

The Storyteller.

OLD MARY.

It was at Mass that I first noticed Mary. Our pew was just outside the sanctuary, and Mary invariably knelt at the altar-rails; but during the sermon she sat on the step, facing the congregation. This habit it was that first drew my attention to her.

How well I remember the curiosity with which I used to regard her—at least, as much of her as was visible—for a faded cloak concealed her form, and indeed her face, with the exception of the nose, a small patch of forehead, and one eye. But once or twice her hands relaxed the close grip of the cloak about her head, thus letting it slip back, disclosing to me a poor old face deeply lined, and pathetic in its expression. It somehow gave me the idea that her life had been a sad one; nor was I wrong, as I afterwards learned.

One evening I took my accustomed walk in a direction hitherto unfrequented by me. The road was bleak and lonely, with a wide stretch of bog on either side which just then looked dazzling in the glory of an autumn sunset. A few thatched cabins dotted the almost bare landscape, and evidently it was only the very poorest who dwelt there. As I was passing one tiny shieling, whom should I see in its doorway but the little figure which had before now excited my interest. She was enveloped in the old green cloak she always wore.

So it was here she lived then. I saw her padlock the rickety door and take her way down the road which I had just traversed. I stood looking after her till a step behind caused me to glance round. A poor woman whom I knew was approaching, carrying an apron full of fagots for her evening fire.

'Good evening, Mrs. Connell,' I said.
'Good evening kindly, Miss, an' isn't it the gran' weather intirely we're gettin'!'

'Lovely weather, indeed. I am admiring the beauty of the bogs.'

'The bogs *inagh*!' repeated the old woman in disgust. 'Faith, Miss, if ye had to live in the bogs ye'd see no beauty in 'em.'

'Perhaps so,' I assented smilingly, 'but, Mrs. Connell, who is the little woman that lives in that cabin? She has just gone down the road you see.'

'Oh, is it Mary Lunn you mane?' looking after the now distant figure. 'That's Mary, sure enough. She lives alone there.'

'Has she no friends, then—no family?'

'Is it poor Mary, Miss? She hasn't wan belongin' to her in Ireland. They all crossed the says long ago, an' left her here. She's just a poor little womanen that all of 'em forgot.'

'Poor creature!' I said, 'and how does she live?'

'Wisha, the neighbors are good to the poor thing. She don't go 'round beggin', you know, Miss, but every wan is fond of her, an' they do be all sendin' her the bit an' the sup, an' she gets enough that way. An' the shanty is her own, mind you. When the ould house was burned down on her the neighbors gother together an' settled up this for her.'

Seeing Mrs Connell was in such a communicative mood I walked back along the road with her. The following, which I have thrown into narrative form, is what she told me concerning Mary Lunn, and few will deny that the story is sufficiently touching:—

Mary's father and mother died of typhoid fever within a few days of each other, leaving their eldest child, then a girl of eighteen, in charge of eight small brothers and sisters. It was a heavy burden for shoulders so tender, but Mary bravely undertook it, and from the moment the last sod was laid on her parents' grave she tried to take the place of both towards the orphaned children. How she did it was a mystery to everyone, but she managed the little farm, for they possessed a few acres of land, milked and looked after the cows, cooked the meals, made the little ones' clothes, kept them at school regularly, and all this entirely without help, for Jim, who was next to her in age, was her junior by six years.

Yet the rent was paid as before, and food was somehow found for the helpless little mouths. Mary alone knew the difficulty of it all, and after a couple of years the strain began to tell on her. Her face began to lose its softness, and lines appeared about her mouth and eyes; her little figure too—for even then she was little—became slight and spare, and now and then she would look quite weary and tired.

There was one who noticed all this with pain, for though Mary was not pretty in the least, there beat one heart whose every throb was for her. After all—and it is a consoling thought for plain women—beauty seldom awakens real love; it may excite a passion, strong perhaps while it lasts, but not abiding.

Barney O'Donovan had all this time been witness of Mary's uncomplaining self-sacrifice. And the big honest fellow's heart went out to the generous little maid, who had ever a cheerful smile and a bright word for him. But now he began to fear that things were becoming too much for her, so he did what for months he had been mustering up courage to do—he went and told Mary simply that he loved her, and asked her to be his wife.

For a brief space the brown eyes shone with happiness, then taking her courage in both hands she told him it could never be. She had received a sacred charge from her dead parents—it was her duty to perform it fully. She must watch over the young family depending on her with parental care—she could not do that and be his wife, too.

But Barney, in the plenitude of his affection, urged that that was no obstacle. He would work for them and her—he would be a father to them as truly as she was a mother. But Mary shook her head.

She did not doubt his love, but she could not bind him to so difficult a task.

'I see, Mary,' said Barney at length, sadly, 'there's no convincin' ye. But my love for ye will last always, an' after all the childer will be big sometime. I'll wait for ye if 'twas half a century.'

She tried to make him cast aside this notion; but no, honest Barney would not give up his 'little bit of future,' as he termed it.

So the years crept on, each seeming to Mary more dreary than the last, though she was still as cheerful as ever. Barney, in obedience to her request, had never mentioned the matter since, but she knew instinctively that time was only strengthening his love for her. He always insisted on helping her in the spring and harvest when the outdoor work was most pressing; indeed but for his unostentatious assistance she would have been forced to employ a laborer, an outlay which she could ill afford, for the task of finding food for so many healthy growing boys and girls was every day becoming harder.

But Jim was now a tall lad of sixteen, and she flattered herself that he would relieve her of the chief portion of the outdoor work. She had kept him at school up to this; now he must work on the farm.

But after a year Jim grew restless; why should he work and slave on a few miserable acres of bog while numberless chances of getting on awaited him elsewhere.

Mary listened to his longings with a sinking heart. She felt she was powerless to prevent his going, so one spring morning Jim left his home for ever. He was sorry to leave them all, to be sure, but how could a fellow be expected to give up his chance in life for the sake of his family? And, of course, he would send them lots of money by and by. He wrote often at first, but he wanted all the money he could earn. Then his letters came but seldom, and at last ceased to come at all.

Meanwhile Tom, the next boy, had stepped into his place at home. He was quieter and steadier than Jim, and Mary fondly thought that he would share her responsibility. So he did for a while. But who can account for the cravings of youth? A red coat cast all this lad's solidity to the winds. The longing for a soldier's life was upon him, and his patient sister's objections only intensified it. So he, too, went.

And then Larry became her prop. But what need to weary the reader further? One by one all the boys fled from the home circle. Each in his turn rebelled against sacrifice. Self rose up and said she was to be obeyed, and her voice was listened to and her command acted upon. And for a while they bore in their memory the little woman far away in Ireland—she who had been their very mother. Yet in the end it was the same with all—they forgot their home and Mary.

But Barney still watched and waited, his love none the weaker because Mary's hair showed many a streak of silver and Mary's face the tokens that she was no longer young. To him she would be always young and beautiful. In a few years more the little girls would be grown, he told himself, and then—ah, then he would have his reward!

Two more years rolled by, and Kattie was a pretty maiden of 17. But she had the restless spirit too.

'Let me go to America, Mary,' she pleaded; 'what can I ever do at home unless I go to service?'

And Mary let her go.

But two now remained, and Barney, after 13 years of waiting, insisted on his rights.

Mary at last let herself be persuaded that marrying Barney would not interfere with her duty to Maggie and Hannie. She looked forward to her wedding-day with that pure and settled joy which those alone experience who have sacrificed personal desires to higher motives.

It was a harvest evening just two days before that appointed for the marriage. Mary had been hard at work biding corn, and, feeling unusually tired, had retired early, after warning Maggie 'to rake the fire an' not forget the sop of hay.'

Maggie did rake it certainly, and hung the wisp of hay on the 'crane' to have it dry to kindle the fire with in the morning; but Maggie did most things carelessly, and she did not notice that she placed a smouldering log dangerously near the hay.

Barney sat up late this night. A strange excitement possessed him which made rest impossible. Thinking a turn in the night air would calm him, he opened the door and went out.

A full moon sailed high in the heavens, flooding the bog with its silver radiance. He glanced towards Mary's cottage, but instead of the white walls shining in the moonlight, he saw with horror a lurid flame shooting up high into the sky.

There was no doubt about it—the house was on fire.

With frantic haste he flew to the spot, and on reaching it gave a gasp of relief as he distinguished female forms outside. But his relief was only momentary, for a second glance showed him that Mary was not one of them.

'Mary? Where is she?' he asked hoarsely.

'She's up in the loft,' answered Maggie, wringing her hands in distress. 'We durst not go in for her. Oh, my! what will we do?'

With a cry of dismay Barney rushed into the house through smoke and flames. It was suffocating. He groped about in search of the ladder which led to the attic, and at last found it thrown on the floor. He placed it against the wall under Mary's door. Above the hissing of the flames he could hear her feeble cries for help. In a moment he had passed through the blazing doorway into the room. He called Mary, for he could see nothing he was so blinded by smoke; she rushed towards him. Catching her firmly in his arms he turned to make the descent, but to his consternation the ladder had taken fire, and even as he looked it fell to the floor with a crash. What was he to do? Another minute there meant certain death. He could not get out by the window, for it was only a skylight. There was nothing for it but to jump down into