

Burkham-Back

The Country Dancing-Master.

from

*TALES AND SKETCHES,
CHARACTER, USAGES, TRADITIONS,
SPORTS AND PASTIMES
OF
THE IRISH PEASANTRY.*

William Carleton

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In those racy old times, when the manners and usages of Irishmen were more simple and pastoral than they are at present, dancing was cultivated as one of the chief amusements of life, and the dancing-master looked upon as a person essentially necessary to the proper enjoyment of our national recreation. Of all the amusements peculiar to our population, dancing is by far the most important, although certainly much less so now than it has been, even within our own memory. In Ireland it may be considered as a very just indication of the spirit and character of the people ; so much so, that it would be extremely difficult to find any test so significant of the Irish heart, and its varied impulses, as the

dance, when contemplated in its most comprehensive spirit. In the first place, no people dance so well as the Irish, and for the best reason in the world, as we shall show. Dancing, every one must admit, although a most delightful amusement, is not a simple, nor distinct, nor primary one. On the contrary, it is merely little else than a happy and agreeable method of enjoying music ; and its whole spirit and character must necessarily depend upon the power of the heart to feel the melody to which the limbs and body move. Every nation, therefore, remarkable for a susceptibility of music is also remarkable for a love of dancing, unless religion or some other adequate obstacle, arising from an anomalous condition of society, interpose to prevent it. Music and dancing being in fact as dependent the one on the other as cause and effect, it requires little argument to prove that the Irish, who are so sensitively alive to the one, should in a very high degree excel at the other ; and accordingly it is so.

Nobody, unless one who has seen and *also felt* it, can conceive the incredible, nay, the inexplicable exhilaration of the heart, which a dance communicates to the peasantry of Ireland. Indeed, it resembles not so much enthusiasm as inspiration. Let a stranger take his place among those who are assembled at a dance in the country, and mark the change which takes place in Paddy's whole temperament, physical and moral. He first rises up rather indolently, selects his own sweetheart, and assuming such a station on the floor as renders it necessary that both should "face the fiddler," he commences. On the dance then goes, quietly at the outset : gradually he begins to move more sprightly ; by and bye the right hand is up, and a crack of the fingers is heard ; in a minute afterwards both hands are up, and two cracks are heard, the hilarity and brightness of his eye all the time keeping pace with the growing enthusiasm that is coming over him, and which eye, by the way, is most lovingly fixed upon, or, we should rather say, *into*, that of his modest partner. From that partner he never receives an *open gaze* in return, but in lieu of this, an occasional glance, quick as thought, and brilliant as a meteor, seems to pour into him a delicious fury that is made up of love—sometimes a little of whiskey, kindness, pride of his activity, and a wreckless force of momentary happiness that defies description. Now commences the dance in earnest. Up he bounds in a fling or a caper—crack go the fingers—cut and treble go the feet, heel and toe, right and left. Then he flings the right, heel up to the ham, up again the left, the whole face in a furnace-heat of ecstatic delight.

“ Whoo ! whoo ! your sowl ! Move your elbow, Mickey (this to the fiddler). Quicker, quicker, man alive, or you’ll lose sight of me. Whoo ! Judy, that’s the girl, handle your feet, avourneen ; that’s it, acushla ! stand to me ! Hurroo for our side of the house !”

And thus does he proceed with vigour, and an agility, and a truth of time, that are incredible, especially when we consider the whirlwind of enjoyment which he has to direct. The conduct of his partner, whose face is lit up into a modest blush, is evidently tinged with his enthusiasm—for who could resist it ?—but it is exhibited with great natural grace, joined to a delicate vivacity that is equally gentle and animated, and in our opinion precisely what dancing in a female ought to be—a blending of healthful exercise and innocent enjoyment.

There are a considerable variety of dances in Ireland, from the simple “ reel of two” up to the country-dance, all of which are mirthful. There are, however, others which are serious, and may be looked upon as the exponents of the pathetic spirit of our country. Of the latter, I fear, several are altogether lost ; and I question whether there be many persons now alive in Ireland who know much about the *Horo Lheig*, which, from the word it begins with, must necessarily have been danced only on mournful occasions. It is only at wakes and funereal customs in those remote parts of the country where old usages are most pertinaciously clung to, that any elucidation of the *Horo Lheig*, and others of our forgotten dances, could be obtained. At present, I believe, the only serious one we have is the *cotillon*, or, as they term it in the country, the cut-a-long. I myself have witnessed, when very young, a dance, which, like the hornpipe, was performed but by one man. This, however, was the only point in which they bore to each other any resemblance. The one I allude to must in my opinion have been of Druidic or Magian descent. It was not necessarily performed to music, and could not be danced without the emblematic aids of a stick and handkerchief. It was addressed to an individual passion, and was, unquestionably, one of those symbolic dances that were used in pagan rites ; and had the late Henry O’Brien seen it, there is no doubt but he would have seized upon it as a felicitous illustration of his system.

Having now said all we have to say here about Irish dances, it is time we should say something about the Irish dancing-master ; and be it observed, that we mean him of the old school, and not the poor degenerate creature of the present day, who, unless in some remote parts of the country, is scarcely worth description, and has little of the national character about him.

Like most persons of the itinerant professions, the old Irish dancing master was generally a bachelor, having no fixed residence, but living from place to place within *his own walk*, beyond which he seldom or never went. The farmers were his patrons, and his visits to their houses always brought a holiday spirit along with them. When he came, there was sure to be a dance in the evening after the hours of labour, he himself good-naturedly supplying them with the music. In return for this they would get up a little underhand collection for him, amounting probably to a couple of shillings or half-a-crown, which some of them, under pretence of taking the snuff-box out of his pocket to get a pinch, would delicately and ingeniously slip into it, lest he might feel the act as bringing down the dancing-master to the level of the mere fiddler. He, on the other hand, not to be outdone in kindness, would, at the conclusion of the little festivity, desire them to lay down a door, on which he usually danced a few favourite hornpipes to the music of his own fiddle. This, indeed, was the great master-flat of his art, and was looked upon as such by himself, as well as by the people.

Indeed, the old dancing-master had some very marked outlines of character peculiar to himself. His dress, for instance, was always far above the fiddler’s, and this was the pride of his heart. He also made it a point to wear a castor, or Caroline hat, be the same “ shocking bad” or otherwise, but above all things his soul within him was set upon a watch, and no one could gratify him more than by asking him before company what o’clock it was. He also contrived to carry an ornamental staff, made of ebony, hiccory, mahogany, or some rare description of cane, which, if possible, had a silver head and a silk tassel. This the dancing-masters in general seemed to consider as a kind of baton or wand of office, without which I never yet knew one of them to go. But of all the parts of dress used to discriminate them from the fiddler, we must place, as standing far before the rest, the dancing-master’s pumps and stockings, for shoes he seldom wore. The utmost limit of their ambition appeared to be

such a jaunty neatness about that part of them in which the genius of their business lay, as might indicate the extraordinary lightness and activity which were expected from them by the people, in whose opinion the finest stocking, the lightest shoe, and the most symmetrical leg, uniformly denoted the most accomplished teacher.

The Irish dancing-master was also a great hand at match-making, and indeed some of them were known to negotiate as much between families as well as individual lovers, with nil the ability of a first-rate diplomatist. Unlike the fiddler, the dancing-master had fortunately the use of his eyes ; and as there is scarcely any scene in which, to a keen observer, the symptoms of the passions—to wit, blushings, glances, squeezes of the hand, and stealthy whisperings—are more frequent or significant, so is it no wonder that a sagacious looker-on, such as he generally was, knew how to avail him self of them, and to become in many instances a necessary party to their successful issue.

In the times of our fathers it pretty frequently happened that the dancing-master professed another accomplishment, which, in Ireland at least, where it is born with us, might appear to be a superfluous one ; we mean, that of fencing, or to speak more correctly, cudgel-playing. Fencing-schools of this class were nearly as common in those times as dancing schools, and it was not at all unusual for one man to teach both.

After all, the old dancing-master, in spite of his most strenuous efforts to the contrary, bore, in simplicity of manners, in habits of life, and in the happy spirit which he received from, and impressed upon, society, a distant but not indistinct resemblance to the fiddler. Between these two however, no good feeling subsisted. The one looked up at the other as a man who was unnecessarily and unjustly placed above him ; whilst the other looked down upon him as a mere drudge, through whom those he taught practised their accomplishments. This petty rivalry was very amusing, and the “ boys,” to do them justice, left nothing undone to keep it up. The fiddler had certainly the best of the argument, whilst the other had the advantage of a higher professional position. The one was more loved, the other more respected. Perhaps very few things in humble life could be so amusing to a speculative mind, or at the same time capable of affording a better lesson to human pride, than the almost mirac-ulous skill with which the dancing-master contrived, when travelling, to carry his fiddle about him, so as that it might not be seen, and he himself mistaken for nothing but a fiddler. This was the sorest blow his vanity could receive, and a source of endless vexation to all his tribe. Our manners, however, are changed, and neither the fiddler nor the dancing- master possesses the fine mellow tints, nor that depth of colouring, which formerly brought them and their rich household associations home at once to the heart.

One of the most amusing specimens of the dancing-master that I ever met, was the person alluded to at the close of my paper on the Irish Fiddler, under the nickname of Buckram-Back. This man had been a drummer in the army for some time, where he had learned to play the fiddle ; but it appears that he possessed no relish whatever for a military life, as his abandonment of it without even the usual form of a discharge or furlough, together with a back that had become cartilaginous from frequent flogging, could abundantly testify. It was from the latter circumstance that he had received his nickname.

Buckram-Back was a dapper light little fellow, with a rich Tipperary brogue, crossed by a lofty strain of illegitimate English, which he picked up whilst abroad in the army. His habiliments sat as tight upon him as he could readily wear them, and were all of the shabby-genteel class. His crimped black coat was a closely worn second-hand, and his crimped face quite as much of the second-hand as the coat. I think I see his little pumps, little white stockings, his coaxed drab breeches, his hat, smart in its cock but brushed to a polish, and standing upon three hairs, together with his tight questionable-coloured gloves, all before me. Certainly he was the jauntiest little cock living—quite a blood, ready to fight any man, and a great defender of the fair sex, whom he never addressed except in that high-flown bombastic style so agreeable to most of them, called by their flatterers the complimentary, and by their friends the fulsome. He was in fact a public man, and up to everything. You met him at every fair, where he only had time to give you a wink as he passed, being just then engaged in a very partic-ular affair ; but he would tell you again. At cock-fights he was a very busy

personage, and an angry better from half-a-crown downwards. At races he was a knowing fellow, always shook hands with the winning jockey, and then looked pompously about, that folks might see he was hand and glove with people of importance. The house where Buckram-Back kept his school, which was open only after the hours of labour, was an uninhabited cabin, the roof which, at a particular spot, was supported by a post that stood upright from the floor. It was built upon an elevated situation, and command a fine view of the whole country for miles about it. A pleasant sight it was to see the modest and pretty girls, dressed in their best frocks and ribbons, radiating in little groups from all directions, accompanied by their partners or lovers, making way through the fragrant summer fields, of a calm cloudless evening, to this happy scene of innocent amusement.

And yet what an epitome of general life, with its passions, jealousies, plots, calumnies, and contentions, did this tiny segment of society present ! There was the shrew, the slattern, the coquette, and the prude, as sharply marked within this their humble sphere, as if they appeared on the world's wide stage, with half its wealth and all its temptations to draw forth their prevailing foibles. There too was the bully, the rake, the liar, the coxcomb, and the coward, each as perfect and distinct in his kind as if he had run through a lengthened course of fashionable dissipation, or spent a fortune in acquiring his particular character. The elements of the human heart, however, and the passions that make up the general business of life, are the same in high and low, and exist with impulses as strong in the cabin as in the palace. The only difference is, that they have not equal room to play.

Buckram-Back's system, in originality of design, in comic conception of decorum, and in the easy practical assurance with which he wrought it out, was never equalled, much less surpassed. Had the impudent little rascal confined himself to dancing as usually taught, there would have been nothing so ludicrous or uncommon in it ; but no : he was such a stickler for example in everything, that no other mode of instruction would satisfy him. Dancing ! why, it was the least part of what he taught or professed to teach.

In the first place, he undertook to teach every one of us—for I had the honour of being his pupil—how to enter a drawing-room “ in the most fashionable manner alive,” as he said himself.

Secondly. He was the only man, he said, who could in the most agreeable and polite style teach a gentleman how to salute, or, as he termed it, how to shilote, a leedy. This he taught, he said, with great success.

Thirdly. He could teach every leedy and gentleman how to make the most beautiful bow or curtsy on airth, by only imitating himself—one that would cause a thousand people if they were all present, to think that it was particularly intended only for aich o' themselves !

Fourthly. He taught, the whole art o' courtship wid all peltiness and success, accordin' as it was practised in Paris durin' the last saison.

Fifthly. He could teach them how to write love-letthers and valentines accordin' to the Great Mac-ademy of compliments, which was supposed to be invinted by Bonaparte when he was writing love letthers to both his wives.

Sixthly. He was the only person who could teach the famous dance called Sir Roger de Coverly, or the Helter-Skelter Drag, which comprehended widin itself all the advantages and beauties of his whole system—in which every gentleman was at liberty to pull every leedy where he pleased, and every leedy was at liberty to go wherever he pulled her.

With such advantages in prospect, and a method of instruction so agreeable, it is not to be wondered at that this establishment was always in a most flourishing condition. The truth is, he had it so con-trived that every gentleman should salute his lady as often as possible, and for this purpose actually invented dances, in which not only should every gentleman salute every lady, but every lady, by way of returning the compliment, should render a similar kindness to every gentleman. Nor had his male pupils all this prodigality of salutation to themselves, for the amorous little rascal always

commenced first and ended last, in order, he said, that they might catch the manner from himself. “ I do this, leedies and gintlemen, as your moral (model), and because it’s part o’ *my* system—ahem !”

And then he would perk up his little hard face, that was too barren to produce more than an abortive smile, and twirl like a wagtail over the floor, in a manner that he thought irresistible.

Whether Buckram-Back was the only man who tried to reduce kissing to a system of education in this country, I do not know. It is certainly true that many others of his stamp made a knowledge of the arts and modes of courtship, like him, a part of the course. The forms of love letters, valentines, &c., were taught their pupils of both sexes, with many other polite particulars, which it is to be hoped have disappeared for ever.

One thing, however, to the honour of our country-women we are bound to observe, which is, that we do not remember a single result incompatible with virtue to follow from the little fellow’s system, which, by the way, was in this respect peculiar only to himself, and not the general custom of the country. Several weddings, unquestionably, we had, more than might otherwise have taken place, but in no one instance have we known any case in which a female was brought to unhappiness or shame.

We shall now give a brief sketch of Buckram-Back’s manner of tuition, begging our readers at the same time to rest assured that any sketch we could give would fall short of the original.

“ Paddy Corcoran, walk out an’ ‘ inther your drawin’-room ;’ an’ let Miss Judy Hanratty go out along wid you, an’ come in as Mrs. Corcoran.”

“ Faith, I’m afeard, master, I’ll make a bad hand of it ; but, sure, it’s something to have Judy here to keep me in countenance.”

“ Is that by way of compliment, Paddy ? Mr. Corcoran, you should ever an’ always spaik to a leedy in an alablasther tone ; for that’s the cut.”
[*Paddy and Judy retire.*]

“ Mickey Scanlan, come up here, now that we’re braithin’ a little ; an’ you Miss Grauna Mulholland, come up along wid him. Miss Mulholland, you are mather of your five positions and your fifteen attitudes, I believe ?” “ Yes, sir.” “ Very well, Miss. Mickey Scanlan—ahem—*Misther* Scanlan, can *you* perform the positions also, Mickey ?”

“ Yes, sir ; but you remember I stuck at the eleventh altitude.”

“ Attitude, sir—no matther. Well, *Misther* Scanlan, do you know how to shiloote a leedy, Mickey ?”

“ Faix, it’s hard to say, sir, till we try ; but I’m very willin’ to larn it. I’ll do my best, an’ the best can do no more.”

“ Very well—ahem ! Now merk me, *Misther* Scanlan ; you approach your leedy in this style, bowin’ politely, as I do. Miss Mulholland, will you allow me the honour of a heavenly shiloote ? Don’t bow, ma’am ; you are to curchy, you know ; a little lower *eef* you please. Now you say, ‘ Wid the greatest pleasure in life, sir, an’ many thanks for the feevour.’ (*Smack.*) There, now, you are to make another curchy politely, an’ say, ‘ Thank you, kind sir, I owe you one.’ Now, *Misther* Scanlan, proceed.”

“ I’m to imitate you, mather, as well as I can, sir, I believe ?”

“ Yes, sir, you are to imitate *me*. But hould, sir ; did you see me lick my lips or pull up my breeches ? Be gorra, that’s shockin’ unswintemintal. First make a curchy, a bow I mane, to Miss Grauna. Stop again, sir ; are you goin to sthrangle the leedy ? Why, one would, think that it’s about to teek laive of her for ever you are. Gently, *Misther* Scanlan ; gently, Mickey. There—well, that’s an improvement. Practice, *Misther* Scanlan, practice will do all, Mickey ; but don’t smack so loud, though. Hilloo, gintlemen ! where’s our drawin’-room folks ? Go out, one of you, for *Misther* an’ Mrs. Paddy Corcoran.”

Corcoran's face now appears peeping in at the door, lit up with a comic expression of genuine fun, from whatever cause it may have proceeded.

"Aisy, Misther Corcoran ; an' where's Mrs. Corcoran, sir?"

"Are we both to come in together, masther ?"

"Certainly : turn out both your toeses—turn them out, I say."

"Faix, sir, it's aisier said than done wid some of us."

"I know that, Misther Corcoran ; but practice is every thing. The bow legs are strongly against you, I grant. Hut tut, Misther Corcoran—why, if your toes wor where your heels is, you'd be exactly in the first position, Paddy. Well, both of you turn out your toeses ; look street forward ; clap your caubeen—ahem !—your castor under your ome (arm), an' walk into the middle of the flure, wid your head up. Stop, take care o' the post. Now, take your caubeen, castor I mane, in your right hand ; give it a flour-ish. Aisy, Mrs. Hanratty—Corcoran I mane—it's not *you* that's to flourish. Well, flourish your castor, Paddy, and thin make a graceful bow to the company. Leedies and gintlemen" —

"Leedies and gintlemen" —

"I'm your most obadient sarvint" —

"I'm your most obadient sarwint."

"Tuts man alive ! that's not a bow. Look at this : *there's* a bow for you. Why, instead of meeking a bow, you appear as if you wor goin' to sit down with an embargo (lumbago) in your back. Well, pract-ice is every thing ; an' there's luck in leisure."

"Dick Doorish, will you come up, and thry if you can meek any thing of that treblin' step. You're a purty lad, Dick ; you're a purty lad, Misther Doorish, with a pair o' left lege an you, to expect to larn to dance ; but don't despeer, man alive, I'm not afeard but I'll make a graceful slip o' you yet. Can you meek a curchy ?"

"Not right, sir, I doubt."

"Well, sir, I know that ; but, Misther Doorish, you ought to know how to meek both a bow and a curchy. Whin you marry a wife, Misther Doorish, it mightn't come wrong for you to know how to taich her a curchy. Have you the *gad* and *suggaun* wid you ?" "Yes, sir." "Very well, on wid them ; the suggaun on the right foot, or what ought to be the right foot, an' the gad upon what ought to be the left. Are you ready ?" "Yes, sir." "Come, then, do as I bid you. Rise upon suggaun an' sink upon gad ; rise upon suggaun an' sink upon gad ; rise upon Hould, sir ; you're sinkin' upon suggaun an' risin' upon gad, the very thing begad you ought *not* to do. But, God help you ! sure you're left-legged. Ah, Misther Doorish, it 'ud be a long time before you'd be able to dance Jig Polthogue or the College Hornpipe upon a drum-head, as I often did. However, don't despeer, Misther Doorish ; if I could only get you to know your right leg—but, God help you ! sure you hav'nt such a thing—from your left, I'd make something of you yet, Dick.

The Irish dancing-masters were eternally at daggers-drawn among themselves ; but as they seldom met, they were forced to abuse each other at a distance, which they did with a virulence and scurrility proportioned to the space between them. Buckram-Back had a rival of this description, who was a sore thorn in his side. His name Was Paddy Fitz-patrick, and from having been a horse-jockey, he gave up the turf, and took to the calling of a dancing-master. Buckram-Back sent a message to him to the effect that "if he could not dance Jig Polthogue on the drum-head, he had better hould his tongue for ever." To this Paddy replied, by asking if he was the man to dance the Connaught Jockey upon the saddle of a blood horse, and the animal at a three-quarter gailop.

At length the friends on each side, from a natural love of fun, prevailed upon them to decide their claims as follows : Each master with twelve of his pupils, was to dance against his rival with twelve of his ; the match to come off on the top of Mallybeny hill, which commanded a view of the whole parish. I have already mentioned that in Buckram-Back's school there stood near the middle of the floor a post, which, according to some new manoeuvre of his own, was very convenient as a guide to the dancers when going through the figure. Now, at the spot where this post stood it was necessary to make a curve, in order to form part of the figure of eight, which they were to follow ; but as many of them were rather impenetrable to a due conception of the line of beauty, he forced them to turn round the post, rather than make an acute angle of it, which several of them did. Having premised thus much, we proceed with our narrative.

At length they met, and it would have been a matter of much difficulty to determine their relative merits, each was such an admirable match for the other. When Buckram-Back's pupils, however, came to perform, they found that the absence of the post was their ruin. To the post they had been trained—accustomed ; with *it* they could dance ; but wanting that, they were like so many ships at sea without rudders or compasses. Of course a scene of ludicrous confusion ensued, which turned the laugh against poor Buckram-Back, who stood likely to explode with shame and venom. In fact he was in an agony.

“ Gintlemen, turn the post !” he shouted, stamping upon the ground, and clenching his little hands with fury ; “ leedies, remimber the post ! Oh, for the honour of Kilnahushogue don't be bate. The post, gintlemen ! leedies, the post, if you love me Murdher alive, the post !”

“ Be gorra, masther, the jockey will distance us,” replied Bob Magawly ; “ it's likely to be the *winnin'-post* to him, any how.”

“ Any money,” shouted the little fellow, “ any money for long Sam Sallaghan ; he'd do the post to the life. Mind it, boys dear, mind it or we're lost. Divil a bit they heed me : it's a flock of bees or sheep they are like. Sam Sallaghan, where are you ? The post, you blackguards !”

“ Oh, masther dear, if we had even a fishin'-rod or a crowbar, or a poker, we might do yet. But, anyhow, we had betther give in, for it's only worse we're gettin'.”

At this stage of the proceedings, Paddy came over, and making a low bow, asked him, “ Arra, how do you feel, Misther Dogherty ?” for such was Buckram-Back's name.

“ Sir,” replied Buckram-Back, bowing low, however, in return, “ I'll take the shine out of you yet. Can you shiloot a leedy wid me—that's the chat ! Come, gintlemen, show them what's betther than fifty posts—shiloot your partners like Irishmen. Kilnahushogue for ever !”

The scene that ensued baffles all description. The fact is, the little fellow had them trained, as it were, to kiss in platoons, and the spectators were literally convulsed with laughter at this most novel and ludicrous character that Buckram-Back gave to his defeat, and the ceremony which he introduced. The truth is, he turned the laugh completely against his rival, and swaggered off the ground in high spirits, exclaiming, “ He know how to shiloot a leedy ! Why the poor spalpeen never kissed any woman but his mother, an' her only when she was dyin'. Hurra for Kilnahushogue !”

Such, reader, is a slight and very imperfect sketch of an Irish dancing-master, which if it possesses any merit at all, is to be ascribed to the circumstance that it is drawn from life, and combines, however faintly, most of the points essential to our conception of the character.

MICKEY M'ROREY, THE IRISH FIDDLER.

What a host of light-hearted associations are revived by that living fountain of fun and frolic, an Irish fiddler ! Every thing connected with him is agreeable, pleasant, jolly. All his anecdotes, songs, jokes, stories, and secrets, bring us back from the pressure and cares of life, to those happy days and nights when the heart was as light as the heel, and both beat time to the exhilarating sound of his fiddle.

The harper is a character looked upon by the Irish rather as a musical curiosity, than a being specially created to contribute to their enjoyment. There is something about him which they do not feel to be in perfect sympathy with their habits and amusements : he is above them, not of them ; and although they respect him, and treat him kindly, yet he is never received among them with that spontaneous ebullition of warmth and cordiality with which they welcome their own musician, the fiddler. The harper, in fact, belongs, or rather did belong, to the gentry, and to the gentry they are willing to leave him. They listen to his music when he feels disposed to play for them, but it only gratifies their curiosity, instead of enlivening their hearts—a fact sufficiently evident from the circumstance of their seldom attempting to dance to it. This preference, however, of the fiddle to the harp, is a feeling generated by change of times and circumstances, for it is well known that in days gone by, when Irish habits were purer, older, and more hereditary than they are now the harp was the favourite instrument of young and old, of high and low.

The only instrument that can be said to rival the fiddle is the bagpipe ; but every person knows that Ireland is a loving country, and that our fairs, dances, weddings, and other places of amusement, Paddy and his sweetheart are in the habit of indulging in a certain quiet and affectionate kind of whisper, the creamy tones of which are sadly curdled by the sharp jar of the chanter. It is not, in fact, an instrument adapted for love-making. The drone is an enemy to sentiment, and it is an unpleasant thing for a pretty blushing girl to find herself put to the necessity of bawling out her consent at the top of her lungs, which she must do, or have the ecstatic words lost in its drowsy and monotonous murmur. The bag-pipe might do for war, to which, with a slight variation, it has been applied ; but in our opinion it is only fit to be danced to by an assembly of people who are hard of hearing. Indeed, we have little doubt but its cultivation might be introduced with good effect, as a system of medical treatment, suitable to the pupils of a deaf and dumb institution ; for if anything could bring them to the use of their ears, its sharp and stiletto notes surely would effect that object.

The fiddle, however, is the instrument of all others most essential to the enjoyment of an Irishman. Dancing and love are very closely connected, and of course the fiddle is never thought of or heard, without awakening the tenderest and most agreeable emotions. Its music, soft, sweet, and cheerful, is just the thing for Paddy, who, under its influence, partakes of its spirit, and becomes soft, sweet, and cheerful himself. The very tones of it act like a charm upon him, and produce in his head such a bland and delightful intoxication, that he finds himself making love just as naturally as he would eat his meals. It opens all the sluices of his heart, puts mercury in his veins, gives honey to a tongue that was, heaven knows, sufficiently sweet without it, and gifts him with a pair of feather heels that Mercury might envy ; and to crown all, endows him, while pleading his cause in a quiet corner, with a fertility of invention, and an easy unembarrassed assurance, which nothing can surpass. In fact, with great re-spect for my friend Mr. Bunting, the fiddle it is that *ought* to be our national instrument, as it is that which is most closely and agreeably associated with the best and happiest impulses of the Irish heart. The very language of the people themselves is a proof of this ; for whilst neither harp nor bagpipe is ever introduced as illustrating peculiarities of feeling by any reference to their influence, the fiddle is an agreeable instrument in their hands in more senses than one. Paddy's highest notion of flattery towards the other sex is boldly expressed by an image drawn from it, for when he boasts that he can, by honied words, impress such an agreeable delusion upon his sweetheart as to make her imagine

“ that there is a fiddler on every rib of the house,” there can be no metaphor conceived more strongly or beautifully expressive of the charm which flows from the tones of that sweet instrument. Paddy, however, is very often hit by his own metaphor, at a time when he least expects it. When pleading his cause, for instance, and promising golden days to his fair one, he is not unfrequently met by, “ Ay, ay, it's all very well now ; you're sugary enough, of course ; but wait till we'd be a year married, an'

maybe, like so many others that promise what you do, you'd never come home to me widout 'hang-in' up your fiddle behind the door;'" by which she means to charge him with the probability of being agreeable when abroad, but morose in his own family.

Having thus shown that the fiddle and its music are mixed up so strongly with our language, feelings and amusements, is now time to say something of the fiddler. In Ireland it is impossible, on looking through all classes of society, to find any individual so perfectly free from care, or, in stronger word's, so completely happy, as the fiddler, especially if he be blind, which he generally is. His want of sight circumscribes his other wants, and whilst it diminishes his enjoyments, not only renders him unconscious of their loss, but gives a greater zest to those that are left him, simple and innocent as they are. He is in truth a man whose lot in life is happily cast, and whose lines have fallen in pleasant places. The phase of life which is presented to him, and in which he moves, is one of innocent mirth and harmless enjoyment. Marriages, weddings, dances, and merry-makings of all descriptions, create the atmosphere of mirth and happiness which he ever breathes. With the dark designs, the crimes and outrages of mankind, he has nothing to do, and his light spirit is never depressed by their influence. Indeed he may be said with truth to pass through none but the festivals of life, to hear nothing but mirth, to feel nothing but kindness, and to communicate nothing but happiness to all around him. He is at once the source and the centre of all good and friendly feelings. By him the aged man forgets his years, and is agreeably cheated back into youth ; the labourer snatches a pleasant moment from his toil, and is happy ; the care-worn ceases to remember the anxieties that press him down; the boy is enraptured with delight ; and the child is charmed with a pleasure that he feels to be wonderful.

Surely such a man is important, as filling up with enjoyment so many of the pauses in human misery. He is a thousand times better than a politician, and is a true philosopher without knowing it. Every man is his friend, unless it be a rival fiddler, and he is the friend of every man, with the same exception. Every house, too, every heart, and every hand, is open to him ; he never knows what it is to want a bed, a dinner or a shilling. Good heavens ! what more than this can the cravings of the human heart desire ? For my part, I do not know what others might aim at ; but I am of opinion that in such a world as this, the highest proof of a wise man would be, a wish to live and die an Irish fiddler.

And yet, alas ! there is no condition of life without some remote or contingent sorrow. Many a scene have I witnessed connected with this very subject, that would wring tears from any eye, and find a tender pulse in the hardest heart. It is indeed a melancholy alternative that devotes the poor sightless lad to an employment that is ultimately productive of so much happiness to himself and others. This alternative is seldom resorted to, unless when some poor child—perhaps a favourite—is deprived of sight by the terrible ravages of the small-pox. In life there is scarcely anything more touching than to witness in the innocent invalid the first effects, both upon himself and his parents, of this woful privat-ion. The utter helplessness of the pitiabie darkling, and his total dependence on those around him—his unacquaintance with the relative situation of all the places that were familiar to him —his tottering and timid step, his affecting call of “ Mammy, where are you ?” joined to the bitter consciousness on her part that the light of affection and innocence will never sparkle in those beloved eyes again—all this constitutes a scene of deep and bitter sorrow. When, however, the sense of his bereavement passes away, and the cherished child grows up to the proper age, a fiddle is procured for him by his parents, if they are able, and if not, a subscription is made up among their friends and neighbours to buy him one. All the family, with tears in their eyes, then kiss and take leave of him ; and his mother, taking him by the hand, leads him, as had been previously arranged, to the best fiddler in the neighbourhood, with whom he is left as an apprentice. There is generally no fee required, but he is engaged to hand his master all the money he can make at dances, from the time he is proficient enough to play at them. Such is the simple process of putting a blind boy in the way of becoming acquainted with the science of melody.

In my native parish there were four or five fiddlers—all good in their way ; but the Paganini of the district was the far-famed Mickey M'Rorey. Where Mickey properly lived, I never could actually discover, and for the best reason in the world,—he was not at home once in twelve months. As Colley

Gibber says in the play, he was “ a kind of a here-and-thereian — a stranger nowhere.” This, however, mattered little ; for though perpetually shifting day after day from place to place, yet it somehow hap-pened that nobody ever was at a loss where to find him. The truth is, he never felt disposed to travel *incog.*, because he knew that his interest must suffer by doing so ; the consequence was, that wherever he went, a little nucleus of local fame always attended him, which rendered it an easy matter to find his whereabouts.

Mickey was blind from his infancy, and, as usual, owed to the small-pox the loss of his sight. He was about the middle size, of rather a slender make, and possessed an intelligent countenance, on which beamed that singular expression of inward serenity so peculiar to the blind. His temper was sweet and even, but capable of rising through the buoyancy of his own humour to a high pitch of exhilaration and enjoyment. The dress he wore, as far as I can remember, was always the same in colour and fabric—to wit, a brown coat, a sober-tinted cotton waistcoat, gray stockings, and black corduroys. Poor Mickey ! I think I see him before me, his head erect, as the heads of all blind men are, the fiddle-case under his left arm, and his hazel staff held out like a feeler, exploring with experimental pokes the nature of the ground before him, even although some happy urchin leads him onward with an exulting eye ; an honour of which he will boast to his companions for many a mortal month to come.

The first time I ever heard Mickey play was also the first I ever heard a fiddle. Well and distinctly do I remember the occasion. The season was summer—but summer was summer then—and a new house belonging to Frank Thomas had been finished, and was just ready to receive him and his family. The floors of Irish houses in the country generally consist at first of wet clay, and when this is sufficiently well smoothed and hardened, a dance is known to be an excellent thing to bind and prevent them from cracking. On this occasion the evening had been appointed, and the day was nearly half advanced, but no appearance of the fiddler. The state of excitement in which I found myself, could not be described. The name of Mickey M’Rorey had been ringing in my ears for God knows how long, but I had never seen him, or even heard his fiddle. Every two minutes I was on the top of a little eminence looking out for him, my eyes straining out of their sockets, and my head dizzy with the prophetic expectation of rapture and delight. Human patience, however, could bear this painful sus-pense no longer, and I privately resolved to find Mickey, or perish. I accordingly proceeded across the hills, a distance of about three miles, to a place called Kilnahushogue, where I found him waiting for a guide. At this time I could not have been more than seven years of age ; and how I wrought out my way over the lonely hills, or through what mysterious instinct I was led to him, and that by a path, too, over which I had never travelled before, must be left unrevealed until it shall please that Power that guides the bee to its home, and the bird for thousands of miles through the air, to disclose the principle upon which it is accomplished.

On our return home I could see the young persons of both sexes flying out to the little eminence I spoke of, looking eagerly towards the spot we travelled from, and immediately scampering in again, clapping their hands and shouting with delight. Instantly the whole village was out, young and old, standing for a moment to satisfy themselves that the intelligence was correct ; after which, about a dozen of the youngsters sprang forward, with the speed of so many antelopes, to meet us, whilst the elders returned with a soberor, but not less satisfied, manner into the houses. Then commenced the usual battle, as to whom should be honoured by permission to carry the fiddle-case. Oh ! that fiddle-case ! For seven long years it was an honour exclusively allowed to myself, whenever Mickey attended a dance any-where near us ; and never was the Lord Chancellor’s mace—to which, by the way, with great respect for his Lordship, it bore a considerable resemblance—carried with a prouder heart or a more exulting eye. But so it is —

“ These little things are great to *little* men.”

“ Blood alive, Mickey, you’re welcome!” “ How is every bone of you, Mickey ? Bedad we gev you up.” “ No, we didn’t give you up, Mickey ; never heed him ; sure we knew very well you’d not desert the Towny boys,—whoo !—Fol de rol lol !” “ Ah, Mickey, won’t you sing ‘ There was a wee devil came over the wall ?’” “ To be sure he will, but wait till he comes home and gets his dinner first. Is it

off an empty stomach you'd have him to sing ?” “ Mickey, give me the fiddle-case, won't you Mickey ?” “ No, to *me*, Mickey.” “ Never heed them, Mickey : you promised it to me at the dance in Carntaul.”

“ Aisy, boys, aisy. The truth is, none of yez can get the fiddle-case. Shibby, my fiddle, hasn't been well for the last day or two, and can't bear to be carried by any one barrin' myself.”

“ Blood alive ! sick is it, Mickey ?—an' what ails her ?”

“ Why, some o' the doctors says there's a frog in her, an' others that she has got the cholic ; but I'm goin' to give her a dose of balgriffauns when I get up to the house above. Ould Harry Connolly says she's with-fiddle; an' if that's true, boys ; maybe some o' yez won't be in luck. I'll be able to spare a young fiddle or two among yez.”

Many a tiny hand was clapped, and many an eye was lit up with the hope of getting a young fiddle ; for gospel itself was never looked upon to be more true than this assertion of Mickey's. And no wonder. The fact is, he used to amuse himself by making small fiddles of deal and horse-hair, which he carried about with him, as presents for such youngsters as he took a fancy to. This he made a serious business of, and carried it on with an importance becoming the intimation just given. Indeed, I remember the time when I watched one of them, which I was so happy as to receive from him, day and night, with the hope of being able to report that it was growing larger ; for my firm belief was, that in due time it would reach the usual size.

As we went along, Mickey, with his usual tact, got out of us all the information respecting the several courtships of the neighbourhood that had reached us, and as much, too, of the village gossip and scandal as we knew.

Nothing can exceed the overflowing kindness and affection with which the Irish fiddler is received on the occasion of a dance or merry-making ; and to do him justice he loses no opportunity of exaggerating his own importance. From habit, and his position among the people, his wit and power of repartee are necessarily cultivated and sharpened. Not one of his jokes ever fails—a circumstance which improves his humour mightily ; for nothing on earth sustains it so much as knowing that, whether good or bad, it will be laughed at. Mickey, by the way, was a bachelor, and, though blind, was able, as he himself used to say, to see through his ears better than another could through the eyes. He knew every voice at once, and every boy and girl in the parish by name, the moment he heard them speak.

On reaching the house he is bound for, he either partakes of, or at least is offered, refreshment, after which comes the ecstatic moment to the youngsters : but all this is done by due and solemn preparation. First he calls for a pair of scissors, with which he pares or seems to pare his nails ; then asks for a piece of rosin, and in an instant half a dozen boys are off at a break-neck pace, to the next shoemaker's, to procure it ; whilst in the mean time he deliberately pulls a piece out of his pocket and rosins his bow. But, heavens ! what a ceremony the opening of that fiddle-case is ! The manipulation of the blind man as he runs his hand down to the key-hole—the turning of the key—the taking out of the fiddle—the twang twang—and then the first ecstatic sound, as the bow is drawn across the strings ; then comes a screwing , then a delicious saw or two ; again another screwing—twang twang —and away he goes with the favourite tune of the good woman, for such is the etiquette upon these occasions. The house is immediately thronged with the neighbours, and a preliminary dance is taken, in which the old folks, with good-humoured violence, are literally dragged out, and forced to join. Then come the congratulation —“ Ah, Jack you could do it wanst,” says Mickey, “ an can still, you have a kick in you yet.” “ Why, Mickey, I seen dancin' in my time,” the old man will reply, his brow relaxed by a remnant of his former pride, and the hilarity of the moment, “ but you see the breath isn't what it used to be wid me, when I could dance the *Baltchorum Jig* on the bottom of a ten gallon cask. But I think a glass o' whiskey will do us no harm after that. Heighho !—well, well—I'm sure I thought *my* dancin' days wor over.”

“ Bedad an’ you wor matched any how,” rejoined the fiddler. “ Molshy carried as light a heel as ever you did ; sorra woman of her years ever I seen could cut the buckle wid her. You would know the tune on her feet still.”

“ Ah, Mickey, the truth is,” the good woman would say ; “we have no sich dancin’ now as there was in my days. Thry that glass.”

“ But as good fiddlers, Molshy, eh? Here’s to you both, and long may ye live to shake the toe ! Whoo ! bedad that’s great stuff. Come now sit down, Jack, till I give you your ould favourite, ‘ *Cannie Soogah*.’”

These were happy moments and happy times, which might well be looked upon as picturing the simple manners of country life with very little of moral shadow to obscure the cheerfulness which lit up the Irish heart and hearth into humble happiness. Mickey, with his usual good nature, never forgot the younger portion of his audience. After entertaining the old and full-grown, he would call for a key, one end of which he placed in his mouth, in order to make the fiddle sing for the children their favour-ite song, beginning with

“ Oh, grand-mamma, will you squeeze my wig?”

This he did in such a manner, through the medium of the key, that the words seemed to be spoken by the instrument, and not by himself. After this was over, he would sing us, to his own accompaniment, another favourite, “ There was a wee devil looked over the wall,” which generally closed that portion of the entertainment, so kindly designed for us.

Upon those moments I have often witnessed marks of deep and pious feeling, occasioned by some memory of the absent or the dead, that were as beautiful as they were affecting. If, for instance, a favourite son or daughter happened to be removed by death, the father or mother, remembering the air which was loved best by the departed, would pause a moment, and with a voice full of sorrow, say, “ Mickey, there is *one tune* that I would like to hear ; I love to think of it, and to hear it ; I do, for the sake of them that’s gone—my darlin’ son that’s lyin’ low : it was he that loved it. His ear is closed against it now ; but for *his* sake—ay, for your sake avourneen machree—we will hear it once more.”

Mickey always played such tunes in his best style, and amidst a silence that was only broken by sobs, suppressed moanings, and the other tokens of profound sorrow. These rushes, however, of natural feeling soon passed away. In a few minutes the smiles returned, the mirth broke out again, and the lively dance went on, as if their hearts had been incapable of such affection for the dead — affect-ion at once so deep and tender. But many a time the light of cheerfulness plays along the stream of Irish feeling, when cherished sorrow lies removed from the human eye far down from the surface.

These preliminary amusements being now over, Mickey is conducted to the dance-house, where he is carefully installed in the best chair, and immediately the dancing commences. It is not my purpose to describe an Irish dance here, having done it more than once elsewhere. It is enough to say that Mickey is now in his glory ; and proud may the young man be who fills the honourable post of his companion, and sits next him. He is a living store-house of intelligence, a travelling directory for the parish—the lover’s text book—the young woman’s best companion ; for where is the courtship going on of which he is not cognizant? where is there a marriage on the tapis, with the particulars of which he is not acquainted? He is an authority whom nobody would think of questioning. It is now, too, that he scatters his jokes about ; and so correct and well trained is his ear, that he can frequently name the Young man who dances, by the peculiarity of his step.

“ Ah ha ! Paddy Brien, you’re there ? Sure I’d know the sound of your smoothin’-irons any where. Is it thrue, Paddy, that you wor sint for down to Errigle Keerogue, to kill the clocks for Dan M’Mahon ? But, nabuklish ! Paddy, what’ll you have ?”

“ Is that Grace Reilly on the flure ? Faix. avourneen, you can do it ; devil o your likes I see any where. I’ll lay Shibby to a penny trump that you could dance your own namesake—the *Caleen dhas*

dhun, the bonny brown girl—upon a spider’s cobweb, without brakin’ it. Don’t be in a hurry, Grace dear, to tie the knot ; *I’ll* wait for you.”

Several times in the course of the night a plate is brought round, and a collection made for the fiddler: this was the moment when Mickey used to let the jokes fly in every direction. The timid he shamed into liberality, the vain he praised, and the niggardly he assailed by open hardy satire; all managed, however, with such an under-current of good humour, that no one could take offence. No joke ever told better than that of the broken string. Whenever this happened at night, Mickey would call out to some soft fellow, “ Blood alive, Ned Martin, will you bring me a candle ? I’ve broken a string. The unthinking young man, forgetting that he was blind, would take the candle in a hurry, and fetch it to him.

“ Faix, Ned, I knew you wor jist fit for’t ; houldin’ a candle to a dark man ! Isn’t he a beauty boys ? —look at him, girls—as ’cute as a pancake.”

It is unnecessary to say, that the mirth on such occasions was convulsive. Another similar joke was also played off by him against such as he knew to be ungenerous at the collection.

“ Paddy Smith, I want a word wid you. I’m goin’ across the counbry as far as Ned Donnelly’s, and I want you to help me along the road, as the night is dark.”

“ To be sure, Mickey. I’ll bring you over as snug as if you wor on a clean plate, man alive !”

“ Thank you, Paddy ; throth you’ve the dacency in you ; an’ kind father for you, Paddy. Maybe I’ll do as much for you some other time.”

Mickey never spoke of this until the trick was played off, after which, he published it to the whole parish ; and Paddy of course was made the standing jest for being so silly as to think that night or day had any difference to a man who could not see.

Thus passed the life of Mickey M’Rorey, and thus pass the lives of most of his class, serenely and happily. As the sailor to his ship, the sportsman to his gun, so is the fiddler attached to his fiddle. His hopes and pleasures, though limited, are full. His heart is necessarily light, for he comes in contact with the best and brightest side of life and nature ; and the consequence is, that their mild and mellow lights are reflected on and from himself. I am ignorant whether poor Mickey is dead or not ; but I dare say he forgets the boy to whose young spirit he communicated so much delight, and who often danced with a buoyant and careless heart to the pleasant notes of his fiddle. Mickey M’Rorey, farewell!

Whether living or dead, peace be with you.[1]

[1] Mickey, who is still living, remembers the writer of this well, and felt very much flattered on hearing the above notice of himself read.— W. C, 1845.

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