
Christmas in the Presentation parlour

by Kate O'Brien

Mary was clean-cut for a vocational life. Into whatever race or class she was born she would naturally have found herself to be its servant, or the servant of God. She desired to spend herself, to be used, to work her passage. She thought that the natural thing was to give life, and she never thought at all about receiving. Her first selfishness in sacrifice was only an error of exaggeration, of over-statement. In young passion of abnegation she had not yet a way of measuring. Discipline and vows were what she needed - and she ran to find them. Father may have thought that more likely she needed an ardent and skilful suitor, but I believe he would have been wrong. I believe that Aunt Mary was a natural-born nun, and more than that, a natural-born governor of nuns.

It was as such that I knew her.

As she flashed in and out of the parlour she was all speed and grace. The slimmest nun imaginable and, when I remember her, with a face of exaggerated beauty. Eyes like hard-cut sapphires and all her person lean and quick and clean-edged. If she was very holy - and it is sure she was - she seemed to throw that grace over her shoulder in company, where she was as gentle and ordinary as she could manage. But she was not ordinary - and so it was not easy for a child or a young girl who perceived that to be at ease with her.

Aunt Mary had a soldierly quality, and was naturally a controller of events and persons. As quite a young nun she was elected to the various officeships of the religious life,

from sacristan to Bursar, to Mistress of Novices.

When she was still quite young there took place, as every five years by the Presentation Rule, an election for the office of Reverend Mother. This was by secret ballot of the community, and took place in prayer and silence in the Choir of the Chapel. The Bishop of Limerick presided over the ceremony, and was assisted by the chaplain. Each nun in her stall, and after prayers and blessings in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament the Bishop counted the votes, and pronounced the elected name.

This time it was Aunt Mary.

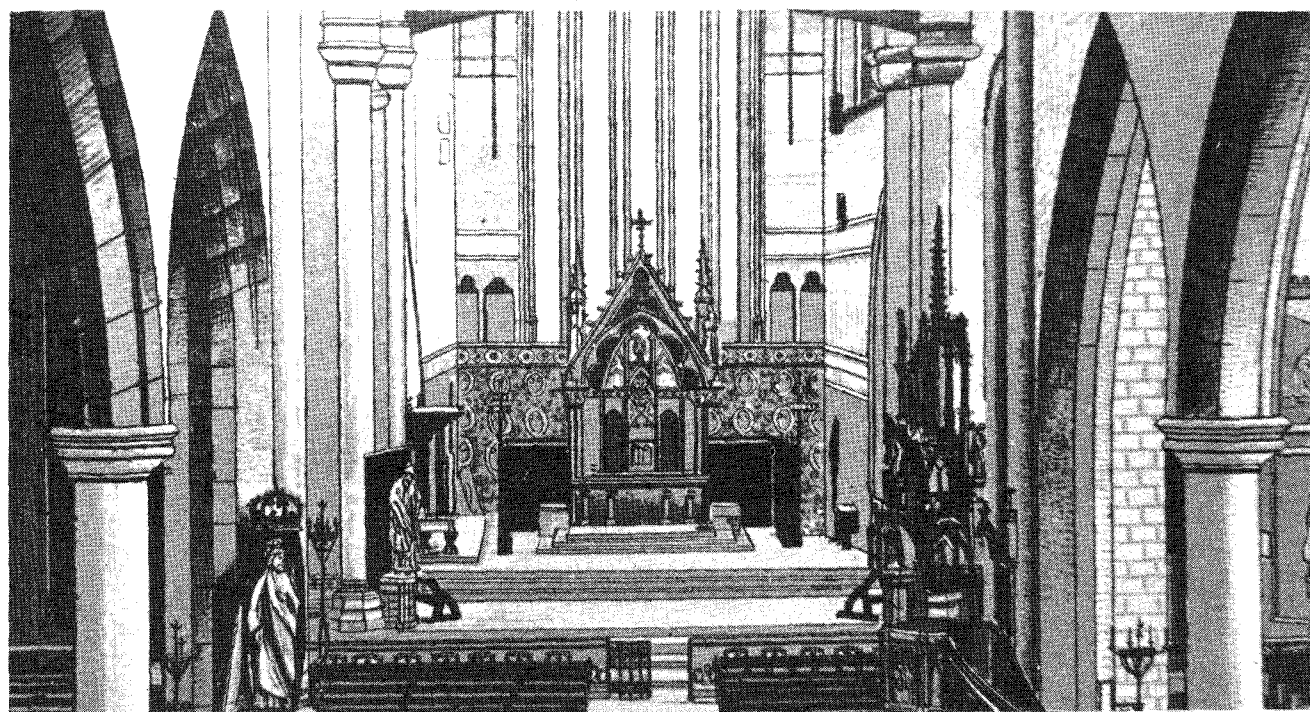
'Margaret Mary Thornhill', said his lordship.

Aunt Mary got on like a house on fire, as they say, with men. I say this of her with perfect ease, and shall have no more to say of it. It was an innocent power, a grace which life in office required her to use without knowledge that she did so, and which was nowhere touched or stained by sexual idea. She was beautiful; she was witty in a simple fashion; certainly she was quick in the uptake, and whether she grew aware of this or not with experience I do not know but in ordinary commerce she understood men. Bishop, chaplain, gardner, embarrassed young doctor, pompous school inspector, visiting prelate, visiting schoolboy, lonely, mourning brother-in-law - Mary talked to any of them directly to their purpose. She could make men laugh, and want to go on talking to her.

I watched her much when I was a child, so I know what I mean about her.



Boru House, the birthplace of Kate O'Brien.



The high altar of St. John's Cathedral, c.1880.

She believed of course in prayer. She heard God's voice in all her days and nights; and it never occurred to her that character, sheer character, was doing for her always and in everything whatever she asked for at early Mass or at evening Benediction. Yet it is my belief that if by some imaginable accident Aunt Mary had woken up one morning to an absence of God, to discovering herself without that governing idea, and supposedly finding that her mind was empty of it and quite calmly blank instead of filled with the incontrovertible vision of his personal reality and attention to her prayers - it is my belief that such a black-out could have altered in nothing her isolatedly holy character. Her person was holy - God or no God - in that it was given to service of life. I think that in any society, Christian, pagan, rationalist, communist or what you will, she would have been as I knew her - naturally at ease in indifference to herself, and naturally at the service of others. And always, in any society, she would have been invulnerable, indifferent before the temptations of the flesh.

She had great charm, whether she knew that or not. And a boyish, mischievous manner - indeed, a spirit of mischief.

Such simplicity will bore sophisticated readers - yet, what they will find hard to believe is this, that were Aunt Mary by chance their hostess in the Presentation Parlour, for sherry or lunch or what you will, they would have found her their match in all moves of conversation - accepted and polite moves, I mean.

Certainly she was effective in the Parlour. When she entered it grew bright. She came in at speed, but her hurry was if on the rush of wings, for she was very graceful. Veils and rosary beads flying never brushed to disturb against anything. But that is a trick many nuns have, as also they have the secret of looking immaculate, and cool. Huge, floating encasements of starched linen, pleated and tight-fitting folds of dark cloth, leather girdles, heavy crucifixes swinging from polished rosaries of bead - in this armour they swirl about winter and summer, uniformly adjusted to weather and circumstances as if they walked naked, or as the women of India walk through London rain and slush, undisturbed in complicated saris of silk.

Aunt Mary, if she was an example of the well-groomed and easy kind of nun, was only one out of many I have observed throughout the world. One marvels at the accent of their un-made up faces, tightly bound in linen; at hands which seem massaged and manicured, yet most certainly are not; above all, the wonder is for the expanses of virgin linen, never limp, never stained - even as they dash and splash through our common life, as now so many, many of them do.

Let me recall Aunt Mary in the Parlour. Christmas Day would be a good occasion. It was our first ceremony on that day, our first worldly ceremony, that is. We had all been to eight o'clock Mass at our parish church, St. John's Cathedral. Father would have no going to midnight Mass. The riff-raff of the town was loose at that hour, he said, and he would not have his children meet it. And in the churches crowded with the poor and the dirty we might get fleas, or worse afflictions. Let him not be judged un-Christian for this - for he was not. He was only a clean-habited and affectionate man who wanted to keep us in good health and as long as possible unaware of violence and uproar in life. So instead of the fun and novelty of the midnight ceremonies we had the bleak morning rigours of ordinary Mass and Communion, fasting and frozen. The novelties were only the exquisite alto boy's voice in *Adeste Fideles* after the Consecration - and before the *Credo* there were the ten minutes of the Administrator's Christmas sermon. I have heard bad sermons all over the world, and I believe a good sermon to be the whitest of white blackbirds; I have listened only to two that I remember for merit. But for sheer agonizing badness, flatness, inexcusable platitudinous fatuity those Christmas sermons from the various head priests of St. John's Cathedral over my years of childhood and girlhood - and I was an attentive listener - take all the cakes and every imaginable biscuit. They were agonizing, that is all I can say. And some of those flinty, dead, unholy voices I can hear now this minute, as I write.

Well, God has forgiven the well-meaning men, if I have not. And afterwards there was breakfast - wonderful and picturesque and decorated breakfast, with candles lighted and frilled cold dishes on the sideboard, and wrapped-up presents heaped at every place - and a deep

sense of relief and benevolence.

Afterwards there came the campaign of the Parlour. On Christmas Day Aunts May and Fan held high reception for us from noon to three o'clock. And when Mary was in office, as Reverend Mother, as Mother Assistant or, again, as Reverend Mother, there was hardly question of our possession of the Large Parlour. (There were two lesser parlours - but neither was furnished with a piano). However, even in all the many years when we belonged to the party in power, so to speak, there were awkward possibilities of protocol; a Monsignor or even a travelling bishop might visit his aunt or his sister on such a day - and throw all our importance out of count; or some titled person might arrive and cause Sister Lucy, the portress, to lose her head. You never knew. So breakfast over, we younger ones were not given half enough time to brood over our presents; we had to be upstairs, changing into our newest and best, and setting off hours too early, 'to bag the Parlour'. This was Father's idea - and over such a matter this kindest of men was a tyrannical fustpot. So off we had to go, feeling fools, in dressed-up instalments, to take up our positions, much too soon for the aunts, in the Parlour.

Father himself, who took everything to do with Christmas with the most seriousness, would not leave the house until the post came. The sending of Christmas cards - and presents, may I add, for he was princely - but the sending of cards was only equalled in pleasurable seriousness for him by his reception of the cards and greetings of his friends - and of ours! (Useless to hope for a private message from anyone at Christmas. Father, in sheer pleasure, had to see and consider all that came to his house). So he waited, alone, for the postman - who arrived intoxicated before one o'clock, and very certainly did not leave our house without some further cheer. Then, and only then, Father would have himself driven to the convent, and come smiling and waving up the long garden - I can see him now - with a Gladstone bag. Our Christmas post, which would be publicly and ruthlessly opened, by him and Fan and Auntie Mick and Sister Bernardine, in the Parlour - and thoroughly discussed and disputed and assessed, every silliest card of it.

'My old friend, William Hill - a nice card really - but I've known William choose better -'

Father, through his business and his friendliness, had many friends in England as well as in Ireland. He also chose a very handsome traditional horsey card for himself, had a great many of them engraved, and sent them punctually to such old friends as William Hill. I think that it was with this especial old friend that the comedy persisted for years of the exchange between them, besides cards, of a Limerick ham and a Stilton cheese. Now most people can eat ham - we must hope Mr. Hill could - but Father could not stand cheese in any form, at any time. And as for Stilton! I always remember the amused groans at the arrival of this handsome Christmas present. What I cannot remember is what was done with the splendid Stilton.

However, back to the cards; back to the Parlour. A large, square Georgian room, with two fine broad windows facing each other, giving on to the visitor's garden, two doors facing each other, one from the hall, the other through which the nuns came to us but beyond which we might not travel. A handsome Georgian fireplace. A tinny little piano. A number of comfortable but severe Victorian chairs. Plants in brass pots. Two portraits of two bishops of Limerick on the walls. (The Bishop of Limerick was always, *ex officio*, the governor of any Presentation house). Some prints and engravings of religious subjects from old masters. A highly polished floor. A rep-covered Victorian sofa. A central table to which, on Christmas Day and other days, many kinds of refreshment were borne by Sister Lucy and Sister Philomena.

A very pleasant parlour. But on Christmas Day one could not see it very well, because by one o'clock it was thronged. Nine of us, Katty's children, for a start, ranging - let us take a date at random - from twenty years to five. That means that Mother - Katty - is more than five years dead, and that her name can at least be spoken without instant tears, between the elders. Nine of us fidgeting around; Father on the sofa with his Gladstone bag; Fan safely planted near him, between him and the window, cushioned, shawled and happy, as eager as dear



The Presentation Convent and grounds.

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The Presentation Parlour.

Tom about the Christmas post in the opened bag. Auntie Mick, who will not stay long, across the window from Fan, upright and elegant, talking to Mother Liguori, and dealing very firmly with Gerard, the youngest of us whom she detests and who seems to love annoying her. He pulls and teases now at her exquisitely rolled and delicate silk umbrella; his fingers are chocolate-stained. But with Father so near she will not give him the brutal slap and insult that he would get on her own ground.

Music Ho! The little piano is overworked on Christmas Day. Our sister Clare, a teenager, is unable to bear the out-of-tuneness of it. She is a natural musician, and has absolute pitch. However, on Christmas Day she tries to control her impatience. Most of the family can sing, and if they can, today they must do so for the nuns.

Now, the funny thing is that, like our father who had a sweet, light tenor voice, most of our family could sing in tune, and with sufficient volume and taste to be bearable performers. But two, Clare and Gerard, had in fact musical and singing talents of distinction. In the general Christmas parade for the aunts, however, there was no differentiation, and we all performed in some way, God help us, and as we were Katty's children we were all marvellous.

So the Christmas Day concert, while Father smiled and nodded and went on through the post - everyone's post; while this priest and that young nun peeped in and asked Reverend Mother (Aunt Mary) if they might listen awhile to all the wonderful talent of her nieces and nephews - until at last the Bishop of Limerick, in a lesser parlour waiting for Aunt Mary, was shown brilliantly in - and brilliant he was and looked, Edward Thomas O'Dwyer - so the concert went on. Broken only by applause, and by the episcopal entrance. Father, who loved Bishops and Princes of the Church - only imaginatively and with no experience of them - was delighted to have

Aunt Mary place the deaf prelate beside him. He knew him well, and mounted him. Bishop O'Dwyer, who would allow none of his priests to hunt, was a great horseman.

So there they sat, shouting at each other. Bishop O'Dwyer shouted high and shrill anyway, and Father's only attack on the deaf - in this case useless - was to bellow.

And as they bellowed my sister Clare, persuaded by some gentle nuns near the piano, began to sing...

She sang 'At the mid hour of night...' Father heard her when she began, and stopped shouting. The Bishop, glad enough no doubt to end an interchange he had not head nor tail to, subsided into some note-taking, with a gold pencil on the back of an envelope. So I can hear the young, sad voice now, overcoming us all. She was already full contralto. She had had lessons from a local musician, but I think they meant nothing to Clare. I always thought, as I listened to her singing, that she was self-taught. She sang out of some knowledge that no Limerick teacher gave her. She sang, as few singers do, like a musician. She sang out of the centre of music. Often when we were young she sang ridiculous songs, but she never sang ridiculously. And that musicianship was her own - she did not learn it from any of her Limerick teachers.

'At the mid hour of night...' The young, rich voice, its purity seeming to contradict the great sorrow of the theme, still insisted that it knew what it sang. I think that Father, some Christmas card in his fidgety hand, could hardly bear the desolate and ghostly song - and yet he loved it.

Aunt Mary would break it up gently, patting Clare's shoulder, and asking her to play "The West's Awake" for Jack to sing, or "The Battle-Eve of the Irish Brigade".

'We must have something lively on Christmas Day', she would say. But Fan's tears fell faster for these songs than for '... when stars are weeping...' the long line of

which bored her a little - whereas she was a patriot always before the first shout; and 'Hurrah! Let England quake!' was very much her idea, even on Christmas Day and from her enclosed convent.

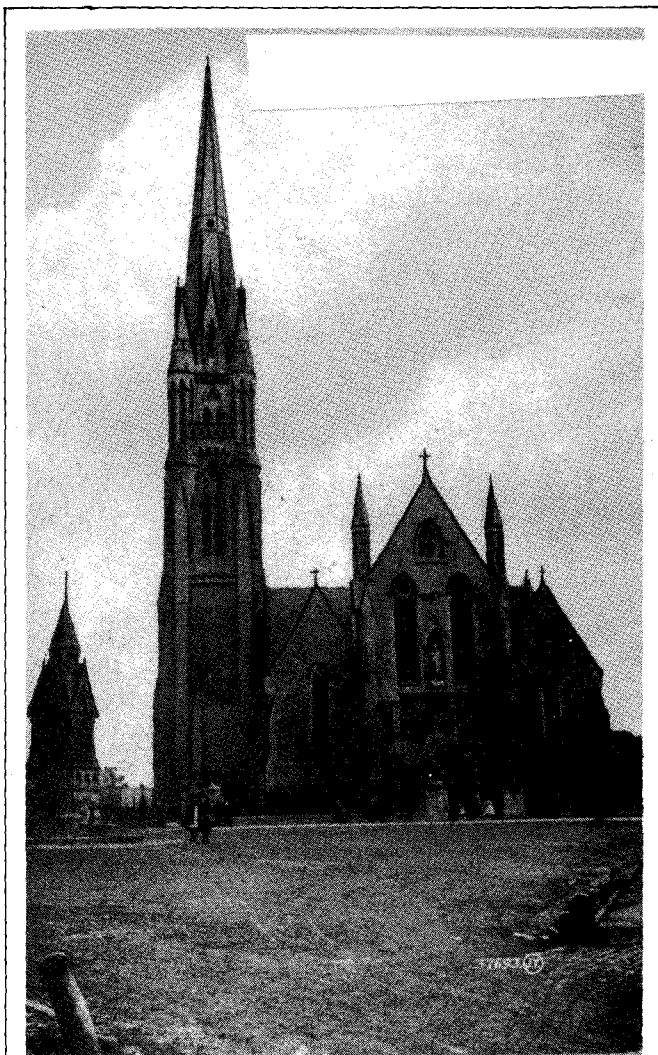
The Bishop rose and we with him, dropping all on one knee for his blessing - and a minute later one could watch him pacing down the garden, silky, silver hair blowing, pink hand cupping his good ear as he conversed with Aunt Mary, this Reverend Mother whom he admired extremely. His carriage horses champing, and even if the wind was cold he would linger with this nun - and hear what she said. And autocrat mostly disliked by his priests, a man of iron principle and courage as he was to prove in political troubles yet ahead, and one who expected to be listened to and obeyed, he often listened and often, I think, without knowing it obeyed when this young nun, his mere subaltern, spoke. It was known, and he always made clear, that he thought highly of her powers in office. But he was a man with an unexpected regard for the brains of women. He proved that in his long liking for the society of two unusually brainy nuns of Laurel Hill Convent, in Limerick. I was educated there, and I know how rarely intelligent were those two Latinists, Mother Lelia and Mother Thecla - and I know too how he liked to visit them, to tackle them about Latin, about the revival of Irish, about Irish history and Ireland's future. His twanging, unpleasantly pitched voice was nevertheless clear and cultivated, and we could hear him from far off if it pleased him to walk into our garden classroom of an afternoon. Then he would take Horace out of Mother Thecla's hand, and singing out the Ode would turn mockingly on me or on Nellie Dundon or whomsoever, for a lightning scan. No use being scared; the thing was to make a stab at the lines - and he never mocked, always bent his good ear down attentively. Then after a few minutes he would slam the book shut, wave dismissal at us, and take Mother Thecla off into the garden in loud, earnest argument, often talking Latin to her, to our deep edification.

Aunt Mary had no Latin, but she had wits and qualities sought and too often missed among his fellow creatures. When he died his chaplain gave her, as a souvenir, a slim, shallow lacquered box - a useful and pleasant desk box, for pencils, sealing-wax, etc. And when she in her turn died, Fan gave it to me, because she knew that I agreed with Aunt Mary in admiring our difficult bishop, Edward Thomas of Limerick.

'Mary would like you to have it, pet. It was the Bishop's scholar-box'.

Soon Auntie Mick would leave, having sipped a glass of port, eaten several chocolates and two very large crystallized fruits - all under pressure - and having run a quick eye over as many as possible of the Christmas cards, although Father enjoyed tricking her about them. She had brought no presents to the Convent - which everyone felt was as well, because her presents to us had been of their usual embarrassing meanness. But to Aunt Mary, embracing her at her departure she said, ironically smiling at the candy boxes and fruit baskets which we had brought and were rapidly stripping - 'I brought no worldly offerings, Mary, having a true respect for holy earth. But I hope my flowers in the Crib will speak for me'.

Her flower-pots, chrysanthemums, cyclamens, brought her gardener on Christmas Eve, were indeed wonderful; but they were only lent, and the convent had plenty of its own. And anyway, she always gave the most and the best of her greenhouses to the Jesuits. We all knew this in the presence of nuns who were not of the family, and of us winked at each other. However when she went away 'In any case, Mick as you know will be generous as always to the convent at New Year...' Father did wink, neatly, at Fan, who got the giggles. However they



St. John's Cathedral and the Fountain, c.1910.

were behind Auntie Mick, who made a stately exit, and was escorted from the parlour and down the garden by some anxiously polite young nun.

With her gone and the Bishop, the pace of feast-day quickened in the parlour. Blushing novices slipped in to wish happy Christmas to Reverend Mother's 'lovely family', and with any luck to hear May, the eldest of us, sing 'The Snowy-Breasted Pearl', looking the while like the heroine of her song; or Nance recite 'O'Rourke's Request' brilliantly; or Father Thornhill, our handsome heavy cousin, oblige with a great long roar of 'Dark Rosaleen' (I had also to make a fair fool of myself, for I was an accomplished reciter, and I think, looking back, that unless someone had upset me beforehand, I enjoyed my own ghastly performances - of 'Only Daisies', or something). Anyway I do believe those nuns enjoyed us all; the five boys were good at entertainment; they could sing - except Michael; they could do little bits from school plays; Tom could recite 'Eugene Aram'; they could conjure; Father could juggle oranges or apples - and he could sing.

But so could some of the vain, shy, visiting curates - and so could Sister Bernardine. Thus, the programme was crowded. However, enraptured or not, people talked and moved about through performances - and ate Turkish delight too if it suited them, and drank port. So the strain was light.

And Aunt Mary, Reverend Mother, governed all.