

The Storyteller

THE LAST LEAF.

A near neighbor of mine was Mr. Matthias Power, an ex-sergeant of the police, retired on pension, who lived in a neat cottage close to my house. There was something uncommon about the man, as well as about his Christian name. To all outward seeming he was a stern, reserved, cold, and unsympathetic sort of man. Such, at least, was my impression of him until I knew him better. In time, however, I discovered that beneath this mask of apparent harshness and crustiness there was, at least for one individual, a depth of love and tenderness which it would be hard to equal. That one was his only surviving child, a girl of some twelve years when I came to the parish.

My old housekeeper told me all about his history since he came to live in Killamure, about eight years previously. His wife, a young and strikingly handsome woman, as I learned, died the first year of their residence in the nice little cottage, leaving him the legacy of a baby boy, who followed her to heaven a few weeks after. It was a hard blow for a man who had only just retired on a comfortable competence after long years of arduous labor. He had married late in life, and he might have been the father of the gentle, winsome girl who, as he fondly hoped, would cheer and soothe the evening of his life in the quiet and blissful repose of domestic happiness.

Old Nancy dilated at length on the subject of his chivalrous devotion and respectful attentions to his young wife. 'He doted down on her,' she said, 'and he dressed her like a queen; faith they were the talk of the parish in a few weeks, with everyone praising them. Well, when the poor thing died, sure half the parish came to her funeral, short a time and all as they were in the place. It nearly broke the poor man's heart, and only he had little Lucy left to him it was people's opinion that he'd soon follow her, he was that fond of her, the poor, dear creature! Ah, there was the purty child! Everyone called her "little Lucy," and she smiled at everybody and everybody smiled at her as she passed through the village with her father, always holding his hand and skipping along by his side like a little lamb, God bless her!'

After his wife's death he centred all his affections in this child. She was everything to him now; and as she grew up she displayed more and more the graces of her dead mother, of whom everybody said that she was the perfect image. If anything, indeed, her mother's charms were intensified and perfected in her, just as the natural beauty of a lovely landscape is made still more beautiful by the artist's brush which touches up the little imperfections seemingly overlooked by nature.

The neighbors told me that when Lucy was able to go to school it was with great reluctance that the old man agreed to let her out of his sight even for a few hours daily. He accompanied her to the school door every morning, went to meet her at noon when she came home for lunch and again went to bring her home at three o'clock. Indeed, he was oftentimes seen hanging round the school all the time from early morning until playtime, and from then till the hour for breaking up, keeping guard over the place which held his little darling, the treasure of his heart. She was indeed, in the expressive Irish phrase, his 'gradh geal mo croidh'—bright love of my heart.

Of course I was not long in the parish without making the acquaintance of my interesting neighbors. Mr. Power, as everybody called him, was a fresh-faced man, slightly stooped, always very trim and neat in dress and appearance even on weekdays. On Sundays he wore a black suit that seemed ever as bran-new as the day it left the hands of the tailor. On Christmas Day and Easter Sunday he donned a brown cloth overcoat with velvet collar, that, apparently, was absolutely proof against the ravages of time.

He was precise of speech but reticent; although he would always reply, I noticed, to little Lucy's questions, however trivial they might be; and he would listen with a pleased expression to her artless babble, as if her voice possessed for him the charms of sweetest music. And often I noticed how the stern, sad face of the fond father relaxed into a smile when he looked with pride and joy on the sunny countenance of her who hung on his arm; and the thought crossed my mind sometimes, as I watched them going thus for their evening walk—with a whole-hearted abstinent tamen, needless to say—what would become of that man should God call home that angel-child in the first flush of her baptismal innocence to join her little brother in the better land? Alas! I little thought that this random and unwel-

come suggestion should ever be realised; and least of all that I myself should ever say to that beautiful girl, so full of bounding life, the hard words: 'Depart, Christian soul, out of this life!' But I am anticipating somewhat.

She was in reality a most beautiful girl, well grown for her age, and having all the appearance of perfect, buoyant health. She was gifted also with intelligence of a high order. Her features were almost faultlessly perfect and pleasing; eyes of cerulean blue, rippling brown hair, cheeks mantling with the roses of health and vigor. Indeed, whenever I saw her I used to think of Burke's glowing eulogium of the charms of the Dauphiness, afterwards the ill-fated Queen Marie Antoinette. 'Never lighted on this orb a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, glittering like the morning star, full of life and splendor and joy.'

Well, toward the end of my third year in the parish an epidemic of scarlatina of a virulent type broke out in the district, and Lucy amongst other school children contracted it. As might be expected, her father was well nigh distracted with grief and anxiety about his darling, and for days and nights could with difficulty be torn from her bedside. Fortunately the attack proved to be a slight one, and she rapidly recovered. However, soon after the scaling process was completed—which left her complexion even clearer and fairer than before—she unaccountably caught a chill which developed into meningitis. Thus the fair promise of a speedy and perfect recovery proved to be of that delusive kind which 'keeps the word of promise to our ears and breaks it to our hope.' God, in the inscrutable way of His Divine Providence, which are not our ways, had decreed that this virgin lily should not run the risk of being soured or stilled by the usages of this rude world, and chose this occasion to snatch her away to join his throng of white-robed virgins 'who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

It was my sad duty to attend her in this illness, and the memory of it will, I think, haunt me always. It is associated with sadness no doubt—sadness tender, pathetic, and yet strangely soothing; but I have long since ceased to think of it as merely a sad episode. It has become to me a memory of gladness, of hope, of education and spiritual enlightenment, more soul-inspiring than whole volumes of ascetical theology; for I am convinced that I assisted at the passing away of an angel to God's home, and that the sad words, 'Depart, Christian soul,' but ushered in her true natal day to glory. Yes, her fifteen years, I verily believe, had left unsmudged the snow-white robe of her baptismal innocence.

When she fully realised the dangerous nature of this second illness her resignation was admirable and very edifying. She professed herself perfectly 'willing and ready to die.' The doctor found it necessary to cut off her beautiful and abundant hair; and when she saw the severed and once much-prized tresses in the hands of her weeping nurse, she said in the most unconcerned way: 'Don't mind, Ellen; put it in the coffin with me.'

Toward the end she became delirious and raved a good deal, and sang snatches of the hymns she used to sing in the children's choir. Her last farewell words to her broken-hearted father were very touching, and moved me, I confess, to tears.

'Father,' she said, 'don't fret for me, for I'm going home to God. And if I'm leaving you, sure I'm going to meet mother, and we'll wait for you in God's house, and won't it be lovely for us all to be together? Father, if I lived to be a big girl you might die before me, mightn't you? And then I'd be very lonesome all by myself, and I might have a long time to wait before I could join mother and you in heaven. So it's just as well for me to go first. Oh, I see the Blessed Virgin there in the picture'—pointing to a print of the Assumption of Our Blessed Lady—and she's smiling at me and beckoning to me! And all the little angels are flying round her. I'm going to be one of them, am I not, Father O'Carroll? Oh, won't that be grand—to fly away to heaven with the Blessed Virgin?'

The old man held her hand to the last in a dazed sort of speechless agony and bewilderment. She pressed it to her lips in a last fond effort of filial love and died in the act. When the women round the deathbed had raised her little head, I thought that her lips were parted in a smile, just like that with which she used to greet me when I met her—the sweet, winning smile of transparent innocence and childish simplicity. Ah, maybe it was caused by the warm parting kiss of her Guardian Angel as he left his earthly charge, his task done, to give back into God's hand a soul pure and spotless as it came from Him!

When the bereaved father fully realised that his heart's treasure had left him—and the dead lips pressed his hand for a long time ere he felt their fatal cold-