

WENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN BEST SELLERS



KATHERINE CECIL THURSTON

THE GAMBLER 赌徒

[爱尔兰] 凯瑟琳·塞西尔·瑟斯顿 著



世界图书出版公司

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序

从 1895 年美国《书商》杂志开启“按销量排序的图书目录”，美国的“畅销书”至今已有百年发展史，其间荣登年度榜的图书达上千册。阅读这些畅销书，可以学习各时代美国最畅销图书中的语言，了解当时的阅读旨趣，领略当时的社会习俗和风土人情，何乐而不为？

不过，阅读畅销书也需精选。畅销书只是显现读者的阅读旨趣，并不区分它的高下，读者真实的阅读旨趣是雅俗共存的；登上畅销书排行榜的并不总经得起时间的冲刷，许多名噪一时的畅销书早已销声匿迹，尘封在历史的沟壑中。

然而畅销书中自然也有大量经典得以长久流传。我们今天重读美国百年畅销图书，有着以往不曾有的优势。一是，时间的冲刷保证了今日重读之畅销书的经典。能留存至今的多是能够让人细细品读出些许感悟的，而不仅是出于猎奇心理、名人效应。二是，时空的距离感让我们能更好地反思畅销书中所折射出的社会现象。多了一分思考的冷峻，少了一分身处当局的迷惑，我们能以一个旁观者的角色更加清醒地审视。

鉴于以上宗旨，本系列所选的畅销书都历经淘洗，至今光彩斐然，甚具代表性。成功类的书籍诸如《白手起家的商人给儿子的信》、《罗斯福总统给子女的信》和《如何度过一天的24小时》；文学类的书籍众多，包括赫赫有名的《马克·吐温自传》，开创了美国西部牛仔小说先河的《弗吉尼亚人》，反映纽约上层社会生活的《纯真年代》，表现女性自我探索的《满溢之杯》，讲述一战之后生死与重建的《贫穷的聪明人》，扣人心弦、探求正义的《公平与不公平》，文字优美、充满真挚情感的爱情小说《百分之一的机会》和表现纽约曼哈顿贫民区生活的《明确的目标：纽约爱情故事》等；此外还有文化类书籍——世界史研究界几乎无人不知的 H. G. 威尔斯的《历史的概要（世界史纲）》。每本读来都会有不一样的收获，可以满足读者对不同类型书籍的偏好。

阅读美国百年畅销图书，浸润美国最地道的语言，了解美国原汁原味的文化。

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PART I

THE GAMBLER
CHAPTER 1

AN eight-mile drive over rain-washed Irish roads in the quick-falling dusk of autumn is an experience trying to the patience, even to the temper, of the average Saxon. Yet James Milbanke made neither comment nor objection as mile after mile of roadway spun away like a ribbon behind him, as the mud rose in showers from the wheels of the old-fashioned trap in which he sat, and the half trained mare between the shafts swerved now to the right, now to the left – her nervous glance caught by the spectral shapes of the blackthorn hedges or the motionless forms of the wayside donkeys lying asleep in the ditches. Perhaps this stoicism was the outcome of an innate power to endure; perhaps it was a merely negative quality illustrating the lack of that doubtful blessing, imagination. But whatever its origin, it stood him in good stead as he covered the long stretch of flat country that links the south-eastern seaport of Muskeere with the remote fishing village of Carrigmore and its outlying district of Orristown.

His outlook upon Ireland, like his outlook upon life, was untinged by humour. He had seen no ground for amusement in the fact that he had been the only passenger to alight from the train at the Muskeere terminus, and consequently no ground for loneliness in the sight of the solitary vehicle, dimly silhouetted against the murky sky, that had awaited his coming. The ludicrous points of the scene: the primitive railway station with its insufficient flickering lights, its little knot of inquisitive idlers, its one porter, slovenly, amiable, incorrigibly lazy – all contributing the unconscious background to his own neat, conventional, totally alien personality, had left him untouched.

The only individual to whom the picture had made its appeal had been the solitary porter. As he relieved Milbanke of his valise and rug on the step of the first-class carriage an undeniable twinkle had gleamed in his eyes.

“Fine soft night, sir,” he had volunteered. “Tim Burke is outside for you.”

For a second Milbanke had stared at him in a mixture of doubt and displeasure. A month's pilgrimage to the ancient Celtic landmarks had left him, as it has left many a Saxon before him, unlearned in that most interesting and most inscrutable of all survivals – the Celt himself. He had surveyed the face of the porter cautiously and half distrustfully; then he had made a guarded reply.

"I am certainly expecting a – a conveyance," he had admitted. "But I have never heard of Tim Burke."

"Why, thin Tim has heard of *you*!" the other had replied with unruffled suavity. "Isn't it the English gentlemen that's goin' to stop wid Mr. Asshlin over at Orristown that you are? Sure Tim told me all about you; an' I knew you the minute I sat eyes on you – let alone there was no wan else in the train."

Without more ado he had hoisted Milbanke's belongings to his shoulder and lounged out of the station.

"Here you are, Tim, man!" he had exclaimed as he deposited the articles one after another under the seat of the trap with a lofty disregard of their owner. "'Tis a soft night an' a long road you have before you! Is it cold the mare is?" He had paused to eye the impatient young animal before him, with the Irishman's unfailing appreciation of horse-flesh.

Here Milbanke, feeling that some veiled reproof had been suggested, had broken in upon the monologue.

"I hope I haven't injured the horse by the delay," he had said, hastily. "The train was exactly twenty-two minutes behind its time."

Then for the first time the old coachman had bent down from his lofty position.

"An', sure, what harm if it was, sir?" he had exclaimed, voicing the hospitality due to his master's guest. "What hurry is there at all – so long as it brought you safe!"

"True for you, Tim!" the porter had interjected softly; and seizing Milbanke's arm, he had swung him into the trap, precisely as he had

swung the luggage a few seconds previously.

"Thank you, sir," he had murmured a moment later. "Good-night to you! Good-night, Tim! Safe road!" And, drawing back, he had looked on with admiration while Burke had gathered up the reins and the mare had plunged forward into the misty, sea scented night.

That had been Milbanke's first introduction into the district where he proposed to spend a week with a man he had not seen for nearly thirty years.

As the trap moved forward, leaving the straggling town with its scattered lights far behind, his thoughts, temporarily distracted by the incidents of his arrival, reverted to the channel in which they had run during the greater part of the day. Again his mind returned to the period of his college career when, as a quiet student, he had been drawn by the subtle attraction of contrast into a friendship with Denis Asshlin, the young Irishman whose spirit, whose enthusiasms, whose exuberant joy in life had shone in such vivid colours beside his own neutral-tinted personality. His thoughts passed methodically from those eager, early days to the more sober ones that had followed Asshlin's recall to Ireland, and thence onward over the succeeding tale of years. He reviewed his own calm, if somewhat lonely, manhood; his aimless delving first into one branch of learning, then into another; his gradually dawning interest in the study of archaeology – an interest that, fostered by ample leisure and ample means, had become the temperate and well-ordered passion of his life. The retrospect was pleasant. There is always an agreeable sensation to a man of Milbanke's temperament in looking back upon unruffled times. He became oblivious of the ruts in the road and of the mare's erratic movements as he traced the course of events to the point where, two months before, the discovery of a dozen gold platters and as many drinking vessels, embedded in a bog in the County Tyrone, had turned the eyes of the archaeological world upon Ireland; and he, with other students of antiquity, had been bitten with the desire to see the unique and priceless

objects for himself.

The journey to Tyrone had been a pleasant experience; and it was there, under the mild exaltation of the genuine find, that it had suddenly been suggested to his mind that certain ancient ruins, including a remarkable specimen of the Irish round tower, were to be found on the southeast coast not three miles from the property of his old college friend.

Whether it was the archaeological instinct to resurrect the past, or the merely human wish to relive his own small portion of it, that had prompted him to write to Asshlin must remain an open question. It is sufficient that the letter was written and dispatched and that the answer came in hot haste.

It had reached him in the form of a telegram running as follows: "Come at once and stay for a year. Stagnating to death in this isolation. Asshlin." An hour later another and a more voluminous message, had followed, in which, as if by an after-thought, he had been given the necessary directions as to the means of reaching Orristown.

It was at the point where his musings reached Asshlin's telegrams that he awakened from his reverie and looked about him. For the first time a personal interest in the country through which he was passing stirred him. He realised that the salt sting of the sea had again begun to mingle with the night mist, and judged thereby that the road had again emerged upon the coast. He noticed that the hedges had become sparser; that wherever a tree loomed out of the dusk it bore the mark of the sea gales in a certain grotesqueness of shape.

This was the isolation of which Asshlin had spoken!

With an impulse extremely uncommon to him, he turned in his seat and addressed the silent old coachman beside him.

"Has your master altered much in thirty years?" he asked.

There was silence for a while. Old Burke, with the deliberation of his class, liked to weigh his words before giving them utterance.

"Is it Mister Dinis changed?" he repeated at last. Then almost

immediately he corrected himself. "Sure 'tis Mister Asshlin I ought to be sayin', sir. But the ould name slips out. Though the poor master is gone these twenty-nine year – the Lord have mercy on him! – I can niver git it into me head that 'tis to Mister Dinis we ought to be lookin'."

More than once during his brief stay in Ireland Milbanke had been confronted with this annihilation of time in the Irish mind, and Burke's statement aroused no surprise.

"Has he changed?" he asked again, in his dry, precise voice.

Burke was silent, while the mare pulled hard on the reins. And having regained his mastery over her he looked down on his companion.

"Is it changed?" he said. "Sure why wouldn't he be changed? With the father gone – an' the wife gone – an' the children growin' up. Sure 'tis changed we all are an' goin' down the hill fast, God help us!"

Milbanke glanced up sharply.

"Children?" he said. "Children?"

Burke turned in his seat.

"Sure 'tishn't to have the ould stock die out you'd be wantin'?" he said. "You'd travel the round of the county before you'd see the like of Mister Dinis's children – though 'tis girls they are."

"Girls?" Milbanke's mind was disturbed by the thought of children. Denis Asshlin with children! The idea was incongruous.

"Two of 'em!" said Burke, laconically.

"Dear me! – dear me! And yet I suppose it's only natural. How old are they?"

Burke flicked the mare lightly and the trap lurched forward.

"Miss Clodagh is turned fifteen," he said, "and the youngster is goin' on ten. 'Twas ten year back, come next December, that she was born. Sure I remimber it well. An' six weeks after Mister Dinis was followin' her poor mother to the churchyard beyant in Carrigmore. The Lord keep us all! 'Twas she was the nice, quiet creature – and Miss Nance is the livin' stamp of her. But, God bless us, 'tis Miss Clodagh that's her father's child."

He added this last remark with a force that at the time conveyed nothing, though it was destined to recur later to Milbanke's mind.

"But your master?" the stranger repeated. The momentary diversion of the children had ceased to hold him. Again the vision of Asshlin – Asshlin the impetuous hero of past days – had risen intangible, mirage-like, and yet compelling from his native stretch of rugged country.

But Burke made no reply. All his energies were directed to the guiding of the mare down a steep incline. For a space Milbanke was conscious of a dangerously accelerated pace; then the white piers of a large gate sped past them, and he was aware of the black shadow of overhanging trees.

Something unusual, something faintly prophetic and only vaguely comprehended, touched his prosaic nature at that moment. He was entering on a new phase of life. Without conscious preparation he was to see the world from a new point of view. With a fresh spur of anxious curiosity he turned again to Burke.

"But your master?" he asked. "Has he changed much? Will I see a great alteration?"

For an added space the old man remained mute, while he piloted the trap up the sweep of avenue with that irresistible desire for a fine finish that animates every Irish driver. Then as they spun round the final curve, as the great, square house loomed out of the mist, he replied without slackening his vigilance.

"Is it changed?" he repeated, half to himself. "Sure if the Almighty doesn't change a man in thirty year it stands to reason that the devil must."

CHAPTER 2

To English ears the reply was curious. Yet with all its vagueness, all its racial inclination towards high colour, it held the germ of truth that frequently lies in such utterances. With native acuteness it threw out a suggestion without betraying a confidence.

An instant after it was spoken there was a final flourish of the whip, a scrape of wheels on the wet gravel, a straining and creaking of damp leather, and the trap drew up before the big white house. Milbanke caught a fleeting suggestion of a shabby door with pillars on which rested a square balcony of rusty iron – a number of unlighted windows – a general air of grandeur and decay curiously blended. Then the hall door opened and a voice whose first note roused a hundred memories rolled out across the darkness.

"Is that you, James? Come in! Come in! Keep the mare in hand, Burke. Steady now, James. Let me hold the rug and give you a hand down. She's a little rogue and might be making a bolt for her stable. Well, you're as welcome as the flowers in May. Come in! Come in!"

It was over in a flash – the arrival, the tempestuous greeting, the hard grip of Asshlin's hand – and the two men were facing each other in the candle-lit hall.

"Well, you're welcome, James." Asshlin repeated. "You're welcome. Let me have a look at you. I declare, it's younger you are."

He laid his hand heavily on the other's shoulder and uttered this obvious untruth with all the warmth and conviction that Irish imagination and Irish hospitality could suggest.

"But you're perished after the long drive! Burke," he called through the open door. "Burke, when you're done with the mare come round and carry up Mr. Milbanke's baggage. Now, James." He wheeled round again, catching up a silver candlestick from the hall table. "Now, if you come upstairs, I'll show you where we're going to billet you."

With long, hasty steps he crossed the hall, his tall figure casting gaunt

shadows on the bare and lofty wall.

"We're a trifle unsophisticated here," he went on, with a loud, hard laugh. "But at least we'll give you enough to eat and a bed to lie on. After all, a decent dinner and a warm welcome are the bone and sinew of hospitality the world over. Unless they include a drop of something to put life into a man —"

He paused, turning round upon his guest.

"By Jupiter, that reminds me! Have a small drink before we go another step, just to take the cold out of you?"

Milbanke, who was close behind him, glanced up. He saw his host's face more clearly than he had seen it in the hall. His answer when it came was hurried and a little confused.

"No, Denis. No," he said. "Nothing; nothing, I assure you."

Asshlin laughed again.

"Still the same stickler?" he said. "How virtues cling to a man!"

He turned and began to mount the stairs. Then, reaching the first door on the wide corridor, he paused.

"Here's your habitation," he said. "Burke will bring up your belongings and get you whatever you want. We dine in a quarter of an hour."

He nodded and was turning away when a fresh thought struck him.

"You may as well take this candle," he said; "we haven't arrived at the civilization of gas. You might stumble over something looking for the matches. This is practically a bachelor establishment, you know — without any bachelor comforts."

Once more he laughed, and, thrusting the candle into his guest's hand, hurried away across the landing.

In silence Milbanke took the candle and, holding it uncertainly, waited until his host had disappeared. Then slowly he turned and entered the large, bare bedroom. For a moment he hesitated, his eyes wandering from the faded window-hangings to the stiff, old-fashioned furniture. Finally, laying aside the candlestick, he sat down upon the side of the forbidding-looking

four-post bedstead.

What motive prompted him to the action he could scarcely have defined. He was strangely moved by the scene just gone through – stirred in a manner he could never have anticipated. For the moment the precise, matter-of-fact archaeologist was submerged, and the man – dry, narrow, pedantic perhaps, but nevertheless capable of human sentiments – was uppermost. The sight of Asshlin, the sound of his voice, and the touch of his hand had possessed an alchemy all their own. The past, that years of separation had dimmed and tarnished, had gleamed out from the shadows and taken shape before his eyes. The influence, the fascination that Asshlin had once exercised had touched him again at the first contact of personalities. But it was an altered fascination. The alloy of doubt and apprehension had tainted the old feeling. The question he had been prompted to ask Burke had answered itself at the first glimpse of his host's face. Indisputably, unmistakably Asshlin had changed.

And in what lay that change? That was the question he put to himself as he sat on the bed unconsciously noting the long, wavering flicker of the candle-flame against the faded wall-paper. He had aged; but the change did not lie with age alone. Something more relentless and more corroding than time had drawn the worn, discontented lines about the mouth, kindled the unnatural, restless glitter in the eyes, and changed the note of the voice from spontaneous vitality to recklessness. The change lay deeper; it lay in the heart and the soul of the man himself.

With a sensation of doubt – of puzzled doubt and inexplicable disappointment – he rose, crossed the room, and, drawing the curtains over the windows, shut out the dark, damp night.

CHAPTER 3

IT was nearly three-quarters of an hour later that a tremendous bell, clanging through the house, announced that dinner had been served.

A wash, a change of clothes, and a half-hour of solitude had done much for Milbanke. He felt more normal, less alienated by unfamiliar surroundings than he had done in the first confused moments that had followed his arrival. The vague sense of disappointment and apprehension, the vague suspicion that Asshlin had undergone an immense alteration still tormented him – as half-apprehended evils ever torment the minds of those who see and study life as a thing apart from human nature – but the immediate effect of the feeling was less poignant. He unconsciously found himself anticipating the next glimpse of his old friend with a touch of curiosity, and when the announcement of dinner broke in upon his meditations, he was surprised at the readiness with which he obeyed the summons.

His first sight of the dining-room came pleasantly to his senses, numbed by the long drive and the bare coldness of his bedroom. It was large and lofty; three long, curtained windows occupied one of its walls, while from the others numerous pictures of the dead and gone Asshlins looked out of their canvases from tarnished gold frames; the mahogany furniture, though of an ugly and ungainly type, was massive; and over the whole room, softening its severity and hiding the ravages of time, lay the warm, red glow of a huge peat fire and the radiance of a dozen candles set in heavy silver sconces.

He stood for a moment in the doorway, agreeably conscious of the mingled shadow and light; then his attention was attracted to two figures already occupying the room.

Asshlin himself was standing by the hearth, his back to the fire, his feet apart, while by his side, in evident nervous embarrassment, stood a little girl of nine or ten. Instantly he saw his guest Asshlin put his hand on the child's shoulder and pushed her forward.