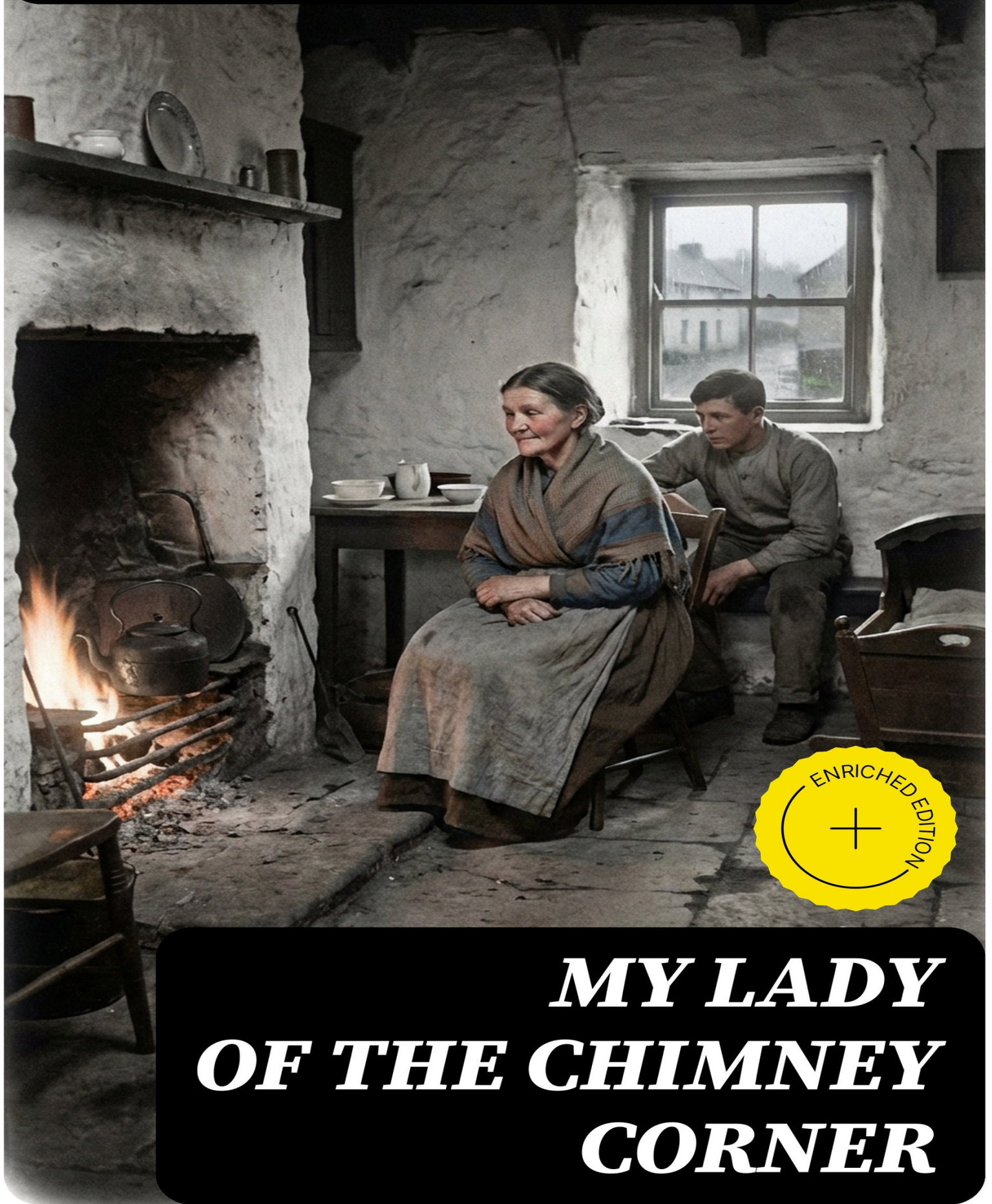
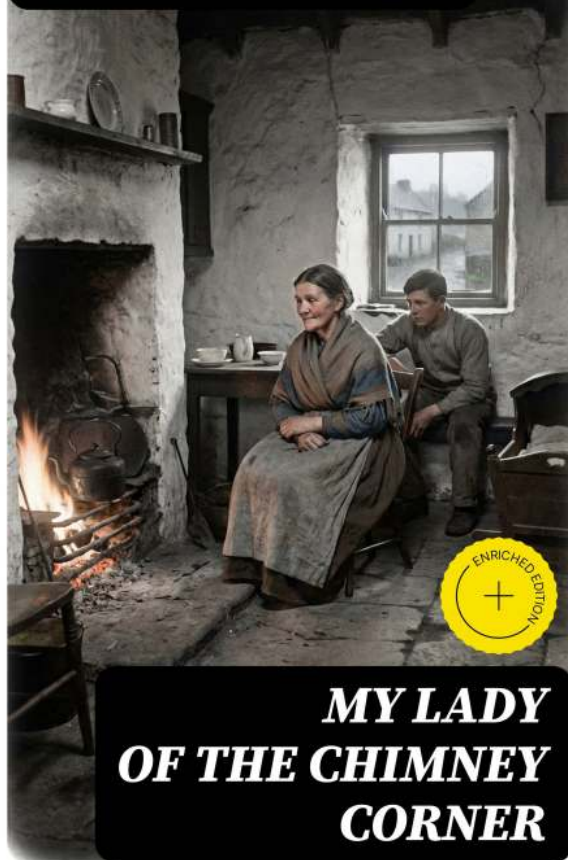


ALEXANDER IRVINE



**MY LADY
OF THE CHIMNEY
CORNER**

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OF THE CHIMNEY
CORNER**

Alexander Irvine

My Lady of the Chimney Corner

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gavin Avery

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Table of Contents

[My Lady of the Chimney Corner](#)

[Memorable Quotes](#)

[Notes](#)

MY LADY OF THE CHIMNEY CORNER

Main Table of Contents

MY LADY OF THE CHIMNEY-CORNER

CHAPTER I

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VII

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER X

**TO
LADY GREGORY
AND
THE PLAYERS OF THE ABBEY THEATRE
DUBLIN**

FOREWORD

This book is the torn manuscript of the most beautiful life I ever knew. I have merely pieced and patched it together, and have not even changed or disguised the names of the little group of neighbors who lived with us, at "the bottom of the world." A. I.

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THE CHIMNEY-CORNER**

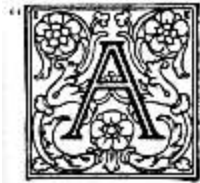
[Table of Contents](#)

**A STORY OF LOVE AND POVERTY IN
IRISH PEASANT LIFE**

CHAPTER I

[Table of Contents](#)

LOVE IS ENOUGH



NNA'S purty, an' she's good as well as purty, but th' beauty an' goodness that's hers is short lived, I'm thinkin'," said old Bridget McGrady to her neighbor Mrs. Tierney, as Mrs. Gilmore passed the door, leading her five-year-old girl, Anna, by the hand. The old women were sitting on the doorstep as the worshipers came down the lane from early mass on a summer morning.

"Thru for you, Bridget, for th' do say that th' Virgin takes all sich childther before they're ten."

"Musha, but Mrs. Gilmore'll take on terrible," continued Mrs. Tierney, "but th' will of God must be done."

Anna was dressed in a dainty pink dress. A wide blue ribbon kept her wealth of jet black hair in order as it hung down her back and the squeaking of her little shoes drew attention to the fact that they were new and in the fashion.

"It's a mortal pity she's a girl," said Bridget, "bekase she might hev been an althar boy before she goes."

"Aye, but if she was a bhoy shure there's no tellin' what divilmint she'd get into; so maybe it's just as well."

The Gilmores lived on a small farm near Crumlin[1] in County Antrim. They were not considered "well to do,"

neither were they poor. They worked hard and by dint of economy managed to keep their children at school. Anna was a favorite child. Her quiet demeanor and gentle disposition drew to her many considerations denied the rest of the family. She was a favorite in the community. By the old women she was considered "too good to live"; she took "kindly" to the house of God. Her teacher said, "Anna has a great head for learning." This expression, oft repeated, gave the Gilmores an ambition to prepare Anna for teaching. Despite the schedule arranged for her she was confirmed in the parish chapel at the age of ten. At fifteen she had exhausted the educational facilities of the community and set her heart on institutions of higher learning in the larger cities. While her parents were figuring that way the boys of the parish were figuring in a different direction. Before Anna was seventeen there was scarcely a boy living within miles who had not at one time or another lingered around the gate of the Gilmore garden. Mrs. Gilmore watched Anna carefully. She warned her against the danger of an alliance with a boy of a lower station. The girl was devoted to the Church. She knew her Book of Devotions as few of the older people knew it, and before she was twelve she had read the Lives of the Saints. None of these things made her an ascetic. She could laugh heartily and had a keen sense of humor.

The old women revised their prophecies. They now spoke of her "takin' th' veil." Some said she would make "a gey good schoolmishress," for she was fond of children.

While waiting the completion of arrangements to continue her schooling, she helped her mother with the

household work. She spent a good deal of her time, too, in helping the old and disabled of the village. She carried water to them from the village well and tidied up their cottages at least once a week.

The village well was the point of departure in many a romance. There the boys and girls met several times a day. Many a boy's first act of chivalry was to take the girl's place under the hoop that kept the cans apart and carry home the supply of water.

Half a century after the incident that played havoc with the dreams and visions of which she was the central figure, Anna said to me:

"I was fillin' my cans at th' well. He was standin' there lukin' at me.

""Wud ye mind,' says he, 'if I helped ye?'

""Deed no, not at all,' says I. So he filled my cans an' then says he: 'I would give you a nice wee cow if I cud carry thim home fur ye.'

""It's not home I'm goin',' says I, 'but to an' oul neighbor who can't carry it herself.'

""So much th' betther fur me,' says he, an' off he walked between the cans. At Mary McKinstry's doore that afthernoon we stood till the shadows began t' fall."

From the accounts rendered, old Mary did not lack for water-carriers for months after that. One evening Mary made tea for the water-carriers and after tea she "tossed th' cups" for them.

"Here's two roads, dear," she said to Anna, "an' wan day ye'll haave t' choose betwixt thim. On wan road there's love

an' clane teeth (poverty), an' on t'other riches an' hell on earth."

"What else do you see on the roads, Mary?" Anna asked.

"Plenty ov childther on th' road t' clane teeth, an' dogs an' cats on th' road t' good livin'."

"What haave ye fur me, Mary?" Jamie Irvine, Anna's friend, asked. She took his cup, gave it a shake, looked wise and said: "Begorra, I see a big cup, me bhoy—it's a cup o' grief I'm thinkin' it is."

"Oul Mary was jist bletherin'," he said, as they walked down the road in the gloaming, hand in hand.

"A cup of sorrow isn't so bad, Jamie, when there's two to drink it," Anna said. He pressed her hand tighter and replied:

"Aye, that's thrue, fur then it's only half a cup[4q]."

Jamie was a shoemaker's apprentice. His parents were very poor. The struggle for existence left time for nothing else. As the children reached the age of eight or nine they entered the struggle. Jamie began when he was eight. He had never spent a day at school. His family considered him fortunate, however, that he could be an apprentice.

The cup that old Mary saw in the tea leaves seemed something more than "blether" when it was noised abroad that Anna and Jamie were to be married.

The Gilmores strenuously objected. They objected because they had another career mapped out for Anna. Jamie was illiterate, too, and she was well educated. He was a Protestant and she an ardent Catholic. Illiteracy was common enough and might be overlooked, but a mixed marriage was unthinkable.

The Irvines, on the other hand, although very poor, could see nothing but disaster in marriage with a Catholic, even though she was as "pure and beautiful as the Virgin."

"It's a shame an' a scandal," others said, "that a young fella who can't read his own name shud marry sich a nice girl wi' sich larnin'."

Jamie made some defense but it wasn't convincing.

"Doesn't the Bible say maan an' wife are wan?" he asked Mrs. Gilmore in discussing the question with her.

"Aye."

"Well, when Anna an' me are wan won't she haave a thrade an' won't I haave an education?"

"That's wan way ov lukin' at a vexed question, but you're th' only wan that luks at it that way!"

"There's two," Anna said. "That's how I see it."

When Jamie became a journeyman shoemaker, the priest was asked to perform the marriage ceremony. He refused and there was nothing left to do but get a man who would give love as big a place as religion, and they were married by the vicar of the parish church.

Not in the memory of man in that community had a wedding created so little interest in one way and so much in another. They were both "turncoats," the people said, and they were shunned by both sides. So they drank their first big draft of the "cup o' grief" on their wedding-day.

"Sufferin' will be yer portion in this world," Anna's mother told her, "an' in th' world t' come separation from yer maan."

Anna kissed her mother and said:

"I've made my choice, mother, I've made it before God, and as for Jamie's welfare in the next world, I'm sure that love like his would turn either Limbo, Purgatory or Hell into a very nice place to live in!"

A few days after the wedding the young couple went out to the four cross-roads. Jamie stood his staff on end and said:

"Are ye ready, dear?"

"Aye, I'm ready, but don't tip it in the direction of your preference!" He was inclined toward Dublin, she toward Belfast. They laughed. Jamie suddenly took his hand from the staff and it fell, neither toward Belfast nor Dublin, but toward the town of Antrim, and toward Antrim they set out on foot. It was a distance of less than ten miles, but it was the longest journey she ever took—and the shortest, for she had all the world beside her, and so had Jamie. It was in June, and they had all the time there was. There was no hurry. They were as care-free as children and utilized their freedom in full. Between Moira and Antrim they came to Willie Withero's stone pile. Willie was Antrim's most noted stone-breaker in those days. He was one of the town's news centers. At his stone-pile he got the news going and coming. He was a strange mixture of philosophy and cynicism. He had a rough exterior and spoke in short, curt, snappish sentences, but behind it all he had a big heart full of kindly human feeling.

"Anthrim's a purty good place fur pigs an' sich to live in," he told the travelers. "Ye see, pigs is naither Fenian[3]s nor Orangemen. I get along purty well m'self bekase I sit on both sides ov th' fence at th' same time."

"How do you do it, Misther Withero?" Anna asked demurely.

"Don't call me 'Misther,'" Willie said; "only quality calls me 'Misther' an' I don't like it—it doesn't fit an honest stone breaker." The question was repeated and he said: "I wear a green ribbon on Pathrick's Day an' an orange cockade on th' Twelfth ov July, an' if th' ax m' why, I tell thim t' go t' h—I! That's Withero fur ye an' wan ov 'im is enough fur Anthrim, that's why I niver married, an' that'll save ye the throuble ov axin' me whither I've got a wife or no!"

"What church d'ye attend, Willie?" Jamie asked.

"Church is it, ye're axin' about? Luk here, me bhoy, step over th' stile." Willie led the way over into the field.

"Step over here, me girl." Anna followed. A few yards from the hedge there was an ant-hill.

"See thim ants?"

"Aye."

"Now if Withero thought thim ants hated aych other like th' men ov Anthrim d'ye know what I'd do?"

"What?"

"I'd pour a kittle ov boilin' wather on thim an' roast th' hides off ivery mother's son ov thim. Aye, that's what I'd do, shure as gun's iron!"

"That would be a sure and speedy cure," Anna said, smiling.

"What's this world but an ant-hill?" he asked[29]. "Jist a big ant-hill an' we're ants begorra an' uncles, but instead ov workin' like these wee fellas do—help aych other an' shouldther aych other's burdens, an' build up th' town, an' forage fur fodder, begobs we cut aych other's throats over