

THE RETURN OF MARY O'MURROUGH

BY BOBA MULHOLLAND

Author "The Tragedy of Chris," "Nanno," "Omar," etc.

CHAPTER XXI

"SO IT'S ENDIN' WELL AFTER ALL!"

On that evening before the day of the impending event spoken of by Miles, the going out of yet another big emigration, Mary O'Murrough stood at Father Faby's door, carrying a small box in her hands. The Father admitted her, his housekeeper having gone out into the summer night to have a talk with her gossip.

"Why, Mary! Come in, child! Here I am in the dark. Blind man's holiday. But I'm going to light a candle. I hope you've come to tell me something good."

"I hope it's for good, Father. Let me light it for you, sir."

"Now, Mary, mind your own business. I know best myself where I keep my matches. There now, and sit down, and tell me all your news."

"It's short enough to tell it, Father. I'm leavin' Killelagh tomorrow for the emigrant ship. I'm not sorry I came home, for I've seen my friends, and I know a lot of things I never could have known if I had understood without comin'. But it's time I was back there, and I'm going."

"No, no, no," said the priest. "You can't be in earnest. Is Shan going with you—or are you running away from him?"

"He'll be happier when I'm gone, Father."

"You're making a great mistake. I'm disappointed in you. What notion have you taken in your head against Shan?"

"I've nothing against him, Father, except that he asked me over again to marry him, when he knows that I know he doesn't care about me. He's broken his heart about a girl that went away to America, and it isn't me."

"The priest knew that she was speaking the truth, but he could not bear to hear it from her. Her brave resolution fretted him, and he was willing to use any argument to dissuade her from carrying it out. All were unavailing, however, and he saw with dismay that she was determined to go."

"You've got a little money, Mary, and it would be useful to Shan."

"I saved it for him, Father."

"And now you're going to keep it from him?"

"I have it here, and it's partly what I came to you about. I want you to keep it for him, to settle it for him when I'm gone. It's all in paper, and your reverence'll know how to turn it into money again."

"Do you think Shan would take it, Mary?"

"He'll have to take it, Father, when I'm gone, and he doesn't know where to find me. It'll come to him the same as if I left it in my will to him, an' I dead."

"Do you mean that you won't write to me, and not let me know where you are and how you are?"

"I will write, Father, but not for a long time. An' by that time Shan'll have married a wife that will be as much to him as I would have been if he had married in the days when he cared about me. He'll take the money then from one that was an old friend, for the sake of the wife and children that'll be more to him than his bride."

Tears were in the old priest's eyes listening to her, but Mary was unmoved.

She put the box on the table and was prepared to go.

"Don't think me ungrateful, Father," she said. "You'll be feelin' me strange, and I'm feelin' strange myself. I would like to cry over it all, but cryin' would be no use, and God knows that, for I can't cry. I love all my friends here for they were good to me, and when I'm far from them I'll be thinkin' of them. But it's most of you, Father, that'll be the thinkin' always. Will you give me your blessin' and let me kiss your hand before I go?"

She went on her knees, and the Father spread his hands above her head, and prayed, and made the sign of the cross. When his raised eyes were lowered again, he saw that her face was pale and composed, like the face of the dead. For a moment passion flashed into it as she caught his reluctant hand and kissed it. Then she stood up and turned to the door, the priest following her through the little dark entry, feeling wildly for his pocket handkerchief, to get rid of the tears that were preventing him from seeing his way by means of the very little starshine that showed the doorway.

"You haven't told me when and how you are leaving Killelagh tomorrow," he said.

"A car is to come for me at five o'clock in the morning. Nobody knows but Anna Bridget. I couldn't be going around saying good-bye. I can just go; but to be shakin' everybody's hand would just kill me."

She stood at the little gate, and fixed a long look, as if across worlds and through eons of time, and on the old man's grieving face; and then she turned sharply round, and went hastening away from him.

The priest watched her till she was out of sight.

"Is that the last I'll see of the best woman I ever baptized?" he said to himself. "My God, how I any way of stopping her?"

He went back into the little room where the one candle he had lighted was burning, and knelt at the table with his face on his hands, praying.

After a few minutes he rose up and said, "God be praised for the thought. I'll act on it."

He took his shabby old muffled cloak from a peg in the wall, and meeting his housekeeper at the door, said, "I'll be back in an hour. Go to bed, and don't wait for me."

"Who is it?" asked she, thinking he was departing on a sick call.

"I'm going up to Sullivan's, and I've got the key of the door."

"Oh, then it's our Owdy that's off at last," muttered the woman. "God speed to him!"

Father Faby knew it would look strangely if he had to knock up the little household, already in bed, and Owdy might be frightened; and he was glad to meet Shan strolling up and down the field path, with his hands in his pockets and his eyes on the ground.

"You're welcome father," said Shan in surprise. "You're very good to my father." Somebody's been givin' y' an alarm, I suppose, but he's fairly well, for him, these few days."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the priest; "but it wasn't Owdy that brought me here, this time. I have a bit of news for yourself, something you thought you ought to know."

"Do they want me in the County Gaol ag'in?" said Shan.

"No, no. Nothing of that kind, thank God! It's a little bit of news about Mary O'Murrough."

Shan stood dumb, waiting to hear more.

"I thought you ought to know that Mary is goin'."

"To be married?" said Shan, in an odd, low tone of suppressed eagerness and anxiety.

The Father's heart sank. The words and the tone sounded badly. If Shan were eager to hear such news of her, then Mary was right in following the instinct that prompted her to efface herself by an absence as obliterating as death.

"Not that, Shan. She won't make another virtue of that kind, I believe. You will do it yourself, I dare say, but Mary won't."

"In the name of God, Father, what do you mean, then? Is she dyin'?"

"Not just that either, though it's dyin' she truly is to you and to me. The thing I come to tell you is that she's leavin' Killelagh in the morning, and will sail tomorrow evening with the emigrants from Queenstown."

"She's goin' back to America," said Shan mechanically.

"That's what she's doing. She thinks you'll be happier when she's out of your sight. Mary's a good woman, and she has it in her mind that when you've got over your disappointment in her you'll marry a young wife, as young and as nice as she was once herself. I wasn't quite sure of it, but now that I see the way you take it, I perceive that she wasn't in the wrong."

"How do I take it, Father?"

"Quietly, as a thing that has to be done. A marriage without affection is an odious mistake. And Mary's good heart has made a generous provision for you and yours in the better days that are to come for you. The money that she earned and saved, and brought home to stock your farm is safe in my hands for you—a legacy she has left you without waiting for her death."

Shan uttered a sharp cry.

"What's the matter with you now, Shan? Isn't Mary's arrangement a good one?"

"Father, don't jeer me. I'm a miserable man, an' y' needn't trample me when I'm down."

"You have had your trials, your share of what's sent to us all by the God who loves us. But Mary O'Murrough and myself are showing you the way to be happy."

"I've lost the only thing that could ever have made me happy, Father. I've lost her heart; but I'll never touch her money."

"You haven't lost her heart. Mary's a heart that doesn't grow cold. But she lost yours, because her beauty isn't as fresh as when she was younger."

"Young or old, she is the sweetest woman God ever made!" burst forth Shan, "but I have lost her, to my sorrow. Her heart isn't cold—no it isn't! But it turned away from me, for she hates me!"

The priest stood astonished at the last bitter words, and the angry passion in the voice that spoke them.

"Send her money after her, an' never mention it or her to me again!" cried Shan. "If I was cruel to her, an' so I was, it's herself that is ten times crueler to me now."

"If that's the way of it, Shan, my son, said the old man gently, "why would you let her go? It isn't too late to stop her."

"It is too late, Father. I'm not goin' to bring a woman into my house that hates me. Didn't I see it in her face, an' didn't I hear the shiver of it in her voice that has the music in it for everybody else? Did she ever smile at me the way she smiles at my father, an' at every soul in Killelagh that came around her?"

"Did you smile at her? Did you encourage her to smile at you?"

"I didn't. It's what I'm tryin' to say, that I know it's my own fault; but all the same, she hates the sight o' me. Let her go to America an' marry some other man that'll have more sense an' more luck than the man that has been the fool to leave her to him."

"Well, Shan, I'll say no more. I'm not going to force Mary on one that doesn't think her worth a struggle. I've given you a last chance, and now I'll wash my hands of you. It's

time all good Christians were in bed. Good-night to you."

The old man turned and tramped away. Shan looked wistfully after him as the shadowy distance absorbed him out of the star-shine.

His voice was still ringing in Shan's ears. The words, "I've given you your last chance," followed him as he turned into the house and lay on his bed listening to the wind from the mountains sighing across the fields and among the elder-bushes. What had the priest meant by it? Did he know more of Mary's mind than he, Shan, could imagine? What if Mary did not hate him, after all? Was it possible that she was going back to America with a sore heart, because she had failed to find a welcome where she had most right to expect it? There was no sleep for him, and he got up by daybreak, and was out on the road waiting for the car that was to convey Mary on her last journey from Killelagh. At last he saw it, passing near enough to allow of his discerning one solitary figure seated on the side of the vehicle which was not the driver's side.

Supposed he obeyed Father Faby, and rushed forth to stop the car. Mary would look coldly at him, and tell the driver to go on; and there would be talk about it afterwards all over Killelagh.

He went about his business, and appeared in the house at breakfast time. At sight of him, Owdy began to ask querulously whether Mary was not coming to see him to-day. Shan made no answer, but the old man's question seemed to cut across some shaky barrier in his mind, and finally break it down. He finished his breakfast abruptly, and remarked that he was going to Ballyrogin on business. Old Moya was crying; some of her people were "going with the emigration."

Shan went out and harnessed his horse to the market cart. His strong hands trembled bucking the traces and gathering the reins, and there was a flame of haste and determination in his eyes. He looked in at the door again and said, "I'm off; and I'll be back early to-night if I have luck!"

The next minute he was on the road to the town, driving the cart at more than market-going pace, and making the old horse wonder what had come to his master. He knew he must be late for the train that was to take Mary on to Queenstown, and the next to follow would barely reach the port in time for his purpose. He chafed at the snail's pace of the train, and thought it was in league with evil spirits to keep him from his desire. Or were they good spirits, that were carrying Mary away from him for her greater happiness?

The train did its part well enough, and Shan was in Queenstown twenty minutes before the tender left the quays. He hurried on the scene, where many tragedies were being enacted; covers parting, husbands and wives clinging together with prayers and promises, mothers lifting their voices in shrieks of despair as their sons and daughters tore themselves out of their arms. Shan's consciousness, vaguely aware of the sorrows of all around him, was absorbed in the uncertainty of his own quest. His eyes were strained through and beyond the crowd for the sight of one figure which might yet be on Irish ground; or, was it already gone out on that green ocean that lapped the stone parapet, as if thirsting for the life-blood of a nation?

No, she was not gone. He saw her moving slowly towards the plank, not pushing, but modestly waiting her turn, carried forward by the movement of others. She had only about another yard or two of Irish ground to tread when Shan put his hand on her shoulder.

"Mary! stop! Don't put your foot on the ship. Come back with me. I have something to say to you!"

Mary stopped, her face white with shock, and looking round, saw Shan's eyes blazing with shame for himself and love for her; his strained lips trying to say more, but failing; the gesture of one hand, and the grip of her arm with the other, expressing, as much as was in their power, what the tongue would have conveyed, could it have been heard.

Stunned by the surprise of her arrest, Mary yielded to the controlling hand, and moved with it, as the dreamer moves, irresistibly impelled, in his dream. Shan pushed their way back through the crowd to a clearing on the wharf, and then released her, and stood looking at her.

"What do you want with me?" she asked, striving to hold her independent attitude, but failing a little because of something that had amazed her in the man's eyes.

"What do I want with you? I want everything: your forgiveness first, though I don't deserve it. You're sweet an' good to the rest, an' won't you be sweet an' good to me? Will you come home with me now, Mary, an' marry me in a week?"

Mary trembled, but spoke up bravely.

"I'm not young now, Shan. The time is past. I couldn't marry you for your pity, when I know you don't care for me the way you did."

"Not the way I did, maybe, but a better way. I love y' far more now, Mary, than ever was in me to do when I was nothin' but a gossipoon and you were nothin' but a girlish Pity, is it? Sure 'tis you that has got to pity me, for I'm a broken-down man, an' if you won't come home to me, I'll never be able to do any good more in this world. For God's sake, Mary, hold out your ban's to me, and

say that you'll come away back with me!"

Lovely changes were passing over Mary's face. Never was mother's smile more tender than the smile that broke from her eyes and went wavering down to her lips.

"God love you, Shan!" she said. "I couldn't leave you; not if y' really want me. And she held out both her hands to him."

Without another word they hurried from the sad scene that was still around them, feeling the sorrow of those other hearts in strange contrast to the joy in their own. There was little to be said as the return train to Ballyrogin whirled them again in their new happiness, which again came on Mary like the unreasonable invention of a dream.

The belief that, after all, Shan was her lover, and joy was to be her portion, was an incredible experience which a word or a breath might bring to an end; though as the landscape spun past, Mangerton and the sun-gleam on Killarney Lakes were aware, and were giving her assurance of the truth.

At Ballyrogin they found the cart waiting, and many a head was thrust out of door and window as Shan rattled through the town with Mary O'Murrough by his side.

"Good luck to them, they've been away buyin' a few things, I suppose, an' the weddin' 'll be immediately!" said one gossip; and the response was sure to be: "God knows, if they wait 'll do it, they earned it."

Shan drove straight to the forge, where Tom Donohue was standing in the black doorway, with his portentous question seemed to cut across some shaky barrier in his mind, and finally break it down. He finished his breakfast abruptly, and remarked that he was going to Ballyrogin on business. Old Moya was crying; some of her people were "going with the emigration."

"We're after havin' a drive," said Shan, as he leaped from the cart and lifted Mary out and put her standing beside the blacksmith. Mary's silent departure had been the talk of Killelagh all that day, and Tom Donohue beamed on the happy-looking pair as he realised the situation.

"I've a man in y' after all, Shan," he said, "an' I'm glad the pair o' ye have made it up. I never seen the like o' ye both for pride. An', sure, black pride's the devil's own invention."

The Dermody's came hastening to the forge, having seen the approach of the cart from their doorway.

"So it's endin' well after all," said Mrs. Dermody to her daughters that night. "Y'll never tell me now that there isn't luck in waitin' a spell o' years for betterness!"

TO BE CONTINUED

THREE SQUARES A DAY

PRIZE STORY IN THE CATHOLIC PRESS ASSOCIATION CONTEST

By Miss Mary Elizabeth Prim of Boston

Face powder, talcum, cold cream, and violet toilet water, blended into that exhilarating atmosphere which precedes a dance in a girl's calendar. Blonde Julie Allen, lovely in pink chiffon and silver, pirouetted before a totally inadequate mirror. From the least cluttered of two beds, her roommate regarded her with mocking, tender eyes.

"Ju Allen," she spoke, "peacock some more! I want to draw a war poster and call it Make the world Safe for Sweet-and-Twenty."

Reluctantly, Julie turned, twisting her little face into an enchanting grimace. "Kathleen O'Connor! You never think of another thing but drawing and war."

Kathleen, loling comfortably in worn dressing gown and down-at-the-heel slippers, twirled the inevitable drawing pencil and laughed lazily.

"Poor Ju-Ju! Did I bore it, then, with shop talk?" She pushed rumpled black hair from a face like a naughty boy's. "It's getting those letters from Peter makes me think of war, dear," she went on, suddenly serious, "rereading those bits that censor passes brings the thing home, I tell you. War is making that nine teen-year-old brother o' mine grow up. He went to France to drive an ambulance because some of his classmates were going and because he wanted to see the thing at first hand but now—crazy darcadeville!" she choked her glance seeking his picture on the opposite wall. Julie's look followed and she smiled up at the boy in football togs, whose wide grin was like a shaft of light across its ugly, adorable face. "Nice boy," she sighed.

At that instant the telephone burred sharply. "A-ah," Julie said, darting toward it, "Nicky Rinn at last."

Kathleen settled to her drawing while the other girl laughed light banter into the phone. Julie's telephone conversations were too numerous and complicated for her artist roommate to follow. Only when the receiver clicked to its hook did she raise her eyes. Julie dashed toward her. "Dearest!" she said tragically, "will you come to the dance—please! Nicky is bringing a friend—I said he might—and I must get him a partner."

Kathleen, lazy among the cushions happy with her pencil and drawing pad, spoke indulgently: "Ju Ju dear, I can't. I must finish this magazine cover."

"Oh, Kath, you might, just this once," pleaded Julie, fearful. "Nicky says his friend is nice and fearfully handsome. You can draw him afterwards. Please!"

Kathleen laughed at the wheedling and got up. "Have I anything to wear?" she queried.

Julie flung open her room-mate's closet door. "No," she announced

with tragic promptitude, "you have not! Your evening gown is crumpled in a ball in one corner. Oh, Kath, I'll lend you my yellow one."

Her room-mate protested, helplessly. "It's all right," Julie insisted; "it looks best on you, anyway. Now go wash and do your hair—and don't waste any time. I'll let you one look in the yellow dress and—y'la! Tuck—go."

Obediently, Kathleen snatched soap, towels, powder, a comb and started. When she returned the frock of misty yellow chiffon was spread on her bed.

"It's like primroses," she exclaimed to Julie as she slipped it over her head.

Twenty minutes after a transformed Kathleen, exquisite in pale yellow that skillfully called attention to her creamy skin, that emphasized the blackness of her hair, came face to face with Nicky Rinn's friend.

As the stranger bowed the artist in Kathleen experienced a thrill of quick pleasure. He was handsome! Sunburned, fair complexion, sleek reddish-brown hair, firm, merry lips.

"Miss O'Connor—Pat McKeen. Miss O'Connor—Pat McKeen. The flustered Nicky was repeating in the manner of a hotel page. Kathleen blushed to realize she had been staring. The keen, blue eyes that saw her discomfort seemed coolly, humorously aware of their owner's startling good looks. At that instant Kathleen became conscious that the newcomer was not in uniform. Nicky Rinn wore the khaki of his college regiment. Kathleen was irritably disappointed in Nicky's "fearfully handsome friend."

The Home Club is one of Greater New York's many hotels "for women only." It is perhaps the most homelike of them all. At any rate it was home to Kathleen and Julie. Once a week it held those dances which were shining gems in the mosaic pattern of eighteen-year-old Julie's life. She was a college freshman and had lessons to wrestle with other evenings. Friday nights she came into her own and danced away the least memory of mathematics and the class.

As the four entered the dance hall a piano, a fiddle and a drum were already jazzing madly. As McKeen swept Kathleen along in a fox trot she lost sight of the fact that his dancing obliterated any thought but one of sheer pleasure. Only when both were panting did they sit out a dance.

About the dance floor of the Home Club there were grouped tiny parlors—such as exquisite as an urban stage setting. To one of these done in dim green, Kathleen led her partner. He relaxed in a wicker chair and smiled across at her. She smiled back and fairly ached for her sketching pad.

"Too joyfully weary to cope with the orchestra—to which a cow bell and a tambourine had since been added—they sat silent, watching the dancers. Nicky and Julie were still bravely at it. There were many young soldiers on the floor, some sailors and a sprinkling of older officers.

"Looks a bit like a military ball," Pat McKeen remarked.

"Yes," agreed Kathleen, who at that minute, was drawing an imaginary portrait of him in tennis flannels.

"It's funny how young kids all rush to enlist," he went on reflectively, the soft green wall a lovely background for his reddish hair.

"M—mm," said Kathleen.

"The draft will get them eventually," he continued. "They say draftees get treated far better than enlisted men."

Kathleen laid aside the imaginary portrait. "What did you say?" she queried.

He repeated the remark, a charming smile about his merry lips.

"O—oh," returned Kathleen whose red-brown eyes could be danger signals on occasion. Her companion, unconscious of this, hummed a bar with the orchestra before he spoke again.

"I may be gone for a long, long time, a long long—time—"

Again he smiled across at her. Though her lips returned the smile, her eyes narrowed. "I couldn't enlist if I wanted to," he disclosed to her. "I'm with a big motor truck concern. We do practically all Government work, now. Business fairly zippin' ng. The head manager said the other day that he never could spare me." Petite disparagement was in his tone.

"I see," said Kathleen; "you make the motors."

He laughed delightedly. "Lord, no!" he answered; "I'm not in the factory."

"You inspect them for the government," she essayed then.

Once more he laughed at the girl's ignorance of big business.

"No, Miss O'Connor," he confessed, "not that either. I well—" Her glance was piercingly interested. "I take orders for cars," he finished lamely.

Her smile, as they rose to dance, was enigmatical.

At one the next morning the two girls still chattered about the dance. Julie, wrapped in a kimono like a drift of apple blossoms, sat cross-legged on her bed. In a chair before her drawing board, Kathleen was putting final touches to an ultra-modern magazine cover. She had kicked off the primrose-yellow slippers but still wore the dance frock

with a paint-smirched apron above it. Her brush flew no faster than her tongue. . . . and my dear I had bright hopes for him when I heard his name was Pat—generally they change it to Parker or Pierce—but from his conversation I deduced that he's just a common, ordinary job-bound. Won't enlist for fear of losing twenty dollars a week."

Julie shivered at the scorn in her companion's voice, and drew the drift of apple blossoms kimono close about her. "Don't stamp up and down on him," she pleaded. "Nicky says he's very clever. He's only twenty-six and has worked his way up to a very good position. It's hard to give it up."

"Give up," Kathleen flashed. "What have some given? Eyes, arms, life itself! Pat McKeen has a face like St. George of England and he stays here, selling motors! He's so secure, so—so smug, when this whole world is fighting super-devils."

There was a silence. Julie ran a small, pink hand through her short, blonde hair. Kathleen surveyed her sketch and yawned elaborately.

"Guess we'll call it a day's work," she said, tossing off her apron.

Through the quiet, the wall telephone rang sharply.

"Someone has reported that our lights are still on," Julie giggled nervously.

Kathleen's brow puckered. "Answer it, please, Ju," she asked her companion.

"Hul-lo," the younger girl breathed into the transmitter. There followed a silence while someone on the other end of the line evidently explained something. Julie hung up the receiver and faced her roommate. "It's for you, dear. Some kind of a silly, registered letter. I'll get it."

Open-mouthed, Kathleen stared at the door through which Julie vanished. It seemed a scant second after when she returned panting, letter in hand. The elevator had stopped for the night and she had run down and up four flights of stairs. She handed the letter to her room-mate and stood while she ripped off the envelope and read the single sheet. Then she saw Kathleen's mobile face slacken above the foolish dance frock. "You read it, Ju," she whispered, and passed the crackling sheet. Sudden, typed words flickered before Julie's eyes.

We regret to inform you . . . Peter O'Connor, ambulance driver . . . killed . . . on duty . . . buried . . .

She dropped it as if the words scorched her fingers and flung herself in a fervent of weeping, at her scornful companion.

"Oh, my dear, don't look so! Dearest, don't look so!" Shivering, she turned from the comfort of Julie's arms.

"Would you—please turn off the light," asked Kathleen heavily.

After a time Julie's mingled prayers and sobbing ceased. Kathleen was glad. The sobbing had bothered her. She herself lay quiet, fearless. Her narrow bed was like an island. All night long, it seemed, black waves crept over her, receded, then flowed back slowly. Ahead, somewhere, were the empty years. Now, black waves and the night. Never—never the beacon of Peter-kin's wide smile.

Kathleen aged that night. The pitiless morning showed a face which had lost all the careless buoyancy which was its high charm. She did her poor best to appear sprightly. "I shan't wear black, Ju. He loathed it! He loathed crying, too. I mustn't make him uncomfortable his first days in heaven—" Her lean, clever fingers gripped Julie's kind hand for a single, agonized moment.

The ultra-modern magazine cover was dispatched to the editor who awaited it. Afterwards, Kathleen put away the drawing board. "I need a vacation," she explained to the amazed Julie.

Thereafter the days found her loitering through the sun-brimmed New York streets where spring still lingered. Sometimes she spent whole afternoons in the little parks at Madison or Union Square. Later, perhaps, the shrill-voiced children, their mothers, the park derelicts who accompanied her would emerge, glorious, at the beckoning of her pencil. Now, she was unconscious of them as she dreamed, read, and tried not to think—much. In the little parks, for the clamor surrounding, her breaking nerves found some moments of lovely quiet.

Nearly three weeks after the heart-shaking news of her brother's death, Kathleen spent a long sunny day in the park at Washington Square. Late in the afternoon her eyes wandered from the volume of O. Henry that lay in her lap. As she glanced to read the direction of a bus which trundled through the Arch, she became aware of a familiar figure approaching. She leaned forward and met the enchanting smile of Pat McKeen.

"So, another artist comes to Hobohemia!" he greeted her.

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