

The Storyteller

A TARDY ATONEMENT.

IN the early paradise of Rostrevor 'it was the time of the roses'; and Cloughmore caught the splendor of July's sunshine on its heights, starting steep and bare from the rich woods. From shore to shore the lough stretched in lines of dazzling light; and a white sail flashing like silver, glided away to where the mountains seemed to meet. In the village was a small shop with limp curtains drooping over an array of cheap blouses, sailor hats, faded ribbons and flowers, and mysterious wire shapes explained by the inscription above the door: 'Ellen Pace, Milliner and Dress-maker.'

In this emporium of fashion came a pretty girl in a costume suggestive of foam, with eyes that were homes of love and laughter, and lips that were sweet and pure. A jingling bell summoned from the back regions a thin, pale, white-haired woman, her brows in an habitual knot, her mouth one straight hard line. But her expression changed, softened, and brightened at sight of her visitor, and a streak of color crept into her faded cheek.

'Is it really you, Miss O'Connor? I heard last night that you had come, but I didn't expect to see you so soon. It is more than good of you indeed.'

'I wanted to be sure that you were really better; and seeing is believing, you know.'

'I am quite strong again, thanks to yourself, Miss!' replied Ellen Pace, her face still flushing and quivering strangely. She looked up and down, and swept imaginary dust off the counter, and twitched at her cap in a nervous excitable way. 'And it is thanks to you that I got through the winter at all and was able to keep a roof over my head. I suppose you cannot help being kind to the poor and sad and lonely. It is enough for you to know that they are so to set you off making things better for them.'

The few words summed up Aileen O'Connor's character with sufficient accuracy. Her acquaintance with Miss Pace dated from one day last summer when she had been attracted by the poverty-stricken appearance of the shop; and, going in on an imaginary errand, had found the proprietress fainting—from the heat, she had said; but Aileen ascertained that it was rather from privation.

The neighbors, not without cause, considered Miss Pace rather eccentric. They opined that she had saved a good bit of money and had starved herself to make it more; others declared that she had not so much as would cover a crutch; but no one really knew anything about her, and she held herself strictly aloof from all social intercourse. The empty cupboard, the threadbare garments, the bony face and figure appealed to the tenderest spot in the girl's tender heart. She was like the sunshine—not to be resisted. Miss Pace drew down the blinds of a brusque reserve, but Aileen penetrated to the depths of the long-frozen heart. Her prompt and practical kindness helped the forlorn old maid over a very stony bit of life's road.

'I'm going away to Canada, Miss O'Connor,' said Ellen Pace. 'Would you believe it?—I have a brother there who has made money, and he wants me to go out and end my days with him. We have lost sight of each other for years; but he advertised for me in a Dublin paper, and so we were brought together again. But if it hadn't been for you I should never have lived to see this piece of good luck.'

Aileen congratulated her, glad that she was to be permanently pro-

vided for; and then departed for the house where she usually spent the summer with Aunt Barbara, in whose care she had been since infancy. Her mother had died then; and her father, Dr. O'Connor, had gone to India, where he had found an early grave.

A quick, light step sounded behind her, and a voice, with a slightly injured accent, exclaimed: 'At last! I've searched the whole district for you.'

Aileen turned to behold a blue-eyed, black-haired young man, with a high-spirited Celtic face.

'Not quite the whole district, I think,' said she; 'and, if accuracy is a first condition of truth—'

'Oh, don't talk down to me like Aunt Barbara, dear! And never mind accuracy or anything, so long as we are together. I have been simply aching to see you; I have been afraid that I have been dreaming and shall one day waken to a grim reality that knows no Aileen.'

'Aunt Barbara may prove sufficiently rousing when you ask her consent. What will she say?'

'Why, naturally she will say: "My niece is lucky to be adored by such an admirable youth as Terence Blake."'

'I'm afraid she will not be quite so complimentary. She is always warning me against matrimony, and declares that an engagement is a period of temporary insanity, during which a man is unnecessarily polite to the woman he will be unnecessarily rude to all the rest of his life.'

'Epigrammatic but unsound; true to the maiden-aunt tradition, otherwise erroneous. Perhaps at some time or another Aunt Barbara has had a disappointment, and thenceforth the grapes have ceased to ripen.'

So chatting, they strolled along the broad, sunny road, like mirrors reflecting each other's brightness, as lovers should be. At a certain green gate they took leave of each other; and Terence went on to his mother's residence, a white house amid a wilderness of such roses as Rostrevor brings forth in profusion.

Mrs. Blake was a wealthy widow, Terry was her only child, and he was naturally the centre of her hopes and ambitions. She was just alighting from her victoria as he arrived; and she took possession of a basket chair on the lawn, under the shade of an immense Japanese umbrella.

'Well, mother mine, did you enjoy your drive?'

'Very much. Don't put away your cigar, I like it. What did you do?'

'Indulged in indefinite—or I should say definite—roaming. The O'Conors are here, mother. They came from Belfast yesterday.'

'Indeed?' Mrs. Blake's tone was like ice-cream—sweet but cold; and under her mildly resolute gaze Terry grew red, twirled his 'weed' confusedly, then jerked it from him.

'Smoking a cigar is like marriage,' he said; 'if it is begun badly, it goes on badly, and nothing will ever put it right.'

'And marriage is not like smoking a cigar; once you have begun it, you must go on with it, and can't throw it down just because it has proved a failure. What set you off on the subject, though? We were speaking of the O'Conors: did the one suggest the other?'

She waited with ostentatious patience for his reply, and at length it came.

'You have found me out, mother. I love Aileen with all my heart.'

Mrs. Blake was not surprised. The information simply confirmed a haunting suspicion; and she told

herself that she ought to have foreseen this result and prevented it in time. It was too late to interfere, and certainly Aileen was very charming. Besides, opposition is the life of love and may rouse even a passing fancy to vigorous stability, whilst amiable acquiescence may nip both in the bud. 'Tell a man that he can't do better for himself, and he soon sets about showing you that he can.' So reasoned Mrs. Blake, as Terry brought his confession to a close with:

'Now only your blessing and your consent are wanting to complete my happiness, mother.'

'I shall not withhold either, my dear boy. At the same time I can't help wishing that we knew a little more of Aileen's antecedents. She appears to know next to nothing of her parents; and once or twice when I have broached the subject to Miss Barbara, she has turned a deaf ear. I suppose you don't know where Dr. O'Connor was practising before he went to India nor why he went there?'

'I really never thought of asking any questions, but I am positive there is nothing to be concealed.'

'Well, I will call on Miss Barbara to-morrow and ascertain when she and Aileen can dine with us,' said Mrs. Blake; and Terry kissed her hand.

Early the following day she fulfilled her promise, and found Miss O'Connor at home and alone, which was just what she wanted. After some polite fencing, Mrs. Blake came to the real object of her visit. She did not like Barbara O'Connor, but she respected her and had confidence in her honor and integrity.

'My son made me a very interesting confession yesterday,' said Mrs. Blake, pleasantly. 'He has fallen in love with your pretty niece, and he will soon, I suppose, be asking your consent to an engagement. I hope you approve?'

'I have no personal objection to Mr. Blake,' said Miss Barbara. She looked bewildered, even stunned. 'I—I never expected that Aileen would care to marry. I never wished that she should.'

'That is a little hard on her, isn't it?'

'On the surface it may seem so. She is very poor, Mrs. Blake. My annuity dies with me, and I have saved little or nothing to leave her.'

'I should not wish my son to marry for money, even if he needed to do so. On one thing only I insist: his wife must bear an unblemished name.'

Lower drooped Miss Barbara's head, and the color receded from her lips.

'You leave me no alternative, Mrs. Blake. I am bound in honor to tell you what I have hitherto concealed from Aileen herself. Her father died under suspicion of having committed murder; the suspicion has never been removed.'

A shocked exclamation from Mrs. Blake sent a flood of crimson to Miss Barbara's brow.

'Yes, horrible indeed! He was my only brother, and he married a pretty, silly, vain creature, whose folly and extravagance made him wretched. His domestic troubles were no secret, and people were always predicting a sensational termination of some kind. Just 18 years ago this month the end came. Mrs. O'Connor was suffering from a slight cold, for which her husband had prescribed. One night he went into her room and gave her the medicine himself before going to a patient some miles away. Before his return she was found by her maid dying, poisoned. You can imagine the sensation such a tragedy caused. My unfortunate brother had to stand his trial, but little or no evidence against him could be produced and he was acquitted. Nevertheless, few believed him innocent, so he was a ruined man. He made a brave effort to live down the stigma, but in