

summer and autumn, after that evening in the drawing-room of Rockview House, when Margaret answered "Yes" to all his questions, Mr O'Keefe was seen very often in company with Ned Cormack's beautiful daughter. He followed her to the seaside, and it was known throughout the parish that Miss Cormack was constantly seen walking with Mr O'Keefe on the beach, and leaning upon his arm; and according to the code that regulated such matters in Shannacloough, the arm-in-arm proceeding meant either "some understanding" or impropriety. And of the latter no one would dream of suspecting the beautiful and accomplished Miss Cormack, of Rockview House. Mrs Cormack, however, thought it wise to keep her eyes open. You remember how she hurried away from the orchard on Lady-Day without waiting for Molly Hanrahan's song, when she saw Mr O'Keefe riding up the avenue.

But Ned Cormack was inexorable. The baffled suitor then suddenly changed his tactics, and without absolutely breaking off the engagement, almost altogether discontinued his visits to Rockview.

Even Father Feehan thought that the matrimonial project was abandoned when he found his nephew quite approving of his intention to hit Ned Cormack hard for voting with the landlord and making his parish "the laughing-stock of the whole county." But the young gentleman knew what he was about. He'd offer his services as mediator, make his uncle forget and forgive, and this, he hoped, would prove no small inducement to Ned Cormack to come to terms with him. Tom Dwyer's carrying Alice out of the chapel was the only circumstances in connection with the parish priest's invective that annoyed him. But why trouble himself about this young Dwyer? He and his would soon be out of the way. Yet Mr Robert O'Keefe, as he fixed his cold grey eyes upon that old homestead at the foot of the mountain, felt an indefinite dread that young Tom Dwyer, of Corriglea, would one day cross his path and defeat him.

He feared that the young farmer cherished a hopeless passion for Margaret Cormack, and Mr O'Keefe derived intense gratification from the thought that he was the successful rival of the man for whom he had conceived an instinctive dislike from the first moment he met him. In fact this jealousy had a good deal to do with the tenacity of purpose displayed by Mr Robert O'Keefe in his wooing. He had gone so far as to have made up his mind to take Margaret even with only the one thousand pounds, and sell his farm and residence to pay his debts if Lord Allavogga succeeded in getting the promised appointment for him. And now a new thought strikes Mr O'Keefe—if one daughter died, would not the dowry of the other be doubled?

He turned quickly round and looked at the parish priest. The bonied smile was upon Father Feehan's lips, as, with half-closed eyes, he went on toying with the silver spoon upon which his crest (or some crest) was duly engraven, in the inevitable tumbler.

Both tumblers were empty since Father Clancy had left the table an hour before, and there was no intention of replenishing them. But for some inscrutable reason men were never known to sit together in Shannacloough without each having a glass or tumbler, or both, before him. We have seen the inevitable tumbler finished from a feeling of sheer compassion towards a merry-faced, talkative advocate of teetotalism, because "he looked so lousome" without the inevitable tumbler.

"Did you hear what Joe is afeer saying?" Mr O'Keefe asked, with a somewhat scrutinising glance at the round, ruddy face.

"Yes," replied Father Feehan softly, with a slight inclination of the head.

The parish priest of Shannacloough is not at all like some other Irish priests whose portraits it has fallen to our lot to paint.

How much pleasanter it was to paint a great-bearded "Father McMahon," or a kindly, loving, "Father O'Gorman"? But what can we do?

Look at this poor peasant woman. She starts in fear and terror, and turns wildly to the right and to the left as if hoping to find some means to escape from a deadly and imminent danger. Her heart ceases to beat; objects around her become confused and dim. And feeling her limbs sinking under her weight, she drops a hurried obeisance, and, recovering herself with an effort, totters forward upon her way.

What did it mean? The sky above her is blue and sunny. Everything around speaks of peace and holiness and love as she hastens homeward from the village between two rows of scented hawthorns. When at a bend of the lonely road the cause of her terror unexpectedly comes in view. It is her pastor. He sees her terror, her anguish, her misery. But he rides on and does not seem to care. Then the poor frightened woman, having bent her knees in humble obeisance, totters forward upon her way, clasping her hands convulsively together, and turning her eyes to that sky beyond which—oh, blessed thought—there is pity and compassion never failing and perennial for us all.

Come a little further on between the scented hawthorns, till you meet those sunburnt children returning from school. Mark how they hang their heads and draw shrinkingly close to the hedge. See the little barefooted girl's hands tremble till her book falls upon the dusty road. But he rides on.

The husband of that terrified woman—the father of those trembling children—was the very poorest of the tenants-at-will you saw one day in the winter standing in the rain in front of Mr Percy Ferrington's hall-door, and he "voted against the priest."

Then, ought we not to go on with our portrait of the parish priest of Shannacloough? Are we not bound to paint the picture as truthfully and completely as we are able? No! We see a wasted arm, raised up from a pallet of straw, warning us to desist.

Beside the wretched couch the same peasant woman and those sunburnt children—whom you have seen tremble at the sight of their pastor—are kneeling upon the damp clay floor.

The poor over-worked rent-maker, prematurely worn out, lies stretched upon his bed of straw, feeble and wasted, and with the damp of death upon his furrowed face. The storm howls so wildly outside that the dying man looks up every now and then as if he expected to see the frail roof to which he had clung so desperately and so long, swept from over his head at last. But there is comfort in the thought that this would not be so bad as to have it pulled down by order of the landlord; for his wife and children might make a shelter for themselves with the fallen rafters.

There is such a great dread as well as great sorrow at the heart of the poor woman herself that she is indifferent to the storm and its possible consequences. This dread is shared by the children—even by the youngest—and she and they pray together in low, fervent murmurs to the Mother of God to avert by her intercession the dreaded calamity, whatever else may happen to them. The dying man, whose mind is quite clear, thinks how difficult and even dangerous the deep and narrow road leading to the cabin must be this pitch dark and stormy night; and, beckoning his wife to him, he tells her to place the rush-light in the little window. Before doing so she holds it up, touching it with her finger first at one end and then at the other, to call his attention to its length, for she had noticed with a feeling of relief that so much of the rush-light remained unburned that the night could not be so far advanced as she had imagined. The sick man understands her action and smiles.

She kneels down again, and the murmured prayers are renewed in clearer though not louder tones.

Their hearts are lightened by the discovery that the time is not so long as they thought since the father got the change for the worse and the oldest boy left the house.

He knows the way so well there is not much reason to fear that he has fallen into any of the deep and dangerous pools along the narrow road, even on that pitch-dark night. . . . But a great cry of anguish bursts from mother and children all at once—"He is dead! He's dead!"

But no. Thank God! Oh, thanks be to the merciful God! his eyes open and he breathes again! The murmured prayer is renewed once more—but in accents hurried and tremulous, and with agonised clasp of the hands and swaying of the body to and fro.

Suddenly they all—mother and children—leap to their feet, their faces lit up with a great joy. The dying man raises his emaciated arms, and a firm, audible voice utters the words "God be praised!" No other word was spoken.

But if the great God of Heaven had come down from His throne of light to banish sin and sorrow from this earth for ever more, His presence could not have filled human souls with more perfect joy and happiness than that with which the presence of their pastor filled the hearts of the dwellers under the thatched roof of that comfortable Irish cabin on that dark and stormy winter night!

He had left his warm bed without a murmur of complaint. When the rain beat into his face, and the wind, like the arms of a giant seemed endeavouring to push him back; when he looked up on hearing a crash of a great bough torn from a tree in the avenue, and tried in vain to catch the faintest glimmer of light in the black sky, he recoiled not. On, on, on he pushed his horse through the storm and darkness of that fearful night, without fear or hesitation.

Only once did he feel his heart sink. It was when he had left the highroad and turned into the narrow and crooked byway. He knew what the light in the cabin window meant, and with the spur he urged his horse forward, when the animal's fore-feet sunk deep into the soft broken road, and the priest thought for a moment he was coming down. Then, for a moment, his heart sank; but it was not of his own danger he thought. His only fear was lest he should be too late.

The priest knelt down for a minute or two by the bedside, and then, putting on his stole, stood leaning over the dying man to hear his confession.

The mother and children knelt down again till the last rites were administered. Then Father Feehan spoke a few kindly words to the poor woman, and, tightening his shawl about his neck, went out to face the wind and rain and darkness again.

He met the boy who had been sent to call him, all dripping wet and covered with mud, at the door. But what did that poor, sobbing boy care for wind or weather, for cold or wet, or hunger, as long as his father got the priest?