

The Storyteller

PEGGY BRADY'S BOYS

It happened through the home-coming of Owen Ward in the spring—young Owen from Ardclougher, he used to be called—who had gone over the sea to push his fortune in bad times; and returned, after years of absence, rich and portly, but at heart as much a child of that kindly Irish valley as ever. And the welcome he received! It was enough to bring the grateful tears into his eyes as the soft, sweet Gaelic tongue greeted him, recalling memories of hours when he had lain in the long grass by the side of Finn Water, listening to the tales the old schoolmaster loved to tell about his bardic ancestors who had harped to O'Donnell in the far-off days of romance and bravery. He had never forgotten those wonderful stories in all his wanderings; but now it was his turn to narrate, instead, wonderful adventures, as curious to the homely people who had rarely cared to travel beyond their native environment.

Around Peter McGrath's hospitable hearth the talk regarding the rich Irish-American ran freely; and when Owen walked in one night there was a general request that he would give them full particulars of his experiences since he had left the valley. They were so sincere in their admiration of his prosperity, handling his watch and thick gold chain without a trace of jealousy in their look or tone, and feeling with careful fingers the texture of the fine black broadcloth that wrinkled, in true Yankee style, across his stalwart shoulders. Only too glad to gratify them, he began at the beginning, telling all the details of his penniless landing in New York, and the days of misery and starvation that followed.

'But I found a good friend in time to save me dying of hunger, and that was James Brady. You all remember the Brady boys—Jim and Pat—I'm sure.—Their father was Hugh, and their mother Peggy Magee, to her own name. Well, Jim is a great man now in New York. He has a dry-goods store of his own, and Pat has a big hotel out in Frisco. Guess they have made a pile, both of them; but they're just the best fellows you ever met, and the humblest-hearted; though Jim's American wife wants to make a grand gentleman of him—as if he wasn't that by nature already. I saw the familiar name over his place one morning when I was nearly giving up the struggle altogether, and went in to ask for a job. By good luck Jim was standing near and heard me appeal to a consequential clerk. He came over at once; and when he heard that I had just arrived from Donegal, he grasped my two hands before them all and wrung them long and silently. I couldn't speak with joy at having met a friend in that big, noisy city at last; and he couldn't speak either, because of the gladness he felt at the sight of his own people. He took me into his employment, fed and clothed me, and got me comfortable lodgings until I was able to pay my way; and all these years he has been my friend and benefactor indeed. Everything he touches turns to gold; and 'tis himself deserves the good luck, fine fellow that he is.'

'Well,' said Molshie, 'sudden anger blazing in her usually cheery face, 'tis little he deserves the like in my opinion, leaving his poor old mother to beg her bit around the country; and only that the Careys took her in she'd be in the poorhouse by now.'

'Oh, it can't be the same Bradys!' replied Owen. 'Jim and Pat broke their hearts over their mother's death years ago. She died the year they left, and they've never ceased sorrowing. They wrote to the parish priest about it, too; and he wrote back that Peggy Brady had left the place and he had never heard more about her. Many a time Jim told me how much he had meant to do for his mother, and how his wealth didn't bring him half the pleasure it would have done had she been alive to share it.'

'But I'm telling you, man, that she is alive and well,' cried Molshie; 'waiting day after day for the letter those boys promised to write her, and fretting all these years for them. She's poor and dependent on the strangers, but she's their mother all the same. The Careys'll be coming this way next week, so you can see her and judge for yourself.'

Surely this was startling information. But all doubt vanished from Owen's mind when he came face to face with Peggy, and saw in her old worn features a strong, unmistakable likeness to his friend Jim.

She was considerably puzzled when the handsome, well-dressed gentleman shook her hand so warmly, saying over and over again:

'Thank God, thank God, I've found you!'

'What is it, ma'am?' she asked, turning to Molshie.

'Tis good news for you, Peggy dear, that he's after bringing—the best of good news—aye, better than any letter! He's come to take you out to your boys.'

The joy that chased the dimness of years from those sad old eyes, the rapture that made her hands tremble as she raised them to heaven in thanksgiving, were so holy that all near gazed in wonder at her transfigured countenance.

By degrees the silence of her sons was explained, and then she would brook no delay in setting out. The best homespun dress and cloak to be had in Ballyboley came to her from Owen Ward; and never were such snowy, befrilled caps seen as Molshie's deft fingers fashioned for the traveller, nor such warm stockings as sorrowful Mrs. Bill Carey knitted after her hard day's work. As for Bill and Shaun, they were 'neither to hold nor to bind' at the prospect of losing Peggy, and glared at Owen defiantly for a 'meddling interloper.' That was before they understood the comfort she was going to. Then, good, unselfish souls, their hurry to get her off was even greater than hers to go.

Ward had written to Jim apprising him of their coming; and great were the lamentations in the valley when Peggy started on her journey—dressed in all her homely finery, and clung to by the three little Carey children, whom she clasped and kissed over and over again, crying bitterly through her tears:

'Maybe it's coming back I'll be soon, darlings; and then I'll bring ye toys the like of which were never seen before in these parts!'

The train and its rapid motion caused her great uneasiness, but the sea voyage thoroughly prostrated her; so that her delight on landing in New York, after the wearisome experience of weeks, was pleasant to behold. Then the meeting between herself and son as he held her in his arms and kissed the beaming old face, from which the repressed mother-love of years shone out like a glory, was touching in its pathos. She could only sit, holding his hand in hers and stroking it as she used to do when he and Pat were twin babies long ago. One regret she gave utterance to, and it made her listener catch his breath:

'It'll be terrible lonesome for yer poor father, now that we're all over the sea away from him; won't it, darling? There'll be nobody to look after his grave, nor cut the clover when it gets too high. And he always wanted me to lie beside him when my time comes to go. How'll we do then, my boy? I'd like best to be with my own people in the valley; but if it would give trouble to you and Pat, why then I'll stay here, and God's holy will be done.'

The grandeur of Jim's New York mansion took her completely by surprise, but the stately lady who held out a white, heavily-ringed hand, and greeted her in a chill, patronising voice, was her first real trouble. She had no idea but that her boy's wife would be glad to welcome her; and the sudden disappointment, as she heard the calm, well-bred accents, made her heart grow faint. Then her grandchildren came in—dainty people, who spoke in clear, staccato tones, and looked over her inquisitively before acceding to her petition for a kiss. She tried to draw one little brown head down to her bosom, half fancying for a moment that she had Jim in her arms a baby again; but the child sprang away disdainfully, striking at the hand that would have held him.

For the first few days the wonder lasted, then she began to feel the strangeness of the place. The sparkling dinner table frightened her and made her nervous. Jim—brave, true-hearted Jim—noticed her embarrassment, and, under the contemptuous gaze of his wife, came to her assistance, and gently told her to eat the dinner in her own way. She complied gratefully, but after that the mistress of the house said it would be impossible to dine at the table with his mother. Her faux pas were quite too many, and would set a bad example to the children. The difficulty was solved by Peggy herself begging that her meals might be served in her own room. 'I'd only affront you, dear,' she told her son; 'and I'd be more comfortable to think there was nobody looking at me.'

She could never be convinced that San Francisco was a long way off from New York; and the desire to see Pat once more grew and grew in her affectionate heart until it found vent one day in an expression that proved to Jim how futile his efforts to enlighten her had been.

'Isn't it strange, alanna, that there's no word reaching us from Pat? Do you think there'd be any chance of him running over to spend the Sunday?'

'Oh, no, mother dear!' he replied soothingly. 'He's too far away for that. It would take him about a fortnight's travelling, and he could hardly spare the time. The hotel needs a lot of looking after, he says.'

'Well, is he nearer Ireland, then, darling? If I knew for certain that he was I'd go back and be there