

byre unheard. Maureen was there, in the gloom, with the young calves pushing greedily around her. He could not see her face, for it was best down over the bucket, but there were tears falling into the milk. At the sight of her, something rose up in his throat, something that he had forgotten, that he had never known since the far-away days of his lonely childhood, when the terrible griefs of ten years old had been relieved by a passion of tears. He put his hand up to his face. Yes, he was crying, not with the dry, hard sobs of broken manhood, but with the hopeless, senseless tears of a child. Then suddenly she raised her head, and, dark as it was getting, through the tears of both, their eyes met. There were only two steps between them, and was it he or she who made those steps? Neither of them knew or cared. The milk-pail rolled unheeded in the straw, its white contents lost for ever to the hungry calves, who followed it; but to Hugh and Maureen understanding had come, and with it entire comfort. Then the pony's footsteps clattered at the gate, and Mrs. Carmody's voice brought them back to earth again. They could not hear her question, but her husband's answer fell like lead upon their hearts.

'Yes, they'll be here all right. Neddy Gagahan is a soft fool—but I seen the bank receipt.'

'What ails you, avick? Is it comin' here to me that has you all that bothered?' It was Katty's turn now to question Hugh, as an hour later he sat cowering over the fire; and, with the sudden impulse of confiding in someone that sometimes comes to those in overwhelming trouble, he told her all.

She listened, never speaking, even when he'd finished. It almost seemed as though she had not heard, for, when at last he broke the silence that had fallen on the little room, it was of her own concerns and not of his at all that she spoke.

'Tell me,' she whispered: 'you've heard them speak of my Paddy, who went from me these twenty years an' more?'

For a moment Hugh looked at her in speechless astonishment. What had her Paddy Duggan to say to the two lives that were being broken to-night? Was the old woman wandering? Surely she was, and that must be the reason for her sudden wish for his companionship.

'Dead!' he said, answering with less compassion than he would have felt at any other time. 'To be sure an' he's dead. Where else would he be these years else?'

'Then, certain sure, he'll never be comin' back to claim what is his own?' she asked.

'Not a thing ever will he claim from you but prayers,' he answered, and then his head fell down on his hands again, and his mind went back to the old problem of how after to-night was he to live without Maureen, knowing now, God help her! that she loved him.

'There, indeed, was the only answer. God help her! and God help him! He did not know if it was minutes or longer that he sat thus in the darkened kitchen. It was only the sound of the old woman's voice that roused him, and looking up he found that he was alone. Katty had left her side of the fire, and the voice that called him came from the little inner room.

Half angrily he got up and peered through the door towards the gloom beyond. Yes, without doubt poor Katty had lost her mind. That was his first thought, and certainly the sight before him gave reason for his thought. The bedding was all upon the floor, the wooden bedstead was dragged out to the middle of the room, and Katty on her knees, was pulling at the loosened stones of the wall against which her head rested at night.

'Oh, Katty, asthore, come out of that!' he began coaxingly, forgetting his sorrow in the fear that the crazy walls would come down upon the two of them if the old woman went on with her work of apparent destruction. But with an exclamation of relief she interrupted him, getting painfully to her feet again, and holding out towards him a small tin box, such as American cigarettes are often sold in.

'Take it,' she said incoherently. 'Tis for you I've had it these many a days. For 'twas only makin' believe to meself I was that Paddy wasn't gone beyond.'

'Mother,' says he, an' he givin' it to me, 'if anything happens me you'll always have this for your comfort and your keep. 'Tis Mr. Brown in the bank within in the town that has the money, but keep the receipt as safe as your own soul, for 'tis your name an' no other that's on it this minute.'

She held the dripping tallow dip in one hand, and with the other forced the box on Hugh.

'Open it,' she said. 'Twas always for you I meant it. What do I want with the like, an' me on the King's list? Read it now an' see if my Paddy's bank receipt isn't every penny as good as Neddy Gagahan's. Two hundred pounds did my Paddy bring home to his old mother, God bless an' help him! an' a nice penny besides for all the years that Mr. Brown's been carin' it, so he does be tellin' me. Read now,' she urged. 'An' then be off wid you before it is too late; I've no need of your company now.' And she chuckled to herself. 'Wasn't it only to keep it safe—it is your own now—that I wanted you at all?'

Once he had seized her meaning, Hugh had no scruples in taking what the old woman offered. What good had the receipt ever done her, but only trouble her with fears? Besides, she was a rich woman, these weeks back, since the Old Age Pension Act had come into force, and couldn't he make it up to her in a hundred ways better than money would be to her, once—

'Katty, you're a good woman; God bless you!'

She felt his lips brushing the white hair upon her forehead, and then he was gone. It was almost as though her own Paddy had come back to her.

The matchmaking was progressing, surely, though slowly. If Neddy Gagahan was a 'soft fool,' his father made up for him in hardness. Every stick and stone, every live thing, down to the very hens and ducks, had to be gone over before the jobber would put pen to paper, to bind himself to the payment of what the bank receipt represented; and before this crucial moment arrived the door was opened and in came Hugh.

At first, John Carmody was impatient of interruption, incredulous as to the receipt that this farm-boy produced being genuine. Then, as Edward Gagahan saw a chance of losing, at the last moment, the farm on which he had set his heart, he began to bluster, and ended with threats.

All through the evening the truth had been coming nearer and nearer home to John Carmody, that with the contract of his daughter's marriage he would be signing the death-warrant of his own interest in the farm that he loved beyond wife and children, beyond everything but life itself. And now, when the chains were almost upon him, he suddenly was given a loophole of escape. What did he care, now, that Hugh was his own farm-servant? Pride had gone to the wall, pushed there relentlessly by the jobber's high hand. He knew Hugh: he was quiet and honest; he would keep to his word, and it was Maureen, not the farm, he wanted. With Hugh as a son-in-law he would still be master: with the other it would in future be the jobber's farm. With a quick thought he looked up from the two receipts that he held in his hand, to the girl for whose sake this money was given.

'One's as good as the other to me,' he said gruffly. 'You'd better choose for yourself, Maureen.'

For the second time that evening, Hugh held out his arms; but now there were no tears between them—only gladness, too deep for words, in the eyes that were raised to claim him as their own.

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