



CHRISTMAS ALMS¹

IN old times there was a married couple living near Cauher-na-mart,² in the county Mayo. They had seven of a family, but God sent them worldly riches, and they wanted for nothing but God's charity.

The man was generous and good and kind to the poor, but the heart of the woman was as hard as the heart of a block of a tree; there was no mercy in her, and she gave no alms to wanderer or outcast, and after refusing the poor 'tis what she would insult him. If a person able to do work came to her to ask alms of her, she would say to him: 'If you weren't a lazy vagabone, you wouldn't be here asking alms and bothering me with your talk'; but if an old man or an old woman came to her, 'tis what she would say: 'What right has the like of ye to be alive? ye ought to be dead long ago.'

One Christmas night it happened that there was great frost and snow out, and the ground was thick covered with it. But in Patrick Kerwan's house—that was the man's name—there was a good fire, and the table was laid. Patrick, his wife, and his family were sitting at it, and ready to go in face of a good supper, when they heard a knock at the door. Up got the wife and opened it. There was a poor man outside, and she asked him what he wanted.

'I'm wanting an alms in the honour of Jesus Christ, who was

¹ The following story, of which I here give a translation, is no doubt largely due to the vivid imagination of some itinerant mendicant working in his own interest.

² Westport.

born on this feast-day, and who died for the human race on the cross of passion.'

'Get off with you, you lazy old guzzler!' said she; 'if you were one-half as good at doing work as you are at saying prayers, you wouldn't be coming looking for alms this night and bothering decent people,' and with that she slammed the door out in his face, and sat down at the table again.

Patrick heard a little of the talk she gave the poor man, and asked who was it was at the door.

'A lazy old rap that was asking alms,' said she; 'and if it wasn't an idle "sgraiste" that was in it, he wouldn't be coming looking for alms from people that are earning their own livelihood hard enough, but he'd sooner be at his old prayers any day than do an honest stroke of work for a bit of food.'

Up got Patrick: 'It's a bad turn you did,' said he, 'to refuse any man for food, and especially to refuse him of a Christmas night. Isn't it God who sent us everything we have; there is more on the table than will be eaten to-night, and how do you know that we shall be alive to-morrow?'

'Ara, sit down,' says she, 'and don't be making a fool of yourself; I don't want e'er a sermon from you.'

'God change your heart,' said Patrick, and with that he seized the full of his two hands of bread and meat, and out with him to follow the poor man, pursuing the track of his feet in the falling snow as quick as he could, till he came up with him. He handed him the food then, and said he was sorry for his wife's refusing him; 'But I'm sure,' says he, 'she was angered.'

'Thank you for your food,' said the poor man. He handed Patrick the food back again, and said: 'There, you have both your food and your thanks; I am an angel out of heaven that was sent to your wife in the form of a poor man to ask alms of her in the honour of Jesus Christ, who was born this night, and suffered the passion of the cross for the human race. She was not satisfied with refusing me, but she insulted me as well. You shall have a great reward for your alms; but as for your wife, it will not be long till she is standing in the presence of

Jesus Christ to render Him an account of how she spent her life in this world; she has not much time for repentance, and urge her to make a good use of it.'

The angel went away, and Patrick returned home. He sat down, but he could neither eat nor drink.

'What's on you?' said the wife. 'Did that vagabone do anything to you?'

'My grief,' says Patrick, 'it was no vagabone that was in it, but an angel out of heaven, who was sent to you in the shape of a man to ask alms of you in honour of Jesus Christ, and you were not satisfied with refusing him, but you must go and abuse him also with bad names. Your time on the world is not long now, and I beseech you to make a good use of it.'

'Hold your tongue!' says she. 'I think you saw a ghost, or that you lost your senses; and may God never help you nor any one else who would leave a good fire and a good supper to go running out in the snow after a lazy rogue. But the devil a much sense was in you ever.'

'Unless you take my advice, you'll repent when it'll be late,' said Patrick; but there was no use for him to be talking.

When Little Christmas came, the woman was not able to get dinner ready; she was deaf and she was blind. On Twelfth Night, she was not able to leave her bed, but was raving and crying, 'Give them alms, alms, alms, in the name of Jesus Christ! give them everything in the house!'

She remained for a time like that, between life and death, and she without her senses. The priest came often, but he could do nothing with her. The seventh day that the priest came to her, he brought the last oil with him to anoint her.

The candles were lit for him, but they were immediately quenched. They tried to light them again, but all the coals that were in the county Mayo would not kindle them. Then he thought to anoint her without a candle. But at once the whole place was filled with great smoke, and it was little but the priest was smothered. Patrick went to the door of the room,

but he could get no further. He heard the woman crying, 'A drink, a drink, in the name of Christ!'

She remained like that for two days, and she alive, and they used to hear her from time to time screaming, 'A drink! a drink!' but they could not come near her.

Word was sent for the Bishop O'Duffy, and at last he came, and two old friars with him. He was carrying a cross in his right hand. When they were come near to Patrick's house, a host of vultures swept down on them with one swoop, and it was little but they picked the eyes out of the three of them.

Then they came to Patrick's door and lighted the candles. The bishop opened his book, and said to the friars, 'When I begin reading the prayers, do ye give the responses.' Then he said, 'Depart, O Christian soul——'

'She is not a Christian soul,' said a voice, but they saw nobody. The bishop began again: 'Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world, in the name of the all-powerful Father who created you, in the name of Jesus Christ who suffered the passion for you, in the name of the Holy Spirit, that was poured upon you——'

Before he could say more there came peals of thunder and lightning, and they were all deafened with the sound, and the house was filled with smoke. The lightning struck the gable of the house and threw it, a deluge of rain came down, and the people thought the end of the world was there. The bishop and the two friars fell to their prayers again. 'O Lord, according to the plenitude of Thy mercy, look mercifully upon her,' said the bishop.

'Amen!' said the friars.

There came a little calm then, and the bishop moved over to the bed. Poor Patrick came to the other side of the bed, and it was not long till the woman opened her mouth, and there came out of it a host of dar-daels.¹ Patrick gave a screech, and ran for

¹ The 'dar-daol,' or 'daire-daol,' is the most universally loathed and feared of all the insect tribe. It is a kind of black beetle (the 'göevius olens' of the naturalists, I think) of a dull black, with a cocked tail, said to be full of venom. Hands festered by the prick of a thorn, or the cut of a reaping-hook, are believed to have done so because a dar-daol

fire to burn them. When he came back the woman was dead, and the dar-daels were gone.

The bishop said prayers over her, and then he himself and the two friars went away, and Patrick went out to get women to wash the corpse, but when he came back there was no corpse to be found either here or there. There was a purse of gold hung at her neck, and the purse went with the body, and there was no account of either of them from that out.

About a month after this the speckled disease¹ broke out amongst the children, and they all died. There was very great grief on Patrick. He was alone by himself, without wife, without children ; but he said : 'Welcome be the will of God.'

A short time after that he sold all he had and went into a monastery. He spent his life religiously, and died a blessed death. May God give us also a good death, and the life that is enduring !

DOUGLAS HYDE, LL.D.
(An Chraoibhin Aoibhinn.)

had walked on the thorn or hook. This foul and terrifying insect, of which countless legends are related, is invariably burned, not trodden on, when found in a house. In English it is always called in Connacht a 'crocodile.'

¹ Small-pox, 'galar breac.'

