

The Storyteller

FATHER MACCARTHY'S CHRISTMAS DINNER

No need to tell you, when you have seen the name, that Father Daniel MacCarthy belonged to the nation that more than any other, perhaps, has helped to evangelize the earth.

A spare little man with a weather-beaten face and a pair of clear, well-opened eyes, the thirty years of his priesthood had been spent in going here, there, and everywhere (which means wherever there was work to do) at the bidding of the superiors who, humble as his estimate was of himself, knew his worth.

At the time this story begins, Father MacCarthy had been sent to seek out 'the lost sheep of the House of Israel,' in a long neglected district, and possessing 'nor gold nor silver, nor money in his pockets, nor scrip for his journeyings, nor two coats, nor, certainly, a change of shoes, he had packed up his few possessions in a little carpet bag and started off, and settled down in the village that seemed most central for his purpose.

Father MacCarthy's courtesy had the trick of disarming rudeness. The people, indeed, stared at him as they whispered to each other he was 'a priest,' but they soon accustomed themselves to his going out and in among them, and learned to return with something like cordiality his gentle 'good-day.'

'There was no harm in him,' was the verdict of the Protestant widow with whom he first lodged, and she made no bones of declaring her regret when he went into a cottage a little higher up the village and made one end into a chapel and the other into a living-room, and engaged one of the faithful to come in and 'do for him' by the day.

Half-a-dozen grown-up Catholics, all of the laboring class, with the best will in the world, cannot do much to support a pastor, and how the priest lived was a problem that even the village gossips could not solve—often as the question came to be discussed. To be sure, a sack had arrived somehow from somewhere, and somebody had seen it carried into the house, and a rumor got abroad that he lived on—oatmeal porridge and skim milk.

Ellen Simpson, who 'did' for the Father (and who had been chosen for her discretion), refused to divulge the mystery, and the most that could be got out of her was this, that there was no doubt about it, his Reverence 'enjoyed a potato'; but however it might be, Father MacCarthy lived and flourished, and after a year or two at Lesser Barton looked no sparer than he had done on his first arrival.

It was little Mrs. Bruton, the doctor's bride, who took it into her head as she unpacked one Christmas hamper after another, sent to her from her old home, to wonder whether 'Mr. MacCarthy,' her opposite neighbor in the long and straggly street, had a Christmas dinner. 'You see, Teddy,' she said as she brought her husband from the surgery to look at the good things spread out on the kitchen table, 'we could never eat all these, and people don't pickle fowls, do they?'

'Put them into salt, you mean? Well, I've read they do something like that with geese in Westphalia, but chicken or turkey in brine!' The doctor shook his head.

'Mother's turkey and tongue and plum-pudding, and Aunt Bate's pair of fowls and ham, and Uncle Jack's chickens, and Aunt Robina's fat duckling. Teddy, we could set up a poulterer's shop!' Mary Bruton laughed.

'See what comes of being the first bride in the family, madam,' her husband responded as he looked proudly at his pretty young wife.

'Are brides supposed to have such big appetites?'

Mary lifted her eyebrows. 'Teddy—'

'Well, madam, what are you going to say now?'

'You know Mr. MacCarthy?'

'No, I don't know him. I have seen him, if that will satisfy you.'

'Don't tease. I should like to send him Uncle Jack's chickens.'

'Mr. MacCarthy?'

'I don't believe he has anyone to send him a Christmas dinner, and he looks good, Teddy,' lowering her voice, 'he makes me think of St. Stephen.'

'St. Stephen? what next?'

Mary Bruton nodded. 'Full of faith and the Holy Ghost' that's what he looks like.

'Curb your imagination, young woman. We'll be having you turn Papist next.'

'No, I shall never do that, but that does not prevent me seeing the good in a man like Mr. MacCarthy. You have told me what a good man you think he is yourself.'

'Yes, from all I hear of him he is good, as you put it. I suppose,' the doctor acquiesced, 'and pray is it as a reward of virtue you are going to present him with a pair of fowls?'

'Teddy, what a tease you are. But please let me. I'll do them up in paper and Phyllis shall run across with them at dark and pop them in at the door. He'll never guess who sent them.'

'A most ingenious plan, but why shouldn't you have the credit of giving Mr. MacCarthy his Christmas dinner?'

Mary shook her head. 'No, I don't want him to know; it would take away half the pleasure.'

'Your pleasure or Mr. MacCarthy's pleasure?'

'Oh, Teddy, do be quiet: may I send him Uncle Jack's chickens?'

'I have no voice in the matter,' Doctor Bruton shook his head. 'If you don't know your rights, Mrs. Bruton, it is time I taught them to you. There is such a thing as the Married Woman's Property Act. Mark, learn, and digest that fact, if you please, madam. The chickens—no longer the property of Uncle Jack—are your own.'

'Teddy, how provoking you are! But if they are mine, I shall give them to Mr. MacCarthy.'

'Which you meant to do from the beginning, madam, and might have done without disturbing my peaceful slumbers.'

'Oh, Teddy, were you asleep?'

'Were you up half last night, madam, may I ask?'

'Oh, Teddy, I shouldn't have awakened you.' The little wife was penitent.

'You are forgiven, and listen; I think it was a kind thought to think of Mr. MacCarthy, and just like my little woman. They tell me he's poor, poorer than his flock, and that is saying everything.'

'Then I'll tell Phyllis to stuff them,' Mary returned with such conviction that her husband went off to the surgery in a roar of laughter.

It was the eve of Christmas Day, and Father MacCarthy—he had been trudging through the sleet and rain all day hunting out the scattered members of his fold and exhorting them, even with tears, to celebrate the birth of Him Who was born for them in a stable, by coming at least to Mass—had at last got home from his rounds.

Ellen Simpson had gone home to her own cottage, leaving the key in the door, and as the Father turned it in the lock he stumbled over something lying on the threshold. So when he had struck a match and lighted his candle he went back to see what it might be, and found a brown-paper parcel neatly tied up and addressed with careful hand to

'The Reverend

D. MacCarthy.'

With best wishes for a happy Christmas.'

Now who could have sent him this? The Father shook his head, as he puzzled over the strange handwriting while he unknotted the string.

A pair of fowls! Who could have sent these? The Father's memory ran over his flock. Mrs. Tomlinson, in the Church Lane, had 'poultry,' three hens and a cock, but they had been scraping in her scrap of a garden when the Father passed it at dark, and these were chickens, young, plump, trussed, stuffed. The odor of Phyllis' stuffing rose to the Father's nostrils.

Providence had, at any rate, sent them to him and to do with them what he liked, and—God reward the sender—here was a dinner for Kitty Cadman! Yes, what a treat for Kitty! The Father's eye beamed; yes, Kitty, who turned from all that was proffered to her, would here, surely, find something she could eat. And the other? Now who should have the other? The Father considered Jem Collyer of course. Certainly, Jem Collyer. The Father rubbed his hands together as he thought what the pleasure would be of the recipients, and then he touched with delicate hand the golden plumage of the heads that Uncle Jack's facitum had left on the poor plucked chickens 'just to show Miss Mary as was that he hadn't forgotten she thought a heap of them Indian fowls.'

Well, Christmas Day came, cold, windy, and wet, but a doctor must work, even on Christmas Day, and Dr. Bruton, after taking Mary home from the parish church, went off in his mackintosh to see one or two of his patients.

An unusual and savory odor greeted him as, after an unanswered knock, he opened Kitty Cadman's door. Kitty was at least going to have a Christmas dinner, he noted that with satisfaction. Kitty, her best filled nightcap on her head in honor of the day, was sitting up in bed (a feat she had not performed for weeks), while Sara Bucknill, the friend who shared her room, spoon in hand and flushed in face, was bending over a Dutch oven hooked to the bars of the little grate.

For the first time in the doctor's acquaintanceship with Kitty, she had no new symptom to proclaim, but she had a tale to tell. Father MacCarthy, the priest himself, had brought her a 'hen,' a hen, according to her, about as big as a turkey, and Mrs. Bell, next door, had lent her her Dutch oven, and Mrs. Potts, at the Greyhound, had given Sara (who had gone up to buy a pennyworth) the size of an egg of dripping, and Mrs. Martin, the baker's wife, had sent down a couple of mince-pies, and Sara and she were going to feed like 'queens.' 'Here's your Christmas dinner,' Father MacCarthy had said, 'and pray for those that sent it to you.'

But it was himself, no doubt about that, Kitty opined, and just like him; why, if he'd a penny to spare he'd leave it under a book maybe, or on a corner of the dresser. It was queer, but the taste of a chicken was just what she had been longing for, and—here it was! And then Kitty called out to her friend to take care the 'bird wasn't drying,' and Sara, redder than ever, had to unhook the oven and give the 'bird' a good 'lasting.'

Here was news for Mary. Dr. Bruton chuckled to himself as he walked down the street after bidding the old woman good-day.

As he passed Jem Collyer's door the doctor hesitated, he was past help, long past human help, poor suffering old fellow, but a shilling might gladden even his