

The True Witness

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SHEMUS DHU, THE BLACK PEDLAR OF GALWAY. A TALE OF THE PENAL TIMES.

CHAPTER I.

The village of Portarah lies a mile east of the Castles of Tullykeane, or, as they are often called, the "Castles of the Two Hags." The village to which our story belongs, was quite different from the present village of the same name. The latter though comfortable in the sense in which Irish villages are esteemed comfortable in this part of the country—that is, by comparison with the wretchedness of others—is no way interesting to us, save as occupying the site of the home-places of the persons of our story. That which would make Portarah and other villages of In-Connought remarkable, has passed away. Their power to attract the visit of the lover of the picturesque has died with the death of their oaks and their ash—with the death of their own original and happy inhabitants.

The people of the present Portarah, and of the other villages of Moyculleen, generally appear contented, and have a character for merry sentiment and a manner which distinguishes them from those of other parts of the county Galway; still nothing tells the traveller that this part of the country was once worthy of some attention, except the brushwood scattered here and there—the successors of the majestic forest tree—and the mouldering grey stones of the castles, hallowed in the people's minds in connection with the legends of their forefathers. The castles soon will pass away; one has already entirely fallen beneath the power of the storm, and lies in rubbish at its companion's base, and the other has partly fallen, and in a few years will follow in the ruin of its comrade—perhaps, indeed, the avarice of man may forestall the fury of the winds of heaven; and then nothing will be left to remain the after inhabitants of them but the spring in the fallen castle's foundation—the theme of many a story—which yet comes young and leaping from a far deep vein, mocking with its life and health the ruin of man's work which lies about.

There are many accounts of the origin of the castles, especially of the cause of their having been built not more than a few yards asunder. One is laughable enough and characteristic in many points of view. "Two sisters, heiresses of the O'Hallorans," as the country people tell it with humour, "could not settle the boundaries of their respective estates. They were old when the matter was settled, and found that their lands and money were lost by the expense of the law-suit. Then they agreed to build, with all their resources, two castles on the only lot of ground remaining to them, in which they would be shut in from the world which they detested, and from each other, with one condition of mutual service—that every morning and evening that they should appear at opposite windows and scold and grin at each other to their hearts content." Hence the name of the "Castles of the two Hags."

I once stood beneath a broken door-way of the castle, and thought with sorrow on its decay. I could not help given utterance to the melancholy of my feelings. "What an illustration of the saying, 'that all human things are vain!'" I said aloud. "Those who built the castles thought, perhaps, that their memories would live for ever in the works of their hands. But who knows them now? where even are their works? Aye, even at the very time of their building, the stone and the iron were decaying under their touch. What fools we are in hoping for a permanence of existence in our works; for we, first, and then our works, are no more." My soliloquy would have gone on, for I was then in a mood to think with melancholy pleasure on the mutability of things, had not a voice near me interrupted it with—"Ah, then, it's true what your honour says, God knows; we have seen enough every day to teach us what you say. Many is the thing that could me that thrush since I was a boy, and yet you see, sir, I am the same still, with one foot in the grave. I am as anxious now about the world as on the first day, when a youngster I married Shelah—the Lord be good to her. But if it was nothing else but the changes in that old castle, they ought to teach me what this world is. Many is the day that I and the other boys of the village played around its walls, and often when the old people would bid us have a care, in our love of wildness, we would climb to the very top to frighten them. I didn't think then that I would see one of the castles down before I died, and the other ready to fall; but the Lord's will be done. We as well as they had our time, and we must be satisfied." The feeling more than the eloquence of the old man affected me. There was an earnestness in his manner and voice which would excite feeling in the breast of the least sensitive. I had sometimes seen him before, but not then knowing the interest which he could create, or the fond information on the customs of his ancestors which he possessed, I had not spoken to him. He wore a felt hat with a brim larger than was usually worn by the peasantry, a broad-skirted fringed coat of dark grey, breeches of green corduroy, which were clasped according to the old fashion, on the calf with a buckle, that, from appearance, was once plated; a green-striped buff waist coat, and dark grey stockings. His linen was of remarkable cleanliness, though coarse, and adjusted with care by the aid of a black silk cravat, which had lost something of its first colour.

It was a Sunday, and the peasantry on this day, especially those who attend Mass, vie with each other in cleanliness of dress. Bryan, as he was solely called—without any cognomen to distinguish him from other Bryans of the same surname, who had many soubriquets—was one of a class yet found among our western peasantry, who unite in themselves the fine old feeling of the old times—which means, I suppose, liberal hospitality and generosity, however reckless and improvident with the common-place feeling of anxiety for future necessities. It would be folly to say that our peasantry generally have not the latter, though the romantic character of the Irishman's generous recklessness and improvidence may suffer by the substitution of the more modern feeling.

On this evening Connel occupied a triangular stool in a corner of the fire-place—his usual seat—where a plentiful supply of bog wood gave light and heat around. His house was esteemed the most comfortable in the townland. It was a well thatched cabin, which, from its outside appearance, in the form of small houses with well-plastered walls, gave an idea of comfort to the inhabitants of the country had not yet advanced. But it was not among them Connel had learned his notions of comfort and of accommodation.

ment; necessity will bring down even the wildest enthusiast's thoughts to a level with his more material fellows. This is a truth—too much, indeed, a truth—which we experience in the change of the Irishman. Want has caused not only the national shrewdness to become mean cunning in many, but has also caused the national generosity, for which Irishmen were remarkable, to degenerate into selfishness in not a few instances. Yet many, privations, among their cares and strugglings and daily bread, the generosity of feeling and the sincerity of friendship which characterized their forefathers. Bryan's countenance was one of those which strike immediately. There was no feature which expressed a feeling under cover—all was openness; yet there was a self-confidence about him—I might say, a consciousness of superiority when speaking to his equals, discernible in the steady look of his dark eye. In readiness he answered my questions about the castles and villages. He seated himself on a chiselled block of stone, which once was the key of some arch in the castle, and placing his hat on a moss-bank near him, while throwing back his long white hair from his forehead—the evening was sultry—with his native eloquence related many legends connected with the site on which we were seated.

The sun had set before I arose to depart. With regret I separated from the old man, whose fervent blessings for my safety mingled for some time with the clatter of my horses shoes. During my ride to the place where I was to spend the night, some three miles from the castle, I thought with intense pleasure over the old man's stories, yet with a regret that others could not feel them with me. It was then that the thought arose of making them known to my friends. At the time, it was not my intention to accomplish this by writing a book; but I have since, however, been induced by the counsels of my friends to give them to the public. How far they may please, I don't know. The pleasure which they have given me in writing them for those dear to me during my leisure moments, is compensation enough for any labour they could have induced. If the first simple story satisfy, or be even tolerated by, the excited palate of the present reading taste, it may possibly be followed by some of the others which I have heard.

CHAPTER II.

It is now more than a century back, when the inhabitants of Portarah were the happiest community in In-Connought. Their own resources supplied the few wants of their simple life; and the day on which their boats left home to exchange goods or make purchases in the neighboring market of Galway, was an event in their year. Yet, all the year round, there was no want of the comforts of living among them. The poorest villagers could afford, when occasion required, an addition to their usual fare in the form of a kid, or fowl, or smoked salmon, or of any other of the good things that the season supplied. Patches of sweet pasturage amid limestone rocks gave plentiful feeding to the few cows and sheep that they possessed; and the woods and lakes about them gave amusement and employment to the young men, when not otherwise engaged, and a supply of fish, wild fowl, and venison, to the winter stores of the housewives.

Fortunately for their comfort and their peace, the music and hum of more refined society seldom were a principle in their transactions with each other. Present necessity was allowed among them to give a right of using in common; and never did this liberality cause a loss to the first possessor. Day after day, and night after night, their occupations appeared the same. There was no variety in their labors or amusements, except that which the seasons brought; and yet they felt happy, because they were contented with themselves. The cold-heartedness or vice of the world—that is, of the neighboring city, which was the world to them—was known to them only through the medium of some straggler's story. And whether the straggler were beggar or pedlar, as he knew his importance, and more so, his gain, depended upon the interest that he excited, his story seldom wanted a coloring of blood and deceit to make it horrible; and his simple auditors, as they listened with eagerness to the wickedness he related, thanked God mentally that they were protected, in preference to others from such scenes.

If we except such chance visitors, and one other, whom we shall know presently, few were the means which the portarah people enjoyed of knowing the manners of the world outside of them. The visits of their pastor were those of duty, and consequently, short and far between, unless when he held stations at Easter and Christmas, and then, good man, he little thought of teaching anything but faith and contentment. We speak of the general mental and physical condition of the people of Portarah. Among them there were some exceptions to both.

It was on a November evening, and the villagers were assembled around the social fire of Connel More O'Keane; a person of some importance among them.

It was an old custom with the inhabitants of the western villages of our island, during the winter evenings, to visit in rotation each other's cabins. The custom continues still, though the feeling which dictated it has partly departed.

They meet yet, but in many instances it is more to while away the dreariness of a winter's night by gaming, or by conversation not less criminal, rather than the desire of hearing the instruction of the old, which, in former times, suggested the visit. On the occasion on which our villagers met, no house was oftener merry with the wit and joyousness of the happy group within than Connel More's.

On this evening Connel occupied a triangular stool in a corner of the fire-place—his usual seat—where a plentiful supply of bog wood gave light and heat around. His house was esteemed the most comfortable in the townland. It was a well thatched cabin, which, from its outside appearance, in the form of small houses with well-plastered walls, gave an idea of comfort to the inhabitants of the country had not yet advanced. But it was not among them Connel had learned his notions of comfort and of accommodation.

The interior of the cabin was divided into three apartments, of which the largest supplied all the necessities of its occupants, except those of sleeping room and store house. From the smoked rafters were suspended, over the heads of the visitors, in comfortable confusion, yarn and flax, nets and rods, instruments of domestic and of farming use; and, here and there, a dried salmon and smoked haunch of venison, interspersed with bacon and ham, gave notice of the comforts and of the amusements of the possessors. From lower pegs, inserted in the wall, hung the blue cloaks and red bodices of the females, and the gray jackets and under garments of frieze of the male portion of the family.

A large, rough made chest, of which only the women of the house knew the secrets, though it had neither hasp nor lock—such precautions were unknown among them—held a conspicuous place against the wall in the middle of the room, and over it were placed two or more shelves of rough boards, on which were arranged, in fanciful order, different articles of pewter, the pride of their owner, and the wonder of the other simple inhabitants of the village. On the whole, Connel's cabin possessed comforts, and displayed a superiority in the order and material of its furniture, with which none of the other cabins of the village could vie.

The owner sat, seeming to enjoy the comforts which he possessed. He was a man about fifty years old, yet in the strength of life. Years showed not their influence either on the powers of his mind or body, except in the instances of his hair being thin and silvered, and of his shape being somewhat rotund and heavy. There was about his strong-marked manly countenance an expression evidencing a disposition to communicate to his fellows the happiness which he felt. This expression, though partly the result of his natural kindness of temper, did not proceed from mere natural feeling, prompted without its possessor being conscious of it. There was thought and even deep reflection strongly mingled with the openness of Connel's countenance. His neighbours felt his superiority of mind.

Light seldom fell upon a more unsophisticated society than that which surrounded him, on the evening of which we speak.

The visitors were principally men of the village; their wives and daughters being engaged at home in their household duties. The old men were seated on low stools, nearest to the fire, though at a distance, which did not preclude the heat and light from reaching the younger portion of the meeting. Some of the latter, with their bare necks and open breasts, lounged upon the strewn hay, each engaging the attention of his neighbour with some passing conversation, or josting with the young women of the cabin, who, in a distant part of the room, hummed some plaintive air to the music of their reeds; whilst others leaning upon the upright back supports of the old men's seats, listened eagerly to their conversation, or enlivened it by some well-timed remark—all the while their short pipes silently passing from mouth to mouth, or stationary, giving a full curl of smoke to the open basket-worked chimney. A couple of hounds of the wolf-dog species, were crunched at the feet of a middle-aged woman in a red bodice and blue head gear, who was engaged near the fire knitting the stockings of the household.

Such was the scene the hospitable hearth of Connel O'Keane presented. The story or the anecdote took its rounds among the old. The jest was passed and bandied among the young; and sometimes, at the call of their host, a deep sonorous voice gave thrilling melancholy to some air connected with the real or fancied sufferings of their country. During the song the feelings of the listeners underwent a change. It was evident from the eager attention of all. The pressed lip, the erect attitude, or the dilated eye of the young man showed their excitement.

The old men raised their heads and turned towards the singer, Shemus Rue, a young man of powerful make, who was well fitted to excite interest by the energy of his manner and the depth of his voice, and at each sentiment which pleased them, they gave vent to their approbation in a cry of "saol fan aguth," and struck the floor with their sticks. I am sorry Bryan could not give me the name of the song. However, we may be sure it was one of the class whose sentiment and music have even on strangers an electric effect—for in these our country people delight—an effect often lasting longer than that, which those who sing, and are followers of the singers, feel. Such is the sudden excitability of the Irish peasant, in general, but more particularly under the influence of music, that one moment sees him expressing the joyousness of the kindest and most peaceful loving nature by laughter and good humour on his face; and the next moment, if the character of the music change, he as quickly changes with it—melancholy succeeds—stormy passion seizes on his soul, and revenge follows; but, another moment, a lively joyful note is struck, and brisk spirits, with sudden laughter, arise over the dying mournful air, and mirth and joy in their fullest sway again become rulers of the night. We do not mean by this that the Irish peasant has not a capability of enduring feeling. However, these changes of feeling and music did not happen on the present evening. Still though their host responded to the jest and to the laugh, there was an effort to be merry in the act, which did not escape the observation of his visitors, and which consequently gave, as night advanced, a solemn character to the conversation.

"Is it true, Connel," said an old man who occupied the seat nearest to him, that those of the dark faith are again commencing their wickedness?—Heaven knows even in this life of suffering, we have felt too much."

"No, Dermot," answered Connel, "I haven't heard. What now would be new with them? Have not the nobles and brave of the city been scattered? Few, I think, are now left advantageous victims for their hatred."

"Aye," but Connel, Dermot speaks truth," said one of the young men. "Your friend, Shemus Rue, was taken up by D'Arroy, and is now under sentence of death in the quay jail."

"Faith, this can't be," said Connel, suddenly agitated. "The pedlar has ever been an friend of the Connel's. I on must have heard wrong, boy—and I should have said so."

then he could not have been in the town at the time."

"I know," said the young man. "Seeing is more than hearing, and I saw Shemus Rue on this blessed day brought through the town by some of the Sasseanach soldiers. It is said he was taken at some place on the sea side, near Spiddal, where he had been plotting with strangers against the Council, and that his companions escaped."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Connel, from whose soul a heavy weight seemed to be raised by the last words of the speaker. The object of his thanksgiving, however, was mistaken! for the first speaker said to him in an undertone—

"I am glad Connel, that you rejoice that he is taken, though by our enemies. I have had my dark thoughts about him, and I was sure that he was a traitor, though I feared to speak my mind to you, knowing that you were friendly to him."

"Hush!" interrupted Connel sternly; you know nothing about him, man."

The rest of the company who overheard Connel could not be so easily silenced as the old man was. Connel would have exercised his power over them had he heard their opinion. But though the faith and sincerity of the pedlar were examined in whispers, and proved false, none ventured to assert this openly, knowing the friendship between him and Connel.

General conversation had ceased. Their host's thoughtfulness threw a damp on the hilarity of their meeting; for he sat forward in his seat, one hand supporting his head upon his knees, whilst the other was engaged in disturbing the cinders of the charred bog-wood. The old men understood the delicacy of being observers of Connel's feelings. They arose to depart, and in giving the night salutation, they aroused Connel from his thoughts. He answered shortly and hurriedly, and looking among the young men, some of whom had already taken their leave, for the first time during the night, he observed the absence of his son.

"Has Fergus been amongst us to-night?" he asked some of his family.

"No, Connel," answered the old woman in the corner. "You know he has been the entire day with the priest."

"Ha!" said Connel, aloud, with energy, forgetting that he was overheard by many. "It cannot be that he has missed the way, though the night be pitchy dark; he is not wont to be out so late. We must look to it."

The fear may appear suddenly suggested by paternal anxiety; but it was excited by some feeling of danger, of which he alone was aware. He felt more at ease, however, when some of his neighbours spoke to him of his son's acquaintance with all the by-ways of the country; his prudence in avoiding danger, and his physical capability to contend with it, even if it came suddenly; but, still there was evidently some weight upon Connel's heart, which he could not throw off, though he pretended to be at ease. The old woman was not so soon at ease. She understood Connel's hints better than any present. She had observed the agitation of his manner, in connection with his question about his son; but these thoughts were less capable of making her uneasy, than some recollection of the preceding day to which they gave birth.

The weather was natural to the month. A dull heavy vapour arose with the darkness of the evening. As the night advanced, the mist turned to rain, accompanied with a strong wind, and at the departure of the villagers, the loud moaning of the trees told of a rising storm. But we must tell why old Judith felt anxiety about O'Keane's son.

CHAPTER III.

Thanks to the advance of education—no—yes—for in it is all freedom—the period has gone by, at which the faithful historian of Galway would put in danger his fortune and life. We can now enter upon the history even of misrule in Galway without risk of injury to purse or head. But do not expect the dusty archives of the Honourable City Council of the Corporation of Galway. Indeed, we might thence get some choice specimens of their manner of government—facts and cases—the latter teaching the doctrine of forbearance for the errors—as they may be—of the political or religious creed of your neighbour; and the former so admirably illustrating that doctrine. In truth, this is not my formal intention in the present story. I will now only say why old Judith felt an interest in O'Keane's son.

We have hinted that Connel was not always an inhabitant of Portarah. Happy for him if he had been. Among the recollections which the thoughts of our younger life bring with them, none are more pleasing, or more melancholy than those connected immediately with home and with our first friends. Home! happy or unhappy home!—is memory's spell word, which amidst gaiety and pleasure, troubles and sufferings, constantly changes the character of our feelings, giving a transient light and joy to the darkened, heavy breast of some, and throwing gloom and pain upon the peace of others.

Connel often experienced the latter change, for though his adopted neighbours were kind and generous, his thoughts often went back to the place of his birth, and to the early friendships which he had formed. Oftentimes, when conversation was at the highest among his evening visitors, and when his simple hearers wondered at the knowledge he displayed, as he gave his opinion on some subject of dispute, or instructed them in the customs of the world unknown to them—I mean of Galway; he was observed to start, and become suddenly silent. This was not understood by some, it was overlooked by the villagers who loved Connel, and who had experienced amusement as well as benefit from his instruction.

Be this as it may, the rumours never reached him and he felt happier with them than he had felt among his neighbours of the town, immediately before his departure from it. However, it was said openly, and Connel gave his sanction to the report, that he was obliged to leave Galway and a flourishing business of inn-keeping, or some business of the kind, because he had been implicated with his foster-brother and patron, a respectable merchant of the town, in some affair, which gave umbrage to the town. (To be continued in our next.)

religious feelings of the city Council; and that he, after his patron's exile and confiscation of property, some fifteen years before the period of which we write, received protection from F'rench of Moyculleen, being at the time accompanied by his orphan children, a son and a daughter, the latter an infant in the arms of Judith the nurse.

It was on the day previous to the opening of our story that Judith, in the order of her weekly custom, visited an old acquaintance, whose dwelling lay some miles away in a thick wood that surrounded Portarah. Those visits were not made weekly to the same persons; for Judith, or as she was more commonly called, Judy Bawn, an agamam given either on account of her fair complexion, or more probably from the white colour of her hair, had many intimate acquaintances among the country folk. When it pleased Judy to make a particular visit, as on the present occasion, it behoved her to remain to partake of the boiled salmon and of the curds and whey of goat's milk, which were promised to be prepared in a short time for her refreshment, the time naturally was spent in gossip; though at the same time, Judy was expected, or rather was pleased to assist in the industry of the household, for the female ancestors of our peasantry had no idea, as at present, of making an idle visit.

"How is it, Judy Bawn," said an old woman, a visitor, too, who sat in a corner of the cabin, assisting to repair the meshes of a net, "that Connel keeps up such long and intimate acquaintance with Shemus Dhuv. We have heard, and that from people who know, that he is not over good; others may be pleased with him, but I don't like the looks of the man."

"Shame, old neighbor," said Judy, letting the reel fall with which she had been busily engaged; "shame, that you at your age should judge from the looks of a man. But what for that? Do you think Connel would be his intimate friend unless he was trustworthy?"

"That may be as it answers your master's purpose best," replied the old woman, tauntingly, no notion of propriety being offended at Judy's insinuation about the looks of a man, although Judy had no sinister meaning in the word; "but I will say and I don't care who takes it, that a time was, when some of my neighbours would be less likely to thrive on the looks of a man than I. I am sure, mistress, we may think as we please?"

"Aye; but not to say what you think of your betters, good woman," said Judy, with a toss of the head, indicative of the low place which her opponent held in her opinion.

"Oh! does it come to that, mistress?" retorted the old woman, throwing the ball of thread from her, and tying and undoing again with excitement the strings of her lower garment. "But, let me ask, Mistress Bawn, who are my betters?"

Judy was prepared with an answer, and an answer which would confound the unfortunate woman who dared to question her superiority over the other matrons of the country, had not the woman of the house interfered, perceiving the issue so disputable to her hospitality, which the conversation was likely to produce.

"Come, come, neighbors; it would be a nice thing, indeed, to say of Norah Finherly, that she let old friends say cross words to each other under her roof. We will eat our bread in good feeling, and to-morrow, when you think well of it, you may speak as you please. Here, Maurice, take this muggin to Judy Bawn, and the other to Mary."

"Thank you," said Judy, whose wrath was suddenly appeased not by the offering of the sweet posset and eaten cake, for we would not insinuate that she prized these comforts so highly as to sacrifice her spirit and pride to the animal satisfaction of enjoying them in peace. But Judy had her own reasons for desiring to withdraw, yet with honor, from the dispute. "I hope," she continued, "I have no grudge for any person, and that no person wishes me harm."

"In truth, avournee, you may say that," said the old woman. "But you know people cannot help hearing what others say of their friends."

The tone of conciliation in which this was spoken satisfied both parties, and they again were on as friendly a footing as when they entered the cabin.

The rays of the sun were now playing horizontally through the openings of the wood, and as Judy had some distance to go, she prepared to depart, lest the sudden November night might catch her on her way. The good woman of the cabin regretted that neither her husband nor her sons were at home to conduct Judy through the wood, for the wild deer, who now were beginning to come nearer to the villages, were sometimes troublesome to lone travellers, especially to those of the weaker sex. Judy said she had no fears concerning them, and throwing her blue frieze cloak over her head and shoulders, she left the cabin.

For some time she was engaged with the recollections of her visit and conversation which it produced. "Am I not an old fool," she thought, "to allow myself to be vexed by the remarks of that silly creature? What if I let her know something, which might injure Connel? Ah! I see I must not visit such foolish people so often; or if I do, I must not be vexed with them."

With this resolution, so creditable to her prudence she arrived at a part of the wood where the path divided. For some time she was irresolute which path she would take. Both led to Portarah, but then the nearer and easier path had not an over-good character, especially at nightfall, and Judy too strongly credited the stories of supernatural agency connected with it to entrust herself to its loneliness. For some time, as she picked her steps through the rocks and underwood of the longer path, she naturally thought on the course which gave her so much difficulty in her journey. "Am not I an old fool," again she said, as she recovered from a stumble over a concealed rut, "to give myself such labour for nothing. I cannot say my five decades, or any prayers, God help me, over these villainous rocks, and when I am at home, Connel will have the old men with him; and the youngsters will be playing and tittering. The Lord forgive me for committing this way I can't say my rosary this blessed night."

Judy's soliloquy would have gone on in the same strain if an accident did not occur, which we will relate in the next chapter.

(To be continued in our next.)