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The Ballad of the Twelve Marys

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# THE BALLAD OF THE TWELVE MARYS

*By SEUMAS O'KELLY*

The old hag hobbled on the floor  
Then drew the bolt back from the door,  
When twelve dark figures, Marys all,  
Young maidens wearing each a shawl,  
Made entry to the hovel dim  
With faces pale and halting limb.

They lit green rushes as the stroke  
Of twelve o'clock upon them broke,  
And each one then a place did take,  
Like mourners at a solemn wake,  
Bending above a shroud that hid  
A thing shaped like a coffin lid.

The agéd hag a strange rhyme said,  
Swaying about her ragged head;  
She beat her claws upon her breast,  
Calling a curse from east to west  
Upon the man of woman's womb  
Who wronged a maid now in that room.

She named each Mary, one by one,  
And when the twelve names all were done  
A silence fell upon the place  
And then was lifted up a face,  
A youthful face, reluctant, shy,  
That spoke a man's name with a sigh.

"A sheaf of corn lies in that bed,"  
The woman of the pishrogues said,  
"It sprang from seed in virgin earth  
And from the hour of favoured birth  
Was tended by the man that now  
May stricken be from heel to brow.

## THE BALLAD OF THE TWELVE MARYS

*"Twelve rushes we have burned to-night,  
Twelve curses now upon him light,  
Twelve Marys on their bended knees  
Twelve plagues do pray his limbs to seize,  
Twelve winds above his bones shall play  
And twelve sods on his head we'll lay."*

She wound the shroud about the corn  
And in the cold light of the morn  
A secret grave made on his lands  
And laid it down with trembling hands,  
While tears upon it, hot as fire,  
Fell from the eyes of Mary Dwyer.

"Now when the good corn buried here  
Rots with the progress of the year,  
So will the mortal days he tells  
Be numbered by our holy spells,  
And when it moulders in the clay  
Then will his soul have passed away."

Within the circuit of that time  
Hugh Cloran from his kiln of lime  
Was carried home by dark-faced men  
And women keening through the glen,  
While some told stories of a spell,  
Of how it came and how it fell.

Beating the path, her breast on fire,  
Was seen the form of Mary Dwyer;  
She threw the cloak back from her head,  
Her widening eyes upon the bed  
Where lay the stricken form of Hugh,  
His cheeks so white, his lips so blue.

Upon her arm she felt a touch,  
And turning round she saw a crutch  
Make signs across the empty air  
Above a crouching figure there:  
It was the hag of Evil Eye  
Who leered and made a meaning cry.

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"Hush, women, for his heart beats still,  
He may recover, by God's will,"  
A man of knowledge whispered low  
Who felt the pulse beat, fitful, slow;  
And from the house without her cloak  
The figure of the young girl broke.

With stumbling steps and eyes of flame  
Up to the secret grave she came,  
And delving in the yielding clay  
Like some wild thing she bored a way  
Until, still fresh within its shroud,  
She raised the sheaf and cried aloud.

She said: "The people now may give  
Great praises, for young Hugh will live,"  
Then joyous to his house she fled  
And standing there beside his bed  
Held up the sheaf of golden corn  
And looked upon the hag with scorn.

The eyelids of the stricken man  
Trembled, then slowly they began  
To show the orbs where living sight  
Grew 'customed to the dawning light,  
And raising up his head there broke  
A cry that of some terror spoke.

He stared at Mary Dwyer's young arm,  
His eyes now filled with wild alarm;  
A wind that whirled across the door  
Played swiftly on the corn she bore,  
And in his sight the sheaf was cast  
To shapes fantastic by the blast.

"My God, look at that grinning head,"  
The man now in delirium said,  
"Look at the ribs that naked rest  
Where once there burned a living breast,  
Behold the limbs that lately trod  
Behind the plough upon the sod.

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“O, Mary Dwyer, why do you stand  
Holding there in your trembling hand  
A skeleton from out the grave—  
May Christ my sinning soul now save,  
For in these bones I likeness see  
To my own shape and destiny.”

He fell back on the pillow white,  
And from his eyes there died all sight,  
While Mary Dwyer swooned by the bed  
And I have often heard it said  
That in the hag's low cackling moans  
Was heard the rattle of dead bones.