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BITS OF IRELAND.

"HE WAS A GENTLEMAN ONCE."

By HENRY STANTON.

"UNHAND me, men! God in heaven, do you value your lives? Well, take that, and that, and clear the way there. And who are you to say this or that to me? Clear the way there. By Heaven, I was a gentleman once."

Such were the expressions, delivered in short, furious spasms of speech, and accompanied by the shouting all together of many voices, with the noise of falling men and breaking furniture, which a little after nightfall arose suddenly in a low public-house so near the sea that its faint light streaked the crests of the waves.

If passion raged within M'Closky's *shebeen*, the elements were beginning to rage without. The rising wind was whistling round the corners of the half-dozen cabins which were grouped irregularly round M'Closky's, and the waves were touched by the humble ray shot from M'Closky's one window, showed ever whiter and whiter.

The wind was from the west, and blew out of the Atlantic on to the iron-bound coast, in a nook of which nestled the little hamlet. For a long time before this fierce outbreak on the part of the man who had been a gentleman once, the sounds which arose from M'Closky's, though potheen was flowing there, gave no promise of such a wild *finale*. There were no songs or loud altercations, or any of the usual signs or tokens of a rustic symposium. But for the clink of glass, an occasional hum of applause or outburst of wild laughter, an outsider might fancy that a religious service was being held this night in M'Closky's, for one voice only was heard—some one man talked and the rest listened.

At nightfall, one by one, with a good interval between, four men left the *shebeen*. Each of the four faces as it passed the door wore a grin of amusement, as if the laughter were a conspirator in some practical joke. These four worthies made their way to the beach, and surrounded a boat. There, laughing the while, they seized each a thwart and the gunwale and rushed her down the steep strand into the waves. There was another boat on the strand, but lying keel upwards, her bottom showing some white planks newly laid on, and two or three naked ribs devoid of planks old or new. If anyone at Coos-Darig should want a boat to-night he will not get it, not nearer than fifteen miles from Coos-Darig.

"It's meself could stay listening to him till cockerow," quoth one of the four as he prepared to step the mast. "Be gor, he's the illigant spaker, an' he knows a sight."

"There was a power of boys at M'Closky's to-night," added another worthy. "It's always the way when Birmingham do be there. Sure, they say that he has rare quality blood in him, and was a gentleman once. M'Closky will do good trade to-night, for the spacheless man has ever the glass to his mouth. M'Closky should pay him."

"Faix, I'm thinking," added the first speaker, "that he'll raise hell in M'Closky's when he knows we gave him the slip, and all for to pleasure the ould naygur, M'Closky. He'll raise hell, that he will, seeing as his comarade is on the main (mainland) as well as himself, and no one left for to light up the glim at

Corrig-Wohr; and the night dark, wid the wind blowy and comin' in from the say."

"Will he swim it, seeing as how—"

My informant told me that that was all he heard out of the boat, "for the sail was by that time hysted (hoisted), and away she runs shipping cans of wather on the lee bow, and it wanted little, but I could see her keel on the starboard, for the wind jusht thin began to blow powerful."

It was about an hour after this that a perfect storm of "*Hanim-an-Dhoul*," and "Hell-to-your-sowls," and "Can't-you-be-aisys," and other forms of friendly Irish protestation and exhortation arose in M'Closky's; but above all that tempest and hubbub of gutturals, clear, strong, and sharp-edged, one voice untouched by the brogue sounding trumpet-like dominant in the guttural clamour, shouting passionate inquiries and strange blasphemies unfamiliar in Coos Darig, and which one hopes that the recording angel intent on the issue forgot to write down. Then came the sounds of struggle, and then in fierce gasps and spasms the words which stand first in this story, ending in what seemed a shout of victory and freedom: "By Heaven, I was a gentleman once"

From the door of that low public-house emerged a young man, taller than the tallest men of a coast where gigantic figures are by no means uncommon, and of an apparently corresponding strength and power. His garb was that of a common sailor or fisherman. His jersey, where torn by too friendly hands, showed his white skin.

He turned round as he crossed the threshold, still shouting horrid blasphemies and imprecations, battle, murder, and sudden death gleaming in his eyes. In his raised hand was a long knife, flashing dangerously. In that attitude he paused a moment, while a silence like death reigned in M'Closky's. Then, turning, he strode, not too steadily, to the water's edge, kicked off his long boots, and though he reeled and tottered, for his brain was still on fire with undiluted M'Closky, stripped to the skin and staggered into the sea.

"When the water ruz above his white skin I seen him no more," so ran on the *gossoon* from whom I heard the tale, "barrin' wanst, when I seen his yalla head, and the same shining like a golden guinea be raison av the light of M'Closky's winda, for it ran over-right the waves out, same as a road. But if I didn't see him I heard him, for at the mouth of the Coos, and when he felt the big waves coming lively agin him, he lets a shout you'd hear north side of the hill, and it was all wan as if he was beginning to enjoy himself and to find the devil's own diversion in those quare proceedings. Oh, there's no lie in it, Master Ralph; the night was pitch-dark, and the wind blowin' powerful strong. Still, in all, I would not be after saying it was a storm."

The lighthouse of Corrig-Wohr—*i.e.*, the Big Rock, was situated at the western extremity of an inhabited island, which lay rather more than an English mile from the mainland. Birmingham and another man named Hourahan, as we have already learned, were spending the night on the mainland. Hourahan was attending the wedding feast of a relative some miles up the country. Birmingham having intended to return to the island before nightfall, had not objected to his chum spending the night

out. Of course there was a breach of regulations in all this; but Birmingham thought little of such breaches, provided the light of Corrig-Wohr shone as usual—and now it was night, and Corrig-Wohr, unlit, stood out a spike of death into the Atlantic.

In the island there was but one harbour, or, indeed landing-place—a little breach in its rocky ramparts called Gregory's Cove. Here there was a little hamlet similar to Coos-Darig, and almost opposite to it. So the brave swimmer, if he can manage to keep afloat, will have something to steer by, for the lights of the little hamlet were just visible at night on the mainland. But will he? Has he sufficient strength to rise victorious over the slapping and foaming waves of the channel, and of the racing tide there, running, too, this night against the wind, for the tide comes from the east and the wind from the west? Birmingham had swum this mile of water before, but it was in daylight and calm weather. Will he swim it to-night?

Such were the thoughts which agitated the crowd of fishermen and cottiers whom M'Closky's drinking den disgorged as soon as they were released from the terror of the light-keeper's wrath and the gleam of his raised knife. They rushed to an eminence lying westward from Coos-Darig, and which in daylight commanded a view of the Corrig-Wohr lighthouse.

Here the guttural storm broke out anew. "Will he do it?" "No, he wont." "Yes, he will." "Sure, the tide's running like a thrain." "Be gor, Birmingham's game, and no mishtake," etc., etc., while, like a refrain or catchword in the clamour of mixed patois—English and pure Irish—again and again the phrase was repeated, "Sure, he was a gentleman wanst."

The democratic ideas of the nineteenth century had not yet penetrated Coos-Darig. Here men were simple enough to believe that a gentleman was essentially different from, and generally superior to, ordinary humanity. Indeed, in this remote spot they had few opportunities of putting to the test their traditional notions on that subject. For hours they stood there gazing into darkness, or watching the faint lights of Gregory's Cove. Then they collected furze bushes and tried to light a bonfire, as some assistance to Birmingham should he be still alive; but the wind blew the fuel away as soon as it was lit. Finally someone came from the village with a torch. It was only a sod of turf soaked in fish-oil and held on the top of a pitch-fork. At last the conviction grew that all was over.

They said that if Birmingham had made good his landing at Gregory's Cove there would have been a movement among the lights there. But all the lights of Gregory's Cove had continued to burn quietly. The assembly was beginning to disperse. Some were wending inland, others returning to M'Closky's to chew the sweet cud of this tragedy over fresh bumpers of M'Closky's fire-water.

Then someone uttered a yell. It was taken up by others, and a universal shout from those still on the height drew back the strayers. Yes, there in the Corrig-Wohr direction, the great revolving light shone, went out, and shone again. Birmingham, undrowned, was at his post. The flaming sentinel of that Acroceraunian headland was warn-

ing off from those spikes of death all ships and men who might be passing that way.

"Oh, yer honour, it was grand, it was grand," said little Larry Burke, as he concluded the account from which I have made my tale, "and I seen ould men cryin' that night same as they wor childher" (children).

I knew the story well in its general features, for it made a great noise at the time; but the best, fullest, and most dramatic version of the affair I had from little Larry one fine summer evening as we sat in our boat, bream-fishing, when the fish would not bite.

I myself met Birmingham only once, but, though I was then a child, I noticed even then something characteristic in his behaviour, and suggestive of his antecedents.

In company with a small party, including two ladies, I visited the Corrig-Wehr lighthouse. Near the entrance I saw a huge, but shabbily-dressed, figure start up suddenly and bound indoors like a deer. When we came to the lighthouse another figure, just as shabby but not so big, met us and proceeded to show us over the lighthouse. It was Hourahan, his comrade.

I myself cared nothing about the lighthouse, but I was extremely anxious to see the man who had been a gentleman once, and who swam from Coos-Darig to Gregory's Cove on a stormy night. I was beginning to despair when a tall and handsome man joined us, saluted the party, and especially the ladies, with much respect and much self-possession, sent Hourahan away and showed us over the rest of the building. He was dressed in an exquisitely clean and neat suit of man-of-war's-man's clothes, which looked as if they had never been used before—or very seldom before. His face shone from recent soap and water, and his auburn beard was nicely trimmed. He had seen far away the flutter and colour of feminine attire, and had not failed to remember that he was a gentleman once. Though certainly handsome, bad habits and low associations had left their stamp on his countenance. His hair was golden and fine in texture his eyes grey-blue, his nose high, long, and straight. Two remarks which he made that day I chance to remember.

He said, with a serious expression of countenance, that he had run away from home when he was fourteen, and also that he had heard his father say that the correct form of his name was De Birmingham. No one in the neighbourhood knew his history. Indeed, we had nothing but his own word, his actions, and to some extent his appearance to justify the prevailing rumour that Birmingham, head-keeper of the Corrig-Wehr light, had been a gentleman once.

Dear Mr. Stanton,—I know the Story which has its own modicum of sheer truth. When I write my guide book to Bantry, Glengariffe, Castletown Berehaven, I shall ask permission to include your half-true Tale.—ED.

MISGIVINGS IN THE NORTH.

TO THE EDITOR ALL IRELAND REVIEW.

DEAR SIR—Many very happy returns of your birthday, and may each of them find you nearer the Heaven you wish to go.

[Dear E. B.—I am not sure; I rather

think there is better, and certainly bolder company in the other place—Ed.]

Of course we all know you "mean something," and that that something must be what commends itself to you as honourable. But what that something may be is, to me, not comprehensible. Are you driving at an Irish Parliament? I think, in justice to your friends, as you are kind enough to style me, you ought to let them understand what is going to be your ultimate end.

[Candidly I don't know myself.—Ed.] There are two things that would compel me to withdraw from you, viz.—(1) Any co-operation with so-called Nationalists (I do not mean Catholics), and (2) any attempt to re-instate the Irish landlord. I am not competent to judge whether or not an Irish Parliament, fit to rule Ireland, is possible. If such a thing were possible I would gladly welcome it. I am afraid you give the Catholic Hierarchy credit for more honesty of purpose than they deserve; and it is they who rule in this Celtic Ireland. Your article on "The Law" has shocked my friends here. Wishing you wise guidance, and success where you are wise.—I am, yours sincerely, E. B.

DEAR E. B.—I hardly know how to comment on your kind, sympathetic, truly feminine letter, but which is, I think, just a little too timorous and apprehensive. Why should we be afraid—you and I? We have not, either of us, a great many more years to live. Let us do something brave before we die, and go into one or other of those two other strange places, or is it *three*? Do you remember the grand little figure of Frederick, son of Frederick William, when he faced Europe with a bottle of poison in one pocket and a sheaf of bad poetry in the other? And he did beat Europe! That brave, young, royal rascal; he beat Europe! Is there any reason, dear E. B., why we should not beat not Europe but a decrepit and absurd kind of Irish folk, and so secure statues for ourselves from the Irish Corporations. You would not care for such an honour. Well, indeed, no more would I. Don't desert me; not for a while yet E. B., and, if we don't win, we shall have a little fun before we die.—Ed.

BLACKSTAIRS.

For a long time I have been travelling to and fro between Dublin and a certain town in the South; often enough with rueful, if not ghastly, thoughts concerning both myself and the poor old country running all into prairies and pampas. Right and left, and far as the eye can reach, grass! grass! grass! the countless, all-consuming Lilliputian hosts of the grass. Then, and always suddenly, Blackstairs reveals himself, like a god—as I believe he is—so divine in his impassivity, divinely calm and patient, strong with a strength that we poor, fretful children of a day can never know. And the troubled waves subside, and for the first time after leaving the Capital I feel and know that I am in the beautiful, sane Provinces of Ireland, not in its fictitious and illusory capital, bought and mad. Men who read this and who, like me, travel the same line, have not you, too, had experiences like this? I know you have.

IF.

Some time ago, under the heading of "Ominous Noises," I wrote "the crack of the rifle far away South below the Equator where the stubborn race that broke the mighty Spanish Empire are making cracks in a mightier," for I wished serious-minded readers not to forget the possibility of disaster and the things that may follow on the heels of disaster. Some will consider the presentation by us of such a possibility as unpatriotic, but the times are becoming a great deal too serious for the maintenance of a cheerful and unthinking optimism. Things may not end in the huge troubles whose thrown back shadows seem to surround me so often, but they may.

Have we thought of the nature of these troubles and how to deal with them if they come?

30 Waltham Terrace, Blackrock,
Co. Dublin, Sept. 14th, 1901.

DEAR SIR.—In Vol. II. of Mr. Skene's "Celtic Scotland," p. 91, in describing Iona, he says:—"On the highest point overlooking the expanse of the Western Sea is the Cairn, called "Cul ri Erin," which marks the spot where Columba is said to have ascended for the purpose of ascertaining, if he could discern from it, the distant shores of his beloved Erin."

Columba, the founder of the Christian colony in Iona in 563, A.D., was of the Royal race of O'Neill.

His father was Felim, son of Fergus, who was grandson of Niall of the Nine Hostages; the mother of Felim was Aithne, daughter of Loarne, who reigned, in conjunction with his brother Fergus, over the Scots of Argyllshire.

The following is a translation of a poem of Columba's relative to his view from the above-named point in Iona, and to his mode of life, which may interest many of the readers of "THE ALL-IRELAND REVIEW":—

I.
Sweet to me in 'Uchel Alüinn,
On a peaked crag to be,
That I might often behold
The face of the boundless sea.

II.
To look on the heaving waves,
While in their father's ear
Music for ever they chant,
Hymning the world's career.

III.
The level and star-bright sand,
No sorrow it were to see,
And to hear the wondrous birds
Sailing on happily.

IV.
The thunder of crowding waves
To hear on the rocky shore;
And down by the church to hear
The sounding surges roar.

V.
To see the swift-flying flocks
Over the watery plain,
And greatest wonders of all
The monsters of the main.

VI.
To see the ebb and flood
In power upon the sea
And "Cul ri Erin"—thre I say
My secret name would be.

VII.
And grief would come to my heart
While gazing on her shore;
And all the many ills I've done,
I, weeping, would deplore.

¹Lovely Breast. The rocky heights to the S.W. of Iona are called Uchdachan to this day.

²Back turned to Erin—Erin no more.