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A VETERAN OF 1812.

CHAPTER I.



ON the 16th of November, 1780, in the little village on the south bank of the Shannon immortalized by Gerald Griffin's graphic pen and the sad story of the Colleen Bawn,* was born the lad whose after life was destined to be more eventful than generally falls to a soldier's lot.

The square stone house, then forming three sides of a paved court-yard, is now a heap of ruins. Ivy drapes the roofless walls; the barred doorway through which the faithful Danny-man went in and out about his work attending to his master's horses, is gone ; a pile of loose stones and weed-choked crevices alone mark the spot, but the little brook still winds its way in tiny leaps and bounds down the steep hillside—sin ripples over its stony bed, widening as it reaches the foot of the old grey tower of the ruined castle of the Knights of Glin, and under the high-arched bridge

* Colleen Bawn, a dramatic adaptation of Gerald Griffin's novel, " The Collegians."

to the broad river below, Is merrily at the end of the nineteenth as during the latter years of the eighteenth century.

In some of the family letters extant, James FitzGibbon's descent is spoken of as being in the direct line from the White Knight, but I have no positive knowledge of the family tree beyond the three preceding generations. At the time of his birth, the property herd by his father was little more than the Small freehold and the old stone farm-house at Glin.

His father and grandfather, both Gerald's, were good classical scholars, and though James' early recollections of his childhood are of the village school where Ned FitzGerald dispensed learning to the lads of the village and neighboring district, his education was not by any means entirely dependent upon that pedagogue. James owed much to his maternal grandmother, who must have been a superior woman, much looked up to, loved and honored by her sons. His mother was a Wyndham, a name well known in Jacobite annals in the '45. In after years, when a member of the Highland Society, James often declared his claim to election should be derived from his maternal grandfather's connection with the " true men " of that day, he having only escaped attainder and loss of property through arriving too late to take part in the battle of Culloden.

James was the second son. Of his elder brother, John, we hear little. He died unmarried at the age of nineteen. The third son, Gerald, afterwards was

the well-known Irish Master in Chancery, and father of the present Lord Justice FitzGibbon. Thomas and Henry, the latter father of the present Judge and Recorder of Belfast, and three sisters. These made up the home-circle at Glin.

Gerald Griffin drew his character of Danny-man in " The Collegians " from the hunch-backed stable-boy at the stone house, and that of Lowry Looby from another of the family retainers, who followed their fortunes when they moved to Prospect Lodge, near Limerick.

" The earliest recollection of my childhood," writes James, " was that of a bird being brought me by one of the laboring men. The eagerness with which I grasped it, my delight in the bright eye and beautiful plumage, made a lasting impression, never forgotten in after life. Again, sometime later—one of those landmarks of childhood's memories, which stand out like mile-stones by the roadside—one of the men took me with him in his cart to a distant farm. The way lay over a neighboring hill Turning to look behind me as we reached the summit, I was filled with surprise and awe at the vast extent of land and water spread so far below me. It was a mild, beautiful, but cloudy autumn day. The broad Shannon, the distant hills beyond, melting, as it were, into the soft grey sky, roused a hitherto unknown sensation. I felt as if my body and spirit were alike swelling into a vast magnitude. The delight of perception, the sense of the beautiful, the dawning knowledge of the greatness

and grandeur of nature, and the dimly conscious, although unrealized, sense of the spirit to feel it, was a revelation to me.

" The first book I ever read, and which forms my only recollection of my first reading, was the 'History of Troy's Destruction.' I yet well remember the difficulty in understanding the first few pages. I read, or rather spelled, it over and over, until I believed I understood it. It was a small volume of not more than forty or fifty pages. I had no other book except my spelling book, and I read it again and again. It contained four prints, of Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector, and Penthesilia, to me objects of great wonder and admiration. I found incidents in it at the second perusal which, in my ignorance, I thought had, by some miracle, been inserted since my first reading. I kept my little book hidden away from others, and read it to pieces unaided by any explanations.

" In those days the only books sold in the village shops, beside the ' Primer Spelling Book' and the 'Child's New Plaything,' were such as 'The Seven Wise Masters of Greece,' 'The Seven Champions of Christendom,' 'The History of the White Knight,' 'Parismus and Parismenus,' 'The Arabian Nights' Entertainment,' and a few others of the like character. I soon gained the reputation of being the greatest reader in the school. I found a new world opening before me, and looked with avidity for a new book. The boys from the neighboring farms and mountains came to me to

help them to select one whenever they had the money to purchase it, and I, with childish wisdom, invariably chose one hitherto unknown to me, that I might borrow and read it, too. Thus in time I read every book brought into the school or possessed by my companions, often incurring the schoolmaster's displeasure by absenting myself from school to lie under the hedge and read a tale so absorbing as to render me forgetful of all else.

"At eleven years of age, I was taken from school to help my father and elder brother on the farm and in carrying on a small branch of the linen manufacture. I read the ' History of Telemachus,' by candle light during the long winter evenings, my father pointing out to me the derivations of the words, and rousing an intense interest in the connection between the Latin and English languages and my first attempts at the construction of sentences. I used to save and hoard the candle ends that I might pursue my unaided studies when the household were asleep."

James was as fond of out-door life as other boys. He always retained an affection for the yellow wall-flower, as it reminded him of the bright blossoms he had climbed the old stone tower of Glin to gather when little more than a baby. He describes, with a keen sense of pleasure in the excitement, his delight in his first salmon.

" I was paddling barefoot in the brook which raid.. down through the meadows and round the foot of the castle, when I spied a fine salmon lurking under

a big stone. To climb down round the boulder and make a grab at him was the work of a moment. I did not catch him, but the startled leap he gave cast him at the very edge of the brook ; I flung myself bodily upon him and caught him by the gills. After a hard fight I dragged him up on the bank, gaffed him with a rusty old knife, and carried him home in triumph. I have no recollection of his weight, but remember his length was more than I could lift from the ground—although I was a tall boy for eight years—but trailed his shining body along the grass."

Of his early religious impressions the first mention among his papers shows, also, the dawning reasoning faculties and clear judgment which were afterwards his strongest characteristics.

" One day, while working in the field, my attention was drawn to the conversation between the hired laborers on the subject of the Protestants and Englishmen and their religion.

I already knew that Protestants and Englishmen were disliked, nay, hated, as the Irish had but one word in their language to express either. I knew no Protestants (all in the village were Roman Catholics), and I knew that, could they do so with impunity, few among these men would hesitate to take the life of a Protestant.

" ' Why do you hate the Protestants ?' I asked.

" ' Because they are heretics and go to hell.'

" To this reply I made no answer, but thought, ' Surely you ought rather to pity them—blame them

—for being such fools as to live in this world for seventy-five years as Protestants only to be sent to hell for seventy-five million ' "

" My mind dwelt long on what I thought was the unaccountable insensibility of these Protestants. In those days, about the year 1790, the judges going to the circuit were escorted and guarded by a troop of mounted men bearing halberds and pikes. A trumpeter rode in advance, and upon approaching a village sounded his trumpet.

"This procession was to us boys a splendid spectacle, and looked for every half year with lively anticipation. When I learned that these judges were Protestants, my surprise was great. That men so wise as they must be could so disregard their future salvation for any present wealth or power seemed incredible, and the information that the king, who in my childish faith, must of necessity be the wisest man living, was also a Protestant, filled me with amazement. It was about this period that I read for the first time the parable of the good Samaritan, and, though ignorant that the Jews hated the Samaritans, the conviction was impressed upon me that the Catholics were wrong, and by hating their neighbors were not following the teaching of our Saviour. This was the first doubt raised in my mind of the infallibility of my teachers."

The boy's anxiety for new books had by chance put him in brief possession of a New Testament. He purchased it from a travelling pedlar, who probably

was very glad to find a customer for such unsalable stock in that part of the world.

James crept under the hedge with his treasure, and was soon absorbed in the wonderful story.

Here he was discovered by the parish priest, who, spying the boy and curious to know what study he was so deeply immersed in, accosted him. Unfortunately I cannot give any detailed account of the discussion between them over the right of the parishioner as well as the priest to the privilege of reading the Bible for themselves, but I have heard those who had the story from FitzGibbon say, that " he got the best of the priest in the argument, but the priest got the better of the boy in size, for the Testament was forcibly confiscated, but what he had read was indelibly fixed in his memory."

Some years afterwards, about 1795 or 1796, the people of Ireland were called to arms and formed into yeomanry corps to defend the country against the threatened invasion of France.

" My father enrolled his own, his eldest son's and my name, although I was only fifteen. With the military bias already given to my mind by my early reading, this excited me very much. On entering the corps each had to take the oath of allegiance, part of which contained the following words : ' And I do further swear that I do not believe that any Pope, --Priest or Bishop has power to forgive sins.'

" My father, my brother and I took the oath without hesitation, as did many others, but many refused.

" On the following Sunday the priest proclaimed from the altar that all might take the oath, as it was only upon condition of confession and repentance that the priest could absolve the sinner.

" Some time after the yeomanry corps were raised, the French fleet, with a large land force on board intended for the invasion of Ireland, anchored in Bantry Bay. Troops were sent, for the first time in the century into that remote part of Ireland, and the first regiment that appeared in our village was the Devon and Cornwall Fencibles. We had thus an opportunity of encountering the 'hated Englishmen'--hated to the extent of a proverb, of which the literal translation is, ' An Englishman is not more hateful to me than thou art.'

" A sergeant and two privates presented their billet at my father's door and were admitted, not only rooms but meals also being provided for them. Their quiet behavior, their gratitude for my father's kindness and hospitality, astonished me. Could these be the dreaded Englishmen ? My former fears were changed into admiration.

" The sergeant often spent an hour or two in the evening drilling us boys in the old stone-paved kitchen, and my military ambition and desire to be one day a soldier was fanned into a flame.

" A storm driving the French fleet to sea again, it was feared their coming to Bantry Bay was but a feint to draw off our troops from the north, where they meant to land without opposition.

" In the uncertainty the troops were marched and counter-marched from one place to another, and the Fencibles often again passed through or were quartered in our village. Our former hatred became friendship and liking ; no one of our own militia regiments were greater favorites with us than these English soldiers.

" About this time the corporal who drilled the yeomanry corps to which I belonged, was ordered to join his regiment, and we were without a teacher. Our captain, the Knight of Glin, who had hitherto been in England, returned soon after the corporal's departure. The first time he inspected us in the field, he attempted to put us through our exercises. He gave orders of which we knew nothing. Not having learned the new system ordered for the instruction of the army in 1792, he was following the tone acquired with the volunteers at the close of the American war. In striving to obey him, we fell into confusion and disorder. He flew into a violent passion and swore roundly at us, declaring, with an oath, that if he had the ' scoundrel ' who had drilled us within reach, he would 'cleave his flesh from his bones with his sabre.'

"A good landlord, an excellent and just magistrate, to whose active exertions we were indebted for the peace of the surrounding country during the rebellion of 1798, the knight was yet a hot-tempered man, whose rage sometimes found expression in hard blows as well as in words. His language was so offensive on this occasion that, unable to endure it longer, I

stepped out from the ranks and said : ' The men are not to blame, sir. You are giving us words of command we have never heard. The man who drilled us was a good teacher, and were he here, he could make us appear to greater advantage.'

" For a moment I thought my bold words would bring the knight's wrath upon my head, but, reflecting that my father was a freeholder and no man's tenant, though inwardly quaking I stood my ground.

" After a pause, probably of astonishment at my daring, he asked if there was anyone there who could put the men through their exercises. Upon my replying that I did not know, he asked me to show him what they could do. I did the best I could, and the men did well. He then desired me to go on drilling them until he could procure another instructor from the army. A sergeant and twenty men were soon after added to the corps, and, on returning from my work some days later, I found a sergeant's pike, sword and sash sent to me with an order appointing me sergeant. Thus was I, at the age of seventeen, promoted over my father and elder brother. What wonder that my boyish enthusiasm was greatly increased by such unexpected honor."

In 1798, the first lieutenant of the corps obtained a company in the Tarbert Fencibles, then being raised by Sir Edward Leslie, and James was easily persuaded to join him ; an additional inducement being offered in the promised appointment of pay-sergeant to the company.