CHAPTER XVII

STEPHEN BUTLER arrived at Dhulough late one evening during the week which followed Father Staunton's denunciation of the Land League. As he drove home he heard from his groom an account of the demonstration in the village on the previous Sunday evening. It was difficult to believe that the people had really shown disrespect and hostility to their parish priest. Stephen questioned and cross-questioned the groom, willing to think, if possible, that the story he heard was an exaggerated account of some trifling occurrence. But the answers to his questions brought him no satisfaction. The groom was a Roman Catholic and had heard the priest's sermon about the Land League. He had also heard the comments of the people on their way home after mass. It was certain that a meeting of the Land League Committee had been held the same evening, and that Father O'Sullivan had presided at it. The people, according to the groom's account, had stood in groups in the street waiting for the conclusion of the meeting. Father O'Sullivan had gone straight home to the presbytery and shut himself up. Very few others had gone home.

"Do you mean to say that you think Father O'Sullivan encouraged the people to hoot the parish priest?" asked Stephen.

"Indeed he did not, sir. Why would he do such a thing? They say he was mad angry the next day about it. Didn't I say he was at home and out of the way?"

"Well then, who goaded the people to do such a thing? They'd never have done it if they'd been left to themselves."

"Unless it was some of the boys from beyond out at Cuslough, sir. But, sure, nobody knows,"

Stephen Butler slept uneasily. Things were evidently more serious than he expected.

Next day he set out to drive to Mr. Manders' house immediately after breakfast. It was a fair day in Dhulough, and the village was crowded. Going through the streets, he noticed a definite hostility towards him in the attitude of the people. Men turned their backs when they saw him approaching. Women went into their houses and shut the doors. No one except the policeman, who stood at the gate of the barrack, saluted him. This was a curious experience for Stephen. He was accustomed to have hats touched to him, to greet the men and women who passed, and to be answered by them. He could scarcely believe that the change in the people's demeanour was deliberate and intentional. Outside the village he pulled up his horse and bade the groom drive slowly along the road. He himself walked back through the village to the gate of his own demesne. The people saw him coming, and this time the street was almost entirely empty. He had no opportunity of speaking to any one. He turned and walked through the street again. A young man whom he did not know, possibly one of those alluded to by his servant as "boys from beyond out at Cuslough," stood in the middle of the street. He stared Stephen full in the face, and, as he passed, spat on the ground. Stephen walked on. In a minute he was overtaken by the young man, who turned towards him, spat again, and then passed. Twenty yards further up the street the man turned, walked towards Stephen, and once more as he passed spat. There was no possibility of escaping from the conclusion that he meant to be insulting. Stephen hesitated. His first impulse, not wholly an unnatural one, was to turn, meet the man, and knock him down. He resisted the temptation

quickened his pace, and got clear of the village street before he was overtaken again.

He drove rapidly to Mr. Manders' house. He found the agent in his dining-room with the remains of his breakfast on the table before him. He was not an early riser, and there was seldom any necessity for him to be in his office before eleven o'clock.

"Hullo," said Mr. Manders. "What's brought you home? I thought you'd have been up to your eyes in defending the cause of the poor downtrodden Irishman against the Saxon oppressor. If you'll excuse my saying so, you're rather a fool to come home just now. Ireland is a very good country to be out of at present. It's in the devil of a state, and getting rapidly worse."

"What has happened?" asked Stephen. "I hear that Father Staunton was booed in the street of the village on Sunday night, and the same wasn't far off happening to me this morning."

"Oh, that's nothing, I assure you. I was shot at myself last week."

"I saw something about that in the papers. But surely it wasn't true? They didn't actually attempt your life?"

"The bullet ripped up the cushion on the well of the car, and must have gone uncommonly near taking the ear off the horse. I don't know whether you call that attempting my life. If they only wanted to frighten me, I wish they would have the decency to fire blank cartridges."

"My God, how horrible!"

"Oh, that's only the beginning. There's worse coming, I suspect. You see, we're just having a little foretaste of what Home Rule will be like when we get it."

Stephen winced and stood silent.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Manders. "I oughtn't to have said that. I forgot for the moment that you are a Home Ruler. I only

remembered that you're a gentleman, and in the same boat with the rest of us."

"Never mind. I must expect to have such things said to me. But, mind you, I am not going to change my opinions. This isn't nationalism, it's a conspiracy."

"All right. We won't quarrel over the name of the thing. The point is, how are we going to get in the rents and still keep our skins whole? We can argue out the difference between nationalism and the Land League afterwards."

"I suppose you offered my tenants twenty-five per cent reduction as I told you, on account of the bad harvest."

"I offered it. Yes."

"Well?"

"I haven't had a penny paid, except by two or three fellows, who came up here after dark with their money, and begged and prayed of me not to tell on them."

"But surely——"

"Look here, Butler, it's as well for you to be clear about this matter. Your property is underrented, let at less than the market-value of the land, and you offer a reduction of twenty-five per cent off that. Very well. Lord Daintree's estate is fairly rented. I don't say rack-rented, for it's not, and he offers no reduction. Mr. Snell's little bit of property round Cuslough is rack-rented. That's the position of the three estates I manage. But not one of the three of you is going to get his rents paid. This Land League isn't an organisation for obtaining fair rents or anything of that sort. It's a conspiracy to prevent the payment of any rent, fair or unfair, and the weapons it uses are outrage and terrorism. Come to the office with me and I'll show you something that will make you open your eyes."

Mr. Manders' office was conveniently situated, being in fact a wing of the house, with an en-

trance door of its own. It contained two rooms, an outer office in which the clerks worked, and an inner office which communicated with the house by a private door, in which Mr. Manders did business. Into this room he led Stephen Butler.

"Look at that," said Mr. Manders, pointing to the chimney-piece.

Stephen Butler looked. At first it seemed to him that his agent had hit on an eccentric plan of papering his walls with old letters instead of putting them into the waste-paper basket. For about three feet above the chimney-piece the wall was covered with scraps of paper, some stuck up with fragments of the selvedge of postage stamps, some with dabs of gum, others with tacks or pins driven through them.

"Go over and read them," said Mr. Manders.

Stephen began at the top row and read across the fireplace.

"Your graive is dug. If their is a prair in your dastardly hart, say it before you're damned."

The spelling was eccentric, purposely eccentric as it seemed, for "prayer," a comparatively easy word, was spelt wrong while the writer had been successful with "dastardly" and "damned." The next letter was adorned at the top with a picture of a coffin. It was brief, but very much to the point.

"The abuv," he read, "is for you."

Afterwards came a much more grandiloquent epistle whose authors despised the disguise of bad spelling.

"At the Council of the Confederation of the Green Sons of Liberty it was decided, after vote taken, and by the unanimous opinion of the members, that sentence of death should be inflicted on Mr. James Manders, Esq., J.P. (so called). You are hereby given notice of the fact. Signed by order."

"That one," said Mr. Manders, "was dropped

into my letter-box some time on Wednesday night. On Thursday the ruffians had a shot at me and missed, missed, by God, and they couldn't have been twenty paces distant when they fired! Have you had enough of those things? They're not all mine. Some of them came to my clerks. Poor devils, they were frightened into fits at first, but they're getting accustomed to the feel of it now. More of them came to tenants suspected of having paid their rents. I'm making a collection of the documents. I hope to have the whole room papered with them in the course of the next few years; that is to say if I haven't succeeded before that in shooting all the fellows that write them."

There was a knock at the door and one of the clerks entered the room.

"Mr. Heverin and another man want to see you, sir."

"Mr. Heverin! Do you mean Fat Heverin, the publican from Cuslough?"

The clerk grinned.

"Well, hasn't he the devil's own insolence?"

Mr. Manders turned to Stephen and added in explanation—

"He's the secretary of the Dhulough and Cuslough branch of the League. And who might the other gentleman be?" he asked.

"He didn't give his name," said the clerk; "but I think he's the son of old Sheridan, the man we evicted on the Snell estate."

"Very well," said Mr. Manders. "Tell them I'm engaged at present, but I'll see them in a quarter of an hour or so. They can cool their heels outside till I'm ready."

The clerk left the room.

"Don't let me interfere with your business," said Stephen. "I'll go outside and smoke a pipe till you've finished talking to these men."

"Don't do anything of the sort," said Mr. Manders. "I should like you to be present to

hear what they say. It's sure to be amusing. I didn't send that message because I couldn't see them at once, but because it's good for these fellows to be kept waiting. It takes the keen edge off their self-importance. They are a deputation, you may be sure, and they're swelled up with a notion of the grandeur of their position. There's nothing better for them than to stroll about a bit outside and feel that nobody's taking any notice of them. In the meanwhile we'll get ready for them."

Mr. Manders unlocked a drawer in his writing-desk and took out a revolver. He laid it on a pile of papers in front of him. Then he took out a handful of cartridges from a box and put them beside the revolver.

"Surely," said Stephen, watching him, "that can't be necessary."

"Not in the least. Heverin's the last man in Ireland who'd attempt anything so risky as an assault on me. But he'll go away and tell the rest of his gang that I threatened his life. That'll make a hero of him and teach the others caution. As a matter of fact the thing is not loaded." He took it up and pulled the trigger three or four times. "Besides, the cartridges wouldn't fit it. Anyway, it isn't the weapon I'd use if I meant business. It's an old pattern, far too heavy in the handle; kicks like the mischief and always throws high. Oh, no, I have quite a different tool for real use. This is for show. It looks murderous. You watch Heverin's face when I put my hand upon it carelessly in the course of conversation. See if he doesn't go white about the gills."

"Don't do that sort of thing," said Stephen. "What's the good of it? Reason with the men. Talk sense to them."

"That's all very fine. I may tell you that I have reasoned with them and talked sense. But you might just as well reason with a tiger in the Zoo when he's got your arm dragged through

the bars of his cage. I listened to you talking nationalism in the past and didn't worry you or laugh at you, but I knew very well what would come of it. And now this is a serious business. We've got away from speculative opinions. We're dealing with hard facts. When my life is in danger I feel entitled to take the best precautions I can to protect it."

Mr. Manders rang a small hand-bell which stood on his desk. The clerk opened the door and ushered in Mr. Heverin and his companion, young Sheridan, son of the evicted tenant. Heverin came forward and bowed to the agent. Then, catching sight of Stephen, he said—

"I'm glad to see you home again, Mr Butler."

He stood rubbing his hands together and smiling in a vacuous manner. Much in the same way he would have stood and smiled behind his counter a few months before if a respected customer had entered his shop and given him an order. His eyes moved from Mr. Manders' face to Stephen's and back again. Then he glanced quickly round the room. He started when he saw the decorative letters stuck above the chimney-piece, started again and fidgeted uneasily, rubbing his feet on the carpet, when he caught sight of the revolver and the cartridges. Mr. Manders eyed him with quiet contempt. It was quite obvious that Mr. Heverin was a coward. His companion behaved differently. Sheridan was a young man, probably not more than five-and-twenty years of age. He was of more than ordinary height, and looked even taller than he was because he was slightly built and was besides extremely thin, almost emaciated. His skin was dark; his clean-shaved face sallow and dusky. He had long, straight, black hair, locks of which hung over his forehead and gave him a wild, unkempt appearance. He had large, dark eyes—eyes capable of expressing, and accustomed to express, an extraordinary range of

emotions. They were the eyes of a dreamer, of one for whom old romantic things might be plainly visible, who might see the fairy cavalry sweep across the country on stormy nights; who might, under certain conditions, see the Son of God walking in beggar-man's attire through the fields of Ireland. He was the best man in the whole county at playing the fiddle, and the people said that when he played his face was wonderful to look at. They saw in his eyes then the passion of love at its highest, love that was pure of all sensual feeling, the supreme desire for some ideal perfection. But those great eyes of his were capable also of letting white-hot anger, fury, and an unquenchable desire for revenge, shine through them. Mr. Manders had seen nothing but a ragged peasant with a sulky face standing a little apart from the crowd on the morning when the Sheridans were turned out of house and home. But if Mr. Manders had looked more closely, if he had been capable of seeing what was in the young man's face, he, brave man as he was, might have trembled. The same light of fierce passion was in his eyes now as he stood, with his arms dropped stiff by his sides, staring straight in front of him.

Since the eviction he had lived among his neighbours, going from house to house, doing a day's work for one or another, often sleeping in the open air, often going for a day or more without food. The committee of the Land League had associated this man with Heverin, because, in spite of all his fine talk, they were not very sure of Heverin. Young Sheridan was no talker. But he could be relied on to prevent any kind of treachery or double dealing.

"Well," said Mr. Manders cheerfully, "here you are and here I am. Now what do you want?"

"We come," said Mr. Heverin, "on behalf of the Land League to make certain proposals."

"Then you may just as well go home again.

I don't recognise the League as a body that has any right to do business with me, and I won't hear what the League has got to say."

"It might be better for yourself to listen," said Heverin truculently.

He glanced at his companion while he spoke, as if he was anxious that his words should be noted.

"If you mean to threaten me," said Mr. Manders, "you're simply wasting your breath. You may as well understand me clearly. I'm perfectly willing to meet the tenants of any of the estates I manage, and talk to them or hear what they have to say. I won't receive deputations, or spend my time listening to the demands of a body like your League."

"Is that all the message I'm to take back again to the committee?"

Mr. Manders took up the empty revolver from the table in front of him and looked at it admiringly. Then he poised it in his hand, raised and lowered it slightly, got out his pocket-handkerchief and began to polish the barrel.

"I suppose," he said, "that you never read Roman history, Mr. Heverin?"

Heverin scowled. He had an uneasy sense that Mr. Manders was poking fun at him. He suspected some latent insult, without being able to say exactly where it lay. He was, in his own opinion, a man of great importance, occupying a responsible position as ambassador from one great belligerent power to another.

"I'm not here to be insulted," he said. "As the representative of the people I——"

Mr. Manders became exceedingly bland and polite.

"Nothing was further from my mind than to insult you. I assume with pleasure that you have studied the history of the ancient Romans. If you like I'll take it for granted that you read a chapter of Livy at every meeting of the League."

He toyed ostentatiously with the revolver.

"As a student of the classics, Mr. Heverin, you will recollect the story of the king who answered a messenger by cutting the heads off all the big poppies in his garden. The messenger understood that his actions were of more importance than his words, if he spoke at all. I can't at this moment recollect whether he did or not. I hope, Mr. Heverin, that you will prove an equally sagacious messenger."

While he spoke he took up the cartridges as if to slip them into the chambers of the revolver, smiling blandly at Mr. Heverin as he held them in his hand.

Then suddenly young Sheridan spoke.

"Mr. Butler——"

Stephen started. He had not expected to be addressed. Mr. Manders interposed.

"Kindly address your remarks to me. Mr. Butler is here merely by accident and is taking no part in this discussion."

"Mr. Butler——" said young Sheridan again, without apparently heeding Mr. Manders' interruption.

Something in the man's face, the intense eagerness of his eyes, the thin drawn cheeks, the lips trembling with excitement, moved Stephen.

"Let the man say his say, Manders," he said.

"Mr. Butler," began Sheridan again. Then he stopped dead. There was something which he wanted to say, but he could find no words in which to say it.

"Mr. Butler."

Stephen smiled at him gently, kindly.

Then suddenly the words came pouring from the young man's lips rapidly, almost incoherently.

"It's little good I am at speaking anyway, and no good at speaking the English. But it's this that's in my heart to say to you. Many and many's the time I've heard my father telling me of the days long ago before the famine; the way when he was a boy your father did be coming

into the house where my father was reared, and how he would be talking the Irish to the old man that was in it then, my grandfather. There was a love on my people for your people in those days. Then the famine came and the fever after it, and your father came home again, and it was more the people loved him and not less, for it's wonderful all that he did for them. But he died, and may God have mercy on him, and Gorteen and all the old townland was sold to a stranger. Maybe it couldn't be helped, for they were hard times then for landlord and tenant. But the man that came raised the rents on the people, and he raised them again, and more than twice, till the money that was on them at him was what couldn't be paid, let a man work early and late. The harvests came bad on us at the latter end. We were put out. It wasn't you that would do the like of such a thing to us, but done it was. My father is in the workhouse and my mother along with him. And myself—but, sure, it's no matter about myself."

He stopped and sobbed suddenly. Then after a struggle for composure spoke again.

"I'm not begging from you, nor it's not asking mercy or pity I am. But I'm telling you this so that whatever comes you may know what the people that once were your own people and would have died for you or yours—that you may know the things they are suffering now. You're angry to-day—yes, there's anger in your heart, don't I know it? Can't I see it? But it's justice we're asking, only justice and no more. Let Mr. Manders here think what he likes and let the law, that's no law of ours nor yet of God's, do what it likes to us. But you'll remember, Mr. Butler, for the sake of them that's gone from yourself and from us, you'll remember the old times. You can't help us. I know that well. You needn't pity us. I don't want that, nor none of us wants it. But you'll give us justice, give us justice in your own heart."

Stephen had no words in which to answer him. He walked across the room and held out his hand silently. Sheridan hesitated for a moment and then took it and held it fast in his own two hands.

"Maybe the day is coming," he said, "when you'll not give me your hand, when you'll turn your face away from me. But whether or no, I take your hand to-day, and may the Almighty God bless you and keep you."

He turned and left the room. Heverin shambled after him. It did not please Heverin that the principal part in the interview had been appropriated by Sheridan. He had imagined himself acting greatly in the tyrant's vein, Ercles' vein, and, like the lion, roaring extempore. He had in fact been snubbed and ridiculed by Mr. Manders. Sheridan, whom he thoroughly despised, had moved emotion.

CHAPTER XVIII

THINGS got much worse in the neighbourhood after Mr. Manders refused to listen to the deputation which was sent to his office. The members of the League committee were extremely angry at the contemptuous way in which their ambassadors were treated. Heverin gave them a detailed account of the interview. Nobody, except perhaps Father O'Sullivan, understood the reference to Roman history; but everybody realised that Heverin had been laughed at. No man in the world likes being laughed at. An Irishman likes it less than any one else. To be abused is the natural lot of Irish politicians, members of leagues and adherents of any cause. It is not at all unpleasant to be abused, because abuse affords an excellent opportunity for replying in even more violent language. The frown on the face of an opponent is nothing. His smile is the