

THE RETURN OF MARY O'MURROUGH

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CHAPTER I

A GREEN-ROAD DANCE
The green district of Killageh lies in the high country above Killarney; a place of pastures, blue mountain distances, swift-sailing clouds dropping rain in the very face of the sun, and only one brown in the summer landscape, the brown of the cragged brow of Mangerton looking solemnly down on the laughter of the lower hills.

A few little homesteads of the better class lie folded between up and downs of the fields, and around and among them the cabins of the poorest of the population stand here and there, this way and that way, their gables set against the coldest wind, their bushes gathered round them, and their tin sheds erected like barricades against an enemy. Over yonder a gilt cross gleams against a grey cloud, with birds perching on it. When the angelus bell rings the birds do not fly, so accustomed they are to the sound. The priest's thatched cottage is beside the chapel yard, and from it can be seen, about a quarter of a mile across the fields, Mrs. Dermody's modest farmhouse.

In the long evenings when night is only a name, and light never leaves the wide firmament with its fringes of gold, and litter of stars glittering big in delicate green ether, there would be, some years ago, dancing at Killageh cross-roads; after the little as-carts had come home, and boys and girls had finished work in the fields and haggards, washed up, and snatched a mouthful of supper, then, away with them down the hedges, and across the hills to the spot where the red blaze from Tom Donohoe's forge makes a constant landmark for the traveller!

On a certain summer evening, Mrs. Dermody was made aware that there was a dance at the Cross roads by finding herself alone in the house with Finn the Irish terrier, who stood at the open door wagging his tail violently and gazing in the direction of the forge, but with no intention of going a step further unaccompanied by his mistress. To his great satisfaction she began at last to cover the red ashes on the hearth, threw her blue Kerry cloak over her shoulders, and stepped out into the open, despite his obstructing gambols, and heralded by his rapturous barking.

"Glory be to God, such a night! What'll Heaven be after this, at all, at all?"
For a few minutes she stood quite still. The golden arc of a round rising moon began to appear above the darkening purple of the mountains, while over in the direction of the forge there was a warm glow of lingering or approaching day; up in the high blue dome the reigning stars. The glamour of beauty had seized her unexpectedly, and softened away impatient thoughts.

"I declare Mrs. Mulquin's house might as well be thatched with silver!" she muttered. "And och, God be wid you, poor Mary O'Murrough, god your old home is the ruined wreck! Stan'in' there like a grey ghost, cheek by jowl wid the white faces in the elder trees!"
As the now risen moon poured its splendor over the landscape, illuminating the paths at her feet, Mrs. Dermody moved on in a different direction from that to which Finn was urging her with short sharp barks. She plucked a bit of wild sweet-brier and pressed it to her nostrils as she walked, and her gaze went once towards the chapel with its cross, visible from the glint of the moonlight on its shafts.

"Not that you're there, Matthias Dermody," she whispered. "Yourself isn't in it, my dear man!"
After a minute's silence she went on talking to herself.

"It was you, sure, that loved the step-dance on a night like this. An' who would you dance wid, only Winnie? You hadn't the land when I married, y' but still an' all, God sent it to y'. An' I'll keep the childer on the land too; never fear but I will!"
The change in her thought broke the spell of her dream, and she turned round, to Finn's delight, and set her face toward the Cross roads.

"She went along slowly, for she was not as angry as she had intended to be. She was a woman with a soul to be soothed by moonlight and the memory of a grave-yard, or softened by a glance at the comely face of her daughter Bess; a kind neighbor with an open hand for the hungry poor, and ready to help a fellow-creature at an emergency. There was nothing of the 'naggy' about Winnie Dermody; but still an' all, as some would say, she was a hard woman in the regard of the tight grip she kept of the half-dozen acres that Matthias left her. An' if she did want a husband with a farm for her daughters, an' a gran'son to lave her own to, seein' that she had no son, who's to blame her? Anne Bridget disappointed her, an' for the matter o' that she disappointed Anne Bridget, puttin' a spoke in the wheel o' the only boy that the girl would ever let speak to her. She has Bess to the fore, now, an' if she doesn't plant her well somewhere between Bantry Bay an' Glengarriff, I wouldn't be in Bess's shoes, not for the fullest haggard between this an' the town of Killarney."

if she doesn't give the girl her way, she'll have neither chick nor chail' to lave her own bit o' lan' to, let alone grab at another's!"

Headless that such gossip might be going forward among a few witch-like elders sitting "on the top of the ditch," Mrs. Dermody made her way through a little crowd on the outskirts of the dancing ground, old men and children playing "ring-a-ring-a-roses" with scampering feet and peals of laughter. She was pushed about and caught in the game unwillingly, as not being in the humor for it; and clutching her cap with both hands she put it straight, and retired to the side of the road, waiting an opening to proceed further.

"Oh, Mrs. Mulquin, is it yourself? But sure the very cats wouldn't stay in the house on such a night. Is that my Bess at the melodeon?"
"Is it nobody else, Mrs. Dermody. There isn't one in the country can make them foot it like herself."

"Your own girls aren't had at it, Mrs. Mulquin?"
"Och, Bess has to get a dance some times an' then Kate comes in well enough," said Mrs. Mulquin modestly.

The lively strains of "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" were vibrating in the air, emphasized now and again by the more distant ring of the blacksmith's hammer from the forge.

The "sets" were in lively movement, and the earlier dancers sat by, clapping their hands and singing to the measure of the tune and the dancing feet. Mrs. Dermody got on a vantage ground, from which she could see Bess sitting high on the bank waiving her melodeon as she played, with her chin in the air and the moonlight on her face; and the man beside her, bending forward with his hands locked together behind his knees and his eyes on her, was Miles Donohoe, whose shadow was threatening to cast a blight on all Mrs. Dermody's plans and prospects.

The tune of "The Wind that Shakes the Barley" capered and danced in the air, the step dancers sprang higher and higher, and the tune was marked by an occasional groan from Mrs. Dermody, as well as by that distant ring of the hammer from the forge, which seemed to be driving home the assurance to her mind that bitter disappointment was in store for her.

"She's too cold to be slapped," said the mother to herself, "an' she laughs at everythin'. What am I goin' to do wid her at all, at all?"
She heard a familiar dry cough beside her, and looked round to see a "neighbor man" seated by her on the bank.

Mrs. Dermody's brow cleared. "Well now, Pether Flynn, it's good to see a sight o' you. How's every bit o' you? It's late for y' to be out with your rheumatis."

"May be that. May be that. But a man doesn't mind a little risk if he has an object," Mrs. Dermody said. "True for y'," said Mrs. Dermody. "You're not askin' me what my object is, ma'am."

"I'm not too curious about other people's affairs, Pether Flynn."

gathered unexpectedly by Mrs. Dermody, but she said:

"Now I am surprised. Will y' tell me what y' think I could do for y', Pether Flynn?"
"Ye two daughters, Mrs. Dermody; which o' them are y' goin' to give me?"

"Y' must give me time to think of it, Pether. There's a deal to be said. Anne Bridget's a good girl, an' knowledgeable about a place."

"If I'm to take my pick, I'll have Bess," said Peter.

Anne Bridget's the eldest, an' there's many a look on her face. "Is there an' one with a place like mine to settle her into? But I'll tell y' what it is, Mrs. Dermody. I'll take Bess without a thraesen o' fortune, but y' ll have to give me the money if I take Anne Bridget."

It was the answer expected by Mrs. Dermody, and she was no way disturbed by it.

"Y' must let me sleep on it," she said, "an' have a talk with the girls. Y' ll come down to us some evenin' an' see how things is goin'. And in the meantime I suppose y' won't be lookin' round anywhere else?"

"Not till I get your answer, ma'am," said Peter Flynn. "So now I'll bid y' good-night, an' go home."

Mrs. Dermody sat where he left her, staring straight before her without even noticing that somebody was now playing the mouth organ for the dancers, and that of the best "steppers" on the road were Bess and Miles Donohoe. She was not looking into her heart, or she would have been assured that Peter Flynn was no proper husband for Bess, whatever he might be for Anne Bridget.

was the same too—how well he remembered it—but the accents were cultivated and the manner assured.

He listened with a sort of tense interest to her recital, absorbed for a quite different reason than were the others who listened to her—contrasting the refined, distinguished-looking figure before him with the Rosalie of other days, and moved by a mixture of emotions of which amusement had no small part. To think it was Rosalie Breen standing up there haranguing these people, who hung on her words as though she were an oracle from the moon!

There was a prolonged burst of applause, and Miss Breen was bowing herself off the stage and into the hands of the admiring committee.

"I must go and shake hands with her," Mrs. Shields said. "You can wait outside in the car. I shan't be any longer than I can help," with an apologetic smile. She knew how her husband hated that sort of thing.

His wife turned on him a most astonished gaze.

"An old friend?" she exclaimed. "Miss Breen? Why didn't you say so?"

"I wasn't sure until I saw her that it was the same person," he answered calmly. "I haven't seen her for twenty-five years. We grew up side by side."

"You did? Mrs. Shields was still surprised. That her husband had been reared in very humble surroundings she well knew, but from the fact that he never spoke of his early days she had somehow gathered that there were circumstances connected with his boyhood of which he was ashamed, as she had heard it put, it did not matter in the least to her, since he had long ago cut loose from them; but to have grown up with a person like Miss Breen! Bewilderment kept her silent as the crowd flowed past and they made their way slowly toward the stage.

"Oh, Mrs. Shields!" one of her friends caught sight of her, "you want to meet Miss Breen, I know."

guest had indulged in many laughing reminiscences.

Miss Breen looked at her inquiringly.

"Meeting old friends—old school friends, the companions of my young days," she explained. "After all, there's nothing like it."

"Too busy, I dare say," Miss Breen responded lightly. "As a boy Brian was like that—he could only be interested in one thing at a time. It's a quality that belongs to genius, I believe," smiling at her hostess, "and no doubt that's the reason he's made such a tremendous success of iron."

But only she had been wondering the same thing, though she was almost sure she knew. When he had left Ernerville he had been ashamed of them all.

"That road has as many twists as the road to success," Rosalie remarked idly.

"Oh, yes, quite a good many. How about yours?"

"Mine? Oh, not any, I think. No, it was a long, straight road."

"After you left Ernerville, you mean?"

and happy, and untidy, and careless—come day, go day, God send Sunday—I know it was all very exasperating to an aspiring young fellow like you were, with your trim high school ideas and your laudable desire for nice ways and nice living."

"Well, I admit it was hard for one of your temperament. You thought you were fighting against odds—in an environment you hated—you saw no future for yourself in Ernerville, and above all you yearned for a future—"

"Wasn't it my right?" passionately he interrupted. "Wasn't it a proper ambition?"

"Of course, Brian. Didn't I always say so and encourage you." Then as he nodded dumbly, ashamed of his heat, she added: "I only wanted to tell you what happened when you left. It seemed like a miracle, but your going was such a shock that it woke them all up—your father from his shilly-shallying ways, your poor mother from the inertia caused by chronic ill-health, Jimmie from his idle, boyish dreams; and as for Lill!" she turned to him with shining eyes.

"I could never begin to tell you of my admiration for Lill's character and the way she developed, training all those youngsters and training herself at the same time! It was wonderful! That, I mean, is what you missed, Brian, seeing them all grow and develop, and knowing you had a hand in it. It would have made you so proud, so happy! Lill, who has lovely children, a happy home and the most devoted of husbands, says she looks back to those days as the happiest of her life. And yet they were hard and dark enough, or would have been if Lill and Jimmie hadn't pulled together so well. They stood shoulder to shoulder during their mother's long illness and—"

"Here's the car!" Mr. Shields' voice was hard and his face a cold mask as he helped Rosalie into the car, and he offered a few dry commonplace as they rolled out through the quiet of the early streets.

"At last he resumed the subject.

"Well, Rosalie," he said, "go on with the angel chorus, but don't forget to put in that your paragon turned me down and any help that I offered."

"Did you ever offer yourself?" she put back at him quietly.

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THE LONG STRAIGHT ROAD

"I wonder if I could coax you to go with me to a little meeting this evening, Brian," Mrs. Shields said. "A very wonderful woman is going to talk—"

"These wonderful women," Mr. Shields grumbled, folding his evening paper into more satisfactory proportions. "Is there never to be an end to them and their talks?"

"Well, they all have something to tell us," his wife answered briskly. "Yes? Then I am not so terribly changed?"

"Very little. And yet it's a long time since . . . since . . ."

"Thank you," Miss Breen said pleasantly.

"And I want you to shake hands with my husband," Mrs. Shields added; "he says he is an old friend of yours."

"Why—why—Brian Shields!" she exclaimed slowly.

"Rosalie!" he said. And they shook hands, each smiling curiously into intent, weighing eyes.

"I don't know. Some of us there found the way to success, though not, I grant you, over a very straight or easy road."

"The man winced. "Of course, after I left there," he made answer rather harshly. "I shouldn't have had much success had I stayed there."

"Jimmie? What do you mean?" She looked at him coolly. "Don't you think Dr. James Shields has achieved something?"

"Heaven's Brian!" she interrupted, impatiently acrimonious.

"I don't mean that Jimmie—"

"And you don't mean—you can't mean—that you don't know what your own brother has done? Dr. Shields, the greatest diagnostician in the world, almost the famous consulting surgeon?"

"They had stopped and were staring at each other in mutual amazement."

"I don't know. Some of us there found the way to success, though not, I grant you, over a very straight or easy road."

There was silence while the car