

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

BIDDY'S PEARL.

"Biddy, can you come and settle me a bit more easy?"

"Surely, father," and the finely built Irish peasant girl turned from the doorway of the humble cabin and went towards the spacious chimney-corner, where close to a very small heap of smouldering turf ashes on the open hearth, an old man was leaning back in an oaken chair, breathing heavily.

"It's very cold, Biddy, and there's more rain coming, I'm thinking; every bone in my body aches."

"Indeed, you are right," said Biddy, and a tear stole down her cheek, as, after raising the old man and giving him a cup of warm milk, she went to the door again and looked out.

What did she see? The grand old Donegal mountains, which she had leaved from childhood; the little bay on whose pebbly strand she had played many a game with her brother, who was now lying under the sad sea waves (for he had been drowned at sea), not looking blue and sunny to-day, but beginning to swell with angry wavelets; and the faces, too, of those mountains, always lovely in weather, would soon be hidden from view. For a lowering sky, filled with rolling rain-clouds, and scudding before a southerly breeze, was already blurring the outline of their grand old heads.

It had been a long, cold winter, and spring seemed as if it was never coming. The crop of potatoes in their acre of ground had failed; the stormy weather had made fish scarce; and her father had been so ill all winter, that she had little time to earn any money by "sprigging" tea-cloths and white linen blouses for the big Belfast agents. In her mother's lifetime all had been different. Father had been strong and well then, and able to go out fishing and manage his bit of vegetable ground with a profit, while mother looked after the house; she herself had earned a nice sum by "sprigging" most of the day. Now, mother was dead, and brother Ned—the mainstay afterwards—drowned, father ill, and nothing coming in to keep body and soul together.

There were no rich people about—a few well-to-do tradesmen lived in the seaside town seven miles off—but there was no one near to give them help, even if she had put her pride in her pocket, and, for the sake of her poor sick father, begged for it.

Things looked very black indeed; there was not a particle of turf in the house, and the man of whom she had had the last load would give no more till she had paid what was now owing—four and sixpence; for that was the price per load. And yet, father was cold and ill; what was to be done? There was nothing in the house to eat either, except a handful of Indian meal and a few bad potatoes left from their scanty store. All the money she could scrape together had gone to pay the rent last week, and now it seemed as if things had got to their very worst, and that there was no heaven or God over all.

Yet as Biddy mused thus, the grand old mountains, as they reared their heads above the storm, seemed to repeat to her the one hundred and twenty-fifth Psalm: "They that put their trust in the Lord, shall be even as the Mount Zion, which may not be removed, but standeth fast for ever. The hills stand about Jerusalem, even so standeth the Lord round about His people, from this time forth for evermore."

... O well, O Lord, unto those that are good and true of heart." Biddy felt glad that her mother had taught her to learn so much of the Bible by heart, for she was not often able now to go to the little Protestant church four miles off. The parson had been very ill all the winter, so he had

not been able to come to them, or she might have consulted him as to some way out of their troubles. And the verses of Scripture she had often repeated to her father, when in the dead of night he had called her up to give him a cooling drink and soothe his feverish, anxious mind, what a comfort they had been to him! Well, even to-day something might turn up to help them. She would not despair. And following up the Psalm, the verse of an old German hymn, also learnt in childhood, came to her mind:

"God gives! there is no fear
That I of want shall die;
Though hunger come right near,
Mercy is still more nigh.

He has yet bread—
In thirsty deserts well supplied;
In days of famine satisfied."

Yes, she would trust in the Lord, and He would provide. She must just do what she could to meet the day's needs. A few wild (gorse) bushes would keep the fire going and her father warm for to-day, and tomorrow's need must be left in God's hands. In every spare moment she had gathered and dried pieces of the prickly furze, and as she brought them in and spread them with almost reckless bounty on the open hearth, she felt rewarded by seeing the old man's face brighten at the cheerful blaze as he spread out his withered hands to catch the grateful warmth.

"See, father," she said, "there's a grand fire, and now I'm going to leave you for a bit. I reckon there'll be a tidy few cockles and mussels on the rocks this morning. I'll get them before the tide comes in, and boil them for our dinner. With the praties and meal they'll be tasty."

The old man nodded assent. He liked Biddy to go gathering shell-fish. As she brought them in, the fresh salt smell brought back memories of his rearing days, when Biddy's mother had been alive.

Biddy hurried away. She could not leave her father alone for long. Along a rain-drenched lane, across a marshy field, where the full fury of the blast cut her like a knife, she entered a rough steep roadway, leading to the shore, and was soon on to the rocks. There were few cockles, but plenty of mussels—sometimes not one was to be found. The Lord was good; He had provided a dinner at any rate for to-day, and she would trust Him about the turf. Pat Nolan, who sold it for four and sixpence a load, said, if she could come and fetch it, a creel at a time, it would only be three and sixpence. Perhaps he would let her have one creel on credit if she told him how things were. She would pay him the first bit of "sprigging" she got. Orders for "sprigging" had been scarce lately; financial matters had been bad in America, and the Belfast agents said that had affected the "worked" linen by fits and starts; please God, if father would take a turn, she would try and get on the list of regular workers again.

She felt cheerful altogether as she brought in the shellfish to boil. A rift seemed already opening in the cloud of despair. The shell-fish were soon cooked, and then thrown out in fine Irish fashion on the bare table. Biddy, with deft hands, had selected the finest for her father's repast, when a wonderful thing happened. As she cleared one particular mussel from its shell, a big shiny substance rolled out onto the table.

In a moment, with all the keen instinct of an old fisherman, the old man cried out, "A pearl, Biddy! a pearl! good luck to ye, my girl. I myself never found a finer in foreign parts."

Yes, true enough, it was a pearl of considerable value. Biddy was not long in going to the town seven miles

off, and selling it to the local jeweller for a sovereign. It was worth more, he said; but then, it would have to be properly polished and set before he could dispose of it. A pound down she could have if she liked. So Biddy accepted the offer. She bought "sprigging" work in the town to do that she could sell at a profit, and several necessities for her father, and last of all she visited Pat Nolan, and brought home a creel of turf on her shoulders, knowing that there was still money enough left to buy more till the cold weather should have gone. And, as she stepped across the Donegal mountain passes, you could have heard her singing:

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform,
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head."

WHY THE LIONS STOPPED
THE RAILROAD.

Siriba station has made history for itself by the numerous attacks on the station by lions. It was a matter of common occurrence at one time for the railway traffic manager to receive urgent "clear-the-line" messages over the wires, such as:

"Traffic manager Nairobi: Lions on platform—train approaching—pointsman up water tank—lions won't let down—station master in office—cannot give line clear to oncoming train—please arrange."

"Traffic manager Nairobi: Wire station master Makindu to instruct driver up mixed to approach station here with caution, as four lions on platform in charge. Am powerless—please arrange," etc.

The traffic manager has many such messages, pasted into a book in his office as a memorial of the time when lions disorganized the traffic of the Uganda Railway at Simba.

It was at Simba that Capt. Stigand, F. Z. S., F. R. G. S., made himself famous a few years ago by sitting up all of one moonlight night on the water tank in order to rid the station house of several lions that were continually harassing the railway staff. He waited his chance until the early hours of the morning, when out on the platform stalked a fine lion with two lionesses in attendance. He fired and killed the lion; the others escaped after he had mortally wounded one lioness. Later the other lioness returned to look for her mate, and as she appeared in the open, Capt. Stigand fired again, wounding her. As she dragged herself off into the bush, he climbed down from his place of vantage, in order to follow her up, but he had not gone far into the long grass before the wounded animal sprang out suddenly and brought him down, mauling terribly his left arm and shoulder. Then raged a terrific struggle for mastery between the captain, who was a powerful man, and the lioness maddened with pain and rage in the last struggle for existence. The fight ended when Capt. Stigand, with his right arm freed, hit the lioness in the jaw, breaking her jaw bone. He was found the next morning by his servants in an unconscious condition, with the dead animal across his body.

Capt. Stigand lived, but it was a close call. He is still shooting big game in Africa—W. Robert Foran, in Circle Magazine.

"I'm sure I don't know why they call this hotel The Palms. Do you? I've never seen a palm anywhere near the place."

"You'll see them before you go. It's a pleasant little surprise the waiters keep for the guests on the last day of their stay."