

Complete Story.

The Master of Ballyoshane.

I.

Dusk. Overhead a gorgeous red sunset was fast fading to the slate-grey of night.

A glaze sea lapped lazily to the edge of the beach, ever receding, ever creeping a little nearer, nearer. A seagull whistled mournfully as it winged its way into the beyond. Lights were beginning to twinkle here and there along the Wicklow coast, and a solitary figure rose from the shingle with a regretful sigh.

"Three whole days gone!" said Joan Bount, Englishwoman, art student, and holiday-maker, as she moved across the stony foreshore to the road.

With a final, lingering, backward glance at the sea, she crossed a deserted railway-line and set her face towards winding, shady ways and green country. There were no terrors in the lonely walk before her. Already it seemed that a friendly understanding existed between the bright-haired English girl—who lodged "wid Mrs Kelly beyant"—and the simple-minded inhabitants of the scattered thatched cottages comprising the village of Ballyoshane.

Unconsciously the girl slackened speed as she approached the shabby iron gates of the one "big house" of the neighbourhood. Through the dense surrounding foliage she caught a glimpse of weather-beaten, yellow walls and shuttered windows. The owner, then, was still absent. Joan had heard much during her three days in Ballyoshane of "Master Michael," and had been told that he was in Dublin.

Somehow the old place and the unknown young master had a curious interest for her. She weaved romances about the fallen fortunes of the head of the O'Shanes, delighting in her conception of picturesque poverty, peculiarly a feature, in Saxon eyes, of Erin's sons. Her holiday, charming as it was, would not be quite complete without an encounter with Michael O'Shane, she thought, without an exploration of his rambling old home.

A shuffling footstep and a hoarse cough broke in upon her reverie. From the shadow of the gates a man emerged cautiously, and laid a hand upon her arm. The girl flinched momentarily.

"Don't let me frighten you," he panted. "I have been watching for somebody and—"

His voice died away into a murmur as he removed his hand from her arm and fell back against the gate.

Joan's pity was instantly aroused.

This was no tramp, but a cultured gentleman, she swiftly decided. For a space the pair stood motionless. The man—he was little more than a lad—was clearly endeavouring to regain control of himself. Through the gloom the regarded uncertainly the wasted outline of his features and slight, trembling form, clad in a plain suit of grey tweed. "You are ill?" the girl interrogated gently.

"Indeed, I am only anxious to help you!"

"Thank Heaven!" he muttered. "Yes; I have been ill—very ill—a long time ago."

He passed his hand across his brow as he talked disjointedly, staring wildly into the shadows.

"But I can't stand it any longer! I don't care what he says; I meant to go myself; but it is a long way, and I am weak—you can go for me."

"Where can I go?" mystified Joan asked.

"Why, to the police barrack!" he cried with sudden energy. "To tell them that—that—to send them for me! Quick! He may miss me at any moment, and take me back again! I escaped, you know, when he thought I was asleep! I was too cunning for him!"

Joan shrank back, horror-stricken. For a moment the thought flashed upon her that she was interviewing an escaped lunatic.

"But why must I go to the police barrack?" she faltered.

"You know—the man who disappeared! It must have been in all the newspapers! And I won't put up with it! Hush! He will be angry when he finds that I am gone! Never let him know that you helped me! He would be furious!"

The wild, husky voice sank to a whisper.

"Who was this mysterious 'he'?" The perpetrator of some bold crime, she was sure.

What disclosures would follow her visit the police barrack?

That her companion had been confined against his will, and had now escaped, she gathered vaguely. The police barrack was a mile beyond the cottage where she lodged, and she was making a rapid calculation as to how speedily she could get there, when a third form loomed up.

"It is he!" Joan's new acquaintance gasped.

The girl thrilled with the dramatic horror of the moment. The new-comer seemed to be a well set-up, distinguished looking man, wearing rough shooting clothes. He looked from one to the other in a brief silence, outwardly cool and collected; but Joan noted the extreme pallor of his handsome face, and when he spoke his voice shook.

"Ah, what a foolish lad you are!" he said, with an affectionate touch upon the younger man's shoulder. "You should not venture out until you are stronger. Come back with me now. I am sure you have quite startled this young lady."

Joan looked a hot remonstrance, but the other merely acquiesced sullenly, seeming even glad of the support he accepted.

"Yes, yes, I shall return with you!" he said, hurriedly.

As they passed up the avenue together Joan sped onwards. She decided to go at once to the police barrack, as she had been requested to do.

II.

So deeply engrossed was she in thought that she did not hear a footstep behind her, and the sound of a quiet voice in her ear was her first intimation that she was not alone. The girl wheeled round, at bay, and confronted the gaoler of the man she had determined to rescue. A pair of keen

blue eyes searched her face, read her inmost thoughts.

"Who are you?" she murmured faintly.

The man lifted his cap. "I am Michael O'Shane," he answered simply. "You are the English lady who is staying at Mrs Kelly's cottage. Pardon me for overtaking you, but I must have speech with you—" He paused as though at a loss for words to continue.

Joan stood silent, embarrassed. So this was Michael O'Shane!

She was surprised to find her indignation ebbing; that in spite of herself her companion impressed her favourably, with his grave, sunburnt face and pleasant tones.

"I am extremely sorry that Fate should have forced you into any connection with this affair," he went on presently. "Your presence in the roadway just then was an unfortunate accident, and Heaven knows what the consequences may be," he finished, half to himself.

A shadow of sadness fell across his face, a groan broke from him. Then, rousing himself, unconscious of his action, he imprisoned her slender hands in both his own.

"What do you know?" he demanded, abruptly.

Joan's eyes were lifted courageously to his.

"I know that you detain a man against his will for a purpose of your own; that he escaped this evening, only to be brought back again by you, whom he fears that he is in some cruel strait from which I may be able to release him!" She cried boldly.

"That is all?"

She thought that she heard a sigh of relief.

"And now you intend giving information of my—my guest at the police barrack?"

"Yes."

"You will not do anything of the kind."

"You cannot prevent me!"

"No!" He laughed. "You are a free agent, and yet— Tell me one thing. You meet me in damaging circumstances, you believe me to be a criminal at present; but, withal, don't you feel that I should inspire you with confidence, if it were not for the knowledge you have gained—that you could trust me?"

The girl was yet unable to resist him.

"Under any other circumstances I should have trusted you," she conceded slowly.

"Then will you go a step further, and trust me now! I want your promise that you will remain silent about this evening's work until I give you leave to speak. I cannot tell you all; but I believe myself to be in the right, and I ask you to believe me, too. Will you try?"

"No, no! It would be horrible of me! And, oh, why should I trust you?" Joan cried wildly.

"Nevertheless, I think you will," he answered. "Listen! Your information will not benefit this man, and no harm will come to him in Ballyoshane. I swear. Whereas, if his presence is discovered now, ruin and destruction follow. I have told you all that I dare. You are quite at liberty to seek the police with your story, but my honour is in your hands. I am going to see you back to Mrs Kelly's now, and you can make up your mind as we go."

It was like a troubled dream to Joan as they paced along the quiet road in the August night between the fragrant hedgerows, her hand resting meekly up-

on the arm of this authoritative, mysterious criminal, who proved to be her hero, Michael O'Shane, too. When they reached Mrs Kelly's cottage he spoke again—gently, persuasively.

"You will be silent!"

Joan heard herself saying, "I will!"

And then O'Shane, with a whisper of gratitude, raised her fingers to his lips.

"You brave little girl!" he said wonderingly. "You will never repent of your clemency!"

A moment later Joan was standing alone, her brain whirling with the excitement of her adventure. Of a truth Irishmen were every bit as daring and impulsive as they were said to be!

The following morning Mrs Kelly walked into her lodger's room, and laid a packet in her hands.

"A letter which Master Michael gave me himself," she announced importantly.

Joan had passed a wakeful night. Michael O'Shane's blue eyes and saddened face, the intonation of his voice as he thanked her, refused to be banished from her mind. The words he had used to bend her to his will still rang in her hearing: "I believe myself to be in the right, and I want you to believe in me, too."

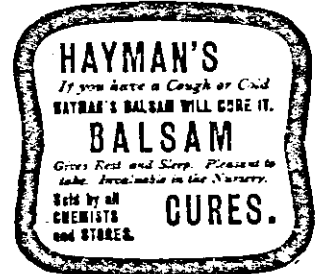
Trembling, she broke the seal now and read:

"Thank Heaven, all's well that ends well, and I am able to reward your trust by a full confession. My 'prisoner' is a great friend, who was in touch with me, believing he had killed a man at Ballydogan Fair. He fell ill on a raging fever, and I was obliged to frustrate his desire to give himself up to justice. In my temporary absence he escaped yesterday as you know, and sought your aid. When I got him back to the house he had already regretted his rash step, and was in terror of being arrested. Had you done his bidding, I am sure that the coming of the police and their investigation would have killed him.

And this morning we have news that the man he supposed dead is alive, and progressing towards recovery. My friend, I am happy to say, is mending rapidly. I thought to remove the ban of silence imposed upon you when I had contrived to ship him to America, but the burden has been taken from me—Always your grateful friend.

"Michael O'Shane."

Mrs Kelly's English lodger soon attained her wish of exploring the "big house," and the grounds thereof, the master making a very capable cicerone. That her holiday was thus perfected, there is no doubt. Furthermore, when it came to an end, the friends she had made in Ballyoshane were comforted at parting by the six communication of "Master Michael" that her absence would be but a matter of months, as he was going to fetch her back to them himself!



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