

APRIL 27, 1913

SOME MEMORIES OF FATHER TOM BURKE

A MISCHIEVOUS BOY, A WIT OF EXCEPTIONAL BRILLIANCY, A PULPIT ORATOR OF THE HIGHEST ORDER, WAS THE GREAT DOMINICAN

More than a quarter of a century ago, on the morning of the 2nd of July, 1883, there died in the historic village of Tallaght, County Dublin, Ireland, at the comparatively early age of fifty-two, one whose name was at the time a household word wherever men and women were to be found.

I do not intend in the limited space at my disposal to write a life of Father Burke. Even had I the opportunity of doing so, I should be slow to take up such a work, for it would have to be a life of a man who lived in the great world, and who was known to all eyes.

Galway, the "City of the Tribes," has the honor of having been the birthplace of Father Burke. He was born on the 8th of September, 1830, and a few days later he received the name of Nicholas Anthony in baptism.

His early years were, like those of most Irish boys of that period, full of frolic and escapades. Over and over again he was severely chastised, not only for his own wild deeds but very often also for those of others, which were wrongly charged to him on the principle that once a dog has a bad eye, though you have no proof, of the delinquency of others.

He used to tell many droll stories of those days; amongst others how on one occasion he managed with great difficulty to get astride a pig, which, no doubt resenting its unusual burden, ran wildly through the streets. Great was the consternation whilst in this ludicrous position to see a priest who knew him coming in his direction.

Another time he made good use of his wits in a public school. In school he had merited, punishment. Flogging was the usual form inflicted in those days. The process was peculiar and drastic. The delinquent was made to divest himself of his outer garments, so that there was scarcely any protection against the rod.

When the flogging was over, he was put on the back of one of the older and stronger boys. The flogging was generally administered with a light hand. When young Burke was preparing for the ideal he contrived, without being seen, to put a big pin between his teeth. Scarcely had a few strokes fallen upon him when he struck it into the neck of the boy on whose back he was, with the result, as he used to say, that the poor fellow, yelling with pain, dropped his burden "like a hot potato."

Like most wild boys, he had little malice. He had some, however, as the following incident will show: Once while "flogging" a boy on the flags before a grocer's store, the grocer himself came out and, in a fit of rage, drew a switch viciously across the poor boy's neck and cheek. Young Nick determined to be even with him. The grocer was that day having his store front and town and countryman who was peddling turf; told him that his father wanted a creel; piloted him carefully to the grocer's store front, and ordered him to tumble his creel right against the hall door; then directed him to go into the office and ask his father "for payment." The grocer came out, and to his amazement and rage saw his newly painted hall door and store front beautifully shaded with turf mould. Needless to say, Nicholas Anthony was at a safe distance, watching to see whether the merchant's face was as highly colored as it had been a few hours previous, when he drew his switch across his cheek and neck. Young Nick had his innings and won.

Notwithstanding his mischievous pranks, however, those who knew what lay beneath the gay exterior were not surprised when he expressed a wish to enter the Dominican Order. On the 29th of December, 1847, he was clothed with the habit of the Friars Preachers in the convent of Perugia, in Italy. It is worthy of note that the Archbishop of that see at the time was he who years after, under the name of Leo XIII, sat upon the Chair of Peter. More than once the Archbishop—knowing that young Burke spoke French fluently even at that early age, sent for the "young Irish novice," and the future Pope and he whose fame as a preacher was to be world-wide used to converse in that language. Before the end of his stay of two years in Perugia the young Irish student received minor orders at the hands of Archbishop Pecci.

He then went to Rome, where he continued his studies in the Convent of the Minerva. At the time a part of that religious house, like others in the Eternal City, was used as a barracks by the French soldiers. An amusing story was told as by Father Burke himself of a practical joke he played upon them. One day, as he was looking down upon the cloister, he saw a number of the soldiers scattered about, some walking, others lying on the ground, all chatting and enjoying themselves, but prepared for any emergency. It was a time of sudden alarm. No one knew when the revolutionists might break out. Suddenly the word of command rang out clearly in the noiseful air. I forget what it was. I think it was a call to arms, something like the order, "Saddle and horse," in the British army. There was a great commotion among the sons of Mars. All were in expectation, awaiting the advent of him who had given the word of command. But no one came. It was a practical joke of young Burke. A strict inquiry was instituted by the French officer in command of the garrison. The identity of the culprit, however, was never discovered.

About this time Burke met Cardinal Wiseman, who, when speaking of him to others, said, "That young man has a wondrous power of inspiring affection; he will be a great priest some day." So great was the opinion entertained by his superiors of his piety and talents that he was ordained priest in 1851 to the parish of St. Andrew's, in London. He had some rare experiences at this time. As the monastery was the first opened in England since the time of the so-called Reformation, many non-Catholics visited it, anxious no doubt to see what manner of men the friars were. It happened one day that a party of three or four called. Father Burke, who had been prior to meet them, invited them to continue his journey. It was during his stay in Woodchester that he was ordained priest on Holy Saturday, March 26, 1853, and stood an examination for his degree of Lector, which, as the Dominican Order is equivalent to that of Doctor in Sacred Theology.

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The conversation turned on the celibacy of the clergy. The spinster plainly gave it as her opinion that the state was an impossible one, and she appeared to look upon those professing it as hypocrites. Father Burke listened patiently as she expatiated, "holsted"—upon the back of one of the older and stronger boys. The flogging was generally administered with a light hand. When young Burke was preparing for the ideal he contrived, without being seen, to put a big pin between his teeth. Scarcely had a few strokes fallen upon him when he struck it into the neck of the boy on whose back he was, with the result, as he used to say, that the poor fellow, yelling with pain, dropped his burden "like a hot potato."

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The great honor conferred upon him of being one of a commission of five appointed for the revision of the Rules and Constitution of his Order, a work involving no little trouble at many of them, dating back to medieval times, needed judgment and adaptation to modern life.

And now comes the crowning part of Father Burke's life, his visit to America. He was sent in 1871 to the United States as representative of the General Chapter of his Order. He expected to be absent only a few weeks, but did not return to Ireland for eighteen months.

When his work as "Visitor" of the houses of his Order in the States was finished and he was about to return to Ireland, it may be truly said a crisis arose with regard to the Irish race. Charles Anthony Froude, historian of the Irish race, had appeared upon the scene. He told the Americans that the "mere Irish" got what they deserved. He had come, he said, "to appeal to an American jury for a verdict of justification of England's occupation of Ireland, and of her administration of the affairs of that country. He had a brilliant reputation. All were afraid to meet him, not that they had not a good case, but that the time was short. Father Burke was asked to take up the work. He retired for a few days to the residence of a friend, who is now an illustrious member of the American hierarchy, and there in a well-stocked library prepared himself for the fray.

His arguments are well known. Froude's arguments were shattered, and the cause of Ireland was vindicated. Thenceforth Father Burke's short career in the States was that of which the most exalted might be proud. A sumptuous banquet was given in his honor in New York, at which all that was representative of the Empire City was present. He was the lion of the day. I heard an amusing story from good authority which shows perhaps more than anything else what a popular idol he was with the Irish in America. He had his hair cut on one occasion by a barber in New York. That barber shrewdly what he was selling Father Burke's hair (?) long after the Reverend Father had bid good-bye to the land of the Stars and Stripes.

Banqueting, however, occupied only a small portion of Father Burke's time. He preached and lectured constantly. The net proceeds of his sermons and lectures amounted to at least £40,000. Of all the money his lectures and sermons in the States realized, not more than £4,000 came into the hands of his Order. The remainder of the big sum was handed over to churches, orphanages, and convents in the United States.

Amongst pleasant memories he had of his visit to America were those of the meetings he had with Longfellow and Jefferson Davis, formerly President of the Confederate States during the Civil War. It was in Memphis at a private dinner that he met the latter, who happened to be seated near him at table and with whom he was greatly impressed. It was Father Burke's great privilege to receive an invitation to speak on the floor of the House of Representatives. I believe only one Catholic ecclesiastic had previously had that honor conferred upon him—Bishop O'Connell, S. J. Parnell also got the invitation and accepted it. Father Burke intended to appear in the House in the habit of his Order; he was ordained otherwise, England's faithful garrison in Ireland, many of whom were and are what we call "Catholics," got alarmed at the impetus given by his lectures to the cause of Irish nationality. A complaint was made to his superior, and he was ordered to return immediately to Europe. Before the order reached him the superior, who was in his last illness when he issued it, had died, and the news reached Father Burke by cablegram. Many a person might have said to himself in like circumstances, "I am no longer bound to obey the order now that he who issued it is dead." Father Burke did not argue in this way; but

Without a murmur the obedient priest ascended the pulpit and preached as he had been ordered. He considered it one of his best sermons. He was ordered to Ireland in 1855 to begin a work similar to that which he had so ably accomplished in Woodchester. It was in September, 1859, that he preached his first famous sermon. It was the opening of the Church of the Star of the Sea in Sandymount, County Dublin. In 1834 he was appointed rector of San Clemente, in Rome. In the following year he was called upon to take up the course of sermons begun by the Cardinal, Maria del Popolo, in the Church of St. Maria del Popolo, as the latter was hastily summoned to England to the deathbed of Cardinal Wiseman. Later on he preached the Lenten Conferences of Santa Maria del Monti, and Santa Maria degli Angeli. He returned to Ireland at the end of 1867, and in May, 1869, when at the height of his fame, he delivered an oration which occupied two hours in delivery in presence of some fifty thousand spectators, on the occasion of the removal of the remains of O'Connell to the crypt beneath the round tower in Glasnevin. When Dr. Leahy, O. P., Bishop of Dromore, was setting forth for the Vatican Council in 1870, he selected Father Burke as theologian to accompany him in the journey. During the sitting of the Council he lived in San Clemente, as did also the late Dr. Moriarty, Bishop of Kerry, and Dr. Errington, formerly coadjutor to the Archbishop of Westminster. A certain English gentleman held brilliant receptions in Rome during the Council. These were attended by many of the Bishops and priests. Amongst those who visited the house from time to time was Father Burke. He discovered that a special room had been fitted up in Oriental style for the Eastern Bishops, many of whom would sit there and smoke their hookahs with the exchange of scarcely a word. The quiet of the place appealed to him rather than the talk and laughter of the salon. He often retired to it, sitting down in Eastern style like his companions; his horror one day when the door was suddenly thrown open and he heard the voice of the host saying: "This way, my lord, if you please. I will have the pleasure of introducing you to some of the Eastern Bishops."

"Oh! oh! is this a smoking room?" replied his lordship, Dr. McEvilly, the Bishop of Galway. "There was nothing for it but to brazen it out. Father Burke hoped that as the room was filled with smoke, and he sat like the Easterns, he might escape observation. But it was not to be. On came the host and his guest, the former making the introductions: "Your lordship, this is the Patriarch of So-and-so. Allow me to introduce you," etc., etc. When the two came opposite to Father Burke, the gentleman of the house knew not what to say. Father Burke was sitting like a statue. Dr. McEvilly was bewildered. He peered through the thickening smoke. He could scarcely believe his eyes. "Is that you?" he cried. "Who else could it be, my lord?" replied Father Burke. "What in the name of goodness are you doing here?" asked his lordship. "Oh, my lord, I come here occasionally to have a smoke and a few words with the Patriarch of So-and-so."

"You are joking," said Dr. McEvilly. "Let me hear you talking to His Grace." Now Father Burke was gifted with an acute musical ear, and years before he had readily acquired, through intercourse with a Chinese Dominican novice in Rome, and other Oriental knowledge of the Chinese language. Taking up the challenge of Dr. McEvilly, he turned towards the Eastern Bishop and addressed him in what appeared to be the articulate language. The Eastern turned round, looked at Father Burke, uttered some words—very probably it was, "What are you saying?" then he raised his hand to his pipe. "You are joking, my lord," said the remark of Dr. McEvilly to Father Burke. "Let me hear you talking to His Grace." Now Father Burke was gifted with an acute musical ear, and years before he had readily acquired, through intercourse with a Chinese Dominican novice in Rome, and other Oriental knowledge of the Chinese language. 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