

MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED THE HOUSE OF
PRAYER.'*

(AN INCIDENT IN THE LIFE OF FATHER JOHNSON,
ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIEST.)

FATHER JOHNSON'S Irish village is not Irish. For some unknown reason it is polyglot. They are, as one might say, a most extraordinary family.

I took my friend James Pelple down with me for an afternoon's jaunt, to give the priest a call in his new house; for he had moved since last I saw him. Pelple knew of Father Johnson by hearsay, and disapproved strongly. There is no other word to describe his feelings: 'A good man, yes,' he would remark. 'But if all you tell me, and the half of what I hear from others, is true, he is much too lax. His ritual——'

'I've never been to his place,' I interrupted. 'I know him only as the man. As a man, I love him, as you know; as a priest, I admire him. Concerning his ritual I know nothing. I don't believe he is the man to be unduly lax on vital points.'

'Just so! Just so!' said Pelple. 'I know nothing; but I've heard some *very* peculiar things.'

I smiled to myself. Certainly Father Johnson has some unusual ways. I have seen him, for instance, when we have been alone, forget to say his grace until, maybe, he had eaten one dish. Then, remembering, he would touch his fingers together, and say, 'Bless this food to me' (glancing at the empty dish), 'an' I thank Thee for it' (looking at the full one in front). Then, remembering the one yet on the stove: 'An' that too, Lord'—and direct the Lord's attention to the same by a backward nod of his head, afterwards resuming his eating and talking in the most natural fashion.

'I've heard that he allows his church to be used for some very extraordinary purposes,' continued Pelple. 'I cannot, of course, credit *some* of the things I hear; but I have been assured that the women take their knitting into the church on weekday

* Copyright 1911, by the Canton Magazine Publishing Company, in the United States of America.

evenings, whilst the men assemble there, as to a kind of rendezvous, where village topics are allowed. I consider it most improper, most improper. Don't you?'

But I found it difficult to criticise Father Johnson. I was frankly an admirer, as I am to-day. So I held my peace, assisted by an elusive movement of the head, that might have been either a nod or a negative.

When we reached the village, and asked for the priest's new house, three men of the place escorted us there in state, as to the house of a chieftain. Reaching it, two of them pointed to him through the window, where he sat at table smoking after his early tea. The third man would have accompanied us in bodily; but I told him that I wanted to see the priest alone, whereupon they all went happily. To have need to see the priest alone was a need that each and all understood, as a part of their daily lives.

I lifted the latch and we passed in, as all are welcome to do at any hour of the day or night. The door of his house opened into a short half-passageway, and I could see direct into his little room, out of which went the small scullery-kitchen. As we entered, I heard Sally, his servant-wench, washing dishes in the little scullery; and just then Father Johnson called out to her, 'Sally, I'll make a bet with ye.'

In the scullery I heard a swift rustling and a subdued clatter, and knew that Sally (having heard that preliminary often before) was stealthily removing the handles of the knives from the boiling water. Then her reply:

'Did y'r riv'rence sphake?'

'I did, Sally, colleen,' said the priest's voice. 'I'll make a bet with ye, Sally, you've the handles av thim knives over hilt in the hot water—eh, Sally!'

And then Sally's voice, triumphant:

'Ye're wrong, y'r riv'rence, thim knives is on the dhresser!'

'Ay, Sally,' said Father Johnson; 'but were they not in the hot water whin I sphoke firrst?'

'They was, y'r riv'rence,' said Sally, in a shamed voice; just as she had been making the same confession for the past seven years. And then the priest had a little fit of happy, almost silent laughter, puffing out great clouds of smoke; in the midst of which we walked in on him.

After our greetings, which the priest had met with that strange magnetism of heartiness that had left even the critical

Pelple less disapproving, we were set down to a tea, which we simply had to eat, the priest waiting on us himself, and making the little meal 'go,' as you might say, with the abundance of his energy and humour—telling a hundred quaint tales and jests of the country-side, with his brogue making points of laughter where more formal speech would have left us dull and untouched.

The meal over, the priest suggested that we might like to accompany him down to his chapel, and see whether things were 'kapin' happy,' as he phrased it. As you may suppose, we were quite eager to accept his invitation, for, as I have made clear already, I had never been down to his place before, and I had heard many things—even as had Pelple—about his chapel and his methods.

We had not far to go. On the way Father Johnson pointed with his thumb to a little stone-built cabin, very small and crude, which I learned was rented by a certain old Thomas Cardallon, who was not an Irishman.

'Tom's wife died last week,' said the priest quietly. 'He's to be evicted to-morrow as iver is, if he cannot find the rint.'

I put my hand into my pocket, with a half-involuntary movement; but he shook his head, as much as to say no good could be done that way. That was all, and we were past the small hovel in a minute; but I found myself looking back with a sudden new curiosity at the little rough-built living-place, that before had been only one poor hut among many; yet was now instinct to me with a history of its own, so that it stood out in my memory from the others that were here and there about, as something indicative of the life-hope and striving of two poor humans. I put it badly, I know; but it was just such a jumble of vague thoughts and emotions as these that stirred in my mind. I had reason afterwards to have further memory of the cottage and its one-time occupants.

We reached the chapel very soon; but when we entered, I stood for a moment, in astonishment, looking up the single aisle of the long whitewashed room. There was not much noise; for, as I discovered, the reverence and sense of the Place held power all the time; moreover, they were Father Johnson's people. I looked at my friend, smiling. I fear.

'Even worse than Rumour foretold,' I suggested in a low voice; but he made no reply, for he appeared to me to be stifled by the excess of his astounded disapproval. The priest was a

few paces before us, where we had made our involuntary pause in the doorway; and he, too, came to a stand, and looked at the scene, unobserved.

You will understand that there was cause for my astonishment, and even—as many will agree—with the strong disapprobation which my friend was feeling, when I tell you that *there was an auction in progress within the House*; for within the doorway to the left was a pile of household goods, evidently from the cottage of one of the very poor. In front of the little heap was an old man, and round him in a semicircle stood a number of the villagers, listening intently to the old man's extolling of each article of his household gear, which he was putting up for sale.

"My House shall be called——" I quoted softly and involuntarily, but less with any blame in my heart than a great wonder, salted by a vague shockedness. The priest, still standing a little before me, caught my half-unconscious quotation; but he only said 'Hush!' so gently that I felt suddenly ashamed, as if I were a child fumbling with the garments of life, which the priest had worn upon his shoulders all the long years.

For maybe the half of a minute longer we stood staring at the scene, Father Johnson still a few paces before us into the chapel.

'Tom Cardallon,' he said presently over his shoulder. 'If he sold outside, the officers would confiscate. I showed ye the house av him as we passed.'

He beckoned us to join the group of villagers round the pitiful pile of household goods, which we did, whilst he went on up the chapel, speaking a word here and there to the many who were gathered together in companionship for the quiet hour that preceded the evening Rosary. Some were praying; a few were sitting quietly in restful isolation from the world of reality; many of the women, I noticed, were knitting, or sitting making butter in small glass jars, which they shook constantly in their hands; the whole scene, in the soft evening light that came in through the long, narrow windows, giving me an extraordinary sense of restfulness and natural humanity.

I turned presently, from my viewing of the general chapel, to the particular corner where I stood upon the skirt of the little group around the old man. I began to catch the drift of his remarks, uttered in a low tone, and found myself edging nearer,

to hear the more plainly. I gathered—as the priest had told me—that he had just lost his wife, after a long illness which had run them hopelessly into debt. Indeed, as you know, the eviction from the little hovel was arranged for the morrow, if the old man could not find the small sum which would make it possible for him to stay on in the old cottage where he had evidently spent many very happy years.

'This 'ere,' the old man was saying, holding up a worn saucepan, 'wer' one as my missus 'as cooked a pow'r o' spuds in.' He stopped, and turned from us a moment, with a queer little awkward gesture, as if looking round for something that he knew subconsciously he was not in search of. I believe, in reality, the movement was prompted by an unrealised desire to avert his face momentarily, which had begun to work, as memory stirred in him. He faced round again.

'Eh!' he continued, 'she wer' great on chips in batter, she wer'. Me 'n 'er used ter 'ave 'em every Sunday night as ever was. Like as they was good to sleep on, so she said. An' I guess they was all cooked in this 'ere ole pan.'

He finished his curious eulogy rather lamely, and pulled out his old red handkerchief. After he had blown his nose, and furtively wiped his eyes, he used the handkerchief to polish the interior and exterior of the pan; after which he held it up once more to the view of the silent and sympathetic crowd.

'What'll ye give for it?' he asked, looking round anxiously at the many faces.

'Sixpence,' said a low voice, and the old man, after a quick glance round the crowd, said, 'It's yours, Mrs. Mike Callan,' and handed it across to a woman in the front of the crowd. The money was paid into his hand in coppers, as I could tell by the chink.

I looked towards the purchaser, feeling that I should like to buy back the saucepan, and return it to the old man. This way, I saw Father Johnson moving here and there through the little crowd, with a calico bag in his hand. From this, in a surreptitious manner, he drew something constantly—which I conceived by the faint chinking to be money—and distributed it to a man here and a woman there among the onlookers, accompanying each act with a few whispered words. I understood much and guessed the rest. It was obvious that the people had little money to spare, for both their clothes and their little huts all

told of an utter poverty. This poverty Father Johnson was remedying for the occasion, and his whispered words were probably hints concerning the articles for which to bid, and the amount to be bid for each. This, of course, is only a guess; but I believe that I am correct in the main.

Once I bid for a little old crock, offering double or treble its original value, but the old man took not the slightest notice, and continued to offer the article to bids that counted pence to the shillings of my offer. I was astonished, and began to see newly, if I may put it in that way. The man next to me bid fivepence, then turned and put up his finger, shaking his head in friendly fashion, but warningly. Evidently I was to be allowed no part in this function of neighbourly help, which was obviously ordered by rules of which I lacked a fundamental knowledge. A woman near to me made things somewhat clearer. She bent my-wards, and whispered, 'E'd not take it back from you, sir, nor the price you offered, neither. 'E's got a independent 'eart, 'e 'as, sir. Poor old man.'

So the things were going to be given back after all. I wondered how they would arrange the returning. It was evident that he had no conceiving of the intentions of his neighbours; for the emotion of distress was too plainly writ in his face, with each familiar article that he auctioned. I learned afterwards that he was detained in chapel by Father Johnson for a few 'worrd's,' during which the household gear was replaced in his cottage.

When everything else had been sold, there remained only a poor bundle of something, done up in a faded shawl. It was as if the old man had put off to the very end the selling of this. Now he got down clumsily on to his knees and began to undo the knots, fumbling stupidly, and bending his head low over the bundle. He got the knots undone at last, and presently, after a little turning over of the few things, in a way that I perceived to be more a dumb caressing than because he sought any particular article, he rose to his feet holding an old worn skirt.

'This 'ere,' he said slowly, 'wer' my missus's best, an' she wer' very spechul 'bout it these 'ere thirty year. I mind w'en she first wor' it.' (His face lined a moment grotesquely.) She wer' that slim 's she hed ter put a tuck in ther waistban'; not that it 'armed it; she tuk pertickler care, an——'

I lost the old man's low-voiced explanation at this point, for

I was suddenly aware that Father Johnson was almost at my side. I glanced an instant at his face, but he was staring at the old man, with the oddest expression on his face. I noticed subconsciously that he was clenching and unclenching his hands rapidly. Then the old man's quaver caught my ear again.

'It's fine an' good cloth, an' them stain-mark couldn't be 'elped. As she said, it wer' ther Lord's will, an' she mustn't complain. This 'ere one on the 'em wer' done fifteen year back——'

Again my attention was distracted. I caught the sharp flip of a finger and thumb, and a man looked round and sidled out of the crowd up to Father Johnson, in obedience to his call.

'Sthop ut, Mike ! Sthop ut this instant !' I heard the priest whisper, his brogue coming out strong, because he was stirred. 'Offer tin bob for the lot, an' sthop ut ; 'tis breakin' the hearts av us.'

He handed the man some money, and Mike bid for the shawl-full. But even then it was horrible to see old Cardallon's fight to relinquish the garments to the buyer.

The sale was over. The latter part of it had been attended by an ever-increasing audience—from those who at first had been content to sit and talk and rest quietly on the benches, and who—coming from the outlying districts—were not intimate neighbours of old Tom. As they broke up to return to their seats I saw one or two women crying openly.

James Pelple and I stayed for the service of the Rosary, in all reverence, though of another persuasion. Afterwards, as we stood in the doorway waiting for Father Johnson, I looked across at him.

'Well?' I queried—'a den of thieves?'

But Pelple, 'the stickler,' shook his head.

'A wonderful man,' he said—'a wonderful man. I should like to know him better.'

I laughed outright.

'So you've come under the banner, too,' I said. 'I wondered whether you would.' And just then Father Johnson joined us in his cassock, and we began our return journey to his house. On the way we passed the door of Cardallon's cottage, the upper half of which was open. The priest looked in, with a cheery word, and we joined him. The old man was standing in the centre of his hard-beaten mud floor, looking round in a

stunned, incredulous fashion at all his restored household goods. He stared half-vacantly at Father Johnson, the tears running silently down his wrinkled face. In his right hand he held the little bundle, knotted round with the faded shawl.

The priest stretched a hand over the half-door and blessed old Tom Cardallon in the loveliest, homeliest way, that stirred me, I admit frankly, to the very depths.

Then he turned away, and we resumed our walk, leaving the old man to his tears, which I am convinced were signs, in part at least, of a gentle happiness.

'He would not take the money from us,' said the priest, later. 'But do ye think the heart av him would let him sind back the gear?'

I looked across at Pelple, and smiled to his nod; for I knew that his last vague questioning was answered.

WILLIAM HOPE HODGSON.