

OUR PRIZE STORY.



AT LAST!

By *Mac*

Eoghan Mac Diarmada

Gerald Brennan had sought and obtained through a friend's influence a minor position on a newspaper in one of the large cities in England. The opening was, indeed, welcome to him. His earliest dreams were of the mighty centres of wealth, brilliancy, and learning; and here now was the beginning. His parents had died in his infancy, leaving him to the care of a dour and rigorous old aunt, from whose control he was delighted to free himself. He bade farewell to his neighbours with a light heart, the household of Thady Nolan being left to the very last. Thady and his wife had said good-bye, given him a hearty handshake and their benedictions, when turning to depart (as if the thought had only just then come into his head), he asked:

"An' where is Sheila?"

"Oh, Sheila," said her mother, glancing towards the door, "she was here a minute ago. I suppose she's gone down to the well for water. I don't see the cans about. 'Deed an' she'll be lonesome for her old playmate, Gerald. An' to think of the two of you being born at the same hour on a St. John's Eve! I wanted your mother (God rest her soul!) to call you John or Sheaghan, but she had her way. Dear me, but it's quick the years pass, Glory be to Him!"

Gerald was not anxious to encourage the good woman's flow of talk, and bidding a hasty farewell, he departed.

Something spoke to his heart that designedly Sheila did not wish to say the last adieu in the presence of her father and mother. It was sweet to his vanity to picture a tender parting with her. It was a fond fancy surely, for though companions from their earliest childhood no word of love was ever spoken between them, and no indication shown that even the beginning of such a passion existed. They were as brother and sister, it is true; and from the fact of their living so close to one another and of having been born on the same night, their mothers were constantly pitting the one against the other, and speaking of both in the same breath. They grew up fine bright children; she, slight and graceful and agile as the mountain deer, meek-eyed and soft-spoken; he, daring and impetuous, and ever seeking danger. The wildest escapades of his were the delight of Sheila. Many a romping day they spent together, but now their play days were ended.

Gerald sauntered towards the well, pretending to have to pay a visit to a neighbour's house a little way beyond. He met Sheila on the path.

"I'm going away to-morrow, Sheila," he said in the most matter-of-fact, unconcerned way.

She laid down the two cans of water she had been carrying, without vouchsafing a word of reply, and hung her head.

"I was overjoyed at first at the prospect

of getting away, and thought I'd never be off, but to-day, somehow, I'm heavy-hearted. I'm sure I'll often look back to Coolmore and think of you all—of you, Sheila—and of the happy romping days we've had."

She raised her eyes to his and they were full of tears.

"I wonder, Gerald, who'll be my playmate when you're gone?" she asked; and then lightly laughed a sweet little musical laugh that was peculiarly her own as she added: "O, yes! I'll get Johnny Keogh!" Gerald joined in the laugh, for Johnny Keogh was the simpleton of the district and often worked as labouring man for the Nolans. There was a bitter moiety of truth, nevertheless, in Sheila's words, for of recent years mostly all the young men of the place had emigrated. Emigration had become a fever. Nothing could induce them to remain in Coolmore.

"Well, Sheila, I suppose I can only say, like Sheumas O'Brien, that 'sooner or later the dearest must part,'" and Gerald held



But the illusion was no longer. And Sheila gone! Only the walls of the home remained.

out a hand to her. She put her own small hand in his, and at the warm, soft touch something of a suddenly acquired manhood possessed him. He felt his heart beat faster as he held her hand closely in his. It was the supreme portentous moment in the lives of both. Their hearts were awakened to love, alas! to find only the sorrow and anguish of an immediate separation. The question, quick as lightning, was formed in Gerald's mind: should the words of love be spoken or should the impulse be controlled? But her heart and ears were hungering, eager for the slightest speech that would give her hope. Oh, what if separated for ever if only she knew he loved her! Her great love for him had not come instantaneously, it had grown year by year: nor could she resist its growth. It filled her days with ineffable sweetness and



joy, and her nights with dreams that were beyond the power of speech. Her's was the hidden wondrous love that courted sacrifice and self-effacement. It was timid as the beautiful soul of a child.

Gerald had answered the question formulated in his own mind. No, it would be unmanly to say he loved her at such a time. What had he to offer save that ephemeral, fickle, insubstantial love, which to them in their present circumstances meant only heart-aching and vain longing. And aloud he expressed the decision:

"To be sure, Sheila, success is not easily attained in a vast community. For years I know my struggle will be an uphill one. Should the Fates be kind, in a year or two, perhaps, I may call back to see you all in Coolmore."

A sigh escaped her lips, but she retained her composure. These were not the words she was impatient to hear. For her the dream had vanished, and the light and sweetness of her existence had turned to darkness and sullen despair. The cup of wine had changed to gall, and the divine inarticulate song in her breast was hushed for ever. She saw herself as she was—her eyes were opened to the commonplace present—a poor, despised girl going her daily rounds with a heavy bitter secret in her heart! Their last meeting and parting was of only a few moments' duration. The words were spoken that divided their ways. He should go out into the big, contending, brilliant world to carve a name for himself; she, to stay in Coolmore listless to the end of her days.

CHAPTER II.

The career of Gerald Brennan was starting in its meteoric brilliancy. He became the intellectual giant of his day. His pen was facile, his ideas original and daring. Men stared in astonishment. The literary world had a thrill. The personality of the man was embodied in his writings, but above all, the appalling terrible realism of his novels and stories claimed the public ear. And what strange creatures of humanity he exposed to the public gaze! The lost under-world of the vast city became his study, and in awful pen-pictures he portrayed its denizens. One little colony in an especial manner claimed his whole-hearted sympathy, and in a little while he became in word and deed one of themselves. These were the poorest of the poor exiles of his own land. At first his heart was torn with pity for their sakes; they had almost returned to a state of wild nature. They were depraved, fever-stricken, pagan or semi-pagan, and intemperate. It was a long step from Coolmore to a dark, narrow street and evil-smelling lanes in a great city. It was a big change from the cleanly, well-ordered, religious lives of those he had known at home to the companionship of souls that were almost irrevocably given over to the Evil One. Genius is a fearful gift, and if it was not this that led him away then it was that erratic waywardness, that desire to escape from the tinsel show of respectability that had become early a passion with him. He gloried in tumult, riot, and the delirious ecstasy of abandon. It was the re-awakening of the savage man. It was the revolt against insincerity, it was the joy of freedom, the triumph of licence. And on the terrible morrow of remorse he preached a sermon or hung a rosary of homilies. The incessant passing from hell to heaven and from heaven to hell was for poor Gerald the very quintessence of life. His philosophy was founded on his experiences and was contradictory as his own nature. Out of all grew the works of his pen that made his name great. But greatness now made no appeal, he did not desire fame. Had he been denied it he would have stormed like a fury, or hanged himself. He laughed cynically at the littleness of man. In Ireland his writings were quoted as a warning

to those who were over-anxious to leave the peace and happiness and religious atmosphere of their native shores. But these blessings are not all that men want. There is something so commonplace, dull and pervading about mere stolid prosperity, peace, and so-called goodness that were it not for the devil life would not be worth the living! This was Gerald's comment.

Meanwhile, in Coolmore, Sheila kept



The body of Gerald Brennan was found some time afterwards.

harking back to the dream that had vanished. The remembrance of her older life, as she phrased it; the memory of him who was gone were ever present. He had crept into her heart and remained there. He had once—only once come in the night, with the shafts of moonlight that filled her room, and kissed her as she clasped him tightly in her arms. It was a dream. She cried to him: "Oh, why did you not say you loved me that evening in the long ago? I have waited for you long. Say the words now—speak, Gerald!" and as the whispers of love fell upon her ear a beautiful imagined peace possessed her soul.

During the years many changes had come to the family of the Nolans. Mrs. Nolan, Sheila's mother, had died, and the old man, ever improvident and wanting in application to the interests of his farm, had fallen on evil days. His rent became years overdue, and the landlord should be paid. The holding was understocked and running to waste; and besides was heavily mortgaged. There was only one remedy—none other and then—emigration! With bent head and unsteady steps poor Thady went from boundary to boundary of his snug farm. The land was fertile and capable, if well tilled and sedulously managed, of yielding a good return. It had been held by his ancestors for generations back, and now to think of parting with it was an extreme bitterness. But go it must. Sheila thought at times,

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as she foresaw the inevitable exodus of her poor father and herself, that 'twas well it should be so. With the going away of Gerald she had ceased to love Coolmore. It was a pang—dagger-like in its velocity and intensity—to look at the old familiar haunts where but a few years before they played together. Every bush and nook had its attendant memory. At times she would pause and ask herself whether the past was wholly imaginary. But then the beloved image of Gerald would reappear to her, and she would say: he is dead. She would be glad to bid adieu to the fields about her for they ever spoke to her of one lost. The only consideration that gave her pause was the low-spiritedness of her father, and who unhappily persisted in imbibing strong drink that he might for a time forget his fallen state. It gave her cause for anxiety, too, that his intention was, after the sale had been affected and a settlement of his affairs completed, to go to his brother in Glasgow, where she feared no power could save him from intemperance.

Gerald Brennan's thoughts often went back to Coolmore and Sheila, but never could he summon up sufficient courage to write to her. He well remembered the evening of their parting, and often debated if he did right then in quelling the impulse that would have laid bare the innermost thoughts of his heart. He knew he loved her, and time and separation had only served to intensify that love. Of her love he was certain.

To Gerald a great change came. A nausea swept over him. He grew tired of the company he had for so long courted and immortalised. He determined on a visit to Coolmore, and Sheila stood out before his glowing imagination the embodiment of all that was beautiful and lovable in womanhood. He pictured how radiantly she had grown from girlhood into the perfect, serene, full woman. He looked into the deep liquid brown eyes—wondrous, a little sad. He saw the white, broad forehead and the stray ringlet that ever persisted in falling over it. In her movements before him she enthralled. He hugged the vision to his breast, and called himself fool for all the years of separation. But the pleasures he had anticipated were not to be realised. Coolmore was silent, dreary and overhung with a terrible chilling grey-ness. It was tired; it had lost its youth, its song, its boisterousness. He was angry that he had so far yielded to his better judgment in visiting it. Had he but remained in the big mysterious city Coolmore would come to him refreshingly out of the past—just as he knew it in childhood and boyhood. But the illusion was no longer. And Sheila gone! Why, the walls of her home remained—for the farm had been purchased by a grazier who had no use of the dwelling—and no cheery voice or smiling face gave him a welcome as he stood on the threshold. He went down the little path to the well—grass grown now and scarcely discernable—and as he stood on the spot where last he saw Sheila—sweet, gentle, and fragrant as the wild rose of the hedgerows—he felt that all life and man's best endeavour, his wisdom and his fancy were deceptive; that everywhere was disillusionment. The cup, inviting and sparkling, when raised to the lips, tasted of the waters of Marah. He would gladly, were she here now, have spoken the words that then he repressed. But of her whereabouts he was ignorant. The neighbours heard that she and her father stayed for only a few weeks with their relative in Glasgow, and that after that they were supposed to journey southwards through England. It was rumoured that Sheila and her father went from town to town singing ballads; the reason of this it was explained was that the old man would not rest peaceably anywhere; and Sheila, since such was his determination, resolved to accompany him wherever he went. She sang to provide food and lodging for both.

It was a St. Patrick's Eve in the great city, and the poor exiles from Ireland, their children, and their children's children were preparing for the coming of the feast of their patron saint. Despite their many and grievous delinquencies they never forgot the land whence they sprang. It was pathetic. Even when religion was forgotten, this vague sentiment of patriotism, this desire to commemorate the national holiday remained. To be sure it resolved itself into a wild Bacchanalian orgie, and

gave only dishonour where honour perhaps was meant. A low tavern was the rendezvous on this particular occasion, it was, indeed, at all times the rallying point of the leading spirits of the colony. This was to be an especial evening as a sort of prelude to the morrow.

Again, buffeted and disappointed, brooding over the ups and downs of the life behind him, and resolving new schemes for the future, Gerald Brennan found himself aimlessly wending his way towards the old haunts. He was in a bitter, cursing mood—violent, torn with the conflict of opposing emotions. Sheila loomed large in his thoughts, assumed a graver and holier aspect now that she was lost to him. He upbraided himself for the cowardice and ungenerous caution he had displayed. He was now, if that were any solace to him, famous and wealthy. But what was she, and where? A beggar going the rough roads, leading and consoling her aged father, and singing to keep body and soul together! Gerald had come to another crossroads on the way of life. Should he journey the easy path of mediocre respectability, and pose as a kindly ordinary citizen, adapting himself to the mannerisms of those who were the elect, or should he go from the city that in his wanderings he might meet her? There was also the old way that led to the lowly and the lost.

His meditations were, like all such, suddenly put an end to for unexpectedly he found himself the centre of a motley crowd.

Gerald wended his way unsteadily towards his lodgings. He was thinking back to the old days in Ireland. They hardly seemed a part of his life—so far off were they, so innocent, so happy! He saw Sheila gathering shamrocks for the morrow. She shook her soft, sun-kissed ringlets at him and smiled. He noted with a feeling of pleasure the grace of her form.

"Hello! young man," said a loud voice in his ear, "run across the road and ring Dr. Manning's bell." Gerald glanced at the speaker. It was a policeman holding in his arm a seemingly unconscious form. He had no sooner rang the doctor's bell, than the policeman appeared at his elbow, holding still in his arms as though it were a child, the lifeless figure. The good Samaritan laid his burthen on one of the doctor's splendid couches in the waiting-room. Gerald glanced at the reclining form and saw it to be that of a young woman. He shuddered as he withdrew his gaze. The face was still: she appeared to be dead. He looked again, and this time surveyed her more closely. He could not understand what fascination this strange young woman had for him; but fascination she undoubtedly had. He wondered if he were quite sober, and if the thoughts that had been in his mind when the policeman interrupted him had anything to do with the present bewilderment.

The doctor entered, and tenderly took the poor girl's hand in his. He felt her pulse, and looked long and earnestly in her face. He shook his head slowly.

"Dead?" said the policeman.

The doctor nodded.

The policeman came close to the doctor, and whispered in his ear.

"Ah, dear me! said the doctor sadly. "May God be mercifully with her!"

All this time Gerald remained as one stupefied. With a wild, unearthly look in his eyes he crept towards the dead girl. He uttered a loud cry of intense agony, and flung himself at her feet.

"He was passing, and I asked him to ring your bell," said the policeman, in answer to the doctor's look of inquiry.

"Oh, Sheila! Sheila! speak! I have longed for you. Oh, my lost love. Oh, my little Sheila!" But the rose-bud mouth was now closed for ever; the eyes of liquid brown—wondrous, a little sad—for ever hidden, and Gerald's words were spoken to mocking Death.

He took one slender white hand of hers in his. He looked at it long, stroking the fingers fondly; then he took the other, and crossed both on her breast.

"Oh, Sheila! I will be with you," he murmured. He took a hurried glance at the frail girl, beautiful as she lay there, and, uttering a wild, demoniacal laugh, rushed out.

The body of Gerald Brennan was found some time afterwards floating close under the brows of the old ruined mill that stood by the river.

EOGHAN MacDIARADA.