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The Midnight Mass

By Seumas MacManus

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(By N. C. W. C. News Service)

The come-back of Dinny Kilbride it proved in the end. But at first it was the return of Mr. Dennis Kilbride—or rather Yankee Kilbride, as our people term the returned Irish-American.

Mr. Kilbride stood on the street of the little mountain village of Ardara just as night had fallen—on a Christmas Eve. He was heading for the mountain road afoot. He couldn't get a jaunting-car. Every soul of them, as Johnnie the post told him, was far off at the funeral of Father Ned Gallagher (the Heavens be his bed!), two parishes away. He wouldn't remain overnight in Mrs. Hegarty's Inn, and make his journey on the morrow. Mr. Kilbride had come here against his will—much against it—and must get through with his little mission and be gone on the morrow. He only came in connection with the execution of the will of a grand-uncle who had lived and died, all but forgotten, on a Montana ranch—and for which he needed particulars about his mother's birth and antecedents.

Mr. Kilbride had concluded a tiresome scramble over the Continent—the first tour of his life—and the last. He left the east well come part to the end, and hopped into Ireland and to his native place to find the particulars he wanted—on his way home to America. As he now stepped out on the hard, frosty, mountain road, bending his head to the hills, the queerest kind of feeling came over him. The one and twenty years (it seemed a century) that had elapsed since he trod this road before, sort of fell off him, and an eerie feeling which he scouted, but couldn't shake off, gripped him. His boyhood in Ireland was long a closed book to him. He was only eighteen when he left—but yet a big young man—aye, and a handsome. Gracie Brennan with whom he was frantically in love and who liked him, even if she didn't love him, in return, had slighted him he thought at the big dance in Parra Mor's—given him the go by for her namesake, Peter Brennan, of the head of the glen. He left the dance and left the country without even saying good-bye to Gracie, or to neighbor or friend. He had none of his own left to say good-bye to. He landed in Boston, hurried forth to find some place where there would be no Irish, settled down in a little New Hampshire town, hired as a general helper to an old Yankee storekeeper there, who took a fancy to him, and very soon adopted him—and when he died left him the store, and a little pile, besides. And in the twelve years since his patron's death, Dennis Kilbride had added to the pile. And he had finally sold out his concern advantageously, expecting to begin to enjoy life.

But alas for the vain expectation. To his exasperation he found that he couldn't force enjoyment from his withered soul—if he had a soul left that is. The dried up Yankee life he had lived, his roots rudely torn from the old kindly and congenial soil and set down in a soil all arid, had failed to provide him with spiritual sustenance. Now he had money and plenty of it—but nothing more. Boyhood and its beautiful memories had gone. The spirit of his country didn't whisper to his soul. His religion was for twenty

years forgotten. Since his fit of madness over Gracie Brennan he had been a woman-hater, and, despite a manly, handsome figure, was now at thirty-nine a dried up old bachelor, without wife or child, or friend or kin. He found to his utter surprise that in the market for happiness gold had no more purchasing power than the withered leaves into which it had turned in the old fairy tale. He had purchased a Cook's ticket to the famous places of the Continent—like he had known other Yankees to do, who were seeking happiness after—and only after—they had ceased seeking money. But oh, he was deadly sick and tired of going the rounds of famous places—and was now heartily thankful that it was all over, and that he was finally on his way to New Hampshire, to—to—oh, just to exist! This compulsory visit to Ireland and the old mountain home was, thank God, the last of the unwelcome tasks that his trip had imposed upon him. 'Twas little wonder he refused to stay overnight at Mrs. Hegarty's and suffer another day here.

He would spend the night at old Lanty MacFadden's, the man from whom he was to get the necessary genealogical information—and Mrs. Hegarty's post-car was to be out to take him away from there at eight o'clock in the morning. He had been pleased to hear from Mrs. Hegarty that Lanty was still alive—because no other in the mountain was so well versed in local genealogy and could so surely supply him with the information he needed. Lanty, more by the same token, was the paternal grandfather of Gracie Brennan. Poor Gracie, he learned, had married Peter Brennan of the Moor, less than two months after he left Ireland—and died, in childbirth, less than a year later.

Looking around as he went, he saw the countryside sombre and still in the faint light of the stars that studded the clear heavens on this frosty night. The memory of just such nights, many, many of them, came dimly to him. The many lights that twinkled on the hillside and in the valley, the lights of the poor cabins, struck him as familiarly as if he had seen them yesterday. Only, why were there so many more of them, and so vastly brighter than in the picture which memory conjured out even saying good-bye to Gracie, or to neighbor or friend. He had none of his own left to say good-bye to. He landed in Boston, hurried forth to find some place where there would be no Irish, settled down in a little New Hampshire town, hired as a general helper to an old Yankee storekeeper there, who took a fancy to him, and very soon adopted him—and when he died left him the store, and a little pile, besides. And in the twelve years since his patron's death, Dennis Kilbride had added to the pile. And he had finally sold out his concern advantageously, expecting to begin to enjoy life.

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Such a different person from the

bright, buoyant, and romantic Dinny Kilbride who footed it here a hundred years before! He was surprised in this strange thought by suddenly meeting on this lonely mountain road, at this lone hour, a colleen of handsome figure and face, tripping airily along, and humming an old tune to herself, all unafraid. In the Gaelic, which came back to him like a flash, she saluted him: "God guide you, stranger!" going calmly past. Then he remembered that in Ireland, the loneliest road at the loneliest hour was walked without apprehension by any girl, however young and beautiful. Well, it was a strange country, surely!

And when he timidly ventured to hail her, to ask some directions, she stood with him and chatted as kindly, yet unconcernedly, as she might in the midst of a fair old mountain home was, thank God, the last of the unwelcome tasks that his trip had imposed upon him. 'Twas little wonder he refused to stay overnight at Mrs. Hegarty's and suffer another day here.

He reached Lanty's—he remembered it. The Christmas candle was just going in the window when he came up, and—and—he was suddenly halted on the road, and then made to stagger back a step or two! He could swear he beheld bending over the candle the oval face and flashing black eyes that had, on such a night, and on such occasion, fascinated him more than twenty years before. "Gracie Brennan!" he ejaculated, before he recovered his self-possession. Then he no longer saw a face at the candle. His fancy had played him a trick. He growled at himself for an idiot. But he walked a furlong past Lanty MacFadden's, to collect himself. Returning to it, he pricked up his ears, at hearing a hum which he knew must have been once familiar. What was it? Then he remembered in a flash. It was the long-forgotten hum of the family Rosary. How regularly he used to hear and raise his hat to it once, passing the cottages at this hour of the night. He didn't raise his hat, now. He scowled instead.

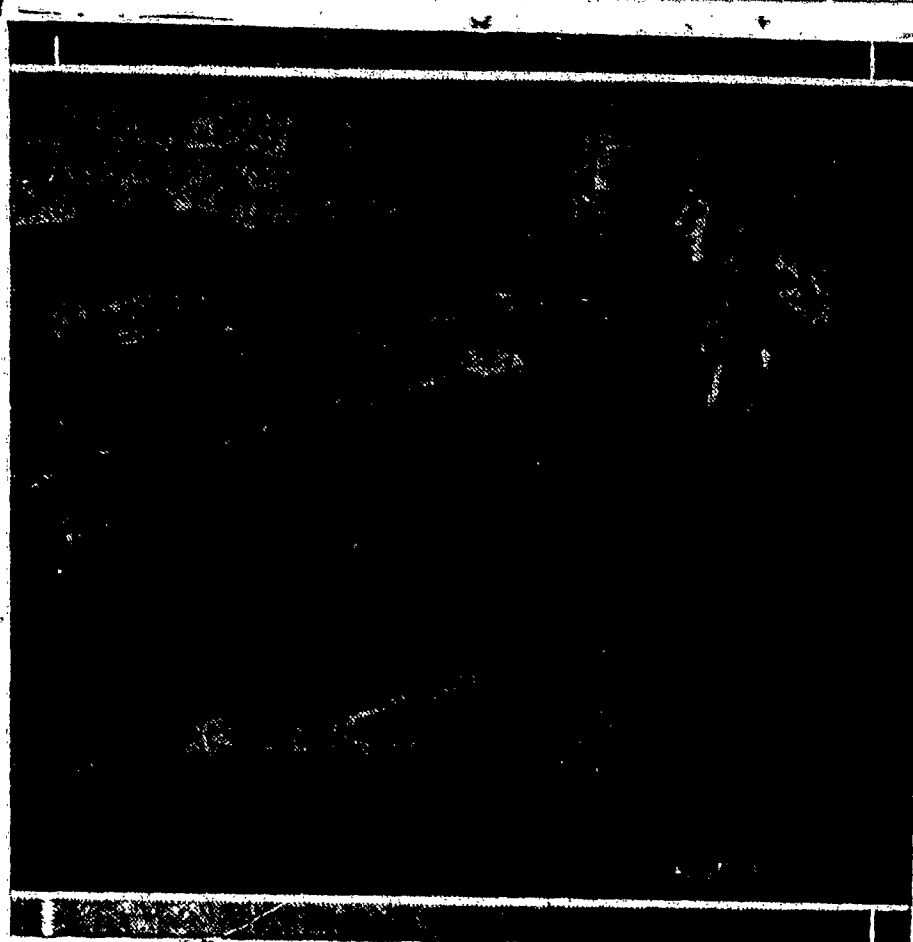
He was a good bit irritated to find—for this he had forgotten—that they did not cease their Rosary when a stranger entered. The old lady, the bean-a-tighe, in her white bordered cap, who was leading the Rosary, got up, and without stopping her prayer, gave the stranger a kindly bow, a welcoming hand-shake—and a chair whereat to kneel—and resumed her position.

He determined, even at the price of being rude, defiantly to sit him down on the chair—but, to his surprise, he found himself on his knees the next moment. And as, with one hand over his eyes, he harkened to the Rosary being chanted with full heart and full voice by the kneeling circle around the blazing turf-fire, a score of years seemed somehow to fall from his shoulders.

But when having come to "the trimmings" (the word leaped into his memory!) the bean-a-tighe, after getting prayers for the living, the dying, and the dead, for all friends and relatives, not forgetting poor souls in Purgatory, especially "them who died in wrecks and wars, and them that left no one to pray for them," asked "One Pater and Ave for all our poor boys and girls in-American and foreign parts that, the Lord may guard and guide them, hold their feet in the ways of faith, and the Blessed Virgin be a candle before them, all days, till they come to their own again!"—Mr. Kilbride winced, and in a confused kind of way wished that the Rosary was over with. Any-

how, it was having a queer influence on him. He had almost to pinch himself to realize that this person was Mr. Dennis Kilbride, a start out o' ye, when you were at a Rosary against his will—not little Dinny Kilbride back in the long ago, saying the soothing Rosary by his own mother's fireside. Something like the mesmerism he had often heard of was the effect the Rosary was having on him. And when, from somewhere outside the maze wherein he felt himself being drawn, he heard the soft voice of the bean-a-tighe saying: "And we'll now wind up, with the kind stranger leadin' us in one decade from our hearts to the Infant Saviour born this night, and the Holy Mother who bore Him, to grant each and every one of us the special blessing of which he or she stands sorest need"—instead of being stunned by the request he, next moment, heard himself in beseeching voice, leading the decade to the heartfelt choral of the household—and the thoughts he hadn't uttered for twenty years, springing from his heart and flitting from his lips, and a spirit which he had thought was dead within him seeming to be winged and singing its way upward with the thoughts and the words!

He couldn't tell how it was—but he who had knelt to that Rosary under compulsion, arose with reluctance, not the same man.



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He couldn't tell how it was—but he who had knelt to that Rosary under compulsion, arose with reluctance, not the same man. And then as he made his mission and himself known to the family who gathered around him, the elder ones only of whom recollected Dinny Kilbride, the words were suddenly stilled on his tongue, and he sat with mouth agape staring strangely, almost wildly, at one singularly handsome, dark-eyed colleen, who, her sweet face lit up with sympathy and interest, he now saw leaning toward him from a seat in the chimney corner. Pointing a finger at her he slowly arose from his seat, half-dazedly. When words came with him, he said: "Who—who are you?" But his dazedness was completed when he saw sweep over her countenance a smile that instantly carried him back twenty years, and heard her reply: "Me? I'm Gracie Brennan!"

Dennis Kilbride swayed as though he might fall, so that Lanty MacFadden stretched out a hand to support him. "Is any-thing the matter, craiture?" Mrs. MacFadden appealed. He recovered himself, rubbed his hand across his forehead. "It's all right," he said. But he felt it was all wrong. Or something, anyhow, was wrong. "Maybe 'tis no wonder little Gracie 'ud make you start," said Mrs. MacFadden. "Her mother,

my own niece, if my memory serves me right, took more than a start out o' ye, when you were a bit of a bouchall—and young Gracie is the dead spit o' her (I wish her God's rest!) that's up-sary by his own mother's fireside. Under the green sod."

Dennis Kilbride recovered himself suddenly as he had, a minute before, lost himself. He took Gracie Brennan's hand in both of his, and without saying a word seated her next to him. She looked twice as attractive now, blushing as she was for the honor done her by the grand and handsome stranger. And Gracie's blushes were delightedly renewed again, when in the course of his conversation with the family he would occasionally pause to take up her hands in both of his and sometimes with a far-away look in his eyes, sometimes looking deep into her eyes, say, with a measured shake of his head: "Well, well, well!" Then he would drop again the hands of the blushing maiden and resume his discourse.

"Come, children," at length said the bean-a-tighe, Mrs. MacFadden. "'Tis time we were all of us footin' it to Mass." Dennis Kilbride turned to her, staring, and said: "To Mass!"

"Midnight Mass, to be sure. This is Christmas Eve," replied Mrs. MacFadden.

Immediately he remembered—that—and something more. He took Gracie's hands again in his, and bent his head for a thoughtful minute. Then he said: "With your poor mother—God rest her!" he broke off what he was going to say, with a start. He found coming off his tongue, as easily as if he had always used it, this phrase of his home people, which he had utterly forgotten for an age. What was coming over him? He resumed, after a moment. "With her I walked to the Midnight Mass two and twenty years ago—the night I first met her. If I may, I'll walk to Midnight Mass with her again, this night." Gracie understood—and nodded her head. They all understood and nodded.

Then Lanty, having ushered all old and young, out of the house, sent them forth with torches. Picturesque indeed was the scene that met their eye—and met the eye of Dennis. Down the hillside on which he stood, along the valley below, across the hillsides opposite, many lights like Will-o'-the-wisps were tossing, dancing, twinkling, glimmering. There were dozens, scores, hundreds, myriads of them, appearing and disappearing as they moved athwart the blackened landscape. Below him on the hillside he saw torches pass so close as to dis-

close to him the forms of those that bore them. Men and women, old and middle-aged, were going singly, in pairs, or in groups—mostly in groups; and boys and girls were moving forward, too, mostly in pairs, the one torch sufficing to light each couple. The pairs and groups of young people were laughing and chatting right gayly as they went, and when one made a mis-step in the dark, and met with a mishap, volleys of light-hearted laughter pealed from the many bands. Everyone was carefree. Except Dennis Kilbride.

Yet, though he could not feel happy, he recognized and recollected the beauty of the night, the beauty of the scene, the invisible beauty, too, that seemed to envelop the world and all in it. This was wondrous revelation to him—to whom for years all beauty had been buried. In his soul was either a dawning or an awakening.

He held the torch and lit the way for Gracie Brennan. He gently took her hand at the unchosen place, and tenderly lifted her over the ditch. Yes, it was very near happiness, he acknowledged to himself—the happiness which he had come to believe was not in the world any more. And when the torchlight lit up that radiant face of Gracie, and glimmered in those black eyes, even a half-observant person could see that she was happy beyond ordinary. And as Dennis Kilbride was more than half-observant, ere they reached the little chapel he had seen it—and was pleased to see it. But it was not new to him, he at once realized. For on that same radiant face he had seen the same look of happiness—yesterday. Yes, yesterday it felt new—neither a hundred years ago nor even twenty-two years ago, any longer.

The first time that the lad Dinny Kilbride had gone to Midnight Mass he was awed and impressed. Now the third time, the worldling, Mr. Dennis Kilbride, kneeling amid the other hundreds of mountain men and women and children, upon the bare rock that was a floor to that mountain chapel, was, in the solemn hush, more startlingly impressed than the boy Dinny had ever been. But the impressive awe now carried something peculiarly poignant to the heart of him. And when he reached the elevation and there burst from the lips of the bowed multitude that great and wonderful murmur of heart-greeting which our mountain congregations give to the Host, he found his lips, which had long been stranger to the tender Gaelic, swell that murmured greeting: "Cead mile fáilte romhat, a Thighearna dhílis!" ("A hundred times and welcome before Thee, O Lord dearest!") And next instant, on the back of his hand fell a burning teardrop. The holy Gaelic greeting was the Mass rod that brought water from the rock!

It is Christmas morning at Lanty MacFadden's. They and their guest have finished a hearty breakfast. There's a grating of wheels on the frosty road, and out—a knock at the door—Mrs. Hegarty's man-of-all-work, Mackey, shoves in his head, and asks: "Is the strange one here? Is the Yankee Kilbride here? Is he in 'er car waitin' his wife?" "Sure, ye are," says the man-of-all-work, "but he's not here now. He's out on the hillsides he saw torches pass so close as to dis-