

# Daniel O'Keefe and Jo

## *A Story*

### *Bluebell Stewart Phillips*

**G**RANDMAMA O'Keefe was eye to eye with me when I was twelve and she was seventy-five, and the top of her head reached barely to Grandpa O'Keefe's heart. She was his third wife, and when I was twelve they had been married fifty years.

Grandpa kept enormous pictures of all three wives in the dining-room and meals were eaten under the warm brown eyes of Grandma Molly; the cold hazel regard of Grandma Janet; and the brilliant blue haze of Grandmama on the wall as a young wife, and Grandmama as I knew her, sitting at the table listening to Grandpa recount the deeds of his youth. When I was there for supper, he would bend his head, say the good protestant grace he thought the Lord would find most acceptable, twirl his fine moustaches that still showed stubbornly red through the grey befitting his eighty-seven years, and boom in the large Irish voice that age could never conquer:

"Foine lookin' women, all of 'em, Davey me lad, but none of them a patch on my Jo. If you want a good wife, marry a French girl."

And Grandmama would chide him gently, "Now Dan, now Dan. They were all of them good women—p'raps too good for you." She had just a breath of a French accent that I found very intriguing; I was always more than half in love with her, and of course I loved her dearly as well. My happiest days were spent with Grandpa and Grandmama O'Keefe.

I loved to hear about Grandpa's wives—and even when I had heard the stories so often I knew them from memory, my interest in them never flagged, and I never sat down to the table without the hope that the old man would begin, waving a fork tipped with a hearty portion of potato in the direction of his defunct first spouse.

"Now me first, Molly—ah, there was a broth of a girl. Such curves she had, and all in the right places, and wicked black eyes that fair shot lightning." Grandpa would smack his lips appreciatively. "I'd known her since she was a kid, but the day of me older sister's weddin' Molly and I went skylarkin in the wee copse—"

"Dan! Dan! Remember Davey is but a baby!" Grandmama would remonstrate and Grandpa would twirl his moustaches and tip me a wink.

"Well," he would say, "I was scarce out of diapers before the girls knew which way to run when I was about, but lads aren't what they used to be. Why, I wasn't above eighteen when Molly an' I were wed. Many a good row we had after marriage before she passed away—God rest her soul. 'Twas in childbirth she died, when yer Uncle Rathwell was born, Davey. I'll bet the angels had the devil's own toime afther she arrived in heaven." And Grandpa would chuckle: then he would doff his head in the direction of Mrs. O'Keefe number two, deceased. "And then there was Janet. What a woman! There was no dallying in hayfields or

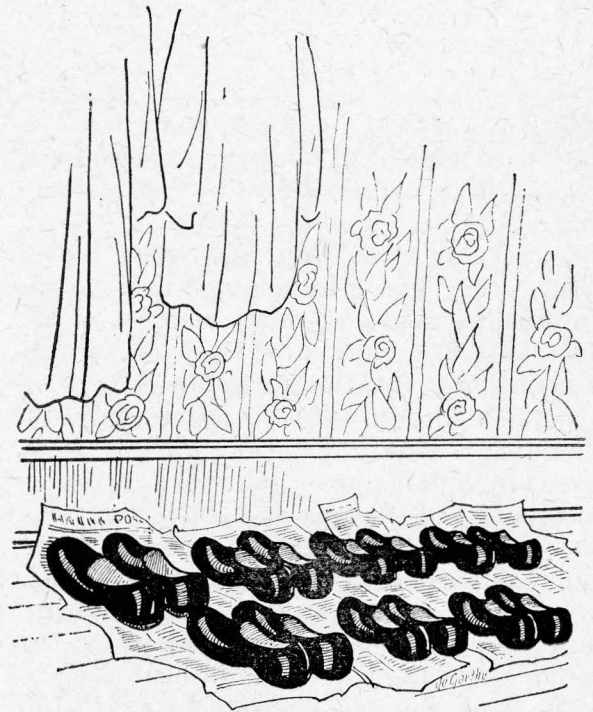
opses with her. A man said please before he kissed Janet. Not that she wasn't a likely lookin' woman, tall like a young willow she was, and slim—and hard!" Grandpa would look up at Grandma Janet again. "'Twas along of Janet's savin' ways that we managed to come to Canada. Soul av' me body, but she would wangle the very last penny out of me pocket. She'd stand in the parlour and she'd say, "Danny—where is that shillin' left over from the money you had this afternoon?" And I'd have to fork out every last farthin' of it. When she said "Danny", 'tweren't soft like when your Grandmama says it, Davey boy." And he would look at Grandmama, his dark blue eyes shining with a tenderness that made her shake her head at him admonishingly.

"Janet was a good wife, Dan. A ver' good wife to you and a ver' good mother to your children," she would say.

**N**EXT would come the story of Grandma Janet's dying, and I would look up at the commanding face in the picture, the fine forehead, the slim black eyebrows, the large hazel eyes that sometimes made me look down to see if my hands were clean and I would try to piece her dying with her living.

"Janet was a fine, proud woman," Grandpa would reminisce, "but not comfortable to live with. There was no smokin' in the house with Janet," and he would tap his pocket where his smelly pipe reposed, lovingly. "No smokin', no drinkin', no carelessness. I can min, yet, comin' in of a winter evenin' and the first words I'd hear would be, 'Did you take off yer rubbers, Daniel O'Keefe, or are ye splatterin' the floor with wet feet?' And along the hall, on newspapers, would be sivin little pairs of rubbers; Rathwell's, Peggy's, Moira's, Shawn's, Mike's, Kathleen's and Patrick's." He would count the names off on his old fingers, and I could see the row of shoes standing forlornly in the hall while the children padded about quietly, making neither noise nor dirt. "'Twas her need to be clean that brought about her death—may her soul rest in pace," added he, piously. "She

spring-cleaned in April, with no bendin' the knee to the weather. Spring come late, or spring come early, she cleaned. The year she died the spring was late—snow as high as Shawn's head and the wind enough to knock a man's breath back into his gullet." And Grandpa would look at me with proud eyes, "Weather was weather in those days, Davey. The store was two miles from the house, and what with sivin kids to feed and clothe there was no money for me to keep horses, so I walked. 'Twas a long cold walk, but I enjoyed it: made me feel good."



**I** COULD picture him, six-foot-two of arrogant, swaggering manhood swathing the distance like one of the railway engines I loved to watch, leaving a cloud of white behind him as his breath cut the winter air.

"But what about Grandma Janet?" I would ask, never weary of the past.

"Aye, Janet. Cleanliness is next to Godliness she always said. And she proved it."

"Now Dan, tha's not ver' kind," Grandmama would reprove him, helping him to a huge piece of pie, for age never dulled his splendid appetite. "I am sure that many times I would 'ave like to 'ave her fastidiousness."

"You suit me, Jo," Grandpa would boom. "Can you imagine, Davey, what that foolish Janet did?"

I would shake my head no, though I could have told him as readily as I could tell him my name.

"She did her spring-cleanin' in spite of the winter weather: batin' the carpets outside, washin' windows. And she caught a cold. Not a little cold, but a heavy one that dragged on her like a chain. She was a stubborn woman, Davey. Not like Jo, who likes to have her own way, but cold stubborn. I said to her she'd best cut off the cleanin' a bit and go to bed, but she just looked at me out of her hazel eyes and said, 'Maybe you're content to live in filth Daniel O'Keefe, but I like a clean house and a clean house I will have.' She did, but whin everything was shinin she collapsed in the parlour. I carried her up to bed, called the doctor. But 'twas too late, so we called in the parson." Grandpa would shake his head dolefully. "He'd baptised all the babies and knew us well, but whin he offered her the blessed sacrament she just turned her head away and the big tears went coursin' down her cheeks. She was never one to cry, so I took one of her hands in mine and said, 'Janet darlin', tell Dan why it is ye're refusin' the communion—and now especially. With that she looked up at me and says, 'Dan, in my drawer's a wee box, a wee silver box. Give it me.' Do you know what was in that bit box, Davey boy?" Grandpa would ask me, his voice still full of the wonder of it, and I would shake my head, waiting for the answer I knew as well as he. "'Twas a bit of airth from the oulde counthry that she had brought with her and kept hidden all these years."

I WOULD look up at the proud, dark head and try to picture it bowed over a few grains of sand, while Grandpa would continue, 'I know I can't lie under the grass in Ireland, Dan,' Janet told me, Davey, 'but I'll sleep easier if ye'll just sprinkle my breast with this bit of dust from home.' And I promised her: and the next day she died. And I did as she wished, Davey

boy. I sprinkled the dust right over the heart that had hungered for home." Grandpa would sigh; pause; shake his head. "She'd two thousand insurance I never even knew about. She was a strange, savin' woman, was Janet."

The story of Grandma' Janet's dying always affected Grandmama, whose soft blue eyes would fill with shadows.

"You know, Davey, sometime' it make' me feel ver' sad, thinking of poor, lonely Janet," she would say, and look up at the pictures of her predecessors. Grandmama, as I, had respect, commiseration perhaps, for Grandma Janet, but we both had a real affection for Grandma Molly whose luxuriant brown curls fell in such profusion around smooth white shoulders, whose hands were folded so primly about a bouquet of violets, but whose warm brown eyes and soft mouth with its hint of a smile spoke of rich life.

## II

ONCE, when my mother was ill, I spent almost a year with my grandparents.

One of my favourite times during that happy period was early in the morning when I would go down to the kitchen and find Grandmama in the blue wrapper that matched her eyes, her hair that never lost its soft brown colour hanging over her shoulders in pigtails, and tied with a bit of blue ribbon. We would sit together, drinking strong coffee sweetened with two or three spoonfuls of sugar, a treat I was not permitted elsewhere; conversing in conspiratorial whispers because Grandpa, upstairs, slept so soundly his snores rumbled down the stairs and into the kitchen, admonishing us to respect his slumbers.

We would sit together, with our steaming cups on the open oven door, I in Grandpa's arm chair with my bare feet pulled up under my striped nightgown, my knees to my chin.

"Tell me about meeting Grandpa, Grandmama," I would beg. The delicate face with its soft pink skin would break into a maze of little wrinkles.



"Well, my father was not a rich man," she would begin, "so it is necessaire for me to go to work. There is not much for young ladies to do in those days, eh? So—I think I can work in a store, and I go down to a ver' fine one called O'Keefe's. There I see your Grandpa, Davey—oh he was such a big fellow, with hair red *comme un* fire and shoulders like a mountain. He look' at me and he roared—you know how your Grandpa roars always when he talks, eh? 'What can I do for you, Miss?' he cried.

"I should like to work here as a sales-lady," I answered.

"Well, then, if ye can see over the counter that might be a good thing," he says and laughs," said Grandmama, trying to imitate Grandpa's brogue, which was part of the delight of hearing her tell it. "I was ver' angry, Davey," she would continue, flashing her eyes as she had fifty years before, "and I drew myself up and said, 'Monsieur, I am not accustomed to ridicule, me,' and I started to walk away, but he yelled at me to go back—which I did."

"What a little spitfire you are, and not packaged any bigger'n Shawn," your Grandpa said to me, Davey, and I asked him, ver' quick, 'Who is Shawn?' And your Grandpa answered, 'Shawn. He's my boy—not much more'n twelve, but he

tops you.' Grandmama would laugh. "You know, Davey, I think he cannot be telling the truth, for he looks so young, and I tell him so. 'Well,' he tells me, 'an' I have one as near to eighteen as doesn't matter, and six others besides.'

"Then your wife needs a servant more than you require help in this emporium," I said—and that was true, eh, Davey?" And Grandmama would chuckle deliciously before continuing with the story.

"Then your Grandpa scratched his head and looked me up and down. 'Me wife is dead,' he said, 'and sure now, the Lord must've sent you this foine mornin' and put the words of wisdom into your mouth. For I need someone to keep me youngsters in order.' And he looked troubled, Davey, and sighed. 'Will you just come and look at my youngsters?' he asked me, and I went." Grandmama would smile, as she told me, and I could just imagine the big man taking her by the elbow and whisking her along the streets, from the store to the house.

"And what a house, Davey! There in the dining-room was your Grandma Janet looking down on dirt that must have made her poor heart very sorry. The children were screaming and a big girl with red hair was trying to make things tidy and stop some of the noise. We stood in the doorway, your Grandpa and I, and he screamed, 'Shut up, every dratted one av ye,' and there was silence. One little fellow—*pauvre enfant*—came over and held up his hand. It had been cut. He came right up to me and held it up and said, 'It hoits.' 'That's Patrick,' said your Grandpa. 'Will you stay?' Well, Davey—that was the question, eh? I did not know, so I answered that he did not know even my name, so he demands it. 'I am Mademoiselle Josephine Lamontaigne,' I tell him, 'but I do not know your name, either, Monsieur,' upon which he is annoyed, Davey, and says, 'I'm Daniel O'Keefe, an' I thought my name was known to all. Now—will you stay?' *Bien*, what shall I do? There is that wee Patrick holding onto my skirts and all the other children looking at me, so at last I say, "For *aujourd'hui*—today—only: but

you must send me a ton of soap from your store and not return yourself until tonight. By then supper will be ready, and we will have this place so one can walk in it."

**H**E went out—just like that—not one more word, and lef' me with all those children. They looked at me—I looked at them. I cannot think of one thing to say, and I wonder if maybe I am crazee. Then the little Patrick—he began to cry, so I pick him up and he put his face in my neck—it was burning and I feared he was *malade*, so I ask the big girl with red hair to show me where is his bed. What a sight!" And Grandmama would raise her hands in horror at the memory. "But those were good children, Davey. Peggy, she big one, kept watching me. All of sudden she cried out, 'Come on, kids,—this one looks all right. Let's help her.'

"When your Grandpa came home—what a difference! He just took one look. 'Your're hired,' he said, but I answered him ver' sharply that my parents would not permit me to work as a servant, and that besides he was so young there would be a big scandal.

"There's one way to stop that,' he said, and looked at me, ver' careful; and then nodded his head. 'Why aren't you married?' he asked me. Well, Davey—he asked so quick I have not time to think of a reason so I tell him the truth. 'Because I have not met a man I like enough,' I say. 'Well—you've met one now!' he answered. Well! I was mad—but not too much so!" And Grandmama would smile, half to me and half to an old memory. "When we sat down to supper, everybody clean and nobody crying, your Grandpa look' ver' happy. Peggy made me sit in the mother's place, and the table was well filled. Do you know what your Grandpa said, that ver' first night, Davey?"

I knew: of course I knew, but I liked to hear her tell it, her eyes shining with the memory of Grandpa at thirty-six or so, young and handsome and vital, so I shook my head.

"He looked at me and at the table and said, 'I can see where we're goin' to have

to put in some new boards.' Oh, the conceit of the man! But that is just what we did have to do, Davey," said Grandmama, "for we were married at the end of the week, and four more children came to sit at the table: your daddy, John, Mary and little Jo." And Grandmama would laugh happily.

**B**Y the time we got that far in the story the light from outside would drown the lamp-light in the kitchen; the snores from upstairs would become the short snorts and groans that spoke of Grandpa's waking, so Grandmama would brew the tea, since Grandpa would not drink coffee, and I would scuttle upstairs to watch the wonder of Grandpa's coming to life.

Even at eighty-seven he looked very fierce to a boy of twelve: especially in the early morning with his bristling grey-red moustaches disarrayed and smeared fiercely against his cheeks, as if they were trying to meet in combat the heavy eyebrows that met above his hawk-like nose. He would thresh around in the bed a few times, emitting ferocious sounds, then he would sit up straight, his flannelette nightgown bunched around his waist, and he would stretch mightily. Then he would roar, "Jo! Where's my tea?" and Grandmama would just be coming up the stairs with the steaming cup in her hand. "Here it is, Danny. Stop your shouting." And he would protest loudly, "I'm not shoutin'. I'm just askin'." Grandmama would laugh, standing beside him in her pretty blue wrapper in the clear morning light. After a moment he would roar, as though she were a mile away, "Jo! Where's me pipe?" and she would shake her head and say, "But Dan, it is bad for you to smoke in bed." "Woman, give me me pipe!" Grandpa would demand, and Grandmama would get it for him, filling it, even lighting the match for him, and he would take a satisfying puff, swallow a mouthful of tea, and then straighten his whiskers. "That's foine, Jo! That's foine!" he would say. Sometimes he would see me and bellow at me to get in bed beside him, and I would crawl under the bedclothes, for I knew what

Grandpa's next move would be. "Jo. Bring me the Good Book."

WE must have looked odd, a tousle-headed twelve-year-old, snuggling against the fierce-looking old man whose pipe, ancient and smelly, was used to punctuate the rolling phrases of the Psalms or the beautiful poetry of Revelations, Grandpa's favourite portions of the Bible, while Grandmama would sit primly at the foot of the bed, holding the empty tea-cup and listening to the magic of Grandpa's voice.

I remember, once, during my year at Grandpa's, being told at school that smoking would stunt your growth, shorten your life and start one on the road to goodness' knows what iniquities. The next morning after the reading of the Scriptures I said to Grandpa, "You know, you should stop smoking: it does terrible things to you, and besides it'll kill you one day." How Grandpa laughed. "I've smoked since I was nine, Davey boy, and if it kills me yet, sure it's taken old devil tobacco almost a century to catch up to me: no matter." But when he caught me trying to smoke his pipe he took me by the ear and delivered a sound lecture on not smoking until I was eighteen. "Not for any reason, Davey boy, but that tobacco becomes the master, and 'tis best not to have a master so early." And then he said, "You know, Davey, usin' the things the Lord gave us never hurts us; only abusin' them."

### III

GRANDPA was a very religious man, and Sunday after Sunday we trailed down to church when I lived with him; Grandpa dignified in sober black, walking as straight at nearly ninety as a young soldier; Grandmama dainty in her favourite blue; me shined and brushed beyond recognition.

Grandpa was a Protestant, belonged to the Orange Order and still marched in the July parade. Each Sunday when we stood to say the Creed, and everyone repeated, "I believe in the holy catholic and apostolic church" Grandpa would protest in the

sight of the congregation and before the Lord, "I believe in the holy *protestant* and apostolic church." Strangers were inclined to stare at him, but he would scowl with such ferocious dignity that visitors would take a hurried look at their Prayer Books to see whether they, perhaps, had made a mistake!

FOR fifty years he tried to make Grandmama follow his example, but she withstood both shouts and blandishments with the stubbornness of the mild when a question of principle is involved. She never liked to hurt the feelings of even those who were quite at variance with her, but Grandpa could never be persuaded charity should be exercised toward those who differed with him—or from him. Our church was in the same neighbourhood as an enormous Roman Catholic edifice, and after service on Sunday we would invariably meet half a dozen black-gowned Roman priests: Grandpa's head, always held high, would reach higher, his aggressive chin would be out-thrust, his cane would jab the air as he sailed past the in-offensive men muttering "heretics" under his breath, but apparently oblivious to their existence. While Grandmama had almost to run to match his speed at this juncture, her blue eyes would be full of the sweetest kindness as she managed to nod a breathless greeting which was always returned with the utmost courtliness. After we had reached our own street and past all danger of meeting Grandpa's "Bete noirs" he would slow his speed to normal, shake his head and snort, "You did it again, Jo."

"I merely exchanged a Christian greeting," Grandmama would say quietly.

"Humph!" Grandpa would rumble.

THEN he would stop and poke me in the chest with a finger to emphasize his admonition. "Don't ever forget that ye're a good protestant, Davey boy. Never be content with half measures," and he would continue on his way home, singing belligerently under his breath, "Onward Christian Soldiers." About half-way through lunch he would look at Grandmama and say, "You're a good woman,

Jo," the closest he ever came to acknowledging the courage of her convictions.

#### IV

WHEN I was fifteen Grandmama took ill. All through their married life Grandpa had suffered from various ailments that turned him into a howling baby entirely dependent upon Grandmama. Did he but have a head cold, he would become a sniveling child demanding inordinate amounts of attention from the *petite* woman who ministered to his wants without a word of complaint. I can hear him howling, "I'm done for this time, Jo. The old man's finished," while Grandmama soothed him with her soft voice, "No Dan, you'll be all right tomorrow." Grandpa would groan in double force, and his voice would be tinged with an infinite, if rude, pathos as he moaned, "Woman, you don't know what it is to suffer. Me heart's thumpin' like to burst. I can feel the end approachin'." But within a day or two he would be hale and hearty as ever, boasting about his fine physique.

When Grandmama became ill, he was completely lost. He could not understand that she could lie quietly in bed, apparently careless of his needs. He sat in the bedroom beside her, his pipe unlighted in his hand because the doctor said Grandmama could not stand smoke, his Bible open on his lap, reading to her or just looking at her with pain in his eyes.

"Do you feel better, Jo?" he would ask her time after time, and she would smile at him and put out her hand to pat his clenched fist. "I'll be better tomorrow, Danny," she would answer. "*Demain.*"

But she wasn't. One tomorrow she slept with her hand in Grandpa's and didn't waken.

I was fifteen, but I shed tears unashamedly. I loved Grandmama more than anybody in the world, except perhaps Grandpa. I could not understand that he sat, stood, walked, without shedding a tear.

"Don't you want to cry, Grandpa?" I asked him as we drove behind the prancing black horses that brought us back from the cemetery. He just shook his head.

As we descended from the carriage in front of his house two Roman Catholic priests came by and Grandpa raised his hat as they touched theirs in unspoken sympathy: perhaps the old man could have paid no greater tribute to his wife.

Grandpa went into the house, walked straight upstairs and shut himself in the bedroom. Uncle Rathwell sent me up later on, for I was Grandpa's favourite. He was sitting beside the window, looking out unseeingly. On the table beside him lay his pipe, unlighted; and the Bible, closed.

Grandpa looked old and shrunken: his shoulders sagged and his moustaches drooped.

"Davey boy," he said, and put a hand on my head. I leaned against him and we stayed together for a long time, not talking; perhaps not even thinking; just feeling.

Presently Grandpa said, "I think I'd like to go to bed, Davey."

"Wouldn't you like to read, to me Grandpa," I said, touching the Bible, and picking up his pipe, "while you have a smoke?" He looked at me, and there was a world of sadness in his eyes.

"I think not, Davey," he said, and placed the pipe on top of the book that had been his constant companion. "I think not."

FOR almost three months he lingered, never moving from the big bed where he had slept with Grandmama for over a half a century. It hurt me like a physical pain to see him lying there, so quiet and apathetic, with no fight in him at all.

One evening I was sitting in the window watching the people passing to and fro in the street below, when Grandpa suddenly sat up in bed. His face was alight for the first time in three long months, and his voice rolled out, a shadow of its old fierceness. "Jo! Where's me pipe?" he cried. "I can't get up without me pipe!"

If angels are allowed to smoke, I know that Grandmama was waiting, just beyond the vision of my eyesight, shaking her head and remonstrating, softly, "Now Dan, now Dan," but with his pipe filled and a match poised for lighting.