

The Storyteller.

THE BETROTHAL.

THE momentous day had at last arrived, and Mr. Hawthorne's tenants, to the number of nearly 30, had gathered on the lawn outside his house to hear what he wished to propose to them. Discussion had been rife for weeks past as to the probable nature of these propositions, but one and all had agreed that they could only be in the shape of betterment; for it is hard to beat the worst, and that was the stage they seemed to have reached. Nor was it anything like a new stage for these struggling Irish tenants. The soil would not repay them for the labour they spent upon it in any greater degree than to just keep the wolf of actual starvation from the door. To save from their scanty produce anything approaching sufficient to pay the rent of their holdings seemed to get more and more impossible as the years went by. That this must be so was as clear as day. They took the strength from the soil, in itself unfruitful and unproductive, and had not the means or power of refertilising it, or changing the nature of their products that exhausted Nature might rest and recuperate.

A hundred thousand sons of Erin had found out the fact, and left in grief the shores of the land which failed to support them, finding far across the seas the rich land waiting for the spade to turn it—land unploughed and untilled, which had been storing up its riches for centuries.

Nor was the lot of the owner any better. He stayed in the impoverished country to guard his possessions and look after his tenants; but the possessions brought him no reward, and the fact that his tenants could not pay their rent made it no better for him than if they could and would not.

Thus the gentleman and the peasant met in the common anxiety of finding daily bread, and little could be found in the lot of either which proved him really better off than his neighbour. A finer suit of clothes meant the additional anxiety of paying for it. The responsibility attached to the few extra comforts of the landlord probably outweighed their advantage and left the tenant better off without them.

It was all summed up in the daily problem which wore away the brain and nerve and fibre of both classes alike—the problem of keeping famine from the door.

And now they stood around, a picturesque group of comely Irish men and women, and from a ricketty seat, which ran round a shady oak tree, John Hawthorne rose to address them. Beside him, dressed in simple muslin, was his daughter. For a hundred miles round one might have searched the country and failed to find a more beautiful type of real Irish loveliness. A profusion of chestnut hair framed a face each feature of which was as near perfection as human beauty can attain. She looked with pathetic love and interest in her father's face as he rose and commenced to speak.

'Tenants,' he said, 'there is no need for me to tell you the troubles we all endure, and have endured now for so many years. We are all doing our best but the land itself is against us and our best is very little better than the worst. It troubles me as much as I know it troubles you all, and I think none can say that I have ever proved a hard landlord. When you are able to pay you do pay, though it means often enough, and I have never lost sight of the fact, privation to you and pinching, and, too often, want.'

'Now I have been thinking these matters out, thinking for you as well as for myself, and I have come to the conclusion that we are drifting to worst times, and that the day has come for us to stop and look the matter in the face. If to stay here means famine, and any way is open for us to go, is it not better to go now rather than to wait until famine is actually at our door? I love my country as well as any of you but when it comes to the question of keeping body and soul together I am prepared to say, as I now say to you, let us emigrate. Better men than we have done so and found brighter homes in some of the rich lands far a way, and have been glad as their children grew up that they were preparing a far better home for them than they could ever have done in dear old Ireland.'

'I don't ask you to do what I will not do myself, and where her father goes my daughter Eileen will go also. So what I say to you is: Let us all go together and try our fortunes in far-off Canada. We have never quarrelled as landlord and tenant here, and if we go on trusting one another and acting square and straight we shall get on well enough on the other side. Well, tenants, before I say anything further what do you think about my proposition?'

There seemed no need for them to even look in one another's faces to know that all were ready. In the mind of many amongst those present had the same idea, though vague and illusory, taken root, and now that a man capable of working the plan had proposed it to them, a loud cry of 'We will go' went up from men and women alike. 'But it's the money stands in the way,' added one Patrick O'Meara, 'it will cost such a lot for us and our families, and how are we to get the money?'

'Leave that to me, I'll find the money,' Mr. Hawthorne rejoined, 'I'm not rich, as you know, but what little I have I'm putting it into this business, and if we work with hearty good will I don't doubt but what I shall see it all back again.'

'Thank you, sir. God bless you, sir,' responded the full hearts of his delighted tenants.

'Then this day fortnight we sail,' said Mr. Hawthorne, 'and meantime I will see again those amongst you who have old ones dependent on you who may feel unable to take the voyage, and we must see what can be done for their comfort.'

With faces filled anew with hope and longing for the brighter future, which seemed to open out before them, and with many a

hearty 'Thank you,' and 'God bless you, sir,' the tenants went their way to talk over this big event amongst themselves.

When the last of them had departed a tall man stepped from a clump of bushes which had concealed him and advanced, hat in hand, to the young girl who still sat, apparently lost in thought, on the seat beneath the tree. Perhaps she had been thinking about him, for as she raised her head at his approach she blushed vividly and was more than a little disturbed.

'Lord Ellenmead!' she said.

'Forgive me, Miss Eileen, for playing the eavesdropper. Your father was speaking as I came up and I did not wish to interrupt.'

He shook hands with her—perhaps holding the beautiful white fingers a moment or two longer than was absolutely necessary—then turned towards Mr. Hawthorne and heartily gripped his outstretched hand.

'So it is settled,' he said, 'and you are really going to brave the unknown future in the lands across the sea?'

'Yes, it is settled,' answered Hawthorne. 'I only hope that all will turn out for the best. At least you recognise how impossible the state of things was growing here.'

'I know you saw grave reasons for taking such a step. But my offer is still open to you, and I daresay it is not too late to draw back if you will reconsider it.'

'The offer was kindness itself; but I told you it was useless to press me further.'

'And yet it was only a loan, Hawthorne, a few hundreds or more, to use as you thought best until the tide begins to turn.'

'The tide might never turn, and then I should have been your debtor for life. No, Lord Ellenmead, it was impossible. Besides, Eileen did not think it right.'

'And your daughter. Does she go with you?'

'Yes; I have tried in vain to persuade her to do otherwise.'

'And yet it is hard work, this pioneer life, and there is little enough amusement for a young girl. But Miss Eileen would not do otherwise. It was, of course, a foregone conclusion that where you went she would follow. And she is right, as she always is right.'

There was a touch of sadness in his voice which did not escape Hawthorne's notice and confirmed what he had felt for some time—that the beauty and charm of his daughter had made more than a passing impression upon the man who stood before him.

The conversation had not been heard by Eileen, who, recovering something of her usual gaiety, now interrupted them.

'You are inhospitable, dad, to go on talking when tea is waiting inside and Lord Ellenmead is wanting to go in and refresh himself.'

Lord Ellenmead turned with a bright smile towards her.

'As thoughtful as ever, Miss Eileen. Suppose we lead the way and leave your naughty dad to follow?'

And suiting the action to the word, he boldly took her arm and turned towards the house. Mr. Hawthorne did not immediately follow, and thus the two were left alone.

And so you have decided to go, Miss Eileen, and your friends will be left behind to mope and pine away?'

The young girl laughed.

'I am afraid you are overstating the case, Lord Ellenmead, for I know of no friends whom my absence could affect in such a way as that.'

'Perhaps that is because you have not studied your friends well enough to know if they would feel deeply or otherwise. I know one who will miss you, who will find Ireland robbed of its greatest charm when you have gone.'

And do I know this friend who is kind enough to think so well of my humble self?'

'You do not know him so well as he would have you. I should like indeed to think that you regarded him as warmly as he regards you. Miss Eileen—and here his voice lost its touch of lightness, and a deeper feeling was manifested in the tone in which he continued—Miss Eileen, I shall miss you more than I can say. I don't think you know all that your absence will mean to me.'

The girl's face flushed, and for an instant the lovely eyes flashed to his and then sought the ground.

'It is indeed good of you to say so, but other friends will soon help you to forget, or at least to think more lightly.'

'You say so, not knowing me,' he answered, 'if I have said little it is because I never thought that you would be going away like this. I have waited, Eileen, that is all, waited until I could feel that you would not be offended if I told you that I loved you more dearly than anything on earth. It is the truth, I may as well tell you now. Would that I had told you so before, for then you might not have wished to go away.'

She did not answer, but allowed her arm to slip from his and walked on beside him.

'You are offended?'

'How should I be offended—you are only kinder than I deserve. But it will make it harder for me to go, and perhaps it would have been better if I had never known.'

'Why need you go?'

'It is too late to think of doing otherwise, Lord Ellenmead, and in any event my father would have gone, and my duty, at least for the present, is by his side.'

'Let me talk to your father and see if I cannot induce him to remain.'

'It would be quite useless now, for he is pledged to our people, and nothing you or anyone else could say would make him go back upon his word.'

They were nearing the house, and the young man again took her hand in his.

'I can only listen to one answer, Eileen. I love you. I want you to be my wife. Tell me you love me well enough, and everything else will straighten out before us.' She was silent for so long that at last he again added, 'You are not offended?'