

Undiscovered Friendship

'Rain stopped play!' Mrs Mc Dermot laughed. 'But it's hardly 'play' the way you're going at it.'

'I'm hoping to finish early. It's my night for college.' Tony looked up at the sky. 'It's only a shower. I'll have time to finish the lawn edges when it's gone over.'

'Time for a cup of tea, then. Come on in the kitchen.'

'All right.' Tony kicked grass cuttings from his boots before bending down to untie them.'

'Don't worry about your boots. I'm not fussy. The place is too clean since my husband died.' She opened the door wide. 'Harry was a bit careless. He said you didn't have to bend so much to sweep up as you did to get your boots off.'

'How is the college course going?' Mrs. McDermot enquired as they sat over their tea.

'Good. I'm enjoying it. Though the written work doesn't come easy. It never did.'

Tony had told Mrs. McDermot his situation when she hired him to tidy her garden two half days a week. He had been made redundant from the paint factory and shocked to find that he was considered old at fifty, with not much hope of work. Fortunately the family had flown the nest and Barbara, Tony's wife still had a good job, but Tony couldn't sit at home all day. He had always loved gardening so he put an advertisement in the local paper. There were more enquiries than he could ever take on. Then he saw the piece about horticultural courses at the local college and Barbara had encouraged him to sign up.

Mrs. Mc Dermot was rather a shy lady and this was the first real conversation Tony had had with her other than to talk about the garden. She poured him another mug of tea and in the momentary quiet which followed Tony decided to ask the question that had been on his mind for the past ten minutes.

'I hope you don't mind me asking,' he said hesitatingly. 'But you said your husband's name was Harry, Harry McDermot.'

'That's right,' she smiled at him. He noticed for the first time what a kindly face she had. It matched her gentle voice. 'He was Henry Richard, but everybody called him Harry.'

'Was he a teacher?'

'That's right. He was head teacher at St Michael's Primary School on the other side of town. He'd been there most of his working life.'

'He was my teacher,' said Tony.

'Really, ' replied Mrs. McDermot. 'He must have been very young. Oh dear! I didn't mean to suggest you're old.'

Before Tony could say anything, she added. 'You'll be in his little book. What year were you there? She went out of the kitchen and in a few moments was back again with a blue notebook in her hand. She sat at the table and thumbed through the pages.

'Harry kept all sorts of notes about his children. All confidential you understand. Here's Geoffrey Williams.'

'That's my younger brother.'

'Now I've got it. Tony Williams.'

'I'd better not ask what he wrote,' Tony grinned, wanting to know but afraid of what would be in Harry's little blue book. 'I can imagine what he's written. Awful behaviour - rude, rowdy, lazy, untidy, couldn't do much worse!'

'No, you won't find anything like that here,' said Mrs. McDermot. 'It's not that sort of record. Harry only kept notes of the good things.' She pushed her glasses up her nose and peered closely at the page. 'He's written about you giving up your place to Simon on the football first team. Then there's notes about how you helped him with a nature project and helped start the school garden. He's also written that you were interested in trains.'

Tony was puzzled. 'Why did he keep all those notes?' he asked. Mrs. McDermot turned to the first page of the book and showed it to him. Just above the date was a title, "Friendship Book". 'It was his friendship book,' she said. 'He believed the best way to help children learn was to be their friend. Unfortunately not many of you understood that. A teacher was different. He represented authority and the idea of being friends with your teacher didn't appeal to many. Most were afraid of being called 'teacher's pet I suppose. But he believed it and he jotted down the good things down, so he think about ways of getting to know you all better and encourage you. I expect he talked to you about trains some time - and gardening!'

'He did. I'm not just saying that,' Tony added quickly. 'I remember, he really did. He said he'd got a book out of the library to find out more about trains and he let me look at on my own for one whole lesson.' Mrs. McDermot closed the book and held it tight in both hands like a treasure. She looked straight at Tony. His face was more serious now. 'You may not understand,' she said. 'But this was Harry's prayer book too. Every night he would open it and say a prayer for each of the children.'

Tony had been brought up knowing the meaning of prayer, but in recent years it had become a fourth emergency service for him. 'Maybe that's why I've finished up as a college student!' he said quietly.

When Tony had finished the lawn edges Mrs. McDermot came out to pay him for the afternoon's work.

'I've been thinking,' said Tony. 'Old Harry. Sorry, that's what we all called him. He worked so hard at being a friend, and we never even knew it. We went home at the end of the day and never gave him another thought while he took us home with him in his little blue book. You know, I didn't understand then, but when I think back, Harry was different. I suppose unconsciously we knew he cared. It's a pity we never appreciate things till it's too late.'

'None of us do really,' Mrs. McDermot said almost in a whisper.

Tony picked up his tools. 'I'll see you next week. Thanks for the tea. And thanks... for Harry.'