



HAGARENE.

BY THE

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H A G A R E N E.

CHAPTER I.

Now, in company with that halting imp who is ever at the romancer's service, let us pay one more visit to Ballynane gaol.

Three full days had elapsed since Evan Griffiths bade Mariette Clyde farewell, and his condition, both of body and mind, seemed unchanged. With much outward docility he had followed the surgeon's prescriptions, without greatly benefiting thereby: at least he still complained of the same palpitations and fits of faintness, and, according to his own account, slept no sounder. In several points, as you are aware, the prison discipline had been relaxed in his favour; and, perhaps, his chief indulgence was the permission to keep his gas burning long after the regular hour of curfew. It was not till midnight, indeed, that the jet was cut off in the corridor without.

The fourth day was far spent, and the Major, having done rather more justice than usual to his evening meal, was pacing to and fro in his cell, ac-

ording to his custom, when the warder on duty looked in whilst going his last round. As Griffiths bade the man good-night, he inquired if a note, that he would prepare in the meantime, could be sent down to barracks early on the morrow. On receiving an affirmative reply he seemed quite satisfied, and, as the door closed, sat down to the table, drawing writing materials towards him. A long time, however, elapsed before he actually put pen to paper: at last he began to indite a letter, and it ran thus,—

“MY DEAR MACALLISTER,—It may seem strange to you that one in my condition should be anxious about his health. But I have a strong desire to live on yet awhile, if only to let justice take its course. Somehow—this, too, may seem strange to you—I do not greatly fear the result.”

Only with a strong effort he succeeded in writing those words firmly. And, perforce, he paused here; for his brow grew damp and his features contracted as if a spasm racked him. Yet it was nothing more than a revolt of pride—if not of principle—against the penning of a lie. He went on after a pause; but the handwriting was visibly less steady.

“The surgeon here is both zealous and skilful. But your long knowledge of my habits and constitution might enable you to give him some useful hints;

and I am certain he would gladly consult with you. I leave it to you to fix——”

He came to an abrupt check here, saying half-aloud, in a thick, gasping voice—

“That’s enough, surely.”

And, as he spoke, the pen he had just filled dropped from his fingers on the paper, leaving a broad blot where it fell. Then he arose, and for some while paced to and fro again. He halted at length, immediately under the gas-jet; and, drawing forth the packet you wot of, unwrapped it very carefully.

Within the folds of brown paper was a small wooden case, rather shallow than deep, and within this again, wrapped in cotton, two common cardboard pill-boxes, one of about the ordinary size, the other infinitely smaller. The two last-named objects Griffiths laid on the table behind him, and then, with infinite pains, and not a little skill, proceeded to make a tiny pyre of the wooden case and outer wrappings, adding thereto certain written papers of his own: he coaxed and nursed the flame so effectually that at last nothing but a little heap of dark ashes remained, which a few strong breaths easily scattered to the four corners of the cell.

This accomplished, the prisoner sat down again, as though wishing to rest for awhile: he looked, indeed, strangely fagged and weary, considering that he

had scarcely done more than use his fingers deftly. But, as many of us can testify, to tire under the weight of thought is no rare case; and, in truth, the tenor of this man's musings was somewhat heavy.

By physical fear he was not troubled one whit. Having once accepted his position, he shrunk from it no more than he would have shrunk from some military service, the performance of which must need cost him his life. As for immaterial terrors—however miserably false their creed, few thorough fatalists are disquieted over measure when their foot is on the threshold of the unknown world. It was over the past, rather than over the future, that Evan Griffiths meditated, and the current of his thoughts ran very far back.

It had been a dull, colourless thing, this life of his, after all. Even as a boy, he had had no holidays; for, in his strict, methodical home, vacations were more irksome than school time. Though he liked his profession, lack of money and interest made his upward progress toilsome and slow; and, slaving always in the mill of routine, he had known nothing of the romance of war. Whilst his fellows took their pleasure without stint or shame, partly from pride, partly from temperament, he had stood aloof, looking on their vagaries with a certain scorn—expecting, too, doubtless, substantial reward for his virtue. And what