

An Agnostic In An Irish Village

A Novelette, Based on a True Story.

By Tadhg Gavin.

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Chapter 1: The Assignment.

To say that the assignment came as a surprise to Tom Henderson would be putting it mildly. It would be nearer the truth to say that it was a veritable bolt from the blue. But, like so many others in the world of journalism, he was well aware that in nine cases out of every ten, it is the unexpected that happens, and, just as soon as the initial shock was over, he took it all as a matter of course.

When the editor called him into his office on the morning of that dank December day, the young man was under the impression that it was the French murder trial that he wished him to cover. The prospect appealed to him. For one thing, it offered far greater variety than a job in London ever could; and more important still was the fact that it would enable him to get away from the English climate which, unpleasant enough at most times, was yet more uncongenial in the depth of winter.

But Mr. Smith's first words left the reporter in no doubt that a trip to France was off, as far as he was concerned.

"How would you like to go to Ireland, Henderson?" the editor began without the slightest warning or preamble.

"Ireland?" echoed Tom dully. "I've never been there in my life," he added slowly, as if realising that a comment of some sort was expected of him.

"All the same, you are of Irish extraction, I believe?"

The young man nodded. How Mr. Smith had got hold of the fact he didn't know. Anyway, the fact remained. His grandfather had been born in Belfast, and had come to England at an early age.

"That's why I've decided to offer you this particular assignment," Mr. Smith explained. "I feel that one with an Irish background could handle it better than a mere outsider."

"You mean you want me to cover some Irish crisis?" Tom queried.

The editor began to play with a paper-knife which lay on his desk. It was a favourite trick of his when dealing with a rather ticklish situation.

"Not a crisis really," he explained. "I simply want you to write a series of articles on the Irish way of life — only I want you to present the facts from a particular angle — an angle that will appeal to those who believe that Ireland is unprogressive and obscurantist and who are convinced that Catholicism is one of the main reasons why it is so far behind the times."

Tom chuckled quietly, in spite of himself.

“And what if the facts rule out that angle altogether?” he put in suddenly.

“The facts don’t really matter,” came the editor’s swift reply. “As long as what you write serves to boost the circulation of my paper, that is all that counts. You must know by now that what many people want to read is merely an expression of their own personal views. If they think that Ireland is obscurantist and unprogressive, then they will be only too anxious to buy the paper in which those opinions are published. All you have to do is to give the ring of authenticity to what you write. Visit some district in the back-of-beyond; describe the people who live there as victims of ignorance and superstition; add some snatches of conversation taken completely out of their context; and you will have done all that is expected of you. Understand?”

“I think so,” Tom said thoughtfully. “All the same, I can’t help feeling that it’s not quite the right approach.”

“Is it your Irish extraction that’s worrying you?” Mr. Smith demanded.

“It’s not that,” Tom assured him. “Your religion, then?”

“It’s not that either. Neither my grandfather nor my father was a Catholic. I was brought up a Methodist; but I’ve shed all my religious beliefs long ago. Right now you might describe me as a dyed-in-the-wool agnostic.”

“Then I can’t see where the difficulty comes in.”

Tom was not sure himself.

“I just think that the series of articles you have in mind is a bit threadbare,” he stated simply.

At that, Mr. Smith stared him full in the face.

“You mean — you’re turning down the assignment?” he queried.

Tom was quick to note a challenge when he saw one.

“I didn’t say that,” he answered.

“I’m glad for your own sake that you didn’t,” the editor broke in. “A good reporter is sensible enough to agree to go wherever he is sent. If you were to turn down my offer, I could always find another man who would only be too glad to step into the breach; whereas, if you do go and make a success of the job, I can guarantee you an increase of salary and the prospect of a further assignment that will prove more to your liking than the present one.”

Tom took his cue and resolved to make the most of it.

“Of course, I’ll go to Ireland, if that’s what you want,” he agreed.

Immediately the challenge faded from the editor’s eyes and once more, he became calm and relaxed.

“Then that settles it,” came his approving comment. “Let me see! Today is Friday. You can take the morning plane and get to your destination well before the week-end.”

“Had you any particular part of Ireland in view?” Tom enquired.

Mr. Smith shook his head.

“The district doesn’t really matter, provided that the news you send along sounds sufficiently convincing. Galway should be a good place. It’s far enough away from London to conjure up a regular hinterland, and they tell me that remnants of the older way of life may still be found there.”

Tom Henderson felt inclined to sigh. To think that he who was so fond of excitement and adventure would have to spend a couple of weeks in the wilds of Ireland and that the chances of a visit to Paris were even more remote than ever!

But then, like a burst of sudden sunshine, the memory of the editor’s guarantee came back to him. At the thought of Mr. Smith’s promise, Tom’s good spirits returned, and by the time he got back to his desk, he was humming the latest pop-tune.

Chapter 2: Chance Encounter.

The train pulled out from Westland Row to the accompaniment of a series of “Cheerios” and “Good-byes.”

Tom Henderson glanced at his watch. One of the porters had told him that the journey would take over four hours, and he began to calculate the time when he would arrive in Galway city.

There was only one other passenger in the compartment besides himself — a tall, broad-shouldered youth with deep-blue eyes and a shock of fair, wavy hair. There was a newspaper in his lap, but he wasn’t reading it. All his attention was focused on a letter which he was holding in his hands.

It was only after they had passed Mullingar that Tom decided to break the silence that lay between them.

“Excuse me,” he began, “but you don’t happen to be going to Galway, by any chance?”

“I do,” the other informed him. “As a matter of fact, that’s where my home is.”

“Oh!” put in Tom non-committally. He was glad to have come across one who would put him wise as to the best place for spending the next couple of weeks. “You live in the city itself, I suppose?”

The youth shook his head.

“No. Actually, I live a good twenty miles from there. Currabeg is the name of the village where I was born and bred. I don’t suppose that the name means a thing to you. You wouldn’t find it on any map, and not one of the guide-books that I’ve seen even bother to mention it. In the summer, it’s really beautiful, though, and it does attract a fair share of tourists; but at this time of the year, it’s as quiet as could be. You’d be a tourist yourself, judging by your accent?”

Tom’s lips framed a faint smile.

“In a way, you could call me that,” he said glibly. “This is my first visit to Ireland, and I want to see for myself what the country is really like.”

“You’ve chosen a bad time of the year to come on a visit,” the youth remarked.

“I daresay I have,” Tom agreed, “but people are always the same, and it’s people more than scenic loveliness that really interest me.”

“You’ll be staying in Galway city, then?” the youth suggested.

Tom looked through the window at the swiftly-changing landscape before making a reply.

"I think that a quiet country district would suit me better," he at length returned. "That is, if I could only hit on the right spot. Come to think of it, Currabeg — or whatever you call it would probably prove as good as the next for my purpose."

"I don't think you'd like Currabeg at this time of the year," the youth maintained. "If you're used to bustle and activity, you'd find yourself completely out of your depth there."

"As I said before, it's a quiet place I'm looking for," Tom reminded him. "The only snag is accommodation. Have you got any hotel out there?"

The youth laughed outright at that.

"I'm afraid you can't even imagine what Currabeg must be like if you're expecting it to run to a hotel," he explained, just as soon as his laughter had subsided.

"A guest-house, then?"

"No, there's no guest-house there either." Tom shrugged his shoulders.

"Then that rules Currabeg out," he muttered grimly, and it was the look of disappointment that flashed into his eyes that made the other wish that he could help him.

"If you're really so dead-keen on going to Currabeg, my mother might be able to put you up," he suggested suddenly.

"We have a fair-sized two-storey house, and we do keep a few tourists in the holiday season."

Tom's eyes became instantly brighter.

"But that would mean putting your mother out no end?" he remarked,

"I don't think so," the youth replied. "We've no stereotyped conventions or hide-bound formalities in our household. We're as free-and-easy as you could find in your day's travels. I'm at a boarding-school in Dublin, and right now, I'm going home for the Christmas holidays. Terry McGrath, one of my classmates, was to have spent the vacation with me; but he fell ill a week ago and had to go to hospital. Only this morning I had a letter from him, telling me that he doesn't expect to be discharged before the New Year. His room is already prepared, and I can't see why you shouldn't make use of it — that is," he added warningly, "if you are prepared to make do with an ordinary country house."

"I sure am," Tom grinned. "I only hope that your mother won't turn me away when we arrive."

"You don't know Irish hospitality, if you even think that she'd dream of doing any such thing," the other briskly intimated.

Tom winced at that. In his heart he felt ashamed of himself to be taking advantage of all this kindness and consideration when, at the end of it all, he would repay such hospitality with a series of scurrilous articles.

However, he brushed his self-recriminations aside with the reflection that he had a living to make and an assignment to cover. This was neither the time nor the place to be maudlin or sentimental. He had been sent to Ireland to do a job of work; and the sooner that job was completed, the happier he would feel.

“Since we’re going to see so much of each other for the next couple of weeks, we’d better get introduced straight-away,” he put in quickly. “My name’s Henderson — Tom Henderson.”

“And mine,” said the youth, “is Ciaran O’Mara.”

There and then they shook hands; and, immediately afterwards, the conversation drifted into other channels. They discussed literature and art, football and politics, and by the time the train drew up at Galway station, they seemed to have known each other for quite a long time.

Chapter 3: Life in an Irish Village.

Tom Henderson stood on the brow of a hill and let his eyes wander at will over the scenes of rugged grandeur that spread themselves out before him. Above him was a grey and leaden sky, and the winds that swept across the neighbouring moorlands were almost as keen as a razor’s edge. But the young man was utterly oblivious of the inclemency of the weather. His mind was busy reviewing the events that had taken place since his arrival in Currabeg.

It was only four days ago that he had first set foot in the village, and already he felt more at home in his new surroundings than he had ever felt in London.

Mrs. O’Mara had, of course, been surprised when Ciaran brought him along; but she was not the sort of woman to dream of spoiling his hopes, and, though she reiterated her son’s opinion that Currabeg was not the ideal place to spend a winter holiday, she nevertheless extended to him a hearty “Cead mile failte” (‘a hundred thousand welcomes’) and assured him that she would do everything in her power to make his stay comfortable.

Mrs. O’Mara was one of those people who would much sooner think of another’s comfort than her own. She couldn’t be too well-off, Tom surmised. Her husband was only a farmer, and the holding which he tilled consisted for the most part of land that had been reclaimed from the barren hillsides. Yet she never complained or made a poor mouth. Indeed, she didn’t even mention money at all, and it was Tom himself who had insisted on paying for his keep in advance.

“You’re not like many another landlady I’ve met,” he declared, as he made the payment. “The vast majority that I have come across were solely concerned with the old £ s. d –the pounds, shillings and pence.”

Mrs. O’Mara had laughed at that.

“Poor creatures!” she exclaimed. “Sure the likes of them are more to be pitied than blamed. A fat lot of good all the money in the world will be to us when the time comes for us to die!”

“All the same, you must admit that money is important,” Tom reminded her.

“Ah, but there are things in life that are a thousand times more important,” Mrs. O’Mara assured him.

“Such as?” the reporter remarked interrogatively.

“The happiness which comes from living the sort of life that God wants us to live,” came her immediate reply.

During the four days that followed, Tom Henderson discovered that the O’Mara family had indeed found that happiness. All day long Mr. O’Mara worked on his holding of land. All day long Mrs.

O'Mara was busy with her household tasks. All day long Ciaran was lending a hand to either his father or his mother. No cross word ever passed between them.

No breath of argument ever rippled the smooth surface of their daily lives.

They lived each moment of their lives in the company of God and God's Blessed Mother. They regarded each blessing and each bliss as gifts from the hands of an All-Loving God. They regarded each trial and suffering as golden links that would bind them yet more closely to their Maker and Redeemer. That was the reason why they never grumbled. That was the reason why their days were fraught with joy and their nights suffused with peace.

"God knows best," Mrs. O'Mara would say when things failed to work out exactly as she had planned, and her eyes would stray in the direction of the white-draped altar of the Sacred Heart that stood in a corner of her kitchen, illumined by the ruby glow of a little lamp. "The help of God is nearer than the door" and "God is strong and His Mother good" were some more of her favourite sayings.

It must have cost Mr. and Mrs. O'Mara a heavy sacrifice to send Ciaran away to a boarding-school; but it was a sacrifice which they were only too willing to undergo in order that their only son might reap the benefits of a more liberal education than they themselves had received. What the boy would eventually turn his hand to Tom did not know; but he was convinced that he could easily gain a scholarship and go on to the university, for he had a quick and active brain and his knowledge of literature and science was far superior to that of the average English schoolboy.

With the rest of the villagers, the reporter had also struck up a swift acquaintanceship. The O'Mara homestead was the local visiting house; and, when the day's work was over, about a score of people would gather in the spacious kitchen and while away the hours with many a tale and jest.

They were a likeable crowd, and no mistake about it. The older folk were just as blithe and good-humoured as the young, and from the very first evening, they had insisted that Tom should share in their mirth and laughter.

Of course, they pulled his leg at times. That indeed was only to be expected. They expressed their regret that he was a Sasanach (an Englishman) and they teasingly reminded him that he had quite a lot to feel ashamed of. But they said it in such a jovial way that he couldn't help enjoying it all, and he knew that in their hearts they liked him and would be only too willing to come to his aid if ever he were in trouble.

"If you stay in Currabeg long enough, we'll manage to make a proper Irishman out of you," Carty Dillon had predicted on the previous evening.

Tom was thinking of those words now. Strange how things worked out, he opined. Less than a week before, he had dreaded the idea of an Irish assignment and already the charm of Ireland had woven itself about the tendrils of his heart. Truly, it is the unexpected that happens, he reflected as he left the brow of the hill and slowly moved off in the direction of the main road.

He had not gone more than ten yards, however, when he heard someone hailing him. A fraction of a minute later he caught sight of Ciaran emerging from the nearby grove with an orange-coloured envelope in his hand.

“A telegram, Mr. Henderson!” shouted the youth breathlessly. “I hope it isn’t bad news. It arrived about half-an-hour after you left; and, since Colum O’Dwyer said that he saw you coming this way, I decided to bring it along — just in case it might be urgent.”

Hastily Tom broke the seal; but, before he scanned the actual words, he knew beyond a shadow of doubt the purport of the message.

“First article overdue. Deadline in sight. Smith.”

It was extremely terse, but it told Tom all that he wished to know.

As one in a daze, he refolded the missive and thrust both itself and the envelope into his pocket. Ciaran looked at him anxiously as he did so.

“It is bad news, then Mr. Henderson?” he quietly interposed.

Tom Henderson shook his head.

“No, Ciaran,” he replied; “it’s simply a message that I was expecting — nothing more.”

And putting the matter out of his mind for the time being, he forced a faint smile and continued to make his way down the side of the hill.

Chapter 4: Fresh Surprise.

It was not until he was out on the main road that Tom Henderson decided to put the question that for the past four days had lingered in his mind.

“What do you intend to do when you grow up, Ciaran?” was how he framed it.

“Haven’t you already guessed?” Ciaran parried. Tom shook his head.

“There are so many things that you could go in for,” he explained. “Science or medicine or engineering or teaching. Life is full of possibilities for boys like yourself who have plenty of brains and the desire to get on.”

“I’m going to be a priest.”

“What?” If a bombshell had there and then been thrown at his feet, Tom could hardly have been more astounded. “You can’t really mean it?” he demanded incredulously.

“Does the idea so surprise you?” Ciaran queried.

“Of course, it does,” the reporter blurted out. “Why, here you are with tons of chances at your disposal, and then you turn about and form the sudden decision to become a priest!”

“But it isn’t a sudden decision,” Ciaran informed him. “Ever since I can remember, I have wanted to dedicate my life to God.”

“And do your parents know about all this?”

The youth nodded.

“And they went to all the trouble and expense of sending you to a Dublin boarding-school so that you might eventually be ready to enter a seminary?”

“They did, indeed,” Ciaran assured him.

“But you are their only child. Surely they didn’t relish the idea of losing you like this?”

“I’m afraid you’ve got it all wrong,” Ciaran corrected him.

“My parents are not really losing me at all. They are wise enough to appreciate the fact that it was God who gave me to them in the first place, and they therefore account it a privilege that that self-same God has accorded me such a sublime vocation.”

“But I simply can’t understand it,” Tom declared with a wry grimace.

“What can’t you understand, Mr. Henderson?” Ciaran enquired.

“Why you should be so set on becoming a priest,” the reporter explained. “It seems all so futile — so worthless — so diametrically opposed to all that really matters.”

“You can’t be a very good Christian if you really believe what you have just said,” the youth sighed.

“I’m not a very good Christian,” Tom admitted. “As a matter of fact, I’m not even a nominal one. If I’m anything at all, I’m a realist, and I’ve no patience with those who spend their whole lives chasing after illusions.”

“You’re not a realist,” Ciaran maintained. “How can you even dream of calling yourself a realist when you shut your eyes to the Greatest Reality of all?”

“And what is the Greatest Reality that you have in mind?” the reporter queried.

“God,” returned the youth. “Without God life would have no sense and no meaning. As a matter of fact, without God there would be no life at all.”

“The scientists wouldn’t agree with you there,” Tom endeavoured to point out.

“The pseudo-scientists might not,” Ciaran conceded, “but it is a well-known fact that all the really great scientists that this world has produced were Christians. That was true in the past, and it is also true at the present day. Such scientists are far too wise to accept theories that can’t be proved or to enunciate concepts that have no solid foundation. If there is no God, then how did the universe come into existence in the first place? How did life begin if an Omniscient and Omnipotent Creator did not put it there? Can you answer me that?”

Tom shook his head confusedly.

“I can’t answer you that,” he admitted frankly.

“No, and neither can all the scientists that this world has ever known,” Ciaran went on. “You see, it is utterly impossible for any reasonable man who uses the intelligence that God has given him to doubt the existence of a Supreme Being. That is what amazes me about you. You appear such a fair-minded person — quite honest and above-board in lots of ways — and yet you can venture to heap scorn on beliefs which have far more to commend them than the doubts which cranks and crackpots have so foolishly devised.”

Tom turned his head away to hide the sudden blush that mantled his cheeks. Honest and above-board, indeed! In his heart, he knew he was anything but that. He had wormed his way into the O’Mara homestead under false pretences. He had ingratiated himself with the rest of the villagers by the self-same devious means. But, though he might deceive others, he could not deceive himself; and, as in a mirror, he saw himself as he really was — a bluffer who tried to come out best in each

and every argument — a fraud who constantly endeavoured to put God and the things of the spirit into the dim background of forgotten things.

“I’m sorry, Ciaran,” he whispered abjectly. “I had no right to say all those things. Please try to forget that I ever said them. Try to understand that religion has never played an important part in my life. The fact is I have barely given a moment’s real thought to what you, on the other hand, have considered so deeply and so well. It just seems to me...”

“I know,” Ciaran interposed. “That’s the big trouble with the world today. People think that it’s only what they can see that’s important. They mistake shadows for substances. Thank God, we Irish are more sensible than that. We know what is important and what is not. That’s the reason we are not afraid of life, and that’s also the reason why we are not scared of death.”

“You are certainly not afraid of life,” Tom agreed. “During the short time that I’ve been in Ireland, I have come to appreciate that. But I can’t for the life of me believe that there’s a person in the world today who would not be afraid to die.”

“Would you like to see someone who has only a couple of days to live?” Ciaran suddenly suggested.

“Right here in Currabeg?”

Ciaran nodded.

“But nobody told me that anyone in the village was dying?”

“They probably thought that you wouldn’t be interested,” Ciaran observed. “It’s Mrs. Burke — Granny Burke as we have come to call her — her house is only a few hundred yards ahead of us. She’s eighty-six years old, and the doctor has emphatically stated that she won’t live to see another year.”

“But she herself doesn’t know that, I take it?” Tom remarked.

“Of course, she knows it,” Ciaran replied. “The doctor knew that she’d much rather have the truth, and he saw no point in hiding the fact.”

“But wasn’t he afraid that the news would hasten her death?”

Ciaran didn’t reply to the question.

“I think we had better go and see Granny Burke herself,” he put in. “That will help you to find out the answer for yourself.”

It was a weather-beaten and time-furrowed woman who smiled up at her visitors from her death-bed.

“They told me that a young gentleman from London was in the village,” she said, as soon as the introduction was over. “It was good of Ciaran to bring you along to see me. As you know, I haven’t much longer to live.”

Tom cleared his throat in an effort to find the right words in which to pose his question.

“How can you manage to face death so calmly, Mrs. Burke?” he enquired.

The old woman’s smile grew wider at that.

"Is there any reason why I should be upset?" she asked. "I've tried to be a good Catholic all the days of my life. I've never purposely injured another human being. And, now that death is on the way, I've made a General Confession and I shall leave this world fortified by the Last Rites of the Church."

"But doesn't the thought of the unknown worry you at all? If I were in your shoes, I would feel as if I were taking a leap in the dark."

"The unknown?" Granny Burke echoed. "Ah, now I pity you if you really look upon eternity as the unknown! Sure death is only the gate which will lead me to God and to the many other friends who have been called before me. To my way of thinking, I'll merely be exchanging the shadows for the sunshine and the hardships of this world for the joys that will have no end."

Tom Henderson swiftly opened his mouth; then just as swiftly, he closed it again. There were so many things which he felt inclined to say; but each and every word that he might utter was drab and inadequate at a time like this.

He had seen strong men grow pale at the very thought of death. He had known self-styled atheists who had burst out into a paroxysm of weeping when told that their days were numbered. Yet here was a frail old woman who could look serenely back on the life which she had lived and could just as serenely look forward to the death which was fast approaching; a frail, old woman who even on a bed of pain could find solace in the knowledge that God was close beside her and would safely guide her to the unfading beauty of the Eternal Hills.

Chapter 5: Maureen O'Byrne.

Great though Tom Henderson's amazement must have been when he visited Mrs. Burke, it was greater still when he came face to face with Maureen O'Byrne. The meeting happened in the simplest way imaginable, and he could never really say whether it came about by chance or whether it had been previously arranged by either the child or her mother.

It was only a few minutes after leaving Mrs. Burke's cottage, as both he and Ciaran were making their way homewards, that he caught sight of a wheel-chair and in it a little girl with a pair of limpid-blue eyes and a cluster of flaxen curls and the sweetest smile that he had ever seen. There was a middle-aged woman walking behind her; and, as he drew nearer, he recognised the lady as one of the people who regularly visited the O'Mara homestead in the evening.

"Good day, Mr. Henderson," the woman quietly greeted him as she and the little girl drew alongside. "We've met before, of course; but I imagine that you've been introduced to so many strangers during the last few days that you don't remember my name. I'm Margaret O'Byrne, and this is my daughter, Maureen. She's been simply longing to see you since I told her you arrived."

"I'm pleased to have this chance of meeting you now, Mr. Henderson," whispered the little girl as she looked up at him.

Tom took the child's outstretched hand in his own big palm and pressed it gently.

"I'd have come to see you long before this," the child explained, "only, as you see, I am not able to walk."

Pityingly Tom looked down at the little girl. She couldn't be a day more than twelve, he decided, and he could not help feeling sorry at the thought that one who was so young and beautiful should be deprived of the use of her limbs.

"I had no idea that there was a little girl like you hidden away in Currabeg," he put in softly. "If I had, I'd certainly have made it my business to go and have a talk with you. Tell me — how long have you been like this?"

"About two years," Maureen told him.

"And up till then you were just as strong and active as all the other children in the village?"

"Indeed, I was," came the child's reply. "Come to think of it, I was probably far more active than I should have been. That was how the accident happened, in the first place."

"What sort of an accident was it?" It was more than idle curiosity that prompted the reporter to put the question.

"I fell from a rock while I was climbing over there." As she spoke, Maureen pointed in the direction of a nearby quarry. "When I fell, I pulled down a lot of other rocks after me. So it is really a miracle that I am alive at all."

For a fraction of a minute, Tom was silent.

"You have been to hospital, I suppose?" he put in, after the pause.

Maureen nodded.

"I've been to a hospital in Dublin, and the doctors did all that was in their power. But they couldn't give me back the use of my legs."

"You would have liked to be cured?" Tom insisted.

"Of course," Maureen returned. "I wanted to be as strong and active as I always was. I wanted to be able to run and hop and skip and play with the other children."

"And yet you don't appear to be at all unhappy right now?" Tom commented.

"No, I'm not unhappy," Maureen told him. "You see, I asked God and Our Lady to cure me; and, when no cure came, I began to understand that there might be a reason why the use of my legs might have been taken away from me."

"And what might that reason be?" the reporter wanted to know.

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Henderson," the little girl explained. "I might have grown careless about God and the things that really matter if I were always strong and active. I might have found things easier if I were able to go where I wanted to go. I might have enjoyed myself more if I could go to dances when I grew up. And at the height of it all, I might have lost my soul. It wouldn't be much use if I had everything my own way in this world and was miserable in the next — would it now?" the child asked.

Tom made no reply to that. He himself had still another question to ask.

"And you feel no bitterness towards God for having taken away the use of your limbs?"

“Bitterness?” Maureen echoed, as if she were not sure that she had heard aright. “Why in the name of all that’s sensible should I feel bitterness towards One Who has been so wonderfully kind to me? Didn’t Our Lord Himself carry a huge Cross for the love of me and people like me — and shouldn’t I in my turn be only too pleased to be allowed to carry even a tiny splinter of that Cross for His sweet sake?”

Tom closed his eyes and drew a hand swiftly across his forehead. For the second time that day, he had come face to face with a person who was endowed with the courage of an early Christian martyr. For the second time in the space of an hour, he had come across such patience and resignation as was nothing short of heroic.

“People like you, Maureen, are the salt of the earth,” he whispered huskily, and he could not bring himself to say another word at that particular moment.

The little girl laughed outright at that.

“Now I can see that you’re making fun of me,” she declared. “But I can take a joke just as well as the next; and I’ll not hold your leg-pulling against you if you agree to do me a favour.”

“And what favour had you in mind? Tom enquired.

“They tell me you’re not a Catholic,” the little girl went on. “But for all that I’d like you to come to Mass in the village chapel on Christmas morning. The nine o’clock Mass, if you could manage it.”

“I’ll go to Mass if that would make you any happier,” Tom agreed. “But why the nine o’clock Mass in particular? I’m not an early riser, especially when I’m out of London.”

“I meant to keep this as a bit of a surprise for you,” the child informed him. “But I suppose I had better tell you here and now. The fact is: I’ll be singing the *Adeste* at that Mass, and I’d like you to hear me. You know it, don’t you? ‘O Come, all you Faithful’?”

“I’ll try to make it, then,” Tom smiled back at her.

“A promise?” Maureen queried.

“A promise,” the reporter assured her.

And it was good to see the radiant expression that came to rest on the child’s face.

Chapter 6: The Light of Faith.

At the gate of the village chapel Tom Henderson paused and glanced back at the throngs of people that were hurrying along to early Mass. Some of them he already knew, but there were many more whom he had never seen before that day. He was not surprised at that, however, for Ciaran had already told him that Currabeg church was the only chapel within a radius of five miles and that it served as a place of worship for those who lived in various other villages.

Briefly, the reporter took mental stock of the people as they proceeded on their way. They were a mixed bunch, judging by the looks of them. Some were old, others young; some seemed rich, others poor; some were in the bloom of health, while others appeared as if they were far from vigorous. Yet this much, at any rate, they had in common, Tom found himself thinking: they were a hundred per cent Irish and a hundred per cent Catholic, and there was not a person among them who would not be willing to struggle and suffer and die for the glory of God and the honour of the land that bore them.

It was an unpleasant sort of a day. Snow had fallen during the night; rain had followed; and the roads were therefore wet and slushy. But the hurrying throngs paid slant attention to climatic conditions. The thought at the forefront of their minds was the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in which they were soon to participate; and they considered it a privilege to kneel, like the Shepherds, at the feet of the Christ-Child and to pour into His ear all the love and longing of their faithful hearts.

Ciaran led the way through the porch and down the body of the little church. Meekly Tom followed in the boy's wake. And when Ciaran knelt down, the reporter followed suit.

The altar was aglow with light and greenery. At one end of the sanctuary was a crib, and in the nearby aisle sat the organist and several girl-choristers. In the passage-way, Tom caught sight of Maureen O'Byrne seated in her wheel-chair. He continued to look in her direction, but she was apparently oblivious of his presence. Eyes closed, head bowed, she was pouring out her heart in prayer, and the reporter had the feeling that Heaven was close beside her in those hallowed moments.

The Mass began. The choir began to sing. As in a dream, Tom listened to the beautiful strains of the young voices. Maureen's tones he could not distinguish from those of the other choristers, for they had quite obviously been well trained, and their voices swelled and blended in one harmonious melody.

The reporter had heard beautiful singing before. Many and many a time he had been present at concert-operas where celebrated prima donnas had elicited round after round of thunderous applause. But never in his whole life had he been so strangely moved as he was in that little Irish church. It was the fervour rather than the rendering that made such a deep impression on him. Somehow, he had the feeling that each and every chorister was thinking of God and God alone and was solely interested in greeting the Christ-Child Who was born in a draughty stable for the sake of sin-scarred humanity.

Suddenly the singing ceased. A hush descended on the little church. The moment of consecration was at hand. Reverently the rest of the congregation bowed their heads, and Tom automatically did the same.

It was only when the Sacred Host was uplifted that the reporter again caught sight of the people's faces; and, as he did so, he held his breath in sheer amazement, for the light that shone in the eyes of those about him was beyond the power of either tongue or pen to describe. It was not merely faith that was mirrored there. It was something akin to actual vision, and their fervent "My Lord and my God" was a greeting that clearly indicated that they knew beyond a shadow of doubt that the Author of Life and Death was really and truly present in their midst.

At that moment, the scales fell from Tom Henderson's eyes, and for the first time in his life he saw things in their true perspective. He, too, knew that God was present in that little church. True, he could not see Him with his bodily eyes. Nor could he ever explain in actual words how the knowledge came to him. But he was just as sure as he was kneeling there that a Supreme Being had come down upon the altar and that He was filling the souls of the faithful worshippers — and his own soul, too — with a joy that was not of this world or all its dreams and hopes.

For the first time in his life, happiness came to Tom Henderson, and it was a happiness that was so rich and great that his heart seemed too small to contain it. It was as if the old and threadbare

pattern which represented his wasted years had suddenly been swept aside and was supplanted by a design of such exquisite workmanship that it could be better imagined than described.

Back in London, the pattern of his daily life had lacked both meaning and purpose. He had got up in the morning, made his way to the office, and covered various assignments. In his spare time, he had taken in films and shows and “socials,” and had done his level-best to extract from these a certain measure of enjoyment. It was a barren kind of existence, to say the least about it, but it was the only kind of existence which seemed open to him, and he had therefore accepted it without further questioning.

But now the realisation was clearly and unmistakably borne in upon his consciousness that life did not merely consist in sleeping and waking and eating and working. There was another side to the picture, too — a side that was so grand and glorious that it raised the mind of man above the petty things of time and filled his heart with a sense of gladness that the material world could never give.

Life was a gift that came from the hands of an All-Loving God. It was a gift which, like all other gifts, could be wisely utilised or grossly misspent. But, if one used it as God intended, it could provide a foretaste of Heaven amid the trials and tribulations of a work-a-day world.

The people of Curragbeg had grasped that all-important truth. In so doing, they were wiser and more far-seeing than those seductive philosophers who prided themselves in their self-sufficiency and their self-reliance. It was because they lived close to God every moment of the day that the inhabitants of this remote Irish village were so happy and contented, and it was because they failed to do so that the hearts of so many others were cauldrons of unhappiness and unrest...

The notes of the organ again throbbed and echoed through the little church. The choristers once more began to sing. And, like an angel's message streaming out across the world, the words of the Adeste rose and fell on the vibrant air.

Slowly and reverently, Tom Henderson bowed his head. He tried to recall some of the prayers which he had learned in childhood, but each one of them refused to come. He could only thank God in the silence of his heart for the light of faith which had so graciously been bestowed upon him and mentally reiterate the prayer which the rest of the congregation had so recently whispered when with loving eyes they had gazed upon the uplifted Host and emitted the hallowed words: “My Lord and my God.”

Chapter 7: Homeward-Bound.

“I’m sorry that you must leave us, Mr. Henderson,” Ciaran remarked.

“I’m not exactly glad to be going myself,” the reporter returned.

They were standing by the side of the road, waiting for the bus that would take Tom on the first lap of his journey back to England. It was still quite early in the day; and, if all went well, the traveler should be in London by the following morning.

December still hung over the land. Yet the sun was shining and the winds that swept across the fields and moors carried a breath of tenderness that was most unusual for that time of the year.

“What exactly do you do in London?” Ciaran suddenly enquired. “You never told us, and I often wondered.”

"I'm a newspaperman," Tom admitted frankly. "As a matter of fact, it was the hope of finding material for a series of articles that brought me to Ireland in the first place."

Ciaran emitted a sharp whistle.

"Then all I can say is that you must have wasted your time completely in a backwater like Currabeg," he declared. "Nothing out of the ordinary ever happens here, and the general run of editors are only interested in the sensational and the spectacular."

Tom Henderson smiled. In a way, of course, the boy was quite correct. His visit to Currabeg spelled the termination of the post which he had once held. He could not carry out the assignment which had been entrusted to his care, and he was well aware of the fact that Mr. Smith was not the sort of man to put up with one who had failed to comply with his wishes.

Nevertheless, nothing could be further from the truth than to suggest that he had completely wasted his time. Short though his stay in Currabeg might be, it had opened his eyes to a peace and a happiness which he had never previously dreamed of and it had guided him to a faith that was more priceless than the brightest gem in a royal crown.

"It may surprise you to know that I regard my visit to Currabeg as one of the most important events in my whole life," Tom put in quietly. "And to the end of my days I shall treasure the memory of the hours which I spent among you all."

"You'll come back to see us again sometime — won't you, Mr. Henderson?" Ciaran went on.

"I'll try, Ciaran," Tom intimated briskly, and he said no more just then; for at that moment, the Galway-bound bus rounded a nearby bend, and a minute later, the reporter was clambering aboard.

He waved to the boy, and the boy waved back at him. Then the bus moved off again.

Through filmy eyes, the reporter cast a final glance at the little village which he was leaving behind. Very calm and tranquil it lay under the glow of the pale December sun. A stream gurgled. A cow lowed. Immediately afterwards, the bus skirted a corner, and the whole place was lost to sight.

Reluctantly Tom Henderson drew his eyes away from the rear of the bus, and, leaning back against his seat, began to stare straight in front of him. And, as he did so, he was thinking hard. A couple of weeks before he would have regarded Currabeg as a regular back-of-beyond and would have been only too pleased to exchange the serenity of its ways for the bustle and activity of much-acclaimed Paris. But he was older now — older and wiser. And, as he reviewed the halcyon days which had just elapsed, that little Irish village stood out in his mind as an oasis in the wilderness, and he knew that, as long as he lived, the splendour of its grace and goodness would be embedded in his heart.
