

The Cluricaun's Tale

Sean Arthur Joyce

—with a grateful nod to 'Irish Fairy and Folk Tales', edited by WB Yeats

Edmund Carlyon Wragge¹ sits in his Josephine Street office on a muggy late summer afternoon. The ceiling fan whirs, uselessly. He yanks the noose of his tie apart. "Damn things," he mutters. "Always did hate them. And the drill sergeant who invented them." Unable to concentrate, he brushes aside the idea that the ripe old age of 89 is making him lose his edge. "Waste of time, working today." As if on cue, he hears the door to the street groaning open. Wragge shoves the chair out behind himself and ambles for the door. On his way past the reception desk he motions for his secretary not to get up.

"It's okay, Inez. I need a change of pace anyhow. Had it with this heat. Probably Silver King Mike², at this time of afternoon. He likes to close up shop early Friday afternoons."

Wragge walks toward the ragged man seated on the chair nearest the door. He is leaning a grizzled head against the wall, lost in thought. Or stoned with exhaustion. It's Silver King Mike, alright. Bushy whiskers, damp sod odour and all. Wragge is never too busy to entertain a fellow prospector. Kootenay old-timers have a standing invitation in his office. As long as it's after 3:30 on a business day. The lawyering is fine, in its place. But his times in the bush, cresting a ridge above the soaring spine of the Valhallas, with Slocan Lake spread out like a jewel at his feet. . . . No matter his track record: Boer War veteran, prospector, lawyer—Wragge isn't one to stand on ceremony. Not amongst the work-hardened backs of greybeards like Silver King Mike.

"Mike, how ya doin', ya old stinkpot!" Wragge chuckles.

"Stinkpot yourself, Eddie. Didn't come here to trade boyish insults. Been a helluva week."

"Let me just get Inez to hang up the closed sign and we'll adjourn to the beer parlour."

"Naw, never mind. Now I'm finally sittin' down I can't git up anyhow. Besides, I'm tryin' to go light on the hooch. Takes the what-for outta my stomach lining. Or so the doc says."

"You mean the ulcer. Good idea. That reminds me, remember the old Gunner from Galway?"

Silver King Mike snorts. "Now there's an Irishman never got enough spike! Say, did anyone ever know his real name?"

Wragge smiles. “John Gibb Devlin³. He was, shall we say, known to the legal profession in these parts. I got to know him pretty well. We staked some claims on the south fork of the Salmon River together.”

“Why ’n hell they call him the Gunner from Galway?”

“On account of that old Irish song he invariably sang when he’d had a drop too many. Which was more often than he didn’t. He was, I believe, a Glasgow Irishman and must have made quite a fortune over the years, now I come to think about it. But, hell—it was easy come, easy go with him. Poor bugger died just about as poor as the day he was born. Had a helluva good time on the way out, though.”

Silver King Mike has a devilish gleam in his eye. “Why, Eddie, I didn’t know you consorted with such—riff-raff.”

“Only the best!” The two men laugh. “I spent a long weekend one summer with him prospecting near Sheep Creek, where he found some high grade float. We found nothing much else. But in camp each night he regaled me with stories of his life. Like the time he’d made a big sale of ore claims to Anaconda Mining. You always knew when Devlin was flush, ’cause he’d blow into Nelson or Nakusp and look up every drinkin’ buddy he knew. This particular occasion, he tells me, he wakes up the morning after a bender in the Nelson hospital. His throat is burning with a powerful thirst, and I don’t mean for water. Then he hears through the window the milk wagon, two storeys below. He looks around desperately for his britches, but the nurses had taken his clothes away the night before, knowing his reputation. He rushes back to the window, and seeing the milkman go inside with his milk cans, Gunner climbs out the sill in his night shirt, grabs the storm drain and shinnys down the drainpipe.”

Silver King Mike has been chuckling all the while. “By God, he WAS a helluva character!”

“Landing on the cold pavement in his bare feet, gunner jumps into the wagon, cracks the traces and before you know it, he’s off to the races, empty milk cans clattering and horses screechin’ like they was bein’ driven outta Hell!”

“Did they catch the poor bugger?”

“That they did. Sergeant Jarvis got the word from the milkman and just traced Devlin’s usual haunts, hotel to hotel, bar to bar, ‘til he found the Gunner sittin’ on a barstool in the Manhattan Saloon, in nothin’ but his night shirt. So Jarvis collars him and drags him back to the hospital. Well. You can imagine the wrath of the sisters in white. The head matron—a stiff old Scotch

Presbyterian named Sister Moore—gives him what-for, right on the hospital steps, with old Gunner so plastered he could barely keep from fallin' over.

Silver King Mike is red-faced, teary-eyed with laughter. “Ah, thanks Eddie—I needed a good laugh today!”

Wragge grins, his eyes hinting that the better story is yet to come. “When the Gunner recovers his wits, he puts on his best beseechin' Paddy accent, that sly face that told you he was up to no good. “Why, madam,” he says, but she promptly reminds him she is no Lake Street whore, thank you very much. “I'm just sayin',” the Gunner continues, “you ought not to treat a poor old body like this. Why, isn't only after a drop I was? Surely 'tis not a capital crime, after all? Besides,” he says, leaning in too close to the poor sister's face, “you'd not want to be bringin' down upon yerself the curse of the Cluricaun, now would ye?” Well, Mike, even them starchy old Prebyterians can't resist a good fairy tale. She huffs a breath but stays put, ear at the ready like a child at bedtime.

Silver King Mike is immersed in the tale as Wragge imitates Devlin's accent perfectly. “Y'see, 'twas like this, sister,” says the Gunner. “One night of a full moon a Cluricaun of Galway came to the house of a poor family. And the little fella knocks at the door. When the potato farmer's wife answers the door through a crack, he asks her for a bed for the night, if that be pleasin' to her family. And maybe just a wee drop 'o the stuff, if she be so kind.” Sister Moore huffs again. “And what, pray tell, is a Cluricaun? Foolish, pagan superstitions?” The Gunner's face pales with shock. “Careful! Careful, sister. You'll not be wantin' to bring down the curse of the Cluricaun on yer sainted head, now would ye?”

Christian she may be, but this forces her to back down. “A Cluricaun is of a similar race to his cousin the Lepracaun. Seems to favour wealthy gentlemen with well-stocked wine cellars, if y'know what I mean.” Sister Moore looks like she's had candy snatched from her again. But the Gunner calmly carries on. “Well, now. The family was quite poor, with seven children. But sure enough, they invited the hungry Cluricaun inside for the night. “If it please you sir,” the poor farmer says. “We are a poor clan, hilling potatoes long days and months for the landlord who owns the fields about us and even this humble house you see about you now. So if it please you, sir, we have only a few potatoes to roast over the hob. And a drop of our own poteen to warm your cold bones.”

“Aye kind sir,” says the wee Cluricaun. “That you be takin' it from your need and not your wealth, 'tis as fine a bed and board as there be in all Ireland.”

“After the mother and father and the seven children crowded around the rough plank table, the Cluricaun set to his meal like a man starved, smackin’ his lips and wiping his red-bearded face on a wide sleeve.

“Dear sir,” pipes up the missus. “I fear we’ll run out of food before yourself and the family be fed, beggin’ your pardon.”

“Tis no matter,” says the Cluricaun, pouring down a deep draft of poteen. “Only look to your sideboard. You’ll not be disappointed, so long as I’m treated well.” And sure enough, when the farmer’s wife looked to the sideboard, it was heaped to overflowing with roast beef, steaming potatoes, and a fine new crock of poteen. Well. From wee bairn to the old man himself, all feasted as they’d never feasted in their lives.

“The next morning, the humble family awoke to find the Cluricaun already gone. And behind him he’d left the sideboard as full and succulent with food as though they’d never eaten a bite. Well. Sister Moore is now sniffing witchcraft. “And what is the purpose of such a tale, Mr. Devlin? To drive off the angels themselves?” But the Gunner could charm the brass off a general. “Well now, if you’ll just exercise one ’o the seven virtues I’ll soon be tellin’ ye.” Moore huffs something about being Presbyterian, not Catholic, but obviously needs to know the rest of the story. “Y’see, sister, the Cluricaun was up at dawn to explore the country. And what should he find, but a gentleman’s estate, master of forty horses and a great white mansion ’o forty rooms. So the wee Cluricaun knocks at the broad oak door with his hawthorn staff, three times. And a servant as smartly dressed as yourself answers, lookin’ down his nose at the wee gentleman on the steps. “I be travellin’ a dozen leagues on shank’s pony,” the Cluricaun says, “tired and needin’ bed and board for the night. And a drop ’o poteen if your master would be so kind.”

“What is that to us?” the servant answers, cool as ice. “Ah,” says the Cluricaun, “but you’d not be wantin’ to bring down the curse of the Cluricaun upon the house, now would you sir?” And sure enough, the servant’s face goes white as this morning’s milk as he turns on his heels to fetch his master. Soon heavy-booted steps can be heard coming down the hallway. The master stands above the wee Cluricaun, blocking out the light with his barrel belly and trussed up in a satin waistcoat.

“What is it you require?” the master demands. “I be after a mere morsel to sate the snarlin’ beast and a drop to quench the infernal fire,” the Cluricaun humbly answers. “What? And take to my bosom a rover I don’t know from Adam? For all I know you could be a highwayman, come to rob and plunder my household!” “Upon my honour, sir,” says the Cluricaun. “Tis a thousand and more households I’ve visited across this emerald isle. Nary a one of them has suffered the

loss of a single spoon.” “Pah!” the master snorts. “I have only your word on that! Begone with you now!”

“Now,” the Cluricaun holds up a kindly finger. “I’m not one wantin’ to bring down a curse lightly, particularly upon a member of the gentry such as yourself, sir, but. . . .” But the door slammed so hard the Cluricaun’s wee red beard blew back from his cheeks. A cold and bone-shiverin’ night the Cluricaun spent in the brakes that night, cursing the gentleman to the dark spirits. By mornin’ his blue-chilled lips had worn themselves out with curses.

“Well, Sister Moore,” says the Gunner, “St. Patrick himself cast me into the fiery lake if that very mornin’ the master didn’t rise to find all his servants gone for fear of the fairy curse. The wealthy gentleman left alone to walk the forty rooms of his mansion, and not a sound of living things to be heard. Outside he huffs and puffs to check on his stables, and sure, if the horses hadn’t all died in the night, every one. A terrible sad sight. And runnin’ back to his house, if the stone steps themselves didn’t splinter and crack beneath his boots, and the heavy oak door with its polished brass knocker shriek and fall off its hinges behind him. And scramblin’ up the grand staircase, if they didn’t shudder and fall like the Earth itself behind his every step. And if the very fine clothes upon his back didn’t shred and tatter into a threadbare shadow, silk vest and all, fallin’ from his body. And fleeing from that accursed place, if he didn’t run and run and run ’til the very fat dissolved from his body and left him a wraith of himself, almost invisible in the night.

“And true ’tis, to this day, if those walkin’ in the remote places of this county don’t hear the master himself skulking the brakes, a tattered rakeful of leaves, a desperate shade knockin’ at the doors of the farmers, starved to a shadow and beggin’ for board and bed. So thin has he grown, people in those parts say he’s nothin’ but the wailin’ wind batterin’ at the hinges.

“Hmmp. Such a frivolous tale.” Sister Moore is secretly pleased with the story but has a reputation to keep, after all.

“Ah, sister—no! Upon the Redeemer himself, not frivolous at all! The wee dram that heals the world!”

Eddie Wragge and Silver King Mike roar with laughter. But the sun is casting longer shadows now into the waiting room. Time for Mike to make his way to his ramshackle room at the Kootenay Hotel⁴, Eddie to his sprawling Victorian home at the corner of Observatory and Ward streets⁵.

FOOTNOTES

1. Edmund Carlyon Wragge was born August 1, 1872 in Toronto. His father, Edmund Sr., was an engineer on the first railway construction project in South Africa between Capetown and Stellenbosch, on the Cape of Good Hope. Edmund Carlyon Wragge was somewhat of an adventurer who spent time working in the wilds of James Bay and Manitoba. A job with the abortive Canadian Yukon Railway in the Stikine Valley brought him to BC. He found his way to the West Kootenay, arriving in Nelson in 1899 while the mining boom was still on and never looked back. There is still a camping area on Slocan Lake, Wragge Beach, named for him. Wragge spent much time prospecting in the Slocan Valley.
2. Silver King Mike was the nickname of Michael Ginsberg, a prospector and operator of a second hand shop in Nelson who resided in the Kootenay Hotel for many years. Little was known of Ginsberg; after his death it was learned he was from a wealthy Jewish family in New York state.
3. John Gibb Devlin, known as the 'Gunner from Galway' had a reputation in the early days of Nelson's history for his hard-drinking escapades. Little is known of him outside a few stories told in the memoirs of Dr. Lorris E. Borden and Edmund Carlyon Wragge. Devlin built a house in Nakusp near the Grand Hotel and had two sons and two daughters. The youngest son, Scotty, lived in Fauquier and ran a service station at Needles on upper Arrow Lake.
4. The Kootenay Hotel stood roughly where the loading bays for the current Canada Post office are now on Nelson's Vernon Street.
5. This home is profiled in my book *A Perfect Childhood—100 Years of Heritage Homes in Nelson*, pages 29-40, Kootenay Museum Association and Historical Society, 1997, ISBN 0-9680038-1-8