

The months dragged by, until at last the day of the expiration of Danny's sentence came. Mary Ellen had waited through the weeks with growing anxiety. What would Danny do when he was free once more? Would he return to Ballyheigue or would he seek to hide his hurt far away from those he knew? She did not know; she could only wait and wonder.

It was in one of the pearl-gray summer twilights peculiar to Ireland that Danny Doolan entered the village once more, having walked across the hills from Ardfert, the County town, and with bowed head and troubled eyes passed along the familiar street. The last six months had left their mark upon him. The quarrel with Tim Kerrigan, indeed, lay easy upon his conscience. Kerrigan had brought it upon himself. In Danny's hearing, he had spoken Mary Ellen's name, coupling it with a foul insinuation, and the blow that followed had been the only fitting answer; but the malignancy shown against him at the trial by those whom he had known only as friends and neighbours had hurt him sorely. The laughing blue eyes were full of shadows now, there was a glint of gray in the dark hair and the once swift steps were hesitating and uncertain. For a moment he lingered outside the closed door of Mary Ellen's cottage. Should he enter? Others had changed—would she be the same? But the windows were dark and with a heavy sigh he passed on.

As he came to the cross-roads where the little schoolhouse stood, he was suddenly confronted by a group of visitors who stood forward to bar his path. All their faces were familiar to him, and he felt a sudden tightening about his heart as he realized that there was enmity in every glance. Jimmy Doyle was the first to speak.

"And is it back to us you have come, Danny Doolan?" he said. "The way you would be thinkin', maybe, that it is proud Ballyheigue should be of havin' a jailbird in our midst?"

"Or perhaps it is seekin' to murder a few more of us he is," jeered a woman's voice. "'Tis small thanks to himself that Tim Kerrigan is alive to-day."

Danny stared dumbly from one to another for a moment. Surely he must be in some dreadful nightmare. These were his old-time friends and neighbours—these men and women who hurled such bitter taunts at him and eyed him with such scorn. He flung out a helplessly protesting hand, but his tormentors took no notice of the gesture. He was standing with his back against the wall of the old schoolhouse now, as Mary Ellen had stood on that long ago day when he had come to her rescue, but there was no defiance in *his* gaze—only bewilderment and heartbreak. The little group of unfriendly faces drew in closer.

Mary Ellen had waited at the Ballyheigue station, hoping in vain to see Danny's familiar form descending from the ramshackle third-class carriage which was all the railway service that Ballyheigue knew, but no passenger emerged from its depths and after waiting until, with many groans and rattlings, the train moved on its way, she set out for home once more, a trifle wearily.

As she neared the cross-roads she heard the murmur of voices, and, quickening her steps, a moment later saw the little group that had gathered before the schoolhouse wall, against which Danny still stood.

Jimmy Doyle was speaking as she reached the outskirts of the group and there was an insolent arrogance in his tones.

"So it is the sooner you are away from here the better," Mary Ellen heard him say. "'Tis no jailbirds we will be wantin' in Ballyheigue and so Tim Kerrigan bade me tell you."

At that word, Danny straightened himself, the heartbreak and bewilderment dying out of his face. His eyes flashed and his voice rang out with all its old-time boldness as he answered.