

# The Storyteller.

MERVYN COURT.

(By E. LEAHY, in the *Catholic Fireside*.)

LARGE snow-flakes fell thick and fast, covering with their soft, fleecy mantle the dense, overgrown wilderness of shrubs and bushes surrounding Mervyn Court, and veiling the ivy-covered front of the old house with the same soft white drapery.

Snow was rare in that mild southern climate, and the feathery particles fluttered hither and thither in their descent, as if they had lost their way or were shy of alighting on the shrivelled vegetation.

From one of the windows, deep sunk in the massive stonework of the ancient mansion, a young girl looked forth at the wintry scene, her eyes sparkling with delight as she watched the light flakes whirled wantonly to and fro by the wind.

Although Gladys Luttrell was eighteen years of age, a snow-storm afforded her as much pleasure as when she was a curly-headed fairy of five.

'I will run out and make a pair of snowballs and catch Rex when he comes through the gate. Oh! what fun!' she exclaimed, clapping her hands and running out of the room, with a parting glance in the looking-glass on her dressing-table.

It was a charming image that was reflected in the mirror: eyes blue as the forget-me-not, dancing with fun, a complexion delicate as the bloom of a wild rose, while from under the fur cap which she had donned for her escapade a wreath of golden curls strayed coquettishly over her white brow. Her dress was worn and shabby, but the girl's sweet face and exquisite figure made it as becoming as the finest masterpiece of art and fashion.

She ran lightly down the stairs, opened the hall-door, and, heedless of the elements, flew along the winding avenue bordered by stately trees until she reached the entrance gates, once imposing and massive but now sadly dilapidated. Here she ensconced herself behind a clump of trees which stood like sentinels, and securely hidden waited the expected arrival to make her mischievous onslaught.

'Well played, madcap,' said a fresh young voice, and Rex Mervyn stood for a moment between the headless stone lions which guarded the entrance to Mervyn Court, and replied with a handful of snow to the damp missile which, sped by Gladys' rosy fingers, had struck him in the ear.

'You'll pay for that,' young lady, the first time I get a chance.' Gladys suddenly flung the second snowball, which she had ready to follow up the attack, carelessly on the ground, and bounding lightly to the young man's side, slipped her hand through his arm.

'Rex, what is the matter with you? You look so sad. I know there is something wrong by your face; tell me, what is it?'

'Yes, my darling, you are right. Since yesterday I have been thinking very seriously over everything and have come to a final decision. I have no secrets from you, and you shall know what it is.'

Gladys' small hand pressed the young man's arm more closely, and for some moments both walked on in silence, broken at last by Rex.

'Three months ago a young man I met in Dublin told me a story which, improbable as it may sound, revived all my hopes. He told me he had received news from a friend in America, which, he thought, would prove beyond doubt Reginald Mervyn's death. I followed up the matter eagerly and gladly, as you can imagine, and I found this report was as groundless as all the others, which have made fools of us. I swore to myself that if this last search failed I would give up all hope and start on some new career, and so Gladys, darling, I am going to Australia.'

'Rex! you are going to leave me,' and withdrawing her hand the young girl stopped and looked at her companion in blank despair.

If the young man had declared he was going to take his life she could not have been more shocked.

'Gladys, do not make my life harder than it is. See, my darling, it will be good for both of us for me to go. We can never marry on the miserable pay that I earn here. In Australia, on the contrary, I shall very soon earn enough to buy the little cottage we so often talk about, and you shall have the pair of ponies with the flowing manes. So cheer up, my darling, it will all come right.'

And Rex drew the slight, trembling figure close to him. 'Or perhaps, if you get rich, we could come back and live here,' said Gladys, for the moment beguiled from her sadness at the thought of the parting from her lover.

'The dear old place! How glad I would be if I were able to restore it to some of its old splendour, but—that can never be,' and Rex sighed heavily.

Rex, the New Year will soon be here, and we are so gloomy and despairing. It is very wrong of us not to be more cheerful during the last days of the dear old year, it is a shame for you, sir.'

'And yet, you little rogue, your eyes are full of tears,' rejoined Rex, looking at her tenderly.

Because I cannot bear the thought of your going away across the sea. Oh, Rex, Rex, it is dreadful.'

'I shall not go for three months. Spring is the best time for such a journey.'

'Three months! That is a long way off yet; perhaps something will happen before then to make you change your mind.'

'You grey old walls,' exclaimed Rex, raising his hand towards the old house, 'why will you not reveal your secret?'

'Be quiet, Rex darling,' said Gladys in a hushed, solemn voice, 'Reginald Mervyn was last seen in that room over there where the

ivy grows thickest round the window. His ghost will appear to you if you talk like that.'

'I wish I could see his ghost, then at least I would be certain he had quitted this mortal life.'

'What good would that do?' The judges would not believe your ghost story any more than they believed the other reports and stories brought to them.'

'That's true, only too true,' sorrowfully acquiesced Rex.

'So now, dear, let us put away our sad thoughts for a while, and for Aunt Letty's sake try to be bright and cheerful, for she deserves that much,' said Gladys with a determined effort to hide her own feelings, which were very far removed from the cheerfulness she was assuming.

Tourists who chanced upon the beautiful corner of Ireland in which Mervyn Court was situated were invariably struck with admiration at the extent and beauty of the demesne, while, at the same time, few could avoid feelings of regret at the sight of the ruin and decay everywhere rampant.

Those strangers who happened to secure the services of Pat Donahoe, the champion jurvey of the village, were fortunate indeed, Pat was a living chronicle of all the stories and legends of the neighbourhood, and he was always in his element when anyone questioned him as to the history of Mervyn Court and the reason of the neglect and desolation which hung like a pall over the beautiful spot.

'Yes, indeed, yer honour,' he would say, 'it's a dreary-looking place now, but when I was a young fellow—that's close on forty years ago—there wasn't a finer nor better kept place in the county. Some of the ould stock still live in the house up there, but they haven't as many pence now as they once had guineas. Shure an' it's some curse must have come upon them, an' little they deserved it, for they were always the rale good sort.'

And Pat would shake his head mournfully and be silent, until adjured by his listeners, whose curiosity he had thus judiciously aroused, to give them the history of Mervyn Court. Then he would launch out and detail the sad story:

'Thirty years ago, yer honour, there was grand doin's in the ould house, that's so lone and desolate looking now. The master, Sir Reginald, was only 25 years of age, an' hadn't long come into his property. He was a fine, handsome jintleman—all the Mervyns are handsome—but had a terrible temper of his own, if anything went again him he would fly out like a madman; still, he was rale kindhearted, an' every wan loved him, an' all the young ladies were dyin' about him, but sorra a wan would be look at save Lady Geraldine Mowbray. An', faix, he had good taste.

'Eh, yer honour, but she was a rale beauty. Molly Brady, the housekeeper up at the house, once showed me her pieter hangin' in wan of the rooms, an' troth she'd turn any man's head. Well, it wasaisy to see that Sir Reginald was half crazy about her, an' bedad, she was no better about him. Well, sir, it was all settled, an' the weldin' was to come off in no time, but nothin' would do the young Mather but that Lady Geraldine an' her father an' mother should come an' stay at the Court for a week. Such doin's as was then, nothin' but diversion from mornin' until night.

'Well, yer honour, there was to be a grand ball wan evenin', an' Sir Reginald went to his room in the height of good spirits to dress for the dancing, but from that good hour to this, an' that's thirty years ago come Christmas, not a livin' soul seen nor heard anything of Sir Reginald. High an' low, far an' near, across the say, in furrin' parts, they sarched, but never got tale nor tidin's of him. Some of the people round here, the ould wans, firmly believe the good people took him away, but an' coorse, that's rale nonsense, but the Lord only knows what became of Sir Reginald.

Poor Lady Geraldine was like a mad woman at first, she wouldn't believe them he was gone, an' for years an' years she was always expectin' him to come back, but, at last, the clayther gave up hope, an' pined away. The poor lady's dead these ten year now. There was great commotion all over the country. No one was sartin whether Sir Reginald was livin' or dead, so nobody could get the property. His uncle, Mister Maurice, it was him as should have got the place, came to live at the Court, but not a penny did he get of the rents—they wouldn't even give him as much as would keep the place in order. Mister Maurice died, and left a son—Mather Rex—as fine a young fellow as you'd meet with in a day's journey. With God's help sooner or later, he'll come in for his own, but he must find it very hard to want a five-pound note where there's thousands in the bank belongin' to him.

Mister Rex's aunt, Miss Laetitia Mervyn, lives up in the house beyond with two servants where I remember twinty. She has a lovely young lady livin' wid her, Miss Gladys Luttrell. They say as how she's a cousin of poor Lady Geraldine's and troth she's the born image of her. Anyhow, Miss Laetitia has a little money of her own, and when poor Miss Gladys' father and mother died she adopted her. Mister Rex has some appointment in Dublin, but he very often comes down here. They do say as how he's in love with Miss Gladys, but he has no manes of keepin' a wife; and, faix, people can't live on love.

'Well, yer honour, the queerest thing about it is there's an ould mad woman, Rachel Bray, livin' here in the village, and many think if she had her senses and could spake she'd be able to tell somethin' about Sir Reginald. She was poor Lady Geraldine's maid, and was with her at the Court when all the trouble happened. She was a rale good lookin' girl then, but very proud and reserved in herself, and never made free with the other sarvints. The mornin' that the young mather was missin', they found Rachel Bray—that's her name, sir—lyin' on the flure in a dead faint, and when they brought her to, her senses was clane gone. 'Twas said as how she had taken a letter to Sir Reginald's room the night before, an' every wan thinks she saw somethin' terrible as set her crazy, but the Lord knows what happened. The worst of it all is if she had her senses she, maybe, could help our young master to get his rights. Poor Rachel is very quiet, niver a bit o' barrum in her, an' so they let her stay on about the place, an' Miss Letty is rale good to her, sir; and the Mervyns was always good to the poor and misforthunit. And now,