

A Touch of Genius

I MET Danny O'Donnell in the main street of Ballyross at about eight o'clock on that winter evening. At the best of times Danny was a miserable, half-starved looking oddity who owned the skinniest, most woebegone example of an Irish terrier you ever clapped eyes on, and that evening, with a hint of snow in the air and the wind making a chimney of the narrow street, I found myself feeling sorry for him – a dangerous luxury so far as Danny is concerned, because he's the greatest toucher in Ireland, with an infallible instinct for any hint of softness in the heart of a likely client. I should explain, in case you might think me hardhearted, that everyone in Ballyross gave Danny food and clothes to try to improve him – but it never seemed to have any effect, good, bad or indifferent. Danny could eat five meals a day and still manage to look half famished.

"Where are you off to, Danny?" I asked him.

"Up to meet the bus," he said, "to see if I can raise the price of a pint."

In the matter of drink Danny had made a fine art of providing for himself. He was an old soldier, with an old soldier's perpetual thirst, who drank his way through his pension two days after he drew it and it was his habit, when he was broke, to try raising a few bob by meeting the bus at the top of the main street, and singing for the passengers during the half-hour wait. He always took the dog with him, knowing of course that the woebegone spectacle of the pair of them was enough to draw tears from a glass eye. It was alright in summer, but in winter I didn't fancy his chances and I said so.

"You'll be lucky if there's anybody at all to sing to," I said to him.

"I'll have to take that chance," Danny said. Then he

looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Unless, of course, you were feeling like saving me the trouble."

"I'll ramble up to the bus with you, Danny," I said to him. I'd stood him three free pints that week already and that was the limit I'd laid down for myself.

When we got as far as the bus Danny let an oath out of him and when I had a look for myself I saw why. The only people in it were an elderly gentleman and a youngster of about eight – his nephew, by the looks of things. Naturally, there was no sense at all in singing to a house as poor as that.

"You're bunched, Danny," I said.

"Don't be too sure," said Danny and off with him into the bus.

There was a cocky note in his voice that made me hang around to see what would happen, because I'll say this for Danny, he was a resourceful man, not easily put off the trail of free drink. I saw him talking to the elderly man and after a while the nephew and the gentleman got up and left. They went off in the direction of the village, while Danny followed at a distance. It appears he'd told the old man there was half an hour to kill and that the whiskey in Tim O'Leary's was as good a cure for frozen feet as anything devised by a benevolent providence.

"And where were you thinking of going yourself, Danny?" said I.

"Down to Tim's for a pint," said Danny, "what else."

He was as cocky as you please and I knew now that getting a pint had become a question of honour with him.

"And how much have you got?" said I.

"I've tuppence," Danny admitted.

"You won't get a pint for that," I reminded him.

"If I don't," said Danny, "I'll have a damn good try."

The upshot was I followed him into Tim's myself. I expected he'd have a go at what I called the dog trick and I was right. The dog was as cute as a christian and whenever a stranger came into Tim's it used to go over, plant its skinny chin on the stranger's lap and look up at

him with that adoring and trustful look that all dogs can conjure up when occasion demands it. Danny had it trained to this, of course, and he used to come over after a while and apologise at length for the dog's unmannerly behaviour. Nine times out of ten it led to a conversation and ended in the stranger asking Danny to have a drink. I fell for it myself on my first visit to Tim O'Leary's the previous summer, so I know what I'm talking about.

However, the elderly gentleman was in no mood for skinny animals. He was at the counter coaxing himself to a ball of malt and when the dog planted its chin on his knee he gave it a push with his hand that nearly dislocated its jaw. Danny called the dog to him with a great show of anger, gave it another wallop for good measure – to teach it manners, moryah, and then went over to the nephew, who was sitting at a table with the blank look on his face that all kids seem to wear when they're working their way through a packet of biscuits. I watched closely. Danny patted the nephew on the head and said in a loud voice that he was a fine little man. Then he started a rigmarole, asking what age he was, was he going to school, what book was he in – all that class of blarney, for about ten or twelve minutes. You could see the old uncle at the counter beginning to lap it up. Then Danny said the boy must have another packet of biscuits.

"How much is the biscuits?" he shouted over to Tim.

"What they always were – twopence," Tim shouted back. You could see Danny's antics had him feeling a bit impatient.

"Throw us over a packet," said Danny. Danny caught the biscuits and gave them to the nephew.

"A bird never flew on one wing, son," he said, "isn't that a fact now." The voice would put you in mind of Daddy Christmas.

The kid lit into the biscuits right away and Danny went up to pay for them.

"You shouldn't have done that," the old man said to him.

"Yerra – what's a packet of biscuits," said Danny, as though not taking much interest, with such a grand wave of his hand that you'd think he was the factory that made them.

"Were you going to have a drink?" asked the old man.

"I was thinking of it," said Danny.

"Just a moment, then," said the old man. He rooted in his pocket, slapped a half crown on the counter and said, "You'll have this one on me."

Danny looked surprised.

"Indeed then and I won't," he said, firmly.

"I insist," the old gentleman said, and I don't think I ever saw a man so anxious for the honour of standing another man a drink. It was the packet of biscuits that had done the trick, of course, I could see that.

"What will it be?" the old man insisted.

Danny hesitated beautifully. Then, with the look of a man who is only doing it to be agreeable, he gave in.

"I'll have a pint, so," he said.

When he was raising it to his lips he had a look over his shoulder at me, to see how I was taking it, I suppose, and I raised my glass with his.

"You're the greatest chancer in Ireland," I told him, when the old gentleman and the nephew had left.

"I'd want to be," said Danny, with such a hard look at me that I found myself breaking my rule and buying him another.