

GARRYOWEN

by *Gerald Griffin*

The little ruined outlet, which gives its name to one of the most popular national songs of Erin, is situate on the acclivity of a hill near the city of Limerick, commanding a not unpleasant view of that fine old town, with the noble stream that washes its battered towers, and a richly cultivated surrounding country. Tradition has preserved the occasion of its celebrity, and the origin of its name, which appears to be compounded of two Irish words signifying "Owen's garden". A person so called was the owner, about half a century since, of a cottage and plot of ground on this spot, which, from its contiguity to the town, became a favourite holiday resort with the young citizens of both sexes — a lounge presenting accommodations somewhat similar to those which are offered to the London mechanic by the Battersea tea-gardens.

Owen's garden was the general rendezvous for those who sought for simple amusement or for dissipation. The old people drank together under the shades of trees — the young played at ball, goal, or other athletic exercises on the green; while a few lingering by the hedge-rows with their fair acquaintances, cheated the time with sounds less boisterous, indeed, but yet possessing their fascination also.

The festivities of our fathers, however, were frequently distinguished by so fierce a character of mirth, that, for any difference in the result of their convivial meetings, they might as well have been pitched encounters. Owen's garden was soon as famous for scenes of strife, as it was for mirth and humour; and broken heads became a staple article of manufacture in the neighbourhood.

This new feature in the diversions of the place was encouraged by a number of young persons of rank somewhat superior to that of the usual frequenters of the garden. They were the sons of the more respectable citizens, the merchants and wholesale traders of the city, just turned loose from school with a greater supply of animal spirit than they had wisdom to govern.

These young gentlemen, being fond of wit, amused themselves by forming parties at night, to wring the heads off all the geese, and the knockers of all the hall-doors in the neighbourhood. They sometimes suffered their genius to soar as high as the breaking of a lamp, and even the demolition of a watchman; but perhaps this species of joking was found a little too serious to be repeated over frequently, for few achievements of so daring a violence are to be found amongst their records. They were obliged to content themselves with the less ambitious distinction of destroying the knockers and store-locks, annoying the peaceable inmates of the neighbouring houses with long-continued assaults on the front doors, terrifying the quiet passers-by with every species of insult and provocation, and indulging their fratricidal propensities against all the geese in Garryowen.

The fame of the "Garryowen Boys" soon spread far and wide. Their deeds were celebrated by some inglorious minstrel of the day in that air which has since resounded over every quarter of the world; and even disputed the palm of national popularity with "Patrick's Day". A string of jolly verses were appended to the tune, which soon enjoyed a notoriety similar to that of the famous "Lilliburlero, bullum-a-la" which sung King James out of his three kingdoms. The name of Garryowen was as well known as that of the Irish Numantium, Limerick, itself, and Owen's little garden became almost a synonym for Ireland.

But that principle of existence which assigns to the life of man its periods of youth, maturity, and decay, has its

analogy in the fate of villages, as in that of empires. Assyria fell, and so did Garryowen! Rome had its decline, and Garryowen was not immortal! Both are now an idle sound, with nothing but the recollections of old tradition to invest them with an interest. The still notorious suburb is little better than a heap of rubbish, where a number of smoked and mouldering walls, standing out from the masses of stone and mortar, indicate the position of a once populous row of dwelling-houses. A few roofs yet remain unshaken, under which some impoverished families endeavour to work out a wretched subsistence, by maintaining a species of huxter trade, by cobbling old shoes, and manufacturing ropes.

A small rookery wears the ears of the inhabitants at one end of the outlet, and a rope-walk, which extends along the adjacent slope of Gallows-green (so called for certain reasons), brings to the mind of the conscious spectator associations that are not calculated to enliven the prospect. Neither is he thrown into a more jocular frame of mind as he picks his steps over the insulated paving stones that appear amid the green slough with which the street is deluged, and encounters, at the other end, an alley of coffinmakers' shops, with a fever hospital on one side and a churchyard on the other. A person who was bent on a journey to the other world could not desire a more expeditious outfit than Garryowen could now afford him, nor a more commodious choice of conveyances. From the machine on the slope above glanced at, to the pest-house at the farther end.

But it is ill talking lightly on a serious subject. The days of Garryowen are gone, like those of ancient Erin: and the feats of her once formidable heroes are nothing more than a winter's evening tale. Owen is in his grave, and his garden looks dreary as a ruined churchyard. The greater number of his merry customers have followed him to a narrow play-ground, which, though not less crowded, affords less room for fun, and less opportunity for contention. The worm is there the reveller — the owl whoops out his defiance without answer (save the echo's) — the best whisky in Munster would not now "drive the cold out of their hearts" — and the withered old sexton is able to knock the bravest of them over the pate with impunity. A few, perhaps, may still remain to look back with a fond shame to the scene of their early follies, and to smile at the page in which these follies are recorded.

Still, however, there is something to keep the memory alive of these unruly days, and to preserve the name of Garryowen from utter extinction. The annual fair which is held on the spot presents a spectacle of gaiety and uproar which might rival its most boisterous days; and strangers still enquire for the place with a curiosity which its appearance seldom fails to disappoint. Our national lyricist has immortalized the air, by adapting to it one of the liveliest of his melodies — the adventures of which it was once the scene, constitute a fund of standing joke and anecdote, which are not neglected by the neighbouring story-tellers — and a rough voice may still occasionally be heard by the traveller who passes near its ruined dwellings at evening, to chaunt a stanza of the chorus which was once in the mouth of every individual in the kingdom:

'Tis there we'll drink the nut-brown ale,
And pay the reck'nin' on the nail,
No man for debt shall go to jail
From Garryowen na gloria.

(*"The Collegians"*, 1828).