

The Ace of Clubs.

IN TWO INSTALMENTS—PART II.

FitzGerald looked thoughtful. 'You see,' he said, 'one can't exactly judge of a man like that. For all we know he may be a splendid sort of chap; but, of course, as you say, we don't know, and you're naturally anxious about your cousin. However, it can't be helped, so we must hope for the best, and trust he'll make her happy.'

'Poor Eileen!' said Jimmie half sadly, 'and she thinks she's so clear-minded.'

'A very common mistake,' replied FitzGerald.

They were walking together up the castle hill and he looked away from his companion over to the opposite hill, where rose the grand old oaks of the deer park.

In the summer there had been one or two picnics in that same park, and on one of these occasions, Eileen and he had some how been separated from the others, and had sat for an hour or two together in the branches of a fine old tree, and it was on that day that he had first begun to love her.

She had looked charming in a big straw hat, trimmed with nodding poppies and blue corn-flowers, and a blue muslin frock, unsuitable for tree climbing, as was testified by the appearance of a long rent in the skirt.

From the spot where he now stood he fancied he could almost see that tree, and Jimmie, who remembered the occasion, was charitably silent while he gazed.

A little further on they encountered O'Hea and Eileen mounted on bicycles.

It was evident that they came from the park, which, the weather being unusually fine for the time of year, was still the favourite resort of engaged couples of the place.

'What a handsome pair they are!' FitzGerald remarked admiringly.

Jimmie's face was clouded; she was silent for a moment and then burst out impetuously—

'How horrid people are when they get engaged!'

Her companion regarded her in surprise. 'Why?' he inquired.

'Oh! they're so full of themselves and each other. Eileen and I were always together before, and we told each other everything—nearly; now I hardly ever see her, and when I do it's all Terence, Terence, Terence, and nothing at all about herself. I shall really be glad when she's been married a few years, and his splendour is worn off a little—though it will probably be babies then,' she added sadly.

FitzGerald laughed.

'Who knows but that the same subjects may occupy you by that time?' he suggested, with a twinkle of the eye.

Jimmie shook her curly head. 'No man for me,' she said decidedly.

'I'm going to be an old maid, and be so good to my friends' children. I don't say my nephews and nieces, because, if Driscoll ever marries, it will only be to someone much beneath him, and I somehow don't think their children will be nice; but, if Eileen has any, I shall be a dear old maiden aunt to them, and take them out for the day and let them enjoy themselves. Children are generally misunderstood, I think.'

'Miss Eileen's children will be lucky if their aunt, remarked FitzGerald, and then there was silence.

'Where is Doctor Magrath?' asked Jimmie presently.

'I think he is in the Canaries at present,' replied her companion; 'at really, I hardly know. He went off so suddenly.'

'I wonder whether he was really ill,' said the girl slowly. 'Do you know, I have sometimes thought once or twice that he liked Eileen rather.'

'Oh! do you fancy so?' he exclaimed. 'I really don't think there could be anything in it. I've so often seen them together, and I never noticed anything; besides, I almost fancy he'd have told me. We were so very intimate always, and—'

—Now I come to think of it, though, he did say something—'

'About Eileen?'

'No; but he said he intended to propose to some girl on the night of the dance, and he wouldn't tell me who she was. Now I admit that his going off like this just when Eileen's—I beg pardon, your cousin's—engagement was announced, looks rather suspicious. Poor old boy, I never thought of it before.'

'Ah! said Jimmie sagely, 'we women are wiser, you see. We notice things men never do, and that's why we so often get the better of you. Of course, I won't deny that men have their uses—as soldiers and sailors, for instance, they shine—but there is no doubt as to our being vastly the superior sex.'

Whereat FitzGerald smiled.

CHAPTER VI.

'Jim, will you come for a drive?' It was Driscoll who asked this question, as he stood in the doorway, his cap pushed back on his dark curls, his eyes dancing, and for once without the peevish discontented expression which usually characterized him.

'What are you going to drive in?' inquired his sister.

'I've borrowed O'Leary's car, and I thought you might like to come with me,' he explained.

It was late in the evening and rather cold, but Jimmie felt flattered by her brother's unusual desire for her company,

and accepted his invitation. 'Where are you going?' she asked.

'Oh, out towards the coast somewhere!' he answered, whipping up the horse. 'The moon'll be up directly, and it'll be looking fine on the water. Will that suit you?'

'Perfectly,' said Jimmie, in high delight at the prospect; and she drew her cloak closer about her in preparation for the somewhat long drive.

They were rather silent as they sped along through the gathering twilight, Driscoll being occupied with the horse, Jimmie with her own thoughts; beside, the brother and sister had not much in common and conversation between them was always a little difficult.

Presently, the faint odour of brine was borne towards them on the evening air, and the road became narrower and more rough and stony. Civilization was fast being left behind, and they were nearing the wild coast, where the waves of the vast Atlantic broke on the rocks of the Seven Heads.

Suddenly the horse shied violently at something which stood in the shadow of a hedge, and, with a muttered impression, Driscoll, peering into the darkness called out—

'Who's there?'

'Begorra, Mr Donovan, 'tis only meself,' and the figure of a man came out of the shadow and stood beside them with uplifted hand.

'Shop a minute, will you please, sir?' he said. 'I want to be tellin' ye somethin'.'

'Hurry up then. What is it?' demanded Driscoll impatiently. 'Oh, it's you Patsy Bourke! Well?'

'Don't be turnin' down this road, yer honor 'tis haunted. Shure, haven't I seen the ghost wid me own eyes a minute or two ago? A man on a horse gallopin' along and takin' leaps a sane man wouldn't take in the daylight, and all the time—'

But Driscoll interrupted him impatiently. 'Rubbish!' 'Go home and tell that to the old old women. D'ye suppose I care for your ghosts? Get up, Brady,' he went on, flicking the horse again, and they were off once more, swiftly rattling over the road by which the discontented Patsy had just come.

'I wonder will we see the ghost?' laughed Jimmie.

'Stuff and nonsense!' grunted her brother crossly. 'Hullo! What's that?' he added in an altered tone, and pointing away to the west with his whip.

They had just come within sight of the sea, which lay like a sheet of silver in the moonlight, the old headlands standing out like ebony against the sheen of the water.

On a slight eminence a little way off, and between them and the shore, a horseman was silhouetted in the clear light, his back towards them, his arms stretched seawards, and his voice rising into the still night air, so that his words were distinctly heard by the two listeners.

'Eh! Eh! Eh! Come back to me—I am waiting.'

'Who can it be?' whispered Jimmie, clutching timidly a her brother's sleeve.

Even as she spoke, the horseman wheeled his animal sharply about, and galloped at full speed towards them, leaping any obstacle that came in his way, even as Patsy had said.

He passed them so rapidly that he was gone almost before they were aware of it; but for one moment Jimmie caught a glimpse of a wild, white face, and as she saw it she almost screamed aloud, for the face was that of Terence O'Hea.

Had Driscoll recognized him? That was the question; but his next words proved that he had not.

'I wonder who it could have been,' he soliloqued, as he turned Brady's head homewards.

His words showed that it was all right, Jimmie thought.

Nobody save herself need know. Perhaps after all O'Hea was only amusing himself in a rather new and singular fashion, and at any rate Eileen would utterly refuse to believe that it could be anything else.

So, wisely or unwisely she decided to tell no one she had recognized the mysterious horseman, though the matter continued to trouble her somewhat for the next few days.

Then in the bustle and excitement of the wedding preparations, she almost forgot it.

CHAPTER VII.

The wedding was fixed for the Thursday after Easter.

On the Monday there was to be a dance at a large country-house half-way between the Desmonds' and the Dunwhorley, and it was arranged that O'Hea should escort Ellen to it, returning with her to sleep at her home.

Jimmie was invited; but she was going with Dr. McGrath and his two sisters, and they had no room for Eileen in their carriage.

At first, Mrs Desmond remonstrated. 'I shouldn't go if I were you, dear, tiring yourself out before your wedding, and it is so important that a girl should look her best on her wedding day.'

But Eileen was firm.

She was passionately fond of dancing and saw no reason why she should not avail

herself of all possible opportunities of enjoying it.

'Besides,' she said, 'it will be my last single appearance in public. After this I shall always have a husband tacked on to me, and I want to have a good time while I'm still unmarried. I shall never forget this dance.'

As things turned out she never did forget it, but it was remembered in a way she little anticipated.

The evening arrived at last, and Eileen radiant and lovely in a wonderful concoction of 'black chiffon and lace' as Charlie airily described her costume, waited amid amid a circle of admiring family for her lover's appearance.

At last his carriage rattled up to the door drawn by a pair of magnificent bays, to whom fourteen miles was absolutely nothing, and a moment later O'Hea was in the room.

He was a man who looked most to advantage in evening dress, as it set off his slight, graceful figure to perfection, and Eileen felt as she looked at him, that he was a lover to be proud of.

'Wish I was coming too,' sighed Harold regretfully, while Charley, who was fifteen, and rather fancied himself, meditatively stroked his upper lip as if in search of an embro moustache.

'Never mind, old chap,' said O'Hea consolingly, 'you'll be able to take in another three years, and then you can make up for lost time and enjoy yourself finely. Ready Eily?'

'I'm having the house done up,' he told her as they drove along; 'at least it's nearly finished, but wait till you see.'

'Fancy!' laughed Eileen; 'I've never seen your home.'

'No, darling; but you soon shall. I've tried to make your rooms nice, Eileen—the drawing-room and your boudoir. They look out on the sea, and I've had them furnished in the nicest way I could think of. I do hope you'll like them.'

'I like whatever you like, dearest,' and there was a moment's silence.

'I wonder will the dance be nice,' pondered the girl presently.

'I shall think so,' he replied.

'Silly boy! Do you know, Terry, I think there's something rather funny about you tonight; I don't know quite what it is, but you're different from usual.'

'Sure, it's happiness, dear,' he said gaily, taking her hand in his and pressing it to his lips. 'How could I help being half crazy with joy when I think how soon you will be mine? Oh, Eily, how I've been longing for this ever since I first met you! I wonder what made you say "Yes" to me, for I'm not half good enough for you, dear.'

His voice was almost reverent and half-sad as he uttered the last words.

Eileen's reply was interrupted by their arrival at their friends' house, and O'Hea had only time to whisper, 'The first waltz,' before they parted.

Directly she entered the dancing-room, she was surrounded by a crowd of eager men and youths, all clamouring for her programme, and it was almost filled by the time O'Hea could make his way to her.

'You have kept the first waltz for me?' he inquired anxiously. 'Thanks, dear; and may I have nine and twelve? How cruel of you to fill it up so soon.'

'I couldn't help it,' she pleaded; 'you should have come before.'

As she spoke the music of the first waltz began, and, putting his arm around her waist, O'Hea glided into the midst of the dancers.

They were a splendidly-matched couple, and the best waltzers in the room, as the lookers on were speedily agreed, all but Magrath, who watched them with a sullen scowl on his handsome face, and who was quite unable to say a single good word for his hated and successful rival.

'Do you know this song?' asked O'Hea. They were playing 'Our Last Waltz,' and he softly sang the last bars—

Only to-night, just for to-night, and never for me again.

'How melancholy!' said his partner. 'Don't, Terry, it's like a bad omen.'

'Do you believe in omen?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Superstitious little girl! Well, dear, I think it will take more than an omen to keep up apart on Thursday.'

'Oh, don't!' she cried. 'You can't tell. Please don't talk like that, Terrence! If you can't talk nicely, I'll go and dance with Murtagh. Poor boy! how miserable he looks! Why, the next is his dance. I'm afraid he won't be very nice; but still—'

'I've only booked you for one dance,' said Murtagh, as he led her away. 'Do you mind if we sit it out?'

'No,' said Eileen, 'it's a polka, and I hate polkas; don't you?'

'I hate lots of things,' replied Murtagh darkly, as they seated themselves in a remote corner of the hall.

'Me included!' suggested Eileen sweetly. 'Sometimes,' he answered.

'You aren't very nice to night, are you?' she asked.

He turned on her fiercely.

'And it's you that's saying that to me!' he exclaimed; 'you that I've loved for three long years—you that I've thought of before all others, thinking, fool that I was, that because you flirted with me you perhaps cared just a little—that you had a heart, when it's a stone you have instead!'

'You that I've thought of by day and dreamed of by night, that I've planned for and worked for, only to see you marry a fool that you hardly know, at the end of it all! My God! why are women made to treat us so? Yes, I know what you are saying: I was 'only a boy!'

'I was at first, but I'm a man now—twenty-six in years, but thirty-six in bitter experience. We doctors grow old soon, I think and you women bring us to it by the quickest road of all! But there I know I've no right to talk like this; only I wanted to tell you what I think of you while I'd the opportunity.'

'There's the next dance beginning. Good-bye, Miss Eileen, and it's for ever—I'm going to leave this place very soon. I hope you'll be happy—happier than you deserve. Good-bye!'

After Murtagh's indignant tirade he disappeared to the smoking-room for the rest of the evening, while Eileen relapsed into a state of pre-occupied gravity, which was remarked upon by many of her friends.

'Perhaps she's repenting of her choice,' suggested one.

In reality she was wondering if she had behaved quite fairly to Murtagh.

Certainly she had flirted considerably with him at one time; but then everyone flirted, and it was not her fault if he chose to take too it seriously.

'What's the matter with my little girl?' asked O'Hea at last.

It was after the twelfth dance, and they were sitting in a little breakfast room adjoining the drawing room.

Undoubtedly there was something strange about O'Hea.

He was very white and his dark eyes were shining with a strange light—something like the light that glows in the eyes of an enraged Irish setter—a fixed, glassy, luminous stare, and his hand shook as he raised it to caress his moustache.

Eileen smiled, but made no reply. On a little card-table near them a pack of playing-cards lay scattered.

Evidently someone had been weary of the maze game, and had come in here for a quiet game.

The girl stretched out her hand, and began to toy with them idly.

'Beware of the Ace of Club!'

Eileen started to her feet in terror as her lover bent towards her.

He was white to the lips now, and his eyes were like black diamonds, while his voice was strange and husky.

'Terrence,' she cried, 'what is the matter?'

He recovered himself with an evident effort.

'Oh! it's nothing,' he said, smiling faintly. 'I—I don't feel very well.'

'My poor darling!' said the poor girl sympathetically. 'Look here, Terry. We'll go home at once; you don't look well, and the sooner you're in bed the better.'

'Yes,' he agreed; 'we'll go home.'

'Going already?' asked Jimmie, in surprise, as they passed her in the hall.

Eileen explained.

'Oh! said her cousin, 'I am sorry. Good night, dear. By the way, my dress has come. It looks lovely.'

Jimmie was to be bridesmaid.

Meanwhile, O'Hea had called up the coachman, and the prancing bays were before the door.

'Good-night, Jim,' called out Eileen, as they drove away.

She was rather tired herself, and leant back in the carriage with closed eyes, content to let her hand lie idly in O'Hea's, and neither spoke a word.

'How rough this road is!' mused Eileen to herself. 'I never noticed it coming; I suppose I was walking too much.'

It grew rougher and rougher, and she was continually jolted against her lover till at last he put his arm round her to steady her, and then, laying her head on his shoulder, she dropped off to sleep.

She awoke with the smell of the sea in her nostrils, and sleepily wondered why it was so.

'Are we nearly home?' she asked.

'Yes,' he replied; 'in five minutes we shall be there.'

But before the end of that time she was fast asleep again, and then drowsily conscious of being carried upstairs into a brilliantly-lighted room, where she was deposited on a sofa.

By degrees she managed to open her eyes, and sat up to rub the sleep out of them; but in a moment she was wide awake with surprise, for she saw that the room was a strange one.

It was a long, lofty apartment, handsomely furnished, and brightly lit with both lamps and candles; the walls were painted pale green, and hung with sea-scapes in handsome frames, and the doors of which there were two, and the windows were covered by beautiful curtains of Irish material, heavily embroidered in gold.

On little tables about the room were knickknacks of various kinds—mostly foreign—and there were cabinets of rare china; there were also well filled book cases, and a piano.

Evidently it was the room of a refined and cultured person of luxurious tastes; but whose could it be, and how had she come there?

Also, where was O'Hea?

This question was speedily answered for her.

Suddenly one of the doors was opened gently, and her lover entered and came towards her, a smile on her face, the strange glitter still in his eyes.

'So you are awake at last, Elra?' he said gently; 'and how do you like my room?'

Eileen stared at him in bewilderment. Why did he call her by that name? Why had he brought her here? 'It is nice, is it not?' he went on. 'Fit for my queen to rule over and reign in. Ah! Elra, how long I have waited for this! Seven years of waiting and hoping—and fearing, too I could not help it, though I knew your dear, faithful heart. I should not have doubted you, Elra, should I? But I will do so no more—you are mine now for ever.'

Stooping over her he pressed his lips to her forehead.

She clung to him, terrified.

'Terrence, what is it. Why do you talk like this? Take me home.'

'He laughed.

'Home, dearest! Why, are you not at home?'

'No, no! Where am I? Oh! Terry, why do you laugh at me? What has happened? I don't know this place and I'm frightened. What is the matter with you? Why don't you do as I ask you?'

'Hush, hush, dear!' he whispered. 'They mustn't hear. Suppose Lady Sinclair came in and found you, think what would happen. Ruined and lost to me for ever! We must not stay here. Elra, we must hide. Come in here!'

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He took her by the arm and led her through the door by which he had entered. She found herself at once in a smaller room, furnished as a lady's boudoir. There was not so many knick-knacks and ornaments as in the other room, but it was quite as handsomely furnished in its way, and contained more shelves full of books.

There was also a beautiful little writing-desk and a small card-table, on which lay a pack of cards, not yet removed from its paper wrappings.

Eileen started as she saw them—they recalled to her mind the scene that had occurred during the dance.

'Here, darling,' said O'Hea, 'we can be at peace and quite—quite safe.'

He led her to the card-table, and drew forward a chair.

As he did so his demeanour changed, and he became stern and authoritative.

'Sit down,' he commanded, taking a chair himself.

Eileen watched him in furtive terror as he swiftly unwrapped the cards and began to deal them, his lips compressed, his eyes blazing and bloodshot.

When he had dealt them all, he said shortly—

'We play for the Ace of Clubs, and the one who turns it up must die!'

The room seemed to whirl round before Eileen's eyes, and for a moment she felt as if she must surely swoon away; but she was no coward, and with a great effort she steadied herself and began the fatal game, knowing that every moment might be her last.

That she was alone in this strange place in the dead of night with a maniac, there was no longer any doubt, and the knowledge was enough to shake the nerve of the bravest man on earth; but so terrible was the shock of finding that her lover was a madman, that she felt death would almost be welcome, so long as it came swiftly.

A little clock on the mantel-shelf ticked out the seconds relentlessly.

Its hands pointed to the hour of two, and Eileen found herself wondering where she would be by breakfast time—dead or alive, and if alive, in what circumstances.

Her hand turned her cards over mechanically, while her mind wandered helplessly from one subject to another.

Her heart seemed to be beating so loudly as almost to drown the ticking of the clock. O'Hea was perfectly still and quiet, only moving slightly as his hand turned the cards, and his eyes were never raised from the table.

Would the Ace of Clubs ever come? The suspense grew so terrible that Eileen found herself longing for the crisis, for anything rather than this terrible strain.

There were only three cards left to each of them now, and O'Hea was turning.

The queen of spades.

Her turn, the ten of hearts.

His again—his last card but one, and then—

He sprang to his feet, and gripped her by the wrist.

Her eyes had travelled upwards to his face; it was terrible in its suppressed excitement and madness.

Suddenly the eyes lost their strained expression, the lips relaxed their grim, compressed lines.

She looked down at the table. He had turned the Ace of Clubs.

As if in a dream she felt herself held in a fierce embrace.