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HALLORAN THE PEDLAR. AN IRISH STORY.

By the writer of the "Diary of an Eannyc."

[Continued.]

Food set before her, she chanced to see the eyes of the old woman fixed upon the morsel in her hand with such an envious and famished look, that from a sudden impulse of benevolent feeling, she instantly held it out to her. The woman started, drew back her extended hand, and gazed at her wildly.

"What is it then ails ye?" said Cathleen, looking at her with wonder; then to herself, "hunger's turned the wits of her, poor soul! Take it—take it, mother," added she aloud: "eat, good mother; sure there's plenty for us all, and to spare," and she pressed it upon her with all the kindness of her nature. The old woman eagerly seized it.

"God reward ye," said she, grasping Cathleen's hand, convulsively, and retiring to a corner, she devoured the food with almost wolfish voracity.

While they were eating, the two Hogans, father and son, came in. They had been setting snares for rabbits and game on the neighbouring hills; and evidently were both startled and displeased to find the house occupied; which since, Barny Hogan's disgrace with "my lord," had been entirely shunned by the people round about. The old man gave the pedlar a sulky welcome. The son, with a muttered curse, went and took his seat in the chimney, where, turning his back he set himself to chop a billet of wood. The father was a lean stooping figure, "bony, and gaunt, and grim;" he was either deaf or affected deafness. The son was a short, brawny, thickset man, with features not naturally ugly, but rendered worse than ugly by an expression of lurking ferocity disgustingly blended with a sort of stupid drunken leer, the effect of habitual intoxication.

Halloran staid at them awhile with visible astonishment and indignation, but pity and sorrow for a change so lamentable, smothered the old man's wrath; and as the eatables were by this time demolished, he took from his side pocket a tin flask of whiskey, calling to the old woman to boil some water "screeching hot," that he might make what he termed "a jug of stiff punch—enough to make a cat spake." He offered to share it with his hosts, who did not decline drinking; and the noggin went round to all but Cathleen, who, feverish with travelling; and, besides, disliking spirits, would not taste it. The old Pedlar, reconciled to his old acquaintances by this show of good fellowship, began to grow merry under the influence of his whiskey-punch: he boasted of his late success in trade, showed with exultation his almost empty pack, and taking out the only two handkerchiefs left in it, threw one to Cathleen, and the other to the old woman of the house; then, slapping his pocket in which a quantity of loose money was heard to jingle, he swore he would treat Cathleen to a good breakfast next morning; and threw a shilling on the table, desiring the old woman would provide "stirabout for a dozen," and have it ready by the first light.

Cathleen listened to this rhodomontade in some alarm; she fancied to detect certain suspicious glances between the father and son, and began to feel an indescribable dread of her company. She arose from the table, urging the Pedlar good-humouredly to retire to rest, as they intended to be up and away so early next morning; then concealing her apprehensions under an affectation of extreme fatigue and drowsiness, she desired to be shown where she was to sleep. The old woman lighted a lanthorn, and led the way up some bro-

ken steps into a sort of loft, where she showed her two beds standing close together; one of these she intimated was for the Pedlar, and the other for herself. Now Cathleen had been born and bred in an Irish cabin, where the inmates are usually lodged after a very promiscuous fashion; our readers, therefore, will not wonder at the arrangement. Cathleen, however, required that, if possible some kind of skreen should be placed between the beds. The old hag at first replied to this request with the most disgusting impudence; but Cathleen insisting, the beds were moved asunder, leaving a space of about two feet between them; and after a long search a piece of old frieze was dragged out from among some rubbish, and hung up to the low rafters, so as to form a curtain or partition half way across the room. Having completed this arrangement, and wished her "a sweet sleep and a sound, and lucky dreams," the old woman put the lanthorn on the floor, for there was neither chair nor table, and left her guest to repose.

Cathleen said her prayers, only partly undressed herself, and lifting up the worn out coverlet, lay down upon the bed. In a quarter of an hour afterwards the Pedlar staggered into the room, and as he passed the foot of her bed, bid God bless her, in a low voice. He then threw himself down on his bed, in a few minutes, she judged by his hard and equal breathing that the old man was in a deep sleep.

All was now still in the house, but Cathleen could not sleep. She was feverish and restless: her limbs ached, her head throbbled and burned, undefinable fears beset her fancy; and whenever she tried to compose herself to slumber the faces of the two men she had left below flitted and glared before her eyes. A sense of heat and suffocation, accompanied by a parching thirst, came over her, caused, perhaps, by the unusual closeness of the room. This feeling of oppression increased till the very walls and rafters seemed to approach nearer and close upon her all around. Unable any longer to endure this intolerable smothering sensation, she was just about to rise, and open the door or window, when she heard the whispering of voices. She lay still and listened. The latch was raised cautiously,—the door opened, and the two Hogans entered: they trod so softly that, though she saw them move before her, she heard no foot-fall. They approached the bed of Halloran, and presently she heard a dull heavy blow, and then sounds—appalling sickening sounds—as of subdued struggles and smothered agony, which convinced her that they were murdering the unfortunate Pedlar.

Cathleen listened, almost congealed with horror, but she did not swoon: her turn, she thought, must come next, though in the same instant she felt instinctively that her only chance of preservation was to counterfeit profound sleep. The murderers, having done their work on the poor Pedlar, approached her bed, and threw the gleam of their lanthorn full on her face; she lay quite still, breathing calmly and regularly. They brought the light to her eye-lids, but they did not wink or move;—there was a pause, a terrible pause, and then a whispering;—and presently Cathleen thought she could distinguish a third voice, if as expostulation, but all in so very low a tone that though the voices were close to her she could not hear a word that was uttered. After some moments, which appeared an age of agonising suspense, the wretches withdrew, and Cathleen was left alone, and in darkness. Then, indeed, she felt as one ready to die: to use her own affecting language, "the heart within me," said she, "melted away like water, but I was resolute not to swoon, and I did not. I knew that if I

would preserve my life I must keep the sense in me, and I did."

Now and then she fancied she heard the murdered man move, and creep about in his bed, and this horrible conceit almost maddened her with terror; but she set herself to listen fixedly, and convinced her reason that all was still—that all was over.

She then turned her thoughts to the possibility of escape. The window first suggested itself; the faint moon-light was just struggling through its dirty and cob-webbed panes: it was very small, and Cathleen reflected, that besides the difficulty, and, perhaps, impossibility of getting through, it must be some height from the ground: neither could she tell on which side of the house it was situated, nor in what direction to turn, supposing she reached the ground; and, above all she was aware that the slightest noise, must cause her instant destruction. She thus resolved upon remaining quiet.

It was most fortunate that Cathleen came to this determination, for without the slightest previous sound the door again opened, and in the faint light, to which her eyes were now accustomed, she saw the head of the old woman bent forward in a listening attitude: in a few minutes the door closed, and then followed a whispering outside. She could not at first distinguish a word until the woman's sharper tones broke out, though in suppressed vehemence, with "If ye touch her life, Barny, a mother's curse go with ye! enough's done."

"She'll live, then, to hang us all," said the miscreant son.

"Sooner than that, I'd draw this knife across her throat with my own hands; and I'd do it again and again, sooner than they should touch your life, Barny, jewel: but no fear, the creature's asleep or dead already, with the fright of it."

The son then said something which Cathleen could not hear; the old woman replied,

"Hisht! I tell ye, no,—no; the ship's now in the Cove of Cork that's to carry her over the salt seas far enough out of the way: and haven't we all she has in the world? and more, didn't she take the bit out of her own mouth to put into mine?"

The son again spoke inaudibly; and then the voices ceased, leaving Cathleen uncertain as to her fate.

Shortly after the door opened, and the father and son again entered, and carried out the body of the wretched Pedlar. They seemed to have the art of treading without noise, for though Cathleen saw them move, she could not hear a sound of a footstep. The old woman was all this time standing by her bed, and every now and then casting the light full upon her eyes; but as she remained quite still, and apparently in a deep clam sleep, they left her undisturbed, and she neither saw nor heard any more of them that night.

It ended at length—that long, long night of horror. Cathleen lay quiet till she thought the morning sufficiently advanced. She then rose, and went down into the kitchen: the old woman was lifting a pot off the fire, and nearly let it fall as Cathleen suddenly addressed her, and with an appearance of surprise and concern, asked for her friend the Pedlar, saying she had just looked into his bed, supposing he was still asleep, and to her great amazement had found it empty. The old woman replied, that he had set out at early day light for Mallow, having only just remembered that his business called him that way before he went to Cork. Cathleen affected great wonder and perplexity, and reminded the woman that he had promised to pay for her breakfast

"An' so he did, sare enough," she replied, "and paid for it too: and by the same token didn't I go down to Balgowna myself for the milk and the *male* before the sun was over the tree tops; and here it is for ye, ma colleen!" so saying, she placed a bowl of stirabout and some milk before Cathleen, and then sat down on the stool opposite to her, watching her intently.

Poor Cathleen! she had but little inclination to eat, and felt as if every bit would choke her: yet she continued to force down her breakfast, and apparently with the utmost ease and appetite, even to the last morsel set before her. While eating, she enquired about the husband and son, and the old woman replied, that they had started at the first burst of light to cut turf in a bog, about five miles distant.

When Cathleen, had finished her breakfast, she returned the old woman many thanks for her kind treatment, and then desired to know the nearest way to Cork. The woman Hogan informed her that the distance was about seven miles, and though the usual road was by the high way from which they had turned the preceding evening, there was a much shorter way across some fields which she pointed out. Cathleen listened attentively to her directions, and then bidding farewell with many demonstrations of gratitude, she proceeded on her fearful journey. The cool morning air, the cheerful song of the early birds, the dewy freshness of the turf, were all unnoticed and unfelt: the sense of danger was paramount, while her faculties were all alive and awake to meet it, for a feverish and unnatural strength seemed to animate her limbs. She stepped on shortly debating with herself whether to follow the directions given by the old woman. The high road appeared the safest; on the other hand, she was aware that the slightest betrayal of mistrust would perhaps be followed by her destruction; and thus rendered brave even by the excess of her fears, she determined to take the cross path. Just as she had come to this resolution, she reached the gate which she had been directed to pass through; and without the slightest apparent hesitation, she turned in, and pursued the lonely way through the fields. Often did she fancy she heard footsteps stealthily following her, and never approached a hedge without expecting to see the murderers start up from behind it; yet she never once turned her head, nor quickened nor slackened her pace;

Like one that on a lonsome road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread

She had proceeded in this manner about three quarters of a mile, and approached a thick and dark grove of underwood, when she beheld seated upon the opposite stile an old woman in a red cloak. The sight of a human being made her heart throb more quickly for a moment; but on approaching nearer, with all her faculties sharpened by the sense of danger, she perceived that it was no old woman, but the younger Hogan, the murderer of Halloran, who was thus disguised. His face was partly concealed by a blue handkerchief tied round his head and under his chin, but she knew him by his eyes: yet with amazing and almost incredible self-possession, she continued to advance without manifesting the least alarm, or sign of recognition; and walking up to the pretended old woman, said in a clear voice, "The blessing of the morning on ye, good mother! a fine day for travellers like you and me!"

"A fine day," he replied, coughing and mumbling in a feigned voice, "but ye see, hugh, ugh! ye see I've walked this mornin' from the Cove

To be continued.