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THE TWELFTH RIG

IN SIX CHAPTERS

CHAPTER I. – THE CHARM SUGGESTED

In a certain district of Ireland, at the foot of a tall mountain, and well sheltered from the wind, stood the comfortable farm-house of Patrick Daly, who, though not much raised above that class, so numerous in Ireland, called small farmers, had by thrift and industry, aided no doubt by good fortune, attained to a position of some consideration, and was accounted a wealthy man in the neighbourhood. His farm was well stocked and his barns well filled.

The dwelling was a long low building, substantial and roomy, planted in front with some fine trees, among which the scarlet berries of the mountain-ash peeped forth, giving to the place a picturesque as well as comfortable air.

One source of Daly's wealth above others might perhaps be found in the fact that, beyond a daughter, he had no family. His wife had been dead many years; and this only daughter, now aged nineteen, ruled all within the house, not excepting her father. As the farm would be her undivided property, and it was known besides that Daly paid occasional visits to a certain bank in the nearest town, she was looked upon as a great heiress. Be that as it might, she was reckoned the loveliest girl in that part of the country.

On a mellow October afternoon, Eliza stood in the garden before her father's house engaged in lopping off branches from the mountain-ash trees. The finest and richest with berries were those she selected, as if they were destined for some festive occasion. The garden still presented a very pleasant appearance, though November was almost at hand; but the season had been a particularly mild one, and few signs of winter were yet apparent.

As Eliza stood thus, her head thrown back, the light straw-hat she wore fallen over her shoulders, and displaying the glossy coils of her raven hair, she made a charming picture. She had placed some of the crimson berries in her bosom and hair, and they became admirably her rich, sparkling brunette beauty. Had she arranged them so bewitchingly with any reference to some one who might chance to pass that way?

'Good-evening, Miss Daly,' said a voice at the gate; but it was the cracked tone of an old woman.

Eliza advanced, her arms laden with branches. An old woman, apparently about ninety years of age, stood there. Her form was bowed almost double, her face yellow and one mass of wrinkles; but the dark eyes were still keen and clear. She held a basket in her hand filled with small-wares, which she hawked about among the farm-houses in the neighbourhood, and thus earned her livelihood.

'Oh, it's you, Catty; and how are you?' she returned carelessly, while her bright black eyes darted a quick glance up the road.

'Very well, thank you kindly, Miss Daly. I see you're busy preparin' for to-morrow evenin'. If I'm not mistaken, it's the last Hallow-eve you'll spend as Miss Daly. If we may b'lieve all we hear, it's a happy bride you'll be long afore a year's over.'

She paused, as if expecting some confirmation or denial of this statement. Eliza, however, was engaged plucking off some withered leaves from the branches she held, and made no answer.

'He's a good, steady gorsoon, an' a handsome too, well worthy your choice; an' I'm sure' —

'*Who's* good and worthy my choice? Who is it you're talking about?' interrupted the girl, lifting her head quickly and speaking sharply, while the colour deepened on her cheek.

'Why, Mr Hogan, iv coorse. Sure, doesn't everybody know all about it; an' it's only waitin' they all are every Sunday to hear you an' him called in chapel.'

'Maybe then, they'll have to wait long enough. I might take it into my head to disappoint them and him, after all. Suppose I shouldn't marry at all; or suppose — suppose' — She stopped.

'Suppose there is some one else you like better. But sure, didn't you give the go-by to all the boys in the place? an' aren't you an' Mr Hogan always constant together? at laste used to be till the last month or so, when young Mr Crofton cum home from foreign parts. But you wouldn't be so foolish as to be afther thinkin' of a gintleman like him. An' you know, besides, don't you, that he's been plighted since both were childer to his father's ward, Miss Ellen Courtney, that's come to live at the Hall?'

'I neither know nor care whether he is or whether he isn't,' returned Eliza, with a haughty little toss of her head and a touch of defiance in her tone. 'He's not married to her yet, at all events, no more than am I to Will Hogan. But tell me, Catty, have you seen Miss Courtney yet? I hear she's very beautiful.'

'Yis, I have; an' a sweeter, lovelier-lookin' craythur never lighted on this earth — so gentle an' kind to all in her manner too, an' ready to help them that's in trouble. The folks are all jist delighted to think Crofton Hall will have sich a mistress.'

'Maybe she'd never be that, after all.'

'Well, maybe not. But tell me honey, is there anythin' rale at all betune you an' Mr Crofton, or is it jist a little divarsion you're havin', to thry Will Hogan's temper?'

Eliza broke into a ringing laugh. 'Settle it whichever way you please,' she answered. 'Call a jury of twelve of your gossips, and do you state the case to them.'

The old woman shook her head, and her strangely undimmed eyes shot forth a flash of anger. She was ill accustomed to be spoken to thus pertly; for old Catty was looked upon with reverence and some awe, and considered as a kind of oracle in the neighbourhood, both on account of her extreme age and the wisdom of her sayings, which it was declared never failed to come true.

'Woe be to them that part plighted lovers! Woe be to them that break their own plight, woe an' bitter wailin'!' she exclaimed; then drawing her cloak round her, she moved on without a word of parting.

The smile instantly faded from Eliza's lips. 'That old creature sends a chill through me,' she muttered in a tone of annoyance. 'Would it be for my woe? Oh, if I could read the future!' Suddenly throwing down her boughs, she opened the gate and ran up the road after the old woman. 'Forgive me,' she said, coming up with her. 'I didn't mean to be rude. Now tell me, Catty — they say you know everything — what will be my fate? Shall I be happier next Hallow-eve than I am now? Or — or — shall I do anything to bring misfortune on me?'

'Sure, how can I tell?' returned the other.

'You are angry with me still. Come now, do tell me. You know you can, if you like. You've told others, and weren't you always right?'

'If you want to know your fate, try the charm o' the Twelfth Rig.'

'And what is that? Tell me what I must do.'

They were standing beneath a wall. The old woman seated herself on a stone, and leant her arms on her knees. As she sat thus, her red cloak drawn closely about her, her spare gray locks hanging

loose, her eyes glancing restlessly about with a strange kind of motion, as if they were set in work by mechanism, she looked like some weird sibyl of ancient days. Eliza had to repeat her question before an answer came. Then, in a mysterious undertone, but so distinct that not a word was lost, the other said: 'You must go to a field wid furrows stretchin' from north to south. Go in at the western side, an' walk slowly over the ridges till you come to the twelfth, then stop in the middle, an' listen. If you hear merry music an' dancin', there's a long an' happy life afore you; but if mournful cries an' groans, you'll die afore a year's over.'

'How frightful!' murmured Eliza, shuddering. 'And should one go alone?'

'Yis, entirely alone, an' unknownst to any livin' sowl.' As she uttered these words, she rose and walked on with a rapidity astonishing in one so old and feeble.

Eliza gazed after her. She wanted to ask more questions, but fearing to do so, she too turned and walked away in the opposite direction.

The wall they had stood beside inclosed a spacious park. But behind that wall there had been a listener to their words, of whose presence they were not aware.

In the centre of the smoothly gravelled side-path a young lady stood still. She seemed to have been taking an evening saunter when the voices outside arrested her attention. As she now walked slowly on, she appeared to be sunk in deep reflection, evidently of no cheerful nature. The deep dark-blue eyes, whenever the snowy lids with their fringe of long black lashes allowed them to become visible, were full of mournful expression. It was a beautiful face, a perfect oval in contour, with features more strictly regular than those of the rustic beauty Eliza Daly; but wanting in the brilliancy and richness of colouring which made the great charm of that sparkling little brunette. The full white forehead was very thoughtful. One could see that melancholy would be at any time the characteristic of her countenance, as it indeed frequently is of thoughtful faces. But there was so much sweetness and gentleness in it, and the charm of its pensiveness was such, that you would not have wished to change it for a gayer look.

'How will it all end?' murmured the lady. 'How will things be with *me* in a year? If I believed in presentiments I would say that this weight that presses on me boded evil. Which of the two fates is to be mine? To die, or to live and be *his* wife. One or the other, I think; but which?'

Suddenly she again stopped, and listened with her head bent down. No sound seemed to break the silence of the evening; but after a few minutes, footsteps on the road without became distinctly heard, a light elastic tread, with a firmness in its fall that told it was that of a man. She listened with suspended breath, standing perfectly motionless, the colour suffusing her pale cheek, her hands clasped tightly, as if in intensest agitation and suspense. The steps came nearer and nearer, went by the park wall, reached the gate, and as they receded, the colour faded slowly from the expectant face, the hands unlocked themselves, and drooped by her side, while her breath returned with a low gasping sigh.

The next moment a thought seemed to strike her; she sprang towards the wall, and stepping on the trunk of a fallen tree, looked over it down the road. The figure of a young man was visible at a little distance, and while he walked, as if in careless mood, he passed his cane lightly through the wayside grass and flowers, striking off their heads as he went by. She watched him till he disappeared from view, taking the turn which led to Daly's farm.

'I knew it, I knew it!' she murmured; and in that passion of sorrow which seems as if it must take hold of and cling to something, she wound her arms tightly about the young elm that stood by her side, striving to choke back the sobs that rose in her throat. The evening breeze went moaning through its topmost boughs, mingling its sighs with hers. A shower of yellow leaves, shaken by her convulsive grasp, fell around her to the ground, like the faded hopes for which she lamented.

CHAPTER II. – THE CHARM TRIED

The house of Patrick Daly was ever a favourite resort on festive occasions; he was himself much liked for his hospitality and genial manner; and wherever Eliza was, there the male portion of the population of the place were eager to go; although many amongst them had given up their claims to her hand in favour of the young farmer Hogan, they now stood by to see whether he who had defeated them would himself be defeated by any still more powerful rival.

There was a merry gathering at the farm on the eve of All-Hallows. Many bright pretty faces were present that might well have consoled the disappointed ones; but beside the radiant young hostess who, in more than usual beauty, dispensing smiles and hospitality at the head of the table, they all paled into insignificance. At least so thought Hogan, as he sat by her and watched her graceful movements, and listened with rapture to her sweet ringing laughter; the merriest and most silvery of all, it seemed to him.

On his other side a fair gentle-looking girl was seated, who divided with Eliza the duties of hostess-ship. But though her soft blue eyes rested often on his face, and she evidently listened to him with more attention than the other, he seldom turned to address her. This was Eliza's cousin, Mary Conlan, who lived at the farm. Daly had risen to his present comfort by his own efforts, but had relations who were in a very different position; and Mary's parents when living, had occupied a very poor cottage. On their death Daly brought her to reside with him. Though her attractions of person, and still more so those of fortune, could bear no comparison with Eliza's, she was still not without her admirers; but notwithstanding her gentleness, it seemed that she could be saucy too, for none had as yet succeeded in winning her. Daly, however, was not anxious for her marriage, for she was invaluable in his household. Though Eliza had decorated the room and filled the vases with autumn flowers, Mary it was who had made the cakes which the company seemed to appreciate so highly, and whose skill as a housewife had in a great measure won for the farm its reputation of always having everything of the best description. That Mary Conlan would make a model farmer's wife, everybody declared. Eliza was unusually gracious this evening, smiling upon Hogan almost as of old, and playing off a hundred arch little tricks at his expense. Daly looked on well pleased, for there was nothing he desired so much as a marriage between his daughter and the young farmer. Whispers went round that 'to be sure it was no one but Will Hogan Eliza would marry after all, and it was only nonsense to think she'd ever had any other idea in her head.'

Thus pleasantly, amidst talk and laughter, the tea and cakes were passing round, when suddenly the door was thrown open, and a young man, whose dress and bearing unmistakably stamped him as belonging to a very different class from any of those assembled, appeared on the threshold. He started as if surprised, on seeing the company; but a close observer might have noticed something a little studied in the movement, as if the intruder were not altogether so taken aback as he would have it appear. He advanced easily, however, and going up to the young hostess, apologised gracefully for his intrusion, requesting at the same time that as chance had led him there, he might not now be excluded from so pleasant a gathering. Eliza, blushing, but with warmth, gave the desired permission that he should remain; whereupon he drew a chair to her side, heedless of one, farther removed, offered him by Daly, who did not seem by any means so flattered as might be expected by the condescension of his landlord's son in thus honouring his house.

There was a constrained pause. Charles Crofton, however, leant back in his chair, conversing with Eliza, and throwing out two or three general remarks of a nature to provoke laughter, soon contrived to restore things to their former state. But for Hogan all enjoyment was gone. He sat moody and silent, a frown knitting his usually open brow.

The two competitors for Eliza Daly's favour were as great contrasts in appearance as in rank. Hogan was the taller of the two, being above six feet, and of more powerful and vigorous, though

less graceful build. Could he have settled his claim to Eliza by personal combat, it is likely that the other would have fared but ill at his hands. Both were handsome – Crofton particularly so; and it is probable that the cultivated expression of his features and the play of his handsome eyes, which he knew well how to make the best use of, would have a greater charm for Eliza than the frank sun-burnt countenance and straightforward untutored orbs of her rustic lover.

'All-Hallows eve, is it not?' inquired the new-comer, bending close to Miss Daly. 'Has any one got a ring? Have you?'

'No, indeed; no one has yet, I believe.'

'Then I'm in luck, for here is one in my cake; and there, Miss Daly, why you have the other half.'

'Well now,' whispered some of those near, 'if that isn't an omen, to get a ring the same minute!'

'Tisn't the right half,' exclaimed Hogan, somewhat roughly. 'I have that. – Don't you know, Eliza,' he whispered, 'I got one before.'

'This fits exactly,' said Crofton, trying his own and Eliza's together. And so they did; but it seemed that seeing was not believing, in Hogan's case.

'No,' he persisted; 'they aren't fits at all. Let me try.' He stretched out his hand, and almost snatched the little shining crescent from the white fingers of Crofton, who relinquished it quietly, and with a provoking smile watched the other's vain efforts to make it fit.

'You see now it won't do,' he said banteringly. 'What haven't been made for each other won't go together, no matter how you may try. But cheer up; you'll find the match yet.'

The young farmer, however, returned his smile with a very black frown, and stood up. As he did so he perceived Crofton whisper to Eliza, who laughed merrily and glanced at him. He could willingly have struck the young gentleman at that moment. He determined, however, not to let him have altogether his own way if possible; and when the tea was removed and dancing begun, he went up to Eliza and requested her hand. But Eliza was engaged, and told him so.

'Dance the next with me then, won't you?' he pleaded earnestly.

'No; I won't: I don't want such a sulky partner,' answered she with a saucy laugh.

'I am not sulky, Eliza; indeed I am not. I'm only sorry and vexed that you should turn from me so, and for a stranger. It is not fair treatment.'

'Not fair treatment indeed!' returned the girl, with a queenly toss of her graceful little head and a curl of her rosy lip. 'Ah, now say no more, Will Hogan.' And away she went round and round with Crofton, while the fiddles struck up a merry tune.

Hogan stood still between two minds whether he would go away at once; but he was reluctant to let his rival see him abandon the field. When, however, the dance was finished, and the burning of nuts and other Hallow-eve rites began, he still found no opportunity of approaching Eliza; and all the omens which in other years had been favourable to his cause were against him. At last, when Eliza's nut being placed beside his, instantly bounded away and fell into the fire, there was silence for a moment, and glances were exchanged.

Dancing having recommenced, several came round Eliza requesting her hand; but she answered hurriedly that she could not take part in this dance, but would in the next. She had things to look after just now, and must leave them for a little while. Saying which, she quietly quitted the room.

A few minutes after, a slight figure wrapped in a cloak might have been seen gliding through the farm-stead. On emerging by the back-gate on the road, it stood still for a moment and looked behind. The pale moonbeams gleamed on the face; but so blanched were the features, so altered the expression, that even had any of her friends been near they might almost have failed to recognise Eliza. With a shiver, as if the chill wind pierced her after the heated room she had left, she drew the hood of her cloak closer over her face and began to speed rapidly along. Nor did she pause or again look around till, some distance from home, she at last stopped, breathless, at the gate of a potato-field. For a minute or two she stood before it, as if irresolute.

'Shall I go back without trying it after all?' she murmured. 'No; I will go on, and see what comes of it.'

She entered the field and began to walk slowly across the ridges, counting them as she went till she had numbered TWELVE; then she stood still and listened intently. The wind, which was high, swept over the wide unsheltered space around. Was that its murmur she heard? She held her breath. Low moans and sobbing sighs seemed to mingle with it. Surely no wind ever wailed with such human anguish as that. Louder and clearer it rose, swelling on the breeze, full of more piercing passionate sorrow. She remained rooted to the spot, terror-stricken, her heart almost ceasing to beat. The sounds seemed to come along the ground. As she listened, a slender figure rose up slowly, as if from off the earth, confronting her in the uncertain light, and gazing upon her with a cold sorrowful eye. Shrieking, Eliza rushed back, stumbling and sometimes falling over the ridges as she ran. How she gained the road, she scarcely knew, but she found herself flying along it, with the cry of 'Doomed, doomed!' ringing in her ears. She had heard it, low and despairing, as she left the field, as if wrung from some soul in mortal terror and anguish; now it seemed repeated by a hundred voices exclaiming: 'Doomed, doomed!' She flew before it, pressing her hands to her ears, to shut out the sound.

The farm-house was reached in a shorter time than one could have imagined possible. She wrenched open the gate, rushed up the garden-path, and with trembling hands knocked loudly at the door. The summons rang through the house, above the music and dancing, and the buzz of laughing voices. Everybody flew into the hall. On the door being opened, Eliza rushed in, and would have sunk fainting on the threshold if Hogan had not caught her in his arms. She was carried into the room and laid on the sofa, while every remedy for fainting was procured. Where had she been? was the question each asked the other. Her hair, damp and dishevelled, hung about her, her dress was torn and soiled, her hands covered with clay, and bleeding. At length the remedies had effect; consciousness began to return, and when it did, it came quickly. She opened her eyes and gazed earnestly round, as if seeking for some face. If it was Crofton she sought, he was not there, having left some time before.

'What has happened, dearest Eliza?' whispered Hogan, close by her side. 'Where have you been?'

'I went out, and was frightened,' she murmured.

'And what frightened you, mavourneen?' asked he coaxingly, as if speaking to a wayward child.

But she made no reply, nor could any questioning draw from her an explanation. The party broke up, and each went home indulging in all manner of conjectures as to what had happened. It was whispered by some that Eliza had gone to the Twelfth Rig.

VITAL FORCE

Though we have not the slightest conception of what life is in itself, and consequently could not define it, we may, for the sake of convenience, think of it in this paper as some kind of force.

'In the wonderful story,' says Professor Huxley in his *Lay Sermons*, 'of the *Peau de Chagrin*, the hero becomes possessed of a magical wild ass's skin, which yields him the means of gratifying all his wishes. But its surface represents the duration of the proprietor's life; and for every satisfied desire, the skin shrinks in proportion to the intensity of fruition, until at length life and the last handbreadth of the *peau de chagrin* disappear with the gratification of a last wish. Protoplasm or the physical basis of life is a veritable *peau de chagrin*, and for every vital act it is somewhat the smaller. All work implies waste, and the work of life results, directly or indirectly, in the waste of protoplasm. Every word uttered by a speaker costs him some physical loss; and in the strictest sense, he burns that others may have light – so much eloquence, so much of his body resolved into carbonic acid, water, and urea. It is clear that this process of expenditure cannot go on for ever. But happily, the protoplasmic *peau de chagrin* differs in its capacity of being repaired and brought back to its full size, after every exertion. For example, this present lecture is conceivably expressible by the number of grains of protoplasm and other bodily substance wasted in maintaining my vital processes during its delivery. My *peau de chagrin* will be distinctly smaller at the end of the discourse than it was at the beginning. By-and-by I shall have recourse to the substance commonly called mutton, for the purpose of stretching it back to its original size.'

This explanation may be very philosophical, but it is only a roundabout way of saying that, within reasonable bounds, we can recover the effects of exhaustion by proper food and rest; which, as a fact, people are pretty well acquainted with. The error to be avoided is, in any shape to make such a pull on the constitution as to be beyond the reach of recovery. Life-force, or call it protoplasm, is an inherent quantity not to be heedlessly wasted; and this truth becomes more apparent the older we grow. Why is one man greater, in the sense of being more powerful than another? Because he knows how to get out of himself a greater amount of work with less waste of life-force.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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