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Our Little Irish Cousin



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INTRODUCTION

WITH the home of our Irish cousins we are not very familiar, but with our Irish cousins themselves we have a better acquaintance, for many of them have come over to settle in America, and they were among the bravest of the American troops in the World War. Of the part in the war taken by their people in Ireland we do not know so intimately, but we do know that they sent many men to France to help England defeat the Germans. They took our boys to their homes, and fed and clothed them; they nursed them back to health and strength, and by so doing the people of Ireland won their way into the hearts of the people of America.

Since the end of the war the bond between the two countries has grown even closer, for, under the leadership of America, the nations of Europe began to listen to Ireland's plea for home rule. This plea was backed up by active Revolution, as was our own struggle for independence. Finally the Imperial British Government, with the interests of the Irish people at heart, granted them Home Rule, to control their own destinies within the British Empire. Unfortunately, however, even this did not prove a complete solution of Ireland's difficulties, for some of the Irish people wished to remain attached to England, and enjoy the advantages of her wise and just rule. These were the people of Northern Ireland, called Ulster. So it has been agreed that they shall remain under English rule, leaving Home Rule for Southern Ireland.

Preface

YOU have often heard people speak of the Emerald Isle. When you have asked where it is and why it is so called, you have been told it is only another name for that small island to the northwest of the continent of Europe called Ireland.

The rains there fall so often, and the sun shines so warmly afterward, that Mother Nature is able to dress herself in the brightest and loveliest of colours. The people there are cheerful and good-natured. They are always ready to smile through their tears and see the funny side of every hardship.

And, alas! many things have happened to cause their tears to flow. They have suffered from poverty and hunger. Thousands of them have been forced to leave parents and friends, and seek a living within the kindly shores of America.

America is great, America is kind, they may think, but oh! for one look at the beautiful lakes of Killarney; oh! for a walk over the green fields and hills of the Emerald Isle. And oh! for the chance to gather a cluster of shamrock, the emblem of dear old Erin.

The little Irish cousin, who has never left her native land, may be poor, and sometimes ragged, but her heart is warm and tender, and she loves her country and her people with a love that will never change, no matter where she may travel or what fortune may befall her.

CHAPTER I

NORAH

"Londonderry, Cork, and Kerry,
Spell *that* to me without a K."

"CAN you do it now?" said Norah, laughing.

"Can I do it? Yes, easy enough, for I've heard the riddle before. T-h-a-t. There, Norah, you didn't catch me this time."

Molly laughed, too, as she spoke, and the little girls went on dressing their rag dolls.

They were great friends, these two children of Ireland, and, although they were ragged and dirty most of the time, and neither of them owned hats or shoes, they were happy as the day is long. And, when I say this, I mean one of the longest days of Ireland, which are very long indeed.

Norah had beautiful blue eyes and dark auburn hair. Her teeth were like pearls and her cheeks were rosy as the brightest sunset.

"She is a true daughter of Erin," thought her mother, as she looked at the child. "May God will that she grow up to be as good as she is beautiful," she said to herself, making the sign of the cross on her breast.

As for Molly, Norah's little playmate, her hair was black as night. Many other lads and lasses of Ireland have hair like that. It is because, long years ago, before even the Christ-child dwelt among men, Spaniards came to the west coast of Ireland and settled among the people there.

They gave their black hair and dark eyes to the people already in the country, most of whom were fair in face, hair, and eyes. So it happens that sometimes they now have dark hair and blue eyes, and sometimes light hair and dark eyes.

"Norah! Norah, darlint! Come and feed the pigs," called her mother. "They are that hungry they would eat the thatch off the house if they could reach it."

Norah jumped up, and running home as fast as her young feet could carry her, took the dish of mush from her mother's hands. She was instantly surrounded by a thin old mother pig and her ten little ones.

They were cunning little things when they were born, and Norah loved to hold them in her arms and pet them. But they were big enough now to root about in the mud, and the little girl held them no longer.

"Oof! oof!" grunted the mother pig. "Good! good!" was what she meant, of course, as she swallowed her supper as quickly as possible, and the ten babies followed her example.

Then Norah had to feed the ducks and chickens, and her precious goat.

"I love it. Oh, I love it, next to father and mother and the children," thought the little girl.

"How much it knows, and how gentle it is! And what should we do without the sweet, rich milk it gives us!" she said, turning to Molly, who was helping her in her work.

"It is a dear little creature" (Molly pronounced it *crayther*), "but I love our pet cow better. I suppose the reason is because it is ours. But, good night till ye, Norah. I must be after getting home."

Molly went running down the lane, while Norah entered the house.

House! It would hardly be fair to give it such a grand name. It was a small stone hut, not much taller than Norah's father, with a roof covered with mud and straw mixed together. Such a roof is said to be thatched.

There was only one window in the hut, and that was a small one. The door was divided across the middle, and the upper part of it stood wide open. Yet, as Norah stepped inside, the air was thick and heavy with smoke.

Over in one corner was a fireplace, and in it cakes of dried peat were slowly burning. It was the only kind of fuel Norah's mother had to burn, so it was no wonder the air of the room was smoky.

Do you know what peat is? In Norah's country there are many square miles of marshy land covered with moss and grasses. If it could speak to us, this land would tell a wonderful story.

"Ages and ages ago," it would say, "great forests of oak stood here. The trees grew large and strong. But the rain fell often and the air was very damp. This is the reason mosses and other plants gathered on the trunks and branches of the trees. They sent their roots into the moist bark and fed on the sap that should have nourished the trees.

"The great trees became weaker and weaker as the years passed away, until at last they sickened and died, and fell to the ground.

"Fir-trees began to grow in the places of the oaks. But they were treated in the same manner. Their life-giving sap was taken by a new growth of mosses. The fir-trees died, and added to the great masses of decaying wood which now covered the damp ground.

"Then plants grew up. But they met with the same fate as the trees.

"Thousands and thousands of years passed by. The beautiful forests that once covered the land were slowly changed into peat."

The peat-bogs are now so thick and heavy that the poor of Ireland can dig twenty-five feet into them and cut out squares of the solid peat.

After drying them in the air and sunshine, the people burn them in place of coal. This queer fuel does not make as bright and clear a fire as coal, but it is cheap, and keeps the poor from suffering.

"Be patient and wait only a few more thousands of years," the bogs would say to us if they could, "and you may have coal instead of peat. Father Time will make the change without any work on your part."

But the people of Ireland cannot wait. Most of them are very, very poor. They live from day to day, glad if they have a roof to cover their heads and food enough to keep them from starving.

Norah's father hires the land for his little farm from a rich lord who lives most of the year in England. The Irishman built the little hut on this land for himself and wife, and his family of growing children.

"What use would it be to spend much time on it?" he would say. "The better I make the place, the more rent I shall have to pay."

Every year he planted his patch of potatoes and cabbages for himself, besides oats and turnips and other things for his fowls and pigs and goat. He mended the thatched roof when it leaked too badly for comfort, and they all tried to be happy. They succeeded pretty well.

When each new year came around, the home looked about as usual. It was no better, and no worse, unless, perhaps, it was a wee bit more shabby.

But the children grew fast. They were merry and rosy, and thought very little about the shabby stone hut they called "home."

"Sivin of us there are," Norah would tell you, "and baby Pat is the dearest and best of us all."

As she came in to supper that night, her mother lifted the kettle that hung by a hook over the smoky fire and made a pot of tea. Then she placed a dish of steaming potatoes and a plate of dark, heavy bread on the table.

"A good supper, indade," thought the hungry children, and in a few minutes not a sign of anything to eat could be seen.

"Here chick! chick!" called Norah, dropping crumbs to her pet chicken. It had kept close beside her during the meal, and once had grown so impatient that it flew up into the little girl's lap.

An old hen had already gone to roost on the rung of a stool in a dark corner of the room, while the much-loved goat stood munching grass at Norah's elbow.

The child's mother did not seem troubled in the least by these things. She was busy as busy could be, giving hot potatoes and slices of bread to Mike and Joe, Norah and Katie, while she trotted baby Patsy on her knee.

But when the whole flock of geese came running and flying into the hut for their share of the family supper, it was a little too much.

"Away with you, noisy creatures!" cried the busy mother. "Away with you! Mike, take the broom and drive them out. Joe, lend a hand and help your brother."

When the room had been cleared of the greedy geese, every one went on eating, until not even a crumb was left on the table.

The girls cleared away the dishes; the boys brought a load of peat into the house, and placed it before the fire to dry for burning; the mother rocked Patsy to Dreamland, and the father smoked his pipe.

Then, when the work was all done, he told the children there was good news.

"What is it, what is it?" they all cried together.

"A letter from our own Maggie, in Ameriky. Sure, what else could the good news be?" said their father. "Listen, and you shall hear it.

"DEAR FATHER AND MY OWN SWEET MOTHER: – First of all, how are yoursilves and the pigs and all the children? I have a good place, and my mistress is very kind to me. My work is not hard, and I am fast learning the ways of this great country. My wages is now two dollars and a half the week. In the money of good ould Ireland, that is just ten shillin's. By bein' careful since I last wrote ye, I have saved enough to send you two pounds. My master got the money changed for me, he was that kind. What will the money buy yez now? Mother darlint must have two pounds of the best tay, and a new red woollen petticoat. You, father, will have some grand leather boots, and aich of the children must buy something for the remimbrance of the sister Maggie far across the great say.

"Good-bye, and may the blissings of Hiven fall upon ye.

"MAGGIE O'NEIL."

As he came to the end of the letter, every one was silent for a moment. The mother wiped away some tears which had fallen upon her cheek, and her husband cleared his throat.

Two pounds! It seemed like a fortune to the little family. It was nearly enough to pay the year's rent.

"But the pigs are doing well, and, if they keep on, there will be no trouble when rent time comes," said the father, as they sat talking the matter over. "The price of the pigs will be enough for the rint, I'm thinkin'. It shall be as Maggie said. Let the childer go to bed and dream of the fine things they will see in the town when they go shopping."

Somehow or other the children were all stowed away for the night in the small room next the kitchen, and Norah was soon sound asleep, and dreaming a most wonderful dream.

It seemed in her dream that the goat was harnessed to the jaunting-car belonging to the father of her friend Molly. He was a very, very big goat in the dream, and he looked really handsome, as he capered down the lane, carrying the whole family to market.

Norah's pet chicken was going to see the sights, for he was perched on the goat's head. The old mother pig ran by his side, and the baby pigs, with their curly tails high up in the air, were trying their best to keep up. Everybody was laughing and singing to the tune of an Irish jig that Norah's father was playing on the bagpipes.

CHAPTER II

THE THUNDER-STORM

"WHISHT, now! The fairy folk are passing along. We must get out of their way, and greet them politely," said Norah to her little sister Kate, as she made a bow, and whispered, "God speed ye."

The children were out berrying, and were quite a distance from home. They had wandered down the lane running through their little village, and were now on the road to Killarney.

"Why, Norah?"

"When you see a cloud of dust sweeping along, you may know the fairies are travelling. It might bring something bad to us if we stood in their way. We want them to be our friends, of course."

"Oh, yes, yes, Norah. I'll be careful next time. But I'm tired. Tell me a story about the fairies."

"I'm tired, too, Katie darlint. But I'll tell ye this much. There once was a man who did not care for the fairies as he should. Perhaps he did not believe they used arrows and shot them at the cattle of those people with whom they were angry. Oh, Katie, it is the living truth that the fairies can bewitch any one whom they please.

"Well, the man of whom I was tellin' ye bought a farm. It was close to a beautiful valley where the fairies had their home. He built himself a house; he ploughed the land; and then he made a lime-kiln on the very borders of the fairies' home.

"They were so angry that they punished him in many ways. But not all at once, Katie darlint. First, they killed his horse; next, three of his cows; and, as though that wasn't enough, nine of his pigs died.

"The farmer knew well enough what was the matter. He took down his lime-kiln, and was careful after that to keep clear of the borders of fairy-land."

"Look, look, Norah! I hear a carriage. It may be people travelling through the country. Put on your sweetest smile and maybe they will give us a penny."

The two children stood still on one side of the road. As the carriage passed them, little Kate held out her chubby hands, saying, "A penny, kind lady, if ye plaze."

She was quick to notice that, besides the driver, three gentlemen and a lady filled the seats of the jaunting-car.

"Take this, little one, for your rosy cheeks and smiling face."

The lady threw out a three-penny piece, as the driver stopped his car and asked Norah how far it was to the lakes of Killarney.

"Four miles, sir, if ye keep straight on this road," was the answer.

"Do you mean four Irish miles?" asked one of the gentlemen. "For, if you do, we have an hour's good drive before us."

"Sure, and I always supposed a mile is a mile," answered Norah, with a perplexed look in her eyes.

The gentleman laughed, and said, "If you go to America when you grow up, you will find that two of our miles will almost make one of yours."

The car passed on, and the children stood watching the travellers out of sight.

"Isn't it grand to be travelling like that, Katie?" said her sister. "A jaunting-car is one of the finest things in the world."

But the people who were in the carriage did not agree with her.

"Dear me!" said the lady, "I'm afraid of falling out whenever the horse goes fast. And as for this beautiful country, I can only see what is on one side of the road at a time."

"I quite agree with you," said her husband. "I have always wanted to ride in a jaunting-car, but it is more fun to talk about it than to really do it."

"But what is a jaunting-car?" perhaps you are wondering.

It is a carriage in which the seats are placed back to back, facing sideways. It has no top, but has big wheels and big springs underneath.

A small jaunting-car, like the one which had passed the children, has two wheels, and seats long enough to hold four people, two on each side. The driver's place is built out in front, reaching over the horse's back. Such a car is very light, and one horse can carry it easily.

But what the lady said was true. There was no way for the passengers to hold on firmly. Besides this, they could see the view on only one side at a time.

A story has been told of a man who was travelling in Ireland and wished to see the country. He rode in a jaunting-car from Queenstown to Cork. He sat on the side of the car toward the hill and did not get a single view of the river. When he went back again he changed his seat to the opposite side of the car. And still he saw nothing but the hill. It is no wonder that, when people spoke to him about the river between Cork and Queenstown, he said, "There is no river. There is nothing to be seen except a hill."

Do you see the joke? And do you understand the reason why he saw only one side of the country, though he travelled twice over the same road?

Norah and her little sister had just turned to go home, when they noticed the sky had grown black with heavy clouds.

"It is going to rain, Katie. We must hurry, for I fear it will thunder and lighten," said Norah.

The children began to run. Although they did not mind the rain, they were both afraid of thunder-storms.

"There! hear that, and that!" sobbed Katie, beginning to cry. A streak of lightning had darted across the sky, followed almost instantly by a loud peal of thunder.

Down came the rain in torrents, just as the children turned from the road and entered the lane leading to their own little village. As they did so, the sound of wheels could be heard behind them.

They were in too great a hurry and too much frightened to turn around. But as they reached their own door, the very jaunting-car they had met on the road to Killarney drove up.

The children's mother had been watching from the doorway.

"Come in, children, as fast as you can. I was near beside mesilf, I was that worried about ye."

Then the good woman, turning with a welcome smile to the people in the carriage, asked them to shelter themselves from the storm in her poor little cot.

The two drenched children rushed to the fireplace and stood there with the water dripping from their skirts and making little puddles on the floor of the cabin.

In the meantime, their mother was making her visitors as comfortable as she could. Two of the gentlemen took seats on the edge of a big feather bed, for there were not chairs enough to go around. The lady was given the best chair, after Norah's mother had dusted it with her apron, and placed it near the fire.

The flock of geese had somehow managed to follow the visitors into the house, and the big apron was next used to drive the poor wet creatures out into the storm. It was plain to see they did not enjoy it any more than the people themselves.

"You must excuse us for taking you by surprise in this way," said the lady, as soon as it was quiet enough for the kind Irishwoman to hear her, "but we saw the storm suddenly coming up, and we knew we were too far from Killarney to get there before it should break upon us." She smiled as she went on, "Indeed, it overtook us before we could even reach your village."

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