.

"I believe you," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him. "My heart is light again. Little I care what people may say or think when I know it is false. Sure, there is only one that can truly judge us, Almighty God, and to Him I will go and return thanks."

She went smilingly out of the office, and Kathleen recognised that Denis Quirk had proved his innocence to his mother's satisfaction.

[Pg 177]

Ebenezer Brown seized the opportunity for reviving "The Observer" with Gerard as editor. In capability and brilliance he was not to be compared with Cairns, but the public marked its disapprobation of Denis Quirk by supporting "The Observer" and neglecting its rival. Day by day the circulation and the advertisements of "The Mercury" dwindled until at last Denis Quirk

summoned a meeting of those interested in his paper.

"If we intend to win out, I must go," he said. "The public has awoke to a sense of virtue and selected me for punishment. It has blundered on the wrong man, but that does not make the case any better. When I have gone, "The Mercury" will return to its own and destroy 'The Observer'."

"I say stay in Grey Town and fight it out," said Dr. Marsh. "I am prepared to put my last penny into the paper."

Samuel Quirk was there with Dr. Marsh, Cairns, and the staff of the paper, right down to Tim O'Neill.

"Would you be running away?" Samuel Quirk asked indignantly, "with me to help you fight the blackguards? You, an Irishman, whose fathers have battled for independence in the dark days as in the fine ones? No, Denis you will remain here and trample 'The Observer' under your feet once again."

"I don't need any pay, sir," said Tim O'Neill. "I'll work for nothing, just for the love of you and the old 'Mercury'." [Pg 178]

"Good boy, Tim! You are gold from the hair of your head to the soles of your feet. But I shall go to Melbourne and open out there. Once I am out, 'The Mercury' will have a fair run, and Ebenezer Brown, Gerard, and Garnett will be sorry they invested their money in a hopeless cause. You shall buy me out, Dad."

The day before Denis Quirk's departure he found Kathleen alone in the dining room.

"Miss O'Connor," he said, speaking less confidently than was his custom. "I am not an idealist. As a general rule I class men and women as bad or indifferent, but I have a great respect for you, and I want you to believe in me."

"I do," cried Kathleen eagerly.

"Men have been tried and convicted on false evidence," he went on. "The world judges us by results, but I want you to disregard the past and take my word that I am innocent."

"I have always believed it," she said.

"Thank you," he said, and was turning away when Kathleen said:

"You are going to Melbourne, Mr. Quirk. I place Desmond in your hands. Bring him back to the Faith."

"I shall do my best, but no man can constrain another. Desmond must work out his own salvation," he answered.

When his business was completed, Denis Quirk departed from Grey Town. But Ebenezer Brown and his satellites discovered that his absence made things even more uncomfortable for them than had been the case during his presence in the town. "The Mercury" rose buoyantly to resume its old power; and in a month's time it had crippled its rival beyond recovery. Samuel Quirk took his son's place on the Council, and there asserted himself so triumphantly that Councillor Garnett recognised that it was time for him to retire. Grey Town awoke to sudden municipal vigour, and the town put on a modern, up-to-date appearance, in keeping with a new commercial activity. Those who had flourished under the old system retired to their holes, impotently cursing the new regime. Their triumph over Denis Quirk had proved a veritable disaster to Ebenezer Brown and his companions in evil. [Pg 179]

CHAPTER XVII.

[Pg 180]

FATHER HEALY'S MISSION.

It was a warm night, and Father Healy was entertaining his friends in the garden of the Presbytery. They sat together on the green lawn that faces the town and the distant ocean. In a quiet and secluded place, just within earshot of their conversation, Molly Healy sat on the lawn, her back supported by a big pine tree. Near her a kitten was playing with Mollie's collie dog. Father Healy had returned from Goldenvale, and his cronies had gathered together to greet him, and hear from his lips the account of his travels. Dr. Marsh asked, abruptly, almost impatiently:

"Your mission was a failure, Father Healy?"

"Not entirely a failure," answered the priest. "I have brought back no evidence to prove Denis Quirk innocent, but I am convinced that he is."

"You went away with a bias in his favour," suggested Clark.

"I did, and I come home still more biassed. I saw the priest who wrote to me, a good man, but to my mind a poor student of human nature. He received me kindly, and made me welcome. In the evening we talked of Denis Quirk. He told me what a great man Denis had been before the

divorce case. There never was such a scandal in Goldenvale. I asked him what sort of a woman was Mrs. Quirk. 'A splendid lady,' said he, 'clever and talented. She was under instruction for the Church at the time, but, naturally, she did not go on after divorcing her husband.' 'And how do you reconcile a good man, going to his duties regularly, doing the things Denis was accused of?' said I, quoting the old Latin proverb, 'No one becomes suddenly altogether base.' 'That was where the scandal was,' he answered me. 'Did he leave Goldenvale in disgrace?' I asked him. 'No, he stayed on, and went and talked the Bishop over. The Bishop wrote to me; I have his letter, and you may see it,' said this good priest."

[Pg 181]

"And what did the Bishop say?" asked Mr. Green, who had listened attentively.

"He just told Father Richardson that Denis had seen him, and that there was no valid reason to prevent him from the Sacraments."

"Did you meet Gerard there by any chance?" Dr. Marsh asked.

"I did, and never were two men more surprised than when we ran into each other's arms round a corner. Gerard began to explain why he was there. You see, he had a maiden aunt in the town," said Father Healy, smiling all over his face, "and I had a cousin, which was true, for I discovered him soon after my arrival there. The next day Gerard called on me, and began to tell me about Denis Quirk. He was grieved over it, the poor man! It was as bad as if his great grandmother had just died." At this sally the company laughed.

[Pg 182]

"I told him," continued Father Healy, "it did not surprise me. It is a wicked world, and it would not astonish me to hear that you yourself were not quite perfect, said I."

"Not quite perfect," growled Dr. Marsh. "If ever there was a thief, Gerard is the man."

"How do you prove that, Doctor?" asked Clark.

"From the company he keeps. To be hand in glove with Ebenezer Brown is certain proof of a man's criminality."

"Merely presumptive evidence," replied Clark.

"Did you make further enquiries?" asked Mr. Green of Father Healy.

"I saw Mrs. Quirk—that used to be—and Mrs. Clarence that is now."

Dr. Marsh grunted, as was his way when anyone of whom he disapproved was mentioned.

"And what did you think of her?" he asked.

"That divorce is a failure. If ever there was an unhappy woman, Mrs. Clarence is that one. I sent up my card to her; presently she sent down a message: 'Would Father Healy come up?' I went up three stories in a lift to the prettiest little flat you can imagine. A nice, tidy maid showed me into a charming little room, and there I found the lady. She is an artist, and a clever one, they tell me; a pretty woman, and agreeable; but unhappy, if I am any judge of happiness. I told her where I had come from, and what do you think she asked me, 'Did I know Denis Quirk?' 'Know him,' said I, 'of course I do; a fine man, and honest.' Then she began to praise him, until at last I asked her: 'Did you know him?' The lady was lost in confusion, but at last she answered: 'We were married.' 'And what are you now?' I asked her."

[Pg 183]

"That was not like your customary caution," said Mr. Green.

"It was a mistake, but I was hot with indignation at her asking for Denis. She shut up at once like the blade of a knife. But before I left her she said to me, 'Will you give Denis Quirk a message?' 'Certainly I will,' I answered her. 'Tell him I shall never forget his nobility,' she said. What do you make of that?"

"It was not the message of a deeply-wronged woman," said Mr. Green.

"Precisely my opinion, but I wasted no more words on her, merely, 'Good day, Madam.' As I was leaving the flat I met a man at the door, short, stout, with bloodshot eyes, and baggy eyelids. 'What are you doing here?' said he. 'Paying a morning call,' I answered. Thereupon he began to call me unpleasant names, but I brushed him on one side, and went home to wash my hands. I pity that poor lady, that has leaped from the frying pan into the fire."

"And there your enquiries ended?" suggested Clark.

"I paid my respects to his Lordship, a kindly old man, with plenty of common sense. 'I know nothing of Denis Quirk,' said he, because, as I understood, his lips were closed by the seal of Confession. 'But,' he asked me, 'what do you think of him?' 'I believe he is innocent,' I answered. 'Speaking as a man who has carefully reviewed the case, I believe you are right,' said he. What do you think of my mission, Mr. Green?"

[Pg 184]

"With you, I consider it not altogether a failure," the clergyman answered; then, as an afterthought, "If all Roman Catholics were like you, we would all be Roman Catholics."

"There are many better than I, and a few worse. You must make allowances for the weaknesses of human nature," the priest answered. "Come inside now and play bridge."

"Did you see Desmond O'Connor on your way home?" asked Dr. Marsh.

Molly Healy, from her secluded place, strained her ears to catch her brother's answer.

"Naturally I did," he said. "Desmond is a great man now, a partner in the firm of Jackson and Company, and coining money, they tell me."

With this he intended to content them, but Dr. Marsh asked, inquisitively:

"Did you bring him back to your Church?"

"I did not try. There are seasons to speak and seasons to say nothing. It was not the time to argue with him."

"Why not the time? You could have put him on the broad of his back," said Dr. Marsh.

"To what purpose? I was not there to quarrel with him. The boy will come round.... Let us get to bridge!"

Molly Healy, in the quiet of the garden, turned her eyes towards the dark, limitless ocean. She could not see it, but its droning was in her ears. To it she often turned in her moments of depression, when she walked in those lower depths of melancholy that are occasional with natures which mount to the heights of happiness and merriment. It seemed to her that the ocean was responsive to her moods, that it answered back her mirth, and whispered sadly when she was depressed. Looking towards it now, she whispered:

[Pg 185]

"Desmond O'Connor will win through. Sure, I will start Bridget Malone praying for him. They say she never failed to get what she asked for."

Therewith she followed the men inside, to find them playing their game in the silence of strict bridge.

CHAPTER XVIII.

[Pg 186]

THROUGH THE GORGE.

Kathleen O'Connor had been spending the day with Mrs. Sheridan, and was returning slowly, laden with the gossip of the countryside, her rein hanging loosely on Douglas' neck.

She had many things to trouble her young mind at that moment. The thought of Desmond was always with her; she could not reconcile herself to his professed want of faith. Though Father Healy told her to have no fear, and Mrs. Quirk bade her trust in God, she carried a heavy heart for her brother.

Only the day previously yet another sorrow had been confided to her. She had accompanied her dear old friend, her second mother as she called her, to Dr. Marsh. After the examination the doctor had called her back into his surgery.

"I give her six months to live," he said; "but you must keep it to yourself. Old Samuel Quirk has a heart that might stop at any moment. He must not know."

"I may write to Denis Quirk?" she asked, anxious to share the burden with someone.

"By all means. But tell him not to come back until I send for him," the doctor answered.

She had accordingly written to Denis Quirk, confiding the ill news to him. The prospect of separation from Mrs. Quirk was hard to bear, for she was a mother, and "Layton," a home, to the girl.

[Pg 187]

The road from Mrs. Sheridan's farm to the lower bridge now dips down beside the river, and now rises high above, where it runs through the Gorge. It was at a spot where the river banks are low that Kathleen heard her name called from the river. Looking towards the spot whence the voice came, she saw Gerard seated in a boat that he had moored to the bank. He had been fishing, pipe in mouth, for with the failure of the "Observer," he had returned to desultory journalism and idleness.

Kathleen reined her horse in, and he scrambled out of the boat and came towards her. He was wearing a low-necked shirt; his face and neck were tanned by the sun, as were the arms, bare to the elbow. Without doubt he was a handsome man, and the bold, devil-may-care expression on his face did not make him the less attractive. Kathleen knew that many a girl in the district, well-to-do and not bad looking, would have welcomed the attentions of Gerard.

But, ever since his return from Goldenvale, Kathleen had recognised that the old feeling for him had died out of her heart. He had expected to resume the old, intimate relations, but she had held him at arm's length. Two things were accountable for this—a dread of the influence he had once exerted over her, and resentment of the part he had played in the downfall of Denis Quirk. Gerard had not accepted the girl's change of attitude with philosophy, although he had given no sign that it affected him. He smiled pleasantly as he stood beside her horse's head, one hand stroking the satiny skin, the other on the bridle rein.

[Pg 188]

"This is quite a pleasant chance," he said. "We never meet one another now."

Kathleen murmured something about being so very busy.

"It is my loss," he answered. "But there is no reason why we should not make the most of this chance meeting. There is my boat. Tie your horse to a tree and allow me to scull you up the river."

"I have no time," Kathleen replied. "I must hurry home to Mrs. Quirk."

"Nonsense," he answered; "Mrs. Quirk can wait for once. You can't refuse me the last favour I shall ever ask of you."

"I can and I will," Kathleen answered; then she added, with a laugh: "You can find any number of girls only too willing to take my place."

"Undoubtedly, but I am a man of caprice. If I order turkey for dinner, I will have turkey or nothing. To-day I intend that you shall do what I ask. If you will do it gracefully, I shall accept it as a great favour; if you refuse, I shall be compelled to insist."

Kathleen became frightened. She cast a glance at his face, careless and bold, staring up into her own with an ardent admiration, and a second glance around her. The place was lonely and unfrequented; only occasionally did a farmer's cart or gig drive along the road. On the further bank of the river a line of pine trees hid them from the distant farm-houses. Under these circumstances it was wisest to temporise.

[Pg 189]

"If I accept, how long will you keep me?" she asked.

"That depends entirely on the amount of entertainment I find in your society."

"Then I will accept. Will you kindly tie my horse to that tree?"

She dismounted quickly, refusing the help he offered her. Then she threw the reins in to his hands. The nearest tree was some yards distant, and she waited until Gerard had approached it. Then she suddenly made a run towards the boat, and, unhitching the rope, stepped in, and pushed out from the shore. Gerard, seeing what she had done, ran towards the river with a loud curse.

Kathleen could row, and she put the oars in the rowlocks, and sat down to scull. At the same moment Gerard sprang from the bank into the stream, and began swimming towards the boat. Kathleen strained at the oars, and little by little the distance between them increased, although Gerard was a strong swimmer.

But there are sand-spits on the Grey, and on one of these the boat stranded. With a loud shout, Gerard welcomed the fact, while he made stronger exertions to gain the boat. Kathleen seized an oar, and stood up, attempting to free the boat from the obstruction. The boat began to yield to her exertions, but Gerard came nearer and nearer. Just as she had set the boat free his hands were on the gunwale of the boat, but she raised the oar and brought it down smartly across his knuckles. With a fresh curse he let go, and a moment later the boat was drifting further and further from him.

[Pg 190]

It is a dangerous passage, even for a skilled oarsman, through the Gorge of the Grey River. In times of flood no man who laid claims to sanity would attempt the feat; but, even when the river is low and flows quietly if swiftly, there are rocks and snags that obstruct the passage. To strike one of these would mean a total wreck.

On either side of the river the masses of grey rock ascend steep and slippery from the surface of the water. The stream is deep to the very edges of the cliff, offering but little foothold to one who would climb from the water to firm land. Here and there the caves break the even surface of the rocks, and in yet other places great masses jut out in fantastic shapes above the water. It is always dark and cool in the Gorge, for the sun never penetrates there excepting in stray beams; a pleasant place of a hot summer's day, with an expert oarsman and coxswain to make a safe passage, but full of peril to a young girl alone in a skiff.

Kathleen O'Connor was, however, so glad to be freed from Gerard, not so much because she feared physical violence as on account of the uncanny influence he had over her, that she faced the passage of the Gorge almost with equanimity. She recognised the danger, for more than one narrow escape from drowning was chronicled in connection with the place, and she crouched in the bow of the boat with an oar in her hand, watching anxiously for rock and snags. Now and then she used the blade of her oar as a paddle to prevent the boat from turning broadside to the current. In this manner she was carried safely through the Gorge.

[Pg 191]

Kathleen O'Connor's passage down the Grey is recorded as the first occasion on which a woman accomplished the feat alone. Others have done it since then from bravado and a desire for notoriety. Kathleen was compelled to be the pioneer among women by fear. The following day she had a paragraph to herself in both papers, and Grey Town was led to believe that she had made the passage merely from a love of adventure. This story was never contradicted, but, like many other tales of adventure, it is untrue.

At last she found herself safe in the wider expanse of water below the Gorge, an object of interest and admiration to the fishers and boating men who frequent that part of the Grey. Of them

Kathleen took little notice. She scrambled back to the sculler's seat, and after a short pull found herself beside the boat shed.

Tomkins, who kept the boat shed, was smoking his pipe on the landing stage when Kathleen drifted out from the Gorge. Shading his eyes with a big, rough hand, he stood watching her in amazement.

"It's Miss O'Connor," he muttered to a man beside him, "and she's come through alone. She's the last woman I'd have expected to do such a thing!"

"You never can tell what a woman will do these times. We'll be taking a back seat in the kitchen before long," answered the other. [Pg 192]

"But Miss O'Connor's not that sort," said Tomkins. "What I can't make out is this: I let that boat to Gerard. What's become of him?"

As Kathleen stepped from the boat, Tomkins greeted her with applause, seasoned with advice.

"You've done something, miss, that no other woman ever did before. But never you try it again. Next time you and the boat may come drifting down, the one after the other."

"I have no intention of trying the Gorge again," answered Kathleen. "Thank God, I am safe!"

As she was about to leave the shed, to make her amazement more complete, Gerard rode up on her horse and reined in. His clothes were damp and clung to him, but he disregarded that. "You have won your wager, Miss O'Connor!" he cried; "but you went with your life in your hands."

Kathleen was too much astounded by his audacity to reply. He dismounted and lifted her into the saddle holding her rein for one short moment, while he said in a low voice:

"You have nothing more to fear from me. You have taught me a lesson, and, by Jove! you are a well-plucked one."

She did not pause to answer him, but, giving Douglas a cut with the whip, rode away at a smart canter to "Layton."

CHAPTER XIX.

[Pg 193]

"THE FREELANCE."

Denis Quirk was a man of courage and energy. He had an almost heroic disregard of public opinion; if those few whom he loved would give him their faith, the rest of the world might praise or condemn him at will. Had it not been that the future of "The Mercury" was imperilled by his presence, and that Dr. Marsh was interested in the success of the paper, he would have remained at Grey Town to fight on until the tide had turned or want of funds compelled him to close down. As it was, he sold his share to his father for no more than he had originally invested in the paper, and went to Melbourne to start a weekly magazine, "The Freelance."

In this undertaking, he was able to ensure success by his own ability and, perhaps to a still greater degree, by the assistance of Jackson and O'Connor, who were at that time the leading advertising firm in Melbourne.

Prior to giving him support, Jackson stepped into Desmond O'Connor's room to debate Denis Quirk's credentials with his junior.

"See here, Desmond," he said, "you know more about Quirk than I. We were together on "The Golden Eagle" at Fenton before he went to America, and we have continued friends right down to to-day, but his ability is an unknown quantity to me." [Pg 194]

Desmond O'Connor heard this remark with considerable interest.

"Do you also know Gerard?" he asked.

"Never heard the name."

"Then I have to thank Denis Quirk for your interest in me?"

Jackson had forgotten Denis Quirk's letter, with its request to keep the latter's name a secret from Desmond. He answered readily:

"Partly Quirk; but largely yourself. Quirk sent me to you and I liked you. That was my reason for helping you in the beginning; later on you helped yourself."

"I have done Quirk an injustice, and now I can help him. Well he deserves it. Quirk is a born journalist. He understands the public as no other man does, and knows what to say to them and how to say it. This paper of his is a certain success."

"Then we will support him. Put the 'Freelance's' name down for a regular column of advertisement," said Jackson.

"I will slip round and see Quirk," suggested Desmond.

Denis Quirk was in his office, busy in putting his ideas into effect with a piece of foolscap in front of him, and the telephone receiver close at hand.

"Jackson and O'Connor re advertisement," he read on his list.

"I may as well try them; probably they will say: 'Prove yourself, and we will support you.'" [Pg 195]

He rang the bell, and had the receiver at his ear, when Desmond entered.

"It is all right, Exchange," he cried. "I will ring up again. Hullo, O'Connor! Glad to see you. I was just ringing the office up. Take a seat."

Desmond sat down.

"Quirk," he said; "I owe you a good deal."

"That old chatterbox, Jackson! Has he been bleating?" Denis asked.

"Inadvertently he opened the bag, and out jumped the cat. You are a little bit old-fashioned, Quirk. If every man hid his virtues as you do, Jackson and O'Connor would be forced to close down. I have been crediting Gerard with your balance in my gratitude ledger."

"Gerard!" cried Denis. "What made you select him?"

"He professed so much. If I had all Gerard promised me I would be a multi-millionaire. But I am not ungrateful. Jackson and I can help you a little; count on us!"

"Thanks, Desmond. At present you are invaluable to me, as much because of the weight you carry with the public as for the £ s. d. I don't think you are making a mistake because I intend to succeed, and I haven't drawn a blank yet."

"Oh, you'll succeed, Quirk; that's a foregone conclusion.... Are you looking for rooms?" Desmond asked.

"At present I am staying at the 'Exchange,' but there's no privacy there. Do you know of a quiet, respectable place?" [Pg 196]

"I can offer you a share in my flat in Collins Street," said Desmond. "I have the best man in Melbourne, miles ahead of any woman ever born; a self-respecting fellow, who expects good wages and earns them. He keeps the flat in A1 order, cooks well enough to content even you —."

"Hang it! I am not a gourmand," Denis Quirk interjected.

"I am not accusing you of gluttony, my friend! I know from experience you like your work well done, even if it happens to be the preparation of an omelette on a Friday. I suppose you still hold to your old prejudice against meat on a Friday?" asked Denis with a smile.

"Undoubtedly! Not from any objection to meat, but as a mark of loyalty and obedience," Denis replied.

"I avoid it myself; merely from a health point of view. I have thrown the old traditions and superstitions to the winds. I am a free man," said Desmond.

"Do you wear a hat in the street?" Denis asked laughingly; "and a coat; or have you descended to the habits of your ancestors and eschewed clothes on a hot day?"

"No, my good man, and for an excellent reason. I have no desire to run counter to the law," replied Desmond.

"Precisely my reason for abstinence on Friday; but my law is a moral one, and my justice of the peace that stern fellow, conscience. Don't talk to me of traditions and superstitions. You, free men, are more bound by superstitions than we who profess to be servants to a kindly mistress.... I will share your flat and your wonderful man; and give you the benefit of my beauty and my intelligent conversation on one condition. We will swear a truce of God, neither shall run atilt at the other's convictions until he is invited to do so. Is it an understanding?" said Denis. [Pg 197]

"Agreed! Go your own way and leave me in peace," said Desmond.

Thus did it come about that these two men shared the same flat and lived on a hearty brotherly footing, although their views were diametrically opposed. Around them they gathered a Bohemian band of companions, of all creeds and every condition of life. Lawyers, doctors, actors, journalists, and politicians; if they were decent, straight-living men, with something to give in thought for that which they received, the Bachelors' flat in Collins Street, as it was termed, was open to them all. Denis Quirk lived strenuously as was his way, making "The Freelance" a power in the land. He set himself to found a school of journalists who wrote for the love of truth and scorned the mean and paltry things of life. As with "The Mercury," Denis Quirk made his new organ a censor of all that is contemptible.

Desmond O'Connor, for his part, lived the parti-coloured life of other men, business and pleasure in equal portions. Occasionally he assisted Quirk with a black and white sketch for "The Freelance." He still retained his old power as an artist, and Denis Quirk turned to him in [Pg 198]

preference to the regular staff when he desired a particularly striking sketch.

"Just sit down, Desmond, and illustrate this article. The initials, D. O'C., are always appreciated," he would say.

"So I have every reason to believe. I am a genius and I know it. But anything, even undesired artistic fame, to oblige you," Desmond would answer.

He had a heartfelt admiration for Denis Quirk, whose fate it was to win the love or hate of those who knew him. None who came in contact with him failed to appreciate the strength of his personality, and he threw himself resolutely on the side of truth. Those who lived on injustice and untruth would willingly have destroyed him because he exposed them relentlessly to public odium; the honest and straightforward placed him on a pedestal as a just man. "Good old Quirk" was a synonym for strength and uprightness of life in those days.

CHAPTER XX.

[Pg 199]

GREAT IS THE TRUTH.

"Bachelors' Flat," in Collins Street, was peculiarly silent. The customary visitors paused in the hall downstairs and did not venture to ascend to the third floor of the mansions. Merely a sympathetic message to the caretaker, a few parting words of hope, or a shake of the head, and they passed on into the busy world outside.

In the flat itself men and women walked with quiet feet and spoke to one another in whispers, saving in the darkened room where Desmond O'Connor chattered unceasingly, and now shouted or laughed in the wildness of delirium. A nurse was installed in his room, a quiet and gentle little lady, never hurried yet never slow; always patient, with a coaxing manner and a soft voice. When he was sensible Desmond called her the Angel of Mercy; in his delirium he spoke to her always as Sylvia. Even in his wildest ravings, when he muttered and shouted sentences he had heard from the lips of others and never sullied his own lips with, he was always respectful to her.

Kathleen O'Connor and Molly Healy were with her as untrained auxiliaries to take her place and implicitly follow her directions when sleep could no longer be denied. To them she gave the highest praise in her power when she remarked approvingly:

[Pg 200]

"You should have been nurses, both of you."

Denis Quirk had resigned his room to the nurses, and when he slept stretched himself out on the couch in the dining-room. He was watching anxiously for his friend's moment of softening when Desmond would need and ask for a priest. By a special arrangement the Archbishop had granted to Father Healy the permission to attend Desmond, if he desired a confessor. Then, day or night, as soon as the telephone carried the expected message, the parish priest of Grey Town was prepared to hasten in a motor car to Melbourne.

But the fever had gone on to the dread third week, where death crouches beside the patient's sick bed, and Desmond had made no sign. The doctor came and went frequently, having the brand of anxiety plainly printed on his face; the nurse had curtailed her hours of sleep to the minimum of possibility, and the message had not been sent.

"Why will he not surrender?" sighed Kathleen O'Connor. "I have asked him to see Father Healy, and he always answers, 'No.'"

"The good God is just trying us," said Molly Healy. "He wishes to see how far our faith will go. But I am hoping that mine will stretch a little further yet; for it needs to be elastic in times like this."

Denis Quirk came in from his work, a little older and more tired-looking than he had been, but just as warm-hearted and humorous as when life was moving like a well-oiled machine.

[Pg 201]

"Any improvement?" he asked.

Kathleen shook her head, while tears filled her eyes.

"We are so weak and powerless," she said.

"But brave of heart," he answered cheerfully. "Things are at their worst just now, but there is always a glimmer of light in the East. Keep your eyes that way and you will soon see the sun rising to send the shadows and the black thoughts helter skelter back into the darkness.... May I see him?"

"I will ask nurse," said Kathleen. "She is the commander-in-chief."

"Oh, you great-hearted women—angels of self-sacrifice," said Denis, after she had left the room. "You make me feel such a mean and contemptible worm."

Molly laughed at this outburst.

"Sure you are not so bad—for a man," she said. "The Lord gave you the physical strength, and us poor women the moral virtues. You can't help it that you were not made a woman. Just do your best to put up with yourself."

In a few minutes Kathleen returned.

"Nurse says you may go in to him for five minutes. He is quiet and sensible now," she said.

Denis entered the sick room very quietly. It was darkened and cool; about it there was the scent of fresh flowers brought daily from Jackson's garden. The bed linen was scrupulously white, and the room itself bare of furniture, but exceedingly tidy. Desmond O'Connor was lying in a peaceful doze, low in the bed, in the prostration that had followed a period of wild delirium. As Denis entered he opened his eyes and smiled.

[Pg 202]

"Is it you, Dad?" he asked. "I fancied you would come to me. I have been a disgrace to you!"

Denis did not answer, fearing to break the chain of thought that had taken his friend back to his childish days.

"A disgrace to you and to the O'Connors," Desmond continued. "Didn't you tell me that in the dark days the O'Connors clung to the Faith; that never a one of them ever fell away? Well, I have been the first; just from pique, dad; pique and pride.... Why don't you speak to me?"

Still did Denis refrain from answering him, and Desmond continued:

"But I begin to see again. It was all darkness for a time ... after Sylvia had left me hopeless.... Where is Sylvia?"

He turned his head to search the room.

The nurse, hearing the name by which he addressed her, entered the room, and stood beside his bed.

"Ah, there she is! Don't go away from me, Sylvia."

"Only into the next room," she answered.

"Yes, that will do.... Isn't she splendid, dad?... I intend to come round, when I am well again, to make my peace with God, and live like an O'Connor.... Why don't you send for a priest?" he asked, in an irritable voice.

"You shall have a priest!" cried Denis.

But Desmond relapsed into a half sleep, broken by a rambling delirium, like to a fragmentary nightmare. The word had been spoken, and when Denis Quirk had called the nurse and left her in charge, he hastened to the nearest telephone exchange and sent the long-delayed message to Father Healy. In half an hour's time the big motor car from the Grey Town garage was starting on the long journey to Melbourne.

[Pg 203]

Through the evening and night the good priest sat silently beside the chauffeur, but his lips were moving constantly, his fingers passing the rosary beads as he prayed for the boy he loved. The chauffeur, who knew him well, had never found the priest so self-absorbed. As a general rule, Father Healy made the longest journey short; to-night he could only pray silently. For he had seen Desmond grow up from infancy to manhood, and had prepared him for the Sacraments. His downfall had been a calamity; his return to the Faith would mean a triumph over the powers of evil. Thus did the car rush through the night, its bright headlights picking out the road in front of it; blackness around; the horn now sounding its deep note as they dashed past a township, while Father Healy was praying for the sick man in Melbourne.

It was three o'clock in the morning when the car entered the sleeping city, where darkness and quiet held possession. Here and there a light shone from a window, telling its tale of sickness; now and again they passed a night wanderer or policeman; but Melbourne lay in placid sleep, reinvigorating itself for the busy day.

[Pg 204]

In the flat Denis Quirk was sitting in an armchair anxiously expecting the sound of the motor. His quick ears heard it as it came up Collins Street, and he was at the door to admit Father Healy.

"I suppose you are tired and hungry?" he asked.

"Neither," the priest replied. "But my friend here has had a long drive. He would appreciate a cup of tea—eh, Jack?"

"No thank you, Father. I will take the car to the garage, and get to bed," the chauffeur answered. Therewith he started post haste for the garage and bed.

"How is Desmond?" Father Healy asked anxiously.

"At his very worst, the doctor tells me. If he comes through the next few days there is hope; at present it might go either way," Desmond answered.

"Can I see him?"

"I will ask the nurse," said Denis. "We do nothing without consulting her. Sit down and eat while I find her. Ah! here is Miss O'Connor," he added, as Kathleen entered the room.

"Father, I am so pleased to see you," said Kathleen. "I have been waiting so long for you, until at last I began to lose hope."

"I have been as anxious as you," he answered. "Is the boy asleep?"

"I will ask nurse," said Kathleen, and went quietly out of the room.

Desmond had just awakened from a quiet sleep. He was fully conscious, more so than he had been for many days. When Kathleen entered the nurse stole over and looked at him. [Pg 205]

"Awake?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Very much so," he answered. "All the queer things have gone, leaving me at peace."

"Father Healy is here," she said.

"Did I send for him? I have a faint idea I did ... a sort of half dream that the dad came to me and told me to see the Father," he answered.

"Will you see him?" she asked.

"Give me something to pull me together first. I am in a mortal dread," he whispered.

"Would you rather wait?" she asked.

"No; it has to be gone through. Just a mouthful of nourishment; then send him in!"

In the quiet of the sick room priest and penitent conferred together in whispers; Desmond O'Connor pouring the story of his fall and the subsequent history resulting from it into the good Father's kindly ears. And when it was completed there was a great joy in the two hearts and a peace in Desmond's that had not been there for many years.

"You are tired, my son," said Father Healy kindly.

"Tired, but glad, Father. I have come out of the ocean of darkness and doubt into the old harbour of peace and certainty."

A few minutes after Father Healy had left him he was again sleeping as peacefully as a child. The nurse, looking into his thin, pale face, where black lines encircled the eyes, found a gentle smile on it.

"Oh, these Catholics!" she said to herself; "what a satisfaction their religion is to them! I believe he will come through now." [Pg 206]

Yet, strangely enough, although she was a good little woman, she did not realise that there must be something superhuman in a religion that can give perfect peace to the soul and increased strength to the body.

In this manner began Desmond O'Connor's progress towards recovery. Slowly the fever began to abate, leaving him prostrate and feeble after the severe struggle he had maintained for weeks. During the first days of convalescence he was so weak that death seemed preferable. But inch by inch he fought his way back to health; until he was allowed to sit in an armchair. After that his recovery was more rapid.

As he became stronger Desmond found himself a prey to the most dreadful spiritual desolation. The Faith that he had again found and accepted as a great gift, with an outburst of thanksgiving, seemed to be withdrawn from him. For days and days doubts and misgivings troubled him so that he walked as a blind man, gropingly. And with the doubts there came a myriad of evil thoughts to torment him. He could not read nor pray; he had to cling blindly to Acts of Faith and resignation.

It was fortunate for him in those days that Father Healy had left him under the care of an old Jesuit Father. Day after day the old priest visited him, and while he was with him Desmond was at peace. But no sooner was the good Father out of the room than the blackness of desolation closed around him. [Pg 207]

"Is this to go on for ever?" he asked the priest.

"No, my son. You are weak in body and new to the Faith. You have weakened yourself during the years of doubt. In a short time you will find your feet again and walk confidently. Go frequently to the Sacraments, and trust in God."

Thus did it happen with Desmond. Slowly the doubts and difficulties left him, so that he wondered that they had ever caused him uneasiness. But daily in his Acts of Thanksgiving he praised his Divine Redeemer who had lifted him from the valley of desolation to an absolute certainty of Faith.

This was the beginning of a new life to him. During his convalescence he entered more deeply into his religion than he had ever done before. Slowly its great beauty unfolded itself to him; he found it so wonderful in its perfection, so satisfying that he marvelled at his previous lukewarmness. It was just at this time that a visitor came to see him.

Desmond was sitting up in an easy chair; the nurse had gone to another patient while Father Healy and Molly were in Grey Town. Kathleen, having made her brother comfortable, had slipped out for a short breath of air, leaving Desmond in charge of Black, the incomparable man-servant.

A ring at the door bell, a vision of a beautiful face and a graceful figure becomingly dressed, conquered Black. His orders were to admit no visitors, but he was so fascinated by the apparition that he carried the card in to Desmond, and a moment later Sylvia Custance was sitting beside the sick man's chair.

[Pg 208]

Desmond looked up as she entered to judge how the years had treated her. Older and more mature, but otherwise unaltered, he decided as he took her hand and shook it.

"You poor man! How pale you are!" she cried. "I only returned home last week to hear that you had been so desperately ill."

"Home?" he asked, in a puzzled voice.

"The only home I have ever known. I have been miserable since I left it," she explained.

"And Custance?" he questioned.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He is impossible," she said. "I have done my utmost for him, but at last there came a time when I could not go on. We have separated."

"With his consent?" he asked.

"Custance cares for nothing now but that cursed drug. Oh, what a fool I have been," she almost moaned.

There came a painful silence, broken at last by her.

"But now I intend to return to the old life and the old friends. I shall forget the horror of what I have endured.... You will help me to forget?"

He was very weak and weary. As he watched her the old passion began to return to him. But it so happened that he looked towards a picture given him that very day by the old Jesuit Father. It was a simple painting of the Sacred Heart, with no attempt at artistic beauty. That very day, however, the old priest had spoken so eloquently of the mystery of love portrayed by that poor picture that Desmond valued it better than if it had been a treasure of art.

[Pg 209]

"I have done with the old life," he said.

"You fancy that now. But wait until you are strong and feel again the joy of life," she said. "Then you will alter your mind."

"Tell me about your trouble," he suggested.

"No. Not that, please. It is bad enough to have lived it. It was pure misery and hopelessness. I prefer to talk of anything but that."

They were still talking when Kathleen returned. She concealed the dismay and dread that she felt in finding Sylvia Custance with Desmond. She feared the old influence that had so vitally helped to ruin her brother's life and drive him from his Faith. At present he was weak in body, and like an infant in religion. The slightest obstacle might turn him again to his former state of doubt. At this critical stage Sylvia Custance was a great danger. But it flashed into her mind that Desmond must fight his own fight unaided. If he succumbed again it was not her fault. She could only pray for him.

That evening when she bade him good-night, he said to her:

"I think I will go down to Grey Town to-morrow, Kath."

"Are you strong enough?" she asked.

"I don't want to see Sylvia Custance again. The old life must die, Kath. It seems rather hard, but it must be done. Make all arrangements like a dear girl."

[Pg 210]

The next morning as they travelled towards Grey Town she recognised that he had not slept well, but she made him comfortable with rugs and cushions, and watched him drop into a quiet sleep. Denis Quirk, who had insisted on accompanying them, brought them refreshments at every possible opportunity and watched over them with untiring zeal. When they arrived at Grey Town the "Layton" motor was waiting to carry them to the Quirks' home. Here they found Mrs. Quirk, very enfeebled, but smiling a glad welcome, and old Samuel Quirk, to greet them warmly.

"It is like home to me," cried Kathleen, as she kissed the kindly, withered old face.

"And home it is, honey, when you are here; but it is a lonely home without yourself and Denis," said Mrs. Quirk.

CHAPTER XXI.

[Pg 211]

THE BISHOP'S SOLUTION.

Denis Quirk, at Grey Town, threw away all thoughts of work, and laid himself out to make the time pass pleasantly for Desmond and Kathleen O'Connor. During his fortnight at "Layton" he was only in the town for Mass on the two Sundays, and once when he paid a visit to Cairns at the "Mercury" Office. That visit he curtailed to a brief fifteen minutes.

When he entered the old office, to find everything as he had left it—the old faces, the same order, even his own room arranged as it had been in his day—he felt that he could not stay for any length of time. This was home to him, and he an exile.

"I had to see you," he said to Cairns, "but it breaks me up to visit the old place."

"It is waiting for you, Quirk, and we miss you every day. When are you coming back?" the editor asked.

"When I can thrust my innocence in the town's face—perhaps to-morrow, possibly never," Denis answered.

"Nonsense! The scandal is dead and buried. We never realised what you were until you had left us. We want your initiative, Quirk."

"It's very good of you to say that. Lord, how I miss you Cairns—you and the old paper! The 'Freelance' is all right, but it never can be the 'Mercury.' And Grey Town, too! I love it for its very shortcomings," Denis replied.

[Pg 212]

He interviewed the staff, and parted after a few friendly words with each. The remainder of his time in Grey Town was spent at "Layton" and in the country around the town. His friends were invited to meet him at dinner—Father Healy, Mr. Green, Dr. Marsh, and a few others. Not that he feared to face the town, but because he could not bear to enter it as a mere visitor; to stand, as it were, on one side, as an onlooker and not as a worker.

"You have done wonders, they tell me," he remarked to his father, "but I feel that there is more to be accomplished, and my fingers are itching to be doing it."

"I am just keeping your seat on the Council warm for you. Say the word, and it is yours," remarked Samuel Quirk.

"When the word comes to me, I will send it along to you. Meanwhile, keep firing at them, Dad. Grey Town is yawning and rubbing its eyes. The town is beginning to realise what it is to be awake. In time it will be awake and moving briskly."

"I'll keep on pinching them, until they must be moving just to be quit of my fingers," Samuel Quirk replied complacently. "By the time you are back with us this town will be a young city."

The time passed pleasantly and swiftly at "Layton." Every day brought some new pleasure or excitement for the O'Connors, and Denis Quirk did his utmost to make them forget the strain that they had just been through. He proved that he could play as strenuously as he was accustomed to work, and that he was still a young man in his mind.

[Pg 213]

One morning Kathleen O'Connor attempted to thank him for his kindness. They were in the garden, old Mrs. Quirk resting placidly in an easy-chair under a large oak tree, Kathleen seated beside her, and the two men sprawled out at full length on the lawn. Desmond lay far apart, out of earshot, while Mrs. Quirk was fast asleep.

"I don't know how to thank you—," Kathleen began.

"There is no occasion to thank me. The gratitude is on my side, Miss O'Connor. You have made my mother happy, as no one else could have done. No payment or reward could represent what I owe you," he answered.

"But I am a paid companion," she protested, half-laughingly.

"Money cannot buy a friend, nor pay her for her friendship," he said. "And please not to forget that I am enjoying myself as much as you are. It seems to me that I have never been young until now. I went from school into a hard world, and I have been battling with it ever since. It is only now I realise that there is something else beyond work to make the world pleasant. Until now it has been a case of fighting hard and keeping myself straight by means of religion. Once I was tempted to drift—that was after my trouble, over there in Golden Vale—but I was fortunate enough to find an old friend, a Father, who put things before me in their proper light."

[Pg 214]

It was the first time he had spoken to her of the dark days in Goldenvale. She had often wondered to herself as to how he had accepted what must have been a terrible experience. Now that he had confided in her, she wished to hear more.

"A priest?" she asked him.

"The Bishop. I wish you knew him."

"I do," she answered. "We have a Bishop like that."

"Then I must know him. Will you take me to him and introduce me?"

"It is a long journey from Grey Town to Millerton," she answered laughingly.

"Nothing to a motor on a fine day and good roads. We will start early in the morning, and be there for lunch, see your Bishop, and return here for dinner. Desmond shall come—but what about the Mother?"

Mrs. Quirk had awakened, and lay very quietly, with closed eyes, listening to their conversation. She knew the Bishop well, for he came to visit her whenever he chanced to be in Grey Town. His very name brought a smile to her face, but she refused to place his Lordship before his reverence the parish priest.

"Never mind me," she said. "What is one day to me? But it may mean a good deal to Denis—and still more to Desmond."

They turned in surprise to look towards the spot where Desmond O'Connor lay, apparently asleep.

"To Desmond?" Kathleen asked, in a puzzled voice.

[Pg 215]

"Sure, you don't know the boy as I do. He comes to me, and we talk together, Desmond and I. The seed is working in the boy's soul—I am thinking he will be a priest."

"A priest!" cried Kathleen so clearly that Desmond rolled over lazily and faced them.

"What's that?" he asked. "You three look as if you were conspiring together. No secrets are allowed in this establishment—excepting Mrs. Quirk's and my own. Now, what is it, Kath.?"

"We are going to see the Bishop to-morrow," said Denis. "I intend to put his Lordship to a severe test. He shall be placed alongside my Bishop, and judged in that comparison."

"Six to four on his Lordship," said Desmond, still lazily.

"Will you come?" Kathleen asked.

"Of course I will. I have a spiritual conundrum of my own to be answered, and no one can find the solution but he. Book a seat for me in the car."

"May we take Molly Healy?" Kathleen asked.

"Who better? Molly Healy would make the longest road short and the roughest one smooth. If we puncture or blow out, she will cause us to forget the trials that pursue the tyres of a motor car."

The following day, at nine o'clock, the big "Layton" car, resplendent in a recent coat of paint, well shod, and perfectly equipped, started from the house on the long journey to Millerton. Denis Quirk was at the wheel, the chauffeur beside him. In the tonneau Molly Healy and Desmond O'Connor kept up a crossfire of good-humoured raillery, while Kathleen sat between them, smiling at their jests. It was a bright, sunny day, with a gentle breeze blowing from the south; the roads were smooth, and the motor throbbed along throwing the miles behind her, and the dust in the faces of those whom they passed on their way.

[Pg 216]

"A brief epitome of this Commonwealth," said Denis Quirk, with a wave of his hand as they were running through a vast, untenanted domain, protected on either side by rows of dark green pines. "Neglected opportunities! Land that should be supporting one hundred families wasted on one man."

Again they were hurrying between cultivated farms and farm houses, widely scattered, but sufficiently near to one another to represent civilisation. Double-fronted wooden houses were dotted here and there, single-storied, each with its wide verandah, a small garden, and possibly a row of pine trees to guard them from the wind. Behind them each had its row of wooden outbuildings, large haystacks, and sleek cattle feeding on green meadow-land.

"The proof of what we can do—given the one necessary thing, man. Lord! how the Japs must gnash their teeth when they think of the prize out here in the lone Pacific! When I am a politician —."

"Why not now?" Desmond asked. "Go forth and preach your new crusade. You can't begin too soon."

"I object to his preaching it in a car. Motors were never made for moralising. There's a feeling, in riding in a car, that makes a person lazy and contented," cried Molly Healy.

[Pg 217]

"Until something goes wrong with the car," suggested Desmond. "Then—"

"I have heard them in difficulties, and my ears are still tingling and my conscience burning me for the language they used," said Molly Healy.

"It's no use carrying other men's sins on your conscience. Haven't you sufficient of your own?" asked Desmond.

"That is between me and my confessor, Desmond. But if I don't carry these men's crimes no one will trouble about them, for they don't seem to think it a sin to swear at a motor, although they call the thing 'she.'"

"That's why they abuse her—woman was the original cause of sin, and still is, nine cases out of ten."

"Shame on you! The world would have little virtue to be boasting of were it not for us poor women."

"And less of sin," Desmond replied, cynically.

"Peace, children!" said Kathleen; "you spoil the scenery."

The Bishop was at home—a handsome man, tall and erect, with a stern face, yet one that was singularly sweet.

"Well, my child," he asked Kathleen, "what can I do for you?"

"Mr. Quirk wished to know you, my Lord," Kathleen answered, with a smile. "I brought him from Grey Town to introduce him to you."

"It is very kind of Mr. Quirk to come all this way to see me. Perhaps you will lunch with me, now that you have come so far." [Pg 218]

"Oh! no, my Lord—," cried Kathleen.

"Oh! yes, my child. You have something to say to me?" he asked Desmond.

"It is private, my Lord—but it can wait," Desmond answered.

"No; it must not wait. Come with me, and talk until luncheon is prepared. I will send Father Geary to entertain your friends."

In his study, a small room, where large books on Theology were ranged on shelves round the walls, where a large silver crucifix stood on the table, with the Bishop's breviary and writing materials beside it, he bade Desmond sit down. Then he began to interrogate him shrewdly, but kindly.

"You wish to be a priest?" he asked.

Desmond eyed the Bishop in profound surprise, and his Lordship continued:

"How do I guess? Eh? It is not great wisdom nor the black art that has told me your secret. A friend wrote to me—."

"Mrs. Quirk!" cried Desmond.

The Bishop smiled, and his usually stern face relaxed, so that the lines and wrinkles of care smoothed themselves out.

"A friend," he answered, "who was interested in you, and anxious for advice."

"My Lord, I am quite uncertain. I can see which is the better, and which the more difficult."

"Make a retreat, my child; then come to me again."

"Tell me it is impossible, my Lord!" cried Desmond.

[Pg 219]

"Nothing is impossible. I was myself a man of the world like you, and, when I found myself confronted with a vocation, I was for running away, like you. But the grace of God constrained me by force."

"I can save my soul in the world," said Desmond.

"You may; probably you will. But there are other souls to save besides your own. Make a retreat, my child—."

"But I know what the result will be. There can be only the one answer."

"Then a retreat is not needed, but it will do you good. The Bishop commands you to make a retreat—at once!"

After luncheon, a plain meal, seasoned with good stories and laughter, they bade his Lordship a respectful good-bye. He stood at the door watching them as the car slipped down the avenue. On his face was the smile of one who has scored a triumph. Kathleen turned to Denis, and asked:

"What do you think of my Bishop?"

"Equal in every respect to my own, and that represents the very summit of virtue. But Desmond can tell you more of his Lordship than I. I met him as a mere man; Desmond was privileged to a more intimate knowledge."

Desmond smiled as he answered:

"A wise counsellor and a kind Father. He administers unpleasant medicine, flavoured with human kindness."

"And will you be taking the Bishop's black draught?" asked Molly Healy.

[Pg 220]

"I have not decided whether I shall swallow it or throw it away," he answered evasively.

But Molly Healy realised that Desmond O'Connor had decided. To her, this represented the destruction of an ideal she had never hoped to realise; but, as she wiped a few tears from her

eyes that evening she remarked to herself:

"Life is made up of not getting what you want, Molly Healy. It is better Desmond should become a priest than die a scallywag—and it will keep him out of the way of that Sylvia Custance. God knows what is best for every one of us."

CHAPTER XXII.

[Pg 221]

A LINK BROKEN.

Denis Quirk was back in Melbourne, in the "Bachelors' Flat," and working relentlessly at the "Freelance." That intrepid little weekly had shouldered its way into a prominent position in the literary world. It stood for independence of thought, avoiding the humdrum of the beaten track, offering its own ideas to the public, careless of passing crazes and passions.

It may be said of Denis Quirk in those days that his only pleasure was in his work. He was lonely for Desmond O'Connor, now a student at Manly. The flat was still frequented by the representatives of motley and variegated talent, as in the old days. Jests were made, good stories told, and songs sung by well-trained voices; but these were mere acquaintances. Denis longed for the intimate companionship of the former days.

Jackson had invited him to his home in Brighton, but there he found Sylvia Custance. She weaved her web to enslave Denis, interesting herself in his career, asking him fairly intelligent questions, and doing her utmost to persuade him that he was the most important person in the world to her. Denis watched her as a scientist observes a remarkable organism. Once, after a prolonged silence on his part, she asked—

[Pg 222]

"What are you thinking about, if I may ask?"

"I was thinking about you," he replied.

She eyed him for one moment, as if uncertain how she should regard his answer. "And what is your opinion about me?" she asked, after a pause.

"One that I cannot properly express in every-day language. You are the most versatile woman I have been privileged to know, and in some respects one of the very cleverest."

"That is great praise from you," she answered.

"It is neither praise nor flattery; it is merely the truth. You are so clever that I cannot understand you."

Sylvia Custance imagined that she had at last won Denis Quirk's admiration. Had she listened to him coldly dissecting her for the benefit of one of her chosen bodyguard, she would have suffered a bitter disillusionment. Denis was walking home with this admirer, a mere boy, to whose unopened eyes Sylvia Custance was the ideal of women.

"Did you ever see such another woman as Mrs. Custance?" the young man asked, in his youthful enthusiasm.

"No, thank God, I never did," Denis answered bluntly.

This was a sudden and unexpected check to the boy's eloquence. He regarded Denis frowningly.

"If you intend—," he began.

"You asked my opinion, and I have answered you. There is no need for anger. I have a very high regard for good women. Mrs. Custance is not a woman, merely a psychological problem to me. She cares for only one person—herself, and that self she regards as a celestial body around which all other lesser bodies should revolve. To attain this necessary consummation she adopts a chameleon character, altering herself to suit all who approach her. To you she is sweet, and inclined to gush; to me, a woman whose interests are in the stern affairs of life; to another an artist—something different to all men. She is so versatile that she has no fixed character. She is neither good nor bad, frivolous nor earnest; she assumes whatever she considers most suitable to the present moment. But I annoy you?"

[Pg 223]

"No, you don't. Not one bit. Mrs. Custance's character can bear your satire. She is the sweetest and most kindly woman in the world."

"To you she probably is. That sweetness is the music to which you are expected to dance. I accuse her of no evil intention. She is far too prudent to ever repeat her one mistake of falling in love with anyone but herself. You may fall in love with her; she expects you to do that. But you need expect no act of imprudence from her. She will lead you to the very gates of love and close them gently in your face."

The boy went away furiously angry with Denis, but in the months to come he recognised that he had heard Sylvia Custance accurately analysed during that unpleasant half-hour's walk with Denis Quirk.

Denis watched the boy as he strode away towards his home, his figure stiffly borne, the picture of indignant protest. For his own part, Denis desired no further acquaintance with Sylvia Custance. He despised her so much that the very thought of her was repulsive to his nature. After that one visit he preferred to cultivate old Jackson in his office in the city.

[Pg 224]

Occasionally he made a flying visit to Grey Town to enjoy the restfulness of "Layton," but he did not stay long even there. After a week or ten days he would suddenly pack his Gladstone bag and return in haste to Melbourne. His answer to his mother was always the same, when she pleaded with him to stay a few days longer:

"I must get back to work. There is nothing else worth living for."

Denis Quirk was busy in his office, writing, revising, correcting proofs, reading a celebrated work for review, criticising illustrations, doing many things and several men's work at the one time. He had a sub-editor, a very capable journalist, but he had the feeling, like other great men, that no one could do his work but he, and in this he was partly right. The telephone rang while he was thus engaged, and he sprang up and seized the receiver. Grey Town was speaking.

"Yes, Grey Town speaking. It is Kathleen O'Connor. Can you hear me?"

"Distinctly," he answered.

"Mrs. Quirk is seriously ill. She wants you."

"I will be with you in seven hours. Will she last till then?"

"Dr. Marsh thinks so; but please waste no time. Good-bye."

[Pg 225]

He rang his bell, and the office messenger answered it with promptitude. He had learned the lesson of haste when the master's bell rang.

"Send Mr. Gillon to me, and order a motor to take me to Grey Town at once. Ring up my flat, and ask my man to pack my valise," cried Denis. "Tell the motor to call for it," he added.

To the sub-editor he confided the work that still remained to be done.

"I will take this with me," he said, picking up an important article, "and read it on the journey. I will send it back in the motor."

A quarter of an hour later he was being carried at full speed in a twenty-horse power Fiat car towards Grey Town.

"If you delay one moment; if you blow out, or even puncture, I will never employ you again," he remarked to the chauffeur.

"It's all luck," the driver answered, indignantly.

"I prefer lucky men," Denis replied. "Now drive like the very deuce."

Nursing his outraged dignity, the chauffeur sent the car at its topmost speed on the long road to Grey Town. This was his lucky trip; stray nails there were in plenty, also dangerous places, but the Fiat raced through in six hours. Denis sat rigidly perusing and correcting the article, determined not to think of grey sorrow at the other end. Once he groaned to himself.

"The last good thing in life, and I am to close it. But, there is work—and the Church, thank God!"

[Pg 226]

Then he made a further correction, folded the article, and placed it in an envelope. This he confided to the chauffeur.

"I like you," he remarked; "you can be as reckless as I when it is necessary. I shall want a driver soon. Would you take the post?"

"I prefer to be where I am," the man answered. "A driver can't be lucky always."

"He only needs to be lucky on occasions like this, when a mother is waiting to say 'Good-bye' to a son."

In six hours' time the car raced up the avenue at "Layton," to find Samuel Quirk pacing the verandah while he awaited his son. Denis could see the hand of bitter grief in the old man's bent figure, in the deep lines on his face, and in the sunken eyes. After nearly fifty years' companionship the prospect of losing his faithful wife struck Samuel Quirk a titanic blow.

Denis had never been outwardly demonstrative towards his father. Samuel Quirk had not invited any sign of affection, and his son had not offered it. But they loved and respected one another, for Samuel Quirk was the type of man that Denis could best admire. He recognised honesty and purity of intention in the old man; he knew that Samuel Quirk would never intentionally injure another. These virtues appealed to him like rich jewels hidden within a rough casket. To-day his heart went right out to the pathetic figure of hopeless misery portrayed by his father.

[Pg 227]

He sprang from the car and took his father's hand tenderly.

"It's the will of God," he said.

"Did I say it was not?" asked Samuel Quirk. "I knew it must come soon—but that doesn't make it one bit easier!"

"How is she?" Denis asked.

"Slipping away—and calling out for you."

Denis waited to hear no more. He ran up the stairs to his mother's room. Here he found Father Healy, Molly, Kathleen, and the nurse who had been with Desmond O'Connor. At his coming they left the room, whispering each one a short welcome as they passed him.

Mrs. Quirk turned her head, and her thin, white face broke into a sweet smile.

"Come to me, Denis. God is good to send you. Sure, I am blessed above all women. Himself is with me, the Divine Redeemer, and His Blessed Mother, and the angels. Father Healy has been praying over me, and now you have come to say good-bye. Sit beside me, and take my hand. Don't be crying. I am just passing to God. Don't forget to say a prayer for me."

She paused in distress, while Denis took her hand, and sat on a chair, the tears rolling down his cheek. After a few seconds she spoke again:

"Don't be fretting because the world is hard, boy. All will come right, and there's a good wife waiting you—one that will be true to you." [Pg 228]

"Don't be worrying yourself about me. I shall always land on my feet," he answered. Then, after a pause, he added: "You have been perfect as a mother and as a woman. There is nothing to regret on that score."

"Many things undone, and many that might have been done better. But God is good and merciful, boy. He doesn't expect too much."

Thus they spoke together for ten minutes. Then Denis saw that she was exhausted. He rose to call the nurse, but she held his hand for one minute.

"Promise me that you will marry Kathleen," she whispered.

"I am already married," he answered.

"You will be set free—I am sure of it. Promise me, Denis."

"I promise to do that if it is ever possible."

"God bless you and keep you. May the Sacred Heart prevent you from sin, and Mary, the Mother of God, pray for you," she said, in a low, broken voice.

A few hours later the end came to her peacefully, and the soul of "Granny" Quirk passed the narrow gate that leads from things seen to those that are apprehended by faith. With a smile on her face she passed the portal, confident in the mercy of Almighty God.

After the funeral the question of Kathleen O'Connor's future came up for discussion. After various solutions had been suggested by Father Healy, Dr. Marsh, and Denis, old Samuel Quirk calmly settled the matter. [Pg 229]

"Kathleen will stay here, and keep the house for me," he said. "She will be my daughter. What would I be doing all alone in this big house?"

The few days that had elapsed since Mrs. Quirk's death had changed him into a decrepit old man. He sat through the greater part of the day in an easy-chair on the verandah, taking no interest in anything; just gazing vacantly in front of him for hours at a time. Mental and bodily strength seemed to have deserted him. From vigour he had passed suddenly into senility.

"Are you willing to stay with him?" Dr. Marsh asked Kathleen. "It means acting as a nurse to an impatient old man."

"I promised Mrs. Quirk that I would remain at "Layton" while he needed me," she answered.

"The burden may be a heavy one," said Father Healy.

"I can bear it," she answered cheerfully.

Denis Quirk waited until the other had gone. Then he went to Kathleen to find her working among the flowers, filling the vases and placing them in the positions where Mrs. Quirk had liked to see them. He sat watching her silently, as he had been accustomed to do in the days of their first acquaintance. Presently she turned towards him.

"You remind me of the old Denis Quirk to-day—the one whom I resented," she said.

"I was summing you up in those days," he answered; "just wondering whether you were genuine." [Pg 230]

"That was what I objected to," she answered. "I have never been subjected to examination—I have not so much as examined myself too critically—and the feeling is creepy."

"You have been tried and acquitted," he laughed. "You leave the court without a stain upon your character. Indeed, you have been promoted to stand upon a pedestal, and receive the admiration of your fellows."

"No, no! Not that, if you please," she cried. "Allow me to remain just a woman. It is my best plea

for leniency. I detest the idea of a pedestal. Supposing I were found to have a flaw—I have a good many, I assure you—everyone would see it. Let me hide myself in the crowd."

"Only one person is permitted to admire you on the pedestal; the one who has placed you there. In his eyes there is no flaw. But," he added, hastily, "I may, at least, thank you for your kindness to my parents. You are a good woman, and you need no higher praise. Take care of the old man, and—good-bye."

He took her hand and crushed it in his own. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and left her. That night she fancied she could hear him pacing the avenue restlessly, and in that fact she found security. The following morning he was gone.

"Where is Denis?" old Samuel Quirk asked her, in his half-sleepy way.

"He has returned to his work. You should be a proud man, Mr. Quirk, for I believe that Mrs. Quirk is a saint, and I am sure that Denis is a hero." [Pg 231]

"He should be here in Grey Town," the old man grumbled.

"He is in the best place—out there in Melbourne. He will return to Grey Town when the time is ripe for him."

CHAPTER XXIII.

[Pg 232]

A SICK CALL.

If there is one suburb in Melbourne where a man might be excused depression and discontent it is that undesirable and dusty part called Tottenham. On a hot night in the summer time Tottenham gasps in the streets. In shirt sleeves and thin blouses, not infrequently in a still scantier attire, men, women, and children sit on doorsteps and pavements, or collect in the small parks and open spaces, seeking fresh air. The language on such occasions is apt to be in keeping with the weather, for the heat excites men's tempers, and leads to unpleasant remarks and retorts that are still less courteous, until a brawl frequently terminates the proceedings. The neighbouring hospitals anticipate scalp wounds and bruises after a hot spell in Tottenham.

It was on such a night that Father Desmond O'Connor, recently ordained, and appointed curate to Father Quinlan, the parish priest of St. Carthage's Church, went quietly and swiftly along Carrick Street in answer to a sick call. He walked absorbed in thought, and heedless of the groups of people whom he passed.

Desmond O'Connor had fought a severe campaign, and had triumphed. In Tottenham he lived a quiet and uneventful life, content to do his duty conscientiously, and pass his leisure hours with his brother-priests and in the society of his books. [Pg 233]

Father Desmond O'Connor was not perfect; he was a good, honest, hard-working priest, one of that splendid army who are fighting the Church's battles against human weakness in Australia. His brothers among the clergy liked and respected him none the less because he was a cheerful companion, not above an occasional joke.

Father Desmond O'Connor was, in fact, meditating a practical joke as he hurried on his sick call this hot summer's night. His eyes were twinkling, and his lips occasionally relaxed into a smile as he considered the details of this piece of drollery. Once he remarked to himself, half-audibly:

"I must confer with Father Gleeson. He would suggest the necessary details."

Thus did he go, smiling and occasionally laughing to himself as some particularly amusing aspect of that which he was considering struck him. So pleasant was his face that a man whom he met paused to ask the direction to a certain street that he well knew. When Father O'Connor had answered his question, the man asked him:

"Are you a Roman Catholic priest?"

"I am," Desmond answered.

"You'll excuse me stopping you, sir, but you looked so happy and pleasant that I thought I would like to speak to you. You remind me of a young fellow I once met some years ago—Desmond O'Connor."

Father O'Connor laughed aloud at the remark.

"Supposing I were to tell you I was he, would you believe me?" he asked. [Pg 234]

The stranger shook his head emphatically.

"No, sir, I would not believe it, even from you. I had an argument with young O'Connor, half-fun and half-earnest. He was an Agnostic, while I profess to be a Christian of no denomination—just a Christian. You are not he."

"I am Desmond O'Connor, and your name, if my memory is correct, is Laceby, a reporter for the

'News.' If you care to have a chat with me, you will find me at St. Carthage's Presbytery, in Nixon Street."

"But how did you happen—," Laceby began.

"To change my views? A long story, which I will tell you if you call. You must excuse me at present. I have to attend a sick call at St. Luke's Hospital."

They shook hands, and bade one another good-night. Laceby stood watching Father O'Connor until he had disappeared round a corner.

"A strange army, the priesthood," he said to himself. "Every race and every rank of life—men who have always had a creed, and men who have had none. Soldiers, sailors, men from trades and professions, drawn to the Standard by an irresistible impulse that they term a vocation—but fine fellows, every one of them."

All the world knows St. Luke's Hospital, its Mother Superioress, and the devoted nuns who labour for the sick poor. Within the wards many a great healer has served an apprenticeship, and many a sorely-diseased man or woman has been snatched from death. There is no charitable institution in which the Catholics of Australia have more reason to take a legitimate pride. Standing in Burgoyne-avenue, its brick walls tower towards the sky, one storey above another, while beside it the small and modest building, now the convent, remains to speak of small beginnings that have been brought to a great success.

[Pg 235]

Father O'Connor was met at the door by a Sister in the black habit of the Order, a sweet-faced, gentle nun, smiling as kindly as the priest himself.

"Well, Sister Bernardine!" he cried. "What makes you always smile? One would expect a serious face in a place like this."

"A smile never made a sick man worse," she answered. "The Mother Superioress would like to speak to you before you see Mrs. Clarence."

"Certainly, Sister. I am never the worse for a word with Mother Superioress. Where is she?"

"In the convent expecting you. I think you should be as quick as you can; the poor woman is seriously injured."

The Mother Superioress beamed upon Father O'Connor. She had conceived a great liking and respect for the young priest, for she recognised that beneath his humour and high spirits was concealed a strong sense of duty, akin to her own.

"I shall not detain you, Father," she said. "This poor lady met with a motor accident outside our doors, and was carried in here. She is too sick to move, otherwise we would have sent her to a private hospital. Dr. Broxham has just seen her, and holds out no hope of recover. But the trouble is this: she is a Protestant, yet she has asked to see a priest."

[Pg 236]

"Does her husband consent?" Father O'Connor asked.

"The poor man was killed," the Mother Superioress answered. "We have not told her that. But she does not ask for him. She asks constantly for a priest—and for Denis Quirk."

"Denis Quirk?" cried the priest, "and her name is Clarence! Strange! Have you sent for Denis Quirk?"

"Who is he?" she asked.

"You must surely know Denis Quirk, the editor of the 'Freelance.' Two such important persons as you and he must have met."

"Of course I know him. He is one of our best friends. But are you certain it is he she wishes to see?"

"I merely surmise, Mother. I will see her at once and ask her—the Sister told me to lose no time."

In the big surgical ward of the hospital, the bed surrounded by screens, Father O'Connor found a woman, her face of an ashen colour, and constantly contracted in pain. She lay very quietly and in silence save when a faint groan spoke of a spasm of agony. Her voice had sunk to a faint whisper, so that the priest was compelled to bend over and listen to that which she desired to say. But, in a low voice, and disjointed sentences, she confided her sins to Father O'Connor's ears, and was then received into the Catholic Church. Before the priest left her she asked:

[Pg 237]

"May I see Mr. Denis Quirk?"

"He shall be sent for at once," Father O'Connor answered. "Good-bye, and God bless you. You are happy now?"

"For the first time for many years. I only need Denis Quirk's forgiveness before I die. Promise me I shall not see Mr. Clarence again."

"I promise that," Father O'Connor answered, whispering to himself: "May the Lord have mercy on the poor man's soul, for he will need mercy."

In half an hour Denis Quirk was shown to the sick woman's bedside. It is not my purpose to say

what passed between the dying wife and the husband whom she had so grievously wronged. Denis Quirk readily forgave her the evil she had done him, and with her he remained until she had passed the portal of death, holding his hand in hers. Then he rose from his knees and gazed into her face, and on it he saw a great joy and peace, that had not rested there for many years.

CHAPTER XXIV.

[Pg 238]

DENIS QUIRK'S HOMECOMING.

There is a large field beside the house at "Layton," sloping downwards from the rise, on which the house stands, towards the road. It is particularly green in spring and early summer, while scattered here and there about it are giant gum-trees, left purposely for shade. Here Denis Quirk gathered the employees of the "Mercury," their wives, children, and relations, soon after his return to Grey Town. In the centre of the field was a huge marquee, with a great table in it spread with snow-white linen and adorned with flowers and coloured ribbon. The silver, cutlery, and glass, together with a multitude of eatables and tempting drinks, proclaimed that this was provided for hungry appetites and for the thirsty. Waitresses in black dresses, with white aprons and caps, flitted backwards and forwards, arranging the table; occasionally an inquisitive child peeped in to view the arrangements, while now and again Molly Healy or Kathleen O'Connor entered to confer with the caterer.

There were other marquees in the field, places of interest and curiosity to the smaller guests. In one of these were sweets in abundance, to be had for the asking. The young lady in charge was the kindest and most obliging dispenser of sweets that any child had ever yet seen. She did not ask, "How much?" nor did she expect payment in base metal. A "Thank you" and a smile was sufficient to satisfy her. In another there was an amusing man, whose purpose it was to make children, both young and grown up, laugh. With him was a mysterious gentleman who performed the most wonderful feats of magic, and two young ladies who sang and danced as never young ladies had done before.

[Pg 239]

Outside there were sports and cricket, the big "Layton" motor to ride in, and the whole range of the field for romps and games. Finally, to complete the day, there was to be a picture show after dark, with music from the Grey Town Band to add greater enjoyment. Was it to be wondered at if children and adults vowed that this was a picnic complete to the smallest detail?

Denis Quirk had arranged the entertainment to celebrate his return to the "Mercury" Office. He had begun on a very small scale, his intention being to limit the pleasure to those immediately interested in the paper. But the invitations had spread from one to another, from the staff to their relations, then to their friends, and finally to their friends' friends.

"Let them all come," cried Denis Quirk. "If the thing is to be done, the more who find pleasure in it the better. Every child in Grey Town who cares to and can squeeze in, is welcome."

He had returned to the town without fuss or excitement, and had strolled into the "Mercury" office as if he had never been absent from it. Cairns had rushed to welcome him, a broad smile on his face, and a suspicious dimness, about the eyes.

[Pg 240]

"Upon my word, Quirk, I am glad to see you," he cried.

Then he turned away for an instant.

"I never knew I was an emotional man before, but it makes my eyes wet to see you," he explained, as he blew his nose violently, and gripped Denis Quirk's hand. "You swear not to leave us again?" he asked.

"Not until I am called for, Cairns. Upon my life, Cairns, I never knew how much I loved you until to-day," Denis answered. He wrung Cairns' hand until the editor winced. Then he went in haste to interview the staff.

"Tim O'Neill!" he cried, meeting that youth outside the editor's office, "how far up the ladder have you climbed?"

"Senior reporter, sir. Glad to see you back, Mr. Quirk."

"Thank you, Tim. I suppose you will be leaving us soon, now that you are famous?"

"Not unless you tell me to go, sir. I am quite happy here—plenty of work, and, now you are back," Tim asked wistfully, "there will be some fighting to do?"

"You are a worthy descendant of a fighting race, Imp. Is there anything perfect in Grey Town?"

"No, sir, nothing quite perfect—excepting Miss O'Connor," Tim answered with a blush.

"Nothing perfect! Then we must fight. Take down your blackthorn, Tim, and get your muscle up."

In this manner he passed from one to another, and the "Mercury" staff was one broad smile of joy and satisfaction, for they all loved the big, ugly man.

[Pg 241]

A week after his return the picnic was arranged. Kathleen O'Connor and Molly Healy had charge of the minutiae, while Denis ordered the big things, and opened his purse to its widest extent.

"They shall remember this, every one of them, right down to the babies in arms," he said. "They welcomed me when I returned; it is for me to show my gratitude."

At one o'clock the adults assembled for dinner in the large marquee. Old Samuel Quirk was wheeled in in an invalid chair, but, though he smiled urbanely on the company, he did not gather the significance of the proceedings, for he was now as much an infant as the head compositor's youngest baby. Father Healy came to bless the proceedings, and Dr. Marsh to stand by in case of sickness. After the dinner Cairns rose to his feet, to the sound of loud applause.

"Reverend Father, ladies and gentlemen," he began; "I want you to drink the health of the finest man in Grey Town. Mr. Quirk went away against our wish, and he has not come back a minute too soon. We needed him all the time he was in Melbourne. The 'Mercury' missed his power of organisation, his splendid gift of pugnacity. The old gang has been broken up, but there are a few of the same type prowling about. See that your gun is loaded and cocked, Quirk; there is plenty of shooting to be done in this town yet."

"Ebenezer?" Denis Quirk asked, with a broad grin.

"Ebenezer is crippled, but a few of the same species remain with us," replied Cairns. "We will put you back into the Council, and send you to Parliament if you like." [Pg 242]

At this there was loud applause, while from the distance could be heard the sound of a baby squalling.

Before Cairns could continue his speech Molly Healy appeared at the door and cried out to Mrs. Crawford, the baby's mother:

"You will have to come to him yourself. Sure, I fancy he must have swallowed a pin, and it is scratching his inside."

Mrs. Crawford sprang from her seat and hurried to the succour of her offspring, while Molly remarked to Cairns:

"No wonder the child is scared, with you shouting so loud."

Thereupon she whisked out of the marquee.

"We want a few of your stamp in Parliament," continued the orator. "So, whenever you pass the word, we will be up to put you into Parliament. Meanwhile, here is your good health, Quirk, and we are glad to have you with us."

Men, women, and children shouted themselves hoarse as Cairns sat down, and Denis Quirk rose to his feet.

"Not yet, Cairns," he said. "I don't intend to leave the 'Mercury' just now, when I am realising all she is to me. The sound of her heart, as she turns out the news of the world, is music to me. I love to sit at work with my coat off and sleeves rolled up, preparing a daily stimulant for Grey Town. But when Grey Town is braced up, if you still need a man who will make your interests his, and battle for you in Parliament, just call on me. I am glad to be with you again. There is not one man in the office that is not dear to me—I love even his wife and children. Dr. Marsh and I have been consulting as to the future management of the paper, turning over, at the same time, the great social problem. Now, we offer you a partnership in the profits of the paper. Dr. Marsh and I will take one-third of the sum, and divide two-thirds between you, on a graduated scale, to be decided in conference. Mr. Cairns will, of course, receive the largest share, and from him, down to the printers' devil, you will all be partners. How does that suit you?" [Pg 243]

A shout of applause showed that his proposal was satisfactory to the whole staff.

"Then an agreement shall be drawn up between us, but we rely upon you all to work hard and prove your appreciation of the offer. This scheme is an attempt to find a solution to the labour problem. You all realise that fact? Dr. Marsh and I have purchased the machinery; we have initiated the enterprise, and we are not prepared to divide our property among you; we are merely trying to pay you on an equitable basis. This is to be a partnership of profits, not of the stock. I wish you all to understand that. I now ask you, if you approve, to hold up your hands."

Every man, woman, and child signified their acceptance.

"Thank you. I hope it will prove a success, and that we shall never regret our new departure. I have only a few more words to say to you at present. Mr. Cairns tells me that you are loyal, every one of you. That is what I ask of you—loyalty to your own interests. Put your best work into the paper, and remember that the 'Mercury' is the production of every member of the staff. Thank you again for your welcome; you have made me realise that the 'Mercury' is home, the staff a happy and united family, to whom I am a father." [Pg 244]

He spoke simply, in a straightforward, manly style, that went to their hearts. When he sat down they continued to applaud for several minutes before filing out to view the pictures.

"Denis Quirk is white," a compositor remarked emphatically to Tim O'Neill.

"White!" replied Tim. "He is snow-white. He is the biggest and the whitest thing in Grey Town—outside Miss O'Connor."

CHAPTER XXV.

[Pg 245]

A PROPOSAL.

"Where shall I put the old gown?" sighed Molly Healy as she surveyed a trunk already packed to overflowing. "I took it out to make place for the shoes, and now I must take out the shawl to make place for it. I am tired of taking out and putting in again."

Therewith she seated herself despairingly on a chair and eyed the trunk in disgust. Kathleen O'Connor regarded her with a smile of amusement.

"May I see what I can do?" she asked.

"I am beyond refusing you anything, Kathleen. I have that trunk on my brain, and it's worse than water in the same place. Mrs. Gorman kept poking her nose in and telling me: 'I had no method' until I slammed the door in her face and locked it. Then the Father and Dr. Marsh began to look in on me through the window, telling me I was overlooked when the gift of tidiness was being distributed. But I have sent them on a dying message to Pat Collins, who is not sick. Dan, too, must come along and ask me why I was swearing? There is only one good angel in Grey Town, and you are that one, Kathleen O'Connor."

Kathleen began to remove the contents of the trunk, loosely rolled up and thrown in after a harum-scarum fashion.

"What will you do at St. Luke's?" she asked.

[Pg 246]

"I am going there to mortify the flesh. Nursing I love, but to be tidy is a penance to me."

"Make a big effort," suggested Kathleen.

"I wonder could I? I wouldn't enjoy a tidy room one bit. I would not so much as dare to brush my hair for fear of disturbing the arrangements."

"The Mother Superioress insists upon her nurses' appearance being spick and span," said Kathleen.

"For two ha'pence I would not go there, but ever since I cared for poor Joe Mulcahy I have wished to be a nurse. Well, heaven help me and send me the virtue of order."

Kathleen had managed by rearrangement of the contents to find a place in the trunk for the rebellious gown. She closed the trunk and tied the straps.

"I shall miss you every moment of the day," she sighed.

"Why not come with me and keep my room tidy? Now that Denis Quirk is home you have no call to be spending your life slaving for the old man."

A hammering at the door prevented Kathleen O'Connor from replying.

"What do you want with me?" cried Molly.

"A gentleman would be asking to see you—Mr. Cairns," Mrs. Gorman answered from the passage.

"Now, what would he be wanting with me?" asked Molly. "Tell him I am coming," she cried. "Am I tidy, Kathleen?"

"Of course you are," replied Kathleen. "I will put the smaller things in your bag for you while you entertain him." [Pg 247]

Molly found Cairns waiting for her in the passage. Always punctilious in his dress to-day he was exceptionally spruce, his tie very new, and clothes without one crease.

"Come into the garden, Molly," he said, and there was an unaccustomed nervousness in his voice that caused Molly to ask:

"Are you not well, Mr. Cairns?"

"Oh, yes—perfectly well," he answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You look pale, and there is a kind of a quiver in your voice," she answered as they strolled to a seat in the garden that overlooked the town, a favourite place for Father Healy when saying his Office.

"Sit down and rest yourself," Molly advised. "You get no peace down there in the office. Denis Quirk believes you are all machinery like himself."

But Cairns remained standing behind the seat on which she sat. After a short silence Molly Healy asked:

"Now, what are you doing to my hair? Do be leaving it alone; it is untidy enough already."

"Molly," he said, and his voice caused her to turn suddenly.

"I knew you were ill," she said. "It's the rest cure that would be doing you good. Denis Quirk has overworked you."

"Try to be serious for once," he asked.

"Serious? There is no need for me to be serious. Your face is solemn enough for the whole town. Just let my hair alone. There it was just put up in a hurry and you have pulled it down." [Pg 248]

Molly had glorious brown hair, her one real beauty, and she rose with it falling in waves to her waist.

"If you only knew the work it is to build it up you would be down on your knees begging forgiveness of me," she cried.

"If you only knew that," he began, and ended with a mumbled "that I love you?"

Molly Healy dropped her hair and gazed at him in absolute surprise.

"Did you come all this way to joke with me?" she asked.

"Please take me seriously for once," said Cairns. "I don't want you to go away from Grey Town if I can keep you here."

Molly had fixed her hair up in haste. It formed a great tower on her head, for she needed time to arrange it in order. Slowly dawning surprise crept into her eyes as he spoke, surprise with perhaps a not unnatural triumph.

"I really believe you are in earnest," she said; "but I can't understand it. They call me 'plain Molly Healy,' and I believe it from what the glass tells me."

"In my eyes you are beautiful," he replied.

"No blarney, if you please," she said. "I don't love you, and that is a fact, Mr. Cairns. But I will think of you—and perhaps—that is, if you don't find someone else in the meantime—when I come back—." [Pg 249]

"How soon will that be?" he asked.

"A matter of three years."

"Three years!" he groaned; "an eternity to wait. I will give you three months to think about it; then I will come to Melbourne and ask again."

"And what will Mother Superioress say to me with a young man?"

"Oh, blow—I mean, never mind the Mother Superioress. Quirk tells me she is delightfully human, and as sympathetic as you are," replied Cairns.

"Sympathetic? Sure, you must be in love to believe that of me. I am as hard as flint. But come if you like, and bring me a big box of chocolates. Will you now?"

"I intend to bring a ring with me. What stones do you like best?"

"Emeralds, to be sure, and diamonds. But don't be spending your money until you are sure of me. I may be taking the veil myself."

"If you do I shall destroy myself," said Cairns.

"Would you do that for me?" she cried eagerly. "How would you do it?"

"Oh, poison, or possibly a razor. But there will be no need for that."

"And do you really love me—me, Molly Healy? I don't understand it. I am plain and untidy, with never an accomplishment to my name. If I had money I could see a reason for it. Why do you love me?" she asked.

"Because you are Molly Healy, cheerful, light-hearted and kind," he answered. [Pg 250]

"I intend to think of you all night and every night. I can't think of you and be neglecting the day's work. But, perhaps, after three months, I may be willing to consider the ring. Now be off with you, for I am busy. You may kiss my hand, and here is a rose for you. Good-bye, Mr. Cairns, for three months. Sure, I will miss you."

To Kathleen O'Connor Molly confided Cairns' proposal.

"I don't understand it," she sighed. "If it had been you, Kathleen, I would not have wondered, for you are as beautiful as I am plain. But what made the man be wanting me? I have nothing beyond my hair, and who would be marrying a girl for her hair?"

"If I were a man I would marry no other woman but Molly Healy. Plain! Why, you are lovely, and you have a heart of gold, Molly," Kathleen answered.

"Mr. Cairns could not see my heart; it is what a man sees that he loves. But I am perplexed what to do. I like Mr. Cairns, and he is an honest gentleman, not like Gerard, all on the surface. But I don't fancy I love him. What does it feel like to be in love, Kathleen?"

Kathleen blushed scarlet at the question.

"There is a real love and a false one," she said. "The false sort loves a man, not for what he is, but for what he is imagined to be. The real love comes from recognising that a man is noble and brave."

Molly pondered a while over this.

"Mr. Cairns is not young, and he is not beautiful," she soliloquised, "but he is honest and brave, just a gentleman. Perhaps I might come to love him in time." [Pg 251]

"Shall I prophesy?" Kathleen asked.

"If it would be any help to you or to me, I would not be the one to stop you."

"Then I see you, in six months time, Mrs. Cairns," Kathleen answered.

"I wish it had been O'Brien, or Fitzgerald, even O'Connor, but Desmond has chosen the better way," said Molly.

CHAPTER XXVI.

[Pg 252]

GOOD AND EVIL.

It was evening again at "Layton." The moon was shining down on Kathleen O'Connor as it shone on her that night when Gerard walked beside and tempted her. She was pacing the shadowed avenue with Denis Quirk beside her. Their voices were low, mere faint murmurs to Father Desmond O'Connor, who sat on the verandah beside old Samuel Quirk and spoke an occasional word to the old man.

There was stillness in the garden, bright moonlight and dark shadows. Overhead the heavens were glittering with a myriad stars. Well might Kathleen's thoughts revert to that other night when danger paced beside her. This night she had no dread, for Denis Quirk had been tried and tempered by the furnace of suffering. Nevertheless, the girl's heart was beating more rapidly than usual, because she recognised that this night marked an epoch in her existence.

For three months since his wife's death Denis Quirk had abstained from asking that which was constantly in his mind. This he did, not because he felt himself bound by a specious loyalty to a false wife, but that Kathleen O'Connor might become accustomed to him in his new position. He would not hurry nor attempt to constrain her; he preferred to give her time to consider him as one permitted to woo her honourably. He became more attentive, more openly anxious to give the girl whatever she desired, more courteous in speech and action; but he refrained from asking the inevitable question. [Pg 253]

As they walked side by side Kathleen had the feeling that Mrs. Quirk was close to them. She could almost hear the voice calling "Kathleen" from the drawing-room upstairs, but this night there was no note of warning in the voice. She knew that "Granny" Quirk had looked forward to a union between herself and Denis as the consummation of earthly happiness. She believed that even in her present state of bliss her old friend would rejoice in that union.

Denis Quirk softened his voice to a tender key that is not customary. As a general rule he spoke in the tone of command or in a blunt, off-hand manner. To-night he had chosen the note of entreaty.

"Kathleen" (he rested tenderly upon the word) "I have longed for you many a day. Sometimes I have been torn by a tempest of passionate desire. But I have always respected you, and that respect restrained me. But if you had known the devouring furnace that has burned in me day and night you would have pitied me. I was compelled to hold myself always in hand, to avoid even an unguarded word or look, because I wished to walk with honour beside me. Now I am free to speak all that is in my heart, and that all is 'I love you and I desire you above all women.'"

Kathleen did not answer at once. She was moved by the passion in his voice; she had come to love him, but she was afraid. [Pg 254]

"I am frightened," she said in a low voice.

"Frightened of me?" he asked. "Why, I will protect you against the whole world. There is no place for fear."

"You are asking me to give you myself, and if I give, I must give unreservedly."

"Take any time you like to consider it. I can wait," he answered gently.

"No. I don't ask any longer time than a few minutes. Leave me alone for ten minutes; then come

to me."

Without another word he returned to the verandah and seated himself beside Father O'Connor, lighting his pipe and blowing thick volumes of blue smoke into the evening air.

Kathleen paced on alone. But suddenly the shrubs beside the avenue parted and Gerard came out quietly. So softly did he step that he was beside her before she recognised the fact. Then she shrank away from him in terror.

"Kathleen," he said, "I've tried to forget you, but I can't. I came here to-night to ask you to come with me; I heard that cursed Quirk speaking to you. What can you care for an ugly brute like that?"

"He is as far above you," she said, "as that star is above the world. How dare you even mention his name?"

He paid no attention to her remark.

"I don't come to ask you to share poverty. I offer you a good name and a fortune," he said. "My father is dead and I am heir to great estates and a time-honoured name." [Pg 255]

"If you offered me the world I would refuse it," she answered.

"You loved me once——."

"Never. That was mere imagination on my part, not real honest love," she cried. "Go, at once, before Mr. Quirk returns."

"No, I shall stay," he replied.

"Then take the consequences."

Denis Quirk's step was to be heard crunching the gravel as he came. When he was near them Kathleen hurried to him.

Denis increased his pace until he came to where Gerard stood.

"I warned you not to come near this house," he said.

"The moth comes to the candle. Your warning was useless," said Gerard. "Night after night I have walked this avenue with Kathleen O'Connor. Now she is tired of me."

"Liar," cried Denis Quirk.

"Abuse cannot alter what I say."

"Put up your hands and defend yourself. I hate to strike a defenceless man," said Denis, moved to fury.

"Do you fancy I am afraid of you?" Gerard asked tauntingly.

"Then take it," cried Denis Quirk, and his fist flew out suddenly, beat down Gerard's guard, and stretched him on the gravel path.

"You have killed him," cried Kathleen in sudden terror. [Pg 256]

"Not I. Such men as this never die."

Denis stooped and examined the prostrate man.

"He will live to lie again," he said. "I know him for a liar. Night after night I have followed you, not because I distrusted you, but I have seen him lurking about and I feared danger."

She came to him with outstretched hands and hid herself in the big man's arms. They went side by side up the long avenue, and their steps seemed to march to a triumphant anthem.

POST SCRIPTUM.

[Pg 257]

Grey Town after many years, and Grey Town in the early summer, when the farmers were congratulating themselves on fat factory cheques. But a changed Grey Town, for prosperity had transformed the town. It was no longer merely a country centre for a pastoral and agricultural district, but a busy industrial town, where the manufacturing interests were as important as the farming interests; where every morning a stream of workers flowed from the outside suburbs into the town; where there was bustle and noise and confusion; where money circulated freely; where men grew rich and proud in the power of their money bags. A happier Grey Town? Perhaps not quite so contented as the lazy, easy-going, and self-satisfied Grey Town, as Denis Quirk had found it, for here comparative poverty stood side by side with riches, and suffered in the contrast.

Prosperity had come to the town on sound lines, thanks to Denis Quirk. He had provided that riches should not be accumulated in Grey Town at the expense of suffering and discomfort to the poor. It was thanks to him, so the Grey Towners said, that the factory area was separated from

the residential portion of the town. They also hinted in Grey Town that he was largely responsible for the Government Bill, compelling landlords to provide their tenants with sufficient space for a garden and yard of greater extent than one might swing a cat in. There were others in it, Grey Town acknowledged that; but their Member, their Denis Quirk, was the prime mover.

[Pg 258]

He was rich now, and happy, but I may safely say that no poor man paused beside his gate to hurl a curse at the oppressor of the unfortunate. He still had enemies—his determined and combative nature made that unavoidable—but his enemies were of those who had been prevented from exploiting the poor by his agency. These termed him an enemy to progress, their notions of progress being summed up in self-progress. And they vowed that "that demagogue Quirk" should go out when the country recovered its mental equilibrium, lost for the time in an absurd humanitarianism. He was in his garden, sitting on a garden seat, with a book in his hand, but work had been declared an insult by the two rosy rogues, a boy and a girl, by the way, who had escaped from Nurse, now vainly seeking them in the house. Kathleen was beside her husband, watching in an amused manner the subservience of the master of men to the children.

Kathleen, the elder, was a copy of her mother; Denis, the boy, promised to be as good as his father; singly, they were powerful; united, as to-day, they were irresistible. And they had decided that "Daddy" must play a game with them, and the game should be hide and seek.

"Hide 'oo eyes and count," said Kathleen, junior, in a compelling voice.

"But Daddy wants to read," expostulated Mother, in a tone of entreaty.

[Pg 259]

"Daddy mustn't read to-day. It's Denny's birthday. Daddies don't read on their little boys' birthdays, does they, Denny?"

"No," replied Denny, in a voice of conviction.

"What do Daddies do under such circumstances?" asked Denis, senior, in an amused tone of voice.

"What their little girls wants them to do, doesn't them, Denny?"

"Es," answered Denny, seeing no reason to controvert this reasoning.

"But it's not your birthday, Kath," suggested Mother.

"It's Denny's, and Denny gave it to me, 'cos I told him I wouldn't kiss him if he didn't."

Here the peculiar injustice of this proceeding suddenly struck Denny, and he began to cry, not in a quiet and subdued manner, as a respectable boy would, but in a stentorian roar.

It was at this moment that Molly Healy came up the avenue, and she rushed at and snatched Denny up in her arms.

"Were they cruel to my boy on his birthday? Never mind. Molly's brought you something nice," she cried.

"Now, be under no misapprehensions, Miss Molly Healy. Neither Kathleen nor I have done anything to deserve that scornful look. If you must scold anyone, there is the culprit. Kath. has swindled Denny out of his birthday."

Kath. had noted the result of Denny's roaring, and she argued that similar conduct on her part would meet with similar treatment. Therefore, she took up the strain of loud weeping, from which Molly had interrupted her brother.

[Pg 260]

"Something for you, too, Kath.," cried the kind-hearted and impulsive Molly, handing Kath. a parcel similar to that which the boy was hugging in his arms. Straightway Kath. ceased from tears, and consented, when Nurse appeared, to accompany her indoors and there investigate the contents.

"I've done it at last!" said Molly, when she had ceased from bestowing kisses on the children, greatly to Nurse's indignation, and had permitted them to be led away.

"You don't mean to tell me!" cried Kathleen, springing up impulsively and kissing Molly.

"Done what? Murder, suicide, or the Confiding Public?" asked Denis.

"Oh! you old stupid. You never understand," cried Kathleen.

"I claim to understand the English language when it is openly expressed. But I lay no claim to a knowledge of female wireless telegraphy. Miss Molly tells you, in the tone of one who confesses a crime, that she has 'done it at last.' If she will explain, I may possibly be able to change the sentence from murder to justifiable homicide."

Kathleen went to him and whispered in his ear.

He rose, and grasped Molly's hand so firmly that she winced under his pressure.

"And why was this not done years ago?" he asked. "Why keep an unfortunate poor man constantly on the verge of suicide?"

[Pg 261]

"I was getting over Desmond," replied Molly! "It takes a girl a long time to recover from a heart

affection, and I was trying him to learn if he was constant."

"Well, better late than never. I wish you and Cairns joy. Have you mastered housekeeping yet?"

"There you are!" cried Molly triumphantly. "How should I marry and never know how to look after the man's house? But I am getting on now, and I don't expect to be much better this side of the grave, so when he came with his monthly 'Will you?' I just dropped into his arms, and that ended it."

"And what did Cairns do under those distressing circumstances?"

"He didn't know exactly what to do until I told him. Then he did it fairly well for an amateur."

"And when do you intend to be married?" asked Kathleen.

"Next week, to be sure," answered Molly without hesitation.

"Impossible! It would be an outrage on the conventionalities," cried Denis.

"And haven't I been outraging them ever since I came to Grey Town? If they expect anything ordinary of Molly Healy, they won't get what they expect. Next week will be Easter, and Desmond here to marry us, and next week will see Molly Healy Molly Cairns."

[Pg 262]



*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREY TOWN ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic

works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this

work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this

electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the

solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.