

The Storyteller

A MOTHER OF SORROWS

I don't think I ever knew a more thoroughly happy family than that of James Kerrigan, who lived on the boreen leading up the mountain to the village of 'Doo-leys' Street,' as the collection of houses was called. He was one of the most comfortable farmers in the parish—a hard-working, honest, much-respected man. He had managed by shrewdness and unremitting industry to save money sufficient, at least, to provide 'fortunes' for his two daughters. He had this money invested in the Loan Bank at A., and was drawing a tidy income from the interest on it. Hence there was a fair prospect that his darling colleens would 'get settled' at home, instead of being obliged to emigrate—the lot, as a rule, of the portionless girl in Ireland.

They were girls that a parent might well be proud of—handsome, sensible, and industrious. 'As good as gold,' was the term the neighbors applied to them. And the three boys also were model young men—quiet, steady, self-respecting, and inoffensive. Tom, the oldest boy, was generally regarded as a 'rock of sinse'; Jim was voted 'a nice-goin', respectable chap'; while Paddy, the youngest of the whole family, was spoken of as 'a fine, promisin', likely gossoon.'

'But, kind father for them, for that,' as my old housekeeper said when I asked her about this family, soon after my first acquaintance with them—'kind father for them to be decent and good; for where would you meet the likes of James Kerrigan and his wife Anne for industry, and keeping up their respect?' My housekeeper, I should remark, was a native of the Mountain Parish, and took a proper pride in maintaining its fair fame on every available opportunity. Mrs. Kerrigan had been considered in her young days, I was informed, the belle of the parish. At the time to which I refer she was about forty-five, but so fresh-faced, unwrinkled, and smooth-checked that she looked still younger. I used to think that I always felt the better for seeing her pleasant, cheerful, sunny face, it was always so calmly and placidly happy-looking. Her smile, especially, was peculiarly sweet and winning—a smile eloquent of a soul attuned to peace and joy, and of a heart that knew no guile. Ah, me! that the cancerworm of grief and care should—but I must not anticipate.

None of us, I dare to say, need go far for evidence of the truth of the Scriptural sayings, 'God's ways are not our ways,' and 'Whom the Lord loveth He chastiseth.' The family of James Kerrigan furnished, I think, a very striking example of the incomprehensibility of the workings of Providence, who yet 'ordereth all things sweetly,' and who takes cognisance of even the sparrow's fall. Mayhap, the story of their Job-like afflictions will give solace to some sorrow-laden soul.

The first of the series of misfortunes with which Providence was pleased to afflict this happy family occurred in the beginning of my second year in the parish. It was the failure of the Loan Bank at A., owing to the dishonesty of its manager, who, after losing in speculations on the Stock Exchange all its funds, committed suicide. James Kerrigan thus lost every penny he had in the world. The utterly unexpected misfortune had the effect of somewhat deranging his mind. He became moody and silent, and moped about, disconsolate at the wreck of his fortune and the fair prospects of his children. At any rate, one morning he was found drowned in a small river that ran through his farm. He had gone out very early, as was his wont, to bring in the milch-cows; and, in passing over the footbridge, doubtless in a fit of abstraction, stumbled into the river, which at the time was flooded, and at that particular place was deep enough to drown a man who could not swim.

The idea of suicide in his case was not to be thought of, considering the pious, God-fearing man he had always been. Nevertheless, the circumstance of his having lost his little all in the Loan Bank crash gave a color of probability to the notion of self-destruction, and the thoughtless correspondent of an obscure local paper, in reporting the sad occurrence, made some unhappy reference to this point, that sorely wounded the feelings of the bereaved family.

The Irish peasant knows no greater calamity than for any one 'to die without the priest'—that is, the rites of the Church; for in that he considers the soul's salvation is grievously imperilled. Hence the Kerrigan family were inconsolable not only on account of the loss of a good and kind father, but quite as much on ac-

count of the sad, mysterious, and sudden manner in which he met his end. I was on the scene soon after the finding of the body, which lodged in the shallows of the river a few yards from the narrow footbridge; and I never saw such a scene of wild, distracted grief, or witnessed such a frenzy of wailing, as occurred when the drowned man was brought home. His wife and daughters screamed, shouted, and wrung their hands in violent paroxysms of grief, till they sobbed themselves into low moanings of heartfelt anguish; while his sons shook and shuddered in the violent throes of manly grief. It was, indeed, a very affecting scene and one that few could witness with dry eyes. One must have had a heart of stone not to be affected by it.

'O Father dear,' said Mrs. Kerrigan, 'do you think is there any fear of his poor soul? Do you think he's saved? Oh, what matter, after all, if he only got the benefits of his Church and his clergy before he went to God! Oh, who is ready to die that way, without warning or time to prepare to meet their Judge? Oh, if I was only sure that his soul was safe, I'd bear his loss patiently; although he was a good husband to me and a good father to his children, working and slaving late and early to make us comfortable. But, Father jewel, only say he's saved, and I'll cry no more for my poor dear James; though God knows my heart is scalded.'

After her husband's sad end I noticed that Mrs. Kerrigan no longer wore the happy, sunny expression of countenance that was habitual to her formerly; and her open, pleasing smile grew wan and sickly. Indeed, as if to confirm the truth of the saying that one trouble never comes without bringing another with it, things went badly with her after that untimely death; for her husband was an economical farmer, who, as his neighbors remarked, would live and thrive where another man would starve. Certainly, by managing to save money on a highly-rented farm of poor soil, he went as near as might be to solving the problem of how to extract blood from a turnip. At any rate, what with the loss of all their 'dry money' through the failure of the Loan Bank, and unexpected and serious losses in crops and stock as well that same year, the Kerrigans became very poor, as was plain to be seen. The hey-day of their prosperity was gone; but that, after all, was a small thing compared with the sorrows still in store for them.

Just as the Widow Kerrigan was beginning to forget her first awful grief, under the blessed influence of the great healer, Time, a dread calamity overtook her family; and this time the hand of the Lord smote her far more severely than before. Her eldest boy, Tom, now the manager of the farm and the mainstay of the family, took typhoid fever, and after a short illness died. He was scarcely a week in the grave when the two girls also caught the fever—which evidently was of a malignant type—and succumbed to it, the older girl on the ninth day, the younger on the tenth. Both, in fact, were buried on the same day.

I attended, of course, in their illness all three victims of the plague—in truth, I was present at each deathbed—and I do not know anything in my missionary experiences so pathetically sad as Mrs. Kerrigan's sudden bereavement. It was, indeed, an awful visitation of Providence to be deprived of three of her children in as many weeks: her brave boy, the flower of the flock, and her gentle, winsome colleens—all cut off in the fair springtime of their glad young lives. Poor woman! she was just beginning to hope that a brighter day was about to dawn for her; but instead there came a black night of woe.

I shall never forget the scene the house of death presented on the day of the funeral of the two girls. Except a few immediate relatives, no one came to it. The first funeral was attended by the whole countryside, for Tom was universally beloved; but when another of the family fell ill and died, and yet another succumbed to the malady, the terrible words, 'Fever, the Lord save us!' were whispered abroad; and then the house of the Kerrigans was avoided as were the lepers of old. Scarce sufficient help could be procured 'to lay out' the poor remains of the sisters, or to lower their coffins into the grave.

I never saw such a picture of blank misery as that sad mother presented when the hearse had left her door with its double freight. She sat on a stool in the chimney-corner, rocking her body to and fro, and uttering low, pitiful moans like a dumb creature in its death agony. 'Light griefs,' it is said, 'cry out, but great ones are silent.' Her grief was of this latter kind. She could not cry now; she had passed through the stage of violent, hysterical weeping. She could only moan and moan, with head bowed down, bruised, crushed, and broken under the burden of her sorrows. Her own mother—a very old woman—sat by her side, seeking to comfort her with soft, soothing words of con-