**The Hard Road to Klondike**

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**from Rotha Mór an tSaoil**

**by Micí Mac Gabhann**

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My First Sea Journey

We spent a good while with Davy. We knew that the day would be well gone by the time the boat left Derry and it was just as well for us to spend the time with Davy as to spend it wandering around the town. In due course we strolled over to the quay of Derry. There were crowds of people getting on to the same boat – people from every corner of Donegal all bent on the same mission as ourselves. There they were, men and women, young and old, all off to Scotland looking for work to gather a bit of money to keep themselves and the families they were leaving behind them alive. You could see that the older ones, who already had tasted the foreign parts, had no great wish to be on the move again. They knew that they would have neither ease nor peace until they returned. But we were young, we didn’t know any better and we were like young people going to a feast.

We got our tickets. They weren’t dear then – I paid two shillings and I had a half-crown left over. A lot of the time went by while they were loading up the boat with bullocks and goods; we were then put on board among the cattle and the boat made off down Lough Foyle. The grief of Columbkille leaving Ireland from the self-same harbour was hardly worth talking about when you saw the state some of those poor people on the boat were in.

Everything was right enough while we were in the channel but as soon as we got out to sea the pitching and the tossing started. The wind was blowing from the north-west against the shoulder of the ship and a heavy sea accompanied it. Even though I had been reared beside the sea, I had never put my foot in a boat before this. I was sitting in the front of the ship and when the pitching started I thought my head was getting light and that my stomach was turning over. It wasn’t long until I had plenty of companions and though I was sick enough I wasn’t vomiting. God was watching the night that I spent between sickness and depression particularly from looking at those who were worse than I was. Indeed, there was one period when I longed for the ship to sink straight away to the bottom of the sea. I lay there wretched and weak and I didn’t care if I never saw dry land again!

We got into Glasgow quay sometime about six o’clock in the morning. The first question then was which direction should we go in – where would we be likely to get something to do. Conal was as ignorant as I was myself about this part of the business, but while we had been standing on the quay at Derry the day beforehand we got into conversation with a man from the Rosses – a fine man named Paddy O’Boyle. He was middle-aged and we knew by his clothes that he was going back to Scotland. We questioned him and he told us that he was working in the big iron works at Coatbridge. He had been there for years and was well satisfied with it. Coatbridge is in Lanarkshire about nine or ten miles east from Glasgow. The Baird Company built the Gartsherrie Iron Works there and for many a long year they were the most famous ironworks in the three kingdoms. There was nothing you could think of from nails to huge anchors that didn’t come out of their enormous furnaces but if that was the case there was plenty of sweat being lost in their factories. The work was heavy and the hours long but it was better than spending half your life tramping the Lothians and down to England looking for work.

‘Would we have any chance of getting a start there,’ I asked O’Boyle, ‘if we made our way up there?’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘I can’t give you a straight answer on that but I’m friendly with the foreman and if you come up there, I’ll put in a word for you.’

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East to Coatbridge

As the people disembarked from the boat when we reached Glasgow, O’Boyle went off with himself and we didn’t see any more of him at that time. We strolled up town and spent some time looking around. We saw biscuits on sale in a shop for a halfpenny each and one of them would do any man for a meal. We bought a couple each and stuck them in our pockets. After that, we put our heads together and decided that the best thing for us to do was to go east to Coatbridge. It was too early to start work on a farm and we thought we might pick up something that would do us until about the middle of summer.

We asked and got directions and started on our way. Neither of us had the remotest idea about the country and, whether long or short the journey, we hadn’t an inkling. One thing was giving me some worry. I used to hear the older people who had been to and from Scotland years before talking about a village they passed through on their way to the harvesting – a place called Armadale. In those days, people from our place used to wear breeches and great-coats made from home-spun bawneen and no matter where they went they were recognized as being from our area. Whatever hatred the people of Armadale conceived for them, it appears that that they would attack our people with bottles and stones anytime they saw them. Our men at that time had to bring their sickles over with them and they used to bind the blade with rope so that no damage would be done; but coming towards Armadale, they’d take the rope off the sickle so as to be ready to fight if the toughs of the village started attacking them. I was afraid that we might have to go by that village but, luckily enough, we didn’t – it lay further on westwards.

We didn’t know that at the time, however, so we walked warily. We had a couple of pairs of old boots on us and as we weren’t used to wearing them it wasn’t long until our feet were hurting. Well, we sat down on the side of the road and took them off. We threw them over our shoulders and forged ahead bare-foot. Then, like the women who carried their boots going to Sunday Mass and who put them on at Colleybridge, outside Gortahork, we put ours on again outside Coatbridge. We ate the biscuits we had bought in the shop and when our repast was over we went into the town and headed for the iron-works. There was a right lot of men to be seen there and they all looked very busy. We asked for O’Boyle and a boy brought us to him. He was almost in his skin, I can tell you, loading ore as fast as he could into one of the furnaces. When I saw him there bathed in sweat, I thought to myself that even if I got a job, I’d never be able to stick it for very long.

O’Boyle recognized us immediately and he called to another man to take his place while he was talking to us. He knew well, of course, what brought us there. He brought the pair of us into a little office and told the man there that we were two young fellows looking for work – friends of his own – and said that if anything could be found for us, he’d be very grateful. The man asked us where we were from and when we told him, he said, ‘you’re both very young but I’ll see what I can do.’

O’Boyle left us there and said that he’d see us at knocking-off time. The man in the office told us to follow him and he ordered another man to get us two barrows.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘come along here.’

Off we went and he brought the two of us to a part of the works where there was a heap of ore as high as Errigal.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘if you want work, you can barrow that ore over to that furnace. You’ll be paid ten shillings a week from Monday to Saturday. Think over it now but if you don’t take it there’s nothing more I can do for you.’

We looked at one another and made up our minds instantly to take the job. We took hold of the barrows. We hadn’t arranged lodgings or anything else but we knew that O’Boyle wouldn’t let us sleep out. When we knocked off, we met him and asked him if he had any address where we could try for lodgings. He said he had. He took us along with him and settled us with a woman from Annagry who kept lodgers. We were as well off as we could be then; we had work, a bit to eat, and a bed of our own to stretch out on. I tell you, we didn’t find making the bed too hard that night; and you can imagine our satisfaction as we stretched our bones in it – our first night in Scotland and our first day’s pay earned as grown men making their own way.

We worked away shunting the ore but neither of us had any intention of staying in the works. We were waiting impatiently for the month of June. We knew that the men who came over thinning the turnips were expected in Berwickshire about the twenty-second of that month. That was bout the time they’d be hoping to get work at the thinning. An odd year, it would happen that the turnips wouldn’t be ready by then and that meant a week’s hardship or more for the poor creatures while they waited on work. Most of the work at home – of the heavy work, anyhow – would have been done by them before leaving. Many crops would be saved and the turf cut. The woman and children would have to look after the rest while the men were away. But there were women in our parish that would work as well as any man and there was nothing that some of them couldn’t do – even to thatching a house.

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Bonnington Farm

Some of our people worked for years at a place they called Bonnington Farm and as Conal and I drew near Dunbar we thought we’d go looking for that place. We did that and without much trouble indeed we found it. The holding wasn’t as big as those around it. About six hundred acres it was in extent and unless my memory is failing me altogether I think that Young was the name of the man that owned it. He spoke to us nicely enough but whatever about the English on the Lagan, you wouldn’t understand a word out of this man’s mouth. We managed to let him know, however, what it was we wanted.

‘Well,’ he said (and I tell in my own words what I understood him to say). ‘You’re in luck. My turnips are ready for thinning any day now and I was just waiting for some of the people from your parts to come and start work on them. Come along with you now and I’ll show you your quarters.’

Down we went with him. He unlocked the door and God himself would have taken a second look at what we saw in front of us. There was an old bed up in the corner of the hut with a few fistfuls of hay and a big of rough sacking thrown on it. That was to be our bed. There were a few bits of coal in the other corner.

‘I suppose now,’ said the master to us, ‘that you’re a bit hungry now after your walk?’

‘We are that,’ we said together.

‘Fair enough,’ he replied, ‘I’ll go up to the house now and bring you back something to eat. After that, you can look after yourselves.’

Off he went and it wasn’t long until he came back with a bit of oatmeal and a couple of bowls and some milk.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you can mix the milk with the oatmeal and make some gruel. That will keep you going until you get something for yourselves. You can get out on the turnips tomorrow morning.’

He left us alone then.

We had never heard about this Scottish gruel beforehand. We had known many other kinds of gruel that they made at home but we had never seen the cold oatmeal mixed with milk now, nor, had we any great desire to eat it. In our pockets we still had a couple of biscuits and we ate those with the cold milk. Then we started to look around us, we cleaned up the bothy as well as we could and made a bed of sorts for ourselves. Off we went then looking for a shop. We searched around until at least we found one a couple of miles from where we were. We bought some bread there and, after all, we hand the master’s word that we’d have plenty of milk in the house. Which we had.

We went to bed early that night. We were worn out and we knew that we’d have to be on our feet at the crack of dawn. And it was true. At six o’clock the following morning while we were still asleep, there was a loud knocking on the window and someone outside calling that it was time to be moving if we were going to do any work. We dressed quickly and having eaten a bit of the bread to sop up the milk that we were given, out we moved. The bailiff was standing there waiting for us and he took us along to the field. And a fine field it was. Without any lie or exaggeration there must have been a hundred acres there under turnips. We were set at them. To be sure, we hadn’t any experience of thinning but it wasn’t hard to learn. Two shillings an acre was being paid for this work and I can tell you that young lads starting there would be a long time making their fortunes.

We worked away and it wasn’t long until the people from Cloghaneely were arriving in hordes. In the place we were, only two men were needed until autumn. The first two who came got the work – James Gallagher and Micky Sweeney. The master knew them of an old date and, of course, we knew them also. The two of them are dead now this good number of years. James was about six feet high and a droll fellow he was indeed. When he saw the old sacking on the bed, he became very critical and went straight up to the house to look for blankets; not only did he get one each for himself and his companion but he also got a couple of old ones for us. When he arose next morning, I asked him how he had slept.

‘Sure, I didn’t sleep at all,’ he said.

‘What was wrong with you?’ I asked.

‘O,’ said he, ‘my blanket was too short but when I come in tonight, I’ll make it long enough.’

When the day was done and when we had come back in to the bothy, James sat down and had a smoke and a rest. After that, he went over to the bed and brought the blanket over by the fire. He took out a pocket-knife then and nicked the middle of the blanket. He seized it then and ripped it from top to toe. He had a needle and thread – as all the old hands who had been in Scotland before had. They usedn’t have much clothes and when they’d tear them they’d have to be able to put a patch on them here and there. And they always had the necessary tools. James stitched the two pieces of blanket together anyhow and it was long enough for him that night.