

OUR SHORT STORY.



FERDIA FEENEY



By O. MacDERMOTT

NOBODY in Bearna believed for a moment that Ferdia Feeney would content himself in the Civil Service. He was the most incomprehensible visionary, iconoclastic revolutionary that that little village had ever produced—and that was saying much. But his father, a shrewd, far-seeing “strong” farmer, was obdurate; Ferdia should become a Civil Servant. The local National school teacher urged that a government position was the very be-all and end-all of ambition. To be sure Ferdia, though he might rage and rebel, was not yet in a position to do better. If asked what he wished to become he would probably have said that he didn’t know, and didn’t care. To be a free lance, a vagrant, a strolling ballad singer, an African or Tibetan explorer, a wild, uncaring adventurous wanderer was his ideal, but even he had sense enough to realise that that was only good enough in romantic writings and as a pleasurable vision. It would hardly do in a cold unpoetic world. He was undecided, and being so was, as it were, kicked into the Civil Service.

To London at first he went, but, after a few years, found himself in Dublin.

Still, with a strong primitive instinct, with that ineradicable “call of the wild” in his blood, it was no easy matter to conform to office routine of the most soul-deadening, mechanical sort. ’Twas copy, tabulate, index!—index, copy, tabulate! It made him angry, sullen, unapproachable. Whatever London had been to him, Dublin roused and angered all that was manly and virile in his nature.

It seemed that in London, in common with many other Irishmen, he had studied keenly the language and history of the old land; had met unhappy Irish geniuses—bards, fiddlers, story-tellers, literateurs, politicians; had opened his mind and soul to all that was grand and heroic; had imbibed, so to speak, the high brave stories of the old sages; had, in fact, become a storehouse of Gaelic story, an impassioned speaker, a transcendentalist, an intransigent. It was

little wonder that he, on his coming to Dublin and being rudely disillusioned—that was it: being dashed down from the stars—became somewhat of a biting cynic. Disillusionment may be said to be the putting out of the light of the world; then there is cursing and groping in the darkness. Later a calmer, purer light may appear, but Erebus has to be traversed.

Ferdia’s resentment, however—against whom or what he himself could not well define—gradually subsided, and it was with pleasant feelings enough that he accepted an invitation from his cousin, Elsie Brennan, to spend the summer vacation at Coole.

Arriving there towards noon of a glorious summer’s day, he was received open-armed by Elsie, who was some ten or more years his senior, and always treated him as her own especial favourite. He was glad—heartily glad—to look into that open, freckled face, into those two kind blue eyes. Her embrace and merry laugh touched the sore heart soothingly.

“Well, Elsie,” said he, “I’m delighted I’ve come.”

“Oh, I thought I’d never see you heart-whole again—that a grand London lady would have captivated you,” said she.

Ferdia smiled.

“And the Dublin colleens have been no more successful—eh?”

It was now for Ferdia to laugh outright, for he found it difficult enough to make ends meet on his paltry salary of some odd ninety pounds a year, without the burden of a wife. “I’m heart-whole anyway, Elsie,” said he, and he spoke the truth.

There are those who love young—who feel the divine passion they say at a very early age—Dante loved his Beatrice at nine; and there are those who for the first time in mature manhood succumb to an overmastering passion. Ferdia, as shall appear, would seem to belong to the latter category.

“I have not met my counterpart,” said he, laughingly.

"Then," said Elsie, suddenly and with dancing bright eyes as she glanced out the open window, "you won't be long so."

A light step sounded on the threshold and a soft musical voice gave a "God save all here!" And Ferdia, without fully realising what formality of introduction was being gone through, found himself saying he was "so glad to meet Miss ~~Kilbride~~. *Tiernan*."

"We call her Una," corrected Elsie, with a sly glance at the radiant girl who had just come in.

"And may I, too?" said he.

"May be, Una?" coaxed Elsie.

Una Tiernan for reply gave as pretty a coquettish glance at Ferdia as ever came from laughing brown eyes.

"Then you'll be Una to me?" said he, courageously.

"And you'll be Ferdia to her—isn't that so, Una?" said Elsie, as she hurriedly put the kettle on the fire for tea, leaving the happy pair to their own tête-a-tête.

And that tea in which Una participated intoxicated poor Ferdia beyond hope of ever being sober again. What an amount of laughter and love was in those two simple cups of tea! But then Ferdia didn't know whether it was two or twenty-two cups he had had.

"Una has another boy, Ferdia," said Elsie, mischievously. "Don't throw yourself at her feet too readily." She laughed very heartily, Una blushed, and the whilom hater of mankind in general—and womankind, too—felt the first keen pangs of jealousy! However, with the intensity of the passion that had been awakened, Ferdia could not be otherwise than eloquent and serious. And the more serious he became the more both girls laughed.

That tea, of course, had ^{to} come to an end, and Una in a little time departed.

"Now," said Elsie, after she had left, "what did I say?"

Ferdia only smiled the faintest glimmer of a smile.

"Isn't she glorious?" questioned Elsie; but no response.

"Wait till you see her at the dance in her uncle's house on Tuesday next," said she, determined to rouse him to speak.

"How can I see her then—we are not invited," said he.

"But we are—at least I am—and to give herself an excuse for calling again to-morrow, your dear Una has purposely omitted to ask you to-day. She had just come over to ask me."

Elsie was right. Una appeared next day; and the little archer-god committed fearful havoc. How easy and whispered their conversation became, and although their talk was of birds and flowers and green fields for the most part, save when occasionally Una asked about the fine city, the operas, and the fashions there, they could have for ever remained speaking to one another and looking into each other's eyes.

The dance, the light step of Una, the heightened colour of her delicate cheek, the softly-rounded lip and graceful lissome form when Tuesday night came, completed the annihilation of Ferdia.

After that, the days raced madly, one pursuing the other with inconsiderate haste, for the lovers found occasion to meet often.



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What an aching heart Ferdia had when he prepared to return to the city! The cynic and angry-hearted man that came to Coole only a few weeks since now made ready to depart with every drop of blood in his veins singing a never-ceasing hymn of joy. Love, the alchemist, had come and transmuted all the base metal of his being into gold.

The day of parting was a sore one for Ferdia. His wish was to ask Una to be his wife; but could he? She had a good home, was well and carefully brought up, had plenty of leisure and a light joyous heart. Could he assure her a continuance of all these? Could he promise her more? To be sure his love was something—was all-in-all to her, perhaps. He was no fool withal—no dreamer now of wild dreams that never eventuate.

"I would ask you to be my wife," said he, softly in a whisper to her the morning of his departure as they stood together under the rich foliage of an old sycamore tree, through which the honey-



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bees hummed musically, "but I am too poor."

She looked at him coyly and then hung her head.

"And I do not believe in what are called engagements," he added.

"Oh," said she, confidently with tear-dimmed eyes, "I cannot think of being married without misgivings. I fear it would be less than love and the imagination paints it. I must be strangely constituted." There was a silence between them for a few moments then she resumed quite at her ease and said, "I should so like to live in a great city."

"And I should so like," said he, pronouncing every word slowly and deliberately, "to uproot—scatter ~~to the winds~~ every great city!"

The grand awakening had brought about the great revulsion.

"My people are anxious that I should marry Mr. Maguire," said Una. "He is a neighbour of ours and a farmer. Oh, yes; you remember I introduced him to you at the dance."

Ferdia knew what the custom was in these parts as regards marriage; that it was simply a business transaction, and that even as such, worked remarkably well, let sentimentalists say what they will. He knew Una to be eminently collected, far-seeing and obedient, and that her love for him would have to give way to saner considerations.

They parted after all in that way—leaving their little love affair, as it were, under the old sycamore tree.

The city and office drudgery appalled Ferdia on his return. Primitiveness, the insistent call of the open country, the intense desire to go out into the prolific yielding fields and till them; the joy of trudging behind two strong proud horses harnessed to the plough: these calls, these desires—mocked at by a bloodless emasculated generation—thrilled his blood: And Una—and he couldn't believe that she would become Maguire's wife, for she was ordained to be his from the beginning of the world—paused on hill-crest, silhouetted against the setting sun, before coming towards him!

Wrestling with one of these tantalising visions, one day as he passed along O'Connell Street he came face to face

with Una ~~Maguire~~^{Tiernan!} She was in the company of Maguire and another girl. His face burned; he saluted and passed on. So that was the end of it; she was evidently Mrs. Maguire!

The death of his father brought Ferdia again to Bearna. His brother who was to inherit the old homestead, not agreeing very well with his father, had emigrated—renouncing for a substantial sum of money any claim he might have had. Ferdia was now proprietor of the old home. The Civil Service would know him no more, and it did not.

A year had almost passed, and he thought he should pay his cousin Elsie a visit. She was the ever-radiant woman of old, looking as though Time had forgotten to reckon up her years since last he saw her.

"O my big baby cousin!" she cried, "so you've thought it worth while to come to see us?"

That last visit of his flashed poignantly on his memory. She must have guessed.

"Indeed," said she, very seriously, "you managed the affair very prettily."

"What affair?" said he, pretending not to know.

"Ah! well, maybe it's not too late yet."

"She's Mrs. Maguire," he rejoined.

"Who told you so? She'll be Mrs. Somebody that I know — if — if —. Oh, but you two are the queer ones," said she, laughing too—that glad ringing laugh that is sweeter music than choir of songsters. And next day when he and Elsie called on Una, they were received with tears. A quite smile soon came to the deep brown eyes and softly-rounded lip, and then like Irish skies after a summer shower an ineffable sweetness and repose settled on the delicate speaking face.

"Oh, I was only the bridesmaid," said she, when Ferdia referred to the meeting with her in Dublin. "He married my cousin."

"And I suppose I'm going to be bridesmaid soon," interrupted Elsie. "— oh you two—," but she couldn't say whatever she intended saying for the tears coming fast she fell on Una's neck and wept.