

_____ TIME AND TIDE. _____

By

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On a lonely strip of the Derry coast, with the gray waters of Lough Foyle surging almost at their feet, a man and a woman were walking and talking together. It was a wild winter evening, snowing, blowing, and bitterly cold- a sample of the weather vouchsafed to northern Ireland during a great part of the year. On one side of the lonely wayfarers stretched the embankment, hiding from their gaze the low-lying country it protected from the greedy clutch of the sea. On the other side lay the wide expanse of sullen, restless water, always chafing at the barrier that held it from its prey, and at high tides threatening to overleap the puny obstacle and win its own again. A broad tract of land, now covered with fields and dwellings, had once belonged to the sea, and had, by immense labour and pains, been reclaimed and made productive. On stormy winter nights, when the winds howled across the land and the wild rains followed them, the people would shiver in their beds, and pray for morning. Their presence there was an insult to the relentless power they had displaced, and the rush of every incoming tide held a menace to their safety.

As the man and the woman paced along, the latter met the force of the wind with a certain defiant pride in her upright carriage and firm, strong step. There was no finer woman than Mary McDonnell in all that countryside, and she knew it herself- none better- and gave thanks for it every day of her life. Jamsie² Mullan knew it too, and₁

his hopes, that budded and bloomed when out of her sight, shrivelled again when he met her, and contrasted her splendid presence with his physical insignificance. Mary McDonnell could have carried off Jamesie in one of her strong arms, and he knew it, poor man, and the knowledge hampered him in his wooing.

Jamesie owned a snug little farm in a sheltered nook among the hills, and Mary was the sole and proud possessor of a diminutive house and a wee bit of land near the sea. To Jamesie the advantages of his cosy mountain home were never more apparent than on the wild winter evenings when the sea, with its insolent demands and fierce threats, flung itself against the frail embankment. Mary, unfortunately, possessed different tastes, and found an exhilarating delight in storm and danger, a defiant rapture in measuring her strength and endurance against the power of wind and wave.

On this particular evening, Jamesie was pleading his cause with all the eloquence at his command. He made a creditable effort, taking into account the difficulties that beset him. He had not the Viking nature of his lady-love, and preferred a sheltered fireside to an exhausting struggle with the riotous powers of wind and sea. The wind that Mary defied with such haughty grace made poor Jamesie totter on his feet, and sent his long coat tails flapping here and there with an irresistibly ludicrous effect. Mary's warm shawl, firmly wound about her figure, only clung in closer folds as the wind beat about her supple form.

Above the howl of the wind Jamesie's voice came fitfully, protesting and entreating.

" Now, just say you'll marry me, Mary agra, an' make me the proudest man from here to Inishowen," he pleaded.

"Wisha, Jamesie," broke in Mary, "it's not so very proud ye would be, seein' it's more nor likely you're the only man between yourself and Inishowen this blessed minute- unless the wheen o' poor crethurs who may be out at the fishin', may God protect them this night!"

"Amen," said Jamesie.

There was a brief silence and then he spoke again, rather bitterly.

"It's easy to mock me, Mary, an' I suppose I deserve nothin' betther, seein' the way I've put myself under your feet this many a day. I have a lonely house but, if I have, you have another, and the day might come when you'd welcome an honest man to care for ye, an' weeshy childre to play about your knees."

" What you say is thrue enough, Jamesie Mullan," said Mary, "an' it's a lonely house I'll have a long time before I take up wi' a bit of a man I could carry home in my pocket. As for the childre, I tell ye- an' well ye know it anyway- there's not a wane for twenty mile round but's as fond of me as of its own mother. I'll niver be a lonely woman while any poor childre is left in the country. "Why, you're only a wean yourself by the side of me, Jamesie son," she finished, looking down at him with a provokingly good-humoured smile.

Jamesie was accustomed to rebuffs and humiliation where Mary was in question, and they only seemed to make him more persistent in his efforts to win her favour.

"If ye just seen the wee house, Mary," he said coaxingly. "It's the neatest an' snuggest ye iver clapped an eye on. It would be a nice change to be up in the hills sometimes, among the gorse an' the blossoms, an' the birds singin' songs at your windy before ye got up in the mornin'. Of coorse ye could come here when ye wanted, but I'm thinking ye would soon take to the hills. An' sure if I'm not much of a man by the side of you, ye might do worse wi' many another. I'm religious an' sober, an' hard-working, an' I'd work the skin off my bones for you."

"I hope ye won't need to do that," said Mary. "I'm quite well able to work for myself, an' I don't see why you need fash yourself at all. I get on very well at the farmin', an' though you may despise the flat counthry, an' be frightened at the sea, they're both the very breath of life to me, an' I'll lave them for no man."

Jamesie sighed deeply, but attempted no reply. Mary turned to him again with an exasperating smile.

"I'll make ye wan promise, Jamesie," she said, "if that'll do ye. When the bank breaks, an' the sea laves me neither stick nor stone, I'll go up to your wee shanty an' mind it for you. But ye needn't be in a hurry gettin' ready for me."

Jamesie's doleful countenance brightened a little. "Well, a promise is aye a promise," he said "an' even a poor one is better nor none at all. I'll just bide my time an' hope for the best."

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It was some weeks later, and the wild weather seemed to promise

a likely fulfilment of Mary McDonnell's mocking promise. The bank had not yet broken, but after each day and night of high wind and angry sea the people looked with more anxious eyes at the threatened barrier.

Accustomed as dwellers in Derry have grown to angry elements, the night of the big storm of January 1903, will not soon be forgotten along the northern shores. With a furious wind lashing the high, incoming tide, and torrents of rain flooding the streams and drowning the fields, the people did not dare to go to sleep.

In her own lonely dwelling Mary McDonnell kept anxious vigil. The house strained and creaked in the grasp of the gale, and the fierce rain flung itself without pause against the windows. Mary knelt in the little kitchen, all alone, and through her prayers her ears were strained to catch the sounds of the tempest. The night was black and starless, the clouded heavens shewed nothing of light or hope, and the long dark hours dragged slowly on.

At last Mary could bear it no longer. The blood of turbulent ancestors surged in her veins, and made inaction unendurable. She wound a thick shawl about her and opened the door, but instantly, with a howl of triumph, the wind caught it from her, and flung it back against the wall. Using all her strength Mary pulled it forward and fastened the latch, leaving herself on the outside. It was nearly morning now, but the wintry dawn had not yet banished the darkness. For a moment, as the storm caught her, Mary staggered and gasped, then a fierce excitement seized her, and she pulled herself together for the combat. Her heart leaped with a wild joy as she

hurried down the lane, and the noise of the sea mingled more clearly with that of the wind. She came nearer to the embankment, and her joy was changed to consternation. The huge waves flung themselves against the earthen rampart, and, even while she gazed, the long resistance was overcome. Through a gap, soon enlarged, the angry waters rushed, and Mary fled as the waves swept round her feet. On from dwelling to dwelling she ran, and soon the warning cry was heard repeated on every side- "The bank's broke, the bank's broke!" The wind caught the shout, and hurried it in scattered echoes far up to the hills.

Soon the water had hidden the fields, and was deep in the dwellings. In the wild, dark, winter morning the people hastened away, making pathetic endeavours to save some treasured household articles. The frightened screaming of children mingled with the voices of the storm. The neighbours whose^{se} houses were higher, and out of danger, opened their doors to the refugees, and when the children were safely bestowed the parents went back to rescue what few belongings they could carry away. All the boats that could be found were brought into requisition, and many a heroic deed was done, unpraised and unregarded.

After the first alarm, Mary McDonnell hurried to the little house, two miles or more from her own, where old Richard Hegarty and his four grandchildren lived. Since the luckless summer day when the children's parents had gone out in a boat for their pleasure, and found a sudden grave, the old man had cared for the orphans. Mary

McDonnell and many another kindly neighbour helped him in his task, for no woman of his own kindred was left to give him aid.

Richard's house was low-lying and close to the sea, and when Mary came near she found that the waves had outrun her. The home of his youth would never again give the old man shelter. The sea had recaptured its own, and would hold it with greedy hand. Across the surging waves the white walls could be dimly seen. Mary shouted several times, but no reply came back. Then a faint answering call came from the height beyond, and running there she found the old grandfather drenched and shivering, with some children sobbing round him. In a dazed and nervous way he seemed to be trying to count them.

"Have you got them all safe, Richard?" asked Mary.

The old man turned to her appealingly. "Would ye count them, Mary alanna, for the love o' ^ggod" he said, "I'm a kin' o' moidhered wi' all the noise, an' my head's spinnin' roun' like a mill wheel."

"Where's wee Bridget?" said Mary.

The old man staggered as at a blow. "Lord ha' mercy on us, did I forget wee Bridget?" He rushed forward to cross the water again but Mary held him back.

"Is the boat gone?" she asked.

"Iverything's gone!" he screamed- "let me go for wee Bridget- would ye dhrown my own wee girl?"

Mar unwound her shawl and gave it to him. "Shelter the childre wi' that," she said, "an' wait here for me. I'll fetch ye wee Bridget."

As the old man took the shawl, Mary started on her way to the abandoned dwelling. A wide stretch of stormy water barred her way, and if she found it too deep for wading she must swim- there was nothing else to be done since the boat was gone and every moment precious. Even now little Bridget might be past succour.

There were few men in the townland who could have made their way across as quickly as did Mary. Her splendid physique and hard training stood her in good stead now. The house was reached triumphantly, and she fought her way through the little doorway. A pang smote through her as she gazed around inside- there was no trace here of Bridget, the little blue-eyed treasure of her heart, the child she loved above all else on earth. There was small hope for any helpless life abandoned to the mercy of these cruel, turbulent waves. The loft was still to be searched, so Mary stumbled forward and climbed the iron ladder that shook beneath her as she went. The top was gained, and there, fast asleep, a seraphic smile upon her baby face, lay the child of her desire.

With an exclamation of delight Mary seized the little one, and pressed her to her breast. Bridget nestled there contentedly, and uttered no cry as she was borne down the shaky ladder and into the whirling waters. The waves had grown deeper and stronger, and it would take all Mary's strength and skill to fight her way back to safety with the precious burden she had found.

Mary was not to return unaided however, for, making his way towards her with what speed he could, was Jamesie Mullan, managing a trim little boat as to the manner born. Pride and joy filled

Jamesie's heart as he hurried to rescue his lady-love. It was a pleasing and entire reversal of their usual positions. Mary caught sight of the boat, and in her surprise came near to dropping Bridget.

"Lord love us! Jamesie Mullan, is that you?" she said- "where in the world did you drop from?"

Jamesie wasted no time in replying, but brought the boat up close, and with some difficulty Mary and her charge got safely in. Then Jamesie looked ^{her} in the face manfully, though his heart thumped hard.

"Do ye mind your promise, Mary?" he asked- "I was past your house just now, an' it can hardly be seen for the wather. It'll be many a year- if iver- before ye get a crop off them fields again."

"Was that what brought ye down the night?" inquired Mary sternly.

"It was that, an' nothin' else," said Jamesie ^{valiantly,} ~~vlaiantly~~, "I thought ye might have some need for me at last."

"Jamesie, you're a good honest crethur, an' your heart's big if nothing else is," said Mary, between tears and laughter. "If ye want me ye can have me, an' I hope you'll niver rue your bargain. Ye won't if I can help it."

"I'll risk that," said Jamesie, with a smile of deep content.

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