

Messer Marco Polo

By

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Note On The Author

So Celtic in feeling and atmosphere are the stories of Donn Byrne that many of his devotees have come to believe that he never lived anywhere but in Ireland. Actually, Donn Byrne was born in New York City. Shortly after his birth, however, his parents took him back to the land of his forefathers. There he was educated and came to know the people of whom he wrote so magically. At Dublin University his love for the Irish language and for a good fight won him many prizes, first as a writer in Gaelic and second as the University's lightweight boxing champion. After continuing his studies at the Sorbonne and the University of Leipzig, he returned to the United States, where, in 1911, he married and established a home in Brooklyn Heights. He earned his living, while trying to write short stories, as an editor of dictionaries. Soon his tales began to attract attention and he added to his collection of boxing prizes many others won in short-story contests. When *MESSER MARCO POLO* appeared in 1921 his reputation in the literary world was firmly established. Thereafter, whatever he wrote was hailed enthusiastically by his ever-growing public, until 1928, when his tragic death in an automobile accident cut short the career of one of America's best-loved storytellers.

Messer Marco Polo

The message came to me, at the second check of the hunt, that a countryman and a clansman needed me. The ground was heavy, the day raw, and it was a drag, too fast for fun and too tame for sport. So I blessed the countryman and the clansman, and turned my back on the field.

But when they told me his name, I all but fell from the saddle.

"But that man's dead!"

But he wasn't dead. He was in New York. He was traveling from the craigs of Ulster to his grandson, who had an orange-grove on the Indian River, in Florida. He wasn't dead. And I said to myself with impatience, "Must every man born ninety years ago be dead?"

"But this is a damned thing," I thought, "to be saddled with a man over ninety years old. To have to act as GARDE-MALADE at my age! Why couldn't he have stayed and died at home? Sure, one of these days he will die, as we all die, and the ghost of him will never be content on the sluggish river, by the mossy trees, where the blue herons and the white cranes and the great gray pelicans fly. It will be going back, I know, to the booming surf and the red-berried rowan-trees and the barking eagles of Antrim. To die out of Ulster, when one can die in Ulster, there is a gey foolish thing. . ."

But the harsh logic of Ulster left me, and the soft mood of Ulster came on me as I remembered him, and I going into the town on the train. And the late winter grass, of Westchester, spare, scrofulous; the jerry-built bungalows; the lines of uncomely linen; the blatant advertising boards -- all the unbeauty of it passed away, and I was again in the Antrim glens. There was the soft purple of the Irish Channel, and there the soft, dim outline of Scotland. There was the herring school silver in the sun, and I could see it from the crags where the surf boomed like a drum. And underfoot was the springy heather, the belled and purple heather. . .

And there came to me again the vision of the old man's thatched farmhouse when the moon was up and the bats were out, and the winds of the County Antrim came bellying down the glens. . . The turf fire burned on the hearth, now red, now yellow, and there was the golden light of lamps, and Malachi of the Long Glen was reciting some poem of Blind Raftery's, or the lament of Pierre Ronsard for Mary, Queen of Scots:

Ta ribin o mo cheadshearac ann mo phocs sios.
Agas mna Eirip ni leigheasfadaois mo bhron, faraor!

Ta me reidh leat go ndeantar comhra caol!
Agas gobhfasfaidh an fear no dhiaidh sin thrid mo lar anios!

There is a ribbon from my only love in my pocket deep,
And the women of Europe they could not cure my grief, alas!
I am done with you until a narrow coffin be made for me.
And until the grass shall grow after that up through my heart!

And I suddenly discovered on the rumbling train that apart from the hurling and the foot-ball and the jumping of horses, what life I remembered of Ulster was bound up in Malachi Campbell of the Long Glen. . .

A very strange old man, hardy as a blackthorn, immense, bowed shoulders, the face of some old hawk of the mountains, hair white and plentiful as some old cardinal's. All his kinsfolk were dead except for one granddaughter. . .And he had become a tradition in the glens. . . It was said he had been an ecclesiastical student abroad, in Valladolid. . .and that he had forsaken that life. And in France he had been a tutor in the family of MacMahon, roi d' Irlande. . .and somewhere he had married, and his wife had died and left him money. . .and he had come back to Antrim. . .He had been in the Papal Zouaves, and fought also in the American Civil War. . .A strange old figure who knew Greek and Latin as well as most professors, and who had never forgotten his Gaelic. . .

Antrim will ever color my own writing. My Fifth Avenue will have something in it of the heather glen. My people will have always a phrase, a thought, a flash of Scots-Irish mysticism, and for that I must either thank or blame Malachi Campbell of the Long Glen. The stories I heard, and I young, were not of Little Rollo and Sir Walter Scott's, but the horrible tale of the Naked Hangman, who goes through the Valleys on Midsummer's Eve; of Dermot, and Granye of the Bright Breasts; of the Cattle Raid of Maeve, Queen of Connacht; of the old age of Cuchulain in the Island of Skye; grisly, homely stories, such as yon of the ghostly foot-ballers of Cushendun, whose ball is a skull, and whose goal is the portals of a ruined graveyard; strange religious poems, like the Dialogue of Death and the Sinner:

Do thugainn loistin do gach deoraidh treith-lag --
I used to give lodging to every poor wanderer;
Food and drink to him I would see in want,
His proper payment to the man requesting reckoning,
Och! Is not Jesus hard if he condemns me!

All these stories, of all these people he told, had the unreal, shimmering quality of that mirage that is seen from Portrush cliffs, a glittering city in a golden desert, surrounded by a strange sea mist. All these songs, all these words he spoke, were native, had the same tang as the turf smoke, the Gaelic quality that is in dark lakes on mountains summits, in plovers nests amid the heather. . .And to remember them now in New York, to see him. . .

Fifteen years had changed him but little: little more tremor and slowness in the walk, a bow to the great shoulders, an eye that flashed like a knife.

"And what do you think of New York, Malachi?"

"I was here before, your honor will remember. I fought at the Wilderness."

I forbore asking him what change he had found. I saw his quivering nostrils.

In a few days he would proceed south, when he had orientated himself after the days of shipboard.

That night it seemed every one chose to come in and cluster around the fire. Randall, the poet; and the two blond Danish girls, with their hair like flax; Fraser, the golfer, just over from Prestwick; and a young writer, with his spurs yet to win; and this one. . .and that one.

They all kept silence as old Malach spoke, sportsmen, artists, men and women of the world; a hush came on them and their eyes showed they were not before the crackling fire in the long rooms but amazed in the Antrim glens.

Yes, old Malachi said, things were changed over there, and a greater change was liable. . .People whispered that in the Valley of the Black Pig the Boar without Bristles had been seen at the close of the day, and in Templemore there was a bleeding image, and these were ominous portents. . .Some folks believed and some didn't. . . And the great Irish hunter that had won the Grand National, the greatest horse in the world. . .But our Man of War, Malachi?. . Oh, sure, all he could do was run, and a hare or a greyhound could beat him at that; but Shawn Spadah, a great jumper him, as well as a runner; in fine, a horse. . .And did I know that Red Simon McEwer of Cushundall had gone around Portrush in eighteen consecutive fours? . . .A Rathlin Islander had tried the swim across to Scotland, but didn't make it, and there was great arguing as to whether it was because of the currents or of lack of strength. . .There were rumblings in the Giants' Causeway. . .very strange. . .A woman in Oran had the second sight, the most powerful gift of second sight in generations. . .There was a new piper in Islay, and it was said he was a second McCrimmon. . .And a new poet had arisen in Uist, and all over the Highlands they were reciting his songs and his "Lament for the Bruce". . .Was I still as keen for, did I still remember the poems, and the great stories?. . .

"Behold, the night is of great length," I quoted, "Unbearable. Tell us, therefore, of those wondrous deeds."

"If you've remembered your Gaidhlig as you've remembered your Greek!"

"It's a long time since you've had a story of me, twelve long years, and it's a long time before you'll have another, and I going away tomorrow. Old Sergeant Death has his warrant out for me this many a day, and it's only the wisdom of an old dog fox that eludes him; but he'll lay me by the heels one of these days. . .then there'll be an end to the grand stories. . .So after this, if you're wanting a story, you must be writing it yourself. . .

"But before I die, I'll leave you the story of Marco Polo. There's been a power of books written about Marco Polo. The scholars have pushed up their spectacles and brushed the cobwebs from their ears, and they've said, 'There's all there is about Marco Polo.'

"But the scholars are a queer and blind people, Brian Oge. I've heard tell there's a doctor in Spain can weigh the earth. But he can't plow a furrow that is needful, for planting corn. The scholars can tell how many are the feathers in a bird's wing, but it takes me to inform the doctors why the call comes to them, and they fly over oceans without compass or sextant or sight of land.

"Did you ever see a scholar standing in front of a slip of a girl? In all his learning he can find nothing to say to her. And every penny poet in the country knows.

"Let you be listening now, Brian Oge, and let also the scholars be listening. But whether the scholars do or not, I'm not caring. A pope once listened to me with great respect, and a marshal of France and poets without number. But the scholars do be turning up their noses. And, mind you, I've got as much scholarship as the next man, as you'll see from my story.

"Barring myself, is there no one in this house that takes snuff? No! Ah, well, times do be changing."

Chapter 1

Now it's nearing night on the first day of spring, and you could see how loath day was to be going for even the short time until the rising of the sun again. And though there was a chill on the canals, yet there was great color to the sunset, the red of it on the water ebbing into orange, and then to purple, and losing itself in the olive pools near the mooring-ties. And a little wind came up from the Greek islands, and now surged and fluttered, the way you'd think a harper might be playing. You'd hear no sound, but the melody was there. It was the rhythm of spring, that the old people recognize.

But the young people would know it was spring, too, by token of the gaiety that was in the air. For nothing brings joy to the heart like the coming of spring. The folk who do be blind all the rest of the year, their eyes do open then, and a sunset takes them, and the wee virgin flowers coming up between the stones, or the twitter of a bird upon the bough. . . And young women do be preening themselves, and young men do be singing, even they that have the voices of rooks. There is something stirring in them that is stirring, in the ground, with the bursting of the seeds. . .

And young Marco Polo threw down the quill in the counting house where he was learning his trade. The night was coming on. He was only a strip of a lad, and to lads the night is not rest from work, and the quietness of sleeping, but gaming, and drinking, and courting young women. Now, there were two women he might have gone to, and one was a great Venetian lady, with hair the red of a queen's cloak, and a great noble shape to her and great dignity. But with her he would only be reciting verses or making grand, stilted compliments, the like of those you would hear in a play. And while that seemed to fit in with winter and candlelight, it was poor sport for spring. The other one was a black, plump little gown-maker, a pleasant, singing little woman, very affectionate, and very proud to have one of the great Polos loving her. She was eager for kissing, and always asking the lad to be careful of himself, to be putting his cloak on, or to be sure and drink something warm when he got home that night, for the air from the canals was chill. The great lady was too much of the mind, and the little gown-maker was too much of the body, either of them, to be pleasing young Marco on the first night of spring.

Now, it is a queer thing will be pleasing a young man on the first night of spring. The wandering foot itches, and the mind and body are keen to follow. There is that inside a young man that makes the hunting dog rise from the hearth on a moonlit night: "Begor! it's myself'll take a turn through the fields on the chance of a bit of coursing. A weasel, maybe, or an otter, would be out the night. Or a hare itself. Ay, there would be sport for you! The hare running hell-for-leather, and me after him over brake and dell. Ay! Ay! Ay! A good hunt's a jewel! I'll take a stretch along the road."

Or there is in him what does be troubling the birds, and they on tropic islands. "Tweet-tweet," they grumble. "A grand place this surely, and very comfortable for the winter. The palm-trees are green, but I'd rather have the green of young grass. And the sea, you ken, it becomes monotonous. Do you remember the peaches of Champagne, wife, and the cherry-trees of Antrim? Do you remember the farmer who was such a bad shot, and his wife with the red petticoat? I'm feeling fine and strong in the wings, AVOURNEEN. What do you say? Let's bundle and go!"

He wandered out with the discontent of the season on him. The sun had dropped at last, and everywhere you'd see torches, and the image of torches in the water. On the canals of the town great barges moved. Everywhere were fine, noble shadows and the splashing of oars. There was a great admiral's galley, ready to put to sea against Genoa. There a big merchantman back from Africa. And along the canals went all the people in the world, you'd think. Now it was a Frenchman, all silks and satins and 'la-di-da, monsieur!' Or a Spaniard with a pointed beard and long, lean legs and a long, lean sword. And now it was a Greek courtesan, white as milk, sitting in her gondola as on a throne. Here was a Muscovite, hairy, dirty, with fine fur and fine jewels and teeth sharp as a dog's. And now an effeminate Greek nobleman, languid as a bride. And here were Moorish captains, Othello's men, great giants of black marble; and swarthy, hook-nosed merchants of Palestine; and the squires of Crusaders -- pretty, ringleted boys, swearing like demons. And here and there were Scots and Irish mercenaries, kilted, sensitive folk, one moment smiling at you and the next a knife in your gizzard.

And as he went through the courts there were whispers and laughter, and occasionally a soft voice invited him to enter; but he smiled and shook his head. Near the Canal de Mestre, which is close by the Ghetto, he stopped by the wine-shop called The Prince of Bulgaria, and he could hear great disputation. And some were speaking of Baldwin II, and how he had no guts to have let Palaeologus take Constantinople from him. And others were murmuring about Genoa.

"Mark us, they mean trouble, those dogs. Better wipe them off the face of the earth now." And a group were discussing the chances of raiding the Jewish Kingdom of the Yemen. "They've got temples there roofed with gold." . . . And an Irish piper was playing on a little silver set of pipes, and an Indian magician was doing great sleight of hand. . .

"I'll go in and talk to the strange foreign people," said Marco Polo.

Chapter 2

Now, you might be thinking that the picture I'm drawing is out of my own head. Let you not be thinking of it as it is now, a city of shadows and ghosts, with a few scant visitors mooning in the canals. The Pride of the West she was, the Jewel of the East. Constantinople was her courtyard. Greece, Egypt, Abyssinia, Bulgaria, and Muscovy, her ten-acre fields. The Crusaders on their way to fight the Saracen stopped to plead for her help and generosity. There were no soldiers more chivalrous, not even the French. There were no better fighters, not even the Highland clans. Sailors? You'd think those fellows had invented the sea. And as for riches and treasures, oh! the wonder of the world she was! Tribute she had from everywhere; the four great horses of Saint Mark they came from Constantinople. The two great marble columns facing the Piazzetta, sure, they came from Acre. When foreign powers wanted the loan of money, it was to Venice they came. Consider the probity of Venetian men. They once held as pledge the Crown of Thorns itself. King Louis IX of France redeemed it.

The processions of the tradespeople were like a king's retinue, and they marching in state on the election of a doge. Each in their separate order they'd come, the master smiths first, as is right, every one garlanded like a conqueror, with their banner and their buglers. The furriers next in ermine and taffeta; the tanners, with silver cups filled with wine; the tailors in white, with vermilion stars; the wool-workers, with olive branches; the quilt-makers in cloaks trimmed with fleur-de-lis; the cloth-of-gold weavers, with golden crowns set with pearls; the shoemakers in fine silk, while the silk-workers were in fustian; the cheese-dealers and pork-butchers in scarlet and purple; the fish-mongers and poulterers, armed like men-of-war; the glass-makers, with elegant specimens of their art; the comb-makers, with little birds in cages; the barber-surgeons on horseback, very dignified, very learned, and with that you'd think there'd be an end to them, but cast your eye back on that procession and you'd find guilds as far as your sight would reach. . .

Let you be going down the markets, and what would you see for sale? Boots, clothes, bread? No, they were out of sight; but scattered on the booths, the like of fairs of bread on a fair-day, you'd find cloves and nutmegs, mace and ebony from Moluccas, that had come by way of Alexandria and the Syrian ports; sandalwood from Timor, in Asia; camphor from Borneo. Sumatra and Java sent benzoin to her markets. Cochin China sent bitter aloes-wood. From China and Japan and from Siam came gum, spices, silks, chessmen, and curiosities for the parlor. Rubies from Peru, fine cloths from Coromandel, and finer still from Bengal. They got spikenard from Nepaul and Bhutan. Their diamonds were from Golconda. From Nirmul they purchased Damascus steel for their swords. Nor is that all you'd see, and you'd be going down by the markets on a sunny morning, and a fine-thinking, low-voiced woman on your arm. You'd see pearls and sapphires, topaz and cinnamon from Ceylon; lac and agates, brocades and coral from

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