

In a Far Country

By Octavia Roberts, Author of "A Badge of Servitude," Etc.

JERRY O'CONNOR limping nimbly from one end of his grocery store to the other, tried to forget in the manifold details of his business the domestic tempest that seethed in his apartment above. Yet even as he directed the hanging of a long line of Christmas geese and turkeys and the outlining of the windows with holly his mind was filled with the humble picture of Maggie, his niece, as he had left her, seated provisionally on the extreme edge of one of the plush chairs in the O'Connor parlor, cowering before the scornful glances of his wife and daughters.

He had been startled the night before by a heavy knocking on the door and had been roused from his slumbers to hear exclamations of astonishment and dismay from his daughter, Lillie, and the smart young salesman, Mr. Finley, who was spending the evening with her.

"Pal Pa!" he had heard Lillie calling, and staggering into his clothes he had found the commotion to be caused by a poorly clad trembling young girl, bare-headed save for an old shawl, who stood beside a rude, stoutly roped box staring at him with eyes like a frightened animal's.

"Are you my Uncle Jerry? I'm Maggie, yer brother Mike's gurl; I've come to Amerikay."

By this time Jerry's wife and his daughter Aggie had partly dressed and peered curiously into the room, sheltering themselves as best they could from view of the young salesman, who was smiling broadly behind his mustache.

Mr. O'Connor, though petrified with astonishment, had been guiltily conscious of Lillie's mortification and had collected himself sufficiently to draw Maggie into the kitchen.

Here, as she stood shrinking by his side, his wife and Aggie, taking in every detail of her uncouth attire, had harshly questioned her:

"Why didn't you write you were coming?"

"Where do you mean to stay?"

"Are you meaning to quarter yourself on your uncle?"

Suddenly in the servant's small room that adjoined the kitchen, some one moved restlessly, and Aggie, whose quick ear caught the sound, warned her mother:

"Ma, Hist! The girl will hear you. Leave her be."

Then, at last, they begrudgingly prepared Maggie a couch for the night; showed her how to extinguish the gas, and left her to what sleep she could find.

At this point old Jerry would willingly have resumed his broken slumbers, but his wife justly argued that as Maggie was his niece, not hers, he plainly had no right to sleep when they could not. He lingered therefore for the family conclave in the parlor, where Lillie now sat deserted.

That Lillie, whose smart prettiness and position as cashier in a fashionable restaurant were matters of family pride, should feel the contrasting coarseness of Maggie with especial keenness seemed inevitable.

"Mr. Finley will never come no more," she said sharply, dabbing at her eyes with a scented handkerchief. "What will he be thinkin' of us, wid a cousin like her, no hat on her head, that ole trunk tied wid rope."—she laughed shrilly and hysterically. "I never seen the like; I thought she was a tramp and so did Mr. Finley. 'I'm yer Uncle Mike's Maggie,' sez she, 'come to Amerikay.' I thought Mr. Finley would die."

"What are you a-goin' to do?" O'Connor's wife demanded of him at last. "Mike must have known you were a softy or he'd never have landed her here." And Jerry, scratching his white poll meditatively, had stolen to his bed, abashed and puzzled.

Jerry O'Connor had left Ireland twenty years before, years that had transformed him from a poor peasant to a prosperous grocer in the New World. His wife, an Irish-American, of grim ambition, had made the most of every penny. Her determination had furnished the parlor in plush, had bought the piano, given the girls music lessons and, lastly, released them from the manual work so generally scorned by securing them positions in stores and

offices and boldly engaging a hired girl to help with the work.

He saw clearly, from the point of view of their mounting ambition, that Maggie would be a stumbling block not to be tolerated. Torn between his love for his family and his desire to do his duty by Mike's girl, Jerry tossed uneasily until the small hours, his heart swelling with tenderness for the wanderer, the unavailing tenderness of a timid, henpecked man.

Next morning at breakfast Maggie sat timorously in the seat assigned her, blundering over the various dishes, awkwardly handling her napkin, flushing painfully when she met the repellent faces of her cousins.

"Didn't you have no hat on the ship, Maggie, nor no warm cloak?" old Jerry had asked, with husky emotion.

"I had the blanket off my bed whin it blew cold," she articulated, with a wan smile into his kind face. She gathered courage to ask:

"Is Amerikay a large place? I'm thinkin' I'll be a-goin' on to Baltimore. I've a fri'nd there," her color mounted to her curls. "Is Baltimore anywhere near yez?"

They exchanged smiles of superior knowledge. The hired girl grinned openly.

"You should have gone to Baltimore from New York, Maggie; ye're miles and miles past it now."

"Wad it be takin' much money to get there?"

"Yes," the aunt said sharply, "twenty dollars anyway. You haven't that, have you?"

"No," she said hopelessly. "I ain't any money at all. I must get wark."

"What can you do, Maggie?" her uncle questioned.

"In the ole country I tinded cows, and thin a lady taught some of us to make lace. I've me loom in me trunk."

Maggie followed her uncle with wistful eyes as he departed soon after for the store.

Lillie, resplendent in a feathered hat and braided jacket, started for the restaurant, with no pretense of farewell.

"You'll have to get her work," O'Connor's wife whispered fiercely as he clattered down the stairs to the store. "She's mortifyin' the girls to death. She sha'n't stay here."

"I'll take her into the store," he promised, trying to retreat.

"The store! no, indeed you won't; she'd expect to live with us. Why can't you give her the money and send her to Baltimore?"

Jerry unexpectedly asserted himself: "I'll not turn me brother Mike's gurl into a strange city. He sint her to me and here she shall stay."

During the morning's rush he stepped forward to wait on a customer, and patiently awaited the conclusion of a conversation, tablet in hand.

"You don't mean to say, Mrs. Dean," the lady wassaying with a shade of triumph in her manner, "that even you are in the general predicament. I thought that with your small family you never had any

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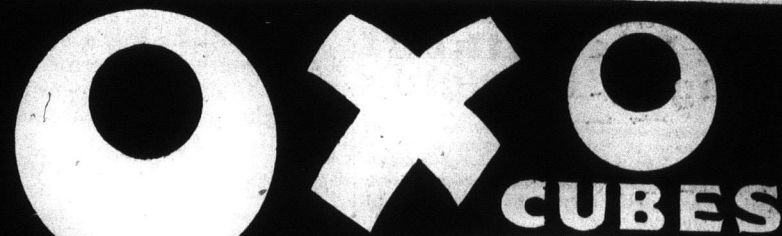


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