

CHAPTER XXXIII: THE HERMIT OF THE SEA-ROCK

A LITTLE time after leaving this, they saw something a long way off towards the south, which at first they took to be a large white bird floating on the sea, and rising and falling with the waves; but on turning their curragh towards it for a nearer view, they found that it was a man. He was very old, so old that he was covered all over with long, white hair, which grew from his body; and he was standing on a broad, bare rock, and kept continually throwing himself on his knees, and never ceased praying.

When they saw that he was a holy man, they asked and received his blessing; after which they began to converse with him; and they inquired who he was, and how he had come to that rock. Then the old man gave them the following account:

"I was born and bred in the island of Tory. When I grew up to be a man, I was cook to the brotherhood of the monastery; and a wicked cook I was; for every day I sold part of the food intrusted to me, and secretly bought many choice and rare things with the money. Worse even than this I did; I made secret passages underground into the church and into the houses belonging to it, and I stole from time to time great quantities of golden vestments, book-covers adorned with brass and gold, and other holy and precious things.

"I soon became very rich, and had my rooms filled with costly couches, with clothes of every colour, both linen and woollen, with brazen pitchers and caldrons, and with brooches and armlets of gold. Nothing was wanting in my house, of furniture and ornament, that a person in a high rank of life might be expected to have; and I became very proud and overbearing.

"One day, I was sent to dig a grave for the body of a rustic that had been brought from the mainland to be buried on the island. I went and fixed on a spot in the little graveyard; but as soon as I had set to work, I heard a voice speaking down deep in the earth beneath my feet; "'Do not dig this grave!'

"I paused for a moment, startled; but, recovering myself, I gave no further heed to the mysterious words, and again I began to dig. The moment I did so, I heard the same voice, even more plainly than before.'

""Do not dig this grave! I am a devout and holy person, and my body is lean and light; do not put the heavy, pampered body of that sinner down upon me!'

"But I answered, in the excess of my pride and obstinacy, 'I will certainly dig this grave; and I will bury this body down on you!'

"If you put that body down on me, the flesh will fall off your bones, and you will die, and be sent to the infernal pit at the end of three days; and, moreover, the body will not remain where you put it.'

""What will you give me,' I asked, 'if I do not bury the corpse on you?'

""Everlasting life in heaven,' replied the voice.

""How do you know this; and how am I to be sure of it?' I inquired.

"And the voice answered me, 'The grave you are digging is clay. Observe now whether it will

remain so, and then you will know the truth of what I tell you. And you will see that what I say will come to pass, and that you cannot bury that man on me, even if you should try to do so.'

"These words were scarce ended, when the grave was turned into a mass of white sand before my face. And when I saw this, I brought the body away, and buried it elsewhere.

"It happened, some time after, that I got a new curragh made, with the hides painted red all over; and I went to sea in it. As I sailed by the shores and islands, I was so pleased with the view of the land and sea from my curragh that I resolved to live altogether in it for some time; and I brought on board all my treasures silver cups, gold bracelets, and ornamented drinking-horns, and everything else, from the largest to the smallest article.

"I enjoyed myself for a time, while the air was clear and the sea calm and smooth. But one day, the winds suddenly arose and a storm burst upon me,

which carried me out to sea, so that I quite lost sight of land, and I knew not in what direction the curragh was drifting. After a time, the wind abated to a gentle gale, the sea became smooth, and the curragh sailed on as before, with a quiet, pleasant movement.

"But suddenly, though the breeze continued to blow, I thought I could perceive that the curragh ceased moving, and, standing up to find out the cause, I saw with great surprise an old man not far off, sitting on the crest of a wave.

"He spoke to me; and, as soon as I heard his voice, I knew it at once, but I could not at the moment call to mind where I had heard it before. And I became greatly troubled, and began to tremble, I knew not why.

"'Whither art thou going?' he asked.

"'I know not,' I replied; 'but this I know, I am pleased with the smooth, gentle motion of my curragh over the waves.'

"'You would not be pleased,' replied the old man, 'if you could see the troops that are at this moment around you.'

"'What troops do you speak of?' I asked. And he answered; "'All the space round about you, as far as your view reaches over the sea, and upwards to the clouds, is one great towering mass of demons, on account of your avarice, your thefts, your pride, and your other crimes and vices.'

"He then asked, 'Do you know why your curragh has stopped?'

"I answered, 'No;' and he said, 'It has been stopped by me; and it will never move from that spot till you promise me to do what I shall ask of you.'

"I replied that perhaps it was not in my power to grant his demand.

"'It is in your power,' he answered; 'and if you refuse me, the torments of hell shall be your doom.'

"He then came close to the curragh, and, laying his hands on me, he made me swear to do what he demanded.

"'What I ask is this,' said he; 'that you throw into the sea this moment all the ill-gotten treasures you have in the curragh.'

"This grieved me very much, and I replied, 'It is a pity that all these costly things should be lost.'

"To which he answered, 'They will not go to loss; a person will be sent to take charge of them. Now do as I say.'

"So, greatly against my wishes, I threw all the beautiful precious articles overboard, keeping only a small wooden cup to drink from.

"'You will now continue your voyage,' he said ; ' and the first solid ground your curragh reaches, there you are to stay.'

"He then gave me seven cakes and a cup of watery whey as food for my voyage; after which the curragh moved on, and I soon lost sight of him. And now I all at once recollected that the old man's

voice was the same as the voice that I had heard come from the ground, when I was about to dig the grave for the body of the rustic. I was so astonished and troubled at this discovery, and so disturbed at the loss of all my wealth, that I threw aside my oars, and gave myself up altogether to the winds and currents, not caring whither I went; and for a long time I was tossed about on the waves, I knew not in what direction.

"At last it seemed to me that my curragh ceased to move; but I was not sure about it, for I could see no sign of land. Mindful, however, of what the old man had told me, that I was to stay wherever my curragh stopped, I looked round more carefully; and at last I saw, very near me, a small rock level with the surface, over which the waves were gently laughing and tumbling. I stepped on to the rock; and the moment I did so, the waves seemed to spring back, and the rock rose high over the level of the water; while the curragh drifted by and quickly disappeared, so that I never saw it after. This rock has been my abode from that time to the present day.

"For the first seven years, I lived on the seven cakes and the cup of whey given me by the man who had sent me to the rock. At the end of that time the cakes were all gone ; and for three days I fasted, with nothing but the whey to wet my mouth. Late in the evening of the third day, an otter brought me a salmon out of the sea; but though I suffered much from hunger, I could not bring myself to eat the fish raw, and it was washed back again into the waves.

"I remained without food for three days longer; and in the afternoon of the third day, the otter returned with the salmon. And I saw another otter bring firewood ; and when he had piled it up on the rock, he blew it with his breath till it took fire and lighted up. And then I broiled the salmon and ate till I had satisfied my hunger.

"The otter continued to bring me a salmon every day, and in this manner I lived for seven years longer. The rock also grew larger and larger daily, till it became the size you now see it. At the end of seven years, the otter ceased to bring me my salmon, and I fasted for three days. But at the end of the third day, I was sent half a cake of fine wheaten flour and a slice of fish; and on the same day my cup of watery whey fell into the sea, and a cup of the same size, filled with good ale, was placed on the rock for me.

"And so I have lived, praying and doing penance for my sins to this hour. Each day my drinking-vessel is filled with ale, and I am sent half a wheat-flour cake and a slice of fish; and neither rain nor wind, nor heat, nor cold, is allowed to molest me on this rock."

This was the end of the old man's history. In the evening of that day, each man of the crew received the same quantity of food that was sent to the old hermit himself, namely, half a cake and a slice of fish ; and they found in the vessel as much good ale as served them all.

The next morning he said to them, "You shall all reach your own country in safety. And you, Maildun, you shall find in an island on your way, the very man that slew your father ; but you are neither to kill him nor take revenge on him in any way. As God has delivered you from the many dangers you have passed through, though you were very guilty, and well deserved death at His hands; so you forgive your enemy the crime he committed against you."

After this they took leave of the old man and sailed away.

THE OLD HERMIT'S STORY

The storms may roar and the seas may rage,
But here, on this bare, brown rock,
I pray and repent and I tell my beads,
Secure from the hurricane's shock.
For the good, kind God, in pity to me,

Holds out His protecting hand;
And cold nor heat nor storm nor sleet,
Can molest me where I stand.
I robbed the churches and wronged the poor,
And grew richer day by day;
But now on this bare, brown ocean rock,
A heavy penance I pay.
A bloated sinner died unshrived,
And they brought his corse to me
"Go, dig the grave and bury the dead,
And pray for the soul set free."
I dug the grave, but my hands were stayed
By a solemn and fearful sound,
For the feeble tones of a dead man's voice
Came up from the hollow ground!
The dead monk speaks up from the grave
Place not that pampered corse on mine,
For my bones are weak and thin;
I cannot bear the heavy weight
Of a body defiled by sin.
I was a meek and holy man;
I fasted and watched and prayed;
A sinner's corse would defile the clay
Where my wasted body is laid
The old hermit continues his story
The voice then ceased, and I heard no more
Its hollow, beseeching tone;
Then I closed the grave, and left the old monk
To rest in his coffin alone.
My curragh sailed on the western main,
And I saw, as I viewed the sea,
A withered old man upon a wave;
And he fixed his eyes on me.
He spoke, and his voice my heart's blood froze,
And I shook with horror and fear:
'Twas the very voice of the dead old monk
That sounded in mine ear!
The dead monk speaks again
Far from my grave the sinner's corse
In unhallowed clay lies deep;
And now in my coffin, undefiled,
For ever in peace I sleep.
Go, live and pray on the bare, brown rock,
Far out in the stormy sea;
A heavy penance for heavy crimes,
And heaven at last for thee!
The old hermit ends his story

And here I live from age to age;
I pray and repent and fast;
An otter brings me food each day,
And I hope for heaven at last.
The tempests roar and the billows rage,
But God holds forth His hand,
And cold nor heat nor storm nor sleet,
Can harm me where I stand.

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