

The Storyteller.

A WINSOME MAID.

(Conclusion.)

But it was hard work. Now she had the wind in her teeth, and she made but little headway. Still she struggled bravely on, and was gradually approaching the landing-stage when a big wave struck the side of the boat and she staggered and almost fell from her seat. In an instant she recovered herself and sat up breathless and alarmed. Then, suddenly, a cry escaped her trembling lips. One of the oars had slipped from her grasp, and the boat was soon being whirled away before the storm, completely beyond her control.

Upon the opposite bank, gazing out across the lake, stood a tall broad-shouldered young man, his hands behind his back, his hat well down over his eyes.

'I have not courage to present or introduce myself,' he murmured, his eyes fixed upon the old house, just visible through the trees. 'I'd like to make their acquaintance, but would rather they did not know any more than—'

He uttered a cry of horror.

'A boat! My God! She will be lost!'

Then, running forward with the utmost speed, he sprang down upon a grassy ledge, not a foot from the water, and facing the girl as she was carried helplessly along, he shouted at the top of his voice:

'A rope—throw it to me—if you can.'

Sheila heard and comprehended, but the pitiless wind bore her madly on. Still, her presence of mind did not forsake her, and, groping round the bottom of the boat, she soon found what he had asked for.

'It's useless, I fear,' she murmured. 'He could never overtake me now. Death stares me in the face. My God, mercy! Mary, help me! Into Thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit!' And she closed her eyes with a sigh.

But as she breathed her prayer another squall swept up the lake from the opposite direction, and the boat was tossed back, then landed upon a sand-bank about twenty yards from the shore.

Quick! cried the young man. 'Another instant and you may be whirled off again. Fasten the rope to the seat and throw it to me.'

White and resolute, Sheila stood up and following his instructions implicitly, sent the rope flying through the air.

Very dexterously he caught it and without much trouble hauled the boat up to the bank, then, bending, caught her hand and assisted her on to the grass.

'Thank you,' she said, looking at him, her beautiful clear eyes full of deep gratitude. 'You have saved my life.'

'With God's help, yes,' he answered. 'You were certainly in a bad way. It was rash to go out boating by yourself in such uncertain weather.'

'Yes, but it seemed quite settled when I left home. And I did not mean to go far.'

He smiled. 'One's intentions count for little against such a wind.'

'Very little,' she said quietly. 'Thank you for your timely aid—so much.'

'Not at all.'

Her manner had grown colder, more dignified, and he glanced at her uneasily. Did she mean to suggest that he should leave her?

'I don't like to go till I see you safely home,' he said. 'My name is George Lyons. I am a guest of the parish priest, Father Tom Ryan. Of course you know him?'

She smiled as she looked up at him, and he felt that he had never seen such a beautiful girl.

'Everyone round here knows and loves Father Tom,' she replied. 'I have known him all my life. My name is Sheila Burke. I live with my mother at Leamont. He may have mentioned us to you.'

'Indeed he has, frequently. May I escort you home and pay my respects to Mrs. Burke?'

'Certainly,' she cried gaily. 'I feel that we have been introduced, and my mother will long to thank and bless you when she hears what you have done for me. See, there is Leamont shining through the trees. Across the lake it is very near, but we must walk round some miles to it now.'

Then, leaving the boat high and dry upon the bank, the young people struck out together through the fields.

Mrs. Burke, who had spent an anxious morning, received her daughter with open arms, and thanked and welcomed George Lyons most warmly.

'Father Tom has been here and he was telling me about you,' she cried, wringing his hand. 'He says you love Ireland and the Irish, so I was prepared to like you when you came. But your goodness to my Sheila makes you doubly welcome, and I feel I can never thank you enough. Were you ever in Ireland before?'

'Never. All my life has been spent in Australia. But my parents were Irish, and taught me to know and love the old country.'

'I'm glad of that.'

'If you've live in Australia,' began Sheila. Then she stopped short with a quick blush.

'Yes,' he replied, smiling. 'I'm ready to answer any questions.'

'Oh, I was going to ask rather a silly one—if, as you came from Australia, you had ever met my uncle, Mr. Myles Burke? But then Australia is an immense country. And so—'

'It is immense,' he answered gravely. 'But I have met your uncle, Mr. Burke.'

'Oh! And his adopted son?'

A curious expression flitted across the young man's face, and he looked quickly away as he said:

'And his adopted son.'

'Is he nice?'

'I—' He reddened slightly. 'I hardly know. At least—I'd rather not say.'

'That'—Sheila's face clouded—'does not speak well for him, I'm afraid. And I'm sorry, for as you perhaps know, when my uncle dies he succeeds to this place.'

'Yes, I know, I—' He hesitated. But pray do not allow me to prejudice you against him. Some people, I believe, like him very—at least, fairly well.'

Sheila laughed.

'You are not enthusiastic. And after all we need not care whether he is nice or not. My uncle seems to love him.'

'Yes, warmly, that he does. And he is devoted heart and soul to him.'

'That is in his favor.'

'Perhaps. But he would be a brute if he did not love the man who has been father, benefactor, friend—everything to him.'

'You speak warmly,' said Mrs. Burke. 'And I must say I agree with you.'

'I speak as I feel,' he said, rising from his seat. 'And now I must hurry away. I have promised to be back to lunch with Father Tom. May I come over again to-morrow and see something of the place?'

'Certainly. You'll be welcome. Sheila will show you round.'

'With pleasure,' the girl answered. 'But come early. The afternoon is to be devoted to the school children, to whom my aunt, Mrs. Walker, is standing a tea, in honor of St. Patrick's Day. We are to have romps and games in the park and a grand spread in the coach-house afterwards.'

'How delightful! May I come up and help?'

'Certainly, if you will. Father Tom is, of course coming.'

'Good. Then I shall be sure to accompany him. But I'll come also in the morning, if I may.'

'You will be most welcome.'

'Thank you. Good-by.' And taking up his hat he went away.

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Early next morning George Lyons strolled up the long winding avenue that led to Leamont. 'I am not sure that I am right—and yet how easy I've drifted into it,' he said, a troubled look in his handsome eyes. 'And it was his wish. From the moment I made the acquaintance of Father Ryan in Switzerland that summer and he invited me to pay him a visit, he never rested till I accepted it. He wished us to meet: to know each other; hoped—She's very beautiful, very charming—fit to be a queen; while I—She must surely have a high ideal! She is so good, so noble. How dare I venture to—My God! he'll be a lucky man who wins her love—lucky indeed.'

And sighing heavily, he stood still for a moment, gazing up through the leafless trees at the clear, blue sky; then with a smile strode briskly on.

At the entrance to the garden he found Sheila talking to one of the men. She was simply attired in a dark-blue serge skirt and coat, a pink flannel blouse, and a plain straw hat. Yet as the sun fell upon her golden brown hair and slim, lithe figure she made, thought Lyons, one of the most beautiful pictures he had ever seen.

'She is far beyond anything I ever dreamed of or expected,' he murmured. 'Neither Father Tom nor her photograph spoke half the truth.'

'Good morning, Mr. Lyons,' cried Sheila, stepping forward to meet him, her eyes shining with health and happiness, her sweet face wreathed in smiles. 'I have been giving directions about our tea-party. Isn't it delightful that the day is so fine?'

'Yes. Everything will go off better.'

'I should think so. Poor mites! A wet afternoon would spoil all. But the weather has been steadily improving since yesterday. Even the lake would be safe now.'

'Yes,' eagerly. 'Shall we go for a row?'

'No, thanks; not at present. I must play the part of show-woman, or my mother would not be pleased. This is the garden.' And she led the way into a big, high-walled garden, where vegetables and all kinds of old-fashioned flowers grew together in sweet profusion. 'Isn't it nice?'

'Perfectly beautiful,' he murmured, stealing surreptitious glances at the girl's rounded cheek and delicately regular profile. 'But what an awful brute your uncle's heir will feel if you and Mr. Burke insist on leaving your home on his account!'

Sheila turned and looked at him with a faint smile.

'It will not be a case of insisting. We shall be expected to go.'

'Oh, no; I'm sure he would never wish or expect you to do such a thing.'

'He's a stranger, and will not care.'

'I am convinced he'll care—a great deal. Couldn't it be arranged that you and Mrs. Burke could stay and—'

'That is a question I do not think we need discuss,' said the girl with cold dignity.

'Excuse me if I presumed too far.' Lyons reddened to the roots of his hair. 'But I didn't mean that I—only—'

'You meant kindly, I am sure; so pray say no more,' Sheila said gently. 'But my mother and I are resigned to what we know is right and natural. My uncle has been most generous in allowing us to remain on here; but when he dies we shall go willingly to a little cottage near.'