

"Och now, Maureen, yer not in sarnest; yer not goin' to spen' yer Hallow's Eve at the fireside yer lone. Sorra wan o' you!"

"I'm goin' to my bed, by-an'-by," said Maureen. "I'm thinkin' it's the fittest place for me that's been workin' hard since four this mornin'."

"Ay, Maureen, you work too hard," said Con Lavelle, speaking for the first time, shading his eyes with a brawny hand, while he shot a glance of tenderness at her from under his massive rough-bewn brows.

Maureen flushed again as she felt the glance. "That's for my own judgment," she said, impatiently. "I'm young an' strong, an' if ever I'm to work it's now for sure; an' I thank you, Con!"

"But you'll come to the dance?" said Nan, coaxingly.

"No, Nan; I'll go to my bed."

"Well, if ever I seen or hard of such a girl!" said the sickly stepmother, fretfully. "Heavens above! when I was yer age, there wasn't a dance in the island that I wouldn't be at. Come, none o' yer laziness, Maureen! Bed, indeed! I tell ye there's nothin' on airth for restin' young bones afther a hard day's work like a good dance. Up with you, girl, an' put on yer shoes, an' take the cloak."

"Mother!" said Maureen, looking up in amazement, "don't bid me for to go to-night. You don't know what yer doin'."

"But I do bid you for to go, an' if you gainsay me now, it'll be the first time in yer life. As for not knowin' what I'm doin', it's a quare speech, Maureen, an' wan I didn't expect from you. Be off with ye, now!"

"An' I'm to go, mother?"

"You're to go, an' be quick!"

"Then 'at it stan' so," said Maureen, rising up suddenly, and looking down at her stepmother with a queer expression on her face. "I'm doin' yer biddin', an' come good or come ill of it, ye must bear the burthen. I'll go."

Down to the room went Maureen, with a lighted candle in her hand, which she struck in a sconce on the wall.

"I have thrived an' I have wrought," muttered she, as with trembling hands she began to put on her grey worsted stockings, and the shoes that on Sundays and state occasions only, covered her nimble feet. "I have toiled for her, an' she niver would give me my will as much to the sayin' of I'll go or I'll stay. Now I'm doin' her biddin', as I still have done it, an' if ill comes out of it, let her look to 't. I've hardened myself, an' I've hardened myself, but I'm not as hard as the rock yet. An' if I go at all, feth I'll go decent, an' not be danced unnder her foot by the grandeur of Peggy Moran, with her genteel airs, an' her five muslin founces, stickin' out all round her, starched as stiff as the grass in a white frast. Oh!—"

Here Maureen gave one desperate grasp of impatience to the thought of Peggy Moran, and struck her heel to the ground to drive it home to its unaccustomed shoe. Who should keep her from going to Biddy Prendergast's dance now? Not all the men in Bofin, armed to death with shillelaghs.

She opened an old painted chest in the corner, and produced a gown. This gown had belonged to her own dead mother, and was the one piece of finery which Maureen possessed in the world. It was a grand chintz, with blue and gold-colour flowers on a chocolate ground, and fitted her figure to a nicety. This was quickly assumed, and her long amber hair rolled round her head in as smooth a wreath as its natural waviness would permit of. When this was done, a little cracked looking-glass over the hearth declared her toilet complete. Then she came back to the kitchen, and while Con Lavelle's admiring eyes devoured her from a shadowy corner, she served out their supper of potatoes to the children, and placed "the graia of tay" in a little brown tea-pot, burnt black, on the hearth within reach of her stepmother's hand. These things done, she put the key of the house in her pocket, and taking "the cloak," a family garment, she followed her friends out of the cabin into a calm moonlit night, which had replaced the gloomy twilight.

Biddy Prendergast's house was in the Middle Quarter village, a good walk from the Widow Lacey's. When Maureen and the Lavelles arrived at the festival scene, operations had already commenced. Screams of laughter greeted their entrance, from a crowd of boys and girls who were ducking for apples in a tub of water behind the door. The kitchen was lighted by a huge turf fire that roared up the reeking chimney. In the smoky rafters hens dozed, and nets dangled. Flitches of bacon and bunches of dried fish swung in the draught when the door was opened. Biddy Prendergast was a well-to-do woman, one of the island aristocrats. In the ingle nook two or three *colliaighs*, *anglied* crones, were toasting their knees and holding their chat, while the light leaped over their worn red petticoats and withered faces and hands. In a retired corner was Paudeen, the island piper, wrinkled and whitehaired, sitting with his knowing eyes half closed, drining and turning at his pipes, holding commune with them, as it were, rallying and inspiring all their energies for the coming struggle with the rival pipes and piper, who had come to dispute the palm for skilful harmonies with the Bofin instrument and the Bofin musician. Tady, the other performer, was "down in the room" at his tea. And "down to the room" went our party from the North Beach.

In this room a notable assemblage was convened. A long board, contrived by means of several small tables, was spread with tea, soda cakes, "crackers," and potatoe cakes, several pounds of butter in a large roll being placed in the centre on a dish. A bed, with blue checker curtains and patchwork counterpane, choked up one corner of the room, leaving no space for chairs. This difficulty was comfortably ignored by the guests sitting on the bed, and nursing their cups and platters on their knees. Those opposite were less fortunate, as the heels of their chairs were nearly treading on the hearth. All the *élite* of Bofin were here. There was Timothy Joyce, the national schoolmaster, about whose learning there were dark reports. It was whispered that he had a crack right across the top of his skull, occasioned by too reckless a prosecution of abstruse studies in his youth, and that this was why he wore his hair so long, and brushed so smooth and close above his forehead. There was Martin Leahy, the boat-maker, the ring of whose cheerful hammer on the beach, late and early, helped the larks and the striking oars in the harbour

to make music all through the summer months. There was Mick Coyne Mack, the last name signifying "son," and Irish way of saying "junior." He was clerk in the chapel, a spare grizzled man, a great hand at praying and discoursing, a famous *votéen* (devotee), and almost as good at an argument as the schoolmaster himself. Then there was Tady, the strange piper, who having penetrated as far as Dublin and Belfast in the course of his scientific researches, and picked up odd polkas and operatic airs from hurdy-gurdys and German bands, was looked upon with much awe, as a superior professor of music. There was a young man, a cousin of an islander, who had just returned from America, with genteel clothes, a fine nasal twang in his speech, and plenty of anecdote about foreign lands. And though last, not least, there was the captain of a trading sail ship which, on her way from Spain to Liverpool, had been driven out of her course and taken refuge in Bofin harbour.

Biddy Prendergast, a plain faced woman in a grand dress cap and plaid gown, was making tea at the head of her board, in high spirits. She was talking volubly, joking and laughing at Mike Ternary, who with a huge black kettle in hand was replenishing her earthen teapot. Every now and again she winked at Peggy Moran, who sat close by, with her back to the fire, in all the glory of the five muslin founces, a knot of red ribbon blazing under her chin, and her great black eyes dancing responsive to Biddy's winks, or falling demurely on her teacup when handsome Mike looked her way. Not a doubt, but Mike was the best-looking man in the house, tall, and manly, and bronzed, with his coaxing voice, and his roguish smile, and his frank way of tossing the dark hair from his forehead by a fling of his head. Peggy, the bell, had long desired to count him on the list of her admirers. Peggy had three cows and two feather-beds to her dower: the finest fortune in Bofin. Biddy, through pure good will to Mike, her favourite, was trying to make a match between him and the heiress, all unknown to the elder Morans, who would sooner have seen their daughter mistress of Con Lavelle's fine farm at Fawnmore. Biddy's hints and Peggy's handsome eyes had until to-night remained unheeded. Now there was a sudden change. Mike was remarkably civil to both of these ladies. He tucked Peggy's founces carefully away from the fire, and helped her twice to crackers. Peggy dimpled and blushed, and Biddy laughed and winked, and Mike was in the act of pouring the water into the teapot, when the door was pushed open and Maureen and her friends came in.

A scream from Biddy greeted their entrance. "Bad manners to it for a kittle!" cried Mike, getting very red in the face. "Is the finger scalded aff o' you entirely? Surely if it is I'll put a ring of it for a plaster, an' if that doesn't mend it, sorra more can I do."

The finger was suitably bound and bemoaned, and Biddy pardoned the offender, forgot her pains like a heroine, and attended to her new guests.

"Come down, Con; come down, man; here's a sate by the fire. The night's cold. Good luck to ye, Nan, hang yer cloak on the door there, an' come down an' ate a bit o' somethin'. Yer welcome, Maureen Lacey! Make room, girls, an' let her come down. It's seldom we get you to come out. An' how's the rumatics with yer mother?"

Con Lavelle being an important man, the richest farmer in the island, was soon forced into a seat by the fire, and he and his sister had their wants quickly attended to. Maureen, who was looked on by the hostesses as rather an interloper, was not so eagerly noticed. Maureen felt this with a swelling heart. The next moment Mike had shouldered his way to her, had cleared a place for her on the bed, and taken his seat beside her, just at the corner, where he could draw back his head behind the looping of the curtain, and look at her proud downcast face as much as he pleased. Maureen, with a huge cup and saucer in her hands, trembled so that she spilled the tea all over her grand chintz gown. Sitting there opposite to Peggy Moran's jealous eyes, with Mike leal and true beside her, Maureen struggled in the toils of the temptation to turn round and smile in his face, and ask him to hand her a piece of cake. She knew that Mike was thinking of her last words to him on the bog, knew it by his jubilant air, and the fire from his eyes that shone on her from behind the looping of the curtain. The temptation fought within her to let him have it his own way. In the whirling vision of a second she saw herself Mike's wife, mistress of a snug little shelter at the East End, making ready the hearth for Mike coming home from his fishing. No more drenching in the high spring tides, battling with storm and rain, carrying home the sea-rack on angry midnights. No more long days of labour in the fields of strangers for the wretched earning of sixpence a day. No more lecturings from a fretful stepmother, but always these strong bands beside her, and always these tender eyes. Oh, for Mike she could gladly work, with him could starve if need be. These things strove within Maureen as she sat spilling her tea over her grand chintz gown. But the old strain of duty, of pity for those depending on her, of fidelity to her promise to her stepmother, still kept its echo sounding in her ears, though but dimly and from afar off. The temptation shook her; but when the gust allayed itself, she regained her vantage ground, breathless, but sure of foot. The habit of restraint was strong within her. She did not turn and smile to Mike; neither did she ask him for a piece of cake.

Peggy Moran, sitting with her back to the fire, was beginnings to get very red in the face. Biddy Prendergast's wit had fallen dead. There was no one to tuck Peggy's founces away from the blaze, nor to hold the kettle gallantly for Biddy. Maureen sitting there, filling the moments for herself with the intense vitality of her own hard struggle, was looked upon by her two female neighbours as an unpardonable poacher on their promising preserves. But tea was over now, and the two pipers were sending forth rival squeaks and groans in the kitchen. Young feet were restless, and old feet too. The "room" was deserted, and the dancing began with spirit.

Maureen had made one gallant struggle, but it was hard to be proof against all the enchantments of this most trying night. When Mike, whom many glancing eyes coveted for a partner, eagerly pressed her for the first dance, her customary short reply was not ready; and she found herself upon the floor by his side before