

HOW I KISSED THE BLARNEY STONE.

"There is a stone there,
That whoever kisses,
Oh! he never misses
To grow eloquent.
'Tis he may clamber
To a lady's chamber,
Or become a Member
Of Parliament."

FATHER PROUT'S RELIQUES.

"NOW mind," said a friend, as I stood on the railway platform at Dublin, and was about to start for the pleasant city of Cork, "mind when you get to Cork you drive straight to the Imperial Hotel and secure a bed; you will be sure to get a good one, and there's an excellent table d'hôte."

I took my friend's advice and my ticket, and on arriving at the Cork railway station, jumped into an omnibus and was soon set down at the Imperial Hotel. I was not a solitary visitor.

The good reputation of the hostelry had evidently been imparted to others, and the arrivals that day were numerous. I alighted from the bus, preceded by a fine port-winey looking Ecclesiastic—who seemed Bishop, Dean and Chapter rolled into one—and followed by an unmistakably strong-minded female, who wore a broad Leghorn hat with green veil, no crinoline, gold spectacles, badly fitting black gloves, and carried an umbrella and a toy terrier.

My other fellow-passengers were less remarkable, but there were plenty of them; and, as they all brought a fair share of luggage, the vestibule of the hotel was soon choked up with a perfect barricade of boxes, portmanteaus, carpet-bags, &c., &c.

Why it is that some English travellers always will encumber themselves with such heaps of luggage is a problem I need not now stop to consider. I am content to record it as a fact, apropos to which I may relate an incident that occurred to a friend of mine who journeyed this last summer with his family, and an abundance of other luggage, to a certain watering-place.

"Coachman," he said, "that box is mine, and so is that portmanteau; that large trunk, too, belongs to the same lot, and so does the hip bath, and"—"Oh, yes, sir," interrupted the driver, "I see, I see, you seem to have brought everything with you, but the kitchen-range." I was reminded of Jehu's sarcasm as I watched the quantity that was shot from the roof of the omnibus upon the steps of the hotel; but my reflections were soon interrupted by a smart squeal, and turning round, I observed the concentrated Ecclesiastic profuse in his apologies to the strong-minded lady, on whose toy terrier he had inadvertently trodden. But the S. M. L. and her pet alike refused to be comforted. The unhappy car shivered and whined in a paroxysm of fright, whilst its indignant mistress, looking not "daggery" but a full charge of bayonets, excitedly observed, "Very clumsy and very unfortunate, indeed"—which brief utterances she appeared to hurl vocally at the head of the reverend aggressor.

Leaving the Ecclesiastic, "Dusky" and his mistress to settle the contretemps between them, I walked to the bar, where a modest, pretty-looking young lady allotted me my bed-room, and then, it being mid-day, and plenty of time to spare, I sallied out to take a look at the "Lions" of Cork and the neighbourhood.

Lionising by yourself is dull work. Solitude, as a rule, should be avoided; but the worst solitude of all is solitude in a crowd. I was forcibly struck with this as I strolled through the streets of Cork. So, as the best way "to drive dull care away," I hailed the driver of a car, and bade him to take me to any place in the neighbourhood that was worth seeing.

"Shure, thin, yer honour, 'tis Blarney y'ud like to see," said he.

"And what's the fare to Blarney?" I asked.

"Faith, 'tis a cheap ride, yer honour; only five shillings there and back, and maybe y'e'll give the boy a thrille" (the "boy" being himself a promising young dare-devil, aged fifty).

"Well, then, Blarney be it," said I, as I took my seat in the car. "Hep, hep!" shouted my

Jehu, giving the reins a friendly jerk. But the horse refused to budge, so the promising youth jumped off his seat, turned the animal round, sprang on the car again, shouted "Hep, hep!" once more; brought the whip heavily down on the animal's flanks, and away we went, for at least five minutes, at the rate of about ten miles an hour. We then moderated our pace, and I began to chat with my charioteer, our conversation being carried on somewhat in the following fashion:

"Blarney is the place where the celebrated stone is, is it not?"

"Yes, yer honour—Come up, you baste" (the latter remark being addressed to the horse.)

"And do many people kiss the Blarney stone?"

"Well they kiss one stone, but faith it's not the Blarney stone at all."

"How do you mean?"

"How do I mean? You baste (this last observation again to the horse.) Shure, sir, there are two stones, one inside the tower—but the real Blarney stone is on the top, and y'e'll have to go out and kiss it, but most people kiss the other, and come away desaved entirely."

"Then won't they let you kiss the stone on the top?"

"No, I don't think she will, yer honour!"

"Who's she?"

"The old lady that shows the Castle, shure."

"Ah, well, I shall try it on."

"And good luck to yer honour, thin, for he-er ye are—there's the Castle, see; you'll just walk across that field to it, and I'll be waiting for ye when ye come back—and, yer honour (speaking slowly and with marked distinctness,) perhaps, —the—poor—baste—may—be—wanting—a—dhrop of—beer—to—drink—meanwhile."

"Beer! your horse don't drink beer, I'm sure."

"Well, yer honour, shure what he laves I'll dhrink myself, it shan't be wasted."

The appeal thus made was irresistible. I don't envy the man who would have refused to respond to it.

As I walked across the field leading to Blarney Castle, I was accosted by a ragged looking youth of about eighteen years of age, who suggested that "His honour would want a guide." In reply, his honour expressed the opinion that he had no occasion for a guide; the Castle was but a short distance off, straight before him, and he could not well miss it. But "His honour would like to see the groves." His honour thought he should only have time to kiss the Blarney Stone. "Ah, his honour would not be able to do that." His honour inquired the "reason why."

"You have no companion with ye, sir, and they won't let gentlemen go up singly."

"But I can take you, can't I?"

"Shure guides are not allowed up at all."

By this time I had arrived at the front of the Castle, and my guide stopped and spoke to a comely-looking old woman, who, sitting on a stool placed on the lawn, was busily engaged like the poet Hood's sempstress, "plying her needle and thread." She did not, however, recall any of the painful associations connected with the song of the shirt. Her fingers were not weedy and worn, her eyelids not "heavy and red," nor was she attired in "unwomanly rags." On the contrary, she was a fresh coloured, trim, sturdy, little dame, dressed with perfect neatness, and at the sight of whom one was irresistibly reminded of the fairy tales of childhood. As you looked at her, clad in a neat print gown, spotless white handkerchief, and neat little cap, sitting close to her braided silvery hair, you might have imagined her "the Little Old Woman cutshorter," the "Old Woman who lived in a Shoe," "Goody Two Shoes," or even that eccentric lady whose scrupulous love of cleanliness led her to "sweep the cobwebs from the sky."

Whilst, as I lay upon the grass, these thoughts were passing through my mind, my guide was busily engaged with the object of them. I could not, however, well hear what was said, as they spoke in a low tone, and the conversation appeared to be carried on in Irish. But from the glances that the old lady occasionally cast askance at me, I had every reason to believe that I was the subject of the palaver; so, making towards her,

I raised my hat, and expressed the wish to be permitted to kiss the Blarney stone.

"Oh no, indeed, sir, it can't be done: we don't open the Castle doors again to-day."

"Indeed! why not?"

"'Tis past the time, sir."

"But it is not so very late," I urged. "It's not five o'clock yet."

"Indeed it's too late, sir."

"Come, madam," I said, endeavouring to coax a bit, "don't be hard-hearted. I'm sure you don't look so. I've come all the way from Canada to kiss the Blarney stone, and I hope you won't refuse me."

"But I can't help it, sir; sure it's against the rules."

"Oh, never mind the rules, ma'am; let me kiss the stone, and when I get back to Montreal, I shall say I kissed it by the permission of the nicest little woman in all Ireland."

The old lady looked at me steadily and scrutinizingly for a second, and there was an intelligent twinkle in her eyes as she replied, "And indeed, sir, I don't think you need to kiss it at all."

Unabashed, however, by this rejoinder, I continued to plead my suit, and whilst doing so, two other tourists appeared upon the scene, who were anxious to kiss the far-famed stone. The old lady evidently did not like to turn away these visitors; all of whom would, no doubt, remember the doorkeeper. But what was to be done? She had already refused me admission, on the ground that it was after time, and could not, with a good grace, grant to the fresh arrivals the favour she had denied to another. Her woman's wit soon came to her aid. "Well, gentlemen," said she, "if I let ye go up, will ye take care of this gentleman, who has no companion, d'ye see?"

The new arrivals looked at me, pulled their beards, looked at each other, and then muttered something about my being "old enough to take care of myself." I assured them I was perfectly able to do so whenever occasion required, and begged that they would not trouble themselves on my account, as I had no doubt the good lady would for once break through her rule, and allow the guide to attend me. There was no response to this "last appeal," but addressing a few words to the guide, the stately little dame laid down her work, produced the keys, undid the door, and we stood within Blarney Castle.

Here the old lady soon showed me the stone inside the tower, of which I had been previously warned by my Jehu.

"And that's the Blarney stone?" said I.

"Yes (without the slightest hesitation), that's the Blarney stone, sir—kiss it, sir."

I did as I was bid, and observing, "and now, ma'am I'll go and kiss the genuine article. I followed the other strangers to the top of the tower, my guide coming after."

"Many writers assert," says my Guide Book, that the "real stone" is not to be reached unless the curious traveller will have himself lowered a distance of twenty feet from the top; and we are further informed, that "in order to sip inspiration from the stone it is required that the tourist be suspended by the heels in the mid-air."

Speaking from experience, I can say that in this, as in other instances, the writers are at fault. It is not at all necessary that the tourist should be subjected to any such inconvenience. Two strong iron bars are let into the wall of the tower. Between the bars and the Blarney stone there is a chasm you have to stretch before you can kiss the stone. To do this, you lay hold of the bars, lie down flat, like a sprawling turtle, stretch out your neck, and with a little care the feat is accomplished. Of course, were you to slip through the chasm, you would fall a distance of about 120 feet, be balked of kissing the stone, and kiss mother earth for the last time instead. But to avoid this danger, you are held tightly by the heels, and this is the reason why no one is allowed to perform the ceremony singly, and why, as I now understood, the old lady was so anxious that some one should take care of me. It took but a very short time to perform the wonderful feat. Having emptied my pockets of watch and purse, I laid down flat, whilst the guide grasped me tightly round the ankles: then