

The Cottage at Bantry Bay

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY

Hilda van Stockum



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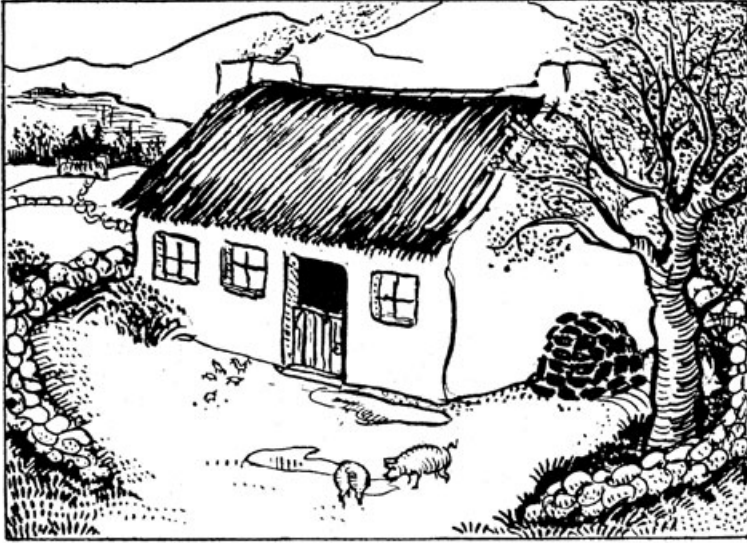
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*To My Mother,
Who Minded the Babies*

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1. Father Tells a Story

BRIGID sat in the corner of the big kitchen, trying to put a patch in one of Liam's breeches. She had to help her mother as much as she could, for Mrs. O'Sullivan had her hands full with the washing and cleaning, and the feeding of the men folk, not forgetting the chickens and pigs and the cabbage patch. Father was out all the time in wind and weather; he did the rough work, the haying and the plowing, the fishing and the cutting of turf. There was little he could not do, from mending Mother's pots and pans and broken furniture to slaughtering pigs and playing the pipes. But he would leave odds and ends scattered about the place and Mother was forever tidying after him. Brigid sighed. She had no liking for needlework; she would rather have been a big boy like Michael, able to help his father shoot rabbits. "Ow!" she cried as the needle stuck in her thumb and the blood pearled up like a round, red jewel. Brigid sucked the sore spot and watched Mother, who was putting plates on the scrubbed deal table for tea. It would soon be time for Father to come home, and then she could stop sewing.



Brigid

The black kettle, hung on the chain over the fire, sang softly as Mother moved about, cutting the bread and putting scant butter on each slice. Then she kneaded something in a bowl and flattened it out on the table, fashioning nice round slabs.

“Oh, is it potato cakes you’re making, Mother?” cried Brigid, sitting straight with sudden interest.

Mother smiled. “It is so bad a day, there was need for something to fill ye all,” she said.

Indeed it was bad weather. The rain had been beating against the windowpanes all day long, and dark clouds chased over the mountain tops.

Mother put the cakes into a skillet and crouched in front of the fire, turning them quickly with a fork. A delicious smell of fried butter filled the kitchen. Suddenly Mother stopped and turned around.

“I haven’t heard the twins this long time,” she said. “Do you know where they are?”

Brigid gladly put down the breeches and jumped up. “They’re sure to be out in the rain,” she said. “Shall I fetch them in?”



Mother O'Sullivan

“Do so. Francie’s so delicate he might catch his death of cold.”

Brigid threw a shawl over her head and slipped out of the back door. She looked all over the yard, the mud squeezing between her bare toes, and called: “Francie! Liam!” but there was no answer. The chickens left their shelter and ran to her, hoping with greedy little eyes that she would throw them some food. But she was intent on finding the boys and called again, cupping her hands around her mouth: “Francie and Liam!”

The blue Kerry mountains, looming behind the green fields, threw the sound back at her; still there were no answering shouts from the twins. She went around the whitewashed cottage and peeped down the road. The cottage stood halfway up a hill; below she could see several thatched roofs, with turf smoke curling from the chimneys. Through the trees there were silver glimpses of Bantry Bay. But it was not at the scenery Brigid gazed; there was something else to attract her attention. For, in the middle of the road, where horses’ hoofs had pawed a groove which the rain was transforming into a river, two little boys stood ankle deep in the water, spattered with mud from grimy legs to sopping hair. They were

scooping up the dirt with some old battered cans, and they hailed her gladly.

"Come and see, Biddy. Come and see!" cried Francie, dancing up and down in his excitement. "We've built a bridge that'll keep the enemy out of the country entirely. Liam is the Sassenach and I'm a Sinn Feiner. When he comes with his men I'll knock them all into the river. . . ." He brandished a stick.

Liam seemed less happy. "I'm no Sassenach," he kept repeating. "I'm a patriot." But Francie would not listen.

"Come and see, Biddy," he repeated. "It's the grandest bridge ever you saw, and I've me fleet ready!" He pointed to an empty matchbox which was floating uncertainly in the puddle. But Brigid did not admire.

"Shame on ye!" she cried. "It's kilt ye'll be, with the damp and the dirt. Come along in now, or Mother'll be after ye!"

"You're always spoiling the game!" Francie grumbled indignantly. "It's a real woman ye are an' no mistake."

Liam was more lenient. "Sure, she means no harm," he said protectively. "Come, Francie."

"Wait a minute." Francie rescued his matchbox, wiping it carefully and stuffing it into one of his pockets, the one without a



hole. He threw one last rueful glance at his lovely bridge and, as he did so, saw something else which made him cry out.

Brigid and Liam turned around and repeated his cry.

“Father! What’s after happening to him?” It was a sorry pair they saw stumbling up the road, Michael supporting his father, who seemed scarcely able to walk.

Brigid flew to meet them, Liam at her heels, and Francie last, for the poor lad had a crippled foot. Michael hailed them from afar and tried to tell them what had happened, but there was no making it out until they had come closer. It appeared that Father had stumbled into a rabbit hole and twisted his ankle so that he could hardly walk. Michael had had some trouble getting him on his feet again and down the treacherous mountainside. Once on the road, it had been easier, although Father had been forced to rest ever so often and had suffered great pain. His ankle was badly swollen.

“The rabbits got meself this time,” he said, with a faint smile; Michael had to do the rest of the explaining because Father was too busy stifling his groans.

Brigid offered to support him on the other side and between her and Michael the poor man was brought safely home. The twins ran ahead to tell Mother, who came to meet Father with outstretched arms.

Father was soon settled in a comfortable chair by the fire, his sprained foot on a stool. Mother bathed his ankle many times in hot water till he began to feel a little better and was able to eat some potato cakes and drink a cup of tea. What with the excitement and bustle Mother had paid no attention to the twins. Now she noticed their appearance as they stood eating their cakes with grimy hands, the gray mud slowly drying in patches on their faces and clothes.

“Mercy on us!” she said, staring. “Is there any dirt left outside at all, at all?”

After that she had no peace until the little boys were thoroughly scrubbed and cleaned—even their ears got a turn, much to Francie’s disgust. Then the two were allowed to sit near the fire to dry and had to drink hot tea to keep colds away.

Mother washed up the tea things and settled herself in a chair with her knitting. Michael fetched Father’s pipe and tobacco and took a stool to sit beside him, whilst Brigid and her homemade rag doll shared the bench in the chimney corner with the twins. They made a nice picture, as they sat around the flickering fire. Michael,

the eldest boy, had a round freckled face, merry blue eyes, and a mop of red hair; Brigid was the pretty one with red-gold curls and an elfin face. The chubby twins looked like sweet blond cherubs, though they often acted otherwise.



Father O'Sullivan

"How are ye feeling now, Father?" Mrs. O'Sullivan asked anxiously, when she had finished counting stitches.

"Better, much better," Father said. "But I'm afraid I won't be able to go to Kenmare tomorrow to bring Farmer Flynn the donkey he wanted to buy from me."

"Will he mind, Father?" Michael asked.

Father smiled sadly. "He may not, son-o, but I do. He may buy some other donkey, and then where will we be? Mother needs the money, doesn't she?"

Mother sighed a little, but she smiled bravely and said: "No harm, we'll manage." By the way her needles clicked the children could tell she did mind. There was always a lot to be bought and never much money to do it with. Though Mother did turn around clothes till they looked like new and managed to use every scrap of

food to great advantage, Michael and Brigid knew full well there was need of money always. Never had there been enough to buy Bridy a proper doll, and she did so long for one. For though the doll she had was fondly cherished, it had no face. One misses a face. Brigid wanted a doll with blue eyes and a red mouth full of pearly teeth. She had seen several in the shop windows when Father took her to town on market days, but she was afraid she would never have one. She was now nine years old; when you were twelve, you were too old to play with dolls. What a pity it would be, thought Brigid, if she had to grow up without ever having a real doll! She sighed a little as she thought of it. Grownup people led such dull lives. It was a wonder they got through the days. They were always mending and working and worrying. Of course, she would have to grow up sometime, but she'd like to enjoy herself first, and then, when the mysterious thing happened and she had to let down her skirts and put up her hair, she would at least have something to look back on. But she was afraid there never would be enough money, and so she gazed sadly at the faceless creature on her lap. There were other things that could not be had because they cost money. There was the cow Father had set his heart on, the Sunday hat Mother needed, and Michael wanted to go to a good school, for he was clever and the village teacher said he was getting too knowing for her. Money was needed most for poor Francie, who had a club-foot and could not walk well. The doctor who had seen him said there was a hospital in Dublin where he would be treated free of charge, but Dublin was a long way off, and it would cost so much to get him there.

"Couldn't I sell the donkey for you, Father?" Michael asked.

"It's too far, me lad," said his father, but he looked as though it was not such a bad idea.

"It's not so far. Many's the day I've walked further than that. I'm sure I can do it!"

"Oh, I wish you'd take me with you!" cried Brigid. "I'd love to go!"

Mother sat frowning; presently she looked up and said: "It may be a good plan, Father, to let both of them go. They're fine healthy children, God bless their hearts, and if one of them is in trouble the other can let us know. I'd sooner they went together. It's safer I think, and we're in sore need of the money."