

The Storyteller.

DARBY CLANCY'S WIFE.

THE sun was setting over lake and bog, casting a wonderful purple shade on the pebbles that edged the water and making an ever-changing background of crimson and gold to the brown turf-banks and green fields of Tara.

The rattle of far off cart-wheels, the cry 'pewit! pewit!' of the plover, the mournful call of the curlew, were the only sounds that broke the stillness of the evening, for Margot O'Leary's light footstep fell noiselessly on the springy heather, and the strange, wild beauty around her had hushed the song upon her lips.

'Thanks be to God for a lovely, lovely world!' she murmured, 'and for having put me in it.'

As she spoke her eyes wandered away over the moorland to where a curl of smoke on the hillside pointed out the site of some solitary farm, and there they lingered restfully, as though all happiness and beauty came from that spot; and in her heart Margot knew that for her it was really so. Yet her home was not over there at Clancy's farm of Baughan, but close to where she stood in Dera.

The slated house yonder had once belonged to her grandfather, and it was her uncle now who owned it. Margot's father had got a younger son's share years ago, and had gone out into the world to make his fortune; but though he managed to get along, and to keep his wife and child in comfort, there was little to leave them at his death, and that little was soon swept away by the long illness that finally took Mrs. O'Leary to rejoin her husband, and so left Margot friendless and alone.

Her uncle's offer of a temporary home had been gratefully accepted by the penniless orphan, and now, though a year had sped by, she had not yet left the grey house by the gravel-pit.

At first the loneliness of Dera had overwhelmed the town-bred girl, and, despite her people's kindness, she had often thought of trying to find some way of earning her bread elsewhere. But after a time she became used to her surroundings, and grew to love the wide, desolate bogland and the kind, homely neighbors who had known her father as a child.

Dan O'Leary, her uncle, had a comfortable bit of farm that edged the lake like a long green snake winding its way between turf and water; and what with cows and pigs and poultry, there was plenty for Margot to do about the house, for her aunt was not so young as she had been once, and Polly never cared to do more work than she need.

There was only one son in the O'Leary household, so the daughter would have a fair fortune when they came to marry her, and as the months slipped by and Margot seemed willing to stay and take her place, Polly's parents thought the time had come to begin to look round and make a match for her.

A suitable one was not far to seek. Darby Clancy's land touched O'Leary's at the end of the lake, and the two farms were joined by some rushy bottoms, originally built out of the bog by some dead and gone Clancy, but which in some way had now passed into Daniel O'Leary's hands. It was no secret that old Darby had his eyes on these bits of grazing, and he had long ago determined that his son should marry Polly and get back the coveted possession of the fields as her fortune.

When the people of Dera spoke of Clancy as old Darby they only did so to distinguish him from his son, young Darby, for the title in itself was not suited to him at all. Tall and straight, with bright eyes and a firm, hard mouth, there was nothing about him but his grizzled hair and beard to show that he was not still on the right side of 50.

He was an honest, industrious man, and people liked him when they knew his worth; as to his son, no one thought about his worth. They just took him to their hearts and kept him there because they couldn't help it.

When Margot came to Dera she heard them talk of him, and with her knowledge of the world prepared to be politely contemptuous to this universal favorite. There was no ceremony on their first meeting. She was taking her uncle's dinner down to the potato garden, and unaccustomed to the deceitful bog, laden with basket and tin can, Margot found herself muddy and breathless on a clump of heather, unable to go on, not daring to go back; then Darby had come to her assistance. Of course he had to grasp her tightly to help her back to a place of safety, but was it necessary for him to hold her hand all the way on until they had reached the garden? Was it necessary for him to loiter about and wait to show her the best and safest way to her home?

Margot never asked. Her prejudices had vanished away, and the hours passed very slowly till evening, when he came again to the waste land where the cows were waiting for her to drive them home.

That was all a year ago, and now, as the girl's eyes rested on the Clancy's house at Baughan, and she thought of all her love was to her, she was filled with gratitude to God for sending her such happiness. Darby was her very own now. He had told her that he loved her and nothing could separate them, nothing come between them; she would never give him up unless it were for his own good. She smiled at such a possibility, yet the thought did not pass away without a pang. What would life without him be? The glory of the sunset paled before her, and the cattle she was seeking were hidden away in a sudden mist of tears.

But it was only the weakness of a moment. No harm could reach her when Darby was by, and from where she stood she could hear his voice, wafted on the evening breezes from the turf bank where he and his father were at work.

Unseen by them she had to advance but a few yards to hear what was being said.

'I was talking with Dan O'Leary in market yesterday.'

The deep tones of the elder man were the first to strike upon her ears.

'And had he any news for you?' inquired the other carelessly.

Old Darby seemed to be considering what to say, for there was a moment's pause before he went on in a deliberate way:

'We're to go there on the holiday and settle things. He'll give us the bottoms, lad, and the polly heifer, or else a hundred pounds down, but I stuck to the land for you, and I asked £20 in with it, but I won't be holding out for that if there's any danger, for come what will we must get those fields, that should be ours, back again.'

'What is it you mean, father?'

Darby knew only too well, but he still wanted time to collect his thoughts. His father's plan had been no secret, and before Margot came the young man had made no objection to it, but from the moment that he had met the newcomer on the bog, he had decided that she and not Polly should be his wife. Knowing his father's determination, he had whispered no word of his intentions, hoping that if he made no advances the O'Learys would find another match for their daughter, and with her married and the possession of the fields impossible, Darby hoped to get his father's consent to marrying Margot, for he was not a grasping man as a rule, and her want of fortune would not have stood in the way of his boy's happiness if it had not been that through Polly they would get that wretched bit of land.

'What do I mean?' repeated old Darby. 'It's yourself should know what I mean when it's day in day out you be down at Dera, and if it isn't talking to Polly, I'd like to know your business there.'

'Polly don't want me,' retorted young Darby defiantly, and seeing it was no use beating about the bush any longer, he added: 'and I don't want Polly.'

A deep flush dyed the elder man's face, and he spoke through his clenched teeth.

'Want or no want, you'll marry her at Hollandtide.'

'I won't.' Darby threw down his spade and faced his father. 'Don't take on so, father,' he cried, 'for I can't marry Polly. I didn't want for to have words with you, so I never told you how it was, but I tell you now that Margot O'Leary's promised to be my wife, and nothing will keep me from her.'

For a moment old Darby stood thunderstruck. It was a rude awakening to the dream of a lifetime.

A torrent of words broke from his lips; he vowed by all he held sacred that the young man should bend to his will. He swore he would not be cheated out of those bottoms now that their possession lay in his hand, and he assured Darby that unless he obeyed him he would cut him off from him for ever, and cast him out into the world with nothing but the work of his two hands to keep him from the poorhouse.

Then he began to speak of Margot, and for the first time Darby raised his voice.

'You can say what you will of me,' he said firmly, 'but you'll leave my girl's name alone.'

'I'll say what I choose of the hussy,' thundered the furious old man.

Darby's eyes flashed as he spoke, and for a moment his father was silenced.

But the eavesdropper had heard enough. Falling on her knees among the heather, she covered her face with her hands, and forced herself to think. Half an hour ago—no, less—she had smiled when she thought of it being for her lover's good that she should give him up; now, with terrible distinctness, she realised that unwittingly she was leading him to ruin. Those threats and curses that made her shudder to think of would most certainly be carried out if he married her.

She knew how deep his love was for the old home on the hill, and for the bogs and lakes that he had never left. yet, unless he gave her up, he would have to leave them all and start life afresh. And what could the new life be? With no trade, no capital, she knew what it meant—she had seen it so often in Dublin. No, she loved him far too well to let him make a beggar of himself for her, and she knew he would never fail her. It was for her to act, she must give him up. She must go right away and leave him to marry Polly. He owned that had he never known her he would have done it, so why not now? She would go out of his life and let it be as though she had never come into it. But she must go now, at once; there must be no time to think, or the agony of parting would be too unbearable; there must be no chance of seeing him again, or her resolution must inevitably break down.

Afterwards, when it was over, she never quite remembered how she had managed her flight. The reasons she gave for her hurried departure passed from her memory. The early drive through the mists of morning, the journey up to Dublin, the rattling through the noisy streets, seemed like some part of a bad dream: it was as though she had fallen asleep on the heather-clad bog and had only awakened to find herself in the bare, familiar convent parlor, sobbing her very heart out at the feet of Mother Margaret, the class-mistress of her girlhood, and now her only friend and adviser.

Five years' training and hard work in a Dublin hospital, and once more Margot found herself near home and Dera.

Little was changed at the wayside station when she alighted from the train, yet no one recognised the quiet, dark-eyed nurse in her blue cloak and bonnet. It was the same face as of old, only marked by the inevitable traces that five years had left upon it—five years spent in working for others, and in trying to forget the aching loneliness of heart.

'God love you, nurse, dear,' exclaimed one loungee as she passed along the platform. 'It's badly wanted you are. We wouldn't be brought to what we are to-day if there were more of the likes o' you in the country.'