

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS

It was the week before Christmas. The home of Paddy O'Reardon of Kilkenny was ringing with laughter and merry making of a number of the young swains of the village who had gathered in to while away the long evening. It was the custom for these young people to assemble from time to time at one home or another, and on this particular evening the lot had fallen upon O'Reardon's son, Dan, to entertain his friends.

Old Paddy was one of those cross-grained, grouchy, querulous individuals, who never saw any pleasure in life, nor wished to see others happy. The noise and chatter of the young folks pressed so hard upon his irritable feelings, that, unable to restrain himself any longer, he turned savagely upon his son, and, with all the wrath and vehemence he could muster, said in a tone that made his neighbours' sons and daughters tremble in their shoes:

"Get out and bring in a back-log, bad cess till ye, and it's yourself that should be ashamed to be lavin' yer chores till his toime o'noight, and havin' yer ould father continually remoindin' ye o' them; make haste, do ye hear?"

Poor Dan was humiliated at being thus rebuked in the presence of his young friends. Hanging his head with shame and mortification, he rose and awkwardly quitted the room. But little did his parents and friends realize the many changes that were to take place before he would again cross that threshold.

Once outside, his mind was made up. He would bear his father's ill-treatment no longer; this very night, he determined, a new era would begin in the life of Daniel O'Reardon.

The dwellings in Ireland at that time were very low, so that one could, with little difficulty, reach the upstairs windows from the ground. In a few moments our hero had climbed into his mother's little room.

His mother! How the thought of leaving her filled his heart with anguish; she who had always been the best of mothers to him, who had nursed and cared for him since his birth nineteen years ago, she who had always taken his part and shielded him from the stormy wrath of his father. Yes, it was hard to think of leaving her, and the thought almost turned him from his purpose. She had often told him that he was her only joy and comfort, and he felt that

her heart would break when she found that her boy had left her. For sometime he knelt by her bedside and prayed to the Mother of God to shield her until he should return. Then, hastily scribbling a note, and pinning it to his mother's pillow, he bundled up his scanty wardrobe, took one last look around, let himself out through the window, and in a few minutes was off to fight his battle with the world.

"He's a moighty long time getting that back-log, the spalpeen," growled Old Paddy, some time after Dan's departure, and the boys and girls had one by one stolen away, "I wonder what can be kapin' him anyway."

Going to the door he called loudly: "Dan, where be ye, ye vagabond? Bring in that back-log or it will be the wust for ye."

Receiving no response but the whistle of the wind as it swept around the corner of the dwelling, the irritated old Irishman slammed the door with a bang, and returned to his place by the fireside.

"Faix, and it's the disobadient young gintleman he's got to be, but he won't come in here till he does his father's bidding, I'm telling ye," he growled to the kind-hearted and gentle old lady who sat on the other side of the hearth, and whose ways were so different from those of her rough old husband.

"Och! Paddy O'Reardon, it's ye that ought to be ashamed of yourself; little wonder it is indade, that the poor lad wouldn't come back, after ye bedraggling him so before his young frinds. Why can't ye be gentler with him, Paddy? It's a good boy he is and a kind hearted boy, God bless him, and he ought to be the joy of yer old age. He would too, if ye'd only let him." said Dan's mother, bursting into tears.

"Indade, and it's yourself that'll be forever after takin' the young rascal's part, and that's the raison he's so disobadient to his kind father," returned Paddy, "but he'll find out if it pays to disobey Patrick O'Reardon around these premises."

Hours passed, and yet the son did not return. Never before had any light been seen in the O'Reardon home at such a late hour. Dan's poor mother became worried. He had never been so long away from her before; how dreary and lonely the time seemed without him. What if he ever left her? No, she could not think of it. She remembered how, many times, when his father's harsh-

ness had almost driven him away, she had pleaded with him to stay to comfort her in her declining years, telling him that some day a bright star would shine in their lives and then all would be happiness.

She glanced across the hearth, where O'Reardon sat moodily gazing into the flames of the fire, which was by this time much in need of the belated back-log. She shivered as she thought of the storm that would be raised when Dan returned, and perhaps, in her heart, she almost wished that he would not come. She lighted a candle and ascended the creaky stairs to her little bedroom, to pray to the Mother of God to protect him from all harm and danger. She knelt down by her bedside; suddenly her eyes were attracted by a piece of paper on her pillow. What was that? Doubtless it had blown in through the open window. No, it was pinned there. By whom? Could it be——? A fear gripped her heart; a cold chill crept over her, as she seized the missive and cast a hurried glance at its contents. A groan of agony escaped her lips. "Heaven be merciful to us!" she shrieked, and fell senseless on the carpetless floor.

"By the powers o' Moll Kelly," shouted O'Reardon, bounding up the stairs, "what are ye roaring about? Glory be!" he exclaimed, when he saw his wife prostrate on the floor, "what does all this mane, Bridget Mahoney? and what's this ye'll be holdin' so tight in yer fist?" Then, raising her from the floor, and taking the paper, Paddy read the words:

"Dear Mother, I can't bear it any longer; I am going away to America. Some day I will come back for you. Dan."

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"Move on!" shouted a New York police officer to a scared looking individual, who was standing on a street corner, and who was staring around with mouth and eyes wide open in amazement, as he was jostled hither and thither by the hurrying streams of people. "One would think you had just dropped into America from the Old Country."

"Faix, and that's just what I am, yer honour, and its a moighty fine hand ye are at guessin,'" returned the other. "But bless me sowl!" he exclaimed, looking the officer in the face, "can I belave me own eyes, or is it dram-in' I am? Is it yerself, Dan O'Reardon or yer ghost that

I see afore me? And is this where ye've been this fifteen years back since that noight ye left yer ould home in Kilkenny? And what will ye be standing there gapin' at me for? By the Powers! don't ye know yer ould friend, Teddy Doyle, or is it too big falin' ye be to spake to an ould acquaintance?"

It is always delightful for one, when far away from home and among strangers, to meet some day with an old friend or acquaintance from one's native shores, and no less delighted was Dan O'Reardon to see his pal from Kilkenny. Teddy was overjoyed at having found the lost son, and had much news to impart to the officer as they walked along together.

"Shure and it's only yesterday noight that I landed in this great city where ye pick up the Gould aigles on the strates," he went on, "and it's many things I'll be after telling ye, as have happened since ye left the ould sod, and it's sore at heart ye'll be when ye hear what I'll be after saying'. It's a different place yer ould home is now, and it's sorely needed ye are by yer ould mother, who has been worryin' and cryin' her eyes out all these years for yer return, and now that she's alone—"

"Alone!" exclaimed O'Reardon, "do you mean—?"

"I mane that yer ould man is dead—"

"Dead! the Lord have mercy on him!" cried Dan, and when did he die? and how?"

"He fell from his horse this two years gone, and whether by accident or through bad nature, sorra the one o' me knows, he was killed. He was picked up on the road as dead as a doornail, after his horse had returned home without him."

The officer was much disturbed to hear of the melancholy end of his father. "My poor mother, Teddy, what about her?" he asked.

"It's a hard lot indade, that the poor ould woman will be in" replied Teddy, "she has managed to make out a wretched existence these two years back, but now I hear the place is to be sold, and then there is nothing left for her but the poorhouse, and that afore Christmas. And here ye are, a great gintleman in Ameriky, with all ye want to ate and dhrink, while the poor ould lady who was always so good to ye is dyin' from hunger an cowl'd in that little hut over there in Ireland, where ye first saw the light of day. It's home ye'd better be going to look afther her, Dan O'Reardon."

Dan was deeply moved, as his friend related the sad events that had taken place in his old home. He could not suppress the tears that welled up in his eyes, as he thought of the circumstances by which his poor mother was surrounded. He realized how glad she would be to see him now, when all the world was so dark before her. His only thought was to fly to her as quickly as possible, and to bring her those comforts which she stood so badly in need of. How thankful he was to Heaven for having sent Teddy to him; for if he had not met his countryman, he would not have heard about those sad affairs at home. It might have been many years before he returned to the old sod, and then, perhaps, it would have been too late.

"Thank God you found me, Teddy," said he, taking his friend by the hand, "I shall never forget you. Some day I will repay you for what you have done, but for the present it's Ireland for Daniel O'Reardon."

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In an old-fashioned cottage in Kilkenny sits a little gray-haired woman, whose care-worn features bear the unmistakable marks of years of grief and worry. The night is cold and her scanty supply of fuel and clothing barely suffices to keep her warm. Shivering, she gathers her shawl closer around her, and draws her chair nearer to the cheerless fire. As she gazes into the depths of the great fireplace, her mind goes back to that night, fifteen years ago, when that well beloved son left her. She remembers how the shock of it knocked her senseless; she recalls the many weeks that followed, during which she had lain in bed, writhing in the throes of a fever, incessantly calling to him to come back to her; she remembers how she watched and prayed during all those years for his return, or at least a word from him, but none ever came; she recalls vividly the blow she received when Dan's father was carried in dead to her, and how she longed then for Dan to come and comfort her; she lives over again that hard struggle, since Paddy's untimely death, to keep the little home, but that, alas, too, is to be taken from her. Tomorrow she is to go to the poor-house, and tomorrow is Christmas Day. Oh! if he only knew, how quickly he would come! She has never ceased to pray to the Blessed Mother of God to send him back to her, and she feels certain that her prayers will be answered some day. So absorbed is she in her thoughts