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THE HELL-FIRE CLUB.

THE acquisition by the National Museum of a table authentically stated to have at one time belonged to the Hell-Fire Club brings our attention for a few moments to the story of this famous, or infamous, institution. It is necessary to turn back the pages of history some two centuries to form a proper estimate of society as it then existed, and to gather some idea of the tone and taste of the day before we can understand how men and women of high rank and good position deliberately formed coteries at the assemblies of which, according to report, all that is held most sacred and solemn was turned to ridicule and contempt.

The Hell-Fire Club with which in this country we are concerned consisted only of men members, but similar societies previously established in England, three alone in London, are recorded of being composed of ladies and gentlemen of the first quality, limited in number, and very exclusive. At a place called Medmenham, in Buckinghamshire, where a fine old abbey stood from olden times, Mr. Francis Dashwood, John Wilkes, Sir William Stanhope, and Lord Despencer in the eighteenth century formed a community sometimes called the Medmenham Monks, but also known as the Hell-Fire Club. These "Monks" were twelve in number, chosen from men of the highest rank, and who termed themselves Franciscans in honour of their founder. At this place were carried out all the practices for which such clubs were formed, and which, at a time when drunkenness and profligacy were regarded as the attributes of a gentleman, even attained a notoriety from the extent of their excesses. A pamphlet was published in 1721 which was a satire on the Hell-Fire Clubs of the period,

and proclaimed that they were kept by a society of blasphemers, who at their gatherings assumed the names of patriarchs, prophets, and martyrs in derision, and ridiculed the doctrines of the Trinity, and the mysteries of the Christian religion. A picture formerly hung on the walls of Schomberg House, in London, representing a scene of a Hell-Fire Club. The artist appears in the picture sitting on a donkey and engaged in the act of sketching the extraordinary scene before him, and the persons depicted in it were stated to be authentic portraits.

The three Hell-Fire Clubs in London were situated in prominent localities, and continued to flourish until with the others, they were suppressed by act of Parliament. The formation of clubs of a like character in Ireland is attributed to Colonel St. Leger and Richard Parsons, first Earl of Rosse. Colonel St. Leger (or Sallenger as it was commonly called) had a romantically-situated seat at Grange Mellon, near Athy, where his gardens, fishpounds, bowling green, and castellated gatehouse were the pride and admiration of the neighbourhood. He belonged to what was known at that period as the company of "Bucks," and every sort of extravagance and diversion was recorded of the gallant colonel and his neighbours and friends, who included old Bagenal, of Carlow, Buck Whaley, and also the celebrated "Jerusalem" Whaley. The fame and memory of Colonel St. Leger lasted in the district long after his death, and by reason of his connection with the notorious Hell-Fire Club, the country people maintained several traditions concerning him, one being that he still (or did to a few years ago) drive about the roads in a coach and four, but his coachman and footmen were minus their heads, as were also the horses. Some of the peasantry have declared they have met this uncommon cavalcade, and many would not pass near Grange Mellon at night.

Although it would appear that several of the Hell-Fire Clubs in England were put down in 1721, it was not until some years later, in 1735, that the far-famed one in Dublin was established. To Richard Parsons, Earl of Rosse, and James Worsdale, the painter, is ascribed the doubtful honour of its foundation. The meetings were held at the Eagle Tavern, Cork Hill, and the pranks and practical jokes of the members formed for a long period subjects of conversation among society in the metropolis. On the summit of one of the Dublin mountains is an old ruin, which on inspection proves to have been a building of considerable extent. This house on Mount Pelier (or Pelia, as the country-folk term it), was erected by Mr. Conolly, Speaker of Irish House of Commons, early in the eighteenth century, as a residence during the hunting or shooting seasons of the year. It contained fine apartments, and must have been from its situation a charming abode in fine weather. To this house the members of the Hell-Fire Club sometimes wended their way, and here in the midst of the beauties of nature and with the fresh winds of the hills about them, they carried on the same round of wild enjoyment that were customary in their city rendezvous.

All manner of tales and reports were current of these gatherings on the mountain side, and to this day the ruined dwelling on the top of Mount Pelier, visible from many parts of Dublin, keeps the designation of "the Hell-Fire Club," although it was only occasionally used by the members, and the greater portion of its fabric was removed in 1763 by Lord Ely, of Rathfarnham, to further the erection of a shooting lodge lower down on the slope of the hill. Among the fables circulated was a belief that his Satanic Majesty himself presided at these banquets on several occasions, and formed a pleasing addition to the lively and distinguished company gathered in his honour; but an easy explanation is

afforded by the suggestion that doubtless some member personated the character, and, allowing the simple people to catch sight of him amidst unusual surroundings, imposed on their credulity without much trouble. The practice of duelling was very usual in the eighteenth century, and among the habitues of a club composed of the most daring spirits of the time it is not to be wondered that the member "who killed his man," was held in high esteem, and was even, it is recorded, awarded a badge of honour after such an event, and the notorious Lord Santry (who was in 1738 tried by his peers in the Parliament House, College Green, on the charge of murdering one of his servants, and was sentenced to death, but afterwards pardoned) used, it was said, to notch the barrel of his pistol for every duel he fought in which he came off the victor.

Sir Compton Domville, of Templeogue, was uncle to Lord Santry, and from him has come into the possession of the National Gallery in Merrion Square a remarkable picture, entitled "The Hell-Fire Club." It was painted by James Worsdale, stated to be, with Lord Rosse, one of the original founders, and the portraits given—five in number—are full-length likenesses of the most prominent members, namely—Henry Barry, 21st Lord Santry; Colonel Clements, Colonel Henry Ponsonby, who was killed at Fontenoy in 1745; Colonel St. George, and Simon Luttrell, late Earl of Carhampton. The scene of the picture is believed to be laid at Santry Court, Co. Dublin, and the five gentlemen above-named are seated round a table covered with a green cloth; in the centre of which is a silver bowl, which holds a quaint wine bottle encased in straw, while tall slender wine glasses close at hand indicate the giving of a toast. This picture was exhibited in London in 1867, and was at the time owned by the Domville family. When sold, some years later, it was purchased by Mr. Wardell, who expressed a desire that it should

be presented to the National Gallery in Dublin, where it has been for the past five and twenty years.

Of what passed at the meetings of this strange club rumour had much to tell, but, doubtless, there was much exaggeration in many of the reports, though wild extravagance and excessive drinking were indulged in, without much doubt, and a deplorable incident in connection with the burning of a servant is stated to be the ultimate cause of the break up of the Irish community. One custom was confidently asserted to prevail in leaving the vice-chair unoccupied *pour le diable*, in whose honour the first toast was always drunk, and on one occasion it is reported that they deliberately "set fire to the apartment in which they met, and endured the flames with incredible obstinacy, till they were forced out of the house, in derision, as they asserted, of the threatened torments of a future state." So strange and eccentric was the behaviour of the high-born members of this, and the other similar clubs—the Mohawk, the Hawkabite, the Cherokee, the Sweaters, and the Pikkindindies—that we can hardly realise that such conduct was tolerated or even could have been regarded as consistent with the character of a gentleman.

The Bucks of Dublin were a powerful and numerous body, and many of their escapades brought terror and sorrow to the plainer citizens with whom they came in contact. The proceedings of the Hell-Fire Club, whether on the summit of Mount Pelier, or within the walls of the Eagle Tavern on Cork Hill, were whispered among the plainer folk with awe and horror. It was told how blasphemous toasts were followed by the awfully sudden death of the speaker on more than one occasion, while the sulphurous flames and fumes which were produced at their gatherings, caused any country person who happened to witness them for a moment to be convinced that they literally saw the infernal regions.

Among the beverages consumed by the members of the Dublin Hell-Fire Club was a mixture known as *scaltheen*, made by brewing whiskey and butter together, and as the making of this was an art in itself, they employed a special *scaltheen* maker. From this man have come many stories of the doings of his wild masters, who, as they imbibed the burning drink so carefully prepared, used, he said, to stand in impious bravado before blazing fires till they dropped down dead from the heat. Again, he related how brimstone certainly was perceptible to the senses when they were "waked," and how the very horses showed a dislike to draw their hearses. Of a certain black cat there are several accounts. This animal belonged to the Club, and had a place at the dinner table, when it was always served first, and any insult or neglect to it was regarded as an offence to be punished by the life of the offender. But the cat in the end is stated to have been the cause of the dissolution of the club, for the story goes that a country clergyman, although he knew no member of his profession ever entered this club-room, declared once, when in Dublin, that if he was invited he should feel it his duty to attend. He got the invitation and went, and his curiosity was so far aroused at seeing the cat helped first, that he inquired as to the reason, and received for answer, from the gentleman who was carving, that it was out of respect for age, as they believed it to be the oldest individual in the company. The clergyman replied that he believed so too, as it was not a cat but an imp of darkness. The Club rose *en masse*, and instant death awaited this rash speaker. He craved, however, five minutes to read one prayer, which was granted, and during this interval, the cat betrayed great uneasiness and indignation by means of yells and groans. Instead of a prayer, however, the wily cleric, it appears, was reading an exorcism which had the effect of making the cat assume its proper form of a fiend,

and it forthwith flew away, carrying the roof of the clubhouse with it, while the now truly terrified members listened with respect to the earnest exhortations of the clergyman, and decided to dissolve the club, and it is satisfactory to know that the curate was rewarded with a bishopric by the King.

With this agreeable ending of the famous Hell-Fire Club it would not be wise to entertain any doubts; all our readers can go and see for themselves what is stated to be a relic of these olden times in the table now in safe keeping in the National Museum, and which, besides being a most serviceable piece of furniture, well made after the fashion of the workers in the eighteenth century, has as ornament an unmistakable carved resemblance on one side of his Satanic Majesty, and has four supporters, which terminate in what look uncommonly like cloven hoofs.