

# **FITS AND STARTS**

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Fits and starts by T. A. Fitzgerald

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**T. A. FITZGERALD**

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By Rev. T. A. FITZGERALD, O.F.M.

*Author of "Homespun Yarns"*

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## The Widow's Luck



ALTHOUGH five and forty years had passed since the Widow Cooney as a little girl had taken her seat in a Bianconi coach to bid good-bye for ever to her native village of Holy Cross, near Thurles, on her way to far-off Australia, yet her memory was filled with as living images of home and her childhood's friends as if she had only been one day beneath the Southern Cross. She remembered every path and where it led to across the fields: to the bubbling spring-wells; to the fields where the mushrooms grew; to the hedges where nut-trees bore their toothsome clusters; to the crab-tree, fruitful of wild russets and—stomach-aches. How often of an evening used she sit on the shady verandah of her weather-board house in the heart of the Australian bush when the sun, like a globe of burnished bronze, had set, and recall the happy, happy days that were, and the people she knew and their neighbourly voices with their hearty greetings and their good wishes when they lifted the latch of the cottage and said to the group around the blazing turf-fire: "God save all



here," and the response: "Save you kindly," and "draw up to the fire and take the weight off yer legs." And a tear would glisten in her eyes when she remembered how when she was a little gersha she'd bring over a jug of buttermilk to the tinkers that were camped near the limekiln with their children and asses, and the wives often with black-eyes; and a bag or two thrown on the ground to hide the feathers of a goose or two the same tinkers "had met sthrayin' on the road," as they said, "wud nobody ownin' them." Sad but pleasant memories. And now she's so far away from it all. But it seems only yesterday. Why, even Kathleen, her grown-up Australian girleen, knows as much about Holy Cross as if she had been born there herself. How often used the mother tell her about Jack Barrett who slept in haystacks in his wanderings, and how every dog in the country knew Jack and every rag on him. But what the dogs didn't know was whether Jack was a bird, a beast of prey or a human being, he was so "raggedy" and crooked; and how Jack had like to be murdered one night by Tom Ryan for stealing his swede turnips, only that Jack was wearing the big pants of poor Father Long, buried the week before, that the housekeeper gave him, although as she said, they were oceans too big for him. Kathleen loved to hear her mother tell about the churning days when they'd put a piece of burning turf under the churn to keep some bad neighbours from "taking" the butter, and how everyone that came in would have to take the churn-dash and give a

few minutes at it so as not to take the luck of the house away with them. Kathleen loved above all to hear her mother and Father Pat Hickey conversing about old days in Tipperary. For Father Pat was from near the same place as her mother, and it used to put her in stitches when they'd talk about the pig-fair in Thurles and how a pig broke loose once from the sugawn, ran between the legs of a fat town Councillor and landed him on his back in a plather of liquid mud.

Father Pat was the parish priest of where the widow lived far up in New South Wales, but let no one imagine it was a parish like we have in Ireland, a few miles in this direction and a few miles in that; for Father Pat's parish was more than a hundred miles every way, like many an Australian parish at the present day. He used to come once a month up to Budgerie Plains, and it need not be said that there was a warm welcome before him from the widow Cooney and her daughter Kathleen. They regarded it as an honour to entertain the messenger of God, as the widow said, and the fine cosy room, newly-boarded and papered, at the end of the verandah, was christened Father Pat's room. It used to be Johnnie's room—poor Johnnie, her son who only three months before had gone to Heaven, leaving lines of sorrow on his mother's face and taking half the merriment out of Kathleen's bright and handsome looks. The widow used to say, "Father Pat sleeping in poor Johnnie's room will bring a blessing to his soul." And the last word she'd say of a night to him

when he'd be going into the room would be, "Father, don't forget a prayer for poor Johnnie." There was no fear that Father Pat would forget him, for he was under deep gratitude to Mrs. Cooney and her family for the kindness of many years. Hadn't they nursed him back to life the time his buggy struck a stump one dark night and left him half dead on the track? And there over the bed was Johnnie's picture and a piece of withered palm on the top of the frame and a newspaper clipping from the *Boggabri Chronicle* gummed on the foot of it which told how he met his death.

"TRAGIC OCCURRENCE AT KANGAROO FLAT

*"A Young Man Succumbs to Snake-bite*

"An untoward event occurred in the bush about five miles from Kangaroo Flat last Thursday night. It appears that a party of ring-barkers were at work on Mr. Musgrave's property and were camped in the bed of a dry creek. The weather had been persistently wet for many days and the party were out of fire-wood. What they had stored was sodden with rain. A young man known as J. Cooney dug up a log half-hidden in the sandy bed of the creek and brought it to the tent, and with the strands of the inside of a gum-bark, aided by an old celluloid collar, made a fire and arranged the "billy" on the cross stick. The log was partially burned when from a cleft in it a huge black snake which was coiled inside in the log, stung by the fire, darted out and bit J. Cooney on the hand.