

FOR THE OLD LAND.

(By CHARLES J. KICKHAM.)

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

Mr Armstrong returned home from Corrilea that same Friday, more doubtful than ever as to Amby's "doing any good." Not that he had lost faith in the efficacy of Mrs Dwyer's prescription, or that the fishing-rod and book of ballads were likely to prove more deleterious than usual. But there was John Dwyer's eldest daughter just returned from the convent boarding-school, and one of the most intelligent and graceful girls he had seen for some time.

"I never thought of this before," the attorney soliloquised, as he tightened the rein while passing over a little mountain rill that crossed the road. "He didn't seem a bit surprised either—as I was—to see her grown such a fine young woman. And so far from showing any surprise or bashfulness at his seeing the change in her, she looked and laughed at him as if he were still a boy. However," he continued, looking at the bright side of the picture, "she appears to be a sensible girl who won't listen to nonsense. She'll be getting married in Shrove. And nothing worse will come of it than an outbreak of poetry. Ned Cormack would be a good match for her," the attorney went on, his mind reverting to business. "She doesn't look like the sort of girl that would turn up her nose at a man because he or his father got up in the world—instead of coming down as so many have done. I'm glad Ned Cormack got that farm of Connelly's. He's a decent sort of a fellow." And Mr Armstrong touched his horse with the whip and got him into a brisker trot, as he thought of the cheque presented to him by Ned Cormack on getting possession of Connelly's farm. "But he ought to build a decent house, without waiting for a lease. He's the best tenant on the estate now, only that he is so cautious."

The attorney's guess was a shrewd one enough. Ned Cormack did propose for Ellen Dwyer, though Molly Maogug, who was supposed to be omniscient in such matters, never got the slightest hint of it. Ned Cormack was not the man to set people talking about his match-making until he had made pretty sure that it would not end in talk. He learned from John Dwyer's daughter herself that her vocation was to be a nun, and the escapade to Cork was the result. It was not, however, generally known that the lady who played the piano and was afraid of the cows was a great friend and regular correspondent of his first love. In fact, the escapade to Cork was all Ellen Dwyer's doing, and in after years Ned Cormack's children were her pupils and her pets, and even at the time our story commences—when these children are young women and their father's hair sprinkled with gray—Sister Mary Bernard could never mention Ned Cormack's name without blushing. But as for that matter her nephew, Tom Dwyer, noticed that a rosy tinge used to steal into his aunt's pale cheek whenever she inquired whether Mr Armstrong still came down the river to fish. However, it must not be inferred from this that he also wanted to marry her.

On the contrary, even in his father's presence, on that Friday evening when the attorney's fears for his son's safety were just awakened, Miss Dwyer made laughing allusion to the low thatched house beyond the river, and the narrow breen, at which young Amby Armstrong blushed like a girl. For it so happened that Ned Cormack had a sister who sang certain favourite ballads of his with such ravishing sweetness that the young angler often returned to the ivied farm-house with an empty basket, confessing to Ellen Dwyer that he had lost the best part of the day listening to Aileen Cormack's singing. And how the memory of those hours clung to him forever after! And how changed everything seemed when the voice that so charmed him was hushed forever! But even when Aileen Cormack was mouldering in the silent dust, and Ellen Dwyer was a cloistered nun, the ivied farm-house—and above all the bridge—had a charm in the eyes of Ambrose Armstrong which he felt no other spot on earth could ever possess for him. And as the quiet years rolled on until these last three, he was seldom missed during the spring and summer months, for many days together, from the river, between Gleabawa Mill and the bridge and Corrilea.

"I am always a dreamer, Tom," Mr Armstrong repeated again, still looking earnestly towards the old house, and the orchard with its wall of great boulder stones. His heart sank within him, as he pictured his old school-fellow and life-long friend with his wife and children driven—as he had seen so many others driven—far from their home. "Tom is a strong young fellow," he reflected, "who can make his way in the world. And as for his mother, she can grumble and complain to her heart's content wherever she is. But poor Martin's heart would break. And then the poor little girls!"

Nannie and Nellie had called to see him the previous Sunday after Mass, and how bright and happy they looked as they told him about their flowers, in that corner that used to be so "handy" for the turkeys. At the thought of the bright, happy little creatures, the tears came into the old gentleman's eyes; and glancing hurriedly towards his companion by whom he did not wish his emotion should be observed, he was struck by a strange expression in the young man's face.

Yes, there was Miss Cormack walking up and, by the hazels in her red cloak, and with her long curls floating on the air. But what was there in that to account for that look of surprise and sorrow in the face of his young friend?

"She's a fine girl, Tom," Mr Armstrong remarked, tauntingly.

"There's no mistake about that, sir," Tom Dwyer answered, with a solemnity that the occasion scarcely demanded. "She has the name of being the finest and the handsomest, and the most accomplished girl in the country."

"And she knows how to walk," added Mr Armstrong, moving a step backward in order to keep the young lady in view to the end of her walk—for they were looking through the arch of the bridge. "I'd only ask to see the motion of her head to know that she has a graceful carriage. But now, Tom," he continued more seriously, "tell me, is there anything between her and you? I am more deeply interested in the matter than you may suppose. I'll perhaps tell you the reason why another time."

"There was never a word about it," Tom answered, with quiet emphasis.

"Oh, it may not have come to words," returned Mr Armstrong.

"Nor to thoughts," said Tom, with a laugh.

"And if I did think of her it would be little use for me. It is generally said that no one but an estated man will get her; and sure there's nothing surprising in that."

"You talk like a sensible man, Tom. Her father will expect a rich husband for her. But do you know I think you'd have the mother's good word; you were always such a favourite with her. And now tell me honestly what was the cause of that look of blank disappointment I noticed in your face just now? You were certainly looking at the lady in the red cloak at the time."

"It had no reference to her at all sir," Tom Dwyer replied, dropping his eyes thoughtfully upon the ground. "The fact is," he added after a pause, and with a sad sort of smile, "the thought that came across my mind when I saw her walking by herself—here Tom Dwyer became embarrassed; and looking about him, as people were apt to do under such circumstances, he saw his father standing on the bridge, with his hands resting upon the parapet, much in the attitude and with the expression of an after-dinner orator, conscious of having his speech well by heart, looking smilingly down upon them.

"My father is glad to see you, sir," he remarked, not sorry for the relief from his embarrassment. 'Tis long since I saw him in such good humour."

"I never saw him in anything but good humour," said Mr Armstrong, returning Martin Dwyer's wave of the hand. "But certainly he does seem to be in unusually high spirits," he added, as Martin Dwyer, his thin and worn face beaming with childlike glee, flourished his hand above his head, and then brought the open palm slowly down upon the parapet, as the before-mentioned after-dinner orator might have concluded a rhythmic and convincing peroration.

The old farmer, after another wave of the hand, got over the stile with an agility that reminded Mr Armstrong of early days, and walked quickly along the path through the meadow which led straight from the bridge to his house.

"He's after hearing some news," said Tom. "Maybe, 'tis about the election."

This remark brought back the picture which Mr Armstrong's fancy had conjured up a few minutes before—the old farm-house a desolate ruin, or occupied by strangers, and Martin Dwyer and his family exiles in a strange land, and, as if wishing to drive it away, he said, hurriedly:—

"Tom, tie up my rod," and, opening the wooden gate, he crossed an angle of the next field and came out through another gate upon the road, going at once—as a matter of course—to the bridge. A little to his surprise, he caught a glimpse of the red cloak disappearing within the glass porch; for it looked as if the young lady had seen and wished to avoid meeting him. His thoughts, however, were too busy with the old farm-house and its occupants to give much heed to the whims of even the "finest and the handsomest girl in the country", and he was rather startled a few minutes afterwards when he felt his hand grasped by Ned Cormack, who welcomed him to Corrilea Bridge with a warmth that was unusual with him.

"Margaret saw you," he said. "And they all want you to come in. Shake hands with Mr Armstrong, Eddy," he added, turning to his little son, a bright, curly-headed boy of six or seven. He'll be telling hereafter," he continued, "how he met you here on the bridge."

"Why," Mr Armstrong asked, a little surprised, "are people likely to remember me hereafter?"

"To be sure they are," was the reply. "Everyone missed you these two or three years. Won't you remember Mr Armstrong when you are a man, Eddy?"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, who, however, seemed to be entirely occupied with the wheel of the fishing-rod, which Tom Dwyer allowed him to turn round and round.

"I'm going up with Tom," said Mr Armstrong: "But I'll run in on my way home to see Mrs Cormack and the young ladies."