

# Ned Reilly's Christmas Surprise.

(By Eoghan MacDiarmada.)

## I.

**N**OW, my good, kind nurse," said Dermot Conroy, one evening as he returned to his home on a wide fertile West Australian plain, "we must soon part. My poor father (God rest his soul!) is dead these three months, and I must go to Ireland to fulfil his dying wish. His poor soul can never find rest till this is done. You have not, perhaps, heard the whole story. Now, I will tell you:

"My father was born in Carrowbaun, in the County Galway, about the year 1840. In his youth he was strong-willed and passionate—qualities he retained, though under considerable restraint, till the day of his death. In '67, "the year of the Fenians," he was a young man of robust physique. He heartily joined that body, determined, as I often heard him say, to do a man's part for Ireland. In the same parish lived one Ned Reilly, many years my father's junior. He too was a member of the Fenian Brotherhood. They became bosom friends. And, O, my God! So much greater the injury—but I am too previous with my narrative. Nora Degan—ah, you smile—(there should be a woman in it!) was a winsome, sweet little girl at the time, and the pride of the parish. My father loved her, but she did not reciprocate his affections. To Ned Reilly she had given her heart, and well he loved her in return as became his noble nature—this and many other tributes to Ned I've heard my father utter repeatedly during the last few years. And seeing the great love manifested between Nora and Ned, my father (God forbid that I his son should say a word against him!) because filled with hatred of his fellow-Fenian and neighbour. I told you he was self-willed and passionate, and when the dark fiend of hate took possession of his soul, he vowed in secret to have vengeance on one whom he considered his rival. For he rashly calculated that were it not for Reilly's intervention he would ultimately be able to win Nora. He severed his connection with the Fenians, and (pity that I should have to say it!) was hereafter suspected—whether rightly or wrongly I cannot truly say—of speaking loosely and disparagingly of his late associates, and he had not the good word for poor Reilly."

Dermot paused. He looked out the open window across the broad undulating plain, rich in herds and crops; but these had now ceased to interest him.

"To resume my story. Poor Ned Reilly and many of his comrades were arrested and sentenced. Ned got seven years' imprisonment. He was an only son. The news of Ned's conviction nearly broke his poor father's heart. In less than two years from that day the poor old man was forced to sell half his land,

and poorly indeed did he manage to exist on the remainder till Ned's release. Need I say, my father found means to leave Ireland immediately. He settled here in Western Australia, succeeded beyond expectation, married my poor, dear mother (God give her eternal rest!) I was born to them, their only child as you are aware. Everything my father put his hand too turned to gold; but gold could not dispel the shadow of suspicion that pursued him. The consciousness of having deserted his comrades, of having spoken slightly of them, of their bitter and long imprisonments smote his inmost heart.

"Meanwhile poor Ned Reilly, in bleak Carrowbaun, was trying after his long incarceration to put together the remnants of the old home. Nora Degan, was, of course, faithful to him. They were married on his release, and now live, God only knows how, in the old place. I must seek them out!"

As he uttered these last words, Dermot Conroy stood up. Lithe of build, athletic-looking, clean-limbed, dark-browed and comely—handsome, indeed, in a true masculine sense was he. And as his old nurse and housekeeper looked at him she felt proud of her boy with almost a mother's pride and love. But now he was about to leave her, perhaps never to return.

"But Dermot, agradh, are you sure they will have any welcome before you in Carrowbaun, you the son of an—"

She stopped. She could not bring herself to utter the word "informer," for that was the word on her tongue, though wholly untrue.

"Welcome or no welcome I have a promise to fulfil, a duty to perform a duty imposed on me by my father's dying words, and that duty shall be done. Ask of them forgiveness for me, Dermot, my son, said he 'give them what of all your wealth you can spare if they can be induced to accept it. An stay in Ireland if you feel you love the land of your forefathers, which I'm sure you do, for your poor mother (God grant her rest!) taught you that love with your baby-milk. I love Ireland and do still, and would have given my life for her, but, of my God!—' My poor father died with these words on his lips. And although I never say it, I feel within my breast a strong desire to go to Derrybeg, my poor mother's native place in the County Clare, and see all her people—those she used to speak of so lovingly. Then on to Carrowbaun. All my effects are now settled, and the next boat sailing from Melbourne finds me on board, a passenger for Ireland. I will be there for Christmas and glad to spend my first Irish Yuletide. And how strange and beautiful it will all seem with God's white mantle of snow over the earth!"



# NED REILLY'S CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

Here Christmas comes at midsummer. To my young mind it seemed puzzling that Our Saviour should be cold in the stable of Bethlehem on a December Day. You remember last Christmas here and its scorching heat!

"Well that's our history, Mrs. O'Carroll; a dark one enough, indeed. For me, the sole remaining representative of our family, it remains to undo the grievous injuries inflicted by my father in his blind passion, hatred and thoughtlessness, to erase the ugly stain on our name. No easy task, God knows.

## II.

"Run, Noreen, aroon, to the door and listen if you can hear the sound of the cart."

Little Noreen, a sweet delicate child of about ten years, hastened to obey her mother. She opened the door and looked out. The snow fell heavily, covering tree and field and boreen with its soft, cold fleece. The bitterness of winter—the sharp, piercing frost-wind rushed in through the half-opened door. Mrs. Reilly—aye, the same poor Nora Degnan as the neighbours usually called her, using still her maiden name, a habit pretty common throughout Ireland—felt the chilly hand of King Frost and called out:

"Is it snowing, Noreen?"

"'Tis, mamma."

"Then, come in, alanna, and shut tight the door. No noise can be heard when the snow lies heavy on the roads. Poor little Paudeen will be famished, the creature."

Noreen returned and joined her brothers and sisters around the fire. They were nine, and little Paudeen away in Knockglunin for the "Christmas things" made the tenth—five boys and five girls, ranging from little curly-headed, laughing Cormac, just able to toddle to Breegeen in the fulness and beauty of womanhood. Their father was with Paudeen in the village. They had Flanagan's little ass and cart to carry home the necessaries of the joyous season. The Reillys "dealt" with John Gorman, a grocer and general dealer as well as a publican. But now, of all times, poor Reilly had least chance of obtaining the little he wanted. He owed a pretty large bill to Gorman, and though pressed and threatened and processed repeatedly for repayment he found it impossible to "clear the books." Worse still, the landlord's ejectment summons in his pocket! And Gorman knew this too through Barlow, the process-server.

"Well, Nora," said poor Reilly to his wife before he and his little son set out for the village, "we can only try. It's a bleak look-out. Gorman knows we are under notice to quit from Brinkley, the agent. Some fifteen pounds we owe the same Gorman, and little hope of paying him."

In the village of Knockglunin there was bustle; it was the day before Christmas Eve.

"Isn't that one Ned Reilly and little Paudeen over there at Gorman's door with Flanagan's ass and cart?" said Terry Tansy to Tom Cummiskey.

"'Tis indeed, Terry," responded Tom, "and little welcome before them in the same place. Gorman is a hard man, and poor Reilly hasn't a penny in his pocket."

"He's ageing greatly, Tom."

"Ah, wisha, a wrie and long, helpless family on a few acres of bad land will soon age any man," said Tom in a sympathetic tone.

"And they say 'tisn't long he'll be in Carrowbaun either," pursued Terry. "Nancy said Barlow the process-server went up to the house the other day."

"May God help them, Terry."

"Amen," responded Terry.

Ned Reilly waited and waited for his turn in the shop. He was ignored by the great man of the establishment, who had welcome before his other customers. Paudeen was perished outside standing by the little ass and cart in a door-way, out of the falling snow and stinging cold blast.

"Well," said Ned to himself as he stepped outside and walked up the street, "I must be patient. A beggar cannot be insolent. The shop is thinning out and it's just as well no one to be by when I state my poor case to Mr. Gorman. He's almost sure to be surly, but I don't mind that."

He turned at the corner, then back again, stopping suddenly as if overcome by some thought.

"Aye, at twenty I took a man's part, I shouldered my pike, and on many a colder night than this I was drilled in Glennahown, that I might be with my neighbours at the rout of the red-coats! But 'twasn't to me. And this because I loved Ireland and was willing to free her."

Thus mused poor Ned Reilly. He pulled himself up, and into his eyes there came a strong, brave, manly light. Where now was the craven, the beggar, at the door of a petty, sordid huckster!

"To-night," he continued to commune, "I must plead for Nora—dear, gentle, faithful Nora! Little did she think that we should come so low, still, God be praised, we did our best. I must not be rash; I must curb my natural pride for Breegeen's sake, for the sake of little Cormackeen, for the sake of all the children, that their Christmas may not be—"

"Now, Reilly," called out the shop-keeper, "do you want to see me? Come in, man, before I shut up for the night, and let's hear you."

All poor Reilly's pleading was in vain. "Sorry for you—indeed I am," said Gorman, "but what can I do? A business man like me, Reilly, must have no sentiment—no sentiment, sir!" He repeated, "must have no sentiment—no sentiment, sir," as if to convince himself of the extreme beauty and applicability



## NED REILLY'S CHRISTMAS SURPRISE.

of the words, as poor Reilly turned towards the door and departed.

"We must go home as we came, Paudeen, avic." The little son's appealing and pinched face, on which shone the dull light from Gorman's doorway, looked up at the father. Strong man though he was, and accustomed to trial and hardship he could not meet the gaze. He passed the rough sleeve of his old frieze coat across his eyes and turned towards home. The little boy followed with Flanagan's slow-moving conveyance, the ass and cart.

Ned Reilly walked to Carrowbaun without speaking a word. "Twill be a poor Christmas for us all this year," thought he, "but we must bear it. I wouldn't care but for the children."

"They're all gone to bed," said Mrs. Reilly as if she heard the words that were running through her husband's mind. "They didn't wish to go. Cormac was waiting for sweets, Noreen for candy, Jem said you promised him a Jack-in-the-box; indeed they all expected something—God help them. I feared when ye stayed so long that you're journey would be a fruitless one."

Ned said nothing but went to the fire and sat down.

"Breegeen stayed up, however, to keep me company, and to get ready, as she said herself, something for ye to eat. She's just gone out for a 'bockoge' of turf. She baked the last little grain of flour in the house, not knowing where the next would come from. It's bitter cold, and Paudeen is famished."

Ned and his little son sat down to their supper; indeed for poor Ned it was dinner as well as supper, but he scarcely tasted a bit. "The children in the morning will want it more," he said in a whisper to his wife, "and I had something to eat in Knockglunin." He added aloud as if to satisfy Breegeen who looked anxiously on fearing, gentle girl, that she was somehow to blame for her father's reluctance to eat.

The Rosary was said; and God surely heard that night the prayers of those brave, humble and gentle hearts. "He will not forsake us," muttered Ned almost audibly as he arose from prayer.

### III.

Little did Ned Reilly know as he paced the street opposite Gorman's shop that he was an object of interest. And little did he think that later the harsh words of Gorman reached the ears of a third party. "A business man like me, Reilly, must have no sentiment—no sentiment, sir." These words were plainly audible to a well-dressed, dark-complexioned, athletic-looking young man who passed the door at the time. The stranger paused for a moment pretending to be interested in advertisements of Sunlight soap, borax, Rickett's blue, Day and Martin's blacking and such-like foreign goods displayed in the window of the great Gorman emporium.

Late that day—the day prior to Christmas Eve, Dermot Conroy, of Western Australia had reached Knockglunin. He found it too late to proceed any further that day, and said to himself that he would rest where he was till next morning, and in the meanwhile prosecute a few careful inquiries regarding the Reilly's and Carrowbaun, so as not to put the garrulous tongues of the district a-wagging.

"Could you tell me, good man," said he addressing a seedy, emaciated-looking little man who happened to be the village tailor, and who along with a few boon companions were about to enter Donnellan's bar for a "round," "if there is anyone by the name of Looby living in Coolamurla?"

"No, there's no Looby that I know of."

"Or anyone of that name in—in—Coolmore?"

"No; there's only Kane and Jem Haherty and Mick McGettrick in Coolmore."

"Nor in Carrowbaun?"

"No; in Carrowbaun there's Terry Tansy, Tom Cummiskey, Luke Brady, Markeen Hoban and Ned Reilly. That's Reilly over there, and Tansy and Cummiskey are inside there in Donnellan's."

"Thank you," said Dermot and walked away.

"That's a queer chap," said the tailor to his comrades as they blew the froth off their pints. Looby in Coolamurla? Wisha, who ever heard of the name in these parts, though, I believe, it's common enough elsewhere. Then in Coolmore and Carrowbaun! Faith, he knows the names of the places anyway and can't be quite as big a stranger as he looks and pretends to be."

"Now," said Dermot Conroy to himself as he left the tailor and his chums, "this is the man whom my father wronged. To-morrow is Christmas Eve, and I will present myself at Carrowbaun—no, not to-morrow. I cannot disturb the family with my presence till, say, St. Stephen's Day."

He passed up and down the street twice. The snow was falling heavily and his footsteps were almost noiseless. He began to feel the loss of friends and home. "I wonder has Ned Reilly a daughter." At such a thought he could not help smiling at his own conceit. "If he has, she ought to be a full-grown woman now, and if like her mother, who my father often said was the pride of the parish, she may.— Well, what romantic fancies I'm getting already into my head. But I can't resist inhaling the atmosphere here. To me these places have a strange familiar interest, perhaps because my father spoke so much of home in recent years. I feel as if I knew them all long ago. A truce to my nonsense. I'll join the company of the man of the needle and his gay associates."

Pursuing his thoughts, he entered Donnellan's. He found the tailor "well on it," and Tansy and Cummiskey with the rest of the company very talkative and noisy.



## NED REILLY'S CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

"I hope," said Dermot moving towards the revellers, "I am not intruding. I am somewhat lonely and couldn't resist the appeal of your loud merriment. Permit me to stand a treat."

"Ha, ha," laughed the tailor, "you didn't find Looby?" and then he sang in a tipsy manner:

"Bad luck to the one of the name in the place,  
Sure, Shauneen the tramp was the last  
o' the race."

At this witticism there was loud laughter in which Dermot joined, although the laugh was against himself.

"Now your healths, gentlemen, and yours especially, my poetic friend. A merry Christmas to you all!"

Dermot learned from the general and unrestrained talk of the jolly company that Ned Reilly was very poor, and likely to spend a sad and stinted Christmas; and when his opportunity came he arose and departed. On his way to his lodgings in passing Gorman's door he overheard the words which were used by the shopkeeper to poor Reilly.

He pondered long on these words before going to bed that night; and the hard story of Reilly, as gleaned from his casual company in Donnellan's, kept mixing itself up in his dreams with many strange fancies. Still his dreams took a pleasant turn now and again, and a sweet, delicate, pure face of a girl smiled on him from out of a halo of soft, clinging curls. "Twas only a dream," he sighed. "But that face!"

#### IV.

The morning of Christmas Eve was ushered in by cold, biting east winds and occasional falls of snow. The roads were almost impassible. The famished robins fitted from door to door as if conscious of the holy season of joy and hospitality at hand, and thus emboldened to ask for sympathy.

"God gracious!" exclaimed Terry Tansy who was doing something about the haggard, "what can be bringing that heavily-laden cart of Donnellan's up the breen to Reilly's? Surely, there's some mistake, not that I begrudge him twenty times as much as there's piled on the same cart. And the horse is scarcely able to draw it."

"It's strange enough," returned young Rory Tansy, "for I don't think Reilly ever 'dealt' with Donnellan."

But consternation was greater still among the young Reilly's, and the old people could only look on and await explanations.

"I know nothing about the whole thing, Mr. Reilly," said the young fellow in charge of the Christmas cargo, "except that my master told me deliver the goods to Ned Reilly, of Carrowbaun."

"And who gave the order?" asked Ned.

"That I don't know either, sir, the goods are paid for. There's the bill, twelve pounds, seventeen and eightpence halfpenny, marked 'paid' and signed John Donnellan," and with that the carman handed the bill to Reilly. It was as stated.

"This, surely, is a Godsend, but don't go yet, Larry," said Ned, "you must get something out of this big jar to warm you up before you start, for it's the bitter biting day that's in it."

There never was a more delighted house than Reilly's that day. The children shouted and romped. There was everything to make a very happy Christmas, and happy it was. All Christmas day Ned Reilly was guessing and guess-

ing who it was that came to his assistance in the hour of need, and made their hearts glad.

St. Stephen's Day Dermot Conroy himself called. He had a long story to tell, and he told it well.

"Wisha, there's nothing to be forgiven, Dermot, achorra," said Ned, grasping him firmly by the hand. "Your father, it is true, didn't stand by us as well as he might, but, God knows, no word of his ever brought the severe punishment we underwent."

"O God be thanked!" prayed Dermot out of the depths of his heart. "Our name is clear of suspicion. I can now hold my head up."

"You must spend a while with us," said Mrs. Reilly, "though it's little enough we have."

"Not little" quickly responded Dermot, "ye have the only true richness of the world—great and faithful hearts."

Dermot Conroy stayed till the New Year in Ned Reilly's, of Carrowbaun. He saw the sweet face of his dreams in gentle Breegeen; and, oh, what a pretty story in itself was that wooing! He repurchased for the Reilly's at rather an exorbitant price the portion of land lost during Ned's exile. All the arrears of rent were paid. He bought the beautiful lands of Derrymore for himself and Breegeen, and built thereon a house after the model of his forsaken West Australian home. And to make a long story short, two happier families than the Conroy's and Reilly's there are not in all Connacht to-day.