

The Storyteller

THE OLD OIL PAINTING.

A wild October wind swept down the hillside and sent the withered leaves whirling around his horses head and feet as Mr. Crawford alighted from his high-wheeled dog-cart and opened the gate of the little boroen that led to Thady Donnellan's farmstead. The agent's kindly face was serious and troubled; it was no welcome task that lay before him as he led the horse up the rough boroen and looked about him, noting the evidence of thrift and industry of long years' standing—the neat well-kept cottage, with its windows even yet a blaze of bright blossoms, scarlet geraniums, blue lobelias, red and white fuchsias; the haggard, with its little group of ricks huddled comfortably together and snugly thatched against the winter storms; the substantial slated barns and outhouses, with the sturdy young calves peeping curiously over the half-doors at the newcomer—his heart grew sore within him.

As he reached the little gravelled pathway in front of the hall door, he lifted his hat in kindly greeting to Mrs. Donnellan, the farmer's young wife, whose rosy face held a look of anxiety which no amount of politeness or desire to be hospitable could quite keep hidden.

'Good day to ye, kindly, Mr. Crawford,' she said, in answer to his greeting; 'won't you come in, sir? It's too bad entirely now, to say you had to get down and open the gate yourself. But the boys are at school, and himself is laid up still, and, moreover, we never caught sight of ye till ye were half-way up the lane. Won't you come inside, Mr. Crawford,' leading the way into the little parlor, and placing a chair near the fire for him. 'I have a little bit of a fire lit for Thady, to keep the damp out of his bones. It must be cool enough driving over the mountains this evening, sir, and the winter setting in so early. Here's Thady himself, sitting in the corner. He's able to be out of bed this couple of days, thanks be to God!'

Mr. Crawford shook hands warmly with the farmer, inquiring kindly after his health, and hoping that the rheumatism would soon leave him.

'I hope so, please God,' Thady answered, fervently. 'It's too soon to be makin' an ould sick man of meself, sitting in the corner by the fire side from morning till night, and plenty of work to be done outside.'

Thady was quite a young man, still on what ought to be the sunny side of 40, but an attack of rheumatic fever which he had had the previous winter had left him partially crippled and helpless. During the summer he had grown almost well, but now the damp atmosphere and the wet winds had set his poor bones aching again.

'The house must be damp, Thady,' Mr. Crawford said to him. 'Those elm-trees over the garden at the back make the place cold and dark and keep away the sunshine, and sunshine, plenty of it, is what you want.'

'Ay, sir, we were thinkin' ourselves lately that the place might be better without them ould trees. We do be terrible afraid on the wild nights that some of them will come crashin' down atop of us, the Lord between us and all harm! An' yet it makes wan lonesome-like to think of cutting them down an' they there so long. But what use is it to be thinkin' of such ould foolishness now!'

Thady looked sorrowfully into the firelight. Suddenly he pulled himself together as with an effort. 'I suppose you come to talk about the rent, sir,' he asked.

'Yes, Donnellan, that is my business,' Mr. Crawford answered; 'Is there a chance at all of your being able to overtake the arrears?'

'Not the laste, sir,' the other answered, dejectedly. 'Not unless a miracle comes to pass. I can give you the half-year's rent I have every penny of that, but we can't give you any of the arrears, Mr. Crawford, not just yet, sir.'

The landagent's fingers drummed restlessly on the little table beside him.

'You got the notice, of course,' he asked quietly.

'We did, sir; oh yes, it came all right.' He looked pleadingly at his questioner. 'But sure we couldn't think his lordship ever meant it, not, my God! to turn us out for a matter of eighty pounds or so,' he went on passionately. 'Us that has lived here, father and grandfather, and great-grandfather before us, for nearly 200 years. He could never mean to do it!'

'I'm afraid he does,' Mr. Crawford said. 'I have very emphatic orders to evict every man on the estate who hasn't paid up, rent, arrears, and all, by next gale day.'

'God forgive him,' exclaimed the farmer, bitterly. 'Eighty pounds! What is that to him!'

'You know sir,' he went on, 'that if it wasn't for me being laid up the best part of last year that things wouldn't be like this with us now. You know that when I came into the farm there were hundreds of pounds due on it. That was in the old lord's days. God rest his soul! him that was good and kind and patient with us all! I paid off the greater part of that, all but this eighty-four pounds, and sure you see for yourself, sir, that there's more than will cover twice that in the place this minute, if he'll only give us time. There's between forty and fifty tons of hay and straw, and that of the best, out in the haggard there, let alone the bits of calves and three acre field of potatoes across the road. I should be taking them out of the ground now only for

the way I'm crippled; but next week, please God, I'll be able to make a start with them. And you understand, sir, you that is used to the like, that it's only a matter of time with the hay and straw too. It's a bit taidious, of course, carting it off two mornings a week to Dunlavin market, but the money is sure enough in the end.'

'I know that, Thady, quite well,' Mr. Crawford answered, sorrowfully, shaking his head. 'God knows it is not my wish to come troubling or rushing you when I know you are doing your best. But I have his lordship's orders, Thady. It is not my wish, as I said. But I can't risk losing my position. I have already explained things fairly to him, and said all I could for the tenants, apparently to no use. Unless we can make up the arrears in some way, I'm afraid you must go.'

'God help us all, then, if it comes to that,' cried Thady, miserably. He looked anxiously towards Mollie, his wife, who stood near the window, idly picking a half withered leaf here and there from the geranium plants. She said nothing, but her face had grown pale, and she bit nervously with her teeth a corner of the apron which she held before her quivering lips.

She brushed away one rebellious tear which would not be kept back; then she turned a sunny April face to the two men.

'Well, 'tis no use fretting now,' she said, cheerfully. 'God knows what good luck will turn up to us between this and next March. And first and foremost you have to think of getting well—that's the chief thing; isn't it, Mr. Crawford?' she added, bravely, stirring up the embers of the fire and sending pleasant shafts of light and warmth through the little room as she spoke.

A merry, noisy group suddenly appeared, breathless at the kitchen door.

'Why, are ye home from school already?' she cried to the four sturdy boys who trooped in, cap in hand, shrinking back as quickly in shyness at the sight of the gentleman within.

'Come in, boys! Don't be afraid of me!' the agent said to them, kindly. 'Why, Patsy, to the eldest, what a big man you've grown! and is this little Larry, the baby I used to know a year or two ago!' Larry blushed rosy-red at being referred to as 'a baby,' and looked with shy apprehension at his bigger brothers.

'Oh, but Larry's the baby no longer, Mr. Crawford,' the mother cried, coming to the rescue, and fondly caressing the golden head that sought sanctuary at her knee. 'Larry's a big man now, you know, since he got a little sister to take care of. Did you know we had a little girlen too, sir? the quietest little creature, and no trouble at all. She's asleep the best part of the day.'

Mr. Crawford's eyes were hungrily fixed on Patsy's ruddy, healthy beauty.

'You are proud of your sturdy sons, Mrs. Donnellan,' he said at last, with a heavy sigh. 'After all, you don't know how much you have to be thankful for.'

'And how is Master Herbert himself,' Mrs. Donnellan said, with a sudden intuition of her visitor's thoughts. 'It's time for me to ask you, sir, but, indeed, the trouble put everything else out of my head. I hope the little lad is getting fine and strong.'

'He is just the same, thank you; no better, no worse. I am taking him to London next week, to see a great doctor who is a specialist in such cases, and, if possible, will have an operation performed. The doctors think he is old enough to stand it now.'

Mr. Crawford's only child had been a cripple from infancy. No one quite knew what had happened the boy, who had been born a sturdy, strong-limbed little fellow, but it was suspected that a careless nursemaid had been to blame for some injury to his spine. His illness and the pathetic little pale face had turned his father sad and old before his time. It may have been this too, that made him so soft-hearted and kindly towards his poorer neighbors, ready to sympathise in all their joys and sorrows.

He was not at all the typical, cold-blooded, heartless land agent of modern Irish life. Many a poor widow's blessing had followed him for kindly help given in the time of her greatest need, and it was shrewdly suspected by the tenants that he himself had staved off eviction for some of them by paying up arrears himself, and waiting their time till they should be able to pay him back. But the agent himself was a poor man, and his son's illness had been a constant drain on his slender income, so that it was only in a small way after all that he was able to help them.

The Donnellans knew all this, and never thought of blaming him for the harshness of his employer. Now when he stood up to go, Mrs. Donnellan, who was busily employed cutting up great slices of home-made bread and jam for her boys, and helping them to little nogginns of milk, suddenly became shamefacedly mindful of her want of hospitality.

'What's on me, for a woman!' she cried in impatient self-condemnation. 'To think of letting you go, sir, without as much as a cup of tea, and the kettle on the boil there this half-hour. Won't you wait a while, sir? It won't take me two minutes to get it ready.'

Mr. Crawford thanked her, but assured her he was going straight home to Coolnagrena to dinner.

'Well, then, sir, you mustn't go without a few new-laid eggs for Master Herbert and a piece of home-made bread. Not but what I know he has plenty of grand things at home to tempt his appetite, but the eggs are scarce everywhere this month, and I know the grand people's childer thinks more of a bit of griddle-cake than our own rough lads would do.'