

OUR IRISH STORIES.

THE BIG FIRE AT DRUMAHINCH.

BY WINIFRED PATTON.

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 Drumahinch with their rapturous tumult. Their joy grew so loud and insistent that it pierced through his load of trouble to the sad heart of 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 him through the apple-boughs. In his care and gloom 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 woke 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, with a new softness 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 the day he had met her—the one love of his life—until the day he laid her in the little churchyard, life had gone on wings for him. Her cheery face and tender heart had made sunshine around her. 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 his days had been spent in 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 Bridie from the workhouse. There was no strong son to take the burden from his failing hands—his only living child was Bridie, 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 smoky chimney caught his eye—a volume 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 was a fine way of making money, somebody had said.

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—what could be simpler than to fire the old worthless barn at the corner, and get a fine sum in compensation—a sum that would relieve his anxieties, and give winsome Bridie some of the pleasures that other young girls enjoyed. The thought seemed to take years off his life. In its contemplation, he experienced the 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 Drumahinch with the news that Manus O'Keane's place was on fire, and the blaze could be seen ten miles away. It was not many minutes till the whole population—man, woman, and child—was on its way to Drumahinch. The babies, who could neither walk nor toddle, were carried in willing arms, for in such a quiet neighbourhood a big fire was a spectacle not to be missed. When the scene of the conflagration was 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 old barn, and not threatening the homestead. As the foremost of the visitors came near, however, the fire 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 disaster.

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 an' cans ye can find about the place," he commanded, 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 ould friend's house an' property from destruction."

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

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

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 strong arm, cleared away most of the rival aspirants, and forcibly elected himself pumper-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.

Inside 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 during his long, uneventful life it had never before been called into active evidence. His limbs had been tortured with rheumatism for many a weary 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 cost Manus much trouble to get them in there that evening. 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 grimy and perspiring, but his smile had something heavenly in its kindness as he caught sight of his old friend.

"Don't be afear'd, Manus Achree; we'll not let you suffer," he said, tenderly. "Don't fret yerself, Alanna; there's not much more nor a ha'p'arth o' damage done yet, an' we'll have the fire out in no time. Just you take a wee danderer roun' for a bit."

"Come out o' there, man dear, if ye don't want to get your death," said Manus, with badly-concealed 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 pained surprise, and then quietly resumed his work. "Poor ould Manus!" he thought to himself. "He's clean distracted wi' all the noise an' fret, an' doesn't mane a word he's sayin'. It's a quare shock to the ould crethur, this misfortunate happenin'."

In the midst of Dan's kindly communings a bucketful of cold water washed over him; and, turning round angrily, he met the penitent gaze of little Tommy Mullan, a very diminutive boy, with the most angelic face and the most mischievous disposition to be found in two baronies. It was not the first drenching Dan had received that night, and he was getting tired of it. The accidents 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 had better run off an' play yerself somewhere else. We have 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, "abusin' the poor innocent wean in that manner, an' him doin' all he can to help ye! That's all the gratitude 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; and that delinquent, 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 Drumahinch fire, but his angelic expression was his own especial gift, even as his beauty was not to be rivalled 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 that a wheen hour's work in the mornin' wouldn't put right." The workers seemed reluctant to tear 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, and he noticed 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 dacent 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 !"