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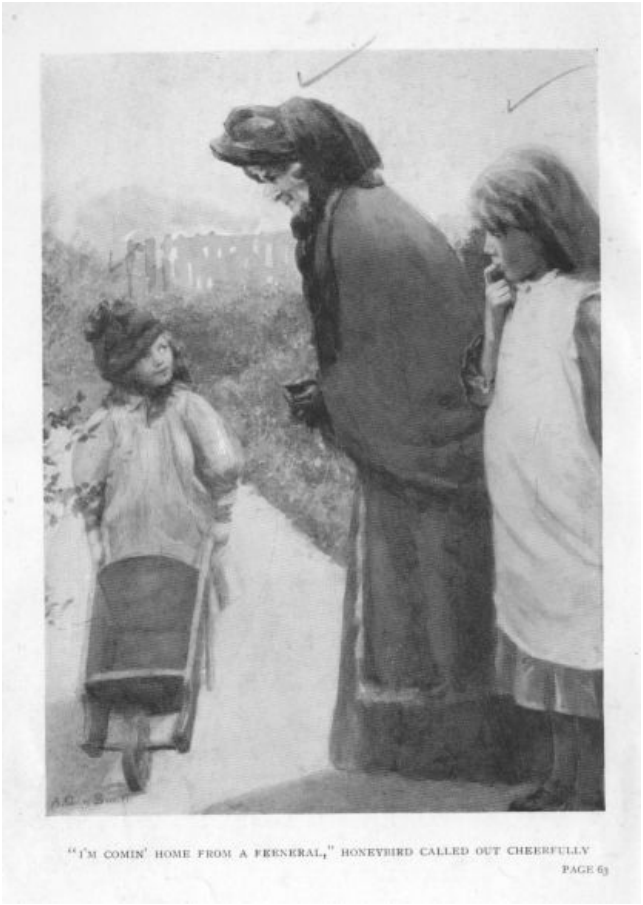

**"I'm comin' home from a feeneral,"
Honeybird called out cheerfully.**

THE WEANS AT ROWALLAN

BY

KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. GUY SMITH

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THE WEANS AT ROWALLAN

CHAPTER I

WHY MRS M'REA RETURNED TO THE FAITH OF HER FATHERS

One soaking wet day in September Patsy was sitting by the kitchen fire eating bread and sugar for want of better amusement when he was cheered by the sight of a tall figure in a green plaid shawl hurrying past the window in the driving rain. He got up from his creepie stool to go for the other children, who were playing in the schoolroom, when Lull, sprinkling clothes at the table, exclaimed:

"Bad luck to it, here's that ould runner again."

Patsy quietly moved his stool back into the shadow of the chimney corner. In that mood Lull, if she saw him, would chase him from the kitchen when the news began; and clearly Teressa was bringing news worth hearing. As far back as Patsy or any of the children could remember, Teressa had brought the village gossip to Rowallan. Neither rain nor storm could keep the old woman back when there was news to tell. One thing only—a dog in her path—had power to turn her aside. The quietest dog sent her running like a hare, and the most obviously imitated bark made her cry.

She came in, shaking the rain from her shawl.

"Woman, dear, but that's the saft day. I'm dreepin' to the marrow bone."

"What an' iver brought ye out?" said Lull shortly.

Teressa sank into a chair, and wiped her wet face with the corner of her apron. "'Deed, ye may weel ast me. My grandson was for stoppin' me, but says I to myself, says I, the mistress be to hear this before night."

"She'll hear no word of it, then," said Lull. "She's sleepin' sound, an' I'd cut aff my han' afore I'd wake her for any ould clash."

Teressa paid no heed. "Such carryin's-on, Lull, I niver seen. Mrs M'Rea, the woman, she bates Banagher. She's drunk as much whiskey these two days as would destroy a rigiment, an' now she has the whole village up with her talk."

"Andy was tellin' me she was at it again," said Lull.

"Och, I wisht ye'd see her," said Teressa. "She was neither to bind nor to stay. An' the tongue of her. Callin' us a lock a' papishes an' fenians! Sure, she was sittin' on Father Ryan's dour-step till past twelve o'clock wavin' an or'nge scarf, an' singin' 'Clitter Clatter, Holy Watter.'"

"Dear help us," said Lull.

"'Deed, I'm sayin' it," said Teressa. "An when his riverence come out to her it was nothin' but a hape of abuse, an' to hell wid the Pope, that she give him."

"That's forty shillin's an' costs if the polis heard her," said Patsy, forgetting he was in hiding.

Teressa jumped. "Lord love ye, did ye iver hear the like a' that?" she said. "It's a wee ould man the chile is."

"Be off wid ye, Patsy," said Lull; "what call has the likes a' yous to know that?" But Patsy wanted to hear more.

"What did Father Ryan say to her, Teressa?" he asked.

"Troth, he tould her she'd be in hell herself before the Pope for all her cursin'," said Teressa.

"An' will she?" said Patsy.

"As sure as an egg's mate," said Teressa. "If she doesn't give over drinkin' the ould gentleman's comin' for her one of these fine nights to take her aff wid him."

"Does she know when he's comin'?" Patsy asked.

"Not her, the black-mouthed Protestant divil," said Teressa.

"Whist!" said Lull, "that's no talk before the chile."

"And a fine child he is," said Teressa, "an' a fine man he'll be makin' one a' these days."

But Patsy had heard enough, and was off to tell the others. They were playing in the schoolroom when he brought the news. Mrs M'Rea was drunk again, and had cursed the Pope on Father Ryan's doorstep, and the devil was coming to take her away if she did not stop drinking. It was bitter news, for Mrs M'Rea kept the one sweetie shop in the village.

"I'll go an' see her," said Jane.

"What good'll that do?" said Mick.

"I'll tell her the divil's comin'," said Jane.

"She won't heed ye," said Mick.

"I know," said Fly, who had said nothing so far but had been thinking seriously; "let's send her a message from the divil to tell her to give over or he'll come for her."

This plan commended itself to the others as a brilliant solution of a difficulty. Mrs M'Rea had been known to see devils and rats before when she was drunk—they had only been dancing devils, and had come to no good purpose that the children knew of—she would, therefore, be quite prepared for another visit, and a devil with a warning would have to be taken seriously. It was well worth trying, for Mrs M'Rea, in spite of her drunken habits and the fact that she was a turncoat—had been born a Roman Catholic, and had married into the other camp—was a great favourite with the children. She often gave them sweets when they had not a farthing between them to pay.

As the idea was hers Fly was to go with the message. Mick raked down a handful of soot from the chimney, and rubbed her face and hands till they were black, then dressed her in a pair of old bathing-drawers and a black fur cape. Patsy got the pitchfork from the stable for her to carry in her hand.

Fly started off for the village. The others waited patiently for her to come back. She was gone nearly two hours, and came back wet to the skin, and frightened at the success of her mission.

"Go on; tell us right from the start," said Jane.

"Well, when I got outside the gate who should I meet but Teressa goin' home, so I just dodged down behind her, an' barked—an' she tuk to her heels, an' run the whole way. An' when we come to the village I hid behind a tree, an' then I dodged round to Mrs M'Rea's. The door was shut, so I knocked with the pitchfork. Sez she: 'Who's there?' Sez I: 'Come out a' that, Mrs M'Rea.' Sez she: 'What would I be doin' that for?' 'Because,' sez I, 'it's the divil himself come to see ye, Mrs M'Rea.'"

"But ye wern't to be the divil," Jane interrupted. "Ye were only one of his wee divils."

"I clean forgot," said Fly; "'deed, indeed, I clean forgot. An' oh, Jane, I wisht ye'd seen her. She opened the dour, and when she seen me she give a yell, an' went down on her knees, an' began prayin' like mad. I danced round, an' poked her with the pitchfork, an', sez I: 'I'll larn ye to curse the Pope, Mrs M'Rea, ye black-mouthed ould Protestant,'—that's what Teressa said, wasn't it, Patsy? 'Look here, my girl,' sez I, 'I'm comin' for ye at twelve the night, so see an' be ready.' An' with that she give another big yell, an' run in an' shut the dour, an' I could hear her cryin'. An' oh, Jane, Jane, I've scared the very sowl out of her." And Fly began to cry too.

"Ye've just spoilt it all, Fly," said Jane. "The divil wasn't to be goin' to come for her on'y if she wouldn't give over drinkin'."

Fly shivered, and sobbed.

"Yes, ye jackass; an' how can we take her away at twelve?" said Mick.

"An' if we don't she won't believe it was the divil," said Patsy.

But Fly only shivered, and sobbed the more.

"Look here," said Jane, "she'll be sick if we don't dry her." So they all went upstairs, and Fly was washed, and dressed in her own clothes, and sent down to sit by the kitchen fire, having first sworn to cut her throat if she let out one word to Lull. Then the four went back to the schoolroom to think the matter over.

"We can't have Mrs M'Rea goin' round sayin' the divil tould her a lie," said Jane.

"An' we can't have her sittin' there all night scared to death," said Mick.

"We'll have to send her another message," said Jane.

"Another divil?" said Patsy.

"No," said Jane; "it must be some person from heaven this time to tell her that if she'll quit drinkin' the divil won't be let come!"

They agreed that this was the only plan; but who was it to be? "I'll be the Blessed Virgin," said Jane; "there's mother's blue muslin dress in the nursery cupboard, an' I can have the wax flowers out of the glass shade in my hair."

"But Mrs M'Rea's a Protestant," Mick objected, "an' what would she care for the Blessed Virgin?"

"Let's send a ghost of Mister M'Rea," said Patsy. But here again there was a difficulty, for Mr M'Rea could only have come from purgatory—and who would have let him out?

"Is there niver a Protestant saint?" said Mick.

"Not a one but King William," said Jane.

"An' he's the very ould boy," Mick shouted, and upstairs they ran to search for suitable clothes. Jane begged to be King William; but by the time she was dressed it was dark, and she was afraid to go alone, so Mick and Patsy went with her.

Honeybird was sent downstairs to the kitchen to wait with Fly till they came back, and if Lull asked where they were she was not to tell. When they dropped out of the dressing-room window into the garden the rain was over. The wind now chased the clouds in wild shapes across the sky, now piled them up to hide the moon. The children crept along the road, terrified that they might meet Sandy M'Glander, the ghost with the wooden leg, or see Raw Head and Bloody Bones ride by on his black horse. When they reached Mrs M'Rea's cottage all was in darkness, but they could hear through the door the crying that had frightened Fly.

"Hide quick yous two," said Jane; "I'm goin' to knock."

There was a yell of terror from inside.

"It's all right, Mrs M'Rea," said Jane; "come out, I want to speak to ye."

"Who are ye?" said Mrs M'Rea.

"Sure, I'm King William, of Glorious, Pious, an' Immortal memory, come to save ye from the divil."

They heard Mrs M'Rea fumbling with the latch, and then the door opened. Jane stood up straight, and, as luck would have it, the clouds parted, and the moon shone bright on King William in an old hunting-coat stuffed out with pillows, a pair of white-frilled knickerbockers, and a top hat with a peacock's feather in it.

"God help us," said Mrs M'Rea, "but the quare things do happen."

"Ay; an' quarer things will happen if yer don't give over drinkin', Mrs M'Rea," said King William. "Fine goin's-on these are when dacent people can't rest in heaven for the likes a' you and yer vagaries."

"It's Himself," said Mrs M'Rea, and got down on her knees.

"If it hadn't been for me meeting the divil this evenin' ye'd have been in hell by this time; but sez I to him, sez I: 'Give her another chance,' sez I."

"God save us," sobbed Mrs M'Rea.

"An' sez he: 'No.' Do ye hear what I'm sayin', Mrs M'Rea? Sez he: 'No; the black-mouthed Protestant, she cursed the Pope, and waved an or'nge scarf, on Father's Ryan's dourstep,' sez he."

"Whist!" said a warning voice round the corner, "King William's a Protestant."

"What do I care about Protestants?" shouted King William, getting excited. "If I didn't know ye for a dacent woman I'd 'a' let the divil have ye; but sez I to myself, sez I: 'Where would the childer be without their wee sweetie shop?'"

Jane was losing her head. The whispers round the corner began again. King William took no notice, but went on: "An' he'll let you off this wanst, Mrs M'Rea; but ye'll go down first thing in the mornin', an' take the pledge with Father Ryan."

"Did yer honour say Father Ryan?" gasped Mrs "M'Rea.

"'Deed, I did; an' who else would I be sayin'?" said King William.

"But I'm a Protestant, yer honour," said Mrs M'Rea.

"So ye are; an' I'm tellin' ye, Mrs M'Rea, ye'll be sorry for it. Sure, there's niver a Protestant in heaven but myself, an' me got in by the skin a' my teeth. There's nothin' but rows an' rows a' Popes there. Sure, there's many the time I be sorry for ye when I hear ye down here shoutin' 'Clitter clatter' an' wearin' or'nge scarfs when I know where ye're goin' through it."

"Och-a-nee, an' me knew no better," said Mrs M'Rea.

"Ye did know better wanst, an' ye know better again now. Go down to Father Ryan, an' take the pledge; an' let me hear no more about it, or it'll not be tellin' ye, for divil a fut I'll stir out of heaven again for you or anybuddy else." Mrs M'Rea was rocking to and fro on her knees. The clouds once more hid the moon, and in the darkness Mick and Patsy seized King William, and hurried her away.

"Ye very near spoilt it all," said Mick.

"But I didn't," said Jane. "Let's hide, an' see what she'll do."

Mrs M'Rea only got up from her knees, and went into the cottage, and shut the door. It was late when they got home. Jane crept upstairs, and changed her clothes before she went into the kitchen for supper.

Next morning Teressa came with the strange news that Mrs M'Rea had been converted, and had been to Father Ryan to take the pledge. "Small wonder, for the divil himself come to see her," said Teressa. "An' sure, I seen him myself wid me own two eyes. As I was goin' home last night who should come after me but a black baste wid the ugliest face on him ye iver seen. An' it wasn't long after that the neighbours heard her yellin' 'Murder!' She sez herself that he come to her as bould as brass, like a wee ould black man, an' poked holes in her wid a fiery fork, an' by strake a' dawn she was down at Father Ryan's tellin' him she was converted. An' not a drop of drink on her. An' the whole parish is callogueing wid her now. But she houlds to it that King William's a great saint in glory."

CHAPTER II

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE MOUNTAINS

Rowallan was an old, rambling house that stood in a wilderness of weeds and trees under the shadow of the Mourne Mountains. It was a house with a strange name; people said it was never free from sorrow. Others went so far as to say there was a curse on the place, and many went miles out of their way rather than pass the big gates after dark, and crossed themselves when they passed them in broad daylight. There was not a man or woman in the countryside who could not have given you the reason for this feeling about Rowallan. Anyone could have told you that the master had been murdered not five years ago at his own gates. Most of them could have told how his father before him had died on the same spot—died cursing a son and daughter who had turned to be Roman Catholics. And in some of the cottages there still lived a man or a woman old enough to remember the master before that: a bad man, for he had believed in neither God nor devil, and had broken his neck, riding home one night full of drink, at the gates. God save us! was it any wonder people were afraid to pass them? The present, too, had its own share of sorrow. The children, they would tell you, lived almost alone; there was no one to take care of them but two old servants, both over sixty, for the mistress, though still alive, was a broken-hearted woman, who had never left her room since her husband's death. This they might have told a stranger, but no one would have dreamt of telling the children these tales about their home. They, though they had friends in every cottage, had never heard one word of either haunting sorrow or curse. It is true that sometimes, coming home in the evening from a long day's expedition across the mountains, they felt a strange sense of depression when they came to the big iron gates. For no reason, it seemed, a foreboding of calamity chilled their spirits, and sent them, at a run, up the avenue into the house to the warm shelter of the kitchen, to be assured by Lull's cheerful presence that their mother had not died in their absence, and life was still happy.

There were five of them: Mick, Jane, Fly, Patsy, and Honeybird. The tales people told of their home were not the strangest part of their history. Their father had been a man hated by his own class for his broad and generous views at a time when the whole country was disturbed, and loved by his poorer neighbours for the same reason. He had been murdered by a terrible mistake. It was not the master, Michael Darragh, but his Roman Catholic brother Niel, the murderer had meant to kill. Niel Darragh, when he and his sister had been driven out of their father's house for

their religious views, had taken a farm about a mile from Rowallan, and it was over his title to this farm the quarrel had arisen that had ended in the master being murdered, mistaken in the dark for his brother. The children's mother was an Englishwoman, who came of an old Puritan stock, and had married against the wishes of her family. Her husband's death was God's judgment for her wickedness, she thought. She had never recovered from the shock of the murder, and was only able to move with Lull's help from her bed to a couch by the window, and she was so entirely occupied with her own troubles that she often forgot the children existed. So it came that they were being brought up by Lull, their father's old nurse, and Andy Graham, the coachman. Lull had so much else to do, with all the work of the house, and an invalid mistress to wait on, that the children were left to come and go as they pleased. Twice a week they went to old Mr Rannigan, the rector, for lessons, but on other days they roamed for miles over the country, making friends at every cottage they passed. When they came home in the evening Lull was always waiting with supper by the kitchen fire, ready to hear their adventures, to sympathise or reprove as she saw fit. So long as they were well fed and clothed, and did nothing Quality would be ashamed of, she said she was content. Days spent on the mountains, fishing in some brown stream, helping an old peasant to herd his cow, or watching a woman spin by her door, taught the children more than they learnt from Mr Rannigan. They brought back to Lull stories of ghosts, Orange and Papist, who fought by night on the bridge that had once been slippery with their blood; of the devil's strange doings in the mountains: how he had bitten a piece out of one—the marks of his teeth showed to this day; or milder tales of fairy people—leprachauns, and the fiddlers whose music only the good could hear. Lull believed them all, crossed herself at the mention of ghosts and devil—her own mother had seen fairies dancing on the rocks one day as she was coming home from school. Lull herself, though she had never seen anything, had heard the banshee wailing round the house the night the master's mother died. The children were sure Lull could have heard the fairy fiddlers if she would have come with them to the right place up the mountains; she was good enough to hear it—they knew that.

Lull was a good old woman. The children were right; she was never cross, but always loving and kind, always ready to help them whatever they might want. Any spare minute she had was spent at her beads, and often while she worked they could tell by her lips she was saying her prayers. Blessed saints and holy angels filled her world, and her tales, if they were not of the days when she first came to Rowallan, were about these wonderful beings. They were far better than fairies, she said; for the best of fairies were mischievous at times, but the saints could be depended on. But the children thought her tales about their home were even more interesting than tales of the saints.

There was a time, she said, when the dilapidated old house and garden had been the finest in Ireland. When she came to Rowallan, a slip of a girl, more than forty years ago, there had been no less than seven gardeners about the place. Ould Davy, who worked in the kitchen garden now, was all that was left of them. Now the house was falling to pieces, great patches of damp discoloured the walls, and most of the rooms were shut up; but Lull had seen the day when all was light and colour, when the rooms were filled with guests, and the children, who slept in the nursery then, had heard the rustle of silk dresses, not the scamper of rats, on the stairs at night. The children could see, when they opened the shutters in the disused drawing-room, how beautiful everything had been then, though the yellow damask, the satin chairs, and the big sconces on the wall were faded, moth-eaten, and dusty now. And in the garden, where Lull's thoughts loved to dwell on the flowers she had seen—lupins, phlox, roses, pinks, bachelor's buttons, and more whose names she had forgotten, that had fought others for leave to grow, she said—a strange flower would now and again push its way up through weeds and grass to witness that her tales were true. Lull always ended her talks as she rose to take the children off to bed, with a promise that all would come back again, that one fine day their ship would come in.

Andy Graham, in the stable, said the same thing. On Sunday mornings, when they watched him getting ready to take them to church, he would say, as he put on the old top hat and faded blue coat that were his livery: "Troth, the day'll come when I'll not be wispin' hay round me head to keep on a hat that was made for a man twiced me size, an' it's more than an ould coat that has only one tail to it I'll be wearin'. I'll be the smartest lad in Ireland, with livery to me legs forby, when yer fortune comes back to yez all again."

This hopeful view of the future, a romantic fiction half believed by Lull and Andy themselves, was taken quite seriously by the children. They imagined their home was under some kind of enchantment that would one day be broken. It was true Lull had told them the present state of Rowallan was God's will, and Andy said God alone knew when their fortune would come back; but the children, whose mind held fairies, saints, banshees, and angels, and their mother's Puritan God, had no difficulty in reconciling God's will and an enchantment. One thing had helped to confirm this belief. Mick and Jane remembered the night their father died—it was the night Honeybird was born—and, thinking back over it now, they were sure they had heard the incantation that had wrought the spell. They had been waked by a noise, a muttering, and a tramp of feet on the gravel beneath the nursery window. They had been frightened, for Lull was not in the nursery, and when they ran out into the passage to call her they saw their mother standing in a white dress at the top of the stairs and a crowd of strange faces in the hall below. That was all they had seen, for someone had pushed them back into the nursery, and locked them in, but they had heard shrieks and horrible laughter through the night. No one knew when the spell would be broken, but when the one fine day did come the children believed that in some mysterious way the house would shake off its air of ruin and decay; the six gardeners would come

back to join ould Davy, who, though he was so cross, had been faithful all these years; the horses and carriages and dogs that Andy remembered would return; their mother would come downstairs; and, perhaps, their father would come to life again, if he were really dead, and had not been whipped away to some remote island, they thought it was quite possible, till the time when the enchantment would cease.

Their chief reason for looking with joy to this day was that then their mother would be quite well, and their anxiety about her would be over. Twice a day they went to her room—to bid her good-morning and good-night. Then she read them a chapter from the Bible, and made them promise to say their prayers. From her they got their ideas of God's terrible judgments, and of the Last Day, when the heavens would roll back like a scroll, and they would be caught up in the clouds. Jane was afraid it might happen when she was bathing some day, and she would be caught up in her bare skin. She always put her boots and stockings under her pillow when she went to bed, in case it came like a thief in the night. Occasionally Mrs Darragh was well enough to forget her own trouble, and then she would keep the children with her, and tell them stories of the time when she was a child. These were the children's happiest days. They would sit on the floor round her sofa, listening, fascinated by her description of a life so unlike their own. Their mother, like a child in a book, had never gone outside the garden gates without her nurse, and they laughed at the difference between their life and hers. She never went fishing, and brought home enough fish to feed her family for three days; she never tramped for miles over mountains or spent whole days catching glasen off the rocks. The country she had lived in had been different, too—a red-roofed village, where every cottage had a garden neat and trim, and all the children had rosy cheeks and tidy yellow hair. But on their mother's bad days, when she remembered another past, they would creep to her door, and listen with troubled faces to her wild talk of sins and punishment, and hear her praying for forgiveness and death. Their love for their mother was a passionate devotion, and through it came the only real trouble they knew—they were afraid that God would answer her prayer, and take her from them. So her bad days came to mean days of black misery for them, when they spent their time beseeching God not to take her prayers seriously: it was only because she was ill that she thought she wanted to die, and would have changed her mind by the morning. If after one of these bad days a stormy night followed, misery changed to terror. On such a night the Banshee had wailed for their grandmother, and if they heard her now it would be for a sign that their mother must die too.

Lull would do her best to comfort them. "Banshee daren't set fut in the garden, or raise wan skirl of a cry, after all the prayers yez have been sayin'," she would tell them. But when she left them it was only to go to the kitchen fire and pray against the same fear herself. But, apart from this shadow, that often lifted for weeks at a time, their life was very happy. Mick, the eldest, was twelve years old, and Honeybird was five; the others, Jane, Fly, and Patsy, came between. The two eldest, Mick and Jane, led the others, though Fly and Patsy criticised their leaders' opinions when they saw fit; Honeybird was content to blindly obey. After one of their good days they would go to bed in the big nursery, sure that no children in the world were so content. When there was no frightening wind in the trees they could hear through the open window the sea across the fields. "It's a quare, good world," Jane would mutter sleepily; and Fly would reply: "The sea's the nicest ould thing in it; you'd think it was hooshin' us to sleep"; and then Patsy's voice would come from the dressing-room: "Mebby it's bringin' our ship in to us."

CHAPTER III

JANE'S CONVERSION

On Sunday morning the children went to church by themselves. They would rather have gone to Mass with Lull in the Convent Chapel, but Lull said they were Protestants. Everybody else was a Roman Catholic—Uncle Niel, Aunt Mary, Andy Graham, even ould Davy, though he never went to Mass.

None of the children liked going to church; they went to please Lull. The service was long and dull, and though each one of them had a private plan to while away the time they found it very tedious.

Jane was the luckiest, for under the carpet in the corner where she sat—Jane and Mick sat in the front pew—there was a fresh crop of fungi every Sunday; all prayer-time she was occupied in scraping it off with a pin. Honeybird came next; she had collected all the spare hassocks into the second pew, and played house under the seat. So long as they made no noise they felt they were behaving well, for old Mr Rannigan, the rector, was nearly blind, and could not see what they were doing. Sometimes Mick followed the service in the big prayer-book, just for the fun of hearing Mr Rannigan making mistakes when he lost his place or fell asleep, as he did one Sunday in the middle of a prayer, and woke up with a start, and prayed for our Sovereign Lord King William.

Fly played that she was a princess, but she always stopped pretending when the Litany came. Not that she understood the strange petitions, but she felt when she had repeated them all that there was no calamity left that had not been prayed against.

The sermon was the most wearisome part for them all. When the text was given out Jane read the Bible. Nebuchadnezzar was her favourite character. She pictured the fun he must have had prancing round in the grass playing he was a horse or a cow. Mick read the hymn-book, Fly fell in love with the prince whom she saved up for the sermon, while Patsy and Honeybird built a ship of hassocks, and sailed as pirates to unknown seas.

One Sunday morning they had just settled themselves in their seats—Jane had discovered what looked like a mushroom under the carpet, and was waiting for the general confession that she might see if it would peel—when the vestry door opened, and, instead of the familiar little figure in a surplice trailing on the ground, that had tottered in as long as the children could remember, a strange clergyman came in. He began the service in a loud voice that startled them, and read the prayers so quickly that the people were on their feet again before Jane had half peeled the mushroom.

When he came to the Psalms he glared at the children till Jane thought he was going to scold her for not reading too. She had not listened to hear what morning of the month it was, but she got so frightened that she had to pretend to be reading by opening and shutting her mouth. But it was worse when he came to the sermon. Jane, who had not dared to go back once to the mushroom, but had followed his movements all through the service, saw with horror when he went into the pulpit that Patsy and Honeybird had forgotten that he was not Mr Rannigan, and were stowing away all the books they could reach in the hold of their pirate ship. She reached over the back of the pew to poke Honeybird, but at that moment a loud voice startled her.

"Except ye be converted ye shall all likewise perish," the clergyman said. Then, fixing his eyes on a thin woman, who sat near the pulpit, he repeated the text in a louder tone.

"Do you know what that means?" he said, pointing to Miss Green. "It means that you will go to hell."

"What has she done?" Jane wondered. But the preacher had turned round, and was pointing to old Mr Byers. "You will go to hell," he said. Then he looked round the church. Jane saw that Patsy and Honeybird were sitting on their seats watching him.

"You will go to hell," he said again. This time he picked out Mrs Maxwell. Jane waited, expecting he would tell them some awful sins these three had committed. But after a long pause he said: "Everyone seated before me this morning will go to hell."

A chill seemed to have fallen on the congregation. Patsy said afterwards he thought the devil was waiting outside with a long car to drive them off at once. "Except ye be converted," the preacher added.

He went on to describe what hell was like, and told them a story of a godless death-bed he had stood beside, where he had heard the sinner's groans of remorse—useless then, for God had said he must perish. Jane's eyes never for a moment wandered from the man's face. Even when he turned to her she still looked at him, though she was cold with fear. "The young too will perish except they be converted," he said.

At last the sermon came to an end. The children went out to the porch to wait for the car. But the sermon had been so long that Andy Graham was waiting for them. The others ran down the path, but Jane turned back, and went into the church. All the people had gone. The strange clergyman was just coming through the vestry door. Jane went up to him. "I want to get converted," she said; "quick, for Andy Graham's waitin'."

"Pray to God, and He will give you an assurance that your sins are forgiven," the clergyman said.

"Come on, Jane," Patsy shouted at the porch door.

"Thank ye," said Jane, and went out to the car.

On Sunday afternoon they generally weeded Patsy's garden or played with the rabbits, but this day Jane went up to the nursery the minute dinner was over. Fly, who was sent up by Mick to tell her to come out, found the door locked.

"Who's there?" said Jane.

"It's me; Mick wants ye," said Fly.

"I can't come."

"What're ye doin'?"

"Mind yer own business," was the reply.

"Let me in; I want a hanky," said Fly.

There was no answer, but as Fly went on trying to turn the handle and banging at the door it suddenly opened, and Jane faced her.

"Can't ye go away ar that an' quit botherin' me?" she said.

"What're ye doin'?" said Fly, trying to look round the door, but Jane slammed it in her face.

"If ye don't go away I'll give ye the right good thumpin'," she said. Fly went downstairs.

At tea Jane appeared with a grave face.

"We'll play church after tea," she said, "an' I'll be the preacher."

They arranged the chairs for pews. Patsy rang the dinner bell. Fly was the organist, and played on the table. Jane leant over the back of an arm-chair to preach.

"Mind ye," she said, "I'm not making fun. I'm converted, an' ye've all got to get converted too, or ye'll go to hell for iver and iver. An' ye can't think about for iver an' iver, for it's for iver, an' then it's for iver after that, till it hurts yer head to go on thinkin' any more. We'll all have to quit bein' bad, an' niver fight any more an' tell no lies an' niver think a cross word, an' if we say our prayers God'll give us an insurance, an' then we'll be good for iver after."

Then she read a chapter out of the Bible. But it was not a part the others liked—about Daniel or Joseph or Moses and the plagues—it was a chapter of Revelation. They listened patiently to that, but when Jane said she was going to pray Patsy got up.

"I'm tired," he said, "an' I don't want to get converted. I don't believe that ould boy knowed what he was talkin' about. Andy Graham said he was bletherin' when I told him about us all goin' to hell."

Fly and Honeybird said they wanted to paint, so Jane came out of the pulpit.

"Ye'll just have to get converted by yer own selves," she said, "for I'm not goin' to help ye any more."

When they went to bed Jane read the Bible to herself, and was such a long time saying her prayers that Fly thought she had gone to sleep, and tried to wake her.

"I'm niver goin' to be cross any more," she said as she got into bed.

The next day was wet, so wet that Lull would not allow them to go out. Jane began the morning by making clothes for Bloody Mary, Honeybird's doll. But Honeybird would have the clothes made as she liked. Though Jane tried to persuade her that Bloody Mary had worn a ruff and not a bustle Honeybird insisted on the bustle, and would not have the ruff. At last Jane said she would make the clothes her own way or not at all.

"Then ye needn't make them at all," said Honeybird, picking up Bloody Mary, and going out of the room.

When she got to the door she added, over her shoulder: "Girney-go-grabby, the cat's cousin," and ran.

But Jane was at her heels, and caught her at the foot of the stairs. She pulled Bloody Mary from under Honeybird's arm.

"I'll make a ruff, an' sew it on tight," she said grimly.

Honeybird began to cry. Jane was just going to give her back the doll when Fly appeared at the top of the stairs, and looked over the banisters.

"Let her alone," said Fly.

"Shut up," said Jane.

"I thought ye were converted," said Fly. In a minute Jane was at the top of the stairs, and slaps and howls told that Fly's remark was answered.

There was nothing Fly hated so much as being slapped. If they had fought properly, and she had been beaten, she would not have minded so much, but when Jane slapped her she felt she was degraded.

Having punished her Jane walked slowly downstairs. When she got to the last step she looked up. Fly spat over the banister.

"Cat!" Jane yelled running up the stairs again two at a time; but Fly raced down the passage, and was just in time to shut and lock the nursery door in Jane's face.

"All right, me girl," Jane shouted through the keyhole. "You wait an' see what ye'll get when ye come out."

"I'm not coming out," said Fly, "I'm goin' to see what ye've got in yer drawer."

Jane went down to the schoolroom. No one was there. Honeybird had gone to play in the kitchen. She sat down, with her elbows on the table, her head in her hands.

"It wasn't my fault," she muttered—"I didn't want to fight—but I'll kill her now when I catch her. I don't care. God had no business to let her spit at me, an' I will just kill her."

Soon she heard Fly coming downstairs, and got under the table to wait for her. Fly pushed the door open, looked in, then came in, and shut the door behind her. She went up to the bookcase, and was looking for a book when, with a yell of fury, Jane pounced on her. Jane thumped on Fly's back and Fly tore Jane's hair. They rolled over on the ground, biting and thumping, till Jane was on the top. She held Fly down, and very deliberately slapped her, counting the slaps out loud, six times on each hand. "That's for spittin'," she said as she got up.

Fly sobbed on the floor. Lull came in to lay the table for dinner.

"'Deed, ye ought to be ashamed a' yerselves," she said, "fightin' like Kilkenny cats. What would yer mother say if she heard ye?"

Jane banged out of the schoolroom, and out of the house. She went across the yard to the stables, climbed up into the loft, and threw herself down on a bundle of hay.

Lull called her to come in to dinner, but she did not move. Mick and Patsy came out to look for her. After a few minutes she heard them go back into the house. When all was quiet again she sat up. "I'll go to hell," she said—"an' I don't care a bit. I wisht I was dead." She had thought only yesterday, when she was converted, and had been all warm and happy inside, that God would never let her fight any more. But God had failed her. He had allowed her to fight the very next day.

"He might 'a' made me good when I ast Him," she muttered. "I hate fightin'; but I can't help it, an' now I'll niver be good."

By-and-by she heard Honeybird at the kitchen door. "Janie, come in," she was calling, "there's awful nice pancakes for pudden." Jane didn't want the pancakes; she wanted very much to go in, and be happy, but something held her. "Come on in, Jane," Honeybird called. "Fly's awful sorry she spit at ye." Honeybird called once more, then Jane heard the kitchen door shut.

"It's the divil," she muttered; "he won't let me be good." In a burst of despair she beat her head against the wall till she fell back exhausted on the hay.

The next thing she heard—she must have been asleep—was the tea bell ringing. Still she did not go in, but when the loft began to get dark she was so frightened that she crept down the ladder, and went into the kitchen. There was no one in the kitchen but Lull.

"Och, now ye'll be sick if ye cry like that," said Lull. "Sit down here by the fire, an' have a drop milk an' a bit a' soda bread."

But Jane could not eat. She managed to swallow the milk, then as Lull stroked her rough hair she began to cry again.

"Whisht, whisht, chile dear," Lull said; "sure, ye can't help fightin' now an' then. Come on upstairs, an' have a nice hot bath, an' go to yer bed, an' ye'll be as good as Saint Patrick in the mornin'."

When the others came to bed she was asleep, but she woke before they were undressed.

"I'm sorry I was cross," she said.

"So am I," said Fly.

"Ye were just as cross as I was yerself," Jane said sharply.

"That's what I mane," said Fly.

"Then ye should say what ye mane," said Jane. "Ye just want to make me fight again."

"'Deed, I don't," Fly began.

But Jane threw back the clothes, and jumped out of bed. "There!" she said, "ye've done it. Ye've made me cross again."

Fly and Honeybird both began to cry. They got undressed, crying all the time. When they were ready for bed Fly said: "Aren't ye goin' to get into bed, Jane?"

"No!" said Jane.

"But ye'll catch yer death a' cold," said Fly.

"I just wisht I could," said Jane. She sat down on the floor by the window.

"I'll just sit here till I die," she said, "an' then I'll go to hell."

Fly and Honeybird began to howl. The boys came in from the dressing-room.

"What's the matter?" said Mick.

"I'm goin' to hell," said Jane; "I can't help it. I don't want to go, but Fly makes me fight. She's sendin' me to hell, an' I'll just sit here till I'm dead."

Mick begged her to get back into bed. Fly and Honeybird sobbed and shivered. "Don't go to hell, Jane," they pleaded; "get into bed, an' we'll niver make ye cross any more."

But Jane shook her head. "I'm goin'; I can't help it," she said.

Patsy looked at her.

"Let her go if she wants to," he said, "I'm goin' to sleep." He went back into the dressing-room. Jane looked after him, and then began to laugh.

"I declare to my goodness I'm an ould divil myself," she said, "makin' ye all miserable." She got up, and kissed them all.

"An I'll make Bloody Mary a bustle in the mornin'," she said as she got into bed.

"I think I'd rather have a ruff," said Honeybird.

Next Sunday Mr Rannigan was at church. When he gave out his text Jane looked at him. "Brethren, it is my duty to preach the simple gospel," he began, and Jane opened the Bible at Nebuchadnezzar.

CHAPTER IV

A DAY OF GROWTH

Fly sat on the wall in the wood at the back of the garden simmering with excitement. Two wonderful things had happened to her, each of which by itself would have been enough to make her happy for a week. First, she had got a letter in the morning addressed to herself. She was so pleased that she did not think of opening it till Jane took it from her. The inside, however, was still more delightful. Somebody called Janette Black said she had a little present for Fly, and was bringing it to Rowallan that afternoon. Lull said Miss Black was Fly's godmother. She used to live at Rose Cottage years ago, but for a long time she had been away in Dublin. Fly was too much excited to eat her breakfast. The others as they watched her dancing round the room could not help being a little bit envious at her good fortune. They had never heard of anybody before, except Cinderella, who had had a visit from a godmother. Their godmothers were all dead, or away in England. Fly in her happiness had a pang of regret that she could not share this delightful relative with the others. She said she would share the gift. She had thought that morning would never pass. Lull was getting the drawing-room ready for the visitor, and once or twice she had warned Fly that she might be disappointed.

"I wouldn't marvel if she niver come near the place at all," she said. "She's a bird-witted ould lady, an' niver in the wan way a' thinkin' two minutes thegether." But Fly could not have been calm if she had tried. She had spent her time going backwards and forwards to look at the kitchen clock. Now the time had come, dinner was over, Fly had her clean pinafore on, the godmother was, perhaps, already in the house, but Fly was so busy thinking of something else that she had almost forgotten her. The second wonderful thing had happened. There were days, Fly told herself, when things took jumps—when, instead of growing up at the usual pace, so slow you could not feel it, something happened that made you older and richer and cleverer all in a minute. To-day life had taken two jumps. As she was sitting there quietly on the wall, thinking only of her godmother, a big yellow cat had come out of the wood. Everybody at Rowallan hated cats—they were deadly enemies, poachers, and destroyers. Andy had been in trouble for the past week over the wickedness of a cat who, night after night, had been at the rabbits in his traps. Rabbits were a source of income to Rowallan, and it was a serious matter when six rabbits were destroyed in one night. Fly had been in the kitchen that morning when Andy came in to tell Lull his trouble.

"I niver seen the cat that could get the better av me afore," he said dejectedly. "I'm thinkin'

I'm gettin' too ould for this game." Fly remembered this as she watched the cat coming towards her through the wood. If only Andy were there now with his gun. It was a terrible pity that such a chance should be lost. She sat quite still, waiting to see what the cat would do. It never seemed to notice her, but came boldly on, with no sense of shame, straight towards her, till it was beneath her feet. The wall was high, and the cat had jumped before Fly realised that it meant to use her legs as a ladder to the top. Indignation on Andy's account now gave place to wild rage at personal injury. The cat's claws were in her leg. She kicked it off, then, quick as thought, seized a big flat stone off the top of the wall, and dropped it on the cat's neck. The yellow head bowed, and without a sound the body rolled over on the grass. Fly saw that she had killed it. Her heart jumped for joy. She could hardly believe she had really done this wonderful thing. Andy's enemy lay dead at her feet, struck down by her unerring aim. What would the others say? What would Andy say? How they would all praise her! She felt that God had helped her. It must be He who had brought the cat within her reach and given her power to kill it with one blow of a stone. Honeybird's voice called from the garden. Fly gave a little gasp—her heart was beating so quickly with excitement. To find a godmother and to kill a cat in one day!—had anybody else ever had such happiness? She got down from the wall, and took the dead cat in her arms. She must go to the godmother now, and wait till she had gone before she could tell the others. There was nobody at home to tell except Honeybird, for Jane had gone with Andy on the car to bring Mick and Patsy home from school. She would hide the cat in the stables, she thought, and when the others came home she would produce it dramatically, and see what they would do. On the way through the garden she met Honeybird coming to find her.

"She's come," said Honeybird, "in a wee donkey carriage an' a furry cloak; but I'm feared she's got nuthin' with her, 'cause I walked all round her to see."

Fly held up the cat. "I've just kilt it with wan blow av a stone," she said.

"Well done you," said Honeybird joyfully. "Bad auld divil," addressing the dead cat, "what for did ye eat the neck out a' Andy's rabbits?" Then her tone changed. "Give him to me, Fly, to play feeneral with. Sure, you've got a godmother, an' I've got nuthin' at all." Fly had not the heart to refuse. She gave Honeybird the dead cat, but explained that she must be allowed to dig it up again to show it to Andy. Then she ran quickly towards the house. A smell of pancakes came from the kitchen. Lull was getting tea ready for the visitor. Fly felt that life was richer than she had ever known it to be. At the drawing-room door she paused to mutter a little prayer of thanksgiving. She hardly knew what she had been expecting, but she was a little bit disappointed when she opened the door and went in. Her godmother was sitting on a sofa. She was a little woman, dressed in dull black; an old-fashioned fur-lined cloak fell from her shoulders; a lace veil, turned over her bonnet, hung down like a curtain behind. She wore gloves several sizes too big for her, and the ends of the fingers were twisted into spikes. But her voice pleased Fly's ear. She had been to see Mrs Darragh, she said, but had only stayed a minute. In spite of her disappointment there was something about the little lady that attracted Fly's fancy. Her eyes were just the colour of the sea on a clear, sunny day. She talked a good deal, holding Fly's hand and patting it all the time. Fly did not understand much of what she said—she mentioned so many people Fly had never heard of before.

"You know you are my only god-child," she said; "when I die you shall have all my money if you are a good girl." Fly thought this was very kind, but she begged her godmother not to think of dying for years yet. The little lady smiled. Then she began to talk again about people Fly did not know, nodding and smiling as though it were all very funny. Fly wondered when she would come to the gift.

"There now, I've talked enough," she said at last. "Tell me all about yourself and the other dear children now."

Fly told her everything she could remember. Miss Black said "Yes, yes," "How delightful," "How pleasant," but she did not seem to be listening; her eyes were looking all round the room, and once she said "How pleasant" when Fly was telling her about the time Patsy hurt his foot. Fly was in the middle of the tale of Andy's trouble that morning when Miss Black interrupted her.

"You must come and see me, my dear, and bring the others with you, and you shall make the acquaintance of my darling Phoebus."

Here was another person Fly had never heard of. She wondered who he could be.

"Naughty darling Phoebus," Miss Black went on. "Oh, he has been so naughty since we left Dublin. Out for hours by himself, frightening me into fits. But he doesn't care how anxious I am."

He must be her son, Fly thought; rather a horrid little boy to frighten his mother like that. She asked Miss Black if he were her only child.

Miss Black laughed. "He is, indeed, my darling only one; you must come and see him. You will be sure to love him. He is not very fond of children, but I shall tell him he must love you and not scratch."

Fly thought she would not love him at all, but she was too polite to say so. She wished Miss Black would say something about her present. But Miss Black went on talking about Phoebus.

She called him her golden boy, her heart's delight and only treasure. Fly was rather bewildered by this talk. It seemed to her that Phoebus must be a very nasty little boy: he ate nothing but kidney and fish, his mother said, and never a bite of bread with it.

Lull brought in tea, and when Miss Black had finished her tea she became silent. Fly did not like to speak. She thought her godmother must be thinking of something important. She waited a little while, then, as Miss Black continued silent, she cautiously introduced the subject of godmothers. It might, perhaps, remind the little lady of what her letter had promised. She told Miss Black about the other children's godmothers, and how lucky the others thought she was to have a godmother alive and in Ireland. Miss Black patted her hand absently, and gazed round the room.

"I know there is something I wanted to remember," she said at last. Fly waited eagerly. She knew what it was, though, of course, she could not say so. "I have it," said Miss Black. "I wanted to ask for a rabbit for Phoebus. He has no appetite, these days. This morning he touched nothing but his saucerful of cream. Do you think you could get me a rabbit, my dear? Phoebus adores rabbit."

"To be sure I can get ye wan," said Fly, swallowing her disappointment. "I'll get ye wan to-morra from Andy."

Miss Black got up to go. "That is kind of you," she said; "and, now that I remember, I had a little gift for you, but I forgot to bring it. Come to-morrow, and you shall have it. And don't forget the rabbit for Phoebus."

"I'll hould ye I'll not forgit," said Fly. "We've been havin' bad luck this wee while back with the rabbits. Some ould cat's been spoilin' them on us. But just a minute before you came I kilt the ould baste." Fly looked for applause, but her godmother's attention had wandered again.

"How very pleasant," she said. Then suddenly she looked at Fly. "What did you say, dear child?"

"I said I kilt an ould thief of a cat," said Fly proudly.

The godmother grasped her by the arm. "Killed a——" Her voice was almost a scream. "Merciful heavens! what do you mean?"

Fly was frightened. Her godmother seemed to have changed into another person. She looked at Fly with burning eyes.

"Wicked, wicked, cruel child!"

"I couldn't help it," Fly stammered. "I done it by accident." Had she all unconsciously done some awful thing? Surely everybody killed cats. They were like rats—a plague to be exterminated.

"What was it like?" demanded her godmother.

"The nastiest-lukin' baste I iver set eyes on," said Fly earnestly.

"If it had been Phoebus I think I should have killed you," said Miss Black.

Fly looked at her in a bewildered way.

"You are quite sure it wasn't Phoebus—not my darling cat?" said her godmother sternly.

A horrid fear seized Fly. Phoebus was not a boy, he was a cat—surely, surely not that yellow cat—such a thing would be too terrible.

"Was it a large, dignified creature with yellow fur?" her godmother questioned.

"It was not," said Fly emphatically. "It was a wee, scraggy cat, black all over, with a white spot on its tail."

"Thank God for it," said Miss Black. "If it had been Phoebus I should have died."

Fly was shaking all over; she felt like a murderess. If only her godmother knew the truth! It was, of course, hopeless to ask God to make the cat alive again. The only thing was to get her godmother safely away from Rowallan, and pray that she might never come back. Anxiously she watched the lady go down the steps. The donkey carriage was waiting. In another minute she would be gone; but, with her foot on the step of the carriage, Miss Black paused.

"I must see the garden; it was so pretty once, and I may never be back again," she said. Fly led the way. The burden on her chest lifted a little as she heard that her godmother would not be likely to come again. It would not take long to see the garden, and then she would go for ever. When they were half way down the path the garden gate opened, and Honeybird came through, wheeling a barrow. She had Lull's old crape bonnet on her head. Fly had a moment of sickening fright.

"I'm comin' home from a feeneral," Honeybird called out cheerfully. "I've just been buryin' my ould husband, an' now I'm a widdy woman."

Fly breathed again: Phoebus was safely buried.

"How very nice," said Miss Black.

"Ye wouldn't say that if ye knowed who her husband was," Fly thought.

"Would ye 'a' liked to be a mourner?" Honeybird asked, with a smile at Miss Black. "'Cause if ye would I can dig him up, an' bury him again."

Fly grimaced at her in an agony of terror. "Lull wants ye this very minute," she said hurriedly. Honeybird nodded to them, and took her barrow again, and went on round the house.

By this time the sun had set, and the garden was full of that strange, luminous twilight that comes with frost in the air.

A cluster of late roses in Patsy's garden glowed against the fuchsia hedge; a white flower stood out in almost startling distinctness. Above the pear-tree the sky was clear, cold green; a flush of red mounted from the south-west. The garden, shut in by the convent wall and high hedge, seemed to Fly like a box without a lid at the bottom of a deep well of clear sky.

She sniffed the cold air. Her happiness had gone from her, but she had been mercifully delivered from her trouble. Suddenly a hand gripped her. Her godmother pointed with the spiked finger of a black kid glove to Honeybird's garden. It was a bare patch—nothing grew there—for what Honeybird planted one day she dug up the next. To-day Honeybird evidently had made a new bed-centre, and bordered it with cockle shells. Fly's knees shook under her. In the middle of that bed, coming up through the newly-turned earth, with a ring of cockle shells round its neck, was the head of a big yellow cat. It was here Honeybird had buried her husband—buried him, unfortunately, as she always buried birds, with his head out, in case he felt lonely in the dark. Miss Black was down on her knees, clearing the earth away. Fly never thought of escape. She felt as though she were tied to the path. She stood there while her godmother lifted the dead cat in her arms and tenderly brushed the earth from its fur. Then the little lady turned round. "Now she'll kill me," Fly thought. She lifted her terrified eyes to Miss Black's face. How would she do it, she wondered. But her godmother never seemed to notice her. Without a word she turned, and walked quickly from the garden. A moment later Fly heard the gate shut. She was too bewildered to move. The sound of wheels going down the avenue roused her to the fact that her godmother had gone. She had been found out, and no awful punishment had followed, but to her surprise there was no relief in this. Fly felt as miserable as ever. She looked up at the sky. A star showed above the pear-tree. She had not meant to do anything wrong, but she had hurt somebody terribly. Whose fault was it? Almighty God's or her own? The donkey carriage was going slowly up the road; she could hear the whacking of a stick and the driver's "gone a' that." Suddenly through the frosty air her ear caught the sound of bitter weeping. Then Fly turned, and ran from the garden, dashing wildly through Patsy's flower-bed in her haste to get away from that heart-breaking sound.

CHAPTER V

THE CHILD SAMUEL

Fly and Honeybird introduced Samuel Brown to Rowallan. They found him sitting at the gate one day, and mistook him for the child Samuel. For a long time they had been expecting the coming of a mysterious beggar, who would turn out to be a saint or an angel in disguise. Such things had often happened in Ireland, Lull said. But, although scores of beggars came to Rowallan, so far no saint or angel had appeared. Most of the beggars were too well known to cast off a disguise worn long and successfully and suddenly declare themselves to be celestial visitors. But now and then an unknown beggar came from nobody knew where, and disappeared again into the same silent country. These nameless ones kept the two children's faith and hope alive. Samuel was one of these. Fly had spied his likeness to the child Samuel the minute she saw him sitting at the gate tired and dejected. They went to work cautiously to find out the truth, for they had got into trouble with Lull a few days before for bringing into the house a possible St Anne, who had stolen the schoolroom tablecloth. But when they asked his name, and he said it was Samuel, they did not need much further proof.

Was he the real child Samuel out of the Bible? Honey bird asked, to make sure. The boy confessed he was. He had come straight from heaven on purpose to visit them, he said.

As they were taking him up to the house they met Patsy, and told him. Patsy jeered at their tale, and reminded them of St Anne. But, in spite of Patsy's warning, they took the beggar into

the kitchen. Patsy, disgusted at their folly, left them to do as they pleased. If he had remembered that Lull was out he might have been more careful. Half-an-hour later he caught sight of the child Samuel running down the avenue wearing his best Sunday coat. Lull was very angry with Fly and Honeybird when she came home. Mick and Jane said it was the beggar who was to blame. Patsy had given chase, and did not come home till ten o'clock that night. When he did come back he brought his Sunday coat with him, as well as a black eye. He had followed the child Samuel to the town, he said, and Eli had never given the boy as good a beating. In spite of this beating and the discovery of his fraud Samuel came back a few days later. His mother was sick, he said, and he had come to borrow sixpence. Jane wanted Mick to give him a second beating.

"Nasty wee ruffan, comin' here cheatin' two wee girls," she said.

Samuel took no notice of her. He addressed his remarks to Patsy.

"Anybuddy could chate them, but I'm thinkin' it'd be the divil's own job to chate yerself," he said flatteringly.

Patsy smiled. "Don't you try it on, that's all," he said.

"Do ye think I want another batin'?" Samuel grinned. He stayed, and played with them all afternoon, in spite of Jane's plain-spoken requests for him to be off. Before he left he had a good tea in the kitchen, and got sixpence from Lull, who had a tender heart for the poor. After that he came frequently. He said his mother was dying, and wrung Lull's heart by his tales of the poor woman's sufferings. Jane noticed, and did not fail to point out, that grief never spoilt his appetite for pears. Now and then Samuel would silence her by a wild fit of weeping. Patsy got angry with Jane for her cruelty.

"Let the poor wee soul alone, an' quit yer naggin' at him," he said one day, when Jane's repeated hints had made Samuel throw himself on the grass to cry.

"I wisht I believed he was tellin' no lies," was Jane's answer.

Lull agreed with Patsy that Jane was too suspicious.

"No good iver comes to them that's hasky with the poor," she told Jane. Lull was Samuel's best friend. Every time he came she gave him something for his dying mother. There was one thing the children did not like about Samuel: he never seemed to be content with what he got. He begged for more and more, till even Patsy was ashamed of him. One evening he grumbled because Lull had only given him a penny. He had had a good tea, and his pockets were lined with apples to eat on the way home.

"It's hardly worth my while comin' if that's all I'm going to get," he said.

"Then don't be troublin' yerself to come anymore," said Jane; "we'll niver miss ye."

Samuel looked reproachfully at her. "How would ye like your own mother to be dyin'?" he asked. Jane's heart melted at once. She offered him flowers to take back. Samuel refused the flowers. "Thon half-crown ye have in yer money-box'll be more to her than yer whole garden full," he said.

But Jane was not sympathetic enough for this. She said she was saving up to buy Lull a pair of boots at Christmas. After he had gone she wondered how he could have known about her money-box, and then remembered that Fly and Honeybird had told him most of the history of the house on his first visit. The very next day Samuel came to tell them that his mother was dead. His eyes were red and swollen with weeping. For half-an-hour after he came he sat in the kitchen sobbing bitterly, and refusing to be comforted. Fly and Honeybird cried in sympathy, and Jane would have cried too if she had not been so busy watching him. He cried steadily, only stopping every now and then, to wipe his nose on his sleeve. She decided she would give him the black-bordered handkerchief she had treasured away in her drawer upstairs; also, she would make a beautiful wreath for his mother's coffin. But soon the terrible truth came out that there was no coffin. Between bursts of sobs Samuel explained that his father was in gaol, and he himself had not a penny to pay for the funeral.

"An' her laid out an' all," he wept. "The neighbours done that much for her. In as nice a shroud as ye'd wish to wear. She had it by her this many's the day. But sorra a coffin has she, poor soul, an' God knows where she's goin' to get wan."

Lull was greatly distressed. "To be sure, the parish would bury the woman," she said; "but God save us from a burial like that." She took her teapot out of the cupboard, and gave Samuel five shillings.

"If I had more ye'd be welcome to it, but that's every penny piece I've got," she said. Samuel thanked her kindly, and murmured something about money-boxes. Mick responded at once.

"I'll bet ye we've got a good wee bit in them," he said joyfully. The money-boxes were opened, and found to contain nearly ten shillings. The children handed over their savings gladly to help Samuel in his need. Even Jane rejoiced that she had her half-crown to give. Samuel went away

immediately after this, and not until he had been gone some time did Jane remember the black-bordered pocket handkerchief. However, she determined to take it to him, and also to take a wreath for the coffin. After dinner she made the wreath in private. Lull might have forbidden it if she had known. Then she called Mick and Patsy, and they started for Samuel's house. He lived near the town, so they had a long walk before they reached the squalid street. Some boys were playing marbles when the children turned the street corner. One of them looked up, then rose, and fled into a house. Jane thought he looked like Samuel, but she said nothing. Patsy had led the way so far; now he stopped, and said they must ask which was the house. They asked some women sitting on a doorstep.

"If it's Mrs Brown ye want, she's been in her grave this six years," one of them said.

"Why, Samuel tould us ye helped to lay her out this mornin'," said Jane indignantly. A drunken-looking woman came forward.

"To be sure we did," she said. Jane fancied she saw her wink at the others. "Samuel tould ye his poor mother was dead, didn't he, dear? I suppose ye've brought a trifle for him, the poor orphan."

"Which house does he live in?" Jane asked.

"Don't trouble yerselves to be goin' up. The place is not fit for quality. Lave yer charity with me, an' I'll give it to the childe." Jane insisted on going up. The woman said she would bring Samuel down to them. She seemed anxious to keep them back. But suddenly Samuel himself appeared at a door.

"I knowed ye'd mebby come," he said in a hushed voice as he led them up the stairs. He pushed open a door, and invited them to step in.

"The place is that dirty I hardly like to ask ye," he said. The room was very dirty, but the children hardly noticed this. All their attention was concentrated on the bed where the corpse lay, straight and stiff, covered with a sheet. They stood silently by, awed by the outlines of that rigid figure. Jane began to wish she had not insisted on coming upstairs. But it was their duty to look at the dead. Samuel would be hurt if they did not; he would think they were wanting in respect. She dreaded the moment when he would turn back the sheet, and show them the cold, unnatural face, that would haunt her eyes for days. Breathing a prayer that God would not let her be frightened she stepped forward, and put the wreath at the foot of the bed. As she did so her hand touched something hard. At once fear gave place to suspicion. Under cover of the wreath she felt again, and made sure the corpse was wearing a pair of hobnailed boots. She looked carefully, and saw that the sheet was moved as if by gentle breathing. Samuel, weeping at the head of the bed, never offered to turn back the sheet.

"I'd like to luk at her face," said Jane at last.

Samuel cried more than ever. "Don't ast me," he said. "The poor soul got that thin that I'd be feared for ye to see her."

"God rest her, anyhow," said Mick piously.

"Well, I'm thinkin' that's the quare thing," said Jane, looking hard at Samuel, "not to show a buddy the corpse. I niver heard tell a' the like." Samuel's answer was more tears. Mick and Patsy were both ashamed of their sister.

"I'm thinkin' she's not dead at all," Jane went on.

"Whisht, Jane; are ye clean mad?" Mick remonstrated. Samuel stopped crying. "Can't ye see for yerself she's dead right enough?" he said.

"I'd be surer if I seen her face," said Jane.

Mick in disgust turned to go, but Jane stood still.

"Wait a minute till I fix this flower that's fallen out," she said, noting with satisfaction that Samuel looked uneasy. She watched the figure under the sheet, and made sure it was breathing regularly then she took a pin out of her dress, and bent over to arrange the wreath. Suddenly her hand dropped on the sheet. There was a yell of pain, and the corpse sat bolt upright. Samuel's fraud was laid bare. His dead mother was a man with a black beard.

"God forgive ye, ye near tuk the leg aff me," he shouted, "jabbin' pins into a buddy like that."

"Shame on ye!"—Jane's eyes blazed; "lettin' on to be dead; I've the quare good mind to tell the polis." She turned to Samuel, but he had gone. Patsy had gone too; only Mick stood there, with a white, scared face.

"Come on ar this for a polisman," she said wrathfully, and swept Mick before her. The corpse was still rubbing his leg. Out on the street the women crowded round to know what had happened. Jane pushed her way through them.

"I think ye all a pack a' rogues," was the only answer she would give to their questions. Patsy was nowhere to be seen, so they turned sorrowfully homeward, to tell Lull for what they had parted with their savings. Patsy followed them a few hours later. He had been looking for Samuel to beat him, but Samuel had got away. He never came back to Rowallan. They watched for him for weeks, but never saw him again. The thought of the first beating Patsy had given him was the only satisfaction they ever got from the memory of Samuel Brown.

CHAPTER VI

THE BEST FINDER

The children had gone on an excursion that would have been too far for Honeybird, and had left her playing on the grassy path. It was a favourite place, especially in May, when the apple-trees, that made a thick screen on one side, were in blossom, and the grass was starred with dandelions and daisies. There was not a safer spot in the garden, the hedge was thick, the path was sunny, and it was a part ould Davy, the cross gardener, never came near. Patsy had allowed her to play with his rabbits and call them hers while he was away. He had carried out the hutches for her before he started. Honeybird was quite content to be left at home when she could play with the rabbits. She played being mother to them. Mr Beezledum, the white Angora, was her eldest son. Together, mother and son, they went to market to buy dandelions for the children at home, bathed in the potato patch that was the sea, and went to church under the hedge. It was the nature of children to hate going to church, she knew, so when Beezledum struggled and protested against having his fur torn by thorns she only gripped him closer, and sternly sang a hymn. Beezledum suffered a great deal; for Honeybird liked this part of the game best, and went to church more often than to market. When Mick looked back from the far end of the path as he started she was already under the hedge, with Beezledum struggling in her arms. He heard her shrill voice singing: "Shall we gather at the river?"

The day was warm and bright. The children tramped for miles, and it was nearly eight o'clock when they came home, tired and hungry, and clamouring for food. But the minute they saw Lull's face they saw that something had happened. Her eyes were red with crying. Teressa was in the kitchen too, wiping her eyes on the corner of her old plaid shawl. It was Honeybird, Lull said when she could speak, for the sight of the children made her cry again. Honeybird was lost; she had been missing since dinner-time. Andy Graham and ould Davy were out scouring the countryside for her. The children did not wait to hear more. They ran at once to the grassy path where they had left Honeybird in the morning. Mrs Beezledum was turning over half a ginger biscuit in her hutch, the other rabbits were nibbling at the bars for food, but all that was left of Honeybird and Mr Beezledum was a tuft of white fur in the hedge. For a minute the children looked at each other, afraid to speak. One of their terrors had come at last. Honeybird had been stolen. Either the Kidnappers or the Wee People had taken her. The children stared at each other's white faces as they realised what had happened. If the Kidnappers, those tall, thin, half men, half devils, had taken her they would carry her away behind the mountains, and there they would cut the soles off her feet, and put her in a hot bath till she bled to death. And if the Wee People had got her it would be to take her under the ground, where she would sigh for evermore to come back to earth. Mick's voice was thick when he spoke. "We'll hunt for the wee sowl till we drop down dead," he said.

The fear of the Kidnappers was the most urgent, so towards the mountains they must go first. The rest started at a run that soon left Fly behind; but they dared not wait for her, and though she did her best to keep up they were soon out of sight. But Fly never for a moment thought of going back. Left to herself she jogged along with her face to the mountains. The sun, setting behind Slieve Donard, threw an unearthly glow over the fields. The mountains looked bigger and wilder than ever, the sky farther away. Everything seemed to know what had happened, even the birds were still, and a silence like an enchantment made the whole country strange.

At last, in the middle of the field, Fly stopped, with a stitch in her side. A flaming red sky stared her in the face, a wild, unknown land stretched away on every side. Things she had been afraid of but had only half believed in crowded round her. She saw now that they had been real all the time, and had only been waiting for a chance to come out of their hiding-places. Strange faces grinned at her from the whins, cold eyes frowned at her from the stones. In another minute that ragged bramble would turn back into an old witch. And behind the mountains the Kidnappers were cutting the soles off Honeybird's feet. With a wail of anguish Fly began to run again. She was not afraid of the fiends and witches. They might grin and frown and laugh that low, shivering laugh behind her if they liked—her Honeybird, her own Honeybird, was behind the mountains, alone with those awful Kidnappers.

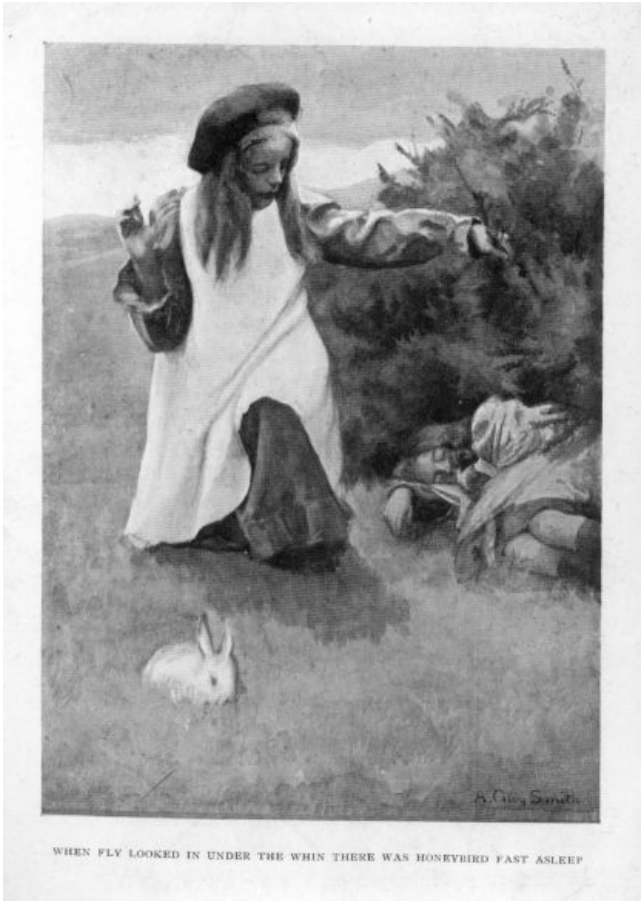
"Almighty God, make them ould Kidnappers drop our wee Honeybird," she wailed.

Then she stopped again. She had forgotten that Almighty God could help.

But He would not help unless He were asked properly. For a moment she doubted the wisdom of stopping to ask. She was conscious of many grudges against her. This very day she had promised she would not do one naughty thing if God would let it be fine—and then had forgotten, and played being Moses when they were bathing, and struck the sea with a tail of seaweed to make it close over Patsy, who was Pharaoh's host. But her trouble was so great that, perhaps, if she confessed her sin He would forgive her this time. So she knelt down, and folded her hands. "Almighty God," she began, "I'm sorry I didn't keep my promise about being good, I'm sorry I was Moses, I'm sorry I'm such a bad girl, but as sure as I kneel on this grass I'll be good for iver an' iver if ye'll send back our wee Honeybird."

Tears blinded and choked her for a moment. Almighty God could do everything, could help her now so easily. It wouldn't hurt Him just for once, she thought. She went on repeating her promise to be good, begging and coaxing, but no sign came from the flaring heavens. At last she got desperate. "If ye don't I'll niver believe in ye again," she shouted, then added: "Oh, please, I didn't mean to be rude, but we want our poor, poor, wee Honeybird." She laid her face down on the grass, and sobbed.

Almighty God might have helped her, she thought. It wasn't much she had done to make Him cross after all—but, then, He was just—and she had made Moses cross too. But Honeybird must be saved from the Kidnappers, and if Almighty God would not help Fly knew she must go on herself. She dried her eyes on her sleeve, and was getting up from her knees, when something white hopped out from behind a whin. It was Beezledum; and when Fly looked in under the whin there was Honeybird fast asleep. She knelt down, and folded her hands again. "Almighty God," she said, "I'll niver, niver to my dyin' day forget this on ye." Then with a yell of joy she ran to wake Honeybird.



WHEN FLY LOOKED IN UNDER THE WHIN THERE WAS HONEYBIRD FAST ASLEEP

When Fly looked in under the whin there was Honeybird fast asleep.

There was great rejoicing when they got home. Lull hugged and kissed them both, and made Honeybird tell her story over and over again.

"It was that ould Beezledum," Honeybird said; "he didn't like goin' to church, an' he ran away through the hedge. An he run on an' on, an' I thought I'd niver catch him. An' when I catched him, an begun to come home, I was awful tired, an' I just sat down to get my breath, and Fly came and woke me up."

About ten o'clock the others came home, despairing of ever seeing Honeybird again. They had met ould Davy at the gates, who told them to run on and see what was sitting by the kitchen fire.

What was sitting by the kitchen fire when they came in was Honeybird eating hot buttered toast.

Lull pulled up their stools to the fire, and took a plate of toast that she had made for them out of the oven. The rest of the evening was spent in rejoicing. Fly began to be elated.

It was she who had found Honeybird. The others had run on and left her, but she was the best finder after all. They praised her till she was only second to Honeybird in importance. The desire to shine still more got the better of her; though her conscience hurt she would not heed it.

"Ye'll find I knowed where to look," she said; "ye'll find I know things."

Lull and the four others listened with breathless interest to her tale. Andy Graham came in from the stables to hear it. Fly got more and more excited. "When ye all left me," she said, "I just run on till I come to the quarest place, all whins an' big stones an' trees, an' I can tell ye I was brave an' scared; I was just scared out a' my skin. But I keep on shoutin': 'Where's our wee Honeybird? Give us back our wee Honeybird,' an' all the time I run on like mad, shoutin' hard, an' I lifted a big stick, an' sez I: 'If ye don't give us back our wee Honeybird I'll wreck yer ould country an' I'll burn yer ould thorn-trees,' an' I shook the big stick. 'Do ye hear me?' sez I—'for I will, as sure as I'm standin' on this green grass.' An' with that something white jumped out, an', sure enough, this was Beezledum, and Honeybird fast asleep in under a whin."

"God love ye, but ye were the brave chile," said Lull.

"An' as I was comin' away," Fly went on, "I throwed down the big stick, an' I shouted out: 'I'll thank ye all, an' I'll niver, niver to my dyin' day forget it on ye.'"

They praised her again and again. No one had ever such a triumph. But in the middle of the night yells of terror from the nursery brought Lull from her bed. Fly was sitting up in bed howling, the others were huddled round her. Mick and Honeybird were crying with her, but Jane and Patsy were dry-eyed and severe. Almighty God's eye had looked in at the window at her, Fly said. He had come to send her to hell for the awful lie she had told. Patsy said she deserved to go. "It's in the Bible," Jane said: "all liars shall have a portion of the lake of burnin' fire an' brimstone."

"Sure, she's only a wee chile, an' how could she know any better?" Mick remonstrated. "God'd be the quare old tyrant if He sent her to hell for a wee lie like thon."

"But, after Him lettin' her off one lie, He'll be clean mad with her by this time," said Patsy.

"Whist, childer dear," said Lull, as she put them all back to bed and tucked them in. "Sure, the Almighty has somethin' better to do than be puttin' the likes a' yous in hell. Just be aff to sleep, an' I'll say my beads, an' the Holy Mother'll put in a good word for the chile afore mornin'."

CHAPTER VII

A STOCKING FULL OF GOLD

Mrs Kelly and her grandson Tom lived in one of the two cottages just outside the gates. Her husband, when he was alive, had worked in the garden at Rowallan. She was a sprightly little woman, rosy-cheeked and black-eyed, and always wore a black woollen hood, that had a border of grey fur, around her face. The children loved to go to tea with her, to eat potato bread just off the griddle, and hear the tales of the days when she was young: when the boys and girls would go miles for the sake of a dance, and when there was not a wake in the countryside that she did not foot it with the best, in her white muslin dress and white stockings.

Lull said Mrs Kelly hadn't her sorrows to seek. But the children thought they had never seen anyone who looked more cheerful. She herself said there were not many old women who were so well off. "Sure, I've got me wee house, that I wouldn't change for a king's palace," she said one day, "an' me grandson Tom, that niver said a wrong word to me. Wouldn't I be the quare old witch if I didn't be thankin' Almighty God for it!"

But one morning ould Davy, who lived in the next cottage, when he came to work, brought a message from Mrs Kelly to say that Tom was ill. Jane, who went down to see what was the matter, came back crying.

"He's goin' to die," she said, choking back her tears, "an' she's sittin' by the fire cryin' her heart out."

"Auch, the critter! she's had sorras enough without that," said Lull.

"What ails him?" Mick asked.

"He's got consumption, an' she says—she says—she's buried eight a' them with it."

"God help her! she was the brave wee woman," said Lull.

"Mebby he'll get better," said Patsy.

"He'll niver do that in this world," Lull said sadly.

"It's just awful," said Jane. "She says there's no cure for it. It'd break yer heart to see her sittin' there."

"I'm sure as anything Doctor Dixey could cure him," said Fly. "Didn't he mend Patsy's foot when he hurted it in the threshin' machine? An' didn't he take them ould ulsters out a' my throat?"

There was some hope in this, the children thought. And though Lull shook her head she allowed them to send Andy for Doctor Dixey. It was not until the evening that the doctor came. Lull had promised that they might stay up to hear what he thought about Tom. When he did come, and Lull took him down to Mrs Kelly's house, he stayed there nearly an hour. The children were getting very sleepy when he came back into the school-room.

"Well," he said, pulling up a chair to the fire, "so you want me to cure this boy Tom?"

Mick nodded.

"I think it could be done," Doctor Dixey went on. "But it would cost a deal of money—more than any of us can afford to spend."

"How much?" Jane asked.

"Ten pounds at least, and then it's only a chance. And the old woman will be left alone in any case."

They looked inquiringly at him.

"You see, the only chance is to send him abroad. He'll die if he stays here. And when he gets there he'll have to stay there. So the grandmother would miss him just as much as if he——"

"She wouldn't care," Jane interrupted. "Sure, couldn't he write letters to her if he was alive! An' he couldn't do that if he was dead."

"But the money—where's that to come from?" said Doctor Dixey.

"We'll just have to fin' it," said Mick.

"I'm afraid that will be a hard job," said Doctor Dixey as he got up to go. "But I'll see to the boy while he's here, and if you find the money I'll find the ship."

They sat up for another hour, talking it over with Lull. She said it was hopeless to think of such a lot of money, but the children declared that they would find it somewhere. After they had gone to bed, and Lull had put out the candle, Jane heard a noise in the dark room.

"Who's that?" she said, starting up in bed.

"It's on'y me sayin' me prayers," said Honeybird.

"Ye said them wanst afore," said Jane. "Get into bed, an' be quiet."

Honeybird got into bed, but in about three minutes she was out again.

"What's the matter now?" said Jane.

"It's on'y me sayin' me prayers," Honeybird answered.

"Sure, ye said them twiced afore," said Fly crossly.

"I'm sayin' them three times for luck," said Honeybird as she got back into bed.

Next morning Mick and Jane started off together to look for the money. Soon after they had gone Honeybird came into the kitchen with her best hood on, and said she was going out to see somebody. "Don't ye be feared," she said when Lull had tied the strings of her hood. "I'll be away the quare long time, but I'll bring ye all somethin' nice when I come back."

An hour later she was knocking at the door of the big white house, two miles away, where old Mr M'Keown lived. None of the children had ever been there before; but they had heard about Mr M'Keown from Teressa, who went once a week to do his washing, and who had told them stories of how he lived all by himself, with not even a servant to look after him, and kept all his money tied up in old stockings.

Honeybird's heart was full of joy. Last night she had asked Almighty God to let her find the money for Tom Kelly, and when she got back into bed for the last time Almighty God had

reminded her that old Mr M'Keown had stockings full of gold.

After rapping for a long time on the panels of the front door—she could not reach the knocker—she walked round to the back of the house, and knocked there. But still there was no answer. Then she tried the side door. By this time her knuckles were sore, and, as she found she could turn the handle, she opened the door, and walked in. A long passage led to the hall, where she stopped, and looked round. There were doors on every side, but they were all shut. The first door she opened showed another passage, the second led into a dark room. But when she opened the third door she saw an old man sitting in an arm-chair by a fire. Honeybird smiled at him. Then she shut the door carefully behind her, and went up to him, holding out her hand.

"An' how're ye, Mister M'Keown?" she said.

A bony hand closed over hers for a second, but Mr M'Keown did not speak. Honeybird pulled up a chair to the fire. "I hurted me han' rappin' on thon dours," she said, "so I just come in at last."

"May I ask who you are?" said Mr M'Keown in a thin voice.

"I'm Honeybird Darragh," she said.

"Darragh!" he repeated. "Ah, yes."

Honeybird's eyes wandered round the room. Cupboards with glass doors lined the walls, and the cupboards were full of china. "Can I look at them things?" she asked.

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr M'Keown.

She got off her chair, and went round the room. In one cupboard there were china ladies and gentlemen in beautiful clothes. She sighed before it. "Auch, I wisht I was a lady," she said, coming back to the fire. "Wouldn't ye like to have long hair, Mister M'Keown?"

"I am afraid it would not afford me much pleasure," he said.

Honeybird looked at him again. He was very thin, and his long back was bent. "Aren't you feared to live here all by yer lone?" she said.

"Afraid? What should I be afraid of?" he asked.

"I'm feared," she said, "an' there's me an' Fly an' Patsy an' Mick an' Jane an' Lull an' mother—all them—an' I'm feared to death sometimes."

"What are you afraid off?" he asked.

"I'm feared a' ghosts an' Kidnappers, an' Skyan the Bugler, an' the buggy boo an' the banshee, an' when I'm a bad girl I'm awful feared a' the divil."

"Surely that is a rare occurrence?" said Mr M'Keown.

Honeybird did not understand. "Aren't ye feared a' them things?" she asked.

"Not in the least," he replied.

"I'll hould ye ye're feared robbers'll come an' steal all yer stockin's full of gold," she said.

"My stockings full of gold!" he repeated, looking puzzled.

"Teressa sez ye've got hapes an' hapes a' them," she said.

"I am afraid they only exist in Theresa's imagination," he said. "I have not got one stocking full of gold."

Honeybird stared. "Then ye haven't got one to give away?" she faltered.

Mr M'Keown sat up in his chair, and made a crackling noise in his throat, that grew more distinct, till at last Honeybird realised that he was laughing.

"I have not laughed for ten years," he said, smiling at her.

She tried to smile back, but her eyes were full of tears.

"Did you expect me to give you a stocking full of gold?" he said.

"'Deed, I did," she said sadly. "I was tould to come an' ast ye for it."

Mr M'Keown frowned. "Ah," he said; "so it was not simplicity?"

"No; it was a hape a' money," she said.

"Perhaps you can tell me the exact sum?"

"'Deed, I can," she said; "it was just ten pounds."

"Ten pounds! What madness!" he exclaimed. "And, pray, is it to build a new chapel or to convert the Jews that you have been sent to beg such a sum?"

"It's just to make Tom Kelly better," she said, the tears running down her cheeks. "He's goin' to die, and Mrs Kelly's buried eight a' them, and Jane sez she's heart bruk, and Doctor Dixey sez ten pounds'll cure him."

Mr M'Keown coughed. "Did Doctor Dixey send you to beg for the money?" she said.

She shook her head.

"Perhaps it was Father Ryan or Mr Rannigan?"

Again she shook her head.

"Was it your sister?"

"'Deed, it wasn't Jane, for she just hates ye; she always says ye're an ould miser, an' ye'd skin a flint."

"I am sorry that my conduct does not meet with her approval," Mr M'Keown said. "But I shall be glad if you will tell me to whom I am indebted for the honour of your visit."

Honeybird looked at him. She did not understand what he meant.

"Who sent you here?" he said.

"Almighty God tould me to come," she said.

"Almighty God?" he said. "I do not understand."

"I ast Him to let me fin' the money to cure Tom Kelly. An' I said me prayers three times for luck. An' when I was gettin' into bed the last time Almighty God just said in a wee whisper: 'Ould Mister M'Keown's the boy.'" Her disappointment was so bitter that she could not stop crying.

"Did you tell this to anyone?" Mr M'Keown asked.

"I didn't tell a sowl. I got Lull to tie on me Sunday hood, 'an' came here as quick as quick." For some time neither spoke. Mr M'Keown was walking up and down the room. Honeybird was sniffing, and wiping her eyes on her pinafore. At last Mr M'Keown came back to his chair. "Will you tell it to me all over again?" he said.

"I'll tell ye all from the start," she said. "Jane said Tom Kelly was goin' to die, and Fly said Doctor Dixey could cure him, 'cause he took the ulsters out a' her throat. An' Doctor Dixey come, an' sez he: 'I can make him better with ten pounds,' sez he, 'an' if yous can fin' the money I'll fin' the ship.":

"What is the matter with this Tom?" Mr M'Keown interrupted.

"He's got consumption. An' we thought an' thought, an' Jane ast Lull to pawn our Sunday clothes. An' Lull said they weren't worth more'n a pound. An' when we went to bed I prayed like anythin', an' Almighty God tould me to come here." She got up, and held out her hand. "I may as well be sayin' good-mornin' to ye, Mister M'Keown," she said.

Mr M'Keown took her hand, but did not let it go again. "Perhaps Almighty God did not tell you to come to me," he said.

"'Deed, He did," she said, trying to swallow a sob; "but mebby He was just makin' fun a' me."

"Certainly I have not got stockings full of gold," Mr M'Keown said.

"Well, I was thinkin' ye had," she said.

"Ten pounds!" he murmured, looking into the fire. Then he got up from his chair.

"Will you wait here by the fire till I come back?" he said, and went out of the room.

Honeybird-sat down again. Her heart was heavy. She had pictured to herself how she would go home with the stocking full of gold, and how glad the others would be when they saw the money, and knew that Tom Kelly could be cured. But now she must go back empty-handed. Mr M'Keown was gone such a long time that she grew tired of waiting, and got up to go home. But before she reached the door it opened, and he came in. He had something in his hand.

"Come here," he said, and, to her astonishment, he laid on the table a handful of glittering gold pieces.

"That is ten pounds," he said.

Honeybird looked bewildered.

"It is for you if you will accept it," he said.

She answered by throwing her arms round his legs and hugging them tight. Mr M'Keown took her hand, and went back to his chair.

"An' what made ye say ye had none, ye ould ruffan?" she said, hugging him round the neck this time, till he had to beg to be allowed to breathe.

"I think you must ask Doctor Dixey to call here for it," he said.

Honeybird's face fell. "Auch, sure I can take it home myself," she said.

"I'm afraid you might lose it," he said.

"How could I lose it?" she said. "Are ye feared I'd drop it? 'Cause I tell ye what: I couldn't drop it if ye'd put it in an ould stockin' for me to carry."

Mr M'Keown smiled. "Perhaps a sock would do," he said. He went out of the room again, and came back with a sock. "But it will not be full," he said, as he tied the money in the toe. Then he said he would walk back with her. Honeybird went with him to get his coat, and brushed his top-hat for him with her arm, as Andy Graham had taught her. They set out, hand-in-hand, Honeybird carrying the sock. Mr M'Keown walked very slowly, and Honeybird talked all the way. She told him about her mother and Lull and Andy Graham, what she played, and what the others did, till they came to the gates of Rowallan.

"Now I shall leave you," Mr M'Keown said.

She kissed him good-bye, and when, half way up the avenue, she turned to look back he was gone. The others were having dinner. Jane and Mick had come back. Honeybird ran into the schoolroom, waving the sock.

"Ye were quare and cross with me for gettin' out a' bed last night, weren't ye, Janie? But luk what it got me." She shook the gold out of the sock on to the table.

They all danced round her while she told her tale. And when they ran down and told Mrs Kelly she was so bewildered by the news that she could not believe it till they brought her up and showed her the little heap of gold on the table. Honeybird was the least excited of them all; not even when Doctor Dixey came and made her tell her adventures twice over did she lose her head.

"Sure, Almighty God always does anythin' I ast Him," she said. "Mind ye, He's quare an' obliging; if I loss anythin' He fin's it for me as quick as quick."

"Well, He worked a miracle for you this time," said Doctor Dixey.

A fortnight later Honeybird wrote, or rather Jane held her hand while she wrote, to Mr M'Keown.

"I write to tell you that Tom Kelly is away to Africa," the letter ran. "And Mrs Kelly cried and old Davy said he would be her grandson now and that would make you laugh again if you knowed Davy for he is the cross old man and never says a word but it is a bad one and Doctor Dixey knowed a man there and Jane is awful sorry she called you an old miser."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BANTAM HEN

"Father Ryan's lost his wee bantam hen," said Patsy when they were having supper one evening. "Ould Rosie was out lukin' for it as I come past the presbytery."

"Somebuddy's stole it," said Honeybird. Mick challenged this statement.

"Well, it's just like what somebuddy 'ud do," Honeybird replied.

"I'm goin' to help ould Rosie to luk for it the morra," said Patsy.

Honeybird looked up from her porridge. "Ye'll niver fin' it," she said. "Somebuddy that lives away at the other side a' the town tuk it. I seen him goin' away with it under his arm."

The others stopped scraping their plates to look at her.

"Why didn't ye tell us afore?" Jane asked.

"'Cause I was feared," said Honeybird. "He tould me that if I telt anybuddy he'd come back an' cut my throat."

The family stared at her. Here was a wonderful adventure Honeybird had been through, and had never said a word about it till this minute. Questions poured in on her. Lull, remembering that Honeybird had been out by herself all afternoon, listened anxiously. Honeybird glanced quickly over her shoulder, as though she were afraid of being overheard. "I was coming along the road," she began, lowering her voice, "when who should I meet but a big, wicked-lukin' man, with a baldy head on him, an' two roun' eyes as big as saucers."

"Away ar that, Honeybird," Patsy interrupted.

"Well, I can tell ye they luked like that to me," said Honeybird. "An' just as he was passin' me I seen a wee beak keekin 'out a' his pocket, an' sez I to myself: 'Thon's Father Ryan's bantam hen.'" Honeybird had an attentive audience. "An' sez I to him: 'Drap it,' sez I."

"Lord love ye, child, the man might 'a' hurted ye," said Lull.

"He very near did," said Honeybird. "He lifted a big stone, an' clodded it at me, an' sez he: 'If ye tell on me I'll cut yer throat,' sez he."

"That's the last time ye're out stravagin' the roads by yer lone," said Lull. "Yez'll not have to lave the wee sowl after this," she cautioned the others. They were as frightened as Lull.

They treated Honeybird as though she had been rescued from some terrible danger. Next morning Andy was told. He questioned Honeybird closely, and said he would give a description of the man to Sergeant M'Gee. Honeybird remembered that the man had red whiskers, and carried a big stick. Later on she remembered that he had bandy legs and a squint. The more frightened the others grew at the thought of the dangers she had been exposed to the more terrible grew her description of the man's appearance. Once or twice Jane had a suspicion that Honeybird was adding to the truth, but when questioned Honeybird stuck to the same tale, and never contradicted herself.

"God be thankit no harm come to the wee sowl," said Mick when Honeybird had gone off to play, in charge of Fly and Patsy. "I'll be feared to let her out a' my sight after this."

"I'll hould ye Sergeant M'Gee'll keep a luk out for thon boy," said Jane. They were up in the loft getting hay for Rufus.

"Wasn't she the quare brave wee thing to tell the man to drap the priest's hen?" said Mick. Jane lifted a bundle of hay.

"She's an awful good wee child, anyway," she answered. "What's that scrapin' in the corner?" she added.

She stepped over the hay to look.

"What is it?" said Mick. Jane did not answer. He repeated his question, and Jane turned a bewildered face.

"Come here an' see," she said. In the corner, where a place had been cleared for the purpose, a bantam hen was tethered by a string to a nail in the floor!

"God help us," said Mick, "but why an' iver did he hide it here?"

"He!" said Jane, "don't you see the manin' af it? She's stole it herself, an' tould us all them lies on purpose."

Mick could hardly be brought to believe this.

"Did ye iver hear tell a' such badness?" said Jane.

"Mebby she niver knowed what she was doin'," said Mick.

"Didn't she just," said Jane; "she knowed enough to tell a quare good lie."

"We'd better go an' ast her if she done it," said Mick.

They found Honeybird playing on the lawn with the two others, and led her away to the top of the garden. Jane began the accusation.

"Do you know, Honeybird, we think you're a wee thief," she said.

"Dear forgive ye," said Honeybird.

"We seen the bantam," said Jane.

Honeybird looked up quickly. "Then just you lave it alone, an' mind yer own business," she said.

"Do you know that you are a thief an' a liar, Honeybird Darragh?" said Jane sternly.

"Well, what if I am?" said Honeybird. "Sure, I'm on'y a wee child, an know no better."

"Ye know the commandments an' 'Thou shall not steal' as well as I do," said Jane.

"I forget them sometimes," said Honeybird; "besides, too, I niver stole it. It as near as ninepence walked up into my pinny."

"Where was it?" Mick asked.

"It was out walkin' on the road all by its lone," said Honeybird, "an' if I hadn't 'a' tuk it mebby somebuddy else would."

"Then ye niver seen no bad man with a baldy head at all?" Mick asked.

"No, I didn't," Honeybird confessed; "but I might 'a' seen him all the same."

"Luk here, me girl," said Jane, "you've just got to walk that bantam hen back to Father Ryan."

"I will not," said Honeybird.

"Then we'll tell Lull."

Honeybird began to cry. "If ye do I'll run away, an' niver, niver come home any more," she said. Jane was dumfounded.

"Ye can't go on bein' a thief, Honeybird," she said at last. "We on'y want to make ye good."

"Then ye'll not make me good," said Honeybird. "If ye tell anybuddy I'll be as bad as bad as the divil, so I just will."

"Well, if ye don't give up the bantam Almighty God'll let ye know," said Jane.

"I'm not a bit feared a' Him," Honeybird replied. Say what they would they could not move her. Mick reasoned and Jane reasoned, but it was all to no purpose. Honeybird was determined to stick to her sin. In the end she got the better of them, for to put an end to her threats they had to promise not to tell. Later in the day Andy also discovered the bantam hen, and told Lull.

"I wouldn't 'a' believed there was that much veeciousness in the wean," he said. Andy was cross—he had been to the police barracks, and told Sergeant M'Gee to look out for Honeybird's bad man.

"God luk to yer wit, man," said Lull. "Sure, childer's always tryin' their han' at some divilment or other."

"She'd be the better af a good batin'," said Andy.

"It'd be the quare wan would lift han' to a chile like thon," said Lull. "I don't hould with batin's, anyway. Just take yer hurry, an' ye'll see what'll happen."

What did happen was that Honeybird brought an old hymn-book into the kitchen that evening, and sat by the fire singing hymns. "I am Jesus' little lamb," she was singing in a shrill voice when the others came into supper.

"Then ye're the quare black wan," said Jane.

Several days passed, and Honeybird showed no sign of repentance. She even continued the tale of the bad man to Fly and Patsy, who did not know the truth, and were still frightened of him. She said she had met him again. Where and when she was not going to tell, for he had told her he was going to America, and was never going to steal any more. He had also said that if she were a good girl he would give her a bantam hen for herself.

"He'll on'y give ye the wan he stole from Father Ryan, an' then ye'll have to take it back," said Fly.

"No; but he said it'd be wan he stole from somebuddy I niver seen or knowed," said Honeybird.

"Don't you be takin' it," Patsy warned her. "The receiver's as bad as the thief, ye know."

Honeybird was disconcerted for a moment. "Who tould ye that?" she asked.

"It's in the Bible," said Patsy.

"Well, I don't believe it," said Honeybird. "Anyway, Almighty God forgets things half His time. I seen somebuddy that done a sin wanst, an' He niver let on He knowed."

That night Mrs Darragh was ill again. The children had all gone to bed. Lull thanked God they were asleep as she sat by their mother's side listening to her wild prayers and protestations of repentance. "The childer'd make sure she was goin' to die if they heerd her," she thought, and hoped the nursery door was securely shut. She had found it was best to let Mrs Darragh cry till she had exhausted her grief. Then she would fall asleep, and forget. Tonight it was past twelve o'clock before Mrs Darragh slept. Lull made up the fire, and crept softly out of the room to go to her own bed. But when she opened the door she discovered the five children in their nightgowns sitting huddled together in the passage. They looked at Lull with anxious eyes.

"Is she dead, Lull?" Jane asked. Lull drove them off to the nursery.

"Tell us, Lull; is she dead?" Mick begged.

"Not a bit a' her," said Lull cheerfully. "She's sleepin' soun'." She tucked them into bed, and hurried back to see if they had waked their mother. All was quiet there, and she was once more going off to bed, when she heard voices in the nursery.

"I'll take it back the morra, but I think Almighty God's not fair." It was Honeybird's voice. "He might 'a' done some wee thing on me, an' instead a' that He done the baddest thing He knowed."

"Whist, Honeybird," came Jane's voice.

"I'll not whist," said Honeybird. "He's near bruk my heart. Makin' mother sick like that all for the sake of a wee bantam."

"God help childer an' their notions," said Lull to herself.

Next morning, when she was lighting the kitchen fire, a figure passed the kitchen window. It was early for anybody to be about the place, so Lull got up to see who it could be. It was Honeybird. She was running quickly down the avenue, with something under her arm. She was back again before breakfast.

"How's mother?" were her first words. Lull assured her that Mrs Darragh was better again.

Honeybird gave a sigh of relief. "Och, but I got the quare scare," she said. Lull pretended to know nothing.

"Well, I may as well tell ye it was me stole Father Ryan's wee bantam," said Honeybird. Lull expressed surprise.

"An' sez I to myself: 'Almighty God niver knows that I know right well it's a sin'"—she paused for a moment—"but He knowed all the time. 'Clare to you, Lull dear, I made sure He'd 'a' kilt mother afore I got the wee bantam tuk back."

"Did ye tell the priest that?" Lull asked.

"Troth, I tould him ivery word from the very start," Honeybird answered.

"An' what did he say to ye?" said Lull.

"He's the awful nice man," said Honeybird. "He tried to make out that Almighty God wasn't as bad as all that. But I know better. Anyhow, he's goin' to buy me a wee bantam cock and hen, all for my very own, to keep for iver."

CHAPTER IX

THE DORCAS SOCIETY

The Dorcas Society was Jane's idea. She thought of it one Monday evening as they all sat round the kitchen fire watching Lull make soup for the poor. A bad harvest had been followed by an unusually wild winter. Storms such as had not been known for fifty years swept over the country, and now, after three months of storm, February had come with a hard frost and biting wind that drove the cold home to the very marrow of your bones. In winters past the poor had come from miles round to Rowallan, where a boiler full of soup was never off the kitchen fire. This winter, driven by want, some of those who remembered the old days had come back once more, and Lull, out of her scanty store, had filled once more the big boiler. On this Monday evening, as she stirred the soup, she mourned for the good days past.

"Troth, Rowallan was the full an' plenty house when the ould master was alive. Bad an' all as he was there was good in him. It was a sayin' among the neighbours that if ye'd had three bellies on ye ye could 'a' filled them all at Rowallan." Lull could have talked all night on this subject. "An' the ould mistress, God have mercy on her; she'd have blankets an' flannel petticoats, an' dear knows what all, for the women an' childer; I'm sayin' Rowallan was the full an' plenty house wanst."

"Well, I wisht it was now," said Mick. "I met Anne M'Farlane on the road the day, an' ye could see the bones of her through her poor ould duds."

"Ah, I thought a quare pity a' her myself," said Patsy; "the teeth was rattlin' in her head."

"That'll make me cry when I'm in bed the night," said Honeybird sorrowfully.

It was then that the idea of a Dorcas Society, such as their mother had told them of, came to Jane, and was taken up enthusiastically by the others. "Ye get ould clothes, an' mend them, an' fix them for people," she explained to Lull. "We could have a brave one with all them things in the blue-room cupboards."

"Is it the clothes of your ould ancestry ye're for givin' away? I'm thinkin' ye'll get small thanks for that rubbidge," said Lull.

"Why, they're beautiful things, that warm an' thick," Jane protested, "an' we'd fix them up first." Lull looked at the five eager faces watching hers. She hated to damp their ardour, but she knew what the village would think of such gifts.

"Say yes, plaze," Honeybird begged, "or I'll be awful sorry ivery time I mind Anne M'Farlane shiverin'."

"Go on, Lull; many's the time I can hardly sleep when I think the people's cowld," said Mick.

"We'd begin at wanst," said Fly eagerly, and Lull weakly gave in. "God send they don't be makin' scarecrows a' the poor," she murmured when the children had departed in joyful haste to begin their Dorcas Society. For three days they could think and talk of nothing else. Lull, watching them, regretted that she had not the heart to discourage them at the first, for they took such pleasure and pride in their society that she could not disappoint them now. She did drop a few hints, but nobody took any notice. The clothes from the blue-room cupboards represented the fashions for the past fifty years—full-skirted gowns, silk and satin, tarlatan, and bombazine calashes, areophane bonnets, Dolly Varden hats, pelerines, burnouses, shawls, tippets. At these Fly and Jane sewed from morning till night. Fly saw the hand of Providence in an attack of rheumatism that kept Mr Rannigan in bed and put off lessons for a week. The boys were at school, but directly they came home they sat down by the schoolroom fire to help. Honeybird could not sew; she unpicked torn linings and, on Lull's suggestion, ripped off all unnecessary bows and fringes, working so hard that she had two big blisters where the scissors chafed her fingers. On Wednesday evening all the sewing was done, and the children prepared to take the clothes to the village. Lull regretted her weakness still more when she saw how pleased they were with their work. They brought her into the schoolroom to show her everything before they packed.

"Look at that fine thing," said Honeybird, patting a red burnouse. "That'll keep Anne M'Farlane's ould bones from rattlin'." Patsy held up a buff-coloured satin gown, pointing out with pride where he had filled up the deficiencies of a very low neck with the top of a green silk pelerine.

"That's more like a dress now, isn't it, Lull?" he said. "I'm thinkin' whoiver wore that afore I fixed it must 'a' been on the bare stomach." They packed the clothes in ould Davy's wheelbarrow and the ould perambulator, and started off. Jane and Mick wheeled the loads. Patsy held a lantern, Fly and Honeybird carried armfuls of bonnets and hats that would have been crushed among the heavy things. Lull felt like a culprit as she watched them go. She waited with some anxiety for them to come home, but they came back as pleased as they had been when they started. Everybody was delighted, and had promised to wear their gifts.

"Anne M'Farlane cried, she was that glad," Honeybird told Lull.

"An', mind ye, the things fitted quare an' well," said Mick. "The only thing I have my doubts about was thon lilac boots ye give Mrs Cush."

"They went on her all right," said Jane.

"Ah, but I could see they hurted her all the same," said Mick; "but I suppose they'll stretch." Lull thanked God in her heart that the people had evidently taken the will for the deed. And perhaps, after all, though the clothes were not fit to wear, some of them might be useful—one of those satin dresses would be a warm covering on a bed.

Next morning she was skimming the soup when old Mrs Kelly came in. Lull turned to greet her, and saw to her surprise that Mrs Kelly wore a tight black silk jacket and a green calash. "Saints presarve us, Mrs Kelly, woman," she exclaimed, for a moment forgetting the Dorcas

Society. Mrs Kelly smiled weakly.

"I suppose I look like mad Mattie; but I couldn't be disappointin' the childer. Ye'll tell them, Lull, I come up in them, won't ye? I give them my word I would." Mrs Kelly departed with her soup, and Lull sat down to face the fact that the people had taken the children seriously. "Dear forgive me, I'm the right ould fool. The village'll be like a circus the day," she murmured. A tall figure in vivid colours passed the window. "God help us, there's Anne," she gasped. The next moment Anne M'Farlane stood in the doorway. She wore a brown bombazine dress, a red burnouse, and a bonnet of bright blue areophane. Lull greeted her as though there were nothing unusual about her appearance. But Anne, in no mood to notice this, stood still in the doorway. Lull turned towards the fire.

"Come on in an' warm yerself, Anne," she said cheerfully, trying to ignore Anne's dramatic attitude. A burst of weeping was the reply from the figure in the doorway.

"Luk at me—luk!" wailed Anne. "Did ye iver see the like in all yer days?—all the childer in the streets a-callin' after me. An' when I met the priest on the road, sez he: 'Is it aff to a weddin' ye are in Lent, Anne?' sez he." Lull could find nothing to say. She tried to make Anne come in and have some tea, but Anne's woe was beyond the comfort of tea.

"Gimme the soup, an' I'll away home to my bed," she wept. "God help me, I'd be better in my grave." She dried her eyes on the burnouse, and took her soup, adding, as she turned to go: "Don't be lettin' on to the weans, Lull. Their meanin' was a' the best, but it's an image upon airth they've made a' me—me that always lived a moral life, an' hoped to die a moral death." She went away crying.

"It's the sore penance I'll get for this day's work," Lull muttered.

Teressa was the next person to arrive, and to Lull's relief she wore her own well-known green plaid shawl. On seeing this Lull took heart again. Mrs Kelly and Anne M'Farlane were both such good-natured bodies, perhaps they would be the only ones to wear the Dorcas Society's gifts. But Teressa was charged with news. She was hardly inside the door before she began. "Man, Lull, woman, but there's the quare fun in the village the day. Ye'd split yer two sides at the people. I niver laughed as many. Thon's the curiosities a' the ould-fashionedest, to be sure. Silks an' satins trailin' round the dours like tip-top quality rared in the parlour." She took a seat by the fire. "God be thanked, the childer niver come near me; mebby they'd 'a' made a kiltie a' me, like poor Mary M'Cann, the critter." Before Lull had time to reply the door was once more opened, and old Mrs Glover came in, looking very apologetic in the full-skirted, buff-coloured satin gown that Patsy had made wearable.

"Good mornin' to ye, Lull," she curtsied. "Is that yerself, Mrs O'Rorke?" She was evidently on the verge of tears. Teressa looked pityingly at her.

"Och, but the quality does be makin' fun a' the poor," she said. Mrs Glover's tears brimmed over. "The boyseys has laughed their fill at me, an' me their ould granny," she quavered. "I'd do anythin' to oblige, but I hadn't the nerve to come out in thon fur hat: Geordie said I looked for all the world like an' ould rabbit in it."

"A dacint woman like yerself. I'm sayin', I wonder the childer would do the like," said Teressa sympathetically. Lull felt her temper rising, but she was powerless to reply. Teressa invited Mrs Glover to sit down.

"They're stirrin' weans, an' I'm not aquil for them," Mrs Glover murmured.

Teressa nodded from the other side of the fire. "Families does be terrible like other," she said.

"'Deed ay; that's no lie," said Mrs Glover plaintively. "I mind their ould grandfather afore them; many's the time the people be to curse the Pope for him afore he'd let them have the wee drap a' soup."

Lull rose in wrath. "Is it the weans ye're namin' wi that ould ruffan?" she said fiercely—"an' them stitching an' rippin' for a pack a' crabbit ould women that the saints in glory couldn't plaze."

Teressa and Mrs Glover both got up hastily, full of apologies, but Lull would not be appeased. She gave them their soup, and sent them off. "People does be thinkin' quare things," she murmured as she watched them go. "How an' iver am I going to tell the childer thon?"

She had no need, however, to tell the children. The news came from an unexpected quarter. Dinner was waiting on the schoolroom table, and the children, standing by the fire, were still discussing their Dorcas Society, when there came a tap at the door, and Miss Rannigan, the rector's niece, walked in.

Miss Rannigan was a little woman, prim and bird-like in her movements. She came to stay at the Rectory about twice a year, and the children avoided the place while she was there. She had never been to Rowallan before, and they thought she must have come to tell them that Mr Rannigan was dead. Her first words dispelled this fear.

"Fie! oh, fie!" She pointed a black-kid finger at Jane. Jane quickly reviewed her life to see which sin had been discovered. "The whole village is intoxicated, you cruel child." They all stared at her. "They tell me it was you made such shocking guys of those poor, benighted old women who are now dancing in the street like drunken playactors." A scarlet flame leapt from face to face; the children turned to each other with burning cheeks. "If my uncle had been able he would have come here himself," Miss Rannigan went on.

"We—we—we——" Jane stammered; she could not tell Miss Rannigan about the Dorcas Society.

"Do not try to make excuses," said that lady.

"We make no excuses," said Patsy wrathfully. "We done it a' purpose, just for the pure divilment a' the thing."

"Wean, dear!" Lull remonstrated.

"Their meanin' was good, miss," she began. Andy's head appeared round the door.

"If ye plaze, Miss Jane, wee Cush is here, an' she says for the love of God will ye come an' take them fancy boots off her ould granny that ye put on last night, for ne'er a buddy else can. The ould woman niver got a wink a' sleep, an' the two feet's burnin' aff her."

"I should like to teach you what a mother is," said Miss Rannigan grimly.

"Do ye think she was tellin' the truth?" said Mick when she had gone.

Jane was putting on her hat. "I'm goin' to see," she said. She departed for the village, and the others went with her, in spite of Lull's entreaties to them to stay and eat their dinner first. Lull put the dinner in the oven, and then sat down and cried. They came back miserably dejected. Miss Rannigan's tale was only too true. "There's hardly wan sober," Jane explained. "Ould Mrs Cush is, 'cause the boots hurted her that much she couldn't put fut to the flure. I had to cut them off her."

"Where did they get the drink?" Lull asked.

"At the Red Lion. John M'Fall had them all in, an' made them drunk for nuthin', 'cause they looked that awful funny in our clothes." Jane put her head down on the table, and cried bitterly. Mick tried to comfort her, while Fly and Honeybird wept on Lull's lap.

"Sure, ye did it all for the best, dear," Lull said. "It's meselfs the bad ould fool not to see how it would be from the first."

Suddenly Patsy began to laugh. "I can't help it if ye are cross wi' me, Jane, but I wisht ye'd seen ould Mrs Glover in thon furry hat."

Jane raised a wrathful face. "It's awful wicked of ye, Patsy, when mebby they'll all be took up and put in gaol through us."

"They can't be that," said Patsy, "for Sergeant M'Gee's as drunk as anybody."

Jane's face cleared. "Are ye sure?" she demanded.

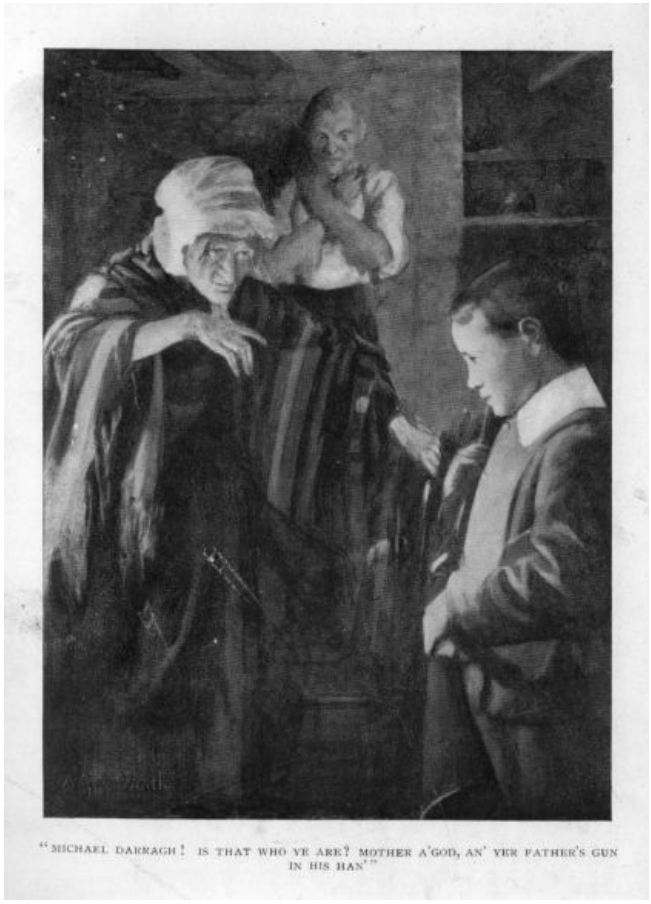
"Sure! didn't ye see him walasin' round in thon tull bonnet? I heard him sayin' they'd burn tar bar'ls the night." This relieved their anxiety, but it could not do away with the disgrace. The children avoided the village for weeks, and never again mentioned the Dorcas Society.

CHAPTER X

THE CRUEL HARM

Mick had made friends with Pat M'Garvey in the spring, when Jane and the others had measles, and he had been sent to the Rectory to be out of the way. The weather had been fine, and he had gone exploring nearly every day. On one of these expeditions he had come across a tall, red-haired boy setting potatoes in a patch of ground behind a cottage on tfie side of the mountain. The coast road ran below, and Mick must have passed the cottage dozens of times, but he had never seen it before. He discovered it now only because he had been up the mountain and had seen a thread of smoke below. Even then it had been hard to find the cottage, hid as it was by boulders and whins. At first Pat had not been friendly. When he straightened his long back up from the potatoes he was bending over he had looked angrily at Mick. But Mick had insisted on being friends, he was so lonely, and after a bit Pat had invited him into the garden, and allowed

him to help to plant the potatoes. The next day Mick went again, and then the next. He soon discovered that Pat was not like the boys in the village: he knew things that Mick had never heard of, and told him stories of the Red Branch Knights and the time when Ireland was happy. Once when Mick tried to show off the little he knew about the Rebellion Pat took the story out of his mouth, and got so excited that his grey-green eyes looked as though they were on fire. He was twenty years old, and lived alone with his old grandmother.



"MICHAEL DARRAGH! IS THAT WHO YE ARE? MOTHER A'GOD, AN' YER FATHER'S GUN IN HIS HAN'"

"Michael Darragh! Is that who ye are? Mother a' God, an' yer father's gun in his han'"

The first time Mick went into the cottage a strange thing happened. Old Mrs M'Garvey was sitting by the chimney corner, her hands stretched out over the fire. She looked like a witch, Mick thought. Over the chimneypiece there was a gun that took Mick's fancy. It was nearly six feet long. Pat saw him looking at it, and took it down. He said it had been washed ashore the time of the Spanish Armada, and had been found in the sand. Mick took it into his hands to feel the weight. Suddenly the old woman looked up, and asked Pat what was the young gentleman's name. Mick answered for himself. She rose from her stool with a screech: "Michael Darragh! Is that who ye are? Mother a' God! an' yer father's gun in his han'." Mick turned in bewilderment to Pat, but he was leaning against the wall, shaking all over. "In the name of God," he was saying. Then he took the gun away, and hurried Mick out of the cottage. "I niver knew that was who ye were," he said; "I made sure you were wan a' the young Bogues." He told Mick not to think about it again—the old woman was doting, and did not know what she was saying—but he made him promise never to tell anyone what had happened, and never let anyone know they were friends—they might both get into trouble if it were known, he said. Soon after this Mick went back to Rowallan, and then he was not able to see Pat so often. If the friendship had not been a secret he could have gone, but it was hard to get away from the others without explaining where he was going. Once or twice through the summer he slipped away, and found Pat about the cottage. On one of these days Pat told him he was going away to America soon, to his father. Mick had imagined that Mr M'Garvey was dead. He thought Pat looked very miserable. "Don't ye want to go?" he asked.

"It's not so much the goin' I mind as a terrible piece a' work I have to do afore I go," he said. Then after a pause he added: "But I'll not be goin' yet a bit; I'll wait till I bury my ould granny."

Mick did not go back till one day in November. He could not see Pat anywhere outside, so he knocked at the cottage door. It was opened by Pat himself. "She's dead," he said. He came out, and they sat on the wall. "Then ye'll be off to America," Mick said sadly—he had never seen Pat look so thin and ill; "I'll be quare an' sorry to see ye go."

Pat did not answer, he was looking straight out at the line of grey sea. Mick could hear the waves beating on the rocks below. At last Pat said: "I have that bit of a job to do before I go." Mick thought he meant he must bury his granny. He tried to cheer him up. "Yer father'll be brave an' glad to see ye," he said.

"It's six years the morra since I seen him," said Pat, still looking out to sea.

"Six years the morra; why, that's just as long as my father's been dead," said Mick. Pat did not answer.

"Will ye iver come back any more?" Mick asked.

"Niver," said Pat. "I'll bury my granny the morra, an' then—then I start."

"Well, I'll niver forget ye," said Mick. Now that it had come to saying good-bye for ever Mick felt he could not let Pat go; it was like parting from Jane or Patsy; he was almost crying.

"Ye'll have no call to forget me or mine," said Pat bitterly.

"'Deed, I won't," said Mick; "ye've been quare an' kind to me. I'd like to give ye somethin' before ye go, so that ye won't forget me, but I've nothin' but my ould watch. I wisht ye'd take it, Pat."

Pat hid his face in his hands, then he gave a sound like a groan, and got up, and took Mick by the shoulders. "See here," he said, "ye'll niver forget me, an' I'll niver forget you. God forgive me, I wouldn't hurt a hair a' yer head, an' yet I'm goin' to do ye the cruel harm. An' it's tearin' the heart out of me to do it. Mind that. But I give my father my word I'd do it, an' it's the right thing for-by. It's only because it's yerself that it's killin' me." And he turned back into the cottage, and shut the door. The whole way home Mick puzzled over what he could have meant.

The next day was Honeybird's birthday, and they were all to go to take tea with Aunt Mary and Uncle Niel at the farm. This was one of their greatest treats; but at the last minute Mick said he did not want to go. All the morning, every time he remembered, tears kept coming into his eyes—Pat was burying his old granny to-day, and then he was going to leave Ireland for ever. It seemed a mean thing to go to a tea party when your best friend was going away, and you would never see him again. When he thought of how white and ill Pat had looked yesterday Mick felt a lump in his throat. But Lull said he must go to the farm whether he liked it or not, or Aunt Mary would be hurt.

The farm was nearly a mile from Rowallan. Half the way was by the open road, but the other half was through the loney—a muddy lane with a bad reputation. All sorts of tales were told about it. A murderer had been hanged, people said, on the willow-tree that grew there, and late at night his bones could be heard still rattling in the breeze; and *Things* that dare not go by the front road, for fear of passing the figure of the Blessed Virgin on the convent chapel, came to and from the mountains by this way. The convent wall, on one side, threw a shadow on the path, making it dark even in daylight; on the other side was a deep ditch. The children ran as fast as they could till they came to the end of the wall, when the path turned across the open fields to the farm. They knew no place that looked so clean and bright as that whitewashed house on the brow of the hill. After the gloom of the loney the low, white garden wall, the fuchsia bushes, the beds of yellow marigolds seemed to smile at them in a glow of sunlight. Aunt Mary was waiting at the half-door, quieting the dogs, that had been roused from their sleep in front of the kitchen fire. Aunt Mary was a little woman with a soft voice; she wore her hair parted down the middle, and brushed back till it shone like silk. When she had kissed them all she took them upstairs to her bedroom to take off their things. Jane always said she would be feared to death to sleep in Aunt Mary's room. The ceiling sloped down on one side, and in under it there was a window looking across the fields to the river and the big dark mountains beyond. To-day the window was open, and they could hear the noise the river made as it fell at the weir. Jane listened a minute, then turned away. "I hate it," she said; "it's like a mad, wild woman cryin'."

"Don't, Jane," Mick said sharply. That mournful sound had made him unhappy again about Pat.

"Come on out of that," said Patsy, "an' let's get some pears."

Aunt Mary always allowed them to play in the room where the apples and pears were stored. Besides apples and pears there were two wooden boxes full of clothes to dress up in—stiff, old-fashioned silks, Indian muslins, embroidered jackets, and a pair of white kid boots. Aunt Mary had worn these things when she was young and lived at Rowallan, before she turned to be a Roman Catholic and was driven out by her father. When they were tired of play they came downstairs to the parlour. This, they thought, was the most beautiful room in the world. There was a carpet with a wreath of roses on a grey ground, a cupboard with diamond panes, where Aunt Mary kept her china, and the deep window seat was filled with geraniums. Aunt Mary had a birthday present for Honeybird; she kissed her when she gave it; and said: "God and His Blessed Mother keep you, child." Then she cried a little, till they all felt inclined to cry with her. But she jumped up, and said it was time she baked the soda bread for tea. When the bread was baked and the table laid Aunt Mary went to the half-door to look out for Uncle Niel.

"I always know when he's comin' by your face, Aunt Mary," Jane said.

Aunt Mary laughed. "Indeed, I'm not surprised," she said; "for I can't remember a day when I didn't watch for his coming."

He came soon, and they had tea, and then he told them fairy tales by the kitchen fire. In the middle of a story Mick suddenly noticed Aunt Mary's face as she looked up from her knitting to watch her brother. Jane was right; her face changed when she looked at him, her eyes seemed to shine. When he and Jane were old, and lived together as they had planned to do, they would love each other like that. Uncle Niel was like their father, Lull had once told them. She said there was not a finer gentleman in Ireland, and held him up to Mick and Patsy as a pattern of what they ought to be when they were men. Mick agreed with her. Uncle Niel was the kindest person he knew; after being with him Mick always felt he would like to be more polite to the others. When he was old he would be as polite to Jane as Uncle Niel was to Aunt Mary. On the way home it was very dark, and they all walked close to Uncle Niel going through the loney. He laughed at them, but Jane said she was afraid of the murderer whose bones rattled in the breeze.

"It's the first time I've heard of him or his bones," Uncle Niel said, "and I've been through the loney at all hours of the day and night."

"Did ye niver hear tell of Skyan the Bugler?" said Honeybird, "for I'm quare an' scared of him myself."

Uncle Niel picked her up in his arms. "What would Skyan the Bugler want with you?" he said.

"'Deed, he might be after marryin' me," she said, "an' ye know I wouldn't like that."

"I'd rather be married that kilt," said Jane.

"I think one is as bad as the other," said Uncle Niel, and he laughed again. "But I tell you what," he added; "if I ever meet anything in the loney worse than myself I'll come over in the morning and tell you."

Then Patsy, who had been walking along quietly, suddenly spoke. "Uncle Niel," he said, "who was Patrick M'Garvey?"

Mick caught his breath. Where had Patsy heard that name? Uncle Niel seemed to be startled too. He stopped short on the path. "Who was telling you about him, Patsy, lad?" he said.

"It was just a man at the fair wanst. He said if Patrick M'Garvey had waited in the loney instead of at the big gates my father would be alive to this day. I ast him what his manin' was; but another man tould him to hould his tongue, an' tould me not to heed him, for he had drink on him."

"Well, don't think about it any more, Patsy," Uncle Niel said; he was not laughing now. "You and I have a lot to forgive when we think of Patrick M'Garvey, but we do well to forgive, as God forgives us."

Mick could not go to sleep that night thinking of what Uncle Niel and Patsy had said. It was a wet night, and the rain beat against the windows. After a bit Jane came into his room from the nursery; she could not sleep either, and she thought she had heard the banshee crying. But there was no sound except the pelting of heavy rain when they listened. Mick made her crawl into his bed, and then they must have fallen asleep. They were waked by the sound of voices downstairs. The rain was over, but the wind was up, and the voices seemed to die away and rise again every time there was a lull in the storm. They both got up, and dressed hurriedly, without waking the others. Something must have happened, they thought, and on such a dismal morning it could only be something bad. All the village was gathered in the kitchen when they got downstairs. Some of the women were crying, and there was a scared look on the men's faces. Mick and Jane were sure their mother must be dead. But no one took any notice of them, and they could not see Lull anywhere.

"The dog was howlin' at half-past eleven," Mick heard a man say, "an' the dour was locked and boulted when the polis tuk the body home."

Then the back door opened, and Father Ryan, the parish priest, came in.

"Go home, every one of you," he said; "talkin' won't give the man his life back."

The kitchen was soon cleared. Mick saw Lull sitting by the table, her head on her hands. Father Ryan put his hand on her shoulder.

"I've lost my best friend, Lull," he said. Lull looked up; Mick hardly knew her face, it was so small and old.

"God help us, Father," she said, and then began to cry wildly. "Miss Mary, poor Miss Mary; it'll be the death of her."

"You are right, Lull," Father Ryan said; "she'll never get over it. I've just come from her. It will just be the mistress over again—— What are the children doing here?" he added quickly.

"God forgive me, I niver seen them to this minute," said Lull.

Father Ryan called them over to him. "Do you know what's come to you?" he said.

"Somebody's dead," Mick answered.

"It's your Uncle Niel," Father Ryan said; "he was killed in the loney last night."

Father Ryan did not stay long. When he had gone Andy came in. Mick was crouching by the fire.

"Do you call to mind what day it was, Lull?" Andy said in a whisper Mick heard.

"I do, well," said Lull; "six years to the very day. God's curse on him," she added in a strange, harsh voice; "couldn't he be content with murderin' the wan, an' not hape sorra on us like this?"

"He's safe in America," said Andy, "that's the divilment of him; but them that's got childer has got the long arm. I'll hould ye he's niver let the boy forget. The ould mother was buried yesterday, an' the boy must 'a' been waitin' for that till he done it."

Mick heard no more; he slipped out down the passage to the schoolroom. He had forgotten all about Pat, but now he remembered, with a terror that overwhelmed him. For a moment he wondered if he were really himself. It could not be true that Uncle Niel was dead, and he, Michael Darragh, knew—knew what? He could not bear the thought. But it was all spread out plain before his eyes. Pat M'Garvey, his friend, whom he loved so much, had murdered Uncle Niel. He shut his eyes, and drew in his breath. "I'm goin' to do ye the cruel harm"—he could see Pat's face as he said it, so thin and miserable. Why, why had he done it? Uncle Niel was so good, and Pat was so good too, but now one was dead and the other was a murderer. Quick before his eyes horrid pictures rose up—Uncle Niel lying dead, and Pat, with blood on his hands, caught by the police; Pat going to gaol on a car, handcuffed, between two policemen, his white face—— "He didn't mane it," Mick burst out passionately. "Oh, God, I just can't bear it." Then another thought came. He himself would be brought up to give evidence. Pat had told him he was going to do it, and now on his word Pat would be hanged. What had happened that the whole world had turned against him like this?

The next minute he was off, across the wet lawn, over the road, running for his life, not on the road, in case he was seen, but on the other side of the stone wall. It was not daylight yet, but dawn was struggling through the clouds. When he came to the village he skirted it by climbing over the rocks, then on as fast as he could go, on the coast road now it was safe—he would meet no one there—then up along the little path that wound through dead whins and boulders, up to the cottage, where the rain was dripping from the thatch. Mick never stopped till he was at the door. There was no answer to his knock. "Pat," he whispered, "let me in." Still there was no answer. He looked in at the window: the fire was out, and the place looked deserted. "He's away," he muttered. But just then the door opened. "Is that you?" said Pat's voice. "Come in." Mick went in, and shut the door behind him.

"Pat," he said, "ye must be off at wanst—quick, quick—or they'll catch ye."

"Who tould ye?" said Pat.

"Nobuddy tould me. They said he was in America an' the ould mother was buried yesterday. But ye must be goin' this minute."

"Hould on a minute," said Pat; "do ye know what ye're sayin', do ye know what I've done at all?"

"I do," said Mick; "ye mur—— Ye tould me yerself ye were goin' to do me the cruel harm."

"Is that all ye know?" said Pat—"then ye know nothin'. Do ye see that gun there?" Mick saw it was still hanging over the chimneypiece. "Well, it was that gun shot your father. Do ye see what I mane?"

Mick stared at him in a dazed way. "My father?" he repeated.

"Your father," said Pat; "an' it was my father murdered him."

Mick was too dazed to take it in. All he could think of, all he could see, was that thin white face before his eyes.

"Do ye think ye'll get safe to America?" he said huskily.

"My God, are ye a chile at all?" said Pat. He gave a big sob, that made Mick jump, and then began to cry and shake all over. "What did I do it for at all at all?" he wailed.

Mick put his arm round him. "Whist, Pat, whist, man; ye must be off, now, at wanst."

Pat stopped crying. "I'm not goin'," he said. "I done what he bid me, an' now I'll give myself up, an' let them hang me: it's what I disarve."

"Listen a bit, Pat," said Mick. "Ye didn't mane it, I know that. It's not you but yer ould father that ought to be hanged——" He stopped, something came back to his mind as though out of a far-off past; but it was only last night Uncle Niel had said: "We do well to forgive him, as God

forgives us." "Pat," he cried, "Uncle Niel said we were to forgive your father!" Quickly he told the whole story—what Patsy had said, what Uncle Niel had answered, with such a sense of relief as he told it that he felt almost glad. "An' I know he would forgive you for murderin' him, Pat, this very minute, if he could spake." Pat did not answer. "An' if ye don't go they'll make me give evidence, an' ye wouldn't have me an informer, would ye?"

"I'll go," said Pat.

No one had missed Mick when he got home. Their mother was ill, and the doctor had come. Lull was with her, and Teressa had come to do the work. After dinner Teressa came into the schoolroom. She said she was afraid to be by herself in the big kitchen. Jane questioned her about Uncle Niel, and she told them that one of the men had found the dead body in the loney late at night as he was coming back from Newry with one of the horses. The horse had stopped half way down the loney, and when the man looked round for a bit of a stick to beat him with he saw the body lying on its face in the ditch. "But the quare thing," Teressa said, "is that yer Aunt Mary houlds to it that he come in after seein' yez all home last night. She let him in, and boulted the dour after him, but when they took the corpse home the dour was still boulted, an' his bed had never been slep' in." Here Lull came into the schoolroom, and was cross with Teressa. "Have ye no wit, woman," she said, "sittin' there like an ould witch tellin' the childer a lock a' lies?"

The day of the funeral Mick stood at the schoolroom window in his new black coat watching the rain beating against the panes. The burden of the secret he carried weighed him down. He must have been changed into another person, he thought, since Honeybird's birthday.

"I wonder why it always rains when people die?" said Fly.

"He didn't die, he was murdered," said Jane bitterly.

Mick shivered; he felt like an accomplice. All night he had been thinking of the funeral. Lull had told him yesterday he must go to be chief mourner. But had he any right to be a mourner? What would the people think—what would Father Ryan say—if they knew that he had helped his uncle's murderer to escape?

"I wisht I could go with ye, Mick," said Jane at his elbow. "I ast Lull, but she said ladies niver went to feenerals."

Mick turned round. "I'm all right, Janie," he said. But Janie's kindness seemed to hurt him more: what would she say if she knew?

"Wouldn't it be awful nice if ye woke up this minute an' it wasn't real at all, an' we'd only dreamt it?" said Fly.

"Nip me as hard as ye can," said Jane. Fly nipped her arm. "Ye needn't nip so hard—it's true enough."

"I wonder if God could make it not true?" said Fly.

"He couldn't," said Mick, "for I'd niver, niver forget it."

"Andy's ready waitin' for ye, Mick," said Lull at the door.

When they came home from the funeral Mick was ill, and had to be put to bed. Jane came up to his room, and sat with him. "Do ye mind what Uncle Niel said to us in the loney?" she said. "Well, he couldn't come as far as this to tell us, so he went an' tould Aunt Mary; Teressa says it was his ghost come back to her."

"To tell us what?" said Mick feverishly.

"That it was wan of them *Things* done it."

"I thought ye meant about forgivin'," said Mick. "Mebby it was that; don't ye think it might 'a' been, Janie?" His voice was very eager.

"I niver thought a' that," said Jane; "but Uncle Niel was quare an' good. I believe he'd even forgive a buddy for murderin' him."

Mick lay down with a sigh of relief. "I thought that myself," he said.

It was not till the primroses were out that the children went to the farm again. Half way down the loney there was a rough cross scratched on a stone in the wall, and the words: Niel Darragh. R.I.P. Aunt Mary had been ill all winter, and at first they did not know her, for her hair was quite white. But nothing else was changed. The parlour looked brighter than ever; there was a bowl of primroses on the table. Through the window you could see the big cherry-trees in the orchard white with blossom. Upstairs the sun streamed into Aunt Mary's bedroom, and the river sounded quite cheerful across the fields as it raced along over the weir. When Aunt Mary had baked the soda bread for tea she went to the half-door, and looked out across the fields. "I thought I saw Niel coming," she said; "it is about time he was home." Then she turned back to the children, and welcomed them, as though she saw them now for the first time. On the way back they asked each

other in whispers what could be the matter with her, but Mick walked on ahead, and said not a word. At the end of the loney they met Father Ryan.

"I was just coming to see you," he said. "It's you, Michael, I was wanting. I've got a blue pigeon for you, if you'll walk the length of the village with me."

Mick turned back with him. It was a lovely evening; the air was full of the smell of spring. They walked along silently. At their feet were tufts of primroses and dog-violets growing under the shelter of the stone wall. A chestnut-tree in the convent garden hung a green branch over the road. Before them, on one side, the sea lay like a silver mist; on the other the mountains, so ethereal that they looked as though at any moment they might melt away into the blue of the sky. But Mick had no heart for these things. Even when he heard the cuckoo across the fields, for the first time that year, it was with no answering thrill, but only with a dull sense that he had grown too old now to care—seeing Aunt Mary had brought back all the trouble he had tried so hard to forget.

When they got to Father Ryan's house they went straight into the parlour. "Mick," said Father Ryan, sitting down in his chair, "what ails you, child, this long time back?" Mick looked into his face. "It's all right," said Father Ryan; "you can tell me nothing I don't know. I had a letter from him this morning, poor boy."

"Is he all right?" said Mick.

"He's all right; that's what I wanted to tell you. But yourself, Mick, what ails you?"

"There's nothin' ails me," said Mick; "I've just got ould."

"Whist, boy, at your time of life," said Father Ryan.

"What did he do it for?" said Mike sharply. "Ye've seen her, Father; it's made her go mad." He began to cry.

"There, there, child," said Father Ryan. "It's more than you or me can say what it was done for. A better boy than Pat never lived, but the father had a bad hold on him."

"I sometimes think I done it myself," said Mick.

"You did it?" said Father Ryan. "Faith, child, you did a thing God Himself would have done."

When Mick said good-bye to Father Ryan about half-an-hour later, and was starting out, with the pigeon buttoned up inside his coat, he found Jane sitting on a stone at the presbytery gate waiting for him.

"Ye're the good ould sowl," he said, and he took her hand. "Come on, let's run home; I'm quare an' happy."

CHAPTER XI

A CHIEF MOURNER

Some time after the death of Uncle Niel, Patsy's ways began to puzzle the others. Until then they had always been quite open with each other about their comings and goings, but Patsy took to disappearing for a whole day at a time, giving no reason when he came home at night for his long absence. Mick and Jane asked him one day where he went so often by himself, but his answer only made them more curious. "If I telled ye," he said, "ye'd all come, an' that'd spoil it."

About a week after this Lull took them into town, eight miles away, on a shopping expedition. Jane and Patsy were on one side of the car. Jane noticed that several people they met, and they were people she did not know, touched their hats to Patsy, and Patsy pulled off his cap each time, but said nothing. At last, while they were waiting outside a shop for Lull, a tall man came down the street. As he passed the car he started, looked at Patsy, and then with a bow took off his hat, and walked on.

"Who's that, Patsy?" Jane asked.

"He's just a man I'm acquainted with," Patsy answered, and would say no more.

A few days later something happened that made Jane still more suspicious. They were having dinner, when Lull said: "Which of ye has touched Mick's black coat and hat?"

They all denied having seen them since the day of the funeral, except Patsy, who did not

speak.

"Well, that's the quare thing," said Lull, "for I've hunted the length and breadth of the house, an' can't lay my han' on them at all."

Again they declared they had not seen them. This time Patsy spoke with the others, but Jane noticed that he put his hand on the back of a chair as he spoke. After dinner she told Mick. "It was Patsy tuk yer black coat an' hat," she said.

"An' how do ye know that?" Mick asked.

"Didn't I see him touch wood when he said he niver seen it?" she said. "I wonder what he's done with it, though," she added. The more she thought about it the more bewildered she grew. But of one thing she was sure: that if she could find out where he went, and what he did on those long days away from home, she would have a key to the other mystery. So she set herself to find out. The only thing to do was to follow him some day; but Patsy seemed to know what was in her mind, for he guarded his departures so carefully that each time it was not until he had got a good start of her that she discovered he was gone.

One morning at breakfast Jane saw by the look on Patsy's face that he meant to be off that day, and she made up her mind that this time he should not slip through her fingers.

Patsy got up from the table with a yawn. "Who's seen the wee babby rabbits?" he said. No one had.

"Well, first there gets the pick," he said, and they flew to the hutches. But when they got there no baby rabbits were to be seen, and, in a fury of disappointment, Jane realised that Patsy had got the better of her again. She was so angry that she slapped Fly and Honeybird for daring to laugh at the joke, and their cries brought Lull out into the yard. Lull dried their tears on her apron, scolding and comforting at the same time.

"There now, ye're not kilt," she said. "Shame on ye, Jane, to lift yer han' again them. If ye lay finger on them more I'll tell yer mother." This was always Lull's threat, and though she never kept her word it never failed to have the same effect on the children. The thought of making their mother unhappy was the most dreadful punishment they could imagine. Jane walked out of the yard with her nose in the air and a miserable feeling in her heart. But, once out of sight, she ran to her favourite hiding-place among the sallies at the top of the garden, and sitting down with her back to the convent wall she cried with disappointment, and with repentance too. It was wicked to have slapped Fly and Honeybird, but they had no business to laugh at her; and that little brute of a Patsy was off again all by himself, and she didn't know where he was. By-and-by she heard Mick calling her. She knew he would be sure to look in the sallies for her, so she dried her eyes, and crept along by the wall, and under the fence at the top of the garden, out into the field. No good could come of letting Mick find her; for she was still in a bad temper, and she knew it would only mean more fights if she went home before her temper had gone. She wandered through the fields in an aimless way, till she began to get bored, and not any better tempered for that.

It was all Patsy's fault; if he had not put her in a temper she might have been working at the pigeon-house with Mick; but now the whole day was spoilt, for she could not, with dignity, go home before tea-time. Soon she found herself in a lane, and had to stop to choose which way she would go.

One way led to the village and the sea, the other to the big road that ran to Castle Magee and town. It was too cold to go to the sea, and she didn't want to go through the village with red eyes. Then the thought came into her mind that the snowdrops might be out in the church-yard at Castle Magee, so she turned that way.

Castle Magee was a village of about six cottages and as many bigger houses; a damp, mouldy place, that always impressed the children with a sense of hunger and death. They rarely saw anyone about but the sexton, and he seemed to be perpetually at work digging graves in the churchyard. Then, too, there was no shop, and they had no friends in the village, and after the long walk from home all that could be hoped for was a turnip out of the fields. The church, surrounded by yew-trees, stood in the middle of the village. The whitewashed walls of the Parsonage blinked through an avenue of the same trees. Lull said the church was a Presbyterian meeting-house, and on Sundays people came from miles round, and sang psalms without any tunes, and the minister preached a sermon two hours long, and then everybody ate sandwiches in their pews, and the minister preached another sermon two hours longer.

The children had often climbed up, and looked in at the church windows, and the cold, bare inside and the square boxes for pews had added to their dreary impressions of the place.

If it had not been for the snowdrops they would never have gone near Castle Magee; but at the right time of year the churchyard was a white drift of these flowers, and the sexton had often given them leave to pick as many as they pleased. With a big bunch of snowdrops Jane felt she could go straight home. Dinner would be over, of course, by that time, but there would still be the afternoon to give to the new pigeon-house. And how pleased her mother would be with the flowers. All Jane's bad temper disappeared at the thought, and she would tie up two little bunches with ivy leaves at the back for Fly and Honeybird. She skipped along the road, making

up romances to herself to while away the three long miles. She was going to a ball in a blue satin dress trimmed with pearls; then it was a dinner, and she wore black velvet and diamonds; then a meet, and she had a green velvet habit, like the picture of Miss Flora Macdonald Lull had nailed on the kitchen wall.

Soon she got tired of these thoughts.

"'Deed, I won't wear any of them things," she muttered; "everybody wears them. I'll just go in my bare skin an' a pair of Lull's ould boots." She laughed, and began to run. As she got near the village the old feeling of hunger, native to the place, reminded her that turnips would now be stacked behind the Parsonage, and she remembered that it would be best to look for an open heap, for the last time she and Mick had broken into one they found they had opened a potato heap by mistake. She laughed as she thought of how cross the old farmer had been when he had caught them filling up the hole again. Luckily, the first heap she came to was open, so, picking out a good big turnip, she went on till she came to the churchyard wall, and sat down there to eat it. The village looked more desolate than usual. The slate roofs of the cottages were still wet with the rain that had fallen in the night, and a cold wind moaned in the yew-trees. There were only a few snowdrops out, and for once the sexton was not to be seen, but a heap of earth at the far corner of the churchyard showed a newly-dug grave. Jane had got through her first slice of turnip when she was startled by the sound of the bell in the church behind her.

One! It went with a harsh clang.

She looked round, but the bell had stopped. She was beginning to think she had imagined it when the bell clanged again. Then another moment's pause and another clang. Jane thought she had never heard anything so queer, when she suddenly remembered what it was. Of course, it was tolling for a funeral. It had tolled three already. Lull said it tolled one for every year of the dead person's life.

Four—five—six—went the bell.

"That might be our wee Honeybird," Jane said to herself, and remembered the slap she had given Honeybird that morning.

Seven—eight.

The sound grew more and more melancholy to her ears. Each clang of the bell died away like a moan.

Nine.

"Mebby it's some person's only child," she thought.

Ten—eleven.

"It'd be the awful thing to be dead," she muttered, and shivered at the thought of being buried this weather with nothing on but a white nightgown.

Twelve—thirteen—tolled the bell.

"It'd be awfuller to be goin' to Mick's feeneral," she said. The thought made her heart sick.

She jumped up to go home—she could come back when more snowdrops were out—but she caught sight of a long black line, slowly climbing up to the church by the road from town. The sight of a funeral always depressed Jane, but there was something specially gloomy about this one. The wet road looked so cold, the sky so grey, and the black hearse and six mourning carriages came heavily along, as though they were weighed down by grief.

Jane began to say her prayers. It was an awful world God had made, and He might let one of them die if she didn't pray hard to Him.

The bell went on tolling. It had got past twenty by the time her prayer was said. The funeral was so near that she could see the mourners behind the hearse. There were six tall men in black; two of them walked in front of the others. They were the chief mourners. Perhaps it was their sister who was in the hearse. The bell tolled oft till it was past thirty; the funeral came nearer and nearer.

Then all at once Jane's heart went cold with pity, for between the two chief mourners she saw a little boy. It was the little boy's mother in the hearse, of course, and one of the men was his father. Tears rolled down her face at the sight of him. He was such a little boy, in a black coat that was miles too big for him, and his head bent like his father's. This was too much for Jane's feelings; she rolled over the wall, hid her face behind a tombstone, and cried bitterly.

The bell went on tolling. The wind soughed in the yew-trees. The funeral procession came into the churchyard, the tall men carrying the coffin, and the chief mourners walking behind. The little boy walked beside his father.

"Poor, poor wee sowl," Jane sobbed. "God pity it—it might 'a' been our wee Patsy!—Ye young

divil!" she added through her teeth—for it was Patsy. Sure enough, there he was in Mick's black coat and hat, walking solemnly behind the coffin, holding that strange man's hat.

"So I've catched ye, my boy," she muttered, hiding down behind the tombstone. She could watch without being seen, by lying flat on her stomach, and she determined to see the end of it now. The burial service began. She could hear voices, but could see nothing for the crowd round the grave. Then the crowd parted, and she saw the coffin lowered. The tall man began to sob. Patsy respectfully held the man's hat and gloves while he cried into a big black-bordered pocket-handkerchief. At last it was over, and they came back along the path. As they passed by the tombstone where Jane lay she heard Patsy say:

"Well, I must be goin', so I'll be sayin' good-mornin' to ye, sir."

A man's voice answered. "Ye're the remains a' them as is in their graves, sir. Good-morning to ye, sir."

When they had all passed she crept along behind the tombstone to the far wall, and jumped over it into the field. Then she ran as fast as she could to the road, climbed up the bank, and sat down behind the hedge to wait for Patsy. He came soon, whistling, with the skirts of Mick's coat tucked up under his arm. Jane waited till he came quite near, then she jumped over the hedge, and stood in front of him.

"Think I didn't see ye," he said; "jukin' down behind a tombstone with yer flat ould face? Ye very near made me laugh."

"What were ye doin', Patsy?" she said.

"'Deed, I was a mourner at the woman's feeneral, an' a very dacent woman she was by all accounts."

Jane forgot to crow over him in her interest. "What'd she die of, Patsy?" she said.

Patsy stopped. "Ye know that wee public-house as ye go into town, just as ye turn down North Street?" he said. Jane nodded. "She kep' that, the man tould me, an' she died a' hard work.'

"I niver heerd of any person dyin' of that afore," said Jane.

"Well, she did," said Patsy, "for I heard the sexton ast the man, an' he said she died a' labour."

"I wonder if it's catchin'?" said Jane.

Patsy walked on whistling.

"But what tuk ye to the woman's feeneral at all, Patsy?" Jane asked.

"I just went for the fun a' the thing," he said.

"Sure, there's no fun in that," said Jane.

"Isn't there just?" said Patsy. "That's all you know; I tell ye it's the quare ould sport." He stopped, and counted up on his fingers: "That makes two weman's, two childers', and one man's feeneral I've been chief mourner to since Christmas."

"But ye can't be chief mourner if ye're no relation," said Jane.

"Ye can just. I walked close behind the hearse of every one of them," he said. "When I see the feeneral comin' up the road I take off my hat, an' they make room for me to walk with the best."

He bound Jane over by a promise not to tell. In return for her promise he showed her where he kept Mick's coat and hat—wrapped up in a newspaper, and covered with sods, under an old bell-glass at the top of the garden—and promised, on his part, he would tell her what the people died of whose funerals he attended in the future.

But, as it happened, that was the last one he went to. When they got home they found the secret was out. Mick met them. He knew all about it, he said; and Lull knew too, and was cross. Teressa had told. Her sister, who was in service at the Parsonage at Castle Magee, had been to see her, and told her all about the little gentleman from Rowallan who came to every funeral in the churchyard.

"She sez," Mick went on, "that ye were the thoughtful wee man, Patsy, an' it'd melt the heart of a stone to see ye standin' at the grave like an' ould judge, holdin' the mourner's black kid gloves."

"Bah!" said Patsy.

But Lull threatened awful things if Patsy ever went to a funeral again. "Mind, I'll tell yer mother if I ever hear tell of it," she said; "dear knows what disease ye'll be bringin' home to us."

The lesson was impressed more deeply on Patsy's mind by Lull being ill that evening, and

going to bed early with a headache. Patsy was terrified. He sat on the mat outside the door till past ten, and refused to go to bed.

"She's just the very ould one would catch it," he said when Jane tried to persuade him to go to bed, "for she works that hard herself."

"Well, I'll go in an' ast her if it's catchin'," Jane said at last.

Lull was awake when they went in. "What's the matter?" she said, sitting up in bed.

"There's nothin' the matter," said Jane; "only Patsy wants to know if what the woman died of was catchin'."

"What did she die of?" said Lull.

"She died a' labour," said Patsy in a trembling voice. "Is it catchin', Lull?"

Lull laughed so much that she could not answer.

"Patsy was afraid ye'd catched it," said Jane, laughing too, though she did not know why.

"God be thankit I have not," said Lull, and as they went joyfully off to bed they could hear her still laughing.

CHAPTER XII

A SAFEGUARD FOR HAPPINESS

May was at its height; all the apple-trees were in blossom, and the crimson thorn-trees on the lawn. Through the open nursery windows a soft wind brought the smell of hawthorn and lush green grass. Bright patches of sunlight spotted the bare floor and Jane's red and white quilt. It was early, and the children were still in bed. They were wide awake—the sun had waked them an hour ago—and already they had planned how they would spend the day. It was Saturday—a whole holiday. Nobody had to do lessons to-day; the long, rich sunny hours lay before them full of happiness. They had agreed that the rocks was the place for to-day's picnic; no place would be half so beautiful. This was the weather for the sea. As they lay quiet in bed each one was thinking of the joys in store. First, there would be the walk across the soft, spongy grass—past the whins for the sake of the hot, sunny smell of the blossom. They would be tempted to stop and have the picnic there; but they would go on, towards the sea, and the sheep would move off as they came near, and rakish black crows would rise slowly, and sail away. Then the sea would come in sight: so blue this weather, how deep and full it looked, with what a soft splash it washed against the black rocks, and how it stung your naked body as you slid in for one dip and out again. Fly loved to look forward, as she called it. Pleasures were worth twice as much to her if she were able to think of them beforehand. Then there would be the long afternoon, when you lay on your face on the rocks, and watched the ships sailing far away, and now and then caught sight of a trail of smoke on the horizon, that told you a steamer was passing by. A sound of singing came from the convent garden, and in a moment all the five children were out of bed, leaning out of the window, watching the long procession of white nuns file slowly out of the convent door. The voices, low at first, grew stronger and clearer as the procession came along the cindered path. The nuns' white dresses, the black path they walked on, the delicate green of the apple-trees on each side, the blue of the banner, the shining gold of the cross, make a wonderful picture in the strong sunlight. The children watched in silence. This singing procession of white and blue was one of the things they liked best in May. It came every fine morning to remind them how happy they were now that the good weather had come. Lull said the nuns sang because May was the month of Mary.

"Ave Maris Stella
Dei Mater Alma!"

They were singing hymns to the Blessed Virgin now; their voices, very sweet and clear, seemed to fill the garden. They went on along the path, paused by a black cross that marked a grave, then went round the chapel, and the children could see them no longer. They listened till the singing died away, and then began to dress quickly. Fly was always last. The others teased her about it, but they could not make her hurry. Fly had a reason for being slow. She liked to say her prayers last. If she had been dressed sooner she would have had to say her prayers at the same time as the others, and then, she thought, Almighty God could not give her His undivided attention. Fly said her prayers very carefully; sometimes when she had said them once she went all through them again, in case she had forgotten anything. When the others had gone downstairs she knelt down by her cot. She said her proper prayers first, then added: "And, please, don't let

any of us have anythin' the matter with our heart our liver our lungs, or any part of our insides that I don't know the name of; please don't let any of us kill or murder anybuddy, or be hanged or beheaded; an', please, remember that it's ould Mrs Bogue's turn to die first."

She rose from her knees, and ran downstairs. The hall door was open, and the sunlight streamed into the hall. There was really no need to say your prayers at all this weather, Fly thought; for, of course, nobody ever died except in winter, when the wind howled round the house and rain lashed the window-panes. Still, she liked to be on the safe side. She was very proud of her prayer: the last petition she had thought of in the winter, when Mrs Darragh had been ill. She had reminded Almighty God that they had had a father and an uncle die, while the Bogues had never had a death in their family. Therefore it must be Mrs Bogue's turn next. Honeybird, the only one to whom she had told this petition, was so pleased with it that she prayed it too. Both children chuckled over the wisdom of it; for Mrs Bogue, in spite of her eighty years, was a strong old woman—Lull had said she would see ninety—so their turn could not come for years yet.

"It's the awful thing that people has to die at all." Jane's voice came from the schoolroom. "An it's quare that God thinks anybuddy'd like to go to heaven."

"Well, I niver want to go," said Patsy. "I'd hate the ould gold street an' glass sea; I'd far rather have a nice salt-water sea, with crabs an' herrin's in it."

Fly stood in the doorway. "What's happened?" she said.

"Ould Mrs Bogue's dead," said Jane, with her mouth full of porridge. A sharp pang of fear seized Fly. A moment before she had been altogether happy, now the light seemed to have gone from the day. She looked at Honeybird, but Honeybird was taking her breakfast calmly; she did not realise what this meant. Their safeguard was gone. If Mrs Bogue had died so suddenly and unexpectedly might it not mean that Almighty God wanted their turn to come quickly? She swallowed her breakfast, and went out into the garden. She could not go to the picnic with the others; she was too miserable for that. Why, oh, why did God make people only to kill them again? Why did He want them to go to such a dull place as heaven? Honeybird's voice called her from the garden gate, and the next minute Honeybird came running down the grassy path.

"Why didn't ye go for the picnic?" Fly asked.

"'Cause I know'd ye'd be sorry about ould Mrs Bogue," said Honeybird, sitting down beside her. "I'm thinkin' mebby Mrs Bogue wasn't as strong as we thinked. It might 'a' been better to say Mr Rannigan."

"That wouldn't 'a' been fair," said Fly; "he had a sister die. It was ould Mrs Bogue's turn right enough, only it come far sooner that I thought."

"What are ye goin' to do?" Honeybird asked.

Fly could think of nothing.

"Why don't ye pray to have ould Mrs Bogue alive again?" said Honeybird.

"That's no use wanst people's dead," said Fly.

"But couldn't God make her niver 'a' been dead at all?" Honeybird asked. "I'd try Him if I was you."

Fly thought for a moment. "We'll both pray hard, and then we'll go an' see." They knelt down under an apple-tree. Honeybird prayed first, and then Fly. Then they started for Mrs Bogue's house. Honeybird would have liked Fly to tell her a story as they went along the road, but she dare not ask, for she could tell by Fly's face that she was still praying.

The road was hot and dusty. Both the children were soon tired. Honeybird thought of the others enjoying themselves on the rocks. She wished she could have gone with them. She would have enjoyed it too, for though she pretended to Fly that she was anxious, she really was not troubled at all. She did not believe that Almighty God wanted one of them to die. Lull said their mother had not been so well for years. But she had shared Fly's prayers, and a sense of honour made her try to share Fly's trouble now that the prayer had gone wrong. Fly was still muttering. Every now and then Honeybird could hear: "For Christ's sake. Amen."

When they came to Mrs Bogue's gate Fly said they were to say a last prayer each, and then ask at the lodge. They shut their eyes.

"Make her alive an' well, Almighty God. Amen," said Honeybird.

They opened their eyes, and went up to the lodge, but while they were still knocking at the door Mrs Bogue's big yellow carriage came round the corner of the avenue. Inside the carriage was the old lady herself. Fly gave a howl of delight. The children ran forward, and the carriage pulled up.

"There ye are alive an' well," said Fly joyfully. "Och, but I'm glad to see ye."

Mrs Bogue's wizened face expressed no pleasure at seeing Fly.

"Of course I'm well; I always am," she said in a thin, high voice.

"Ye were dead this mornin', though," said Honeybird.

"Dead! who said I was dead?" Mrs Bogue demanded indignantly.

"Lull tould us that iverybuddy said ye died last night," said Fly; she was still smiling with delight.

Mrs Bogue turned to her niece. "Do you hear that, Maria? That is twice they have had me dead. I don't know what the world is coming to. They won't give people time to die nowadays."

"We'll give ye any amount a' time, Mrs Bogue," said Fly earnestly; "we want ye to live as long as iver ye can please."

"It's quare an' nice for us when ye're alive," said Honeybird. Mrs Bogue looked at them sharply. Both faces were beaming with happiness.

"You are very kind children," she said. She began to fumble in a bag by her side. "Here is a shilling each for you."

The yellow carriage went on. Fly and Honeybird looked at each other. Honeybird was thinking how glad she was that she had stayed with Fly and had not gone off with the others. Fly was thinking how good Almighty God had been to hear her prayer. They went on down the road to Johnnie M'Causland's shop, and bought lemonade and sweets, and then struck out across the fields towards the sea to find the others.

"Do ye know what?" said Fly, stopping in the middle of a field, with her arms full of lemonade bottles. "Ye're always far happier after ye're miserable. I believe He done it on purpose." She kicked up her heels. "Let's run; it's a quare good ould world, an' God's a quare good ould God, an' I'm awful happy."

CHAPTER XIII

JIMMIE BURKE'S WEDDING

Jimmie Burke's wife had not been dead a month, when one morning Teressa brought the news that he was going to be married again.

"The haythen ould Mormon!" said Lull. "God help the wemen these days."

At first the children could not believe it. The late Mrs Burke had been a friend of theirs. They had walked to the village every Sunday afternoon, for the whole long year that she had been ill, with pudding and eggs for her. And they thought Jimmie was so fond of her. He was heartbroken when she died. When they went to the cottage the day before the funeral, with a wreath of ivy leaves to put on the coffin, they found him sitting beside the corpse, crying, and wiping his eyes on a bit of newspaper. Even Jane, who, for some reason that she had not given the others, had always hated Jimmie, told Lull when they came home that she could not help thinking a pity of the man sitting there crying like a child.

"It bates Banagher," said Teressa, sitting down by the fire with the cup of tea Lull had given her—"an' the woman not cowld in her coffin yet; sure, it's enough to make the dead walk."

"Och, but the poor critter was glad to rest," said Lull.

"An', mind ye, he's the impitent ould skut," Teressa went on, stirring her tea with her finger; "he come an' tould me last night himself. An' sez he: 'The wife she left me under no obligations,' sez he; 'but sorra a woman is there about the place I'd luk at,' sez he."

"They'd be wantin' a man that tuk him," said Lull. "The first wife's well red a' him in glory."

"When's the weddin', Teressa?" Fly asked.

"An' who's marryin' him?" said Lull.

"He's away this mornin' to be marriet. She's a lump of a girl up in Ballynahinch," said Teressa. "Troth, ay, he lost no time; he's bringing her home the night, the neighbours say."

In the stable Andy Graham was even more indignant. "It's the ondacentest thing I iver heard tell of," he told Mick; "an' the woman be to be as ondacent as himself."

But Andy's, indignation was nothing to what Jane felt. "I knowed it," she said to the others when they were together in the schoolroom; "I knowed the ould boy was the bad ould baste. Augh! he oughtn't to be let live."

"Away ar that, Jane," said Patsy; "sure, that's the fool talk. Where's the harm in him marryin' again?"

"Harm!" Jane shouted. "It's more than harm; it's a dirty insult. Ye ought always to wait a year after yer wife dies afore ye marry again; but him!—him!—he just ought to be hung."

"It's a dirty trick, sure enough," said Mick; "but ye couldn't hang him unless he done a murder."

"An' so he did," said Jane sharply. "Think I don't know? I tell ye he murdered her, as sure as I stan' on this flure."

"Whist, Jane," said Mick; "that's the awful thing to be sayin'."

"An' I can prove it, too," she went on, "for I saw him do it with my own two eyes, not wanst, but twiced, an' she let out he was always doin' it. I promised her I wouldn't come over it, but there's no harm tellin' it now she's dead. Ye know them eggs Lull sent her?" the children nodded. "Well, do ye mane to say she iver eat them? For she just didn't; he eat ivery one himself, an' he eat the puddens, an' he drunk the milk. Augh! the ould baste, he'd eat the clothes off her bed if he could 'a' chewed them."

"Who tould ye he eat them all?" said Patsy.

"Sure, I saw him doin' it myself, I tell ye. He come home drunk one day when I was there. He was that blind drunk he niver seen me. An' he began eatin' all he could lay han' on. He eat up the jelly; an' two raw eggs, an' drunk the taste a' milk she had by her in the cup, an' he even drunk the medicine out of the bottle, an' eat up the wee bunch a' flowers I'd tuk her, an', when he'd eat up ivery wee nip he could find, he lay down on the flure, an' went asleep."

"The dirty, greedy, mane ould divil," said the others.

"An' she tould me he always done it," Jane went on. "An' I seen it was the truth, for he come in another day, an' done the same, an' he was that cross that he frightened her, an' she begun to spit blood, an' if it hadn't been for me I believe he'd 'a' kilt her; but I was that mad that I hit him a big dig in the stomach; an', mind ye, I hurted him, for he went to bed like a lamb, an' I tied him in with an ould shawl afore I come away."

The others could find no words to express their disgust. They agreed that Jane was right—such a man ought not to be allowed to live.

"If we tould Sergeant M'Gee he'd hang him," said Fly.

"That'd be informin', said Mick.

"Almighty God's sure to pay him out when he dies," Honeybird said.

"I'd rather pay him out now," said Jane. At that moment there was a flash of lightning, and a crash of thunder overhead, and then a shower of hailstones rattled against the window.

"Mebby he'll be struck dead," said Fly; "Almighty God's sure to be awful mad with him."

For three hours the rain poured in torrents. The children watched it from the schoolroom window splashing up on the path, and beating down the fuchsia bushes in the border.

But by dinner-time it had cleared up, and the sky looked clean and blue, as though it had just been washed. When dinner was over they set off to the village, expecting to hear that Jimmie had been struck by lightning, or, as Fly thought would be more proper, killed by a thunderbolt.

Mrs M'Rea was standing at her door, with a ring of neighbours round her. As they came up the street they heard her say: "There's the childer, an' they were the kin' friends to her when she was alive."

"Good-mornin', Mrs M'Rea," said Jane; "has Jimmie been kilt?"

"Is it kilt," said Mrs M'Rea; "'deed an' it's no more than he desarves—but we don't all get what we desarve in this world, glory be to God! Troth, no; it's marriet he is, an' comin' home the night in style on a ker, all the way from Ballynahinch."

"We thought Almighty God'd 'a' kilt him with a thunderbolt," said Fly.

"Do ye hear that?" said old Mrs Clay. "The very childer's turned agin him—an' small wonder, the ould ruffan; it's the quare woman would have him."

"By all accounts she is that," said Gordie O'Rorke, joining the group; "they say she's six fut in

her stockin's an' as blackavised as the ould boy himself."

"We'll be givin' her the fine welcome the night," said his granny; "she'll be thinkin' she's got to her long home."

"They say she's got the gran' clothes," said Gordie, "an' a silk dress an'a gowld watch an' chain; mebby that's what tuk his fancy."

"If she doesn't luk out he'll be eatin' it," said Patsy. There was a roar of laughter.

"There's none knows better than yous what he could ate," said Mrs M'Rea. "Any bite or sup I tuk the woman I sat and seen it in her afore I come away."

"He's stepped over his brogues this time," said Gordie, "for me uncle up in Ballynahinch is well acquainted with the woman, an' he sez she's a heeler, an' no mistake."

"Well, well," said ould Mrs Glover, "I'm sayin' she'll not have her sorras to seek."

"No; nor Jimmie either," said Mrs M'Rea. "But there, where's the good a' talkin'? It's the lamentable thing entirely; but they're marriet now, an' God help both a' them."

"'Deed yis; they're marriet," said Mrs O'Rorke, "an we'll not be forgettin' it the night. It's tar bar'ls we'll be burnin'—they'll be expectin' it, to be sure—an' a torchlight procession out to meet them forby."

"Troth, then, they'll get more than they're expectin'," said Gordie.

"What time did ye say they'd be comin' back the night, Mrs M'Rea?" Mick asked.

"Ye know we'd like' to come to the welcome," said Jane.

"Och, it'd be late for the likes a' yous," answered Mrs M'Rea. "It'll be past ten, won't it, Gordie."

"Nearer eleven that ten," said Gordie. "You lave it to us, Miss Jane; niver fear but they'll get the right good welcome."

Going home they were all very quiet. No one spoke till they came to the gates. Then Patsy said: "Lull'll niver let us out at that time a' night."

"We'll just have to dodge her," said Jane; "it'd be the wicked an' the wrong thing to let ould Jimmie off."

"It'll be the quare fun," said Patsy, dancing round.

"It won't be fun, Patsy; it'll be vengeance," said Jane severely.

"Ye'll take me with ye, won't ye?" Honeybird begged.

"'Deed, we'll take the sowl," said Mick; "but ye'll be powerful tired."

"What do I care about that?" she said. "I just want to hit that bad ould man."

Lull was surprised to see them go to bed so quietly that night. "Ye niver know the minds a' childer," they heard her say as they left their mother's room after they had said good-night. "I made sure they'd be wantin' to the village to see Jimmie Burke come home." Honeybird sniggered, but Fly nipped her into silence.

The convent bell was ringing for Compline when Lull tucked them into bed, but before the schoolroom clock struck ten they were on their way to the village. When they got to Jimmie's cottage the crowd was so great that they could see nothing.

"We'll have no han' in the welcome at all," said Mick.

"An' it's that pitch dark we'll niver see them," said Patsy.

"We'd better be goin' back a bit along the road, an give them the first welcome," Jane said. "Come on, quick," she added, "an' we can stan' on the wall, an' paste them with mud as they come by."

"Hould on a minute," said Mick. "I've got a plan: we'll stick my lantern on the wall, an' shout out they're home; they'll be that drunk they'll niver know the differs; that'll make them stop, an' we'll get a good shot at them."

"Troth, we'll do better than that," said Patsy, with a chuckle. "They'll be blind drunk, I'm tellin' ye, an' it's into the ould pond we'll be welcomin' them. Yous three can stan' on the wall out a' the wet, an' me an' Mike'll assist the man an' his wife to step off the car."

The pond was at the side of the road, not more than a hundred yards from the village, and the

wall ran right through the middle of it. The children climbed on the wall, and crept along on their hands and knees till they came to the deepest part. The water was up to the the top of the wall, so they had to sit with their legs doubled up to keep them out of the wet.

Soon they heard the wheels of the car coming along the road.

"Now, mind ye all screech at onst," said Patsy as he dropped off the wall. "Auch! but the water's cowld."

The car came nearer. Jane held up the lantern. "Hurrah, hurrah!" they shouted; "here ye are at last. Hurrah!"

"This way, this way," Mick shouted; "drive up to the man's own dour."

A stone from Patsy smashed the lamp on the car.

"Begorra, I can't see where I'm goin'," said the driver.

"Ye're all right," Mick shouted; "there's the lamp in the man's windy."

"Home, shweet home," said Jimmie; "no plache like home."

"Hurrah, hurrah!" they shouted as the horse splashed into the pond.

"Jump off, Mister Burke, there's a bit of a puddle by the step," said Mick.

"Home, shweet home, me darlinsh," said Jimmie; "lemme shisht ye off kersh."

"Come on, we'll help the wife off," said Mick.

But Jimmie had taken his wife's arm, and as he jumped she jumped too. Splash they went into the pond, and at the same time a shower of stones came from the wall. The horse took fright, and started off, the driver shouting "Murder!" as they raced down the road.

"In the name a' God, where am I?" shouted Mrs Burke.

But she got no answer, for Jimmie, with the help of Mick and Patsy, was taking back ducks in the pond. Mrs Burke splashed towards the light, going deeper every step.

"Ye ould villain, will ye come an' help me out?" she screamed. "Sure, it's ruinin' me dress an' me new boots I am."

Then the light went out, and a moment later there was a gurgling cry, followed by shrieks and cries of murder. In the middle of it all voices were heard coming along the road from the village, and the sound of the car coming back.

"Hist!" said Mick. "Home."

"Och, I'm wet to the skin," said Patsy as they ran along the road, "but ould Jimmie's far wetter."

"He's as dry as the wife," said Jane, "for I ducked her three times; she went down awful easy."

"It was me helpin' ye," said Fly; "I had her by the leg."

"Wasn't it quare an' good a' God to make the pond that deep?" said Honeybird. "It must 'a' been Him put it into Patsy's head to duck them."

"That's why He made it rain so hard this mornin'," said Jane, "an' me thought there was no manin' in it."

"It was the finest bit of vengeance I iver seen," said Patsy. "Ould Jimmie was as light as a cork, an' we soused him up an' down till there wasn't a breath left in him."

"I wonder what Lull'll say when she sees our clothes," said Jane; "me very shimmy's wet." But, to their surprise, when they woke next morning clean clothes had been put out for them, and when they came downstairs Lull only said: "Has any of ye tuk a cold?"

"No, we haven't," said Jane.

"Well, then, don't name it to yer mother," Lull said, and left them wondering how she had found out.

Andy Graham called them into the stable after breakfast.

"Did ye hear the news?" he said.

"What news?" said Mick.

"The news about the weddin'," Andy said. "Didn't Lull tell ye about it? Sure, the whole place is ringin' with it. Poor ould Jimmie Burke an' the wife were near kilt last night. A pack of ruffians stopped the ker at the ould pond, an' ducked both him an' the wife. He was that full a' waiter they had to hould him up by the heels an' let it run out; an' the wife covered with black mud from head to fut."

"Who done it?" said Patsy, looking Andy in the face.

"Who done it, do ye say?" said Andy—"sure, that's what I'd like to know myself. There wasn't wan out a' the village but what was waitin' at the man's own dour when the ker come up, an ne'ery a wan on it but the driver, shoutin' murder, an' when the neighbours went back along the road there was Jimmie an' the wife in the middle a' the pond, and niver a sowl else to be seen."

Mick laughed. "Ye're the fly ould boy, Andy," he said; "an' I must say ye done it right well, but didn't ye get awful wet when ye were duckin' them?"

Andy stared at him.

"It's all right, Andy; we'll niver name it," said Patsy. "An' I wouldn't 'a' blamed ye if ye'd 'a' drownded the both a' them."

Andy whistled. "Ye've as much brass as would make a dour knocker," he said. "But, see here, the next time yous are on the war pad don't be lavin' circumstantial evidence behind ye." He brought out from behind the door an old rag doll, soaking wet.

"Och a nee!" wailed Honeybird, "it was me done that. I hadn't the heart to lave her at home," she explained. "She's Bloody Mary, an' I thought she'd enjoy the vengeance."

"I thought I knowed her when I seen her lyin' at the side a' the pond this mornin," said Andy. "An', mind ye, I'm not blamin' ye, an' I'm not sayin' but what Jimmie an' the wife disarved it, but ye'd better keep a quiet tongue in yer heads. There's nobuddy but meself an' Lull knows who done it, and nobuddy'll iver know. It's all very well for a wheen a' neighbours to do the like, but it's no work for quality to be doin'."

CHAPTER XIV

JANE AT MISS COURTNEY'S SCHOOL

Jane hated going to school. She had begged to be allowed to go on doing lessons with Mr Rannigan, though he had said five children were too many for him at his age. Then she had begged to be allowed to go to a boys' school with Mick. But all her pleadings were in vain. Lull had arranged that she was to go to the select young ladies' school that Aunt Mary had attended when she was a girl. Lull secretly hoped that contact with the select young ladies would make Jane a little bit more genteel. Every morning, driving into town on the car with Andy, Jane mourned to Mick for the good days that were gone. Mick annoyed her by liking the change. His school was quite pleasant.

"How'd ye like to be me," she asked him, "goin' to a school where whativer ye do it's always wrong?"

She hid her unhappiness from Lull, partly because Lull had taken such pride in sending her to Miss Courtney's, partly because she could not have told Lull the offences for which she was reproved—offences no one would have noticed at home.

In spite of an eager desire to be good and polite Jane was constantly accused of being wicked and rude. Mr Rannigan had never found fault with her manners, but Miss Courtney sent her back three times one day to re-enter the room because she bobbed her head and said: "Mornin'," when she came in. Jane, in bewilderment, repeated the offence, and was punished. "I wisht I'd 'a' knowed what it was she wanted," she complained to Mick. "If I had I'd 'a' done it at wanst."

She gathered that, in school, it was considered a sin to speak like the poor. Miss Courtney said a lady should have an English accent, and a voice like a silvery wave. Jane trembled every time she had to speak to her. In other things besides pronunciation she never knew when she was doing right or wrong.

She was reproved for shaking hands with a housemaid, and sent into the corner for putting a spelling-book on the top of a Bible. School was a strange world to her. To speak with an English accent, to have a mother who wore real lace and a father who did no work, these things made you a lady, and if you were not a lady you were despised. Jane could tell the girls nothing about her father. Her pronunciation was shocking, and the girls made fun of her magenta stockings and home-made clothes. If only Mick had been with her Jane felt she could have borne anything. She

was terribly home-sick every day. From the time Andy left her in the morning she counted the minutes till he would come to take her back again to Rowallan and people who were kind. But it was only to Mick she told her trouble. He said Miss Courtney was a fool, and Jane trembled lest Miss Courtney might overhear it six miles away. She was almost as frightened of the big girls as of Miss Courtney. They wore such elegant clothes, and had such power to sting with their tongues. One day when Jane, in joyful haste, was putting on her hat to go home three of the big girls came into the cloakroom. They were talking eagerly. One of them mentioned Jane's name, then asked Jane how much she was going to give towards Miss Courtney's birthday present. She explained that they always gave her a beautiful present each year. "What is the good of asking her?" said another, "she's hasn't a penny, I'm sure." The scorn in her voice seemed to scorch Jane.

"I'll give five shillin's," she said calmly. She had not as many pennies in the world, but she could not bear to be despised. The big girls were delighted. They were quite kind to her. Jane promised to bring the money next day. All the way home she prayed that God would send her five shillings. She would not ask Lull for it—Lull was too poor; Jane would rather have confessed to the big girls that she had no money than take it from Lull. She prayed earnestly before going to bed, she woke in the night to pray, but morning came, and she was on her way to school without the money. When she got off the car at the end off the street she was still praying, hoping that at the last moment she would find the money on the pavement at her feet. Suddenly Mick's voice startled her. "Ten shillin's reward! Lost, a red settler dog." He was reading a poster on the wall. Jane laughed with glee. She thanked God for His goodness before she read the poster. Here was the money, and five shillings over. She expected to see the lost dog at the end of the street. She read the poster carefully. The red setter answered to the name of Toby. Nothing could be more easy to find. Mick dropped their schoolbags over a wall among some laurel bushes, and they started on the search. They began with the street they were in, calling Toby up one side and down the other. But they got no answer. Then they went on to the next, and so on from street to street. They saw brown dogs, black dogs, white dogs, yellow dogs, but no sign of a red setter. When they had searched the principal streets they tried the back streets. Jane called the dog's name till she was hoarse, and then Mick called in his turn. They asked a policeman if he had seen Toby. "A settler dog! I niver heerd tell a' that breed," he said. "Where did you loss it?"

"We niver lost it, we're only lukin' for it," said Jane.

The policeman thought for a moment. "I think I know where I could lay my han' on a nice wee coally pup, if that'd content ye," he said.

Jane thanked him kindly, and they continued their search. When they had been walking for about two hours Mick began to despair.

"We're sure to fin' it," Jane assured him. "Somebuddy's stole it; let's luk in people's back yards." Back yards were hard to get at in town. They listened for barks, and followed up the sound. Three times a bark led them back by different ways to the same dog. Then they were chased by owners of back yards, and once Jane tore her frock climbing over a shed. Jane never thought of giving in. The lost dog was to be sent in answer to her prayer to give her the money she needed so badly. At last they came to an open door, through which they saw into a yard, and there by a kennel sat a big red dog. Jane gave a shout of joy.

"Toby, good Toby!" she called. "Is it here ye're settlin', and' us lukin' the town for ye?" The dog was chained, but they unfastened him, and with the help of a slice of bread and butter Jane had with her for luncheon they coaxed him from the yard. It was well they kept him on the chain, for once they got out Toby began to run. He was a big dog, and pulled hard. Both the children held tight to the chain, and still he pulled them at a run through the streets. At last they were so tired they had to rest. They sat down on a curbstone, with Toby between them, and were just beginning to discuss the reward when a heavy hand fell on Mick's shoulder. It was the school porter. In spite of their protests he insisted that Mick was playing truant, and marched him off to school. Jane, left alone with Toby, debated what she ought to do. The reward was to be got in a village three or four miles at the other side of Rowallan, so she would have to wait and go back with Andy. But there was still an hour and a half before he would call at Miss Courtney's to take her home. She decided that it was her duty to go back to school till he came. She could explain to Miss Courtney that Toby was a valuable dog she had found. She could also tell the big girls, with perfect truth, that she would bring five shillings next day. When she got up to go Toby started at the same bounding pace, dragging her through mud and puddles. But she got him to the place where Mick had hidden the schoolbags. Then, with her bag in her hand, she stood for a moment in doubt.

"I wouldn't take ye if I didn't think ye'd be as good as gold," she said. Toby wagged his tail. As she was taking off her hat in the cloakroom she warned him once more that he must be good. He seemed to understand perfectly, and walked quietly by her side to the schoolroom door. When she opened the door everybody looked up; there was a murmur of astonishment, and before she could stop him Toby had bounded from her, and was barking furiously at the infant class. All the children screamed. Jane did her best to catch him, but he got away from her. The big girls jumped on tables and forms, the little ones huddled behind each other. Miss Courtney stood on a chair.

"He'll not hurt ye," Jane tried to assure them. "Quit yer yellin', an' he'll be as quiet as a lamb."

"Turn him out, turn him out!" screamed Miss Courtney. At last Jane succeeded in catching Toby by the collar.

"Ye bad ruffan," she said, "scarin' the wits out a' iverybody." The noise died down except for the wailing of a few children who were still frightened. Miss Courtney rang for a servant, and ordered her to turn the dog out. Jane explained that this was impossible; Toby was a valuable dog she had found, and she must take him home to his owner. Miss Courtney would not listen to her. The dog was to be sent away at once. Jane, when she saw Miss Courtney was frightened of Toby, said she would take him away herself. But, to her surprise, this was not allowed. She was to stay, and the dog was to go. Miss Courtney would not listen to reason. It was nothing to her that Toby was valuable, that there was ten shillings reward for him, that Jane had had great trouble finding him. Jane was a wicked girl, she said, and the dog must go. Jane could not see why she was in disgrace—she had done nothing wrong. It was Toby who had frightened them. But astonishment soon gave place to tears. Miss Courtney made it plain that she must be obeyed. The servant, afraid to touch Toby herself, led Jane weeping to the front door to turn him out. The moment the door was opened Toby bounded away, dragging his chain after him. Once he stopped to look back; then, as Jane did not follow, he went on alone. The servant was unsympathetic; she knew nothing of the bewildered disappointment in Jane's heart. She said Jane deserved to be whipped. A far more awful punishment was in store. Jane was condemned to stand in the corner till she had fulfilled all the hours she had wasted in the streets. Jane was terrified. She forgot the disgrace, forgot the lost reward, forgot the scorn the big girls would heap on her when they found she had no money. If she had to stay there till six o'clock Andy would go away without her, and she would have to walk all those long miles back to Rowallan in the dark alone. She begged Miss Courtney to let her go; she prayed God to soften Miss Courtney's heart. But it was all in vain. When the other children went home a Bible was put into her hands, and she was told to learn the fifty-first Psalm. She got no further than "Have mercy upon me, O God." Misery such as she had never known before overwhelmed her. Perhaps she would never get home again. Anything might happen in those long, long hours. Everybody might die in her absence. Perhaps, when she got out of school at last, and tramped the long miles home, and ran past the shadow of the gates up the dark avenue, she would put her hand on the bell, and hear it echo in an empty house. Everyone would have grown up and gone away years ago, and left her.

The light began to fade from the sky, and Jane could bear her misery no longer. She determined to run away. She crept quietly across the floor to the door. As she opened it she heard Miss Courtney's footstep on the stairs. For a moment Jane's heart was sick with fear; then, in despair, she ducked her head, and charged for freedom. Miss Courtney went down three steps backwards way. Jane never stopped. She seized her coat and hat, and ran out into the street. There at the gate was the car, with Andy and Mick waiting for her. She gave a sob of relief at the sight.

"Drive quick, Andy," she begged as she climbed up; "I'm feared I've kilt her."

"Ould divil," said Mick sympathetically. "One a' the girls tould me what she done. All I got was a slap with the cane."

Jane was laughing and crying by turns. "Her two feet was up in the air, but I'm feared thon crack must 'a' split her skull."

When she was calmer Mick broke the news that Toby was not a red setter at all. "It's a wonder the polis wasn't after yez," said Andy from the other side of the car, "stealin' dogs out a' people's back yards." Jane did not mind about Toby. She said it did not matter now, for she was never going back to Miss Courtney's again. She told Lull everything that evening. Lull thought Miss Courtney would forgive her, but Jane refused to go near the hated place again. So Patsy was sent to school with Mick, and Jane went back to do lessons with Mr Rannigan.

CHAPTER XV

AN ENGLISH AUNT

No one had invited the English aunt to come over, so when a letter arrived one morning saying she would be with them that same day, and would they send the carriage to the station to meet her, everyone was surprised. The children were delighted at the thought of a visit from an unknown aunt: they had thought Aunt Mary was the only aunt they had. This strange Aunt Charlotte was their mother's sister, and, Patsy said, she was sure to bring them a present in her trunk. But Lull went about the house, getting ready a room in the nursery passage, dusting the drawing-room, and opening the windows, with a look in her eyes that was not of pleasure.

"Don't ye want Aunt Charlotte to come?" Jane asked her.

"Want her?" Lull snapped. "Why couldn't she come when she was wanted sore? What kep' her

then, an' me prayin' night an' day for her?"

Jane stopped in the middle of the drawing-room floor with a soup tureen full of dog-daisies in her hands.

"There, I'll quit bletherin'!" Lull added. "None of yous mind, thank God, but—if I had 'a' had a young sister struck dumb in morshial agony haythen Turks wouldn't 'a' kep' me from her."

Lull flounced out of the room, and Jane was left standing in the middle of the floor. She had never heard Lull speak like that before. What did she mean? A young sister, she had said; their mother was the only sister Aunt Charlotte had. When was their mother struck dumb and Aunt Charlotte wouldn't come? Jane went out to the stable, where Andy Graham was putting the horse in the car. Honeybird was brushing his top hat for him at the far end of the stable, but Jane did not see her.

"Andy, when was mother struck dumb in morshial agony?" she said.

Andy dropped a trace. "By the holy poker! what put that in yer head?" he said.

"Lull said Aunt Charlotte wouldn't come when she was wanted sore, an' her young sister was struck dumb in morshial agony," said Jane.

"An' a fine ould clashbag Lull was to say the word," said Andy, picking up the trace.

"Tell us, Andy, an' I'll niver name it," said Jane.

"See here, Miss Jane," said Andy, "it's no talk for the likes a' yous to be hearin'. Sure, there's niver a wan would mind it at all if it wasn't for that ould targe of a Lull, an' it be to be as far back as the flood for her to forget."

"Go on, Andy; tell a buddy," Jane begged, "an' I'll not come over it to a livin' sowl."

"Sure, ye know all I know myself," said Andy. "The mistress was tarble bad, an' they sent for yer Aunt Charlotte, an' she wouldn't come."

"Why wouldn't she?" said Jane.

"God knows," said Andy. "She wouldn't, and Lull was clean dimented at the time for the want of her. An' I'm tellin' ye it got yer Aunt Charlotte an ill name about the place. There's many's the wan has it agin her to this day."

"Have you, Andy?" said Jane.

"Is it me! God forgive me, I could bear no malice. An' see an' forgit it yerself Miss Jane, for she'll be the good aunt to ye all yit."

Jane went slowly back to the house. She would have liked to consult Mick about it, but she had promised not to tell. The only thing to do was to wait till she could ask Aunt Charlotte herself.

Mick went to the station on the car to meet Aunt Charlotte. The others waited at the gate, two on each of the stone lions, to give a cheer when she arrived.

It was a long drive from the station, and they were stiff and cramped before the car came back, but Jane would not let them get down, for fear the car might turn the corner while they were down, and Aunt Charlotte would not get a proper welcome.

It came at last, and they hurrahed till they were hoarse. Aunt Charlotte sat on one side, and Mick on the other. There was a tin box between them on the well of the car. As the car came nearer they saw that Mick was making signs, shaking his head and frowning, and when the car turned in at the gate Aunt Charlotte looked straight in front of her, and did not even glance at the welcoming party on the lions.

They got down, and followed up the avenue. In a minute they were joined by Mick. "Let's hide," he said; "she's an ould divil."

Silently they turned away from the house, across the lawn, and dropped over the wall into the road. They went up the road till they came to an opening in the wall on the other side, where they filed through, and struck out across the fields. Sheep were feeding on the spongy grass, and as they got farther away from home rocks and boulders began to appear, and at last a long line of clear blue sea. Mick led the way till they came to a flat rock jutting out like a shelf over the sea, and here they sat down.

"What did she do?" Jane asked.

"She said I was no gentleman," said Mick.

"What for?"

Mick began his tale.

"When the train come in I went up to her, an' sez I: 'How'r' ye?' Sez she: 'Who are you?' Sez I: 'I'm Michael Darragh.' 'Is it possible?' sez she, an' ye should 'a' seen the ould face on her. Sez I: 'The car's waitin'.' 'Then tell the man to come for my luggage,' sez she."

"Oh Mick," gasped Jane, "what did ye do?"

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't like to say right out that Andy had got no livery on his legs, and daren't strip off the rug. So I sez: 'We'll get a porter to carry it out.' 'No,' sez she; 'I'd have to tip him. Tell the coachman to come.'"

"As mane as dirt," said Patsy.

"Sez I: 'He can't come, Aunt Charlotte, 'cause he can't get off the dickey.' 'What's the matter with him?' sez she. I was afraid I'd tell a lie, but I thought a bit, an' then I sez: 'He's disable.'"

"Good for you, Mickey Free!" Jane shouted.

"But it wasn't good, for when we started she begun astin' Andy what ailed him. Andy didn't know, so he said he was in the best of good health. Sez she: 'My nephew tould me you had been disabled.' 'Divil a fut, mem,' sez Andy; 'I'm as well as ye are yerself.' She got as red as fire, an' sez she: 'No gentleman tells lies, Michael!" Mick's face was white with anger.

"But ye tould no lie, Mickey dear," said Fly.

"An' ye couldn't tell her Andy had no white breeches," said Patsy.

"Dear forgive her," said Jane bitterly, "an' we thought she was an aunt."

They did not go home till it was getting dark. When they went into the kitchen Lull was sitting by the fire. "Well," she said, "did ye see yer Aunt Charlotte; she's out lukin' for ye?"

"She can luk till she's black for all I care," said Jane.

Their mother was sitting up in bed when they went in to say good-night, and they saw she had been crying.

"You are the best children in the world," she said, "but your Aunt Charlotte thinks you are barbarians."

"She's an ould divil, an' we just hate the sight a' her," said Patsy.

"'Deed, an' there's more than yous does that," said Lull.

"Hush, Lull," said their mother; "she is my sister, after all."

"Purty sister," Lull snorted, "comin' where she's not wanted, upsettin' everybuddy with her talk a' ruination."

"It's true, it's true," Mrs Darragh wailed, and began to cry again.

Lull hurried the children out of the room; they heard her comforting their mother as they went down the passage. They went to bed with heavy hearts. Jane said her prayers three times over, then cried herself to sleep.

Next morning Aunt Charlotte was down early. Fly and Patsy, who had been out to see if the gooseberries were ripe, met her in the hall as they came back.

"Good morning," she said. "I don't think I saw you yesterday. What are your names?"

"I am Fly, an' he is Patsy," Fly answered.

"What?" said Aunt Charlotte.

"Fly an' Patsy," Fly repeated, and was going past, but Aunt Charlotte pounced on some gooseberries Fly had in her pinafore. "What are you going to do with these?" she said.

"Ripe them," said Patsy, trying to get past.

"You cannot ripen green gooseberries off the bushes," said Aunt Charlotte.

"'Deed, then, ye just can," said Fly; "ye squeeze them till they're soft, an' then ye suck them till they're sweet."

"I am sure your nurse cannot allow you to do anything so disgusting," said Aunt Charlotte.

At this moment Lull came out of the schoolroom, where she had been laying the table for breakfast.

"M'Leary!" said Aunt Charlotte—they had never heard Lull called that before—"surely you cannot allow the children to eat such poisonous stuff as unripe gooseberries?"

Lull's eyes flashed fire for a second, then she said: "You lave them to me, mem," and took Fly and Patsy off to the kitchen, where they squeezed and sucked the gooseberries in peace.

At breakfast Aunt Charlotte asked questions about everything: who their neighbours were; where they visited; where they went to church.

"You see," she said, "I have not been here before, so you must tell me everything about your surroundings now."

"Why didn't ye come afore?" said Jane eagerly. "When ye were wanted sore, what kept ye then?"

"Little girls cannot understand the motives of their elders," Aunt Charlotte said sharply. "I was far from well, and the country was disturbed."

"What's disturbed?" said Patsy.

Her back stiffened. "Your fellow-countrymen were in a wicked state of rebellion against the powers ordained by God," she said.

"'Deed, an' who wouldn't fight the polis?" said Patsy. "Ye should 'a' seen the gran' fight we had last week on the twelfth."

"I understood that everything was quiet," Aunt Charlotte murmured.

"Lull was prayin' night an' day for ye to come. She was clean dimented for the want of ye," Jane went on, hoping Aunt Charlotte would explain. But Aunt Charlotte did nothing of the kind.

"We will not discuss the matter," she said; "I have told you it was impossible for me to come."

"I'm tellin' ye it got ye an ill name about the place," said Honeybird, looking up from her porridge; "there's many's a one has it agin ye to this day."

The children looked at each other in surprise. Honeybird had a way of repeating things she had picked up; but only Jane knew where she could have heard this, and a kick from Jane told her to be quiet. Aunt Charlotte's knife and fork dropped with a clatter on her plate. Her face was white as chalk. For a minute no one spoke. Aunt Charlotte drank some coffee, and shut her eyes. The children thought she had forgotten to say her grace till now; they went on with their breakfast, and in a few minutes she spoke again.

"I suppose you all like toys," she said.

The three younger ones brightened up.

"You know there are beautiful toys to be had in London, and I did think of bringing you some, but, then, I thought that out here in the country, with so many trees and flowers to play with, it would be like bringing coals to Newcastle."

They understood that she had brought nothing. Mick and Jane looked relieved, but Honeybird's eyes filled with tears. "Niver a wee dawl?" she said.

"What does she mean?" said Aunt Charlotte. "Oh, a little doll; the child speaks like a peasant."

No one answered. Honeybird's tears dropped into her lap. Fly passed her a ripened gooseberry under the table.

After breakfast Aunt Charlotte said they must show her the gardens and the stable. They had meant to go out bathing, and stay away all day; but there was no escaping from her, so they started off, to the stables first.

Aunt Charlotte shook her head over everything.

"Disgraceful neglect," they heard her say.

"We'll soon make it grand when our ship comes in," said Jane.

"What a strange expression," said Aunt Charlotte. "And, pray, when will that be?"

"God knows, for I don't," said Honeybird, repeating what Andy Graham always said when they asked him that question.

Aunt Charlotte looked at Honeybird, who was playing with the cat. "Do you know that you have taken your Maker's name in vain?" she said. "Go back to the house at once, you wicked child."

Honeybird stared, her grey eyes growing wider and wider.

"Do you hear me?" said Aunt Charlotte. "Go into the house at once."

With a gasp of horror Honeybird turned back across the yard, and they heard her go into the kitchen, sobbing: "Poor, poor wee me!"

"Now take me to see the kitchen garden," said Aunt Charlotte.

"Ould Davy'll be mad if we do," said Jane.

"I wish you would speak more distinctly," said Aunt Charlotte, "I cannot understand what you say."

"I on'y said ould Davy'd be cross," said Jane.

"What is his name? Who is he?" said Aunt Charlotte.

"'Deed, he's just ould Davy," said Patsy; "thon's him in among the cur'n' bushes."

But ould Davy spoke for himself.

"Be off wid yer," he shouted; "away home ar this, or if I catch the hould a' yer I'll cut yer throats."

"I tould ye he'd be cross," said Jane.

But Aunt Charlotte was running back to the house as fast her legs would carry her.

"She's feared," said Jane joyfully.

Patsy danced. "It'd be quare fun to take her to see Jane Dyer," he said.

They laughed at the thought till they had to sit down on the path.

"I wisht I could come with ye," said Jane, "but ould Jane's friends with me, so I can't."

"No; ye'll have to stay at home, Janey dear," said Mick; "she wouldn't lift a finger if she saw ye with us."

"It's all because I tuk her them ould boots," said Jane; "but yous three can go; an' mind ye run the minute she throws the first stone, for if ye stan' an' face her she's like a lamb."

A few minutes later Mick and Fly and Patsy came into the drawing-room, and asked Aunt Charlotte if she would like to go for a walk; they were going down to the sea, they said. Aunt Charlotte said she would be delighted to go. She put on her hat and gloves, and they started. On each side of the road was a wall of loose stones bound together by moss and brambles. In the distance, to their right, rose the mountains, and a turn of the road about a mile from home brought them in sight of the sea. They passed through the village, a long road of whitewashed cottages, with here and there a fuchsia bush by a door, a line of bright nasturtiums under a window, or a potato patch dotted with curly kale by the side of a house. Farther down the street the church stood back from the road in a graveyard full of tombstones and weeds. Aunt Charlotte said she was interested in churches, so they stopped to look at it. Coming back through the graveyard Mick showed her the tombstones of the rebels, with skull and crossbones on the top, and the grave of a great-uncle of theirs, who had been hanged at the time of the rebellion for deserting his friends.

"Serve him right, the ould traitor," said Patsy.

Aunt Charlotte was shocked. "If he was your great-uncle you should think of him with respect," she said.

"An' him an informer!" said Mick; "'deed, I'd 'a' kilt him myself, so I would. Andy Graham sez he'd 'a' japped the brains out a' him."

"Lull sez she'd 'a' napped him on the head with a wee blackthorn," said Fly. "But whist," she added, "I do believe the ould ruffian's lyin' in his grave listenin' to us."

Aunt Charlotte shivered. As they were going down the steps Patsy stopped. "Look at them two ould rats," he said, "sittin' there on the wall like ould men. They're just sayin' which of us all will be brought here the first."

Aunt Charlotte gave a little scream, and ran out into the road. "You children have such morbid minds," she said; "indeed," with a little laugh, "you have made me quite nervous."

About five minutes' walk from the village they came to a lane that ran down to the sea, black mud underfoot and stone walls on each side. The lane widened into a small farmyard. There was a low cottage, a stack of peat, and two or three hens picking about in the mud.

"What a squalid scene!" said Aunt Charlotte. "Is it possible that any human being can live here?"

The children did not answer, for, to their disappointment, the door was shut. "She's out!" Mick said.

A few yards from the cottage the land ended on the seashore. The sand was covered with brown seaweed; a cart filled with it was propped up on stones. Bits of cork and wood were strewn about in every direction, and beyond the line of dry seaweed there were big round stones covered with golden brown seaweed, still wet, for the tide was only half-way out.

Aunt Charlotte didn't like this sea very much. She said it was all so untidy. Not even the beautiful green crabs that Fly caught under the wet seaweed pleased her, so after a few minutes they turned back. The children were afraid that Jane Dyer would not have come home yet, but just as they passed the cottage Aunt Charlotte suddenly gripped hold of Mick's arm.

"Who is that," she said sharply; "there, coming down the lane?" Fly gave a hysterical giggle. Coming towards them down the lane was a tall figure dressed in an old green ulster coat, tied in round the waist by an apron; white hair fell about a flat white face, and big bare feet splashed in the mud. As it came it muttered and frowned and shook its fist.

"Who is it, I say?" said Aunt Charlotte.

"It's Jane Dyer," said Mick.

Patsy gave a loud 'Hee-haw,' that was supposed to remind Jane of her dead donkey, and always made her wild with rage, even if the sight of visitors in her lane had not already made her angry. She came swinging along, muttering and cursing to herself, stopping here and there to pick up a stone, till her apron was full. Then, with a sudden leap in the air, she aimed. The stone hit Fly on the shin; she gave a yell of pain, and was over the wall in a second. The boys followed, while a volley of stones and curses came from the lane. Aunt Charlotte was left behind. They heard her scrambling over the wall, the loose stones rolling off as she scrambled, and as they ran they could hear her panting: "My God, my God, this is awful!"

Two fields away the boys found Fly sitting on a bank nursing her leg. "Did ye hear her takin' her Maker's name in vain?" said Patsy, and he rolled on the grass with laughter.

"I niver seen ould Jane in better fettle," said Mick.

"If we'd had any wit we'd 'a' set Sammy on her too," said Fly.

"We'll do it yit," said Patsy, and there and then they began to run like hares along the road to the cottage where Sammy lived. Sammy was an innocent, and lived in a one-roomed cottage on the roadside that was entirely hidden from sight by the rowan-trees that grew round it. He was a little old man, who spent his days attending to his sister's pig. There was not a more peaceable soul in the countryside, but on the subject of the pig Sammy could be roused to fury. He talked to it, sang to it, fed it out of his hand. When he walked about the fields the pig followed at his heels, when he sat on the doorstep it lay at his feet. But if one of the village children threw a stone at it, or if any threatened in joke to harm it, Sammy was beside himself with rage, and it was an insult he never forgot. Twice a week he came to Rowallan for the refuse and broken meat, and, next to the pig, he loved the children. He was at home when they knocked at the door, and came out at once.

"M-m-m-m-mornin'!" he stammered.

They were out of breath, and could hardly speak. Sammy began to look frightened; it was so easy to scare his few wits away.

"Oh, Sammy, she's comin' after yer pig," Fly panted.

"Wh-wh-wh-where?" Sammy shouted.

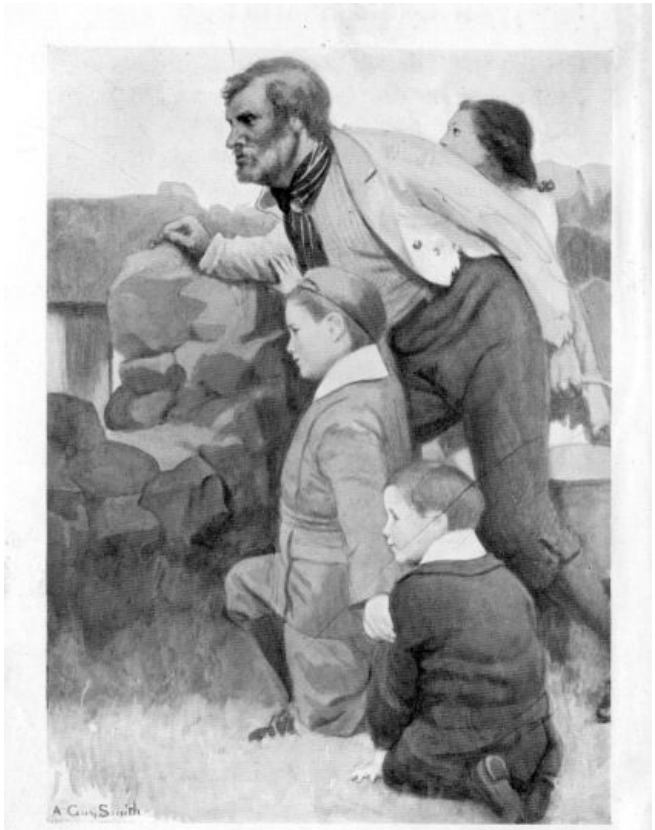
"Along the road," said Patsy; "she'll be here in a minute; a long string of a woman with a black dress on. She's clean mad to get at it; ye'd better be out, an' chase her."

"L-l-l-l-let me at her!" roared Sammy, picking up his bucket.

"She's comin' to kill it, Sammy," said Mick; "she come all the way from England to do it."

Sammy was dancing on the doorstep. "Hide down behind the wall till she comes," said Patsy, and they pulled Sammy down with them.

"Whist, Sammy; be quiet, man, till she comes," said Mick—for Sammy was snorting and quivering. "I'll give ye the word when I see her."



"Whist, Sammy, be quiet, man, till she comes," said Mick

In about five minutes Aunt Charlotte came in sight. They saw her through the holes in the wall, limping slowly, and looking back over her shoulder every few steps. Her hair was down, and she was trying to fasten it up. Mick nudged Fly and Patsy not to speak, and gave Aunt Charlotte time to pass the cottage before he said: "Here she comes, Sammy." Sammy jumped up, and out on to the road, waving his bucket over his head, and roaring: "Ye-ye-ye-ye ould butcher, E-e-e-e-english butcher, I'll-'ll-'ll-'ll bite ye."

There was a half-stifled scream as Aunt Charlotte turned for a second, and the next moment she was out of sight. Sammy danced on the road, and yelled after her till he was hoarse, then he came back to where the children were crouched down behind the wall.

"S-s-s-she was aff like the wind, af-af-af-fore I could touch her," he said, "b-b-but I'll kill her th-th-the next time."

They shook hands with him, and told him he was a brave man. Then they went down to the sea, and bathed, and stayed out till it was tea-time. Jane and Honeybird met them at the door when they got home. "She's away back to England," they chanted.

The others could hardly believe their ears. "She came back all mud and dirt," said Jane, "with her hair a-hingin' in her eyes, an' said we were all haythens an' savages, an' she wouldn't stay another day in this blackguardy country."

Lull questioned them while they were having supper. "An' what an' iver did ye do to send yer Aunt Charlotte home like thon?" she said.

"'Deed, we just tuk her to see Jane Dyer," said Patsy.

Lull looked at him for a minute. "There's a hape a' wisdom in a chile," she said at last.

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THE LOVE THAT OVERCAME.

Sidgwick (Mrs. Alfred). THE KINSMAN.

Surtees (R. S.). HANDLEY CROSS.
MR. SPONGE'S SPORTING TOUR.
ASK MAMMA.

Walford (Mrs. L. B.). MR. SMITH.
COUSINS.
THE BABY'S GRANDMOTHER.
TROUBLESOME DAUGHTERS.

Wallace (General Lew). BEN-HUR.
THE FAIR GOD.

Watson (H. B. Marriott). THE ADVENTURERS.
CAPTAIN FORTUNE.

Weekes (A. B.). PRISONERS OF WAR.

Wells (H. G.). THE SEA LADY.

White (Percy). A PASSIONATE PILGRIM.

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