

blazed merrily all over the house. Hothouse flowers were in profusion; hothouse fruit graced the table. The great hall quite shone with firelight and the gleam of dark old oak. Mrs O'Shanaghgan dressed herself in her most regal black velvet dress for this auspicious occasion; and Nora, Molly, and even Biddy Murphy, all in white, danced excitedly in the hall. For Biddy Murphy, at Nora's special suggestion, had been asked to spend Christmas at the Castle. It was truly good to see her. Notwithstanding her celestial nose and very wide mouth, it would have been difficult to have looked at a happier face than hers. And, Irish as Biddy was, she had got the knack of coming round Mrs O'Shanaghgan. She did this by her simple and undisguised admiration.

'Oh, Mrs O'Shanaghgan!' Biddy would cry, 'it is the very most lovely thing I have ever clapped eyes on. I never saw anything so magnificent as this room. It's fairyland; the whole place is fairyland;' and as Biddy spoke her eyes would twinkle, and her big mouth would open, showing her immaculate white teeth. So much did she contrive to win over Mrs O'Shanaghgan that that lady presented her with a soft white muslin dress for the present occasion. If Biddy was proud before, she was almost rampant with pleasure now. She twirled round, and gazed at herself in the long mirrors which had been inserted in the hall between the oak panels.