

AN IRISH GENTLEMAN

BY
W.
SOMERSET.
MAUGHAM.



I.



WHEN mine host of the Golden Eagle took the visitors' book to a foreigner lately arrived by diligence in the little capital of the Principality of Wartburg-Hochstein, the new-comer, in a flourishing hand, described himself as Robert O'Donnel, gentleman, aged twenty-eight; and when the innkeeper, curious to know his guest's history, made discreet inquiries, he added to these brief facts the information that he travelled through Germany in pursuit of artistic emotion, had visited the galleries of Dresden and Berlin, and now, on his way to Munich and Italy, proposed in the town of Wartburg to sort his ideas and bring his journal up to date. For in those early years of Queen Victoria's reign no person of culture went abroad without a copious note-book; and Mr. O'Donnel had already covered a vast number of pages with the ecstasies occasioned in his enthusiastic bosom by the palaces of Potsdam, the Madonna Sistina, the castles of the Rhine; and for his own edification had added thereto sundry philosophic reflections and poetical ideas.

He was a handsome man, with a florid complexion, white teeth, and bold eyes; the Byronic frenzy still reigned supreme, and his hair was worn in admired but careful dis-

order; of his whiskers he was inordinately vain. His dress, flamboyant even for those days, when young bloods sought systematically to astound the vulgar, excited a flattering attention; his loose collar exhibited the fine contour of his neck, his satin stock contrasted vehemently with the extravagance of his waistcoat, and his tall hat was worn with a rakish swagger achieved by none but him. The innkeeper thought him a surprising creature, but was charmed by the assurance with which in a rich brogue he discoursed fluently in abominable German; and his good-humoured, gallant ease made the German suspect that he must be some English nobleman of great wealth, till Mr. O'Donnel assured him he was greater than that, bedad, for he was an Irish gentleman in whose veins ran the blood of innumerable kings. It never occurred to him to add that his family had fallen upon evil days, and the five notes in his pocket-book formed the entire capital of this scion of an ancient race.

For many years Mr. O'Donnel had lived adventurously on his wits, turning his quick intelligence to whatever offered the chance of honest gain; he had taught ignorant boys Latin, played the grave-digger in "Hamlet," written for booksellers, gambled, enjoyed every minute of his life; and now, having by lucky chance made a hundred pounds by backing an outsider, was carrying out an old-

cherished dream to visit the romantic lands whereon his fancy had so long batted. His good spirits had borne him through many vicissitudes, his sense of honour had kept him, even in the direst straits, from any action unbecoming his Royal forebears, and his charm of manner had secured him a multitude of friends from whom, at an extremity, he could always borrow a guinea.

Things looked brighter for him in London at last, and it seemed possible that he could attain a position of some ease; but a life of humdrum prosperity was the last to attract him, and no sooner had he this round sum in his pocket than he flung his prospects to the wind, and with "Virgil" in one pocket and "Childe Harold" in the other set out on a tour of adventure. He reckoned that his money would last till he came to Rome, where he had friends and could wait till something happened; there perhaps some cardinal might want a secretary, a war would break out wherein volunteers were needed, an expedition might be formed to discover the North Pole, some nobleman might desire a tutor for his son. Anyhow, the future must look after itself; Mr. O'Donnel could only attend to the present.

The day after his arrival at Wartburg he set out to visit the castle, celebrated for its romantic history and its dungeons; he observed everything with eager eyes, and afterwards, wandering in the princely forest, his imagination all aflame, invented thrilling adventures wherein he, a gallant hero, rescued from those dark walls fair damsels in distress.

Suddenly he saw coming towards him a young girl on horseback, at terrific speed. She pulled the reins with all her might, obviously terrified, but with no effect; and he saw that she had entirely lost control over the steed she rode. Mr. O'Donnel was strong in the arm and brave; he flung himself in the way, seized the bridle, for some yards was dragged along, but succeeded eventually in stopping the horse. The lady slipped from the saddle and fainted in his arms; he was sufficiently versed in the literature of the day to know how to revive her, and, carrying her to the neighbouring brook, bathed her temples with cold water. Presently she opened her eyes, smiled gently, and blushed.

"I think you've saved my life," she murmured.

"Madam, for that I would willingly have given mine own," he replied, gallantly.

But before the conversation could proceed

an older lady and two gentlemen cantered up, dismounted quickly, and surrounded the fair equestrian with anxious demands.

"I'm not hurt, I'm not frightened," she said. "This gentleman came to my rescue."

The elder woman thanked him elaborately, and one of the gentlemen stepped forward, a wizened man with a skin of parchment.

"Sir, allow me to present myself—Count Peter von Graban."

"My name is Robert O'Donnel, your very humble servant."

"You have done an inestimable service to her Serene Highness the Princess Mary of Wartburg-Hochstein."

Mr. O'Donnel swept the ground with his tall hat, and the girl, with a smile, held out her hand.

"How can I thank you?"

He kissed the proffered hand and placed his own on his heart.

"Madam, it is I who owe you thanks."

II.

A FEW hours later Mr. O'Donnel was writing in his journal a glowing account of the whole affair, with such information as he had gathered concerning the Hereditary Prince whose daughter he had so romantically assisted. It appeared that John-Adolphus of Wartburg-Hochstein was a most despotic ruler, and Mr. O'Donnel's liberal soul revolted against the accounts of his tyranny; feared by all that came in contact with him, seldom seen to smile, he rarely spoke save to command. He seemed altogether a person of few amenities. Mr. O'Donnel drew a flowery picture of this martinet chastising his people with scorpions, of the constant terror wherein they lived, and asked in flowing periods when the spirit of liberty would awake these sluggard Teutons to a sense of the nobility of man.

There was a knock at the door and the innkeeper, with wondering visage, announced that the Court Chamberlain, Count Peter von Graban, desired to see him.

"Show him in," said Mr. O'Donnel.

"I am commanded by his Serene Highness to thank you for the service you rendered the Princess this morning and to give you this small return."

The little old man produced a pocket-book and counted a number of bank-notes.

"In English money you will find it amounts to fifty pounds."

Mr. O'Donnel reddened to the very roots of his hair, for such an insult had never been offered him before; then grew extremely

pale. He paused for one moment to consider his reply.

"I beg you to tender my most respectful thanks to his Serene Highness. I am extremely grateful for this mark of his favour.



"THE OLD MAN PRODUCED A POCKET-BOOK AND COUNTED A NUMBER OF BANK-NOTES."

At the same time, may I ask you whether there is not in the town some charity in which the Princess is interested?"

"Certainly. The orphanage for daughters of poor noblemen is under her special protection."

"Then perhaps she will permit me to subscribe to so admirable an object this sum, and to add thereto another fifty pounds of my own."

Mr. O'Donnel unlocked his box, took out his five English notes, and gravely handed the whole to the astonished Chamberlain

"You will be so good as to see to this matter for me."

"But, sir, I do not know what the Prince will say to such a proceeding. You still leave his Serene Highness under a great obligation to you."

Mr. O'Donnel raised himself to his full height and struck a magnificent gesture.

"Sir, King William IV., before he ascended the throne, once borrowed a guinea from your humble servant and never repaid it. I shall be charmed to add the name of your master to the Sovereigns in my debt."

"The Prince will never permit it."

"Then let her Serene Highness his daughter give me the glove which I had the honour to touch with my lips this morning, and I shall feel myself amply repaid."

The Court Chamberlain stared at him with helpless amazement; in his long experience he had never come across anyone whose manner was so magnificent, whose glance was so haughty, and whose German so imperfect.

"But you don't know what sort of a man the Prince is. If I go back to him with such a message, he's capable of hitting me with his riding-whip. He'll look upon this reply as an insult—his temper is ungovernable. I won't answer for the consequences to yourself."

Then Mr. O'Donnel held his tongue no longer.

"And how dare he insult me! Who does he think I am that he should send

me fifty pounds as though I were a lackey? Go, sir, and tell your master that he must have the soul of a flunkey to use an Irish gentleman with such indignity."

Mr. O'Donnel flung open the door, and the Count Peter von Graban was so taken aback that, without another word, he walked out. Then the Irishman rubbed his hands.

"Robert, me boy, you acted with spirit," he said to himself, contentedly. "I'm proud of ye."

But then he sat down to think, for his generosity, though apposite to the occasion, had left him—penniless. His wanderings in North Germany had cost half the sum at his disposal, and the fifty pounds he had just given away were all he had. He did not regret his munificence, but it forced upon him a hateful subject, the future; the most he could do was to get away decently from Wartburg, and then he must trust to luck. For one hour he was immensely despondent, but then an idea struck him; he would get as far as Baden, and then it was strange if he found no one from whom he could borrow ten guineas to try his luck at the tables. Already he saw a shining pile of gold in front of him, and, feeling that his

journey to Italy was after all assured, he went down to dinner in the highest spirits. The state of his finances was such that economy was entirely out of the question, and he ordered the innkeeper to bring the best bottle of wine in his cellar. The news of his adventure had quickly spread, and the various persons at the *table d'hôte* were anxious to hear details; but with a wave of the hand Mr. O'Donnel put them off, giving them to understand that it was his habit to stop run-away horses every day of his life. He had not finished dinner when the maid entered to say that the Chamberlain was again desirous to see him.

"Will no one rid me of this pestilent fellow?" cried Mr. O'Donnel, with irritation. "Say that I'm dining, but shall be glad if he will drink a glass of wine with me."

The innkeeper, marvelling at his guest's independent spirit, himself carried the message, and Count Peter walked in. Somewhat curtly he signified his desire to speak with the Irishman alone, and in a moment the pair were left to themselves. For a while he hesitated awkwardly, sipping the wine which Mr. O'Donnel insisted he should take.

"You must wonder why I intrude myself upon you again to-day," he said at last, abruptly.

"Not at all. I can quite understand that the pleasure of my company has drawn you hither."

The Count frowned, unused to such flippancy, and irritably drummed the table with his fingers.

"I am the bearer of an apology. His Serene Highness commands me to express his regrets and my own for the insult that was offered you."

Mr. O'Donnel nodded.

"Was he in a passion?"

"The saints preserve us!" cried the old man, throwing up his hands. "He raged and stormed and fumed. You don't know what a man he is; he was within an ace of having me arrested. . . . He wishes to know how he can acknowledge the great service you have done him."

"Let him do me the honour of dining with me to-morrow," answered Mr. O'Donnel, without hesitation.

"Are you mad, sir? Do you not know that John-Adolphus is the proudest prince in Germany? He would no more eat with you in an inn than—than—"

The Chamberlain sought for some monstrous comparison, but found nothing. He

repeated that such a thing was impossible; the Prince would look upon the invitation as the height of impudence; he might very well cause the Irishman to be conducted across the frontier.

"Which would certainly save the expense of the diligence," interrupted Mr. O'Donnel, with a smile.

The Count reasoned, argued, persuaded, but the other was immovable. He wanted nothing on this earth save the company at dinner of his Serene Highness Prince John-Adolphus of Wartburg-Hochstein. At length the Chamberlain departed, saying, grimly, that the answer would be brought next day by a troop of soldiers. Mr. O'Donnel shrugged his shoulders, and presently going out composed the first verses of a ballad suggested by the dungeons of Wartburg-Hochstein. In the morning an equerry brought the reply that his Serene Highness would be pleased to dine with Mr. O'Donnel that afternoon.

III.

MR. O'DONNEL told his landlord that he expected a distinguished person to dinner, and himself went to the cellar to choose the wines that pleased him. He interviewed the cook, and impressed her vastly by the subtlety of his knowledge. He was something of an artist in culinary affairs, and with his own hands prepared a dish which the greatest epicures of London had pronounced incomparable. At the appointed hour, to the innkeeper's confusion and amazement, the Prince himself drove up in full uniform, blazing with decorations. He was a huge man, with grey hair and a grey moustache, with bushy eyebrows and scowling eyes. He gave the impression of imperious temper and of violent disposition. Mr. O'Donnel received him with courteous ease, and, as though he had known him for years, led him into the private room made ready for their meal.

"I thought you wanted to show me off at the *table d'hôte*," said the Prince, grimly.

"By no means. Had it been possible I should have begged you to come incognito."

They sat down and dinner was served. Mr. O'Donnel was always good company, but on this occasion he surpassed himself; he was humorous, fantastical, witty; he would have kept a whole table in a roar of laughter, but the Prince never smiled. He watched his companion gravely, apparently indifferent both to the brilliant conversation and the excellent dinner. Still Mr. O'Donnel was not put out of countenance, and exerted

himself to amuse and divert his Royal guest. At last the Prince rose to his feet.

"Now we are quits," he said.

"On the contrary, I am eternally your debtor for the entertainment you have given me in these two hours."

The Prince looked at him grimly, and perhaps the shadow of a smile twinkled behind his heavy eyebrows; but he said



"I AM ETERNALLY YOUR DEBTOR FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT YOU HAVE GIVEN ME."

nothing, and turning to the door ordered his carriage.

"I do not understand you," he said, as he stepped in. "What have you gained by this?"

"The pleasure of a brief acquaintance with your Serene Highness."

The Prince grunted fiercely and drove off. Mr. O'Donnel went to his room, flung himself on the bed, and cried: "Now, how the deuce am I going to pay the bill?"

Somewhat ruefully he counted the loose change in his pocket, which formed the entire capital at his command. Nothing was left but to pawn his ring, which he valued immensely, since it was a present from the great Count d'Orsay, and when it grew dark he set out to find a jeweller. On second thoughts, considering it unlikely that he would ever again set foot in this unlucky town, Mr. O'Donnel offered it for sale, and

though the man was willing to give but half its value he had not the face to haggle. The sum suggested was large enough to get him safely to Baden, and he accepted thankfully. Next morning he paid his bill and set out with the diligence.

Mr. O'Donnel, light of heart once more, observed the scenery with as much enthusiasm as though there were no uncertainty about his dinner on the following day. At the frontier horses for the second time were changed and, somewhat to the passengers' surprise, passports demanded. An officer carefully examined the Irishman's and looked at him with great suspicion.

"Have you any fault to find with this important document?"

"You did not have it *visé* when you arrived at Wartburg."

"Upon my soul I had better things to do than to trouble myself with needless formalities."

"I can't allow you to leave the Principality. You must go back to Wartburg."

"What do you mean, sir?" cried Mr. O'Donnel, in a fury. "I shall do no such thing, and I'll see you—further."

The officer briefly motioned to his men, and before the other knew what they were about he found himself seized and pinioned. He struggled with all his might, but they had taken him unawares and he was helpless; he could only vent his wrath in a copious flow of language, and he expressed himself with a force and vigour which would have astonished a Billingsgate fishwife. The officer was entirely indifferent, and ordered him to be taken into a room of the inn at which the diligence had stopped till a carriage could be got ready to take him back to Wartburg. In half an hour all arrangements were complete, and Mr. O'Donnel, fuming and mystified, found him-

self traversing the country he had admired during the day.

"Will you undo my arms?" he asked, savagely. "If I've got to spend the night in this jolting carriage I may as well make myself as comfortable as possible."

This was accordingly done, and Mr. O'Donnel, having come to the conclusion that he had been arrested by some mistake which would be explained as soon as he got to Wartburg, soon recovered his equanimity. He was in search of adventure, and here was one which would make an admirable story for his friends in London; he began already to surround it with humorous details. So passed the night, and in the morning the carriage seemed to ascend a steep hill, and it flashed across the Irishman's mind that he was being taken to the castle of Wartburg. He chuckled when he thought of meeting the Prince again under such different circumstances. The carriage stopped.

"Now I must blindfold you," said the officer.

"What ridiculous folly is this?" cried Mr. O'Donnel, losing his temper again. "I've never been treated so ignominiously in my life. I shouldn't like to stand in your shoes when I tell the Prince how you have used me."

"Everything that has happened to you is by express command of his Serene Highness."

The Irishman was too staggered by this to answer, and helplessly allowed his eyes to be bandaged. He was led along passages, through courtyards, down stairs, till a greater chill told him he was underground. The handkerchief was removed, and with a cry Mr. O'Donnel saw he was in one of those historic dungeons which two days before had so excited his romantic fancy.

"Upon my soul," he cried, "this is beyond a joke."

IV.

WITH creaking of locks and drawing of rusty

bolts the heavy door was closed and the Irishman was left in absolute darkness; for a while he could see nothing, and it seemed to him the dungeon was darker than the darkest night he had ever known. But presently through a narrow chink he discerned a faint glimmer of light, and, his eyes growing used to the obscurity, he saw that he was in a small chamber with stone walls, slimy and wet. In one corner was a plank bed, and opposite the light was dimly seen a crucifix. He started when something crossed his foot, and with beating heart recognised the scampering of rats. Beside this, all that broke the oppressive silence was a continual drip, drip, as water fell slowly from the damp roof.

Mr. O'Donnel sat on the bed to think what this might mean; the whole thing was so improbable that he was utterly dumfounded; a hundred explanations ran through his mind, but each seemed absurd. He passed from amazement to despondency, from terror to rage. At last, growing desperately hungry, he made the tour of his cell, and discovered in a recess a jug of water and some coarse black bread. This assuaged his hunger, but scarcely his passion, and the more he thought of what had happened the more



"TWO SOLDIERS ENTERED WITH CANDLES."

indignant he grew. Then he heard sounds ; the door was ponderously unlocked and two soldiers entered with candles, which they set on a ledge, thus illuminating for the prisoner's edification all the discomfort of that place. They retired, and in a moment there appeared—John - Adolphus, Hereditary Prince of Wartburg-Hochstein.

"Good morning, my friend," he said, coolly. "I hope you've made yourself at home."

For an instant Mr. O'Donnel was too much taken aback to reply, but, recovering himself, broke forthwith into an indignant harangue, wherein he threatened the Prince with the most horrid revenge, and demanded explanations for the infamous treatment to which he had been subjected. John-Adolphus shrugged his shoulders.

"You entertained me so well that I desired to continue our acquaintance. It seemed the only way to gain once more the pleasure of your conversation was to arrest you before you crossed the frontier."

"But I will never suffer such an indignity. I will appeal to the English Ambassador, and you shall learn what it means to trifle with the liberty of an English subject."

"Nonsense, my dear sir. It will never get to the ears of your Ambassador that I have taken you prisoner. I can detain you for thirty years without the smallest risk to myself."

"My disappearance will be remarked and commented upon."

"I doubt it. I can scarcely think anyone will much trouble himself with the whereabouts of an obscure Irishman who travels with ten thalers in his pocket."

"How do you know that?"

"You forget that you were searched. Your luggage was examined, and I arrived at the conclusion that you were nearly penniless. By the way, that was a singularly unflattering description you drew of me in your journal—and somewhat treasonable to boot."

"Treasonable it may have been," returned Mr. O'Donnel, "but by all the saints of Heaven it was not unflattering."

"I am anxious to know why you gave your entire fortune to a charitable institution and then sold your ring to pay for my dinner."

With a grim smile the Prince held out his hand, on the little finger of which Mr. O'Donnel observed the ring which two days before he had left with the jeweller. He was about to burst out again angrily when the twinkling eyes of the Prince suggested to him that the whole thing was an elaborate practical joke.

"Upon my soul," he cried, "your Serene Highness has the oddest sense of humour that ever I saw."

The Prince chuckled : it was the first time Mr. O'Donnel had seen in him any signs of amusement.

"You had your little jest with me, Mr. O'Donnel—you must not mind if I have mine. I could not resist the temptation to see how you would like the dungeons about which you raved so poetically when you only knew them from the outside. Let us make friends and go to our dinner, which is just now ready."

"Faith, I shall be able to do justice to it," answered the other, still very sore, but determined to make the best of things, "for your prison fare is not calculated to stay a man's appetite."

It seemed like a story from the "Arabian Nights" when Mr. O'Donnel found himself half an hour later seated at table between John-Adolphus and his daughter the Princess Mary. The Prince was quite a different creature from the sullen, haughty officer who came to the Golden Eagle, and evidently could enjoy a joke as well as any man. The Irishman, flushed with wine, finding his audience appreciative, gave of his best, and poured forth the full stream of his rollicking fun ; there was no restraint to his audacity, to the quaint turns of his humour, to his boisterous anecdote. The Prince and his daughter held their sides with laughter. Tears streamed from their eyes, and the grim stone walls of Wartburg had not for years heard such loud hilarity.

But with his spirits Mr. O'Donnel had recovered his sense of the effective ; he knew his success was unparalleled, and he did not mean to spoil it by lingering on the scene of his triumph. Admirable actor as he was, he knew the value of a striking exit. No sooner was dinner ended than he rose to his feet.

"It grows late, and I must reach Baden quickly. Have I your Serene Highness's permission to retire?"

"To-night?" cried the Prince. "Of course, if you wish it, I say nothing ; but is there not something I can do before you go to show my appreciation of your wit and good-humour?"

"Certainly," returned Mr. O'Donnel, promptly. "Your Serene Highness remembers that my means are small. If the carriage that brought me back here may take me again to the frontier you will overwhelm me with benefits."

"But you have no money at all. Surely now you will accept something from me?"

"The saints preserve me!" cried Mr. O'Donnel, with a wave of the hand. "Have you more charities that you want to benefit?"

The Prince shook his head, more mystified than ever by this eccentricity. He could not understand that to the Irishman, rollicking and romantic, featherbrained and heroic, a fine phrase or a striking attitude was more than all the treasure of this world. At length he had a sensible idea.

"Mr. O'Donnel, I am going to keep this ring with which you paid for my dinner. In return I crave your acceptance of mine."

He took a splendid diamond from his finger.

"But beside this mine is quite worthless," cried Mr. O'Donnel.

"Pray take it. You may find it useful when next you entertain Royal personages at dinner."

Mr. O'Donnel hesitated no longer, but with profuse thanks slipped the ring on his finger. Then the Princess stepped forward.

"I, too, have a present for you. I wish you to keep it in remembrance of the

service you did me. It is of no value at all."

She handed him the glove which he had before gallantly asked for.

"On the contrary," he said. "It is ten times more valuable than the ring, for you have worn it."

He bent down and kissed her hand. The carriage was at the door, and waiting only to launch one parting jest Mr. O'Donnel took advantage of their laughter to bow and retire. From the window, laughing still, the Prince and his daughter watched him drive out into the night, with ten thalers in his pocket and on his hand a ring worth two hundred pounds.

"Is he a mountebank or is he a hero?" she asked. "I've never met such a man."

"English and Irish, they're all mad," answered John-Adolphus; "that's why they conquer the world."

Meanwhile, Mr. O'Donnel, immensely pleased with himself, without a thought of the difficult future, composed himself to sleep as comfortably as though he lay on a feather bed.



"HE BENT DOWN AND KISSED HER HAND."