

The Ace of Clubs.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

CHAPTER I.

'My friend, Mr. O'Hea, Miss Desmond.' Eileen Desmond looked up from the contemplation of her programme, and bowed. 'May I have the pleasure?' O'Hea murmured, taking the card from her hand. 'I see there isn't much choice left,' he added. 'May I have ten and fifteen? Thank you.' As he turned away, Eileen laid a detaining hand on the arm of his companion. 'Murtagh,' she said, 'I want you one minute.'

'Sure you know I'm always at your service, Eily, dear,' replied Dr. Murtagh Magrath. 'And what can I do for you now?' 'Who is that man?' she asked briefly, taking no notice of the tender ring in his voice. 'I've never seen him before.' 'And it isn't likely you would have, seeing he's only just come from abroad; but it's likely enough we'll see plenty of him now, as he's taken a big house out somewhere near Dunwhorley, and intend to stay there for the present, though he'll not like it much in the winter, I'm thinking'—he laughed—'especially as he lives alone, I believe, with only a few servants to speak to from one day to another.'

'Where did you meet him?' 'Oh, up in Cork, at the Fitzjames's. I asked him to come over tonight, and he said he'd be very glad. Seems a nice sort of chap; but you won't be flirting with him, will you, Eily?' he pleaded. 'Oh, indeed, I won't promise!' she answered saucily. 'Is this ours, Captain Daly? Yes, of course. Au revoir, Murtagh.'

'Begor,' muttered Murtagh to himself, as he was left alone, 'if that man tries to cross my way where Eily's concerned, I'll let him feel the weight of my opinion, or know the reason why.'

'What's the matter with you, Murtagh?' said a heavy voice behind him, while a broad hand was laid on his shoulder, and turning his flushed, handsome face, he met the gaze of a pair of laughing blue eyes—eyes which could belong to no one in the world but his dearest friend and neighbor, Dennis Fitzgerald.

'Matter enough, Den,' he replied sadly; 'were you ever in love yourself? But I needn't ask that of an Irishman.'

'Faith, you needn't!' said Fitzgerald, laughing. 'I fancy I know something about the business; but who's the lady, Murtagh? Tell me, and maybe I'll be able to put in a good word for you. I've a wonderful lot of influence with the ladies.' 'You have my boy, I'm not denying it; but if I'm any judge of faces, there's someone here tonight who has more—or will have soon.'

'And who's that?' 'A new chap, from near Dunwhorley. He's some distant relation of the O'Heas; yet I can't quite make out who he is, or where he originally comes from. But, dear dad, my boy! he's got a pair of eyes that would turn the head of any girl if he only used them the right way, and I'll bet he knows how to do that.'

'Sounds dangerous, I'll admit,' Fitzgerald remarked coolly; 'but never fear; you've got a very respectable pair of eyes yourself and there's certainly no doubt about your knowing how to use them. Turn them on tonight when you've got the girl in a comfortable corner. Mind there's a dim religious light about the place; it makes things easier. Then squeeze her hand a bit, and finally, when you've led up to the subject prettily, propose. She'll have you.'

'But I say, hang it! I can't propose tonight! What about my prospects?' 'Hang the prospects, man! If she's worth anything she'll say "Yes" first, and think about the prospects afterwards. There's plenty of time: you're only five-and-twenty and she's—'

'Eighteen.' 'A very good age. Wait three years—or two if you like; you'll both be all the wiser for it.'

'Doctor Magrath wanted at once, please your honour,' said a man in the costume of a waiter—was in reality, the doctor's groom. 'And what'll I do at all? Sure I can't saddle Croppy in this, with a pasteboard down me chest and me hands in sausage-skins.'

Murtagh muttered an impatient ejaculation.

'Is it to go far?' he asked. 'Over to Harbor View, sorr. There's a man that's had his leg cut off by mistake, and he wants it put on again immediate. Will I take off these clothes, sorr?'

'No, no; I'll saddle Croppy myself. Just my luck,' he went on, turning to Fitzgerald. 'I shan't be back before this is over, and I shall miss my opportunity of proposing to—the lady I was speaking of. Ah! never mind her name. I'm off, old man. Good-night; and Murtagh hurried off to the stables to saddle his sturdy little bay cob.'

He had not been practising very long, and was anxious to make himself agreeable to his patients by hurrying as much as possible to obey their at present, too infrequent calls.

In another year or so he would not trouble himself quite so much.

As he passed the staircase he saw Eileen Desmond and O'Hea sitting together in a corner of the landing, talking earnestly.

The sight did not serve to improve his temper, and as he rode swiftly along through the damp air, he hurled down anathemas on O'Hea's luckless head.

'Why did I introduce them?' he growled. 'But he asked me, so it wasn't my fault. Bad cess to him, though!'

Meanwhile Eileen in the aforesaid corner was enjoying herself very much. Her companion was comparatively young and decidedly handsome. Moreover, he had travelled a great deal, and was an excellent talker, and, above all this there was an element of mystery about him very fascinating to a girl of her age.

So she sat beside him, quite entranced, and forgetting the existence of her other partners, who were searching for her in the dancing-room and hall below.

'So you have come to live at Dunwhorley,' she said. 'Do you like it so much?' 'That I can scarcely tell at present,' he replied, 'but I think it will suit me. I want a place that is out of the world, but at the same time near it and I think Dunwhorley answers that description pretty well.'

'As to being out of the world, that it certainly is; I don't know that it's very near it, though. You see, Cork is more than thirty miles away and the little country towns round about here can scarcely be called "the world," can they?'

'Well, I shall be near you, at any rate, I hope,' he said softly, and she tried desperately, but most unsuccessfully, not to blush as she answered 'Yes.'

'How near?' he pursued. 'Oh! about twelve or fourteen miles, she replied carelessly. 'That's not much in Ireland.'

'You may be sure it won't be much to me,' he said gallantly. 'May I call and see you sometimes?'

'Well, I don't know, she returned. 'You see, you can't have known me long enough yet to make up your mind whether you like me or not, so you'd better wait a bit before you ask such questions.'

'But I assure you,' he said, 'that I don't take all that time to make up my mind. I'm quite sure I like you; in fact, I was sure of that before I was introduced to you. By the way, do you know Magrath well?'

'Yes,' she said briefly. 'She was sensitive on the subject, knowing that she had not treated Murtagh very well—and was not going to treat him any better in future.'

It was all very well to let him make love to her in a mild, boyish sort of way; but it was quite another thing to marry him. She meant to do better than that.

'Then I may come?' urged her partner, as they parted in the hall at the end of the evening.

'I wonder if I ought to say "Not at home to gentlemen?" she pondered. 'It would be rather a fib, and—no, I think I won't. Yes, if you like,' she added aloud.

Dennis Fitzgerald passed them at this moment, and recognizing O'Hea from Magrath's description, he paused on the pretext of saying good night to Eileen. 'Enjoyed yourself?' he asked.

'Immensely, thanks,' was her reply, and she glanced, half unconsciously, at O'Hea. 'Ha, ha!' Fitzgerald ejaculated merrily. 'I smell a rat. Too bad of him to go in for my girl.'

Eileen was remarkably pretty, and she possessed numerous admirers, among them Fitzgerald, though he had never declared himself in any way.

Although a thorough Irishman and a considerable flirt, there was little sentimentality about him, and he never spoke of his feelings to anyone.

Magrath, too, though more emotional, felt a little shy about mentioning Eileen's name, so that these two friends went on blindly loving the same girl, when, had either known the other's sentiments, he would immediately have retired from the field, for both possessed a fine sense of courtesy; and, besides, they were really fond of one another.

As for Eileen, young and susceptible as she was, she had inherited from an English mother a wonderful power of self-control, and she would never have thought of falling seriously in love with a man who had not the means to support her in comfort.

Fitzgerald was certainly fairly well off; but, so far, he had evinced no desire for matrimony, and, besides, they did not often meet.

'At any rate,' she told herself, 'there's heaps of time, and I'm not sure that I'll be married at all.'

But somehow, in spite of all her self-control and judgment, O'Hea's face seemed to haunt her dreams that night, and when she woke next morning her first thought was: 'Will he call today?'

She entered the breakfast-room with a radiant face, and her family, who were accustomed to see a rather cross, gloomy Eileen the morning after a dance, looked up in surprise.

'Has he proposed yet?' sang out her eldest brother, his voice rendered somewhat inarticulate by merriment. Eileen surveyed him with a lofty look, and sat down.

'Any letters, mother?'

'A note from Miss Benn, asking us to tea this afternoon.'

'Oh, bother!' sighed Eileen. 'Must we go?'

'Of course, my dear. Why, I'm sure Miss Benn is a very nice woman, and so kind to the poor. Mr. Harris says—'

'Oh! yes, I know she's very worthy. She has the look of a person with a mission; you can always tell them. I don't

know exactly where the expression lies, but it's always there.' 'What's her mission?' inquired one of the boys. 'Making flannel petticoats for youthful nannies!'

'Or breeches for their little brothers,' suggested another.

'Or slippers for the curate?' put in Mr. Desmond flippantly.

Mrs. Desmond looked at them reproachfully but refrained from answering.

At this moment the door opened abruptly, and a dark curly head was thrust into the room.

'Anybody in?' asked a voice.

'Why, it's Jimmie!' exclaimed everyone in delight, and the door was opened a few inches wider to admit the new comer, a girl of about Eileen's age, and a favorite cousin of hers, who lived about two miles from the Desmond house.

'I've come to ask you to walk over to Ballymartin with me,' she announced, turning to Eileen. 'Will you?'

Eileen considered.

Ballymartin lay in the direction of Dunwhorley, and it was just possible—

'I'll come,' she said.

As the two girls set off together down the street, many heads were turned to look after them.

They were almost equally pretty, although, perhaps, Eileen was the more striking.

She was taller and straighter, and her coloring was more vivid—deep blue eyes and hair of a rich dark auburn, with that delicate complexion which so often accompanies it—these, and a very radiant, flashing smile made her unusually attractive even in a country so noted for its beauties as is Ireland.

Her cousin, whose real name, by the way, was Beatrice Donovan, though she was never called anything but Jimmie, was smaller and slighter, though very well made.

Her hair was of a rich brown color, and fell in disordered curls about her face: her eyes were dark, too, and wonderfully soft and expressive.

Her complexion was a delicate olive, giving her rather a foreign look, though anyone more totally Irish it would have been hard to find.

As they went, Jimmie begged her cousin to give her a full and graphic account of the dance, and Eileen did so, dwelling somewhat suspiciously on O'Hea's name.

'And was Dennis Fitzgerald there?' asked Jimmie anxiously.

Now Jimmie, being a smart young damsel, had for some time been well aware of two facts; firstly, that her elf was by no means indifferent to Fitzgerald; secondly, that Fitzgerald did not care a rap for her, but was decidedly partial to Eileen.

The first of these facts she contemplated resignedly enough—Jimmie was well used to taking the second place; but the other did occasionally worry her.

Why Fitzgerald did not speak and make an end of his suspense she could not tell—indeed, he could hardly have told the reason himself; but probably the proverbial carelessness and procrastination of his race had more to do with the matter than anything else.

Singularly enough the two girls rarely spoke of him to one another, so that Eileen remained quite in ignorance of his sentiments.

'Yes, he was there,' she said, in answer to her cousin's question; 'I danced only twice with him.'

'And how many times with the others?' 'Well, let me see. Is six dances rather a lot to have with a man you've only just met?'

'Well, rather; who on earth did you have six dances with?'

'With Mr. O'Hea. Of course we weren't dancing all the time.'

Knowing you, my dear, I've no difficulty in believing that. What did you talk about?'

'Oh different things! Travels and dancing, and missionaries, and actors.'

'A sort of penny jumble; it must have been very stimulating to the mind. And where does he live?'

'At Dunwhorley. Why, I do believe that's him!' exclaimed Eileen, regardless of grammar.

Sure enough a horseman was approaching them from the Dunwhorley direction, and, as he drew near, she saw that it unquestionably was O'Hea.

Jimmie looked about her for some secluded nook whither she could retire, leaving them to their inevitable conversation and flirtation; but seeing nothing on either side but low turf walls and level fields, she submitted gracefully to her fate.

'After all,' she ruminated, 'I'm used to playing gooseberry, and it can't hurt me to play it once more.'

O'Hea looked very handsome as he trotted up on his fine chestnut hunter.

He wore a light cap set rather far back on his wavy black hair, and as he drew near, his dark eyes were lit up by a flashing smile.

'H'm, presentable, decidedly,' thought Jimmie.

'Good-morning, Miss Desmond!' he cried gaily. 'Have you quite recovered from the dissipation of last night?'

'Yes, thank you,' laughed Eileen. 'I'm hardened.'

'You look as fresh as a daisy,' he pursued gallantly.

'And you must feel as fresh as one, for you're out early Mr. O'Hea.'

'Oh, I'm always an early rider; but this morning, I'll own, I'm a trifle stiff,' he replied, laughing.

'If you're out this way in the afternoon,' said Eileen, 'you might call and have a cup of tea.'

'Thanks. I shall be delighted,' he answered, and they parted.

The girls walked on in silence for a little while, a silence which Eileen broke by exclaiming suddenly—

'He waltzes divinely!'

Jimmie, whose thoughts were elsewhere, gazed absently at a rheumatic old peasant who was hobbling along in front of them, and asked—

'Who?'

'Why, Mr. O'Hea, of course, stupid! Where are your wits? I said he waltzed divinely, and you look vacantly at old O'Leary, and say "Who?"'

I must give Dennis a hint, thought her cousin. 'He'd better make haste, or he'll be too late.'

CHAPTER II.

Jimmie was as good as her word. The next day, with a delicate tact which did her credit, she hinted to Fitzgerald that matters were likely to become serious between Eileen and O'Hea, and he was roused from his usual carelessness to decide what was best to be done.

That very afternoon he brushed his best coat, stuck a flower in his buttonhole, trimmed his moustache, and went to call on the Desmonds.

As he ascended the stairs a sound of music was wafted to him from the drawing room.

Good-bye to hope, good-bye, good-bye!

'H'm a cheerful omen for me,' he thought as he opened the door.

It was, as he had supposed, Eileen who was expressing these doleful sentiments. She rose from the piano and came to meet him, looking unusually beautiful in a pale blue tea gown with graceful lace ruffles about the neck and wrists.

'Mother is out,' she announced, 'so you'll have to put up with me. I'm so sorry.'

'I'm not,' he remarked calmly, as he took a chair.

'Isn't that a little rude?' she suggested sweetly.

'Is it?' he said. 'I'm not going to retract it. I came to talk to you.'

'How very nice of you!'

'Yes, and you are going to be very nice and listen,' he responded coolly.

'Oh! she said. 'Will you have tea?'

'No, thanks, it would only interrupt me. May I begin, please? Don't play with the cat—it's rude and inattentive.'

'Well?' she said, trying to look serious, but seized with an hysterical desire to giggle. 'I'm ready.'

He drew his chair nearer to her, and looked steadily into her face.

She dropped her eyes and waited.

'The fact,' he said 'is this: I want to be married, and I want to marry you.'

Eileen had received proposals before; but the utter prosaicism of this one, the entire absence of any sentimentality, took her somewhat aback.

For a few moments she was silent.

'Will you say "Yes"?' he asked, a little more pleadingly, and a faint look of anxiety crept into his merry, blue eyes.

She hesitated, looked at him, then blushed crimson from brow to chin, and finally answered nervously—

'I'm very sorry, but—but I can't.'

The words came like a thunderclap to Fitzgerald.

Surely he was not too late!

Oh, why had he been so backward a suitor!

'Are you sure?' he said. That was all. He was too proud and too sensitive to plead his cause once he saw that he was not loved.

She shook her head.

'I'm very, very sorry, but it's not my fault. I never knew,' she faltered.

'No,' he assented; 'it's not your fault. Tell me, at least, if it's not a rude question, is there someone else?'

She grew crimson again, but said nothing.

'I see,' he said. 'Well, I hope you will be happy, dear Miss Eileen. Of course, if I'd known, it isn't Dennis Fitzgerald that would have said anything of this. Forget it now, and I'll try to do the same, though it's hard work I'll be, I'm afraid. Any way, thank you for being so nice about it. The lucky man'll have a treasure, whoever he is. You'll forgive me for saying so much, won't you? Good-bye, Miss Eileen, and, if ever you want a friend, you'll let me know of it first? Promise me that, now. Thank you.'

He raised her hand to his lips, bowed, and quickly left the room.

As he passed out into the chill grey of a November evening, the words of Tosti's song rang in his ears like the curse of some malignant spirit—

Good-bye to hope, good-bye, good-bye.

He paused on the little wooden bridge that crossed the river at the bank of the town, and as he stood there two lovers passed him arm-in-arm, whispering tenderly to one another under cover of the twilight.

'Yes,' he said bitterly. 'They're happy enough, and I might be too, if I wasn't a fool; but it's just my luck! I was born a fool, and I suppose I'll live and die one. Ah, Eileen, Eileen! Why couldn't you love me, darling? Though why should you for the matter of that? You're a thousand times too good for me, and may the man you love prove worthy of you!'

He turned away and repassed the Desmonds' house on his homeward road.

Eileen was again at the piano, and the words of her song floated down to him, as he stood for a moment outside.

Good-bye for ever, good-bye, good-bye!

'Ay, for ever,' he murmured hopelessly.

CHAPTER III.

At thirty, Jimmie's father had spent his own fortune left him by his father, that belonging to his mother, and the smaller one brought him by his wife.

Why he had chosen to do this no one could understand; but so it was, and there was a choice left him of two evils—to work or to die.

He accepted the latter, and blew out his brains, leaving his wife and children to take care of themselves as best they might.

Mrs. Donovan was a clever woman, and, before her marriage, she had been a somewhat well-known authoress, so she took up her pen again and wrote to keep the wolf from the door.

Driscoll, her son, was the image of his father, both in face and in character, and,



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therefore adored by his mother.

This may seem singular, but such are the ways of women.

Beatrice, or Jimmie, was like no one in particular, unless it might be a faint resemblance to a sister of Mrs. Donovan's, of whom she was not over fond.

So Jimmie was snubbed and put in the back-ground while Driscoll was petted and supplied with all that he required, and though his sister felt this to be unfair—knowing Driscoll pretty intimately—she never murmured, but took things as they came.

Her cousin Eileen was her only real friend.

The boys, too, she liked; but they were only boys, and younger.

To Eileen she confided a few of her troubles—not many though, for she was extremely reticent, and she took far more interest in Eileen's affairs than she did in her own.

In spite of all the snubbing she received she was a merry, dauntless little soul, and 'almost as good as a boy,' Driscoll had told her.

Driscoll was not bad natured, and was fond of her in a way; but he was thoroughly selfish and a regular ne'er-do-well.

At school he was always at the bottom of his class, though he possessed considerable abilities; and when he grew up into manhood, and was articled as a solicitor, he very rarely did anything but hang about the town, smoke cigars, play billiards, and make love to the girls.

Meanwhile, his sister had begun to earn a little money as a music teacher, and they were somewhat better off than they had been at the time of Mr. Donovan's death.

One morning Jimmie, on entering a breakfast room, was greeted somewhat to her surprise, with radiant smiles from her mother and brother.

The former handed her a letter, exclaiming joyfully as she did so—

'What luck, dear! Only think; Mr. O'Sullivan has proposed for you! Three thousand a year, Beatrice.'

The girl read the letter through in silence, while a frown began to pucker her pretty brows.

Then she looked at her mother reproachfully.

'You want me to accept him?' she said. Mrs. Donovan looked at her much as one regards a glibbering idiot.

Surprise, contemptuous pity, and disgust were written plainly on her countenance.

'Accept him?' she exclaimed. 'Of course! Three thousand a year! Think what we could do for Driscoll; he has done you a great honour.'

Jimmie's lip curled.

'Oh, a great honour!' she said drily. 'Do you know his reputation, mother?'

Mrs. Donovan flushed; this was annoying.

'Of course, I know that he has been a trifle wild,' she admitted, 'but all young men are alike; they must have their fling!—here she gazed fondly at her son—and what is so likely to reform them as the love of a good woman? My dear, you are very young, and know nothing of the world; you must allow me to judge for you in these matters.'

'Humph!' said her daughter. 'Faith, I'm aware that Jerry O'Sullivan is well known as the fastest man in the county Cork! Of course, if that is an advantage in a husband, I do not know the world. All I do know is, that nothing on this earth will induce me to marry him. If Driscoll wants money, he'd better make love to a girl who has some. I'll not accept this man's offer for anyone!'

If Jimmie had a temper, so had her mother, and it blazed up in a moment.

'So you defy me?' she cried.

'I do,' said Jimmie proudly.

'Get out of my sight, then!' her mother almost screamed in her wrath. 'Go to your room, you selfish, disobedient, wicked, unfilial!'

But the door had shut on the girl's retreating figure.