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# At a Safe Distance.

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THE inhabitants of Rathkerin are fairly well used to the idea of emigration in some forms, and every now and then see with tolerable equanimity people going forth from among them, bound for England or the States. Such incidents are, no doubt, generally regrettable, but not necessarily to be regarded as entailing hopeless severance and perpetual exile. Even the Atlantic can be crossed so quickly now, that news of the departed may be had within a fortnight; and thenceforward letters sometimes continue to arrive with a speed and regularity, which encourages a belief in the possibility of a bodily return. But it is quite different when a person sets off to one of those vaguely situated places which can only be described as "outlandish altogether," months intervening before the stay-at-homes need hope for tidings, and popular opinion running strongly against the probability of any further communications.

Accordingly there was much lamentation, both expressed and suppressed, at the departure of young Frank Cahill for a region called the Argentine, about which few facts were ascertained beyond its extreme remoteness and inaccessibility. For Frank was uncommonly good-looking and agreeable, besides being a renowned sportsman and athlete, so that the gap made in the neighbourhood by his removal would not easily be filled. The loss, however, seemed unavoidable. His father's sudden death, in unexpectedly embarrassed circumstances, left him little choice of plans, his means scantily sufficing for his transport to the distant climes where he had heard of an opening—by worse luck, some of his friends considered.

Indeed Lizzie O'Meara said to her sister Norah that she wished Frank had been left without money enough for travelling expenses, because then he would have had to stay in Rathkerin. To which Norah objected: "Sure he might better be away than fretting his heart out here, like some creature tethered with a short rope."

"Well, he's pulled up his tethering-pin now, that's certain," Lizzie rejoined; and Norah replied:

"Maybe he has." But to herself she added: "And maybe he has not."

If it had not been for untoward circumstances, these Misses O'Meara would hardly have numbered among their acquaintances Frank Cahill, a small cattle-dealer's son. For the O'Mearas belonged to a family of old, ancient quality, who, within living people's memory, had owned a fine, though much encumbered, landed estate. They had, however, long been coming down in the world and had, so to speak, descended several steps at a run during the lifetime of Lizzie and Norah's father whose unthrifty habits and convivial tastes led him into extravagance, the disastrous results of which were swelled by numerous children and an invalid wife. Little of their earlier prestige now remained to them, and still less of any more substantial possessions.

One showery spring day about two years after Frank Cahill's emigration, important domestic affairs were being discussed in the parlour of Joseph Dermody, Rathkerin's principal tradesman. The matter under consideration was nothing less than the marriage of his elder son. A rather curious feature in the conference was that Thomas, the person most concerned, appeared, not at all deceptively, to be the most indifferent. He took only a slight part in the discussion, and when he did intervene, it was but like warmly to side with his father, whose views were being opposed by his mother and three sisters. Joseph Dermody was a man who as a rule got his own way in managing affairs of business, and, though thus out-numbered and feebly supported, he would no doubt have done so on the present occasion, had not special circumstances been strongly against him. The fact that Mrs. Dermody was just re-

covering from a somewhat serious attack of pleurisy, which had greatly alarmed her family, gave her wishes unusual weight as well with her husband, who disapproved of them, as with her daughters, who shared them enthusiastically. She must therefore be admitted to have shown considerable judgment in selecting this time for the production of her favourite project, namely, that Thomas should marry one or other of the two grown-up O'Meara girls.

It was a plan which she had long entertained; and a very propitious moment for carrying it out seemed to have arrived, now that Thomas had got a clerkship in Parcolough, the country town more than a dozen miles away, where he would presently be taking up his abode. What recommended the match to Mrs. Dermody and her daughters was social ambition, with which their minds were much occupied. Mrs. Dermody always gave herself the airs of having married beneath her station in life; her neighbours could not think why, as "nobody had ever thought anything of them Clarks." Nevertheless she had thoroughly imbued her daughters with her own sense of illustrious lineage and passionate desire "to climb aloft and others to excel" in rank as well as riches; and this alliance with the aristocratic though impoverished O'Mearas seemed to be an upward step which might most ex-

pediently accompany Thomas' establishment in a genteel situation away at Parcolough. They foresaw themselves visiting him there, discreetly veiling all connection with the vulgar Rathkerin shop, and entering the highest circles of society. Against these advantages Joseph Dermody urged the sordid fact that Mr. Considine O'Meara, so far from having a penny to give his daughter, owed her proposed father-in-law, what with one thing and another, over a couple of hundred pounds; while Thomas diffidently suggested that "maybe the O'Mearas would have nothing to say to the likes of him," an argument which his mother disdainfully demolished.

"No fear of that," she declared. "Sure I've now and agin let fall a word to poor Mrs. O'Meara, and plain enough it is that only too thankful they'd be to have a girl off their hands, along with our account settled."

"A fine sort of fortune, bedad," her husband grumbled; but grumbled vainly, as some judiciously interpolated fits of pathetic coughing and gasping proved more than a match for all his practical arguments. And the end of it was that this very afternoon Thomas set off to the O'Mearas, in the character of suitor for the hand of either Lizzie, or Norah, "according as might happen."

Long and lean, in his new broad cloth suit and low-crowned felt hat, Thomas Dermody looked rather like a theological student, his mother and sisters thought, watching him down the street with admiring eyes. No admiration, however, awaited him when his journey ended three miles off in the O'Mearas' untidy sitting-room. On the contrary, Lizzie O'Meara, whom he found there, trimming a hat, considered his smooth, colourless visage and sleek black hair positively repulsive. It is true that in ordinary circumstances she had really no particular dislike for him, but the unflattering light that falls on an unfavoured wooer seemed to bring out innumerable defects. Lizzie was not unprepared for his advent in that capacity, because her mother had of late thrown out many broad hints, not failing to accompany them with strong remarks about the opinion which all sensible persons would have of a girl foolish and wicked enough to let slip the chance of becoming Mrs. Thomas Dermody. As Lizzie was fully determined upon being that reprehensible girl, she had made up her mind beforehand that when the time came she would refuse Thomas' proposal in unambiguous manner, likely to prevent any repetition of it, and thus to shorten the contentious period, which she knew would follow. Therefore she now hastened to confirm her assertion that she would never dream of marrying him, if he was the only man left standing on his two feet in the width of the world, by adding: "And, sure, I've promised to somebody else this long while," a statement for which no foundation whatever existed.

"He's the lucky chap then," Thomas declared, as was fitting, but with rather less than due conviction. "And who is he at all might I ask?" he inquired after a pause, which had clearly

the gate in the O'Mearas' weedy shrubbery-walk he came face to face suddenly with Norah, and thus with a chance of carrying out his original plan, which was "to get the business settled one way or the other," before he returned home.

Norah's way of settling it was remarkably like Lizzie's, the most striking point of resemblance lying in her final declaration that she had already promised somebody else; whereupon Thomas once more inquired: "And who at all, might I ask?" received the answer: "Ah, well, I wouldn't say but it might be Frank Cahill."

"Och, don't be quizzin' me," said Thomas.

"What talk is there of quizzin' anybody?" said Norah.

"But sure it's the very same thing that your sister Lizzie's after tellin' me about herself," Thomas protested.

Thomas had honourably intended to keep Lizzie's secret, but, taken by surprise, he blurted it out, and gave himself away simultaneously.

"It's a great lie she was tellin' you then," said Norah. "And is it just after comin' away you are from askin' her too? Saints and patience, Thomas Dermody, but yourself's the quare big gaby. If you aren't the laughing-stock of the parish, 'tis no fault of your own. So good evening to you now; and I needn't bid you hold your fool's tongue, for I might as well be biddin' the old cow in the field there quit switchin' her tail."

As Thomas turned homewards his feelings were a mixture of relief and dismay, sprung from a sense of mingled success and failure. But they were to be still further complicated before he reached Rathkerin.

In the O'Mearas' lonely lane there was only one other dwelling, a small farmhouse, inhabited by a large family of Geraghtys people who were even more needy than their next door neighbours, and who were not accredited with having seen better days. Indeed the Geraghtys seemed at all times to have been



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been spent in conjecture. Meanwhile it had suddenly occurred to Lizzie that guesses of the kind might have awkward consequences, so she replied on the spur of the moment:

"Suppose it was Frank Cahill." For she thought to herself that about Frank, at such a safe distance, and not in the least likely to return or communicate from it, this might be said with very little risk.

"Frank Cahill? Why nobody's heard tale or tidings of him this month of Sundays," said Thomas.

"Oh, haven't they not?" said Lizzie with ungrammatical mysteriousness.

"Well, he was always a very decent chap anyhow," Thomas said, displaying a generosity towards his rival, which perhaps appeared greater than it really was. "And don't you be tellin' anybody a word about it, Thomas, for your life," said Lizzie.

"I will not," said Thomas, rising to depart. He was on the point of asking her where he could find her sister Norah, when it struck him that there would be something too crude about this mode of procedure, and he refrained from doing so. Fortune, however, favoured him; for near

thought badly of, not without some cause, and their existing representatives were no improvement upon their predecessors. Consequently Rathkerin was disposed to commiserate an orphaned niece, Nellie Magrath, "a nice quiet little girl," who had been obliged to take up her abode with them. It was commonly believed that "they gave her none too good treatment among them all, and worked her like a black slave."

Now, as Thomas was passing the Geraghtys' rusty gate, a sudden shower came on so heavily that he sought shelter under the robust elder-bush, which supported one of the tumble-down posts. As he stood there he reflected on his recent interview "up at O'Mearas'," considering with some mortification that he had certainly made a greater fool of himself than was necessary, but finding no slight comfort in the fact that he had failed to letter himself for life to one of those large, supercilious, sandy-haired sisters. A small, dark-eyed girl—such as Nellie Magrath—who always looked shyly pleased to see him, and who, he was afraid, hadn't overmuch of anything pleasant, would be far and away more to