

Chapter 1

A NIGHT IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE

*The wee red-headed man is a knowing sort of fellow,
His coat is cat's-eye green and his pantaloons are yellow,
His brogues be made of glass and his hose be red as cherry,
He's the lad for devilment if you only make him merry,
He drives a flock of goats, has another flock behind him.
The little children fear him but the old folk never mind him.
To the frogs' house and the goats' house and the hilly land and
hollow,
He will carry naughty children where the parents dare not
follow.
Oh! little ones, beware. If the red-haired man should catch
you,
You'll have only goats to play with and croaking frogs to watch
you,
A bed between two rocks and not a fire to warm you! –
Then, little ones, be good and the red-haired man can't harm
you.*

– From 'The Song of the Red-haired Man'.

It was night in the dead of winter, and we sat around the fire that burned in red and blue flames on the wide open hearth. The blue flames were a sign of storm.

The snow was white on the ground that stretched away from the door of my father's house, down the dip of the brae and over the hill that rose on the other side of the glen. I had just

been standing out by the little hillock that rose near the corner of the home gable-end, watching the glen people place their lamps in the window corners. I loved to see the lights come out one by one until every house was lighted up. Nothing looks so cheerful as a lamp seen through the darkness.

On the other side of the valley a mountain stream tumbled down to the river. It was always crying out at night and the wail in its voice could be heard ever so far away. It seemed to be lamenting over something which it had lost. I always thought of women dreeing over a dead body when I listened to it. It seemed so strange to me, too, that it should keep coming down and down for ever.

The hills surrounding the glen were very high; the old people said that there were higher hills beyond them, but this I found very hard to believe.

These were the thoughts in my mind as I entered my home and closed the door behind me. From the inside I could see the half-moon, twisted like a cow's horn, shining through the window.

'It will be a wet month this,' said my father. 'There are blue flames in the fire, and a hanging moon never keeps in rain.'

The wind was moaning over the chimney. By staying very quiet one could hear the wail in its voice, and it was like that of the stream on the far side of the glen. A pot of potatoes hung over the fire, and as the water bubbled and sang the potatoes could be seen bursting their jackets beneath the lid. The dog lay beside the hearthstone, his nose thrust well over his forepaws, threaping to be asleep, but ready to open his eyes at the least little sound. Maybe he was listening to the song of the pot, for most dogs like to hear it. An oil lamp swung by a string from the roof-tree backwards and forwards like a willow branch when the wind of October is high. As it swung the shadows chased each other in the silence of the farther corners of the

house. My mother said that if we were bad children the shadows would run away with us, but they never did, and indeed we were often full of all sorts of mischief. We felt afraid of the shadows, they even frightened mother. But father was afraid of nothing. Once he came from Ardara fair on the Night of the Dead* and passed the graveyard at midnight.

Sometimes my mother would tell a story, and it was always about the wee red-headed man who had a herd of goats before him and a herd of goats behind him, and a salmon tied to the laces of his brogues for supper. I have now forgotten all the great things which he went through, but in those days I always thought the story of the wee red-headed man the most wonderful one in all the world. At that time I had never heard another.

For supper we had potatoes and buttermilk. The potatoes were emptied into a large wicker basket round which we children sat with a large bowl of buttermilk between us, and out of this bowl we drank in turn. Usually the milk was consumed quickly, and afterwards we ate the potatoes dry.

Nearly every second year the potatoes went bad; then we were always hungry, although Farley McKeown, a rich merchant in the neighbouring village, let my father have a great many bags of Indian meal on credit. A bag contained sixteen stone of meal and cost a shilling a stone. On the bag of meal Farley McKeown charged sixpence a month interest; and fourpence a month on a sack of flour which cost twelve shillings. All the people round about were very honest, and paid up their debts whenever they were able. Usually when the young went off to Scotland or England they sent home money to their fathers and mothers, and with this money the parents paid for the meal to Farley McKeown. 'What doesn't go to the landlord goes to Farley McKeown,' was a Glenmornan saying.

* The evening of All Souls' Day.

The merchant was a great friend of the parish priest, who always told the people if they did not pay their debts they would burn for ever and ever in hell. 'The fires of eternity will make you sorry for the debts that you did not pay,' said the priest. 'What is eternity?' he would ask in a solemn voice from the altar steps. 'If a man tried to count the sands on the sea-shore and took a million years to count every single grain, how long would it take him to count them all? A long time, you'll say. But that time is nothing to eternity. Just think of it! Burning in hell while a man, taking a million years to count a grain of sand, counts all the sand on the sea-shore. And this because you did not pay Farley McKeown his lawful debts, his lawful debts within the letter of the law.' That concluding phrase 'within the letter of the law' struck terror into all who listened, and no one, maybe not even the priest himself, knew what it meant.

Farley McKeown would give no meal to those who had no children. 'That kind of people, who have no children to earn for them, never pay debts,' he said. 'If *they* get meal and don't pay for it they'll go down – down,' said the priest. 'Tis God Himself that would be angry with Farley McKeown if he gave meal to people like that.'

The merchant established a great knitting industry in West Donegal. My mother used to knit socks for him, and he paid her at the rate of one and threepence a dozen pairs, and it was said that he made a shilling of profit on a pair of these in England. My mother usually made a pair of socks daily; but to do this she had to work sixteen hours at the task. Along with this she had her household duties to look after. 'A penny farthing a day is not much to make,' I once said to her. 'No, indeed if you look at it in that way,' she answered. 'But it is nearly two pounds a year and that is half the rent of our farm of land.'

Every Christmas Farley McKeown paid two hundred and fifty pounds to the church. When the priest announced this from the altar he would say, 'That's the man for you!' and all the members of the congregation would bow their heads, feeling very much ashamed of themselves because none of them could give more than a sixpence or a shilling to the silver collection which always took place at the chapel of Greenanore on Christmas Day.

When the night grew later my mother put her bright knitting-needles by in a bowl over the fireplace, and we all went down on our knees, praying together. Then mother said: 'See and leave the door on the latch; maybe a poor man will need shelter on a night like this.' With these words she turned the ashes over on the live peat while we got into our beds, one by one.

There were six children in our family, three brothers and three sisters. Of these, five slept in one room, two girls in the little bed, while Fergus and Dan slept along with me in the other, which was much larger. Father and mother and Kate, the smallest of us all, slept in the kitchen.

When the light was out, we prayed to Mary, Brigid, and Patrick to shield us from danger until the morning. Then we listened to the winds outside. We could hear them gather in the dip of the valley and come sweeping over the bend of the hill, singing great lonely songs in the darkness. One wind whistled through the keyhole, another tapped on the window with an ivy leaf, while a third swept under the half-door and rustled across the hearthstone. Then the breezes died away and there was silence.

'They're only putting their heads together now,' said Dan, 'making up a plan to do some other tricks.'

'I see the moon through the window,' said Norah.

'Who made the moon?' asked Fergus.

‘It was never made,’ answered Dan. ‘It was there always.’
‘There is a man in the moon,’ I said. ‘He was very bad and a priest put him up there for his sins.’
‘He has a pot of porridge in his hand.’
‘And a spoon.’
‘A wooden spoon.’
‘How could it shine at night if it’s only a wooden spoon? It’s made of white silver.’
‘Like a shillin’.’
‘Like a big shillin’ with a handle to it.’
‘What would we do if we had a shillin’?’ asked Ellen.
‘I’d buy a pocket-knife,’ said Dan.
‘Would you cut me a stick to drive bullocks to the harvest fair of Greenanore?’ asked Fergus.
‘And what good would be in havin’ a knife if you cut sticks for other folk?’
‘I’d buy a prayer-book for a shillin’,’ said Norah.
‘A prayer-book is no good, once you get it,’ I said. ‘A knife is far and away better.’
‘I would buy a sheep for a shillin’,’ said Fergus.
‘You couldn’t get a sheep for a shillin’.’
‘Well, I could buy a young one.’
‘There never was a young sheep. A young one is only a lamb.’
‘A lamb turns into a sheep at midsummer moon.’
‘Why has a lamb no horns?’ asked Norah.
‘Because it’s young,’ we explained.
‘We’ll sing a holy song,’ said Ellen.
‘We’ll sing *Holy Mary*,’ we all cried together, and began to sing in the darkness.

*Oh! Holy Mary, mother mild,
Look down on me, a little child,
And when I sleep put near my bed*

*The good Saint Joseph at my head,
My guardian Angel at my right
To keep me good through all the night;
Saint Brigid give me blessings sweet;
Saint Patrick watch beside my feet.
Be good to me O! mother mild,
Because I am a little child.*

‘Get a sleep on you,’ mother called from the next room. ‘The wee red-headed man is comin’ down the chimley, and he is goin’ to take ye away if ye aren’t quiet.’

We fell asleep, and that was how the night passed by in my father’s house years ago.