

HER IRISH HERITAGE

BY ANNIE M. P. SMITHSON

AUTHOR OF "BY STRANGE PATHS"

CHAPTER X
"CAN THIS THING BE?"

Although Mary Carmichael had spoken lightly enough to Tom Blake about foregoing the Nurses' Dance on the 17th, it was still a great piece of self-sacrifice. She would not have minded it so much if she had not been living in the Home, where the dance just then was almost the sole topic of conversation.

Mary was so popular, too, that each nurse insisted on showing her the evening gown, slippers, gloves, etc., that were intended for the great night, and Mary with that true sympathy which was one of her most attractive qualities, admired and criticised, and helped with all these details.

On the afternoon of the 17th she strolled into the Recreation Room at St. Columba's to see them all having their "hair done." Two hairdressers were there and all the nurses were seated round with their case might be hanging around their shoulders, awaiting their turn, while the two "under treatment" at the moment were submitting to the ordeal of having their hair curled and waved and crimped, and arranged according to the latest fashionable decree.

"Do look at Nurse Breen!" said Mary softly to Nurse Ray, who, like herself, was merely a spectator. "She looks quite frightened! What on earth does she think the poor man is going to do to her?"

Daisy laughed. "Oh! well, she's a regular country girl you know," and she wasn't even trained in town—some small country infirmary. I suppose she never had her hair dressed before and is a bit dubious over it."

"I suppose so," assented Mary, adding after a moment, "do you ever think Daisy, how awful it would be to live in the country?"

"Well it wouldn't suit you, Mac—that's sure!" said the other. "I should think not!" said Mary. "I was in the country once—for a month—in the summer too, when I suppose I should have enjoyed it, and I never was so utterly bored and wretched in my whole life! I can't tell you how my heart leapt for joy simply to hear the jangle of the dear old brass again, and the shouts of the newboys, the evening I arrived back at Kingsbridge."

"Oh, yes," replied Daisy, "as I said Mac, it wouldn't suit you at all—you are essentially a city sparrow, but plenty of people like country life."

"Life?" repeated Mary, scornfully. "It would be living—it would be simply stagnation—why, I should just feel as if I were turned into a cabbage for the rest of my days!"

"Oh, well, Mac," she said, "it's not likely that you will ever have to spend your days in the country. I think Dr. Delaney hates it too?"

"Oh, yes," said Mary, "he detests it! Neither of us are happy off the tram line," and with a gay laugh she left the room to get ready for her evening work, as she had promised to visit some of the more urgent cases of those nurses who were going to the dance.

She was back in fairly good time, and stood in the hall watching the bustle of departure—taxi after taxi driving up and going off with its burden of radiant nurses. Involuntarily Mary sighed. She thought of the Aberdeen Hall with its perfect floor, the lights and music—she could imagine herself whirling round in the gay throng, the gayest of the gay, for Mary always danced—as she did everything else—with all her heart. And then the supper, and the sitting out with him. "Oh! well he won't be there anyhow! I'm sure of that!" she said to herself, and turned to meet Daisy Ray's rather quizzical glance.

"Regretting your resolution, Mac?"

But Mary shook her head. "No," she said, "I'm not—not really. But, of course, I cannot help wishing in a way that I was going off for a night's enjoyment. And you know, Daisy, how I just love a dance!"

"Oh, yes," said Mary, "I said the other way round, I used to feel that way too, but somehow now—since Brendan doesn't dance—I don't seem to care about it. Dr. Delaney does dance, I know," she added, "but, of course he won't be there to-night?"

"Oh, no, he won't be there," said Mary, and the two day-at-homes returned to the deserted sitting room together. The room looked strangely untidy and unlike itself. Scraps of ribbon and lace were thrown here and there, chairs were out of their places, and an odd glove and some flowers—evidently forgotten by one of the nurses—lay on the table. Mary went round putting things straight in a mechanical fashion, while Daisy watched her idly from the hearth-rug.

"Mac," she said, suddenly, "Brendan is coming in tonight for a while. You don't mind?"

"Mind?" said Mary. "My goodness—no! Why should I?" Of course this was strictly against the rules, no gentlemen visitors being admitted at St. Columba's. But tonight when the Matron and nurses were going to the dance, and

both the cook and housemaid were off for the evening, Daisy had evidently considered that she might do worse than allow for her fiancé within the sacred precincts of the Home for a short time.

Just then the door bell rang. "There he is! Let him in, Daisy," said Mary laughingly; but it was not Brendan Kelly who accompanied Nurse Ray back to the sitting room, but a Nurse Maguire who worked under one of the many Insurance Societies in the city.

Mary Carmichael had not met her before, and came forward now with her winning smile, as Daisy made the necessary introduction—which she did in her own way.

"This is Nurse Maguire, Mac," she said, "she thought she would be in time to see the others going off to the dance—and Maguire, this is Nurse Carmichael—the Carmichael you know; you've often heard of her!" she added, with a laugh. Nurse Maguire smiled as she shook hands with Mary.

"Oh, yes, indeed! I have very often heard of Nurse Carmichael," she said; "a certain medical man of my acquaintance often speaks of her."

Mary coloured vividly and was about to reply when the bell rang again, and Daisy went to the door returning in a minute with Brendan Kelly. He shook hands with the other two in his pleasant, boyish way, and then they all grouped round the fire, laughing and chatting.

But presently Mary—whose fellow feeling made her wondrous kind—proposed that she and Nurse Maguire should descend to the kitchen regions and there see what they could discover in the way of an impromptu supper. So, with the visitor, she descended the dark, stone steps leading into the cook's apartment, and there after a diligent forage Mary came upon some sausages and tomatoes and some cold potatoes.

"What luck!" she cried, "I wonder how cook came to leave them out of the safe—which, of course, is locked as usual! Anne is right about Martha—she is an old miser!"

She bustled around, and very soon an appetizing if homely little meal was prepared.

"I'll take up a tray to the two in the sitting room," she said to Nurse Maguire, "and let them have it to themselves, and we will have ours down here—if you don't mind?"

"Of course don't," replied the other nurse, who while watching Mary's happy face and quick, deft movements, had found herself becoming fascinated by that indefinite charm which Mary exercised over so many.

So a supper tray was gaily loaded with sausages, mashed potatoes and tomatoes—and of course the inevitable teapot—and Mary went upstairs with it.

When she returned she gaily dispensed the same luxuries to Nurse Maguire and herself, and then sat and talked round the homely kitchen table as if they had been friends for years.

Presently the door bell rang again, and Mary stopped to listen with her tea cup poised in her hand—the Nurses at St. Columba's always felt guilty when drinking tea in the kitchen. Daisy Ray's light feet could be heard running across the hall, then as the door opened she gave a slight exclamation, and the next moment the sound of rather unsteady, shuffling footsteps were distinguished making their way towards the kitchen stairs.

"Oh!" said Mary Carmichael, "it's Anne! and she's been at it again!"

Nurse Maguire glanced at her interrogatively, and Mary nodded. "Yes," she said curtly, "Jameson's J. J.—and after all she promised me!"

The unsteady footsteps were coming nearer, and presently the figure of Anne could be discerned lurching in a sailor-like fashion round the corner by the last step, and coming slowly but surely towards the kitchen. She wore a tight black skirt and a smart coat, while her Sunday "togue" composed of black velvet, scarlet geraniums and blue ribbon—and of which she was intensely proud—was tilted at a precarious angle to the side of her head. Her hands were encased in black kid gloves, and in one of them she clasped her beaded handbag, and in the other her umbrella.

She advanced towards the kitchen table, smiling benevolently. "Supper," she said then, "and why not? Why not I say! God knows it's not often, Nurse darling, that you can get a bit to eat in peace, and now that the old devil is out—" she paused and glanced apprehensively around as though suspecting that the cook might be lurking in some dim recess of the great kitchen. Although well under the influence the fact did not betray itself much in her speech except for a certain thickness.

"Anne," said Mary, reproachfully, "how could you? and after all you promised me!"

The culprit turned her eyes towards Mary, with a would be innocent expression, which however was rather spoiled by their decidedly fishy look. "What is it, my darling girl?" she demanded, "What are you saying at all? Is it you that's speaking like that to your poor Anne that would lie down and let you walk over her dead body this holy and blessed St. Patrick's night?"

"I don't ask you to let me walk over your body at all," replied Mary severely, "all I did ask you to do was to keep sober, and you know you promised me that tonight especially you would not—"

"Sober is it?" interrupted the innocent one, "and what more sober could I be than what I am at this blessed minute? Two cups of tea and a bottle of lemon soda at my sister's, and she after burying the second twin last week, the poor unfortunate woman, and her husband after—"

But at this moment the heavy and ponderous step of Martha the cook was heard descending the stair.

Martha was a country woman and looked askance at all Dubliners, just as they in their turn looked contemptuously at her. She was a strict teetotaler, and a perfect miser in her own way, putting nearly all her wages in the Post Office. She carried her parsimonious habits into and parred the contents of the larder in a most niggardly style. She detested Anne and regarded her as an extravagant flighty woman, who spent her money on drink and theatres and picture houses, when, instead, she should be saving for that old age which was not so far off, whilst Anne in her turn hated Martha, as "an old Jew who would skin a flea for a ha'penny." Martha was a spinster with a deep, abiding distaste towards all men, while Anne was a widow, and, according to her own account, was still fond of the opposite sex. When relations between the two were very strained, they became "Mrs. Murphy" and "Miss Gillespie" to each other.

Anne turned round as Martha's substantial figure appeared in the doorway, and sniffed disdainfully. The cook was attired in a black bonnet and cloak, she wore the Pioneer temperance brooch, and looked the essence of virtuous respectability. She gave one comprehensive glance at Anne, and then looked rather severely at the two nurses seated so cozily at her kitchen table. Mary, who knew Martha's every mood, understood that she was not too pleased to see her kitchen occupied, and hastened to make amends.

"Well, Martha," she said, "I have been taking French leave you see! I do hope you won't mind?—just for tonight you know, and there's a nice cup of tea in the pot," she added insinuatingly, "perhaps you would like it?"

Here Anne sniffed more loudly than before.

Martha proceeded to untie her bonnet strings, remarking as she did so—

"Mrs. Murphy seems in more need of the tea, Nurse, I think. She seems to have a bad cold all of a sudden, and it might do her good in another way too."

This was said with a significance not lost on Anne, but totally ignored by that lady in her reply. "You didn't lose your way tonight, I hope, cook," she said in her most patronising manner, leaning rather heavily against the kitchen table as she spoke, "city streets do be very confusing to country persons."

Martha made no reply, but walked placidly round putting things straight here and there; but Mary knew that she was "nursing her wrath to keep it warm," and accordingly she was very anxious to get Anne off to bed before hostilities went further. This, however, was easy to wish, but hard to accomplish.

"Yes, indeed, poor country folks do be stupid when they come up to the city," continued Anne; "not that they're stupid in other ways though. Ah! no—not at all! Sure they'd take the bread out of a poor Dublin person's mouth any day—living on a ha'penny a day, and with their cheese-parin' and bone scraps!"

Here Martha's face became of a mottled hue, a danger signal, and Mary hastily threw herself into the breach.

"Oh, Anne," she cried quickly, "Nurse Ray's best boy is upstairs—Mr. Kelly you know. I'm sure she would like you to see him."

The sitting room was at least on Anne thus far she might be able to manage her rest of the journey to her bedroom, for Mary noticed that every moment was making her more intoxicated.

"Come, Nurse Maguire, and we'll all go upstairs," she continued, and between the two nurses Anne was conducted to the upper regions. Martha gazing after them with cold contempt.

At the sitting room door, however, Mrs. Murphy became suddenly shy and coquetish, until Daisy Ray, hearing the scuffling outside, came to the door and opened it. Then Anne advanced unsteadily but smilingly into the room and stood gazing benevolently at Brendan Kelly, who, half amused, half embarrassed, stood regarding her from a man's vantage ground—the hearth-rug.

"Nurse Ray's young man—I see," said Anne. "Yes, just so! Ah, well, we were all young—yes! I say we were all young once! I remember when I—"

Mary interposed here, not knowing what revelations might follow. "Anne! I want you upstairs—for a special purpose!" and the handmaid allowed herself to be led out of the room. But once outside she insisted on returning to give the young couple her blessing, and again, and yet again was this

performance repeated until Mary, losing patience, literally ran her upstairs and into her bedroom window, after removing her candle and matches, she shut the door, which had a convenient bolt on the outside.

Then with a sigh of relief, she went downstairs, knowing that Anne would now retire quietly.

"Yes, she's a protégé of Mac's," Daisy was telling the others when she returned to the sitting room, "she got Matron to take her on here, and is always trying to reform her! Sometimes she will keep sober for months together, but then again we never know when she will go off on a burst like this! I really don't know why Mary bothers with her."

"Because I like her!" said Mary, promptly. "I don't know how it is but I would rather have Anne with all her failings and backslidings than the sober, respectable Martha, who always seems to me such a typical old Pharisee!"

"Ah, well, Mac—you always had a fondness for the black sheep!" said Daisy, which statement was perfectly true.

Shortly afterwards the two visitors left St. Columba's, and the nurses went to bed—Mary not forgetting to give a look into Anne's room in passing. The innocent one, peacefully drooping lay on the bed in a deep and noisy slumber.

"Patient breathing heavily!" Mary reported with a laugh, as she rejoined Daisy, closing Anne's door behind her, but leaving it unlocked this time.

Mary Carmichael slept very restlessly, and heard all the fuss and noise of the others returning from the dance about four o'clock. She sighed as she turned her pillow in a vain effort to count slumber, and yet why she sighed she could not have said.

Of course she and Daisy were the only ones at early Mass that morning, and very bare and cold the breakfast table seemed on their return.

"The others have leave to stay in bed till ten o'clock," said Nurse Ray as she cut some bread. "Mac! do, like an angel, stir the pot well—I don't care whether it's vulgar or not—and give me a decent cup of tea for once!"

"That's just what I'm going to do," said Mary, "and I'm going to run up with a cup to Nurse Seelye—I promised her that I would."

"Very well," replied Daisy, "but don't stay gossiping, Mac! It's not often that you have the chance of enjoying a cup of tea yourself in the morning—so hurry back! You'll have plenty of time for talking after dinner."

"All right!" sang out Mary gaily, as she placed two cups, the teapot, and some bread and butter on a tray and left the room.

Nurse Seelye shared her room with Nurse Lenehan, one of Mary's pet aversions, but greatly as she disliked the girl, Mary Carmichael was not small natured enough to leave her without tea when she was bringing it to her room-mate. She tapped lightly on the door, and turning the handle, entered, looking round rather helplessly for somewhere to deposit her laden tray. The dressing table was a confused medley of combs, brushes, ribbons, laces, gloves, powder puffs and a score of other frivolities, while the top of the chest of drawers was similarly littered, and the two chairs which the room contained were heaped with the discarded evening gowns—even the stockings, handkerchiefs and a few withered flowers.

TO BE CONTINUED

THE FARTHER HORIZON

P. D. Murphy in The Missionary

When I went up to London as a staff writer on the Gazette, Carlton was one of the first fellows I got to know. He was then a promising young artist who earned a modest competence by designing magazine covers for the Grahame Syndicate, and rounded out his year's work with three or four allegorical paintings which found a ready sale among the discerning who paid frequent and regular visits to the Chelsea studios. I took a liking to my new friend from the first, partly, I think, because of his sanity, but principally because of his obvious sincerity. There was nothing "arty" or freakish in his get-up. He was just an ordinary, red-blooded young man of quiet demeanor and cultivated tastes. He not only avoided the new cults which were then springing up like magic in London's literary and artistic circles, but rigidly excluded from his friendship the effeminate men and masculine women for whom these movements have such a peculiar fascination.

Another point of contact between us was a common love of God's great outdoors. Our week-ends we spent on the quiet stretches of the Thames between Hampton Court and Boulter's Lock, or else hiking over the Surrey and Sussex downs, where hops are cultivated and whortleberries grow wild. Invariably he would bring his painting traps with him on these excursions, and I would stuff my pockets with notebooks; but at the end of the day we never had anything to show each other except bronzed cheeks and blistered limbs.

So three delightful years passed before it was finally borne in upon

me that our friendship, while pleasant to both, was profitable to neither. Carlton was still a promising young artist who had not yet found himself, and beyond the routine duties for which I drew a regular weekly stipend from The Gazette, I had nothing to my credit in the way of achievement except some articles for a Catholic paper and half a dozen short stories for the lay magazines. We had stood still while others in our little circle had forged ahead and were receiving the flattering attentions of the critics. Were we being quite fair to each other in thus frittering away so much valuable time? I had a feeling in my bones that it would be better if we were to part company, at all events for a time, but though I tried many times to broach the subject to Carlton, my courage always failed me at the last moment. It would hurt him, I knew, if I were to mention it; and I valued his friendship too highly to do or say anything that might offend him.

What then was to be done? How was the problem to be solved? Events on the Continent began to move rapidly after the tragedy of Sarajevo, and then on the fateful 4th of August, 1914, war was declared. That afternoon I met Carlton by appointment in Victoria Street, and together we strolled up toward the Houses of Parliament.

The streets around were thronged with noisy, gesticulating crowds. As the members of the Cabinet filed into Palace Yard salvo upon salvo of cheering went up. One felt instinctively that a tremendous moment was at hand, but what the next would reveal no man could say. The appearance of some guardsmen at the eastern end of Birdcage Walk was the signal for a further demonstration of enthusiasm. Before it was half over Carlton pulled me up short and swallowed a lump in his throat.

"I can't stand this, Mahoney," he said a moment later. "I mean I can't stand by and cheer. I feel I must do something. I—excuse me for leaving you. I'll call and see you tomorrow."

As usual he was as good as his word. He called next day in khaki, and barely six weeks later he left for France with his regiment.

It took weeks before the people could accustom themselves to the idea that their country was at war. A rigid censorship was imposed upon the press, restrictions were placed upon travel, the bank rate began to soar, and so too did the cost of living. But the normal life of the country went on undisturbed until news filtered through from the hospitals that a succession of German victories in Flanders had placed the British Expeditionary Force in a most precarious position. Then came the change, sudden, drastic, complete. In the piping days of peace I had found the gray city by the Thames an exceedingly pleasant place in which to live. I liked its excellent government, its established customs, its amazing intellectual activity. Ordinarily its people are courteous and friendly, but a people embattled is a people embittered. Under the shadow of war the place lost its attraction for me; and so before Christmas came around I resigned my position on The Gazette, and went back to my home among the gray green hills of the West of Ireland.

There followed some weeks of feverish literary activity, but my only recompense was a choice assortment of rejection slips which chilled and oppressed me. I had not the patience to learn from failure, nor yet the courage to fight back when the battle was going against me. One by one as my manuscripts were returned I threw them into the fire, and then when there were no more to come back I fell to wondering if writing were my vocation after all. A commercial career did not appeal to me, and I doubted whether at my age it would be possible to enter one of the professions, such as medicine or the law. To crown it all news came from London that Carlton, who, unknown to me, had been listed among the "missing," was now reported dead. In the cold and rain I slunk out of the house and wandered about the fields until the Angelus rang from the belfry of the parish church. By this time it was quite dark, and my heavy overcoat was dripping wet. That night as I rolled myself up in the blankets I asked myself again and again whether it mattered greatly how a man spent his life provided he kept the inevitable end in view. Of what moment is the fiction which is time compared with the fact which is eternity? Then I thought of Carlton lying out there in a nameless grave, and with a prayer for him on my lips I finally fell asleep.

Next morning as I was sitting down to breakfast, Father MacMahon called on his way home from a sick call.

"Good morning, Phil," he saluted as he stifled a yawn. "I'm just in time for something to eat, and the fine hearty appetite I had this minute, glory be to God. Here, Mary, pour out the tea, like a good girl, and butter some of the scones. Fill it up, girl, fill it up. None of your two sips and a titter for me. Well, young man, what have you been doing with yourself lately? You're not looking as well as you might be. Been burning the midnight oil, eh?"

"Not for over a week, Father Dan," I answered, "I've been doing nothing, literally nothing."

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