

# The True Witness,

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### THE IRISH WIDOW'S SON; OR, THE PIKEMEN OF NINETY-EIGHT.

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#### CHAPTER I.—CHRISTMAS DAY IN 1797.

"And happy and bright are the groups that pass  
From their peaceful homes, for miles  
O'er fields and roads, and hills to Mass,  
When Christmas morning smiles!"

**Glorious Old Church!** How often is poor humanity soothed and blessed as it listens to the rapturous strains of exulting hosannas, alleluias, magnificats, litanies, and solemn vesperal chants! All these, and many more such like, hast thou for ages used to raise man's heart to heaven, to quiet the spirit that has been tortured and racked by the world, to calm the passions of nature outraged, or soothe the weary fluttering heart. But where, in all thy rich, and glowing calendar, can we find ought to equal the sweet and tender invitation of the *Adste Fiddles*, on a Christmas morning, in some silent nook of holy Ireland!

Our story opens on Christmas morning, 1797.

We take our stand for a little, on the rising ground of the main road leading beyond Randalstown, in the county Antrim, north of Ireland. The snow lies thick upon the ground like one vast winding sheet. Icicles hang from the trees; like diamonds, they sparkle in the bright starlight. See—there are dark figures of people who cross over the fields noiselessly and hurriedly. Not a footfall is heard, although the silence of the grave reigns around. Yonder, amid a clump of fir trees, stands the humble chapel. We can discern the cross from here, bending the lowly knee as they approach within sight of the emblem of salvation! The lights glisten through the frost-covered panes. Come, we'll enter. What an humble spot; and yet there is life and warmth within. The walls are rough and whitewashed; the Altar and its surroundings plain and homely, clean and neat; no seats, no pews, as in the rich and splendid city temples of to-day. Hollys and laurels, festooned in rustic fashion, adorn the holy place. And there is a band of choristers too, but no pealing organ to accompany them. Oh! how sweetly they sing *Venite Adoremus*; we join them in our hearts, and realize the mysteries of the Manger better perhaps for the poverty of the place.

Mass begins, and the people bow themselves to the earth. One glance at them, and we feel that they have just emerged from the dreary days when penal laws forbade them even such a place to worship in.

The sun is breaking in the east; and, as the hands of the good old pastor, Father John McAuley, are raised to heaven to impart his holy benediction on his flock, a ray shoots forth upon the serene countenance of the holy man, and imparts to his face something of the hidden glories and mysteries of the Altar at which he stands. Listen: *LAUDATE NOMEN DOMINE* peals forth from the choristers, and, as the priest bends his knee for the last time at Mass, he slowly rises and stands buried in meditation for a few moments. Again, he ascends the Altar steps. One-half of the congregation retreats; the others remain, and soon again the little chapel is filled. *Re Missa* is again pronounced, and a third Mass commences, the chapel half emptying as before, and filling again as rapidly.

Glorious morn! The sun is now well risen, and with it a sharp and bracing air that gives life and strength to the young, meet of whom go cheerfully along, while the older people remain loitering about in the chapel yard, some to have a talk about the times, and others, chiefly old women, who, after exchanging kindly salutations of "a merry Christmas to you, and a happy new year," re-enter the chapel as if loth to leave the secret spot.

Many of these good people had a sort of foresight that they might never enjoy the happiness of another Christmas morning within its walls again. Most of them believed that before another winter came round they would be quietly gathered to the company of those who preceded them. Others thought, and with good reason too, that the dark cloud of persecution and suffering was gathering ominously around them, betokening ruin to them and theirs.

Various were their thoughts and surmises, as

the priest entered his humble abode which adjoined the chapel.

"Won't you come in Mary," said one old woman to another, "and take a breath of the fire in Father John's kitchen, before we start on the road?"

"I'm just waiting for that same," said her companion; "but, poor man, I wouldn't like to disturb him till he gets some breakfast."

"Ah! that's true; I forgot. He's fasting, and was up the greater part of the night, and the night before, too."

"What in the world would keep Father John out of bed for two nights? Are any of the Dolans worse, did you hear?"

"Well, some of them can't be much worse than they are. Phil is better, I'm told, but Ned, and the father are still confined to bed."

"That was an unlucky market day for them. May God bless them and preserve them, poor fellows."

"To be sure, woman dear; but just the same luck might have happened to any of ourselves. Pat. Dolan was advised not to go to Antrim, as there was a likelihood that some of Mackenzie's crew would be there, on purpose to raise a row because the Dolans were Catholics."

"The Lord help us; but isn't it a sad thing that strangers in the country, who hate the look of every one of us, have it in their power to maim and injure folk, without the smallest chance of punishment to themselves?"

"Yes; and there is worse even than that.—If we are known at all to be what we are, sure there's not one of us free from jibe or insult, go where we may. It was only the other morning I was going across Flanigan's field with a bit of butter and a grain of meal to old Molly, besides the hill, when a young brat of the Bryce's saw me, and called out, 'there's another of them papishes that we are going to string up some fine morning, for cursing the country with their beads and Mass books.' I never once turned round, but just passed on as if I had not heard a word uttered."

"The very best thing you could do. Old Molly is improving, I hope?"

"Sure wasn't she at Mass this morning, thanks be to God, and isn't she gone home with Mike Canavan and the family to spend the day?"

"And is this the way that Mary McQuillan and Nelly McLeesh spend their morning, instead of coming in to see an old friend, and wish him many happy returns of the season?"

Both speakers turned round, and there was Father John, with a hand outstretched to each, and wishing them good health, and many Christmas might they see.

"The same to your reverence," said Mrs. McQuillan, curtsying. "Mrs. McLeesh and myself were going in to see Kate; but we just thought as you hadn't breakfasted that we would bide here a little."

"Come away, come along," said Father John; "nor have I breakfasted yet; but do you think that the sight of one or other of you would take away a hungry man's appetite? Not a bit of it." and the kindly old man rubbed his hands, chattering away as they entered.

Father John's housekeeper was young Kate O'Neill, his niece, and an orphan beside. Her mother, the priest's sister, died when Kate was merely a child. Her father was but lately dead, and since then the handsome girl appeared to be stricken with years, although she had not passed her twenty-second summer.—Before her father's death, her uncle had prevailed upon her to come and make his house her home; she did so, and one year afterwards, her father was laid in the grave beside her mother.

Kate had been at communion that morning, and Father John observing her kneel by the Altar steps, just as he was leaving the chapel, and guessing too that her thoughts were divided between the Manger and the souls of her deceased parents, did not venture to disturb her. Presently she entered, and blushed to find that her uncle had been waiting.

"Now, Kate, child," said Father John, "let us hurry. Here are two of our friends come to see your old uncle, and to bid him all sorts of happiness for another twelvemonth, and what do you think but both of them were waiting outside till I had got my breakfast, just as if I were going to make a meal of them, I suppose."

Kate felt she had acted wrongly, but fell to with a will, and shortly produced a savory

breakfast of ham, eggs, and tea, and all the other *et ceteras* of cream and butter, and home-made bread. The white linen diaper tablecloth, so invitingly spread out, the warm plates, and steaming cups of tea, made Father John anxious to begin.

The two women were heartily invited to partake of breakfast, but declined. They wanted, as they said, just to speak with Kate for a while, and, accordingly, Father John was left alone in his humble but comfortable parlor.

"I wonder," he said to himself, "if Mrs. McLeesh has heard anything more about that rumor; she appears as if she had, and probably wants to learn from Kate if I have heard anything about it."

What rumor did Father John allude to? Let us try if we can understand it. It was observable after last Mass that morning, that the male portion of the congregation did not remain only a few minutes on the roadside, as was their wont; neither did they loiter in the precincts of a house of call kept by one Paddy Farren. It was also observable, that this same Paddy, a rough, but honest specimen of an Irishman, was absent at the very hour when he used to see his neighbors who had come a long distance, and who enjoyed the comforts of his great fireside, where Paddy usually kept a good stock of turf, to send a genial heat through the whole kitchen. What was up? Something was going on, but what was that something, and what did it mean? We shall find some explanation in the following chapter.

#### CHAPTER II.—KATE O'NEILL—THE TWIN BROTHERS—A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY.

"Thy soothing, how gentle! thy pity, how tender! Choir music thy voice is—thy step angel grace; And thy union with Deity shines in a splendor Subdued, but unearthly, thy spiritual face!"

Mrs. McQuillan and Mrs. McLeesh were sisters-in-law. They had known Kate O'Neill's mother and father from the time they were married; and either of these good women would have been happy to have taken care of Father McAuley's niece, if he had permitted them.

Mrs. McLeesh was quite restless from the moment her son told her that, when passing by the priest's house, he observed him go round the chapel with a lantern in his hand, and closely examine all about it as if something lay concealed in its vicinity. This was enough to rouse her suspicions, for she had heard it reported before, that the chapel was soon to be wrecked or burned by a party at that time in the country, known by the name of Wreckers (Orangemen). She thought she was the only one in possession of the secret, and endeavored to learn from her neighbor, Mrs. McQuillan, if she, or Miss O'Neill, knew of any danger.—Finding that both were alike ignorant, she determined to keep the matter to herself, lest the poor priest might come to hear of it. He must certainly have had some reason for his minute examination of the grounds around the chapel; but she hoped it had nothing to do with what she had heard.

Thus it was in those days. The people trying to hide unpleasant rumors from the priest, and the latter trying to bide them from the people.

"Kate?"

"Coming, uncle."

"This fire is getting low, child. Bring some turf, and let us have a cheery glow."

Kate obeyed; and, knowing that the command to make up a new fire, meant also to come and sit at her uncle's knee, was soon beside him.

Laying his hand on the girl's head, Father John said: "How long is it, Kate, since mother died?"

"You told me, uncle, it was nearly twenty years."

"Twenty years. Aye, let me see—twenty and twenty, and twenty-four. That's right, Kate; I am over sixty-four years of age. Now, what will you be, child, when you are sixty-four?"

"I hope to be in heaven long before that, dear uncle, and to be beside you, and father and mother."

"What! and you would really like to die at an early age, and leave poor Cormac breaking his heart behind you. See here, now, my child," and the good old priest feigned a strength and spirit he did not possess. "Sup-

pose that any one—always excepting Cormac, of course,—came near this house to injure us; or, suppose anything to take place, such as any annoyance, I mean, wouldn't the strength of other times, girl, come back to this old arm, and make it just what it was forty years ago, when I beat the biggest McQuillan in the parish at every feat of strength he could invent."

Kate looked up in her uncle's face, and saw that he was merely trying to divert her mind. "But would you really like to die, Kate, before you—"

"Now, dear uncle," replied Kate, putting her soft white delicate hand upon his knee, "I know what you are going to say, and I could laugh and enjoy all the good stories about young Cormac, but to-day, uncle, to-day you know is doubly sacred to your poor Kate, the birth of my God, and the death of my father. I feel happy, dear uncle, in thinking how many Christmases are reserved for us all above."

Father John saw with pleasure that his niece had as yet learned nothing of the evil rumors which were afloat around the whole country for some days past. He knew the inward nature of the sweet girl beside him, and only dreaded that what appeared to be a sort of melancholy with her, was perhaps the result of fear, arising from what she might have heard. His pleasant fancy about young Cormac Rogan was merely a fancy.

Kate O'Neill was beautiful in person, and as pious as she was beautiful. It was seldom that her piety betrayed itself in outward actions, except when alone in her little oratory, before the dear image of her whom she had implored at an early age to be a mother to her. Hers was an inward piety, whereby her whole nature was regulated by the highest standard of virtue, and although she believed she was shrewd enough to conceal all this from the world, yet the actions of her soul were visibly stamped upon her face, and gave to her natural beauty, that supernatural charm which the eye may witness, but which the tongue cannot describe.

Cormac Rogan was a young farmer, about twenty-four years of age. His mother, who resided in the townland of Ballywooly, lost her husband when Cormac was only seven years old, so that there was this in common between himself and Kate O'Neill, they were orphans at nearly the same time.

Widow Rogan's farm was poor and barren; but, with the help of a couple of servants, known by the name of the "two Mullans," the unfruitful soil was made to be sufficiently productive so as to keep all four in good circumstances.

John and Peter Mullan were twins, and resembled each other very strongly. Oftentimes the neighbors found no small difficulty in distinguishing one from the other, and as not a few laughable incidents occurred in consequence of this resemblance, it was agreed on all sides that the pair should henceforth be known by the name of the "two Mullans." \* \* \* \* \*

I shall relate one instance that partly led to the adoption of this course.

John Mullan was known to be a rather "good natured" with a fine young woman named Bridget O'Hara. An appointment was made that each should see the other coming home from America Fair; and as John was busily engaged at out-door work on the morning of the appointed day, his brother Peter was sent instead, not knowing that John was selected by Cormac's mother to perform that duty. On his way home he met Bridget, and gallantly asked her to take a seat beside him in the cart, as the roads were soft and damp. She at once consented, as this was part of the arrangement between herself and John. To Peter's utter surprise, the girl began to banter him on being late, and quizzed him a good deal on that fact. He acknowledged that he was rather behind time, but laid the whole blame on Peggy Dolan and her father.

"And what has Peggy to do with you?" naively inquired Bridget.

"Faith not much; only she beguiled the time while her father and I were taking a dram at McQuillan's counter before starting on the road."

"Maybe it's fond of you she was getting," said Bridget.

"Sure then I wish that that were the fact," said Peter, "for a pretty girl is this same Peggy."

Bridget was glad that the darkness of the evening prevented her emotion being observed by her companion. Peter wondered that she kept so quiet, and thought that he had offended her in some way, little knowing, poor fellow, that he had indeed offended her, but in a manner he little dreamed of.

Bridget's house lay up a loam about forty perches from the roadside. When Peter assisted her to alight, he did so as gently as possible, and with a sort of a quiver in his voice, bade her good-night; but Bridget never replied; she hurried onward lest he might hear the sobs she had tried to smother.

Peter whistled an Irish air, and endeavored to forget the whole "bit of nonsense," as he termed it. After a little while he said to himself: "Well, I took that girl to be a totally different person from what she is, I did tell Jack, more than once, that he was a happy fellow in having such a wife in prospect. My goodness! how she did wonder when I mentioned Peggy Dolan's name. Phew! maybe she's in love with myself and is jealous of Peggy. 'Tis a good joke; and I'll keep it to myself till some day when I want to annoy Jack about his sweetheart."

Next evening when work was done, John Mullan thought he might just as well take a race over to the O'Hara's and see Bridget. In he dashed in his usual off-hand way; but the moment Bridget saw him, she arose with all the dignity she could command, and left the place.

"That's too much of a good thing," said Jack to himself. "I came here on purpose to explain how it was I didn't get to the Fair, and kindly to inquire how she got home, and here she passes me by as if I were a Turk. Nothing like seeing a little temper when there's time to mend matters," thought Jack.

After staying a short time he arose to leave; and, whether by accident or design on the part of Bridget, I cannot tell; but he met her "straight in the face" outside the door. It was but the work of an instant to take her by the hand, and throw his arm around her neck.

"Let go my hand, John Mullan," said Bridget, imperiously.

"Certainly," said John, and he did so.

"I have been trying my best to believe that you weren't sober last night, in order to account for your conduct; but no matter how I strive, I cannot banish the conviction from my mind, that you were under the influence of drink."

John Mullan stood there like a "dumbfounded ass," as he expressed it. He must have heard her—he was not deaf; but what did she say, or what could she mean?

"Might I—"

"Certainly not," said Bridget, in a decided tone.

"Come, come," said John, assuming his former kindly attention towards the true-hearted girl; "there's a mistake somewhere. You know I take no drink, Bridget, and, besides, I never left the house from four o'clock till Peter drove up to the door, when I went out to stable the horse."

Bridget was quiet as the whole truth flashed upon her mind, and, flinging her arms tightly round her lover's neck, kissed him, then darted down the pathway that led from the house.

John certainly had some reason to be non-plussed before; but now he was in a sort of muddle, and began to question himself quite seriously as to whether he should ever have permitted himself to disbelieve in fairies and fairy lore. He followed the girl, whatever took place at that interview has never been known. A duet of ringing laughter and a hearty "good night," were the only evidence of a reconciliation: thus John and Peter were called the "two Mullans," and not without some show of reason, either.

"Kate," said Father John, "you are tired, child, and require some rest, being up so early this morning. I think I'll accept the invitation of Mrs. Rogan's, and go dine there to-day. What if you accompany me? Old Nell can mind the house, and we will all spend a happy evening. Come, child, prepare."

"Dear uncle, excuse me," said Kate. "I am a little tired, and walking would not refresh me; and you know, Father John"—she some-