OUR IRISH STORIES.

THE BIG FIRE AT DRUMHINCH.

By W. W. L. PATRICK.

It was a May morning with a brilliant sun, a glorious sky, and the birds gone mad with joy. Their gladness flashed to the blue heaven in sweet, wild notes. They stirred the dreamy silence of the old orchard at Drumhinch with their rapturous tumult. Their joy grew so loud and insistent that it pierced through the barrenness of the old farm, could be heard by the old man sitting there in gloomy meditation. He raised his down-bent head, and gazed in a kind of dull pain at the flashing of the glad wings above him, at the wonder of blossom that made earth a bridal bower, and the gleam of blue sky that smiled on things unseen. And then he felt himself an outcast from all this exuberant happiness—what part had such as he in Nature's glad awakening? The birds had their place, right enough; they were a fitting part of the beautiful drama, and their jubilant delight waked a thrill of tenderness within him.

He looked up at them and spoke softly:

"God love ye, wee things!" he said; "it's you has the happy time, an' nothin' to trouble ye.

Then, in his heart, he looked back through memory to long-dead joys, the rapture of his own lost youth. The face of his dead wife smiled on him again. From day he had met her—the one love of his life—until the day he laid her in the little churchyard. He had gone on with her, he thought, in a world without sunshine around him. She met the troubles of life with a prayer in her heart and a song on her lips, and a courage that never failed. But she was gone now, and he was lonely and old, and the cares of life had broken his spirit. All had been in vain—ceaseless, uncomplaining toil, and he was no nearer rest now than he had ever been. He must still work and strive to pay the rent, and keep the roof over his head, to save himself and little Bride from the workhouse. There was no strong son to take the burden from his failing hands—his only daughter was fair and fragile as a lily flower.

With a sigh the old man left his dreaming, and rose to take up the day's work. As he passed through the yard, the smoke of the burning barn drifted in his face. The clock of smoke that made a thick black cloud in the clear air.

"Dan's chimney's on fire; it will clean away the soot for him if it does no mischief into the bargain," he thought; and then, as a sudden, strange idea flashed on him, he stood stock still staring at the smoke.

"What was it he had heard yesterday about a fire in the town—an insurance fire," he had heard it called—"where some merchant's old premises had been burned, and the heavy insurance money would soon re-build them in great splendour. It might have been said of the man, but who would have thought of a chance like this?"

Manus O'Keane was an honest soul. He had never wronged man, woman, or child, yet now his heart was filled with unholy delight as he thought of the fraud he could so easily accomplish. All his buildings were insured, and evidently it would be simple work to receive the worthless barn at the corner, and get a fine sum in compensation—a sum that would relieve his anxieties, and give winsome Bride some of the pleasures that other young girls enjoyed. The thought seemed to take years off his life. His heart leaped when he remembered excited and frightened pleasure a small boy finds in robbing an orchard.

It was about twelve o'clock that night when a belated wayfarer woke up the inhabitants of the pretty village near Drumhinch with the news that Manus O'Keane's place was on fire, and the black smoke was well up in the air. It was not many minutes till the whole population—man, woman, and child—was on its way to Drumhinch. The babies, who could neither walk nor toddle, were carried in willing arms, for in such a quiet neighbourhood a big fire was a sensational event, and not one was so far from the scene that reached, it seemed that some discount must be taken off the information. Instead of the majestic blaze that had been reported, the fire revealed itself as a weakly flame feebly lighting the interior of the barn. Most of the visitors came near, however, and they found some straw, kindly placed within its reach by Manus, and was soon blazing in a very creditable and quite impressive manner. Manus himself stood inside the barn looking dazed and bewildered, and evidently incapable of taking any measures to avert the threatened danger. An impromptu fire brigade was quickly formed, and the post of command taken by old Dan Hegarty, who considered himself entitled to it by virtue of being Manus O'Keane's nearest neighbour and oldest friend. If Dan had only known it, he was indirectly responsible for all the excitement, since it was his own smoky chimney that had conveyed the dire suggestion to a hitherto guileless mind.

Old Dan immediately justified his assumption of supreme authority. "Run, weans dear, an' gather up all the buckets and spades you can find about the place," he cried, with a dignified wave of his hand in the direction of the dark and quiet dwelling. "We must do men's work this night, an' save our own friends a house an' property from destruction."

"Where'll we get the water?" shouted a boy's shrill voice.

"There's a pump in the yard by the back doore, an' wee well in the garden, beside the big apple-three. Run along, now, Sonny, an' work like a right wee man," said Dan, with kindly encouragement, and all the youngsters scampered off with wild shouts.

There was such a throng of busy hands about the little pump that it was some minutes before any result of their labours appeared. At last a big man, with a push of his long arm, cleared away most of the rubbish and forcibly elected himself pump-driver-in-chief. In the meantime buckets and vessels of every description were being filled at the well in the garden, and carried to the scene of destruction as quickly as the press of workers would permit. But the burning barn old Dan was doing two men's work, his gentle face grim with determination, and lighted with heroic resolve. He had the spirit of heroes and martyrs within him, though his long, uneventful life it had never before been called into active evidence. Even the weather seemed unfavourable—a wet, cloudy day, but the pain was disregarded as he tugged and strove to get out into safety the cart and other miscellaneous articles of property that were threatened by the flames. They were worth very little, and it had been Manus O'Keane's fortune, rather than his misfortune. Even now they figured in a neat list that was ready for dispatch to the insurance company.

In the midst of Dan's labours he looked up, to find Manus standing beside him. Dan's face was grim and perspiring, but his smile is sometimes heavenly in its kindness as he gazed at his old friend.

"Don't be afraid, Manus Achree; we'll not let you suffer," he said, tenderly. "Don't fret yerself, Alanna; there's not much more nor a ha'porth o' damage done yet, an' we'll have the fire out in no time."

"Get a galterer for a bit."

"Come out o' there, man, for God's sake, if ye don't want to get your dugs singed, and your hair badly-combed irritation; he could cheerfully have shaken old Dan. "What does the like o' you want, workin' among a crowd o' boys? Have some regard for your age, man, an' don't be makin' a fool o' yerself!"

Dan looked at him for a moment in surprised, and then angrily. "Pah! I'd no use a galterer," he thought to himself. "He's clean distracted wi' all the noise an' fret, an' doesn't make a word he's sayin'(). It's a quare shock to the ould celturth, this misfortune happenin'."

In the midst of Dan's kindly concern, a bucketful of cooling water was thrown on him by a turning angry. He met the petulant gaze of little Tommy Mullan, a very diminutive boy, with the most angelic face and the most mischievous disposition to be found in two barrows. It was not the first drenching Dan had received that night, and he was getting tired of the anecdotes no longer appeared quite accidental. The hard work, pain and discomfort were beginning to tell upon his temper.

"Mind yourself, Sonny," he said, sharply. "If that's all ye can do ye can be better off runnin' or play yerself somewhere else. We've no need for ye here.

Tommy's adoring mother caught the words, and flamed into hot wrath. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dan Hegarty," she said, "abusing the poor innocent man in that manner, an' calling the lad a thief. There are all the lads ye have in ye! Niver mind him, Tommy, son; ye're doin' just gran', and yer da'll be quare an' proud when I tell him about it."

As he moved away, Tommy fixed a sad, pathetic gaze on old Dan Hegarty, and then disappeared, meeting the reproach of the great, beautiful, blue eyes, felt his conscience heavy with crime. Tommy was not the only boy who was finding a harvest of mischievous amusement in the Drumhinch fire, but his angelic expression was his own especial gift, and so his belief was not to be rivaled by the more commonplace features of his friends.

The last spark had been extinguished with a lavish expenditure of energy and water; and as the neighbours repeatedly assured old Manus, "not a morsel o' damage done thus a while an hour's work in the town, but don't be so frightenin' the work so we can't get right to themselves away, but at last.
they had all gone; and Drumahinch, in its moonlight splendour, was left to the father and daughter.

Bridie's sweet face was flushed with a vivid colour, and her eyes held a deep and tender light. Manus might have guessed the reason had he seen two people in earnest conversation in a quiet corner of the moonlit garden, when the excitement was at its height, and not a gossip had an eye or ear to spare. But Manus had seen nothing now, as Bridie led him gently within the house, and sent him off to bed.

There was not much sleep for Manus before the morning dawned. A guilty conscience was an unusual companion for him, and he did not appreciate its strange society. He rose at last from a bad dream in which he found himself, guilty and friendless, abandoned to eternal despair. With the horror of it still upon him, he wandered out into the garden. Here the sun was brilliant and the world as fair as on yesterday, and the joy of the morning swept his troubles from the old man's heart. In a wave of realisation, he remembered that his dishonest design had been frustrated; and that, in actual fact at least, he was guiltless of all harm. He lifted his eyes to the bright skies and laughed aloud—a laugh of relief and gladness that trembled into the weakness of tears, the pathetic tears of old age.

It was then that Dan Hegarty came across him on his way to the house to make a neighbourly call.

Dan laid a sympathetic hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"Manus achree, don't be grievin' like that!" he said. "Sure the mischief is but little, after all, an' not worth distressin' yerself about."

Manus turned to him, almost fiercely.

"I'm an honest man, Dan Hegarty! I'm an honest man!" he said, a note of defiance in his quavering tones.

"Deed, throth, ye are that!" said Dan. "Who iver doubted it? Sure we all know you're as honest a sowl an' as decent a crethur as iver the good Lord made. 'Deed, Manus, ye were aye a credit to your Maker—an' that's more nor could be said for most of us!"