

The Storyteller.

LLANFAIR COURT.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun was setting in a sea of glory behind the fir wood that surrounded Llanfair Court. The golden rays pierced the heavy foliage and caught the jagged, pink trunks of the old trees, turning them into ruddy, flaming rods of every tone and shade. Shimmering through the branches, the parting streams of sunlight fell across the broad terrace in front of the house, now touching the old stone parapet with loving caresses, and showering golden kisses upon its grey lichens; now lying in bright patches athwart the grass, or gilding the breast of the swallow as he wheeled in the stream of fiery light.

Pensively along the terrace paced the master of the Court and his daughter, Gwynyth, a tall, slim maiden of 14. He gazed at the setting sun and smiled at it wondrous glory.

'Tis beautiful, 'tis beautiful,' he murmured; then his smile faded away, and his face was overcast by some sadness of thought, as is the strong sunshine by a heavy cloud. Though not yet 40, his bearing was that of a man of many more years. He walked as one weighed down by some burden, wearily and pensively. His face, pale and handsome, was set off by the thick raven locks, and the deep, flashing eyes, which lit up his entire countenance. A short beard, pointed as was the custom of gentlemen of the Elizabethan period, covered the chin and half hid the mouth. Some great sorrow seemed to hold him in its sway, and had imprinted lines of care round the eyes and on the high brow. Perhaps it was this that had traced that gentleness on his countenance, and drew all children to him, and made his own daughter, Gwynyth, worship him with all the ardor of her being. It seemed to her that her father and sorrow had become entwined together round her heart, and were inseparable. Her earliest recollections had been connected with her mother's death. She remembered lying in her father's arms that same night, and while he bent over her she first learnt to know sorrow, and to read in his face the written grief of a strong man. Since then trouble had always been with him, she thought. A staunch Catholic, her father had suffered many wrongs at the hands of the Queen's followers. The old place was going to ruin, for there was no money to keep it up. Only two servants remained, the others had been obliged to seek elsewhere the means of livelihood her father could no longer afford them. She alone was left to him; he was her all in all and she was his. And Richard—For a moment she had half forgotten the cousin who had called the old Court his home.

'Dear old Dicky,' she murmured, and then she sighed—why, she could not tell; but somehow things were not quite the same between herself and the brother-cousin, who had only lately returned from the city of London. He was just as fond of her, of that she was quite sure, and he loved Sir Rupert as much as she did. Where, then, was the difference? Where was the rift between them, which with her quick perception she was conscious of? Far away, deep down in the depths of her heart she feared, rather than knew where it was. How frame that awful fear into thoughts—how admit to herself that it was on the score of religion that he had changed! She would be angry with herself for being thus suspicious, and, running to Richard's room, she would lay her cheek against his, twining her arms about his neck, or holding his hand in hers, she would gaze deep into his eyes to read there the lie to her fears. But why would he glance hastily at her and then turn away! Why, when he received her caresses, did he grow embarrassed at her gaze? It used not to be so. Something had happened—he was changed. Did her father know? Did he suspect anything?

On this glorious evening her heart was heavy within her, and she felt aggrieved. She paced the terrace by her father's side, suiting her steps to his. Sir Rupert's cloak, thrown carelessly over his shoulders, set off the girlish form, clad in white, as she clung to his arm. They were not unlike, and could be told at a glance for father and daughter.

As they walked, the girl was speaking.

'Tis strange, father, that you perceive it not. I see it more and more. Dick is not the same lad he was wont to be; he is no longer the light-hearted boy, who shared my every secret, who was my constant companion and playmate. There are times now when he seems to shirk my company, though, in all truth, he can scarcely be wearied with it, for he spends little enough time at home nowadays.'

The father smiled at her aggrieved tone.

'Poor Gwynyth,' he said, 'she considers herself doubtless, a very injured maiden. She forgets that when a lad has attained his twenty-second year he looks upon himself as a man, and even the most charming of little cousins can scarce keep him tied to her apron strings. He must be away and about his own business.'

'And, pray, what is his business? Naught that I can say will persuade him ever to speak of his city doings,' answered the girl with a pout.

Sir Rupert Trevor seemed amused.

'And if he did tell thee, Gwynyth, dost think thou wouldst be any the wiser? What could such a little rustic wench understand of business? Why even I forbear to question him, for I am but a plain country squire, and could only display my ignorance in city matters. 'Tis different with Dick; he has been to college, as his father would have wished. I have loved the boy as a son ever since the day I took him in, a weakly little lad of six—before thou wert even thought of, Gwynyth—and he has always shown himself worthy of my love and confidence, worthy of his own father, Richard. But 'tis not of Dick I would speak now. Listen, I have news for thee. My old schoolfellow, Father Morgan, is sore pressed

by the priest-hunters, and has sent me word imploring for shelter. I shall receive him gladly to-morrow after nightfall. Let us thank God we shall hear Mass again at last! Once more shall we be permitted to approach the Sacraments.'

The girl's eyes flashed with excitement, for her father's spirit, with his loyalty to the old faith, burned within her.

'What good tidings,' she cried; 'and if those wicked men come and search for him, we shall shut him up safely in the hiding-place in the Blue Room, and we shall die rather than betray him. And suppose they do find him after all, father, and we are killed, we shall be martyrs, shall we not?'

Sir Rupert smiled at her enthusiasm.

'Nay, they shall not find him,' he said; 'a priest's life is very precious in these troublous days. I feel quite secure about our hiding-hole. None who knew not the secret would ever dream of it, so cunningly set behind the chimney. Ah, here comes Dick; let us tell him our news.'

The girl could not explain it, but at that moment a sudden chill struck her heart, she clung to her father's arm.

'Nay, do not tell him,' she said in an undertone; 'he leaves again to-morrow morning for London, 'twill be of no avail for him to know, he will not be here. I pray thee, father, do not speak of it.'

'Nonsense, child,' he answered, surprised at her manner; 'I shall certainly tell him that he may postpone his journey. 'Tis not often the poor lad gets the chance of a Mass, and I would indeed be lacking in my duty were I not to give him the opportunity of assisting.'

Gwynyth saw there was no help for it, her cousin was even now approaching. Sir Rupert, dark and handsome, made a striking contrast to his nephew. The latter, who was somewhat below the middle height, had none of his uncle's commanding aspect; on the contrary, his weak mouth and shifty blue eyes indicated a character easily swayed by every breath of fortune. He was fond of Sir Rupert, in his own way, and of his cousin too, but with him every affection was subservient to the all-engrossing love of self. There were times when he inwardly cursed his uncle's fidelity to the old religion, resulting for him in the miserable allowance, now all that Sir Rupert could afford him.

Gwynyth let go her father's arm as the young man approached; she would not stay to see how he received the tidings. The girl was fond of her brother-cousin and tried ever to shake off those thoughts and suspicions which would creep unawares upon her. Turning away she caught sight of the white cap and apron belonging to Dame Rachel Jones, who was about to announce the evening meal. She was the typical old family housekeeper, was the Dame, and her love, like that of most old servants, amounted almost to adoration for Sir Rupert and her beloved little mistress, Gwynyth. But you must not picture her as a placid, sweet-faced old lady. Dame Rachel's sharp features and small, deeply-set eyes, her swift, business-like movements, all tended to show the quickness of perception, the natural alertness of the woman. In the balmy days at Llanfair Court, she had ruled the household with a rod of iron, and woe to the man who tried in any way to get a penny more than his due, the Dame would be down on him like a hammer.

'If she did not look to Sir Rupert's interests,' she would say, 'she should like to know who would. I troth the poor, dear gentleman would soon be robbed of every farthing he had, and not know it either.'

And now that those days of plenty were over, Dame Rachel still clung to the family: she and old John, the gardener, were all that were left of Sir Rupert's formerly well-filled household.

At the sight of the old servant Gwynyth, in her childish light-heartedness, forgot her momentary trouble and bounded from her father's side to catch the Dame affectionately by the arm, all eager to tell her secret.

'Rachel, dear, what thinkest thou, I have such news!' she cried. 'A priest is coming here and we shall have Mass again; and if those bad soldiers come we shall hide him. And, Rachel, thou'lt help me to get the blue room in readiness, wilt thou not?'

The old woman released herself from the girl's grasp, speaking with apparent irritation.

'A priest coming here! And what may he want with us, I ask you? I wonder he has not more consideration for poor Sir Rupert than to thrust himself upon him in these days, when the harboring of a priest means certain imprisonment, if not worse. I troth we've had enough to bear already!'

Gwynyth only laughed; she well knew the Dame.

'Thy bark is ever worse than thy bite,' she said; 'thou'lt welcome Father Morgan as much as any of us, I know. Poor man, my father says he hath been sore pressed of late by the Queen's men.'

'Then all the greater reason he should keep away,' snapped the Dame. 'I tell thee, child, it truly puzzles me what Sir Rupert is about in receiving him. But there! as I was ever wont to say the poor gentleman has no eye to his own interests. I would I managed them for him. I should soon send the priest a-flying.'

'Rachel!' ejaculated Gwynyth.

'Come now, child, thou knowest well I am as good a Catholic as any of you; indeed I would to heaven Queen Bess and all her rascal Protestants were at the bottom of the sea. To my mind, there's a place for everything, and I troth Llanfair Court is no place for priests and Mass in these days, with the dear master risking his very life; and still grumbling the Dame re-entered the house.

Gwynyth laughed as she returned to the men.

'Rachel is in one of her cantankerous moods to-night; she welcomes not the thought of Father Morgan.'

'Poor old Rachel,' said Sir Rupert; 'if ever a faithful heart rested 'neath a sharp exterior, it is hers. Dick here says he may not stay over the morrow.'

Oh! why that deadly chill again? The girl's voice had lost its joyous tone as she addressed her cousin.

'Do stay, Dicky,' she said; 'why must thou hasten thus away?'