

"The Mountains of Mourne"

by Percy French (1896)

Oh, Mary, this London's a wonderful sight,
With people all working by day and by night.
Sure, they don't sow potatoes, nor barley, nor wheat,
But there's gangs of them digging for gold in the street.
At least when I asked them that's what I was told,
So I just took a hand at this digging for gold,
But for all that I found there I might as well be
Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea.

I believe that when writing a wish you expressed
As to know how the fine ladies in London were dressed,
Well if you'll believe me, when asked to a ball,
They don't wear no top to their dresses at all.
Oh I've seen them meself and you could not in truth,
Say if they were bound for a ball or a bath.
Don't be starting such fashions, now, Mary, mo chroí, (ma chérie?)
Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea.

I've seen England's king from the top of a bus
And I've never known him, but he means to know us.
And tho' by the Saxon we once were oppressed,
Still I cheered, God forgive me, I cheered with the rest.
And now that he's visited Erin's green shore
We'll be much better friends than we've been heretofore
When we've got all we want, we're as quiet as can be
Where the mountains of Mourne sweep down to the sea.

You remember young Peter O'Loughlin, of course,
Well, now he is here at the head of the force.
I met him today, I was crossing the Strand,
And he stopped the whole street with a wave of his hand.
And there we stood talkin' of days that are gone,
While the whole population of London looked on.
But for all these great powers he's wishful like me,
To be back where the dark Mournes sweep down to the sea.

There's beautiful girls here, oh never you mind,
With beautiful shapes nature never designed,
And lovely complexions all roses and cream,
But let me remark with regard to the same:
That if of those roses you venture to sip,
The colours might all come away on your lip,
So I'll wait for the wild rose that's waiting for me
In the place where the dark Mournes sweep down to the sea.

*Still
I
cheered,
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rest.*

This line, "Still I cheered, God forgive me, I cheered with the rest" has stood in my memory since I first heard it recited by my earliest mentor in things poetic, specifically, my brother, Peter, years and years ago.

It had, for me, a much deeper meaning and significance than the rest of the composition in which it is embedded. French's verses entitled "The Mountains of Mourne", quite light-hearted in my sense of it, seem to treat with issues of a different vein, and I find them musical and, indeed, insightful of the disparities between a grainier, jaded London as compared to the gentle beauties of the waters, mountains and maidens of rural Ireland. But this specific line seems ordained for greater import as it deals so succinctly with how we as humans can be swept up into applauding that which may, upon sober thought, not merit it, but we do it anyhow, just to be "with the rest".

The mea culpa of "God forgive me" speaks eloquently to the huge differences that we recognize may sometimes exist between what we say and what we actually think and feel.

So I ask my readers' indulgence as I use this line as a main construct of the following composition:

I Cheered, God Forgive Me, I Cheered with the Rest

*At the ramparts I stood, saw the wounded come back,
And tallied the dead who would never return
I wept that they'd given their lifeblood to spill
And I in truth could no justness discern*

*They were, each one, brave men and true,
Facing their fate at imperial behest
I cheered at the flags, and I cheered at the pomp,
I cheered, God forgive me, I cheered with the rest.*

*"Which ramparts were these", well may you ask,
"What battles and wars have you known?"
"Not one," I clearly admit, "no sword have I plied,
No guns have I fired, no bombs have I thrown."*

*But your question is fair, and it must be addressed,
Else history makes no fair play
We must speak loud the clarion truth,
For honour and courage to carry the day*

*The ramparts I know are not towers of rock,
Nor earthen nor wooden stockades
But rather they are the annals of yore
That have bled unto history's page*

*Hoary legends abound, epic sagas unfold,
Killings and death, in time, turn to grace
Triumphs and glories of battles retold
Altering time, the facts and the place*

*What can I know of these struggles of old,
These stories of bloodshed and woes?
Only that which survives in the tales of old men,
The truth of which ebbs as it flows*

*Those battles were joined at almost each turn
For glories of some monarch's whim
Or flag-draped excuse for political use
In mouthing some greed-driven hymn*

*Nothing I've seen in history's leaves
Comforts my sense of unease
Just isms and schisms that blithely sail in
On four winds or seven great seas*

*Some despot, some caesar, some tyrant,
Some dictator, monarch or king
Some duly-elected martinet, some csar,
Or whatever else times may bring*

*Will sooner or later, citing national needs,
Call for all patriots to ride
With armies to war and soldiers to die
For the glories of national pride*

*For flag and country, and patriot zeal
Their leaders so falsely invoke
Who, 'though they rant long and loud,
Step back and away from the smoke*

*But when the battles are done and the nation
Comes out of the lingering haze
It comes clear who paid life and limb
In the carnage of its glory days*

*When are counted the wounded and dead
Amid tears for those left behind
Does the common man discern that all this
Makes no sense, nor reason, nor rhyme*

*The stretchers, the graves and the wheelchairs
Are filled with the nation's young men
But not those who so safely repose
Far from the bloodshed and far from the din*

*Nor high brass in charge, politicians writ large,
Nor those boasting blood that runs blue
Nor those who hide behind desks and elections
While their battle-gained riches accrue*

*So I stood and I watched them,
Bearing their dead, limping painfully by
I wept for their sorrow, I wept for their pain,
I still weep, I still mourn, I still cry*

*Is this what I'd cheered, God forgive me,
The pageant, the pomp and the flag?
So some official far from the fire
Might thump breast and boastfully brag*

*And point to the ribbons and medals
Proudly pinned on to his chest?
Is this why I'd cheered, God forgive me,
Is this why I'd cheered with the rest?*

*I beg you forgive me, I humbly ask pardon
As I hang my mortified head
That I have somehow let myself be
So sorely deceived and mislead*

*This I ask of the yet marching and wounded
All the battle-scarred ranks who've returned
And those in their graves have my undying praise
Their gift of life in my memory burned*

*So I still cheer and salute every soldier
As they all march so firmly abreast
I cheer not for some flag, nation or ism
But for the brave hearts ensconced in their chests*