

THE STORY OF MARY ELLEN

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MARY ELLEN CONERTY stood with her back against the roughcast outer wall of the tiny Ballyheigue schoolhouse, and looked with dauntless gray eyes at the mob of small savages that danced and howled in a half circle before her. Her little blue cotton dress was torn away from one shoulder; one stocking was trailing about her ankle; the bow of blue ribbon that had confined the ends of her long braid of red-gold hair had disappeared, and the hair itself had come unbraided and was flying wildly about her face. But Mary Ellen was not afraid. The light of battle was in her eyes and a red spot burned in either cheek as she listened to her tormentors. Those who knew Mary Ellen could have told you that her mood was rapidly becoming dangerous.

But the ten or twelve boys and girls who formed that half circle did not know her. To them she was merely the stranger within their gates, and, as such, fair game for all their powers of tormenting. Her low voice and soft Dublin brogue—the way she held her head erect as she walked and looked as if unaware of their whereabouts—had given to the rough fisher lads and lasses a feeling of inferiority which enraged them, and now that they had got her alone, they were proceeding to avenge themselves for it.

Something in the glance of those gray eyes, however, had impelled

them to keep at a respectful distance as they danced and shouted.

"Redhead, redhead!" they cried, "Dublin sthree!" And freckled Jimmy Doyle, the oldest of her tormentors, whose own head was not without a goodly tinge of the colour he vituperated, reached out and seizing a long strand of the maligned hair, gave it hearty tug. "There was a redhead yet," he remarked, "was aught but a vixen."

The crimson spots burned a little brighter in Mary Ellen's cheeks, but she only looked disdainfully at her enemy and remained silent. Emboldened by her quietness, Jimmy gave another tug. Mary Ellen's hand flew out with the quickness of a flash and he staggered back with the imprint of five small vengeful fingers showing white across his cheek. Then the storm burst.

"Take you that, James Doyle!" Mary Ellen's voice was still low, but there was something in the quiet tones that sent a shiver through the ranks of her foemen. "Take you that, and there's more where it came from. You to dare touch a Wicklow Conerty. Why, if Terry Hogan, that's own cousin to me, were here to-day, there isn't ten of ye would face him, ye Kerry cowards! Out of my way now, the lot of ye, or I'll be harmin' some of ye."

She made a step forward as she spoke and so great was the concentrated passion in her voice and so fiercely blazed the dark-gray eyes