

“the door was rapped again, & this time the biggest boy hearing the shuffle of feet in the hallway, edged away from the door. The door was slowly opened, & before they could see her they chorused out; “could you please give us something for the bonfire?” she smiled at them & the smile drew their confidence, & they all crowded closer, each pleading with her to give them something.

“all right,” she said. “go round to the back-door & I’ll give you something.”

They moved round dubiously. “maybe it’s a bucket of water she’ll throw round us!” the biggest said; & they all laughed..a laugh that was strange & low-pitched.

They heard the stiff bolt of the back-door scringing as she levered it back.

“there..would that be of any use for your bonfire?” she said, pointing to a black sofa that was mottled with mildew & propped up with bricks to support a missing leg.

They buzzed round it where it lay under a sideless shelter, & in a few minutes had it hauled through the door & out to the gable end where they turned it over to examine it. Two coils of spring were bursting through the rust-stained sacking & a boy ripped them out, tied them to his feet with string & began to walk round, shouting; “the latest in stilts boys! A walking jack-in-the-box!”

“aw, give us a pair,” the young ones whined as the stuffing & springs were torn out of the sofa by the bigger boys. It was then that a half-crown jingled on the ground & one boy pounced on it. “finders keepers!” he said & tried to put it into his pocket.

“no you won’t”

“it’s mine. I found it. I seen it first.”

“it’s the owl woman’s,” they shouted, balked into honesty.

“come on & we’ll give it back to her,” the leader shouted.

“that’s right! that’s fair! Give it back to her!” they all chanted except the one who held the coin in his fist.

“O, all right,” he agreed dolefully, & they threw their caps in the air & went back with him to the old woman. They told her they found a half-crown in the lining of the sofa.

“are you sure it’s not your own?” she said.

“naw, where’d we get a half-crown?”

She took the silver coin in her hand, turned it over, & stared at a small hole near the rim. She went out with them to the old sofa & they pointed to the exact place where the coin had fallen. For a moment she stood without speaking and the boy who had the springs tied to his feet, disengaged them shyly, fearful that he had done something that had annoyed her.

“keep the half-crown & buy sweets for yourselves,” she said quietly. They gave a cheer of delight, hoisted the sofa on their shoulders like a coffin & marched off singing “the boys of Wexford”.

As she stared after them a long sigh broke from her. She was trembling & she went into the house & sat near the fire in the kitchen. She gripped the arms of the rocking chair to steady herself, & over & over again she said aloud; “calm yourself! calm yourself!” for her mind was leaping back to a night, fifteen years ago, when her only son went to that door, never to come back. Where he went to she didn’t know, & whether he was alive or dead she might never know. She had grown tired of watching for the postman, and though letters came regularly from her two married daughters, the letter she prayed for never came.

Her tears flowed freely..tears of remorse & of baffled pity. One thing she now knew; she knew it now..her son had not lied when he swore he didn't steal his sister's half-crown. It was good to know that, though her home was broken on account of it & she was alone & had nobody to tell it to.

She shrugged her shoulders & poked up the fire. She could believe him now; believe him with all her heart & without forcing herself to believe. And if only he'd step into the kitchen this very moment, she'd go down on her knees & ask his forgiveness.

She sighed, put a hand to her forehead, & spoke aloud to herself; "ah, son, wherever you are this day, be you alive or dead, I believe you. You didn't steal the half-crown. It was lying in the sofa all these years. That's where it was..in the old sofa!" she swayed to & fro, & the rocking chair creaked under her weight.

God in Heaven, she never could forget that night he quarrelled with her & left the house. More than anything else she thought about it. And not a morning past and not an evening passed but she prayed with all her might that he'd come back.