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IRELAND AND THE IRISH.

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CHAPTER 1ST.

Some apology may be necessary for the present attempt to follow in the footsteps of many popular writers who have brought before the public works descriptive of the manners and peculiarities of Ireland and its inhabitants—but the subject is still far from being exhausted, for society like a Kaleidoscope presents to every one who views it attentively, new and strange combinations, and where can greater variety be met with than in the Irish character, teeming like the clime in which it is formed with brilliant and beautiful contrasts—it has been remarked that the dispositions of a people will be found to assimilate to the natural features of the land they inhabit, and we imagine we can trace in the chequered character of the Irish a reflection of the varied aspect of the country. Their exuberant gaiety—their deep sadness—their warm affections; their smiles and tears, their love and hatred, all reminds us forcibly of the lights and shadows of their landscapes, where frowning precipices and quiet glens, wild torrents and tranquil streams, lakes and woods, sales and mountains, sea and shore, are all blended by the hand of nature beneath a sky now smiling in sunshine, now saddening in tears. The traveller who has devoted his attention to Ireland must look back with pleasure to the hours he has passed in the beautiful valleys and scenery with which it abounds, where it is rare to pass a single mile without encountering an object to which some marvellous fiction is attached; where the fairies people every wild spot, and the Banshee is the follower of every old family, where the little Leprechaun is, if not to be seen, to be heard of in every solitary glen. Nor can the wanderer in that country amongst the pleasing expressions he has received, fail to remember the social dispositions of the people as shewn in their enthusiastic love of music and dancing; with them dancing is a natural expression of gaiety and exuberance of animal spirits, indicative of their ardent temperament; even poverty and its attendant evils, have not been able to extinguish the fondness of the peasantry for this amusement.

Their love of music is still more remarkable, it is the genius of the people that by an irresistible impulse prompts them to give vent to their feelings of mirth or sadness in the expressive language of the soul. Song seems to be an Irishman's nature, if he be merry he sings "because he can't help it," if sorrowful "because it lightens the trouble at his heart." The peculiar character of the Irish music must strike even an indifferent observer, alternately joyous and pathetic, soothing and abrupt, mingling bursts of exhilarating liveliness with strains and cadences of the most touching melancholy. The spirit of sorrow seems to sit upon the chords of Ireland's harp, and though it still gives forth

"The light notes of gladness,"

we feel the painful truth of the poet's passionate address to it when he says:

"So oft hast thou echoed the deep sigh of sadness,
That e'en in thy mirth it will steal from thee still."

This mingling of the wild and beautiful, of gloom and sunshine which distinguishes the scenery, the climate and the history of Ireland has impressed its character upon her music, and thrilling through her exquisite melodies awakens emotions in the heart of the listener which none but those who have experienced them can comprehend. One of the most popular writers on Irish subjects describes the Irish peasant as a warm-hearted, hot headed affectionate creature, the very fittest material in the world for either the poet or the agitator, capable of great and energetic goodness, sudden in their passions, variable in their tempers, sometimes gloomy as the moorland sides of their mountains, but often, very often, sweet and gay as the sunlit meadows of their pleasant vales.

Curran, the celebrated lawyer and orator, in one of his beautiful speeches describes the native hospitality of his country in the following words: "The hospitality of other countries is a matter of necessity or convention, in savage nations of the first, in polished of the latter, but the hospitality of an Irishman is not the running account of posted or ledgered courtesies as in other nations, it springs like all his other qualities, his faults, his virtues, directly from the heart, the heart of an Irishman is by nature bold, and he confides, it is tender, and he loves, it is generous, and he gives, it is social, and he is hospitable." Amongst the characteristics assigned to Irishmen, is that of courage, or a tendency to pugnacity; it has been said that while the Englishman fights for the supremacy of the sea, the Frenchman for glory, the German for his Prince, and the Swiss for pay, the son of Erin fights for pure fun, and many of the Irish comic songs cherish this popular notion; fighting is spoken of as an agreeable pastime, and knocking down a friend, an emphatic mode of expressing sincere regard for him, but although this gift of natural courage too often displays itself in noisy brawls amongst the common people, it rises in the disciplined soldier to the loftiest pitch of intrepid gallantry; the pages of history are filled with innumerable instances of the valour, steadiness and determined spirit of Irishmen in battle on shore and at sea.

Without attempting to enter into any learned disquisition on the subject of Irish literature, we may be permitted to allude to that remarkable period in the history of the country, preceding the Union with England, when the light of national genius concentrating its long scattered rays to a proper focus, threw out those sparks of moral lustre

which give

Light to a world and make a nation live.

It was then that the powerful collision of active, ardent, and energetic minds, produced that brilliant burst of talent which flung over the darkness of Ireland, a splendour to which her struggles and her misfortunes seemed only to give a stronger relief and more brilliant effect. It was then that after ages of mental depression, the Irish intellect broke out when none expected or were prepared for the splendid irruption; it was during this remarkable period that such names as Goldsmith, Steel, Sheridan, Swift, Curran, Grattan, Flood, and Burke rose from Ireland and swept like