

Julia Cahill's Curse

By George Moore

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"And what has become of Margaret?"

"Ah, didn't her mother send her to America as soon as the baby was born? Once a woman is wake here she has to go. Hadn't Julia to go in the end, and she the only one that ever said she didn't mind the priest?"

"Julia who?" said I.

"Julia Cahill."

The name struck my fancy, and I asked the driver to tell me her story.

"Wasn't it Father Madden who had her put out of the parish, but she put her curse on it, and it's on it to this day."

"Do you believe in curses?"

"Bedad I do, sir. It's a terrible thing to put a curse on a man, and the curse that Julia put on Father Madden's parish was a bad one, the devil a worse. The sun was up at the time, and she on the hilltop raising both her hands. And the curse she put on the parish was that every year a roof must fall in and a family go to America. That was the curse, your honor, and every word of it has come true. You'll see for yourself as soon as we cross the mearing."

"And what has become of Julia's baby?"

"I never heard she had one, sir."

He flicked his horse pensively with his whip, and it seemed to me that the disbelief I had expressed in the power of the curse disinclined him for further conversation.

"But," I said, "who is Julia Cahill, and how did she get the power to put a curse upon the village?"

"Didn't she go into the mountains every night to meet the fairies, and who else could've given her the power to put a curse upon the village?"

"But she couldn't walk so far in one evening."

"Them that's in league with the fairies can walk that far and much farther in an evening, your honor. A shepherd saw her; and you'll see the ruins of the cabins for yourself as soon as we cross the mearing, and I'll show you the cabin of the blind woman that Julia lived with before she went away."

"And how long is it since she went?"

“About twenty year, and there hasn’t been a girl the like of her in these parts since. I was only a gossoon at the time, but I’ve heard tell she was as tall as I’m myself, and as straight as a poplar. She walked with a little swing in her walk, so that all the boys used to be looking after her, and she had fine black eyes, sir, and she was nearly always laughing. Father Madden had just come to the parish; and there was courting in these parts then, for aren’t we the same as other people—we’d like to go out with a girl well enough if it was the custom of the country. Father Madden put down the ball alley because he said the boys stayed there instead of going into Mass, and he put down the cross-road dances because he said dancing was the cause of many a bastard, and he wanted none in his parish. Now there was no dancer like Julia; the boys used to gather about to see her dance, and whoever walked with her under the hedges in the summer could never think about another woman. The village was cracked about her. There was fighting, so I suppose the priest was right: he had to get rid of her. But I think he mightn’t have been as hard on her as he was.

“One evening he went down to the house. Julia’s people were well-to-do people, they kept a grocery-store in the village; and when he came into the shop who should be there but the richest farmer in the country, Michael Moran by name, trying to get Julia for his wife. He didn’t go straight to Julia and that’s what swept him. There are two counters in that shop, and Julia was at the one on the left as you go in. And many’s the pound she had made for her parents at that counter. Michael Moran says to the father, ‘Now, what fortune are you going to give with Julia?’ And the father says there was many a man who would take her without any; and that’s how they spoke, and Julia listening quietly all the while at the opposite counter. For Michael didn’t know what a spirited girl she was, but went on arguing till he got the father to say fifty pounds, and thinking he had got him so far he said, ‘I’ll never drop a flap to her unless you give the two heifers.’ Julia never said a word, she just sat listening. It was then that the priest came in. And over he goes to Julia. ‘And now,’ says he, ‘aren’t you proud to hear that you’ll have such a fine fortune, and it’s I that’ll be glad to see you married, for I can’t have any more of your goings-on in my parish. You’re the encouragement of the dancing and courting here, but I’m going to put an end to it.’ Julia didn’t answer a word, and he went over to them that were arguing about the sixty pounds. ‘Now, why not make it fifty-five?’ says he. So the father agreed to that, since the priest had said it, and all three of them thought the marriage was settled. ‘Now what will you be taking, Father Tom?’ says Cahill, ‘and you, Michael?’ Sorra one of them thought of asking her if she was pleased with Michael; but little did they know what was passing in her mind, and when they came over to the counter to tell her what they had settled, she said, ‘Well, I’ve just been listening to you, and ’tis well for you to be wasting your time talking about me,’ and she tossed her head, saying she would just pick the boy out of the parish that pleased her best. And what angered the priest most of all was her way of saying it—that the boy that would marry her would be marrying herself and not the money that would be paid when the book was signed or when the first baby was born. Now it was agin girls marrying according to their fancy that Father Madden had set himself. He had said in his sermon the Sunday before that young people shouldn’t be allowed out by themselves at all, but that the parents should make up the marriages for them. And he went fairly wild when Julia told him the example she was going to set. He tried to keep his temper, sir, but it was getting the better of him all the while. And Julia said, ‘My boy isn’t in the parish now, but maybe he is on his way here, and he may be here to-morrow or the next day.’ And when Julia’s father heard her speak like that he knew that no one would turn her from what she was saying, and he said, ‘Michael Moran, my good man, you may go your way: you will

never get her.' Then he went back to hear what Julia was saying to the priest, but it was the priest that was talking. 'Do you think,' says he, 'I am going to let you go on turning the head of every boy in the parish? Do you think', says he, 'I'm going to see you gallivanting with one and then with the other? Do you think I am going to see fighting and quarreling for your like? Do you think I am going to hear stories like I heard last week about poor Patsy Carey, who has gone out of his mind, they say, on account of your treatment? No', says he, 'I'll have no more of that. I'll have you out of my parish, or I'll have you married.' Julia didn't answer the priest; she tossed her head, and went on making up parcels of tea and sugar, and getting the steps and taking down candles, though she didn't want them, just to show the priest that she didn't mind what he was saying. And all the while her father trembling, not knowing what would happen, for the priest had a big stick, and there was no saying that he wouldn't strike her. Cahill tried to quiet the priest, he promising him that Julia shouldn't go out any more in the evenings, and bedad, sir, she was out the same evening with a young man and the priest saw them, and the next evening she was out with another and the priest saw them, nor was she minded at the end of the month to marry any of them. Then the priest went down to the shop to speak to her a second time, and he went down again a third time, though what he said the third time no one knows, no one being there at the time. And next Sunday he spoke out, saying that a disobedient daughter would have the worst devil in hell to attend on her. I've heard tell that he called her the evil spirit that set men mad. But most of the people that were there are dead or gone to America, and no one rightly knows what he did say, only that the words came out of his mouth, and the people when they saw Julia crossed themselves, and even the boys that were most mad after Julia were afraid to speak to her. Cahill had to put her out."

"Do you mean to say that the father put his daughter out?"

"Sure, didn't the priest threaten to turn him into a rabbit if he didn't, and no one in the parish would speak to Julia, they were so afraid of Father Madden, and if it hadn't been for the blind woman that I was speaking about a while ago, sir, it is to the Poor House she'd have to go. The blind woman has a little cabin at the edge of the bog—I'll point it out to you, sir; we do be passing it by—and she was with the blind woman for nearly two years disowned by her own father. Her clothes wore out, but she was as beautiful without them as with them. The boys were told not to look back, but sure they couldn't help it.

"Ah, it was a long while before Father Madden could get shut of her. The blind woman said she wouldn't see Julia thrown out on the roadside, and she was as good as her word for well-nigh two years, till Julia went to America, so some do be saying, sir, whilst others do be saying she joined the fairies. But 'tis for sure, sir, that the day she left the parish Pat Quinn heard a knocking at his window and somebody asking if he would lend his cart to go to the railway station. Pat was a heavy sleeper and he didn't get up, and it is thought that it was Julia who wanted Pat's cart to take her to the station; it's a good ten mile; but she got there all the same!"

"You said something about a curse?"

"Yes, sir. You'll see the hill presently. And a man who was taking some sheep to the fair saw her there. The sun was just getting up and he saw her cursing the village, raising both her hands, sir,

up to the sun, and since that curse was spoken every year a roof has fallen in, sometimes two or three.”

I could see he believed the story, and for the moment I, too, believed in an outcast Venus becoming the evil spirit of a village that would not accept her as divine.

“Look, sir, the woman coming down the road is Bridget Coyne. And that’s her house,” he said, and we passed a house built of loose stone without mortar, but a little better than the mud cabins I had seen in Father MacTurnan’s parish.

“And now, sir, you will see the loneliest parish in Ireland.”

And I noticed that though the land was good, there seemed to be few people on it, and, what was more significant, that the untilled fields were the ruins, for they were not the cold ruins of twenty, or thirty, or forty years ago when the people were evicted and their village turned into pasture—the ruins I saw were ruins of cabins that had been lately abandoned, and I said:

“It wasn’t the landlord who evicted these people.”

“Ah, it’s the landlord who would be glad to have them back, but there’s no getting them back. Every one here will have to go, and ’tis said that the priest will say Mass in an empty chapel, sorra a one will be there but Bridget, and she’ll be the last he’ll give communion to. It’s said, your honor, that Julia has been seen in America, and I’m going there this autumn. You may be sure I’ll keep a lookout for her.”

“But all this is twenty years ago. You won’t know her. A woman changes a good deal in twenty years.”

“There will be no change in her, your honor. Sure, hasn’t she been with the fairies?”