



O'Donoghue

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Irish

Intermediate
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It was in a poor little cabin somewhere in Ireland. It does not matter where. The walls were of rough stone, the roof was of thatch, and the floor was the hard earth. There was very little furniture. Poor as it was, the whole place was clean. It is right to tell this, because, unhappily, a good many cabins in Ireland are not clean. What furniture there was had been rubbed smooth and spotless, and the few dishes that there were fairly shone. The floor was as carefully swept as if the Queen were expected.

The three persons who lived in the cabin had eaten their supper of potatoes and milk and were sitting before the turf fire. It had been a poor supper, yet a little of it that was left—a few potatoes, a little milk, and a dish of fresh water—had been placed on a bench outside the door. There was no light except that of the fire. There was no need of any other, and there was no money to spend on candles that were not needed.

The three who sat before the fire, and needed no other light, were a young man, a young woman, and an elderly woman. She did not like to be called old, for she said, and quite truly, that sixty was not old for anybody who felt as young as she did. This woman was Mrs. O'Brien. The young man was her son, John, and the young-woman was his wife, Kitty.

“Kitty,” said John, “it’s not well you’re lookin’ to-night. Are ye feelin’ anyways worse than common?”

“It’s only a bit tired I am,” said Kitty, “wid the work I was afther doin’ all day. I’ll be as well as ever in the morning.”

“It’s a shame, that it is,” said John, “that ye have to be workin’ that way, day afther day, and you not sthrong at all. It’s a shame that I can’t do enough for the three of us, and the more, maybe, that there’ll be, but you must be at it, too, all the time.”

“What nonsinse ye’re talkin’, John,” Kitty answered. “What would I be doin’, settin’ up here like a lady, doin’ nothin’, and you and mother workin’ away like you was my servants? Did you think it was a duchess or the daughter of the Lord Lieutenant ye was marryin’, that ye’re talkin’ that way?”

“And it’ll be worse a long time before it’s betther,” John went on. “Wid the three of us workin’ all the time, we just barely get along. And it’s the end of the summer now. What we’ll do at all when the winter comes, I dunno.”

The older woman listened to the others and said nothing. Perhaps she had heard such talk as this so many times that she did not care to join in it again, or perhaps she was waiting to be asked to speak. For it was to her that these younger people always turned when they were in trouble. It was her advice and her opinion that they always asked when they felt that they needed a better opinion than their own. The three sat silent now for a time, and then John broke out, as if the talk had been going on in his mind all the while: “What’s the good of us tryin’ to live at all?” he said. “Is livin’ any use to us? We do nothin’ but work all day, and eat a little to give us the strength to work the next day, and then we sleep all night, if we can sleep. And it’s that and nothing else all the year through. Are we any better when the year ends than we were when it began? If we’ve paid the rent, we’ve done well. We never do more.”

“John,” the old woman answered, “it’s not for us to say why we’re here or what for we’re living. It’s God that put us here, and He’ll keep us here till it’s our time to go. He has made it the way of all His creatures to provide for themselves and for their own, and to keep themselves alive while they can. When He’s ready for us to die, we die. That’s all we know. The rest is with Him.”

“I know all that’s true, mother,” said John; “but what is there for us to hope for, that we’ld wish to live? It’s nothing but work to keep the roof over us. We don’t even eat for any pleasure that’s in it—only so that we can work. If we rested for a day, we’ld be driven out of our house. If we rested for another day, we’ld starve. Is

there any good to be hoped for such as us? Will there ever be any good times for Ireland? I mean for all the people in it.”

“There will,” the old woman said. “Everything has an end, and so these troubles of ours will end, and all the troubles of Ireland will end, too.”

“And why should we believe that?” John asked again. “Wasn’t Ireland always the poor, unhappy country, and all the people in it, only the landlords and the agents, and why should we think it will ever be better?”

“Everything has an end,” the old woman repeated. “Ireland was not always the unhappy country. It was happy once and it will be happy again. It’s not you, John O’Brien, that ought to be forgetting the good days of Ireland, long ago though they were. For you yourself are the descendant of King Brian Boru, and you know well, for it’s many times I’ve told you, how in his days the country was happy and peaceful and blessed. He drove out the heathen and saved the country for his people. He had strict laws, and the people obeyed them. In his days a lovely girl, dressed all in fine silk and gold and jewels, walked alone the length of Ireland, and there was no one to rob her or to harm her, because of the good King and the love the people had for him and for his laws. And you, that are descended from King Brian, ask if Ireland wasn’t always the poor, unhappy country.”

“But all that was so long ago,” said John; “near a thousand years, was it not? Since then it’s been nothing but sorrow for the country and for the people. What good is it to us that the country was happy in King Brian’s time? Will that help us pay the rent? And how we’ll pay the rent when the winter comes, I dunno, and if we don’t pay it we’ll be evicted.”

“Shaun,” said his mother, calling him by the Irish name that she used sometimes—“Shaun, we’ll not be evicted; never fear that. Things are bad, and they may be worse, but take my word, whatever comes, we’ll not be evicted.”

“Mother,” said the young man, “you never spoke the word, so far as I know, that wasn’t true, but I dunno how it’ll be this time. We’ve been workin’ all we can and we only just manage to pay the rent and live, and here’s the summer over and the winter coming, and how will we pay the rent then?”

The mother did not answer this question directly. She began talking in a way that did not seem to have anything to do with the rent, though it really had something to do with it, in her own mind, and perhaps in her

son's mind too.

“It's over-tired that you are with your hard day's work, Shaun,” she said, “and that and seeing Kitty so tired, too, has maybe made you look at things a little worse than they are. We've never been so bad off as many of our neighbors; you know that. And yet I know it's been worse of late and harder for you than it might have been, and you can't remember the better times that our family had, and that's why you forget that the times were ever better. No, you wasn't born then, but the time was when good luck seemed to follow your father and me everywhere and always. Yes, and the good luck has not all left us yet, though we had the bad luck to lose your father so long ago. We could not hope to be rich or happy while the whole country was in such distress as it's been sometimes, yet there were always many that were worse off than we, and when I think of those days of '47 and '48 it makes the sorrows seem light that we're suffering now. And I always know that whatever comes, there'll be some good for me and mine while I live. I've told you how I know that, but you always forget, and I must tell you again.”

They had not forgotten. They knew the story that was coming by heart, but they knew that the old woman liked to tell it, so they let her go on and said not a word.

For a little while, too, the old woman said not a word. She sat with her eyes closed, and smiling, as if she were in a dream. Then she began to speak softly, as if she were still only just waking out of a dream. “Blessed days there were,” she said—“blessed days for Ireland once—long ago—many hundreds of years. O'Donoghue—it was he was the good King, and happy were his people. A fierce warrior he was to guard them from their enemies, and a just ruler to those who minded his laws. It was in the West that he ruled, by the beautiful Lakes of Killarney. The rich and the poor among his people were alike in one thing—they all had justice. He punished even his own son when he did wrong, as if he had been a poor man and a stranger.

“He gave grand feasts to his friends, and the greatest and the best men of all Erin came to sit at his table and to hear the wise words that he spoke. And the greatest bards of all Erin came to sing before him and his guests of the brave deeds of the heroes of old days and of the greatness and the goodness of O'Donoghue himself. At one of these feasts, after a bard had been singing of the noble days of Erin long ago, O'Donoghue began to speak of the years that were to come for Ireland. He told of much good and of much evil. He told how true and brave and noble men would live and work and fight and die for their country, and how cowards would betray her. He

told of glory and he told of shame. He spoke of riches and honor, and poetry and beauty; he spoke of want and disgrace, and degradation and sorrow.

“Those who sat at his table listened to him in wonder. Sometimes their hearts swelled with pride at the noble lives and deeds of those who were to come after them, sometimes they wept at the sufferings that their children were to feel, and sometimes they hid their faces from each other in shame at the tales of cowardice and of treachery.

“As he finished speaking he rose from the table, crossed the hall, and walked out at the door and down to the shore of the lake. The others followed him and watched him, full of wonder. They saw him go to the edge of the lake and then walk out upon it, as if the water had been firm ground under his feet. He walked far and far out on the bright lake as they stood and gazed at him. Then he turned toward them, he waved his hand in farewell, and he was gone. They saw him no more.”

The old woman paused for a moment and the dreaming look came back to her face. Then she went on. “They saw him no more—but others saw him—and I have seen him. Every year, on the 1st of May, just as the sun is rising, he rides across the lake on his beautiful white horse. He is not always seen, but sometimes a few can see him. And it always brings good luck to see O’Donoghue riding across the lake on May morning. And I saw him.”

Again there was a pause, but she had no look of dreaming now. Her eyes were open and she seemed to be looking at something wonderful and beautiful that was far off. Slowly and softly she began speaking again. “I was a girl then. My father lived by the Lakes of Killarney. On that May morning I was standing at the door as the sun was rising. I was looking out upon the lake, far away to the east. The first that I saw was that the water, far off toward the sun, was ruffled, and then all at once a great, white-crested wave rose, as if a strong wind had struck the water, only all the air was still, and no wind ever raises such a wave as that on the lake. The wave came swiftly toward me, and I drew back, in a kind of dread, though I knew that it could not reach me where I stood. But still I looked—and then I saw him.

“Through the flying water and foam and mist I saw the old King, on his white horse, following the great wave across the lake. The sun made all his armor gleam like the silver of the lake itself, and the plume of his helmet streamed away behind him like the spray that a strong wind blows back from the crest of a breaker. After him came a train of glowing, beautiful forms—spirits of the lake or of the air, or some of the Good People—I do not

know. They wore soft, flowing garments, that were like the morning mists; they carried chains of pearls and they scattered other pearls about them, that glistened like the drops of a shower when the sun is shining through it. They had garlands of flowers, and they plucked the flowers out and threw them high in the air, so that they fell before the King. They looked like flecks of foam from the waves, turned rosy and violet by the rising sun, but they were flowers. And there was a sound of sweet, soft music, like harps and mellow horns.

“The King and his train came nearer and I saw them plainer, and the music sounded louder. Then they passed me and moved far away again on the lake. The sight of them grew dim and the music grew faint, and I strained my eyes and my ears for the last of them, and they were gone. Then I could move and speak and breathe again, for it had seemed to me that I could not do any one of these things while the King was passing, and I knew that I had seen O’Donoghue.”

The old woman stopped, as if the story were ended, but the younger people did not speak, for they knew that she had something else to tell. “O’Donoghue had passed and was gone,” she said, “but he always leaves good luck behind him, and he left the good luck with me. That summer some rich young ladies came from Dublin to see the Lakes of Killarney. They heard the story of O’Donoghue, and the people told them that I was the last who had seen him. They came to my father’s house and asked me to tell them what I had seen. They seemed pleased with what I told them, or with something that they saw in me, and they asked my father to let them take me back to the city with them, for a lady’s maid. He did not like to let me go, but they said that they would pay me well and would have me taught better than I could be at home. He was poor, there were others at home who needed all that he could earn, I wished to go, and at last he said I might.

“So I went to Dublin and lived in a grand house, among grand people. I tried to do my duties well, and they were kind to me. They kept the promise that they had made to my father. They gave me books and allowed me time to study them, and they helped me in things that I could not well have learned by myself, even with the books. I was quick at study, and in the little time that I had, I learned all that I could. Three times they took me to London with them, and I saw still grander people and grander life.

“Those were happy days, but happier came. Your father came, Shaun. He was a servant of the family, like myself—a coachman. But he was wiser than I, and he talked with me and showed me that there was something better for us than to be servants always. We saved all the money that we could, and when we had enough we

came here, where your father had lived before, and took a little farm. The luck of O'Donoghue was always with us. We had a good landlord, who asked a fair rent. We both worked hard, we saved more money and took more land, and all our neighbors thought that we were prosperous, and so we were.

“Then came '47. Nobody could be prosperous then. Nobody that had a heart in him at all could even keep what he had saved then. What we had and what our neighbors had belonged to all, and little enough there was of it. It is well for you young people to talk of these times being hard. Harder than some they may be, but good and easy compared with those days of '47 and '48. You talk of injustice and wrong to Ireland! What think you of those times, when every day great ships sailed away from Ireland loaded down with food—corn and bacon, and beef and butter—and Ireland's own people left without the bit of food to keep the life in them? All summer long was the horrible wet weather, and the potatoes rotting in the ground before they'd be ripe, and never fit to eat. To add to all that was the fever, that killed its thousands, and then the cold. And when the days came again that the crops would grow, many and many of the people were so weak with the hunger and the sickness that they could not work in the fields. Ah! and you call these hard times!

“Those were the bad days for Ireland, those days of '47. Not even the luck of O'Donoghue could make us prosper or give us comforts then. But we lived through the time, as many others did. The poor helped those who were poorer than themselves; the sick tended those who were sicker; the cold gave clothes and fire to those who were colder. The little money that we had saved helped us and some of our neighbors. And we lived through it all.

“Better times came, though never again so good as the old. We worked again and we saved a trifle. Then you were born to us, John. We had a worse landlord now. He was of the kind that cared nothing for his tenants and nothing for his land, but to get the last penny off it. The rent was raised, and we never could have paid it but for the care and the skill and the hard work of your father. And then, John, you know that when you were hardly old enough to take his place with the work, let alone knowing how to work as well as he, he died and left us—Heaven rest his soul!”

For a long time the old woman said no more, and neither of the others spoke. Then she said: “John, the country is in trouble enough and the times are hard enough for you and for Kitty, here, and for all of us, I know. But don't be cast down. There have been worse days than these; there have been better days, too, and there will be

better again.”

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