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Ancient Irish Bards

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BLACK BEARD, THE PIRATE,

This freebooter lived in the reign of George the Second, and had united in his fortune a desperate and formidable gang of pirates, styling himself their commodore, and assuming the authority of a legitimate chief. His piracies were often carried on near the English settlements on the coast of North America, where he had met with extraordinary success. Perhaps in the history of human depravity it would be difficult to select actions more brutal and extravagant than Black Beard's biographer has recorded of him. In person, as well as disposition, this desperado, who was a native of England, seems to have been qualified for the chief of a gang of thieves. The effects of his beard, which gave a natural ferocity to his countenance, he was always solicitous to heighten, by suffering it to grow to an immoderate length, and twisting it about in small tails like a Ramillies' wig, whence he derived the name Black Beard. His portrait in time of action is described as that of a complete fury, with three braces of pistols in holsters slung over his shoulders, like bandoliers, and lighted matches under his hat, sticking over each of his ears. All authority, as well as admiration among the pirates was conferred on those who, committing every outrage on humanity, displayed the greatest audacity and extravagance. Black Beard's pretensions to an elevated rank in the estimation of his associates may be conceived from the character of his jokes. Having often exhibited himself before them as a dæmon, he determined once to shew them a hell of his own creation. For this purpose he collected a quantity of sulphur and combustible materials between the decks of his vessel, when, kindling a flame, and shutting down the hatches upon the crew, he involved himself and them literally in fire and brimstone. With oaths and frantic gestures he acted the part of the devil, as little affected by the smoke as if he had been born in the infernal regions, till his companions, nearly suffocated and fainting, compelled him to release them. His convivial humour was of a similar cast. In one of his ecstasies, whilst heated with liquor, and sitting in his cabin, he took a pistol in each hand, then cocking them under the table, blew out the candles, and crossing his hands, fired on each side at his companions. One of them received a shot which maimed him for life. His gallantry was also of the same complexion as his vein of humour. He had fourteen wives, if they may be so called, but his conduct towards one of them appears to have been too unfeeling and unmanly to admit of description. He was afterwards conquered, rather than apprehended, by an expedition fitted out for that purpose, after a most desperate resistance, in which he killed almost all the crews of the vessels sent against him, and he died, with most of his gang, in the battle.

ANCIENT IRISH BARDS.

The *Ollamhain Re Dan*, or Bards of the ancient Irish were panegyrist or rhapsodists, in whom the character of the troubadour and jongleur of Provence seem to have been united. Each chieftain entertained in his castle one of these individuals, who, while he, his family, and guests, were assembled in the great hall, around the "groaning board," recited in verse, to the accompaniment of his harp, the praises of his patron's ancestors, or the compositions of the ancient bards from whom he was himself descended. Sometimes the subjects of his songs, like many of Homer's narrations, were founded on hints taken from extravagant tales propagated long before his time;—sometimes they were founded on facts; and often extemporaneous effusions of wit and humour flowed abundantly from him. As the bards, whose persons were deemed sacred, sometimes indulged in satire and invective, they held the nobles in much awe; and gifts were occasionally bestowed on them, to keep their "muse in good humour." The influence of their rhymes, too, as well as the boldness with which they poured them forth on all occasions, was most astonishing, and may well be illustrated by the following anecdote;

When the Earl of Kildare, while Lord Lieutenant of

Ireland, was summoned by King Henry the Eighth to England, to answer certain charges brought against him, he entrusted the administration to his son, Lord Thomas. A rumour, soon after the earl's departure, being spread, that he had been executed in the tower, and that his whole family were threatened with the royal vengeance, this rash young man, by the advice of his associates, determined on revenging the injuries of his family.

While Cromer, who was both primate and chancellor, was pathetically representing to him the rashness, weakness, and iniquity of his intended enterprise, in a council assembled in St. Mary's Abbey, Dublin, Nelan, a bard who waited in his train, rhymes the praises of Lord Thomas, extolling his greatness, chiding his delay, and calling upon him to take immediate revenge in the field for the injuries of his family. The effusions of this ignorant and heated rhapsodist, had, unhappily, a greater influence than the sage counsels of the prelate, and the young Geraldine rushed forth at the head of his Irish train.

CONMAR.

He rushed to the field, and his helmet's dark plume
Triumphantly waved in the air;
And that brow which a joy-smile could scarcely illumine
Was bent by the fiercest expression of gloom,
Revenge reigned predominant there.

And proudly his war courser dashed o'er the plain,
As wild as the white-crested wave—
He foamed with impatience, he struggled in vain,
And seemed as if sharing the haughty disdain
Of Conmar, the fearless and brave.

The mien of the chieftain was graceful—to hear
The clang of the bright-flashing steel
Was the music he loved; it fell light on his ear,
And he cried, as he brandished his gore-crimson'd spear,
"The foeman my vengeance shall feel."

As the mountain-blast swift through the battle he flew,
Destruction and death in his train—
The war-fiend his trumpet exultingly blew,
And feasted his blood-loving eyes with the view
Of the vanquished who lay on the plain.

And loud was the din of the deep-pealing gun
That scattered the foe in its ire;
Helmets and banners gleamed bright as the sun,
When he flings his young rays as his course is begun,
And gilds the broad landscape with fire.

The warrior had gazed on his vassals of might,
The valiant, the wild, and the rude;
As they swept torrent-like o'er the field—a faint light
Shone round his dark features; he sprang thro' the fight
And fell, nobly fell—unsubdued.

He writhed not—he spoke not—but from his sunk eye
Dashed off a bright spot of his gore;
He heard a shout, wild as the Indian war-cry,
'Twas victory;—his mail'd arm he raised up on high,
And the chief of his clan was no more.

H.

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