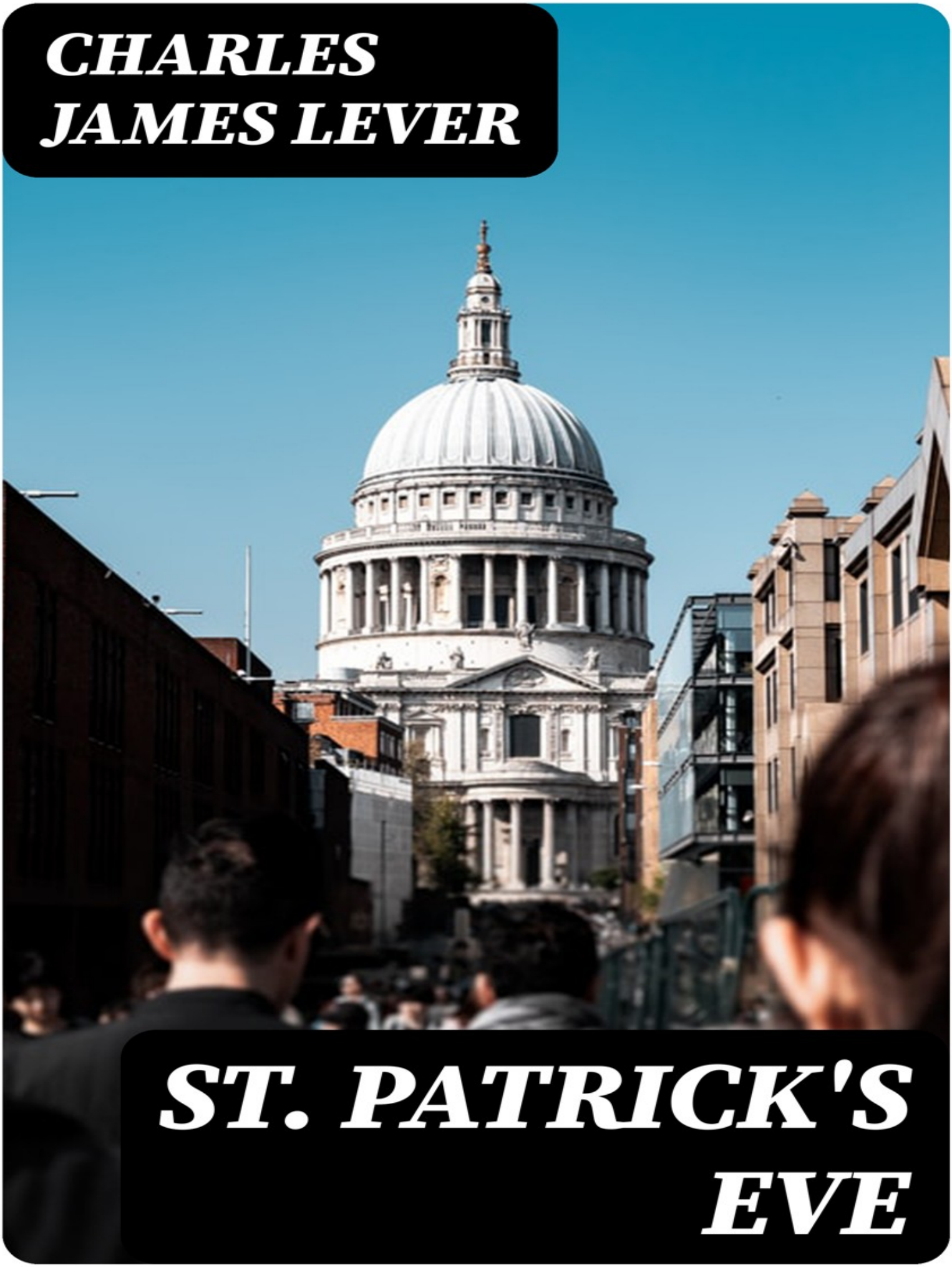
CHARLES JAMES LEVER



ST. PATRICK'S EVE

Charles James Lever

St. Patrick's Eve

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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TO MY CHILDREN

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MY DEAR CHILDREN,

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There are few things less likely than that it will ever be your lot to exercise any of the rights or privileges of landed property. It may chance, however, that even in your humble sphere, there may be those who shall look up to you for support, and be, in some wise, dependent on your will; if so, pray let this little story have its lesson in your hearts, think, that when I wrote it, I desired to inculcate the truth, that prosperity has as many duties as adversity has sorrows; that those to whom Providence has accorded many blessings are but the stewards of His bounty to the poor; and that the neglect of an obligation so sacred as this charity is a grievous wrong, and may be the origin of evils for which all your efforts to do good through life will be but a poor atonement.

Your affectionate Father,

CHARLES LEVER.

Templeogue, March 1, 1845.

FIRST ERA.

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IT was on the 16th of March, the eve of St. Patrick, not quite twenty years ago, that a little village on the bank of Lough Corrib was celebrating in its annual fair “the holy times,” devoting one day to every species of enjoyment and pleasure, and on the next, by practising prayers and penance of various kinds, as it were to prepare their minds

to resume their worldly duties in a frame of thought more seemly and becoming.

If a great and wealthy man might smile at the humble preparations for pleasure displayed on this occasion, he could scarcely scoff at the scene which surrounded them. The wide valley, encircled by lofty mountains, whose swelling outlines were tracked against the blue sky, or mingled gracefully with clouds, whose forms were little less fantastic and wild. The broad lake, stretching away into the distance, and either lost among the mountain-passes, or contracting as it approached the ancient city of Galway: a few, and but very few, islands marked its surface, and these rugged and rocky; on one alone a human trace was seen-the ruins of an ancient church; it was a mere gable now, but you could still track out the humble limits it had occupied-scarce space sufficient for twenty persons: such were once, doubtless, the full number of converts to the faith who frequented there. There was a wild and savage grandeur in the whole: the very aspect of the mountains proclaimed desolation, and seemed to frown defiance at the efforts of man to subdue them to his use; and even the herds of wild cattle seemed to stray with caution among the cliffs and precipices of this dreary region. Lower down, however, and as if in compensation of the infertile tract above, the valley was marked by patches of tillage and grass-land, and studded with cottages; which, if presenting at a nearer inspection indubitable signs of poverty, yet to the distant eye bespoke something of rural comfort, nestling as they often did beneath some large rock, and sheltered by the great turf-stack, which even the poorest possessed. Many

streams wound their course through this valley; along whose borders, amid a pasture brighter than the emerald, the cattle grazed, and there, from time to time some peasant child sat fishing as he watched the herd.

Shut in by lake and mountain, this seemed a little spot apart from all the world; and so, indeed, its inhabitants found it. They were a poor but not unhappy race of people, whose humble lives had taught them nothing of the comforts and pleasures of richer communities. Poverty had, from habit, no terrors for them; short of actual want, they never felt its pressure heavily.

Such were they who now were assembled to celebrate the festival of their Patron Saint. It was drawing towards evening; the sun was already low, and the red glare that shone from behind the mountains shewed that he was Bear his setting. The business of the fair was almost concluded; the little traffic so remote a region could supply, the barter of a few sheep, the sale of a heifer, a mountain pony, or a flock of goats, had all passed off; and now the pleasures of the occasion were about to succeed. The votaries to amusement, as if annoyed at the protracted dealings of the more worldly minded, were somewhat rudely driving away the cattle that still continued to linger about; and pigs and poultry were beginning to discover that they were merely intruders. The canvass booths, erected as shelter against the night-air, were becoming crowded with visitors; and from more than one of the number the pleasant sounds of the bagpipe might now be heard, accompanied by the dull shuffling tramp of heavily-shod feet.

Various shows and exhibitions were also in preparation, and singular announcements were made by gentlemen in a mingled costume of Turk and Thimble-rigger, of “wonderful calves with two heads;” “six-legged pigs;” and an “infant of two years old that could drink a quart of spirits at a draught, if a respectable company were assembled to witness it;”—a feat which, for the honour of young Ireland, it should be added, was ever postponed from a deficiency in the annexed condition.

Then there were “restaurants” on a scale of the most primitive simplicity, where boiled beef or “spoleen” was sold from a huge pot, suspended over a fire in the open air, and which was invariably surrounded by a gourmand party of both sexes; gingerbread and cakes of every fashion and every degree of indigestion also abounded; while jugs and kegs flanked the entrance to each tent, reeking with a most unmistakable odour of that prime promoter of native drollery and fun—poteen. All was stir, movement, and bustle; old friends, separated since the last occasion of a similar festivity, were embracing cordially, the men kissing with an affectionate warmth no German ever equalled; pledges of love and friendship were taken in brimming glasses by many, who were perhaps to renew the opportunity for such testimonies hereafter, by a fight that very evening; contracts, ratified by whisky, until that moment not deemed binding; and courtships, prosecuted with hopes, which the whole year previous had never suggested; kind speeches and words of welcome went round; while here and there some closely-gathered heads and scowling glances gave token, that other scores were to

be acquitted on that night than merely those of commerce; and in the firmly knitted brow, and more firmly grasped blackthorn, a practised observer could foresee, that some heads were to carry away deeper marks of that meeting, than simple memory can impress;—and thus, in this wild sequestered spot, human passions were as rife as in the most busy communities of pampered civilisation. Love, hate, and hope, charity, fear, forgiveness, and malice; long-smouldering revenge, long—subdued affection; hearts pining beneath daily drudgery, suddenly awakened to a burst of pleasure and a renewal of happiness in the sight of old friends, for many a day lost sight of; words of good cheer; half mutterings of menace; the whispered syllables of love; the deeply-uttered tones of vengeance; and amid all, the careless reckless glee of those, who appeared to feel the hour one snatched from the grasp of misery, and devoted to the very abandonment of pleasure. It seemed in vain that want and poverty had shed their chilling influence over hearts like these. The snow-drift and the storm might penetrate their frail dwellings; the winter might blast, the hurricane might scatter their humble hoardings; but still, the bold high-beating spirit that lived within, beamed on throughout every trial; and now, in the hour of long-sought enjoyment, blazed forth in a flame of joy, that was all but frantic.

The step that but yesterday fell wearily upon the ground, now smote the earth with a proud beat, that told of manhood's daring; the voices were high, the eyes were flashing; long pent-up emotions of every shade and complexion were there; and it seemed a season where none

should wear disguise, but stand forth in all the fearlessness of avowed resolve; and in the heart-home looks of love, as well as in the fiery glances of hatred, none practised concealment. Here, went one with his arm round his sweetheart's waist,—an evidence of accepted affection none dared even to stare at; there, went another, the skirt of his long loose coat thrown over his arm, in whose hand a stick was brandished—his gesture, even without his wild hurroo! an open declaration of battle, a challenge to all who liked it. Mothers were met in close conclave, interchanging family secrets and cares; and daughters, half conscious of the parts they themselves were playing in the converse, passed looks of sly intelligence to each other. And beggars were there too—beggars of a class which even the eastern Dervish can scarcely vie with: cripples brought many a mile away from their mountain-homes to extort charity by exhibitions of dreadful deformity; the halt, the blind, the muttering idiot, the moping melanc holy mad, mixed up with strange and motley figures in patched uniforms and rags—some, amusing the crowd by their drolleries, some, singing a popular ballad of the time—while through all, at every turn and every corner, one huge fellow, without legs, rode upon an ass, his wide chest ornamented by a picture of himself, and a paragraph setting forth his infirmities. He, with a voice deeper than a bassoon, bellowed forth his prayer for alms, and seemed to monopolise far more than his proportion of charity, doubtless owing to the more artistic development to which he had brought his profession.

“De prayers of de holy Joseph be an yez, and relieve de maimed; de prayers and blessins of all de Saints on dem that assists de suffering!” And there were pilgrims, some with heads venerable enough for the canvass of an old

master, with flowing beards, and relics hung round their necks, objects of worship which failed not to create sentiments of devotion in the passers-by. But among these many sights and sounds, each calculated to appeal to different classes and ages of the motley mass, one object appeared to engross a more than ordinary share of attention; and although certainly not of a nature to draw marked notice elsewhere, was here sufficiently strange and uncommon to become actually a spectacle. This was neither more nor less than an English groom, who, mounted upon a thorough-bred horse, led another by the bridle, and slowly paraded backwards and forwards, in attendance on his master.

“Them's the iligant bastes, Darby,” said one of the bystanders, as the horses moved past. “A finer pair than that I never seen.”

“They're beauties, and no denying it,” said the other; “and they've skins like a looking-glass.”

“Arrah, botheration t' yez! what are ye saying about their skins?” cried a third, whose dress and manner betokened one of the jank of a small farmer. “'Tis the breeding that's in 'em; that's the raal beauty. Only look at their pasterns; and see how fine they run off over the quarter.”

“Which is the best now, Phil?” said another, addressing the last speaker with a tone of some deference.

“The grey horse is worth two of the dark chesnut,” replied Phil oracularly.

“Is he, then!” cried two or three in a breath. “Why is that, Phil?”

“Can't you perceive the signs of blood about the ears? They're long, and coming to a point—”

“You're wrong this time, my friend,” said a sharp voice, with an accent which in Ireland would be called English. “You may be an excellent judge of an ass, but the horse you speak of, as the best, is not worth a fourth part of the value of the other.” And so saying, a young and handsome man, attired in a riding costume, brushed somewhat rudely through the crowd, and seizing the rein of the led horse, vaulted lightly into the saddle and rode off, leaving Phil to the mockery and laughter of the crowd, whose reverence for the opinion of a gentleman was only beneath that they accorded to the priest himself.

“Faix, ye got it there, Phil!” “'Tis down on ye he was that time!” “Musha, but ye may well get red in the face!” Such and such-like were the comments on one who but a moment before was rather a popular candidate for public honours.

“Who is he, then, at all?” said one among the rest, and who had come up too late to witness the scene.

“'Tis the young Mr. Leslie, the landlord's son, that's come over to fish the lakes,” replied an old man reverentially.

“Begorra, he's no landlord of mine, anyhow,” said Phil, now speaking for the first time. “I hould under Mister Martin, and his family was here before the Leslies was heard of.” These words were said with a certain air of defiance, and a turn of the head around him, as though to imply, that if any one would gainsay the opinion, he was ready to stand by and maintain it. Happily for the peace of the particular moment, the crowd were nearly all Martins, and so, a simple buzz of approbation followed this announcement. Nor did

their attention dwell much longer on the matter, as most were already occupied in watching the progress of the young man, who, at a fast swinging gallop, had taken to the fields beside the lake, and was now seen flying in succession over each dyke and wall before him, followed by his groom. The Irish passion for feats of horsemanship made this the most fascinating attraction of the fair; and already, opinions ran high among the crowd, that it was a race between the two horses, and more than one maintained, that “the little chap with the belt” was the better horseman of the two. At last, having made a wide circuit of the village and the green, the riders were seen slowly moving down, as if returning to the fair.

There is no country where manly sports and daring exercises are held in higher repute than Ireland. The chivalry that has died out in richer lands still reigns there; and the fall meed of approbation will ever be his, who can combine address and courage before an Irish crowd. It is needless to say, then, that many a word of praise and commendation was bestowed on young Leslie. His handsome features, his slight but well-formed figure, every particular of his dress and gesture, had found an advocate and an admirer; and while some were lavish in their epithets on the perfection of his horsemanship, others, who had seen him on foot, asserted, “that it was then he looked well entirely.” There is a kind of epidemic character pertaining to praise. The snow-ball gathers not faster by rolling, than do the words of eulogy and approbation; and so now, many recited little anecdotes of the youth's father, to shew that he was a very pattern of landlords and country gentlemen,