

Chapter 8 – The Secret, July 1923



The next afternoon Mack led through the back gate, down way out onto the road; Mick followed in blissful anticipation. Mack's hand was bandaged, and every time Mick looked at it his very soul blushed for shame.

"You'll be disappointed, Mick," Mack warned him. "It's nothing exciting.

"Moths?"

"No."

"Blue-tongued lizard?"

Mack laughed and shook his head.

"Er - a new kind of flower near the old Quarry?"

"No"

"A - er - a new cave in the Quarry - one we've never been in?"

Laughing again, Mack shook his head. "You'd never guess. It's only old Mrs. Sullivan."

"Aw!" Mick's face grew two inches longer with disappointment. "What fun's in going there?"

"I don't go for fun," his brother answered, seriously.

"What d'you go for?"

"To help the Mission?"

"How can that help?"

"It helps - you'll see."

Old Mrs. Sullivan lived in a little cottage on the Old Quarry Road; she had lived there years and years and years. The Daly twins thought her the oldest woman in the world. But she wasn't really, you know. Why ever did Mack go to her old place? Mick wondered. And how could his going there help the Chinese Mission? Mick's steps grew slow and lagging. There was no surprise in the Expedition, after all; he might have known.

There was a small garden round the cottage, but it wore a sad, forlorn look, as little old gardens will when the little old ladies who loved them grow too feeble to tend them. But two flower-beds near the kitchen door showed signs of someone's care, and the vegetable bed was cool and fresh.

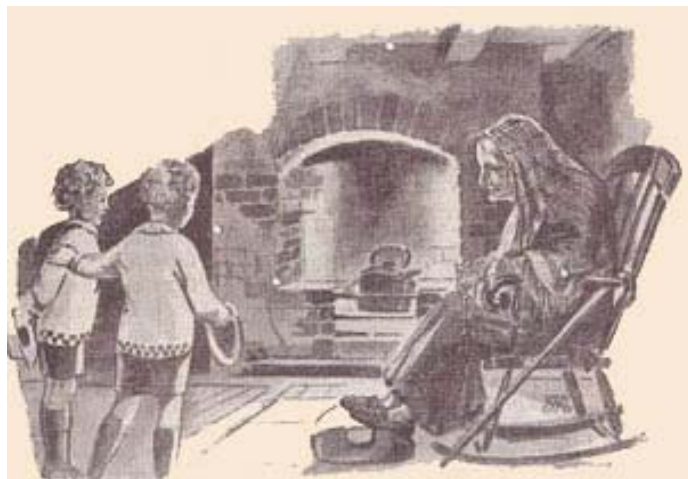
Mack knocked at the kitchen door. Mrs. Sullivan always said that the front of her house was at the back, and all callers knocked at the kitchen door.

"Come in, let ye," said a soft, old voice, and Mick followed Mack into a small, low kitchen. Mrs. Sullivan was sitting in a big chair near a dying fire; her rosary beads were in her fingers. She suffered greatly from rheumatism, and very rarely was she able to leave bed or chair to hobble round her little dwelling and look out sadly down the road. She spent her days praying and suffering.

"I've brought my brother to see you, Mrs. Sullivan - my twin brother, Mick."

Mick shook hands very bashfully, and thought Mack frightfully silly to waste his time on this poor old woman.

"A fine pair of boys you are, and your mother is the proud woman, I know. I had twin sons - little boys like you - long ago. But they grew tip and they went to the war - and got killed on me. I hope and pray there'll be no war when you are men."



"Oh!" Mick said, forgetting his shyness, "we're going to China when we're big. Mack is going to be a priest, and I'm going to be a doctor."

"Look at that now!" smiled the old woman. "I'll be long in Heaven before you are men, please God, and I'll pray for you both - Father Mack and Doctor Mick. It's a good, long remembering friend I'll be to you in Heaven."

Mack thanked her for this far - off promise of favour, and Mick looked awkwardly about. Why ever had Mack come?

Mack then, to Mick's intense surprise (and perhaps slight disgust), busied himself about the kitchen. He "washed up" the solitary cup that had held Mrs. Sullivan's tea at lunch time; he

swept the floor, peeled two large potatoes, and left them ready in a small saucepan. (Mick thought all this a girl's work and quite below him.) Mack carried in armfuls of wood and stacked it neatly beside the stove; he watered the two flower-beds and the one vegetablebed. He brought in a few white jonquils - the first to bloom in the garden - and put them in a glass of water on the table near the old lady's chair.

"Well, then, it's you are the comfort to me," sighed old Mrs. Sullivan, wistfully. "You reminded me of my own little Timmy. 'Twas he was the kind, thoughtful boy."

Mack wanted to put more wood on the fire. "I'm sure you'd like a cup of tea now. It's' after four. I could make it - if you'd let me boil the water. Wouldn't you like a cup of tea?"

"I would, then, but I cannot have you meddling with fires and kettles. If you got hurted I'd never forgive myself. Mrs. Rooney will look in soon, and she will hearten up the fire and make the tea. She comes in every evening, but she's late to-day, being at work, you see, poor soul."

Mack stood beside the table. There was a small cup, cracked and without a handle, on it, He looked in and put his fingers into something that rustled.

"May I count them now, please, Mrs. Sullivan?"

"Do, darling."

Mack tilted the cup and a number of brown beans spilled out on the table. "Oh, what a lot!" he cried, delightedly, and fell to counting them eagerly.

"That's beautiful, Mrs. Sullivan. I'll write the number and put it in the box."

Mick looked on, at a loss to know the meaning of this ceremony. On the mantel stood a white box of Mack's own making (Mick knew Mack's brand!); it was painted white and marked with a golden cross. Into it Mick slipped a small piece of paper, on which he had just written something.

Mack found various other "odd jobs" to do about the cottage, and when he could find no more (nor invent any) to occupy himself the two little boys said good-bye, promising to come the next afternoon. Mrs. Sullivan blessed them and promised to pray for them.

Outside, along the old Quarry Road, Mick trudged sulkily. "Is that secret? Is that where you've going every afternoon for weeks and weeks?"

Mack nodded.

"You are a silly! You're just like an old girl!"

Mack's sensitive face flushed, but he smiled. "I told you that you'd say it was silly -"

"So it is. Girl's work. Mary would do it - if you told her. Or Mother would let Kate come down. Boys don't want to be working round like that."

"This boy does," Mack said, stoutly.

"What for?"

"For China."

"For China! How can that help China?"

"Well," Mack explained, "Mrs. Sullivan, I am sure, is one of the best helpers of the Mission, and it was I got her to help."

"The best helper! - that poor old woman, who can't do anything and has no money."

"Didn't Mother tell you that money is not the best help? You said you wanted a rich friend to help you. Angie and Teddy have rich friends. I wanted a rich friend - and so I thought of Mrs. Sullivan."

"But she's poor - as poor as anything."

"I know, but her prayers are rich, She says Rosaries all day, Mick - I don't know how many. Some she offers for her children who are dead, some she offers for the souls who die each day, and the rest she says for China. So that she will not forget how many, she puts a bean in the cup for each Rosary she has said for the Mission, and then I count them and put them on a paper in her box on the mantelpiece. The box is not to be opened until she is dead. She says I can open it. She says I can offer the prayers for China to God from her. I'd rather that than money from Mr. Carney or the Doctor. She's in pain all day, and she offers her suffering for the Mission. So you see she is my rich friend. And then I help her in the house because - because" - Mack's face flamed red - "because I don't like. But I want to do something, something a bit hard, for the Mission. I said I'd tell you the secret. I'd much rather stay at home after school, or play with you and Shamie, or go collecting. But I thought that it would be a big thing, a hard thing, to help poor old Mrs. Sullivan."

Mick was speechless for a moment. He trudged on a few yards, and then he threw his arm around Mack's shoulders. "I'm sorry I said it was silly," he mumbled. "It isn't a bit silly. It's good. Gee! you are good, Macksie."

"Oh, no, I'm not," said humble little Mack. "But I want to something."

"You are good, and I'll go with you and help, too. And you are the best brother in the world, and I'll never get wild with you again, no matter what secrets you have."

"I'll never have another secret from you, Mick."

And so the breach was healed, and life at Dalys' went on its busy, happy way.

But the happiness was not to last long.