

The Storyteller.

AN UNEQUAL CONTEST.

LOCKED in Manis's big embrace, the little woman was sobbing bitterly. Manis had been looking forward to this meeting with joyful anticipation. But now the thick gloom of the cell fell upon his soul with more deadly weight than yet it had done. As he looked down upon her with a world of sad love in his glance, a big tear started out and dropped upon his wife's cheek, scalding it and drawing from her a sharp cry as if she had been stabbed. Manis O'Donnell was instantly incensed at himself for his untimely weakness.

'Little wife! little wife!' said Manis, almost cheerily enough to deceive her. 'I'm ashamed of you. And I expecting you'd be so glad to see me.' Is this your joy, Brigid? If it is, it's a mighty lonesome way you have of showing it, Brigid. Mo mil a stoir, why will you get on crying like that. Woman, dear, if you felt half as light-hearted as I feel at the sight, you wouldn't get on that way.'

Before he had smuggled Brigid into the cell the kind-hearted warder had himself entered and chased away the rats which were gnawing at the greased whangs on Manis's boots, and had stood the coffin up in the darkest corner, where it was scarcely discernible by an eye like Brigid's, used only to the broad light of God's day. He had now taken up his own position in the corner in front of the coffin, more effectually hiding it, and when, as now, the warder turned away his head, the fellow sniffed audibly. Brigid, indeed, did not notice this, but Manis did, and he was touched.

'My brave little Brigid,' Manis whispered, as he hugged her fondly, 'cheer up! be as gay as myself.'

'It's God's lookin' to that same gaiety!' the warder in an undertone remarked, shaking his head at the black coffin.

'Ah, Manis: Ah, Manis, avillish—Manis, my own, I'm ashamed of myself—but sure I cannot help it.'

Manis bent down and kissed her fervently.

'I knew my own little Brigid was brave,' he said.

'Oh, God help me, Manis, but it isn't easy to be brave. And God help you, it's you that has the right to fail in your courage if any one has.'

'Brigid, don't say so. Is it fail me my courage should to suffer a little for Ireland, and hundreds of thousands far better men than ever Manis O'Donnell could claim to be, year after year laying down their precious lives for her? Brigid, if my courage failed me when Ireland asks me to do a little for her I'd ill deserve to have won you. And, ah, Brigid, though you say it, I'm afraid it's you would have little regard for me, my own wee woman though you are, if you found me out either a coward or a crawler! Am I not right, avourneen?'

Brigid lifted her head, and, wiping tears from her eyes, looked up in the face of Manis. 'If I'd find you a coward or a crawler, is it?'

'Ay—supposing, I say.'

'But, Manis, Manis, it can't even be supposed,' and the illogical little woman wound her arms more firmly about his neck, and, pulling down his head, kissed him.

'God bless you! God bless you!' said Manis, giving up the argument.

'Why haven't they set you free, Manis, when there was nothing proved against you by the court-martial?'

'Ah, Brigid, why haven't they? 'Tis English justice, Brigid.'

'Black was the day when they put foot on our shores. And, Manis, when—when will they release you?'

'In God's good time, Brigid, I'll hope to be released—released!' he repeated, with an emphasis involuntarily mournful, but this escaped Brigid.

'But, Brigid, I had almost forgotten to tell you that I was offered my release on the day after the court-martial.'

'Offered your release! Offered your release! What do you mean? Were you offered your release and refused it?'

'Exactly, Brigid, and there was something quizzing in Manis's tone, offered my release and refused it. And offered more, Brigid, far more. Offered as much gold as would cover a table, and offered a pension so big that I'll not tell you it, for you wouldn't believe me; and offered, moreover, a good place for the rest of my life. And refused all! What think you of that now, Brigid?'

'Manis, don't play on my simplicity. What do you mean? Why did you refuse your release?'

'Well, Brigid, to be short, I refused my release, and refused all the other things I've mentioned, because for them I was expected to sell my neighbors, my countrymen, and my country, and the good name of an O'Donnell—and, here Manis's eyes blazed with wrath, 'I only did not strike in the face him that made the offer because my hands were shackled.'

Brigid to soothe him drew down his head, and kissed him lovingly.

'No, Manis; no, Manis; the man little knew you when he made the mean offer. Ah, God! that you had only been able to fell him.'

'Ah, God! that I had. And well I knew, little Brigid, the scorn with which you'd hear of the insult offered me.'

'Manis O'Donnell!—Brigid stepped from him a pace and faced him; Manis actually smiled at the fierceness which the clenched little hands of her discovered—if I saw you in your coffin there, cold, knowing that you chose it before consenting to say even one little word that would bring the burning spot to the cheek of one of your name or kin, one lit le word that would lay another woe on the bowed head of poor Ireland, I could go on my knees by your coffin and thank God, ay, thank Him—that it was you yourself was dead and not your good name.'

For a moment still Manis looked at her and then clasped her to his bigbosom again and again.

'Oh, God's blessing be on you Brigid! I wish to God we had half a million little women like you in Ireland.'

She nestled lovingly against his breast, and for several minutes both were silent.

Her downward gaze was at length arrested by the appearance of his hand, and she saw with pain how spent it was, how bony. Then she looked up in his face and marked the starvation there pictured. The tears filled her eyes once again.

'The eyes of you are hollow, Manis, and your cheek-bones stand out like those of a wasted corpse. (Manis O'Donnell's daily allowance while he was in Letterkenny Jail was a pennyworth of brown bread and a pail of water. As he was very big and strong, he wasn't likely to die of surfeit.) And your hand—oh, that big, broad hand, that used to be as heavy and so warm—'

'Ah, botheration take ye Brigid! I'm livin' riotously, and fed like a fighting-cock. It's raving ye are. Tell me, Brigid, darling—for I do often be thinking of it, as I sit here liltin' to myself—how do the hills look now?'

'The hills?' Brigid echoed, raising her dark eyebrows. 'The hills? Why, Manis, just as brown and bare and bleak as ever.'

'Bleak and bare you think them, Brigid—and, indeed, bleak and bare I used to think them, too—but wait till you've been like me, long shut from the sight of them, and away from the heathery and whiny scent of them, and you'll come to think there are few things you can so ill spare. Brigid, Brigid, I do be dreaming at night that I'm tramping them again, with the heather flowering round my feet, and the whins blazing with their own sweet flower on all sides of me, and the bee humming, and the lark singing, and the lambs bleating. Oh, such dreams I do have of them, Brigid! like draughts of young life to my soul. Bare and bleak! No, no, neither the one nor the other Brigid! Don't tell me so.'

'Ah, Manis!'

'And there's one little knoll on the face of Loch Salt Mountain fronting our house—far up on it, where I mind we often used to sit down, as I came back fatigued from a long tramp after strayed sheep, and I'd look down on our little cabin, where I knew your sweet self and happiness awaited me, and I'd sometimes see you come out to the doorstep, you looking like a very, very small fairy in the distance far below, and I knew you were shading your eyes with your hand and scanning the hills for a sign of my coming: and then, for you couldn't make me out against the heather, you'd turn and go into the house again, while I laughed heartily at the disappointment I knew you felt.'

'You cruel fellow!'

'I can see that often, just as plain as if it was happening before my eyes—see you turning and disappearing in at the door, Brigid, and I laugh to myself again.'

'I wouldn't doubt ye one bit.'

'And the burn below the house, too, Brigid. I hear the singing of that burn often and often in my sleep, and I do be—'

'Time's up,' said the moist eyed warder, as kindly as he could.

And in another minute Manis O'Donnell was alone in his cell, leaning against the cold wall. Perhaps not quite alone, though, for the rats were coming cautiously out of their holes and peering about them. Manis was neither whistling jigs nor liltin'.

II.

After weary months Manis one day heard a woman's voice in the corridor without, and Colonel Murray's voice likewise.

'But—but—Colonel, you're sure there's absolutely no danger?'

'Absolutely none, my dear Mrs. Hendrick, I assure you. Ha! ha! not any.'

'He's not fierce?'

'No—we've taken that out of him, Mrs. Hendrick.'

Here Manis's cell door was thrown open by a warder and Colonel Murray entered.

'Come in, Mrs. Hendrick, come in.'

'No, no, I'll just stop where I am,' and a richly-dressed lady appeared and stood in the door. There was a frightened look on her face. 'Warder, just stand where you are,' she said, keeping the warder between her and the apprehended danger.

She was peering, trying to discern the occupant of the cell in the corner in which he stood. Her eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, she soon saw a figure standing erect, with arms crossed.

'Ah!' she said, in the tone of one who acknowledges the sight of some rare zoological specimen.

'You may come in and touch him,' the gallant Colonel said, half jokingly.

'Oh, no! oh! not for the world' dear Colonel! I shouldn't venture,' she replied. But just then for the first time she was enabled to gather the expression on the prisoner's face, and to her utter wonderment the expression was one of such ineffable scorn that she instantly backed from the door.

'Colonel,' she said, nervously. 'Colonel, we shall go.'

Colonel Murray not being able to induce her to re-enter, joined her, and both withdrew.

'How I have been misled, Colonel!' she exclaimed, when she breathed purer air again. 'I understood these rebels were—well, barbarians.'

'They're only worse, my dear Mrs. Hendrick.'

'You jest, Colonel. That man looked—looked—'

'Civilised, you weren't surely thinking?'

'He looked a man, and wore a look that many who esteem themselves gentlemen would give half their estates to be able to assume.'

'Why, Mrs. Hendrick, you have almost fallen in love with the scoundrel. I am now glad you did beat a timely retreat.'

'I should like, Colonel, to see this scoundrel matched against one of your choicest dragoons.'