

The Storyteller.

THE STORY OF A RUIN.

THIS is a story told in prose, for want of the skill to tell it in verse.

Behind the ruins of a sheer cliff, crowned with a plume of pines, touching the feet of this cliff a broad dark lake with one dim islet resting on its waters; in front, and beyond the lake, a shallow plain cut off by a chain of lofty peaks, to the left, low mountains; to the right, a comb of ragged hills; and over all the cool grey twilight of a summer night, spangled with the everlasting stars.

The lake of Inisard is a thousand feet above the level of the sea. It rests between the topmost spears of four converging systems of mountains. Its waters are always cold and still, and never vary an inch in height. No stream feeds it, yet from the western angle there is a continuous outflow, both winter and summer. The people who dwell near the lake regard this circumstance with superstitious awe, and those who would explain the phenomenon out of the handbooks of science are at a loss to assign a situation to the reservoirs which feed it, for there are no higher mountains than those around it in a radius of twenty miles.

The only path leading from the valley to Inisard is by the stream which falls from the western lip of the lake. Upon gaining the level of the lake the path bends slightly to the right, gradually narrows until it is no broader than a man's back, and finally, after going a hundred yards, expands into an open piece of level ground. Along this path, and backing the open ground to which it leads, is a perpendicular cliff, varying in height from fifty to eighty feet. Thus, there is no means of gaining this patch of level land save by the narrow causeway under the cliff.

Many centuries ago there stood upon this isolated patch a little cottage inhabited by Thomas Flynn. Thomas had a wife named Brigid, and a daughter Mary; and here the three dwelt happily and contentedly, holding slight intercourse with the world below. Thomas wove baskets from willows growing upon the opposite shore of the lake. Occasionally strangers came to Inisard to enjoy the clear air and solitude of the lake. Thomas had a boat, and rowed the visitors hither and thither, and so in summer considerably supplemented the profits of his basket-making. His wife was well skilled in spinning and knitting, and when Tom went with his baskets down the hills he always had some serviceable stockings and hanks of stout yarn to sell too.

Now, it so happened that when strangers came down into the valley from Inisard the most vivid memory they brought with them was that of Mary Flynn. They said she was no great beauty, but only the sweetest mountain maid eye ever saw. Her voice and her eyes seemed to haunt them continually, and when they advised their friends to climb the hills they always said, 'You ought to go and see Mary of Inisard,' not Inisard itself. So, as time went on, her name crept gradually down the mountains until it spread over the valley, and reached the village of Kilfane.

From the village of Kilfane to the top of Inisard, and as far as the eye could see from the heights above the lake, lay the land of O'Neill. The district was always spoken of by those who lived in it as 'O'Neill's country.' At the time this story opens the lord of the vast tract was away in foreign lands, and he had left during his absence full power with Timothy Davin. O'Neill was not more than three-and-twenty. His father had died but a year before. Davin had acted under the former O'Neill. He was still short of 30 years old. Davin, in the absence of O'Neill, lived in Kilfane Castle, hard by the village of Kilfane.

The fame of Mary's loveliness in time came to the ears of Davin. His curiosity was excited, and one bright, clear, hearty spring day he climbed the mountains and called upon Tom.

The basket-maker showed all due hospitality and respect to the representative of the great O'Neill. He entertained him as best he could. He rowed him all over the lake in his boat, and set before him the best of the simple fare his cottage afforded. Tom's wife let no opportunity slip of trying to do honour to their guest, and Mary moved hither and thither, and waited upon them, to the music of her own laughter and the rhythm of her simple songs; for she, like the birds, sang sweetly; not with diffidence, not as an art, but as a natural expression of her varying moods.

The visitor was fascinated. He had never before seen anything like this simple maiden of the lake. Her pure, unconscious blue eyes, her clear, sympathetic voice, her simple grace subdued and elevated him. He had been in the great city, 50 miles from Kilfane; he had travelled through the valley below, and never felt so touched before. He talked of getting Tom a better place—perhaps land down below. He asked her if she would not like to live in Kilfane. But she said no. She loved to be near the blue sky and the blue lake and the purple heather.

The day wore into evening and the evening into night. He could not leave the place. He told Tom he should stay till morning. Tom was overjoyed, for the friendly notice of the deputy meant good to him. The basket-weaver said that as the cottage was very small he should himself sleep in a shed without and give up his little room to Davin. But the other would not hear of such a thing, and, when Tom pressed, declared that he would rather start for Kilfane, late as it was, than disturb a member of the family; so the visitor was accommodated in the shed, and had for a couch a bundle of dry aromatic rushes.

He was not a man accustomed to endure disappointment or delay. His temper was violent and his nature undisciplined. He was prosperous, and far above the poor basket-maker in social position. He could make or mar the fortunes of anyone on O'Neill's land. Before he rose the next morning he had sworn to himself

that he would make Mary his wife. His passions were headlong and tempestuous, and those who knew him well had often seen that once he set an object before his eyes he did not allow an ordinary obstacle to bar the way.

He slept badly, and day was just dawning when he rose. He went forth, and paced up and down the little patch of level land. As the day broadened in the east, the plover began to cry to one another, and the crows sailed over the pines above his head, cawing and wheeling before drifting down through the blue air to seek food in the valley.

They were early risers in the cottage, and before the sun had climbed above the rugged hills to the right he heard sounds indicating that the family of the basket-maker were astir. Presently he paused, threw up his head, and listened eagerly. Mary was humming some old tune. In a little while the humming ceased, and she sang in a clear, soft voice, which seemed like the hymn of early day, breathed by the morning wind to the purple heath.

When the song was finished, Davin stood a while pondering. Then he muttered in a tone of dissatisfaction: 'Only a song she picked up somewhere. Yet,' he added, after another little while, 'it is wonderfully true of her position.'

That day wore away into evening, and Davin signified his intention of using the bed of rushes in the shed a second time. Upon the third day he called the old man aside and spoke to him. He told him that he was rich. He had a house upon O'Neill's demesne—there was no farmer on the whole lands of Kilfane as well off as he. Mary was a poor, portionless girl. He could have the daughter of any man on the lands, with a dowry of cattle, and sheep, and money, too; but he could afford to choose, and his choice was Mary.

Flynn was overwhelmed with astonishment. If the O'Neill himself had come and asked for the girl he could scarcely have been more amazed. After some talk, Flynn said he would consult with his wife and speak to his daughter.

The basket-maker moved away, leaving Davin wondering what need there could be for consultation or reflection, when he had made such an offer. There was not a father in all the valley would not eagerly embrace his proposal. Davin never thought at all of Mary herself in the matter. Her compliance was a matter of course. What girl could resist the fascinations of his figure, the allurements of his position? He walked up and down for some minutes nursing the ill-humour born of Flynn's deliberate manner of treating his contemplated sacrifice. As time went on his ill humour changed to anger, and when, at the end of half an hour, the basket-maker did not appear, his anger rose to rage. He was not accustomed to delay or denial; how dare this low pauper hesitate? How dare he keep him waiting? His steps grew hasty, his eyes flashed; he was already half regretting the act which had subjected him to the indignity of allowing consideration for anyone or anything to come between him and his object. 'Why did I speak to that old fool at all?' he exclaimed, angrily stamping the grass. 'Why did I not speak to the girl herself? She would have taken no time for consideration.' He surveyed the reflection of himself in the placid lake.

As he stood there the door of the cottage opened, and the father came forth and approached the deputy with bent head, apprehensive glance, and uncertain steps.

Davin turned sharply as Flynn drew near.

'Well,' he demanded, savagely.

Flynn started as he began.

'I have spoken to my wife.'

'Well,' reiterated the other, harshly.

'And, Mr. Davin, she said what I say, that your offer is an honour—an honour which we could neither deserve nor look for.'

'Well.' The tone was as brutal as ever.

'But—' He paused, horrified by the expression which passed across the man's face. 'But, Mary—Mr. Davin—you musn't mind.'

'Go on, you idiot. What did she say?'

'You musn't mind her, sir; she's very young, and young girls—'

'Are you going to stand preaching there all day? Do you think I'm here to listen to you until sundown? Out with it, I say or I won't answer for keeping my hands off you.' He turned white and shook his fist in the old man's face.

'She says she'll never marry, Mr. Davin.'

'Did you tell her it was I—I, Timothy Davin, asked her?' He was livid now.

'Yes.' The old man trembled with fear.

'Then as sure as that sun is shining on your cottage, it will shine through the roof before the year is out.'

Davin had the power to make his threat good—and he used it. During the absence of O'Neill there was no one to dispute his will or question his acts. He ruled absolutely over the land of Kilfane. The lord of the soil was not expected back for months, so there was plenty of time to look for a pretext. Although Davin exercised full control he did not like to do any act which might possibly give rise to an unpleasant inquiry hereafter; consequently he sought for an excuse, good or bad. Failing, after every search, to discover anything, he became solicitous about the game upon the hills. It was badly preserved. Birds and hares—aye, and deer—were continually destroyed by idle vagabonds and professional poachers. It was absolutely necessary, in the interest of his master, that this state of things should be remedied. Some one should be appointed to preserve the game. The keeper's house ought to be in a good central position. What better situation could be selected than Inisard? Of course there was only one house in the district, but, much as it went against his feelings, he found it incumbent upon him to give Flynn warning, in order that he might install the gamekeeper in the cottage.

Such was the explanation given by him to the people with whom he spoke. At that time game was taken small heed of, and