

The Storyteller.

MOLLY MERLIN.

MY old friend Father John Manby had been some years stationed at the mission of Canrith. It is a quaint little town, with an old ruined castle, and stands high above the valley, with a grand view of the mountains not far off. The air is bracing, and the spot is full of sunshine. Even when the storm rages on the hills and mountains some few miles away, the sun shines at Canrith.

Father Manby wrote to say that he wanted to go south on business, and if I would take a Sunday for him, he could supply for me, and the arrangement would be profitable to both of us. He knew I didn't mind the winter in the country, and so I arranged to go. I thought I should not find much to do, but there are lovely walks in the neighborhood, and I had before experienced the good effects of the fresh keen breezes of the winter time in that mountain district.

It was early in January. I knew the locality well, and many of the good simple Catholic country folk recognised me, and heartily welcomed me as I called at their cottages on my daily walks.

'Did your reverence hear that old Molly Merlin, up along Wimblewood valley, over the fells, near the cairn, was very ill?' said a man to me, one morning soon after my arrival.

'Yes,' Father Manby told me he had seen her before he left, and I intended going over to see her to-morrow.

'I saw her to-day,' replied the man, 'and although she was about she seemed not so well, and said that if I saw the priest would I tell him she would like to see him as soon as he could go.'

That settled the question. I had determined to go the next morning directly after my breakfast; but I now changed my mind and thought it would be best to go at once. I returned to the presbytery, and after my early dinner set out to administer the last Sacraments to the good woman.

The cottage by the cairn was a long way up Wimblewood Valley, and four or five miles from the presbytery. For some distance the road was sheltered and pleasant, but when the fells were reached and the valley opened out it became more open and exposed. It was one of those peculiarly raw winter days that one meets occasionally in the north. There was a grey sky, but at times the sun shone and there were strong gusts of wind. As I turned up the desolate and bleak part of the valley I passed the last cottage, some two miles from the cairn near which Molly Merlin's cottage stood. At the best of times this place was very dreary and desolate, and the wind came sweeping down dismally and keenly. The old man who dwelt there was standing at the door and looking up the valley.

'Be going to see the old woman up by the cairn?' he asked. I told him such was my object.

'I'm afeared, sir, you'll have a nasty walk. I don't like the look of the weather; it's beating up for a big snow storm I think.'

I began to think so too. As I pushed along, the wind howled down the hills and through the valley, sending at times the frozen sleet cutting into my face. Then the dark clouds came over, and snow and hail were driven along by the angry wind. I crept along under what shelter I could find, but it was hard work. I shall never forget the last mile. The snow came in gusts like a blizzard, and several times I had to crouch under some protecting boulder of rock or low bush to protect myself from the biting blast. I was fairly beaten at times, and wondered should I ever reach the cottage. My breath was knocked out of me by the cruel pelting storm, and I felt that I must give up.

I never knew how I managed to get to the end of that journey. It was one of the most terrible experiences I have ever had in the whole of my missionary career. I found out afterwards that those two last miles had taken me more than an hour to accomplish. Faint, weary, and with my strength fairly beaten out of me, I at length reached the cottage. I placed my hand on the latch; the wind swung the door open and dashed me into the room. When I had shut the door and sufficiently recovered myself I looked round.

It was a neat little room, with white-washed walls and ceiling. There was not much furniture—a little deal table and a couple of chairs. In a kind of a rude arm-chair, seated by a fire of blazing turf and wood, was the object of my journey.

Mrs Molly Merlin was a fine old woman of nearly eighty years. She must have been very beautiful as a young woman, for her face and features still bore traces of their former comeliness. Her hair was as white as the snow on the hillside.

She raised herself to her feet and lifting her hand cried out in astonishment, 'Ah, Father dear, how could you come out on such a cruel afternoon? God and His blessed Mother and all the Saints protect you as they have done in this dreadful storm.'

I then explained to her that I had heard how ill she was, and that I did not like to put off my visit. 'But,' I exclaimed, 'I thought to find you in bed.'

'Well, Father dear,' she replied, 'it was so cold, and I was able just to get about, so I thought I'd better be near to the fire, where I could keep it alight, and get a little warmth into my poor old frame.'

I then told her of the real object of my visit, which was to prepare her for the reception of the last Sacraments.

Never shall I forget the good soul's gratitude. She had prayed, she said, that she might receive the great blessing of the last rites of Holy Church: that she might not pass away without the holy anointing and the last blessing.

'Father, all through the terrible storm this afternoon something seemed to be saying to me: "Molly, your end is coming, and your soul will go on the storm-cloud into the great world beyond

us"—but I kept on answering: "No, I've prayed for the priest to be with me, and I know God will answer my poor prayers: I shan't die till my good Father has seen men." And so I hoped—and waited. And you are here—praised be God's holy Name.'

Molly told me where to find the blessed candles and the holy water and a clean white cloth, and there was a little vase with some fresh green heather, which some of her far-off neighbors had brought her. So I made a little decent altar for the repose of the Divine Guest. I then sat down for a while, and rested after the terrible fatigue of the journey.

'Father, before you attend to me, you'll find some coffee in that little cupboard, and perhaps you'll be able to help me to make a cup. You must need it badly—or something: there's a little bottle with some brandy in it which Father Manby brought, as the doctor said I should have some. Anyhow you'll see what there is in the cupboard. God help us, what an awful storm it is!' said Molly, as the wind howled in the chimney, and the door and the window creaked under the stress of the storm.

I found a little coffee-pot and the requisites, and soon was regaling myself with a steaming and comforting cup of coffee. Feeling quite refreshed and perfectly warm, and having satisfied the anxieties of the good woman with regard to myself, I prepared her for the reception of the Sacraments.

It was a truly touching spectacle. The child-like piety, the ardent faith, and the fervent hope of that simple soul, reminded me of the Divine Master's words—'I confess to Thee, O Father, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to little ones.'

And while the good old faithful child of the Church made her thanksgiving to the Divine Guest, and poured out her soul in grateful prayer, I took out my Breviary and recited a portion of my office. I could not venture out into the storm, which was raging with unabated fury.

I soon forgot the storm outside, and the poverty within that little cottage. The time passed quickly. I busied myself in rendering what assistance I could to that saintly old woman. I am not a bad hand at making a cup of tea or, at a push, at preparing a meal; so finding a not badly stored cupboard, I managed to set before Molly Merlin a very inviting little repast, which I shared with her.

She was very weak, but full of animation. She reminded me of former visits I had made to her cottage with Father Manby; and I naturally questioned her about her granddaughter, whom I had once seen with her at the cottage.

The old woman's eyes were dimmed with tears as she said 'Father, her's is a sad story; shall I tell it to you?'

At my request she informed me that she herself had been left with an only child who married a soldier. The husband of her daughter had died in India, leaving his wife with an infant. When this child was seven years old her mother died. The good Molly then took charge of her grandchild, whose name was Kate Penton.

It was, she explained, but a poor life for the child. She herself had lived in the old cottage from the days of her own widowhood, and her life had been passed in the shadow of those mountains—Kate grew up a fine, strong, handsome girl: but she was headstrong and wayward. She had a knack—a very unhappy one—of quarrelling with all who wished to do her good. She imagined all were against her; and her proud spirit often resented even acts of kindness. She was continually getting herself into scrapes. When she was 15 she left her grandmother's cottage, and nothing was heard of her for a year, when she returned quite suddenly. She had obtained a situation at a distance, but left it in a fit of temper, and had gone back to the cottage near the cairn. She knew, she said, that granny would forgive her, and that she would find the door open. 'And,' added the good woman, 'she was right—the door was always on the latch. I never locked it, for as I told her when she asked me why: "Darling," I said, "I knew you'd come back: but if you'd found the door locked you might have turned back and never come home!"'

Kate stayed with her grandmother for more than two years, and then she went away again. Her wayward, active spirit could not rest; she found no scope for her energetic nature in those wild and rustic scenes. Her grandmother had heard from her once or twice from London, and she had sent money, but she would not give an address, and so she could not be communicated with. In fact she had sent her money some couple of months back, and this had enabled the good woman to live in some degree of comfort. 'But,' she added, 'it is five years since she left me, and she'll be about 23 now. Ah, how I would wish to see her before I die! to know that she is happy and well and keeping good. You remember when she was with me the last time, you saw her, Father, and gave her a medal of Our Lady. She always wore it, and took it away with her. You, she said, were always kind with her; and you never scolded her for being naughty. She only knew you when you came down here; but somehow she often spoke about you. Some day, perhaps, when she hears that her old granny is dead, she may come to see you. I know you'll be kind to her, for she was not and is not, I'm sure, a bad and wicked girl. But sometimes I've thought—yes, often and often I've thought—and prayed that I might see her before I die. God has been good to me—oh! so good, and perhaps He may grant me this one more great favor in this life, to see my darling Katie's face once more.'

I could not chide the good woman for this fancy; but I felt she was nearer the end of her long, quiet good life than she herself expected. I said some little prayers with her, and then prevailed upon her to retire to rest.

'It is impossible,' I said, 'for me to return to-night; the storm is still raging, I must remain here till daylight. I will stop by the fire and watch. To-morrow I can send up someone to look after you, for you must not be left alone.'

When I had seen that she was comfortably resting, and had supplied her with some warm beverage, I settled myself down to a comfortable rest in the old woman's quaint arm-chair. I had piled