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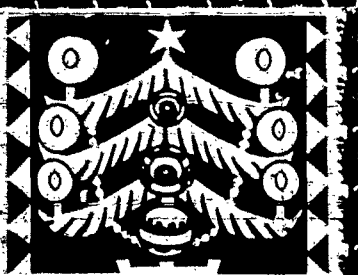
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## The Night of Christmas Eve

(Continued from Page 9)

Everything must be left spick and span and all the food of the house be spread out on the spotless table. The kettle must be refilled and hung by the great black hook over the fire. All the little actions were accompanied by ejaculations, which betrayed their preoccupation. "It's a poor meal we have for them this night," from the woman. "If only I could have got in to Dingle for a real Christmas candle!" muttered the man.

Anyone observing them might think they were preparing for important guests in spite of the snow. And that really was the explanation of all their efforts. All over the valley similar lights might be seen twinkling in the windows of every cabin. Could one look inside the walls, similarly laden boards and well-stocked fired would have been observed.

It was Christmas Eve—Christmas Eve when thoughts flew back to the journey of the Virgin, as she and Joseph sought the City of David, The Roman Emperor's decree had ordained that everyone should be enrolled in his own city, so the poor carpenter of Nazareth left his bench and set out with his young wife for Bethlehem.

The Kerry peasant loves to imagine that that journey may be repeated and that once more the saintly pair may come seeking shelter. And lest they should think that once more "there was no room for them at the inn," every house is made ready for their use. The light set in the window is to guide them through the darkness to where food and warmth awaits them behind an unlocked door.

So Miceal O'Connor and his wife Kate prepared for the night of Christmas Eve, as they had been taught from infancy to do. Just as they were leaving the kitchen, a timid knock came to the door. The man of the house strode over and flung it wide.

"God's blessing be on you," he greeted in Irish the muffled figure of a man on the threshold.

Asks for Shelter  
"Long life to you," replied the stranger mechanically. He stumbled into the bright kitchen and asked earnestly:  
"Could you shelter my wife for the night? She's down the road in a faint. We were making for Pat Casey's (he's a cousin of herself) but we went astray in the snow and got on to the upper road. Darkness came on us soon after starting out and we've been struggling for hours without being able to see a yard before us. She's in no way for traveling, poor lass. She fell the other side of the bend and if I hadn't seen your light, I don't know what we'd have done. This is the first house we have come to since we first lost our way. Herself will be frozen, for I'm nearly done myself helping her along?"

"Sure I will and glad to," responded Miceal heartily and threw a coat about him.  
A few minutes later the two returned with the woman between them more dead than alive.  
"The poor creature!" exclaimed Kate sympathetically. "Bring her over here to the fire till we put a bit of life into her."

She had hastily improvised a couch of straw on the hearth and now helped them to lower their burden gently down to it.  
"Get a pillow from the bedroom, Miceal," she ordered. "I'll keep her head on my knee while you're getting it."  
When the woman was settled comfortably, Kate poured the water from the kettle into a basin and set about warming her patient's hands and feet. Miceal quietly put more water on to boil.

"Give the man a drop of something hot, Miceal."  
"Joe Kavanagh is my name, volunteered the visitor.  
"Let the two of you go up to the room to bed when you're finished," she went on.  
"Maureen is not too strong," said the young man hesitatingly.  
"I know," said Kate. "You must leave her to me."

Finally he yielded when Miceal added his persuasions to those of his wife. Glad too was Kate O'Connor to have him out of the way, for towards morning a son was born to their unexpected guest.

Supplies Exhausted  
The thaw did not come until the New Year. The enforced sojourn within doors exhausted the already scanty supplies of the poor O'Connors. Nevertheless until the last bit of bacon and the last handful of flour were consumed the night before the sun at last appeared, they saw that the Kavanaghs wanted for nothing. The little milk their old cow gave was reserved for the young mother and her babe, of whom Kate became quite fond as she tended them in turn.

When the road was once more fit to travel, Miceal yoked up the horse and settling the mother and child in the cart, they all made for Dingle. Here the Kavanaghs bid them goodbye with many broken expressions of gratitude. They were taking the train for Cork to catch the boat for America. It was too late now to try to see the wife's cousin, Miceal and Kate turned to the matter of getting provisions feeling curiously lonely.

Writing was then a little practiced art in some of the outlying parts of Ireland. Year after year passed tranquilly away and no news came to the O'Connors of how their progenies had fared in the New World. Every Christmas Eve as they lit the great candle and set it in the window, their thoughts naturally turned to the time the Kavanaghs had found refuge with them from the piercing cold.

At last came the Christmas twenty-five years after the event—a again a memorable one for them. The couple were now old, their two sons in America and a daughter at service in Dublin. Kate began to all the week before Christmas. It was a very wet season and Miceal simply dared not leave her alone while he made the long journey to Dingle. On Christmas Eve she was so bad that she could not leave her bed. To keep the life in her he had to make up near the fire the iron bed, brought back by their daughter when she was home in the summer. To this he carried Kate from the wooden fixed bed of the upper room.

Quietly he made the usual preparations. At first his wife rallied enough with the warmth to direct him about the laying of the table. But when all was finished, the fuel stacked, the kettle on the hook the food spread and candle alight, he found to his dismay that she had collapsed entirely. Her breathing was labored and she seemed quite unconscious.

Could he get to the priest in time was his one thought when he recovered from his first dismay. But when he went to the door it was only to find that the rain had turned to sleet. Half-an-hour later he looked out again to find snow falling softly, silently smothering the valley in a white blanket. Impossible to get help that night.

Kate was no better. Feverishly Miceal paced up and down the kitchen muttering little scraps of prayers of which "O God, send a priest—send a priest" was perhaps the only coherent one. How could a priest come to that high eyrie, hard to reach at the best of times and now becoming moment by moment inaccessible?

Knock at the Door  
But wait, what was that? A knock at the door.  
Hastily he opened, and a muffled figure stumbled in.  
"Long life to you," gasped the stranger brushing the snow from his sleeve. "The car had to stop half a mile back, so I struggled on towards your light on foot. You're Miceal O'Connor, aren't you?"  
"I am that same," responded the host.

"Do you call to mind another Christmas Eve twenty-five years back?"  
"I do indeed," declared Miceal. "A man and his wife came in on us like you've done."  
"And the woman had a son that night," went on the stranger, shaking snow off his hat. "I am that son."  
"Praise be to God this night!" exclaimed the other.

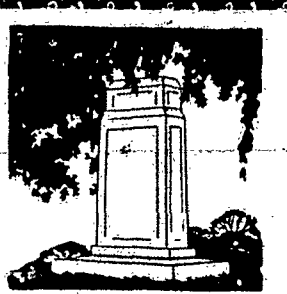
"You may well say that," agreed the visitor. "My mother told me if ever I was in Ireland I was to look you up."  
Opening his coat he displayed the Roman collar.

"A priest," returned Michael open-mouthed. "Glory be to the Good God. Here was I praying for a priest this last hour, for the wife is mortal bad."  
He indicated the bed near the fire.  
"I'm glad I came," said Father John Kavanagh. "Something urged me to drive right out when I got off the train instead of spending the night in Dingle. But if it hadn't been for the light I'd not have found you in the dark."

"It was the light that brought your father too, years ago," Miceal told him. "It's the Kerry custom to light the window the night of Christmas Eve in case the Virgin Mary should be seeking shelter, as—she did in Bethlehem before the Child was born."  
The priest bent over the sick woman.

"In Him was life and the life was the light of men," he murmured softly. "And the light shined in the darkness—the light that was to bring peace to men of good-will."

Son: Yes, I'm a big gun at school now.  
Father: Well, then I'd like to hear some better reports from now on.

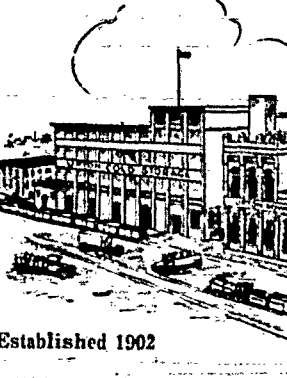


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