

ISLE, RACE, AND DOOM.

By James Stephens.

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Our holiest love of Ireland was quickened by the shores of Lough Lein. The heaviest woe—the keenest agony recorded in our annals has been the lot of our people since, but those shores remain unchanged; and the vision that met our youthful eye—filling our soul with joy, giving a high and settled purpose to our life by wedding us for ever to the cause of Ireland—may be seen the whole year round. Our faith in the present generation of the Irish *People* is boundless, especially in the young men: never have the youth of this country been moved and pervaded by a nobler spirit of patriotism—never been more compact of the stuff of martyrs and heroes. He who has eyes to see let him see. Seeing and believing ourselves, we would fain point out, to each and all of them, every one of the matchless treasures of this land: treasures of beauty, riches and health: that they should know to a jot, and feel to the quick, what they lose in leaving and shall gain by clinging to the home of their kith and kin. For the present, however, we can only invite them to a most hurried glance at two of the wonders of this isle—Killarney and the Golden Vale.

Youth of Ireland!—you on whom we rest our faith as on a rock—come with us in the May-blooms to Lough Lein. You are standing on Rosse Island and the place around you has been called a patch of Paradise! It would not take a spirit to draw a girdle round this fairy isle in forty minutes; yet that little circle alone might keep you captive all the summertide, for within it you cannot escape from beauty. Another isle hard by is the daintiest dream of loveliness. Right across the lake is a bay with charms to stay the swoop of death. Farther off, the peak of rock on one side, and on the other those beetling jags of mountain, sentinel a gorge leading to regions of beauty, enough to take the soul with ecstasy. See here, that sweep of myriad-tinted shore and mountain shuts in a lake that, seen, becomes a marvel, and a joy for ever. These are but a few of the features, vaguely indicated, of a spot which, much as we have seen of other lands, we hold to be

incomparably fair. The beauties of this one part of Kerry alone are next to numberless, and, if it be not to the genius of the poet, unutterable. Who would willingly sever himself for ever from such senses as these!

Now follow us to the Golden Vale. Here, too, the eye might grow dazzled and drunk with beauty. But it is not in this way that we would now direct the eye—of mind or body. We would wish to draw attention to the teeming wealth around. Something like soul might stir the frame and gleam in the eyes of the grossest mercenary, looking at it. So the strong-handed robber thought when, pointing to it from the crest of Slievenamon, he asked his Ironsides—‘Is not that a land worth fighting for?’ Their deeds have proved how well they believed it was. In this we share the faith of those Ironsides. Lord of hosts! how long and devoutly we have believed it. Yea, it is so believed by every Irishman not possessed by the soul of a dog. It *is* a land worth fighting for—living or dying for as a man. On parts of it the fat alluvial lies many feet deep—more than a dozen feet, they say! In several places it is too rich to grow corn! The pastures round the Rock of Cashel cannot be grazed down, and many a spot throughout the vale is equally favoured. A golden vale in very deed—a country decidedly worth fighting for. Cromwell, we thank thee for the word.

Here let us glance at another characteristic of our isle. Its climate has been sneered at; and we ourselves, as a child playing with its mother, in pet or spleen, have not spared a random wit-pellet. But we *know* that our clime is healthy and fertilizing, and delightful to the senses and the spirit: the moisture at which we are wont to grumble, is a sure defence against the exhausting extremes of heat and cold; it enriches our fields and gives them the hue we love so well, and to it we owe the varying magic of our hills and glens—their lights and tintings, with all the spiritual world that come down in mists. Many a poet—in the better days to come—shall sing these rain-births in immortal song. O for those days!—when our isle, at all times healthy, fruitful and fair, shall be happy also, and vital with the spirit hosts of mind.

And what is to be said about our race, of whom you—the *People*—are now the flower and fruit as well as the trunk and core? We are not blind—we do not wish to be blind—to the defects of our

countrymen, and their weaknesses shall be fearlessly told them, when we deem it wise. For the present, however, we have to do with their strong points alone. Physically, and against the hardest grain of circumstance, they are allowed to stand in the foremost files of men. In intellect they have done enough to warrant our faith in their right to quite as high a rank. While of their morals we can speak with the utmost confidence, and in this regard as in every other, we claim for them at least equality with any people on the earth.

Gifted race and gifted isle, what happiness and glory must have been your lot! O woe and shame!...

On this so favoured isle, and with this so favoured race for the principal *dramatis personae*, a drama is being evolved for many an age. Though different in certain essentials, yet in others it bears a striking resemblance to the antique drama, in which a hideous destiny is the ruling and overwhelming power. In this one feature, the resemblance between *ours* and the antique dramas is perfect; for the hideous destiny is here also, and seems to scorn and baffle the justice of God. Other resemblances exist, as one at least, if not two of the *unities* may be traced in 'The Doom;' but we will not strain analogy. Enough, that no dramatist, classic or romantic—not even the foremost man of all the world—would dare to try his art on a subject so vast and so appalling. The subject is—the murder of one People by another; the scene—Ireland; the time—close on 700 years; the actors—the military power, backed by the laws and institutions of England, on the one side, and on the other, all the men, women and children, of Irish heart, who have lived and died in this island for the past seven centuries. The drama fairly opens with the landing of the first murderers—some steel-clad Knights and their followers, all of them spurred on by greed, and guided by a wretch who, for the sake of a worthless woman, did not shrink from the traitor's brand and eternal shame. Soon the action thickens: battles are fought, the first murderers are joined by kindred bands, and win a firm foothold on the soil. They are strong-willed, strong-handed robbers all, and as they won so will they hold by the robber's hand. But they have to do with a noble race, whose land may be *occupied* but never *conquered*. And now begins, in appalling earnest, that struggle without parallel in the annals of the world. 'Submission

or death' is the eternal aim and motto of the robber hordes, met by the immortal 'Death or freedom' of our sires. Dying for Ireland, each falling generation bequeaths to its successor the same sacred cause and heroic spirit, and the fresh generation does battle for the hallowed trust with the souls of men who nobly love their land. *How* subdue—or murder—the whole race, for nothing short of *that* will do? The sword is unequal to its task, let them slay as largely as they will. Rests there no other means? Hundreds of years roll by before this last question is asked. In this time, the vast unfolding of 'The Doom' goes on: a generation is compressed into a single scene, and an act embraces more than a whole century. At length, and at what now appears the rapidly approaching catastrophe, an answer is found. Law, with a few minor auxiliaries, will surely do what war could never have accomplished. And this law appears mild enough at first. We don't of course forget the system known as the Penal Code. But we make light enough of even *that* now. The law we have actually in view is deadlier far and producing far more effectual—that is, deadly—results. In a word, we mean the law that leaves the toiler at the mercy of master and landlord. The chief auxiliaries of this law, and its natural birth, are Famine, Disease and Exodus. We know their united power and mark how they hurry to the long-calculated end; but, believing in God and the youthful manhood of our time, we know that the 'Doom' shall *not* be consummated.

This faith of ours is shared by the People. Woe to the man who would perplex or weaken, much more endeavour to crush it out. He would strike harder than any materialist against the spiritual life of our race; and so—however well-meaning—he would help to make it hard 'to justify the ways of God to man.'