

GOD DISPOSES.

STORY OF THE WEEK.

“God Disposes.”

BY EOGHAN MACDIARMADA.

CHAPTER I.

“I hope,” said Peter Tahaney to his wife, Peggie, as he unharnessed the mare from the car of a cold evening in early spring, “that Sheila will content herself at her studies and be a good girl. The nuns seem to be of the right sort, too. The Mother Superior is an Englishwoman, and that’s something.”

“She is,” briefly replied Peggie. The mare gave a joyful whinny on hearing the sweet, gentle voice of her mistress. “Put her into the stable, Peter, and I’ll get Larry to bring her a warm oatmeal drink. Don’t delay, your tea is ready.”

Peter Tahaney was a strong farmer. He had married late in life, and even then under protest, though his wife, Peggie Scanlan, was the wisest and at the same time the most lovable girl in her native parish of Cormucklety. Peter was a worldly man; up early and down late—industrious, it is true, but close-fisted and mean. He was never known to pay a shilling to the Land League, or any other league for the matter of that. And the neighbours averred he never attended a political meeting of any sort—indeed, any meeting, gathering, discussion, or business that had no bargain-driving or ready money in it he carefully avoided. On this account he was called a practical man, and by this simple method

of his he evaded all possibility of arrest for unlawful assembly, intimidation, high treason, or interference with the police in the discharge of their duty. He kept his credit with his un-Irish and nondescript neighbours—the Ffolliotts, Dukes, Rowletts, and O’Haras.

“Of course, if Home Rule is obtained or a good Land Bill I’ll benefit, I suppose, as well as the best of them. They can’t have a special clause inserted excluding Peter Tahaney.” This was his method of reasoning. He chuckled at his own extreme wisdom, and his neighbours’ folly.

Peter had only one child, Sheila, of whom he intended to make a lady. Today he had left her in a “high-class” convent in the county town, having just returned after the journey; and to do poor little Sheila justice, who was in her fourteenth year, she was the makings of as pretty a wee lady as ever the sun shone upon. For these amiable and noble indications she had little to thank her “papa” for.

“The house will seem deserted without Sheila,” said Peggy, trying to suppress a sigh, for Peter detested any weak show of femininity. She sipped her tea and awaited her lord’s speech.

“It’s true we’ll miss her greatly; but then she’d never become anything here with us. She was fast losing the little she had learned from Master Geraghty.”

“’Deed an’ I was grieved to have her here about the house, feeding calves and pigs, and slopping in and out like Mary Anne there for the last year, but I couldn’t resign myself to let her go so far away as the Convent of Notre Dame.”

“And is it to the miserable little convent there beyant at Ballinfull you’d have me

send her, where I believe they're only all Irishwomen! Bah! what could they teach her?"

"They'd teach her a good deal, and then she'd be near me. I could run over to see her occasionally."

"Teach her a good deal, inagh! They'd teach her Irish—don't they pride themselves on their efficiency in that respect! And what the devil does Sheila want of such a language, which nobody speaks or bothers about except Biddy Ruadh and that mad son of Kane's. Ha! ha! ha! Nice company for Sheila, indeed!"

Poor Peggy was silent. She knew her husband's dislike of the good Irish nuns of Ballinfull, who were bravely struggling to be true to high and patriotic ideals. Peter had hold of his pet aversion—to adopt a very hackneyed expression—and was determined to have his say.

"They'd teach her Irish songs—oul'—oul' ramashes—with neither sinse nor meaning in them. Sheila will be taught something better where she is, thank God. Then she'll learn to play the piano and the mandolin; and as for languages, she'll have French, German, Latin, Greek, and, I think, Hebrew. The Mother Superior, as I said, is an Englishwoman of high birth—daughter of a lord, so Father Hargidan told me—and there is no fear of Sheila coming out with a brogue."

Tea over, Peter arose and went out. His wife busied herself about the house, ever thinking of her only and dearly-beloved child, who for the first time was taken from under her care.

"God save all here," said a shrill, quavering voice in Irish from the doorway.

"God save you kindly," responded the woman of the house in the same language.

"Wisha, is it yourself that's in it, Biddy—come in and you're welcome."

"I know that, ma'am," said Biddy, as she approached the fire and took a seat, still speaking in Irish, for Biddy had a towering scorn for the Beurla.

"Augh! Biddy, you know I don't understand enough Irish to converse with you."

"Aye," retorted the beggar-woman, for that was her profession, and speaking now in English; "but what is this I hear of your sending Sheila, the sweetest girleen I've ever met in all my wanderings, to be brought up a grand English lady?"

"Well, not a grand English lady, Bid. Sure, she can't discard her nature and nationality that easily."

"No!" exclaimed the old woman in wrath, and clenching her outstretched bony hand, "by G—! no. I have read the future before now—oh, don't look surprised. I'm not a witch, or devil, or the like—and I say to you here that your child Sheila will yet glory in the name of Irishwoman. How the man of the house

will be disappointed!" And, laughing a loud, derisive laugh, Biddy Ruadh arose and departed.

The night grew bitterly cold. The blast shrilly whistled through the ruinous crevices of Behy Castle, and rustled the ivy that clung to it in its decay. A sad and lonely picture it presented in the full moonlight, yet not sadder or lonelier than the ragged, drooping figure of Biddy Ruadh as she wended her way slowly in its direction. Here by its massive western wall she had erected a little hut for herself, with the assistance of "that mad son of Kane's," as Brian Kane was called by Peter Tahaney.

"I wonder," she thought, "will my son Brian be here before me. I've been away these three days, and perhaps he doesn't expect my return—the return of his Caithleen nee Houlihan, as he jocosely calls me. Yet how true the likeness after all. What is she but what I am—a beggar, old, shrivelled, starved, and ragged! The rich turn her from their doors, as they do me; the poor give her of their poverty. She has no home, neither have I. Almost all have deserted her, as my own children have deserted me." The long self-communion brought the lone wayfarer to the door of the wretched, improvised shelter.

"A hundred thousand welcomes before you, mother," said Brian Kane in Irish, rising respectfully as the old woman entered, and took the seat he had vacated to her. A freshly-lighted fire was burning cheerfully.

"Thank you, my brave son, Brian, did you expect my coming?"

"I did; I am always prepared for your coming."

"How's that, avic?"

"Oh, I'm here every night till bedtime. I sit by the fire and read."

"But this is a poor and lonely place for one so young."

"Not lonely, nor is it poor."

"How so, Brian?"

"Maybe 'twas only fancy, but as I read and read on last night in that old book you lent me I felt a strange unearthly thrill come over me. I think I slumbered. There was a loud trumpet call—sweet and piercing—I can hear it now! The Castle here was brightly illuminated; there were cheers and counter cheers. There was the clash of steel, the neighing of horses, the wild huzza of battle smote on my ears. I heard the cry in Irish—"Ar son na h-Eireann! Ar son na h-Eireann!" And then methought the din of strife sounded farther and farther off. Gradually sweet music and song intervened. There was bustle of preparation for a home-coming. "Who," said I to a reverent man of long, flowing beard whom I took to be a bard, 'are they bringing home?"

He smiled and answered simply: 'Child, have you slept? The Strangers are routed, Caithleen nee Houlihan is Queen again; and then methought he touched the harp and sang. I awaited her coming. Oh, how shall I tell of those moments of jubilation and expectation! 'Here comes herself,' said I, and I could not suppress a smile as I uttered the words, 'my Caithleen nee Houlihan, who used to live in a little hut by the side of this very castle, then a silent, decaying memento of ancient greatness.' I ran to meet you, but as if by magic—how the transformation was effected passes my understanding—who should I clasp to my bosom but—but—'

"But whom?" queried Bidy Ruadh in bated breath. "I can tell you."

"Yes."

"Sheila Tahaney!"

The young man looked down to hide the hot flush that suffused his cheek.

"You did not dream, my son; all shall come to pass as you have just told. The Strangers shall be routed, and Caithleen nee Houlihan—young, glorious, full of life, hope, and beauty, as Sheila Tahaney, God bless the girleen! is full of these attributes and virtues—again our Queen, our pride, and the glory of the world!"

Neither spoke for a time—both looking intently into the fire. The wind soughed and moaned outside around the old castle, dying away in a melancholy rune as the pale moon ascended the heavens. A queer couple these—boy and hag! What secret bond holds two such so closely together? The great tie of fellowship, the glamour of a common love, the light that shines from the brow and eyes of her they call Caithleen nee Houlihan!

"Now, Bid, it's nigh time I departed." Brian stood up and prepared to leave.

"Stay here a moment, son. Here is another old book of good Irish, I believe, for 'twas Conchubhar O'Gilligaun, the bard and seanachie, that wrote it. I told you the story of Conchubhar last week, you remember. And listen! I've picked up this song over by Lyney."

She sang in a plaintive, low tone. He listened attentively, then attempted it himself, and finally taking out pencil and paper, wrote it down from her dictation.

CHAPTER II.

Shawn Kane—Brian's father—lived in a small house, which was situated on Peter Tahaney's land, and on the edge of Cloonlurg bog. Shawn was almost constantly employed by Peter as a workman about the farm. Himself and his good wife found it no easy matter to support a weak family of nine children, but God is good to those who trust Him. The young Kanes were all naturally gifted, and the envy of their better-to-do neighbours, whose children, though better fed and clothed,

could not cope with them intellectually. As Mr. Geraghty, the schoolmaster, used to put it, "one Kane was worth a shipload of Kellys, Reillys, Doogans, and Keilys." Brian was the second eldest, and inclined to be delicate. He was his mother's favourite, and a source of much anxiety to her on account of his studious leaning. "He'll undermine his health," were her oft-repeated words of concern. She felt a growing dislike towards Bidy Ruadh as she observed the strong influence the beggarwoman, who was not, it must be admitted, supposed to be in her right mind—was gaining over her sensitive boy. "With her strange stories and old books she has bewitched my son—." Mrs. Kane stopped in the litany of her wrongs as she observed the object of her solicitude and love coming up the pathway. When he stood beside her in the low door of the cottage she said:

"Brian, why do you devote so much time to these old stories and songs of Bidy Ruadh?"

"Oh, mother, I cannot help it. My soul is enthralled. I cannot sleep, but these weird and beautiful stories are for ever running in my head. And my ears are filled with the music of our people."

"But last night Brian you stayed late over by the old castle with that—that—evil-tongued, scornful hag, Bidy Ruadh."

"Don't speak so harshly of her, dear mother. She is not evil-tongued, but sweet-tongued to those who know her as I do. And all her scorn is for the mean-souled bloodless cowards who deny the land of their birth and are forever apologising for their very existence. Her scorn for those is not greater than mine."

"Peter Tahaney dislikes Bidy—she has dared, he says, to condemn his sending of Sheila to a big convent in the town; and he told your father, Brian, to keep you out of Bidy's company."

Brian smiled and awaited his mother's further words.

"And is it true that Bidy has coupled your name with Sheila Tahaney's?"

"Surely there can't be any harm in that," said Brian timidly, as a blush stole over his fine pale features, "she is placed by her parents' wealth and position too far above me."

"Yes, that is so Brian. Do not listen to Bidy Ruadh if she speaks to you of Sheila again. This little house and garden belong to Peter Tahaney. He would turn us out at any moment if his harsh and stubborn disposition was roused to anger, and, left without a home and employment, we were a pitiable sight indeed."

Brian felt the force of his mother's argument. The wild dreams he had builded upon the words of Bidy Ruadh faded away, and sorrowfully he entered the cabin.

And what gifted boy would not have the same day dreams as Brian Kane? True, before the night in the improvised shelter by the ruins of Behy Castle, the possibility of winning Sheila Tahaney never entered his head. Too much taken up with old stories and songs, gathered from the people of the neighbourhood who spoke Irish fluently, he was ever looked upon as a shy, quiet boy. The wild, rollicking dance, the tipsy spree, the disorderly wake, repelled his gentle and lofty nature. He had no companions among the boys of his own age, and would sit night after night in old Miley Kilcoyne's chimney nook listening attentively to every word that was said. Old Miley was a noted Fenian, and though now in his eightieth year, as fiery as a youth of twenty filled with high ideals. Brian Kane's young blood was stirred by all he heard, and he soon ceased to speak English altogether, to the great disgust of Master Geraghty, who had intended to train him for the English Civil Service, along with George Rowlett's son, and the lad of the Scanlan's from over by Carrow-nanty.

"It's a grand opening for smart young fellows," said the master to old Shawn Kane outside the chapel door one Sunday after Mass.

"But, God help your foolish head, Mr. Geraghty, that Brian of mine would rather beg from door to door along with Biddy Ruadh and sing ballads to the birds than enter the English army."

"Not the English army, sir—the Civil Service."

"All the same—all the same, so Brian says, and I'm inclined to believe him."

"Very well, have your own opinion, Mr. Kane," retorted the schoolmaster, as he walked away, grievously hurt that so promising a youth as Brian Kane couldn't be induced to join his Civil Service evening class, conducted at the very moderate sum of thirty shillings a quarter per pupil, payable in advance.

Brian was now rapidly gaining notoriety. He was winner of several prizes at local feiseanna for fiddle-playing, story-telling, and essay-writing. He had even been successful at the Oireachtas in Dublin in the Oratory competition, as well as thers. His words were so spontaneous and forcible, and delivered with such evident conviction that the adjudicators were surprised that one so young could so readily master the art of public speaking.

A year had passed since Sheila Tahaney went to the Convent. 'Twas said that she was coming home, and that she wouldn't return; that her father and mother were anxious to have her married to Bernard Tighe, of Farnaharpy, whose father was a shopkeeper, and able to put down five or six hundred pounds. The old people for

this sum were, of course, to give up their title in the land to Sheila and her husband, retaining, however, certain small rights, so that in the event of disagreement with the son-in-law they would not be turned out on the roadside.

III

"There is every appearance of a fierce storm to-night, Brian, to crown the terrible week of rain we have had," said old Shawn Kane from the open door. "Come out till we secure the little bit o' hay with an extra rope or two, and I think we'd do worse than put some weights on the thatch." As he spoke the wind blew furiously outside, roaring and careering madly. Big drops of rain pelted against the window panes. Brian rose up, leaving aside a book he had been reading, and went out with his father.

"Wisha, God protect any poor people at sea to-night," reverently prayed Mrs. Kane, "it's preparing for a fierce storm. The wind blew from that part—over across Johnny Fahy's brae—on the night of the awful hurricane and rain twenty years ago."

"Didn't the river flow over the road at Behy Bridge that year, mother?" queried little Una from the corner. She had often heard her parents tell of that event.

"Yes, Una, child. Your brother Brian was born that very night, and I've often said that although he came with the storm he's the meekest child in the house, barring yourself, alanna."

Here Una, opening wide her big, soft blue eyes, arose and nestled her golden head on her mother's breast. The father and Brian returned, the latter without being seated saying:

"I must go over to see poor Biddy Ruadh. I fear she'll be lost to-night if we cannot find a place for her here."

Nearing the old castle he met Larry Neilan. Larry was Peter Tahaney's boy, and was just returning after placing the outlying stock in a sheltered place, and giving them a good supply of hay for the night.

"This will be a night to be long remembered, Brian," shouted Larry, for the wind and rain necessitated his using his lung power. "And where, in God's name, are you going?"

"Over to see old Biddy Ruadh."

"Ah, she'll be all right. Th' oul' boy looks after his own."

The storm was gathering strength. The trees bent before its fury. Lightning flashed incessantly, and the loud thunder kept up a deafening roar. The rain now fell in torrents. Larry and Brian took refuge in an outhouse near by.

"God bless us," exclaimed Brian, making the sign of the Cross as the lightning flashes cut pathways in the terrible sky.

"The master and Sheila are coming home to-night. I wish they'll have sense to stay in the town till morning," said Larry, and shouting "good night, Brian," sped as fast as his legs would carry him.

The river was rising rapidly, and as Brian passed was up to the height of the road.

Old Biddy Ruadh sat crooning over a few bright embers as Brian entered. She looked up and smiled in a way Brian did not comprehend.

"Ah, welcome, son," she cried. "You come, fearing lest the storm, or the river, or the devil would carry away your Caithleen nee Houlihan," and laughing wildly, she stood up and looked out.

"It's a dangerous night, Bid. God guide all travellers!"

"Amen, Brian. I was reading your fortune in the fire as you came in. There is imminent danger in store for you by water—and for others. I couldn't for a long time make out whether you were to survive the ordeal or not—the cross of Christ about us, Brian!"

The old woman, with blanched and horrible features, drew hastily back. The space in front of the old castle was lighted up with the awful glare of repeated lightning flashes. Both instinctively drew closely together. She caught his hands firmly. "Be brave, Brian, my son, be brave," she muttered, and drawing him towards the fire on the hearth, seated herself beside him.

Brian felt the terrific majesty and grandeur of the night—for in no other light could he view it—was too awesome for poor Biddy's senility.

"You must come over to our house to-night, Bid," said he. "When a lull comes in the storm we'll run across the fields. This is no shelter for such a night."

"Lull, Brian! No lull will come till my words are fulfilled. You cannot know how near your hour of trial is."

He thought she was gone mad; these were not the words of a sane person.

The storm did not abate; rather did it seem to grow worse. Brian looked out.

"The river flows over the road," said he; "it may have swept away the bridge. We are scarcely safe here, but as you will not come with me, I must stay with you."

Merciless night! And yet Brian could not help repeating the rapturous lines of Byron:

"Most glorious night!

Thou wert not sent for slumber! Let me be
A sharer in thy fierce and far delight—
A portion of the tempest and of thee!"

A cry—a scream borne on the careering winds.

Old Peter Tahaney, taking his daughter Sheila home on the car from the Convent, had, owing to the deafening and confusing effects of the storm, driven into the river—the bridge over which had been partially swept away by the increased and turbulent flow of water.

"Up! up! Brian," shouted the old wizard, Biddy Ruadh, as, grasping him by the coat-collar, she roused him from the dream-slumber into which he had fallen. He

74
obeyed the summons, and, rushing towards the broken bridge, from whence cries were borne on the wind, dashed heedlessly into the dark, treacherous, swollen river. The noble boy was being carried like a leaf on the bosom of the furious torrent, but, luckily, coming in contact with a projecting portion of the broken arch, was saved from a cold, watery death. Some of the neighbours had now gathered, having been speedily roused by Biddy Ruadh. By the aid of ropes, and a rude contrivance of a boat dexterously managed, poor Sheila Tahaney was saved; but for days remained in bed suffering from severe shock. Her father was drowned.

The old, old story. The fairy-tale ending. And now Sheila Tahaney is a mother—her baby boy is named Connor O'Kane, or, more properly, as Brian calls him, and so, too, does his mother—Conchubhar O Cathain. Sheila speaks Irish, and no word of Beurla is ever heard in that household.

26 June 1908

Packet