

# *Pegeen*

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Hilda van Stockum



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To  
May Murray  
and  
her eight brothers  
and sisters



*Peggen*

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## 1. Alone in the World

A LATE sunbeam struck the little whitewashed cabin that lay snuggled against the mountainside, and picked out the red flash of a girl's petticoat. She was sitting on the doorstep, her chin cupped in both hands, wide eyes raised to the smoldering sky. Blue shadows stole up around her, hiding the shining playthings of the day; a sound of lamenting and weeping came from the cottage, where candles burned around a still, white figure.

The little girl's thoughts had followed her eyes into far worlds. Grannie had gone. What was left was not Grannie any more. Pegeen had fled the unfamiliar presence, fled the kitchen, where bulky neighbors rocked and keened, waiting for the funeral. Pegeen would rather sit here and watch the sky change behind the mountain tops. Up there, somewhere, God sat on His throne with His angels around Him and star-crowned Mary, the Mother of God. Somewhere, there, behind those fading clouds, shone the Glory of Heaven from which the sun borrowed its light. How Grannie always did bless the sun when it warmed up her old bones for her! But Grannie had gone now; Grannie, who had been all the parent Pegeen had ever known, for her father and mother had died before she was old enough to remember. Grannie, whose knotted fingers had smoothed away Pegeen's first pains, whose wrinkled lips had taught her her first prayers. Dearest, darling Grannie, she

was up with God now, sitting in His golden light with His holy saints and angels. If only Pegeen could be *quite* sure that she was happy now. But Grannie had been so fond of her old gray shawl and her cup of black tea, and she had so loved telling stories. Pegeen couldn't help wondering how she'd get on in Heaven, standing up all the time in the strong glare of Blessedness and shouting: "Hallelujah!" If only there were a quiet little corner with a rocking-chair and a turf fire, to keep Grannie in comfort. The more Pegeen thought about it, the more she doubted it. Och, it was a pity, it was indeed, that Grannie couldn't have taken her shawl and slippers with her. She'd be lonesome in one of those thin white dresses they do be wearing up in Heaven, and she wouldn't look right in it, either. And she wouldn't find anyone to listen to her tales, for once you came to Heaven you knew everything naturally, like the angels, Father Kelly said, so the others'd be knowing the end before she had begun, and what was the fun of *that!*

Oh, if only Pegeen could die too! She'd take care of Grannie all right, all right. She'd torment old Saint Peter till he gave Grannie all she wanted. But perhaps he wouldn't let her in even if she did die, because of all the wickedness with which she had been filling her days. No, she had better bide awhile and learn to be good first, so she could be with Grannie later. It would be easy to be good now, for there'd be no one to forbid her anything. She could manage very well by herself, so she could. Hadn't Grannie often praised the tea she made? And wasn't she able to cook stirabout and mind the pig, that contrary creature? Och, it wouldn't be any trouble at all, at all. . . .

But in the kitchen of the little white cabin the neighbors were planning other things for Pegeen.

"Who's going to look after the child?" one of the women asked, when the quietness in the room had grown too heavy.

"She has got relations in America, hasn't she?" said Mr. Coyle, between two puffs from his pipe.

"Maybe she has, but the news won't reach them for a long while, and they may not be wanting her at all."

"Sure, old Mrs. Murphy was a poor hand at raising childer, God have mercy on her soul," said the widow Magee, shaking her head. "They all up an' left her, except the one that died, an' he small use to her."

“They say her son Dan has been making a fortune in America,” chirped Mrs. Coyle. “He’d be able to take the child surely, an’ bring her up in comfort.”

“Little ye know,” croaked the widow ominously. “I’ve heard that he has lost his religion an’ has gone into society! I wouldn’t expect too much of himself!”

“She’ll have to go to an orphanage so,” said Mrs. Coyle. “An’ they do say the poor childer never get enough to eat in those places.”

“Not enough to please ’em, but enough for their health,” said the widow Magee grimly. “I don’t hold with spoiling charity childer. Sure, it’ll only make it harder for ’em later on, when there’ll be no one to look after ’em.”



“God spare the child! Can’t we take her home, Mike?” asked good-natured Mrs. Coyle of her husband. “She’d be better off with us!”

“Arra, haven’t ye your hands full with your own?” scolded the widow. “An’ this one is a terror, I promise ye. She missed a strong hand over her, indeed she did. Old Mrs. Murphy wasn’t equal to her at all, at all. Sure, I might be doing worse than to take her me-

self, an' I a lonely woman in need of company. I'd soon have the nonsense knocked out of her!"

"Yes, we know well ye were a miracle at rearing your own childer," teased Mrs. Geoghan. "It's a pity they're all in their graves, or we could be admiring them. Maybe Pegeen'd be safer with me-self; I could find a use for her. She is of an age now to lend a hand around the house an' she only a skinny wee thing that won't eat much, an' can sleep in the bed with my Sheila."

"It's my opinion she should be going to school," suggested Pat Finney. "She is as ignorant as a donkey. I don't believe she'd know a letter if she saw one."

"Small blame to her, living in this lonesome place with no school for miles around," said Mrs. Coyle. "Sure, I pity the girl an' the wild way she was brought up!"

"I'm thinking it suited Mrs. Murphy; she always blamed it on the modern education that her childer left her. You leave Pegeen to me an' I'll see to it she soon knows her letters," and the widow waved her hand as if it held a stick.

"Och, it isn't learning, it's companionship she needs most," argued Mrs. Coyle. "She hasn't played with other lassies the way she should. She is too shy entirely."

"Shy! She's as bold as brass. She needs a firm hand, I'm telling ye!"

The women raised their voices as they continued to disagree, and their talk drifted down to Pegeen, filling her ears.

The sun had gone and the vision of Heaven faded before the black arm of the night. Pegeen felt like a treasure washed ashore for anyone to pick up. She didn't want to go to an orphanage, where girls are packed like peas in a pod and kept hungry for their own good. She didn't want to go with Mrs. Coyle to her shouting, quarrelsome family. She didn't want to go with the widow Magee to be whipped into her likeness. She didn't want to go with Mrs. Geoghan, to sleep in a bed with Sheila, whose mouth stood open and who never understood anything until you said it twice. And least of all did she want to go to America, the place that had swallowed up all Grannie's happiness. This was her home, this little cabin in which she had spent the seven years of her life. No one should have the power to drag her away from it. But grown people could always do what they liked to children. You were never safe from them until you were big yourself.

“Please God, make me grown up *at once*,” prayed Pegeen, her fists against her eyes. She waited a moment, hopefully, but when she felt no miraculous force tugging at her limbs she gave it up and slipped off silently into the gloaming.

The moon was in full sail when Father Kelly came clip-clopping around the mountains on his old brown horse. Something had drawn him to the little white cabin where his old friend Mrs. Murphy now slept her last sleep.

“Sure, ye needn’t be traipsing around at this hour of the night,” his housekeeper had grumbled. “As if ye didn’t need yer rest more than anyone, what with calls coming for ye here an’ calls coming for ye there, till ye look as if I didn’t give ye anything fit to eat. Couldn’t ye be sending a message now, like, instead of going yerself?” But Father Kelly had shaken his head. A message wouldn’t do at all, for what was driving him out into the cold September evening was the memory of two startled eyes watching him from afar as he sat by old Mrs. Murphy’s bed, holding her dying hands. When all was over, he had wanted to comfort the child, but she had fled from him like the wild thing she was, not trusting the touch of his hand on her sorrow. Now the memory of it was urging him. Something must be done for Pegeen as soon as possible, before gossiping crowds came trampling into the intimacy of her life with Grannie. So he had saddled his horse and gone the long way around the mountains, leaving Mrs. Malone to her grumbling.

