

THE
EARL OF DESMOND;
OR
O'BRIEN'S COTTAGE.
AN IRISH STORY.
(Continued from our last.)

"The author of these papers threatens, that, at the altar, he will manifest himself. Let it be so—we have nothing to fear—nothing to reproach ourselves with. It is therefore, my most earnest advice, that this seeming impediment, so far from preventing, should expedite the marriage.—Do not, dearest Georgiana, oppose my opinion, but let us, by coming to the test at once, discover this lurking intruder, this blight to our harmony.—We, with firm confidence, can approach the altar; when there, if there exists any cause for this threat, let it then and there be made known without disguise; and let the redress be such as the nature of the complaint demands."

This advice delighted all but her to whom it was principally addressed.—Georgiana, filled with an insurmountable dread, knew not how to reconcile her mind to it; but the united encouragement and soothing of her friends, who undertook to convince her how much more desirable decision was than the state of suspense they were now in, and that, whatever consequences might ensue, their consciences were clear from every accusation.

Georgiana, therefore, more overpowered by her friends' arguments than convinced by them, waved all further objections, and consented to the marriage taking place in three days.

Many were the anxieties which possessed the mind of Georgiana during this period; and every moment passed alone, or in her chamber, continually brought to her recollection the circumstances of the last mysterious note—though, since that event, she had had every precaution taken to prevent any interruption, from the want of proper caution in respect to the doors.

The time last appointed passed on without any thing occurring which could cause a moment's uneasiness; and could our heroine have banished from her memory the distressing intimations she had received, she would have been perfectly happy.

The eventful morning arrived.—The joy this occasion would have naturally inspired in all parties, was overcast by a strange dread of some unpleasant event, which it was impossible to be entirely divested from; but each carefully concealed, in their own breast, their apprehensions, or whatever might tend to damp the happiness of the other.

Lords Desmond and Seymour, with the colonel and Edmund, formed the male part of this company, whilst Georgiana (who might, with truth, be called the mourning bride, for she yet dreaded some serious interruption), attended by two elegant young ladies, as bride's-maids, composed the female, who, in separate carriages, reached the church.

Lord Desmond, who was to act as father, conducted Georgiana, whose trembling agitation was so violent, that lord Desmond in vain endeavoured to tranquillise her mind, by every encouraging sentence he could whisper, as they walked through the long aisle which led up to the altar.

Fearfully, she threw a timid glance around the cold and empty church, but nothing met her view but the lofty marble monuments and sculptured entablatures, which recorded the valiant and heroic deeds of many an illustrious ancestor, and the more humble, though more beneficial, records of those whose domestic virtues only made them conspicuous to those to whom their merit was known and felt. The waving banners, suspended over the achievements of each hero here, now resting in peace, agitated by the rushing current of air, added to the increasing terrors of Georgiana, who was every instant expecting to see some terrific figure start forward to oppose her happiness.

But her ideas were soon collected again by the awful ceremony beginning, the solemnity of which drew her whole and fixed attention—it proceeded to the moment where the earl of Desmond was on the point of giving her away, when a little door, by the side of the communion table, was violently thrust open; and, to the astonished eyes of all, Francis Fitzhugh stood in perfect health before them.

Struck dumb by this appearance, the

fainting Georgiana hid her face on the shoulder of her uncle, whose supporting arms strongly encircled her.

For a moment silence reigned:—but if amazement tied now the tongues of the Desmond family, how greatly was it increased by the wonderful change the figure of Francis Fitzhugh exhibited, compared to what it had a moment before. His eyes, stretched to their utmost extent, were fixed, with a frenzied stare, on lord Desmond. Large drops of perspiration started on his forehead, and every limb was convulsed with agony.

Retreating a few paces, though without removing his gaze from the object on which it rested, he, in tremulous and inarticulate accents, exclaimed—"Great God! what is it I behold?—Is that dreadful form conjured up by my harassed imagination, to guard from my demand her I have so much imposed upon?—so much injured.—Such a protector unmans my resolution, and agonising recollection turns my brain to madness."

"Francis," answered lord Desmond, with dignity, "why should the sight of me, whom you supposed dead, affect you so forcibly and so strangely?—We have had every presumptive proof of your death—yet your present appearance, added to the unworthy and indirect manner you have made it in, does not affect us with terror, with agitation like yours. Did you not come here, prepared to see us, to witness this scene?—Explain, then, at this altar, where you have threatened us with many menaces, and before this worthy and reverend clergyman, the cause of your strange conduct, and what has induced the shameful behaviour you have adopted towards us—why have you descended so low, as to deceive and injure us, and to introduce yourself, at a moment like this, which your own deceptions have occasioned, in this unwarrantable manner?—Speak; and let a sufficient apology, well-grounded and reasonable, plead your excuse."

This address appeared to increase the distraction of the tortured Fitzhugh.

Without appearing to notice it, he gave an agonising groan; and, striking his hand vehemently on his forehead, said—"Oh, God! this is too much—it is more than human nature can sustain. Can my proud soul bear the full discovery of my numerous crimes—can I survive the presence of these injured parties.—Ah! no—I feel it is impossible."

So saying, he drew a concealed stiletto from his pocket and, before he could be prevented, with the violence of madness, plunged it into his breast.

A stream of blood instantly deluged the pavement, on which he fell with a deep groan.

Georgiana, whose mind during this whole scene was in a state bordering on frenzy, no sooner witnessed the last dreadful action, than she fainted in the yet supporting arms of her uncle, and appeared as lifeless and insensible as the body which lay weltering at her feet.

By this time a number of attendants came to their assistance.—Georgiana, and Fitzhugh, who yet lived, were both conveyed to proper apartments, and the best advice immediately procured.

Before the arrival of the surgeon Mr. Fitzhugh had recovered sense and speech; and Georgiana was likewise restored to perfect recollection.

The doctor having ordered some trifling preparations for her, and given orders for her being kept particularly quiet, he proceeded to visit his other patient.

On examining the wound, he made no scruple in pronouncing it mortal, though he was not apprehensive of immediate death, thinking it probable he might survive several days.

Proper dressings being applied, and some cordials administered, he appeared much revived, and, in a faint voice, entreated the surgeon to inform him truly of his fate; which being communicated with much delicacy, he expressed the utmost pleasure at the intelligence, and added, he was happy a few hours were granted him to make his peace with God and man, by every endeavour the time allowed.

The surgeon entreated him to compose himself, and not, by any exertions, frustrate the expectations which might be formed.

He then begged that only the necessary

attendants might be left with him for that night, in which he would strive to compose his mind, to fit it for the task he had to perform.

He then stated he had much to say to the colonel, who, he hoped, would visit him, as soon as possible, in the morning; as, in his circumstances, delays were of the utmost consequence.

A night of great anxiety was passed by all concerned. The enigmatical conduct, and mysterious return of Fitzhugh, could not be reconciled to reason. That he should have skulked about the castle in disguise, which, they were assured, he must, and have practised such mean artifices, where no necessity prompted it, surpassed their abilities to define, and bewildered their imaginations more, the more they thought on it:—yet they hoped he would account for these things in a manner to make him appear less culpable, in their eyes, than he did at present, though they could comprehend no existing cause to palliate such unprecedented behaviour.

They likewise deeply reflected on the unspeakable astonishment and terror which seized him when he entered the church, and first saw lord Desmond—his confused and incoherent sentences, and the subsequent catastrophe, which would, most probably, terminate in his death.

All their ideas on these events were nearly similar—but they were silent—each waited the elucidation of these mysteries from himself, as they doubted not his present situation would tempt him to give a particular explanation.

Poor Georgiana, added to these afflicting thoughts, had the additionally distressing one, that the man, who now appeared, in all eyes, under such dreadful disadvantages, was her husband, and the father of her child.

The message the colonel received from Mr. Fitzhugh, corroborated the opinion of the much-desired development; and he determined to attend him, as soon as he possibly could, the next morning.

On entering the apartment of Fitzhugh the following day, the colonel found, on enquiry, he had passed a night of great suffering—that he now sat up in the bed, supported by pillows, in which position he felt easier, and that he had expressed much impatience for the colonel's arrival.

On being informed the colonel was in his room, a great degree of perturbation again seized him, as much as possible, he endeavoured to conquer. He begged him to approach; and entreated to be alone with him, the attendants immediately quitted the room.

"Behold," said Fitzhugh to the colonel, in faltering accents, "the victim of ambition, of avarice, and ingratitude, who has progressively pursued a plan of duplicity, which has finally led to this conclusion."

"Happy am I that Heaven in its mercy has permitted me time to ease my mind, by a full confession of my villainies—to solicit pardon from Heaven and those I have offended—and to compose and prepare my mind for the awful change which is about to take place.—Humiliating, indeed, is the task I have to perform."

As he concluded this sentence, agitation was so violently increasing the colonel was going to call in some assistance, but Fitzhugh vehemently begged he would not; for that, on no consideration, would he miss the opportunity of the present conversation, which a few hours would, most probably, incapacitate him from continuing.

He then requested the colonel would give him a small quantity of a cordial, from which he had found great relief in the night.

The colonel instantly presented it, which appearing much to refresh him, he prepared to pursue his discourse.

But the colonel, though he ever disliked Francis, yet, compassionating his present situation, entreated he would not exert himself too much; for, though he had an ardent desire to know the reasons which had influenced his proceedings, yet he could not bear the communications being attended with so much trouble to him—"for though," continued the colonel, emphatically, "the events which have taken place have destroyed my most sanguine wishes, yet, situated as affairs originally were, I have reconciled my mind to it."

"Ah! dear Frederic," said the languid Fitzhugh, "how little do you know of the agonies of my feelings, which nothing but the most ample acknowledgement of my offences can possibly tranquillise—therefore, impede not the great work I have to accomplish."

The colonel was silent, and he thus proceeded:—

"I ought to preface my discourse by entreating your pardon and compassion, but time presses, and must not be lost in frivolous matters; neither, till you know the full extent of my crimes, can you possibly judge whether or no you can sincerely grant it."

"From my earliest recollection, the seeds of ambition and rapacity took deep root in my heart, and my senses were dazzled with the hope of being, one day, earl of Desmond. I will not waste breath in calling back to your recollection the transactions of our boyish days, or I could state many instances where those passions might be easily distinguished; but your brother and yourself were too noble to judge them at that time."

"My first grand source of joy and exultation was when colonel Dunscomb took you with him to India:—this I greeted as my first step to dawning greatness, and I sincerely prayed you might never more be heard of. In a few years, the expectation of your return with a wife, and prospects of an increasing family, again almost blasted my rising hopes."

"Shall I further expose the blackness of my heart, by stating the joy which took possession of it, when the express arrived from Maynard, stating your calamity, and that your infant was a daughter?"

"I entreated your brother to let me be absent at the sorrowful meeting which was to take place, pretending, as I could be of no use or consolation, I wished to spare myself the distressing interview, and would introduce myself to you when time should have, in some degree, blunted the severity of your affliction: but the fact was, I wished to retire, and brood over my flattering prospects.—Every thing conspired to favour my rising hopes. From a fortunate concurrence of circumstances to me, you left your infant far distant from her connexions, and determined yourself to return to India."

"Rejoiced was I when you took your last leave of Desmond castle, which I warmly prayed you might never enter again:—but still I was wretched on your account—I dreaded your marrying again, and saw, in prospective, a numerous race of your children."

"Thus, I reflected, whilst you lived my hopes were very slender. I therefore began to conceive the design of intercepting your letters, to make it appear, as much as I possibly could, that your being alive was doubtful, and so to perplex the enquires, that nothing but your return should prove your existence."

"Fortune, in this instance, appeared peculiarly to favour me, for I had not withheld more than two of your letters, when the correspondence really did cease. My heart palpitated with rapture, as time elapsed without hearing account of you.—Every possible method of discovering what had become of you was adopted, in which I now warmly joined, from my anxious desire to prove your death, and every enquiry served rather to confirm than dissipate my hopes, though your brother never ceased expecting your return, and could not be induced to entertain an idea of your death, as no official account had been received of it."

(To be continued.)

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