

THE LITTLE ROADS OF CLOONAGH

By Maude Radford Warren



MICHAEL MONAGHAN had walked ten miles from the railroad station, his heart singing for joy that at last his feet were tasting the turf of his own home. He had been all over the world; but his eyes had looked past alien sights to a little Irish thatched cottage against the cheek of a hill where stony, niggardly land stretched from the mountains to the sea. Wherever he had gone, he had seen his home which looked down on the roads of Cloonagh, the green little roads of Cloonagh where the neighbors walked, and the face of everyone of them felt to him like his own face. He shifted his valise from the right to the left hand and took a fresh grip on the stick he had cut for himself; for he was coming close to Cloonagh.

"And 'tis myself will never go two miles from my own doorstep again!" he said, threatening a lean cow by the wayside.

The cow did not move; for stony Kerry is so poor it is said that even a Kerry cow is afraid to look up for fear of losing the bite.

It was little enough Michael Monaghan had seen of his own doorstep since he was a child of ten, the youngest of a long brood. Uncle Terry in America had sent for one of them to come to him, and Michael had been despatched because he was of a dreamy nature, "fit for nothing at all—God help him!—but to be whistling the blackbirds and looking for leprechawns under a hedge." The elder brothers were sharp enough after the pennies, and maybe Michael would learn to be quick enough to pick up them that lay before him in the streets of America.

Michael had gone and had stayed seven years, doing well enough; but not his best, because his heart was back in Cloonagh. One by one his elder brothers had come out to Uncle Terry, and then his father died, and his mother, alone in Cloonagh, called back her youngest child. Michael had gone back, a gawky, well grown young man, who could ride like a centaur and lift a barrel as if it was a straw; but with a slow brain, which, his mother told him, was "after being asleep in County Kerry when his body would have gone on to County Mayo."

When, the week after his return home, he found his mother about to be evicted for back rent long unpaid by his shiftless father, that brain of his found no other way out of her difficulties than to accept the offer of Lord Connemara, who was getting up a cavalry regiment for the Boer war and would advance Mrs. Monaghan all the money she needed if big Michael would go for a soldier. This seemed to Michael quicker than waiting for money from America, and he had enlisted.

Just one week of his beloved Cloonagh, and he was off for Africa. After the war was over, the regiment had been sent to India, and, not yet free from financial obligations, Michael had had to go too. While he was out there his mother had died, and the little home of Cloonagh had gone to his elder brother Terence. Michael had expected that Terence would come back from America; but on the very day of his discharge he received a letter from America which almost repaid him for his weary years of exile. Terence, for a consideration, had handed over his rights in the old place to Uncle Terry, and now, as the letter said, Uncle Terry was dying, and intended to leave the home to Michael, since the little roads of Cloonagh had always gone twisting through the heart of him.

THE little roads of Cloonagh were in plain sight of Michael now, and so full of people it might be market day. All coming one way too—couldn't he

see the sun shining on all the faces, turning toward him? There was old Mrs. Mulvaney—didn't he know the blue dress of her, and the blue cloak? Were her eyes as blue as ever? he wondered. At least the back of her was not bent. And that tall man behind her that she'd just given a whack of her stick to, he must be her great-nephew, Thady Kiely, who had come back from Australia to take care of her. Michael had heard all about that.

They were near enough now to call out to him, and he could see their smiles. The kind hearts, to be welcoming him! There was a white slip of a girl in blue, like Mrs. Mulvaney; he could not be sure who she was. But there was Maggie Casey. She was only sixteen when he had left for Africa; but he would know that red hair and that walk anywhere. What a walk on her! Like a Queen, no less. He could make out the faces of them now as they came closer; all he had to do was put on nine years or so to them.

SO here he was in the midst of them, and the years of his exile falling from him almost as if they had never been. Mrs. Mulvaney made herself spokesman; for she was the leader of Cloonagh. If the villagers were sometimes restless under her control, she had ingenious ways of bringing them to heel and maintaining her sway. The one person she could not entirely manage was her devoted nephew Thady. Mrs. Mulvaney stepped forward and took Michael's hand.

"You're welcome, Michael!" she cried. "We welcome you wid all our veins!"

He looked down into her blue eyes which, for all their guilelessness, could deepen with shrewdness and insight, and he said, "Oh, but it's glad I am to be here! The back of my hand, the sole of my fut, to all other places but Cloonagh!"

The laugh that greeted this struck even Michael's unsuspecting ear as unduly boisterous, though he was unable to catch its note of irony.

"You'll be singing another tune soon," said Maggie Casey, coming forward, the sun dancing on her red hair and dimples dancing about her smiling mouth. "'Tis a rolling stone you are, Michael."

"Is it yourself that's in it, Maggie?" he said, shaking hands.

"So you've not forgotten me?" said Maggie. "And why should you, when her that was your Uncle Terry's wife was my own aunt? Do you remember Sheelagh, too?"

She pulled forward the white slip of a girl dressed in blue. Michael did seem to remember a light haired child of nine or ten given to hanging her head and hiding behind the backs of people. But he could not see that child in this slim girl with eyes like the sky above Cloonagh on a gray day, and thick hair, rich brown, like the earth of the fields he had come home to till.

Before he could speak to her, his neighbors were addressing him in a laughing chorus. He was aware that they had something of importance to tell him; but his slow brain could not disentangle their mingled speech. Mrs. Mulvaney struck her stick on the ground.

"Am I to tell him, or am I not?" she asked. "Was it to me the priest and the lawyer spoke first, or was it not?"

Thady Kiely came closer to her with a look of concern on his handsome face. "Don't be afther exciting yourself, Aunt darling," he said tenderly. "Think of your years! Come next Michaelmas, you'll be—"

"You let my age alone, Thady!" she shouted, and

in her rage at him she almost forgot her news for Michael. Well she knew the neighbors were admiring Thady for his devoted attention to her, while she hated to look at his face in the fear lest its sympathetic commiseration should strike into her bones that old age she had never really felt! "Well, Michael, alannah," she said, recovering herself, "'tis you are the lucky man."

"Aye," agreed a voice, "and 'tis a quare way luck lights, if the truth were said."

"I'm lucky to be home," said Michael in a dull voice, while a harsh fear struck at his heart.

YOUR Uncle Terry—may the heavens be the bed of that generous man, dead now a month!—went on Mrs. Mulvaney—"your Uncle Terry made a new will."

The little roads of Cloonagh stretching all about Michael mingled in one green blur before his eyes. He began to

walk toward his old home, Mrs. Mulvaney beside him, the neighbors pressing closer to watch his face and hear his words.

"And in that will," said Mrs. Mulvaney, "he thought shame to 'ave you that stony bit patch of land and tumbledown hut the Monaghans have always lived in till your Uncle Terry lifted them up."

The neighbors nodded their heads. Musha! maybe the Monaghans were rich enough now; but in their day they'd been as poor as anyone, so they had!

"Your Uncle Terry left that bit of trash," said Mrs. Mulvaney, whose own land was poorer than the Monaghans', "to his wife's niece, Sheelagh Casey, here."

Michael looked at the girl accusingly, and she dropped her head and stepped behind Maggie as if to relieve him of the painful sight of her.

"To all of your brothers he gave land or money, for he had plenty; but to you, Michael, he left, divided between you and Maggie Casey, his wife's other niece, a farm of no less than six hundred acres, with a house and barns on it, and cattle till you couldn't rest, and three hundred pounds apiece."

Maggie Casey flung back her splendid red head, and Michael reflected that it was no wonder she walked like a Queen, and she such a grand heiress and all! The fact of his own prosperity had not yet penetrated; he only knew that his little home in Cloonagh was not his, and that once more he must go to an alien land, once more he must look over flat prairie country, instead of up to the rocky hills of Kerry, and, twisting between them, the little green roads of Cloonagh.

"You'll be stopping with me," said Mrs. Mulvaney, tapping his arm and thrusting away Thady, who was making ready to help her over a stile. "Thady, I'll thank you to keep your distance! I climbed this turf bank before ever your father was born."

The neighbors were disappointed at Michael's taciturnity; but, not willing to forgo their drama, they made it themselves, and cried aloud with joy for him, and said that Cloonagh was a grand place entirely, now it had two rich people in it, and the priest would doubtless call on Michael, and maybe it was Michael would be helping build the new chapel that had been standing wanting a roof these two years and no money to put it on.

The road that led to the Monaghan and the Mulvaney cottages was hilly, and one by one the neighbors fell off, until, besides Michael and Mrs. Mulvaney, there were left only Thady and Maggie and Sheelagh.

"You can take yourself back to the village, Thady!" said Mrs. Mulvaney sharply.

"Sure, I can't be 'aving you, Aunt dear," drawled Thady. "You might be wanting me to draw a pail of water to boil the potatoes."

"And if I do, I can get it myself!" said Mrs. Mulvaney sharply. Then she sighed and, drawing aside her blue skirt, fished from a difficult pocket a handkerchief, in the knotted corners of which were a few coins. She untied a knot with her sharp old teeth and handed a sixpence to Thady. "Get yourself some tobacco, then," she almost snarled, "and Sheelagh can go wid you if she likes!"

SHE stood looking after him impatiently as he went down the hill, Sheelagh a pace or two behind. Then she walked on silently beside Michael, whose eyes were fixed on that little gray cottage at the top of the road, its dark thatch touched with hints of green. He noticed with a start that the