

The O'Conors of Castle Conor

by

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I shall never forget my first introduction to country life in Ireland, my first day's hunting there, or the manner in which I passed the evening afterwards. Nor shall I ever cease to be grateful for the hospitality which I received from the O'Conors of Castle Conor. My acquaintance with the family was first made in the following manner. But before I begin my story, let me inform my reader that my name is Archibald Green.

I had been for a fortnight in Dublin, and was about to proceed into county Mayo on business which would occupy me there for some weeks. My head-quarters would, I found, be at the town of Ballyglass; and I soon learned that Ballyglass was not a place in which I should find hotel accommodation of a luxurious kind, or much congenial society indigenous to the place itself.

"But you are a hunting man, you say," said old Sir P- C-; "and in that case you will soon know Tom O'Conor. Tom won't let you be dull. I'd write you a letter to Tom, only he'll certainly make you out without my taking the trouble."

I did think at the time that the old baronet might have written the letter for me, as he had been a friend of my father's in former days; but he did not, and I started for Ballyglass with no other introduction to any one in the county than that contained in Sir P-'s promise that I should soon know Mr. Thomas O'Conor.

I had already provided myself with a horse, groom, saddle and bridle, and these I sent down, en avant, that the Ballyglassians might know that I was somebody. Perhaps, before I arrived Tom O'Conor might learn that a hunting man was coming into the neighbourhood, and I might find at the inn a polite note intimating that a bed was at my service at Castle Conor. I had heard so much of the free hospitality of the Irish gentry as to imagine that such a thing might be possible.

But I found nothing of the kind. Hunting gentlemen in those days were very common in county Mayo, and one horse was no great evidence of a man's standing in the world. Men there as I learnt afterwards, are sought for themselves quite as much as they are elsewhere; and though my groom's top-boots were neat, and my horse a very tidy animal, my entry into Ballyglass created no sensation whatever.

In about four days after my arrival, when I was already infinitely disgusted with the little Pot-house in which I was forced to stay, and had made up my mind that the people in county Mayo were a churlish set, I sent my horse on to a meet of the fox-hounds, and followed after myself on an open car.

No one but an erratic fox-hunter such as I am,--a fox-hunter, I mean, whose lot it has been to wander about from one pack of hounds to another,--can understand the melancholy feeling which a man has when he first intrudes himself, unknown by any one, among an entirely new set of sportsmen. When a stranger falls thus as it were out of the

moon into a hunt, it is impossible that men should not stare at him and ask who he is. And it is so disagreeable to be stared at, and to have such questions asked! This feeling does not come upon a man in Leicestershire or Gloucestershire where the numbers are large, and a stranger or two will always be overlooked, but in small hunting fields it is so painful that a man has to pluck up much courage before he encounters it.

We met on the morning in question at Bingham's Grove. There were not above twelve or fifteen men out, all of whom, or nearly all were cousins to each other. They seemed to be all Toms, and Pats, and Larrys, and Micks. I was done up very knowingly in pink, and thought that I looked quite the thing, but for two or three hours nobody noticed me.

I had my eyes about me, however, and soon found out which of them was Tom O'Conor. He was a fine-looking fellow, thin and tall, but not largely made, with a piercing gray eye, and a beautiful voice for speaking to a hound. He had two sons there also, short, slight fellows, but exquisite horsemen. I already felt that I had a kind of acquaintance with the father, but I hardly knew on what ground to put in my claim.

We had no sport early in the morning. It was a cold bleak February day, with occasional storms of sleet. We rode from cover to cover, but all in vain. "I am sorry, sir, that we are to have such a bad day, as you are a stranger here," said one gentleman to me. This was Jack O'Conor, Tom's eldest son, my bosom friend for many a year after. Poor Jack! I fear that the Encumbered Estates Court sent him altogether adrift upon the world.

"We may still have a run from Poulnaroe, if the gentleman chooses to come on," said a voice coming from behind with a sharp trot. It was Tom O'Conor.

"Wherever the hounds go, I'll follow," said I.

"Then come on to Poulnaroe," said Mr. O'Conor. I trotted on quickly by his side, and before we reached the cover had managed to slip in something about Sir P. C.

"What the deuce!" said he. "What! a friend of Sir P-'s? Why the deuce didn't you tell me so? What are you doing down here? Where are you staying?" &c. &c. &c.

At Poulnaroe we found a fox, but before we did so Mr. O'Conor had asked me over to Castle Conor. And this he did in such a way that there was no possibility of refusing him--or, I should rather say, of disobeying him. For his invitation came quite in the tone of a command.

"You'll come to us of course when the day is over--and let me see; we're near Ballyglass now, but the run will be right away in our direction. Just send word for them to send your things to Castle Conor."

"But they're all about, and unpacked," said I.

"Never mind. Write a note and say what you want now, and go and get the rest to-morrow yourself. Here, Patsey!--Patsey! run into Ballyglass for this gentleman at once. Now don't be long, for the chances are we shall find here." And then, after giving some further hurried instructions he left me to write a line in pencil to the innkeeper's wife on the back of a ditch.

This I accordingly did. "Send my small portmanteau," I said, "and all my black dress clothes, and shirts, and socks, and all that, and above all my dressing things which are on the little table, and the satin neck-handkerchief, and whatever you do, mind you send my PUMPS;" and I underscored the latter word; for Jack O'Conor, when his father left me, went on pressing the invitation. "My sisters are going to get up a dance," said he; "and if you are fond of that kind of things perhaps we can amuse you." Now in those days I was very fond of dancing--and very fond of young ladies too, and therefore glad enough to learn that Tom O'Conor had daughters as well as sons. On this account I was very particular in underscoring the word pumps.

"And hurry, you young divil," Jack O'Conor said to Patsey.

"I have told him to take the portmanteau over on a car," said I.

"All right; then you'll find it there on our arrival."

We had an excellent run, in which I may make bold to say that I did not acquit myself badly. I stuck very close to the hounds, as did the whole of the O'Conor brood; and when the fellow contrived to earth himself, as he did, I received those compliments on my horse, which is the most approved praise which one fox-hunter ever gives to another.

"We'll buy that fellow of you before we let you go," said Peter, the youngest son.

"I advise you to look sharp after your money if you sell him to my brother," said Jack.

And then we trotted slowly off to Castle Conor, which, however, was by no means near to us. "We have ten miles to go;--good Irish miles," said the father. "I don't know that I ever remember a fox from Poulnaroe taking that line before."

"He wasn't a Poulnaroe fox," said Peter.

"I don't know that;" said Jack; and then they debated that question hotly.

Our horses were very tired, and it was late before we reached Mr. O'Conor's house. That getting home from hunting with a thoroughly weary animal, who has no longer sympathy or example to carry him on, is very tedious work. In the present instance I had company with me; but when a man is alone, when his horse toes at every ten steps, when the night is dark and the rain pouring, and there are yet eight miles of road to be conquered,--at such time a man is almost apt to swear that he will give up hunting.

At last we were in the Castle Conor stable yard;--for we had approached the house by some back way; and as we entered the house by a door leading through a wilderness of back passages, Mr. O'Connor said out loud, "Now, boys, remember I sit down to dinner in twenty minutes." And then turning expressly to me, he laid his hand kindly upon my shoulder and said, "I hope you will make yourself quite at home at Castle Conor, and whatever you do, don't keep us waiting for dinner. You can dress in twenty minutes, I suppose?"

"In ten!" said I, glibly.

"That's well. Jack and Peter will show you your room," and so he turned away and left us.

My two young friends made their way into the great hall, and thence into the drawing-room, and I followed them. We were all dressed in pink, and had waded deep through bog and mud. I did not exactly know whither I was being led in this guise, but I soon found myself in the presence of two young ladies, and of a girl about thirteen years of age.

"My sisters," said Jack, introducing me very laconically; "Miss O'Connor, Miss Kate O'Connor, Miss Tizzy O'Connor."

"My name is not Tizzy," said the younger; "it's Eliza. How do you do, sir? I hope you had a fine hunt! Was papa well up, Jack?"

Jack did not condescend to answer this question, but asked one of the elder girls whether anything had come, and whether a room had been made ready for me.

"Oh yes!" said Miss O'Connor; "they came, I know, for I saw them brought into the house; and I hope Mr. Green will find everything comfortable." As she said this I thought I saw a slight smile steal across her remarkably pretty mouth.

They were both exceedingly pretty girls. Fanny the elder wore long glossy curls,--for I write, oh reader, of bygone days, as long ago as that, when ladies wore curls if it pleased them so to do, and gentlemen danced in pumps, with black handkerchiefs round their necks,--yes, long black, or nearly black silken curls; and then she had such eyes;--I never knew whether they were most wicked or most bright; and her face was all dimples, and each dimple was laden with laughter and laden with love. Kate was probably the prettier girl of the two, but on the whole not so attractive. She was fairer than her sister, and wore her hair in braids; and was also somewhat more demure in her manner.

In spite of the special injunctions of Mr. O'Connor senior, it was impossible not to loiter for five minutes over the drawing-room fire talking to these houris--more especially as I seemed to know them intimately by intuition before half of the five minutes was over. They were so easy, so pretty, so graceful, so kind, they seemed to take it so much as a matter of course that I should stand there talking in my red coat and muddy boots.

"Well; do go and dress yourselves," at last said Fanny, pretending to speak to her brothers but looking more especially at me. "You know how mad papa will be. And remember Mr. Green, we expect great things from your dancing to-night. Your coming just at this time is such a Godsend." And again that soupcon of a smile passed over her face.

I hurried up to my room, Peter and Jack coming with me to the door. "Is everything right?" said Peter, looking among the towels and water-jugs. "They've given you a decent fire for a wonder," said Jack, stirring up the red hot turf which blazed in the grate. "All right as a trivet," said I. "And look alive like a good fellow," said Jack. We had scowled at each other in the morning as very young men do when they are strangers; and now, after a few hours, we were intimate friends.

I immediately turned to my work, and was gratified to find that all my things were laid out ready for dressing; my portmanteau had of course come open, as my keys were in my pocket, and therefore some of the excellent servants of the house had been able to save me all the trouble of unpacking. There was my shirt hanging before the fire; my black clothes were spread upon the bed, my socks and collar and handkerchief beside them; my brushes were on the toilet table, and everything prepared exactly as though my own man had been there. How nice!

I immediately went to work at getting off my spurs and boots, and then proceeded to loosen the buttons at my knees. In doing this I sat down in the arm-chair which had been drawn up for me, opposite the fire. But what was the object on which my eyes then fell;--the objects I should rather say!

Immediately in front of my chair was placed, just ready for my feet, an enormous pair of shooting-boots--half-boots made to lace up round the ankles, with thick double leather soles, and each bearing half a stone of iron in the shape of nails and heel-pieces. I had superintended the making of these shoes in Burlington Arcade with the greatest diligence. I was never a good shot; and, like some other sportsmen, intended to make up for my deficiency in performance by the excellence of my shooting apparel. "Those nails are not large enough," I had said; "nor nearly large enough." But when the boots came home they struck even me as being too heavy, too metalsome. "He, he, he," laughed the boot boy as he turned them up for me to look at. It may therefore be imagined of what nature were the articles which were thus set out for the evening's dancing.

And then the way in which they were placed! When I saw this the conviction flew across my mind like a flash of lightning that the preparation had been made under other eyes than those of the servant. The heavy big boots were placed so prettily before the chair, and the strings of each were made to dangle down at the sides, as though just ready for tying! They seemed to say, the boots did, "Now, make haste. We at any rate are ready--you cannot say that you were kept waiting for us." No mere servant's hand had ever enabled a pair of boots to laugh at one so completely.

But what was I to do? I rushed at the small portmanteau, thinking that my pumps also might be there. The woman surely could not have been such a fool as to send me those

tons of iron for my evening wear! But, alas, alas! no pumps were there. There was nothing else in the way of covering for my feet; not even a pair of slippers.

And now what was I to do? The absolute magnitude of my misfortune only loomed upon me by degrees. The twenty minutes allowed by that stern old paterfamilias were already gone and I had done nothing towards dressing. And indeed it was impossible that I should do anything that would be of avail. I could not go down to dinner in my stocking feet, nor could I put on my black dress trousers, over a pair of mud-painted top-boots. As for those iron-soled horrors--; and then I gave one of them a kick with the side of my bare foot which sent it half way under the bed.

But what was I to do? I began washing myself and brushing my hair with this horrid weight upon my mind. My first plan was to go to bed, and send down word that I had been taken suddenly ill in the stomach; then to rise early in the morning and get away unobserved. But by such a course of action I should lose all chance of any further acquaintance with those pretty girls! That they were already aware of the extent of my predicament, and were now enjoying it--of that I was quite sure.

What if I boldly put on the shooting-boots, and clattered down to dinner in them? What if I took the bull by the horns, and made, myself, the most of the joke? This might be very well for the dinner, but it would be a bad joke for me when the hour for dancing came. And, alas! I felt that I lacked the courage. It is not every man that can walk down to dinner, in a strange house full of ladies, wearing such boots as those I have described.

Should I not attempt to borrow a pair? This, all the world will say, should have been my first idea. But I have not yet mentioned that I am myself a large-boned man, and that my feet are especially well developed. I had never for a moment entertained a hope that I should find any one in that house whose boot I could wear. But at last I rang the bell. I would send for Jack, and if everything failed, I would communicate my grief to him.

I had to ring twice before anybody came. The servants, I well knew, were putting the dinner on the table. At last a man entered the room, dressed in rather shabby black, whom I afterwards learned to be the butler.

"What is your name, my friend?" said I, determined to make an ally of the man.

"My name? Why Larry sure, yer honer. And the masther is out of his sinses in a hurry, because yer honer don't come down."

"Is he though? Well now, Larry; tell me this; which of all the gentlemen in the house has got the largest foot?"

"Is it the largest foot, yer honer?" said Larry, altogether surprised by my question.

"Yes; the largest foot," and then I proceeded to explain to him my misfortune. He took up first my top-boot, and then the shooting- boot--in looking at which he gazed with wonder

at the nails;--and then he glanced at my feet, measuring them with his eye; and after this he pronounced his opinion.

"Yer honer couldn't wear a morsel of leather belonging to ere a one of 'em, young or ould. There niver was a foot like that yet among the O'Conors."

"But are there no strangers staying here?"

"There's three or four on 'em come in to dinner; but they'll be wanting their own boots I'm thinking. And there's young Mither Dillon; he's come to stay. But Lord love you--" and he again looked at the enormous extent which lay between the heel and the toe of the shooting apparatus which he still held in his hand. "I niver see such a foot as that in the whole barony," he said, "barring my own."

Now Larry was a large man, much larger altogether than myself, and as he said this I looked down involuntarily at his feet; or rather at his foot, for as he stood I could only see one. And then a sudden hope filled my heart. On that foot there glittered a shoe--not indeed such as were my own which were now resting ingloriously at Ballyglass while they were so sorely needed at Castle Conor; but one which I could wear before ladies, without shame--and in my present frame of mind with infinite contentment.

"Let me look at that one of your own," said I to the man, as though it were merely a subject for experimental inquiry. Larry, accustomed to obedience, took off the shoe and handed it to me.

My own foot was immediately in it, and I found that it fitted me like a glove.

"And now the other," said I--not smiling, for a smile would have put him on his guard; but somewhat sternly, so that that habit of obedience should not desert him at this perilous moment. And then I stretched out my hand.

"But yer honer can't keep 'em, you know," said he. "I haven't the ghost of another shoe to my feet." But I only looked more sternly than before, and still held out my hand. Custom prevailed. Larry stooped down slowly, looking at me the while, and pulling off the other slipper handed it to me with much hesitation. Alas! as I put it to my foot I found that it was old, and worn, and irredeemably down at heel;--that it was in fact no counterpart at all to that other one which was to do duty as its fellow. But nevertheless I put my foot into it, and felt that a descent to the drawing-room was now possible.

"But yer honer will give 'em back to a poor man?" said Larry almost crying. "The mather's mad this minute because the dinner's not up. Glory to God, only listhen to that!" And as he spoke a tremendous peal rang out from some bell down stairs that had evidently been shaken by an angry hand.

"Larry," said I--and I endeavoured to assume a look of very grave importance as I spoke--"I look to you to assist me in this matter."

"Och--wirra sthru then, and will you let me go? just listhen to that," and another angry peal rang out, loud and repeated.

"If you do as I ask you," I continued, "you shall be well rewarded. Look here; look at these boots," and I held up the shooting-shoes new from Burlington Arcade. "They cost thirty shillings--thirty shillings! and I will give them to you for the loan of this pair of slippers."

"They'd be no use at all to me, yer honer; not the laist use in life."

"You could do with them very well for to-night, and then you could sell them. And here are ten shillings besides," and I held out half a sovereign which the poor fellow took into his hand.

I waited no further parley but immediately walked out of the room. With one foot I was sufficiently pleased. As regarded that I felt that I had overcome my difficulty. But the other was not so satisfactory. Whenever I attempted to lift it from the ground the horrid slipper would fall off, or only just hang by the toe. As for dancing, that would be out of the question.

"Och, murther, murther," sang out Larry, as he heard me going down stairs. "What will I do at all? Tare and 'ounds; there, he's at it agin, as mad as blazes." This last exclamation had reference to another peal which was evidently the work of the master's hand.

I confess I was not quite comfortable as I walked down stairs. In the first place I was nearly half an hour late, and I knew from the vigour of the peals that had sounded that my slowness had already been made the subject of strong remarks. And then my left shoe went flop, flop, on every alternate step of the stairs. By no exertion of my foot in the drawing up of my toe could I induce it to remain permanently fixed upon my foot. But over and above and worse than all this was the conviction strong upon my mind that I should become a subject of merriment to the girls as soon as I entered the room. They would understand the cause of my distress, and probably at this moment were expecting to hear me clatter through the stone hall with those odious metal boots.

However, I hurried down and entered the drawing-room, determined to keep my position near the door, so that I might have as little as possible to do on entering and as little as possible in going out. But I had other difficulties in store for me. I had not as yet been introduced to Mrs. O'Connor; nor to Miss O'Connor, the squire's unmarried sister.

"Upon my word I thought you were never coming," said Mr. O'Connor as soon as he saw me. "It is just one hour since we entered the house. Jack, I wish you would find out what has come to that fellow Larry," and again he rang the bell. He was too angry, or it might be too impatient to go through the ceremony of introducing me to anybody.

I saw that the two girls looked at me very sharply, but I stood at the back of an arm-chair so that no one could see my feet. But that little imp Tizzy walked round deliberately, looked at my heels, and then walked back again. It was clear that she was in the secret.

There were eight or ten people in the room, but I was too much fluttered to notice well who they were.

"Mamma," said Miss O'Connor, "let me introduce Mr. Green to you."

It luckily happened that Mrs. O'Connor was on the same side of the fire as myself, and I was able to take the hand which she offered me without coming round into the middle of the circle. Mrs. O'Connor was a little woman, apparently not of much importance in the world, but, if one might judge from first appearance, very good-natured.

"And my aunt Die, Mr. Green," said Kate, pointing to a very straight-backed, grim-looking lady, who occupied a corner of a sofa, on the opposite side of the hearth. I knew that politeness required that I should walk across the room and make acquaintance with her. But under the existing circumstances how was I to obey the dictates of politeness? I was determined therefore to stand my ground, and merely bowed across the room at Miss O'Connor. In so doing I made an enemy who never deserted me during the whole of my intercourse with the family. But for her, who knows who might have been sitting opposite to me as I now write?

"Upon my word, Mr. Green, the ladies will expect much from an Adonis who takes so long over his toilet," said Tom O'Connor in that cruel tone of banter which he knew so well how to use.

"You forget, father, that men in London can't jump in and out of their clothes as quick as we wild Irishmen," said Jack.

"Mr. Green knows that we expect a great deal from him this evening. I hope you polk well, Mr. Green," said Kate.

I muttered something about never dancing, but I knew that that which I said was inaudible.

"I don't think Mr. Green will dance," said Tizzy; "at least not much." The impudence of that child was, I think, unparalleled by any that I have ever witnessed.

"But in the name of all that's holy, why don't we have dinner?" And Mr. O'Connor thundered at the door. "Larry, Larry, Larry!" he screamed.

"Yes, yer honer, it'll be all right in two seconds," answered Larry, from some bottomless abyss. "Tare an' ages; what'll I do at all," I heard him continuing, as he made his way into the hall. Oh what a clatter he made upon the pavement,--for it was all stone! And how the drops of perspiration stood upon my brow as I listened to him!

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