

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

THE CROCK OF GOLD

By HERMINIE TEMPLETON

Copyright 1909 by BENJ. D. HAMPTON.

NE June morning on a market day at Fethard, while the sun was yet twinkling and blinking a sleepy eye over the top of shadowy Slieve-na-moon, Darby O'Gill stood upon the threshold of his cottage, impatient to be off to the town.

"Don't dare tell me another thing," he said, fiercely.

"I was only going to say that ye mustn't be stayin' so late at Fethard that ye'll have to be takin' the short cut home through Hagan's meadow after dark. Ye know they do be sayin' that most an-ny night now ye can see lights movin' round in the ruined abbey where the crock o' gold are hid."

"What put the crocks o' gold into yer head?" asked Darby, suspiciously.

"Didn't Mrs. O'Hara tell me only last night that ye put the challenge on her Donohue to go huntin' for them?"

"Huh! Donohue O'Hara! We hear ducks talkin'! That came out of the bottom of the fourth glass of punch. Haven't ye an-ny thing sensible to say, me good woman?"

"Fulth, I have, an' it's this: If ye should meet up with that biggad Bothered Bill Donohue, the tinker, Bridget says a warning finger—have no civility for him or he'll be wantin' to come back with ye to spin the night."

The three counties were in Fethard by the time Darby reached the old town gate, and from that on it was a slip on the shoulder, here, and a bone-crushing hand shake there, and a "God save ye Darby, me bouchin'" everywhere, so that the afternoon was come and gone before the busy lad could spare a thought for any of Bridget's commissions. But through all the friendly greetings of the day there smoldered a constant worry in the man's mind, for whichever way he turned, the sharp gray eye of Bothered Bill Donohue, the tinker, followed him from place to place.

"Bad luck to him," muttered Darby, ruefully. "If I bring the thirly-billed home, I'll have to shiver the two of us. What? I know what I'll do, I'll slip into Murphy's stable here an' hide awhile out of sight, an' when the rovers are gone I'll whip over to Dugan's an' turn the back door with me."

No sooner said than done. When at last he ventured over and poked a cautious head in at the back door of Dugan's shop, a well-known voice hailed him:

"Come in, Darby, afore I've been waitin' for ye this half hour. I'll be gone home wid ye the night I'm thinkin' to give ye a hand wid the bundles." And there, sitting calmly on an upturned tub, lolled Bothered Bill Donohue, the tinker.

As the two men went stumbling along the dark road, Darby was thinking, "By the livin' farmer I have it! I'll tell Bill that I'm goin' over to the abbey to dig for the gold an' I'll ax him to come over an' help me. An' when he rayfuses me—as of course he will—I'll slip into the back door an' hide myself. I won't be in the house till he's gone to bed."

Just then Bill spoke up, as if vaguely divining what was in his companion's mind. "My, but ye're the bold man, Darby O'Gill! They were sayin' all over the market today what a courageous hayro ye wor to be goin' wid Donohue O'Hara after the crocks o' gold in the old abbey."

In spite of the bundles the hero's chest swelled. "Well, I tell ye, Bill," he answered, "I'm at a loss about takin' that same Donohue O'Hara; he has no more control over his long tongue than if it belonged to yerself, and the wurrud knows that an-ny way—no such an' misluns a pious wurrud while he's diggin' for them crocks o' gold, in a twinklin' he may be turned into a big yellow ox, or into a bit of a starved wren. Now ye know yerself, Bill, that while Donohue is a nice, dacent man wid the best of intentions, he has a big fault; ye never know when he's goin' to slip out wid a 'God save ye' or a 'Salute, please us.' Now it's what I'm thinkin' about yerself Bill; ye never said a pious wurrud in yer life; an—"

"Bad luck to me if I'll do it," interrupted Bill, promptly.

"I'll be near midnight be the time we reach Hagan's meadow," went on Darby. "So we'll have Donohue O'Hara go diggin' for himself, an' me an' ye'll go partners."

The offer was like nousing Bill with a tub of cold water. He stood still in the road and shivered. "Bishop!" he choked. "There's nayther luck nor grace in talkin' that kind o' talk."

"I'll go into the meadow here," Darby continued calmly. "an' do you, Bill, keep steady on yer way an' ye'll be all safe." The words were spoken to the darkness, for Bill had disappeared.

If the ground in Hagan's meadow had been covered with red-hot coals instead of being carpeted with cool, sweet grass, Darby O'Gill's feet would not have shrunk from coming in contact with it. However, Bothered Bill was not to be trusted; he might be watching and listening in the darkness a few feet down the road, so there was nothing left for it, and Darby, bracing his soul, took the jump and ran a few steps into the haunted field.

He stood, striving with every vein of his body to make out whether the glimmer of light in the distance was from the old abbey or whether it was only a friendly star, when there came a pounding toward him through the darkness a sound of terror—the quick clack of pursuing footsteps.

There weren't three men in the barony that could throw a quicker leg before them than Darby O'Gill, and never before that night had he put such speed into his nimble heels. But, for all that, the thundering footsteps behind gained on him every second. Suddenly he was electrified by the most terrible cry he had ever heard. It was a strange voice in a wild, high shriek, calling his name:

"Da-urby, Da-urby O'Gill," it yelled.

"It's the black headless joint from Croag Mah," thought Darby, "and great gorgonides, how did it get me name?"

And that would have been a mystery for the seven counties only that just then the moon stuck its head through the clouds and took a querulous peep at the night. What the knowledgeable man saw then stiffened every nerve and muscle in his body with angry amazement; for from whom had he been running but from Bothered Bill Donohue?

"Darby! Da-urby! where are ye, Dar-urby!" bleated Bill. Terror had split the tinker's voice into a piping falsetto.

At the sound every shred of Darby's fear turned into white rage.

"The devil need ye," shouted Darby. "Come back till I bate the life out of ye, ye ungracious villain!"

"Where are ye bundles? What have ye done with the mackerel?"

But Bill ran on, deaf with terror, and Darby followed. The horse that won the Curragh Cup would have been proud of their company that night.

"Mulla murder, the Omdahna's makin' straight for the fairies' bush," panted Darby. "Come back!" he roared. "There's a strange thing happened. Darby saw the tinker throw up both arms, and, with a despairing cry, disappear from the face of the earth.

Now in the middle of Hagan's meadow stands an ancient clump of hazel trees, known far and wide as

the fairies' bush, and just beside the bush runs a deep, dry ditch. As Bill went galloping past with head thrown back, and eyes bulging in terror, a malicious root reached up and caught the tinker's heedless feet, and thump! he was rolling head over heels to the bottom of the ditch.

For a second he lay where he had tumbled; but only a second, for in mind and body the tinker was as quick as a cat. Indeed, he was already scrambling to his feet again, and was on the edge of the bank when Darby O'Gill came charging along like a mad bull and plunged into him headfirst. Saints above, but that was the thump!

Freeing himself, Darby rose feebly to his knees and began climbing out of the ditch. The bank was steep and slippery with the dew, so that at the first lad was hard set to get a foothold. He reached the top, however, and was clutching at a bit of twisted root when, to his unspeakable surprise, the root began to twist, and to squirm, and to wriggle in his hand. Darby raised the thing for a closer look, when suddenly a little foot dew out like lightning, and kicked him squarely on the nose, and a wee, spiteful voice piped up:

"Put me down, ye thunderin' blighard! Ye've broke the ribs of me side! Pick up me cap ye nunniferal schindal an' put it on me head so I'll have the power to turn you an' that schreelin' villain behind ye into two yellow tomatoes. And I can wurrud me spells! I'll—"

"Begorra, Bill, come here. I think I've got the leprechaun!" spluttered Darby.

"Ye lie, ye distractin' mullet-headed daygroggity vituperator," raged the little man. "I'm not the leprechaun! I'm Nial the fiddler, from Slieve-na-moon; sometimes they call me Nial the scold, an' I've been waitin' here these three nights to help ye win ye wint diggin' for the crocks o' gold. This is the thanks I get. Where have ye been? What kep' ye, ye laxy, fiddle-faddlin', pottherin', dawdlin' poltroons?"

"Aisy, aisye there," warned Darby. "Aist or West, since the day I was born, I never heard yer aquil for bad language. An' I tell ye now, if ye say wan more of thim bluggard wurruds I'll rap the little head of ye agin this stone. Tell me, what d'ye mane about waitin' for us to go diggin' for the crocks o' gold?"

He gave the fairy a rattling shake.

"Stoph that!" roared the captive. "Do that agin if ye dare! Wait till I get me cap on so I can wurrud me spells! I'll—"

Bill was the first to recover from this deluge of hard names, and drawing a long breath, he blurted:

"Be this an' that, Darby, I'll stan' no more. Hand the Mulligan here till I loose him."

"Oho, is that you, Bill Donohue? I thought it was Donohue O'Hara that was in it. Man alive, Darby O'Gill, what are ye doin' here with that raycastin' malfactor of a cockatrice of a tinker?"

"Be aisy now," warned Darby, pushing Bill aside, as he made a dash at the fairy with his stick. "I'm thinkin' he's here as a friend. What wor ye sayin', little hayro, about the crocks o' gold?" And Darby loosened his fingers so that the fairy stood upright in his hand. The little fiddler shook himself and adjusted his cloak.

"Well, I was sayin', we got the wurrud that you an' Donohue O'Hara were goin' to dig for the crocks o' gold, an' as it's little likin' we Good People have for the unconjugal mooltherin' spurrin' that's guardin' the crocks these fourteen hundred years—"

"Look at that now!" exclaimed Darby. "Shure we thought ye wor an' imlun. To tell the truth, ye honor, Mialther Donohue here is just a thrifle afear of meetin' up wid thim same diseased ghosts."

The little fairy flung a glance of withering disdain at the tinker. "What are ye all afear of? Don't ye know that one of these days ye'll all be ghosts?"

"I'm not afear of the dead," bragged Darby. "But I don't like bein' wurrud wid the likes of thim unless it's necessary. Ould Mrs. Callaghan had a foine chararm that ud kape yer heart lifted on the loneliest road and the darkest night; she wasn't afear of ghost livin' or dead, and she promised to whusper it to me before she died; but the poor creature forgot the wurrud."

"Fulth, I've heard that chararm thim hundreds of years," said the fairy, "but I'll give you a better wan. Besides, mine has a grand chune to it, an' if ye're in any kind of fear or trouble just trow back yer head an' sing it this way:

"O' Phindrig an' Phelim an' Red Conan More
The Leas an' Labras are gatherin'.
Come out of the mounth, they're waitin' me sore,
Bring yer sojers and champeans to lather 'em."
"Now all together," urged the little fellow. The three took up the tune and roared it so lustily that "Bring yer sojers and champeans to lather 'em" was heard a good mile away in her own house by Mrs. Flaherty, as truthful a woman as lives in the village of Ballindere.

When they had sung the powerful charm many times the little fiddler said: "Well, first and foremost, it's not in the abbey at all that the crocks o' gold are buried, but under the yew tree three in the great court where the monks do be lyin'."

"Come on, Darby, an' bring the wee man wid ye," cried Bill, starting up.

"Botheration on ye for a tinker," snapped the fairy, "will ye have patience. Ye must begin afther midnight and in before cockcrow, an' this is the way ye'll go about it. Ye'll find a bran' new pick an' a shovel lyin' snug be the abbey's grave; an' ye'll measure fowle lengths of the pick handle toward the broken gateway and there's the identical spot where ye must dig. Ye'll find gold 'nough there to make you and yer generations rich forever."

Darby gave a great cough into his hand, and Bill Donohue swallowed hard at a big lump that popped into his throat.

"Don't think that the ondertakin' is an aisye wan," warned the fairy. "For there'll be thim watchin' ye the while that would strike the sight from yer eyes and wither the tongue in yer head."

"An' what's to purwin' thim?" asked Darby.

"Ah ha! that's what I'm here to tell ye. Until the stroke of midnight the ghosts beaynt are as helpless as a field full of unfat childer, and afther cockcrow they're nayther more nor less than a flock of jackdaws roostin' in the old ruin. Let ye hurry now before midnight and make a ring of holly tynny feet wide around the spot where ye're to dig, the way the mooltherin' rapscallians can't come within hand's rache of ye. The ghost of no diseased person can cross a twig of holly."

"Shure the whole wurrud knows that," said Bill. "If anyone has a ring of holly around him no shupernatural ghost can bother him."

"Hah! is that so," sneered the wee man. "Well, maybe ye know this, too, Mr. Di-og-ga-ee the philosopher, that if ayther of the two of ye spake a pious or a rayligious wurrud while ye're diggin' in that place, ye'll never ragret it but wance, an' that'll be all the days of yer life."

"Rayminder that, Bill Donohue," warned Darby. "an' grip yer tongue between yer teeth or I'll make sургents wurrud of ye."

Nial lifted a silencing finger. "Whatever ye see an' whatever ye hear," he cautioned, "stir not a stir outside that ring of holly till cockcrow. All the cacklin' an' all the conivin' that can be larned in fowle hundreded generations 'll be used this night to frighten ye or to coax ye to where they can reach ye."

"How'll we know when it's midnight?" asked Darby.

The little fiddler laughed long and low, and the sound of that laugh raised the hair on their heads.

"Never mind," he said. "If an-ny human bean sets foot in the abbey afther midnight lookin' for the crocks o' gold, there'll be lads there an' plenty of thim that'll let him know the time o' day. And now, Darby O'Gill, rayminder to sing that chararm whin ye afear. Take up me hat now, and put it on me head. Good luck go wid ye!" Whisk—he was gone.

By and by the drowsy moon, tossing its heavy blanket of clouds to the top of Slieve-na-moon, slipped higher up into the sky the better to spy out what mischief Bothered Bill Donohue and Darby O'Gill were up to. What was its surprise to find the two bold adventurers at the very gateway of the ruined cloister. There they stood, their arms bulging with holly, and they hesitating and arguing as to which should go in first.

"You own fowle thirds of the gold, so you go in first, Darby O'Gill, that's only fair!"

"Take yer elbow out of me back," suddenly roared Darby. "Stoph scroggin me, or be the powers I'll—"

He said no more, for, with one tremendous rush, Bill sent the knowledgeable man sprawling through the broken arch and stumbling with great strides into the dim, shadowy cloister. As soon as the tinker made sure that no misfortune had befallen his friend, he followed Darby into the old abbey. As that was no place for a quarrel, the two set to work, and five minutes later a wide ring of holly encircled the

were a long, brown cloak that might have been a shroud. The hood was drawn so closely around her head that not one glimpse of the face was visible. For a moment she remained as motionless as one of the slanting tombstones, then slowly raising a stiff, dead hand, she beckoned the speechless men toward her. "Come over!" she hissed. "Come here the both of ye, till I whusper where the crocks o' gold are hid." Although Darby's voice came in choking gulps, he made bold to answer:

"Thank ye kindly, ma'am, we're in no nade of yer advice, so if ye'll only go back quiet and dacent to where ye're berried we'll think it greatly infatuatin' of ye. An' if ye're not obligatin' enough to do that little fayver, then be the hoker I'll take one belt at ye wid this shovel whether or no."

As Darby said this, an amazing thing happened. In the snap of a finger the old woman changed into a raging lion before their bewildered eyes; and giving a roar of fury that sent Bill Donohue a foot up into the air, the great yellow beast went charging around and around the hallowed circle.

"Dye think I'd better throw the pick at her?" asked Darby. At those words the lion began backing towards the farthest corner of the cloister. Suddenly she stopped; and then after drawing herself together, she made a leap at the spot where they covered. The beast fell with its two paws almost touching the ring of holly. Then it was that Darby O'Gill by the dint of his high courage made himself forever after the proud boast of the village of Ballindere. Swiftly stopping, the brave man up with a big sot of turf and striking the snarling creature square between the two blazing eyes. A bellow of rage answered the blow. Then, awish! the lion was gone and the brown old woman flashed into its place. Darby stooped for another sot of turf, but as he did so the frightful old hag with a great swirl of her long brown cloak and a wild, shrieking laugh, vanished into the air.

fairy's charm must have lingered with them still, for, after a moment or two of stifling silence Darby had spirit enough left to raise his head and exclaim: "Are ye alive, Bill?"

"How could I be alive?" moaned the tinker. "Isn't this the second time I'm kilt to-night?"

"Then up wid ye man, it'll be cockcrow before we know it." They went at the digging again, and Bill had not given five good strokes till his pick struck iron.

"The crocks o' gold!" shouted Darby, and the strength returned to their backs, and the power to their arms. No two badgers ever dug dirt with greater speed than did our heroes. Presently the cover of a great black pot began to show itself in the bottom of the hole, and then Bill's pick, glancing to one side, was answered by another metallic ring which told where a second crock was hidden. At the same moment Darby exclaimed:

"I think there's wan over here under me feet, Bill, an' the ducks take the bit of me if it isn't allied to the top. Oh, blur-an-ages, look who's comin' at us now."

From the farthest black corner of the cloister walls, up almost to the edge of the projecting battlements, stretched a broad path of shimmering green light. Down this mysterious gleaming road stalked a gigantic man breathing fire as he came. He was dressed in sinuous black from head to foot, his raven hair stood straight on end, his long face was waven white and the eyes in his head glowed like living coals. On he came to within a hand's breadth of the holly wreath and then he stood with folded arms. All the seething hate and poisoned malice of the world was crowded into his look.

Darby managed to pull off his hat and to make a scrape of a bow. "The t-top of the a-avenin' to your honor. Isn't it a-doin' night. I, I never saw yer lordship lookin' so well. I hear," quavered Darby as he nervously twisted his hat, "that your honor is havin' g-great times wid the Garmin philosophers these days. At laste Father Cassidy was sayin' so at check, for at the mention of Father Cassidy a spasm of raging agony convulsed the face of Satan. Sparks of fire spurted from the top of his towering head and his cheeks glowed red like hot iron."

"Why—why, don't ye say somethin'!" Bill, argued Darby from behind his hat. "The jantleman is lookin' at you. I—I think it's you he's afther."

"I—I'm glad to see ye," said the tinker, his teeth chattering. "N-n-o— I mane, wor ye havin' much rain this sayson down in, in—"

"Have done!" roared Satan, and the walls of the abbey shook. "Out of this place before I wither you like a blasted tree. What fool's work brought you here?"

"I'm sure yer honor don't begrudge us the few dirty handfuls of gold in the crocks below," said Darby.

"Always the gold," sneered Satan. "What good does it bring you, you poor insects of the earth? you snails! you worms! you scurrying gnats!" As all the world knows, from the time a Tipperary lad is the height of your knees he is a poor hand at taking an insult. So now Darby's temper got the better of his fears, and he said hotly:

"Be a civil tongue in yer head, Mr. Belemouth, whatever ye do! I never done an-nythin' agin you or yours, did I? I'll make a child's bargain wid ye: D'you love me alone an' I'll love you alone."

"You rubbish!" roared Satan, "you trembling wretch! You little heaps of dust! You weak-kneed, short-lived, insignificant bipeds!"

The last epithet proved too much for the prudence of the knowledgeable man. "Belped yourself!" he retorted. "Ye long-legged, goat-futtled, chimney-pot of a transgressor! I dare ye to put yer ugly hood over that holly."

But Darby got no further, for at these words Satan's rage became something fearful to behold. He bent his breast with his hands, then flung his arms wide apart. At this last gesture the moon winked out and the night became black as your hut. A might wind arose an' tore through the old abbey, lashing the yew trees to and fro over their heads. The evil darkness made way and framed in the air a swirling, heaving, in dismal chorus, and then came the most astonishing wonder of all. The earth cracked open in one wide circle around the now thoroughly conquered men. From this circling crevice an awful sheet of devouring, crimson flames shot up into the sky, Satan, serene and triumphant, framed in the center of the blazing cataract.

There is no telling what the end would have been had the tinker kept steadfastly in mind the important condition that a person must not utter so much as one pious word while searching for the crocks of gold. But the endurance was pretty well worn out of Bill by this time. He only threw up his hands and exclaimed, "God help us!"

Those were the fateful words. That prayer settled the business of the crocks of gold. Immediately a crash of thunder split the whole world, the sky must have fallen; the two men went down into the hole like leaden plummet; the earth heaved and swayed like a billowy sea and afther that there fell a deadly silence. Then, clear through the distance from Hagan's farm came the warning sound of a crowing cock.

It was a moment or two before either of our sticken adventurers got control of himself. Darby was the first to open his eyes. "The ruse is gone! Quick, Bill, the crocks o' gold. Hurroo, we're not bate yet." No wonder Ballindere is proud of the O'Gills.

But Bill was already on his feet, gazing at the spot where the wide hole had been; for, lo and behold, not only had the crocks vanished, but the hole itself was gone; it was filled to the top. And this was not all; the buttercups and daisies, without so much as a broken stem, were nodding and bobbing in the first morning breeze.

Half an hour later our two heroic adventurers, loaded to the chin with bedragged bundles, hastened anxious-faced on the threshold of the O'Gill cottage. Bridget half turned from the breakfast she was preparing and transfixed them with a scornful glare. Then from the doorkill where they stood the tired wanderers together poured forth an eloquent account of that night's wonderful adventures. From the beginning to the end of the dual narrative Bridget never uttered a single word, but stood motionless on the hearthstone, her hands on her hips.

When the two abashed treasure hunters had finished their story, Bridget never moved a muscle of her face, but stood with tightly drawn lips, her eye still fixed on them in an unsympathetic stare. At last she spoke, uttering a single word, but it stood out against the hearthstone, her hands on her hips.

"How much whiskey have ye left in that jug, Mialther O'Gill?"

"I—I—believe it's party near half empty," answered Darby, looking accusingly at Bill.

"I didn't," blustered Bill. "Ye husband fell down an' spilled the jug whin he was runnin' from the Mulligan, Mialther O'Gill ma'am; an' he busted the lovely eggs, too, ma'am."

Bridget didn't say much then, for she was a woman of few words, but she managed to scatter their words with rare judgment through the remainder of Darby's life.



"How much whiskey have ye left in that jug, Mialther O'Gill?"