FOR THE OLD LAND.

By CHARLES J. KICKHAM

CHAPTER XXV. (*Continued.*)

THE "black sheep" were even more wretched than the unhappy tenants-at-will who ventured to disobey the landlord's ukase. Many of them shrank from meeting their neighb urs, and stole away in the early morning on the following Sunday to hear Mass in another parish, or remained at home on the plea of illness. There was quite an epidemic of "terrible headaches" and "pains in the back" that Sunday morning in the parish of Shannaclough, and particularly in that portion of it of which Mr Percy Perrington was lord and master. But those of the "black sheep" who had the courage to show their faces among their fellow parishioners were agreeably surprised to find that popular indignation in their regard was tempered with a good deal of popular sympathy.

The rumour had gone abroad that poor Martin Dwyer, of Corriglea, was doomed—that he had already "got notice"—and a feeling pretty generally prevailed that, after all, it was hard to blame a tenant-at-will for refusing to incur the displeasure of his landlord. Father Feehan, however, was not in the mood to take this charitable view of the case. He flayed the poor "black sheep" alive in his address from the altar. There were many burning cheeks and sore hearts under the roof of Shannaclough chapel that bright summer sabbath morning. Tom Dwyer could not help turning his eyes in the direction of Ned Cormack's pew. Ned Cormack himself was not at Mass that day; but his wife and daughters occupied their usual places in the pew—which was not a front pew like Martin Dwyer's. "For what were the Cormack's," as Mrs Dwyer used to say, "when that old chapel was first built?" Tom saw Mrs Cormack raise her veil with a steady hand, and look calmly and apparently unmoved towards the altar. In Margaret's beautiful face there was something like scornful defiance. But Alice! The moment Tom Dwyer's eyes rested upon Alice's face the tears welled into them. He turned his head quickly away, and pretended to stoop down to pick up his pocket handkerchief, lest his emotion should be observed.

A sound, as if some one had fallen heavily upon the floor behind him, caused him to look around and spring to his feet; and in another instant Tom Dwyer was rushing from the chapel, with Alice Cormack, apparently lifeless, in his arms. They were followed by Nannie and Nellie in an agony of grief and terror; for the children thought that Alice was really dead. But Mrs Cormack and Margaret showed wonderful presence of mind and command over themselves as with quick but steady steps they left the gallery.

The people in the body of the chapel knew nothing of what had happened in the gallery. But Davy Lacy remarked that Father Feehan had stopped speaking "very unexpectedly," and like as if what he had to say suddenly "left his mind."

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"Get your hats," said Tom Dwyer to his little twin-sisters in the evening, "and I'll go over to see Alice with ye."

"Mind not to stay too long, an' lave me here by myself," said the mother wailingly, as the children returned to the kitchen tying on their hats; "and I so nervous."

"Sure my father is in the parlour," returned Tom. "I think the two of ye ought to go out for a walk."

"'Tis little trouble walking is giving me,' said Mrs Dwyer, who was sitting on a low stool by the fire. "Ye can walk, and pay visits and amuse yourselves——"

Mrs Dwyer stopped suddenly on seeing Nannie clasp her two little hands together and turn her blue eyes upwards with a look of intense pain. The poor child's eyes were red with crying. She was already enduring the bitter anguish of leaving the dear old home for ever, and even Mrs Dwyer felt a sense of shame at her own selfishness.

"Well," she went on, changing her tone, "sure 'tis right for you to go over an' see poor Alice; an' they all so kind to us; an' your father thinkin' that the best thing to do is to make a bargain with Ned Cormack about the good-will. Though," she added mysteriously, and through her clenched teeth, "Molly Manogue told me 'twould be easy enough to get any one settled that would dare to meddle with my farm."

"Don't let any one hear you talk such nonsense," said Tom, in a tone that seemed to frighten the good woman, for she started and cowered over the fire, though the evening was soft and sunny.

"The Cormacks got it to-day, Cauth," said Mrs Dwyer, when the coast was clear, and her face lit up with a look of triumphant delight.

"Begor, they did, ma'am," returned Cauth, who was sitting in the threshold of the door chewing a straw, and calmly observing the efforts of a red bull calf to choke himself with an old apron of his mistress' that happened to be hanging out of the dairy window.

"What good is their money?" continued Mrs Dwyer contemptuously. "I wouldn't be like 'em for all the wealth of Damer.'

"Faith, an' 'tis thrue for you, ma'am," returned Cauth, not quite comprehending what had been said, so absorbed was she in the proceedings of the bull calf, who, finding the swallowing of the whole apron impracticable, was now convulsively endeavouring to disgorge the moiety he had succeeded in getting into his gullet. "O—o—oh!" shouted Cauth, giving vent to one of her customary yells.

"What is it, Cauth?" her mistress asked calmly.

"The calf that's after gettin' a tumble, ma'am," Cauth replied, ejecting the masticated portion of the straw, and biting off a fresh bit. "He's lyin' on his side an' kickin' away like fun."

Fortunately Martin Dwyer looked through the parlour window, and by jumping over Cauth's legs, and running across the yard, he was just in time to save the bull calf from suffocation by pulling the apron out of his throat.

"Come, Eddy," said Ned Cormack, "you and I and Tom Dwyer will take a ride over to Knockgrana."

He was very glad to see Tom Dwyer in his house that evening, and took the opportunity of letting people see him and Tom Dwyer taking a drive together.

Alice was reclining upon a lounge, with Nellie and Nannie standing on either side of her.

"I was very foolish," said Alice smiling, as she took a hand in each of hers and clapped them together. "But I'll be quite well to-morrow."

But Alice was not well the next nor the next day; and on the third day the doctor was sent for.

One day early in the following week Mr Robert O'Keeffe was sitting with his uncle in the priest's parlour, when somewhat to their surprise a man of Mr Cormack's rode up to the hall door and gave a loud double knock. In a minute or two the man rode away again.

Both gentlemen glanced toward the door, expecting somebody would open it and deliver a note or message or give some explanation of the circumstance just mentioned. The door was not opened, however, and both the priest and his nephew turned rather quickly to the table and had recourse to the spoons in their tumblers, as if each wished to conceal from the other that so ordinary an event as a servant on horseback riding up to the door had awakened his curiosity. The priest remembered that Mrs Slattery had gone to visit a friend of hers in the village, and made up his mind to remain in ignorance of the why and wherefore of Ned Cormack's sending his servant to the house till her return. But when Mr O'Keefe saw Father Clancy mount his grey mare opposite the window and ride down the shady avenue at a rather lively pace for the curate, he could not resist throwing up the window and asking Joe Cooney, who had led round the grey mare, what the matter was.

"Miss Alice Cormack, sir," Joe replied, "that has the faver."

And Joe Cooney then turned quickly upon his heel and walked back to the stable, with his eyes fixed upon the ground. He was sorry to hear of Miss Alice Cormack's illness, and sorry to see that Mr O'Keeffe was not sorry. Honest Joe felt that he had made a mistake in his manner of replying to Mr O'Keeffe's question; it is disappointing to find only indifference when one expects sympathy.

Mr O'Keeffe, when Joe Cooney told him that Alice Cormack had fever, evinced no concern whatever, either by word or look. Stroking his thin, light-coloured whisker with his dainty fingers, he took a rapid glance at his whole course of love, and what had and what yet might possibly come of it. He certainly had not played his cards unskilfully; yet, so far, the game had gone against him. His expectations were entirely realised so far as the young lady herself was concerned; but the young lady's father had proved a far harder nut to crack than Mr Robert O'Keeffe anticipated. During the whole