**Nora, daughter of Marcus Beag**

**translated by Thomas McCarthy**

**from Nóra Mharcuis Bhig**

**by Pádraic Ó Conaire**

I

You never saw such surprise as that of the people of Ros Dha Loch when they heard that Nora, daughter of Marcus Beag, was to go to England. A sister of hers was already over there, working, but Nora was needed at home. There would be nobody left after her except the old couple. The two brothers she had never did any good – for themselves or for anyone belonging to them. Martin, the eldest one, was sent to Galway to be a shop-boy, (old Marcus always had notions), but he wasn’t long there when he lost his job because of the drink and after that he joined the British Army. As for Stephen, the second one, there was no stopping the old fellow from thinking that he would make a “gentleman” of him, but when the headstrong lad didn’t get his own way from the father he stole off with the price of two bullocks sold at Uachtarard fair in his pocket.

“He’s no better here than out of here,” the old man said on hearing that he was gone. But he was only pretending that the story didn't hurt him. Often at night he was unable to sleep a wink thinking about the two sons who had left him and gone astray. With any one of the neighbours who would try to brighten the dark old man then, as to sympathise with him over the misfortune of his sons, he would say nothing except – “What’s the good in talking? Very little thanks I got for trying to keep them in the old nest. The two of them took flight and left me by myself. They’ll give me little cause for worry from now on.”

But they did. And up until Nora said that she had decided not to stay at home any longer nothing troubled him but the way the two sons had left him. He had been shamed by them. People were making fun of him. He was the laughing stock of the village – himself and his family. And the way that he'd thought that he’d give them a decent livelihood. The way he worked himself to the bone, labouring morning to dusk in all weathers to keep them at school until they might be as erudite as the master himself, indeed!

But it would be a different story with Nora, according to himself. He would keep her at home. He would find a match for her. He would leave the small-holding to herself and her husband after death. When she told him that she would leave he thought that she was just joking. But it was soon clear to him that she wasn't. Then he did his level best to keep her at home. It was useless. It was no use his wife talking to her either. For a month there was great antagonism between them: the old man threatening every evil on her head if she left, herself trying to better him. But her mind was set on going, and across she’d go no matter what was said.

“You had two sons,” she said to him one night, “and they left you. The two of them showed you. You don’t know that I wouldn't do the same, if you don’t leave me go willingly.”

“Since she’s the last, of them, Marcus,” said the wife, “and by God I hate to part with her at the end of my life, but,” she continued and she nearly weeping, “maybe ‘tis for her own good."

The father didn’t think so. He was adamant. He was certain that it was far far better for her to stay where she was and make a match there. Her husband would have forty acres of land when her old father died. She was a pleasant and affectionate girl. There wasn’t a farmer or a shop-keeper in the seven parishes which were nearest to them who wouldn’t be very happy to marry her.

“And why wouldn’t they be,” he said, “such a lovely girl and with forty acres of land."

But he had to give in in the end.

It’s then they saw the work! The great vexation and anxiety that had come over Nora for a while was all gone, apparently. There wasn’t a trace to be seen. She was as light and festive as the best days of her life, or so it seemed. They had so many things to do. Hats and dresses to make and decorate. Cloth and ribbons of every kind to be bought and dyed. She hadn’t one break in the weeks before she went. Visiting here today and elsewhere tomorrow.

She didn't shed one tear until the two big travelling boxes that she had bought in Galway were put on the cart that was to take them to the railway station at Ballinahinch. Then she wept profusely. When they were east at the crossroads the showers of tears were on the cheeks.

“May God have mercy on them,” said one of the boys who was thrown on a ditch that was on a smooth mossy patch by the roadside.

“Amen," said another one of them, "and everyone like them.”

“But do you know what’s the matter with her that she’s going away?"

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if she could do well at home.”

“Three fellows came asking for her Iast year – the three of them well known for their money.”

“It’s said that she had great time for the son of Sean Matthew, the shop-keeper,” said the old man in their midst.

“The one who was at the big college in Galway?”

"The very one.”

“I don’t believe it. He was a bad lad.”

"You don’t say.”

The cart was moving northwards through the great flat bogland between Ross and Ballinahinch. Nora could still see her own house below in the glen. It wasn’t about that she was thinking, but on the misfortunate day that the son of Sean Matthew met her at the Ros Dha Loch crossroads, and he spending his holidays at his uncle’s house in the village eastwards. She didn’t stop thinking about that until she reached Ballinahinch. The train let off a sharp impatient whistle as if it was telling people to hurry up and not delay something so huge and lively and powerful. Nora went in. The train gave a little jolt. It started to move slowly. Marcus Beag walked by its side. He took leave of his daughter and returned home sad and sorrowful.

II

It was true for the wise old man who was thrown on the mossy green looking at life and letting it go by that she once gave her heart to the son of Sean Matthew at one point in her life. But that time was gone. And it wouldn’t be a lie to say that it was an angry and intense hatred that she had for the fine young man who was over in Glasgow in a college studying to be a doctor. Because of that love that she had had for him she now had to leave Ros Dha Loch and her closest friends and bring the burden of the world on herself. He had been her most beloved once, that bright young man who spent his holidays in Ros Dha Loch, more so than any other person she’d ever met. And weren’t those wonderful stories that he told her about the life they’d have in the great towns out foreign! And how his tales pleased her! And when he said to the foolish naïve girl that he’d never met anyone he loved more than her, how pleased and heart-warmed she’d been! And the wonderful house that they’d have when he’d be a doctor!

And she believed everything that the young fellow told her. He believed it himself – while he was saying it. Indeed, such foolish talk didn't worry him too much when he went away. But it was different with Nora. It would be a long time before he'd come back again. Summertime was a long way away! ‘Twould be a long time before it would be summer always.

She had had great trust but she was deceived. The letters she sent him were returned to her. He was in another place. Nobody had any information on him. Her life was confused. Her mind was in a turmoil when she understood the story correctly. She was thinking about him and turning it all over in her mind by day and by night. She could do nothing but leave the place entirely. She, herself, and everyone associated with her were ashamed in front of people. A young girl who used to be a servant in Ros Dha Loch was working over in London. She would head for that city. She would make for that city now and not for the big town where her sister was.

Sitting in the train she was filled with wonder at the way rivers and harbours, lake, mountain and plain flew past while she herself did nothing. Why were they all moving away from her? What kind of life would be there for her in the foreign faraway land where this wonderful vehicle would leave her? Dread and trembling came over her. Darkness was falling on the flatland and the mountains. A halt was put to her thoughts but it was clear to her that she was borne away on some strange animal; until she felt her heart starting and jumping with the force of anger; until she was a fire-dragon, and flames leaping from her eyes; that she was being taken to some terrible wasteland – a place where there was neither sunshine nor rainfall; that she had to go there against her will; that she was being banished to this wasteland because of one sin.

The train reached Dublin. She felt that the whole place was disturbed by a great single drone of sound. Men screaming and shouting. Trains coming and going and blowing whistles. The noise оf men, of trains, of carriages. Everything she saw filled her with wonder. The boats and shipping on the Liffey. The bridges, the streets that were lit up at midnight. The people, the city itself that was so beautiful, so full of life, so bright in those dead hours of the night. For a little while she nearly forgot the misfortune that drove her from her own hometown.

But when she was on the train over, the reverse was true. The terrible dark thoughts pressed down on her again. There was no stopping them. Why did she leave her home anyway? Wouldn't it have been better to stay, no matter what happened to her? What would she do now? What was going to happen to her in the place where she was going?

Things like that. If there were people long ago who spent a hundred years to discover that life was but a day, as the old storytellers tell us, she herself did something more marvellous. She made a hundred years out of one single day. She became old and withered in just one day. Every sorrow and heartbreak, and every great trouble of the mind that comes upon a person over a lifetime came to her in one single day from the time she left Ros Dha Loch to the moment she was at the centre of London, England – the moment she saw Kate Ryan, the servant girl they had had at home, waiting for her at the side of the train to give welcome. She never understood life until that very day.

III

The two young women were living in a miserable ugly back street on the southside of the city. In a large sprawling house where the people were on top of each other in one great heap was where they lived at the time. You never saw the likes of Nora’s amazement when she saw the number of them that were there. She could have sworn that there was at least one hundred people, between men, women and children. She used to be left alone there for the whole day, because Kate had to go out to work from morning until dusk. She would sit at the window looking at all the people going by, wondering where they could all be going. She wasn’t long like that until she began to wonder if she’d made a mistake in coming at all. She wondered why she had left the lonely village in the west among the hills on the edge of the great ocean. What would her father say if he knew why? He’d be furious of course.

“Why had I the misfortune more than anyone else?" she would say. But that was too insoluble a question, and when she couldn’t find an answer she'd go out onto the street; but she wouldn’t go far for fear of getting lost. But the same thoughts pressed down on her in the street among people, just like in the house.

One night when Kate came home from work, Nora was sitting by the fire crying.

“Now, now, Nora love," she said, "dry your eyes and drink a cup of tea with me. I was told to tell you that a girl is needed by relatives of my mistress, and if you would go there…”

“I'll go there,” Nora said, rising quickly.

On the following morning she journeyed to the house of the lady. She started work there. She had so much to do there, so many new thoughts entered her mind, that she couldn’t think of anything else for a little while. In the letters she sent home she included a little money even though she knew that they didn’t lack much because they were already well set up. And the letters her father sent to her she used to read and reread every night before going to bed. They used to have news of the village. That the fishermen had had a great catch of herring. That Tomas Pats Mor had bought a new boat. That Nell Griffin had emigrated to America.

A few months went like that but in the end the lady told her that she wasn't satisfied with her and that she’d have to leave. She had to do that. She left what she had behind her and went. She had no shelter or protection that night but the rain falling on her and the hard streets under her feet.

Is it necessary to talk about everything that happened to her after that? About the “young nobleman" who gave her food and drink and money and she at the end of her tether with want and need. About the way that she started on the drink. About the way she tried to deceive herself, and daze and blind her mind. About the different people who met her in houses of drink and otherwise. About their talk and their conversation. About the way her self-esteem was narrowed until after a while she didn’t care what might become of her. About the way she was going to the bad day by day, until in the end she had no care or honour, but walked the streets.

IV

Nine years she had like that. Drinking and carousing at night. Dressing up and getting herself ready during the day for the next night. Any thought that used to come into her head about the life she lived now and the one she lived at home she banished as quickly as she could. It was thoughts like that that caused her most unease. And – even if it’s true that a person would have no interest whatsoever in living unless he thought that somehow he was doing more good than bad – she couldn't do any differently. But those thoughts came mercilessly against her will in their hundreds and hundreds during the day – especially after she had just sent a letter home, a thing she often did. And when they came upon her thickly like that she would go out drinking.

She was out one night walking the streets after she had just sent a letter home that contained some money. It was eleven o'clock. The people were coming out of the theatres in their thousands and thousands and she looking at them. There were some among them who stared at her and at women of her kind. The kind of look that shows the desire and greed which brings destruction on people, that drives countries against each other and which gave material to poets and storytellers of the world from the time of Troy to the present day.

She wasn’t long like that when she saw a man in front of her, his woman by his side. They stared at each other, without knowing why. They recognised each other. It was the son of Sean Matthew who was a doctor in London. She turned on her heels quickly. She heard him say it to his wife on going into a restaurant that was near them, and that he would join her shortly. Nora moved off on hearing that. He was after her. She quickened her walk. He did the same. She was trotting, he trotting after her. She had a head start on him. She ran up one street and down another. She feeling that he was at her heels. She worried to death that he might catch her. That everyone would find out about her predicament at home. That everyone would know.

A chapel was just in front of her – a small chapel that stayed open all night because of some feast day. She needed the shelter there from the man who was after her – that man to whom she gave the love in her heart and who’d deceived her. She had no recollection of getting inside, but in she went. What she saw made her feel strange, it had been so long since she was inside a church. Her youth came back to her. She was in Ros Dha Loch Church again. A statue of the Blessed Virgin was in a corner and a red light in front of it. She made for that corner. She threw her hands around it. She was shaking and rocking back and forth with heaviness of mind. Her bright peaked hat almost falling off her head. Her bright red ribbons drenched and soiled by the mud of the street. She was praying to God and the Virgin out loud, prayer after prayer, until she exclaimed in a strong fervent voice: “Holy Mary – Mother of God – pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death – Amen!”

An old priest behind her heard her pray. He spoke tо her in a kind gentle manner. He calmed her. He took her with him. He questioned her. She told him her story without holding anything back. She showed him the letters she had received from her father.

He put further questions to her.

Yes – she was satisfied going home. ‘Twas she who sent the money home with which the old man bought the fishing boat. She was certain that they didn’t – they didn’t know anything about the life she led in London.

“And did your father ask you why you didn’t go to your sister in the first place?”

“He did. But I told him that the work was better in London.”

They spent a good while like that – himself questioning and she giving the answers. He found decent lodging for her for the night. He told her to send a letter home to say that she was thinking of returning, and that he would visit her the following day and that she would be able to make a confession. That night before he went to sleep he wrote a long letter to the Parish Priest of Ros Dha Loch telling him the story and asking him to keep an eye on the young woman when she arrived home.

They were expecting her at home. Everybody was saying that no person ever left Ros Dha Loch who did as well as her. There was no one among them who had sent that kind of money home.

‘‘It must give you great satisfaction, Marcus,” Sean the Blacksmith was saying and he putting a shoe on Marcus’ horse down in the forge on the day she was coming home, “that in the end she’s coming home, because you haven’t got anybody to leave the land to.”

“Well you may say it," he replied, ‘‘and I’m a fair old age an’ all.”

The horse and cart was fitted out for his journey to the railway station for her.

“They used to say," he said boastfully and he fixing the horse to the cart, ‘‘that the other two did nothing, which was true I suppose, but you wouldn't believe the help she gave me. Look at the big fishing boat that’ll be chasing mackerel tonight – I couldn’t have bought it but her.”

“You’re saying nothing but the truth now, Marcus,” said the old man who was giving him a hand, “but tell me this,” he said nervously: “Did she ever tell you that my Seamus met her in some place?”

“I did ask her that, but she never saw him.”

“Well, look at that now... and I haven’t had a letter from him in six months.”

Marcus left. He hadn’t been so light-hearted for many a long day as he went off to the railway station. If his sons had gone to the bad his daughter had surpassed all. She was an example for the whole parish. Now they wouldn’t be able to say that he’d have to sell the land in the end. He would keep Nora at home. He would make a match for her. He would find her a solid, prudent man...

These thoughts hadn’t ended when the train came in majestically. Nora came off it. And he had some welcome for her! And even greater than his, if that was possible, was the welcome that her mother gave her at home.

But didn’t she look spent and tired! What did they do to her at all? Was it the way she’d been doing too much work? But she wouldn’t be at home long before she would have a good appearance again. The wan cheeks would be gone; if she stayed at home at took their advice.

“And the first bit of advice I’ll give you is to have this lovely bit of meat and cabbage, because I suppose you never had time to have a not to eat in that city,” said the old woman and she laughing.

But Nora couldn’t eat. She wasn’t a bit hungry. She was too upset from the long journey, she said. She would go straight to the room and undress. She would rest there. And after a while maybe she’d be able to eat something.

“Or maybe you’d like a cup of tea to begin with,” her mother said when she was going back in the room.

“I’d prefer that,” she said, “maybe it would do me some good.”

That night when the people of the town came in to welcome her they couldn’t see her. They were told that she was so exhausted from the journey that she had to go asleep, but that they would see her tomorrow. Nora heard their talk and conversation as she was across in her room praying to God and The Virgin to put her on the right road from now on and to give her the power to stay that way forever.

V

It was amazing the way Nora worked after her homecoming. Within the person who was called Nora Marcus Beag in Ros Dha Loch there were two actual women: the young gentle one who had spent some time in England earning money and another woman who remained unknown to the people of the village, but who had suffered the hardships of life in a foreign city. And just as there were two persons, you might say, there were two minds and two modes of thought there as well. She had the outlook of the woman who had been led astray in London as well as the viewpoint she had before she ever left her native place at all.

And she bore the constant conflict between them. The woman who had once led a wild life fighting with the other woman who never left and who wanted nothing except to stay at home, settled and secure. It was a hard struggle. Sometimes the evil was stronger, she’d think, and then she could be seen making for the Chapel. And all the people saying that they’d never seen a young woman so devout and pious and polite as herself.

During this time the village nearest to them had a pattern-day. A large number of people from Ros went there. Some of them walking, some riding, and some others across the harbour in their boats. Some of them went there to sell stock. Yet others had no particular business there.

Nora was one of this crowd. She was walking around the fair looking at the cattle that were being sold. Getting to know people here and enquiring after some person who had left the district since she first left for London. She was cheery, all dressed-up and upright. A dress of the best white cotton, the most expensive, was what she wore. A dress that she'd brought back from London. Fine satin ribbons trailing after her. Peacock feathers standing up in her hat. She hadn’t been so breezy and happy for a long time. It was a terribly hot day. The sun was glaring down ferociously. If it wasn’t for the little breeze that came in off thе harbour now and again, one couldn’t take the heat. Nora was exhausted by the day. She heard violin music close by. Soft, sweet, pleasant music. The fiddler was sitting by the door of the cabin. His head swaying back and forth. Such a satisfied and contented expression on his face and in his manner that you’d think he’d never had any worry or trouble in his life before and never would.

Nora went in. She sat on a stooI by the door to listen to the music. She was exhausted. If she could only have a drink! That’s what she thought. That conflict was started again. She was just about to leave when a young man from Ros came over to her to ask if she’d have a glass with him.

“The day itself is so hot that it wouldn’t do a bit of harm to you. Have anything you like.”

She took a glass from him.

Any person who’s been fond of the drink at a point in their life and who’s stayed off it for a while, and who again touches a drop, ‘tis certain that he’ll drink a second glass, and a third one, and maybe a ninth one, because the old desire is reawakened.

That was the way it was with Nora. She drank the second one. And the third one. It soon went to her head. She began to make a show. She went out and danced. But she had to give up before long. Dizziness was in her head. Her legs had gone from under her. She was barely able to go out but she hadn’t got far when she fell on a bank by the side of the road.

A few hours of night had gone by when her father found her like that.

He lifted her into the cart and drove her home.

The following morning the same cart was being prepared outside the door.

"If those are the kind of tricks you learned in England,” he said and bitterness in his voice, “it’s there you can be practising them.”

The two of them went to the railway station.

VI

The very night that Nora left you could see an old man inside a fishing boat if you were by Ros Dha Loch shore. A container was drawn up by his side and he trying to obliterate the name that was written on the boat. Even if he did, he didn’t succeed in rubbing the name from his heart. 'Twas the name of his daughter that was on the boat.