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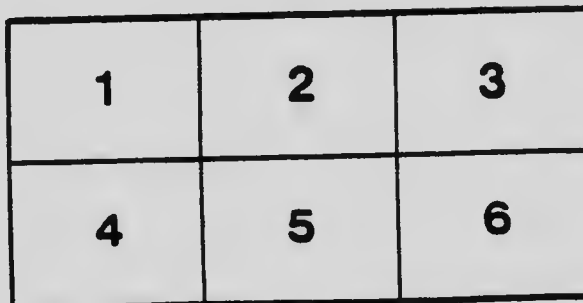
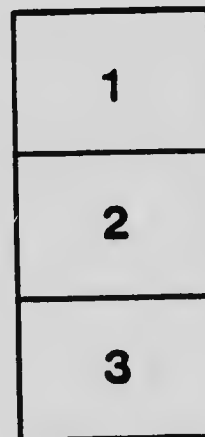
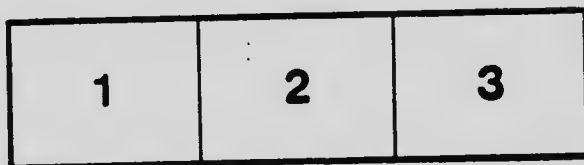
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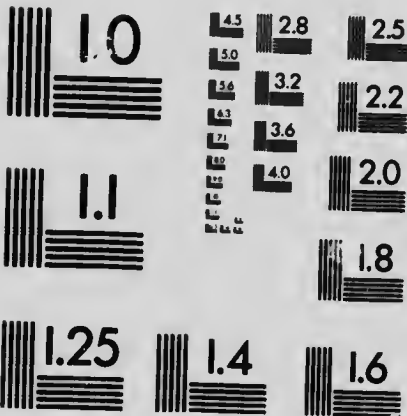
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THE GREATEST WISH
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The Greatest Wish in the World

BY

E. TEMPLE THURSTON

AUTHOR OF

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TO
DOROTHY ALLHUSEN

MY DEAR MRS. ALLHUSEN,

I have often tried in the letter of politeness to thank you for all your kindness to me, but the signal failure of each effort has been so apparent, especially to myself, that I am here endeavouring to make my gratitude seem truly tangible by asking you to accept the dedication of this book.

If, in it, you find any of the joy or any of the laughter which, like good friendship, can conjure the best out of the best of all possible worlds, I shall then feel my gratitude to be in some sense a proven thing.

Yours always sincerely,

E. TEMPLE THURSTON.

Eversley, 1910.

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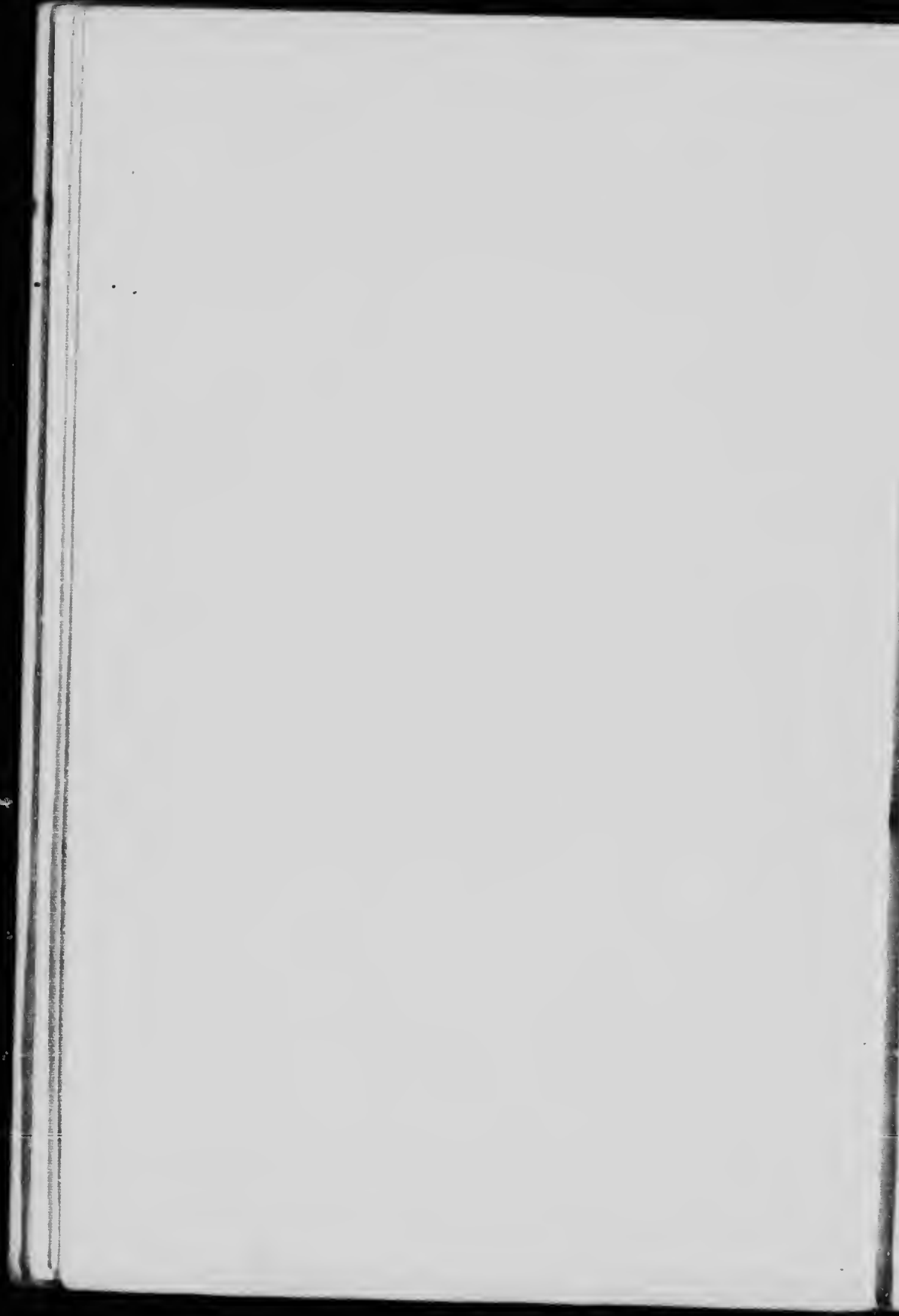
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BOOK I



THE GREATEST WISH IN THE WORLD

CHAPTER I

THE WEEPING WOMAN

IF only it were possible to begin these things at the beginning. If only, and with perfect honesty, I could tell you that this romance of the house-tops began the moment that Peggy saw the light of the farthing candle in the trembling hand of Nicolas Gadd, as he entered the dingy little room of the house opposite. But I am obsessed with so scrupulous a sense of truthfulness when it comes to the lives of real people, that where there is ignorance, I must willy-nilly confess to it. Invention will not do. For a few steps in the march of events, it might carry you along with me; but as sure as fate should I find myself caught in some hazard on the way and then, how could I blame myself when you faced about, leaving me to pursue the journey by myself?

Without beating about the bush then, the evening when Peggy saw Nicolas Gadd showing the new lodger over his room, was not the first of it.

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It began years and years ago—long before Nicolas Gadd was born—before Father O'Leary was dreamt of, or the forefathers of Mrs. Parfitt had thought fit to enter the married state. In fact—if there must be honesty about the matter—it began when our mother Eve tempted our father Adam with what the irrefutable historians have assured us to be an apple.

I have no right to say anything about this. It probably was an apple. One of those hard, juicy fellows with a blush on his cheek that would endear him to the heart of any woman for his complexion alone. But when I think that the result of such temptation was a little child, it makes me for one have doubts about the matter. For the result of all this, if you choose but to come to end of it, is a little child as well. And there is nothing about an apple here.

You will read of the vital relations between muffins and romance. There will be such entertainment as life can offer you with a kitten, by name Inky; with a muffin-man, whom the whole neighbourhood knew by the name of Pinchers. There may be all sorts of comestibles; but never an apple that I know of.

Perhaps, in this history, a muffin takes the place of it. Had, for instance, the Garden of Eden been in the district of Adelphi and the Strand, I can quite imagine Eve tempting Adam with a muffin. You never know. On a wet Sunday afternoon, they are priceless and tempting things. But then the only gardens that I have ever heard of in Adelphi, are the gardens of

Charing Cross, and, high though the flights of my imagination may be, I cannot see Adam and Eve there.

No—it was an apple, or nothing—well—or something else. And since that is the real beginning of this history and a fear of plagiarism forbids me from starting there, I will set forth as best I can.

It was the hour of Benediction in the little chapel of Corpus Christi in Maiden Lane.

I shall probably be accused of having too great a partiality for the hour of Benediction. But I cannot help that. I refer to my sense of truthfulness where real people are concerned. If Father O'Leary were here at my elbow, he would nod his wise old head, blinking those pale blue eyes of his and vouch for the truth of every word I said.

It was the hour of Benediction, then. At that time of day and to that service come the strangest mixture of human beings you can conceive. To begin with, it is voluntary worship on their part. There is no such compulsion as there is in attending Mass. And whether it is that they are by nature religious, or the stress of circumstances driving them to the feet of God—like children to their mother's lap—I do not know. I want to think it is the latter. A mother's lap only exists on these sad occasions. She makes it for the purpose. Perhaps God does the same. I am positive the Virgin Mary does.

However that may be, they look as though some

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direful need had driven them there. Father O'Leary, in a joyful richness of brogue, used to say :

"Faith, I'd sooner give Benediction for one poor rogue of a fella what had got himself into trouble than I would Mass for half the comfortable gintry in London."

It is possible he might not have repeated that in the hearing of his bishop. You can never trust a bishop, not even round the corner of a street. It may be that he does not wear an apron in the Roman Catholic church—I completely forget—but there is something in the nature of him which the first fresh breeze is bound to catch, walk he never so sturdily. Then in a minute he is all orthodoxy. Bristling with it.

You may, in this world, get a man to step over his counter and pass the time of day with you—but wild horses will not drag him out of his shop.

Well, on this evening—if I told you how many years ago, you might distrust my memory—Father O'Leary was saying his beloved Benediction to a handful of poor creatures who had slipped in out of the streets into the hush of Maiden Lane Chapel.

A few candles were burning before the high altar, a few before Our Lady, a few before the little painted image of St. Joseph. Imagine the sound of the sonorous Latin phrases in a broad and beautiful brogue! It was like an organ with a sob in it. His singing! That was execration! Every note he foully mutilated with a benign expression on his face. It was a torture of the Inquisition. Brutal murder, done in all the fanati-

cism of faith. Only the heart of him sang in tune. It was that, after all, which reached the hearing of God.

But his chanting of the prayers was wonderful. It was so strange. And all those poor creatures, with heads bowed and faces hidden deeply in their hands, listened to it afar off, as they poured forth their own supplications in weird and vivid phrases such as education and custom had made it their habit to use.

Before the service was quite over, one woman rose hurriedly to her feet and walked quickly down the side aisle to the door. The chapel woman, who was kneeling in the last pew, declared that she saw her pass out, and that she was crying bitterly—great sobs shaking her whole body as she walked. But, as the chapel woman said herself, when Father O'Leary questioned her later—

“They comes in 'ere and erics their heyes out—most distressful to God, I calls it—so I took no notice of 'er.”

And that was all that was ever seen of the weeping woman in Maiden Lane or elsewhere.

There is little doubt, in my mind however, that she bears a closer relationship to this story than you might suppose from so brief an appearance in it.

For this is what occurred. The candles were being extinguished on all the altars as Father O'Leary, having changed his vestments, walked down the church on his way to the presbytery. Before he reached the door, he stopped, as though some hand had thrust him back. There had lifted into the stillness of the place, a cry—

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the wailing cry of a little child. A tremulous, plaintive little sound which, to those who know it well, has a cunning way of rising up and up, then dropping with terrible precision right into the very heart of him who hears it. A cry, it is, that would echo and thump in the heart of every mother in the world.

For a moment he stood still, counting the pulses that were throbbing in his head, as though, after a certain number, it were bound to recur again. The next instant, he was hunting through the chapel from pew to pew.

At last, wrapped in strange clothing—a petticoat of red wool, a man's waistcoat buttoned round to keep it all in place—and lying on the top of a little black box, he found the tiniest little baby he had ever seen in his life.

And that, with your permission, is what I choose to call the beginning.

CHAPTER II

THE HEART IN MRS. PARFITT

HOLUS bolus, lock, stock and barrel, Father O'Leary carried his burden out of the chapel, through that little door in the porchway and up-stairs into the presbytery.

"I'm just after finding a matter here that must be seen to," said he, and he laid the whole collection down on the table before Mrs. Parfitt's eyes.

Now, nothing short of an event in the nature of a bolt out of the blue could have made Father O'Leary so indifferent to Mrs. Parfitt's reception of anything that discorded with the daily routine.

Mrs. Parfitt had been his housekeeper ever since that day when the Holy Church had thought fit to raise him from a curacy in Fermoy to the parish priest of Cappoquin. From that day to this, her power over him had increased in proportion to his need of her. She ruled him, as it is said of some wives that they rule their husbands. What is more, he knew he was ruled.

There comes a time when to submit to these things is the greater part of valour.

"Shure, what there is of me, belongs to the church."

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he used to say, "and what's left—faith there's no harm in a woman making herself the master of it, if her heart's in the right place."

What is wonderful about this statement, beside its paradox, is that Father O'Leary realized Mrs. Parfitt's possession of a heart—a heart, moreover, set in its right place.

With those thin lips of hers, that sallow face, the bright brown eyes set cunningly in deep hollows, and the straight, black hair plastered tightly about her head, there was no visible sign of a heart anywhere. Yet a heart need not be worn upon the sleeve to be seen.

But the capacity of finding the true heart in any one is so rare, that those who possess it may only be met with in a day's march—and it is a long day's march at that. I would even give my blessing—such as it is worth—to the man who would put up a sign-post, directing one on the way. For I am ever in need of setting out on that journey of discovery myself and would walk endless days in the pursuit of such a person, only that I am bewildered for the road that I should take.

Mrs. Parfitt had found him—by the chance of God, you would suppose—for her husband dying simultaneously with Father O'Leary's promotion in the priesthood, she had applied for the situation of his housekeeper and had been accepted without more to do.

"Have ye any children at all?" he asked her, well knowing she had not. In choosing a housekeeper you must ask these questions. It sounds as if you knew what you wanted. God knows you don't.

To her English ears, untutored at that time in the brogue, she had somewhat misunderstood his question. Any children at all? It sounded as if—well—she blushed at the thought of it. In those days, she had not forgotten how to blush.

"No—I have no children—whatsoever," she had answered with dignity.

And there, in that moment, in the sheer simplicity of his mind, Father O'Leary had discovered the key which was locking up her heart.

"Mind ye—ye might get married again," said he, with his head on one side like a jackdaw.

"I have my doubts of that," she replied, with asperity.

There was the subtle taint of acid in her tone. But he knew well enough why it was there.

"And ye've no doubts about being my housekeeper?"

"I shouldn't have applied if I had," she answered.

"I don't believe ye would," said he, and he took a pinch of snuff out of his waistcoat pocket. "Ye're that sort of woman," he added. "Ye can come over and begin to-morrow, Mrs. Parfitt. Mind ye, I'm not an easy person to deal with." He tried to look very stern as he said this. "I've got the very devil of a temper in me——"

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“And you’ve got a nasty habit of taking snuff out of your waistcoat pocket,” said she. “You can’t expect me to keep your clothes clean if you do that.”

The look of sternness dropped from him. He gazed at her with admiration.

“Will ye come to-day, Mrs. Parfitt?” he said. “Just go an’ tell Micky Sullivan to bring yeer things over at once.”

In such a manner as this, came Mrs. Parfitt down the road to the end of her wanderings. For the end of one’s wanderings is usually a heart that understands, and some there be, who are still toiling on their journeys in search of it.

You may see from this, if you have a mind for it, the subtle knowledge in the back of Father O’Leary’s thoughts, when he found courage to bring his strange burden up straightway into the presbytery and plant it down in front of Mrs. Parfitt’s eyes.

It was a baby, a helpless little infant—the smallest he had ever seen in his life.

Fifteen years had gone by since that day when she had told him with dignity that she had no children whatsoever. Twice, during that time, he had been moved in pursuit of his duties. And in all these peregrinations, having no hesitation in openly abusing the authority that refused to let him settle down, she had followed faithfully. And now, there would never be any children—one way or another—for Mrs. Parfitt.

One day, she had confessed to him her age. It came about—well, why go into the story? A sister in America had not written to her for her birthday. Nothing is so upsetting to a woman than that her birthday should be forgotten at the time. Nor, for the matter of that, is there anything so upsetting to her, as when it is remembered afterwards. However that may be, in a momentary stress of emotion, Mrs. Parfitt confessed that she was fifty-one.

Father O'Leary raised his eyes to heaven—and—"Glory be to God," said he. There was all the submission in the world in his voice.

It is an expression in common use in Ireland and, to a mind gentle in its judgments, proves no more than their close relation with the Deity Himself. To Mrs. Parfitt, who had long since grown accustomed to the sound of it, it meant nothing. But a wealth of meaning was there. The patriarch Abraham, raising the knife to plunge it into the heart of his son, could have praised God with but little deeper meaning than was in the heart of Father O'Leary then.

So Mrs. Parfitt had passed the blessing of God. It was with but little misgiving then that he laid this strange bundle on the table before her very eyes.

She gazed at it, puckering her brows in an ominous silence. Then, leaning both hands on the table, she looked up at the parish priest.

"Well?" said she.

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"'Twas found at the foot of the altar of the Blessed Mother," he replied. "Shure, I found it myself."

"Well?" said Mrs. Parfitt.

Father O'Leary's heart began to drop. The reiteration of that word was a little disconcerting. But he pulled himself together. It was hard to shake his belief in human nature. The man or woman who finds the true heart in you, goes on finding it through the deepest shadows and in the gloomiest of places.

"Well—it's what we've got to do with it," he replied cheerfully. "Ye can't leave a baby on a black box for the rest of its life. It won't agree with it. I may be wrong, mind ye, but I've a fancy for thinking it was a woman who left it. I saw a woman——"

With a curling of her lip, Mrs. Parfitt lifted the little creature off the box and took it in her arms.

"Of course it was a woman," she interrupted. "The shameful creature!" And she was not converted yet.

But then, a wonderful thing happened. The baby cried again. And sure enough, the cry rose and rose, up and up, and dropped right down into the heart of Mrs. Parfitt. In the twitch of a moment, she became a different being. There crept a greater tenderness into her voice as she soothed it, rocking it to and fro. There was even a trembling note in each word as she whispered to it—words that Father O'Leary strove in vain to understand.

But a smile flickered at the corner of his long upper lip. He knew those words had a meaning.

THE HEART IN MRS. PARFITT 15

"I think," said he, under his breath and making for the door at the same time, "I think I'll just slip downstairs to the chapel—and—ask the——"

He was going to say—ask the chapel woman what she knew about it—but Mrs. Parfitt was not taking the slightest notice of what he said. When he closed the door behind him, she did not even look up.

CHAPTER III

THE MAGIC THIRD

THERE is something so magical, so suggestive of legerdemain in the arrival of a little child that, in face of it, we become like children ourselves who have just witnessed the strangest conjuring trick in the world.

Over two people, the magician places a box, calling it a house. If he is doing his tricks in the drawing-room, he just puts a magical cone over two rabbits. It is the same trick, only in the world he does it on a larger scale. For a moment he lifts off the house again, just so that you may make quite sure. There are only two people underneath.

When you are perfectly satisfied that he has nothing up his sleeve, that his pockets are empty, and that the house has little inside it but a few pieces of furniture—to prove which he will rattle a stick round and round the box—then once more he places it back and the trick begins.

Time passes in breathless suspense. And all the while he waves a wand over the house-top. He calls it the wand of romance. A few minutes go by—to you outside it seems but a few minutes—and then at

an upper window, you may perceive one of the two people inside staring out at you from above. Every minute this person keeps looking at his watch, as though he were waiting for some one who does not arrive. There is a worried expression on his face. At times, he puts his hand across his eyes. You might think, did you not know the inner meaning of those signs, that he was trying to shade them from the light. But the next instant he has taken his hands away once more, and is gazing anxiously at his watch. At last he disappears, quickly, as if some one had called him.

This now is the signal!

The moment the magician sees it, he lifts up the box once more. And there you will find three people where before there were but two. Wonderful! Marvelous! You wonder and you wonder how it is done. It seems as though some supernatural power must have been at his elbow, helping him all the time.

"The quickness of the 'and,'" says he, for he always drops his aitches, does the magician, "deceives the eye," and with scrupulous care he always picks them up again as he goes along.

Then, as you examine the smallness of the third person who has crept into the box, you can see how possible it was for him to have concealed it after all. He might have pulled it out of his waistcoat pocket while he was attracting your attention to the furniture in the house. You can even recollect, when you come to think of it, how he expatiated upon the beauties of

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a rocking-horse that stood alone in a big empty room. That probably was the very moment it was done. And then you know it is a trick—a trick of romance; you know that the magician never made this tiny creature out of the air; you know that when you saw the two people—alone, by themselves as you thought—the third person was really there all the time, had been there in fact from the beginning of the beginning.

For when two people take it into their heads to creep under the magician's box, that box which the magician calls home, a third always creeps in with them. Often there are more. The magician does not stop at three.

But sometimes it happens that these two are not even blessed with the virtue of curiosity. They have no desire to see how the trick is done. And then, tired of waiting, the third little person flies up with the smoke through the chimney. There can be no hope of seeing him after that.

Now, never in all his life did the magician perform his favourite trick with so strange a box of a house as the Presbytery of the chapel of Corpus Christi, in Maiden Lane. And never did he choose two such odd people with whom to do it as Father O'Leary and Mrs. Parfitt.

Perhaps the most cunning thing about him—for he is a cunning fellow is the magician—was that he should know that they wanted to see the trick done at all. As a rule, there is no performance of it unless you ask very

particularly, couching your request in such diplomacy of language as will flatter his vanity up to the skies. Then and only then may he condescend to turn up his shirt-sleeves and begin.

But Father O'Leary had said nothing. And Mrs. Parfitt, for her dignity's sake, had been as silent as the grave. Yet there was the matter, accomplished—under their very eyes. The magician had suddenly lifted the box and there on the table with both of them staring at it, lay the smallest little third person in the world.

Ah! he is a clever chap, that magician! There is a man who studies his audience if you like! He is a humorist too. What clever chap is not? For once there was a lady, a Christian Scientist, who, fearing that that wand was being waved above her little house, flew tremulously to the aid of her beliefs. She held a thought against the third little person, declaring thereby that she would foil the magician in his machinations.

And what happened? Ah, he is really a humorist that fellow, for he did the trick twice over with just one wave of his wand. He sent her two!

But at the Presbytery in Maiden Lane, it was humorous enough to send one. And then, the moment it cried, the moment she took it in her arms and Father O'Leary discreetly left the room, Mrs. Parfitt—like all women in the presence of a conjurer—forget to wonder about it any more. It was there.

They are just the same in the drawing-room. When the conjurer lifts up the magic cone and shows you the

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wee third rabbit—while the men are left wondering how the dickens it was done—you will hear a woman's voice say, below her breath—

“Poor little dear—it's terribly frightened!”

Bless her for it!

Directly Father O'Leary closed the door, Mrs. Parfitt began unbuttoning the waistcoat that kept in place the red flannel petticoat. From that onward—with various exclamations, mostly directed against the absent mother—for women are stern judges of each other in these matters—she searched through the tiny garments with which the wee mite was clothed.

Satisfying herself on these points—into the details of which from an admitted and lamentable ignorance, I cannot enter—she opened the black box.

On the top of its contents, written in a clean and well-formed writing, lay a letter. It was directed to Father O'Leary.

Now Mrs. Parfitt was the most honest of women in the world. In her hands, one's possessions were as safe as if a thousand bolts secured them. But when a woman believes that she has another's welfare in her keeping—as they tell me a wife does so believe of her husband—there is no such thing as honesty in her nature. Believing it truly to be for Father O'Leary's sake, Mrs. Parfitt would have opened that letter; shamelessly she would have read its contents and as shamelessly sealed it up again, keeping the secret in her own breast, had not the priest at that moment returned.

Her finger was just beneath the flap of the envelope as he entered.

"There's a letter," said she, eyeing him severely. "It's written to you. I didn't open it—never opening other people's letters."

That delicious note of dignity on the defensive! Father O'Leary took it from her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"*Dear Father O'Leary,*"—for this is what the letter contained. He read it out at once, well knowing her suspense.

"This is my last confession. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. If God had given me help, I think I could have faced the punishment. But what is there left when there is no strength to bear the pain of the punishment when it comes? I cannot go on. All reasoning has left me. I cannot argue that it is right to live—I have no strength to argue. For three days I have had no food. All I can see, is that I have no right to take my little Peggy where I am going. My chance has come and gone. I leave her chance with you. Why you? I do not know. I heard you say in your sermon yesterday—'If you wives or you husbands were just to go home and look in the eyes of your baby child, you would more plainly see God than on this altar.' And I looked down at my Peggy. But her eyes were shut. Perhaps that is why I have left her to you. She will wake soon. Her eyes will open and then you can look into them."

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He dropped the letter on the table and walked across to the window—turning his back.

Mrs. Parfitt picked up the piece of paper. The writing was good. It was better than her own.

“A woman like that!” she exclaimed. “With her education! She ought to be ashamed of herself.”

“Judging by what she says in that letter,” said Father O’Leary, without turning, “she is. Shure, God help her.”

“Indeed, I wouldn’t say that,” rejoined Mrs. Parfitt. “The shamelessness of leaving a poor little child alone in the world while she just walks out of it as easy as you please—and leaves some one else to look after the trouble she’s made. Thank you! Well—I never did!”

Father O’Leary came round on his heel with a swirl of coat-tails.

“Mrs. Parfitt,” said he—and he marched across to the table—“Shall I tell ye why ye’re after saying a thing like that?”

“You can tell me,” said she, as if his telling would only be guesswork, and wrong at that.

“’Tis because ye’re jealous of the poor creature.”

Mrs. Parfitt drew herself up.

“I may be wrong, mind ye, but ye’d have had a heart as large as one of Patsheen’s worzels if ye’d had a child to be pawin’ at it with them ten fat little fingers. Ye’d have forgiven this poor woman sixty times over, if ye’d had a child of yeer own. Shure ’tisn’t blame I’m put-

ting on ye. It is not. God has His way of doing things. May be 'twas the way He saw ye'd have too big a heart. Faith, I've met some like that and all they'd be doing would be to spoil their children. I'm only giving ye my idea of it, mind ye. It isn't because I'm a priest that I'd flatter myself I knew any more about God than ye do. But, faith, I know ye've got a heart. They told me ye sent out to Mr. Wilkins over to tell him to stop beating that boy of his. Ye said he was disturbin' the whole neighbourhood. Shure 'twas yeer own heart he was disturbin'. That was the way wid ye. Why, Glory be to God, I've seen ye jump when a dog howls out in the street. I have so. Do ye hear, now—that's what I'm telling ye. Ye're as envious of that child there as ye can well be. Faith, ye wouldn't mind if it were yeer own, however ye got it. Shure, Holy Mother of God! look at the way ye're huggin' the poor little thing—'tis enough to strangle the life out of it. Will ye give it to me now, please, while I see what we'll do with it——"

And taking the little creature eagerly out of her arms, for by this time Mrs. Parfitt was too amazed to disobey, he clutched it awkwardly in his own and called it "Peggy."

CHAPTER IV

BEING WHAT YOU MIGHT EXPECT

YOUR own faults, and by the same token your own virtues too, it would seem, are those of which you most vehemently accuse others. It is because of these little foibles that human nature is so inimitably charming in its infinite variety.

Mrs. Parfitt, keen an observer of human nature as she was, had never discovered this. For you only arrive at such knowledge through sympathy. A satirical view of life will serve you not at all. And Mrs. Parfitt, for all the heart which we now know her to possess, had somewhat of a bitter view of life. Accordingly, when in his outburst of criticism, she stood accused by Father O'Leary, there was nothing to be said. She knew it was true. But she deduced nothing from it. She never saw for one moment that he stood self-accused as well. Without a word of defence, she handed over little Peggy into his clumsy arms and watched him, seeing nothing, as he treated it in the way most men treat babies. Which is saying the best you can for them.

“For goodness' sake—keep it's head up,” she ex-

claimed; "it's getting red in the face. The poor mite!"

And she said it contemptuously, for it was her parting shot. The last she had.

He took no notice. Certainly he raised Peggy's head, but that was all. To show how little he cared for anything Mrs. Parfitt could say now, he planted a resounding kiss on Peggy's round little cheek.

Now there is more in life that a baby has to endure than you would imagine. Peggy could not endure this. With a kicking of her little toes, her eyes and mouth opened as though they were never going to shut, and she emitted a cry that drove the fear of God into Father O'Leary. The thought that he might have injured her for life pursued the blood from his cheeks.

"Here—give her to me," exclaimed Mrs. Parfitt peremptorily, warm with the sense that nature was bringing her her revenge. "You don't know how to handle a child. It's not a rag doll. There's blood, not sawdust in it."

He gave up his burden as a sheep gives up its wool—conscientious of the inevitable.

"Poor little didums, then," said Mrs. Parfitt, when she had regained possession. "Did they frighten its little life by giving it a smack on the face?"

Full of apology and half under his breath, Father O'Leary murmured that it was meant to be a kiss.

But Mrs. Parfitt was inexorable. She was tasting all the sweetness of revenge, for Peggy's cries were

beginning to cease, in the instinctive soothing of her arms.

“Did they let the blood run into its blessed little head?” she continued. “They treated it like a rag doll, they did.”

Being alluded to like this, and in the third person plural, was more than Father O’Leary could bear. It seemed to multiply the enormity of his sins to such an extent that he felt them stifling the very air he breathed. He made hurriedly for the door.

“I’m just after going out now,” said he—in the voice of one who would make amends—“to see about the nursing of the little creature”—he looked fondly across the room. “Shure, the creature!” he repeated. It meant contrition for all he had done. It meant everything. “There’s that Mrs. Gooseberry in Covent Garden—such a name for a woman in Covent Garden, mind ye! She’s just had a baby what died. I’m going to bury the poor little scrap myself. I’ll go and ask her now about the nursing of this one here.”

“I can nurse it myself.” said Mrs. Parfitt, with some offence.

“Nurse it! Shure, ye can nurse it, but Glory be to God, woman, ye can’t feed it.”

And with that winning stroke, he was gone.

After all this bandying about of a baby from one person’s arm to another, for all the world as if it were a common brawl, it may be as well to get on with the story.

CHAPTER V

THE IMPORTANCE OF ASKING FOR WHAT YOU WANT

Now with all the best intentions in the world would I get on with the story, but the immediate present cries for consideration.

Mrs. Gooseberry lived in the country, coming up to London every day to sell the produce of her garden. Of that very garden there is more to be told, but I swear, upon my honour, that I will not embark upon it now. Greater issues are at stake. For at that time of the evening, Mrs. Gooseberry was not to be found in the market and there was the whole night before them with a baby who, for all they knew, was in distressful need of a meal even then.

Father O'Leary had no sooner closed the door, than the thought leapt into apprehension. He opened the door again and thrust in his head.

"D'ye mind," said he, "the poor wee thing may have nothing in the insides of it these past six hours, and faith, I shan't be in the way of seeing Mrs. Gooseberry till to-morrow morning? I've only just thought of it. Now, how in the name of God are we going to keep it alive till then?"

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Mrs. Parfitt said nothing. This insistence on the matter was hard to bear. It was through no fault of her own.

"D'ye think it 'ud take milk from ye out of a spoon?" he asked. "Shure, woman, for goodness' sake answer me. It may be dying there in yeer arms for want of a sup to eat. Would it take milk, d'ye think now—faith, it might if I warmed it a wee bit?"

"Perhaps you'd like to give her a piece of undercut from the cold sirloin," she jerked out satirically. "Baptizing children doesn't seem to have taught you much about them. The poor little thing must have a bottle. You'll have to go and buy one. There's not such a thing in the house that I know of."

Father O'Leary looked perturbed. She might have asked him to go out into the streets and sing on the curbstone. He would have preferred even that.

"Can't ye manage with some sort of a bottle we've got?" said he. "Faith, I'll wash out any bottle ye like with soda—I will so." He made as if to go and search for one before she could disagree with the suggestion. "I'll be after finding one down-stairs in two minutes now."

Mrs. Parfitt smiled. He saw the smile and it chilled him.

"And what are you going to do," she asked frigidly, "for the—the rubber thing at the end?"

"What rubber thing?"

"The—the rubber thing!"

She refused to say more than that.

"Oh—Glory be to God! Shure, I'd forgotten that."

"You'd better," said she, "go out and get the bottle without making any more fuss about it."

And in abject dejection—he went.

For a man who has sworn and kept the vows of chastity, this is not a nice thing to be compelled to do. He felt, as he crept out into the streets, that every one must know his mission. He hurried past the groups of little boys at the corners of the market, fearing lest they might cry after him the terrible secret that it seemed was burning in his face.

A baby's bottle! He wondered, vainly, why he was doing it. An hour before, he would not have believed such a thing possible. It is wonderful the demands the magician makes upon you, when he does his trick with the magic third. What, perhaps, is more wonderful still, is the way you implicitly obey him.

With long, stealthy strides, he made his way quickly up the narrow side streets in the direction of Drury Lane. No chemist with glaringly lighted windows in the Strand for him! He knew of a chemist in a little alley off Old Drury. Only a red lamp burnt dimly outside the shop. The windows, half-way up, were of painted glass, in numberless little panes, with the suggestive row of bottles showing through the plain glass up above. It was a true chemist's shop of days gone by. Just the mysteriously lighted interior, with its big

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bottles of coloured water, lit by a naked gas jet from behind, where you might imagine poisons and philtres compounded out of strange herbs. The very place in fact to buy, unseen, so incriminating a thing as a baby's bottle.

To that very shop, hugging the shutters as he walked, Father O'Leary made his way. In those days, the chemist—I have no right to tell you his name, for I met his daughter in the street only a short while ago, and it is possible she might sue me for damages—in those days, anyhow, he was a little man with pale yellow hair and a strange cast in one eye. He gave you the impression that he had lived there in that very shop, through numberless transmigrations of his soul. His face was lined with the tortured writing of the thousands of prescriptions he had compounded. His fingers were stained, past redemption, with the numberless chemicals he had measured out. Whenever he made out a prescription for you, he would answer no questions you might happen to ask, contribute to no conversation you might wish to make. But as he walked about behind the counter, from the shelves to his antiquated balance and back again, he would hum a song beneath his breath. It was always the same song. Always pitched in the same key.

“Should she upbraid—I'll answer with a smile.”

And that will show you how old he was.

There is a doctor in Drury Lane, who has written

prescriptions for me that I might go and hear him sing his song. His runs over the notes were exquisite to listen to—a perfect triumph of strategy. I always used to think that he first began singing it, when a love-sick youth came into the shop, imploring him to compound a philtre for some wayward girl who had disdained his suit. I can fancy the youth, seated on that little stool—the only sitting accommodation in the shop—and as he poured forth his woes, suggesting this ballad to the mind of the little old chemist with his wall-eye and his creaky voice.

Heavens! I look back! Two pages, and Father O'Leary is still hugging the shutters! 'Tis high time he reached the chemist's shop and got about his business.

With one stride, when once he saw the shop was empty, he crossed the threshold. In two more, he had reached the counter.

"I want," said he, in a loud voice—and then he had a violent fit of coughing and the longer the little chemist peered at him over the top of a bottle of jujubes, the longer it continued.

"Black currant and eucalyptus is very good," said the little chemist, "I make them up myself." And he emphasized himself, as all good tradesmen do. "You buy other people's," he added, "and you're only paying for the name."

"Faith, it isn't a cold I have," said Father O'Leary, "it's a—well, I want a bottle."

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The little chemist moved the jujubes on one side.

"You mean an inhaler," said he.

"Tis not at all," said Father O'Leary.

"Well—we call them inhalers in the trade," said the little chemist. And with a flash of inspiration he added—"I don't know what you call them in Ireland."

Father O'Leary sat down on the little stool and for one terrible moment of silence, fingered the gold cross on his watch chain.

When that moment had passed, he looked up and, with a voice so quiet that the little chemist with one hand on the jujubes had to lean forward on his toes to catch the words, he said—

"I want a bottle—please God. It isn't an inhaler at all—it's a bottle—a baby's bottle."

"Oh," said the little chemist, coming back on to his heels. "Why didn't you say so at first?"

Father O'Leary, disdaining to answer, took a large red pocket-handkerchief from his coat and wiped his forehead. The worst, thought he, is over. But you never know what twists and turns Fate may take in a matter of this kind. He thought when once he had got the words out of his mouth that there was no more for doing but to pop the thing in his pocket and off, with triumph, as fast as his legs could carry him, to Mrs. Parfitt.

Even when the little chemist appeared again behind the counter with an assortment of bottles in his arms

for him to choose from, he may have been annoyed, but he retained all self-possession. He never flinched.

There was the one with the long tube, said the little chemist, handing it out and entangling it with a pyramid of scented soaps so that they all tumbled to the floor—

“Some prefer them.”

You could hear him saying it from down in the depths where he was grovelling for the scented soap.

“It takes the child longer to get the milk to the mouth—consequent, it don’t consume so much.”

His head popped up again above the counter.

“How old’s your baby?” he asked.

“Two—three weeks,” said Father O’Leary—much as a man hits at something in the dark.

“The wife not quite up to the mark, I suppose,” continued the little man.

Father O’Leary seized hold of a phrase out of the void—“As well as could be expected,” he stammered.

“Then,” said the little chemist, oblivious of everything but his bottles and his soaps—“There’s the one with, what you might say, no tube at all—just the——”

“Faith, that’s the one,” interposed Father O’Leary quickly—“Ye can wrap it up in a piece of paper, and none of yer twine or sealing-wax. Paper’ll do.”

“Just the comforter at the end,” persisted the little chemist quite unperturbed. “You’ll take that one. Certainly.” And he began to wrap it up in paper.

“Been married long?” he went on, as he crossed the

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ends of the brown paper and folded them in. A young girl entered the shop and Father O'Leary looked wildly about him.

"In the name of God," said he, "will ye leave me alone and give me that parcel?" and, leaning across the jar of jujubes, he seized it out of the little chemist's hands.

As he hurried out of the shop, he heard the young girl ask for a farthing's worth of vaseline. And he kept on saying it to himself all the way down Drury Lane—"A farthing's worth of vaseline—" said he, "a farthing's worth of vaseline." It kept him from thinking of other things.

CHAPTER VI

MRS. GOOSEBERRY

SAYS Bacon in one of his essays—"God Almighty first planted a Garden."

I think of that sometimes when, in the pale dawn of the early morning, I see those sleepy wagons, heavy with roses, toiling up the narrow street of Long Acre on their way to the market.

That which is unconsciously beautiful, is so beautiful to you who realize it, that it must almost take your breath away. And there is nothing so unconscious of its beauty, as a wagon-full of roses, lumbering through the squalid surroundings which shut away Covent Garden from the world. The man who makes a show of holding the reins of those willing beasts between the shafts, is more than often asleep in his piece of sack. There is no one so unconscious as he of the beauty of that glistening glamour of pink which meets the pale grey dawn in those streets of dirty houses. The scent of them, perhaps, is in his nostrils as he sleeps. But that is nothing to the perfume, borne on the wings of your imagination, which comes to your senses as they pass you by.

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Oh! so many thousands of times it is said—"Go to Covent Garden in the early morning—it's a sight worth seeing." But who, saving those distressed with the fatigue of a night's long revelry and far from being in the mood which it deserves, ever go there?

At four o'clock, when the market opens, in the steely blue of a day just breaking over the smoke curtain of London, that place might be the very garden which was planted by the God Almighty. The banks of blossom are still wet with dew. There is that indescribable feeling in the air, as of the breath, cool in its passing the lips, of some dear woman whom you love. There is colour—great rainbows of it—that will be so generous as will come again and again in the grey days to your eyes. And everywhere and on everything, the faint dripping and wetness of water that as yet has not been tarnished by the day. The men who move silently in and out amongst the flowers on their stalls, are too heavy with sleep and the prospect of the day's work, to obtrude themselves upon your mind. They might be mutes, in the lavish garden of one whose ears will have nothing but the waking of the birds, and that faint breathing of flowers which, in the hush of early morning and late evening, you can just dimly hear.

And thus, and in such a company, untouched as yet by all but the simple hands that have picked them, lie those argosies of flowers which that same night will droop and wither on half the dinner tables in London. You may see them at your restaurant, exclaiming on

their beauty as you take your meal—but, oh! see them at Covent Garden, when they are as young as the morning! They can turn bright eyes to you then—eyes that have the broad, sweet stretch of the country still in their depths, as a sailor, just ashore, will show you in his, the deep, strong sweep of the sea.

Oh! Covent Garden! Covent Garden! In those early mornings, it is perhaps the more beautiful for being one of the ugliest places in the world. There is no grace in its architecture—nothing but the suggestion of a doleful, tawdry Crystal Palace about its vaulted roofs of glass. With its rows of stalls, there is a painful and British regularity—nothing so hap-hazard, or so fanciful in line as there is in the markets abroad. Empty of its treasures, it is one of the gloomiest of places, but at four o'clock, when the great gates are open to that public which is ever fast sleeping in its bed, it becomes a Palace of Enchantment—a very Garden of Romance.

For what is Romance, but colour? It is Romance when you see the mist of blue on the distant hills. It is Romance when you see shadows of purple beneath the far-off trees. All this is Romance, because if you climb up to the distant hills, they are green; and if you stroll in the shade of the trees, all is green there, too. But in Covent Garden, there are the colours themselves. You need no imagination to make them for you. The blues, the mauves, the scarlets, crimsons and purples, they all are there. However close you

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may look, they do not change. And with it all, is that good, clean smell of the earth, mingling with the scent of ten thousand roses.

If it were not for that alloy, the perfume of the flowers would be too great; but there is no decadence in Nature. She does not cloy you with the scents she wears. There is that cleansing savour of the earth to filter through your senses, leaving behind, not the odour itself, but a lingering memory which comes to you in moments through your life—those moments when your eyes look far away into a distance which God has given you and you believe yourself in a garden—the garden perhaps that God planted, where the roses that grow there are red.

Probably not one soul will read this amiable digression, fancying that it is conceit of mine and has little or nothing to do with Mrs. Gooseberry. But, I venture to think, it has to do a good deal.

People have so much in common with their surroundings—either in contrast or in likeness—that the two are well-nigh inseparable.

No one, who has ever seen Mrs. Gooseberry, seated under her faded green umbrella in that part of the market where the little boxes of growing pansies and geraniums are sold, could possibly separate her from her Romantic environments of Covent Garden. She was so bewilderingly ugly, so compellingly material with her ample bosom and beaming round red face, that she became beautiful in vivid comparison with the wonder-

ful flowers in whose midst she moved. Well—moved—is not quite right. She sat.

Have you never wondered which was the more beautiful—Beauty or the Beast? I can never quite make up my mind. Sometimes it is one—sometimes the other. For the Beast was a good Beast and they tell us—quite rightly, of course—that the beautiful is the good. Now, Mrs. Gooseberry was the very best woman in the world. She, if you like, had a heart as large as her ample bosom could hold. It beamed out at you from under her green gingham umbrella. You could no more pass by a great bank of roses without thinking them beautiful, than you could pass by Mrs. Gooseberry's gingham umbrella without thinking her good.

And so I chose to see her beautiful—the most beautiful woman I think I have ever met.

There may have been something of this in the mind of Father O'Leary when her name came so readily to his thoughts. Certainly, she had just given birth to a baby who had died. But you do not chose a woman solely on that account to be a mother to the third person whom the magician has just given you. Unfortunately that tragedy happens too frequently for it to be difficult for you to find such a person as you require. I think, therefore, that there must have been somewhat of the goodness of Mrs. Gooseberry in his mind when he selected this dear lady. For never is a man so careful as when he sets about choosing the mother for his child. She must have such virtues as go nigh to making her

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unlovable. And if he loves her passionately which, for her weaknesses, he may; then, torn between vanity and remorse, he will exclaim—"But how could she be a mother to my child?"

Yet you may be sure Father O'Leary was pleased with the selection of Mrs. Gooseberry. With a swinging step, he made his way up to that part of the market where she was sitting.

There is human nature in a Roman Catholic Priest, you know, although you are not really supposed to think it. His gait was swinging and his head, with that rough and ready silk hat on the top of it, seemed to beat time to his steps. And all this, because he had got even with Mrs. Parfitt over the matter of the nursing of Peggy. There were few things in life, beyond saying the absolution over some heart-broken degenerate, which gave him greater pleasure.

Lastly of all, he knew that his mission was to bring balm to the poor aching heart of Mrs. Gooseberry. For when a woman loses a child just born, it is the loss of the clinging little fingers and the warm little lips that she cries over.

It is a secret, and I tell it to you with some apprehension, for it may make you think less of that loving creature who is lying so still and so patiently at home—but one baby is as good as another to that woman with the quiet eyes and heart still breathing with relief.

My child! Any other as good as my child! Ah, I should not have said it. Perhaps I am quite wrong.

The little bird who told it me, had just had her nest robbed and possibly the poor thing was distracted. Still—I believe that women will understand what I mean.

Anyhow, in a vague and half-conscious way, Father O'Leary counted it in his reckoning. With a cheery smile that spoke, half sympathy, half promise, he approached her under her green gingham umbrella.

"How's the world treating the flowers this morning, Mrs. Gooseberry?" he began—obliquely, as is the way to approach every woman. It is always round the corner of some angle that a woman is to be met.

For answer, she just picked the blossom of a pansy from out of one of the little boxes and handed it to him.

"As bad as that?" said he, putting it straightway in his button-hole.

"Seems to me," said Mrs. Gooseberry—mingling her cockney with his brogue—"seems to me, people 'aven't no sense of 'ow beautiful flowers is. Look 'ere at these pansies—shillin' a dozen—penny a root. But d'you think there's a blessed one to come and buy 'em?" She looked up to the roof of her gingham umbrella for the answer. And the gingham umbrella replied, as you might have expected it to, with a solemn silence.

For a little while then, they talked of flowers. She told him the woes of the whole market. It is never without them. For the people who deal with the treasures that the earth gives forth out of her bare breast

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are usually discontented. Because Mrs. Gooseberry loved her flowers for themselves, she was probably an exception.

"But—deary me," she always said, when she had poured forth her troubles, "I don't complain." So I take it that the expression of her woes in good cockney English was nothing more than a making of conversation. No one else in the market, that I know of, concluded with that little epilogue of resignation.

Father O'Leary listened patiently to it all; and then, by dexterous movements, calculated to touch her big heart with sympathy, he led the conversation round to the death of her baby.

"Shure, ye're lonely, of course," said he, when he saw her great big hand, that never hurt a fly, picking secretly at the corner of her white apron.

"'Ow can I 'elp it?" she replied, tremblingly, but as brave as you please. Mrs. Gooseberry was not the woman to let her tears fall in public places. "'Tisn't as if I'd got fond of the little thing. I know that. Why, it was only two weeks old. But a child's a child, and when you've brought it into the world you want to do your best to keep it there, no matter what it's going to turn out. See what I mean?"

She looked up at him with the question, and then, suddenly realizing that he was a man and, what was more, a priest, who knew nothing about these things, she swallowed her sorrow. With a jerk, she pulled her apron straight across her knees.

"Oh—you don't understand!" she said in a different voice. "But Gawd understands. 'E knows what a woman feels 'o's been lookin' for the first sight and touch of 'er baby for nine long months and then, just when she's got it—puff! like a candle!"

Some sense in Fathér O'Leary was hurt to the quick. He had never felt so shut out from life, so alienated, so much an outcast before. It was a moment of weakness. Great heavens! We all have them! It was a moment when the great heart of a man must burst open the door which has been closed so abruptly in his face. That door, together with many others, opening to a network of life's passages, he had closed voluntarily himself when he took his vows. Many, perhaps, had opened them since and called his name, but he had not answered. And now, this Mrs. Gooseberry, with her warm sense of life and that great mother's heart of hers, had just opened the door that possessed the weakest latch of all. She had spoken right into the heart of him, and then, finding no answer, had closed it once more, saying—

"Oh, you don't understand! But Gawd understands!"

And that was more than he could bear. The next moment he had flung the door open wide—the next instant he was bending down close to her ear under the old gingham umbrella.

"Shure, Glory be to God," he said quickly, "I understand every word ye're saying. Didn't I tell Mrs. Parfitt it was the ten little wee fingers of the mite

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that would have got at the heart of her? Shure, woman, I understand every single word ye're saying. And I'll prove it to ye now—I will so. What would ye say if I asked ye to bring up a little baby two weeks old? Eh, what would ye say? A wee scrap of a thing that lost its mother just when its little fingers kept pawing for her all day long! What would ye say to me, now, if I asked ye to do that this very day?"

Mrs. Gooseberry caught her breath. She laid her hand on his coat-sleeve and pulled down his head, so that she might whisper in his ear.

"What were you before you went into the Church, Father O'Leary?" she asked.

"Faith—I was a man," said he.

CHAPTER VII

AS MUCH AS THERE IS IN A NAME

It is no go-as-you-please affair, this setting forth in the capacity of Chronicler on a pilgrimage of other people's lives. There are canons to be observed and rubrics to be obeyed. Certain liberty is given you to wander down those enchanting little by-lanes, with their high hedges intertwined with bryony, their banks dotted with wee blossoms of china blue. But you must come back again. You must return to the high-road whensoever the voices call you.

For instance, you have no right to make great business over a black box, without opening the lid, turning it upside down and shaking out the contents, helter-skelter, till you make sure that nothing remains behind.

In the unwritten laws of narrative, no train of interest may be lit which does not burn to some satisfactory explosion. Now a black box, being one of those properties in which every good showman conceals his most alluring mystery, it is incumbent upon him, sooner or later, to have it out upon the table.

This is a pity. In a true pilgrimage, there may

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be black boxes, secret cupboards, drawers concealed in old bureaus, with never the vestige of a mystery contained in them at all.

Once I hunted for a lost will in an old house. It was a thrilling experience. There were all those delightful conveniences for the most breathless of mysteries. The old lady, for whose will I searched, possessed every piece of furniture in which such things lie hid—from grandfather's clocks to an old oak chest with a secret recess contained within the lid. You may conceive my certainty that I had made an end of the business, when I discovered that cunning recess. With eager hands, I wrenched open the panel and found there—a dead mouse.

One of the housemaids discovered the will eventually. It was in an envelope addressed to the solicitors and was standing on the top of the clock on the mantelpiece in the dining-room. The servant who discovered it, was the one whom the old lady had directed to place it there, just before she died.

Now, here am I, the chronicler of a true pilgrimage, and the pity is that, having found little Peggy lying on a black box at the foot of the altar of Our Lady in the little chapel in Maiden Lane, I have, whether I like it or no, to turn out that box for you, from the letter on top to the sampler at the very bottom.

In the excitement of finding Peggy—of feeding her too, for that matter—both Father O'Leary and Mrs. Parfitt forgot about the black box altogether. I had

well-nigh forgotten about it myself, when the thought of Peggy's name—for the letter addressed to Father O'Leary was unsigned—recalled it to me.

You may as well be told it from the first. The only thing of importance which dropped out of that mysterious receptacle was the name by which Peggy passes through this history. No guarantee is given with it that it was her right name; but since these things are a convenience in this world and such importance is attached to them as passes my comprehension, it was considered as well to dub her with it then and there.

You must know then, that the very next morning, when he had signed, sealed and agreed upon the bargain with Mrs. Gooseberry, Father O'Leary returned to the Presbytery and the very first thing he asked for was the black box.

"Will ye bring it up-stairs now to me," said he, "and we'll turn it out here on the table?"

Mrs. Parfitt obeyed—reluctantly, because she had cherished hopes that he had forgotten all about it, and was going to go through it quietly, by herself, that very day.

"It's a wonder she had so much consideration as to leave these," said Mrs. Parfitt, as she drew out a clean white garment that looked as if it ought to be called a pair.

"An' what are they?" asked Father O'Leary, taking them tenderly between the tips of his fingers.

"I forget what you call them," said Mrs. Parfitt, and

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she pulled forth a little bonnet quickly, shaking it out in her hand. "But that's a bonnet," said she.

"Faith, I can see that," said Father O'Leary, and he laid the other things on a far side of the table.

"Then here's a day gown," she went on, drawing out the garments as a conjurer pulls ribbons out of a hat, "and this—well, I never! This is a little flannel nighty."

"D'ye mean to tell me the poor little mite has to wear all these things?"

Mrs. Parfitt rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and went on in silence.

"Her little brush!—bless her little heart! And her sponge!"

"Faith! she's got an outfit that 'ud take her for a journey to Australia and back."

"And here—well, I never did!" exclaimed Mrs. Parfitt. "Here's a feeding bottle after all."

Father O'Leary took it pensively in his hands. "Yirra, if I'd had half a thought of that," said he. "A long tube, too—and I bought a short one. Why didn't ye look in that box last night, Mrs. Parfitt, before ye sent me on that old woman's errand?"

"It was your box," said Mrs. Parfitt. "I don't peer into things that don't concern me."

He laid down the bottle quietly. I think he sighed.

"But yours is the better bottle," said Mrs. Parfitt.

"Thank God for that," said he.

And then, at the very bottom of the box—crumpled and seared, like a piece of old parchment—they found the sampler from which Peggy was given her name.

I could write about samplers till I was tired and you had long lost interest in the story. But I will say nothing about them. No little girls work them now, so I presume they will not be considered worth while talking about. I suppose little girls have better things to do than paint in dainty feather stitches and cross stitches those inimitable trees that grew in Noah's Ark. They are too busy to leave those pathetic little verses, worked laboriously in childish letters, for their children's children, and those children's children after them to read. I hope they have better things to do. Perhaps they have. It is a common plaint to mourn over the past.

But I have so vivid a picture in my mind of the eager fingers, the bright, untiring eyes, and the young, fresh faces which set to work on the samplers that one sees. Simplicity was the art in them. And they will live so long as the threads of the canvas can hold together. Their little triangular trees, with straight, short stems, their peacocks, seated as no peacock has been seated before or since, their birds and their flowers, defy nature or glorify it. I am not quite sure which. But they are so wonderfully unreal that they live in a world of their own. That world into which a child's eyes so often look, when it lies in bed, and stares and stares, just as you put out the candle.

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There is much that might be said of samplers. But I am determined that I shall say nothing—nothing at least beyond what must be written of the sampler that lay at the bottom of Peggy's portmanteau.

It was worked on canvas, the colour of old ivory, and the stitches were blue and they were brown. Long ago the colours had faded and toned into shades so delicate, as would be impossible to describe. Noah's Ark trees, with fluttering little birds seated high on their very pinnacles, stood jauntily with slim straight stems. A lamb frisked in mid-air beside a basket of fruit. Tall standard roses grew up the sides of the sampler with blossoms which the gardener who tended them might well be proud of. A number of little figures, seeming to have no meaning—but probably to the earnest fingers that stitched them, very living things—all combined in some marvellous geometrical design, to surround a little verse, worked in the daintiest feather stitching, in letters of faded blue.

“This life is not all roses,
May be 'tis full of care,
But I have roses in my heart
And birds sing everywhere.”

That was the verse. Underneath, in a little place, all to itself, was written, in the same letters of faded blue silk—

“Sarah Bannister ended this work in 1776.”

Father O'Leary read it all out, in much the voice as when a child repeats its lesson.

"Indeed," said Mrs. Parfitt—"It is *not* all roses."

"Ye're quite right—it is not," replied Father O'Leary—"Faith, it's a pansy I've got in my coat now and this morning the market was full of carnations."

Mrs. Parfitt took the sampler from his hand with a staid—if you please—and to herself she read the verse through once more.

"There are not many birds singing in Maiden Lane," said she, triumphantly.

"Shure, Glory be," exclaimed Father O'Leary. "D'ye mean to tell me ye sleep through the noise those sparrows make of a morning."

"Making a noise isn't singing," said she.

"Faith, it's what I call singing when I say High Mass."

Mrs. Parfitt rolled up the sampler and put it back in the box. With a sudden impulse, Father O'Leary picked it out again.

"Who would ye think this Sarah Bannister might be?" he asked. "I may be wrong, mind ye—I dunno—but it seems to me this might be a family relic. The poor wretched woman kept it because her grandmother or her great-grandmother had worked it. And shure, if a' be I'm right, then Peggy's name is Bannister—Peggy Bannister."

"You can't be sure of that," said Mrs. Parfitt awkwardly; "you don't know how she came by the sampler."

"I do not. That's quite true for ye. But it seems

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the way she ought to be called Bannister. What have ye thought about it yeerself?"

"I'd thought," said Mrs. Parfitt, shifting her weight from one foot to another. "I'd thought she might be called Peggy Parfitt."

Father O'Leary took out his big red pocket-handkerchief, and in the midst of blowing his nose, he said: "Well—I'd thought myself of calling her, Peggy O'Leary—" He cast a hurried glance at Mrs. Parfitt. "It sounds right enough—" said he dubiously—as if he were critically weighing the matter with an unbiassed mind.

"Peggy Parfitt," said the good lady—just audibly, and no more—trying the sound of it as you finger the strings of some cherished instrument.

"Peggy O'Leary," said he—in just the same tone of voice.

"Well, you won't let her be called after Mrs. Gooseberry—will you?" said Mrs. Parfitt, anxiously.

"Oh—shure, not at all," he replied quickly.

"Then it had better be Bannister," said they.

They said it the same moment in a quaint little chorus of resignation. And that settled the matter.

BOOK II

CHAPTER I

THE REGISTRY OFFICE FOR PARENTS

To be born, after all, is the main thing in this world. One can look about for one's parents afterwards.

In nine cases out of ten, the tedious part of the business is done for you. The registry office for supplying parents is a most excellent institution. You will find the name—*Dame Nature*—painted over the door in white letters. Moreover, there is a branch handy at every street corner. And I refuse to believe otherwise than that this excellent lady provides the most suitable situations for her clients.

In her little waiting-room, most days of the week, seated on cane-bottom chairs, with their hands folded in front of them, you will see rows upon rows of anxious men and women waiting for the chance of a place. Usually there are more women than men. Mothers are more fashionable, so I am told. Why, all those little boys who go to sleep at school, their pillows wet with tears on the first night of the new term, they all have photographs of mothers by their bedsides. Oh! undoubtedly there is a greater demand for mothers. Fathers, I don't know how it is, but fathers are not

needed so much as they were fifty or sixty years ago. They have got the name of shirking their work. Usually, you will find them, sitting silently in that dreary waiting-room, with long, expectant faces and watching eyes. They know very well, every single one of them, that they have but a poor chance in this world which has admitted the other sex into the competition.

But the women, they gossip and they chatter. Women will. I believe that is why they are so popular. They discuss their previous situations. Splendid places they always are. No worry, no bother, their masters or their mistresses as good as gold and as fond of them! Oh! you would never have heard of such fondness before in your life.

It is in this perhaps, more than in anything else, that the registry office for parents differs from that which is designed for servants in the ordinary sense of the word. Parents are servants too, of course; dominated by inexorable masters and mistresses, subject to situations that do not suit, to work that is not their place at all—but all this is in the extraordinary sense of the word. As a rule, they have a very fine time of it. The common or garden house-servant—if I am to believe what I hear—will give you nothing but complaint.

But you ought, if you can, to go and sit a while in one of those waiting-rooms in the parents' registry office. It is not so easy to effect an entrance as you would suppose. Dame Nature will not admit you unless with the best of credentials. Even then you must plainly

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state your business. The nature of my business—for I have been there—I had better not relate. I may have said I wanted to write a book about it. We all want to put Dame Nature in a book—if we can. But, no matter with what excuse, you ought to try.

It is the most touching sight in the world, to see a baby girl—minus one year old—stepping jauntily into that registry office.

On her way to the secret sanctum of Dame Nature, where all the private business is transacted, she must pass through the waiting-room, where sit the mothers and fathers who, out of work, are ever hopeful, ever full of expectancy.

She looks at one and then at another as she struts through. They see her glances falling to right and to left, like the drops of dew that splash at either side before the chariot wheels of the morning as it drives over the grey meadows.

Some of them hold their breath with trembling excitement. Their hearts beat and their eyes follow her eagerly to the door through which she disappears beyond their ken. For to these, she is just the little mistress they have lived to serve. They could wait hand and foot upon such as her. They would prove their virtues to the last one, if they were but given a month's trial. And the mothers fiddle with their bonnets; they arrange the folds of their capes. They set straight the bow of the bonnet strings that lies upon their breasts. And the fathers pull down their waist-

coats; they draw out their watchchains and look at them—for a watchchain, you must know, is an essential recommendation in a good father. It is the reins by which every father is driven in harness. His knees, too, they must be strong; for they are the steeds upon which every mistress rides to her country estate of make believe.

Once I saw a poor father in that waiting-room of the parents' registry office who had no chain at all. A watch he had—a gun-metal affair that had not gone or weeks. He took it out and shook it several times, putting it hopefully each time to his ear. But it would not go. There was also the suspicion of a patch on one of his horse's backs, which considerably lessened its value. He looked at that too. He rubbed it with his hand, trying to wear down its edges. It was no good.

And then—in walked a baby girl.

He sat up quickly. His eyes took into them that expression which sometimes you see in the eyes of a little dog that has no home, and is begging timidly from street to street. You put out your hand. You say the half of a kind word, and the little fellow stops in the act of running away. He has two paws in the gutter and two paws on the pavement. He lifts up his head and—you know the look.

That was the look I saw in this poor man's face as the baby girl passed through the waiting-room. Directly she had closed the door of the inner office, I observed

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him regarding the other men as they took out their watchchains. He even so far forgot as to feel for his own. And all the expression dropped from his eyes when he remembered that it, long since, had been sent to the Chapel of Unredemption.

You could see quite plainly that he knew there was no hope for him; that all that waiting was to no purpose; that he would still be wanting a situation when the day had gone. It may certainly not have been in my own interests, but despair is too cruel a thing to watch; so I leant across to him and I whispered—

“Don't be an ass; you've got a bootlace, haven't you?”

He turned with a radiant smile and thanked me. Then, stooping down, and making sure that no one was looking, he undid his bootlace. He pulled it out. Under cover of his coat, he tied it to his watch, slipping it through the hole of his waistcoat. Then he looked up, thanking me once more with a smile.

Presently the door opened. Dame Nature popped in her head and called a name—

“Mr. Greenfly!”

A fat, round man, with long thin moustaches, a lugubrious expression, and a rose in his button-hole, jumped quickly to his feet and hurried forward. The door closed. We all waited. Five minutes, he came out again—crestfallen, looking as though his luck had been tampered with, and he shuffled out into the street, more lugubrious in expression than ever. I heard it

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said afterwards that the good lady thought she would never get him off her books.

"Mr. Wigglesworth!" called Dame Nature.

It was the man who had kept the little eating-house in Fetter Lane, whose business had failed. I knew him well by name, but had never seen him in person. To my surprise, my friend of the bootlace hastily stood up. Then I understood the absence of the watchchain and the patch in the horse's back. He hurried to the door, not forgetting to turn round once more to thank me with another smile before he vanished out of sight into that dread sanctum.

Ten minutes went by and we began to look uneasily at each other. We all knew what a long time in that little office meant. Two women, indeed, tightened their bonnet-strings, as if in anger, and marched out. I waited on.

At last the door opened, and we saw Wigglesworth in close converse with the baby girl. She had got one hand on his bootlace, and was already giving him his orders. I heard her distinctly say, "Gee up; gee up!" and Wigglesworth nodded and shook his head like a pure bred courser.

Then Dame Nature came to the door and—

"You can go," said she gently. "I'm sorry, but I shall not want you any more to-day. 'To-morrow at nine o'clock, please—sharp!"

And we walked away.

Of course, it is no good my disguising any longer the

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business which brought me there. I never said I was going to write a book about the registry office. To be quite honest, an excuse like that is not the least use in the world. I was there in the capacity which brings every one to such a place. I was looking out for a situation. They say you stand just as much chance if you advertise, but don't believe it. The registry office of Dame Nature is the best—the surest.

I shall find employment there one of these days, if I wait long enough. Some little baby girl will pass through and cast her glance upon me. And then, if I have my watchchain on me at the time, I only hope I shall suit!

CHAPTER II

AT THE FOOT OF THE HILL OF DREAMS

It was not until Peggy was five years old, that this tiresome business of choosing a parent had to be gone into.

There is nothing worse than parent-hunting. House-hunting, servant-hunting, they are nothing to it. The law compels you to sign such interminable contracts with those whom you employ, that you must be very careful what you are about. Now the death of that strange lady—the weeping lady of Maiden Lane—had placed Peggy in such a position as can only be described by its similiarity to the case of the woman who, giving up her house, goes to live in some hotel where all attendance is included.

Such an hotel, not conducted on any modern lines, was Mrs. Gooseberry's cottage in the country. Oh, it is a shame to liken it to an hotel! The only similiarity was that during her stay there, all Peggy's parentage was included in the bill of fare. For in Mrs. Gooseberry, she had one of those mothers to wait upon her, whose bigness of heart had room for all the children in the world. And in Mr. Gooseberry, there was a father

born to the service! He had a massive silver curb watchchain on his waistcoat. His knees were tireless and strong. Great gentle cart-horses they were, heavy at the fetlocks, sure of foot and jingling with harness. Just such amiable beasts as you will see between the shafts of a hay-waggon, bringing home the children from the hay-fields with a brave and joyous jangling of bells.

Oh, there were fine rides for Peggy on Dobbin and Dapple when the evenings drew in and chairs were pulled up to the fireside! With a little switch of willow, she would mount upon her steeds, grasping the silver reins with one wee hand, flicking her whip with the other.

"Gee up! Gee up!" shouted Peggy in a short shrill cry, and then, with his somnolent country voice Mr. Gooseberry would begin the journey.

"Once upon a time there was a very old man. Lord 'a mercy, he was old."

"How old?" said Peggy.

"Nigh on two hundred years," Mr. Gooseberry would reply, and stop in silence to think over and wonder at it himself.

"Gee up—gee up!" cried Peggy—tugging at the reins.

"Nigh on two hundred," repeated Mr. Gooseberry—and then, over the Meadows of Make-Believe, Dobbin and Dapple would start afresh with their awkward, ambling trot and on they would go—and on they would go, till they came to the Hill of Dreams.

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And the Hill of Dreams—if you wish to know where it is—is that little white mountain in the corner of the big dark room up-stairs. That is the Hill of Dreams. You kneel at the foot of it every night ; you fold your hands and you shut your eyes. And then, after a little while, you climb up to the very top and, wrapping the clouds tight all round you, you see no more of the world till morning. For when morning comes, the clouds vanish. The sun looks in through the window and all the walls of that big, dark room dance with laughter. You open your eyes and the first thing you do is to count the prisms on the ceiling. That is the first lesson in arithmetic. Sometimes it is very hard. I have known there to be as many as five.

But once your task is accomplished, then you climb down to the foot of the hill once more, and once more, having folded your hands and shut your eyes, the new day begins.

You know it is a brand new day, because the thrushes sing as if they had never sung before and when you look out of the window, the ground, which the previous night was black as you climbed up the hill, is now as green, as green, as green.

So these two—this couple of good-hearted creatures, passing into the years when the magician will no longer do his trick for you because the quickness of his hand no longer deceives your eye—these two were the parents whose attendance upon her for the first five years was included in Peggy's bill of fare.

The bill was paid every Saturday.

Every Saturday, came Father O'Leary and Mrs. Parfitt down to Mrs. Gooseberry's cottage in the country. And every Saturday, after they had gone away, Mrs. Gooseberry found an envelope that jingled, sticking out of the top of the tea-pot that stood in the china cupboard in the parlour.

On the first occasion that this happened, she was all for giving it back.

"She don't cost me nothing," she exclaimed, feeling the money burning through the envelope. "Why I'd pay to have her. What I mean, it's like expectin' Gawd to give yer somethin' when yer feed the sparrers in the mornin'."

"An' how d'ye know He doesn't?" asked Father O'Leary, "only maybe 'tis the way He's more cunning at hidin' it than I am. He doesn't want to hurt the feelin's of ye. Faith, I don't want to hurt them myself."

He was looking well into the future when he said that. There would come a time, he had no doubt of it, when Mrs. Gooseberry, adding her two and two together and making that invaluable five which is to be found in every woman's computation, would come to think that Peggy was her own. Now Father O'Leary had different ideas about that. He was determined to be under no obligations when the time should come for Peggy to return to the Presbytery where her mother had left her in his keeping. The letter had expressly said it. "*I leave her chance to you.*"

That little sheet of paper with its pathetic lines was amongst the most priceless of his possessions. In company with the musty petals of a rose, a thin strip of pale blue ribbon and a card printed with the announcement of Miss Mary Connelly's reception into the convent of Mercy, Cappelquin—it lay in a drawer of which the key was closely in his keeping. Even Mrs. Parfitt had no suspicion of the existence of these sacred relics. She had tried the drawer. She had asked him for the key, and, receiving some vague answer that had distracted her mind, she had completely forgotten about it.

This, I suppose, is what one must call sentiment. A withered rose—a faded ribbon. A man, no doubt, is a fool to keep them. In a work-a-day world there is little place for such things as these. And yet, so long as a man believes in the meaning of a faded ribbon or a withered rose, he will believe in the meaning of God. But in a work-a-day world, so they will tell you, there is little place even for this. I suppose they know.

All that they meant, to Father O'Leary, beside such meaning as this, can never really be discussed in this history. If the events which follow have a voice—which most events do possess—it is possible that they will not remain silent on the matter. But just as Father O'Leary of his own accord never showed them but once to any living person, so it is not right that they should be alluded to here. Sometimes in a long night, waiting

through the heavy hours for the relief of morning, he would rise from his bed and light a candle. Then, unlocking the drawer, he would take out those three sacred things, and, laying the rose petals gently in the palm of his hand, he would smell their musty odour. But it was the scent of a rose that came to his nostrils—the scent of a summer day. And not the first rumbling of the carts in Covent Garden, but the faint humming of bees came murmuring to his ears and mingled with the whispers of a mountain stream, pursuing its busy little way over the worn, brown pebbles.

You may laugh—we all of us do when we find it in others—at such sentiment as this. Yet the alchemist who can change his night into day, who can bring a breath of the air of summer into a cold winter morning, tinkling the heather bells in his ears and sounding the gurgling note of a mountain stream, he is farther on his way than most of us to that discovery which will make the priceless gold out of the poorest metal in the earth.

But it was not as the alchemist, storing a bottle of precious fluid with the treasures on his shelves, that Father O'Leary placed that letter amongst his sacred relics in the little drawer. There was no necessity for him to remind himself of the trust which the weeping woman had placed in him; yet there he laid it, as it were a document—a deed of agreement—according him the rights patent in the life of Peggy Bannister.

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Now what the life of Peggy Bannister was to Father O'Leary, you have every right to ask. A Roman Catholic priest who has taken his vows of chastity, which range over the whole field of thought, word, deed and contemplation, can have but little interest except in the souls of those with whom he comes in contact. Their lives should be nothing to him so long as they are well lived. He is wedded to the Church and so much and no more does the Church demand of him.

Yet when Peggy was five years old, and Mrs. Gooseberry, referring to the period for which he had arranged to leave her in the good lady's hands, wrote him a letter saying—

"I feel as if she was my own child, and don't see no reason why I wants to part with her," he felt the beating of his heart grow hesitating. It was what he had feared.

For during those five years, visiting her every Saturday, bringing her sometimes to stay for a week or so in the Presbytery, Father O'Leary had found out one of life's secrets.

They are the wisest of men who sit at the feet of a little child.

And in the clear blue of Peggy's eyes, in the light ringing of her laughter, the parish priest had discovered more than he had ever read in the pages of Mivart's philosophy.

It was not long before he found the essential qualities

in a watchchain, or learnt the way a knee can jog just like any old horse on its way to market. And these, mind you, are more important acquisitions than knowing what becomes of the unbaptized infant after death. The man who can tell you that, will in all probability be the first to kill it when alive.

Here, in these matters, Father O'Leary excelled even the willing Mr. Gooseberry. You would wonder, had you seen him, why he had ever become a priest. His fund of stories was greater; his power of invention unailing in its infinite resource. A thousand times over, Peggy would confuse poor Mr. Gooseberry with a swift question which, taking him unawares, could only be answered by a dubious scratching of the head.

But she never outwitted Father O'Leary. When you can outwit a Celt, there is no limit to your powers. The quicker she put her questions, the more to the point he answered them. With her hands on her hips, standing in amazement, Mrs. Parfitt used to listen to them.

"I never did," she would say to herself when alone in the kitchen afterwards, "I wish I could tell the stories he does."

She was jealous of those stories—bitterly jealous she was; for Peggy would leave the daintiest of allurements in the kitchen—even the liberty to scrape the dish in which the cakes were made—to go and ride the cock-horse to that famous cross at Bambury where lived the old lady who—according to Father O'Leary—knew all

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the fairies and all the witches in Christendom. From that fund of folklore which is the birthright of every Irishman, he drew the thousand stories that caught tight upon the threads of Peggy's fancy.

“Up the airy mountain
Down the rushy glen
We daren't go a-hunting
For fear of little men.”

She would beg Mr. Gooseberry to repeat that to her when she came back from her visits to London. But he could never remember it. There were no little men that he knew of—only the old fellow who had a power o' years on his shoulders—nigh on two hundred. And she had heard of him so often before.

But with Father O'Leary, the little men were always up to some mischief. Fresh mischief every time she came to town. Out of the far corners of his memory, he drew forth the old stories he had listened to round the open hearth. From the ashes of the years that lay behind him, he resurrected his childhood, finding the spirit of it in the echoed questions in her eyes.

A strange, gawky, half-conscious thing that childhood seemed. He wondered at it, when he saw it again; wondered and realized how much he had let slip by; how much he had forfeited for want of that precious realization of youth.

There can be but little amazement then, that that letter of Mrs. Gooseberry's brought hesitation to the beating of his heart.

For five years he had sacrificed Peggy, yielding to the dictates of his conscience. Now it was a matter of stern struggle to put aside his own inclinations and listen to those dictates once more. Whoever the weeping woman was, she had had some meaning in her heart when she left Peggy in his keeping. But did that meaning imply that he was to keep her to himself or to remain merely a guardian of her interests?

The Friday night on which that letter arrived, he wrestled in the wilderness upon his knees, at the foot of the Hill of Dreams.

It is no small gift in this world to be able to pray. For there is some great distance into which thought travels when once the knees are bent and the hands are clutched tightly across the eyes. And, if you have the mind for it—or as it has been said in a great book, the ears to hear—some answer is echoed back across the darkness. You will catch the faint reply that whispers from the lips of a waking conscience.

That, after all, is the chief benefit of prayer. A voice, wakening, answers. And some there are who chose to call it God, some conscience, and some the far-off memories of what is right and wrong. Whatever it may be, if your knees are truly bent and your hands are truly clasped, there is an answer.

When Saturday morning came then, and Father O'Leary met Mrs. Parfitt on the stairs, he took out his red pocket-handkerchief and, violently, he blew his nose.

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"I'm after receiving a letter from Mrs. Gooseberry," said he, "an' she says 'tis the way she ought to keep Peggy, instead of us having her to live here in the Presbytery. Now what d'ye say to that?"

Mrs. Parfitt shut her lips tight and her nostrils quivered.

"I think she is quite right," she replied.

For one moment Father O'Leary's eyes slowly opened, and then a subtle thought sped like lightning, twinkling across them.

"Faith, I think so too," said he.

CHAPTER III

THE EXERCISE OF DIPLOMACY

It would be impossible to describe the feelings and the thoughts passing through the minds of these two—this old parish priest and his elderly housekeeper—as they sat silently in the train which bore them out into the country.

There are some desires common to all of us. We know of their existence as well as we know our own names. We see them in everybody and everybody sees them in us, and yet, with the exercise of what we imagine to be our diplomacy, we believe ourselves able to hide them from the whole world.

These two, maintaining a discreet silence after that first expression of opinion on Mrs. Gooseberry's letter, could see each other's thoughts as plainly as they could read the notice about heavy luggage on the racks at each side of the carriage. But Father O'Leary was quite confident that Mrs. Parfitt knew nothing of his attitude in the matter. And Mrs. Parfitt's thin lips twisted to a smile when she thought how readily she had deceived him by her eager acquiescence to Mrs. Gooseberry's suggestion.

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"Fancy—Peggy's five to-day," said she—after a long silence, "just think of it—five years since that evening you brought her up to the Presbytery."

"It is indeed—" said Father O'Leary—"Have ye brought her a present at all?" He said it casually, intending in that one move to expose her duplicity. As if he couldn't see through her! As if he believed that she really thought it best for Mrs. Gooseberry to keep Peggy in the country!

"Oh—how well you reminded me of it," she replied—"I must buy her some little thing in the village—" and, being incomplete in her education of the lie generous, she could not forbear from feeling that little parcel, already concealed in the hanging pocket underneath her skirt, just to see if it were quite safe. Father O'Leary looked out of the window rather than expose her at that. He guessed how large a hand had dipped into her savings to buy that selfsame present which, he was to understand when he saw it later, had been purchased at a moment's notice in the village shop. There was one of the same order bulging in his own pocket. He felt for it too, wondering how simple Mrs. Parfitt could be to so plainly give herself away.

"D'ye think I could get her something in the village too?" he asked presently.

Mrs. Parfitt took out her handkerchief and wiped her face.

"I dare say," said she. "I think I'll get her some little things to wear."

"I've been wondering could I get her a doll," said Father O'Leary.

She had no doubt he could—but scarcely at the shop where she would have to go.

"Shure—I didn't suppose that," said he quickly.

And then, they both of them looked out of the window.

"'Pon my word," thought Father O'Leary—"she's a simple poor creature."

Mrs. Parfitt thought much the same of him.

When, therefore, they reached their destination, they both set off to make their phantom purchases. And Father O'Leary, watching Mrs. Parfitt enter the draper's shop, said, with a laugh to himself—"Shure—God bless the woman!"

And Mrs. Parfitt, peering out of the window of the draper's establishment, seeing him enter a shop farther down the street, muttered to herself with a smile—"The poor man—he didn't want me to know he'd been thinking of it for weeks."

At last, each with a parcel swinging ostentatiously from their fingers, they met at the bottom of the street.

"Have ye got what ye wanted?" said he solemnly.

"The best I could," she replied—"I ought to have thought of it before when I was in London. And you?"

"Oh—'tis a cheap little scrap of a doll," said he—"there wasn't much to choose from."

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And then, a pair of children in a world of children, they set off to see their child at Mrs. Gooseberry's cottage in the country.

Oh—it was delicate business that they had to transact there! To let Mrs. Gooseberry know that they had not the slightest intention of allowing Peggy to stay in the country—to do it, moreover, without the one having the faintest suspicion of what the other was about.

You hear of delicate missions of diplomacy in the courts of Europe. They are nothing to this. In matters of state, your personal feelings at least are left out of the question. The emotions that pass, when it is necessary, across your face and the emotions you keep concealed beneath an exterior of calm indifference—these are merely those of your country. They leave your heart beating not one pulse the quicker or the slower than it beat before.

But when it comes to the custody of a little child, you are faced with a different problem altogether. There are strings of emotion set vibrating then which no mute in the world can silence. You may see them trembling in every look; you may hear the throbbing note of them in every word.

And these two—this parish priest, vowed to denial of the most wonderful gift in the world; this elderly housekeeper, deprived by circumstances of her first, her greatest right—were no doubt the more deeply affected.

For procrastination is the sin of most of those two

people who take shelter beneath the magician's box. They postpone and they put off.

"It's time enough," they say, "to ask the magician to conjure for us. Let's have our own youth first."

And the woman considers her good looks, and the man—no less a fool than she—consents to consider them with her. As if they mattered to him! As if, really, they mattered to her!

But when you find two people who have been crossed off from the magician's book of clients, and set them forth on so delicate a matter as the recovery of a third little person from one who holds her dear, you will meet with as much emotion as you could want.

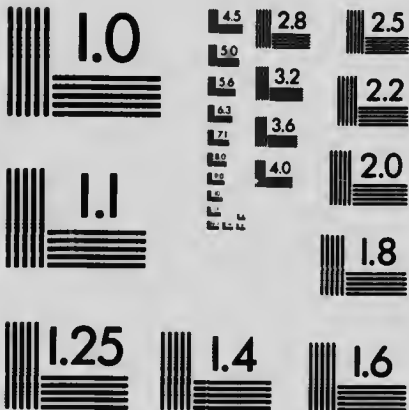
Father O'Leary had made up his mind that Peggy was to return to the Presbytery. For that matter, so had Mrs. Parfitt. But whereas she had merely the human desire of a childless woman to conceal, he was for maintaining all that strange dignity which becomes the celibate; for I gather that it is a breaking of your vows to find the need of such recompense as this. I am certain it must be a breaking of them to fight with all the cunning you possess, lest such recompense should be lost to you. While we are about it, we may as well suppose that there is some mitigation for your sin if you do it with your head so covered as that you cannot perceive how easily you are observed.

For Father O'Leary was cunning. He showed such craftiness on that day as would have dubbed him an Irishman with never the trace of his brogue at all.



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It was the very first moment that was the most trying to bear; for when Peggy came tumbling in her eagerness down that narrow garden path between the avenues of roses, and when, a tangling mass of arms and legs, she twined her little body about him and called him "Daddy O'Leary," it was as much as he could do to keep the tears out of his eyes—as much as he could do not to hold her to him as if she were the very echo of his life.

If you do not see Peggy, even were it only out of the corner of your mind's eye, then there is little use in my showing her to you.

It is not the least bit of good talking about hair the colour of a baby field-mouse, because, to begin with, you may never have seen a baby field-mouse in your life, and do not know the pale, indescribable brown of its silky fur. Were I to say that her eyes were the colour of those two grey-blue pebbles you see twinkling at the bottom of the little brook when the sun is laughing at it, you would get no impression from that at all. You might ask, Which two? But that would be all. And, however accurately I described her tiny fringe, lying tight like a little comb upon her forehead; her wee face, like a field-mouse too, for it had that wistful, apprehensive look of some small animal that knows not whether to eat or run away; no matter how minutely I gave you details of her small warm lips, half puckered, always ready to smile; or her short, upturned little nose, that had a mischievous wink of light right at the

very tip of it—you would still know nothing about her unless as, hoping for your sympathy, I trust you have already caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of your mind's eye.

For Peggy is that child, that little girl, whom every single one of us would like to call our own. We have got the picture of her tight clasped in some small locket, the strings of which are made fast around the secret corners of our hearts.

The only request I make, then, is merely that you open the locket and just look inside.

When once their meeting was over, Father O'Leary braced himself for the task in front of him and, unclasping her little fingers from about his arms, he bent down and just whispered in her ear—

“Mrs. Parfitt.”

The poor woman was standing on the little path, admiring the colour of a red rose, which some insect had cankered. It was the first that came to hand—the first thing upon which she could rivet her attention in order to conceal that aching throb at the heart which comes so readily when you think you are forgotten.

“Goodness me, Mrs. Parfitt,” said Mrs. Gooseberry, who was standing by, nursing her own feelings as well, “that's all eaten with green fly. There are better than that.”

“Oh—but the smell of it,” said Mrs. Parfitt, bending over the rose. “It may be damaged, but it's still a rose.”

And as she said it, she felt that some poet might have

written such a phrase; she felt that it had no little allusion to herself.

But then came the scampering of feet, the whirligig of arms, and the clutching of fingers round her alpaca skirt. She heard the voice that meant more than poets could ever write, shouting, "Mummy Parfitt! Mummy Parfitt!" The rose might have been fit for a prize in Temple Gardens then for all she cared.

"Peggy," she whispered, under the little tails of pale brown hair that fell over Peggy's ears—"My little Peggy."

"I didn't know she called you Mummy," said Mrs. Gooseberry.

Oh—I don't blame her! We all have our hopes that we are the only one.

"Always," said Mrs. Parfitt.

Father O'Leary fell to examining the blighted rose. Green fly or not, he buried his nose in it.

"And what do you call me, Peggy?" asked Mrs. Gooseberry. How could she resist saying that? Any woman would have done the same. There was never a note of spitefulness in her voice. However shy you may have been at first, when once you have been called mother, you want the whole world to hear of it.

Father O'Leary looked up quickly from the blighted rose.

"Won't ye come and see the little present I've got for ye, Peggy?" said he, and he dragged forth the doll from his pocket—a doll that shut its eyes and

did all manner of odd tricks with just the slightest persuasion on your part.

“Fancy,” said Mrs. Parfitt—“he got that in the village. Did you ever think they’d have sale for a splendid doll like that?”

“Faith, I’ll be bound it’s nothing to the things ye got yeerself in the draper’s shop,” said he—“Mind ye, she went into the draper’s shop over, Mrs. Gooseberry—” he went on.

“And how do you know what sort of things I got?” interrupted Mrs. Parfitt sharply.

“Shure, I can make a shrewd guess,” said he.

But Peggy did not care where they came from. They had come. When you are five, essentials are the only things that count. For it is only when you are of an age to count your years upon the fingers of both hands, that you are truly a philosopher. That wizened, grey-haired, skull-capped old fellow, bent over his bulky volumes, leaving his dish of food untouched, to be eaten by the household cat, he has long since lost the fine thread of his philosophy in a veritable maze of side-issues.

The little nighty with pink ribbons, the handkerchiefs with lace borders—it might have been real lace for the pretty look of it—and the doll that shut its eyes, they may have dropped from the skies, for all she worried about it. And when she smothered them with kisses of gratitude, Father O’Leary and Mrs. Parfitt forgot to worry too. After all, what did it matter?

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What did matter, however, was the delicate diplomacy needed in all that was to follow. For when Mrs. Gooseberry, who had been shifting about uneasily from one foot to the other, pulling dead leaves off rose trees and behaving generally as one who either has a great deal to do, or does a great deal in order to seem occupied—when at last she put a handful of dead leaves into the pocket of her apron and, looking up, as though it had just occurred to her, said: “Did you get my letter last night, Father O’Leary?” he knew that the trumpet had sounded for them to enter the lists.

“Your letter?” said he, as if for the moment it had slipped his memory and he were at the same time quite prepared to recall it.

“The letter I wrote you yesterday mornin’. You must ’ave got it last night or first post to-day. Mr. Gooseberry give it to the postman ’isself.”

“Oh—shure, I did, of course,” said he. What a fool he was to forget it! He would be forgetting his own name next!

“Well?” she said. “Perhaps you’d like to come into the parlour?”

He shot a quick glance towards Mrs. Parfitt. But do you think she took any notice of that covert look? Not she! He could see by the sharp set of her ears, that she was listening to every word; but to all intents and purposes, she was busily engaged with Peggy, oblivious of everything else about her.

“Into the parlour,” he repeated, and all for Mrs.

Parfitt's benefit. But still she did not budge. Then he gave up hope of her. It was not fair! Well—was it fair to leave him to struggle alone with a woman nearly as clever as the two of them put together? But he was not to be beaten.

"Come along, Mrs. Parfitt," said he, "'tis the way we've to go into the parlour."

Acknowledging her first defeat, Mrs. Parfitt followed them, Mrs. Gooseberry leading the way, and then Father O'Leary found a moment in the hands of that courtesy which demands that ladies shall go first. He slipped behind to speak to Peggy.

Taking both her little hands in his and stooping down so that his eyes looked straight into hers, he whispered—

"Would ye sooner stay here or go to London?"

The two grey-blue pebbles looked back solemnly into his eyes; for one moment, the sun forgot its laughter at the brook in which they lay and, in that moment, all the struggle he had had the night before at the foot of the Hill of Dreams, came back to Father O'Leary's mind. For this was where the answer to his great doubt was to be found.

"If you wives or you husbands were to go home and look into the eyes of your baby child, you would more plainly see God than on this altar."

Those words came back to him then, as he waited for her answer. At his age, surely, he might have expected to find all the great crises, such as one meets in

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youth, past and done with. Yet here was one, perhaps as great as any through which he had yet suffered, face to face with him now.

You might never have thought it, to see that man of sixty years and that baby girl of five, looking solemnly into each other's eyes on a tiny garden path between that perfumed avenue of roses, you might never have thought how much the whole joy of life in one of them depended upon the other's answer to a simple little question.

Yet it would have seemed, from the solemnity in her big round eyes, that Peggy had some intuitive sense of all that lay trembling in the balance. For, notwithstanding that he offered no allurements whatever choice she might make, there was that slight set of the lips when a man is waiting for judgment. She saw him swallow once or twice; his throat swelled as the emotion passed away. And though, being able to read in none of these signs their true meaning, yet she felt that here was suddenly a serious moment in her life.

The silence was so long, that he was about to repeat his question, urging her to answer; but then she leant forward and touched her lips on his bristled chin.

"The g-ass wants cutting on you face," said she.

He swallowed twice and replied that that was not an answer.

Then she flung her arms round his neck and she whispered in a whole torrent of sentences—

"I want Daddy O'Leary—and I want the little men
—and I want the Leprechaun—and——"

"And don't ye want Mummy Farfitt?" said he.

We can all afford to be generous, some time or
another. The pity is that not all of us realize it until
it is too late.

She stroked his bristled chin again, then nodded her
head vigorously, and, armed with that assurance, he left
her.

CHAPTER IV

WHERE EVEN DIPLOMACY FAILS

IN the parlour, Mrs. Gooseberry and Mrs. Parfitt were already seated. Mr. Gooseberry, his round face beaming, his small eyes twinkling above the rosy cheek bones crowned with their little tufts of hair, was standing with his back to the mantelpiece. And on the table were four glasses of cherry brandy.

If only you could have seen that little parlour! There was one small window, set deep into the old wall. On the sill of it stood pots of great-blossomed carnations. Through the old-fashioned lace curtains, as rich and generous a garden as you could wish your eyes to see, spun all its patchwork of colours in the sunlight, and into the room, from the open window, came again and again the sudden hum of insects as they made swift adventure, drawn by the cool shadows within. Then last of all, away over the meadows that lay beyond the end of the garden, there came the faint strains of the village band, making music and parching their throats at the same time in honour of the Saturday afternoon.

As he entered the room, Father O'Leary held up his hand, calling their attention. Mrs. Gooseberry sat up,

thinking he was going to deliver final judgment on the matter then and there.

"D'ye mind that?" said he.

"What?" they asked in chorus.

"It has a way of making me think the night the Holy Father died in Cappelouin."

"Did the Pope die in Cappelouin?" asked Mr. Gooseberry.

"He did not!" said Father O'Leary. "He died at Rome. But the night we heard 'twas all over with him, the boys came out with the band and up and down the Main Street they marched, with all the candles burning in the windows, and they playin' a tune fit to burst themselves, same as ye'd play the Dead March in Saul, or whatever ye call it, on the organ. Faith, they meant well by it—they did indeed, but 'twas the only tune they knew."

"And what tune was that?" asked Mr. Gooseberry. He was the only person interested in what the priest was saying.

"'Twas 'Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave ye.' Mind ye, they meant no harm by it all. 'Twas the way they'd just started with their drums and their fiddlesticks to make a band out of themselves and shure isn't it the likehest thing in the world that that 'ud be the first tune they be able to vamp? 'Twas the way that band reminded me of it."

Mrs. Gooseberry looked up at him in disgust.

"We 'aven't come here to talk about the band, Father

O'Leary," she said—"Will you take a sip of that? I made it last year out of the best crop of cherries we ever 'ad. And will you pay a little attention—what I mean, you 'aven't answered my letter yet."

She made a great mistake if she thought that Father O'Leary was not paying attention. That little story about the Pope and the band was just a small diplomatic move. When entering a shop, the article you want to purchase is surely the last your eye falls upon. Even then, it is out of compassion for your dealer.

"Well," said he, cautiously—"Twas very good of ye indeed to write what ye did."

"Very good," murmured Mrs. Parfitt, sipping from her glass in much the way that a bird drinks—that is to say with head lifted in appreciation after each little drop that touched her tongue.

Mr. Gooseberry bent over her and said under his breath—"You're right there, Mrs. Parfitt. I say as it's the best I've ever tasted."

"I was talking about the proposal in the letter," said she.

"Oh—well then—beggin' your pardon," he replied and stood upright again—beaming as ever.

These little accidents do happen, you know, in the best of regulated discussions. And when, by bestowing a glance upon Mr. Gooseberry, she had taken due notice of the interruption, Mrs. Gooseberry proceeded.

"Not good, as I can see," she continued. "What I

mean, I've got children of me own—and in a manner of speaking, you've got none."

"Faith, it's more than a mere manner of speaking," said Father O'Leary. "I've got none without any talk about it at all."

"Yes—isn't that what I mean?" said she. "You've got none—and neither has Mrs. Parfitt. You never did have no children, did you, Mrs. Parfitt?"

She put the question with the best-hearted ingenuousness. There was no intention in her mind that it should sting as it did. But Mrs. Parfitt, with that bitter view of life which she possessed, could see nothing but the cruelest accusation which one woman can make to another. Her cheeks flushed—of course, it may have been the cherry brandy—but underneath the table, in her lap, she tore off the button from her black kid glove.

"And if I didn't," said she—"is that any reason why you should throw it in my face? I did have a child if you want to know. It died."

Now this statement took Father O'Leary so completely by surprise that, for the moment, he lost his presence of mind and, instead of leaving the matter alone, he challenged it.

"Why—yeer husband told me ye'd never had the first inklings of one," said he.

"I can't help what my husband said," replied the poor woman, struggling bravely in her difficulties.

And then fell a heavy silence in which thoughts

scampered through the minds of every one of them; thoughts, hard put to it to escape from the suspicions that followed on their heels.

"Well—Lord 'a mercy, you never know——" began Mr. Gooseberry.

"That'll do, William," said his wife.

"'Twas about the cherry brandy," said he.

"It's a warming thing to the insides," said Father O'Leary, and he swallowed half the contents of his glass.

"Well—as I was saying—" Mrs. Gooseberry went on again—"Peggy's got no mother—she's got no home neither."

"She was *left* at the Presbytery," said Mrs. Parfitt with clipped words and Father O'Leary mentally placed one score in his favour.

For this is diplomacy—this inveigling of others into doing what you are so eager to do for yourself.

He pressed his advantage home.

"Shure, for the matter of that," said he—"she was left at the foot of the altar of the Blessed Mother. An' ye wouldn't be keeping her there for the rest of her life."

"I was thinking of the letter that was left with her," replied Mrs. Parfitt in self-defence. "Whoever her mother was, she left her with you."

With an apparent amount of reluctance, he admitted the truth of that.

"But this morning," said he, feeling for the first

time for some years for that pocket-full of snuff which Mrs. Parfitt had long since done away with—"this morning ye thought this idea of Mrs. Gooseberry's was a right good one. Shure, Glory be to God, it takes all the trouble out of our hands."

"Peggy's so good," said Mrs. Parfitt, with distress—"that she doesn't give much trouble—not more than I mind anyhow."

Now all this was going just as Father O'Leary would have wished it. Mrs. Parfitt—he blessed her heart from the bottom of his own—was fighting every inch of the battle for him. Without knowing it, she was saying the very things he wanted to say himself, and, preparing to congratulate himself, he began by taking the rest of that glass of cherry brandy. It was half raised to his lips, when the amiable Mr. Gooseberry, who had no more cleverness in debate than the babe unborn, broke in with his cheery voice.

"I've been thinking," said he, and they all turned to gaze at him—"that if Peggy was left in the charge of Father O'Leary—'tis Father O'Leary should say what's to be done wi' her—and not a one else."

There was the whole pot a-boiling over into the fire, and not one to lend a hand to help him out of the difficulty! For what is the good of diplomacy when you are faced with methods so ingenuously direct and simple as these? The truth is, that when you enter the lists of diplomacy, you had better see to it that your antagonist is fighting with the same weapons as

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yourself. It is always being proved in this world that the two-edged sword of Goliath is of no avail against the common stone in the sling of David.

Only suppose, if, when with the sharpest of tactics, you are cleverly beating about the bush, and your opponent on the other side just pops his head over the top and calls out the old formula—"I spy!" Well—what can you do? It is about time to lay down your stick and, asking him to meet you half-way, discuss it with him in the ditch.

Even this takes a cool head and needs some doing. For the moment, Father O'Leary was so bewildered that he sought to gain time.

"Will ye be so kind," said he—"as to say that all over again?"

And Mr. Gooseberry, beginning to realize by now that he had said something more than ordinarily to the point, flushed up to the roots of his hair, drove his hands deep down into his trousers pockets and repeated it word for word.

After the second time, they all turned eyes upon Father O'Leary once again and, in a silence more heavy than I can say—a silence in which the old clock ticked so loudly, a bluebottle beat itself so violently against the window pane and the village band in the distance lifted its melody with such a burst of music that they could hardly bear the strain of it—they all waited for his answer.

It was a long time in coming. In exasperating

deliberation, blinking his eyes, he drew out his red pocket-handkerchief and loudly blew his nose. It was just the noise he made for Peggy when the little men were asleep, and the horns sounded their blast as they dared to go a-hunting. At last, folding up the red pocket-handkerchief, putting it carefully away in his pocket, he looked up and—

“Daddy O’Leary asked me which I’d do—and I’ve going to London,” shouted a voice through the window.

“Glory be to God!” said Father O’Leary, drawing a deep breath.

“Lord have mercy on us!” exclaimed Mrs. Parfitt, with her hand to her breast.

Mr. Gooseberry looked round, a beaming smile spreading broadly across his face.

And Mrs. Gooseberry was silent.

CHAPTER V

THE CONFITEOR

THERE was something lying heavily on the conscience of Mrs. Parfitt. From the moment that Peggy had outwitted all diplomacy and settled these difficult matters for herself, the good lady had maintained a solemn and almost unaccountable silence.

It was not until they were seated in the train once more, returning silently on their way to London, that she turned and spoke to Father O'Leary. For some long time, she had remained gazing out of the window, looking alternately from the open meadows as they passed, to the place on her black kid glove where once the button had been. At last she turned her eyes on him.

"That was a lie about the child," said she—"a bare-faced lie."

"Shure, didn't I know that," replied he—"the moment I'd made a fool of myself by saying what yeer husband told me? I could have bitten me tongue out and that was the way with me."

"I can't forgive myself for it now," she went on with a trembling lip—"but it just slipped out before I could stop it."

“There’s no call for you to be forgiving yeerself at all,” said Father O’Leary—and he gently patted her arm. “’Twas the way ye ought to have had a child—and ye, thinking ye ought, and that good woman saying ye’d ne’er a one, kind of got in yeer mind till ye thought ye had one. Shure, I don’t call that a lie at all. ’Tis only a mis-statement of what might have been the truth if it hadn’t happened to be the other thing. Oh, for goodness’ sake, don’t let that hang on yeer conscience!”

Mrs. Parfitt pulled herself together with a sigh and, drawing the glove button out of the palm of her hand where it had been lying in concealment all this time, she dragged out the broken threads with her teeth.

Presently she looked up again.

“And what were you going to say,” she asked—“if Peggy hadn’t come to the window just then?”

“Shure, I’m trying to think,” said he.

BOOK III

H



CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE OPPOSITE

THE years scamper by at such a pace now-a-days, that one's own children are beginning their romances before we have had time to get well done with our own.

Indeed, there should be no getting done with them at all. The cloak of Romance—if you do but get the right material for it at the beginning—should last a lifetime. It is the material that matters. All those dainty frillings and embroideries, those gorgeous linings and those elaborate stitches, make not one ha'porth of difference in the wear of it.

The great pity is that the majority of us mistake that cloak of Romance for a Sunday-go-to-meeting gown. It is not. If made of the right stuff, it is the most serviceable garment you can wear in a world, the climate of which is none too generous, the roads of which are none too smooth.

It is as well, whilst you are about it, to get it made of one piece. The fewer the seams the better. Though, indeed, I have seen one whose cloak was a veritable patchwork quilt, so mended was it in torn and thread-bare places. Still, I was assured, it kept out the cold. The gorgeous lining had long since worn to ribbons ;

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the delicate embroidery was all faded and dull. Not one of those dainty stitches had held, which once had bound the seams together, and in its tattered glory it was a dismal thing to behold. But the owner still caught it tightly about his shoulders. He could not see himself in it. That perhaps was a mercy; for he had false pride and might have cast it from him.

Certainly, he took it off and showed it me; smiled at the patches and sighed—reminiscently—sadly too, I thought—at one little tear which had never properly been darned. He knew at least what it was like, if he did not realize the sorry figure he cut in it. But I for one was glad to see him still wearing it, and when, by recounting to him some little story of my own, I helped him on with it again, he shrugged himself down into its well-worn corners, telling me, with a confident nod of the head, that I need not think I had all the luck in this world.

But as I was about to say, it is better that it should be made of one piece. And if it be lined at all, I would recommend—but what are the good of my recommendations? You have had yours made by this time—or you are just going to get it made. There are your own ideas—or perhaps your tailor's—already settled in your mind. In any case—don't go without it. It is the most useful garment in the world.

It is true, though, that hardly have we got our own shoulders to wear their accustomed places into that cloak of Romance, than off go our children to be measured for the garment too.

Before he knew where he was, Father O'Leary found that Peggy was seventeen, and, by some odd little looks that sometimes hurried in their frightened way across her eyes, he knew that she was thinking about the great mystery of the world that lay before her.

Here then, at last, after seventeen years' journeying, over roads that may sometimes have seemed unnecessary to you who have been patient enough to follow, we come to that moment of the chronicle in which Nicolas Gadd, with his farthing candle, entered the room on the top floor of the house opposite.

It was a late evening in August. Her work, in which she assisted Mrs. Parfitt, being finished, Peggy had slipped away to her bedroom under the roof. There was a broad sill to the window of that bedroom. Seated sideways, with your back against the embrasure, you could see across the forest of chimney-pots away over the Strand—over the river—over Lambeth to the dim, faint ridge of hills, before which the great city fades away into a mere fringe of houses.

We choose our corners in this world, much as a cat chooses its favourite cushion. They linger in the minds long after, through the years, when the place that held them has almost vanished from our memory. This was Peggy's corner.

A corner is always the most sacred place in the world. It is in a corner that a jackdaw stores his thefts, that a school-boy hides his catapult and all those things that make life worth living. It is in her corner that a

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school-girl conceals that first letter which a man, many years older than herself, has written to her. A letter, perhaps, that he dashed off with an unthinking pen—signing it “yours sincerely” rather than “yours truly,” adding a “God bless you” because, in the haste of the moment, his pen happened to be running that way. It is in our corners, too, that we dream the few dreams that are left us.

Such a corner in the world was this to Peggy, this window-sill in her tiny bedroom with its sloping ceiling under the roof.

Of all she had thought and wondered when, in spare moments of the day, she had crept away there to be alone, it would need a pen divine with inspiration to describe. The thoughts of a girl of seventeen, brought up in the hedged innocence of life, such as she had found in the Presbytery with this celibate priest and his childless housekeeper, are too wonderful, yet too vague and indeterminate to grasp. They are little white butterflies, hovering, yet never touching, now over some terrible abyss, now over some rushing river. But hovering, always hovering they are, until with tired wings they settle upon some simple flower in an old garden. And there, content to forget the gaping chasms and the roaring waters, they lay back their wings in the warmth and brilliance of the sun.

For the world, to a girl of seventeen, is full of these deep, dark precipices, those cataracts, roaring forth such messages to her ears as, for the noise of them, she cannot

understand. But there is always the flower, growing wild in an old garden, for her to rest her eyes upon. That flower, whose name is wrapped up with romantic stories which cannot, yet must for the time, be true.

If this gives but the faintest impression of the strange workings of a girl's mind, then, let it be understood that such was the mind of Peggy Bannister, as she sat on the window-sill, a silhouette against the sky of an August evening—a sky all orange and dust.

It was after seven o'clock. Here and there a light began a-twinkling in far windows over the house-tops. The band in Charing Cross Gardens was making that music which, being free of charge, one has no right to criticize. There are hundreds, in those darksome little alleys of Adelphi, to whom such music is the most beautiful in the world. The strains of it, generously softened by the distance, were drifting up in faint whisperings on little breaths of wind. The hum of traffic in the streets below was hushed—that quiet hush which comes when the day of work is just over and the night of pleasure has scarce begun. Through the thin curtain of her dreams, Peggy listened to it all—as you listen, ill-attentively, to the monotonous voice of one who reads aloud. With dreams, even in her eyes, she watched the curling lines of smoke that issued from the dense forest of chimney-pots below her.

It was then, suddenly, that she beheld the light of the candle in the house opposite. She could see the shadows of the thin wooden banisters, thrown like the

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bars of a cage upon the walls, as Nicolas Gadd made his way up-stairs.

From that moment, her attention was caught. She watched, waiting to see what would happen.

The door of the bedroom on the top-floor opened. It was a room, such as her own, with sloping ceiling under the roof. Indistinctly, she could see the bareness of it all—the cheap chest of drawers—the little iron bedstead—the whitewashed walls.

But once her eyes had taken in these details, they sought again the face of Nicolas Gadd.

With a beaming smile of unaffected appreciation of the place, he was showing a new lodger over the worst room in the house. His hand, holding the candle, pointed first to the bed—the chest of drawers and then—other articles of furniture which were out of sight.

In his awesome, wheezy voice, with the breath forever hissing through that tube he had in his throat, she could almost hear him whisper—

“A beautiful room—every comfort. No carpet on the floor? But there’s nearly always a fire lighted in the room underneath.”

And then, her gaze wandering from Nicolas Gadd, she could just discern in the darkness the face of the new lodger peering over his shoulder into the cheerless room.

At that moment, a gust of wind, scurrying through the passages, blew out the flame of the little farthing candle. She heard the door bang, and found her heart beating unaccountably in the darkness.

CHAPTER II

HOW BABIES ARE BORN

APPARENTLY, that was all. One way or another, the new lodger had decided about the cheerless bedroom under the roof. Which ever way it was, the door was opened again in the darkness, the candle re-lit when it was closed, and down the stairs once more the light descended, the glow of it peeping out through the different landing-windows until it reached the ground floor. Then it disappeared.

Like a kitten, watching the antics of a fallen leaf in sudden gusts of wind, Peggy, with her head in each direction as the light appeared, kept it in sight until the last glimmer. When, finally, it had vanished, she leant back again against the embrasure of the window, pursuing new dreams, one after the other, until each was lost in the twilight.

Who was the young man whose face she had seen peering over the shoulder of Nicolas Gadd? It was impossible to say. They were strange people who came to that lodging-house of Nicolas Gadd's. None, perhaps, so strange as Gadd himself. A vapour of mystery clung about him, apart from that horrible, inhuman tube in

his throat, the name of which she could not pronounce. They said in Adelphi that he was fabulously rich, that he owned many of the houses in the neighbourhood. Yet he lived in squalid rooms in his own lodging-house.

The muffin man who, one wet Sunday afternoon, had been told to come inside and count out his muffins, declared that there were no cushions on the chairs, and that the horsehair was sticking out of the sofa, when you might have thought that a few pence would have mended it.

He was mean, too, was Nicolas Gadd, for once he gave the muffin man a French penny neatly sandwiched in between the two other coppers in payment for three-pennyworth of muffins.

The muffin man had told Peggy this himself, and she believed everything he said. He had always spoken quite openly about himself. He had told her how he came all the way from Walham Green, which was almost as far as she could see from her window-sill. He had told her without reserve about the poor profits that he made out of muffins, and how hard it was in this world for a man to make his two ends meet. Peggy never rightly knew which two ends of him he meant, but she believed him all the same. For Peggy was one of those creatures to whom, if you talked with straight eyes about the Jabberwock, would firmly trust in your honour that you were telling the truth.

The lodgers, then, in Nicolas Gadd's house, were not as strange as he; but they were strange. The last man

who had occupied the little room with the whitewashed walls under the roof, had been taken away by a policeman early one morning. Peggy could see them far away in the street below. She had asked Father O'Leary about it, for a crowd had been following, and it had seemed that something was the matter.

"'Tis some poor fella," said he, "who has got on the wrong side of life."

And that evening, when she said her prayers at the foot of the Hill of Dreams, she made a gentle little request that the "poor fella" might be able to climb back again. For life, from that moment, was pictured in her mind with a wall running down the middle of it—a wall, topped with broken glass bottles, such as had protected Mrs. Gooseberry's orchard from the road. And one side was the right and the other—well—that was the side the "poor fella" was on when the policeman found him early that Monday morning. Ever afterwards, from that day, she somehow connected the little bedroom on the third floor of the house opposite with the wrong side of that wall which was topped with the broken glass bottles.

There may have been some of this association in her mind when her heart beat so unreasonably at the sight of that young man's face contrasting vividly with the cunning features of Nicolas Gadd by the flickering light of his farthing candle. For beating it certainly was, even then. She wondered why. She could feel it in a strange little pulse in her throat. She rubbed her

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hands over her eyes. Was it because he had seemed so young, so fresh to life to be on the wrong side of it already? For there he was, like the other "poor fella." She had not a doubt about that.

From this she began speculating upon when the policeman would come to fetch him away as well. The policeman was a nice man. She knew the policeman well. He had passed the time of day with her, and shown her many other little courtesies besides, ever since she was eight years old. But it was no good her appealing to him.

When he spoke about duty—and he often did with a large "D" in his throat—his eyebrows knitted together, and he looked unutterable things.

Once she had appealed to him on the subject of a little boy who had stolen a herring from a stall in New Street. At that time—she was ten—she had thought that the policeman who caught the miscreant punished him himself.

Constable X03 had not exactly undeceived her on that point, for it had grossly flattered his vanity. He had pulled at his moustache, stuck out one leg and, loosening the belt around his waist, had answered her question from a general point of view, avoiding incorrect details.

"For them as does wrong, miss," he said oracularly, "there's only one thing—" and he toyed with one of the silver buttons on his breast.

"What's that?" she asked in a little breath.

He drew back his foot and struck out the other one.

"The Law," said he.

So that there was no good in her approaching him about the young man. Could she warn the young man herself?

She began to fancy how it could be done, and then, as the sky changed from orange to dust, from dust to smoke, from smoke to a grey of pearl, her dreams changed too, drifting, imperceptibly, the one into the other, as colours are blended through the threads of a piece of silk.

She made up little stories, the quaintest of conceptions, about the people who lived in the houses below. At odd moments they would appear at their windows, in all sorts of costumes, doing all sorts of odd things. Men in their shirt sleeves might be seen shaving—even at that hour of the day. Women would be doing their hair—or sitting, tight pressed up against the window, sewing little garments against time; trying to catch the last moments of the light while it held. There were some who seemed always to be washing up dishes, no matter what time of the day it was. They never had any opportunity of a meal for themselves.

That was one side of life, if she had only known it. But there was none of the realist in Peggy. The only food that Father O'Leary had given her was the manna of idealism, making life itself one of those fairy stories that come true.

And so from her little perch on the window-sill, with

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all this kinetoscope of the world passing before her, she saw none of the seamy side of it. A seamy side there was indeed. There always is. But, for those who have the heart to see it, there is the plain cloth, too. It is very plain sometimes, perhaps—very, very plain indeed; yet there are few in this world, when you come truly to look into it, who will not rather turn out that plain cloth side to the light.

To every one of these people, appearing in their odd moments through her dreams, Peggy had given names. When your stories are real stories, the people in them must have names. You will find that out when you come to tell a child of six some little narrative of your own.

Fortunately for her, Peggy never came across these individuals in the streets. The houses in that quarter are so massed, so jumbled together—for all the world like a pack of cards, by reason of which you cannot tell whether they are standing on their heads or their heels—that she never knew upon which thoroughfare they faced. Nor, indeed, had she any great inclination to find out. There may—you never know with these children—have been some fear in the heart of her that she would discover the identity of the Lady Godiva who so often brushed out her hair at six o'clock in the evening. She might have learnt that that beautiful creature was nothing more nor less than the proprietress of a fried fish shop, with a name, terrible to think about, painted up over the door. Now where the name Lady

Godiva is a blissful sound, surely it were folly to prove it to be Mrs. Huggins?

At that moment, when the Lady Godiva had just left her window, with hair burnished and brushed, Mrs. Parfitt softly opened the door of Peggy's bedroom. So silently did she peep in, that Peggy never heard her. For a short space of time, Mrs. Parfitt waited, hoping that she might turn of her own accord, when it could not be said that she had disturbed her. But Peggy never looked round, and, with a smile that might have been of disappointment, or simply of satisfaction, just according to the light in which you saw it, she closed the door as silently as she had opened it and disappeared.

Peggy's mind was too far away then to be disturbed by any slight interruption such as this. When the Lady Godiva had vanished, she had fallen to watching the smoke as it curled and twisted, upwards and upwards, like winding scarves of silk, from the endless rows of chimneys that stood above the house-tops.

It was to this dream, the last of all, that her mind always came. For this was the most wonderful. This was the wild flower in the old garden upon which, with tired wings, her mind always rested.

There had come a day, once, when Peggy was nine years old, and the muffin man, in a thoughtless moment had said—gleefully—with a beaming smile that nearly upset the whole tray of muffins—

“I'm goin' to 'ave another baby, Miss.”

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"When?" asked Peggy.

"Next week as ever is," said he.

Such events never take place in a week that never was. It is only misfortunes that happen then.

"What are you going to call it?" she asked.

Its name, you see. Almost the first question.

"Well—that depends," he replied. And the very way he rang his bell seemed a mystery to Peggy. She would have asked him more questions, but he descried a frantic arm waving wildly from an upper window and he fled. You know one does wave frantically for the muffin man. He so easily gets away into other streets.

That evening, still nursing her mystery, Peggy had placed both hands in Father O'Leary's and, with those grey-blue pebbles of hers, she had looked up seriously into his eyes.

"Daddy O'Leary," said she.

"Well—?" he replied.

"How is babies born?" she asked.

Mrs. Parfitt, who was clearing away the supper things, picked up a salt-cellar and left the room. His glance pitifully followed her.

"Faith," said he—"it's a terrible long story that."

Without another word, she climbed up on to his knee and took hold of his watchchain.

"Gee up!" said she.

There was nothing for it, then, but to start on the hazardous journey.

"Well—" he began, after a long pause—and in that

pause he had found time to say a little prayer. I must tell you what the prayer was, for never was a poor man placed in such a predicament, and the repetition of that prayer may help others in the same plight.

“Holy Mother—help me to tell a dacent lie.”

Its simplicity is its recommendation. Moreover, if there is but little time, as usually is the case in these matters, it is conveniently short and to the point.

“Well,” said he—“I’ll tell ye. There’s a fella what hangs about the chimney-pots; ye’ll see him on dark nights when it’s as black as that old hat of mine and ye can’t make out yeer hand in front of yeer face.”

“How can ye see him, then?” asked Peggy.

“Ah—shure be a good child and don’t be asking questions,” said he testily—“faith, aren’t I tellin’ as fast as I can how ye’ll see him? He’s as much like Santa Claus as two pins. There’s divil a hair to choose between ’em.”

“What’s divil mean?” asked Peggy.

For the first time in his life, Father O’Leary was made conscious that he used the word.

“Did I say divil?” he asked.

“You did,” said she.

“Yirra, I must be excited,” said he—“for I generally swallow that word backwards, whenever I hear it coming up my throat. It’s not a nice word—it is not. Will ye forget I said it, please, while I go on with my story. I was saying this fella’s the dead spit of Santa Claus.

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He is so. And he has the divil of a big sack on top of his shoulders and 'tis the way it's just filled up to the brim of it with babies."

Peggy slipped her arms round his neck and whispered in his ear, for fear any one was listening.

"You said it again," said she.

"Did I?" he asked in amazement. "Well—Glory be to God—'tis a fright I am with myself. Shure, I hardly know what I'm saying. If I say it again, don't stop me, because it destroys me a'logether with the story. I shall be forgetting the whole of it."

Peggy unclasped her arms. She kissed him and promised to say no more.

"Well, 'tis the way he puts the babies down the chimney," continued Father O'Leary—"and if there's nobody there, or it may be they are there and don't want to see them—shure, God help them!—well, there's nothing for them but the poor little things catch alight and go up with the smoke through the chimney."

"The creatures!" said Peggy.

"It is the creatures, indeed," replied he—"but shure, they don't feel it. They're fast asleep. Didn't I tell ye the night was as black as that hat of mine? And faith, that's the way babies are born. But I wouldn't ask any one about it if I were you. There's divil a one, but hasn't been outside playing, when the fella came—and they'd be sorry for it afterwards. Asking them

would only remind them of it." He stopped suddenly with a quaint expression of misgiving. "Tell me," said he—"Did I say it then?"

Peggy nodded her head, once, twice, thrice.

"As many as that?" said he.

"No—only once."

"And will ye forgive me?"

At that moment, Mrs. Parfitt had returned and found Peggy, with her arms round Father O'Leary's neck, bestowing the absolution of her kiss.

"Shall I take her up to bed?" asked Mrs. Parfitt courageously. She had been standing in the kitchen ever since, with one hand on the dresser and the other on her hip, saying long prayers which had never reached Father O'Leary's for swiftness.

"Shall I take her up to bed?" she repeated, with less courage than before.

"Shure, she's quite happy where she is," Father O'Leary had replied in triumph.

Here, then, was the birth of that dream, the last upon which her mind rested. There came, in the years that followed, a half-frightened, half-tremulous suspicion that that story which Father O'Leary had told her was not quite, not absolutely true. But she could never thrust it completely from her beliefs. And so, the dim substance of it remaining, you find her on this evening in August, when seventeen years had shed their summers on her mouse-coloured hair—you find her, seated on the window-sill, watching the spirits of the babies in their

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long, grey, trailing vestments, as they lifted up to heaven.

Occasionally, after that evening when Father O'Leary had told her about the "fella" who was the dead spit of Santa Claus, she had asked questions, always wondering why Mrs. Parfitt got so busy and had so much to do that she could never answer them. And then, after a time—the time when she began to suspect that it was not all true—her questions fell to silence. She asked no more. By the time she was seventeen, it began to dawn upon her that there was no "fella" with a sack on his back after all.

Often, she used to look up to the sky, following the grey trails of smoke, and aloud—for she was one of those little fairy people whose dreams are the most real things about them—she would say—

"I expect it's God."

She was expecting it was God then. The smoke went up to heaven with every indication that her suspicion was correct.

At last, as the lights in all the houses began to glow, and the tinkle of hansom bells grew louder, there was a knock and the door opened again.

"Peggy," said Father O'Leary—"are ye never coming down to have yeer supper? Shure, what are ye doing, child?"

"I'm thinking," said Peggy.

"What are ye thinking of?"

"The smoke coming out of the chimneys."

Father O'Leary turned hurriedly to descend the stairs.

"Well—I'm going to have supper," said he.

In a moment she was down from the window-sill and running after him. On the stairs, she caught his arm.

"Daddy," said she.

"Holy Mother," he began under his breath.

"Well," he replied.

"There's a new lodger come to the top floor of Nicolas Gadd's. D'you think the policeman will come and fetch him away?"

"Faith, I shouldn't be surprised," said he, with a breath of relief. "Ye'd better tell him that he ought to be careful of himself."

CHAPTER III

INKY

It is here, that Inky—than whom, there has been no other kitten her like before or since—it is here that Inky finds her way into this chronicle.

I do not question, I unhesitatingly agree that it is bad workmanship to introduce into any history, that which does not concern or lead to its ultimate development. When, therefore, I first reviewed the events of which this chronicle records, I felt that the question of including the character of Inky—however charming, however full of fascination she might be—was one in which the scales must be well adjusted before the balance was decided in her favour.

But now that I view them, spread out before me, as it were in one whole piece of patchwork, I cannot find it, either in the heart, or the judgment of me, to let her go. She is that one small patch of cheap red flannel, in the company of hundreds of pieces of vari-coloured satins, which add the subtlest touch of reality to the patchwork quilt.

When you see that little piece of red flannel, you know how driven was the poor lady to eke out her

material to make the perfect square. You know also, if it so be that you are generous-hearted, that she had made it the last ambition of her life to complete that dainty handiwork; that she yearned to be remembered in this world by those who thankfully drew it about their shoulders ere they went to sleep. You will suppose moreover, that, hard put to it to find that other piece, she took her scissors and, lifting her alpaca skirt of many folds, she cut it off her petticoat. And last of all, you will imagine her little sigh as she heard the scissors snip.

And it is just this that I claim as my reason for bringing Inky into this chronicle. I want to make the perfect square. And so I see in her the resemblance to that little patch of cheap red flannel, for she was only a common little cat. You will see her like peering through the railings at the top of many an area steps—yet never her like. There has been no other kitten like her.

She brings with her, just that slight touch of reality, subtle yet quite common reality, which, in our eyes, must justify her existence.

For Peggy found her, starving, whining, peering down into the deep, black water of the river on the Embankment as though she were just about to determine upon that terrible wish—the most awful, yet pardonable wish that life can bring to you. And Peggy, having in the heart of her that greatest wish in the world, not yet awake it is true, but murmuring as it were in its

slumber, she brought her home, tight wrapped against her heart.

When first she saw the little creature—her thin black tail erect—but we come to this later.

The band was playing in Charing Cross Gardens again, the night after Peggy had seen the new lodger with Nicolas Gadd. Thither she went, begging the penny of Father O'Leary for those little orange-coloured programmes—the most generous programmes I know. They give you admission into that circle where sit the elect penny public of Adelphi. What is more, with a free and easy hand, they throw in a seat along with it. It may be next to the woman who sells you candles and White Rose oil in the daytime. But at night, what does that matter? At night, when the shutters are up, and we can but pay for our seats, we are all of a muchness.

It is that paying for the seats that does it. To be unable to do that, is to be outclassed.

The greatest insult I ever heard, moreover the one which had the greatest effect, was offered by one Irishman to another. It merely serves to point the truth of what I say.

They had been clashing their wits together and neither had the advantage of the other. At last said one—

“Yirra, ye ould yahoo, ye! Ye haven't the price of the sate ye're sittin' on!”

'There was no more to be said; for unfortunately it was true. Oh, undoubtedly, so long as we pay for

our seats, we are brothers and sisters. It is not a bit of good our criticizing the bonnet or the skirt of the woman who serves us with candles and White Rose oil. She is criticizing our hat and the cut of our trousers.

By the same token, the little girls and boys, crowding around you in these places, whose savour perhaps is not the sweetest in the world, are at perfect liberty to exclaim, when you discreetly put your handkerchief to your nose—

“Eugh! He smells of scent!”

They have every right to the exclamation. And here, perhaps, I see a faint shadow of difference between them and you. For I presume that you, at least, do not say aloud what you think. At least, I hope not.

Here, then went Peggy, timidly buying her programme and choosing her seat on one of the chairs which range round that bandstand, for all the world as if they were meted out for a parcel of school children come to learn their lessons.

They are so ambitious, these Park Bands. They do so want to educate the public ear to what is good in music. And so they play the Peer Gynt—the Schubert symphony in C. They will give you the Dead March of Chopin with never a note of the grave in it. How can you bring a note of the grave into a trombone, when all the time you are thinking of that comfortable little public-house in Duke Street where you hope to rest and drink your beer when your work is done?

But the good people, the penny public of Adelphi, sit

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patiently and listen, taking their cues of applause from that one educated gentleman amongst them, who knows all the classics off by heart—and says—in a loud voice so that every one can hear—“My God!” when the cornet plays a wrong note.

He is a happy fellow all the same, is that educated gentleman. I believe he would be really disappointed if the cornet played all his notes correct. It would rob him of that glorious opportunity of turning round to the assembled company with an expression as if to say—“There! What do you think of that? That’s what the County Council gives us! That’s what we have to pay rates for!” It would rob him too of that golden exclamation—“My God!” which earns for him so many a glance of admiration and respect.

From him, the lady who sells you White Rose oil, takes all her cues. When he says “My God” she screws up her face as if she were biting a lemon. The vibrations of that false note may long have passed her by. But that is not the point. There are some people who do not find their disapproval of bad music until the next day, when they have seen the papers. Her paper is the face of the educated gentleman and she reads it in large type. Moreover she reads it then and there.

He is quite a useful man, is the educated gentleman. The County Council should put him on their books. They should pay him a salary. He is an excellent fellow and gets his meaning home far deeper than does the conductor who, as he wields his baton with a loose

and dainty wrist, is saying to himself: "Just a couple of stiff 'uns and then home."

There is an old man too in the audience who taps his foot to every beat of the music. He is probably an advanced musician as well; but he is of no service to our lady of the White Rose oil. She takes no lead from him; for his foot goes on a-beating through all the notes good and bad, with the same amiable regularity. I have even seen him go to sleep over it; yet his foot still goes on a-beating.

But when it comes to the selection from a musical comedy which, sometimes, this highly learned band of the County Council does descend to play—ah! then our lady needs no cue from any. Her bonnet bobs in time. The little aigrette of beads sways gaily to the music. And on her ample lap, she strums her fingers to the notes to let you know that there is a piano in the sitting-room at the back of the little oil shop and that the noises which issue therefrom are hers.

Here it was, amongst all these that Peggy sat, knowing no more about music than the rest of them. It was just the being there, the rows of cheery, gaudy lights about the bandstand, the noise of the music and the lines of strange faces that looked so white and tired in the vivid illumination—it was just these things that pleased her. Moreover, she made up stories about the people, even here. When you can make up stories, the world is a wonderful place.

She made up a story about the young man and the

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young girl who were sitting just in front of her. The girl held a baby in her arms. She whispered to it as it blinked its eyes.

All babies listen with their eyes. What is more, you would be surprised to know how much they can hear.

She was a fair, grey-eyed girl, with a lovable lock of hair that would fall loose upon her forehead. Her face was tired, but very, very patient. Now and again the young man, her husband, drew her attention to some passage in the book which he was reading. It was an old tattered volume of Shakespeare. He was reading the Sonnets.

"Look," said he.

Leaning over his shoulder, she read the line his finger pointed to, then smiled into his face because she had not understood a word of it, and thought how clever he must be. Again she would whisper to her baby, the baby would blink his eyes, and glancing up from his volume, the young father watched them, wondering if any man had ever chosen so beautiful a wife as he had chosen, or possessed so fine a baby in the world.

Peggy made her story out of them. That was not hard. They made it for her. She made her story out of the man who was ostentatiously drawing pictures on little pieces of paper. He was very shy of being watched, was this artist. Whenever any one tried to see what he was doing, he covered up his little sketch with his hand and pretended to have forgotten all about it. But if they waited long enough, they were

bound to catch him off his guard. It was so tactful, the way he let them catch him, just when their curiosity was up to the pitch he had desired—but seldom before.

But, as Peggy's eyes wandered up and down the lines of faces, they met another pair of eyes some little distance away, gazing intently at her own. Suddenly, her heart began whispering in short, quick beats. She looked away. Her eyes would have none of that, and back they came again.

Swift though her impression had been, lasting but the touch of a moment before the farthing candle had blown out, she knew this was the new lodger at Nicolas Gadd's. There was no mistaking his clean, fresh face, the simple eyes like a dog's that watch your every movement. There was something about those eyes—a something that had not as yet described itself in her mind—which she could not mistake.

Again and again she forced her eyes to steady themselves in some other direction, but back they would come, and back they would come, just, if you please, to see whether he were still looking. And every time they met afresh, her heart set to a-whispering and a-twittering for all the world like some fussy little sparrow that has dropped out of its nest before it has properly learnt to fly.

It came at last to be that she was frightened. There appeared that look in those eyes of hers, that look of the field-mouse, not knowing whether to eat or run away. Oh, but the look was intensified a thousand

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times now! She tried in vain to read the print on her little orange-coloured programme. But the Overture to *Euryanthe*, by Weber, meant nothing to her. Why, she could not even pronounce it. The *Dream Pantomime* from *Hansel and Gretel* caught her attention for one brief moment, and then, only because it was by *Humperdinck*.

There is some promise in a name like that. There is a story in it straight away. You can see a cave in a mountain. You can hear the rap-tap-ting a' tong, tong, tong, of the little hammer as it jumps from the red-hot iron to the ringing anvil. And if you peep inside, you can see the wee, hunched-up figure of the dwarf—*Humperdinck*—plying his trade. This is the value of names.

It even for the moment called to her mind the little rhyme that *Father O'Leary* had so often told her of the *Leprechaun*—

“Tip—tap, rip—rap,
Tick-a-tack-too!
Scarlet leather, sewn together,
This will make a shoe.”

And all this—just out of the name of—*Humperdinck*. But it did not last for long. Once more her eyes came up from the programme, and she found the eyes of the new lodger gazing gently, patiently into hers. Then no orange-coloured programme, no names or memories of the fairies could hold her then. There was no doubt in her mind as to what she should do. She ran away. In a moment, when she saw that he

was not looking, she slipped from her seat and hurried away in the opposite direction to which his head was turned.

It brought her out on to the Embankment. That did not matter. It was quite as easy to go round by Villiers Street back to the Presbytery.

When once she knew that she was out of sight, the whispered beating of her heart died gradually down to silence. For it was not that she had been frightened of him. How could she have been frightened of him? Why, he had looked frightened of her! He was a stranger to London, that was certain from the wonder in his eyes. So much, at least, she had realized of him. But the fear that she had had was none the less poignant in her breast.

It was that timidity, perhaps, that the butterfly has, when it soars over the boiling cataract. It knows, no doubt, that there is little fear but it will reach the wild-flower in the old garden, on which to stretch its wings. Yet there below, is the roar of the rushing waters, which lead, if it did but know it, to the quiet river that washes the banks through the meadows of content.

In those moments, Peggy's fear had been nothing more than this. Yet it had driven her to run away. And only when she was outside the gardens on the Embankment, did she feel quite safe. But safe of what? That she had no words to express.

And then it was that she saw Inky.

On the parapet that guards the dark water, she

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beheld a little black figure, its tail erect—a slim wire stalk that has been stiffened upwards at a sharp right angle. With its front legs walking straight and its back legs walking sideways, it was hugging the very edge of the wall. One false step of those wee, black paws and it would have been lost for ever.

Peggy held her breath.

“Kitty,” she whispered, and her hand stretched gently out to reach it.

When Inky saw her, she opened her little mouth. You could see her tiny tongue, as red as red. But scarcely any sound came forth in that piteous, silent cry. She was too weak, too hungry to whine aloud. She opened her little mouth. She took one step towards Peggy’s hand. One step more and then Peggy’s fingers closed round the thin, emaciated little body. Then, nestling close up into the folds of Peggy’s coat, and finding it warm where all the world was cold, she began to hum her song of thanksgiving—a rolling, gentle noise, so weak that Peggy had to bend down her head close to the little body to hear it.

All fear was gone then. As she bound her arms tight round it, her heart took the beating of another note. It was as though some strange, great wish that she had never expressed had been realized at last, and as fast as her legs would carry her, she hurried up with her little burden to the Presbytery.

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH HISTORY SETS OUT TO REPEAT ITSELF

If it were not permitted of history to repeat itself, the chroniclers would be in a poor way. They would, in fact, be as hard put to it as the lady of the patchwork quilt, to make a perfect square of volumes.

But, thank the Fates! such liberty is permitted. When, therefore, Peggy brought up the kitten into the Presbytery and, holus bolus, laid it down in Father O'Leary's lap, the old priest looked up at Mrs. Parfitt and—

"I dunno," said he, blinking his eyes—"but either I'm getting fuddled in me head, or this has happened before."

"It was one evening after Benediction," began Mrs. Parfitt—"about seventeen years ago."

"That'll do," said he. And then, with a wink in his eyes, he looked at Peggy. "Is it the way ye want me to go and get her some milk?" said he.

They marched down to the larder together.

"May be the poor mite 'ud like a wee bite of this cold mutton?" said he, his hand hesitating on the milk jug.

"Meat!" exclaimed Peggy. "Why she's only two

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or three weeks old! I only hope she'll be able to lap the milk herself."

Father O'Leary nodded his head, accepting the reproof.

"I'm not a bit wiser," said he, aloud to himself.

"How wiser?"

"Oh, shure—wiser than I was. It was a cold sirloin then."

"Well—hand me down the milk jug," said Peggy, too intent upon her little burden to listen to his mumbling. He did as he was bid. As he passed it to her, he looked inside.

"Shure, Glory be to God!" he exclaimed. "There is no milk at all."

Peggy's face fell.

"I must go and get some then," said she.

"Is it at this time of night?" he replied—"Here—give the jug to me. 'Tis the way Fate has the twist of all this. Give me the jug. I'll just slip down to New Street with it meself."

And out he went, the milk jug tucked under his coat. Mrs. Parfitt heard of his departure from Peggy, and if it can be said that a person smiles in all solemnity, then let that expression of countenance be imagined in Mrs. Parfitt.

"He wanted to give the creature meat," said Peggy.

"Indeed," said Mrs. Parfitt—"well—I'm not surprised."

It was very brief, that remark, meaning nothing to Peggy. But Father O'Leary would have found the amazing amount of substance it contained.

In five minutes he returned, opening the door cautiously first and peeping in.

"Where's Mummy Parfitt?" he asked guardedly.

"Down in the kitchen," replied Peggy.

He stepped right in, closing the door and unbuttoning his coat.

"I've brought a pint," said he—"will that be enough?" He gave her the jug.

She kissed him impulsively. The next second she had almost forgotten his existence. Inky was lapping up the milk—looking up sometimes to give a brief note of her song, then swallowing it again with the milk.

"The poor wee mite," said Father O'Leary.

"The creature!" said Peggy.

"Say that again," said he in a whisper.

"The creature!" she repeated.

"Ye didn't tell Mrs. Parfitt I went out to get the milk, did ye?" he asked.

Peggy nodded her head.

"Sch! Sch! Sch!" said he.

"Why?" asked Peggy in surprise.

"Oh, shure, 'tis only the way she mightn't think it dignified. 'Tis nothing at all. Ye didn't tell her I thought the kitten might be taking a bit of the cold mutton, did ye?"

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She looked up at him with solemn eyes, nodding her head once more.

He fingered the gold cross on his watchchain.

"I'm sorry for that," said he.

"But why?"

"Oh—shure, no why—only just."

There was a little pause.

"And what did she say?" he asked.

"She said—'Indeed I'm not surprised.'"

"Oh—Glory be to God! Did she say that? Oh, dear!"

"But did it matter?" said Peggy.

"Well—it *did* matter," said he—"and in a kind of a way of speaking, it did *not*."

"Well—say it didn't," she begged.

"Faith, I'll do anything in the world to please ye," said he.

Peggy slipped an arm round his neck.

"I know what matters most," she said.

"What is that?"

She dragged his head down to a level with Inky's little body, so that, for all the world, he looked like a sun-worshipper, making obeisance upon a mat.

"Listen to that," said she—"if you put your ear very close, you can hear her hum in between the milk."

With both eyes screwed up, he listened with all his might.

"Ye can indeed," said he—and a big smile spread over his face as he leant his cheek against the floor.

At that moment Mrs. Parfitt entered.

"You can—what?" she asked.

Father O'Leary scrambled to his feet. There was a speck of dust on the knees of his trousers, so he had to bend down, hiding his face, to brush it off.

"You can—what?" repeated Mrs. Parfitt.

"Hear her hum," said Peggy, still lying on the floor.

Father O'Leary's eyes met Mrs. Parfitt's, they were still looking to him for an answer.

"Hear her hum," said he meekly.

CHAPTER V

THE HERO FOR ROMANCE

THE heroine of Romance is she who, sitting by the still, deep pool that lies in the heart of some forest of Arden, waits motionless, watching the placid water until, gazing over her shoulder in the crystal reflection, there appears the face of her lover.

Then she runs away.

The hero of Romance is he who, mounted upon some brave steed, his heart stout-beating with a great and boundless hope, searches the world over for the maid whom he must win. With his sword ever loose within its scabbard, his eyes ever alight to danger on the road, he journeys tirelessly on, in his quest of great endeavour. He has no fear in face of the fires of fate. He lacks no courage before the waters of destruction. And then, finding the maid in the forest, with a chaplet of daisies about her head, his heart turns to water, his courage to a breath of wind that fans upon his cheek and is gone. The dangers through which he has passed, the fights he has waged, the battles he has won, seem only as playthings to the terrible knowledge he discovers in her eyes.

In that moment then, as she runs away, he becomes, not as the huntsman pursuing his quarry to the earth, but as a little child, following, with footsteps that are blind, that light of the will-o'-the-wisp which leads, he knows not whither, nor does he ask.

There may be other heroes and other heroines than these ; but, however much the world has need of them, they do not touch Romance.

Peggy Bannister—Stephen Gale—these two must touch the very heart of it. For one of the first qualities of Romance is that you are a child in the fingers of destiny. There can be no such thing as taking Fate into your own hands. If you have not within you the heart of a child, then it is a warfare, is life—in the which you are the captain of your soul, leading it to victory or to defeat. A noble warfare maybe it is ; but blood is spilt and tragedy is always lurking there, like a vulture to feed upon her prey.

Now in Romance, there is no bloodshed. You will find no tragedy there. For Romance is that childlike submission to the beauty which is inevitable in life ; that beauty which every one of us may find if our eyes are but young enough to see and our hearts but young enough to understand.

And the youth of Peggy is so tangible a thing, that there can be no need to question it. For youth it is, neither in being innocent, nor in being ignorant, nor in being young ; but in the way you know the big facts of life. Every one knows such facts exist. There are

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none so innocent as can avoid such knowledge as that. But those who can wrap them in the simple garment of Romance are they that are young, young with a youth that lasts throughout the threescore years and ten, and carries old folk still laughing, still crying, still children to their last journey up the Hill of Dreams.

Peggy had youth then. We have no doubt of that. Father O'Leary he had his youth as well and Mrs. Parfitt too, in her own peculiar way. But Stephen Gale, the new lodger at Nicolas Gadd's, you may wonder how he at twenty-eight, comes to be possessed of such a quality. They are always so very old, these boys of twenty-eight.

Perhaps it is work and the stern responsibilities of life that make them so. The clerk in the city office who finds it necessary in this world to wear those paper cuff-protectors with their elastic bands, who carries in his pocket the correspondence he has received over a period of six months until at last it almost spoils his figure, is so weighted with care that his cheeks grow pallid, grey hairs peep out on to his temples and he forgets that it is just as manly to be young.

He has a whole family of appearances to support. His coat must be the latest cut, his boots the latest fashion. He must carry a coloured handkerchief up his sleeve. It must match his shirt. By the same token, it must be in harmony with his tie. He must keep in touch with the theatres. He must entertain that man who has a friend whose brother knows a man who is

acquainted with a leading actress. And all these things are responsibilities which sap him of his glorious youth.

It is responsibilities such as these which, in our cities, make the young man of twenty-eight, so old.

Their weight is more than he can bear. The cares and tribulations that they bring are more than he can hope to battle with. From being old then at twenty-eight, he totters sadly through life, till his office stool falls empty and some other youth grows aged in his place.

Yet there is one calling in this life—one of the few that is left us—where responsibilities weigh no more than feathers in the breeze; where there are no tribulations to distress and harass the gentle mind and where men are always children, never growing old, never passing into that pitiable decay which you may see in the thousand faces in the city streets.

It is the calling of the sea.

And this it is—this calling—to which Stephen Gale belonged.

Once in its life, so they will tell you, a reindeer must touch the sea. Wherever it may be, however many the miles which separate it from its desire, there comes that moment in its life when, raising its head, it scents the far-off brine. There is no power can hold it then.

With a thumping heart and eyes bright set with purpose, it journeys forth, leaving the herd. For days and days together, never touching food, never soothing

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its lips with water, it struggles on. Many there are that die of hunger and fatigue in obedience to this strange summons of the sea. Yet once the call has come, they do not flinch, they do not hesitate. The distant cry of those breaking waters finds so deep an echo; the far-off murmur of those boundless winds strikes so deep a note that, leaving all dear to them, seeking danger and braving death, they must answer that penetrating call—the call of the sea.

And it is so with men. And it was so with Stephen Gale.

At the age of fifteen, running away from school, leaving his parents, leaving his home, with a heart thumping and with eyes bright, he answered to the music of that call. The touch of the sea was in his fingers. The scent of it in his nostrils. He could not shut his ears to the sound of that cry. One night they found his bed empty. The call of the sea had reached him. He had gone.

So far it is with the reindeer, as it is with the man—so far but no farther. When once the reindeer feels the wash of those salt waters on its breast; when once the great breadth and depth of the sea's solitude has lain before its eyes; then it returns to the herd, the great call answered, the great desire fulfilled.

But there is only one thing that can win back the man when once he has seen the grey-green waters, or heard the booming of the waves on shore. For when once the sea has called him, then it always calls. Its cry is as

incessant as the sea-birds' wheeling on the wind. Its joys are as unchanging as the red lamp that burns before the High Altar. Doubtless there is the thrill of reaching shore, of stepping it upon a steady ground again. There are the new faces to be seen, the new voices to be heard. But these joys are nothing to the endless variety of the sea. For the sea can frown, the sea can smile. There is laughter and there are tears, there are gentle whisperings and there are tremendous oaths all to be found in that expressive countenance of the sea.

On shore, it is the changing in the face of man which you must read ; but at sea, it is the changing in the face of God. On shore, it is by the glare of limelight that men work and in the eyes of man. It is only the sailor who labours by the flickering light of the little tallow candle, where none may see him ; but he labours in the eyes of God.

And one thing and one only will call him back ; for one thing and one only will he leave the ship that has borne him safely over so many waters. It is a woman with a little child.

Without these, he will still go labouring on. One day you will see him ashore, declaring with an oath that his last trip has been made. The next, he is off once more. A better berth, a swifter ship, the faintest excuse will serve to drag him back. Off he goes, his world's belongings tied and knotted in a single red handkerchief—off into that strange sweep of the unknown to wrestle with God in the winds that scour the ocean.

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Oh, it is little wonder that sailors are children till they die! That gazing out to sea through the long watches. That absence of all contact with man, that constancy of contact with God, these are the conditions in which it is impossible ever to leave childhood. Their playmates are the stars. Is it any wonder that they believe in fairy tales? Their work is that endless conflict with the sea. Is it any wonder that they have no time to grow old?

For that is the secret of it all. It takes time and it takes leisure to grow old.

And that is why, in the beginning of this digression I have cited to you the city clerk with all his responsibilities and all his cares in life. No wonder he is old at twenty-eight. He never sees the face of God from the beginning of one day to the end of it. We none of us do in the cities of the world.

Therefore, since it is incumbent upon me to choose for my hero of Romance one who, seeing the maid whom he must win, follows her with the blind eyes and the fearing heart of a little child—so it is that I choose a man, voyaging upon deep waters.

I say I chose him. That is not true. In choice there is free-will; but I have no free-will in this matter.

Stephen Gale was a sailor. But had he not been a sailor, this story had never been written. I had no choice but to take that which I found.

CHAPTER VI

AN ACQUAINTANCE

IN London it may justly be said of you that you are alone when your only acquaintances are the landlord of your lodging-house, the muffin man who plies his trade down your street and the little maid-of-all-work who makes your bed of a morning.

When the *Elizabeth Warren* was docked for repairs off Limehouse Reach and Stephen Gale came up to London until further orders, these were the only people he knew. Now there is not much to be said for an acquaintance with a man to whom you have to pay money every week. It seldom ripens into friendship. There is something about the man which savours of meanness. You give him a wide berth. A woman, a landlady, she is a different matter. In nine cases out of ten, she brings you your meals and stands by while you eat them. Her conversation has in it the same principle as that of Sequah's band which was played to drown the cries of the patients. She talks that you may have no opportunity of saying what you think. In despair at last, you will admit, perhaps, that the hashed veal is excellent. Then she goes away. You cannot go back from that statement. She, therefore, is different.

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But a landlord—well—you can avoid him, and say what you like to the little maid-of-all-work. She will never repeat it. We rule out Nicolas Gadd then. Even had conversation with him been likely, that tracheotomy tube would have made it distinctly disagreeable. With one finger on the orifice in his throat, he would hiss out his words at you. They never seemed to be human words. It was 'like the miracle of some animal that speaks. Not a nice animal even then. Be compelled to pay a man like that the sum of seventeen shillings every week, and I deny in any one the desire to hold him in converse.

Lizzie, the little maid-of-all-work, and Pinchers, the man of muffins, these were the only real human beings of Stephen Gale's acquaintance, when first he came to stay in the little lodging which lies packed in between the houses behind Maiden Lane.

Of Lizzie in her faded print, which once was blue or pink or grey—even she had almost forgotten—a whole chapter in digression might well be penned. She ~~is~~—but I will not attempt it. Lizzie has no concern with us. There is but one event which can be laid at her door. If you could have seen her door! If you could have heard its dismal creak—her bedroom door in the attic, with chinks of light admitted through every joining of the flimsy matchboards! What a glimpse into life you would get if for one moment I brought you to peer through those chinks. But it is the event we are to consider.

Lizzie recommended Stephen to the acquaintance of Pinchers.

Beyond one hopeless, heart-breaking moment when she had believed that Stephen was to be the hero of whom she had read, Lizzie did no more for the story than this. She recommended Pinchers.

It was the third morning of his visit to London. Stephen was having that meal which, for want of a name in the weekly bill, was called his breakfast.

"I fried the bottom out'a one of them eggs," said Lizzie, as she laid the plate before him—"but I think yer'll find it all right."

Your knowledge of cooking, when confined to the culinary on board a full-rigged sailing ship, is not that of a connoisseur. Stephen turned the egg over to look at the part of which Lizzie complained.

"There's not much wrong with it," said he.

"There ain't no yolk," she explained—"it bust."

"I haven't eaten an egg for eleven weeks," he confessed while she was making the bed. "All our chickens died—every jack one of them—died off Aden. It was like knocking down ninepins."

"Lor!" said Lizzie. She pulled out the bed at an acute angle from the wall, squeezing her thin body in between. "Didn't know you 'ad chickens on a ship!"

At that moment, just as Stephen was about to begin his meal, he saw the little dormer window of the Presbytery swing open, while on the window-sill was placed a tiny black kitten. With infinite care, it was shown

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how to jump down into the court below would mean instant death, at the same time that it would break the heart of the person who held it with tight fingers about its small black body. Stephen smiled as he watched these unmistakable signs of all that was taking place.

When the quaint little person in the house opposite had disappeared again, he turned to Lizzie.

"Who is the little girl who lives in that house there?" said he, and he pointed through the window to the Presbytery.

Lizzie left the bed and came readily to follow the line of his finger with her eyes.

"That one what sits on the window-sill?"

"Yes. I've seen her sitting there."

"Oh—'er." The tone was contemptuous. She went back to the bed. "I don't know. She don't 'ave much to do 'oever she is. I 'aven't seen 'er cleanin' the steps of a mornin'."

Stephen imagined not. The tone of contempt in Lizzie's voice almost inclined him to say so. He would have done had his glance not fallen upon her as she made the bed. She was an ill-fed little creature, and it is inordinately hard to be charitable in a hungry world.

"Are you sweet on 'er?" asked Lizzie presently.

Stephen looked up in concern.

"Because I ask who she is?"

"Well, she'd walk out with you quick enough."

"How do you know?"

"She's a 'uman bein'—ain't she?"

"That might be the very reason she might not want to."

Lizzie's lips curled. With one dig of her dirty little hand she thrust the blanket under the mattress.

"Go on!" she said. "There's no 'arm in walkin' out. If she's a slavey, same as me, she'd go 'oppin'."

"But she's not," said Stephen at a venture. He did not know, but his mind would not permit of it. Like Lizzie? It was impossible!

"Well, it's a Roman Catholic place over there, where a priest lives, so she must be a slavey."

Stephen cut open the yolkless egg in silence.

"Suppose you wouldn't walk out with a slavey?" persisted Lizzie. She looked covertly at her hand. She stuck in a hairpin.

He glanced at the little maid-of-all-work, wondering what Captain Warren would say if he saw him walking out with Lizzie. He gazed back into the years before he had gone to sea, and wondered what his mother would have said had she been alive to hear this conversation.

"The sea makes a heap of difference," said he, half to himself.

Lizzie pulled the skirt of the print frock round her waist. It had a distressing habit of working back to front.

"To what?" she asked.

"To women," said he.

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"Well, I never 'eard that before!"

"Didn't you? It does."

"'Ow?"

"Well—it makes them women."

"Blowed if I understand a single word ye're saying."

He laughed and rolled a cigarette in a pair of horned hands, then he licked the paper and put it into his mouth.

"Don't you? Well, if I said I *would* walk out with a slavey, would you understand then?"

Lizzie sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled down the skirt of the print frock so that it hid the ladder in her stocking.

"Don't see what difference that makes in me," she remarked.

"It makes a heap," said Stephen, and he crossed to the window-sill, sitting there and blowing clouds of smoke towards the little dormer window opposite. "It makes you a clean little slip of a thing, with a washed face and washed hands. It darns your stockings, and it makes your hair tidy."

Lizzie rose from the bed in disgust.

"You're pullin' me leg," said she. "I bet yer what-cher like, 'er stockings want darnin' over there. An' if she do 'er work at all, same as what I do, trampin' up an' down these bloomin' stairs all day long with no thanks for it neither, I bet cher 'er 'air ain't tidy this time of a mornin', nor 'er 'ands washed neither—so there!"

Stephen wheeled round on the window-sill.

"But she doesn't have to do any work!"

"Yus—she do!"

"How do you know?"

"Pinchers told me. 'E knows 'er."

"Who's Pinchers?"

"The bloke what sells muffins. 'E comes round 'ere ringin' 'is bell every afternoon at three o'clock."

Stephen turned back and looked at the kitten. He inhaled a deep breath of smoke and blew it straight out before him.

"Pinchers," he muttered, "Pinchers!"

Lizzie went out and slammed the door.

CHAPTER VII

PINCHERS

WHEN the muffin bell rang that afternoon, Stephen jumped to his feet. Nicolas Gadd, hearing him clattering down the stairs, put his finger to the hole in his throat and made a remark to himself about sailors.

Lizzie heard him, too. With mouth open in the kitchen, she stood listening to the sound of the bell. It rang and it tinkled—it rang and it tinkled. Then it stopped.

“An’ I ’ope ’e’ll find ’er ’ands are dirtier ’an what mine is.”

With that soliloquy, she went about her work once more; but all the time her ears were strained to the silence of that bell.

Thank Heaven for it though, that bell of the muffin man is never silent for long. But you must live in mean streets to hear the merry tinkle of it. Pinchers and the likes of him will tell you that muffins are not the food of the rich, whether because they have not the digestion for them or because not one of their domestics will so demean himself as to chase the owner of the elusive bell, neither Pinchers nor the likes of him can say. It

is only to Bloomsbury, where stand the almshouses of the well-to-do poor or the needy rich and to such districts down-at-the-heel like these, that the muffin man brings his wares.

Let me then live in Bloomsbury, I say, or in Adelphi, or in any such place where that bell may tinkle out the hour of tea. No sound you will ever hear in the streets is quite like it. For there is a cunning note in that bell which agitates the appetite, making your dish of tea the most wonderful refreshment in the world; making the fire glow warmer and the day outside seem far colder and more inclement than it really is.

While every moment that you are rushing down the cold and draughty stairs; every moment in which, hatless and with flapping slippers, you chase the sound of that bell through the chilling streets, doubles in value the moments when you shall be seated by your fireside once more with toasting fork well loaded and the kettle singing your very sentiments on the cheery hob.

For ten thousand reasons, I shall never live in Grosvenor Square, not the least of which is that I shall have to forfeit such joys as these.

But it was in no such spirit as this that Stephen rushed forth to find the muffin man that afternoon. You know nothing of these joys at sea. 'The ship's bell is a far more sonorous and serious affair.

Sighting the tray, the green baize cloth and the little man with his flapping white apron in the distance as he

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turned down one of those narrow alleys which try to make a mystery of Maiden Lane, Stephen sped after him.

"Hi!" called Stephen.

Pinchers turned. To the muffin man, the voice that shouts, and the sound of hastening footsteps always rise triumphant above the jangling of his bell. Down came the tray from his head and, holding it in position against the wall—a dodge acquired by long practice—he made a table of it, with both hands free to count the spongy muffins and take his sum of coppers.

"Threepennyworth?" said he as Stephen came up.

"Yes—sixpennyworth if you like."

Pennyworths of things never count at moments like these. Money has no value in Romance. There are coins of the realm, it is true; but once you begin to count them—puff! out goes Romance like the flame of a candle. You find yourself in the dark with the counter and the till between you and the only thing in the world that matters.

Pinchers perceived that he was dealing with a gentleman.

"It's not as I like, sir. You have the eatin' of 'em if I may presume to say so—and I think you'll find sixpennyworth a tidy mouthful. I sell 'em seven for threepence. And seein' as I 'ave to bring 'em all the way from Walham Green where my wife bakes 'em—there's not much in it over and above."

"Well—why give so many as seven for threepence?"

"Well—that's my usual, sir. If I was to give less

now, I'd feel as if I was cheatin' the public. That ain't business—is it? The public 's been good to me. I 'ad this appear in a paper, sir—some young gentleman who writes for the dailies, 'e got it put in—picture and all——”

He began to feel in his pocket. You might have known he was mounting that hobby horse of his, upon which most men can jog along till Doomsday. There was just that look in his eye—that look which says “Just one second—only let me get my foot well in the stirrups!” If you give them that second, it is all over with you. Rough and ready measures are the only ones to use. You must catch them firmly by the nearest article of clothing, the seat of their trousers if necessary, and drag them off.

Stephen laid down a sixpence on the tray.

“Is your name Pinchers?” said he.

Had he known, he might never have used so forceful a measure as this. The little man's hand came back empty, with a wave of dignity from his pocket.

“Pinchers!” he exclaimed. “Who said I was called Pinchers? My name 's Stubblethwaite; we've been Stubblethwaite in Walham Green for the last seventy years.”

“And before that?” asked Stephen, concealing a smile.

“Before then?”

“Yes—what was your name before then?”

If Stubblethwaite for seventy years, why not always Stubblethwaite? It needed explanation.

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The little man hung his head. He pressed two muffins together. He pulled them apart again.

"I thought you didn't know, sir," said he.

"How do you mean?"

"I thought you didn't know it was Pinchers before that. My grandmother had the muffin business then—her name was Pinehers."

"Then you *are* Pinehers?"

"No, sir—I'm Stubblethwaite! There are some people round about 'ere as knows—I got talking about myself one day—it's not my usual—but I got talking and said as 'ow we'd been making muffins in Walham Green these seventy years—it leaked out then somehow—and there are some as calls me Pinehers still—but not to my face. You'll 'ave sixpenn'orth, sir?"

"I don't want any," said Stephen—"I want you to tell me something."

The little man thoughtfully fingered the sixpence. He did not want to put it in his pocket as though he had given its full value in muffins; neither did he wish to take it eagerly as a gift. By the same token, he would eternally abuse himself if he lost it.

"What's that?" he asked, and he began counting out the fourteen muffins in the manner of one who is tired of his trade.

"I want to know the name of the little girl who lives in the Roman Catholic place up there in Maiden Lane?"

With the counting of the muffins, Pinehers had got

as far as twelve. He laid them all down on the tray again.

“Up at the Presbytery?”

“Yes.”

“Might I ask why you want to know, sir?”

Pinchers' curiosity was wide awake but, judiciously, he held the reins of it. The gentleman might not want to purchase his muffins; but information, when once you find a market for it, is a far more profitable commodity. There was no need to count the muffins now. His eyes fell almost superciliously upon the sixpence.

“Might I ask why you want to know, sir?” he repeated, as Stephen hesitated over his answer.

Well—matters are not the more palatable for being minced. They really take longer in swallowing. At sea, moreover, one does not get used to such practices.

“I want,” said he boldly—“to make her acquaintance.”

Pinchers looked wise. He started spreading the clean white linen cloth over the passive faces of the muffins. At the same moment, too—though you might never have seen him—he began putting on his shoddy little garment of Romance. It was of plain cloth. It had no lining. But there it was and, for forty out of the seventy years that there had been Stubblethwaites in Walham Green, he had worn it some time or another, every day of his life.

“I don't know,” he began—and his voice was supremely diplomatic—“that I 'ave any right to tell you, sir.”

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He tucked the linen cloth under a pile of muffins at the far end of the tray and looked up—one eye following the other—at Stephen's face.

But, oh—how he wanted to tell! How he longed to tell! The invisible garment was tight buttoned on him now. For he liked the looks of this young man. He could just imagine how he would describe him to his wife when he got back that evening. "Clean shaven—strong in the shoulders—not 'ansome—no! A man worth looking at, ain't 'ansome—an open face—that was the word—and eyes that looked as if a gale of wind wouldn't blink 'em." He was quick at noticing people. They always told him so.

But with a certain amount of craft in the nature of him, Pinchers admitted to himself that faces were deceptive. He remembered his wife's brother, as open-looking a fellow as had ever worn shoe leather. On the strength of that open face and the near relationship, he was out of pocket half-a-crown. He often dreamt of that open face; but it was nothing t the times he dreamt of that half-crown.

"I don't know that I 'ave any right to tell you," he went on. "Yer see, yer may be wanting to make her acquaintance—but 'ow do I know as she 'ave the same inclinations—see? 'Sides which, in a manner of speaking, though we're standing 'ere talking friendly-like—I don't know 'oo you are." A look jumped into Stephen's eyes, and Pinchers proceeded quickly with an amendment.

"You mustn't mind the way I'm going on, sir. I'm only careful for her sake. Why—Lord bless me! I've known 'er ever since she was two foot an' a brick 'igh."

"And you think it's not safe for her to be making the acquaintance of a stranger? Perhaps you're right. There are men and men. I've run across both sorts. I suppose you've only run across one. You can know who I am if it'll do any good to you. Stephen Gale's my name. I'm mate on board the *Elizabeth Warren* in dock for repairs off Limehouse Reach. She's a full-rigger—eleven hundred tons—Captain Warren. I've come up to London till she's ready to start for San Francisco. That's as much as there is to know about me. I'm staying at Nicolas Gadd's—do you know him?" The remembrance of a French penny started in a vivid expression into Pinchers' face. "You do? Well—I'm staying there. It was from the window of my bedroom I saw her—the first day I arrived. I've seen her every day since. That's all."

"And you want to make her acquaintance?"

"I do."

"Well—that beats me," said Pinchers, with a reminiscent smile.

He was thinking of his own wooing. It had seemed so sensible compared with this. Mrs. Stubblethwaite had been cleaning the area steps of a house in Bloomsbury. Every day for one whole week, Pinchers had seen her and found no courage to speak. At last, this

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momentous morning, when she had been at work with her pail of water, he stood looking down through the railings, entranced at the adorable way she used her scrubbing brush. He was so fascinated that it had nerved him to action. He took a muffin from his tray—one of seven, if you please!—and holding it out, enticingly, between finger and thumb, he had said—“Bet you don’t guess ’oo this is for.”

She looked up and laughed—and guessed. Now when a woman laughs, she is amenable to anything. They still talked about it. “Do you remember?”—they would begin—the one eager to recount it before the other—and they still laughed.

But this—this asking a muffin man to begin your courting! Well, all people have queer notions about these things but ourselves. We are always so eminently sensible. It certainly beat Pinchers, that a strong, young fellow who was mate of a big ship with nothing to do, he supposed, but stand on what he believed they called the bridge and give orders to men who would be put into irons if they didn’t obey him—it certainly beat him that such a person should come to him—a mere muffin man—and half suggest that he should act as a steward of introduction to that wee, timid, little Peggy Bannister at the Presbytery. He was a broad-shouldered young fellow—why didn’t he go right up to her himself—make his own introduction, as Pinchers had done, boldly, bravely, holding fast to that proverb which talks glibly about the faint heart and the fair lady?

You may notice the sudden though subtle change in Pinchers' attitude of mind. Pinchers was now quite prepared in thought that they should know each other. He counted on it. And all because the young gentleman had said he was mate of a big ship. That meant he was earning a fair—nay, a handsome wage—compared at least with that which you get out of muffins. And Pinchers, being a married man, was as much a believer in the match suitable as any woman.

That is the way with married men. They change their high tone of love for love's sake as soon as they have the smallest of mouths to feed. Of course he thoroughly enjoyed being taken into confidence like this. It tickled his fancy. It tickled his fancy so much that he kept on smiling and three times—one close upon the other—he said how completely it beat him; but it was a sort of flagellation that he was very partial to.

"I see nothing peculiar in it," said Stephen.

It is no easy matter to maintain your dignity in face of a muffin man who smiles because his fancy is tickled by your foolish sensitiveness of mind. But, being genuinely unconscious of the fact that he possessed such a thing, Stephen was in no way disconcerted. You cannot both eat your dignity and have it.

"I know no one here who knows her," he continued—"and I thought—well——" He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and jingled the money they contained—"I thought you might take a message for me; then

if she doesn't care to make my acquaintance, she can just say so without feeling uncomfortable about it."

Pinchers looked up at the grey eyes which looked down at his.

He had never heard of the word chivalry, or it might have passed across his mind then. He knew a gentleman when he met him. A gentleman in these matters was one who, taking the opportunity when the lady was alone, raised his hat and, making some remark about the weather, turned the conversation with adroitness and consummate ease to the leisure time which he had on his hands the following evening. If the lady threw up her chin, turning her eyes witheringly upon him, then, if he was a gentleman, he raised his hat once more, apologized and troubled her no further until she regretted her impulsive action.

That was a gentleman as Pinchers knew him. That was how he had behaved to Helen Sumpter with such success as is already known. Half of that success he put down to the preliminary of the muffin, and the ease with which he had been able to turn the conversation from that to her next evening out. Anyhow, such was the behaviour of a gentleman.

Then what was this? Pinchers had never conceived that in throwing up her chin and casting upon one a withering glance, a lady might feel uncomfortable. If the truth be known, he had considered that she must rather like it. And yet, it seemed, when he came to

think of little Peggy in such a position, that this Mr. Stephen Gale was right.

With an air of reverence, he laid the green baize cloth over the tray of muffins. It was as if he were covering with a pall the faces of the dead.

"It's just as you like, sir," said he—"I'll take her a message, I shall be up that way in half-an-hour. What shall I say?"

"Say? Oh, say I shall be in the gardens by Charing Cross to-morrow morning at eleven. Say—say I'm all alone in this part of the world, and that I should like a soul to talk to."

"Shall I specify that it's her soul particularly, sir? I think she might be pleased if I put it that way."

"Oh—put it any way you like," said Stephen—"as long as you don't make me look a fool."

Pinchers was just going to explain exactly how he would put it when a face appeared at a window. Seeing him, it took upon itself that expression which you know so well when you deal in muffins. It seems to say, suddenly, with the impulse of divine inspiration—"Of course! Muffins! The very thing! Put the kettle on and let's have tea!"

All this Pinchers was quick to see in the face of the person in the window. As quickly his tray flew up to the perch on his head, and he set off down the alley.

"I'll tell her, sir," said he, and in a joyfulness of heart at the prospect of Romance, he nearly rang the clapper off his bell.

CHAPTER VIII

THE FULL OF THE BLUE MOON

Do you ever know what the day will bring you?

Oh, it is a wonderful world! Teeming like an ant's nest with adventures! Every street, if you have but the eyes for it, hugs some little adventure for your own especial benefit—every doorway with a strange name on the lintel of it, has an event in store for you if you choose but to go inside. Who is to stop you? Why complain that you have no reason? Make a reason!

"Ornum's Magical Depository. T. W. Ornum, The Wizard of the East!"

Surely that should rouse your curiosity if by chance you saw it painted in white letters on a dingy doorpost in a narrow side street? You would stand and stare at it, perhaps. It may be you would give your soul to go inside. But there is no need to give your soul. Just mount the stairs, knock on the door and when Mr. Ornum pokes out his head—as he will—ask for an Aladdin's lamp. It does just as well. He is much more eager to do business than to turn you away.

For if you want adventures, you must go half way to meet them. It is only in those rare moments, when the

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blue moon is at full, that adventures will come to you of themselves.

You might not have seen it, but the blue moon was at its full that afternoon when Pinchers rang the bell of the Presbytery in Maiden Lane. His heart was beating so fast, that he had to take the tray from off the little cushion on his head and blow out his cheeks, as though he were out of breath.

Before the bell had ceased its jangling away in the hollow distance, there was a rattling of footsteps ; the door flew open and there was Peggy.

All that Pinchers had prepared in his mind to say, ran cold out of the tips of his fingers at the sight of her. He found himself talking of muffins. It was the only subject with which he could make conversation at a moment's notice. Oh, they are cowards, are men ! All his superior sophistry, debating whether it were wise to introduce Stephen ! What had become of it now ? There was no doubt about his wanting to tell—oh, he wanted to tell right enough. But when, out of the corner of his eyes, he glanced down at those grey, blue pebbles lying so brightly at the bottom of that rippling stream, he began a-wondering how she would take it.

For that is just the basis of the cowardice of all men. They would dare to say anything, if only they knew how a woman would take it. But they never will know. There is a divinely inspired Providence which blinds their eyes to such a knowledge, and so it is that

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the game is always so wonderful to watch, always so fascinating to play.

"You've been running," said Peggy, as she stood by while he counted out the seven.

"I 'ave, Miss—I've been running."

Liars, they are, as well as cowards. His walk had been most leisurely. Why, he had been making up his sentences and rounding them—all the sentences with which he was going to introduce the delicate subject to her notice. They had all gone now.

"I've just come up from Nicolas Gadd's," he went on. Another fabrication! You cannot blame him for that. It is the first lie for which one is responsible. The second tells itself.

"Strange man—Nicolas Gadd," he continued—beginning to see the light—the light of the ultimate truth at the end of this long tunnel of deceit. "And a strange lot of people 'e gets in that lodgin' 'ouse of 'is. Ever noticed 'em, Miss? Some of the worst there is and some of the best—a strange consortin' of bein's, I calls 'em—a very strange consortin'."

Peggy said nothing. It was uphill work. He felt a little drop of perspiration on his forehead. It trickled to his cheek, and he wiped it off with his sleeve.

"I think it was sixpence you gave me, Miss?"

Peggy nodded. There was something that she felt in the air. It came through Pinchers. Pinchers was not like himself. She knew he could not be ill, because Pinchers—like most men when they are ill—would have said so.

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Something had happened to him then, and all the fineness of her untutored instinct, feeling for what it could be, received impression—as vague and intangible as you wish—but received impression nevertheless that she herself was concerned. So, like a mouse, she kept quiet and waited.

A woman never gives a man the benefit of her instinct. The more he labours, the less will she help him out. Why should she? With that self-same instinct, she knows the battle goes ultimately to the strong.

Besides—Peggy was just as frightened as Pinchers. She did not know what he was going to say next. He did not know how she was going to take it. These are the fascinating subtleties of the game. Nobody knows anything.

At last he blurted it out, and stood there trembling inside him.

“You mustn’t blame me,” he said—“I ’ad nothing to do with it.”

“With what?” asked Peggy in amazement.

Well—it was as good as said then. There comes the moment when you have gone so far as that you must explain. He told the whole story. He’d never known what the young man wanted to say. Hadn’t his first question been—“Threepennyworth, sir?” She could see from that how innocent he was of guile. He was only repeating what had been said to him.

“But what was said?” asked Peggy impatiently.

By this time her heart was going so fast as well, that she had nearly called him Pinchers.

"Well, Miss—I didn't know who he was, from Adam. 'Threepenn'orth I said, see?—same as I always does—thinkin' 'e wanted muffins. But Gor' bless my soul—'e didn't want no muffins, an' 'e began beatin' around tryin' to say it—and feared at the same time as 'ow I should take it, 'cause 'e was an utter stranger to me—see what I mean? I'd never seen 'im before in my life."

Peggy clasped her little hands together and unclasped them again. She knew who it was. It was the young man in that room opposite, under the roof. Oh, of course it was the young man! Destiny cannot conjure for a woman. She guesses all the tricks of Destiny, the very moment they are done. But what had he said? Pinchers was so slow! Why couldn't he see that she was already far beyond him in the story?

"Well," continued Pinchers warily, "at last 'e came out with it. 'E wanted to know the name of the little girl what lived opposite 'im at the Presbytery."

He watched her face closely as he came to this part of the story. This was the crucial moment when, with ice broken all round him, he must be ready to seize hold of anything to help himself out. The look in her eyes told him there was danger and he hurried on.

"But d'yer think I give it him?" said he with a smile, so full of craft that, seeing its effect, he permitted it to linger in his face—"D'yer think I give it away to a mere stranger, what comes up to me in the street?"

The moment of anger dropped from Peggy's eyes.

"You didn't tell him, then?" said she, and the beating of her heart fell to quietness.

"Not for 'is askin'—oh no! 'An' why do you want to know?' I said. I've got a manner, yer know, Miss—when I'm taken sudden like that, I've got a manner, that ain't whatcher might call—cheery. It's all bunkum—I puts it on. But it set 'im back a bit. I could see that in 'is face. 'An' why do you want to know?' I said—'Cause I wants to make her acquaintance,' says 'e—just like that. Pretty good cheek—wasn't it?"

Peggy kept silence.

You must be a woman, nothing else will help you, if you want to realize that strange thrill of terror, of anger, of exaltation when first in your life you are told of that man who, from sight of you alone, has craved to know you. For it is the sure and certain prelude to Romance. Peggy could make no reply. The thrilling of these three emotions held back the words from her lips. She neither knew whether she was angry, or frightened, or pleased. All she desired was that Pinchers should go on, telling her everything. But oh, he was so slow!

"Well—when 'e said that," continued this amiable diplomatist, "I was on my dignity in a minute. A mere stranger—I never 'eard the likes of it! 'An' 'oo might you be?' I asked—same manner, yer know—and I look 'im straight in the eyes. Nice eyes 'e 'as. Look as if a gale o' wind wouldn't blink 'em. I didn't

blink mine either. 'An' 'oo might you be?' I asked, looking 'im straight in the eyes. Well—'e told me."

With all the triumph of vanity of which a man is capable, Pinchers announced that and waited for applause.

"Who was he?" asked Peggy quickly.

Pinchers heard that sudden quickness. It made him forget to be disappointed that he had received no approbation.

"'Is name 's Stephen Gale—proper name for 'im 'cos 'e's a sailor. 'E's mate of a full sailing ship,—'e called it—what's lying up in docks at Limehouse for repairs. Mate—that 's next to the captain. I wouldn't mind the job myself—better paying than muffins—but the sea don't agree with me."

"A sailor," murmured Peggy to herself.

"That 's it," said Pinchers. "'E's got the look of it, too. 'Is eyes is the colour of it. You can see 'ow the wind 's been blowin' on 'is face."

"And is that all?" asked Peggy.

"Lord no—that ain't all! I ask 'im then what 'e wanted me to do about it. 'If I tells you 'er name,' I said"—oh, they are cowards are men!—"an' yer go tryin' to make 'er acquaintance, it'll only make 'er feel uncomfortable,' I said. Well, to do 'im justice, 'e 'ad no idear of speakin' to yer, till 'e'd found out whether you was agreeable or not. I liked 'im for that. 'Well, what do you want me to do?' that's what I said. An'

he replies, 'I want you to take a message for me.' *Me!* Take a message for 'im! Me—a muffin man! Well, it beat me!"

"What was the message?" asked Peggy quickly again, so that all the hope rose triumphant in the romantic heart of Pinchers.

"'Tell 'er,' 'e says, 'that I shall be in the Gardens of Charing Cross at eleven o'clock to-morrow mornin'—an' tell 'er,' 'e goes on, 'tell 'er I'm all alone in this part of the world, an' I'd like a soul to talk to.'"

Peggy stepped back. Her heart was quite still, then it beat faster than ever.

"Does he expect me to go down there and meet him?" she asked in a breath.

"That seemed to be the meanin' of it to me," said Pinchers, cheerfully.

"Oh!"

Peggy took the seven muffins which Pinchers had been holding all this time in his fingers. He had used them to gesticulate with, so familiar was he with the touch of them.

"Ye're not goin', Miss?" he asked, fearfully.

"Of course I'm not going," said Peggy. "I—I don't know him." And the words of his message kept racing through her mind—"I'm all alone in this part of the world, and I'd like a soul to talk to."

She picked up the three pennies in change which Pinchers had laid down on the tray.

"Of course I'm not going," she exclaimed once more,

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and, turning away, she ran up the stairs into the house.

For a moment Pinchers stood there looking at the empty doorway.

"'E was quite right," he said to himself. "It would 'ave made 'er feel uncomfortable. Well—Lord bless my soul!—I'll see what 'Elen says."

And lifting his tray disconsolately to his head, he walked away a miserable and disappointed man.

CHAPTER IX

CHARING CROSS GARDENS

Now so great was the disappointment to Pinchers, that he went straight home to Helen Stubblethwaite—*née* Sumpter—and forgot all about telling Stephen how useless it would be for him to go to Charing Cross Gardens next morning at eleven.

Whenever the mysteries of women came under the notice of Pinchers, he always went straight home to Helen to unravel them for him. Helen could see through the sex, as plainly as she could see through the eye of a needle. That is saying a great deal; for she threaded a needle before most people had finished wetting the cotton in their mouths. One lightning thrust of the fingers and it was done.

But it is no good our tramping all the way out to Walham Green with Pinchers. To begin with, he did not tramp all the way. There was that extra sixpence in his pocket and, for the first time in his life, he took a 'bus from the top of Sloane Street. Even a saving of time such as this may not tempt us. For this chronicle is of Peggy Bannister, of Father O'Leary and all those whose lives intimately concern these two. The

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plain Romance, then, of that little household in Walham Green, will have to take care of itself.

This is a submission, grudgingly made, for I could give you such an insight into that house of Pinchers, as would make you gaze less shudderingly upon those meaningless rows of dwellings in a grimy suburb. They wear their cloak of Romance with the rest of us. The cheapness of the material should make no difference. But I am afraid it does.

Even Mrs. Gooseberry, with the best heart in the world, moving—as she did from Hammersmith many years ago to her little cottage in the country—even she was guilty of the sin of depreciation.

When, having hunted through the village shops without success for a coloured chiffon, Mr. Gooseberry had reminded her of that draper's establishment she used to patronise in the days gone by, she had looked at him with pity—that pity which all women must feel for men when they presume to know anything about clothes.

“'Ammersmith?” she had said; “No thank you—none of your 'Ammersmith chiffongs for me!”

You see that most of us rise in this world—just a little. And the pity is—we forget.

But the Gardens in Charing Cross are calling—as I have heard them call many a summer morning before breakfast. Flowers and green grass in the midst of a forest of chimney-pots! No wonder they have a voice!

Out of the window of his little bedroom, Stephen

had seen the thin green curtains pulled from the dormer window opposite. For one instant—the briefest—he had beheld a head with its two long plaits of hair hanging down over the shoulder. He had caught sight of two slender arms, of two little hands caressing something black and soft. The next moment they had vanished and all that remained was the black kitten, that stretched up its back in a furry arch and yawned—one great cavern of scarlet which swallowed up all its features—then, sitting down in the sunshine on the window sill, it began its morning bath.

High and low, the evening before, he had sought that man of muffins. But the streets were silent of his urgent, tinkling bell and, in bewilderment, knowing nothing of the result of his message, he had spent his evening listening to the band, scanning the faces of the penny public and finding no answer there.

And this sudden sight of Peggy next morning brought no enlightenment. You can acquire a deal of knowledge from that language of signs—the signs of movement, of burning lights and darkened windows—in those lives of the people who live in the houses opposite. A drawn blind—a pulled curtain—the carriage that drives up to the front door—the candle that is burning long after midnight in an upper window—all these have their meanings in that strange tongue which is called, the dead language of the house-over-the-way.

But, however clever you may be in the reading of it, I defy you to make anything out of a black kitten



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sitting on a window-sill in the sun. It means nothing—nothing at all.

At half-past ten, then, Stephen walked slowly down to the gardens. They were almost empty. Only the few *habitués* were there—the old man in the seedy frock coat and ruffled, tall silk hat, his face forever concealed behind the morning paper. You never see him arrive. You never see him get up and go. And so, I was about to say, you never see his face. But I have seen it. One morning I peeped over the top of his paper. An unpardonable liberty I know. But he made no complaint. He was fast asleep.

On a seat some distance from him rested the woman whose heels are worn down to the pavement. You know her? I expect you do. She is the *habitué* of every public garden in London.

With her hands folded in her lap, she was gazing fixedly at a bed blazing with *calceolarias*. Sometimes her eyes blinked. She was seeing pictures—pictures of things that were gone.

There has been a garden in the life of every single one of us. A withered flower dropped on a pavement in Fleet Street is sufficient to bring it back. How much more so, then, a whole bed of *calceolarias*?

If she had made one movement as he passed, Stephen would have slipped a penny into her hand. But her eyes were too steady. She never saw him go by. The picture of the garden was too vivid in her eyes for her to notice anything else.

The voice must be loud ; the call, a penetrating one indeed, to reach you when once you are in the heart of your garden. For the song of the blackbirds in the laurels ; the note of the thrush that used to sing at sunset in the May tree, all these are louder than the present call of any human being. And such a haven as this, perhaps, with sweet-williams and lavender and scented stock in its wide borders is where that poor creature with the worn-down heels is wandering, when you see that far-off look in her eyes as she sits in the public gardens.

Stephen strolled on towards the bandstand. On the little lawns the gardeners were busy bedding out new plants. A glorious life, to be a gardener ! He gazed at them, almost in envy, as he passed. On farther, the waitresses were beginning to put out their tables beneath the chestnut tree, chattering over it, as they hurried hither and thither, like sparrows when they first wake in the morning.

It is a meal, is that tea in Charing Cross Gardens—a meal on which you could well feed a hungry man. People who have no gardens of their own come there and, as they sip their dish of tea—watched greedily by those who linger on the pathways—they feel as though earth held no greater luxury, and were they millionaires with a garden in Park Lane, they could strain no further joy from life. For the glories of this world are all comparative. It is not what you have, but what you have not that makes life worth living.

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"There," said Stephen to himself as he watched the little waitresses; "there, one of these days, we're going to have tea."

That is the true sense of fatalism in a sailor. The things that Fate inexorably decrees are those things he is inevitably going to do.

He chose a seat at last—one where three small children—two girls and a boy—were at play with a skipping-rope. The reason for that affinity between sailors and children is not hard to find. Neither of them have as yet grown up.

Perhaps the most grown up of them all, on the seat that morning in the gardens, was the little boy. His heart was not in skipping-ropes. With all the naval ardour of a first sea lord—at any rate, with all the naval ardour that a first sea lord should have—he had come down to see a battleship that was lying in the Thames. But these two young maidens had waylaid him. With soft words and with ogling glances, they had slipped each an arm about his neck.

It takes two to turn a skipping-rope. They did not tell him that. If you want to know exactly what they did say—they told him that they knew he could keep up longer than they could. What is more, they said they would prove it.

He was quite willing. Where is the man whose vanity is not? But he proposed they should prove it on the Embankment pathway, where he could keep one eye on the battleship.

Now they had seen the battleship the day before and thought the Embankment was the worst place possible. And as they cajoled him away from the parapet above which his head just lifted, they told him there were seats in the garden. He pointed to the seats on the pavement under the trees. But they were not the same seats. That made a difference. By dint of dogged perseverance, they showed him what a difference it made.

And so, step by step, inch by inch, they decoyed him from his manhood. With longing glances and his head for ever turning back, they led him off, as many another man has been led.

Oh, why do women want more power than this? For what but the caressing power of a woman could steal a man of seven from the sight of a battleship in the Thames?

And there, in the gardens, twirling the skipping-rope—with his hands, but not with his heart—pressed into slavery by brave promises of freedom, Stephen found him with his temptresses. His spirit was broken—his manhood gone. As his eyes met Stephen's, his head dropped and he looked ashamed. His hand holding the rope swung loosely to his side.

"Go on, can't cher!" shouted Bessie—"you ain't turnin' it prop'ly!"

So he fell to again, while Bessie skipped and Maud, at the other end of the rope, sang a wonderful song to keep the record of her prowess.

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Stephen sat down and listened. So long as the skipper did not stumble, the song continued, repeated over and over again.

To the burden of two-four-six-eight—if my memory serves me right—Mary was wont to eat cherries out of a plate to mark such occasions as these. But Mary, it would seem, is no more. That garden gate at which she stood has vanished. Doubtless she finished her cherries at last, and left the garden gate as she grew up and went out into the world. For it was not Mary of whom they sang then. They probably had never heard of her.

No—this was a song, strange to Stephen's ears. He could not on the first hearing, distinguish one word from another. But at last they came home to him. He made them out as you do a word puzzle, piecing first one and then another line together.

And this was the song—the song it would seem the children sing to the swing of the skipping-rope—the song that is sung, now that Mary has grown up and gone out into the world.

“I've got a bloke down Oppy—
I've got a bloke down Pim-i-li-co,
I've got a bloke down Kingsway,
And this is what he said.”

There is something more dramatic than Mary's appetite for cherries about this. You wait with breathless interest to hear what this gentleman from Kingsway had to say. But drama is not everything. Moreover

in this case it is sadly and quaintly disappointing. You never hear what he said. For in this wise the song runs on—

“My bloke’s double-jointed,
That’s why I’m disappointed.
I kissed ’im once, I kissed ’im twice,
And now I’ve got another just as nice—
Oh—I’ve got a bloke down Oppy—”

And so on, till the skipper drops.

But without its setting to music, it is pitiably incomplete; without those nasal, cockney voices it loses a thousand joys to the ear. To reproduce the one, there is no difficulty at all; but the other—you must go to Charing Cross Gardens to hear that. And, for it really to be beautiful, the sun must be up, the gardeners must be bedding out their plants; you must know all the joys of life, and, into the bargain, it were as well that you were waiting at the gates of Chance with your cloak of Romance well set upon your shoulders.

Without such an accompaniment as this, it is possible that, testily, you might move away to some other seat, or even, with annoyance, demand that those children should go and play elsewhere. The beauty in life depends so entirely upon your point of view.

They were the best of all possible circumstances in which Stephen heard those children then. The longer Bessie kept up with her skipping, the more he liked it. And when Maud, in an agony of breathlessness, signed to John to continue the refrain, Stephen felt the keenest disappointment. For John would not continue.

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It is possible to swing a skipping-rope, even when your heart is not in the business at all; but to sing, and to sing of so maudlin a matter as kissing, when your whole soul is aboard a battleship, is out of the question.

Stubbornly, John shook his head and his arm swung listlessly to his side.

Bessie stopped her skipping.

"You've been an' spoilt it all," said she.

"'E won't play prop'ly," said Maud—"It was 'is turn. I couldn't go on no more."

"What's the good of yer?" asked Bessie in a withering voice.

John was silent. He could have shown them quick enough what was the good of him if he had been on board that battleship. But there, with a skipping-rope dangling from his hand, he was helpless. They had him at their mercy.

"What's the good of not playin' when yer said yer wanted to?" she continued.

This was more than John could bear. All his manhood rose in arms against it.

"Never said I wanted to," said he—"You ask me. I wanted to see the ship."

His lower lip trembled. It was the fearless truth before God. But they were two to one—two women, too, with their hair in ten different plaits, who looked ready for the fray, however violent. A suspicious brightness crept into John's eyes as he faced them.

"'E's goin to cry," said Bessie.

"'E can tell his muvver if 'e likes," said Maud—" We never arst 'im."

The tears came then—a very deluge of them. Two dirty knuckles were thrust into two sobbing eyes. The end of the skipping-rope lay discarded on the ground.

Maud and Bessie looked at each other. Women are always sorry when they have driven a man to madness or to tears. But it is deep in the nature of them to drive him there first. It makes a child of him. And that is the secret of it all. That is just what they want him to be. For the real woman never wants to be mastered. It is only when she has failed to make a child of her husband, that she consents to that.

Bessie's arm was just about to find its way round John's neck when Stephen intervened.

"What's the ship you wanted to see?" he asked.

The sobbing stopped with two or three staccatoed gulps. They all gazed at him in amazement.

"Which is the ship?" he repeated.

"The battleship," answered Maud.

"Down here?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how many guns she carries?"

The knuckles came out of John's eyes. His mouth began to open.

"She carries fifty guns—two of them will fire five miles and blow another ship to the bottom. Have you ever been on a ship?"

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John shook his head.

"I come from a ship," said Stephen.

Bessie came closer.

"This one 'ere?" she asked.

"No—my ship's down in the docks."

One by one, they all came round him. John's eyes were wide in wonder. And then, just as he was beginning to tell them all about it, there appeared a figure, entering the gardens from Villiers Street. Stephen began a sentence. But the words died away. He never finished. The figure was moving towards them. It came nearer and nearer and nearer—and then—

It was Peggy.

CHAPTER X

THE VIRTUE OF CURIOSITY

IF women had never been curious, the world had never been born. What is still more to the point, if women had never remained curious, the world had never been brought up.

But—the Lord is to be thanked for it, for it is a wonderful world—they still possess their curiosity. It is the true, the real emotion, moreover. There is nothing spurious about it. They really do want to know, to see, to feel, to hear. That which we call curiosity in a man has nothing in common with it. Men are not curious. They are merely vain. A man is curious to be told, not because he wants to know, but because it hurts his vanity to think that knowledge is being withheld from him.

But women—! Oh, why is no monument erected to Eve? Carved in the whitest of marble, it should stand in face of the whole world, that every man who feels the joy of living, might raise his hat to it as he passes by; that every woman, reading the inscription underneath—*To that woman who made the world*—might remember her birthright of curiosity.

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For nothing more nor less than this had driven Peggy to the gardens that morning.

He was to be told—this sailor man who was so alone and needed companionship—Pinchers was to tell him that she did not want to make his acquaintance; that she would not meet him in the gardens at eleven o'clock.

But would he go there, after all?

To suppose it for one moment, was to suppose as well that he had hoped she would change her mind. If she had considered that, she would not have gone for a moment. Besides, she had *not* changed her mind. She was *not* going to meet him. She was only going to see if he was there.

Oh—you don't know what a difference that makes in delicate matters like this. To be unable to think like this, is to rob yourself of all the joys that human nature is heir to.

No woman, with any sense of self-respect, will go and meet a man she does not know. But, God bless my soul, if she cannot justify herself in going to see whether he is there, we should have the end of the world at once.

"If he really wants to talk to some one," thought Peggy—"he'll be there. But then Pinchers will have told him, so he'll know it's no good."

And from that, she set to wondering what he wanted to talk about. Perhaps he would tell her about the sea, about the ships she had seen in the river. Why had she said she wouldn't go? Well—because it was

impossible. She didn't know him. Father O'Leary would never forgive her. Mrs. Parfitt would be horrified. But it would be nice to hear all about the ships. And why did he want so particularly to talk to her? She was no good at talking. But then, he didn't know that. Perhaps he thought she was.

She was really sorry that he felt so lonely. Sometimes when she sat on the window-sill, gazing at the smoke out of the chimneys, she felt lonely too. It was a horrible feeling.

But if she had to put up with it, so must he. She didn't know him, so she couldn't go and meet him in the gardens. It was all settled. Pinchers had told her what she had said, so he wouldn't be there.

But supposing he was.

She was standing by the dressing-table in her little bedroom. It was a quarter to eleven. There was her hat lying on the bed.

Tentatively her hand reached out for it.

If she thought for a moment it was likely that he would come, nothing on earth would bring her there.

She put the hat on her head.

But surely there was no harm in just going to see. He was certain not to be in the gardens.

The little hatpins pierced the crown and buried themselves in her hair.

Oh, she did so long to know how he had taken the message that Pinchers had brought him. If he was not there, it would mean that he had given up all hopes of

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ever knowing her. But there was no reason why he should be so foolish as that. She had only refused to go and meet him as a stranger.

She walked slowly across the room to the door—Destiny at the heels of her, pricking that little heart of hers with aggravating curiosity.

Father O'Leary met her on the stairs.

"An' where's the creature goin'?" said he.

"Oh! Daddy!" she exclaimed, and, flinging both arms round his neck, she squeezed the breath out of him—then kissed him. The next moment, she was gone.

Father O'Leary stood there on the stairs looking after her.

"'Tis the way I shall lose her one of these days," said he to himself—"Shure, Glory be to God, I don't think that was meant for me."

Later on in the morning, while he was striding up and down, reading his office, he confronted Mrs. Parfitt.

"D'ye think Peggy'll soon be falling in love?" he asked.

Mrs. Parfitt shook out her duster with a snap.

"For goodness' sake!" said she—"don't be putting those nonsensical ideas into her head!"

"Faith, I shan't put them there," he murmured—"Shure, what do I know about it?" And the rest of his sentence, being in Latin, was Greek to Mrs. Parfitt.

CHAPTER XI

THE IMPROVED SIGNAL HALYARD

PERHAPS it was because he was surrounded by these three children that she did not see him. But Stephen had seen her, and when she had come so near as that to mistake her was impossible, he put John gently on one side and rose to his feet.

The blood had rushed to his face. His heart was driving it there in great hammer beats. Words fell about, tumbling in his brain, like children in the street when you throw a penny in their midst. He found it difficult to see. It was utterly impossible to think. She had come to meet him, that was all. There she was—the quaint little person in the house over the way. And this was the first time in his life that he had ever spoken to a woman he did not know.

The moment that Peggy saw him, it was all the same with her. She wanted to run away—the heroine of Romance. But it was broad daylight, and she could not escape as she had done that night when the band was playing and it was all dark. Her cheeks grew white, and her heart stopped its beating.

She ought never to have come ; but she had really

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thought that he would not be there. She tried to look as though she had not seen him; as though, if she had seen him, she did not know who he was. But he was coming to meet her, and the gardens were all swimming before her eyes in a sea of light.

Hardly ever in the world were two people so afraid of each other as these. To the minds of each of them, the enormity of what they were going to do was crushing and overwhelming in its terrible insistence.

There had been times at sea when all night long Stephen had lent a hand at the pumps—when the waves hung heavy snarling crests over his very head—when the demented wind shrieked in a shrilling note through the rattling shrouds—but what fear he had felt then was calm in comparison with this.

When there is an order to be given, fear must stand on one side; but when the very sentences you have framed tumble down in your mind like a flimsy pack of cards, then the best of us are reduced to a pitiable state of alarm.

“It’s been very kind of you to take my message in the spirit that it was meant.”

Those were the words with which he had intended to greet her if she came. There were other sentences as good as that to follow. But this was the first. She should not find him a fool, because it happened that one half of his life was spent on the sea where such little amenities as these are seldom cultivated, or because the other half was spent on shore where, until he had

seen her, all thought of women had frightened him. She should not find him ill-at-ease, or stammering with his words if only she would meet him that morning at eleven.

And now the clocks were all striking the very hour, and she was there. The next moment, raising his hat, he was standing on the pathway before her.

"You have come?" said he, and he had to drag that sentence by the neck from the midst of the pandemonium in his mind.

Then, having made up her mind that, if he were there in the gardens, that if, moreover, he made any attempt to speak to her, she would reply—"I beg your pardon, but I don't know you." Having made up her mind to all this, Peggy answered—"Yes."

But it was in such a timid little whisper that he had to bend down his head to hear it. They walked on a few steps together in silence. Oh, those were painful moments! Three times Stephen pulled out his pocket handkerchief and blew his nose. And times beyond counting Peggy dragged the first finger out of her glove and slipped it back again.

Would he never speak? Was there nothing he could say? Oh, why had she ever come?

And all the time Stephen was saying to himself—

"It's a fine day, isn't it? No, she'll think me a fool. Do you ever come down here to the gardens? Well, of course, don't I know she does? Do you know I can see you from my window? No, because she'll think I

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try to peer into her room. It's a fine day, isn't it? My God! I've thought of that before. Lord! what can I say?" and then aloud, and in a hesitating voice, he really did say—

"It's a fine day, isn't it?"

And Peggy agreed that it was.

But this is too painful, this is too harrowing to continue. They were such children, so inexperienced in adventure. There was none of the ready speech in him which makes smooth the pilgrimages to the shrine of Romance. He had learnt none of those cunning little tricks by which one may soften the peas that they lie easy beneath the feet. No—in full penitence, stumbling onwards, they had to traverse that pathway of awful moments when the heart is full and the tongue tied to the coldest phrases of conventionality.

And then, at length, by the chance of God it had seemed, Stephen took a turning in this tortuous road, which brought the end in sight. He asked about the kitten. Peggy's face lit up.

"You've seen it?"

"This morning on your window sill."

"Inky."

"Is that what you call it?"

"Yes."

She told him where she had found it. One moment from that and they were settled down upon the seat next to the old gentleman with his morning paper, and Peggy's words were tumbling fast, one over the other.

It was impossible to tell him the whole story quick enough, for there was that look in his eyes as though he wanted to know it all.

“And I’m sure if I hadn’t saved her,” she concluded—“the creature would have jumped into the water.”

“But do they?” He thought she was romancing.

“I don’t know—Inky would. If you’d had nothing to eat for two days, nowhere to sleep and nowhere to get warm and you came to a river, wouldn’t you?”

“But I’m a person,” said Stephen.

“Well, it’s just the same.”

Stephen thought of their chickens off Aden.

“There must be a lot of things in this world to make you very unhappy,” said he.

She nodded her head seriously, in an old-fashioned way, and all the dogs and cats and horses and birds she had ever known made a pitiful little procession through her mind. You could almost see them go, passing behind her eyes. Sparrows without tails—London is full of them—an old cab horse with the harness rattling on his ribs—London is full of those, too. A blind dog with most of his fur worn off—oh, a sorry lot they were! Stephen tried to watch them go by. He was just going to tell her about the chickens, but he stopped. They were both silent then. Yet he never blew his nose once, and that first finger of hers was lying quietly folded up with all the other fingers in the glove. It never moved.

Then suddenly he felt the silence, and he said some-

thing quickly to break it. But it was easy to think of something then.

"Did Pinchers tell you I was a sailor?" he asked.

The colour ran on tip-toe to her face. This was the first time that Pinchers' name had been mentioned.

"Yes, he said that you were on a huge big ship that was having something done to it at Limehouse. What's the matter with it? Does it leak?"

He could have crushed her in his two hands for that. Did it leak? He wanted to say—"God bless your little heart!" but he was afraid. So instead he told her what was the matter with the *Elizabeth Warren*, from the mizzen to the fore-mast, from the bow-sprit to the lee chains when the wind is dead ahead. And all the time, she gazed at him with wondering eyes, but she never understood a single word of it. For jibs, staysails and flying jibs, mizzen sails, topsails and top-gallant sails, they were only funny words to her. Yet she kept on saying "Yes" and "No" and "Really?" and "Why?" for all the world as if she had been to sea and knew everything about it, when all the time the words were just splashing over her like water on a duck's back and she could think of nothing but how wonderful he was to know so much.

But when he told her how the *Elizabeth Warren* came by the damage which was being repaired in the Limehouse Dock; when he told her of the gale they had weathered round the Horn, how the pumps were going for three days and every stitch of canvas they

ran up was torn to ribbons as if it had been the tail of a shirt; when he talked of waves and pointed to the height of the houses in Charing Cross; when he told her of lightning that slit the heavens in two, of thunder like the rattle of a thousand rifles at their backs, deafening their ears to the screeching of the wind—then she forgot all about dignity; she forgot that they had never met before and—

“You’ll never go to sea any more, will you?” she said, and she clasped her hands on her lap.

He laughed and laughed and nearly said—“God bless you!” again, but the words stopped short at the edge of his tongue.

For something there is in that phrase, some flexibility of texture which permits of the lightest and the fullest meaning being wrapped within the simplicity of its artless folds. “God bless you!” and it may be the merest wish of charitable purpose—“God bless you!” and it may contain the deepest cry of the heart. ’Tis a matter of tone alone. A nonconformist minister will give with it all the cold comfort of a proper sentiment; a beggar in the street, fallen to the last rung of life’s ladder, will imbue it with a heart full of gratitude; and, on the lips of the lover it can be more gentle or more fierce, than all the kisses in the world. ’Tis a matter of tone and that is all about it.

I have heard it from some in such a way that it had not been out of place to ask—“Who’s God?” I have heard it said, I have seen it written when each letter

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throbbed with the fulness of its meaning and God was in every word.

Stephen had nearly said it then, only that he was not sure. For very nearly must a woman guess what it means when first a man says it in impulse to her. It is more than a mere figure of speech, unless he says it when she sneezes. Even then—well—that is when some, more timid than others, take their chance.

So when it stopped short on his tongue, Stephen said the next thing that followed it.

“There’d be few of us on the sea, if we all came home after our first bad storm.”

She looked at him with big, round eyes, as though she had guessed he was going to be drowned very soon.

“Don’t people think you’re very brave?” she said.

“I’ve never met them,” said he.

“But I think you must be.”

“Do you? But I’m not the only one on board.”

“No—but I don’t know the others, you see. Do you ever wear a medal of St. Francis Xavier?”

“What’s that?”

“Do you mean to say you don’t know what a medal of St. Francis Xavier is? Oh, then you must wear one. You wear it round your neck and it’ll save you in all sorts of danger.”

“Will it, by Jove? Where shall I get it?”

“I’ll give you one.”

“You will?”

“Yes—but you’re not a Roman Catholic, are you?”

He shook his head. It was not a ready admission. Most willingly would he have said yes, only she would have found him out.

"Is it a medal of St. Francis whatever you call him that you're wearing now?"

"Me?"

"Yes—the bit of string round your neck."

She put up her hand quickly to her throat and a flush of colour burnt warmly in her face.

"I didn't know you could see it," said she.

"Yes, through your blouse. I've been wondering what it was. I thought it was a piece of string."

Peggy pulled her coat across it.

"It's my scapular," said she; "does it look horrid?"

"It doesn't look as nice as the pale blue ribbon," he replied.

"Oh, but that's on my clothes."

"The pale blue ribbon doesn't mean anything then?"

"Only that I like to be tidy—I always—"

She stopped abruptly. Quite suddenly she realised what she was discussing and with a man she had never spoken to before in her life. The flush of colour had not gone so far, but what it was easily called back again. It leapt up once more like a flame to her forehead.

"Well, if I give you a medal of St. Francis Xavier," she said quickly—"I suppose you wouldn't believe in it?"

"I'd believe," said he, "if you gave me an old boot to tie round my neck."

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"An old boot wouldn't do you any good," said Peggy, and she looked terribly serious because it was a serious subject. "Are you a Protestant then?" she asked.

"I'm nothing at all," said he.

"You don't believe in anything?"

"Not particularly."

"Don't you believe in God?"

There was a hush of awe in her voice; there was a note of pity, too. In his want of belief, he seemed as pathetic to her as had been the little black kitten on the parapet of the Embankment, and, without her knowing it, the great wish moved in her heart again. He spoke like a child who has never been taught. She half stretched out her hand.

"Don't you believe in God?" she whispered again.

"Sometimes I do," said he.

"When?"

"When there's a blue sky."

"Only then?"

"Yes, and on a clear night."

"It's a blue sky now."

He looked straight at her.

"I know," said he.

"Then you believe now?"

He looked straight at her.

"I do," said he.

For a moment or two, she looked back at him. But there comes a point in these moments when what you

were thinking of, by some subtle conjuring of the eyes, becomes changed before you know where you are, to something else. The old fear, not of him but of Destiny, suddenly jumped out at her and, with a start, she took her eyes away.

"But you've promised to send me the medal," he said presently.

"And you'll wear it?"

"Of course I shall."

"How shall I send it?"

A twinkle came into his eyes.

"Tie a signal halyard," said he, "from my window to yours, and I'll wind it across."

He had to explain. A piece of cotton on a reel would do. She would have a reel and he would have a reel—black cotton so that no one would see it. If she let her end down into the courtyard below her window, he would tie it to his end. Then all they had to do was to wind up till it was taut.

"But how do I send the medal across?"

"Oh, you tie it on to the cotton at your end. Then you give the signal."

"How?"

"Well, supposing I have a bell attached to my end—a little bell. You tug your cotton—my bell rings. Directly I hear the bell ring, I come and wind up my reel till the medal comes across."

"It's all over then?"

"That's all—yes."

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"Do we break the cotton then?" she asked.

"Do we?" said he.

"I don't know. You'll have got the medal—it won't be any more good then, will it?"

"But I must send over," said he, "and thank you for it."

"Then I shall have to wind up *my* reel."

"Then you'll have to wind up *your* reel."

"It will be fun!" she said—and she laughed right into the heart of him. "Then I must have a bell too?"

He nodded his head.

"Oh, won't it be fun!" she exclaimed—"Is that what they do on board ship? Is that what you call a signal halyard?"

"Well, it's something very much like it," said he.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT IS MEANT BY ABSOLUTION

It is only when the conscience is bowed down with the weight of its burden, that it needs that welcome caravanserai of the dim confessional where it may ease itself of its load. All those little freights of smaller sins and lesser vanities—the venial merchandise of every soul I know—may well be carried across the whole stretch of the desert. For if one meets one of those generous merchants of absolution on the way, it is an easy matter to seat yourselves there upon a carpet on the sand and for you to show him what merchandise you carry. He will relieve you of all of which you are ready to dispose.

You rise to your feet again. He goes his way. You go yours.

In such dealings as these, there is no need for ceremony. In fact, ceremony is best left out of it. When they are but trivial matters, it merely belittles the value of your wares.

Two days, one after another, Peggy had gone into the chapel to make a confession to Father O'Leary. She knelt in a pew by herself. She clasped her hands

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tightly about her eyes. Her lips moved quickly as though her words were riding on a flood of contrition. But on the first day, when it came to her turn, she could not bring herself to pull aside the little green curtain and begin those great sounding words of the Confiteor—"I confess to Thee, Almighty God—to blessed Mary—ever Virgin—"

Oh—her sin was too trivial for that. She had talked to a man she did not know. They had spoken of kittens and of ships, of religions and of sacred medals—what sin was there there? But they had agreed to run a line of secret communication between their bedroom windows. It was fixed and taut even then. A little bell for signal, hung concealed behind her curtain. There was one likewise concealed behind his. But it was only conceived of in order that she might send him a medal of St. Francis Xavier. Surely what harm could there be in that?

There was another little matter, however, which her conscience presumed to tell her was the outcome of all this. But conscience is a voice you may adjure to keep silent and a woman will find the gentlest way to its favour as soon as any one.

When, therefore, it came to her turn on that first day, she kept her hands tight across her eyes, and some one else slipped into her place without hesitation or request.

Of course there ought to be manners before the confessional as elsewhere. *Place aux dames* was not only

written of the courts of kings or the palaces of the great. Your washerwoman's daughter is a lady, even when she brings back your linen foully starched. She may be a bad washerwoman. Abuse her as such, but give her your place in the omnibus, for she is a lady. This law should hold good before the confessional. But, unfortunately, it does not.

There is plenty of excuse, however. It is only the most pedantic of chivalry which makes a man cry "*Place aux dames*" on his way to the scaffold. And I gather that there is something of this nature in the confessional. I have never yet met any one on their way to it of whom you might say—they were quite themselves.

However that may be, Peggy's place was taken without a word and, after a while, she rose with a little sigh, from her knees, leaving the chapel.

You must never look before you leap over the precipice of confession. If you do, there comes that moment when it seems so terrible a suicide of dignity that you had best turn away. You will never do it then. It is as well to make off in the opposite direction and return again the next day.

Peggy adopted this method, but without success. She came to the chapel the next evening. Once more she knelt in her pew beneath the painted image of St. Joseph; but it was no use. There was no sin in knowing Stephen Gale; yet prefacing the confession of it with that ominous Confiteor seemed to make it so.

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Again she left the chapel, yielding her turn to some other penitent. It became a matter then of carrying her burden with her and disposing of it in such a moment of chance as when she might meet one who would relieve her of it on the way.

Two days later the opportunity occurred. With a well-worn little purse tight gripped in her hand—because Mrs. Parfitt had known many cases of people being robbed in broad daylight—she was going out to do the shopping of the house. At the end of Maiden Lane where you must cross Bedford Street, she ran into the arms of Father O'Leary.

“Will ye kindly mind,” said he—“where ye're goin'?”

She caught up the last note of his brogue.

“I will not,” said she, and she squeezed his hand.

“Well then, for goodness' sake be careful, the way ye're squeezing me hand. What 'ud they be saying to me now if they saw a young woman makin' eyes at me and holdin' with a squeeze on to me hand at the corner of Bedford Street? Shure if one of them French fellas from the Carmelite Church saw me now, I'd never hear the end of it. Will ye leave go of me hand, please, while I talk to ye as if ye ought to be ashamed of yeerself? 'Tis the only way for a priest when he's talking to a woman.”

She dropped his hand and looked up with a flush of embarrassment till she caught sight of the twinkle in his eyes. Then she broke forth into laughter, and a young clerk, passing by the fish shop at the corner on

the other side, kept his head turned to gaze at her with admiration till he ran into the lamp-post. Then he set his hat straight and walked on.

The twinkle died out of Father O'Leary's eyes. Peggy had not seen that young man. But he had. When he turned back to look at her, there was a questioning expression in his face, a look of dawning consciousness as when a sleeper awakens to a new day.

"An' where are ye goin'?" he asked.

"Shopping."

"What for?"

"Something to eat."

"I'll come with ye," said he and, from under the lashes of his eyes, he stole a covert glance at every young man as they passed.

It is a glorious entertainment, is shopping. There are such a heap of things to be sold and such a little money to buy them with. So little money is there, that you come out of the shop the happiest person in the world, for you have left everything you ever wanted inside. The necessities you have purchased, which you carry with you under your arm, make so false a value of the things you cannot get that it would be a wanting in all philosophy to obtain them.

It was between one shop and another—to be exact between the shop where you buy candles in New Street and the dairy where you get milk in Buckingham Street—that Peggy disposed of the little burden that was lying on her conscience.

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She did not dispose of all of it, it is true. You must know well the mood of your merchant before you come to deal with him in a private treaty such as this. And Peggy was not quite sure at that moment how Father O'Leary would look upon her acquaintance with the young man in the house opposite. But the other matter—well, it was not so difficult to dispose of that, so long as it was not prefaced by the great sounding phrases of the Confiteor.

Now, just at the top of Buckingham Street as it opens into the Strand, there are the broad and spacious windows of an attractive jeweller's shop. It is like the facade, glorious in its architecture, arresting in its beautiful line of ornament, the facade of a church which tempts you within its doors. For at the back of all this, there is a little chapel—a chapel of Unredemption. Its narrow entrance is hidden away down Buckingham Street. Two little steps up which you run, an easily swinging door you push, and you are out of sight.

And here, leading him to gaze into those alluring windows, Peggy brought Father O'Leary to a standstill.

"I've got something to ask you, Daddy," said she.

His eye lit upon a diamond necklace in the window marked seventy-five pounds.

"I'll make no rash promises," said he.

"I don't want you to make any promises at all. I want to tell you something. I want to know what I ought to do."

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Her voice was terribly serious because she really was going to tell him about Stephen. But when it came to the actual moment, well, you know the way words dance about on the tip of your tongue when they are too afraid to jump out of your mouth. Before she knew where she was, Peggy found herself offering that other small matter for disposal—that matter about which she had cajoled her conscience to say as little as possible.

Father O'Leary snatched a glance at her. She was going to make a confession.

When you are a priest and have, moreover, a heart under your waistcoat, you acquire the ability for appreciating every pulse-beat of those torturing moments. The very quickness in her voice, the very taking of her breath! He knew those signs so well. She was going to make a confession. But in the street! A confession! Outside the windows of a pawnbroker's shop! Ah, but that is the very sort of place where they do it—women especially. They have the very instinct for those subtle little transactions. They know every inch how much a man is a man of business so long as he is behind his counter. But let them meet him just one hundred yards down the street!

We may thank Heaven for it that the shutters are put up sometimes. It is no place to talk to a woman—across a counter; unless you have merely the soul of a tradesman, in which case—God help you!

And there is no more delicate a business than this interchange of virtues—the disarming meekness of confes-

sion for the noble quality of absolution. For the one is made of all the tenderest texture of humility, and you offer it in fair exchange for that which is set with all the jewels of mercy. Surely, then, it were a pity if such transactions were always made over the counter? You place an unresponsive board betwixt yourself and him with whom you would deal, and straightway there is cast so wide a gulf between you as will sweep away all the gentlest feelings of humanity.

I know if I were a Roman Catholic I would make my confession in the oddest of moments and the oddest of places in the world. Nothing short of murder or a mortal sin would drag me into the formality of that awesome little box with the green baize curtains. However, if I were a Catholic—which so constantly I do regret that I am not—I should doubtless do as I was told. Yet there are, if you chose to look for them, ways even of doing that. But it is only the women who find them out.

When once Father O'Leary had satisfied himself that Peggy was about to confess, he fell into the professionalism of manner which is inseparable from the man who has any feeling for his trade. His voice dropped to the gentle tone of encouragement. He bent his head just a little lower—

“Shure, ye can tell me,” said he, softly.

And by the inflection in his voice you would have imagined that he was just the one person in the world she could have told—not a soul else.

This is exactly as it should be. You have only to meet a shopwalker in a draper's establishment—meet him anywhere—meet him, if you like, in the Zoo, and should you make a casual remark in all the innocence of your heart about a job line—you may be referring to the monkeys in the monkey-house—he will straightway stretch out a graceful arm, then rub his hands as he brings them together.

A man is inseparable from his trade, and in heaven we shall find ostlers chewing straws when their life's work is over, just as they do here when the day's work is done. For whether he is a priest or a doctor, a cat's-meat purveyor or an undertaker, a man's whole expression will change, and his voice will alter when once you mention his trade.

Father O'Leary slipped his hand on to her arm and Peggy could have told him anything then—anything but what she thought she ought to confess.

"Shure, there's no call for ye to be afraid of me," he whispered again. "What is it?"

She drew a breath.

"You know my scapular——"

The words fell over each other.

"I do," said he.

"Well—it isn't that I mind the strings because they scratch."

"Do they scratch?" said he.

"They do," she replied.

"Faith, I haven't felt mine scratch these last ten

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years. I think I must get new strings, for 'tis the way I'm forgetting it altogether."

"But it isn't that I mind the scratching," Peggy persisted eagerly.

"It is not, of course," said he. "Shure, that's what they're there for, to remind ye of the holy order of St. Francis. 'They'd be no good if they didn't scratch."

"Well—you said yours didn't."

"I did, indeed. That's the way with them. Shure, there's divil a tickle in them at all—that's why I can't remember to get new ones. But what's the matter with yours?"

Peggy looked up into his face. This was just where the whole matter lay. Another breath had to be taken.

"They're so ugly," said she.

"Ugly?" said he, and he puckered up his forehead as he looked at her. "Ugly?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"But, Glory be to God, ye wear them next ye're skin, don't ye?"

"Yes—of course."

"Well, what's it matter how ugly they are, so long as they can't be seen?"

It sounded as if he were cross. With only the greatest exercise of courage did she struggle to go on.

"But they can be seen," said she, and he saw her lips half tremble. Then she faced him, opening her little coat and showing how through the lace neck of her blouse and the dainty camisole with its pale blue

ribbons underneath, those dark brown strings which fastened the scapular about her shoulder stood out in glaring conspicuousness.

"Do you see?" she asked.

"I do, indeed," said he.

"I wouldn't mind if they didn't look as if they were dirty."

"They don't look nice at all, shurely," said he. He hung his head first on one side and then on another as he looked at them. "And is it the way ye want to leave the scapular off altogether?"

"Oh, no!"

How could he think such a thing? She was not as bad as that. If there were no other way out of the difficulty, she would go on wearing those scratchy brown strings round her neck for the rest of her life.

"I was thinking," said she, "I might tie the scapular on with—ribbon."

"Silk ribbon?"

"Yes."

"Is it blue silk ribbon?" said he.

She nodded her head so that it was impossible to see the merriment in his eyes.

"Come and get the butter in the dairy," said he.

"It's a thing that needs thinking about. Shure, I don't know what St. Francis would say."

"Do you think he'd mind?" asked Peggy, tremulously, as they moved off from the glittering windows.

"Shure, I can't say that," he replied. "St. Francis

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was a holy man, and he wore the stuff that that's made of over the whole of his body. When I had new strings to me scapular I used to wonder how the devil he did it. But 'tis not the scratching, ye mind—is it?" he added.

"No—oh no, I don't mind that."

"Oh, well then, 'tis a different matter entirely. I shall have to give it serious consideration. Get ye're butter now and come along."

He waited for her outside while she made her purchase, and every one who passed him down that narrow street could not fail to see and wonder at the twinkle in his eyes.

"There's just one place I want to go to myself," said he, when Peggy joined him. "D'ye mind coming along with me?"

He led her up into New Street, never saying a word. At a draper's shop, he took her arm and marched her in.

"I want," said he, as he strode up to the counter, "I want four yards of pale blue silk ribbon."

Peggy held her breath, and below the counter she squeezed his hand.

"One'll be enough," said she.

CHAPTER XIII

A TRUE AND FAITHFUL DEFINITION OF A BARGAIN

It was not until the day after this confession, when he was seated at the window of his room below that in which Peggy slept, that Father O'Leary came truly to understand the full meaning of it all.

It is a fact—many and many a priest has found it so in all denominations—but when you come to deal with a woman over any little delicate matter of business, in the transaction of which she takes you unawares, you will find, when you come to sit down and think over it afterwards, that you have not become possessed of anything which bears the faintest resemblance to what you thought. And as it is with priests, so it is with all men.

It is impossible to explain how it comes about—whether by sleight of hand or what, no one can say. But, having agreed upon the terms of bargain with a smile too wonderful to express, she will proceed to bring forth what, seeming to you to be one thing, becomes when she leaves you alone with it, something very different altogether.

How does she do it ?

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To tell the truth, it were useless to try and find out. It is a secret, the key of which lies possibly in her eyes or her voice, the alluring danger of her smile or the pathos with which she can imbue a single gesture. By the same token it may lie in the tenderness of your heart for the whole sex—that tenderness upon the strings of which she plays with such subtle, wooing fingers that, before you know where you are, the tune of it is racing through your blood and the bargain may go to the devil for all you care.

She will lean confidently across the counter, at which such transactions take place—or it may be you are bargaining in the public highway as was Father O'Leary, in which case her fingers may just touch upon your arm—and in the gentlest and most convincing voice in the world, she will say—

“I think you understand women better than any man I have ever known.”

Well, what would you not give her then? Is there any exchange you would not be ready to make? The bargain is reduced to a farce. A man of business? You become a philanthropist at once or you are one of the stoniest-hearted of men I know.

Possibly that is it then. I had never thought of that before. The secret of all this matter lies in your heart. And it is while she plays her melodies upon it—as when the conjurer deftly distracts your eye—that the little exchange, at which you come later to be so surprised, takes place.

Now this was just what had happened with Father O'Leary. But it was not until he had gone to that secret drawer wherein lay his tender relics ; it was not until his own little piece of ribbon—long faded with the bleaching of the years—it was not until that was lying in the palm of his hand and his head was bent over it, that he came truly to realise what confession Peggy had given him in exchange for that absolution contained in four yards of pale blue ribbon.

For when once the thought of it peered into his mind, there came, like a host of children peeping in at a half-opened door, a thousand little incidents to confirm his suspicion.

The day she had kissed him when he was on the stairs, crushing his face in her hands, calling him Daddy and then rushing like some wild thing out of sight—that was one of them. Then yesterday, the look of admiration, of tenderness almost in the eyes of that young boy until a lamp-post had taught the impertinent young divil his manners. And again, her confession. She wanted pale blue silk ribbon to fasten the scapular round her neck.

But why? Why had she called him Daddy, with a strange high note in her voice?

Because Peggy was in love.

Why had the young boy gazed after her with tenderness in his eyes?

Because there was the halo of something about her then—a halo which possibly his tired eyes could not see

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but which the young eyes of that boy had singled out—without knowing it perhaps—from a thousand other distractions in the street.

It was the halo of love that had touched her. You must be young to see it; young to feel the quickness of its light. He had seen it once. His eyes fell to the withered petals in his hand. He had seen it once—just for a moment or two.

Then last of all—why had she found the strings of her scapular to be so ugly?

Why? Because Peggy was in love.

For when once a woman discovers that halo about her head—the chaplet of daisies may be it is—when once she finds that eyes are seeking her in a world where only one pair of eyes exists, she comes to that great and wonderful knowledge that she is beautiful. Not the self-conscious knowledge which drinks its wisdom from the pool of a generous mirror; but a frightened realisation that she is a woman than whom, if she is but pure and clean and true, there is no more beautiful a thing in the world.

And with this knowledge come trooping the prettiest little pageboys of vanity you could wish to see. They are dressed in delicate grey. They wear the quaint caps of gnomes upon their heads and tinkling bells of silver jingle merrily at their elbow tips. Hand and foot they wait upon her, whispering counsel in her ready ear. And it is they who make her change the doing of her hair. It is they who smooth down her

frock that it may not reach one fraction of an inch above her pretty foot. It is they, in fact, who hold up their hands in horror at the sight of an ugly brown string of cloth where only pale blue ribbon should be seen.

It was when he came, with that ludicrous mathematical accuracy of a man—with just the touch of a woman's instinct too, perhaps—to piece these separate facts together, that Father O'Leary knew Peggy was in love. Some one—as Mrs. Parfitt would have said—had put those nonsensical ideas into her head at last.

But who? Who could there be in this great tangled city whom she had met? He looked out over the forest of roofs, down the avenues of chimney-pots, and a sudden chilling fear for the safety of this little child of his struck icily on his heart.

It was a big world. It was a great world. There was the good—the highest good in everything, but it needed the steady hand of experience to pick it out from the rest.

“Oh—Glory be to God,” said he to himself, as his conscience smote him, “’tis the way I’m goin’ on just like one of them Protestant clergymen fellas—I am so. Ye wouldn’t say I was a celibate at all. Ye’d think I’d got the whole cares of a family on me shoulders—ye would indeed.”

I must confess that I have not known whether to write that word—ye—with a capital letter or not. It

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would have been impossible to know whom he was addressing.

Whoever it was, he forgot the Protestant clergyman fella the next minute and was back in his mind again to that same fear for the safety of his little child.

He had known all along that this was bound to happen, just as surely as he had anticipated that letter from Mrs. Gooseberry. Yet whereas then, it had been a matter upon which he could not only demand arbitration, but also, with deft diplomacy weave such arbitration to achieve his own ends, now, it was that he could do nothing.

What was there to do, when he knew nothing?

He could not go to Peggy and ask her to tell him if it were true. She would say at once—"Whatever made you think so?" And then what, if you please, was he to reply? For that answer would tell him nothing and it was just the very answer he would get.

You may make your question as direct as you like to a woman and think thereby to reach your harbour with a fair breeze; but the question she will give you in reply, will take all the wind out of your sails. Before you know where you are, you must put about and go on another tack.

For what had put that nonsensical idea into his head? Nothing more tangible than a note in Peggy's voice; the look of a youth in the street; a sudden inspiration about her confession, based upon no other fact than that little piece of pale blue ribbon which

was lying in his hand at the moment. Well—how could he show her that? for that was the greatest proof he had.

He put the rose petals back in the drawer. They had no place in this argument. But the ribbon—he still held that in his hand. It was as though he found comfort in it; as though he clung to it because it contained the solution of the mystery he had just exposed. But it gave him no assistance in showing him what he was to do.

It was no good confiding in Mrs. Parfitt; for women whose hearts have been starved of love lose much in understanding. He had found the heart in her, it was true—a good, an honest and a noble heart it was. But there had been no great emotion to ever make it flexible. There had been no cunning fingers of a little child to soften it understanding.

To the woman who has never loved, who has, moreover, passed all hopes of it, love is a nonsensical idea. It scarcely touches her comprehension. For your heart must have become malleable under the hammer of sorrow or great joy, before it can truly be receptive of the emotions of others.

And this was just where Mrs. Parfitt had lost touch with life. She could not understand the heart in others, because her own was dried and seared—the rose that lingers, waiting for the fingers of Romance to pick it—the rose that withers when the Romance of Summer has gone by.

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It was still more impossible to show to her the little piece of ribbon that he held and, in answer to her inevitable demand for proof, reply—

“This—this bit of ribbon—this bit of ribbon that was worn, God knows how many years ago, by just such a girl as Peggy.”

She would never be able to follow from that, the mesh of intricate pathways down which he led his reason to the belief that Peggy was in love. She would only hold up her hands in horror and amazement that he had kept such a thing in his possession—he, a celibate priest! No, that was a secret which must be content to lie in the deepest recesses of his heart. It was too sacred to hope that any one would ever understand.

Then who could help him? How should he ever find out? If he waited until Peggy had told him of her own accord, it might be too late.

And then, when it seemed that he was moving in an impenetrable mist with a voice calling loudly in his ears, calling imperatively for action, there came one of those imps of circumstance with a lively grin upon his face who, in one cunning wink of light, showed Father O'Leary all he wanted to know.

It chanced that he turned to look out of his window; and there, moving slowly through mid-air, with no visible means of support, he saw a speck of something crossing the light of the sky from the Presbytery to the house over the way.

With eyes, curious and intent, he watched it as it performed its tedious journey and then, at last, when it reached the window of the top floor of Nicolas Gadd's lodging-house, a hand—the hand of a man—stretched out and grasped it.

Father O'Leary took a deep breath and shook himself.

"'Tis some sort of a trick they're playin'," said he to himself, but for the moment the thought that Peggy was concerned in it, never entered his head. It was only when he leant far out from the window and could dimly see the fine thread of cotton against the bright light of the sky; it was only when he followed it with his eyes, stretching from the window of Nicolas Gadd's to the dormer window of Peggy's room just above his own, that he realized all the significance it possessed.

"'Tis the way they're writing notes to each other," he whispered, telling himself the terrible secret in such a voice as that no one else might hear. And he would have stayed there, watching the process until he knew exactly all it meant, but a severe voice behind him drew him precipitately back into the room.

"In the name of goodness," exclaimed Mrs. Parfitt—"what are you doing?"

Well—it had to be explained. You do not, without a purpose, lean forth from your window and at such an angle as that you are in immediate danger of falling forty feet on to the pavement below. You do not, for example, do it for fun. Father O'Leary knew quite

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well that it would have to be explained; but to give the true explanation—of course, that was out of the question.

There fled a picture through his mind of Mrs. Parfitt, knowing the truth and straightway marching in wrath across to Nicolas Gadd's to catch this young man red-handed in his treachery. The sequel to that picture was clearer still. But it was not the way to put a stop to it.

Place one barrier in the course of true love and, in the leaping of it, Romance will take head like some restive steed, bearing its faithful lovers out and away into the heart of the sunset. You will never see them again after that.

It is a foolish thing to say that a celibate priest knows nothing of the world. Why, in that little camera obscura of his—the dim confessional—he sees all life passing and learns the subtlest weaknesses of human nature.

No, it was no good telling Mrs. Parfitt the truth. Besides, he was so pleased at finding it out that there was something besides wisdom in his diplomacy. God bless my soul—I don't see why you should blame a dog for lying in the manger! The soft places in this world are for those who find them. The real dog-in-the-manger is he who has the soft place found for him and sees to it that no one occupies it but himself.

I find no blame for Father O'Leary that he practised deception on Mrs. Parfitt, whether because he did

not want her to meddle in so delicate a matter, or simply because he wanted to keep his knowledge to himself. It makes little difference to me, for deceive her he did.

"I'm just after thinking of going out," said he.

"Do you generally go out by the window?" she asked suspiciously.

"I do not," replied he. "But 'tis the way I thought it was misting."

"It's as fine a day as we've had this week," said the good woman, moving across the room to where he was still standing.

"It is," said he—"but I don't know have ye noticed, there's a touch of cold in it."

And he shut the window.

Now that was enough to rouse any woman's curiosity. Mrs. Parfitt would have answered to it as readily as the fish rises to the alluring reality of the tempting fly, had not something, just at that moment, distracted her attention.

She saw the little strip of pale blue silk ribbon, hanging out between the fingers of Father O'Leary's hand. In the immediate need for action, he had forgotten all about it.

"What's that piece of ribbon?" asked Mrs. Parfitt.

He looked up at her, then down at the piece of ribbon. Then he looked up at her again and he forced a careless, jovial smile into his face.

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"Oh—that?" said he, as though he scarcely knew how on earth he had come by it.

"Yes—that," said Mrs. Parfitt.

It was not encouraging.

"Shure, 'tis a—'tis a piece of ribbon," said he.

She bent her head in acknowledgment of the information.

"I can see that," she replied. "What are you doing with it?"

He smiled again. But he felt it was less successful than before.

"Shure—I'm—I'm just holding it," said he.

She thrust out her hand. There was no need to say "let me look"; the very gesture said it for her. Well—with a woman like Mrs. Parfitt, who nursed suspicions as most women nurse other women's children, for the mere sake of holding something alive in their arms—it would have been fatal to refuse her request. And with a heart sinking by reason of the weight of his despair, he placed it tenderly in her hand.

"Why—it's a dirty old piece of ribbon," said she contemptuously.

He nodded his head. Oh, and he tried so hard to look as if he did not care how old it was, how dirty either!

Then suddenly she marched with it to the door.

He gripped his hands to control the agony of his mind.

"What—what are ye going to do with it?" he asked.

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It was almost like a child crying for the toy it was about to lose.

“What am I going to do with it?” She crumpled it up in her stern fingers. “Do you think I’m going to have the floor littered with old bits of stuff like this? What am I going to do with it? Why, put it in the dust-bin, of course!”

And with a burning, righteous sense of that cleanliness which comes nigh to godliness, she was gone.

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUST-BIN—MAIDEN LANE

It is required of you in this net-work of London, where dust-bins and rubbish heaps are a luxury of space only known to the rich, it is required of you that you fill a little receptacle of zinc—it may be a wooden tub if you like—with all the rubbish and odds and ends which collect in your daily march of destruction. It is expected of you moreover that you will place this receptacle on the pavement in the street outside your door and, what is most of all to the point, that you will do it before eight o'clock in the morning.

Ere nine of the day has sounded on the deep-throated bells, there come great, bearded men with heavy, sack-cloth cowls upon their heads. Your little bin of rubbish is carried up a flight of steps on to the first floor of a huge cart. With a sonorous jangling of harness this great Juggernaut passes on down the street, taking its victims—the things that nobody wants—to a place about which, so far as I can make out, nobody seems to care.

Now if your household be well-ordered, you will never leave this little ceremony to the last moment.

Dustmen, like policemen—in fact like all those who are put in authority—are so stern and pitiless of mind when it comes to a dealing with the weaknesses of others, that there is not one moment's pardon for you should you transgress the law. Therefore, if you would order your household to that harmonious swing of the pendulum, it were as well that you followed the example of Mrs. Parfitt. Put out your dust-bin over night.

It was precisely this custom of hers which so stimulated the mind of Father O'Leary to hope. For when the door of his room had closed and Mrs. Parfitt had disappeared with his piece of pale blue ribbon, it had seemed like a visitation of the wrath of God—as sudden, as swift, as devastating. He had stood in the centre of the room, trembling, every moment pressing his hand to his eyes as though he were in prayer. For when

lamity such as this overtakes one whose whole nature is wrapped up in the pages of the Gospels, he immediately looks towards God for the direction from which it has come.

Now, with the greatest deference for the Gospels, you must admit that that is not the way things happen. God visits the earth in great silences, in great deluges of light, in great mysteries of darkness; He seldom accompanies the wanderings of a Mrs. Parfitt as she steals through the house with a duster in her hand to see that all the rooms are tidy.

But to Father O'Leary, with that mind of a child—

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which the Church of Rome may well be thanked for rearing—there was, in the loss of his little relic, nothing more nor less than the justice of God. Wherefore, with all the human nature of which a man is capable, whereby in his judgment he gives God the benefit of the doubt, he said aloud to himself—

“If a’be I can get that out of the dust-bin, ’twill be all right. It will so. But shure, if I can’t—’tis the way God meant me to be having the loss of it.”

For the time being then, he forgot all about his discovery of Peggy’s love affair. The loss of his little piece of ribbon—a symbol that bore witness to the greatest heights of sacrifice to which his mind had ever risen—was no greater in its misfortune than would have been the theft of some image of a saint from its altar.

Therefore, until he knew whether it were possible to recover it from the depths of that insatiable dust-bin, he steeled his mind to refuse this as a visitation of God.

That evening at supper, then, he talked of the Corporation of the City of Westminster.

“’Tis a fine body of men,” said he, and he looked distantly into a far corner of the room as though the members of it were all standing there for his inspection.

“What do they do?” asked Peggy. “Do some of them play in the band down in Charing Cross Gardens?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” remarked Mrs. Parfitt. “Tim Reilly was a town councillor in Cork. I knew

him. He used to put T.C. after his name. He played the cornet in the Butter Market Band. They used to practise of a Sunday morning in a room just near St. Finbarre's Protestant Cathedral. You never heard such a clatter of noise in your life. I always think of Tim Reilly when I hear that band down in the gardens."

"This is [what might be called the indirect method of criticism, quite as painful, I believe, as any other.

"The band has ne'er a thing to do with the Corporation," said Father O'Leary. "'Tis the County Council sees to that. Mind ye, I don't want to say anything against the County Council, but if-it was the Corporation what was responsible for that band, I shouldn't think so well of 'em."

"I think it's a lovely band," said Peggy quickly.

He snatched a glance at her.

"It is indeed," said he—"What's the matter with the bread-and-butter pudding?"

"I don't feel hungry—that's all."

Mrs. Parfitt raised her eyes.

"At your age," said she—"I could eat anything."

Father O'Leary felt the current of conversation to be veering in another direction. The robustness of Mrs. Parfitt's health when she was a child was a topic he knew by experience to be inexhaustible. With a deft hand, therefore, he brought their attention round once more to the Corporation of Westminster.

"'Tis they keep all the streets of London clean," he

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continued—"the way ye'd think every road had had its face washed of a morning."

Mrs. Parfitt's eyes just lifted from her plate. What was all this talk of the Corporation of the City of Westminster? She felt that there was something to be understood, but found no enlightenment in his face. It wore the expression you would expect to accompany an interest in a city corporation. There is no need to describe it. Think of a city corporation yourself. Mrs. Parfitt gave back her attention to her plate.

"Are they responsible for clearing away the dustbins in the morning?" she asked presently.

Father O'Leary brushed his mouth carefully with his napkin, for all the world as if he had a moustache.

"They are," said he—"but shure that's the least interesting thing they have to do."

"It's only in that capaciousness they affect me," rejoined Mrs. Parfitt.

"'Tis capacity you mean," said Father O'Leary.

"Perhaps it is," she snapped, and she blushed up to her forehead as she helped herself to more bread-and-butter pudding. Then for the few moments of silence which followed, she kept saying, "capaciousness, capacity—capaciousness, capacity," in her mind, till the sound of them became so mixed and confused that she believed one word to be just as good or just as foolish as the other.

"I only wish," she added after the pause, heaping her annoyance in tones of asperity upon the heads of

the absent corporation—"I only wish that they'd clear the dust-bins at eight o'clock, when they're expected to."

"And don't they?" said he.

"No!"

"Oh, Glory be to God! And the way we pay the rates and taxes, mind ye."

"An imposition, I call it," said Mrs. Parfitt.

"It is, indeed," said he—"but maybe 'tis the way ye put the dust-bin out in the street too late."

"Thank you!" she exclaimed with righteous indignation. "Turning it on to me! I think I know my duty, if they don't know theirs. You go to bed at half-past ten every night, so there's not much you can know about it. But we put that dust-bin out on the pavement every night before we go up-stairs. That's just like a man, isn't it?"

In particular, she appealed to no one; but to her own sex in general it was the bitter voice of one crying for justice.

"Mr. Parfitt was just the same," she went on—"just the same he was. He'd try and draw up the fire with the newspaper, and when it caught alight he'd push it down in the fender, stamp it out with his foot, and half-an-hour later you'd hear him complaining the grate was untidy. That was Mr. Parfitt all over."

"Shure, I never drew a fire up with a paper in me life," said Father O'Leary meekly. "I stand the poker up against it. I dunno, but 'tis the way they say it

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makes a draught. Shure, I never used a paper in me life ; I did not."

"No ; but you'd leave dirty little pieces of blue ribbon lying about in your room, and then complain of me because I didn't put out the dust-bin soon enough."

"Blue ribbon ?" said Peggy quickly.

As a rule, when Mrs. Parfitt was standing upon her dignity, which occurred at nearly every meal to which she sat down, Peggy kept silent. But blue ribbon—and just after what had happened only two days before ?

"A dirty old piece of blue ribbon," said Mrs. Parfitt. "Carrying it about in his room, just as if he didn't know what to do with it. Just the way Mr. Parfitt went on ! He'd carry a bit of rubbish about in his hand for an hour and then, when I'd tidied up every room in the house, he'd ask me why I couldn't keep the place clean."

For one moment, the very briefest, and yet perhaps that moment more filled with unconscious understanding than any she had yet lived, Peggy glanced at Father O'Leary.

There was a look in his eyes as he met the look in hers, which seemed to beg for silence. She did not know why. Not for one instant did she understand ; yet something—something like a warm wind of summer as it touches the petals of a flower—seemed to touch the gentle heart of her then. She felt as though he were asking the return of gratitude for those four yards of blue silk ribbon which he had bought for her ; as

though he were saying in just so many words, "I did that for you—just say nothing. It's all I want you to do for me."

And so, as Mrs. Parfitt's eyes were steadied upon her in expectation of her opinion, she dropped her napkin off her lap and vanished under the table to pick it up.

"Well ; I'll go and speak to these Corporation men to-morrow morning," said Father O'Leary, as Peggy appeared again. "'Tis a shameful thing, mind ye, to think that ye have all the trouble of putting that great thing outside on the pavement every night, and they not clearing it away till nine o'clock. Shure 'tis what I've been saying all along, only ye wouldn't listen to me. 'Tis a shameful body of men they are, an' we payin' taxes and rates, and all they be doin' is to expect ye to tip them at Christmas and at Easter. An' shure one o' them fellas if he found a shillin' under a stone, he'd go an' drink it. Faith, I'll get up early to-morrow morning and I'll go and give them a talking to meself."

There was a note of such satisfaction and triumph in his voice, that Peggy glanced at him again ; yet, quick as was her appreciation of that note, she could not realize its meaning.

The understanding which love brings with it to the heart of a woman is too intangible even for her grasping. It is as though a window were thrown open, wherefrom the soul of her peers out and, seeing the sunshine, her eyes are blinded in the light of it. Wherefore she closes them once more, and lets the bright light beat down

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upon her face. She is content then in seeing nothing, so long as she may feel the warmth. And this it is, this feeling of warmth, that is the sympathy of understanding which love brings into the heart of a woman.

* * * * *

There was little rest for Father O'Leary that night. Half awake and half asleep, he counted the tolling of the hours until, from his open window, he could see the first light of dawn—a misty flush of palest gold—that mounted tenderly into the sky.

One by one it singled out the silent chimney stacks across the river; one by one it sharpened the fine needle points of the spires of churches which lifted above their surrounding buildings. And on and on it crept, like the luminous dust of a great army marching out of the east upon a city of sleep.

Here and there, as it rose, a dome of metal threw back a dim light in answer. The cold greys of night melted away before it, as though the heat of a furnace was in its breath. Everything upon which first it fell, shivered and then became tremblingly alive. Still on and on it moved, lifting yet higher, growing yet more luminous, giving life to everything it touched until, it was as if God were at labour upon the creation of the world once more.

But as yet it was only the dawn of light that was waking—gold, crimson, yellow and mauve, all stirring from deep sleep and raising themselves from their pillows of silence.

And then, as imperceptibly as light had opened its eyes, sound stirred through the stillness. A sparrow, uncurling its head from its breast, twittered on a sleepy note. From that note and from that moment, the great orchestra of the great city began the subtle tuning of its countless strings. Another sparrow chirped and woke its mate. Then far away, like a bee on a distant flower, there roared a faint muffled hum. You could distinguish no sound in it. No vehicle rumbling over heavy stones, however far away, no actual energy of daily life, could have produced that noise. It was as though five million human beings had, at one given moment, just turned in their sleep, half conscious in their dreams that the light of another day was shining on their faces.

From that moment then, sound woke apace. A cart trundled over the cobbles in a near street. A window was thrown open with a clattering noise. A dog barked. At last came the voice of a man singing and with it the new day was born.

Father O'Leary got up and dressed.

By the time he had crept down-stairs, the day was wide awake. As he passed Mrs. Parfitt's door, he paused to listen. The good lady, who never admitted to more than a light form of dozing, which she refused to call by so satisfying a name as sleep, was snoring in a peaceful cadence. His eyes winked with a smile as he moved away.

But he had every reason to suppose that those sounds would not continue for long. With the painful regularity

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which is to be found in all blameless lives, she rose punctually at six every morning. At six, before the clocks had finished striking the hour, her eyes opened. Then she rose at once.

There were none of the human weaknesses in Mrs. Parfitt. She did not allow that any comfort was to be found in that half-hour after waking, when you pull the clothes more securely round your shoulders and lie, peacefully blinking at the new morning face of the day. But then, even bed, you see, was no comfortable place to her ; for she never slept in it. She only dozed.

And at six—so at least she would lead you to believe—she would rise, because dozing is a tiring habit to have acquired. It brings but little rest and is only slightly removed from dreadful insomnia. At six then, she was up and about her duties once more. At twenty five minutes past six, she was dressed and down-stairs.

The only thing that really occupied her time in her bedroom, was the painful process of eliminating the grey hairs which seemed to make an almost daily appearance in the midst of those deep black locks which she brushed back so sternly from her forehead. One by one, with the cheerful pleasure of self-inflicted pain, she dragged them out. An inimitable expression of satisfaction settled on her face at the sight of each one as she held it up to view. And when once the little bundle was collected, it was twined with grim determination about her finger and dropped mercilessly out of the window into the street.

She never saw the sudden flight of some cock sparrow as he darted down from the roof, bearing it sparrowfully and triumphantly in his beak to that corner under the eaves where these little creatures are eternally building. From the moment it left her finger and disappeared out of the window, Mrs. Parfitt forgot about it; forgot about it so absolutely as to be able to declare without one qualm of conscience, that she had not one grey hair in her head.

Seeing that it was half-past five then, Father O'Leary hurried on down-stairs. Opening the Presbytery door, he stole out into the porch. There, on the pavement outside in the street, stood the silent dust-bin which consumed day after day with unfailing appetite, those crumbs of rubbish which fall from the rich man's household.

There is somewhat of the eternal law in the insatiable appetite of a dust-bin. But then there is somewhat of the eternal law in everything. With the hands of him a man may alter the features of a piece of metal, but whether he makes it into a dust-bin or a threepenny nail, he cannot change the eternal law in its soul.

But to Father O'Leary at that moment, it was nothing more nor less than a dust-bin before which, he must sacrifice all dignity in order to regain his little piece of pale blue ribbon. For can you conceive anything more degrading than that a man should be compelled to go through his own rubbish heap in broad daylight and in the open street, where the first

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passer-by will take him, willy nilly, for a common scavenger?

It was impossible to carry it back into the house. Two men might have lifted it. Two men eventually would lift it on to their car of Juggernaut. The only possible procedure was to go through it then and there and let them see him who might.

“Shure, God be wi’ the days!” said he fatalistically.

And, turning back the cuffs of his black coat, he began.

It is quite easy to learn something about your habits from the contents of your own dust-bin. Father O’Leary was amazed.

“Glory be to God,” said he, as his hands dived into an unfathomable depth of tea leaves—“I’d never have thought we drank as much tea as that now!”

He learnt other things about the management of the household before he had finished. He learnt strange little secrets about Mrs. Parfitt—about Peggy too. And then, when he had carefully laid the bone of a ham upon the pavement, because it persisted in falling from the summit of the mound of tea leaves on to the very top of his excavations, he heard a softened foot-fall behind him and a deep voice saying—

“’Ere—you can’t be litterin’ up the pavement, yer know. If yer want that bone, yer’d better shuv it in yer pocket.”

Father O’Leary looked up. He resented the tone. It is only afterwards that you laugh at these matters.

You are too sensitive to your own want of dignity to laugh with them at the time. The little piece of blue silk ribbon had to be recovered. It was through no fault of his that he was compelled to submit to the ignominious task of searching for it there.

"'Ear what I said?" the constable added in the same even tone of voice.

"'Tis my bone," said Father O'Leary.

"Well—put it in yer pocket."

"I'll put it back in me own dust-bin and when I like," said Father O'Leary shortly.

The policeman's eyes opened.

"Your dust-bin?"

"It is indeed, an' if 'tis the way ye're jealous of the bone ye can take it away yerself—shure I don't want it."

It was not until he had said that, that Father O'Leary saw how preposterous the situation was. In a moment he began to laugh. First his eyes twinkled. Then that long upper lip of his began to twitch. At last, when he saw the look of offended solemnity on the policeman's face, he broke out into laughter.

"Ah, shure, don't worry me now," said he—"I've lost something and I'm trying to look for it here. Will ye kindly go away and leave me alone!"

If the London policeman had but the saving grace of a sense of the ridiculous, we should be a happier and a better nation. It is because you take the law seriously that you break it. No man I have ever met with will

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destroy the thing that really amuses him. No child will ever pull to pieces its Teddy Bear—but give your son an engine, with all the complicated advantages of machinery and, taking it as a serious matter in life, he will reduce it to its component parts in half-an-hour.

The constable looked at Father O'Leary for another moment or so and then, with a stolid expression in which no glimmer of the light of understanding ever shone, he said—

“Well—I've never seen a gentleman going through his own dust-bin before.”

“Indeed,” said Father O'Leary.

“No—and that's a fact.”

And then he moved on, casting an eye of solemn suspicion into every doorway as he passed.

Father O'Leary continued with his search. Cinders and ashes, crusts of bread, the peelings of potatoes, all the sweepings and scourings of a day's labour, he passed through his fingers for the sake of one little piece of pale blue ribbon.

Oh, it is just as well that men should be sentimentalists! They would be drones indeed, fit simply for the massacre, without. For sentiment it is only that has justified their existence. Women were justified from the beginning. They give birth to life. Now all that a man give birth to, dies—for it is conceived in the womb of sentiment. The greatest thing he brings into the world is a religion. It lives for a few thousand of years or so. That is all. In the long run it dies; for

it is only a child of sentiment. It dies and some other man weaves some other sentiment into its place.

Can you have any wonder that there are some who worship the Mother of God? It was She who gave birth to the greatest idealist who ever lived.

Father O'Leary, hunting for his little symbol in that dust-bin on the pavement of Maiden Lane, was only acting in unconscious obedience to that inviolable law which demands the quality of sentiment in all men—that sentiment by which they may move the faith of the world, or touch the heart of one woman to the great and wonderful duty which is hers.

The ribbon itself—that was nothing. That he sought for it so patiently, may also be said to be of little or no account. But the beating of that heart of his, as he turned over the unromantic contents of the dust-bin, was the true fulfilment of his highest justification. That it should be put to no better use, Nature cannot be blamed for. She bestows her gifts upon the just and upon the unjust. The responsibility of the use of them is not hers.

For, beating his heart certainly was. Beneath each jumble of incoherent rubbish, he expected to find his reward. So intent was he upon his search that, though he heard new footsteps approaching him, he did not look up.

“Any good?” said a voice.

He raised his head.

There was a loafer, his hands deep in the pockets of

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a withered pair of trousers, a peaceful expression of contemplation shining cheerfully on his face.

"Any good?" he said again.

By the tone of his voice, you might almost have imagined that he knew what the priest was looking for. Father O'Leary's lips half opened.

"Any good for what?" said he.

"Breakfast."

"I shouldn't think so," said Father O'Leary—"but you can try."

There was a half glint of admiration in the loafer's eye.

"Go on," he said—"your bin—ain't it? Yer got 'ere fust—'Sides which, I never found anything in that blessed bin in me life. What they leaves wouldn't feed a sparrer—" and he slouched on towards the market.

For a moment Father O'Leary's eyes followed him, then, hearing the clock strike the quarter to the hour of six, he pursued his task once more.

It was approaching the end now and he had not found his piece of ribbon yet. Only a few odds and ends lay between him and the bottom of the bin. All round him, the pavement was littered in such a way that if the constable chanced to pass again, he would be bound to complain of it. He might raise his voice in expostulation. Mrs. Parfitt might be wakened. Terrible things might still happen and Father O'Leary felt his heart dropping to the dull beating of despair as he searched and searched in vain.

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Then yet another sound fell on his ear—a sound that chilled his blood and made his heart sick. The Presbytery door had opened in the porch behind him. He dared not look round. Already he could feel Mrs. Parfitt's eyes, sharp and piercing with amazement, drilling small holes into the very middle of his back. In another instant, with ears tingling in anticipation, he knew he would hear her exclamation of astonishment. With every muscle arrested in his body, he waited for the sound of it. But no sound came. Then, just as he was about to turn, hoping that his senses had played him false, a small voice whispered—

“Daddy!”

He jumped to his feet. It was Peggy. She was standing there in the dim shadow of the porchway, gazing at him in undisguised astonishment.

“Daddy!” she said again, in a still smaller voice than before.

He hurried down the little steps. But when he got to her side, he could say nothing.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

He tried to look her in the eyes, but in that light, the grey-blue pebbles were so still. There was not even the faintest ripple on the surface of the stream to stir them. He tried hard to look, but his eyes refused him.

“I was—” he scratched his head—“Shure I was looking for a little thing. ’Twas the way I thought it might have got out in the bin by mistake. I may be

wrong, mind ye, but I'd a fancy that she might have put it in the bin—ye see—er—well—I—I thought if I looked for it—I—I might find it there."

In the shadows of the porchway, Peggy slipped out her fingers till they found his hand.

"She was going to put it in the bin," said Peggy.

"How d'ye mean," said he stolidly—"Shure ye don't know what it is."

"She was going to put it in the bin," Peggy repeated—"But I took it out again, when she wasn't looking."

"In the name of God!" he exclaimed, torn between the hope of finding his cherished relic and the fear of exposing himself to her criticism—"how could ye take it out when ye didn't know what it was?"

"But I did know," said she.

His eyes opened wide.

"Ye knew?"

"'Twas the bit of ribbon," said she—"that Mummy Parfitt found you with yesterday evening."

And solemnly, she placed it in his hand.

He looked down at it. He drew a deep breath. He looked up at her and he drew another.

"If there is one thing in the world——" he began.

"There's a lot of rubbish out on the pavement," said Peggy gently. "You'd better put it back."

CHAPTER XV

OF WAYS AND MEANS

OF the making of love, as of books, there is no end. As in books also—the books that are true—the same great thoughts are repeated over and over again. The only difference you will find is the style, which is the man. About as much difference is there as this in love.

You may woo a maid with the song of a two-edged sword; you may woo her with the song of a lute. You may make love with love, with wisdom or with folly. You may make it with the brave words of a man or the clinging whispers of a little child. Yet whatever means you use, whatever way you take, you are but uttering the same great truth, if your love be true, as all the thousands of lovers have uttered before you.

When Stephen Gale sought counsel with Pinchers, the man of muffins, when he ran up his signal halyard between the bedroom on the top floor of Nicolas Gadd's house and the dormer window of the Presbytery, he was choosing his own way to say what Dante said to Beatrice, what Aucassin said to Nicolette.

Now there is not much that can be spoken when you know that your words must travel on a precipitous

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journey through mid-air, losing warmth, losing all their tenderness every moment, as they proceed on their perilous way. Any instant during their passage, the cotton may untwine, and all that you have written, with heart amazed at your daring, will flutter down irrevocably into the courtyard below. There can be no writing of it again then. These things cannot be repeated. In one effort of daring, the heart will only venture once.

So this method adopted by Stephen Gale of making love to Peggy, if not a tedious one, was slow. For it is the look in a woman's eyes—that look of mute appeal, which tells you, plainer than any words, the very words she may not speak, the thousand thoughts triumphing in her mind. From that look alone, you take your note of courage. From that look, when once it has reached your watchful eyes, you spur the steed which bears you to success.

But across the breadth of a wide courtyard, with only a thread of cotton to link your thoughts together, such little subtleties as these are lost.

When the signal halyard was first made taut and, across the slender line of it, Peggy saw the medal of St. Francis Xavier winding perilously to its destination, it was too much a game of children for her to do anything but hold her breath and then, when it had arrived in safety, burst forth into the joyous laughter of delight. When her own bell rang, tinkling insistently behind the curtain, it was still with the excitement of a child that

she wound up her reel and saw the little fleck of white paper approaching slowly but surely across the great abyss.

With eager fingers she opened it. With eyes dancing she began to read—

“Don't say this is to be all. Don't say we've got to break the cotton now. I want to say good-night to you to-night. I want to say good-morning to you to-morrow.”

All suddenly then, she saw it was not a game. The laughter crept quietly out of her eyes. But how was he to see that? The little slip of paper which came back, twirling and dancing in the sunlight to him, contained just the words—

“Isn't it just as easy to think good-night and good-morning?”

Which, being an answer and a doubtful one, demanded another ringing of her little bell. You had only to hear that bell ring and you would know that nothing in human nature could refuse its request. She had to take up her reel of cotton. She had to begin a-winding once more. Curiosity alone would have expected it of her.

This time it was only that her heart was beating when the piece of white paper sailed out of the shadows of the window opposite into the bright light of the sun. And when it reached her, her fingers were just trembling as she unfolded it—

“I have been thinking it for the last week; but I'm not alone any longer, so can't I say it now?”

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"*Very well,*" she wrote back, "*but you mustn't ring the bell too loud.*"

And midway across the gulf, that silly little slip of paper with a sudden twisting and a spinning came unloosed and fluttered down into the courtyard below.

Stephen rang her bell again till the cotton nearly broke, but there was no answer. Peggy had gone down-stairs. There was nothing for it then but to effect a burglarious entrance into the courtyard below and secure his treasure.

That night, just as she had crossed herself and was kneeling on her bed, the bell tinkled warily behind the curtain. She caught her breath and tried to finish her prayers—"Holy Mother of all sorrows," she prayed, and the little bell tinkled with its tiny note between the words—"Holy Mother of all sorrows," she began again, and again the bell whispered in its jingling voice behind the curtain.

Then crushing her hands together so that the fingers were white, she tried once more—"Holy Mother of all sorrows—" and after that, as it rang once more, she slipped down quietly to the foot of the Hill of Dreams and tremblingly began the winding of her reel.

In the darkness, she could see nothing. But suddenly a piece of paper slid for refuge into the palm of her hand. Her fingers held tight upon it to save it from the deep black chasm below.

"*Good-night,*" was written on it and "*God bless you.*"

She read and read and read it through. Then she

crept back to the bed and lay there with eyes wide open in the darkness.

“God bless you,” she whispered to herself. “God bless you.” She said it again and again till the air whispered with it too.

And in his little room with its sloping ceiling under the roof, Stephen waited for the ringing answer of his bell, but it hung in silence behind the cheap lace curtain. At last he fell into a light sleep and, at the sound of every hansom bell that jingled by down the Strand, he awoke with a start. He raised himself on an elbow. He listened. But the bell rang away into the distance and he lay back again on his pillow.

In such a circumstance as this there is nothing to be done. You must only wait till daylight to say good-morning.

CHAPTER XVI

FATHER O'LEARY AT THE HIGH ALTAR

FATE is more concerned with an even distribution of chances than you would suppose. No sooner has she exalted your mind with the discovery of another's frailty than she whips the tables about and, before you can say Jack Robinson—which on such occasions are the proper words you should endeavour to pronounce—she has your nakedness of humanity set forth to them in such a way as that you are forced to cry quits and be done with the business as best you can.

Father O'Leary had laid bare the secret of Peggy's heart. He had seen it sailing over its perilous passage from window to window. And then, just as he had risen to the very pinnacle of pride at his discovery, the secret of his own heart had been wrenched from him. Before he knew where he was, Peggy was in possession of it, and all the advantage he had gained over her was gone in the moment.

How much she knew of it, or how much of the meaning of that little piece of blue ribbon she understood, was beyond the grasp of his comprehension.

She had arrested him in the very beginning of his explanation.

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"If there is one thing in the world," he had begun—the prelude to a sentence full with the promise of diplomacy. But she had cut the words relentlessly short—

"There's a lot of rubbish out on the pavement," she had replied, and she had said it in that gentleness of tone as if it were not only on the pavement.

It is a terrible moment when a woman absolutely refuses to hear your explanation of something which it would seem to you she cannot possibly understand. You can convey so much with words. There is nothing but the truth to be conveyed with silence. And when it is silence that she insists upon, it means that it is the truth she wants. Now that is a very awkward thing to give to any woman.

It could only be presumed then—and Father O'Leary, with that instinct of his about the instinct of a woman, was perfectly ready to presume it—that Peggy understood.

It is not necessary to know the facts to understand. Facts more often than not are the most misleading things in the world. Without any knowledge of these—without hearing the name of Mary Conelly or knowing that in the Convent of Mercy, Cappoquin, there lived one, the Reverend Mother, who could even have told her where that little piece of ribbon was bought—Peggy had arrived, without a doubt, at the true meaning of his precious symbol with no more enlightenment than that strange flash of intuition

which for a woman illuminates the darkest corners of the world.

Then a thousand times over, Father O'Leary knew that Peggy was in love. Nothing short of it could have given her insight in so brief a moment as when Mrs. Parfitt had mentioned the piece of blue ribbon which she had found in his possession. Nothing short of the inspired sense which is the child of a great emotion could have told her to read the look in his eyes that night at supper or keep her silence to the questioning eyes of Mrs. Parfitt.

There was then, a secret between them. When they met at breakfast that morning after the incident at the dust-bin, it was with eyes averted. No word was said of their encounter. Yet Father O'Leary, as perfectly prepared as he was for the exercise of diplomacy, had none of the cunning of his accomplice.

With solemn face and eyes but scarcely raised to his, Peggy came across the room as she did every morning of her life, and raised her forehead to be kissed.

"Good-morning, Daddy," said she.

He invoked God with the breath he drew in.

"Good-morning," he said under his breath.

Mrs. Parfitt stood by, waiting for the pronouncement of the blessing.

"*Benedicat.*" said he, as he crossed himself—" *Benedicite.* And may God forgive me," he muttered in his breath.

They began the meal in silence. In silence, he stole

quick glances at her. She was an actress. She was indeed. And he—shure the Protestant clergyman fella was nearer salvation than he was then. 'Twas acting a lie, and that was all there was about it. He flattered himself that it finished there. But these things do not terminate so easily. A lie is just as immortal as the truth, till it is found out. What is more, you must carry it about with you wherever you go.

No sooner had she drained the full enjoyment from her first cup of tea, than Mrs. Parfitt broke the silence.

"I heard you get up," said she—"I was lying dozing and I heard you go past my door. I had another of my bad nights. What did you say to the dustmen?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to expose her. Dozing! "Thank God, I'm not the only one," said he to himself; and he drew such consolation from it as is admissible between one human being and another. The qualities of the game withheld him from saying what he had heard as he stood outside her door. Moreover, with that little perversion of the truth, Mrs. Parfitt had finished for the day. At the prospect which lay before him, he shuddered.

But what had he said to the dustmen? Out of the corner of his eye, as he sought pitifully for inspiration, he saw Peggy swallowing something far larger than she could ever have put in her mouth.

"Did you see them at all?" asked Mrs. Parfitt when she received no immediate answer.

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There was his chance if he could but have taken it. There was though, in her voice, that insistence which, in the suddenness of his predicament, made him feel that to have seen those accursed dustmen was essential to any similitude of the truth.

"Oh, shure I saw them," said he—"I did of course."

And from the look that stole out of the point of Peggy's eye, he realized that he had lost the one opportunity of escape.

"Well—and what did you say?"

"Faith, I said they were blackguards, the two of them," he said, in the tone of one who is recounting the gentlest incident of his life.

"It'll do a lot of good if you said it like that," commented Mrs. Parfitt.

Peggy rose hurriedly from the table.

"I think I've got a crumb in my throat," said she. Certainly her eyes were full of water as she turned to the door.

Father O'Leary looked helplessly after her as, with shoulders shaken by subdued coughing, she fled from the room. Two minutes later, he had finished his breakfast.

"Have ye done, Mrs. Parfitt?" said he.

"Done!"

"Shure, I've finished myself."

"I can't help that. If you want to go, you must go. You know this is the only meal I ever eat during the day."

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"Shure, I know that," said he—"but I think I'd better go and see the way that poor child is with herself," and, allowing her this second fabrication to make up for the multitude of his own, he passed her the dish of bacon and went in search of Peggy.

In her bedroom he found her, making the bed with such energy as could only be the expression of a suppressed emotion. You hit a pillow because you feel you want to hit something, not because the pillow needs it. As he appeared in the doorway she laid hands upon the bolster.

"Have ye got rid of the crumb?" said he, with a solemn face. It was as well to remind her of it. They were all in the same boat and, being the master of the craft, he had no intention to let one of them escape their duty.

"Have ye got rid of that crumb?" he repeated.

She let go the bolster and came to put her hands on his shoulder.

"What else did you say to the dustmen?" said she.

"'Tis the worst of having women in the house," he replied; "they lead ye into bad habits. I'd have told her the truth, mind ye, only 'twould have upset the poor woman so much she wouldn't have dozed for a week."

"Did you want to tell the truth?" asked Peggy.

"Shure I did, of course," said he. "'Tis not the habit in me to be telling lies at all; I don't like them. They need more attention than they're worth."

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"But you can make it all right," said she.

"How?"

"Tell me what the little piece of blue ribbon really means."

He held her away from him at arm's length. She was terribly serious now. So keen is the instinct of a woman for Romance that the slightest incident, the faintest note in the voice, will give her clue to it.

Peggy knew, without need of the telling, that it must only be to shield the deepest corner of his heart from the gaze of vulgar eyes that had induced him to use such a weapon as a lie. Now when first you find the deep corner of your own heart, you forthwith suspect every one else of hiding the same secret. Peggy even suspected Mrs. Parfitt. But with Father O'Leary, she knew. And once a woman knows, finding out is a simple matter to her then. She will try the direct question for the honour and glory of being directly told. When that fails—oh, you do not know the cunning little devices to which she will resort!

Her simplest question then will be a pitfall, and it needs must that your eyes be wary and your steps be sure or you will find yourself in the ditch; while she, you will behold, with the gentlest smile in all the world, will be standing upon the bank with hand stretched generously forth to help you out.

Now a man knows all this by instinct, or he knows it not at all. And Father O'Leary, as well assured of it as he was of his own predicament, was just debating in

his mind which would be the wisest course to pursue. For whether he were to tell her the truth then, or, by hiding it, lay himself open to the gentle cunning of her inevitable determination to find out, was more than he could bring himself to decide in so swift a moment. And the more he kept silent, the more he admitted that a secret was there to be told.

"What it means?" said he desperately.

"Yes—what it means," said she.

"Faith, it isn't the way ye'd think I'd be keeping a bit of ribbon because it meant anything, is it?"

"It is," said she, and her eyes never moved from his.

"Well, what does a bit of ribbon mean?" he asked.

"Shure, I dunno."

"It means that it belongs to some one, Daddy."

"It does, of course. Shure, it belongs to me."

"No; but it belonged to some one else first."

"God knows she's giving me every chance!" he exclaimed in silence to himself.

"My God!" said he suddenly, and with such honesty as that she could not but believe—"ye don't think I'd be taking things from a woman at this time of me life, and I a priest with me vows taken and all?"

Her fingers tightened on his shoulder.

"I couldn't think that," said she, "however hard I tried." And then such tenderness crept into her voice as brought the tears to her eyes and to his. "It belonged to your mother, didn't it?"

A great lump forced its passage to his throat. She

would believe him then, if he said it was. She would believe him then, and the whole matter would be buried for ever. It was only a sense of chivalry, the sense which makes a man to love and be unashamed in face of the whole world, which kept the admission back. To such a question and at any other moment, he would have thought it easy to say yes. Opposed with it then and there, it seemed the most impossible word of all that he had ever uttered, to pronounce. This indeed would have been a lie, clinging to him with relentless clutching fingers for the rest of all his life.

Whether it were unpriestly or not to have cherished the love of a dear woman through all the observance of his vows, to deny it then and to such a question, would have been a lie at the High Altar. For the High Altar is but the visible centre of the imaginary circle of truth, and it is not only to be found in cathedrals and in churches. You will find it in all the corners and open spaces of the world.

Whenever you are asked a question from the depths of another's heart, the spot on which you stand to answer is the High Altar of God, and it must be the truth.

It would have been the truth then, had not Providence intervened—that Providence which hovers unseen above these places of the earth.

Father O'Leary's mind was made up to the truth, but before he could utter it, Providence stepped down from her Altar and, with deft fingers, tinkled the little signal-bell violently behind the curtain.

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Peggy dropped her hands as suddenly from his shoulders.

"My God!" exclaimed Father O'Leary amazed.

And then, by the burning rose in her face, he understood.

"Go and answer it," said he, and it was jealousy—it was the unconquerable fear of losing her—which brought that touch of sternness into his voice.

In sudden awe of him, she meekly obeyed. He watched in silence as she took the reel off its little holder. In silence he watched her as she wound the note across.

"Ye may thank God," said he, as she turned round with the witchery of confusion still burning in her cheeks. "Ye may thank God, 'twas not the way Mrs. Parfitt heard the jingling of that bell. So that's the way ye do it. Ye ring a bell. I was wondering yesterday when I saw that miracle of a bit of paper with divil a thing to hold it between heaven and earth——"

"You knew!" she exclaimed.

"I did of course. Shure, Glory be, 'tis not because a priest turns his eyes to heaven that he sees nothing. Who is he now? What's his name?"

"Stephen Gale."

"And how long in the name of God has this telegraphing been going on?"

"Only a few days."

"D'ye speak to him at all?"

"Sometimes."

She was edging nearer. She wanted to touch his hand. A woman knows the value of these little things.

"And what is he at all?"

"He's a sailor."

"They're a bad lot," said he.

"He's not," she whispered, and she made another step without his noticing it.

"They're a bad lot, I tell ye," he repeated. "They've so much time on their hands when they can't be what they'd like to be, that it's the devil an' all when they go on shore. I'd a brother a sailor meself—shure God help us! He'd steal the very pillow from under me head when he came home, and he'd write the most christian letters ye ever read when he was at sea. Me pore father used to be spending his evenings crying over them. They were like the epistles of St. Paul, diluted with salt water. I suppose 'tis the way he writes ye wonderful little bits across that slip of twine there."

It was here, being so much concerned herself, that Peggy was at a loss to understand. Never had Father O'Leary spoken to her like this before. The tears were just smarting in her eyes, and all the strategy of her movements to his side, she abandoned in despair. What is more, there was nothing to be said. She did not feel it possible to convince him of the virtues of Stephen Gale just then. It was sufficient for her that she knew them herself.

"Ye'd better open that note," said he, "and read all the fine words from him."

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This last sentence it was, that broke the heart of her. She crumpled up the little piece of paper in the palm of her hand, and the tears that were flooded to the very edge of her eyes tumbled down her cheeks as a stream that overflows its dam.

"I can't bear it," she sobbed, with her face hidden in the angle of his arm. "It all began—I don't know how it began. But I meant to tell you—I tried."

"Is it the way ye're in love with him?" he whispered. She sobbed an answer.

"What did ye say?" said he. "I couldn't hear. Ye're choking yeerself. Swallow first and then tell me. Are ye in love with him?"

She swallowed bravely.

"Yes—I don't know—oh, I think I am. I am."

"That'll do for an answer," said he, and he looked up at the ceiling with his lips moving in silence.

There was something in that silence which she felt, for she looked up quickly with her eyes still full of tears.

"Do you hate me?" she whispered. "Do you think I'm doing wrong?"

"Does it seem wrong?" said he.

She shook her head.

"Then I suppose it's right," said he.

"But why were you angry?"

"Was I angry?"

"Terribly. You've never spoken to me like that before."

"I'll never do it again," said he.

"But why did you do it?"

"I was cross with the fella over," he replied.

"But why?" she insisted.

"Because I've been waiting for him these two years, and I was just beginning to hope that he wouldn't turn up. Will ye read yeer note now? He'll be pulling that infernal little bell in two minutes and we shall have herself with her breakfast eaten and the divil to pay. What's he say? Will ye read it, please, or do ye want me to go out of the room?"

A ray of the sun fell on the two grey pebbles. She dried her eyes with the handkerchief out of his pocket and she read her little note.

"Well?" said he—as curious as if it had been meant for him.

"He wants me to meet him in the gardens to hear the band to-night."

"Take a slip of paper," said he, "and tell him that Father O'Leary will meet him. Say 'tis Father O'Leary will listen to the tunes with him, because he doesn't want him to be disappointed."

She laid her hand timidly on his arm and peered up with a thousand questions in her eyes.

"Say that," said he firmly. "Tell him I'm fond of music, being a notable performer meself when I sing at High Mass."

"What are you going to say to him?" she whispered.

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"Faith, it's what he's going to say to me that ye can worry about."

And leaving her alone to the delicate little business which she had to perform, he went down-stairs to his bedroom and said something on his knees to the effect that it was just what he had expected.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PATERNITY OF FATHER O'LEARY

To take upon oneself the duties of a father is just as liable to bring down the paternal vices as it is the paternal virtues on one's head.

It is as much like shaking a tree of apples as it is like anything else in the world. With a hand of mastery, you usurp the forces of nature and the fruit, both good and bad, ripe and unripe, tumbles helter-skelter into your lap.

So it happens when you take upon yourself the pretensions of a father. And the very first of the evils that befalls you is that you find yourself possessed of an insane desire to exert your authority. For this is the common paternal vice. To some fathers it is worse than a vice—it is an incurable disease.

A youth I knew, more nimble in argument than perhaps it is well for a youth to be, was commanded by his father in this wise, as he thundered forth the simple statement of his case—

“I say that there can be no truth in any religion but that of Christ!”—It was this gentle subject upon which they dallied with their words. And then he added this awful command—“Confute me if you dare, sir!”

And the youth assured me that he said—
“I daren't.”

But I don't believe him. In the years that have tempered that little incident, he has only come to believe he did, because it was so obviously the one thing to be said. But even if he had thought of it at the time—which I doubt me much—there was too fiercely the sound of Herod commanding the massacre of the infants in his father's voice for him to have risked so poignant a reply. However that may be, he goes about assuring us that he said “I daren't.” And I have persuaded him to tell the story to many people, but never—even now—will he oblige in the presence of his father.

And it was the shadow of this vice of authority which, when he undertook to see Stephen Gale, fell heavily, all but obliterating the good heart of Father O'Leary.

As he said to himself on his way down to their meeting at the gate of the Gardens which opens into Villiers Street—“What right, in the name of God, has a sailor—a wanderin' fella without a home to shelter him—what right has he to be coming here and taking herself out of the Presbytery where she's been happy as a fairy for the last seventeen years, and he with the knowing of her only these last seven days? Shure, if I'd the courage of a flea, I'd put a clam to it at once an' send him about his business to take his dirty cattle over from Waterford or wherever it is he sails in his tub of a boat. An' begorra, I will too! I will indeed!”

But every moment, as he worked himself up to the

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doing of stern things—and you can see him gaining courage as he strode down Bedford Street into the Strand, muttering under his breath like one possessed with the haunting of an idea—every moment, just as he reached forth to grasp that vicious weapon of authority, there came the sound of Peggy's voice in answer to his question—

“Yes—oh, I don't know. I think I am. I am.”

And then—people in the street turning as they heard him—he would exclaim, “Oh, shure, glory be!” as he felt all his heart softening and the courage running like oil out of his finger tips.

From there, then, he would begin all over again. What you are unable to justify with one train of thought may well be accomplished with another. There is many a man who cannot tell his wife a lie, because it is the highest principle of his honour to uphold the truth. But he may yet find justification to deceive her, if it is only to spare her feelings from the knowledge of what he has to tell. In time he may even come to blame her that he told the lie. Mind you, I don't admire him for that. The imagination of it is superb. But it is wanting in all dignity.

To Father O'Leary, trembling with the fear of losing his little child, there was no such thing as dignity then. Foiled in the pursuit of one argument, he swiftly adopted another. And all the way from Maiden Lane to the gate of the Gardens in Villiers Street, he railed with himself.

"A sailor, ndered!" said he—and he withered the words with his contempt—"Shure them are the fellas, the scourge of every town they come to. Haven't I seen them off the ships in Queenstown and hanging around the dirty doorways of them sleepin' houses on Patrick's Quay in Cork? I have, indeed. There's divil a pick to choose between 'em. Shure, haven't I seen 'em leading a pore blind man to a public-house so that he could find his bearings and then charging him a penny, the way they might make twopence to get a drink with themselves?"

It was as he dragged this last and most terrible picture into his mind's eye, that he brought down his foot with a stamp upon the pavement.

"An'd'ye think I'd let herself marry a man like that?" he demanded, and he looked up as though the whole world should hear him say it.

"I wouldn't if I was you, sir," said a hawker who, standing on the edge of the kerbstone, writhing a wire snake on a square black board, had received the question full in the face.

"Begorra, I will not," said Father O'Leary as he strode on.

You can see how, by the time he had arrived at the gate into the Gardens, he must have bespoken a character for Stephen Gale which it would need no little conviction to reconstruct.

But the first sight of that square-shouldered fellow, with those grey eyes which, as Pinchers had said, looked

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as if a gale of wind would not blink them, disarmed him more than he expected. He had forced into his mind the picture of those men who in the days gone by—and now for all I know—take cattle over from Waterford to Milford Haven. And this, in the very first sight of him, Father O'Leary was compelled reluctantly to renounce. For Stephen had the wondering and simple expression of a child, and he stood there by the railings waiting as if, like a dog on duty, he would wait for ever.

The moment he saw Father O'Leary, he squared his shoulders as one who is ready to obey—he rubbed his right hand down the leg of his trousers as they do whose work does not permit of the soft white skin of ease, and a look of the greatest hope came bounding to his eyes—a look that nearly upset all Father O'Leary's preconceived opinions on the spot.

“Are ye Mr. Gale?” said he with a hand held out.

“I am, sir,” and Stephen wrung the hand as if he were belaying a shroud at sea.

Father O'Leary would not have winced for the world.

“Come into the Gardens,” said he—“We can talk while the band's thinking what it'll play next.”

Stephen followed him, much as a school-boy follows the head master into the dread silence of the private study. When Father O'Leary selected an empty seat as far removed from the band as he could find, Stephen seated himself obediently by his side.

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With a sudden twist of his eye, Father O'Leary stole a glance at him.

"Shure, 'tis a strange thing," said he to himself—"how she could find anything on earth in the looks of him. Yet, he's better than I thought he'd be."

For a while then, they sat in silence, both pretending that they were more interested in music than in any mortal thing beside.

"Ye know Miss Bannister, I believe," said Father O'Leary presently—and when he heard himself call Peggy by that ridiculous name, he had to cough violently in order to choke his laughter.

When you are a father and, with all your authority, would preserve a sense of dignity into the bargain, a gift of humour is the fatal thing to have. So few possess it, that this observation is probably wasted. It only applies to those who have.

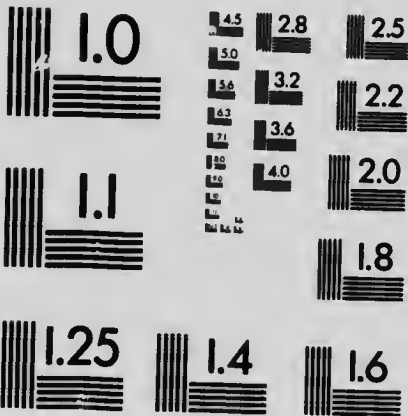
Imagine the father who would laugh at the pitiable little figure of his son, stripped for a whipping, the flesh just comically twitching in expectation of the first blow! Such a man does not exist in England. For laughter of this kind and at such a moment has something in it of the nature of a caress. And the proverb which talks about the spared rod is far too dear to our hearts for us ever to renounce it. Now a caress would do away with it at once.

However, if it is a father that you would wish to be and a sense of humour coming continually in your way, you must cough till you are black in the face rather



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than expose it. Laughter would be fatal, nay, more—it would be a sacrilege of all the paternal ritual which has made this country what it is.

To inure himself against another attack of it, Father O'Leary forced the words from his lips again—

“Ye do know Miss Bannister, don't ye?” said he.

Stephen solemnly admitted that he did.

Beyond that, there seemed little more to be said. They both waited in silence for further inspiration. It came when the band ceased playing.

“How long have ye known her?” asked Father O'Leary cautiously, and there surged again into his mind the bitterness of thought that this young man with all his strength and all his eagerness of youth was a thief in the suddenness of the night.

“About ten days,” said Stephen.

“'Tis a short time,” said Father O'Leary.

“I sometimes feel as if I'd known her all my life.”

The priest in Father O'Leary scoffed at that. He had heard that sentiment in the confessional. But the man in him tried to take no notice of it at all.

“She's been in my charge for seventeen years,” said he. And he said it as though that was only just the beginning of his responsibilities.

“She's terribly fond of you,” said Stephen. It was cunning for him. What is more, when he saw the dim twinkle of delight in Father O'Leary's eyes, he added strategy to it as well.

"I don't think she'd do anything in the world to hurt you," said he.

Father O'Leary looked round at the honest face beside him. Then, suddenly realizing that he was softening, he dragged back into his mind the picture of the dealers on the cattle boats. It had the necessary effect. He stiffened perceptibly.

"They tell me ye're a sailor," said he.

"That's right."

"'Tis a wild life," said Father O'Leary.

"It's better than most," Stephen replied quietly. "I'd sooner depend on the sea than on fifty per cent. of the men I meet on shore."

"Ye've got a pore notion of men."

"Not of men—no. Men are all right. I don't think much of what they become in cities. They're too concerned with making an easy passage. You can't make an easy passage at sea. Some are better than others; but I've never met an easy one yet."

"Are ye master of yeer ship?"

"No. I'm first mate."

A long pause followed then. It was as though the little vessel of their destiny had breasted a great wave and was running smoothly in the deep silence of a hollow sea.

Against all his instincts, Father O'Leary found himself liking the speech of this young man. He seemed to say what he wanted to say, which, in a seething world of words, is a greater accomplishment than you would suppose.

“And how,” he asked, “is it the way ye seem to have known Peggy all yeer life?”

The moment for humour does not last for ever. Miss Bannister would have sounded worse than ludicrous then.

Stephen leant forward, knotting his fingers as you splice a rope. It was all he could think of then, the splicing of a rope. To say what he wanted to say here was impossible. In the first rush of love, a man cannot look on at himself. It is as well that he cannot. I have seen men—so have you! It is things like this that one should never speak about.

“Perhaps ye don’t know yeerself?” said Father O’Leary quickly. For in that moment had suddenly rushed into his heart the hope—like a horseman to the city gates—the hope that this young man was not in love at all. Then how dared he trifle with the affections of his little child? He was just about to challenge him with it, as one who shouts a question to the horseman from the city walls.

“Oh, yes—I know,” said Stephen.

“Why then?”

“Because it was like coming aboard my first ship when I’d been learning about masts and sails and yard-arms just from hearsay. I knew them all, but I’d never seen ’em. And then, when I heard the shrouds tapping, eager to be taut, heard the whining creak of the masts yearning to bend afore the wind—and when I saw the Blue Peter flapping at the masthead

and was shown the bunk where I was to lie till we reached the China seas—I knew I'd known it all, ever since I could walk."

Father O'Leary sat still in a deep silence.

At last he looked up.

"D'ye go to China?" said he.

"Yes."

"Shure, I thought they told me 'twas to Waterford."

"I have been to Waterford," said Stephen.

Father O'Leary's eyes lit up. Suddenly, he could see the long quay with the heavy drays rolling sonorously over the cobbles. He could see the everlasting mud in the never-mended hollows of the streets. He could hear the cattle stampeding up the wooden gangways. He could hear the shouts of those merry fellas driving them, who went shouting about at the tops of their voices as though the world were at an end and they were all crowding to the last judgment. Shure, they were merry fellas—some of 'em. Some were a bad lot. That didn't prevent others from having a soft place in his memory. And all along the quay, he could see the shops with their familiar names painted plainly above the windows—O'Donovan, O'Sullivan, O'Grady, O'Mahony. He could hear the voices of his own countrymen with their easy Waterford drawl. And away behind it all, over the soft green hills through the mist of grey, he could see the sleepy little village of Cappoquin. All this—just because a man, seated beside him in the

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Gardens of Charing Cross, had said that he had been to Waterford.

"Glory be to God!" he exclaimed. "'Tis a wonderful thing. D'ye mind the little tobacco shop at the corner there, near the old Tower? Mulcahy was his name."

"I don't remember it," said Stephen. He had arrived there one evening on a small cargo steamer and left the following morning. There was no necessity however to explain that.

"'Twas there," said Father O'Leary, "I used to buy me snuff."

That seemed to settle the matter. Stephen had been to Waterford. From that moment, all the gentlest side of Father O'Leary was uppermost. Here was a man sitting beside him who had made great voyages in the China seas—and he had been to Waterford. The China seas! Waterford! It seemed in one moment to link that little seaport town with all the wide-reaching romance of a great world. It seemed to justify Stephen as a man of broad appreciation in that, having been to the China seas, he should know it was worth while to go to that wee little spot in the universe called Waterford.

"Did ye hear any speak of a place called Cappelquin?" asked Father O'Leary, and the note in his voice was distant with long buried memories.

"Cappelquin?"

"That's it. 'Tis on the river Blackwater. They

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call it the Irish Rhine. Shure 'tis no need to be called the Rhine at all. 'Tis just the Blackwater, and ye can't beat it at that. Cappoquin is at the top where the steamers go to. Above that is Lismore and the fishing."

"There was a man I knew," said Stephen—"I sailed with him for a year in the *Kate Hardwicke*. They said he came from Cappoquin."

"And what was his name?" asked Father O'Leary quickly.

"Finuchane."

"Yirra, Glory be to God! I knew Finuchane. He had a bald head before he was twenty-five. 'Twas in the family. His father kept a shop where ye bought everything ye didn't want in the Main Street. Shure isn't that a strange thing now—I knew Finuchane. Oh—'tis a fine calling, the sea. There's no doubt about it. It throws ye in touch with the whole world."

Then he suddenly turned full round on the seat and looked straight into Stephen's eyes.

"And ye're in love with my little Peggy?" said he.

"I am," said Stephen.

"Well, God be wi' the days."

It was the final note of sacrifice. It is what the old women say in Ireland when the youngest sons set forth to America. It is said by those youngest sons as they see the coast of Ireland dropping down behind the dim line of the world. It is the last expression of fatality in a people who may not believe in Fate.

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Knowing it to be the inevitable, even at the moment when he had commanded that message to be sent, spinning and twirling from one window to the other, Father O'Leary had yet arrived at his renunciation by strange ways.

It would have gone ill with Stephen had his career on the sea been that which Father O'Leary had pictured in his mind. But to sail the China seas and to have been to Waterford; to have known one who had accompanied him on those perilous journeys, one whom Father O'Leary knew well in his little village of Cappoquin, such facts as these knit a common sympathy between them. The power to struggle against the inevitable went from him then. With a rush of sentiment it had brought him to his own youth in that same little village of Cappoquin. What the church had claimed from him then was a different matter to the right which he possessed to claim anything from this young man. He knew he had no right. So with the final note of sacrifice, he bent his head, and—

“God be wi' the days,” said he. “Have ye told her about it?” he added.

Stephen shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I don't know. I suppose I'm afraid. She's so young. I don't want to frighten her.”

The old priest looked at him with a steady eye.

“'Tis a fright they're very partial to,” said he. “She won't have any respect for ye if ye don't frighten her.”

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Shure isn't that the adventure in a woman's life? Faith, there are some that find adventures all their life through. They're always being frightened, and they've a soft corner in their hearts ever afterwards for the man that did it. Shure, there's no need for ye to hesitate because of that—only when ye frighten her, just see that she comes to yurself for protection."

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT STEPHEN SAID

WHEN Father O'Lea returned from his interview that evening, a dim figure, blurred and indistinct in the deep shadows of the porch, stepped forward and held his arm.

"Me good woman!" he began in amazement.

"It's Peggy," whispered a voice.

"In the name of God," said he, "ye frightened me out of me five senses. I was just going to call for help."

She squeezed his arm just to show that she appreciated the exaggeration, and begged him to come into the chapel.

"What for?" he asked.

She opened the door and led him in.

"I want to hear," said she.

"Hear what?"

"Everything."

She dragged him to the pew beneath the statue of St. Joseph.

"There's nothing to tell," said he; "and, faith, this is not the proper place if there was."

"But you like him?" she asked.

He knelt down on a hassock and whispered that he did. She squeezed his hand.

"Mind ye, this is not the proper place," said he.

She only squeezed his hand again.

"Did he say anything—about—about me?"

Father O'Leary scratched his head. He had seen men on the stage employ that as an expression of doubt, want of memory—in moments too, when they themselves were ill-at-ease. He looked up at the rafters and he looked back into Peggy's eager little face.

"I think 'twas the way he said ye were very young, but I can't rightly remember."

"But was that all?"

"Oh, 'twas not; shure we talked about Waterford and sailing and the China seas. He's been to Waterford, mind ye."

"Yes; but is that all?"

"It is not. Shure, we kept up a conversation that flooded out the music of that old band they have down there. There's a strange thing too. He was sailing one year with a man named Finuchane, a bald-headed fella, that I knew in Cappelquin. Faith, he must be nearly as old as meself to-day. His father's dead these fifteen years, and maybe 'tis the way he's left him the business in the Main Street."

"And he only said I was very young?"

"If ye'll put yeer little face in yeer hands and say yeer prayers," said he, "'twill be better for ye."

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Straightway she did it, but not because she was bid. There was a suspicious trembling of her lower lip to conceal. He had only said she was young.

Father O'Leary rose to his feet and crept silently back to the door. When his hand had reached the iron handle he stopped. Another moment and he was back again to the pew under the image of St. Joseph.

"Supposing he asked ye to marry him?" said he, and he bent down whispering it into her ear.

She did not reply.

"Where would ye go now when he went off to sea?"

She looked up from her hands.

"Come here," she replied at once.

He raised her from her knees.

"Come out into the porch now," said he, "and I'll tell ye what he said."

CHAPTER XIX

MRS. PARFITT GIVES NOTICE

"THERE'S a man," said Mrs. Parfitt in her most precise voice, as she looked into the room the next morning when Father O'Leary was reading his office—"there's a man with a hole in his throat wants to speak to you."

"If 'tis a big hole," said Father O'Leary, "he's chosen a difficult thing to do."

"It's a small hole," said Mrs. Parfitt.

"Thank God for that," said he, and he went down stairs.

There stood Nicolas Gadd, holding a letter in one hand, the other already engaged in stopping up the fearsome orifice in his throat.

"Good-morning," said he, and it was like the voice of a ventriloquist's figure. The lips moved automatically, but the sound that issued from them seemed far away. This may have been because, however tightly he pressed his finger to the hole in his throat, the air hissed through it with every breath, and distracted your attention. In any case the subject is unpleasant.

"Good-morning," said Father O'Leary.

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"A lodger of mine left this letter,"—he gave up the envelope with the hand that was disengaged. "I want to know what it says."

"Is it the way ye can't read?" said Father O'Leary. The old man's eyes glistened angrily.

"It's the way I can't read letters that are not addressed to me," said he in ironical imitation of the priest's question.

"Shure, please God we all suffer that way. I see 'tis addressed to Miss Bannister. I've no wonder ye couldn't read it."

"But I want to know what it says," he repeated.

"I shouldn't mind knowing meself," said Father O'Leary cheerfully. "But 'tis no business of mine."

"Well, it is business of mine, d'yer see," said Nicolas Gadd testily. "I'm going to know what it says." And the air hissed and whistled from his throat.

With a sense of foreboding, Father O'Leary leant up the stairs and called for Peggy.

"I'm just after calling for the young lady," said he. "She'll be down in a minute. 'Tis she'll tell ye whether there's any business of yours in it or not."

"She can tell me where he's gone," replied Nicolas Gadd. "That's all I want to know."

Before Father O'Leary could ask with the fear of his heart what that sentence had meant, Peggy came hurrying down the stairs. Without a word he gave her the letter.

She looked at it; she looked at Nicolas Gadd; she

looked at Father O'Leary. Then she was about to turn and ascend the stairs again—just like some little animal still, some little animal that has been given a morsel to eat, and must off to its own little corner to enjoy its meal in peace.

“Ye must read it here,” said Father O'Leary.

Her eyes opened as the first breath of apprehension reached her.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because,” said he, “this gentleman's curious to know what it's all about.”

In still greater amazement, she looked from one to the other again.

“There's something I want to know about Mr. Gale, as he calls himself,” said Nicolas Gadd; “and I expect you'll find it in that letter.”

The frightening sound of that husky voice drove a vivid picture into Peggy's mind. She saw the man being led away that early morning by the policeman—that “pore fella” who had found himself on the wrong side of life. For the moment, her heart became heavy. She tried to beat back the fear rising like a great wave in her throat. She turned the letter over and her fingers trembled. At last, as they still waited in silence, she broke open the flap of the envelope and read.

“He's gone away!” said she in an awed little whisper, and she read hastily on.

“I know that much,” said Nicolas Gadd, with an

ironical smile. Even the hole in his throat seemed to twist with satire as he said it.

"Ah—but he's coming back again!" exclaimed Peggy, as she continued with the reading.

Nicolas Gadd laughed. It was a demoniacal sound. It shook his finger from his throat so that the noise was broken by a rush of air.

"Oh, yes," said he, "he's coming back. They all say that. They're all going to come back and pay up for their lodgin' like gentlemen. It ain't improved my opinion of gentlemen, for they never comes. Where's he gone? That's what I want to know. Where's he gone, so that I can go and fetch him?"

"But he says he's coming back to-morrow," said Peggy pitifully.

"Shure, glory be to God, the man says he's coming back," exclaimed Father O'Leary. "Isn't that sufficient for ye?"

"No. Where's he gone—that's what I want to know?"

"He's gone to the Limehouse docks," said Peggy angrily, taking her tone from Father O'Leary. To give herself courage she held his hand. "He's gone down to his ship. The captain came up to see him last night."

"There was a man," agreed Nicolas Gadd. "He came at half-past nine. I sent him up to Mr. Gale's room to wait."

"Yes," exclaimed Peggy triumphantly, "then that

was the captain. And they've gone down to the ship together to the Limehouse docks."

A glint of cunning crept into Nicolas Gadd's eyes.

"And what's the name of the ship?" said he.

"The *Elizabeth Warren*," she replied promptly, "and if you want to go down to the docks you'll find her there. She's a full-rigged sailing ship in dock for repairs."

"That's just where I'm going by the next train from Charing Cross," said he, and he hurried away down Maiden Lane out of sight.

"I hate that man!" exclaimed Peggy, as she watched him go.

Father O'Leary took her arm as they walked up-stairs together.

"I don't think I fancy him meself," said he, "but he's every right to be looking after his money. There are some pore fools that think money grows on trees. Shure 'tis a better place to be looking for it than in other people's pockets, for if ye don't find the money ye've got the trees to look at. There are not enough trees in London; by the same token there are too many people's pockets."

He patted her head.

"I don't suppose ye know what I mean," said he—"faith, I don't think I know meself, but it's quite true, it is indeed."

Platitudes are easy things to make. He found it a different matter when, at the top of the stairs, they

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faced Mrs. Parfitt, every angle of her against the light cut stiff with bristling curiosity.

He tried to whisper in Peggy's ear, asking her what they were going to say. It failed so utterly that he had to change the sentence into a fit of coughing.

"Have you got a cold?" asked Mrs. Parfitt, who had seen everything.

"'Tis these chilly nights," said he.

She made way for them to pass, and they went by as meek as you please, fearful to hope that the escape was going to be so easy. Like boys, with stolen fruit bulging their pockets, they walked slowly, fearing to create suspicion with speed. They could feel her eyes following them, burning two little holes in their backs. Another moment and they would be out of reach, able to conspire, free to make a patchwork of salvation.

"Well?" said Mrs. Parfitt; and like those boys, arrested with the stolen fruit still in their pockets, they turned in forced surprise.

"What?" said Peggy.

"What about the man with the hole in his throat?" said she.

"Ye're quite right," said Father O'Leary, "'tis a small hole, but it makes his voice like as if ye talked through a pea-shooter."

"What did he want Peggy for?"

They looked at each other, as if it were the first they had heard of it.

"You called for Peggy," said she.

"I did indeed," he replied. "Shure, what harm?"

"I suppose you wanted her to see the hole in his throat?" she suggested.

He looked at her quickly. It was no good saying yes to that. When a woman prompts you with an answer, beware of it. In the same manner, beware of her. It is with her intelligence she prompts you; while it is with her heart that she is all God made her.

The woman of heart can scarce do wrong; but the woman of intelligence is eternally right. And that is a terrible thing to be.

With all his instinct, Father O'Leary was aware of the trap that was set for him and, to the woman of intelligence, he kept silent. God is to be thanked for it that in few women does she remain predominant for long. As Mrs. Parfitt listened to that silence, the heart in her came uppermost. For in that moment, it seemed to her the signal failure of her life. With lip just trembling, and face more sensitive with expression than they had ever seen it before, she crossed the room to Father O'Leary.

"Would you prefer," said she slowly, "if I gave notice, Father O'Leary, and left Peggy to do the house-keeping for you?"

They gazed at her in wide astonishment, and the consciences of both smote them with a relentless hand.

"I've saved enough," she went on. "I can afford to——"

"In the name of God!" said he, "what's the madness

ye're talking? Shure, I'd sooner lose me right hand. What's making ye say a thing like that?"

"Well, I—I seem in the way," she replied. "There are many things you want to talk to Peggy about without my hearing them."

There was a suspicious huskiness in her voice, but they saw no tears. And then, as it once had been before on her fifth birthday, Peggy's arms were thrown about her neck in a whirlwind of emotion.

"Poor Mummy Parfitt," she whispered, "I'll tell you everything." And in a little louder voice, she added, "I'll tell you all there is to tell when Daddy O'Leary's gone out of the room."

So Daddy O'Leary went out.

CHAPTER XX

THE ECLIPSE OF THE BLUE MOON

IN a chronicle such as this, where you will find record—as in the case of Helen Sumpter—of a muffin playing so vital a part in the wooing of a lady as in a straightforward history does a valentine or a billet doux; in a chronicle such as this, where a strip of pale blue ribbon bears that relation to life which in the Chronicles of Froissart was represented by a sword, and in the Chronicles of the Holy Fathers by a cross; in such a chronicle, where reality is found in those things which to most people are merely material, it is within the natural order of things to speak twice and to speak seriously of the Blue Moon.

The true meaning of material things is dependent upon the use to which you put them.

Thus, if you eat a muffin, it is no more than flour and water, a thing in which you bodily rejoice on a wet Sunday afternoon in winter when the kettle is piping its lay and the logs are hissing and spitting at the fire. But offer it to one as she cleans the area steps—offer it with so subtle a phrase as was employed by Pinchers, “Bet yer don’t guess ’oo t’is is for,” and it has no

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relation to flour and water then. Gold and precious stones are more in the likeness of it.

Once, I was offered a cigarette by a great man. I kept the smoked-out end of it for three years, sacredly concealed within a precious letter case. There were days when I would take it out and look at it. It spurred me to great things which, though they were never accomplished, had all the merit of being attempted. It was no smoked-out end of a cigarette to me. Had he given me a cross or a sword, I could have found no greater meaning in them.

And then I discovered that he was not great; that greatness meant less to him than it did to our scullery-maid who lent me fourpence to save my soul from dishonour. Straightway then his cigarette became a cigarette. I threw it in the gutter. A little boy picked it up and lit it. At the first whiff, he said, "Eugh!"

I don't wonder. It was three years old.

And so, if it were possible, I would show you the reality of something which has not in it even the material tangibility of a muffin, or the fragile substance of a cigarette. By the delicate process of negation I would show you the reality of the Blue Moon.

It is conceivable, that what is so constantly with you—like the sun and the stars and the poor—may, in a very short time, by you, come to be left out of your reckoning. Possibly the sun will not, for it may be in your garden you have a sun-dial. Probably the stars will

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not, for it may be you make great voyages upon the sea. But upon the poor, you reckon not at all.

Yet suppose these were taken from you. Then, whether you had a sun-dial or not, and if you never sailed the seas further than from Tilbury to Southend, you would find that you could no more bring your book to balance than you could split a hair or write in Sanskrit a lucid article on Bi-metallism. And then, and only then, would you come truly to believe in them.

Now this is just what happens in your attitude of mind towards the Blue Moon. It is so constantly with you, a slim fine thread of indescribable blue, set without complement of stars, or majesty of reflected glory, in the firmament of your Eternity, that you never count upon it in your comings in and your goings out; you never include it within your reckoning unless it be at the full, or you are driven into the darkness of despair at its eclipse.

"Once in a blue moon" is a phrase that has entered into and taken place in the language; but it alludes only to that moment when the Blue Moon is at its full. All those other nights—and they are numberless in a life-time—when that little sickle of steely blue is guiding the tide of your Destiny, you think no more of it than you do of the Seven Stars, or of Capella or of the thousand diamonds that glisten and flash in your own material sky.

Yet let there be but an eclipse, let the shadow of

adverse circumstance but fall upon your Moon, obliterating, if only for an instant, the pale blue light of its steady glow, and down are you upon your knees with hope a broken thing, crying, like a child, for the fortune that has left you, for the adventure you have lost. Believe? Oh, you believe in it then.

It had been at its full that day when Pinchers rang the Presbytery bell and gave to Peggy the message of Stephen Gale; yet she never knew how real a satellite it was until—if I finish that sentence, you will know all before you have been told.

It was on the next day, after the visit of Nicolas Gadd, that Mrs. Parfitt, opening the door to a violent ringing of the bell, beheld the man with the hole in his throat once more.

"Tell the priest," said he, "I want to see him."

Mrs. Parfitt drew herself up.

"Speak in a respectful tone," she replied severely, "and I'll tell him—but not unless."

It was no idle threat, for she waited there to be obeyed. She was not afraid of a man because he was not just what God had made him.

"I want to see the priest," he repeated with more civility—and nodding her head in approval, Mrs. Parfitt went up-stairs.

"There's that man again," said she.

Peggy looked up at once.

"What man?" asked Father O'Leary.

"Nicolas Gadd. He wants to see you."

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They both glanced at Peggy as she made a sudden little movement of apprehension.

"What's he want?" she asked.

Mrs. Parfitt replied that he had not said.

"'Tis to tell us," said Father O'Leary, "that he's sorry for what he said about Stephen, and to express the hope that we'll recommend his lodging-house as being as good as Hummum's hotel."

He had tried and failed to carry conviction, even to his own ears. When Peggy took his hand and said that she would come down too, he knew that he had failed with her also. Nicolas Gadd was not the sort of man to come and apologize. That was why he had thrown in the little remark about hoping for recommendation. But even that had not succeeded in making it seem real.

"Come along," said he with forced cheerfulness. "If Stephen's told him to go to the devil, 'tis what I should have said meself, if I was well out of hearing."

Together then, with hearts alternately rising and falling, first with hope and then with apprehension, they went down to the door. At a discreet distance followed Mrs. Parfitt, waiting in the sudden bend of the stairs where she could hear every word.

"Well," said Father O'Leary, "and what sort of a place did ye find Limehouse? They say 'tis a beautiful country there."

"I don't want any of your jokes," said Nicolas Gadd.

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"I expect you know a damn sight better what sort of a place Lime'ouse is than I do."

"Faith, I know how to speak when there's a lady present," said Father O'Leary, "which 'ud suggest that ye know more about Limehouse than what I do."

"I never asked to see the lady," said Nicolas Gadd. "I want to know where 'is ship's gone. I expect you can tell me that, which is more use to me than any advice on manners."

"Gone!" echoed Peggy.

"Yes—gone! Went away on the last tide, and there wasn't a soul as could tell me where she was bound for."

"Gone!" said Peggy again.

"Yesterday—before I could get down there, and you can kindly tell me where she's bound for, because he can get off, but it ain't my usual to let 'em get off as easy as that."

"An' how should we know?" asked Father O'Leary.

"Because 'e's sweet on this young lady 'ere—and 'e ain't goin' away like that, sudden, without writing and tellin' her—is he?"

"But hes not written," said Peggy in a whisper. "I—I don't know where he's gone."

Nicolas Gadd cleared his voice. He put that horny finger of his well down upon the loathsome hole in his throat, and he stood in an attitude of defiance.

"Look 'ere, miss," said he, "we'll take it that 'e didn't know 'e was going off yesterday——"

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"We'll take it," said Father O'Leary, "that ye've been given a straight answer to a straight question, and that unless ye need the door shut in yeer face, ye'll go away and look elsewhere for yeer information."

"And do yer think I'm going to be put off like that?" he tried to shout.

The door slammed.

Peggy looked up into Father O'Leary's face.

"He's gone, Daddy," she whispered.

"But he'll come back," said he. "Ye'll hear from him the first port he stops at."

"Ah, but why didn't he write yesterday—yesterday before he sailed?"

"Shure, I don't know. 'Tis a riddle—the whole world's a riddle, and 'll be a riddle so long as water runs."

"He didn't even pay for his lodging."

"Faith, I can hardly blame him for that."

Peggy said nothing. If he had paid for his lodging that would have made all the difference. It would have been one faint break in the clouds which now were sullen in a lightless sky.

"Thank God," said Mrs. Parfitt to herself, as she crept back up-stairs. "Thank God, I've had all I shall ever have to do with men."

'Twas thus that the shadow fell on the face of the moon.

BOOK IV

CHAPTER I

THE CALLING OF PEGGY

IN women, the emotions of love and of religion are divided by so fine a thread as that the gentlest flame will snap it. They merge, the one into the other, almost before your eyes have had time to see the change.

It is when she rises from her knees in prayer that a woman is most easily won to love. It is when she is first thrilled by the whispering of passion that you will find her most ready to fall upon her knees and pray.

It is by reason of this, that Christianity is the religion of women. They understand what it means to love Christ. A man can only fear God, and that is most times so derogatory to his dignity that he would as lief go without a religion at all.

Father O'Leary had learnt all this once. He was to learn it all yet again. For, as the days fell away into weeks, the weeks into months, and she had no word of Stephen, the great yet simple change came into the life of Peggy.

With an ungovernable fear rising steadily in the heart of him, Father O'Leary watched the inevitable signs of transformation with increasing dread and a

growing sense that tragedy had not yet finished with his life.

He had left no effort unmade to learn of Stephen's movements. The *Elizabeth Warren*, he had discovered, was bound for San Francisco, but what would be her first port of call, no one, with any degree of certainty, could tell him. She might give letters to a passing ship, he was informed, and they would then hear any day within the next three months.

To Peggy, eager to give her hope, he had made much of this; more than with consideration he would ever have done had he not cherished as great a hope himself.

When three months therefore went by and still there was silence—a deep, incomprehensible silence that seemed to fill the very corners of the Presbytery—the flagging of her hope was greater than it might otherwise have been. She spent her spare moments in the chapel before the little image of St. Joseph. She lost laughter. In his tiny confessional, she told of sins to Father O'Leary that were no sins at all.

"I've taken off the blue ribbon from my scapular," she said one day. "I'm wearing the cloth now."

"'Tis an ugly-looking thing," said he.

"Yes, but I felt that it was not really following the order of St. Francis."

"Did ye feel that all the time?"

"I did," she replied.

"Shure, then, ye might as well have kept to the blue

ribbon—'twould have reminded ye more. The other'll only tickle ye, and ye'll forget it."

She made no answer to that. Logic is poor food to a woman. For the matter of that, it is dry in the throats of most of us when once we have made up our minds.

When four months had gone by, she went one day to the little bell behind the curtain in her bedroom. All the nights that it had rung, heralding the coming of the blessing of God, scrawled out on a little piece of paper and dispatched upon its hazardous journey, rushed back with pitiless insistence into her mind. And as she tinkled it again to make the memory more vivid—to make the pain of it hurt still more—the tears flooded into her eyes; she sat down on the floor, tinkling it and tinkling it like a child with a broken toy. Then with every fresh sound she cried over it as though her heart would break.

Suddenly the door opened, wildly and without ceremony. Father O'Leary rushed in.

"The bell!" said he.

But, when he saw her seated on the floor with the little bell dangling from her fingers, he could say nothing. It would be *banale* to suggest that he understood.

Softly he closed the door. He crept gently across the room to her side.

"Shure, he'll ring it again," he whispered.

"No, he'll never ring it again," said she. "I'm going to put it away."

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Suddenly, in a paroxysm of weeping, she stood up and threw her arms around his neck.

“Oh, Daddy!” she moaned—“Daddy!”

He said nothing. He just let the tears soak into the shoulder of his coat as he stroked her hair. When a woman cries you can do no less, and more would be too much.

But all the time, in the heart of him, he was whispering against his besetting fear.

“Holy Mother, make it come out the way I don’t lose her. Oh, Holy Mother!—isn’t she doing more good here?”

But then, when still another month had gone by in silence, the first of the cruelest of his apprehensions began to be realized. Peggy commenced to talk of the religious life.

“I think it must be wonderful to live in a convent,” she said.

A swift and sudden look sped from the eyes of Mrs. Parfitt into the deepest corner of Father O’Leary’s heart. He answered it. Had they gripped hands then and there across the table, it could have meant no more than that answering look of his.

“’Tis wonderful enough for them that have the vocation,” said Father O’Leary.

“I can imagine nothing more terrible,” said Mrs. Parfitt, “than to think you had a vocation and then, when once you’d left the world, to find it had all been your imagination.”

"Surely it isn't your imagination," said Peggy. "A vocation is a gift."

"Faith, I've known men," said Father O'Leary, "with so generous a gift of imagination that they couldn't tell ye the truth once in five years. And then 'twould be because the lie was the most uninteresting of the two."

They were at supper then—their supper which once had been the liveliest meal in the day. When Father O'Leary had said that, Peggy rose quickly from the table. She knew that she was casting a gloom over the whole household. It was best to get away. She left the room in silence and went up to sit on the sill of the dormer window where first she had caught sight of Stephen in the dim light of Nicolas Gadd's farthing candle.

The moment she had closed the door, Mrs. Parfitt opened her lips.

"Say nothing," said Father O'Leary before she could speak. "Say not a word at all. Ye'll only be finding yeerself expressing opinions about convents that neither of us ought to listen to. Say nothing. Shure, Glory be to God! 'tis a self-sacrificing life, is the life of a nun, and 'tis a glorious thing to get a vocation for it. It is, indeed."

"You don't mean a single word you're saying, Father O'Leary," said Mrs. Parfitt.

He brought his fist down on the table so that the spoons danced out of the salt-cellars.

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"I mean every single word of it," said he. "Shure, the best women I've known in the world have been nuns. They have so——" and his voice dropped to a lower and a tenderer note.

"You don't mean to say that you want Peggy——"

"Oh, my God!" he exclaimed. "Will ye whisht! I tell ye we're in the tightest corner we've ever been in in our lives, and 'tis the only thing to do to say nothing—the way ye'll save yeerself from saying things ye'll be sorry for after."

Mrs. Parfitt rose from the table, leaving the food untouched upon her plate. When she reached the door, she turned emphatically round.

"You may be able to say nothing yourself, because you're a priest," said she. "But you're not going to expect me to keep silent while Peggy goes and buries herself in a convent. I brought her up every bit as much as you did. She's come to me and asked me for everything she wanted."

"Faith, she didn't come and ask ye how children were born," said Father O'Leary.

"No!—and if she had, I shouldn't have told her the rigmarole that you did."

"Ye'd have had too much of the fear of God in ye to tell her anything," said he. "An' shure, me rigmarole as ye call it—'tis a silly word that—was better than nothing at all."

"Well, I'm not going to keep silent now," said Mrs. Parfitt. In the excitement of her emotion, she kept

turning the handle of the door round and round in her fingers. "I'm not a priest!"

"Ye are not," said he.

"So I can say just what I like."

And out she went as if about to say it then and there.

As the door closed, Father O'Leary placed his elbows on the table and, resting his face in his hands, he stared fixedly at the lamp before him.

"Thank God!" said he—"she's seen what I mean—and the wonder about her is, that she hasn't understood a word of it," then, inclining his head, he could just distinguish the sound of footsteps in the room above.

He crept to the door, opening it to listen. As he heard the voice of Mrs. Parfitt, raised in excited altercation, a smile spread over his face.

"Only please God, she doesn't overdo it," said he.

CHAPTER II

THE LAST MEASURE

Is it because their hearts are too big? Because women do overdo these things.

Mrs. Parfitt, with the best of intentions in the world, yet let her heart run away with her. For when once a woman has really something to say, her mind becomes so sensitive to the suggestion of every word she utters that before you or she know where you are, you may be discussing the Buddhistic reincarnation instead of solving issues on the servant question upon which you set out.

This was as much what happened with Mrs. Parfitt as it is possible to imagine.

She began with an unjustifiable tirade against the life in a convent. Now what a woman, whether she be Roman Catholic or not—so long as she is talking to one of her own persuasion—can say on such a matter as this, it were well not for one moment to suppose. She can say terrible things. Those who are not for it, are against it. It offends every maternal instinct they possess. And, my heavens! How it offends! To hear them talk—but please God, you never will.

Mrs. Parfitt talked. At different moments throughout that conversation, she sat on every chair and every conceivable spot that would support her weight. This alone will show you how much she said.

Had Peggy but argued with her, keeping her to the point at issue, she might have had some effect. But Peggy said nothing. Poor Mrs. Parfitt, then, was left to the mercy of the suggestions of her own words and phrases, whereby the vows of the convent calling forth the question of maternity and that in turn being superimposed by the existence of men as a sex and some men—she quoted Mr. Parfitt—in particular, it was not long before she found herself exhorting against marriage and all the evils attendant upon its state.

“Do you think I’d have married?” she asked, returning after a complete round of the room to the first chair upon which she had seated herself—“Do you think I’d have consented to it, if I’d known what it was?”

Peggy leant back against the embrasure of her window and stared out across the roof tops into the unfathomable mystery of the smoke. She said nothing.

“I had no child,” Mrs. Parfitt continued in a softer voice—“And I’d like to know how God repays a woman for all that she suffers when He doesn’t give her that? Marriage, to a man—why it’s nothing! It’s of little more account to him than moving house. Not as much! He’d sooner be married five times than move once. If you were to ask me, he’d sooner be married five times,

let alone moving altogether. Affection? They don't know what it is! All they pretend they've got for you goes like a flash in the pan the first time you send up the potatoes hard to dinner. They like you enough when you're new and strange to them, but I've never seen a man that'd do for a woman what he does to get a game of cards. Why, I've seen men, on the golf links at Little Island—just near Fota there—I've seen men, men who wouldn't take a parcel home for their wives—I've seen them carrying round a bag of sticks for miles in the dripping rain and all to hit a ball into a hole which does no good to God, man nor beast. And when they'd get home, they'd be as angry with their wives because the tea was not ready on the spot, they'd be as angry as if she'd burnt the house down while they were away."

Peggy looked round.

"I think you're quite right, Mummy Parfitt," said she.

"Right!" echoed Mrs. Parfitt—"of course I'm right!"

"And that," said Peggy, "is more or less why I've decided to go into the convent."

Mrs. Parfitt rose, sick at heart, from her chair. In a dazed way she moved to another.

"It doesn't seem to me that men are considerate," Peggy went on quietly; "they don't think women count in life. Daddy O'Leary—of course Daddy O'Leary's different. He's a priest. I think he's the most wonderful man in the world. I always think God must be like

Daddy O'Leary, only a little greater and a little stronger, and when He speaks I don't expect it sounds quite the same. I think if I could be married to Daddy O'Leary—without being married to him—I don't quite know how to express it. But I think I should like that best in all the world. And so as that's impossible, I'm going into a convent. I know I've got a vocation. I know it's the best."

"Dear God, have mercy on us!" said Mrs. Parfitt in a whisper when she saw what she had done. Then she burst into tears.

For many days after that, in collaboration with Father O'Leary, using every subtlety they knew, discussing each plan of action in secret before it was attempted, they did everything it was possible to dissuade Peggy from her choice. It was with no success.

"You do think I'm doing the right thing, don't you, Daddy?" she would frequently ask him, when some faint glimmer of the past which they were always cunningly bringing up before her eyes would make her waver for the moment.

And instinct with diplomacy he would reply—

"Shure, 'tis a noble calling, it is, of course. But once ye've put yeer hand to the plough there's no going into the next field to pick primroses."

"I shan't want to," said she.

"Have ye ever seen a primrose," said he, "but what ye haven't wanted to pick it?"

She would make no reply to that. But still she did not change.

At last Father O'Leary made his ultimate bid for her possession.

One day he called her to his room. She came softly, apprehending the purport of all he had to say, yet never realizing the manner in which it was to be expressed.

He sat at the table alone. To this consultation Mrs. Parfitt had been told she could not be admitted.

"Ye will say things," said he. "Shure, didn't I tell ye that first evening, 'Say nothing,' said I, and, faith, ye said enough to drive a reporter off his head. I'm not blaming, mind ye. If I'd had yeer freedom I'd have sent the whole staff of a newspaper mad. I would indeed. Only I'm rendered speechless by the virtue of necessity, and that's the way with me. I can't say what I feel. Shure, 'tis bad enough to know that it's wrong to feel it. So ye can't come in now, and I'd advise ye not to listen at the door, because any moment she might run out of it."

So Father O'Leary was alone. On the table in front of him there lay a little heap of withered rose petals and a strip of pale blue ribbon.

As Peggy closed the door she stood staring in wonder from them to him, then back again to the table.

In silence, he gathered all the petals up into the palm of his hand with such gentleness as you would use were you to collect the dew from blades of grass.

"Smell those," said he.

And he laid them all just as tenderly, into the palm of her open hand.

She raised them to her nostrils. She drew her breath.

"What do they smell of?" said he.

She shook her head.

"Of nothing?" he asked.

"No—nothing," and she laid them back on the table.

"They smell of all the roses that were ever brought to Covent Garden," he replied. "That's what they smell of to me."

Her eyebrows lifted. The tip of her nose just caught a little wink of light and seemed to flash a question too.

"Why?" said she.

"Because as many as fifty years ago—fifty years, mind ye, before I was a priest, they were given to me by a woman whom I loved."

"She died?" whispered Peggy.

"To me," said he—"She went into a convent."

Peggy's eyes met his and, though the tears rose up in them—a flood of water in the little stream—she still looked and looked into his.

Then it became more than she could bear. She rushed to his side. She knelt down burying her head upon his shoulder.

"Poor Daddy!" she whispered. "Poor, dear Daddy!"

"Ye're the only soul I've told that to," said he. "If I were to tell it in confession, they'd only be saying, 'Shure, throw the things away.' And 'tis the way I couldn't do that," he added simply.

"And why have you shown it to me?" she asked.

"To let ye see that a man can love, even when there's no waiting or hoping left for him, the way he can lay his hands on them when his heart's too sick. To let ye see that love is not a thing to burst like a bubble just because the fire gets near it."

"And to stop me from going to the convent too?" she whispered.

"Shure, I wouldn't stop any from so noble a life as that," said he, and his heart thumped and hammered in his breast. He thought he had won her then.

"It wouldn't be any good, Daddy, if you did," said she. "I've got the vocation. I must go now."

At that his heart stood still.

"Ye're shure of that?" said he thickly.

"Quite sure," she replied.

Then, as though he were lifting weights of lead, he picked up the withered petals. He picked up the pale silk ribbon of blue in silence, carrying them to their little secret drawer. As he locked them away, he knew that tragedy had come again.

"Shure, that's the end of me life," he muttered in his heart.

And he turned the key in the lock.

For one moment then he paused with his back still

turned to Peggy. And in that moment he said a prayer, addressed to no one.

"If a' be I've not done me duty," said he, "God knows I've broken me heart."

He looked round.

"There's a Convent of Mercy," said he, "in a place called Cappelquin; I know the Reverend Mother there and I'll write to her to-night."

BOOK V

CHAPTER I

THE LITTLE SISTERS OF MERCY

FROM the rush of the world, from the turmoil of her own thoughts, from all that noise of the coming and going of people's lives which, when your heart is aching brings doubly to your soul the sense of loneliness—from all this, Peggy found herself hidden away in one of those corners so placid and so quiet as might be said of it that it holds its breath as you pass by.

Cappoquin is a true corner of the world. And the Convent of Mercy, which in those days, with its white-curtained windows—as though with eyes lowered to the ground—looked decorously forth on to the Main Street, was the very niche of that corner. You would have heard no sound of life from the other side of those weather-siated walls. The big wooden door which opened on to the very pavement kept, with an expressionless face, all its secrets in sombre silence.

For doors like houses and houses like people, all give their different impressions. You may tell much of a man by the coat he dons; you may tell much of a house by the paint it wears: you may tell much of a door by that indescribable something which is neither in the way

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it opens nor in the way it shuts, neither in the knocker upon its wooden surface nor the handle which it bears ; it is an indescribable something which is a combination of all these.

The expressionless look of that heavy door to the little weather-slatted house in the Main Street was full of meaning by reason of the very vacancy it wore. Even the small square grill, inlet within one of the panels, even that said nothing. It was in saying nothing, that it said so much.

It was in saying nothing that it told you of the secrets upon which it closed ; of the mysteries and wonders which it kept concealed as one who, with a sullen face of stone, guards the treasure of the infinite.

All this you might have seen, had you the heart for such things, as you stood and gazed at the demure windows of that silent house in the Main Street of Cappelquin. But you would never have guessed what a fairyland was there upon the other side of that heavy door. Never would you have dreamed, when you beheld that inviting exterior, that the world beyond it had stood still for a hundred years or more ; that no matter how many carts might rumble down the Main Street, or how many souls might come and go in pursuit of such matters as are important to life in Cappelquin, yet still the world within that little building was unmoved by it all, nor had been stirred for all the hundred years before.

That which you will find in a Convent is not life.

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It is fairyland. They are all sleeping Princesses within.

When their beautiful hair is cut off—as they lie down in their coffins at the hour of their profession—when the veil is put over their faces—then they fall asleep. And the Prince who comes to waken them, cutting his way through the thorny briars, killing the cruel Giant of Despair, slaying the grim Dragon of Regret—the Prince who comes to waken them—is Death.

For that hour of freedom and to that moment of deliverance, they draw each even breath. As they lie down at night and as they rise in the morning, they know that one day has passed, one night has brought them nearer to the instant when the veil shall be rent asunder and the Prince shall open their sleeping eyes.

So they sleep on, from the sun of one day, to the rain of the next and on to the sun once more. When they pray, as pray they do, some moments in almost every hour, it is as those who talk in slumber. A strange and gentle incoherent murmuring it is, with words so often used that all their meaning has been worn away. For every word that one uses, is a step that one mounts. And these steps, by reason of their going up and coming down in countless journeyings, are hollowed to the very shadows of themselves. There comes a time when they scarce need lift their feet at all.

You will see their lips moving at Vespers. You will hear their voices in the somnolent monotone, chanting out the prayers. And you will know that the brook

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which ripples on its peaceful way through the meadows, is more conscious of its motion over the pebbles, than they of their motion over the words.

Oh, surely there is no truer essence of Fairyland in all the world than this! And no more beautiful a fairy palace would you have discovered than that Convent of Mercy in the Main Street of Cappoquin.

It was so still and chill and quiet within. When the sun was brilliant in the heavens, every room in the little Convent was like a larder wherein the light has crept to cool itself. Yet, as it stole through the white linen curtains and lay on the whitewashed walls, it was still sunlight—sunlight too pale and fragile for the world without.

In the room, where they worked, in the refectory where they had their meals, in the little parlour where, on a saint's day, or before Retreat, or on a nun's birthday, they saw their friends, everything was the same—white walls, white linen curtains, a plain and varnished floor.

In the parlour, upon a pedestal projecting from the wall, there stood an image of the Virgin with the divine Babe in her arms. Her robe was of an impossible blue—so blue that, against those white walls, it almost hurt your eyes to see it. But she stood there so patiently, and so tender was the gaze in her gentle eyes as she looked down at the Infant sleeping on Her breast, that you could not but love Her for everything—blue robe and all.

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On the walls, too, there were pictures. Coloured prints they were, in brilliant reds and blues—pictures of saints and of Popes, the saints in their martyrdom, bearing the pangs of untold agony for the glory of their Church. Their faces were so patient and white in suffering that, whenever they looked at them, the nuns were stirred to pity or lifted to adoration. For their pain was so great, but their cause so noble that the hearts of the little sisters were torn between pity and pride.

“Poor St. Stephen,” Sister Mary Conception would say—Sister Mary Conception, with her plump, red face and her warm heart ready to beat if you gave her but the faintest provocation for it—“Poor St. Stephen—oh, the cruel wretches how they must have hurt him!”

And if it were Sister Mary Berchmans who was standing by—Sister Mary Berchmans, with her long, white face and eyes burnt deep with prayer, she would answer—

“Yes—but think of the glory of it!”

And little Sister Mary Conception would try to think of the glory of it, but it was the smarting of the wounds that she felt most of all. They would have hurt *her*, you see. She was so plump. Sister Mary Berchmans would never have felt the blows of the stones. She was so thin. All the spirit of her was burning in her eyes. Stones cannot hurt you then.

So, through the Convent, on the walls of every room there were these sacred pictures to keep their thoughts

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from straying to the world. Even in the little dormitories where they slept, there were the pictures over their beds—the pictures of the saints whose names they had taken in profession.

Whether there is glass or not to those pictures, I do not know. For the glass of a picture—as you, if you are a woman, have long found out—is so generous in some lights as to give you your reflection. Now when once they enter their convent, the little sisters may never see themselves again. Therefore it seems to me that the Mother Superior will have brought with her enough knowledge of the world as to deprive those pictures of their glass. Or, more subtle still, she may leave it there. For they tell me that it is not complimentary—a mirror like this.

Here, then, in their simple dormitories, with their three-foot truckle beds, the little sisters take the sleep their bodies need. The slumber of their spirits, that is always with them. It is a sleep, unbroken until the Prince shall come and waken them at the last call.

Through all these various rooms on the day of her arrival, Peggy was taken, her heart wondering at the stillness of it all, the spirit in her just frightened like some little bird that, flying in through a tempting window, has found itself engaged in a great and silent room.

But it was when she reached the tiny chapel that all her heart lifted. Here was a spot at which the world might well come to an end and think its journey nobly

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finished. For if ever a building of the hands of men enclosed within its four walls the actual presence of God—it was there.

It made no matter that it was small. Twenty nuns might have been seated there—no more. Yet it seemed like disturbing God as you entered, so filled was it with the consciousness of His presence.

Through the windows which opened on to their old garden, the sun was burning with a vivid brilliance of light. Here, there were no white linen curtains. The glass was covered with those transparent coloured papers which are meant to make you think the glass is stained. It made you think better things than that. For the sunlight bore through them in quivering rays, tinting the plain washed walls with great prisms of colour, setting the varnished deal stalls of the choir nuns with jewels or iridescent blues and reds and gold.

One of the windows which had swung open was admitting the incense of honeysuckle that clambered up the wall outside. A trailer of it had struggled in and was fanning in a sleepy motion with the faintest breeze.

As Peggy stood there, with Sister Mary Catherine at her side, a big, white butterfly floated lazily in through the open window. With whirlings and circlings it flew towards the vases of scented stock that were placed upon the altar.

“Look at that butterfly!” said Sister Mary Catherine in a sudden whisper.

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Peggy watched it in silence as it soared by the figure of a nun kneeling at the altar, deep in prayer.

"Wouldn't it be better the way I caught it?" whispered the little sister once more.

"Why?" asked Peggy.

"It may disturb the Reverend Mother at her devotions."

"Is that the Reverend Mother?"

"It is—oh, it's flying so near her head!"

"When shall I see her?" whispered Peggy.

"Presently—oh, dear! Presently. I think I ought to catch it."

"You'd disturb the Reverend Mother more than the butterfly," said Peggy.

The little sister shook back the long sleeves from her wrists in fevered agitation.

"I should, of course," said she, without a smile. "But the chapel is not the place for butterflies to be flying about, is it? 'Tis not."

Peggy looked at her with quiet astonishment.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

Before the little sister could find an answer—it indeed she could ever have found one—the Reverend Mother rose from her knees, crossed herself, and genuflected before the altar. Then she came down the tiny chapel to where they stood.

The moment she saw them, for her head was bowed at first, the look of prayer departed from her eyes, and a smile of wonderful kindness took its place. In

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response to that smile Peggy gave her heart. From that moment she loved the Reverend Mother.

It is a troublesome thought in my mind that you will need description of her, for I cannot give it.

It would be of no service to you to know that her expression was sad—that sadness, bearing no sign of reproach in it, which comes of having given all to gain what must seem less. For that it was, more than any feature, more than the deep grey of her eyes, more than the tender expression of her lips, which fastened itself upon the mind of Peggy.

And when, as she embraced her, pressing her cheek against each side of Peggy's face, and saying, "So 'tis ye are Peggy Bannister?" with the softest accent that the south of Ireland can bring you, then Peggy felt, as Stephen had said of her, that she had known the Reverend Mother all her life.

With hands still holding her shoulders, the Reverend Mother stepped back to look at her.

"Father O'Leary told me a lot about ye," said she, "in the letter that he wrote. We were sorry that we couldn't take ye in the spring. But, shure, 'tis better for ye to be seeing the Convent in the summer."

She smiled again, and in that smile, which was an illumination to her whole face, Peggy felt she saw so noble a triumph over suffering as made the heart of her beat quickly in response to it.

"If ye don't like it now," the Reverend Mother added—"ye'll never like it." Her eyes turned to the

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open window, where the trailer of honeysuckle was nodding gently to the breeze. "'Tis nicest in the summer of all."

"The little chapel is wonderful," said Peggy.

"We're very fond of it," she replied simply. "But ye'd better come now and be having a little talk with me in my room."

They turned away. Sister Mary Catherine shook back her sleeves again.

"Reverend Mother, will I shut the window?"

"Why?"

"'Tis the way the butterflies do be coming in."

The Mother Superior smiled.

"Shure, what harm?" said she. "They have as much right as we have."

CHAPTER II

THE WAY TO KEEP A SECRET

"HAVE ye seen our garden yet?" asked the Mother Superior as they walked down the still passages.

"No," said Peggy.

"Then we'll go there and we'll talk."

And through a little door, as silent, as retentive of its secrets as was every door in that old convent, they passed suddenly from the cool shadows into the burning brilliance of a sun, flooding its light upon the wildest and most wonderful garden that Peggy had ever seen.

The garden at Mrs. Gooseberry's cottage was not like this. Hers had that trimness which must be the intent of one who lives by the sale of her flowers. There was no trimness here. Flowers grew as you could imagine God would have had them grow in that Garden which He first planted in Eden. The pinks clustered over the edges of the paths in defiance of the old gardener who was for ever toiling in the beds.

He did nothing, did Michael—nothing that a gardener should do. Yet he toiled all day long. His back was so bent and he walked with such a stoop that at any moment, had you looked into the garden, you would have thought he was smelling the flowers.

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Nevertheless, fifteen years before, it was he who had planted those bushes of lavender which had grown so tall and strong that they met across the middle path. You had to brush through them as you passed, shaking the scented pollen from their thousand blossoms so that it made the whole air sweet. It was Michael too, who year by year had nailed up the honeysuckle on the wall of the little chapel, until the growth of it was so thick and luxuriant that a blackbird built her nest there every spring. It was he moreover who, every year, planted the two giant hedges of sweet peas—one in each bed on either side of the middle path. And they grew, and they grew, till you could not see the little sister with her basket and scissors as she moved behind them. The flowers were so massed that they looked like myriads of painted butterflies which had settled there and were fanning their wings in the sun.

Yet it would seem to have been more by the grace of God than by anything else that Michael did these things. For though he toiled all day till sunset—except on those rare and epic occasions when the old white horse was harnessed to the closed-in buggy and he drove the little sisters to their branch convent in Ardmore—though he laboured until it almost seemed that his back must break in two, still the garden was a wilderness.

For miles around Cappoquin, all the birds knew of it. In the dense growth of lilacs and laburnums at the very bottom of the garden, all the thrushes and the black-

birds and the chaffinches built their nests. There, year after year, they brought up their young. They showed them the best gooseberry-bushes beneath which they might sit all day long and eat the fruit to their heart's content. There was never a fear of their being seen by those silent figures with their black robes and white gimps, or that odd, bent-up looking creature who was always muttering beneath his breath. No wonder that they came there from all the country round.

And yet, though the gooseberry and the currant bushes with their ear-rings of topaz, of ruby and of the blackest, blackest pearl, though they provided food for the birds of all the neighbourhood, there still seemed to be plenty for every one.

Sister Mary Cecilia made her black currant and her red currant puddings just the same. You might have seen her gooseberry-jam in rows upon rows of pots all down the pantry shelves. And all but Mother Mary Carthage would congratulate Michael upon the virtues of his gardening. To which Michael would mutter that it would be a poor thing, the way he worked, if there weren't enough currants or gooseberries to go round.

It was just the same for all the bees and all the moths and all the insects in those parts. They came in their legions to the flowers in the garden of the Convent of Mercy. A garden of Mercy it was indeed—of generous Mercy too.

In the middle day, you could hear the grasshoppers chanting their strange, metallic song in the grass that

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grew under the lilac-trees. For ever. it seemed, until sunfall, the bees hummed their incessant note up and down the pathways. In fact, if you had stopped and listened to the sound of the world in that old garden, you would have heard nothing but the dim, faint, lingering chord, made up of the notes of the bees and grasshoppers, vibrating in accompaniment to the shrilling songs of the birds.

It was all ranged upon a slope was this beautiful wilderness. Through many gradations of flower-beds and little plantations of raspberry-canies and fruit-bushes, all intersected with tiny gravel pathways, it descended gradually from the terrace at the back of the house to the shaded walk at the bottom. So high a wall surrounded it all, that you could not see the roofs of the neighbouring houses, and might never think that it were possible for there to be a world beyond.

On the gravel terrace, from which the whole garden stretched beneath you, the little sisters walked during their hour of contemplation. Up and down, singly or in pairs, with hands buried in their wide sleeves and heads bent low, they walked till the sun touched the tops of the yew-trees which shut off even the little graveyard from their tiny world.

And it was here that Peggy first stood, gazing, in a silence that might not be broken for fear the words should lessen her delight, gazing and gazing with eyes filled with rapture at the garden of the little sisters in the Convent of Merey, Cappelouin.

Instinctively, she sought the arm of the Mother Superior. She held it tightly in a clinging hand.

"It's no use saying how lovely it is," she whispered.

"After London and all the houses, it's——"

She struggled vainly for a word, but there was none. There is no word in the language which will mean pinks and roses, lavender and lilies, sunshine and blue sky, the song of numberless birds and the hum of countless bees—all these rolled into one. And that was the word that she wanted.

The Reverend Mother looked down at her round and wondering eyes. She smiled. She felt the demonstrative fingers clinging to her arm, and she smiled again. It was a smile that seemed to include everything away and beyond those garden walls—a smile which, answering to the warm touch of Peggy's fingers, was like the smile of one who is dreaming of impossible happiness in an impossible world.

"We'll come and walk down under the trees," said she, when the smile had faded and the dream had gone.

"'Tis quieter there, the way we can talk."

Together then, in silence, crushing their way through the bushes of lavender, walking down those little paths from which the odour of clove rose pungent to their nostrils, they wandered to the garden's end.

Here, under the laburnum trees, where the grass was dank and wet, a rich vivid green, a pathway ran to right and left. Everywhere it was splashed with the sunlight that fell through the branches. When the

breeze shook the leaves, it was like the trembling of colours in a kaleidoscope.

Peggy pointed to an old door, green with age which, with a Gothic arch, was let into the wall. This, of all the doors in all the Convent, looked as though it had the greatest secret to guard. Its hinges seemed to have grown rusty, its panels weather-stained with the ages through which it had maintained its silence.

“Where does that door lead to?” she asked.

The Mother Superior looked at it with eyes in which you could have seen no expression, in which no shadow of thought passed by.

“That door,” said she, “goes out into the world.”

“You never use it?” asked Peggy.

“The key is kept in my room. Any one may have it who asks.”

They moved away. But a silence followed them, clinging like a gossamer veil around their thoughts.

Beyond that door lay the world. Through Peggy’s mind a shudder passed, and then, close on the heels of it there came the warm sense of life that was awake. Again she took the Reverend Mother’s arm to drive away the thought. And again the Reverend Mother looked down at her and smiled.

“Father O’Leary tells me ye’ve got a vocation,” she said.

Peggy lifted her eyes in gratitude.

“Yes,” said she.

"Ye want to give up the world and live here in the Convent?"

"Yes."

"And die here?"

The words were very simple, but as she uttered them, it seemed to Peggy that that was just what the impassive face of the door had said as she gazed at it.

"Yes—I do," she replied

And it was as if the sound of the door as it closed had reached her ears. She looked back over her shoulder, but there it was, as impassively shut as ever.

The Mother Superior took Peggy's fingers in her hand and held them.

"Father O'Leary told me ye'd been unhappy," she went on in a gentle voice.

Peggy inclined her head in assent.

"And d'ye think 'tis the way ye'd be happy here?"

The thought of this garden, of that little chapel with its incense of honeysuckle, of those cool, white rooms, and the silent passages, all sped across her mind. With generous hands they held out to her the most peaceful sense of contentment in the world. She glanced at the Mother Superior's face as a ray of sunlight fell upon it, and she saw that youthfulness which comes with a restful mind. There was scarce a line upon it. The skin was smooth and pale.

But then, as she looked, she perceived a tiny lock of hair which had stolen cunningly from under the linen coif. It was so short that its escape had never

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been noticed. For the moment all her mind fixed itself upon that. She looked and looked away, and then she looked again—for the hair was a dead, dead white.

“What is it?” asked the Reverend Mother.

For nuns are nuns and priests are priests; but each are men and women.

“There’s a little lock of your hair——” said Peggy.

The Mother Superior turned away and pressed it under the linen coif. She made no comment. No exclamation of annoyance passed her lips. But when she spoke again her voice was quick with agitation.

“D’ye think ye’ll be happy here?” she asked as she turned round. “’Tis a thing ye must think of well. A year is no long time to think about it. It is not. When was it ye first took a mind for it?”

“About ten months ago.”

“Was that when it first came to ye to be unhappy?”
Peggy bent her head once more.

“Can ye tell me about it? I don’t ask to know, d’ye mind—’tis only if ’twould be helping ye, to explain.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” said Peggy.

A little pain of disappointment pricked the heart of the Reverend Mother. The thrill of it startled her. She had really thought she did not want to know.

“If there was anything to tell,” Peggy went on, closing her fingers gently on the Mother Superior’s arm, “I wouldn’t keep back anything from you.”

“But ye were in love, my dear?”

She could not help it. The little prompting question

would come out. As she uttered it, the blood mounted in a rushing warmth to her cheeks.

"Yes," whispered Peggy—"I know—but that was all."

"'Twas the way, 'twas ye he didn't love?"

"I don't know. He said he did."

"Was it yeerself he told?"

"No—it was Father O'Leary."

At the sound of his name, there was a faint and momentary pause. It was as though the Reverend Mother, hearing a voice in the distance, had ceased for the instant from her questions to listen.

"And how did he take it?" she continued.

"I think he thought he was going to lose me at first; but when I told him that I should come to live at the Presbytery while Stephen was away at sea, he seemed satisfied then."

"'Tis the way, he's very fond of ye—shure, I could see that from his letter."

"Yes—I believe he is."

She looked up with quick apprehension into the Reverend Mother's face.

"Is it conceited of me to say that?" she asked.

"It is not of course. Shure, why?"

"Because I think he's the most wonderful man in the world. I remember saying to Mrs. Parfitt—only I can't explain it properly—that the thing I'd like best of all would be—no perhaps I'd better not say it."

Well—to any woman this would have been cruel,

baiting the sensitive spirit of curiosity. 'To a nun it could have but one issue. She begged to be told. When then she heard that quaint little statement of Peggy's to Mrs. Parfitt, to the effect that she would like nothing better in the world than to be married to Father O'Leary, and that, if you please, without being married to him at all, the Mother Superior stopped suddenly. She raised her hands and her eyes closed in consternation at the thought.

This was the years of training, rising first from the upper structure of all her thoughts. So long had she contemplated life as she lived it then, that such a statement as this had, as Peggy had rightly foreseen, startled her like a voice crying through empty corridors. But then, out of the consciousness which belonged to the woman before ever she had been a nun, there came a faint glimmer of understanding. She dropped her hands again. Her eyes opened, staring steadily before her through that high garden wall and out away into the world.

Peggy read nothing of this second attitude of the Reverend Mother's mind. She saw only that she had shocked her and, hastening to make amends, she clasped both her hands.

"Please don't misunderstand me!" she begged—"I meant nothing worldly. Oh—I could tell you just what I meant if you would promise not to say one word of it to any one."

A tremor passed through the heart of the Reverend Mother. It came from nowhere. It disappeared into

nothing. Like a little breath of wind that stirs into faint ripples the surface of a pool, then leaves it smooth as glass once more, the tremor had come and gone.

"If 'tis a confidence——" she began.

"It's something Father O'Leary told me."

"Was it the way he asked ye to say nothing about it?"

"No—he didn't say anything like that, because it was about something many, many years ago—before he was a priest."

"Why was it he told ye it?" asked the Reverend Mother in a breath.

"Because I believe he didn't want me to go into the Convent."

"Shure, I guessed that meself from his letter," said the Mother Superior.

"Of course, he doesn't say so," said Peggy quickly—"he always says that the best woman he has ever known was a nun."

"Does he say that?" whispered the Reverend Mother.

"Yes; and it was when he showed me those little things that he'd kept all these years—rose leaves and a little bit of blue ribbon—but perhaps I oughtn't to tell you."

"I don't think ye ought," said the Reverend Mother, and her voice was so low that Peggy could only just hear her.

"So I can't really explain," said Peggy—"But I think I'm glad I didn't tell you."

And she drew a little breath of relief.

CHAPTER III

THE WOODEN CHRIST

THE world weighs heavy when one must wait.

To Peggy, during the few weeks in which she was merely a guest at the Convent, the hours seemed short enough, but the days were long. At night, she lay awake, counting the time that must pass before this period of probation should have departed.

"'Twould be better ye stayed in the Convent for two or three weeks, before ye become a postulant," the Mother Superior had said.

"You think I haven't got a real vocation?"

"Oh—shure, I think ye have indeed."

"Then why not let me enter now?"

With her eyes she had begged it, as well as with her voice. There was something ominous in waiting. Great issues like these it would seem—great issues like marriage, like death—are best done quickly.

"When I came over, I thought I was going to enter at once," Peggy added, and to her voice and her eyes she joined the caressing pressure of her hands.

The Mother Superior took them warmly in her own.

"Shure, what difference will three weeks be making

in a life-time?" she asked gently, and in her voice Peggy heard the finality of decision.

All freedom was given her. She could come and go as she chose. In this, the Reverend Mother was obeying the instructions of Father O'Leary.

"Don't let her enter at once," he had written—"Keep her just a wee while staying with ye. Let her get out and see things. 'Tis no harm. A few weeks will make no matter one way or another, and though I'm sure she means in her heart to be one of ye, there's always the corner in a woman's heart where the unexpected lies curled up out of sight."

Quite willing had been the consent of the Reverend Mother when she had read that. For the sake of her Order alone, she had no wish to entertain the reception of one into their midst who was not sure of her vocation.

But when she had seen Peggy, as with all those who once knew her, it was a different matter then. There crept into the heart of her the longing to take this child of nature under her protection; there came, as is common in the minds of all those vowed to the renunciation of the world, the desire to make her one of them, sharing the joys which only they who live in that fairyland can know.

Whenever Peggy pleaded with her to bring an end to her wandering, she was sorely tempted to give way. But the promise had been made in her reply to Father O'Leary. She could not find in her conscience the cause to break that.

So two weeks went by and Peggy, taking but little advantage of the freedom that was given her, passed her hours in the warm and wonderful seclusion of their old garden. For long whiles together, she would talk to Michael as he bent himself up over the beds. He had few topics of interest had Michael. In fact, there were but two and, so much as you could get him to talk, he spoke invariably of them. His garden—he called it his—that was one. The disapproval of Mother Mary Carthage of his methods of horticulture—this was the other.

When she was in the world, Mother Mary Carthage, whose family was of noble repute, had lived in a great house where there was a garden many times the size of theirs.

“Yirra, Glory be to God, and won’t she be lettin’ us know ut,” said Michael—“She will indeed. Wid her head-gardener and her undher-gardener and her glass houses an’ the divil an’ all.”

Peggy hid her smile.

“But she says you do wonders with the garden,” she ventured presently when the twitching of her lips was still.

“Wondhers, indeed!” exclaimed Michael, and he drove his spade up to the hilt in the rich brown earth to emphasize it—“Shure, all the wondhers she’d be maning would shame anny dacint man if he heard ’em. They would, and ’tis I’m telling ye. They’d shame anny dacint man. ‘Tis a wondher,’ says she—‘the way

himself 'ud be bringing up them peas wid'out the trace av a wire to keep 'em from the birds,' says she. 'Shure in Ballymartle,' says she, 'we'd have fifty rows,' says she—'an' twice the height av thim,' says she—'but, Glory be to God,' she says—'twould be the way d'eyd have little wire tunnels running down the whole row to keep 'em from the birds,' says she. And she'd be sayin' that, mind ye, just as they'd be passing down the way I could hear ivry word av ut."

"I'm sure she doesn't mean it unkindly," said Peggy—
—"She doesn't mean anything against you."

Michael thrust his spade down deep into the ground once more and leant upon it. His small eyes steadied as he summed up the whole matter.

"If she do be belyin' me," said he—"Tis lies she be belyin'; but if I be belyin' her, 'tis the trooth I be belyin'."

Having given that judgment, he spat with finality upon his hands, setting to work once more as though he never wanted to speak again. Two spadefuls of earth he turned and then he looked up.

"A young niece of hers'll be coming to stay at the Hotel down street, to-morrow," said he—"I'm thinkin' 'tis wan av the Miss Clancys. They come from beyond over—'tis a place called Summerville and used to belong to the Lambkins who've gone to live at Middleton. 'Tis a fine place. Yirra, I suppose we shall be hearing of that too—an' the way General Clancy led some riginint or other when they were beaten by the Boers,

the way the ould Queen made a knight av him whin he came back—an' he wid only one arm to him. Shure, I've heard Mother Mary Carthage tell the story whin they'd be walkin' in the garden here, till I'm sick and tired av ut. He was after goin' to the Queen at Buckin'ham Palace, an' the tears came into the eyes av her whin she sees Ginerall Clancy wid one of his sleeves lookin' as if 'twas hanging out to dhry.

“‘Yirra, what's on ye?’ said the Queen.

“‘’Tis a shmall matter av me arm,’ says he, makin' as little av ut as he could.

“‘In the name av God,’ says she—‘what's come to ut?’ she says.

“‘I'm after leavin' it behind me,’ says he, an' he gives a flick av the ould sleeve wid the hand that had got an arm to ut, just to show her the way 'twas all in the day's work.

“‘Oh, Glory be!’ says she, wid the tears droppin' on her chest. ‘Kneel!’ she says, which is what they say whin they want to tap 'em a clout wid the sword, the way they'll make a knight av ye. ‘Kneel!’ she says—

“And shure, right enough, he kneit. Why wouldn't he? What a fool he'd be.

“Ye'll hear all that again to-morrow now, whin Miss Clancy comes over.”

When Peggy could reply, she told him that he might set his mind at rest.

“Miss Clancy is only three years old,” said she.

"She'll learn it then," said he—"an' she growin' up."

It is the coming of little Elizabeth into this chronicle, even at so late an hour as this, upon which many grave and serious things might be written. But the world is a grave enough place as it is. Between the lines of circumstance, they must read who wish.

For when Elizabeth came—Elizabeth with her pale straw hair set round her forehead in an even fringe and straggling to her shoulder in tails of finest gold—Elizabeth with her deep brown china eyes that danced to as merry a tune as ever the fairies could play—when she came to the Convent the next morning with her dolls, Peggy was to learn that lesson which only a child can teach.

For think what it must have been to the little sisters, when every day this baby girl with her dolls came into their midst! Peggy's eyes rushed swiftly from one face to another as she watched them.

When not beneath the stern eyes of Mother Mary Carthage, they struggled jealously for the possession of Elizabeth. Each knew within the heart of her from whence that jealousy sprang. Each tried to hide it as though it were some shameful thing.

And Elizabeth, who knew nothing of thwarted motherhood, who could not recognize as maternal the caresses of those black creatures in their flowing veils, just sat upon the floor of the refectory and played with her dolls. Only Peggy noticed the fifteen pairs of eager

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eyes which followed her every motion. Only Peggy observed the sudden rush of arms that impulsively held her when she had said something to conjure up their laughter.

Elizabeth herself was concerned with far greater matters than these. There were the fortunes of John and the fortunes of Mary to consider. Those fortunes lay in the palms of her tiny hands. For John was a sailor bold with flapping blue trousers, and Mary, who closed her eyes when she lay down, was engaged under solemn promises to be his wife.

"I tink dey's goin' to be married now," she announced one day. "Den dey'll live togedder like mummy and daddy."

A trembling ripple of laughter ran in sibilant whispers through the little group. Sister Mary Conception hid her mouth in her hand. The shoulders of Sister Mary Ignatius shook convulsively.

It was not that they were awake. Their sleep was still unbroken. They were still waiting for the Prince to come and open their eyes. Yet in these moments, it was as if they dreamed and, dreaming, whispered thoughts that their hearts had almost forgotten.

To Peggy, with her heart throbbing, these whisperings were not too low to hear. Every word reached her ears. The blood ran chill in her veins. She wished from the bottom of her heart that her hours of probation were over; that the step had been taken which she so desired to make.

Yet all that she was seeing, fascinated her. She could not turn away. When John and Mary were led to the altar, where Elizabeth, the priest, stood with solemn eyes and folded hands, she could see how the little sisters clung to each other, murmuring between the simple laughter on their lips and the sudden beatings of their hearts.

When John was made to put his arm round Mary's neck to support her during the ceremony, their laughter rose, and shaking shoulders and secreting hands could not keep it back.

At its highest note, it broke. It fell to silence like some shattered thing. The door of the refectory had opened and Mother Mary Carthage had come in.

"What is Elizabeth doing?" she asked.

The dread question found no reply. Their laughter died away behind nervous hands. The little Sisters all huddled together like sheep before the dog of the shepherd.

"What are you doing, Elizabeth?" she repeated, not to be denied.

Elizabeth held up a fat little finger, saying—

"Ssh! Ssh! I'se making John and Mary married. I'se Father O'Sullivan."

A swift hand seized her little wrist. She was dragged quickly to her feet. With tragic suddenness, both John and Mary were parted in the supreme moment of their joy and, for punishment, Elizabeth was sent away to say her prayers in the little chapel. There, in one of the

varnished deal stalls of the choir nuns, she was seated. But once freed from the presence of Mother Mary Carthage, she began to look about her.

For some moments, she watched a butterfly that was vainly beating its wings against one of the windows. Then came two lady birds—one swift rush of scarlet and they were settled on her sleeve. Straightway she set them to race along the varnished deal stall, and when, in obedience to her whispered exhortation that their houses were on fire, they flew away home, she turned her attention to the lay sister who was cleaning the vases on the altar.

One thing after another, Sister Mary dusted with scrupulous care; last of all the wooden Christ which, loosened some years before from the crucifix, had been made fast with an invisible thread of silk.

Intense with interest, Elizabeth watched all her movements with untiring eyes. The wooden Christ looked so real. She could almost feel it breathe with relief as it was taken from the cross and laid tenderly upon the altar. It looked so much more alive than either John or Mary.

They had taken John and Mary away from her. She did not understand that. Why didn't they take away the Christ from the little lay sister?

Between the interstices of her fingers, Elizabeth tried to discover what the little nun was doing. It was the thread of silk that had broken. Sister Mary was leaving the chapel to get some more. It was quite a usual

thing for that thread of silk to break. Whenever it happened, the Mother Superior came into the chapel and, once more, she crucified the little wooden Christ. She would have no one to come and mend it. She would not send it away. The thread of silk was a clumsy device, but the crucifix was too sacred for her to let it from her sight. And now the wooden Christ lay still and motionless upon the altar.

For a moment or two, Elizabeth gazed at it. She felt so sorry. It looked so cold. She thought of John and Mary well clothed, well tended, and her little heart ached for the wooden Christ.

At last, she could bear it no longer. Slipping from her seat, she crept across the chapel to the altar. There, scating herself upon the altar steps, she took the little figure in the gentleness of her tiny hands. She wrapped it closely round in the smallest of little linen handkerchiefs, and in its ear murmured the words that women know from childhood till they die—the words that have no meaning because they have more than meaning—the words which have no recognized place in language, but which find their way into all.

And there, when she had been sent in search of her, Peggy found Elizabeth. At first, she uttered a little cry of amazement. Elizabeth looked up with her straight yellow fringe dangling in her dancing eyes of brown.

“He was so cold,” she said.

Just that little plea of vindication—nothing more—

“He was so cold.”

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Then Peggy caught her in her arms, never realizing how much the hearts of the little sisters were all beating in her then. Swiftly, she caught Elizabeth in her arms, straining her to her heart, kissing the soft, white neck where the curls nestled in finest silk.

“My baby!” she whispered—“My tiny, tiny little baby!”

The great wish rose then like a flood, bursting all barriers of resolve and, passing through her, left her trembling with Elizabeth in her arms.

CHAPTER IV

AT FINUCHANE'S

THEY are strange and wonderful creatures, are women. They make up their minds as you, if you do your own housekeeping, make up the weekly washing-book. But unlike you, who surr'y are the best and most accurate of housekeepers, if the sum of the figures does not tally, they let it go. Their mind is made up. The sternest and most unalterable laws of mathematics must bend first before they will change. You, of course, know better than this.

You know that thirteen handkerchiefs at a penny each are not one and fivepence. They could never have been one and fivepence. Not even the severest height of your imagination, or the heaviest cold in your head could ever have made them so. You cross it out with a self-righteous pencil and in the margin—with an exclamation mark—you inscribe one and a penny. The whole gamut of the law of mathematics is ready to justify your claim.

But a woman, when once her mind has been made up and, seeing her account proved wrong, she will—when no one is looking—erase the proof with a trembling

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pencil. Her mind is made up. That is all there is about it. And what, in the name of Heaven, has mathematics to do with that?

Now Peggy was determined in her mind that she had a vocation. She had said she had a vocation. Father O'Leary had heard her say it—so had Mrs. Parfitt—so had the Reverend Mother. All the little sisters had heard her too. The whole of Cappelouin was aware that another nun was to be received.

She wanted to get right away from every one. She loved this little Convent of Mercy as she had loved no other place in the world. It was the soul of contentment. The very spirit of peace and rest was in every scented breath of flowers that strayed within its passages. What could be plainer than that she was right? She had a vocation.

It made no matter that she had seen the beating hearts of the little sisters. It made no matter that those hearts had beat with one great throbbing note in hers. More than ever then, proved wrong, she insisted against herself that she had a vocation, and, with eyes alight with determination, she set off to find the Reverend Mother; to beg her that she might be made a postulant at once.

In the small square room, set apart for her own benefit, Peggy found the Mother Superior. A letter she had just been reading was folded in her hand.

Peggy came impulsively to her side.

“Won't you say the day—” she begged—“Won't you say the day now that I can be received?”

The Mother Superior looked gently into her eyes. She took the hand that Peggy had stretched out. She held it questioningly in her own.

"What makes ye come like this?" she asked.

Peggy looked back into the steady eyes that met hers.

"I just want you to say," she replied—"I don't want to wait any longer. Surely I've waited long enough? You know now that it's a real vocation, don't you? I want to be like all the other sisters, right away from the world. Don't you know I've got a real vocation? I pray every night and I pray every morning to be shown if it's not. They told me the Bishop is coming on Wednesday—couldn't it be then?"

"Twill be a short while till Wednesday is a day," said the Mother Superior—"All the years are after it."

"I know—I know. But do you think I haven't thought all that out long ago? It's those years I'm longing for. I'm afraid of the world. It makes me feel so much alone. I shall never feel alone here."

The Reverend Mother laid her arm tenderly round Peggy's neck.

"Shure, my dear child," said she—"D'ye think I'm saying this, the way I'd be wanting to stop ye? D'ye think it won't be a great thing for me, the day I see ye with yeer vows taken so that the world may never touch ye any more?"

She spread out the letter that she held in her hand.

"But there's this," said she softly.

"What is it?"

"'Tis the letter from Father O'Leary, telling me not to let ye be received till ye know yeer own mind about it. '*A few weeks,*' says he—'*will make no matter one way or another.*'"

"Well—it's been nearly three weeks," said Peggy quickly.

"It is indeed," said she.

They were silent then, while a few moments slipped by. Peggy looked earnestly into the Reverend Mother's face and the Reverend Mother stared down at the ill-formed writing in Father O'Leary's letter.

"Shure, I'm going by him," said she presently—
"There was some thought in his head when he wrote this letter, but I can't make out what it is. '*A few weeks—*' he says—as though he hoped they'd change ye. Shure, why should he want ye to change? A vocation is a vocation. It isn't every girl who gets it. It is not."

"But I haven't changed," pleaded Peggy— "and on Wednesday it'll be more than three weeks!"

Without another word, the Reverend Mother led her to the chapel. At the foot of the Altar, they knelt, as you kneel at the foot of the Hill of Dreams, and together, they prayed, until the sun fell below the windows, till the colours of the prisms slid in silence from the walls.

At last the Mother Superior rose.

"It shall be on Wednesday," she whispered as she crossed herself. For you do not always say—"In the name of the Father and of the Son—" as you perform that little mystic sign. I have heard women say stranger things than the Mother Superior whispered then. But then it is only women who believe.

As they cross themselves women can tell you that they love you, and by the very quality of their voice you could not but admit that they believed in God. It is when you can talk about love as you perform the ritual of the Church, that religion has become a real thing to you, inseparable from the smallest duties in your day.

"It shall be on Wednesday," she said again as they left the chapel—"I'll write and tell the Bishop now." Forthwith she wrote the letter and gave it to Peggy—"Post that now," said she—"and go down ye into the street to Finuchane's for me and get some more note-paper. Sister Mary Cecilia used the last sheets we had to put covers on her raspberry jam."

With a heart lightened of its load, Peggy set out down the Main Street, leading Elizabeth by the hand.

"On Wednesday—on Wednesday," she kept saying to herself, and back across the lifting of her heart there came an echo with a hollow note.

"On Wednesday," said the echo—"On Wednesday," it repeated as she dropped the letter into the box.

When she heard it, her fingers tightened on Elizabeth's little hand. Then they hurried on, Elizabeth running and panting by her side.

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If you have seen but one of the small towns of Ireland, you know Cappoquin. What is more, you know Finuchane's shop. As Father O'Leary had described him, Finuchane sold all those things you never want. You never want those little threepenny bottles of abominable scent which are fastened in rows to a piece of cardboard, headed with the inscription—Select perfumes. You do not want these. At least, I hope you don't. But Finuchane sells them. Somebody buys them too, for there are always empty spaces on that board. You do not want parasols of vivid shades that would blind the sun itself—you do not want dates that are crushed into an unrecognizable mass, or sweets which, like the priceless amber, hold the flies within their transparent crystals; you do not want ling or oranges that smell of it; you would refuse as a present the heads of pigs which, coated with salt, he keeps in greasy tubs; yet Finuchane sells all these.

And here went Peggy to buy the notepaper for the Reverend Mother.

While Finuchane himself was wrapping it up in brown paper, a man entered the shop. By the sound of his steps, heavy and determined, she knew that it was a man, but she did not look round.

A voice said then in eager, searching tones—
“Are you James Finuchane?”

With a little cry suppressed upon her lips, Peggy looked round into the face of Stephen Gale.

CHAPTER V

THE LONG ARM OF MATHEMATICS

MAD as this world is and long-reaching as the arm of coincidence may be, there is a certain amount of mathematical reason in its madness; there is the faint shadow of physical possibility in all that the fingers of coincidence may touch.

It is simple enough, for instance, that two and two should make four. I can follow that. It does not run so quickly or so far as to deceive my eye. But it begins to send you mad—it does me—to think that four thousand, three hundred and ninety-three and five thousand, four hundred and seventy-eight make nine thousand, eight hundred and seventy-one. It may be simple addition but it is the long arm of coincidence to me that whenever, out of the void, you throw those two numbers together, they produce the same result however much mathematical reason in it there may be.

Now, as it is with numbers, so it is with people. You control the Destiny of numerals. You put down five and you put down six upon a slate whether they like it or not. There they are. Their only moment of free-will is when they make themselves eleven. You

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have nothing to do with that. Once you have put them down upon the slate, they begin to obey a law which you with all your wisdom cannot alter.

Of course you may make them twelve. I have seen people do it. Ladies of the modern civilization and little boys at school—they do it. But they are wrong. The law sends the master, and the master finds them out. Sometimes with painful results.

Thus far and no further do you control the Destiny of numerals. You put them down upon a slate. In such a way as this does God control the Destiny of you. He puts you down upon the slate. And then, in obedience to some great and intangible law, you add yourselves up.

If you bring out the total wrong—God help you as He made you. The law does not alter for anything you do.

And so it is that, instead of being the long arm of coincidence which brought Stephen Gale to Cappelquin it is merely, when you come to look into it, the inevitable accuracy of the mathematical law which never alters.

By the grace of God, Peggy and Stephen had been written down upon the slate. Even death could not rub their figures out. The inviolable law had got to work out its calculations. They had to be added up.

When one morning Father O'Leary was disturbed at his office by the entrance of Mrs. Parfitt, saying—

"Mr. Gale—" in a whisper so awed, that you would have thought it was his ghost, Father O'Leary's mouth opened in amazement it is true, but in the heart of him there was that consciousness of the inevitable, as when you try to cheat in figures and can't.

"Is it Stephen Gale?" said he.

"Yes."

"What does he want?"

"He wanted to see Peggy."

"Well?"

"I told him she was out."

"Shure, Glory be to God, woman, she's more than out—she's in. She's in the convent."

Mrs. Parfitt hung her head.

"I know," she muttered, "But—" she glanced up at his face out of the corner of her eye—"she isn't right in yet. Couldn't we——"

"Stop now!" exclaimed Father O'Leary, bringing his hand down on the table—"Stop, now! Ye shan't be talking like that for me to hear ye. 'Tis an infamous thing for ye to be trying to sejooce this poor child out of the convent when she's got a vocation, and is as happy as a lark. Don't say a word, for I won't hear it! What's done can't be undone, and 'tis no good ye telling him she's just out, trying to raise the hopes in the poor fella, the way he'll be waiting about in the street over till she comes back. For she won't come back from her sacred life, and that's what I'm telling ye. What did he say when ye said she was out?"

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In a subdued voice Mrs. Parfitt replied—"He wanted to see you."

Father O'Leary walked twice up and down the room.

"Faith, I don't know whether I'll be seeing him," said he.

Mrs. Parfitt made a silent gesture of appeal.

"I don't know at all whether it 'ud be right for me to be seeing him. Shure, what has he done? Why, Glory be to God, he's gone and left that poor child without a word, without even paying his bill at Gadd's—which is a most shameful thing to do—he's gone off and left her just when he'd softened her wee heart till we both of us thought it 'ud break! We did indeed. Shure, didn't we?"

Mrs. Parfitt muttered a half audible assent.

"Well then—is it the way I ought to be seeing him?" he thundered.

He had got the poor woman under his thumb. He knew he had. What is more, the experience was so novel and entertaining, that he kept her there.

"Shure, I won't see him at all," said he—definitely, at last.

Well—she gave up all pretence of dignity then. With her hands clasped, she came and stood before him.

"Just see him," she pleaded—"It can't do any harm. He may be able to explain why he went away so suddenly. Perhaps there was a good wind blowing and they had to sail at once."

"Faith, there might have been forty winds blowing, but it shouldn't have stopped him writing and telling her."

"But just see him," Mrs. Parfitt begged once more—

"They may have had no notepaper on the ship."

"Shure, Glory be, ye'll be suggesting that he doesn't know how to write next and he a first mate of a full-rigged sailing ship. 'Tis the marvel the way women'll protect any sex but their own."

"There's only one other," said Mrs. Parfitt apologetically.

"Faith, and that's more than enough for ye," said he, for he was glowing with triumph, and when a man feels like that he is ready to boast about anything.

She took it meekly. None know so well as a woman when is the time to be meek, when the time to refrain from all meekness. For if you but let a man boast, without exposing him, he arrives in time at magnanimity. He has created such a character for himself as to be magnanimous is the only way to give it a semblance of reality.

Now if Father O'Leary thought he was playing his game, Mrs. Parfitt imagined much the same about herself. At last, in a concession of generosity to her ultimate entreaty, he gave way.

"Oh, shure, let him come and see me then," said he. "He'll have a fine tale to spin, I'm thinking—he will indeed. But I'll not tell him a word about her. I shall not."

Mrs. Parfitt was content with this. She hurried away down-stairs. The moment she had closed the door, Father O'Leary strode to his desk. From out of one of the pigeon-holes, he took an envelope. With care he stamped it. With care he sealed it up. Then taking a pen, he addressed it, placing it on the mantel-piece where any one might see it who chose. That finished, he went to the other side of the room and picked up his Breviary. Whether or no he saw one word on the page before him it is not necessary to say. He was diligently reading his office when Stephen entered.

With hand eagerly outstretched, Stephen came forward at once.

"My Lord! I'm glad you were in," he said.

Apparently with much reluctance Father O'Leary shook his hand.

"What's come to ye?" said he—"We thought ye were drowned entirely."

"Not far from it—we were wrecked—two hands and the captain lost—wrecked on an island in the Southern Pacifics. Six months we had of it there. Every blessed ship that passed, too far out to see signals. At last a steamer came in shore for water and we were taken off. I came back in her—straight away. She was bound for Liverpool. It was no good my writing then. Once I reached England, I could get here sooner than any letter."

Father O'Leary looked at the honest eyes, at the

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weather-burnt face before him, and the suspicion crossed his mind that Fate had not played a fair game. Yet there was one thing still needing explanation. He put the question to him.

"Being wrecked," said he, "won't help ye much when ye come to explain why ye wrote never a word last autumn when ye went away. Did ye think 'twas a fair way to treat that child? Shure, my God, man! 'Tis no good talking considerately about not frightening a woman when yeer going to break her heart! Frighten her! Faith, it was because ye didn't frighten her enough that ye broke the heart of her."

"But, my heavens! I did write!" exclaimed Stephen.

"A wee scrap of a note saying ye'd be back the next day. Shure, that only made it worse. If ye'd paid yeer bill to Nicolas Gadd over, she'd have held up with her hope longer."

"My God! What's happened?" Stephen whispered.

"Mrs. Parfitt said she'd gone out?"

"Why didn't ye write?" repeated Father O'Leary.

"But I did, and I sent the money in a postal order to Nicolas Gadd."

"I'd like to see his face when ye tell him that."

"I gave the money to a longshoreman to get a postal order. I gave him two letters besides. One to put the money in and one to Peggy."

"How much was the money?" asked Father O'Leary.

"Thirty-seven shillings. I gave him a shilling for himself."

"Did you know the man?"

"No."

"Had ye ever seen him before?"

"No."

"Was there anybody about there in the way of knowing him?"

"Yes—two or three. They told me he was honest, if that's what you mean."

"Oh—shure, he was honest, of course. Shure, every man's honest. But did they tell ye he was a saint?"

"You mean he took the money?"

"I do not. I wouldn't accuse any man of such a thing. I say 'tis the way he was a saint if he didn't. And 'twill be the great day for Limehouse when he's canonized. It will indeed."

Stephen was in no mood for fine distinctions.

"Then that was it," said he—"He stole the money and to cover his guilt, he never posted either of the letters. But what d'you mean, I've broken Peggy's heart? Where is she? Where's she gone? How long will she be?"

"Faith, she'll be a long time," said Father O'Leary.

"What do you mean?"

The blood was cold in Stephen's lips. He felt sick as he waited to hear the answer.

"She's got a vocation," said Father O'Leary, and he never took his eyes from Stephen's face—"She's gone into a convent."

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Stephen's eyes flashed up like the quick spurt of a match in a darkened room.

"My God! That's all damned nonsense!" he exclaimed. The next instant his hand stretched out—"I'm sorry," he added quickly. "I didn't mean that."

Father O'Leary's lips shut very tight. He had to swallow twice before he could speak. You would never have known what he felt except by what he said. In the use of words now-a-days, all this is as it should be.

"'Tis a sacred and a holy life," said he.

Stephen clenched his fists.

"But you're not going to let her stay there?"

"'Tis nothing to do with me one way or another," said Father O'Leary quietly. "She had her vocation, and 'tis a blessed thing for her. I have nothing to say to it at all."

"But, great heavens! She isn't happy! She can't be happy!"

"I'd need a lot of conceit in meself before I'd say that," said Father O'Leary.

Stephen was mute. He felt helpless. Here was a force far more impregnable, far more impassable than that relentless sea which had cast him upon a desert island. There had been mercy in that, as he had always found it. There was no mercy in this.

"Where is the convent?" he asked at length—

"What convent is it?"

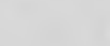
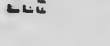
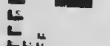
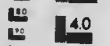
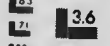
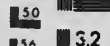
Father O'Leary gazed at him with steady eyes.

"What do ye want to know for?" said he.



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“Because I shall go there and see her and as’ her myself. I shall take the answer from no one but her.”

“And upset the peace of that quiet little convent, is it?”

“I shall abide by her word. If she says I must go away, I shall go away.”

“And d’ye think I’d be telling ye the name of the convent,” said Father O’Leary—“the way ye’d come across her path again?”

“You won’t tell me?”

“I will not.”

With a great sigh Stephen turned to the window in silence. He looked out across the courtyard, and there on the top-floor of Nicolas Gadd’s, he could see the little window through which he had received the tiny medal of St. Francis Xavier, the medal which had saved him indeed from drowning at sea, only to bring him back to this desolation of despair.

“D’you mean to say,” he exclaimed suddenly, turning round—“that because Fate has gone against me like this, I’m to suffer the utmost penalty it’s possible to pay?”

“I didn’t know ye cared as much as all this,” said Father O’Leary softly.

“Cared! What else does a man do for the woman he sees the whole world in? What else does he do for the woman in whom he sees the mother of his child? What else does he do but care—with all his heart?”

Now when Stephen said that, Father O'Leary strode straight for the door. Without a word he opened it. Without a word he was gone.

Stephen gazed after him in amazement. For a moment or two he waited, and then, as the priest did not return, he walked to the mantelpiece. There he leant, burying his face in the angle of his arm. For a little while he was motionless, all the heart in him torn—too wounded for tears. At last he looked up and, on the mantelpiece, staring into his face there was an envelope. It was addressed and stamped ready for the post. His eyes widened.

"Miss Peggy Bannister," he read, "Convent of Mercy, Cappoquin, co. Waterford, Ireland."

"Convent of Mercy," he said aloud to himself, and he said it again and again. Then, with heart lifting to a brighter light, he walked back to the window as he heard the sound of Father O'Leary's steps returning. When he opened the door, Stephen was gazing across the courtyard at Nicolas Gadd's. He turned round. "I'm going to beg you once more to tell me," said he at once—"Where is the convent?"

Father O'Leary searched him with his eyes.

"And I'm after saying that I can't tell ye," said he.

"I believe it's in Ireland," said Stephen.

"Ye may believe it's in Madagascar," said Father O'Leary.

"I believe it's in Ireland," Stephen repeated, and he looked at the priest as though to read the faintest

tremor in his face, "I shall go and search through every convent in Ireland."

"Ye'll be an old man when ye come back."

"Shall I? I'm going all the same."

"Which way are ye going?" asked Father O'Leary.

"By Milford to Waterford."

"They say 'tis the quickest way by Fishguard to Rosslare in County Waterford."

"I shall go the quickest way then."

He held out his hand again.

"You can do all you like to stop me," said he—"But I'm going to see Peggy again. I'm going to get my answer from her."

Father O'Leary wrung his hand.

"Faith, I oughtn't to be shaking hands with ye at all," said he, "and, shure, I wouldn't, if a' be I thought ye were going to find her."

"Perhaps I am," said Stephen, and he had gone.

As soon as Father O'Leary heard the door of the Presbytery close, he hurried to the mantelpiece. With the greatest care, he examined the envelope. Then, with a smile of satisfaction, he tore it up—stamp and all.

A moment later, in tones of uncontrolled excitement, he was calling for Mrs. Parfitt. She came running into the room, her face alight with the desire for knowledge.

"Well?" she answered.

"Pack up my little bag," said he—"throw anything in at all that'll keep me dacint in the eyes of the law. I'm catching the night mail to Dublin."

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She ran to his side. She laid both hands on his arm.

"You're going to bring Peggy back?" she whispered in a breath. "You're going down to Cappelquin?"

"Didn't ye hear me say I was going to Dublin?" said he.

"Ah! but you must be going to Cappelquin!" and her voice trembled.

"If I wasn't a priest, Mummy Parfitt," said he—"But shure, I am—so what's the good of talking about it?"

"You are going?" she repeated.

"I shall probably find meself down that way," said he.

CHAPTER VI

THE MIRACLE OF ST. FRANCIS XAVIER

THAT Stephen then should come to Cappelain, that he should straightway go in search of Finuchane, the only man in the place whom he knew, is all capable of computation in terms of the universal law of mathematics.

That he should enter Finuchane's shop at the very moment when Peggy was making her purchases may the less be wondered at when you take it into consideration that he was going to enter Finuchane's shop some time or other. That being the case—why not then?

The moment of coincidence is only that brief instant when Destiny stretches forth her fingers and steals a second out of the lap of Time.

Good heavens! Why, you are always trying to do it yourself! And not from Time only, but from Space as well. The whole of modern life is a warfare against them. Time and Space, like two frightened giants, stand hand-in-hand watching their Kingdoms being wrenched from them, and they powerless to move in their defence.

Why then, when Destiny steals her chance, should you throw the epithet—coincidence—in her face?

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Stephen walked into that shop and at that moment because it was a matter of convenience to Destiny and a matter of necessity to him. Nothing could be more simple. If you find it coincidental, it is because your arithmetic has not progressed beyond the addition of two and two. In which case it were as well to keep silent about it.

There he was, anyhow, and at the sound of Peggy's little suppressed cry, at the sight of her face, he forgot all about his question. It did not matter to him whether the man on the other side of the counter were James Finuchane with whom he had sailed in the *Kate Hardwicke*, or whether he were the Pope of Rome. This was Peggy—Peggy without a nun's veil on her—Peggy still free in the world to belong to him.

"I've just come back," said he.

It was the simplest thing to say. It was all he could say.

Peggy just stared at him. Elizabeth stared. But Peggy could say nothing. It was only Elizabeth who regained her presence of mind.

"Where's oo come from?" said she.

That made things easier. He turned to Finuchane.

"I'm Stephen Gale," said he—"You don't remember me perhaps. You do? Well—that's my name. I'll come back and see you presently, but I want to speak to this lady. We haven't met for a good time—I want to speak to her." And taking hold of Peggy's arm—Peggy who had not yet got her purchases and was too amazed to disobey—he led her out into the street.

"Where can we go?" he asked—"Somewhere where we can talk in .nean."

"But I mustn't!" Peggy exclaimed. The reality of it all was beginning to sift itself into her mind—"You don't understand! We mustn't talk."

"Oh—yes we must," said Stephen—"You've got to understand why I went away. You've got to understand why I didn't write—why I haven't written these ten months." And without waiting for any reply from her, he told her the whole story—shipwreck—everything.

"But how did you know I was here? Did Father O'Leary tell you?"

"No—I found out. There was a letter addressed to you on the mantelpiece in his room. I saw it and I came straight off here. But he told me you were in the convent."

"So I shall be on Wednesday. I've been on a sort of probation. I become a postulant on Wednesday. The Bishop is coming. I'm to be received then."

"What do you mean?" he asked, and all his strength seemed turned to water—"You won't be received now. I've come for you to take you away. All the waiting's over. I've had to wait too. My God, do you think I wasn't waiting every minute on that island! When every time we signalled a passing ship and I saw her melting away—melting away into nothing, do you think I shouldn't have gone mad if I hadn't had the thought that you'd got my last letter in which I'd told you

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everything! If it hadn't been for that, I should have gone mad. But now—you're not going into the convent now?"

Peggy said nothing. She clung tightly on to Elizabeth's hand as they walked on down the road to Lismore in silence. Here, she was faced with the last, the most undeniable proof that all her calculations were wrong yet, with that perverted sense of reasoning which makes women as lovable as they are—for you love all, or you love none—she would yet have erased all sign of it.

"I must go into the convent," she said at last—"Father O'Leary expects me to—so does the Reverend Mother—so do all the sisters. And only just a little while ago, I posted the letter to the Bishop. Oh—don't you see, it must be now! It's too late."

"That's your answer?" said Stephen quietly, in the strained voice of one who speaks low because he dares not hear the words he utters.

Peggy did not reply to that. She dared not reply to it.

"Then I'll ask you," said he—for now he was bold with that desperation which comes to a forlorn cause—"I'll ask you if you care for me. You must answer that. You love me, or you don't. I mean something to you or I mean a little which is less than nothing. Which is it? If you don't care for me—I'll go. I love you more than to thrust on you what you don't want. Which is it? Do you care? Or don't you?"

They almost stopped in their walking while he searched her face. Even Elizabeth was conscious that some answer

was needed'. She stared up into Peggy's face as well. And Peggy just looked upon the ground. She knew what she was going to say. In the heart of her, she had said it countless times, ever since that night when the little slip of paper came across the line of cotton and she had read the message—God bless you.

For when a woman loves a man, she loves love as well and, though he may efface himself from her life, love is still left to love. Therefore, until some other takes his place, he stands there in her heart like a silent statue in an empty square.

Times without number, Peggy had said it to her heart in the darkness. It is then that women tell their secrets. But it was a different matter, with all the promises and pleadings she had made to the Reverend Mother, to tell it then in the light and to him.

If these things were so easy to say as all that, would they be so well worth saying? Indeed, it needed, not his question direct, but some cunning conjuring with her mind to decoy the answer from her. God knows how sensitive women are! He made them. It were as well for you to approach a filly in an open field with a halter in your hand as ask a woman a direct question to which she must answer yes or no.

Upon the subject nearest their hearts—with that very subject upon which they have most to say—women are silent. Beware of the woman who can tell you in three words that she loves. She has said it before.

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She will say it yet again and not to you. It is the woman who is dumb when most you want her to speak ; it is the woman who can chatter like a starling upon the thousand things you do not care a rap to hear ; it is the woman who falls into silence at that very moment when you most want to hear her voice ; she is the woman who loves you.

But once win her to talk of times gone by—when first you met her—of what she thought of you then, rather for one second than what she thinks of you now and, before you know where you are, your heart is against her heart, your lips against hers. But she has not said it even then—Good heavens, no ! You must teach her like a parrot and like a parrot, one day, to your utter astonishment, she will.

Most women have learnt the lesson—more's the pity. It seems they learn it more easily now than they used. But the more easily you learn it, the more easily you forget.

There once was an old lady, most difficult to teach. Yet her husband was never tired of trying. In the evenings in winter they would sit over the fire while he read a book aloud. And when the clock struck ten, which was the signal for him to close the book, he would lean across with his hands on her knees and he would whisper—

“Say—”

And she would blush—oh, yes—up to the last—and she would

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"You know I do."

Then one day, when she was very old, with her lesson still unlearnt, he fell sick. He watched all the days and all the nights by her bedside. At last, one evening, when her strength was nearly gone, he sat holding her hand waiting with a trembling lip for what they told him must come that night.

The clock struck ten.

The old lady sat up in bed. Her tired arms dropped round his neck and she whispered—

"I love you."

Then he laid her back asleep.

It was this way with Peggy. How could he have expected her to learn so soon? But he did and he would never have found out, had it not been by the chance of God. He suddenly thought of the little medal of St. Francis Xavier.

"Do you remember giving me that medal?" he asked.

She bent her head.

"Do you remember winding it across the thread?"

She bent her head again.

"Do you remember what you told me about it in the gardens?"

"Yes."

"And did you want it to save me from danger at sea?"

"Yes."

"Well—it did. Did it save me for nothing—for

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worse than nothing? Did it save me to make me the most miserable of people in the world?"

Now here was a miracle—the miracle of St. Francis Xavier. Can you wonder with her faith that her heart leapt to it? Of course it had not saved him to make him miserable! Saints never perform their miracles with so malign a purpose. St. Anthony will find for you that dainty little lock of hair which you secrete so cunningly amongst the glory God has already given you. God gave you this as well, of course. But it was a long, long while ago. It is yours still, but only in the sense of possession. And St. Anthony—if you look—will find it for you quick enough if you ask him with a true heart. But there could never be so base a thought in his mind as that he should perform his miracle for you simply to see some careless individual drop it in the fire.

Now here was a miracle of St. Francis Xavier. And how could she say that it had been performed with so cruel a motive as to make him miserable? But do you think she gave a direct answer even to that? Good heavens—no!

Her hand brushed against his hand—her fingers just touched his and she whispered—

“If only Father O’Leary were here to tell the Reverend Mother.”

CHAPTER VII

FATHER O'LEARY'S MISSION

BUT that was the beauty of it. For Father O'Leary was there. In a fairy world, which is the world of Romance, you have only to wish for what you want. There is no need to inquire into the intricate machinery of circumstance, to look into the wheels revolving within wheels, by which you get it. It should be sufficient that you have wished.

It is the last cry of materialism to try and follow the path down which your wish has daintily come true.

By the time you have traced it back three steps, all value of its fulfilment has gone. What is more, you never find out. You might just as well try and discover the way a prayer has been answered. For that is all a wish is—a prayer with its eyes open.

Father O'Leary was there, that was all that mattered to Peggy. When, with bated breath and eyes burning with a fire she could not quench, the Reverend Mother met her in the passage and told her that Father O'Leary had come to see her and was waiting in the garden until she returned, Peggy just knew that it was Romance and that was all.

She did not believe it at first, but that is quite a different matter to asking why it is. To disbelieve,

only makes it more wonderful. Besides, it would not be fairyland if you believed at once.

"In the garden?" she whispered amazed.

The Mother Superior nodded her head. Her fingers were running through the beads of her Rosary, backwards and forwards, as though they would never stop.

"Have you seen him?" asked Peggy.

"No—no, I haven't seen him. He asked for ye. I told Sister Mary Catherine to take him out into the garden. He's there now. He is indeed. Shure it took the breath right out of me when I heard it. Ye'd better be seeing him now."

She laid a trembling hand on Peggy's arm.

"Shure, ye're all trembling, child. What's the matter with ye?"

"It's nothing," said Peggy—"Why has he come, do you think?"

"Shure, how do I know?"

"But you'll see him?" said Peggy quickly.

"Oh, I dunno, indeed. Why should I be seeing him?" and she shook back the sleeves from her wrists as all nuns do in agitation.

"Oh—but you must! After he's talked to me! You must! I want you to. Shall I go to him now?"

The Mother Superior nodded her head in silence and Peggy went.

The moment she saw him, standing there on the terrace, a broad smile on his face, his brogue heavier than ever as he talked to Michael in the manner that he loved so much—the moment that she saw him then,

all sense of fear, all sense of convention was caught and swept away in the whirlwind of her emotion. She rushed across the gravel to his side and threw her arms about his neck.

"Oh Daddy!" she exclaimed—"Oh Daddy—and I'd just wished you were here!"

"Glory be to God, child!" said he—"Ye're disgracing me! Take yeer arms away now for God's sake! There's this old fella with a spade thinking the Church has gone to ruin. Will ye take yeer arms away so as he can hear me abusing ye, the way he'll not think I'm liking it."

She took her arms away, but she kept hold of one of his hands.

"But you are liking it," she whispered.

"Shure, that's a different matter entirely," said he. And then he stood one step away and looked at her—looked at the pale brown hair, the grey-blue pebbles of her eyes and the sunny stream in which they lay.

"I thought I was never going to see ye no more," said he softly.

"But why did you come?" she asked.

"Shure, I'm waiting for ye to tell me that," said he—"Faith, I dunno why I've come."

"And only a little while ago," she whispered—"I was wishing you were here."

"Why, what was happening ye?"

"Do you mean to say you don't know?"

"Shure, Glory be, child! How could I without ye telling me? I'm not a magician—I'm an ordinary

priest—the most ordinary priest there ever was. Yirra, I'm so ordinary sometimes that it's the way I'd be wondering why I'm a priest at all. Are ye going to tell me what happened ye, or are ye not? I'm so nervous, I shall go on talking till ye do."

She made a step nearer to him and lowering her head she said, half audibly—

"I've seen Stephen."

His voice took the note of blank amazement.

"Is it Stephen Gale?" said he.

She nodded her head.

"Oh, dear now! That's a shameful thing!" he exclaimed—"He's found ye out then? Faith, 'twas only yesterday I saw him in London. He came to the Presbytery and he wanted to know where ye were. 'Faith, I'll not tell ye,' said I—'I will not!' 'She's in a convent in Ireland,' says he—'She may be in Madagascar,' said I—'but ye'll not find her.' But Glory be to God—shure, he has!"

Peggy took his arm. She led him down to the walk at the bottom of the garden.

"Daddy," she said, when the lilac trees were hiding them—"Daddy—I can't go into the convent." And in the silence that followed, she dared not look up into his face.

If she had, she would have seen an expression there that would have foiled all her understanding. For a light came into his eyes as if some great thing had happened. And then, with a twist in the corner of his lip, he said—

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"'Tis a sad thing," said he—"When Mummy Parfitt told me he was there asking to see ye, 'twas what I was afraid of meself."

She burst into tears then, and the fear of God was driven into him, just as it had been when he kissed her when she was two weeks old. He was terrified he had said too much.

"Didn't I tell ye," said he quickly—"that ye'd want to pick the primroses? Thank God, the gate's not shut yet. Ye can slip away into the other field now and ne'er a one'll know that ye haven't been picking primroses since day-break."

Peggy looked up, brushing the tears from her cheek with her hand.

"The Reverend Mother," said she.

His eyes softened.

"What about her?"

"I don't know how to tell her. She's so longing for me to be received and come and live with them. So was I—until to-day. How can I tell her? I begged her myself—even to-day, to let it be soon and she wrote to the Bishop. He's coming here on Wednesday. I posted it myself. She'll be terribly ashamed of me. And I can't bear that."

Father O'Leary took Peggy's wandering hand.

"I'll tell her for ye," said he.

And his jaw set firmly as he thought of the task before him.

CHAPTER VIII

FATHER O'LEARY'S SECRET

THEY walked back through the garden together. Not a word was said until they reached the terrace. There, Father O'Leary stopped.

"I'll wait here," said he—"tell her I'm waiting here."

Peggy just squeezed his hand and left him.

"My God," said he to himself, "how can I bear it?" He began walking the length of the terrace up and down.

There were many thoughts that had been beaten out on that gravel pathway, none perhaps so poignant or so tragic as his. Many a little sister pacing backwards and forwards in the long slumber of her spirit, had dreamed of the things which it pleases us to call real in a world of shadows. But the dreams no doubt were as gossamer when they came as when they faded away. Such dreams had not reached their hearts as the thoughts of Father O'Leary that were wounding him then. Even the Reverend Mother had doubtless dreamed—dreamed too of him—dreams that came out of the warmth of the sun and the scent of the lavender; dreams that came and went as she paced up and down in her hour of contemplation.

But there was no coming and there was no going to these thoughts of his. They had been with him every day of every year of his priesthood. With his little piece of blue ribbon and his faded petals of a rose, he had fed them lest they should die. There had been pain to be borne every time that he gave them life; that pain without which life itself would be but a colourless and a tasteless thing.

Yet all this was nothing to the suffering that lay before him now. A piece of blue ribbon, the faded petals of a rose, these are the spirit of love, intangible as sunlight, as mystic as the wind. They mean the greatest of things in one's life, or they are the merest rubbish in the world.

With these, it had been so possible to wound himself from one day to another. Such pain is bearable. It is more; it is the salt of life. But with the sight of her again, after all these years, the great break in the heart of him was sure to open once more. Beside that which had so long lain quiescent, the other memories were little things indeed. He could bear those. Could he bear this?

For this was reality once more. This would sweep away the years in between, as the wind in one great gust will sweep away dead leaves from a garden path. Only that it was for the sake of Peggy, he could never have permitted it to be. And as he strode up and down the terrace, he kept saying to himself—

“If she sees bi a word—if she sees bi a look—then,

shure, God help me—I shall be hurting herself into the bargain.”

So he steeled himself for this meeting, binding about his heart the bands of a stern resolve, setting his face in the lifeless marble of inflexibility.

At last the door from the passage opened. With a swift searching of his eyes, he saw the face that had lived so long in the deepest recesses of his memory, and with hand stretched out, he came at once to meet her.

“How do ye do, Reverend Mother?” said he.

Their hands touched and fell apart. The fingers dared not cling.

“I dunno has Peggy said anything to ye?” he began at once, quickly; for in such moments as these, silence is so full of expression that words become the only things with which to deceive.

“She’s told me nothing,” said the Reverend Mother, and her words were so difficult to say that she must cough before she could speak again. “I suppose it is ye don’t wish her to stay here?”

He looked round the garden at the little kingdom of flowers; at Michael delving like Adam in Eden.

“Shure, ’twould be the most beautiful place in the world for her,” said he.

For the first time she looked up into his face.

“’Tis the way ye’re going to take her away?” said she. There was a frightened note of apprehension in her voice. He felt guilty that it was he who was robbing her.

"Shure, I'm not taking her," he replied. "'Tis something bigger and stronger than me."

She clasped her hands. The ring with which she had wedded the Church, she pressed deep into the flesh of her finger.

"What's that?" said she.

"Love," said he—he paused—"Himself has come back. He never left her at all. 'Twas the way he was shipwrecked on a desert island, which was inconvenient for him and he wanting to write letters. I saw him yesterday in London. That's why I came over here. She's seen him herself this morning, an' she going down to Finuchane's. He told her everything, it seems, in five minutes. They don't take long. Shure, she told me herself in less time than that."

For a while the Reverend Mother said nothing. To one end of the terrace they walked, then back again in silence. And away in the laburnum trees, the birds lifted their voices into a great and swelling chorus—just as if they knew love was triumphant for once in that silent garden where all the Princesses were asleep.

"Is it Peggy's asked ye to tell me this?" the Mother Superior inquired.

Father O'Leary bent his head in silence.

Again she clasped her hands.

"Holy Mother," she whispered, so that he could just hear her—"and she would have been so happy here."

"She would indeed," said he, "but in a different way."

She looked up fearlessly into his eyes.

"But isn't it the best way?" said she.

"They're all the best ways when yeer happy," he answered. "Shure, I put no pass on those people who say the world's just to be lived through as best ye can—the way ye'll get happiness in the next. This world's a place, I say, to be happy in. Faith, I've never seen a man yet did his best when he was groaning the heart out of him with misery. I did not."

"Are ye happy then?" she asked.

"Are ye?" said he.

She pressed her lips together and her eyes lifted high above the yew trees, where had flown the spirits of the little sisters whom the Prince had wakened.

"I am—absolutely happy," she replied in a fervent whisper.

"So then am I," said he.

She paused at that. She lifted her eyes. They met his. And then she knew the secret of Father O'Leary's life which Peggy had left untold. Not a very great secret surely. All the world might have heard it. He had just lived to see her happy. How much he had sacrificed to that end, all he had lost in putting away from him the greatest wish in the world—all this, she would never see, and lest she should have found it then, she lowered her eyes once more.

"Ye don't want Peggy to be happy here, then?" she asked presently.

"Faith, I want her to be happy where she'll be

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happiest," said he. "When she thought she had a vocation I didn't stop her from coming here. Now, 'tis the way she thinks different. Shure, then, I've nothing to say but let her have the best of it."

The Reverend Mother unclasped her hands.

"Ye think a great deal of happiness," she said.

"'Tis a great thing," said he.

"But 'tis the happiness of other people ye think of."

"Shure, that's the secret of it," he replied—"but there's scarcely a soul would believe ye if ye told them."

She plucked a blossom from the bush of lavender as they passed. He watched her as she pressed it in her fingers.

"Well—what had we better do?" she asked—"The whole town'll know that Peggy's left coming to the convent if Jim Sullivan's car drives up to the front door and takes her and her luggage away."

"What's over the wall at the end of the garden?" said he.

"A little lane."

"Where does it run to?"

"On to the Main Road to Lismore."

"I'll get himself to bring a car from Lismore tomorrow evening," said he—"They can drive up to that little door in the wall, the way the driver won't know where he's come to and then herself can slip out and drive away to Lismore and get the train there and never a soul'll see her go."

She lowered her head in silent acquiescence.

"I suppose ye're right," she said then, and they stood looking down the old garden as the bees hummed over the flowers, and Michael bent over the beds, and the thrushes sang with their shrilly notes in the lilacs.

"Is that a piece of lavender ye've got in yeer hand?" said he. He had been looking at it ever since she had picked it.

"It is," she replied, and she passed it to him to see.

"'Tis a sweet smelling thing," said he, and his fingers closed over it, as he locked it in his hand.

CHAPTER IX

THE DOOR INTO THE WORLD

THE little sisters of Mercy were chanting Vespers. Through the open windows of the chapel, the even notes of their voices stole out with the glimmer of candle-light into the pale air of the evening.

All the heads of the flowers in the garden were bent. You say it was evening time? I would sooner think that it was the sound of Vespers drifting to their ears. For Michael too, resting from his labours, at the first sound of it, crossed himself and inclined his head. A faint hush had fallen as well upon the birds in the trees. Sometimes they twittered with subdued voices. Even the bees, visiting the last blossoms on their homeward journeys, lingered in the hearts of the roses.

Once you have heard it, you will never forget, you will never be able to shut out from your mind the sound of Vespers if you have stood in a convent garden, listening to the chanting of the nuns.

There is more in it than the mere beauty of its mediævalism; more than the actual beauty of the peaceful cadences which soften the very perfume of the roses that you breathe in. The greatest beauty it

possesses of all lies in its eternal relation to life. It is a sound picture, not of this time or of that, but of time that always has been since the world of man began—of time that always will be so long as the world of man shall last.

The light of the day is falling. In an hour or more, there will be a great darkness in the heart of every living thing. The sun will have dipped into the unknown. The sky will have covered her face with a vast black veil. So long as these things shall be, there will rise for ever—silently perhaps in most—a gentle cry in the heart of all humanity that they may see the day once more.

This is the beauty of Vespers. And in a convent garden, the candle-light mingling with the faintness of the drooping day, the voices of the nuns swelling out from the open windows, into the cool scent of drowsy flowers, you may drink its eternal beauty to the full.

When he had stood a while, listening, his head nodding mechanically to the measured beats of the chant, Michael shouldered his spade and trudged away out of sight. Three moments he had scarcely gone, when the door of the convent opened on to the terrace and two figures came softly out.

Together they walked down the middle path in silence. At the bottom of the garden, under the deepening shadows of the trees, they stood and waited.

"I'm to go straight to the Presbytery?" said Peggy. Father O'Leary nodded his head.

"Ye'll frighten the life out of Mummy Parfitt," said he. "I've never sent a telegram to let her know ye're coming."

"I can see her opening the door," said Peggy, with half-closed eyes.

"Faith, that's about all ye will see," said he.

For a while again, then, they were silent and the sound of the Vespers, faint and dim in that distance, trickled like a little stream into their ears.

"You're sure the car's there?" whispered Peggy presently.

"Stephen won't make any mistake about that," said he.

Silence fell again. It was Peggy broke it once more.

"It feels terrible now I'm really going."

He made no reply.

"The Reverend Mother was crying when she came back from speaking to you."

He said nothing.

"She said she never felt so unhappy in all her life."

Father O'Leary closed his eyes.

"Oh—do you think it's cruel of me to go?" she asked, and a note of pain was running through her voice—"It seems so hard to go."

"Would it be harder to stay?" said he.

She just took his hand.

"This is the most peaceful place I was ever in in me life," he continued, when the pressure of her fingers had

answered his question. "I dunno would I care to leave it meself. 'Tis like as if God Himself sleeps here. But, shure, on the other side of this door, He's there just the same, only 'tis the way He's awake."

Peggy took his arm.

"Am I selfish?" she whispered.

"We all are," said he.

"Then what can I do?"

"Go on being selfish," he replied: "go on trying yeer hardest to make yeerself happy—so long as ye do it by making the happiness of others."

"Do you think I shall make Stephen happy?"

"There's no answer to that," said he. "I'm in no mood for paying compliments."

She tightened her arm within his, and they waited in silence once more. Presently a black figure came out from the convent on to the terrace. With flowing robes, it hastened down the middle path between the flower-beds.

Peggy caught her breath, and Father O'Leary's lips set to the thin line.

"Here is the key," said the Reverend Mother as she reached their side. She gave it into Father O'Leary's hand. "Let ye open it," she said.

He took it in silence, and, as the two women embraced, their cheeks cool in the evening air, lingering against each other ere they stood apart, he opened the door into the world.

Its hinges creaked. Moss fell down from the wall as

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Father O'Leary forced it open. And there, in that moment, as the Reverend Mother stepped back into the shadows, its secret was wrenched from it.

For one swift moment Peggy held the Mother Superior's hand. Had the tears not been choking in her throat, there still would have been no need for speech. Then she stepped out under the archway. The door was closed once more behind her. Once more it showed its impassive countenance in the wall, as though nothing had ever happened to filch the secret from its heart.

Father O'Leary turned the key. Slowly he drew it out from the lock and gave it into the Reverend Mother's hand.

"God bless ye," said he.

She tried to repeat it.

"God—" she began—"God——"

The words quivered and broke in her throat.

They just stood there in silence, while down through the garden from the chapel windows trembled the voices of the little Sisters of Mercy chanting Vespers.

EPILOGUE

THE evening was closing in round the houses of Adelphi. Under the cavernous arches the lamps were already lit, burning like little beacons away down into the very bowels of the earth.

A few children were playing in that narrow alley which shoots up with its little flight of steps into the sudden traffic of the Strand. A dog was wandering in the gutter. But everything was very still.

If you ask me when this was, I cannot tell you. It is like this most evenings in Adelphi. That is enough for me. The only event out of the ordinary which took place—and it occurs with a certain amount of frequency even now—I am about to describe.

Before the street-lamps were actually lighted, you might have seen the glow of orange in a window of one of the houses that huddle so closely together in Buckingham Street. It was a window on the top floor, right under the roof. You could have pictured to yourself the sloping ceilings. You could have pictured to yourself all sorts of things from just that little glow of orange—a woman seated sewing at a table, her head bent low under the lamp—a man with shoulders bowed as, by the flicker of two candles, he read from the book between his elbows. A thousand different things like

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this you might have thought of, but you would never have guessed the right one.

So far all this is very ordinary. Even the young man pacing up and down the pavement outside the house, might have been seen any day of the week.

But presently he stopped—stopped like one held in a vice. There came a sound—the sound of a window being opened, then shut again. He turned hurriedly. With eager steps, he ran into the house. It seemed as if he never saw the strange-looking individual who passed out as he went in, for he brushed by with never a word of apology and disappeared. You might have expected the strange individual to be annoyed. He not. He only turned round looking after the young man and he smiled.

It is impossible to describe this strange person. If you called him a piano-tuner, there would be no reason why you should be wrong. If you called him a society entertainer, it would suit him down to the ground. He was everything and nothing. His tall silk hat belonged to no period of fashion. It aped nothing. It was itself. His frock coat flapped with shapeless tails that must have held tremendous pockets. But no man of any season has ever worn its like.

You must have looked at him as he passed you by. Even the cheery humour of his very ordinary face would have attracted your attention. There would have come into your mind, whether you liked it or not, a desire to place him in his niche. But as he turned the corner of

the street and vanished out of sight, you would have been compelled to admit that it was quite impossible.

For the moment, as he came out into Buckingham Street on this particular evening, he stood on the pavement, and with another smile, he looked up to the window in which burned the orange-coloured light. Then he set off in the direction of the Strand.

As he reached the little group of children in the alley he suddenly stopped in their midst. They ceased playing and gazed up at him.

"You, little boy," said he, and he laid a kindly hand on the shoulder of a small fellow whose eyes were rounder in curiosity than the rest—"You, little boy—what's this lump you've got in your back? What are you 'iding there?"

The little boy wriggled. The others stared. For there, as the man put his hand down behind the collar of his coat, there was a lump.

"Why—'oo'd 'ave thought it," said the man—"That's a funny thing to be keeping up your back!"

And, to their utter astonishment, he drew forth a tiny, wee white rabbit.

"Now—ain't that marvellous?" said he, a smile spreading his mouth from ear to ear as he looked at their several faces.

"'Oo'd 'ave thought it!" he repeated, and, slipping the white rabbit into the capacious pocket of his frock coat, he hurried on, up the steps and was lost in the traffic of the Strand.

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For half-an-hour those children put their heads together and talked about it.

Then again, out of the strange house in Buckingham Street, there came still another person. This time it was a woman. With short and hurried steps, she made her way as the peculiar individual had done, up into the Strand. She passed the group of children but did not stop. The lines of carts and carriages did not seem to frighten her. She crossed boldly through them all and never hesitated until she reached the Presbytery of the Chapel of Corpus Christi in Maiden Lane.

Here she entered. Up the twisting narrow stairs she ran, her breath by now beginning to come in quick uneven gasps.

At a door in the passage, she stayed for one moment to breathe. Then she entered. A priest was in the room. His eyes sought her face directly she appeared.

"Well?" he said.

"She's all right," she stammered—"It's a little boy and they're going to call it Patrick."

He drew a great breath. He closed his eyes. As he opened them, he looked quickly at the clock that was ticking somnolently on the mantelpiece. Then he made hurriedly for the door by which she had entered.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Shure, I'm going," said he—"to give Benediction."

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And that, with your permission, is what I choose to call the end.

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