THE IRISH PACKET

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"Taken at the Flood."

A Christmas Eve Episode.

By WINIFRED M. PATTON.

"Are you in there, Larry?"

Larry, who was sitting at the desk in the end of the shop, staring gloomily at nothing, lost his dejected air in an instant, and jumped off the stool with joyful alacrity.

"It's you, Nannie," he said, thrusting his curly head across the counter.

"Sure enough it is," said Nannie. "What news have you got for me, Larry? What did my mother say to you at all? I'm dying to hear the whole story."

Larry's gloom came back on him in a modified form. He had made his way round the counter by this time, and had hidden Nannie's two small hands in a huge grip.

"She said just what I thought she would say—no more and no less," said Larry. "She likes me very well in a general sort of way, but not in the least as a son-in-law. What right has the like of me to lift my eyes to her only daughter, the richest girl in the town and the handsomest in the county? She thinks it the height of presumption—but how could I see you and not fall in love with you, Nannie? I'd rather presume than be such a stupid, blind fool as that! The end of the story is that I've been given notice to quit, and the Widow Casey's grocery business will want a new manager a week from to-day."

"Larry, you big goose; it's not the end of the story, it's only the first chapter," said Nannie, her blue eyes refusing to lose their joy. "Of course my mother is a very important person, and we've got to win her consent—by fair means or otherwise—but I'm the chief person, Larry Sheridan, and I'm on your side, all there is of me."

"But there's so very little of you, Nannie," broke in Larry, his mischievous good-humour once again in the ascendant; "much good you would be in a fight! I've thought of a plan myself that will settle your mother beautifully, if you'll only agree to it. Let you and me go over and drown ourselves in the river—go to the bottom and stay there, locked in each other's arms. Think what a fine sensational ending that would be to the story! We'd have at least half a column of poetry in the *Argus* bewailing our sad fates, and the Ballybawn fife and drum band would play a lament at the funeral. Your mother would never survive it."

"But where would the benefit to us come in?" said Nannie. "That's the worst of you, Larry—you haven't an ounce of sense. It's well you have me to look after you. Besides, you would have to be carrying water to the river for a week before there would be enough in it to drown us comfortably, and what do you suppose my mother would be up to in the meantime? We've got to find a more attractive scheme than that somehow."

"I'm thinking of going to America at the end of the week, Nan," said Larry, almost in a whisper, his face grown suddenly grave again.

Nannie grew white, and turned a startled gaze on him, her blue eyes darkening with pain and surprise.

Larry touched her bright hair caressingly.

"It's the best to do, sthoreen," he said softly. "I've thought it all out many a time, and it always comes to that in the end. There has been a good chance waiting for me there this long while back, but I couldn't tear myself away from you. But now that I must leave you, it's there I'll go, and maybe you'll wait for me till I bring you back the money. Will you wait for me, sweetheart?"

"No!" said Nannie passionately. "I will not wait! I won't let you go to America, and wait here eating my heart out, and letting the years come between us. You wouldn't be the same when you came back—you know you wouldn't! You would never again be my own old Larry, you would be a hard-eyed, money-grubbing stranger. That's what America does for people. The nicer you are when you go the more it changes you. Or, if you do go, I'll go too, and then as you get hard and horrible, I'll be the same, and neither of us will think the other has changed a bit. That's what we'll do!"

Her voice broke into a sob at the end, and she hid her face in the convenient shelter of Larry's coat-sleeve.

"Now, Nannie, my heart's treasure, be reasonable," said Larry. "Sure you know there's no chance for a boy in Ireland. America won't hurt me so long as I have your sweet face in my thoughts, and anyway I won't stay long enough to get badly damaged. I'll only wait till I have enough money to satisfy your mother, and then I'll be back for good and all."

"What do we want of money?" said Nannie, lifting her tearful face impatiently. "We're young and strong, both of us, and we can work for all we need here together in Ireland. It's better to be poor and happy in Ireland than rich and miserable anywhere else—now, isn't it, Larry?"

"You're always great at the logic, Nannie," said Larry, "so I won't contradict you. But it's better to be comfortable and happy in Ireland than poor and miserable there, isn't it? And it's nicer to have blue silk blouses—eh, Nannie!—than to go ragged and shabby. You see, money comes in very handy sometimes, so we can't despise it altogether."

Nannie smiled unwillingly as she glanced at the blouse, the latest dream in that line which she had purchased to bewilder and delight the inhabitants of Ballybawn. Then she looked up at Larry, and laughed.

"I might lay in a very big stock before the wedding," she said, "and then they would last me till I am old and ugly, and such vanities become undesirable. But really and truly, Larry, I won't let you go to America, so

don't say another word about it. You know perfectly well my mother can't get on without you, and you won't be gone two days before she'll write imploring you to come back. We'll just wait a bit, and see what turns up."

She drew herself away from Larry, and regarded him for some minutes with a critical scrutiny. Then she shook her head at him till the little shining rings of her hair went dancing over her eyes.

"I'm ashamed of you, Larry Sheridan," she said. "You're not good for much after all. If I were as big and handsome as you, indeed I wouldn't let a woman say 'no' to me. Can't you coax and humbug my mother the way you did me?"

"You see, you're so different," said Larry. "Your mother doesn't take after you the least bit in the world—more's the pity! You're not going, Nannie, are you? Sure I've hardly seen you at all."

"You must get used to not seeing me if you're thinking of going to America," said Nannie, with a provoking smile, and as she vanished round the corner her mother entered the shop by another door.

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The days that followed were made more anxious and uncomfortable to Larry and Nannie by the weather. Though it was Christmas time there was pouring rain all day and every day—no chance now of stolen meetings down by the river, or moonlit rambles by the sea. There was nothing but heavy, hopeless rain; and on the Saturday Larry was to go.

At first the rain was merely an annoyance, and some days elapsed before it assumed the character of a menace. The river, that was the pride and glory of Ballybawn, flowed past Mrs. Casey's, and in wet weather crept sometimes very close. She had still a vivid recollection of the night, long years ago, when the mill dam had burst and flung itself into the flooded river, and she and her husband had been roused from sleep to find the water rushing through their house.

Now, as the river got higher, and the rain continued, Mrs. Casey's manner towards Larry insensibly assumed a new graciousness. In times of stress and danger it is useful to have a strong man about the place.

On the day when the catastrophe occurred—it was Christmas Eve—it chanced that Nannie had ventured out to visit friends some miles away, and was not expected back that night. After the shop was closed and the shutters put up, Larry and Mrs. Casey remained, keeping an anxious watch on the river. When at last their fears were justified, and the water swept up round them and flooded their shop, comparatively little damage was done, as Larry had taken out of harm's way whatever perishable goods could be removed.

From one end of the shop a long passage and a flight of steps led down to a big kitchen, which was used by Mrs. Casey as a storeroom for extra goods. Under Larry's supervision, the place had been cleared, until only a few empty packing-cases remained in it. When the flood came, Mrs. Casey ran down to have a look for herself and see that all was right. Water was flowing along the passage and down the steps, but no anticipation of danger came to her. As she reached the kitchen the volume of the river was suddenly augmented, and the increasing flood nearly swept her off her feet. She lost her presence of mind suddenly and completely. She clambered up on a big packing-case, and called for Larry at the top of her voice.

After some minutes, Larry heard and hurried down—by this time the flood was still higher. On the somewhat unsteady packing-case stood Mrs. Casey—the destroyer of his hopes and the enemy of his happiness—giving vent to prayers and exclamations as the box wobbled beneath her. When Larry appeared she gave a cry of relief and delight.

"Larry, darlin', is that you?" she called out to him. "I thought my days in this world were done. Take me out of this for the love o' God before I'm drowned entirely."

"Will you let me marry Nannie, Mrs. Casey?" said Larry, pausing on the threshold.

"I won't!" snapped Mrs. Casey. "Is this a time for foolery an' nonsense? I've told you already to put Nannie out of your head, an' I'll tell you again if you like."

The box gave a sudden lurch, and Mrs. Casey shrieked.

"Larry, save me!" she cried wildly, as Larry showed signs of departure. "Will you leave me here to drown, you heartless villain? Ah, Larry abagur, you won't desert me? I've nobody but you to look to now."

"Will you let me marry Nannie, Mrs. Casey?" said Larry. "I'd sooner risk my life for a relation nor a stranger."

"I'll die first!" said Mrs. Casey.

"All right," said Larry, cheerfully. "I can marry her afterwards without any bother."

The box gave another lurch, and Mrs. Casey shrieked again.

"Will you let me marry Nannie, Mrs. Casey?" asked Larry.

"Get me out of this, an' you may marry the whole town!" said Mrs. Casey, vehemently.

Larry took her in his arms, and bore her triumphantly to safety. Then he apologised for his behaviour, but his eyes were laughing at her all the time.

Mrs. Casey looked at him wrathfully—with a twinkle in the corner of her eye.

"I suppose I must keep to my promise," she said, "though many a woman wouldn't. But I'll pay you off the whole score when I'm your mother-in-law, Larry, my boy!"

WINIFRED M. PATTON.

OUR NEW PRIZE COMPETITION.

The Editor offers the following prizes:—

For the best original anecdote, jest or epigram (in prose or verse)—

First Prize—Two Guineas.

Second Prize—One Guinea.

Each contribution to have attached to it a coupon from the cover of this issue of The Irish Packet, and to be in by the 12th of January.

A selection of the contributions considered best by the Editor will be published in The Irish Packet; also, in the same number, a voting paper, which each reader is invited to return with the titles of the twelve contributions which he considers best, set down in what he judges to be the order of their merit.

The Prizes as above, will be awarded as the votes of our readers may decide, and a further prize of two guineas will be given to the particular reader whose vote most nearly corresponds with the actual result of the voting. Each reader may send in as many voting papers as he pleases.

All contributions in the competition will become the property of The Irish Packet.

"GOD GIVE YOU JOY THESE CHRISTMAS TIMES."

God give you joy these Christmas times;
Gentles, listen to our rhymes.
Fleecy snow-clouds now are sailing
In the chill and clear moonlight,
And the wintry wind is wailing
To the ear of lonely Night.
Snow-drifts on the roofs lie heavy,
Ice-drops glisten from the eaves;
Boughs in autumn that were leafy
Now are clad with snow-born leaves.
God give you joy these Christmas times;
Gentles, listen to our rhymes.

Hark! from out the ivied steeple
Clangs the jocund peal of bells,
Waves of sound like billows' ripple
On the night in solemn swells.
See, with merry pipe and tabor,
At your doors we play and sing;
Listen to our grateful labour,
Deign to hear our carolling.
God give you joy these Christmas times;
Gentles, listen to our rhymes.

We have songs of pride and glory
For the ear of lord and knight;
We can sing a true-love story
To the heart of maiden bright;
We have ditties sweetly tender
That will make you pleased tho' sad;
Deftly we know how to render
Eyes more bright and hearts more glad.
God give you joy these Christmas times;
Gentles, listen to our rhymes.

Lusty youth and manhood able,
Matrons gentle, maidens dear,
Crippled age and childhood feeble,
Each and all our carols hear;
At this festive time, to cheer you,
We have culled the sweetest lays;
Kindly call us to come near you,
Yield us largesse, yield us praise.
God give you joy these Christmas times;
Gentles, listen to our rhymes.

—John Francis Waller.