

JACK PURCEL AND THE CROWS.

An Irish Sketch.

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JACK PURCEL was a mixture of shrewdness and absurdity, cunning and simplicity—a compound of Nature and Art—and sometimes Nature without Art—stringing truisms on so slender a thread, that it broke before his work was finished, and then laughing at his own mistakes.

At times you felt inclined to believe him a rational, a deeply thinking creature—almost a philosopher—and you listened to the wisdom that fell from his lips—when lo!—a sudden change would force upon you the conviction that the poor fellow was “only a fool.”

It might be that both conclusions were too rapidly drawn. I certainly do not pretend to define *what* Jack Purcel was, or was not; I only mean to record what he said and did—he being what in Ireland is termed “a natural”—one in whom, the lamp of reason, if it burn at all, has never been trimmed or garnished.

“What do you mean by a natural?” I once inquired of an old woman. She replied—

“A *natural* is it?—Why thin, as a body may say, it’s just one that’s *half saved*.”

“And what do you mean by ‘half saved?’”

“Ah thin *it’s a natural*!”

Jack Purcel was called a *natural*, and he knew it, and used to pun thereon, saying, “it was better to be a *natural* than *unnatural*, which many people that warn’t *naturals* were.” He was a tall, thin, fantastic looking creature, whose clothes were most miraculously kept together, being a heap of threads and patches, stitched here and there with pack-thread or twine. Still Jack generally managed to have a clean shirt, and moreover took as much pleasure in arranging his hair, as if he were a young girl; and it fell on either side of his pale lank visage, in a way that would charm the hearts of our modern artists. The peculiarity of Jack’s attire, however, was in a sort of conical cap which he formed of crows’ feathers, and which he designated his helmet, and called upon every one to admire.

“For shame, Jack, to kill the poor birds and then steal their feathers.”

“Me kill!—Me!”—he would exclaim, as was his constant habit when excited, and this observation was certain to agitate him.—“Me kill any thing!—Me!—who knows life, feels life, loves life!—Me take life from any living thing!—Me—*oh yarra! yarra wirras thue!*—

Me?—*oh das deelish avourneen!*—or steal—is it me?—shath!—shath!—it’s enough to set me a dancin’ mad to hear the likes!—Oh the fine handsome black birdeens that knows the paths in the air, while mighty knowledgeable men can hardly find them on the earth—the beautiful crows—they know the differ—they know me, and I know them and their language! Ah! ah!—caw they go, and down comes a feather! ‘*That for you, Jack!*—down it comes—a token of good will—a coal black feather to Jack Purcel from the king of the crows!—Fine birds they are—wise birds—did you never hear their prayers?—I did. Just when the grey light comes stealing out of heaven, the old king crow—he that rests in the tall fir tree—caws to his queen—the old queen—and then to his people, and then they shake the dew off their feathers, and trim their wings, and then they rise, as one bird, in the air, and pray.”

“And what do they say, Jack?”

“May be they wouldn’t like me to tell, but I’ll tell *you*—I don’t mind telling you, for you feed the small singing birds. They pray to be kept from the sins of man; they pray for plenty, and for peace. They’re the rale United Irishmen—the black-bands of the air. I love the crows.—Hurra for the crows—the coal black crows!”

And then he would wave his feather-helmet, and shout and dance.

Poor Jack Purcel was kind to every living thing; but his heart was in our rookery, a square field, mid way up the avenue that was filled with tall fir trees, planted before it was imagined that trees would grow so near the sea. There, a colony of rooks had established themselves—long, long before I was born, and there they were suffered to remain unmolested; but as the young plantations grew up about the house, the rooks wished to emigrate, and while the denizens of their old world remained at home, they drove the young birds to the plantations, and here a war of extermination was commenced against them. Nests, eggs, and birds were destroyed with impunity, and poor Jack was in a state of frenzy. He used to go about with his bosom crammed full of young crows and crow’s eggs, that he had saved from the fangs of the gardener’s boys—and “keen” over his favourites when they died as if he had lost his dearest relatives.

“A thin, it’s little yer mother thought whin she lined yer nest, and rocked with the storm over the wonderful shell that held ye—ye poor *birdeens*—it’s little she thought the end you’d come to, ye innocent craythurs. Ah God help