

BEFORE THE BREAK OF DAY



HE lived in a little wooden house on the corner of the street huddled in the shadow of two towering tenements. There are a few frail buildings of this sort still left in that part of the city, half a mile east of the Bowery and half a mile south of Tompkins Square, where the architecture is as irregular, as crowded, and as little cared for as the population. Amid the old private houses erected for a single family, and now violently altered to accommodate eight or ten—amid the tall new tenements, stark and ugly—here and there one can still find wooden houses built before the city expanded, half a century old now, worn and shabby and needlessly ashamed in the presence of every new edifice no better than they. With the peak of their shingled roofs they are pathetic survivals of a time when New York still remembered that it had been New Amsterdam, and when it did not build its dwellings in imitation of the polyglot loftiness of the Tower of Babel. It was in one of these little houses with white clapboarded walls, ashen gray in the paling moonlight, that Maggie O'Donnell lay fast asleep, when the bell in a far-off steeple tolled three in the morning of the day that was to be the Fourth of July.

She was asleep in the larger of the two little rooms over the saloon. In that part of the city there are saloons on every corner almost, and sometimes two and three in a block. The signs over the doors of most of these saloons and over the doors of the groceries and of the bakeries and of the other shops bear strangely foreign names. The German quarter of the city is not far off, nor is the Italian, nor the Chinese ; but hereabouts the houses are packed with Poles chiefly, and chiefly Jews—industrious, docile, and saving. Not until midnight had the whirl of the sewing-machines ceased in the tenements which occupied the three other corners. The sign over the door of the saloon above which Maggie lay fast asleep bore an Irish name, the name of her husband, Terence O'Donnell. But the modest boards which displayed his name were overawed by the huge signs that flanked them, filling a goodly share of the wall on either street and proclaiming the "McGown's Pass Brewery, Kelly & Company."

These brewer's signs were so large that they made the little house seem even smaller than it was—and it was not more than twenty feet square. The doors of the saloon were right at the corner, of course, to catch trade. On one street there were two windows, and on the other one window and a door over which was the sign "Family Entrance." This door opened into a little passage, from which access could be had to the saloon, and from which also arose the narrow stairs

leading to the home of Terence O'Donnell and Maggie, his wife, on the floor above. The saloon filled the whole ground-floor except the space taken up by this entry and the stairs. A single jet of gas had burned dimly over the bar ever since Terry had locked up a little after midnight. The bar curved across the saloon, and behind it the sideboard with its bevelled-edge mirrors lined the two inner walls. The sideboard glittered with glasses built up in tiers, and a lemon lay yellow at the top of every pyramid. The beer-pumps were in the centre under the bar; at one end was the small iron safe where Terence kept his money; and at the other end, against the wall, just behind the door which opened into the Family Entrance, was a telephone.

Up-stairs there were two little rooms and a closet or two. The smaller of the rooms Maggie had turned into a kitchen and dining-room. The larger — the one on the corner — was their bedroom, and here Maggie lay asleep. The night was close and warm, and though the windows were open, the little white curtains hung limp and motionless. The day before had been hot and cloudless, so the brick buildings on the three other corners had stored up heat for fifteen hours, and had been giving it out ever since the sun had set. Stifling as it was, Maggie O'Donnell slept heavily. It was after midnight when Terry had kissed her at the door, and she had been asleep for three hours. Already there were faint hints of the com-

ing day, for here in New York the sun rises early on the Fourth of July—at half-past four. A breeze began to blow lazily up from the East River and fluttered the curtains feebly. Maggie tossed uneasily, reached out her hand, and said "Terry."

Suddenly she was wide awake. For a moment she looked stupidly at the empty place beside her, and then she remembered that Terry would be gone all night, working hard on the boat and the barges making ready for the picnic. She turned again, but sleep had left her. She lay quietly in bed listening; she could catch nothing but the heavy rumble of a brewery wagon in the next street and the hesitating toot of a Sound steamer. Then she heard afar off three or four shots of a revolver, and she knew that some young fellow was up early, and had already begun to celebrate the Fourth on the roof of the tenement where he lived.

She tried to go to sleep, but the effort was hopeless. She was awakened fully, and she knew that there was small chance of her dropping off into slumber again. More than once she had wakened like this in the middle of the night, an hour or so before daybreak, and then she had to lie there in bed quietly listening to Terry's regular breathing. She lay there now alone, thinking of Terry, grateful for his goodness to her, and happy in his love. She lay there alone, wondering where she would be now if Terry had not taken pity on her.

Then all at once she raised herself in bed, and held her breath and listened. For a second she thought she heard a noise in the saloon below her. She was not nervous in the least, but she wished Terry had not left so much money in the safe; and this was the first night he had been away from her since they had been married—nearly two years ago. She strained her ears, but the sound was not repeated. She sank back on the pillow again, making sure that it was a rat dropping down from the bar, where he had been picking up the crumbs of cheese. There were many rats in the cellar, and sometimes they ventured up even to the bedroom and the kitchen next door.

Time was when it would have taken a loud noise to wake the girl who was now Terence O'Donnell's wife out of a sound sleep. After her mother died, when Maggie was not five years old, her father had moved into one of the worst tenements in the city, a ram-shackle old barrack just at the edge of Hell's Kitchen; and there was never any quiet there, day or night, in the house or in the street. There was always a row of some sort going on, whatever the hour of the day; if profanity and riot could keep a girl awake she would never have had any sleep there. But Maggie did not recall that she had been a wakeful child; indeed, she remembered that she could sleep at any time and anywhere. On the hot summer nights, when her father came home in-

toxicated, she would steal away and climb up to the roof and lie down there, slumbering as healthily as though she were in their only room.

Even then her father used to get drunk often, on Saturday night always, and frequently once or twice in the middle of the week. And when he had taken too much he was mad always. If he found her at home he beat her. She could recall distinctly the first time her father had knocked her down, but the oaths that had accompanied the blow she had forgotten. He had not knocked her down often, but he had sworn at her every day of her life. The vocabulary of profanity was the first that her infant ears had learned to distinguish.

Her father quit drinking for a month after he married again. They moved away from Hell's Kitchen to a better house near the East River. All went well for a little while, and her step-mother was good to her. But her father went back to his old ways again, and soon his new wife turned out to be no better. When the fit was on they quarrelled with each other, and they took turns in beating Maggie, if she were not quick to make her escape. It was when aiming a blow at Maggie one Saturday night that her father pitched forward and fell down a flight of the tenement-house stairs, and was picked up dead. The neighbors carried him up to the room where his wife lay in a liquorish stupor.

Maggie was nearly fourteen then. She went

on living with her step-mother, who got her a place in a box-factory. The first days of work were the happiest of Maggie's girlhood. She remembered the joy which she felt at her ability to earn money ; it gave her a sense of being her own mistress, of being able to hold her own in the world. And she made friends among the other girls. One of them, Sadie McDermott, had a brother Jim, who used to come around on Saturday night and tease his sister for money. Jim belonged to a gang, and he never worked if he could help it. He had no trade. Maggie remembered the Saturday night when she and Sadie had walked home together, and when Jim got mad because his sister would not divide her wages with him. He snatched her pocket-book and started to run. When Maggie reproved him with an oath and caught him by one arm, he threw her off so roughly that she fell and struck her head on a lamp-post so hard that she fainted.

As Maggie lay in her bed that Fourth of July morning, while her past life unrolled itself before her like a panorama, she knew that the scar on the side of her head was not the worst wound Jim McDermott had dealt her. As she looked back, she wondered how she had ever been friendly with him ; how she had let him follow her about ; how she had allowed him to make love to her. It was on Jim McDermott's account that she had had the quarrel with her step-mother. Having robbed a drunken man of five dollars, Jim had in-

vited Maggie to a picnic; and the step-mother, a little drunker than usual that evening, had said that if Maggie went with him she would not be received again. Maggie was not one to take a dare, and she told Jim she would go with him in the morning. The step-mother cursed her for an ungrateful girl; and when Maggie returned with him from the picnic late the next night, and came to the door of the room where she and her step-mother lived, they found it locked against her, and all Maggie's possessions tied in a bundle, and scornfully left outside on the landing.

It had not taken Jim long that night to persuade Maggie to go away with him; and she had not seen her step-mother since. A week later, but not before he and Maggie had quarrelled, Jim was arrested for robbing the drunken man; he was sent up to the Island. Since the picnic Maggie had not been back to the factory. Jim had taken her with him one night to a dance-hall, and there she went without him when she was left alone in the world. There she had met Terry a month later. When she first saw Terry the thing plainest before her was the Morgue; she was on the way there, and she was going fast, and she knew it. Although winter had not yet come, she had already a cough that racked her day and night.

And as she lay there in her comfortable bed, and thought of the chill of the Morgue from which Terry had saved her, she closed her eyes to keep out the dreadful picture, and she clinched her

fists across her forehead. Then she smiled as she remembered the way Terry had thrashed Jim, who had got off the Island somehow before his time was up. Jim said he had a pull with the police, and he came to her for money, and he threatened to have her taken up. It was then Terry had the scrap with him, and did him up. Terry had had a day off, for his boss kept closed on Sundays; at that time Terry was keeping bar at a high-toned café near Gramercy Park.

When he thrashed Jim that was not the first time Terry had been good to her. Nor was it the last. A fortnight later he took her away from the dance-hall, and as soon as he could get a day off he married her. They went down to the Tombs, and the judge married them. The judge knew Terry, and when he had kissed the bride he congratulated Terry, and said that the new-made husband was a lucky man, and that he had got a good wife.

A good wife Maggie knew she had been, and she was sure she brought Terry luck. When the man who had been running the house which now bore the name of Terence O'Donnell over its door got into trouble and had to skip the country, the boss had put Terry in charge, and had let Maggie go to house-keeping in the little rooms over the saloon; and when the boss died suddenly, his widow knew Terry was honest, and sold out the place to him, cheap, on the instalment plan. That was a year and a half ago, and all the instal-

ments had been paid except the last, which was not due for a week yet, though the money for it lay all ready in the safe down-stairs. And Terry was doing well; he was popular; his friends would come two blocks out of the way to get a drink at his place; and he had just had a chance to go into a picnic speculation. He was sure to make money; and perhaps in two or three years they might be able to pay off the mortgage on the fixtures. Then they would be rich; and perhaps Terry would get into politics.

Suddenly the current of Maggie's thoughts was arrested. From the floor below there came sounds, confused and muffled, and yet unmistakable. Maggie listened, motionless, and then she got out of bed quickly. She knew that there was some one in the saloon down-stairs; and at that hour no one could be there for a good purpose. Whoever was there was a thief. Perhaps it was some one of the toughs of the neighborhood, who knew that Terry was away.

She had no weapon of any kind, but she was not in the least afraid. She stepped cautiously to the head of the stairs, and crept stealthily down, not delaying to put on her stockings. The sounds in the saloon continued; they were few and slight, but Maggie could interpret them plainly enough; they told her that a man having got into the house somehow, had now gone behind the bar. Probably he was trying to steal the change in the cash-drawer; she was glad that Terry had

locked all his money in the safe just before he went off.

When Maggie had slipped down the stairs gently, and stood in the little passageway with the door into the saloon ajar before her, she felt a slight draught, and she knew that the thief had entered through a window, and had left it open. Yet there was no use in her calling for assistance. The only people within reach of her voice were the poor Poles, who were too poor-spirited to protest even if they saw her robbed in broad daylight; they were cowardly creatures all of them; and she could not hope for help from them as she would if they were only white men. The policeman might be within reach of her cry; but he had a long beat, and there was only a slim chance that he was near.

Her head was clear, and she thought swiftly. The thing to do, the only thing, was to make use of the telephone to summon assistance. The instrument was within two feet of her as she stood in the passage, but it was on the other side of the door at the end of the bar, and therefore in full view of any one who might be in the saloon. And it would not be possible to ring up the central office and call for help without being heard by the robber.

Having made up her mind what it was best for her to do, Maggie did not hesitate a moment; she pushed the door gently before her and stepped silently into the saloon. As the faint light from

the single dim jet of gas burning over the bar fell upon her, she looked almost pretty, with the aureole of her reddish hair, and with her firm young figure draped in the coarse white gown. She glanced around her, and for a second she saw no one. The window before her was open, but the man who had broken in was not in sight.

As she peered about she heard a scratching, grating noise, and then she saw the top of a man's head just appearing above the edge of the bar behind which his body was concealed. She knew then that the thief was trying to get into the safe where Terry's money was locked up.

Leaving the door wide open behind her, Maggie took the two steps that brought her to the telephone, and rapidly turned the handle. Then she faced about swiftly to see what the man would do.

The first thing he did was to bob his head suddenly under the bar, disappearing wholly. Then he slowly raised his face above the edge of the bar, and Maggie found herself staring into the shifty eyes of Jim McDermott.

"Hello, Maggie!" he said, as he stood up. "Is that you?"

She saw that he had a revolver in his right hand. But she put up her hand again and repeated the telephone call.

"Drop that!" he cried, as he raised the revolver. "You try to squeal and I'll shoot—see?"

"Where did you steal that pistol, Jim McDermott?" was all she answered.

"None o' your business where I got it," he retorted. "I got it good and ready for you now. I kin use it too, and don't you forget it! You quit that telephone or you'll see how quick I can shoot. You hear me?"

She did not reply. She was waiting for the central office to acknowledge her call. She looked Jim McDermott square in the eyes, and it was he who was uncomfortable and not she.

Then the bell of the telephone rang, and she turned and spoke into the instrument clearly and rapidly and yet without flurry. "This is 31 Chatham. There's a burglar here. It's Jim McDermott. Send the police quick."

This was her message; and then she faced about sharply and cried to him, "Now shoot, and be damned!"

He took her at her word, and fired. The bullet bored a hole in the wooden box of the telephone.

Maggie laughed tauntingly, and slipped swiftly out of the door, but not swiftly enough to avoid the second bullet.

Five minutes later when the police arrived, just as the day was beginning to break, they found Jim McDermott fled, the window open, the safe uninjured, and Maggie O'Donnell lying in the passageway at the foot of the stairs, her night-gown stained with blood from a flesh wound in her arm.

(1893.)

