

say, if any weapon could be found suitable for my incursions. My property was situated in a lonely part of Tipperary, about four miles from the nearest post-town. There was no house of any pretension upon it, but in its stead a small shooting-box, which in his younger days my father had occupied for a short time each year for sporting purposes. I wrote over for some one to put this "box" in habitable order, and intimated that I was about to come over for a fortnight's shooting. I thought it, on the whole, better to say nothing about the rents, but to arrange this matter subsequently in confidential interviews with my tenants.

It was in the beginning of September that I crossed St. George's Channel. My uncle accompanied me to the steamer. I could have wished him to come farther. His military training would have been invaluable. But it seemed that his honor somehow depended on his kicking a brother officer that same evening at the United Fire-eater's Club, and this operation, with its probable consequences, would require all his time and thoughts for the present. His last words to me were (I leave out the *hors-d'œuvres* with which he was wont to garnish his discourse); "Give it them hot, Tony, my boy. Load with slugs, and aim low. That'll tickle them, I promise you."

When the steamer was out at sea, and I began to ponder this advice, I confess I more than ever regretted that my gallant uncle had not come with me to set the example of putting it in practice. I had never been much of a sportsman. I hardly knew what slugs (except in a horticultural sense) were, and the aiming low was, after all, a very indefinite injunction. "Low" was such a purely relative term. How low was I to aim? Above all, why was I necessarily to aim at all, and at whom? Was I to commence a promiscuous fire over my estate on my first appearance amongst my devoted tenantry? And was the "Give it them hot" an historical reminiscence of General Elliot and the siege of Gibraltar, and meant to have a literal application, or a mere mode of metaphorical expression? Yes; I could have wished that my uncle had postponed the vindication of his honor—by the by, the event never found its way into the papers—and accompanied me on my difficult mission.

It is true, I was not alone. I was attended by my body-servant, a man whom I had selected for his gigantic stature and (presumably) corresponding strength and courage. Intended that he should play the part of the executive, whilst I reserved for myself all legislative functions. I also had with me an immense retriever, a good-sized setter—pointers are of no use in Tipperary—and a couple of spaniels. As equipment, we had a light rifle, two double-barrelled guns, a revolver apiece, and a loose assortment of bowie-knives and knuckle-dusters.

It was very nasty weather when we arrived. It seemed to me as if the shooting-box stood on a little tuft in the middle of a swamp. I was driven by a man in a frieze coat, who eyed me from time to time askant in a manner suggestive of sudden death. There was something very like the outline of a pistol in the left-hand pocket of his coat. As I know now that he was one of my tenants who had paid no rent for fifteen years, I consider I had a most fortunate escape. At the least he might have upset me in the hope of cancelling all arrears.

As a matter of fact, however, I was not upset, except morally. The door of the shooting-box was opened by a woman who really seemed to me, with all my respect for her sex, a perfect monster of ugliness. I gasped for breath when I saw her. If I know anything of physiognomy, and I once got a prize for it at school—no; that, now I think of it, was for physiology—that woman had either actually or potentially committed every crime of which a woman is capable. I shuddered, not from fear, but from loathing, and passed into the house.

I call it house, but really it was more in the nature of a cottage. It contained only four rooms, two below and two above. Of those below, one was the kitchen, the other the reception-room. The two upper chambers were bed-rooms; and it is a remarkable instance of the eccentricity of the Irish character, as evidenced even in house-building, that in addition to the interior staircase there was at the back an external one of stone, leading to one of these bed-rooms. As I don't much care to have people walking up outside-staircases into my bed-room when I am asleep, I at once told John—his real name was Albert Edward—that that would be his apartment. He grinned in a feeble and foolish manner, but said nothing.

I can't say I felt comfortable that first night. The house seemed to me so utterly defenceless. The front door, which ought to have been of stout oak thickly studded with nails, was a mere thin plank of deal. The windows had no fastenings, and though there were shutters, they were very weak and rickety. Then the wind howled in a way I never heard in England. The old woman's conversation was not more cheerful than her face. A good many people, according to her account, had come to grief at different times in the bog behind the house. If you trod on a soft place, you descended through a kind of slush a depth of sixty feet at least, and never came up again. Then it seemed that my father's former agent had been the last person to occupy the house, and his "potting" had been performed from behind the hedge which bounded the road to the front-door. So, as the old woman observed, it wasn't all wind that we heard; some of it was ghosts.

I was really glad when the horrid old thing said she must go. She belonged to a cottage

about half a mile off, or perhaps I should say the cottage belonged to her. She too was one of my tenants, in so far as condescending to squat on my property could make her one. I never heard that she had been at any time insulted by a call for rent.

When she had gone, John and I sat for some time by the kitchen fire drinking whisky. Then I made him load all the fire-arms, and we prepared to go to bed. We distributed the dogs throughout the house. I took into my room the retriever, as being the biggest. John possessed himself of the setter as his companion for the night. The two spaniels were given the range of the rooms and entrance passage down stairs. Then I bolted my door, and, with the retriever on a mat before it and my weapons within easy reach of my bed, attempted to sleep. It was not however, till morning dawned that I succeeded. I need scarcely say it was not timidity that kept me awake. It was the actual noise of the wind and the uncomfortable sensations always excited in finely-strung organizations by a strange bed.

The next day I formed a sudden and, as I thought, sagacious resolution. I would make the personal acquaintance of my tenantry, and study their characters and habits before I commenced the business which had brought me to Ireland. By way of a beginning, I determined to take vigorously to shooting. I did not think it necessary to mention this to my uncle, when writing to announce my arrival. It is so difficult to explain things properly in a letter.

I got the old woman to provide me with a guide. It seemed that there were two tolerably safe approaches to my abode; the one the road I had come last night from the post-town, the other a less formal way leading to the nearest gentleman's house. I chose the latter, meaning to diverge from time to time whenever a "gamey bit" should present itself. I only got one shot—at a jack snipe. He dropped, not indeed at the instant I fired, though very soon afterwards; but it was in such a dangerous part of the bog that we were obliged to leave him.

About a mile and a half from my "box" there was a very pretty little hill, on which stood a well-built and comfortable-looking house. It was inhabited, so my guide told me, by a Mr. O'Shindy, a very fine Irish gentleman of the old school, and his family. The ancestors of Mr. O'Shindy had, it appeared, at some remote period of Ireland's history, governed that part of the country according to the laws of tanistry, and their descendants had in consequence the local status of kings, queens, princes, or princesses, as the case might be. Moreover, in view of this state of affairs, their tenantry had fewer conscientious scruples with respect to the payment of rent than the tenantry of Saxon proprietors, and the O'Shindies were in consequence in very comfortable circumstances.

On all relating to the O'Shindies the guide was very communicative. According to his account, and it seemed to me he repeated the assertion with an offensive emphasis of comparison on the personal pronoun, "He was a rare gentleman." About Mrs. O'Shindy there was less effusion of sentiment, unless indeed the description of her as "a bit soft" may be viewed in that light. But the young and only daughter seemed to stir all the poetry of my guide's fine Celtic nature. She was as beautiful as she was clever, and more amiable than either. Then, too, she had such a "sperrit." She rode better to hounds than any other lady within fifty miles, and had on several occasions distinguished herself for her almost masculine courage.

As I heard all this, it was not in human nature but that the thought should slide into my mind. "To judge by this description, how exactly Miss O'Shindy and myself would suit each other! She is famous for her courage; so am I. She will bear of the hazardous mission in which I am even now engaged, and this cannot fail to give her the most favorable impression of my character."

Just as this thought was passing through my mind, we had reached a kind of hedge in which there was a gap. Still meditating, I passed through the gap, and was advancing slowly, when I saw the figure of an old gentleman with white hair some way in front of me, and became aware that this figure was not only shouting vehemently, but also brandishing a stick with extreme fury. The fine instinct of the gentleman, which never deserts me for a moment, at once told me that I was an intruder, and led me to withdraw with perhaps even more rapidity than was consistent with graceful motion. But the old gentleman was not to be thus appeased. He bore down upon the scene of action with considerable velocity, and, as he came nearer, I could see that even my uncle's face had no pretension to compete with his in crimson glory. There seemed no doubt that, without even intending it, I had been already carrying out my uncle's injunction and "giving it them hot," for certainly anything hotter than the countenance of the new-comer I had never up to this time beheld.

"By the blood of all the O'Shindies," he began, as soon as he got within easy speaking distance, "I'll teach ye to trespass upon me property—under me very nose too!"

I dislike a man who shouts very close to you, so I drew back a few more paces, and then said:

"I am sure, Mr. O'Shindy, you will excuse the error of a stranger."

"Error of a stranger, indeed!" cried the old gentleman, more violently than before. "What business have strangers in Ireland at all, sir?"

Tell me that. Isn't it enough that ye've reduced me property bit by bit, but ye must come trampling with scorn on what yet remains?"

Mr. O'Shindy did not talk with much tergiversation, but his indignation made him thrill his 'r's, in a way which would have been alarming to any one less courageous than myself.

I did not know what to answer. I had not knowingly deprived him of any portion of his ancestral estates; but then I could not but see that it was very probable, from what my guide had told me, that all that property which I now called mine had, at some former epoch, belonged to the O'Shindy royal-family. So it really seemed as if in this respect he had some cause of complaint, and as to "trampling with scorn on what remained," there was no doubt I had trespassed, and I was well aware that my habitual carriage was so lofty—especially since I had taken my degree—that it might not impossibly convey to the mind of a stranger some idea of contempt. So, considering all this, I drew back yet a little farther, and remained silent.

The guide came to the rescue.

"This, yer honor, is a gentleman as has come over from England to collect his rents," he said, in a brogue which I despair of reproducing on paper; and at the same time I thought I detected him exchanging a significant glance with Mr. O'Shindy.

"Oh, if that's the case," said the latter, rather grimly, "he's not likely to be here very long, and it's a pity he shouldn't have his fling."

There seemed to me to be some latent meaning in the old gentleman's speech, but taken literally it was harmless enough. I had no intention of remaining very long, and it was therefore only considerate to let me see all I wanted, or as Mr. O'Shindy metaphorically expressed it, to "have my fling."

I found afterwards that this gentleman had inherited from his kingly ancestors an uncomfortable habit of flying into a tremendous rage on very slight provocation. His passion, however, was apt to go as suddenly as it came, and this was the case now.

"I am afraid," he said, with a change of manner which startled me almost more than his recent fury—"I am afraid you must think my mode of address rather abrupt, Mr. —Mr.?"

"Aldred," I suggested stiffly.

"Aldred," continued the old gentleman. "The fact is, this spot is at certain times overrun with tourists, who have no right to be in the neighborhood. But you, as I gather, are our nearest neighbor, and under these circumstances my first duty, as well as pleasure, is to offer you my poor hospitality."

I think I should have declined this obliging offer if I had not at that moment caught sight of a white dress fluttering behind the hedge which enclosed Mr. O'Shindy's lawn. The old gentleman seemed to divine my thoughts, for he said, "My mother and daughter will be very happy to make your acquaintance."

I could not resist this renewed invitation, so we went together towards Mr. O'Shindy's house. On entering the garden we found ourselves face to face with two ladies. The elder was one of the very oldest-looking old ladies I had ever seen. Mr. O'Shindy himself appeared quite juvenile beside her. The other was a young lady of two or three-and-twenty, whose appearance was all that my guide's description had led me to expect.

Mr. O'Shindy introduced me to the ladies as Mr. Aldred, who had come to Ireland to collect his rents.

"He's very young," said the old lady, whom I now remembered the guide to have described as "a bit soft." "And he's very like poor Mr. Gathers."

Mr. Gathers was the agent who had had the misfortune to be "potted."

"Well, really," said Mr. O'Shindy, laughing, "there can't be such a very great resemblance, as poor Mr. Gathers was past fifty when he died, and this gentleman cannot be more than five-and-twenty."

"Fifty and five-and-twenty!" snorted the old lady contemptuously. "Why, how you talk, Matthew! Young people are always alike. It's only age that brings out the individual. Come now, can you tell the difference between a small child of four and a big child of two?"

Mr. O'Shindy was compelled to own that he would not lay heavy odds on his powers in this respect, and the old lady declared herself satisfied. Her own age gave her, of course, an authority in such matters at least equal to that of two ordinary individuals.

Meanwhile I had been blushing and stammering in front of Miss O'Shindy. I imagined that a lady of two-and-twenty is a good deal older than a man of five-and-twenty. At any rate, she took the lead in our dialogue. She seemed, notwithstanding my embarrassment, to be favorably impressed with me, for she said, with an air of the utmost sincerity:

"I do so admire your courage, Mr. Aldred."

I was not, then, deceived. Courage I had always known to be my strong point, and it was already producing on her the effect I desired. I guessed, of course, to what she referred; but not knowing what else to say, and being at the moment on the verge of conversational syncope, I caught at the nearest monosyllable:

"Why?"

She smiled, oh, so prettily, showing such sweet little rows of pearls, and said:

"Because, as no doubt you know, it's very dangerous indeed for an Englishman to collect his rents about here."

"What do they do?" I asked; for there was

a precision in her speech which brought the idea of danger very forcibly before me.

"Oh, you know, Mr. Aldred," she answered, with another smile. "What did they do to poor Mr. Gathers?"

It seemed to me rather odd that she should smile at the recollection of such a melancholy occurrence. But then, I suppose, in Ireland one gets so used to these things.

We had a good deal more conversation; but I confess the fate of Mr. Gathers occupied my thoughts during the whole time. I am always ready to meet my man in fair fight, but to be "potted" from behind a hedge is neither just nor agreeable.

When I rose to take leave, Mr. O'Shindy insisted upon accompanying me home. I begged him not to incommode himself.

"Oh, I shall like the walk," he said; "and besides, there are one or two awkward hedges on your way, and it's getting darkish. My presence will be a protection."

It seemed to me when I heard this speech, uttered in the most matter-of-fact way, that things were getting very ticklish indeed. I was evidently supposed to carry my life in my hand. This might be highly honorable, but it was also a somewhat tiresome position. If only my uncle had been with me to aid me with his military experience!

On the whole, I thought it no more than justifiable diplomacy to endeavor to disabuse the mind both of Mr. O'Shindy and of my guide of the idea that I had come to collect my rents; so I turned sharp round on the latter, who was walking some paces behind, and said:

"Who told you, Rory, that I was come to collect my rents?"

"We knows it, yer honor."

"Well, you know quite wrong; such an idea never entered my head."

Rory shook his own in an ominous manner, and said:

"I allus said as how yer honor never would collect them."

The remark had evidently a double meaning. The guide did not believe my assertion, but had no doubt knowledge of some conspiracy which would effectually prevent me from carrying out my supposed purpose.

"It is a truly noble pleasantry," said Mr. O'Shindy; "but when once they get an idea into their heads, it is very difficult to eradicate. And of all ideas, the one they hate most is that of an Englishman collecting rents. That sad accident to Mr. Gathers is a case in point."

"Accident!" I exclaimed. "Was it an accident?"

"I suppose so," he said, "since no one was ever punished for it. What else are you to call it? A man sits behind a hedge for hours, and shoots nobody and nothing—a sufficient presumption that he is not there for shooting purposes. All at once the gun goes off, some one happens most unluckily to be in front of the result is—an accident. It is most unfortunate."

I must say I found Mr. O'Shindy's conversation the reverse of cheerful. Added to this, it was now almost dark. I think I must have been tired too, for my knees seemed to be giving way beneath me.

At last we reached my abode. I pressed Mr. O'Shindy to enter, but he declined. Before taking leave, however, he drew me a little apart, and said in a whisper:

"If you take your guide with you on your shooting excursions, it might be as well not to let him carry your gun. He isn't very strong, you know, and in a bad part of the bog he might slip, and it might go off in his hands. You understand."

That horrible marshy climate must have affected me; for, as Mr. O'Shindy said this, I felt a cold sweet stand out on my forehead. Then Mr. O'Shindy added:

"If you should ever want assistance in the night, or anything of that sort, you have only to come to us."

"Yes," I thought, with intense suppressed irony; "that's all. I've only to come to you, in pitch darkness, over a mile and a half of quaking bog, and pursued by a score of blood-thirsty ruffians—that's all."

"And remember we shall always be glad to see you, Mr. Aldred, for the short time that that pleasure may be possible."

Again the marshy air seized me.

"For the short time that that pleasure may be possible," I thought. Confound the old croaker!

Then Mr. O'Shindy shook hands with me in a cordial if melancholy manner, and went on his home-ward way. My first thought was to see that John was safe. He answered my call all right. Then I proceeded to dismiss the guide, paying him liberally, but telling him I should not require his services again for the next few days, by which I meant—never.

"And as to that foolish idea of yours, Rory, that I am come to collect my rents, pray get it out of your head as quickly as you can, and tell my friends about here that it's all a mistake. I've come to improve their cottages and all that."

The wretched man only shook his head gloomily. It was clear he was not convinced. I began really to think that my days were numbered.

That night the wind howled so frightfully that I could not sleep at all, but sat up with John and the four dogs, drinking whisky-punch. I don't mean, of course, that the dogs drank whisky-punch, only that they sat up, or rather lay down, with us.

The next morning I sent John to reconnoitre the hedges in the immediate neighborhood, and then set out for the town, in order to consult