



The front page of the 1st Edition of *The Ballads of Ireland*, Edward Hayes, Esq. (Editor), Dublin: James Duffy & Sons, 1855.

## OH! GIVE A DESERT LIFE TO ME \*

Oh! give a desert life to me,  
 Where I no tyrant's law need fear;  
 For there, indeed, I may be free,  
 Nor live a slave as I do here —  
 For here we're born,  
 For England's scorn.  
 We weep o'er our degraded land —  
 Or ban the head such curses planned.  
 Oh! on the pampas wild I'll dwell,  
 Amongst Columbia's free born race,  
 With dog and steed that love me well,  
 My flying herds I'll swiftly chase.  
 Oh! then a desert life for me,  
 Dependent I will live no more;  
 My soul is longing to be free,  
 Without the weight of chains it bore —  
 But when again  
 Old Erin's chain,  
 Is cleft by freemen's swords in two,  
 The sea I'll brave,  
 And o'er the wave,  
 I'll come again, dear land, to you. †

\* *The Nation* (Dublin), Mar. 15, 1845.

† The poem was commented on by the editor of the magazine, Charles Gavan Duffy, a man dedicated to the cause of Irish patriotism, "This might be called 'The Coward's Resource:' — . . . We recommend our friend *not* to come again when the work is over. He will get a cold welcome from the men he left to bear the heat of the harvest." This is the first-known published work by Fitz-James O'Brien. The name was printed without the hyphen between his name, as "Fitzjames O'Brien."

To live for ever, and dream 'twere mine,  
 Courts might woo, and kings pursue,  
 Ere I would leave thee — Loved Loch-Ine.

### THE FAMINE \*

Striding nearer every day,  
 Like a wolf in search of prey,  
 Comes the Famine on his way —

Through the dark hill, through the glen,  
 Over lawn, and moor, and fen,  
 Questing out the homes of men.

And a Voice cries overhead —  
 "Rend your hair — the hot tears shed —  
 Ye shall starve for want of bread.

"Though your wail be long and loud,  
 Hope for nothing from the Proud;  
 Dig the grave, and weave the shroud;

"Seek a place where ye may die —  
 Clench the teeth, and check the sigh —  
 Hope, but only hope on High.

"When the last hope fades in air,  
 To your hearts of grief and care,  
 Thus shall speak the fiend Despair:

"Cord and knife, and river deep,  
 "Open paths for those who weep,  
 "To a sweet and dreamless sleep.

"Though ye shun such thoughts at first,  
 "When each hope you long have nurs'd,  
 "Like a bubble shall have burst,

"Ye shall run to death, though He  
 "Armed with double-terrors be;  
 "Better death than misery."

'Tis a fearful sight to see,  
 Man, the equal and the free,  
 Kneeling at a Brother's knee;

When he knows a People's might,

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\* *The Nation* (Dublin), Mar. 7, 1846.

Trained, directed, made unite,  
Can do all things for their right.

Why then does he wail and weep?  
Why does he supinely sleep,  
And nor food nor vengeance reap?

'Tis not base and slavish fear  
Makes him shun the sword and spear —  
'Tis the Faith he holds so dear;

Faith, that turns a trustful eye  
To the God that dwells on high,  
In the bright and blessed sky.

But when thousands, day by day,  
With the Famine pine away,  
Will they own religion's sway?

Ah! ye mighty, ponder well;  
If wild riot burst its shell,  
Who its fearful flight can tell?

Men of wealth, in time be wise,  
Lest they gather, with loud cries,  
Round your well-fill'd granaries,

As the ravens, hunger hoarse,  
Troop around the lifeless corse  
Of a fever-stricken horse.

Give the wretched who complain,  
And their rage you will restrain  
With your love, as with a chain.

Brother, life is but a span —  
See thou dost what one man can —  
Help a fainting fellow-man;

While the magnates of the land  
On their gilded titles stand,  
Be thou called the "Open Hand."

And, when life is ended here,  
In another, higher sphere,  
Voices thus shall greet your ear:

"Without fear to judgment wend —  
Here, the wretched toiler's friend,  
Tastes the joy that has no end."

Heremon †

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† "Heremon" was a legendary king of Ireland in the twelfth century B.C., the founder of the Milesian dynasty. It was a pen name O'Brien would use from time to time in his poetry.

## HOW THE BELL RANG (JULY 4, 1776) \*

There was tumult in the city,  
In the quaint old Quaker town,  
And the streets were black with people  
Pacing restless up and down;  
People gathering in corners,  
Where they whispered each to each,  
And the sweat stood on their temples  
With the earnestness of speech.

As the black Atlantic currents  
Lash the wild Newfoundland shore,  
So they beat against the State House,  
So they surged against its door;  
And the mingling of their voices  
Made a harmony profound,  
Till the quiet street of Chestnuts  
Was all turbulent with sound.

"Will they do it?" "Dare they do it?"  
"Who is speaking?" "What's the news?"  
"What of Adams?" "What of Carroll?"  
"Oh, God grant they won't refuse!"  
"Make some way there!" "Let me nearer!"  
"I am stifling!" "Stifle, then! —  
When a nation's life's at hazard,  
We've no time to think of men!"

So they beat against the portal,  
Man and woman, maid and child;  
And the July sun in Heaven,  
On the crowd looked down and smiled.  
The same sun that saw the Spartan  
Shed his patriot-blood in vain,  
Now beheld the Soul of Freedom,  
All unconquered, rise again!

So they beat against the portal,  
While all solemnly inside,  
The delegates to Congress,  
With but reason for their guide;  
O'er a simple scroll debated,

Which, though simple it might be,  
Could shake the cliffs of England  
With the thunders of the Free!

At the portal of the State House,  
Like some beacon in a storm  
Round which waves are wildly beating,  
Stood a slender, boyish form,  
With his eyes fixed on the steeple  
And his ears agape with greed,  
To catch the first announcement  
Of the signing of the deed.

Aloft in that high steeple  
Sat the bellman old and gray,  
He was sick of British power,  
He was sick of British pay;  
So he sat with lean hand ready  
On the clapper of the bell,  
When signaled from the portal,  
The happy news to tell.

See! See! the black crowd shivers  
Through all its lengthy line,  
As the boy upon the portal  
Looks up and gives the sign;  
And straightway at the signal  
The old Bellman lifts his hand,  
And sends the good news waking  
Iron music through the land!

How they shouted! what rejoicing!  
How the old bell shook the air,  
'Till the clang of Freedom ruffled  
The calm-gliding Delaware!  
How the bonfires and the torches  
Illumed the night's repose,  
And from the flames, like Phœnix,  
Slaughtered Liberty arose!

The old bell now is silent,  
And hushed its iron tongue,  
But the spirit it awakened  
Still lives forever young.  
And while we breathe the sunlight,  
On the Fourth of this July,  
Let us not forget the Bellman,

\* *Harper's Weekly*, Jul. 4, 1857 (1): 418.

Who, 'twixt the earth and sky,  
Rang out our Independence,  
Which, please God, shall never die!

## HELEN LEE \*

Rosy-checked, dark-haired October  
Through the land was passing gayly,  
Crowned with maize-leaves, and behind him  
Followed Plenty with her horn,  
Calling in the later harvests,  
Flattering the chuckling farmer,  
Pelting him with ruddy apples,  
And with shocks of yellow corn.

He it was whose royal pleasure  
Clothed the woods in gold and purple;  
He it was whose fickle pleasure  
Clothed them, stripped and left them bare;  
Then, as if in late contrition,  
Summoned back the truant summer,  
Wove of smoke an azure mantle  
For the shivering earth to wear.

Poor amends the Indian summer  
Made, with all its pitying sunshine,  
For the loss of leafy glory,  
Painted flower, and singing-bird;  
So from rocks, and trees, and hedges,  
From the fallen leaves and grasses,  
Came a sound of mourning, as the  
Melancholy breezes stirred.

Yet the train of hale October  
Rang with laughter, song, and dancing,  
As the young men and the maidens  
Sang and danced the harvest-home;  
As from many a low-roofed farm-house  
Flashed the lights of merry-making,  
Rose the note of ready-making  
For the merriment to come.

Pleasant was the starry evening —  
Pleasant, though the air was chilly —  
When the youths and maidens gathered  
At the call of David Lee —  
David Lee, the hearty farmer,  
Who had wrestled with his acres,

\* Harper's New Monthly Magazine, Nov. 1857 (XV): 809 - 810.

### THE BALLAD OF THE SHAMROCK \*

My boy left me just twelve years ago —  
 'Twas the black year of famine, of sickness, and woe,  
 When the crops died out, and the people died too,  
 And the land into one great grave-yard grew;  
 And our neighbors' faces were as white and thin  
 As the face of the moon when she first comes in;  
 And honest men's hearts were rotten with blight,  
 And they thieved and prowled like the wolves at night;  
 When the whole land was dark as dark could be —  
 'Twas then that Donal, my boy, left me.

We were turned from our farm where we'd lived so long,  
 For we couldn't pay the rent, and the law was strong;  
 From our low meadow lands, and flax fields blue,  
 And the handsome green hill where the yellow furze grew,  
 And the honest old cow that each evening would stand  
 At the little gate lowing to be milked by my hand;  
 And the small patch of garden at the end of the lawn  
 Where Donal grew sweet flowers for his Colleen Bawn;  
 But Donal and I had to leave all these,  
 I to live with father and he to cross the seas.

For Donal was as proud as any king's son,  
 And swore he'd not stand by and see such wrongs done,  
 But would seek a fortune out in the wide, wide West,  
 Where the honest can find labor and the weary rest;  
 And as soon as he was able why then he'd send for me  
 To rest my poor old head in his home across the sea:  
 And then his young face flushed like a June sky at dawn,  
 As he said that he was thinking how his Colleen Bawn  
 Could come along to help me to keep the house straight,  
 For he knew how much she loved him, and she'd promised him to  
 wait.

I think I see him now, as he stood one blessed day,  
 With his pale smiling face upon the Limerick Quay,  
 And I lying on his breast, with his long curly hair  
 Blowing all about my shoulders as if to keep me there;  
 And the quivering of his lip, that he tried to keep so proud —  
 Not because of his old mother, but the idle curious crowd —  
 Then the hoisting of the anchor, and the flapping of the sail,  
 And the stopping of my heart when the wild Irish wail

From the mothers and the children, and the kinsfolk on the quay  
 Told me plainer than all words that my darling was away.

Ten years went dragging by, and I heard but now and then —  
 For my Donal, though a brave boy, was no scholar with the pen;  
 But he sent me kindly words, and bade me not despair,  
 And sometimes sent me money, perhaps more than he could spare;  
 So I waited and I prayed until it came to pass  
 That Father Pat he wanted me one Sunday after mass,  
 When I went, a little fearsome, to the back vestry-room,  
 Where his reverence sat a-smiling like a sun-flower in the gloom,  
 And then he up and told me — God bless him! — that my boy  
 Had sent to bring me over, and I nearly died for joy.

All day I was half-crazed as I wandered through the house;  
 The dropping of the sycamore seeds, or the scramble of a mouse  
 Thrilled through me like a gun-shot; I durst not look behind,  
 For the pale face of my darling was always in my mind.  
 The pale face so sorrowful, the eyes so large and dark,  
 And soft shining as the deers' are in young Lord Massy's park;  
 And the long chestnut hair blown loosely by the wind,  
 All this seemed at my shoulder, and I dare not look behind,  
 But I said in my own heart, it is but the second sight  
 Of the day when I shall kiss him all beautiful and bright.

Then I made my box ready to go across the sea,  
 My boy had sent a ticket, so my passage it was free,  
 But all the time I longed that some little gift I had  
 To take across the ocean to my own dear lad;  
 A pin, or a chain, or something of the kind,  
 Just to 'mind the poor boy of the land he'd left behind.  
 But I was too poor to buy them, so I'd nothing left to do  
 But to go to the old farm, the homestead that he knew;  
 To the handsome green hill where my Donal used to play,  
 And cut a sod of shamrock for the exile far away.

All through the voyage I nursed it, and watered it each day,  
 And kept its green leaves sheltered from the salt-sea spray,  
 And I'd bring it upon deck when the sun was shining fair,  
 To watch its triple leaflets opening slowly in the air.  
 At first the sailors laughed at my little sod of grass,  
 But when they knew my object they gently let me pass;  
 And the ladies in the cabin were very kind to me;  
 They made me tell the story of my boy across the sea:  
 So I told them of my Donal, and his fair manly face,  
 'Till bare speaking of my darling made a sunshine in the place.

\* *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Mar. 1861 (XXII): 433–436.

We landed at the Battery in New York's big bay,  
 The sun was shining grandly and the wharves looked gay.  
 But I could see no sunshine nor beauty in the place,  
 What I only cared to look on was Donal's sweet face;  
 But in all the great crowd, and I turned every where,  
 I could not see a sign of him — my darling was not there;  
 I asked the men around me to go and find my son,  
 But they only stared or laughed, and left me one by one,  
 'Till at last an old countryman came up to me and said —  
 How could I live to hear it? — that Donal was dead!

The shamrock sod is growing on Greenwood's hill-side.  
 It grows above the heart of my darling and my pride;  
 And on summer days I sit by the head-stone all day,  
 With my heart growing old and my head growing gray,  
 And I watch the dead leaves whirl from the sycamore-trees,  
 And wonder why it is that I can't die like these;  
 But I think that this same winter, and from my heart I hope,  
 I'll be lying nice and quiet upon Greenwood's slope,  
 With my darling close beside me underneath the trickling dew,  
 And the shamrocks creeping pleasantly above us two.

## THE STRAWBERRIES \*

*A Summer Picture*

The garden was filled with odors,  
 From jasmin and heliotrope,  
 And the tender moss-rose muffled,  
 In its beautiful velvet cope,  
 White currants like beads of amber,  
 Strung upon sea-green silk,  
 Mingled their spicy clusters',  
 With snowberries white as milk.

I watched her plucking the strawberries,  
 And bending over the bank,  
 Where the large red fellows lay hiding,  
 As if from her search they shrank,  
 And when she bit them she opened  
 Lips ripe and red as they —  
 Ah! if I had been the strawberries  
 I would not have hidden away!

"Are you not fond of strawberries?  
 Why dont you pluck and eat?  
 See, here is a noble fellow  
 Juicy, and red and sweet.  
 Dont stand there looking so solemn  
 As if you thought 'twas a sin  
 To eat of such delicate morsels,  
 But open your mouth and begin."

"Ah! IMOGEN dear," I answered,  
 "I care for no fruit but one.  
 'Tis as ripe and red as this strawberry,  
 And as full of the blood of the sun.  
 But you selfishly hold it from me  
 Nor offer me even a part."  
 "What is this fruit?" she questioned.  
 "This fruit," I said, "is your heart!"

The strawberry dropped from her fingers,  
 And she stretched out her little hand,  
 And I knew that instead of the fruit, it held  
 The sweetest heart in the land.  
 So we left the strawberries lying

\* *Vanity Fair*, Mar. 23, 1861 (III): 143.