Saint Mary's Beacon

(Continued from 1st page.)

FATHER CARMEL'S TEMPTATION.

that Rachel showed signs of yielding. 'Don't let them search the house. You don't know what trick they may be up to.'

'We intend to search the house,' returned Oscar with a savage oath, losing his temper.

'No, Mr. Ludlow,' said a new voice, tremulous and gentle, behind them all; 'do not do that.'

It was Father Carmel—pale and sad.

Never had they seen so much misery in a human face.

'What have you to do with it?' demanded Oscar brutally, exasperated at the sight of the clergyman—a class whom he considered, in his own elegant phrase as "canting interlopers."

'If you won't let me make the search peaceably, shall make it by force.'

'Not while I stay here, sir,' said George Milhurst, quietly; 'and utter one word more in the presence of these ladies in the tone you have been using, and I shall throw you over that railing.'

'Stay!' commanded Father Carmel, advancing. 'There is no need Mr. Ludlow, to search your uncle's house for the will. I found it last night in the oak cabinet in my room and I now surrender it to you. By its provisions you are master of this place and of all of Gen. Ludlow's estate and his daughter is a beggar.'

Oscar took the paper, smiling, scarcely believing his senses.

Rachel burst into tears and fell upon her aunt's bosom, while that astonished lady ejaculated with terrible reproach:

'Oh, Father Carmel! Your little Radie! How could you? What have you done? What *have* you done?'

His duty: but Miss Phœbe's ethics were regulated in feminine fashion by her sympathies, and for the minute, I think she looked upon the trembling old man at her side as the blackest and most ungrateful of traitors.

* * * * *

About a week had passed. Rachel was residing temporarily with the Milhurst family. The day was a lovely one and in an old fashioned, and perhaps not very picturesque, sun-bonnet, and with gauntlets on, and a trowel in her hand, and watering-pot and hoe and rake and other floricultural implements about her, she was working the garden.

Out came George. With a gentle delicacy he had avoided her as much as possible since she had come as his mother's guest, until some arrangement for the future could be made; but now as he stood under the little porch of the cottage and saw her toiling among the flowers—so beautiful, so sad—he could resist no longer. So, assuming a smile, and with his hands in his pockets, he lounged carelessly to the spot she occupied.

'What an industrious little woman,' he said. 'Can't I be of some help? You don't know how miserably idle and lazy I feel. Upon my word, Rachel, you must use some sort of magic with these flowers, they have so thriven since you began to care for them.'

'Do you think so?' she smiled from the depths of that curious old bonnet.

'Every one thinks so; and not only the flowers grow better, as if they really enjoyed growing, but, Rachel, we are all brighter and happier since you came, and—and—I thought—I hope,' he stammered, 'that you won't be angry if I say that we should all be still happier if we were certain you would always remain with us. As for me, I should simply be the happiest mortal on earth.'

She bent over the pretty plant at her feet and was silent for a moment; and then she said, in a low voice: 'I am sorry, George, but it could not be.'

'Why not? But for that—that unfortunate—you know—we should have been married by this time.'

'Yes; but now we shall never be married,' she said, standing erect again, and smiling in his face, sadly but resolutely.

'Oh, Rachel! you don't mean it—you can't! I could not lose you—you are mine already.'

'As Miss Rachel Ludlow, the mistress of Crosswood, I should have married you, George, and been the happiest woman in the world, I think. As plain Rachel Ludlow, of nowhere at all, shall never marry anybody. Without incumbrance, you have a brilliant future before you, George; with me to provide for, you could never raise. In romance, a young wife is always the great spur to exertion and success; but in real life, George, I know too well how different it is.'

'Rachel, you will drive me mad! What are you going to do? You cannot have formed any really wise plan.'

'Oh, yes, I have; and one I shall speedily execute, as you will see. But, come, let us talk of something else—of something pleasant—of my cousin Oscar and his doings, for instance,' she said, with a bitter laugh. 'Have you heard how he is getting on under his new conditions?'

'It is the scandal of the county,' said George. 'He has filled Crosswood with a crew of profligete wretches like himself, and their life there is a continual revel. I suppose you have read of the life of Lord Byron and his friends at Newstead, when he was a young man—something, perhaps—well, Oscar's [illegible] deal like it.'

'[illegible] sorry, but it is pleasant to know that he is enjoying his inheritance. Oh, here comes Father Carmel; and I do believe he has walked all the way from the landing in the hot sun!'

It was quite true. Very much altered looked the kindly old man as he came up, almost breathless with his long walk—days had made the difference of years. So, after greetings, they went into the house.

A little later, the priest and Rachel were alone together, and he said: 'My child, George tells me you have made some plan for the future and will not reveal it. Will you not tell me?' he asked, anxiously.

In the simplicity of his character, I think he had a kind of dread that he had lost her confidence.

'Yes, I will tell you, Father Carmel, I have a mind to go into a convent.'

A look of trouble, pain, surprise, flitted across his face, and, after a little pause, he said:

'But you have no vocation, I am afraid.'

'It will come in time, Father Carmel, and I can at least pray for it; and I suppose there are some who have entered a religious life without a distinct vocation. I don't expect to be happy; but I can be resigned.'

'I hope you will not resolve upon any step rashly, my child,' he answered, still troubled and a little absently.

She saw that he did not approve; that he doubted if she could ever be, as she said, resigned; and there were, no doubt, other considerations which made him still more anxious—the *real* motive, impulse, or what you please, at the bottom of all this.

A silence succeeded.

The sweet Summer breeze came in at the window, the voices of the birds, the faint shouts of the distant plowman to his horse—the world looked so happy.

Suddenly there was a sound of rapid footsteps—a man was running up the garden-path, red-faced and out of breath. He looked like a groom.

'What is it?' asked George, who was on the porch.

A whispered confab ensued.

'Something happened,' thought Rachel, turning pale.

How is it that we know this intuitively? She stepped to the window.

'Is anything the matter, George?' she asked, trying to command her voice.

George, also pale and excited, approached.

'Something serious, I am afraid. Father Carmel is needed immediately at Crosswood. The doctors are already there,' he said rapidly.

'But *what* is it?' demanded Rachel, impatiently.

'Well, there has been a disturbance, and Oscar Ludlow has been hurt—very badly, I am afraid—and—and they think a clergyman had better see him at once; and, in fact, this man says there is not a second to lose.'

Great commotion, of course, then. Father Carmel rode away on horseback.

When he had disappeared, Rachel, frightened, paler than before, asked for additional particulars, and Stubbs, the groom, told what he knew in his homely way.

It was all about a lady who had been stopping at the Crosswood with her husband, Colonel Markharm, so the servants reported.

The Colonel, who was a very violent gentleman, had quarreled with Mr. Oscar Ludlow, and Mr. Ludlow had flung a pack of cards in his face, whereupon the colonel had stabbed him three times—once in the neck, and twice in the chest, near the heart; and Dr. Ruddle, and the other physician—who had posted in hot haste from Leonardtown—both said Mr. Ludlow's state was most dangerous.

Rachel went up to her room, and there, on her knees, she prayed for the life of her cousin; and, if too late, for mercy on his soul—and never in her life had she breathed a more sincere prayer. So affliction changes us.

The great fortune she had lost—that, now, perhaps, might return to her—she would give it all if that unhappy man, whom she never liked, who had never liked her, could have reprieve—or, at least, mercy—in his dreadful hour of trial.

But respite was not to be. Two hours later Father Carmel returned, and she read the intelligence in his face.

"He is dead?" she said quietly. "You were not too late?"

"Not too late, child, thank God!" answered the old man, with a great sigh.

The vast Ludlow fortune was Rachel's again. Short had been the interval since its loss, but she was a wiser and better woman.

I need scarcely add, I think, that Rachel did not go into a convent. She married George Milhurst and made him a good and happy wife, and they lived at Crosswood, where often came fat and cheerful Aunt Phœbe.

Often came, also, Father Carmel, no longer walking from the landing—alas! tottering a little in his steps—but simple, serene and cheerful as of old. Remaining overnight he always occupied the room formerly used by General Ludlow—the room where the oak cabinet stood.

Mrs. Phœbe Brittingham, in one of her enthusiastic bursts, sometimes said:

"Dear old Father Carmel! I do think he is saint. I don't believe he ever had even a temptation to sin in his life."

Did she but know!

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