

The Storyteller

UN PRETRE MANQUE

He kept his school in a large town in the County Waterford. His range of attainments was limited; but what he knew he knew well, and could impart it to his pupils. He did his duty conscientiously by constant, unremitting care, and he emphasized his teachings by frequent appeals to the ferule.

However, on one day in midsummer it would be clearly seen that all hostilities were suspended and a truce proclaimed. This one day in each year was eagerly looked forward to by the boys.

The master would come in dressed in his Sunday suit, with a white rose in his button-hole, and a smile—a deep, broad, benevolent smile—on his lips, which, to preserve his dignity, he would vainly try to conceal. No implement of torture was visible on that day; and the lessons were repeated, not with the usual rigid formalism, but in a perfunctory manner, 'ad tempus terendum.' Twelve o'clock struck, the master struck the desk and cried:

'Donovan, take the wheelbarrow and bring down Master Kevin's portmanteau from the station.'

Then there was anarchy. Forms were upset, desks over-turned, caps flung high as the rafters, and a yell, such as might be given by Comanches around the stake, broke from three hundred boys as they rushed pell mell from the school. The master would make a feeble effort at restoring order, but his pride in his boy, coming home from Maynooth, stifled the habitual tyranny which brooked no disobedience nor disorder.

In two long lines the boys, under the command of some natural leader, would be drawn up in front of the school.

In half an hour the wheelbarrow and trunk would be rolled up the gravelled walk; then the expected hero would appear. One tremendous salvo of cheers, and then a glorious holiday.

There was, however, among these young lads one to whom the home-coming of the Maynooth student was of special interest. He was a fair-haired, delicate boy, with large, wistful blue eyes that looked at you as if they saw something behind and beyond you. He was a bit of dreamer, too; and when the other lads were shouting at play, he went alone to some copse or thicket, and with a book, or more often without one, would sit and think, and look dreamily at floating clouds or running stream, and then, with a sigh, go back to the weary desk again. Now, he had one idol enshrined in the most sacred recesses of his heart, and that was Kevin O'Donnell.

It is quite probable his worship commenced when he heard his sisters at home discussing the merits of this young student in that shy, half-affectionate half-reverential manner in which Irish girls were wont to speak of candidates for the priesthood. And when he heard, around the winter fireside, stories of the intellectual prowess of the hero, in that exaggerated fashion which the imagination of the Irish people so much effects, he worshipped in secret this 'Star of the South,' and made desperate vows on sleepless nights to emulate and imitate him. What, then, was his delight when, on one of these glorious summer holidays, the tall, pale-faced student, 'lean' like Dante, 'from much thought,' came and invited all his friends to the tea and music that were dispensed at the school-house on Sunday evenings; and when he turned round and, placing his hand on the flaxen curls of the boy, said:

'And this little man must come too; I insist on it.' Oh! these glorious summer evenings, when the long yellow streamers of the sun lit up the dingy school-house, and the master, no longer the Rhadamanthus of the ruler and rattan, but the magician and conjurer, drew the sweetest sounds from the old violin, and the girls, in their Sunday dresses, swept round the dizzy circles; when the tea and lemonade, and such fairy cakes went round, and the hero, in his long black coat, came over and asked the child how he enjoyed himself, and the boy thought he was in heaven, or at least the vestibule and atrium thereof. But even this fairyland was nothing to the home-coming, when the great, tall student lifted the sleepy boy on his shoulders and wrapped him round against the night air with the folds of his great Maynooth cloak, that was clasped with brass chains that ran through lions' heads, and took him out under the stars, and the warm summer air played around them; and in a delicious half-dream they went home, and the child dreamt of fairy princesses and celestial music, and all was incense and adulation before his idol and prodigy. Ah! the dreams of childhood. What a heaven they would make this world, if only children could speak, and if only their elders would listen!

So two or three years sped by, and then came a rude shock. For one day in the early summer, the day on which the students were expected home, and the boys were on the tiptoe of expectation for their glorious holiday, a quiet, almost inaudible whisper went round that there was something wrong. The master came into school in his ordinary dress; there was no rose in his button-hole; he was quiet, painfully, pitifully quiet; he looked aged, and there were a few wrinkles round his mouth never seen before. A feeling of awe crept over the faces of the boys. They feared to speak. The sight of the old man going round listlessly, without a trace of the old fury, touched them deeply. They would have preferred one of his furious explosions of passion. Once in the morning he lifted the rattan to a turbulent young ruffian, but, after switching it in the air, he let it fall, like one paralyzed, to the ground, and then he broke the stick across his knees, and flung the fragments from the window. The boys could have cried for him. He dismissed them at twelve o'clock, and they dispersed without a cheer. What was it all? Was Kevin dead?

By-and-by, in whispers around the hearth, he heard that Kevin was coming home no more. Someone whispered: 'He was expelled'; but this supposition was rejected angrily. 'He would never be priested,' said another.

'Why?'

'No one knows. The professors won't tell.'

And some said they expected it all along; 'these great stars fall sometimes; he was too proud and stuck up, he wouldn't spake to the common people—the ould neighbors.' But in most hearts there was genuine regret, and the deepest sympathy for the poor father and mother, to whom his calamity meant the deepest disgrace. They would never lift their heads again. Often, for hours together, Kevin's mother would linger around the fireside, receiving such sympathy as only Irish hearts can give. Her moans sank deep into the soul of the listening child.

'Sure I thought that next Sunday I would see my poor boy in vestments at the altar of God, and then I could die happy. Oh, wirra, wirra! Oh, Kevin! Kevin! what did you do? What did you do at all at all? When he was a little weeshy fellow he used to be playing at saying Mass—'Dominus vobiscum,' and his little sisters used to be serving. Once his father beat him because he thought it wasn't right. And I said: 'Let the boy alone, James; sure you don't know what God has in store for him. Who knows but one day we'll be getting his blessing.' Oh, my God, Thy will be done?'

'How do you know yet?' the friends would say; 'perhaps he's only gone to Dublin, and may be home to-morrow.'

'Thank you kindly, ma'am, but no. Sure his father read the letter for me 'Good-by father,' it said, 'good-by, mother; you will never see me again. But I've done nothing to disgrace ye. Would father let me see his face once more? I'll be passing by on the mail to-morrow on my way to America.'

'And did he go too see him?'

'Oh, no! he wouldn't. His heart was that black again; his son that he swore he should never see his face again.'

'Wisha, then,' the women would say, 'how proud he is! What did the poor boy do? I suppose he never made a mistake himself, indeed!'

But the young girls kept silent. They had mutely taken down the idol from their shrine, or rather drawn the dark veil of pitying forgetfulness over it. A student refused orders was something too terrible. The star had fallen in the sea.

His little friend, however, was loyal to the heart's core. He knew that his hero had done no wrong. He was content to wait and see him justified. He would have given anything to have been able to say a parting word. If he had known Kevin was passing by, shrouded in shame, he would have made his way to the station and braved even the hissing engine, that was always such a terror to him, to touch the hand of his friend once more and assure him of his loyalty. He thought with tears in his eyes of the lonely figure crossing the dread Atlantic; and his nurse was sure he was in for a fit of illness, for the boy moaned in his sleep, and there were tears on his cheeks at midnight.

But from that day his son's name never passed his father's lips. He had passed in his own mind the cold iron sentence: 'Non ragionam di lor.'

The years sped on relentlessly. Never a word came from the exiled student. In a few months the heart-broken mother died. The great school passed into the hands of monks, and the master, in his old age, had to open a little school in the suburbs of the town. Families had been broken up and dispersed, and event after event had obliterated every vestige of the little tragedy, even to the names of the chief actors or sufferers.

But in the heart of the little boy, Kevin O'Donnell's name was written in letters of fire and gold. His grate-