

The Unburied Legs

By Gerald Griffin

In the cool grey of a fine Sunday morning in the month of June, Shoresha Hewer, dressed out in a new *shoot* of clothes, and with a pair of runner leather brogues that had never been on the foot of man before, set out from his father's little cabin, romantically situated amidst a little group of elder and ash trees, on the banks of the river Flesk, to overtake an early mass in the village of Abbeydorney. Such, at least, to the old couple, was represented as the ostensible object of Shoresha's long walk, though they did not fail to hint to one another, with half-suppressed smiles, as he closed the door after him, that his views were not altogether limited to that sacred ceremony. What was really uppermost in his thoughts on that auspicious morning, as he brushed along with a light and springing step over heather or tussock—whether the chapel, where he was to kneel by the side of a little blue-eyed, fair-haired devotee, during the service, and the long and digressive exhortation; or the barn at Abbeydorney cross, where he was to commence the evening dance with her, it would be invidious to scrutinise, and was especially of little consequence on this occasion, as both his love and his devotion fell prostrate before a master-feeling which suddenly usurped an absolute command over the events of the day.

As he was trudging along a low monotonous heath-covered country, whistling the old air of *Thau me en a hulla agus na dhusig me*,¹ he came to a high double ditch, covered with blackthorn bushes, with here and there the decaying trunk of an old oak or beech, throwing forth a few weakly shoots, which still waved their slender boughs in the wind, as if almost in mimicry of the mighty arms it once stretched forth over the fields. He looked along the bank, and observing a spot where the ascent was likely to prove easy, caught hold of a branch to assist him in mounting, when he heard a noise at the other side, and a rustling among the bushes, as if someone was making his way through; he got his foot, however, on a tuft of rushes in the ditch side to proceed, when suddenly with a loud exclamation he tumbled backward into the field; for what should he see walking upon the top of the ditch, and just preparing to jump down, but two well-shaped, middle-sized legs, without either hip, body, or head. It was just as if they had been cut off a little above the knee, and though there was nothing to connect or regulate their movements, they climbed, jumped and progressed along the moor, in as well adjusted steps as if the first dancing-master of the county of Kerry had been superintending their movements. They evidently belonged to a man, as appeared not only from their figure and size, but from the portion of the white kerseymere garment which buckled at the knee, over a neat silk stocking. The shoes were square-toed, of Spanish leather, and were ornamented with old-fashioned silver buckles, such as had not been used in that part of the country for some generations. They had slowly paced by Shoresha, and already left him staring behind, at the distance of a good stone-throw, before he recovered from his astonishment sufficiently to think of rising, which he accomplished slowly, and almost involuntarily, never taking his eyes off the legs, but ejaculating to himself, 'Blessed mother in heaven! is it awake or dreaming I am?' They had now got on so far, that he perceived they would be soon out of sight if he did not move in pursuit; so abandoning Abbeydorney and its inducements, he, without hesitation, adopted that resolution.

¹ I am asleep, and don't wake me.

It would be vain to detail all the ohs! the Dhar a dieus! the monoms! that escaped from Shoresha, time after time, as the legs hopped over a trench, picked their steps through a patch of bog, or pushed through a thicket. He was before long joined by a neighbour who was on his way to Listowel, for the priest to christen his child, but who could not resist the temptation of following and ascertaining how this extraordinary phenomenon should end. A smith, and a little boy who had been despatched to fetch him from the cross-road by a traveller to get a few nails driven into a loosened shoe, soon after fell in with them. A milk-maid laid down her can and spancill, and some ragged gorçons gave over their early game of goal, as they came up, and so great were the numbers collected when they approached Listowel, even at that dewy hour of the morning, that it seemed like the congregation of some little village chapel moving along at prayer time.

It was amusing enough, when they arrived at the waters of the Flesk, to observe with what delicacy and elegance the legs tripped over it, from stepping stone to stepping stone, without getting spot or speck on the beautiful silk stockings. They now cut across the country at a nimble gait, the procession behind lengthening every hour, and increasing in clamorous exclamations of wonder as it proceeded.

After some hard walking, they descended into a wooded glen, where the tangled underwood, and wild briar, and close and stooping branches of the older timber, rendered it no pleasant travelling to such as were under the heavy disadvantage of a superincumbent body. To the subjects of our narrative, which were annoyed by no such lumber, of course no difficulties presented themselves; they hopped over the dense brushwood, or ducked under the branchy arms of oak or elm stretched across the path, with equal activity, while the most eager of the crowd behind were eternally knocking their foreheads and noses against some unobserved bough, or dragging their tattered clothes through blackthorn and briar: several, wearied and fretted with the chase, soon fell behind, while others, seeing no probability of any immediate termination to it, and altogether ignorant to what it might lead, gave up in apprehension. A thousand surmises about it were already afloat; some saying, they saw them going to stop once or twice, and that they certainly would not go much farther; others swearing out, that 'twas faster and faster they were walking every moment, and that the dickens a one of 'em would stop or stay until they got to the banks of the Shannon.' Many suggested that it wasn't they at all that were there, but only, as it were, the shapes of 'em; and that they'd keep going, going, ever, until it was night, and lead 'em all into some wood or desert place; and then, maybe, the ground to open beneath 'em, or a gust of wind to come by and sweep 'em away in one *gwall*, so that they'd never be heard of after. The legs had, meantime, crossed a shallow part of the river Gale that stole noiselessly through the bottom of the glen, and pressed on with renewed vigour at the opposite side. A flat, moorish, uninteresting looking country fell fast behind them; and, as they invariably pursued the most direct route to Tarbert, the tired followers, which now consisted chiefly of boys and young men, began in good earnest to suspect that town to be their real destination. They were, however, soon relieved from these disagreeable anticipations, when the legs arrived opposite a place called Newtownsands, made a sudden stop, wheeled the toes round to the right, and almost instantly sprang across a little trench; they then advanced rapidly towards the remains of an old church, which are still to be seen there, within one or two fields of the road. There are but three roofless walls now standing; and close to where the west gable formerly stood is one solitary tree which, in that unwooded and almost uninhabited region, only adds to the universal loneliness. There are a few graves about, but even these are only observable on a very close approach, so buried are they in the long rank grass and weeds, and in the fallen rubbish of the building. To one of these,

which lay close to the south wall, our heroes moved on, but at a more measured, and it would seem, reverential pace than before; and kneeling slowly down beside it, remained in that position before the wondering eyes of the few who had persevered in the pursuit, and had now, one after another, come up. As their courage grew in contemplating the pacific and holy attitude of the legs, they began gradually to contract their circle, and creep nearer and nearer; but the closer they approached, the more shadowy did the objects become, until the resemblance was only to be distinguished by a fleecy, almost transparent outline, which moment after moment was less defined, and at last melted away into thin air.

Such was the story that occupied the thoughts and tongues of all the gossips from Newtownsands to Abbeydorney, for months and years after. As the occurrence was in itself quite unique in its kind, even those who pretended to the most intimate communication with the spiritual world, as well as the confessed and best accredited agents of the *gentlemen*, were wholly unable to offer anything like a probable explanation of it. One old blind woman, who was, indeed, the Lord knows how old, and was wrinkled and grey in the memory of the baldest inhabitant of Abbeydorney, called to mind a tale that had been told her when a child, which perhaps may be said to give some clue to it.

‘There lived,’ she said, ‘in former times, a lady of immense wealth, who had a strong castle not far from Abbeydorney, though no one could now tell where; and two great lords came to propose for her: one a fair-haired, blue-eyed youth, of a delicate make and graceful manner; the other a dark, stout, athletic figure, but proud and uncourtly. The lady liked the fair lad best, which made the other so jealous of him that he was determined, one way or another, to compass his death. So he engaged a fellow, by a large sum of money, to get access to his bedroom at night, and cut off his head with a hatchet. On the night the murder was to be committed, he made the lad, who never suspected him, drink more wine than usual after dinner, that he might be wholly incapable of resistance. In this state he retired to his room, where he threw himself on the bed without undressing, and, as it awkwardly enough happened, with his head towards the bed’s feet. In a few minutes, in came the fellow with the hatchet, and struck a blow that he thought must have severed the head from the body, but it was the two legs he had cut off. Upon this the young lord groaned, and immediately after received another blow, which killed him. The corpse was put into a sack and carried that night to Newtownsands, where it got Christian burial; but the legs were thrown into a hole in the castle garden, and covered up with earth. The lord who had procured the murder, the next day pretended to the lady that the blue-eyed lad had returned home; upon which, not knowing the deceit, she became quite offended, and in a few weeks after agreed to marry his rival. But in the midst of the joy and feasting on the bridal night, there was a horn blown outside the castle, and soon after, steps were heard ascending the grand staircase, and the doors of the bridal-hall flew open, and in walked two bodyless legs. Then there was screaming, and running, and the bride fainted; but the legs followed the bridegroom about everywhere, until he quitted the castle; and it was said that wherever he looked or turned to, from that hour, he saw them stalking before, or beside, or behind him, until he wasted and fell into a decay. And when he was dying he confessed the whole, and desired the assassin might be searched for everywhere, to ascertain from him where the legs were thrown, that they might be dug up, and get Christian burial; but the villain was never found from that day to this, and maybe,’ continued the old woman, ‘the legs are in punishment this way, and get leave to walk the country of an odd time, to show what’s happening to them, and make some good soul search them out, and have them removed to Newtownsands.’