

Mary Welsh was face to face with a great temptation. She had married young, being only eighteen when Tom Welsh had led her to the altar. He had lived ten years and she had now been a widow five. So that, long as life seemed to her, she was only thirty-three. And that evening, since she had come out of her house, she had received a proposal of marriage. It had come as a surprise, and she had felt it to be almost an insult at first, as though Tom had been still living and the worn wedding ring she had on her third finger united him visibly to her. Her first impulse had been one of anger. Then the sudden, bewildering thought had occurred to her that she was really free to listen to 'such talk,' and that Billy Derham meant no disrespect when he began with some of the old nonsense that she had listened to as a girl. He told her how he had long admired her blue eyes, her brown hair, and figure. She had counselled him in the rude vernacular which the man would best understand to 'Quit his fooling.' Half inclined to laugh and half to cry, she had been carried to the misty land of youth, far off and unreal now as some region beyond the encircling chain of the Chelsea hills.

Billy Derham was a big fellow of thirty-five or six, healthy and strong, with good looks which had made many a girl of the village sigh for him, in vain, but which Mary Welsh had never noticed. He was rich, too, as the ideas of that rural community went. He had been the only child of a well-to-do father, who at his death had left him a competency, and this had been increased by the substantial bequest of a bachelor uncle. Billy had continued to be a 'boss' amongst the shanty-men and to draw his pay regularly, for the love of the forest and the hardy adventurous life he led there was deep down in his heart. He could not change even when the necessity for such strenuous labor was past. But he had been careful to invest his money, and even to speculate with some of it, so that he was really wealthy.

He owned a comfortable house, large and quite grand for that village, at a very pretty corner near the red bridge, and he had plenty of good furniture which had descended to him from more than one generation. It was these advantages that had constituted Mary's temptation. After the first distaste, and even repulsion, to an idea that had disturbed the placid depths of a widowhood which she had never dreamed of making anything else than perpetual, there came stealing softly, almost imperceptibly, that second thought. If she could make up her mind to such a course of action as Billy wished, then the worries that had been like thorns and briars all along her way would be at an end.

The house in which she lived, the worst in the village, was falling into ruins, for the hard toil which she had never relaxed had been insufficient for repairs or improvements. Then the needs of the children—the eldest, twin boys, were only fourteen—were growing ever more insistent. She had been striving for some time to put aside a little money which would enable her to send these elder boys to some cheap Catholic college. For she herself had been able to teach them nothing more than the catechism. A charitable summer visitor had taught them how to read and write, but that was all. Mrs. Welsh was determined at any cost to keep them away from the local Protestant school, where bigotry was said to be rampant.

When Billy Derham saw that she shrank from his rudely expressed protestation of love and admiration, he had artfully dwelt instead upon all that he would do for the boys; what a large fine house there would be, with plenty of room for all the children, and good clothes for the girls when they began to grow up. All that had touched the maternal heart deeply. The man had spoken honestly and fairly. He was steady and sober, qualities that were rarer in that locality than might have been desired. He was roughly kind-hearted, and no doubt he would make as men went, a good husband. And it must be owned she counted among the advantages that he would be away for a certain part of each year at the shanties and leave her and the children with the house to herself.

Argue as she would, however, it was certain that, like the placid river occasionally lashed to violent storms, her whole nature was in revolt against the suggestion. Mary remembered how her mother, long dead, had described the women of Ireland, of that generation at least, as looking upon second marriages for women with the strongest distavor. Also, through the strains of that foolish old ballad, with its rude pathos, the old love, the one love of Mary's life, was rising up and fiercely protesting. She had always intended to meet Tom Welsh some day, in that life beyond which her Celtic eyes perceived so clearly, a widow indeed, still faithful to his memory. In fact, in that sense, her late husband had never seemed dead to her. She had regarded herself bound to him as on that day when, coming down from the altar, the full solemnity of the marriage vows had taken possession of her girlish heart. 'Till death do us part,'—aye and after, through all eternity. That was how she had felt.

Her heart throbbed with a pain it had not felt for many days, and that had simply been forced back into dim recesses by the hard struggle of 'bringing up the children.' She was still keenly conscious of the desolation that had fallen upon her beside Tom's grave. For the brave, strong man, with his faults of temper and his occasional roughness, had been all in all to her. No! no! she could not do that terrible thing and prove faithless to that cherished memory. It would almost seem to her like those light women, of whom in her busy life she had heard but dimly, who saw no sacredness in the marriage tie itself.

And yet many people, most people, perhaps even the priest himself, would cry shame on her for refusing thus to benefit her children. It was with a poignant feeling of relief that she suddenly bethought herself of another and weighty reason which must convince the priest and herself at least that she could not entertain her suitor's proposal. For Billy was an Orangeman. Had she not herself seen him hastening to the lodge, when the drum beat through all the hills, to summon the surrounding members to the monthly meetings. Had not, also, her own two eyes watched him, on the last 12th of July, impersonating, as one of the tallest lads in the village, King William, when the local contingent in their costumes marched through the village to the train to take part in the metropolitan celebration. Mary Welsh remembered how her Irish heart had flamed out into indignation, for those anachronistic mummies were stepping out blithely to the strains of 'Croppies, lie down.' Mary had tartly ordered the children, who were innocently pleased with the pageant, to 'Come in out of that,' and had closed down the window with a bang. But just as those men who indulged upon that day of fateful memories in execration of the Pope and of Papists in general settled down upon the morrow to peace and amity with their few Catholic neighbors, so the flame had died out of Mary Welsh's heart and she had thought no more about the matter until the next 12th of July.

But she knew quite well that were she to 'put Billy or any other Orangeman over her childer' as successor to Tom Welsh, that flame of indignation would burst out very often. Billy's 'doing for the boys' would be, no doubt, to insist upon their being sent to a Protestant school. For she felt an inward assurance that when once Billy had the upperhand her dream of putting the lads at a Catholic college would never be realised. She could see, as in a clear vision, Billy protesting against her walk to church on Sunday mornings, Billy interfering here and interfering there, and talking 'forenest the little ones' against that religion which he had been taught to hate. Mary knew for a certainty that her own fighting spirit, inherited from both sides of the house, would rise up then to the detriment of domestic peace. More grievous still, she felt would it be, to see that other influence work against her own, especially with the boys, and weaken, perhaps destroy, their attachment to that old faith to which she herself clung with such passionate loyalty.

'Oh, no! no!' she cried, 'better poverty, even starvation itself, than to be putting the little ones in danger.'