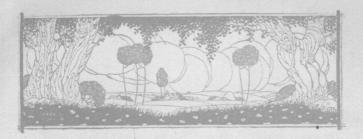


Hangman's House,

by DONN BYRNE





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Author of "MESSER MARCO POLO", "O'MALLEY of SHANGANAGH", "THE WIND BLOWETH", etc.

Illustrated by
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A FOREWORD TO FOREIGNERS

My people, messieurs 'dames, for all their romance, are a practical nation. A national novelist, to them, is not a figure to be placed in an academy in a gold-laced coat, as the French is, or compelled to wear a beard and act like a person in a play, as German and Austrian novelists, or a fellow to be ever on your guard against, to admire very slightly, very grudgingly, to be contemptuously patronizing toward, as is the English novelist to the modern Englishman. An Irish novelist gets from the Irish people a certain reverence, a good measure of kindliness, considerable latitude in conduct and thought: in fine he gets his due from a God-fearing people. But he must not forget that his first duty is homeward.

Granuaile is quite properly a jealous lady. The poet in verse or prose who prefers the foreigner is quite welcome to the foreigner—and be damned to him and them! as we say in the Gaelic. If you want to parade before foreigners, you can have the foreigner's praise, and no more. You will never know that love that Thomas

Moore knew, or Charles Lever, or Miss Edith Somerville and "Martin Ross." The poet William Yeats might not be forgiven for introducing the nine bean-rows of English suburbanity (as of Kingston-on-Thames or Sunbury, God knoweth!) into the eagle-haunted heather of Innisfree had he not written that "Ballad of Father Gilligan" that is like a violin bow across our heartstrings. And that Mister Synge, who gained so many plaudits abroad some years past, had never a "God bless the work!" from home because he would not, or could not, write an Irish play for Irish men.

The most marked difference to be found between the civilization of the city of the excellent Timothy Healy (whom God preserve!) and the civilization of the city of Pericles is this: that where the Athenian sought something intellectually new, the Dubliner, and the Galwegian and the Corkonian also, require something of proven value. The proper subject of conversation for an Irishman, you may have noticed, is Ireland. Where your average Englishman thinks that Jack Cade was a heavy-weight boxer of the reign of Henry VI, and the Wars of the Roses something like the bataille des fleurs at Nice, we know every man and every engagement in every Irish war. Our legendary heroes are household words with

us, even those whom the disciples of the English poet William Morris and the German musician Richard Wagner have fashioned for us; our babes lisp their names between debates as to the relative value of dominion and republican governments.

But apart from the population of Ireland, there are Irishmen everywhere. In New York, in the West Indies, in Monte Carlo of course, in Cairo, in Seville, yes, in Jerusalem's self I have met them, and their question to me has always been the question of General Napper Tandy to the author of "The Wearing of the Green." I don't suppose that down in their heart of hearts anybody cares a tinker's curse about politics, barring politicians. Give us good racing, cheaper cigarettes, and civil policemen, and your Lordships may sleep better of nights. . . . But back of the question of "How is old Ireland?" there is this: "Tell us, is Three-Rock Mountain as purple as ever? And are the three-year-olds as wonderful as ever as they charge up the Curragh Mile? Are there swans on the Liffey? Are the fields still green? Tell me, does the Irish wind whisper gently among the Irish trees, or was it only a dream of exile?" I can remember many years ago in Bermuda being shown the tamarisk (or was it some other sort of tree? I have forgotten) under which Thomas Moore, our poet,

used sit. Those with me were thinking of the pleasant picture of a poet sitting under the swaying branches, dreaming out some precious phrase. But from that tree I could see a greenness of fields, a billowing of land I could duplicate in many a spot in Leinster. So like Ireland it was that there was a wringing of my own heart, and I thought: this, and "At The Mid Hour of Night" are Moore's greatest poems, and of the tears near my eyes I was not ashamed. I hope this little bit of understanding will weigh on the day when I shall have to answer for many cruelties, against my gibes at his facile rhymes. . . . I have a journeyman's smattering of many literatures, but nothing touches me so much as the cry of the Irish captain grown gray and old in Tangier in the days when Charles II was king:

Dha waughee areesh may a gyart-lore mech gheena Dyim hoghee an eesh dyeem is veng areesh ogg.

[If I were set once more in the midst of my people, decay would go from me, and again I'd be young.]

I am certain that no race has for its home the intense love we Irish have for Ireland. It is more than love. It is a passion. We make no secret of it, and people gibe at us, saying, with a sneer that does not speak well of their manners, "Why don't you go back to Ireland?" Which is not

merited, for every one must know the intricate prison this life is, and how this friendship, that grave, and even the unutterable vulgarity of money matters tie us to an alien land. So that to many a million of us, and a million's sons and daughters, Ireland must be a land of dreams. We are like the children who listen about a nursery fire to a tale out of Grimm or Hans Andersen. But the children grow up, and they know-God help them !- that there was never a Cinderella, who had a magic coach, or king's daughters who danced away their slippers among enchanted trees, but our Ireland, we know, did and does live. Gentle and simple, we have all our memories, the hunt ball or the cross-roads dance. Surely there was never such gaiety, such music.

It happened that I returned to Ireland after the German War, in a period very unsettling for all countries and for ours particularly so. Many native precious things were gone. A new era has always a new civilization, perhaps better, perhaps not. Whatever remains, the old fashion of Irish novels is dead as Pharaoh. And to myself, the last traditional Irish novelist (the last, living masters, because the youngest: I have only begun my six and thirtieth year), the work of writing the last traditional Irish novel has fallen. We shall always—please God!—have Irish writ-

ers, but their models will be Scandinavian or American. Our young men have seen terrible realities, and in the Ireland of the future you must be efficient in order to live. So the school of Goldsmith and Sterne will pass, and the author will appeal to the brain instead of the heart, which is perhaps as it should be—and perhaps not. But coming home to Ireland at that time, it seemed to me that I was like some young poet of Carthage who was returning to find great Dido in her tomb, and whose work it was to set down, for men and men's sons to remember, the shining beauty of her face.

They are not in Grafton Street any more, those girls whose faces, whose silvery voices made a fair day fairer. London and Deauville and New York are the gainers. But I can remember going from College to Stephen's Greens, and seeing that street like a garden, so much of beauty did it hold. And those old men, soldiers who conquered and statesmen who ruled the world—the black years have swallowed them. Where is Parnell's brother, who was daily a pillar to be seen? and that great Greek scholar, the friend of continental kings? and poor Endymion, with his umbrellas and his swords? Have I heard the last ballad-singer, his come-all-you splitting the air? I fear I have. Soon, I suppose, even I

shall forget. When I was a boy, Sir Daniel Donelly, the great boxer, was still a memory of living men. And I can remember when Orby won the Derby stakes for Ireland, beating Woolwinder and the gallant Slieve Gallion by a length and a length and a half. Will ever another Derby winner be foaled and trained in Ireland? And will there ever be another winner of the Waterloo Cup like Lord Lurgan's great hound Master McGrath? And I can remember when looking forward we saw revolution as a gallant, chivalrous adventure, in our foolish romantic hearts. Already those great Irish regiments are being forgotten, the Inniskillen Dragoons and the Connaught Rangers. They are disbanded now, whose colors were glorious on all fields of battle. Surely it is better. They were never meant for apothecaries' wars.

So that, before all this is forgotten, I have written a book of Ireland for Irishmen. Some phrase, some name in it may conjure up the world they knew as children. . . I shall never write a "Vicar of Wakefield" or draw an Uncle Toby or Corporal Trim, but in my own way—myself, the poorest perhaps, the humblest certainly of the hierarchy of Irish novelists—I may have the privilege of doing something for my people. The knowledge of that is sufficient reward, and if

there is added to it, from the reader, a blessing on the hand that writes, I am so much the richer.

DONN BYRNE.

Saint Lucy's Day, 1925.

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I

§ I

NCE more had come now the miracle of the Irish June. Yellow of gorse; red of clover; purple of the Dublin Mountains. Everywhere the white of the hawthorn; there would be a hard winter coming, the gloomy farmers said, so much of it there was. And wherever a clump of trees were, there grew great crops of bluebells. And the primrose lingered, who should have been gone three weeks and more. And over the white roads the trees met, elm and ash and sturdy horsechestnut, making cool green tunnels, like some property out of a fairy story. And where there were dock-leaves by the roadside the golden snail crept, with his long sensitive eyes, his little house on his back-sheleg-a-bookie, the Irish children call him affectionately, snail of the hump—the golden snail with his mottled house, who leaves a band of silver on the green leaf.

Once more had come now the miracle of the Irish June. Westward the sun drove, like some majestic bird, and the rays, yellow as yellow wine, cleared the purple peaks and slopes, the peaks of the Sugar Loaves, the Big and the Little; the Scalp; and Katie Gallagher's and Two-Rock Mountain; and Three-Rock Mountain, that in Irish is called Slieve Roe, the Red Hill. But in the valleys and lowlands the foggy dew still rested, so that the kine and horses were breast-deep in it, as in a sea of silver. And from the mountains there blew a little breeze cool as cool water. All the population of the trees was busy. There sounded the passionate note of the wood-dove. The cheery blackbird sang, and the thrush whistled. There arose the little piping of the finches. The lark mounted into the high air, and the kingfisher skimmed the river in search of the golden speckled trout.

Once more had come now the miracle of the Irish June, recking nothing of revolts or reprisals, riot or civil commotion, or that humorous alien phrase about treason against our Sovereign Lord the King, His Crown and Dignity. Somewhence south she had come, out of some secret hiding-place of Africa, and coming high over the Mediterranean she had touched the harsh highlands of

Spain, and, smiling on France, she had come straight as a pigeon to her kingdom. Now there was nothing north of her but the grim and silent Pole, so here she must stay. All the trees nodded to her, all the flowers waved, the rivers sang and the salmon leaped high from his pool. The little people of the hills and the strange creatures of the mist yielded her precedence, retiring some secret whither, the fairy pipers who pipe by the fairy forts, and the little cobbling leprecauns who own each of them a crock of gold, and the Women of the Shee who wail in the mists of winter when great men die, the Naked Hangman with his gibbet, and the great horse-like pooka, snorting fire, who covers Ireland in three bounds. All these were gone, doing her reverence. came with the silver of the foggy dew about her feet, and the sun in her hair, yellow as yellow wine, and about her was a garment of apple green, and the coolness of her hands was the coolness of the singing rivers. And the ripple of the grass and the winds perfumed with clover were her heralds, so that the poacher of the hills, and the fishermen of Aran and the peasant tilling his acre stopped for a moment to say, "God is good!" Once more now had come the miracle of the Irish Tune.

§ 2

If you were to ask all over the County of Dublin which was the most pleasant homestead there, you would invariably elicit the answer: "Begor, that 's a hard question to put on a man, and devil a bit of me knows, barring it's the McDermots' place at Dermotstown." And if you were to go thither, winding through the green lanes and over the little clear streams that nestle under Three Rock Mountain, you would probably be disappointed, for all you would see at first would be the fields of grass, bluish-green like untroubled seawater, and acres of oats, ripening gently as a child breathes, and paddocks where colts gamboled while their staid mothers moved from tuft to tuft of the green pasture. There were no intricate iron gates, only an ivy-covered lodge half concealing an avenue leading toward a group of ancient trees. And feeling you had lost your way, you would inquire at the lodge. A very old, very healthy man, with shrewd eyes and gnarled hands and bent back, would appear.

"Could you tell me, please, where Dermots-

town is?"