

# Red Hanrahan's Curse

By W. B. Yeats

One fine May morning a long time after Hanrahan had left Margaret Rooney's house, he was walking the road near Collooney, and the sound of the birds singing in the bushes that were white with blossom set him singing as he went. It was to his own little place he was going, that was no more than a cabin, but that pleased him well. For he was tired of so many years of wandering from shelter to shelter at all times of the year, and although he was seldom refused a welcome and a share of what was in the house, it seemed to him sometimes that his mind was getting stiff like his joints, and it was not so easy to him as it used to be to make fun and sport through the night, and to set all the boys laughing with his pleasant talk, and to coax the women with his songs. And a while ago, he had turned into a cabin that some poor man had left to go harvesting and had never come to again. And when he had mended the thatch and made a bed in the corner with a few sacks and bushes, and had swept out the floor, he was well content to have a little place for himself, where he could go in and out as he liked, and put his head in his hands through the length of an evening if the fret was on him, and loneliness after the old times. One by one the neighbours began to send their children in to get some learning from him, and with what they brought, a few eggs or an oaten cake or a couple of sods of turf, he made out a way of living. And if he went for a wild day and night now and again to the Burrough, no one would say a word, knowing him to be a poet, with wandering in his heart.

It was from the Burrough he was coming that May morning, light-hearted enough, and singing some new song that had come to him. But it was not long till a hare ran across his path, and made away into the fields, through the loose stones of the wall. And he knew it was no good sign a hare to have crossed his path, and he remembered the hare that had led him away to Slieve Echtge the time Mary Lavelle was waiting for him, and how he had never known content for any length of time since then. 'And it is likely enough they are putting some bad thing before me now,' he said.

And after he said that he heard the sound of crying in the field beside him, and he looked over the wall. And there he saw a young girl sitting under a bush of white hawthorn, and crying as if her heart would break. Her face was hidden in her hands, but her soft hair and her white neck and the young look of her, put him in mind of Bridget Purcell and Margaret Gillane and Maeve Connellan and Oona Curry and Celia Driscoll, and the rest of the girls he had made songs for and had coaxed the heart from with his flattering tongue.

She looked up, and he saw her to be a girl of the neighbours, a farmer's daughter. 'What is on you, Nora?' he said. 'Nothing you could take from me, Red Hanrahan.' 'If there is any sorrow on you it is I myself should be well able to serve you,' he said then, 'for it is I know the history of the Greeks, and I know well what sorrow is and parting, and the hardship of the world. And if I am not able to save you from trouble,' he said, 'there is many a one I have saved from it with the power that is in my songs, as it was in the songs of the poets that were before me from the beginning of the world. And it is with the rest of the poets I myself will be sitting and talking in some far place beyond the world, to the end of life and time,' he said. The girl stopped her crying, and she said,

‘Owen Hanrahan, I often heard you have had sorrow and persecution, and that you know all the troubles of the world since the time you refused your love to the queen-woman in Slieve Echtge; and that she never left you in quiet since. But when it is people of this earth that have harmed you, it is yourself knows well the way to put harm on them again. And will you do now what I ask you, Owen Hanrahan?’ she said. ‘I will do that indeed,’ said he.

‘It is my father and my mother and my brothers,’ she said, ‘that are marrying me to old Paddy Doe, because he has a farm of a hundred acres under the mountain. And it is what you can do, Hanrahan,’ she said, ‘put him into a rhyme the same way you put old Peter Kilmartin in one the time you were young, that sorrow may be over him rising up and lying down, that will put him thinking of Collooney churchyard and not of marriage. And let you make no delay about it, for it is for to-morrow they have the marriage settled, and I would sooner see the sun rise on the day of my death than on that day.’

‘I will put him into a song that will bring shame and sorrow over him; but tell me how many years has he, for I would put them in the song?’

‘O, he has years upon years. He is as old as you yourself, Red Hanrahan.’ ‘As old as myself,’ said Hanrahan, and his voice was as if broken; ‘as old as myself; there are twenty years and more between us! It is a bad day indeed for Owen Hanrahan when a young girl with the blossom of May in her cheeks thinks him to be an old man. And my grief!’ he said, ‘you have put a thorn in my heart.’

He turned from her then and went down the road till he came to a stone, and he sat down on it, for it seemed as if all the weight of the years had come on him in the minute. And he remembered it was not many days ago that a woman in some house had said: ‘It is not Red Hanrahan you are now but yellow Hanrahan, for your hair is turned to the colour of a wisp of tow.’ And another woman he had asked for a drink had not given him new milk but sour; and sometimes the girls would be whispering and laughing with young ignorant men while he himself was in the middle of giving out his poems or his talk. And he thought of the stiffness of his joints when he first rose of a morning, and the pain of his knees after making a journey, and it seemed to him as if he was come to be a very old man, with cold in the shoulders and speckled shins and his wind breaking and he himself withering away. And with those thoughts there came on him a great anger against old age and all it brought with it. And just then he looked up and saw a great spotted eagle sailing slowly towards Ballygawley, and he cried out: ‘You, too, eagle of Ballygawley, are old, and your wings are full of gaps, and I will put you and your ancient comrades, the Pike of Dargan Lake and the Yew of the Steep Place of the Strangers into my rhyme, that there may be a curse on you for ever.’

There was a bush beside him to the left, flowering like the rest, and a little gust of wind blew the white blossoms over his coat. ‘May blossoms,’ he said, gathering them up in the hollow of his hand, ‘you never know age because you die away in your beauty, and I will put you into my rhyme and give you my blessing.’

He rose up then and plucked a little branch from the bush, and carried it in his hand. But it is old and broken he looked going home that day with the stoop in his shoulders and the darkness in his face.

When he got to his cabin there was no one there, and he went and lay down on the bed for a while as he was used to do when he wanted to make a poem or a praise or a curse. And it was not long he was in making it this time, for the power of the curse-making

bards was upon him. And when he had made it he searched his mind how he could send it out over the whole countryside.

Some of the scholars began coming in then, to see if there would be any school that day, and Hanrahan rose up and sat on the bench by the hearth, and they all stood around him.

They thought he would bring out the Virgil or the Mass book or the primer, but instead of that he held up the little branch of hawthorn he had in his hand yet. 'Children,' he said, 'this is a new lesson I have for you to-day.

'You yourselves and the beautiful people of the world are like this blossom, and old age is the wind that comes and blows the blossom away. And I have made a curse upon old age and upon the old men, and listen now while I give it out to you.' And this is what he said—

The poet, Owen Hanrahan, under a bush of may  
Calls down a curse on his own head because it withers grey;  
Then on the speckled eagle cock of Ballygawley Hill,  
Because it is the oldest thing that knows of cark and ill;  
And on the yew that has been green from the times out of mind  
By the Steep Place of the Strangers and the Gap of the Wind;  
And on the great grey pike that broods in Castle Dargan Lake,  
Having in his long body a many a hook and ache;  
Then curses he old Paddy Bruen of the Well of Bride  
Because no hair is on his head and drowsiness inside.  
Then Paddy's neighbour, Peter Hart, and Michael Gill, his friend,  
Because their wandering histories are never at an end.  
And then old Shemus Cullinan, shepherd of the Green Lands  
Because he holds two crutches between his crooked hands;  
Then calls a curse from the dark North upon old Paddy Doe,  
Who plans to lay his withering head upon a breast of snow,  
Who plans to wreck a singing voice and break a merry heart,  
He bids a curse hang over him till breath and body part;  
But he calls down a blessing on the blossom of the may,  
Because it comes in beauty, and in beauty blows away.

He said it over to the children verse by verse till all of them could say a part of it, and some that were the quickest could say the whole of it.

'That will do for to-day,' he said then. 'And what you have to do now is to go out and sing that song for a while, to the tune of the Green Bunch of Rushes, to everyone you meet, and to the old men themselves.'

'I will do that,' said one of the little lads; 'I know old Paddy Doe well. Last Saint John's Eve we dropped a mouse down his chimney, but this is better than a mouse.'

'I will go into the town of Sligo and sing it in the street,' said another of the boys. 'Do that,' said Hanrahan, 'and go into the Burrough and tell it to Margaret Rooney and Mary Gillis, and bid them sing to it, and to make the beggars and the bocachs sing it wherever they go.' The children ran out then, full of pride and of mischief, calling out the song as they ran, and Hanrahan knew there was no danger it would not be heard.

He was sitting outside the door the next morning, looking at his scholars as they came by in twos and threes. They were nearly all come, and he was considering the place of the sun in the heavens to know whether it was time to begin, when he heard a sound that was like the buzzing of a swarm of bees in the air, or the rushing of a hidden river in time of flood. Then he saw a crowd coming up to the cabin from the road, and he took notice that all the crowd was made up of old men, and that the leaders of it were Paddy Bruen, Michael Gill and Paddy Doe, and there was not one in the crowd but had in his hand an ash stick or a blackthorn. As soon as they caught sight of him, the sticks began to wave hither and thither like branches in a storm, and the old feet to run.

He waited no longer, but made off up the hill behind the cabin till he was out of their sight.

After a while he came back round the hill, where he was hidden by the furze growing along a ditch. And when he came in sight of his cabin he saw that all the old men had gathered around it, and one of them was just at that time thrusting a rake with a wisp of lighted straw on it into the thatch.

‘My grief,’ he said, ‘I have set Old Age and Time and Weariness and Sickness against me, and I must go wandering again. And, O Blessed Queen of Heaven,’ he said, ‘protect me from the Eagle of Ballygawley, the Yew Tree of the Steep Place of the Strangers, the Pike of Castle Dargan Lake, and from the lighted wisps of their kindred, the Old Men!’