

All the three pair of eyes were now turned to the doorway, whose sunny space was obscured for a moment by as pretty a figure as any lover of fresh and pleasant sights could wish to see. This was a ripe-faced, dark-haired, country girl, with her coarse straw bonnet tipped over her forehead, to save her eyes from the sun, and her neat print gown tucked tidily up over her white petticoat.

"Come in, Ailsie!" cried Jamie, "come in an' see your cousin, Penny McCambridge, from Lough Neagh side, that was to have been your godmother, an' has come every fut o' the road from that to this, to see what sort o' a lass you've turned out."

"Make haste an' make us the cup o' tay," said her mother. "I hope you didn't forget to bring us a grain o' the best green from Misher McShane's? Good girl! An, how did yer eggs an' butter sell? I'll lay you a shillin' you haven't the sign o' either wan or the other to set before the stranger this day!"

"Maybe I haven't though!" said Ailsie laughing. "It's by the fine good luck I put by two nice little pats undher a dish, afore I went off this mornin'. An' as for eggs, if Mehaffy hasn't laid wan afore this time o' day, I'll put her in the pot for a lazy big hen, an' cousin Penny will stay and help to ate her."

A nice little meal was set, and Ailsie flung herself on a bench to rest.

"An' now you'll have breath to tell us the news, Ailsie," said Mary, the mother, sipping her tea complacently. "What's doin' an' sayin' in Portrush about Lady Betty?"

"Oh troth, mother!" said Ailsie, tossing her head, "troth I'm sick, sore, an' tired, hearin' o' the quare old house she's pulled down on her back, poor body! Sich greggin' an' comparin' you never had since the day you were born. The frien's o' wan MacQuillan, an' the frien's o' another, at it hard an' fast for which'll have the best chance of coming in for the ould lady's favour. An' sich preparations! Mrs. Quinn, the house-keeper, took me all through the castle to see the new grandeur; an' sich curtains, an' pictures, an' marble images, an' sich lookin'-glasses! I felt when I went to the drawin'-room door, I thought I'd gone half crazy, for half-a-dozen other Ailsies started up in the corners an' all over the walls, an' come to meet me with their baskets on their arms. An' then there's the ball-room where the dancin's to be, all hung round with green things, an' the floor as slippy an' as shiny as the duck pond was last Christmas in the long frost. An' I went into Miss O'Trimmins, the dressmaker, to see if her toothache was better, an' I do declare she could hardly reach me her little finger across the heaps of silks an' muslins that she had piled about her in her room. An' while I was there a carriage dashed up to the door an' out stepped the five Miss MacQuillans from Bally Scuffling, an' in they all came to have their dresses tried on. An' Miss O'Trimmins kept me to hold the pins while she was fittin' them, for all her girls were that busy they could hardly stop to thread their needles. An' sich pinchia' an' screwin'! When they went away, I said to Miss O'Trimmins, 'I'm thankful' says I, 'that none o' these gowns is for me.' An' she laughed, and says she, 'I wouldn't put it past you, Ailsie, to be right glad to go to the same ball if you got the chance.'

"I'm not so sure o' that," says I, 'but as for chance, my name's MacQuillan as well as its theirs that were here this minute lookin' at me as if I was dirt undher their feet. An' put it to pride or not, says I, 'but I do think, if I was done up grand, I could manage to cut as good a figure in a ball-room as e'er a wan o' them red-nosed things that are goin' to dress themself's up in all this fine grass-coloured satin!' It was very impident an' ill done o' me to make such a speech," said Ailsie, blushing at her confession, which had sent cousin Penny into fits of laughter, "but my blood was up, somehow, with the looks o' them oid things from Bally Scuffling, an' I couldn't hold my tongue!"

"Go on, go on, Ailsie dear!" said Penny, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, then," said Ailsie, "she began talkin' the same kind o' stuff that they were botherin' me with the day through, axin' me why my father hadn't sent word to Lady Betty like the rest o' the MacQuillans, tellin' me we were the only wans o' the name that hadn't spoken. It's just the wan word in all their mouths. Mrs. Maginty, that buys my eggs, she was at it an' ould Dan Carr, that takes my butter from me, I thought I'd never get *him* talked down, an' Nancy McDonnell that was sellin' sweet ices in the fair, an' Katy O'Neil that was goin' about with me all day, an' Mrs. McShane that I bought the tea from. Ooh! I couldn't remember the wan half o' them!"

"An' what did you say to them, Ailsie dear?" asked Mary the mother, insinuatingly.

"Why," said Ailsie, "I told them first, that all the rest o' the MacQuillans about were ladies an' gentlemen, an' would be creditable to Lady Betty when she made her choice, but that my father was a poor man that had notkin' to do with the comin's an' goin's o' gentry. But when that wouldn't do, I up an' told them that he had too much feelin' for a lonely old woman comin' home without a friend in her ould age, to think of beginnin' to worry her about what would be to divide after her death, afore ever she set foot in the country. 'It's an ill welcome for all their fine talkin',' said I, 'an' if they hadn't put her an' pestered her to it, she would never be for doin' the quare thing she's goin' to do on Wednesday week night.' An' what do you think she's goin' to do, father?" said Ailsie, turning to Jamie, "but she's to have a big cake made, an' a ring in it, an' every MacQuillan at the feast gets a piece o' the cake, an' whoever fir's the ring as sure as he's there he's the wan to share Lady Betty's fortune, an' come after her in Castle Craigie!"

Here Mary the mother began to groan and rock herself, and complain of the obstinacy of people who would not stretch out their hands for a piece of that lucky cake, when it might be theirs for the asking. Jamie was getting very red in the face, and crumpling his paper very fiercely, when Penny, who had been laughing again, once more wiped her eyes, and taking her stick from the corner, prepared to depart.

"It's getting far in the day," she said, "an' I have a good bit farther to go afore night, to see my oid friend Madgey Mucklehern that lives in the Windy Gap; good luck is hers she hasn't been blown out o' house an' all afore this! But I'll be back this way," she

added; "don't you think ye've seen the last o' Penny McCambridge, cousin Jamie, for feth ye'll know more o' me shortly, if the Lord spares me my breath for a ween more o' weeks."

And Penny McCambridge shook hands with her kinsfolk, and trotted away down the lanan, as she had come.

## CHAPTER II.

It was only a few evenings after this that Ailsie was sitting on the end of the kitchen-table, reading the newspaper to her father.

"Na-na," said Ailsie, stumbling at a word, "vi-vi, ga-ga—Och, my blessin', to the word, I can't make head or tale o't. Ye'll read it better yersel', father; an' its time I was goin' feedin' my hens, anyhow!"

"Ailsie," said Jamie, rubbing his spectacles, "I'm feared you'r turnin' out a bad clerk after all the trouble Misher Devnish has taken wi' you. Ye'r gettin' a big woman, Ailsie, an' there's not a thing ye'r bad at but the clarkin'. Go off to school, now, this very evenin', and give my respects to Hughie Devnish, an' tell him to tache you how to spell navigation afore you come back."

Ailsie coloured, and her thick black lashes rested on her russet cheeks while she tucked up her gown and kneaded the wet meal for the hens with her gipsy hands. But as she left the house she looked back with a wicked little toss of her head.

"Then you an' Hughie Devnish may put it out o' yer heads that ye'll ever make a clerk o' Ailsie," she said; "for if ye war to boil down all the larnin' books that ever cracked a school-master's skull, an' feed her on nothin' but that for the next ten years, ye wouldn't have her wan bit the larnder in the hinder end!"

So saying, she stepped out into the sun, and was busy feedin' her hens under the shelter of the golden haycock, when she saw a servant in a showy livery coming riding up the lanan.

"Can you tell me where Miss MacQuillan lives about here, my good girl?" he asked, with a supercilious glance at Ailsie's wooden dish.

"No," said Ailsie, looking at him with her head thrown back. "That's Jamie MacQuillan's house"—pointing to the gable—"an' I'm his daughter Ailsie, but there no Miss MacQuillan here; none nearer by this road nor Bally Scuffling."

"I beg your pardon, miss," said the man, with an altered manner, "but I believe this must be for you." And then he rode off, leaving her standing starting at a dainty pink note which she held by one corner between two mealy fingers. "Miss Ailsie MacQuillan," said the ink on the back of the narrow satin envelope.

"That's me!" said Ailsie with a gasp. "The rest o' them's all Lizabetts, an' Isabella's, an' Aramintys. An' as thrue as I'm a livin' girl, its the Castle Craigie liveries yon fine fellow was dressed up so grand in, an' here's the Castle Craigie crest on this purty little seal."

It was a note of invitation to Lady Betty's ball, and, in spite of her bad "clarkin'" Ailsie was able to read it, spelling it out word after word, turning it backward and forward and upside down, and feeling sure all the time that somebody had played a trick on her by writing to Lady Betty in her name. She sat on a stone and made her reflections, with the sun all the while burning her cheeks, and making them more and more unfit to appear in a ball-room.

"An' she thinks I'm some fine young lady in a low neck and satin shoes, waitin' all ready to step into her ball-room an' make her a curtsy. Good luck to her! What'd she say if she heard Ailsie's brogues hamperia' away on yon fine slippy floor o' hers?" And Ailsie, as she spoke, extended one little roughshod foot and looked at it critically. "Then thank you, Lady Betty, but I'm not goin' to make mysel' a laughin' stock for the country yet!"

"Who came ridin' up the lanan a bit ago, Ailsie?" said the mother, when she went in with the note safely hidden in her pocket.

"Ridin' up the lanan is it?" said Ailsie.

"Ay, ay," said Mary, "I thought I had a horse's fut on the road, but it be to be seen yer father suoria'."

"Me snorio!" cried Jamie, starting and rubbing his eyes. "Ye'r dhramin' yersel', Mary. Ailsie, ye witch, are ye not goin' to school yet?"

"Well, I'll go now, father," said Ailsie. "Maybe," she thought, "Hughie'll tell me what to do with that letter afore I come back."

A hatched house, with a row of small latticed windows blinking down at the sea in the strong sunset, with a grotesque thorn, looking over the more distant gable, and an army of fierce hollyhocks mustering about the little entry-door. This was the school, and Mr. Hugh Devnish was at this moment standing at his desk, writing "head-lines" in the copy-books of his pupils; a young man with a grave busy face and one hand concealed in the breast of his coat. That hand was deformed, and so Hugh Devnish had been brought up to teach school, instead of to follow the plough. That such breeding had not been wasted, his face announced. Even the country people around held him in unusual respect, though he did not give them as many long words, nor talk Latin to them, like his predecessor, Larry O'Mullan, who had died of hard study, poor boy! at the age of eighty-five.

Hughie glanced through the window before him, got suddenly red in the face, and cried "attention!" in a voice which made all the lads and lasses look up from their copy-books. The next moment a gipsy-faced girl walked in, hung up her bonnet, and sat down on a form.

"What's your word, Ailsie MacQuillan?" asked the schoolmaster, taking her book with a severe and business-like air.

"Invitation, sir—navigation, I mane," said Ailsie demurely, studying her folded hands.

The master looked at her sharply, and afterwards frowned severely, when on going the rounds of the desks he found "Lady Betty MacQuillan," "Castle Craigie," and other foolish and meaningless words, scrawled profanely over the page which was to have been sacred to navigation alone. Ailsie was "kept in" for bad conduct, and locked up alone in the school after the other pupils had gone home. And there, when the schoolmaster came to release her, she was found plucking the roses that hung in at the window, and stick-