

HONOR O'CALLAGHAN

Mary Russell Mitford

Freeeditorial 

Times are altered since Gray spoke of the young Etonians as a set of dirty boys playing at cricket. There are no such things as boys to be met with now, either at Eton or elsewhere; they are all men from ten years old upwards. Dirt also hath vanished bodily, to be replaced by finery. An aristocratic spirit, an aristocracy not of rank but of money, possesses the place, and an enlightened young gentleman of my acquaintance, who when somewhere about the ripe age of eleven, conjured his mother "*not* to come to see him until she had got her new carriage, lest he should be quizzed by the rest of the men," was perhaps no unfair representative of the mass of his schoolfellows. There are of course exceptions to the rule. The sons of the old nobility, too much accustomed to splendour in its grander forms, and too sure of their own station to care about such matters, and the few finer spirits, whose ambition even in boyhood soars to far higher and holier aims, are, generally speaking, alike exempt from these vulgar cravings after petty distinctions. And for the rest of the small people, why "winter and rough weather," and that most excellent schoolmaster, the world, will not fail, sooner or later, to bring them to wiser thoughts.

In the meanwhile, as according to our homely proverb, "for every gander there's a goose," so there are not wanting in London and its environs "establishments," (the good old name of boarding-school being altogether done away with,) where young ladies are trained up in a love of fashion and finery, and a reverence for the outward symbols of wealth, which cannot fail to render them worthy compeers of the young gentlemen their contemporaries. I have known a little girl, (fit mate for the above-mentioned amateur of new carriages,) who complained that *her* mamma called upon her, attended only by one footman; and it is certain, that the position of a new-comer in one of these houses of education will not fail to be materially influenced by such considerations as the situation of her father's town residence, or the name of her mother's milliner. At so early a period does the exclusiveness which more or less pervades the whole current of English society make its appearance amongst our female youth.

Even in the comparatively rational and old-fashioned seminary in which I was brought up, we were not quite free from these vanities. We too had our high castes and our low castes, and (alas! for her and for ourselves!) we counted among our number one who in her loneliness and desolation might almost be called a Pariah—or if that be too strong an illustration, who was at least, in more senses than one, the Cinderella of the school.

Honor O'Callaghan was, as her name imports, an Irish girl. She had been placed under the care of Mrs. Sherwood before she was five years old, her father being designated, in an introductory letter which he brought in his hand, as a barrister from Dublin, of ancient family, of considerable ability, and the very highest honour. The friend, however, who had given him this excellent character, had, unfortunately, died a very short time after poor Honor's arrival; and of Mr. O'Callaghan nothing had ever been heard after the first half-year, when he sent the amount of the bill in a draft, which, when due, proved to be dishonoured. The worst part of this communication, however unsatisfactory in its nature, was, that it

was final. All inquiries, whether in Dublin or elsewhere, proved unavailing; Mr. O'Callaghan had disappeared; and our unlucky gouvernante found herself saddled with the board, clothing, and education, the present care, and future destiny, of a little girl, for whom she felt about as much affection as was felt by the overseers of Aberleigh towards their involuntary protege, Jesse Cliffe. Nay, in saying this, I am probably giving our worthy governess credit for somewhat milder feelings upon this subject than she actually entertained; the overseers in question, accustomed to such circumstances, harbouring no stronger sentiment than a cold, passive indifference towards the parish boy, whilst she, good sort of woman as in general she was, did certainly upon this occasion cherish something very like an active aversion to the little intruder.

The fact is, that Mrs. Sherwood, who had been much captivated by Mr. O'Callaghan's showy, off-hand manner, his civilities, and his flatteries, felt, for the first time in her life, that she had been taken in; and being a peculiarly prudent, cautious personage, of the slow, sluggish, stagnant temperament, which those who possess it are apt to account a virtue, and to hold in scorn their more excitable and impressible neighbours, found herself touched in the very point of honour, piqued, aggrieved, mortified; and denouncing the father as the greatest deceiver that ever trod the earth, could not help transferring some part of her hatred to the innocent child. She was really a good sort of woman, as I have said before, and every now and then her conscience twitched her, and she struggled hard to seem kind and to be so: but it would not do.

There the feeling was, and the more she struggled against it, the stronger, I verily believe, it became. Trying to conquer a deep-rooted aversion, is something like trampling upon camomile: the harder you tread it down the more it flourishes.

Under these evil auspices, the poor little Irish girl grew up amongst us. Not ill-used certainly, for she was fed and taught as we were; and some forty shillings a year more expended upon the trifles, gloves, and shoes, and ribbons, which make the difference between nicety and shabbiness in female dress, would have brought her apparel upon an equality with ours. Ill-used she was not: to be sure, teachers, and masters seemed to consider it a duty to reprimand her for such faults as would have passed unnoticed in another; and if there were any noise amongst us, she, by far the quietest and most silent person in the house, was, as a matter of course, accused of making it. Still she was not what would be commonly called ill-treated; although her young heart was withered and blighted, and her spirit crushed and broken by the chilling indifference, or the harsh unkindness which surrounded her on every side.

Nothing, indeed, could come in stronger contrast than the position of the young Irish girl, and that of her English companions. A stranger, almost a foreigner amongst us, with no home but that great school-room; no comforts, no indulgences, no knick-knacks, no money, nothing but the sheer, bare, naked necessities of a schoolgirl's life; no dear family to think of and to go to; no fond father to come to see her; no brothers and sisters; no kindred; no friends. It was a loneliness, a desolation, which, especially at breaking-up times, when all her schoolfellows went joyfully away each to her happy home, and she was left the solitary and neglected inhabitant of the deserted mansion, must have pressed upon

her very heart The heaviest tasks of the half year must have been pleasure and enjoyment compared with the dreariness of those lonesome holidays.

And yet she was almost as lonely when we were all assembled. Childhood is, for the most part, generous and sympathising; and there were many amongst us who, interested by her deserted situation, would have been happy to have been her friends. But Honor was one of those flowers which will only open in the bright sunshine. Never did marigold under a cloudy sky shut up her heart more closely than Honor O'Callaghan. In a word, Honor had really one of the many faults ascribed to her by Mrs. Sherwood, and her teachers and masters—that fault so natural and so pardonable in adversity—she was proud.

National and family pride blended with the personal feeling. Young as she was when she left Ireland, she had caught from the old nurse who had had the care of her infancy, rude legends of the ancient greatness of her country, and of the regal grandeur of the O'Connors, her maternal ancestors; and over such dim traces of Cathleen's legends as floated in her memory, fragments wild, shadowy, and indistinct, as the recollections of a dream, did the poor Irish girl love to brood. Visions of long-past splendour possessed her wholly, and the half-unconscious reveries in which she had the habit of indulging, gave a tinge of romance and enthusiasm to her character, as peculiar as her story.

Everything connected with her country had for her an indescribable charm. It was wonderful how, with the apparently scanty means of acquiring knowledge which the common school histories afforded, together with here and there a stray book borrowed for her by her young companions from their home libraries, and questions answered from the same source, she had contrived to collect her abundant and accurate information, as to its early annals and present position. Her antiquarian lore was perhaps a little tinged, as such antiquarianism is apt to be, by the colouring of a warm imagination; but still it was a remarkable exemplification of the power of an ardent mind to ascertain and combine facts upon a favourite subject under apparently insuperable difficulties. Unless in pursuing her historical inquiries, she did not often speak upon the subject. Her enthusiasm was too deep and too concentrated for words. But she was Irish to the heart's core, and had even retained, one can hardly tell how, the slight accent which in a sweet-toned female voice is so pretty.

In her appearance, also, there were many of the characteristics of her countrywomen. The roundness of form and clearness of complexion, the result of good nurture and pure blood which are often found in those who have been nursed in an Irish cabin, the abundant wavy hair and the deep-set grey eye. The face, in spite of some irregularity of feature, would have been pretty, decidedly pretty, if the owner had been happy; but the expression was too abstracted, too thoughtful, too melancholy for childhood or even for youth. She was like a rose shut up in a room, whose pale blossoms have hardly felt the touch of the glorious sunshine or the blessed air. A daisy of the field, a common, simple, cheerful looking daisy, would be pleasanter to gaze upon than the blighted queen of flowers.

Her figure was, however, decidedly beautiful. Not merely tall, but pliant, elastic, and graceful in no ordinary degree. She was not generally remarkable for accomplishment. How could she, in the total absence of the most powerful, as well

as the most amiable motives to exertion? She had no one to please; no one to watch her progress, to rejoice in her success, to lament her failure. In many branches of education she had not advanced beyond mediocrity, but her dancing was perfection; or rather it would have been so, if to her other graces she had added the charm of gaiety. But that want, as our French dancing-master used to observe, was so universal in this country, that the wonder would have been to see any young lady, whose face in a cotillion (for it was before the days of quadrilles) did not look as if she was following a funeral.

Such at thirteen I found Honor O'Callaghan, when I, a damsel some three years younger, was first placed at Mrs. Sherwood's; such five years afterwards I left her, when I quitted the school.

Calling there the following spring, accompanied by my good godfather, we again saw Honor silent and pensive as ever. The old gentleman was much struck with her figure and her melancholy. "Fine girl that!" observed he to me; "looks as if she was in love though," added he, putting his finger to his nose with a knowing nod, as was usual with him upon occasions of that kind. I, for my part, in whom a passion for literature was just beginning to develop itself had a theory of my own upon the subject, and regarded her with unwonted respect in consequence. Her abstraction appeared to me exactly that of an author when contemplating some great work, and I had no doubt but she would turn out a poetess. Both conjectures were characteristic, and both, as it happened, wrong.

Upon my next visit to London, I found that a great change had happened in Honor's destiny. Her father, whom she had been fond of investing with the dignity of a rebel, but who had, according to Mrs. Sherwood's more reasonable suspicion, been a reckless, extravagant, thoughtless person, whose follies had been visited upon himself and his family, with the evil consequences of crimes, had died in America; and his sister, the richly-jointured widow of a baronet, of old Milesian blood, who during his life had been inexorable to his entreaties to befriend the poor girl, left as it were in pledge at a London boarding-school, had relented upon hearing of his death, had come to England, settled all pecuniary matters to the full satisfaction of the astonished and delighted governess, and finally carried Honor back with her to Dublin.

From this time we lost sight altogether of our old companion. With her schoolfellows she had never formed even the common school intimacies, and to Mrs. Sherwood and her functionaries, she owed no obligation except that of money, which was now discharged. The only debt of gratitude which she had ever acknowledged, was to the old French teacher, who, although she never got nearer the pronunciation or the orthography of her name than *Mademoiselle l'Ocalie*, had yet, in the overflowing benevolence of her temper, taken such notice of the deserted child, as amidst the general neglect might pass for kindness. But she had returned to France. For no one else did Honor profess the slightest interest. Accordingly, she left the house where she had passed nearly all her life, without expressing any desire to hear again of its inmates, and never wrote a line to any of them.

We did hear of her, however, occasionally. Rumours reached us, vague and distant, and more conflicting even than distant rumours are wont to be. She was

distinguished at the vice-regal court, a beauty and a wit; she was married to a nobleman of the highest rank; she was a nun of the order of Mercy; she was dead.

And as years glided on, as the old school passed into other hands, and the band of youthful companions became more and more dispersed, one of the latter opinions began to gain ground among us, when two or three chanced to meet, and to talk of old schoolfellows. If she had been alive and in the great world, surely some of us should have heard of her. Her having been a Catholic, rendered her taking the veil not improbable; and to a person of her enthusiastic temper, the duties of the sisters of Mercy would have peculiar charms.

As one of that most useful and most benevolent order, or as actually dead, we were therefore content to consider her, until, in the lapse of years and the changes of destiny, we had ceased to think of her at all.

The second of this present month of May was a busy and a noisy day in my garden. All the world knows what a spring this has been. The famous black spring commemorated by Gilbert White can hardly have been more thoroughly ungenial, more fatal to man or beast, to leaf and flower, than this most miserable season, this winter of long days, when the sun shines as if in mockery, giving little more heat than his cold sister the moon, and the bitter north-east produces at one and the same moment the incongruous annoyances of biting cold and suffocating dust. Never was such a season. The swallows, nightingales, and cuckoos were a fortnight after their usual time. I wonder what they thought of it, pretty creatures, and how they made up their minds to come at all!—and the sloe blossom, the black thorn winter as the common people call it, which generally makes its appearance early in March along with the first violets, did not whiten the hedges this year until full two months later.* In short, everybody knows that this has been a most villanous season, and deserves all the ill that can possibly be said of it. But the second of May held forth a promise which, according to a very usual trick of English weather, it has not kept; and was so mild and smiling and gracious, that, without being quite so foolish as to indulge in any romantic and visionary expectation of ever seeing summer again, we were yet silly enough to be cheered by the thought that spring was coming at last in good earnest.

** It is extraordinary how some flowers seem to obey the season, whilst others are influenced by the weather. The hawthorn, certainly nearly akin to the sloe blossom, is this year rather forwarder, if anything, than in common years; and the fritillary, always a May flower, is painting the water meadows at this moment in company with "the blackthorn winter;" or rather is nearly over, whilst its cousin german, the tulip, is scarcely showing for bloom in the warmest exposures and most sheltered borders of the garden.*

In a word, it was that pleasant rarity a fine day; and it was also a day of considerable stir, as I shall attempt to describe hereafter, in my small territories.

In the street too, and in the house, there was as much noise and bustle as one would well desire to hear in our village.

The first of May is Belford Great Fair, where horses and cows are sold, and men meet gravely to transact grave business; and the second of May is Belford Little

Fair, where boys and girls of all ages, women and children of all ranks, flock into the town, to buy ribbons and dolls and balls and gingerbread, to eat cakes and suck oranges, to stare at the shows, and gaze at the wild beasts, and to follow merrily the merry business called pleasure.

Carts and carriages, horse-people and foot-people, were flocking to the fair; unsold cows and horses, with their weary drivers, and labouring men who, having made a night as well as a day of it, began to think it time to find their way home, were coming from it; Punch was being exhibited at one end of the street, a barrel-organ, surmounted by a most accomplished monkey, was playing at the other; a half tipsy horse-dealer was galloping up and down the road, showing off an unbroken forest pony, who threatened every moment to throw him and break his neck; a hawker was walking up the street crying Greenacre's last dying speech, who was hanged that morning at Newgate, and as all the world knows, made none; and the highway in front of our house was well nigh blocked up by three or four carriages waiting for different sets of visitors, and by a gang of gipsies who stood clustered round the gate, waiting with great anxiety the issue of an investigation going on in the hall, where one of their gang was under examination upon a question of stealing a goose. Witnesses, constables, and other officials were loitering in the court, and dogs were barking, women chattering, boys blowing horns, and babies squalling through all. It was as pretty a scene of crowd and din and bustle as one shall see in a summer's day. The fair itself was calm and quiet in comparison; the complication of discordant sounds in Hogarth's Enraged Musician was nothing to it.

Within my garden the genius of noise was equally triumphant. An ingenious device, contrived and executed by a most kind and ingenious friend, for the purpose of sheltering the pyramid of geraniums in front of my greenhouse,—consisting of a wooden roof, drawn by pullies up and down a high, strong post, something like the mast of a ship,* had given way; and another most kind friend had arrived with the requisite machinery, blocks and ropes, and tackle of all sorts, to replace it upon an improved construction. With him came a tall blacksmith, a short carpenter, and a stout collar-maker, with hammers, nails, chisels, and tools of all sorts, enough to build a house; ladders of all heights and sizes, two or three gaping apprentices, who stood about in the way, John willing to lend his aid in behalf of his flowers, and master Dick with his hands in his pockets looking on. The short carpenter perched himself upon one ladder, the tall blacksmith on another; my good friend, Mr. Lawson, mounted to the mast head; and such a clatter ensued of hammers and voices—(for it was exactly one of those fancy jobs where every one feels privileged to advise and find fault)—such clashing of opinions and conceptions and suggestions as would go to the building a county town.

** This description does not sound prettily, but the real effect is exceedingly graceful: the appearance of the dark canopy suspended over the pile of bright flowers, at a considerable height, has something about it not merely picturesque but oriental; and that a gentleman's contrivance should succeed at all points, as if he had been a real carpenter, instead of an earl's son and a captain in the navy, is a fact quite unparalleled in the annals of*

inventions.

Whilst this was going forward in middle air, I and my company were doing our best to furnish forth the chorus below. It so happened that two sets of my visitors were scientific botanists, the one party holding the Linnoean system, the others disciples of Jussieu; and the garden being a most natural place for such a discussion, a war of hard words ensued, which would have done honour to the Tower of Babel. "Tetradynamia," exclaimed one set; "Monocotyledones," thundered the other; whilst a third friend, a skilful florist, but no botanist, unconsciously out-long-worded both of them, by telling me that the name of a new annual was "Leptosiphon androsaceus."

Never was such a confusion of noises! The house door opened, and my father's strong clear voice was heard in tones of warning. "Woman, how can you swear to this goose?" Whilst the respondent squeaked out in something between a scream and a cry, "Please your worship, the poor bird having a-laid all his eggs, we had marked un, and so—" What farther she would have said being drowned in a prodigious clatter occasioned by the downfall of the ladder that supported the tall blacksmith, which, striking against that whereon was placed the short carpenter, overset that climbing machine also, and the clamor incident to such a calamity overpowered all minor noises.

In the meanwhile I became aware that a fourth party of visitors had entered the garden, my excellent neighbour, Miss Mortimer, and three other ladies, whom she introduced as Mrs. and the Misses Dobbs; and the botanists and florists having departed, and the disaster at the mast being repaired, quiet was so far restored, that I ushered my guests into the greenhouse, with something like a hope that we should be able to hear each other speak.

Mrs. Dobbs was about the largest woman I had ever seen in my life, fat, fair, and *fifty* with a broad rosy countenance, beaming with good-humour and contentment, and with a general look of affluence over her whole comfortable person. She spoke in a loud voice which made itself heard over the remaining din in the garden and out, and with a patois between Scotch and Irish, which puzzled me, until I found from her discourse that she was the widow of a linen manufacturer, in the neighbourhood of Belfast.

"Ay," quoth she, with the most open-hearted familiarity, "times are changed for the better with me since you and I parted in Cadogan Place. Poor Mr. Dobbs left me and those two girls a fortune of—— Why, I verily believe," continued she, interrupting herself, "that you don't know me!"

"Honor!" said one of the young ladies to the other, "only look at this butterfly!"

Honor! Was it, could it be Honor O'Callaghan, the slight, pale, romantic visionary, so proud, so reserved, so abstracted, so elegant, and so melancholy? Had thirty years of the coarse realities of life transformed that pensive and delicate damsel into the comely, hearty, and to say the truth, somewhat vulgar dame whom I saw before me? Was such a change possible?

"Married a nobleman!" exclaimed she when I told her the reports respecting herself. "Taken the veil! No, indeed! I have been a far humbler and happier woman. It is very strange, though, that during my Cinderella-like life at school, I

used always in my day-dreams to make my story end like that of the heroine of the fairy tale; and it is still stranger, that both rumours were within a very little of coming true,—for when I got to Ireland, which, so far as I was concerned, turned out a very different place from what I expected, I found myself shut up in an old castle, fifty times more dreary and melancholy than ever was our great school-room in the holidays, with my aunt setting her heart upon marrying me to an old lord, who might, for age and infirmities, have passed for my great grandfather; and I really, in my perplexity, had serious thoughts of turning nun to get rid of my suitor; but then I was allowed to go into the north upon a visit, and fell in with my late excellent husband, who obtained Lady O'Hara's consent to the match by the offer of taking me without a portion; and ever since," continued she, "I have been a very common-place and a very happy woman. Mr. Dobbs was a man who had made his own fortune, and all he asked of me was, to lay aside my airs and graces, and live with him in his own homely, old-fashioned way amongst his own old people, (kind people they were!) his looms, and his bleaching-grounds; so that my heart was opened, and I grew fat and comfortable, and merry and hearty, as different from the foolish, romantic girl whom you remember, as plain honest prose is from the silly thing called poetry. I don't believe that I have ever once thought of my old castles in the air for these five-and-twenty years. It is very odd, though," added she, with a frankness which was really like thinking aloud, "that I always did contrive in my visions that my history should conclude like that of Cinderella. To be sure, things are much better as they are, but it is an odd thing, nevertheless. Well! perhaps my daughters...!"

And as they are rich and pretty, and good-natured, although much more in the style of the present Honor than the past, it is by no means improbable that the vision which was evidently glittering before the fond mother's eyes, may be realised. At all events, my old friend is, as she says herself a happy woman—in all probability, happier than if the Cinderella day-dream had actually come to pass in her own comely person. But the transition! After all, there are real transformations in this every-day world, which beat the doings of fairy land all to nothing; and the change of the pumpkin into a chariot, and the mice into horses, was not to be compared for a moment with the transmogrification of Honor O'Callaghan into Mrs. Dobbs.