

# THE TINKERS' FREE

BY Eoghan MacDiarmada

Johnny Feehily, Luke Doran, and Luke's daughter, Nellie, set off at daybreak for the county town. Luke was driving; Nellie sat on a "bircheen" of straw in the centre of the cart; Johnny was perched up behind, his legs dangling, and his big brogues almost touching the road.

"God send ye luck," shouted Mrs. O'Connor, half-seriously, half-amusedly, after them as they passed.

"Ugh! thank you, ma'am—thank you; the same to you," answered Johnny.

"Keep a close eye on them, acushla," said she to Nellie. "Troth, it's the sore time of it you'll have with the pair of them till you get back."

"Gee-up!" shouted Luke as he urged on the ass, pretending not to hear Mrs. O'Connor's last sally. The company moved on delightedly. Luke occasionally broke into a stave of the "Dear Little Shamrock," whilst Johnny chatted pleasantly with Nellie.

Johnny was a happy man to-day, as well he might be. He had the full amount of the long-expected legacy, left him by his late brother in America, in his pocket, and was simply going to the town to turn it into shining gold. No wonder he lilted snatches of the "Piper's Tune," and even went so far as to join Luke in the chorus of the "Dear Little Shamrock." Luke, too, had good reason to be in high spirits. By the death of a sister, a year previously, he had become an annuitant to the tune of forty pounds "for the length of his natural life." Johnny and Luke were, in fact, allowed to be the two luckiest men in the parish of Balladrowin.

Luke Doran's immediate business to the town was, however, to purchase provisions and "good cheer" for a little dinner party he was about to give to Mrs. Hargaden and her husband, who were recently married. Mrs. Hargaden—late Eliza Jane Killoran—was the new-comer; the Hargadens were in Balladrowin since their ancestor, one Cormac Galengach, ruled it, after the manner of the clan, over the three baronies of Galen, Corran, and Lyney. Luke was at the wedding of Brian Hargaden, the present chieftain of the clan, as were also Nellie and her sister Nora. It may be mentioned that both Luke and Johnny were widowers. Luke meant to make the dinner party a record one in the village—which was no small undertaking—and on that account no place other than the county town would suit him to make his purchases.

Two—some say three—gallons of whiskey were purchased; "wine for the ladies," a little cask of porter, a large quantity of beef and mutton, tea, sugar, biscuits, currants, raisins, carraway-seed, and jam; flour, bacon, pickles, and some few dozen bottled beer. Besides, as they were in the town they thought it well to bring with them a few hundred of coal, for the turf that year, owing to the heavy rains, was all "spoddagh." But it must not be forgotten that so many purchases were not made, particularly as regards the liquids, without careful sampling. Johnny, who was a shrewd man of business, repeatedly warned Luke of the folly of "buying a pig in a bag."

"Troth, now, Luke, I'd advise you to take a sample here and there, and then we can decide which is best," suggested Johnny. It was a sensible enough plan, though rather dangerous, for by the time they had tasted a half-one out of five or six brands they were as far from deciding (if not farther) which was best as at the beginning. After considerable argument, however, the order was given.

The shopping done in the town, and the money carefully cashed by Johnny, they set out for home. Nellie, who had her own purchases to make, joined them at a point previously agreed upon. She was, it need hardly be said, heartily tired awaiting their coming. The little company were proceeding out Brian Boru road (or Tinker's lane, as it was called before the Town Council took it into its patriotic and respectable head to rename it), and

were in the very act of passing the last place of refreshment when Johnny said:

"Wisha, Luke, I think we ought to have a deoch-an-doruish."

"Now," said Nellie, as Johnny tied the ass to the jamb of the publichouse door, "I'm going home by train. Let ye not delay long there, and take care of the things."

"Drink it up; drink it up, man," urged Johnny, as Luke surveyed the formidable drink before him; "it's the last we'll have till we get home."

"Here's luck to America," said Luke, raising his glass aloft.

"Good luck and God's blessing to it," rejoined Johnny, "and to ould Ireland, too."

The toast was drunk—and another. The conversation was pleasant and hearty. The landlord of the house joined in, for he had been in America himself for years, and was glad of an opportunity of telling of all he "heard and all he saw."

At last Johnny and Luke arose to depart.

"Now, isn't that Nellie the trickster," said Johnny; "hasn't she gone on with the ass and cart after all! You were saying, Luke, that 'twas too grand she was to come with us on the cart. Deed, she's a good, nice, langhey little girl. I think herself and my lad, Charlie, would make a good match of it."

The subject broached gave them much to talk about, and as the evening was fine they sauntered along pleased with themselves and the whole world. About two miles from the town they came up with what appeared to be a gipsy encampment. Huge fires were lighted inside and outside the tent.

"Fine evening, men!" shouted one of the tinkers, good-humouredly, for it was a party of tinkers after all. "Won't ye have a taste?" and he proffered whiskey in a small tin porringer.

Johnny and Luke, after sitting for some time on a dry sod fence, and having partaken of the tinker's hospitality (which Johnny swore was poteen), entered the tent, for the night was getting a little chilly. Here they found the most uproarious feasting and drinking proceeding, and in a truly primitive fashion. Whiskey was dispensed in porringers and porter in canfuls. There was meat being roasted on a roaring fire. Some tinkers were eating, some drinking, many singing and dancing. The utmost cordiality prevailed. Every tinker—man and woman—shook hands with Johnny and Luke. It was a memorable scene; the two worthies were fascinated.

"It reminds me," said Johnny to Luke, "of the wedding in Tansy's."

Luke smiled, for he, too, had recollections of the same wedding.

# THE TINKERS' SPREE

The dancing and uproar, the singing and shouting continued unabated.

"I wish," said Johnny aloud, "I was twenty years a younger man and I wouldn't mind throwing a step on a door." Johnny in his young days was a "bit of a dancer," and that's why he spoke.

"You're young enough to do that same yet," urged a brawny, sunburnt woman. After a little persuasion Johnny stepped on to the door, and to the wildest strains of a cracked fiddle and a cracked fiddler, who was supported by the liting of a young tinker, danced the "Top of Cork Road."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Johnny, when he had finished, "when done an' at the heel I'm as good as the best of them yet."

He received a salvo of cheers that would have driven terror into the heart of a timorous man. Luke had to add his contribution to the revelry. He sang the old favourite—or as much of it as he had—"The Dear Little Shamrock," which, to tell truth, was the only song—or part of a song—he possessed. The tinkers sang, the tinkers danced; all shouted and cheered, and probably such a saturnalia has not often been witnessed. Good-naturedly the guests were plied with meat and bread and drink. But, like all meetings and carousals of the sort, whether in the halls of the great or the tent of the tinker, a break-up is inevitable.

Here again the tinkers were not to be outdone.

"Ye live in Carrownaha, in the parish of Balladrowin—sure, we know ye well, Johnny Feehily and Luke Doran—two decent men—"

"Two decent men," repeated Johnny.

"And it's a nice step ye have to go," continued the old tinker who had been speaking. "Tom," he shouted, "tackle up the black ass and cart for these two gentlemen."

The ass was harnessed to the cart, and on a clean bed of straw Johnny and Luke were soon cosily seated.

"Keep him safe, give him a wisp of hay and a grain of oats, and a little taste of a soft drink till we call for him to-morrow," said the old tinker, who seemed to be the father of the group and the only sober man of the company, with the exception of Johnny and Luke.

It was breaking day when the ass left his nose on Luke Doran's door. Nellie ran out on hearing the noise of the cart. She was tired-out waiting for the pair of boys, and looked leaden-eyed (poor girl!) under the grey coldness of the dawn. The worthies were asleep. She awoke them.

"What did ve do with the goods?" she asked, looking into the cart.

"What goods?" said Luke.

"The goods we bought yesterday."

"What goods did we buy, Johnny?" asked Luke dazedly of his half-awake companion.



After a little persuasion Johnny stepped on to the door.

"Ugh! bad luck to the one of me knows," said Johnny. "Where were we?"

"How do I know," said Luke.

Nellie looked from one to the other.

Johnny burst out laughing. "Ugh! ho! ho! Do you mind the tinkers? Shure, isn't this the tinker's ass and cart we have! Ho! Ho! Ho!"

"The ass and cart is your own," retorted Nellie sternly. "Johnny Feehily, for an old man that ought to have sense now if you'll ever have it, you're an awful fool. Oh, heigh-bo," she cried, "ye've lost all!" and the angered and justly indignant girl burst into tears. She put her apron to her eyes and went into the house sobbing.

"Johnny," said Luke, "we've done it—we've done it now, and we'll be the laughing-stock of the parish for many a long day. 'Twas to our own the tinkers treated us, Johnny?" and he looked quizzically at Johnny.

# THE TINKERS' SPREE



The worthies were asleep.

Johnny roared out laughing. "Never mind, Luke," said he, putting his hand into an inside breast pocket of his waistcoat, "'twould be worse if I lost the legacy, or either of us a cow!"

The dinner party to Mr. and Mrs. Hargaden was, of course, given despite the trick played by the jolly tinkers. It was, however, a greatly curtailed party, but a very pleasant one. Johnny Feehily related the details of the tinkers' spree till tears of joy and laughter were in the eyes of all present. Even Nellie vouchsafed to smile from her seat near the head of the table; and, at a particularly droll expression of his father's, Charlie nudged her, which caused her to break out into a sweet, musical ripple of laughter.

They have not forgotten the incident of the "Tinkers' Spree" yet in Balladrowin.