

PATSA

OR THE BELLY OF GOLD

by LIAM O'FLAHERTY

There lived in our district an old man called Patsa. He had no doubt been one time young and innocent, but within my memory he had always been aged, wrinkled and a great scoundrel. He embodied within his stinking carcass all the vices and perversions which our ancient community has accumulated through the centuries. For that reason he was greatly feared and respected. He was also a by-word.

He was a tall, lean man, with a solitary yellow tooth in his upper jaw. That tooth was famous and people said when anything was stolen: "Patsa saw it with his wagging tooth." For Patsa, being exceedingly cunning, always affected the grin of an idiot, holding his mouth open, showing his naked gums and flicking his tongue against the solitary tooth, which moved hither and thither like a snake's fang.

His eyes were green and small. He had enormous white eyebrows that almost concealed his eyes. His hair had once been white, but it became, later, a dirty yellow colour through lack of moisture. Patsa's body became too mean to feed its own hair, since Patsa was too mean to feed his body. The skin on his face was also yellow and there was no flesh between it and the bone. His ears were black with dirt and they had as many wrinkles in them as the belly of an aged sow. They were the main cause of the unpleasant odour which Patsa always carried about with him. A chancre had eaten away the top of his nose, leaving a stub which could not possibly be of any use for smelling. The wits of our district said that the nose became diseased through smelling Patsa.

He used to wear a blue tam-o'-shanter cap, a yellow woollen muffler, rawhide shoes and a suit of white frieze. His clothes were generally covered with spots of red ashes and with other unseemly excrements. He made no sound when he walked. He always walked very erect with his hands in his waistcoat pockets. Whenever anybody spoke to him, he stared like a fool for a long time, wagging his tooth. Then, if he had nothing to gain by talking, he said "Hi" and walked away. If he had anything to gain by talking, he began: "Well! By the Cross of Christ! May the swine fever devour me if there is a word of a lie in what I am going to say." He never spoke the truth.

He had no shame in him. Although he had no land and no trade that is considered honourable, he would not fish but begged of the fisherman, who gave unto him in order to drive away his smell. He earned money from strangers and by performing unpleasant jobs. For instance, he had a regular contract for cleaning all the lavatories in the district. In those days there were eight lavatories in the district out of a total of two hundred houses. He also was pleased to accept commissions for burying rotten corpses of animals that had been discovered by the sanitary officer. He was an adept at castration, which he performed at the fixed rate of a penny for a pair of testicles. It

gave him such pleasure that he performed the operation free on practically worthless animals like billy goats. Billy goats especially fascinated him. It is recorded that he once was asked to slaughter a particularly evil smelling one by a widow and he offered his services free on the condition that she allowed him to do it with a hatchet. So he hacked the stinking brute and literally cut him to pieces, while a crowd stood about and yelled with joy as the billy goat, tied to a stone by a halter, dodged hither and thither from the blows, with his gore showering about him on the ground every time he shook his head.

He was extremely clever at getting money from strangers. In those days a great number of visitors came to our island. It had just been discovered by the new school of European mysticism and was considered to be the chief reserve of the gods and fairies of the Celtic Twilight. It was by exploiting these mystics that Patsa collected the golden sovereigns which are the subject of this story.

Every time the steamer arrived from the city, Patsa was standing on the pier head, in his dirty white suit, erect, motionless, with his hands in the pockets of his waistcoat, with his yellow muffler and his tam-o'-shanter cap, with his fowl ears cocked and his green eyes peering from beneath the rims of his bushy white eyebrows, moving hither and thither like the eyes of a sea hawk, with his mouth open and his tongue fiddling with his solitary, yellow tooth. Nobody escaped him. It was impossible to resist his advances. He had that magnetic quality which is possessed by great whores and by madmen who believe themselves to be gods. He had no fixed method of approach. At times he would dash up and seize a bag and lead the stranger to the hotel and on the way engage himself as guide, porter, storyteller or procureur. With another he might pose as a picturesque fisherman, proud, reluctant, a man to be painted or helped for humanitarian and mystical reasons. With another he became a buffoon and was even seen to dance and pretend to be mad. With another he would rush up and commence with great vehemence to beg, showing false scars on his body like a pariah of the ancient East. He stalked others, appearing before them in lonely places, near ancient fortresses, among the ruins of old churches, leaning against prehistoric pagan stones that are supposed to have occult associations. There, in a hollow voice, he told poets and scholars and dramatists, who are now famous, most of the legends and mystic lore that became current in Ireland and even in Europe during the past generation, relating to the Celtic Twilight.

Patsa, with his fowl ears and his chancered nose, would descend to any low depths in order to earn a sovereign, or even a sixpenny-bit. It was even said that he tried to sell his own fleas to an English nobleman who collects fleas from all over the world, and made a tour of our district in search of a rare specimen that was said to inhabit the place.

I have laid stress on his cunning in order to give especial point to the manner in which he was finally outwitted by his wife, whom we all thought to be an idiot. Her name was Nuala. She was small and round and plump in spite of old

age. She rarely left her own yard. When she saw anybody she always ran into her house, rolling in her gait, like an uneven stone going slowly down a hill. She never had any children. She was noted by the peculiar capacity she had for blurring at will. Indeed, small boys used to call after her: "Blurt for us, Nuala."

The unspeakable Patsa even exploited this strange talent of his wife for his own pleasure. He amused himself during the long winter evenings by getting her to kneel on the hearthstone, with her elbows on the ground. Then he would lash her with a dried willow rod, causing her to blurt with great violence. The young blackguards of the neighbourhood were in the habit of crawling up underneath Patsa's window and crouching there in order to listen to this extraordinary performance. But one night a young fellow tried to see as well as hear and brought a torch which he flashed into the room. Nuala thought it was lightning and went into a faint, thinking God had punished her for her immodesty. From that night she never again allowed her husband to beat her for the purpose of making her blurt.

Because of his wife's refusal to satisfy him in this respect, Patsa redoubled his cruelty in other directions towards her, and towards all life. He used to crawl up behind his wife and stick a big needle in her as far as it would go. As she was short sighted, he used to tie a rope across the lane through which she went to the well. He gave her salt instead of sugar for her tea, and he found great pleasure in exploding a packet of gunpowder he stole, by throwing it into the fire while she was crouching over it. He gave her no money to buy food and she had to live on the charity of neighbours.

He himself went about seeking devilment, tying cords on sheep's thighs, knocking walls, pissing in water troughs, terrifying people at night by making strange noises at places that were said to be haunted. He slashed the canvas of curraghs and set fire to hay and exposed his person to young women.

But such was the fear in which he was held that nobody dared interfere with him.

Then suddenly, in his seventy-ninth year, Patsa became seriously ill and took to his bed. The cause of his illness was unknown, but was said to result from eating canned food that had been washed ashore from the wreck of an American ship. That is plausible enough, as he became almost paralysed and both his passages closed up, so that he was given up for lost. Whatever he ate it made a lump in his stomach and the doctor could do nothing to relieve him. At last, the doctor told him that he had only a few hours to live and that he should send for the priest, confess his sins and get anointed.

Neighbours came in when it was heard that the doctor had told Nuala to fetch the priest. The neighbours were naturally delighted that the good God was at last going to deliver them from such a monster, but they also felt a certain awe at the prospect of losing such a famous one.

The house was an extraordinary sight. From outside it looked like an unused barn, with its stone walls almost naked of mortar, with its thatched roof as hollow as the back of an old

stray horse, and with its unpainted door tied by a piece of string. Inside, in the two rooms, there seemed to rest all the smells that Patsa had brought with him from his unsavoury employments. There were great holes in the earthen floor. In a corner there were old potatoes sprouting, with long, unhealthy, white buds sticking up. There was a mound of ashes on the hearth. From the earthen roof and the wooden rafters hung amazing labyrinthine structures made by spiders, in whose meshes lay dead countless enormous flies, beetles and strange insects. The walls were of all colours, caused by rain that dripped through the roof. In the bedroom there was a disreputable bed, on which Patsa was lying, and in a corner, a pallet, used by Nuala since her husband got ill. Patsa, lying on his back in bed, with his tam-o'-shanter on his head and his yellow muffler around his neck, as yellow in the face as tanned leather, looked like a devil. Still people came in to console him and to try to prepare him for death as is the custom. For it is said by the founders of the race that even the soul of a dying dog is saved by a pat on the snout and a kind word in the ear.

So they talked to him and told him that God was good and that Jesus Christ was crucified and that the road to heaven was made of angel's wings and that souls were carried up it on a white horse that could twist soogauns with the fastest wind. But they might as well have been harlots whispering in a eunuch's ears for all the notice Patsa took of them.

"Hi!" said Patsa. "By the Cross of Christ! When sly neighbours come around the bed of death they have the eyes of crows and the only desire they have is to be thieves in the gardens of paradise. But never you fear. My treasure is hidden and I'll be counting it in the company of saints in heaven."

Then they said to him that he should make his peace now with God and with his wife. In the presence of the priest, they said, it was fitting for him to make provision for the old woman with whatever he had saved, in order to save her withered thighs voyages of beggary from door to door. And they said it must be a queer number of pennies he had saved, since everyone knew that the gentry paid well for having their privies cleaned and whitewashed, and many a stranger had given sovereigns for the stories he told them.

But Patsa answered them and said:

"Hi! Why should I leave her anything, the barren hag? She poisoned me, so I couldn't lose a button for the last eight days."

The neighbours then went into the kitchen and sat around Nuala, and Nuala wept. The priest came, but Patsa closed his eyes and mouth.

"Make your peace with God and with your wife," said the priest.

Patsa said nothing. So the priest oiled him and went away. The neighbours also went away. Then Patsa called in his wife.

"Look here," he said. "Do what I tell you now, if you don't want me to put my curse on you from my bed of death. Bring me a saucepan full of gruel."

"I have no meal to make it," she said. "Give me the money and I'll fetch it."

"Go and beg it," he said. "Be quick or I'll put a dying man's curse on you."

She went and got meal from a neighbour. Then she made the gruel and brought it to him in a saucepan. She stood by the bed to see him take it.

"Leave the room," he said, "and close the door after you."

Nuala left the room and closed the door after her. She was sitting by the kitchen fire for a long time, when at last she heard a terrible groan, then another and then a raucous sound, like a man trying to vomit. She ran into the bedroom.

"Is it choking you are?" she said.

Patsa was speechless. His face was blue. He had his two hands on his belly. The saucepan was on a stool beside the bed. She took it up and looked into it. As she did so the saucepan canted to one side and something rattled against the side amidst the remains of the gruel at the bottom.

"Great God!" she said. "Did his old yellow tooth fall into the gruel out of his mouth! He must be near dead, sure enough."

She shuffled out into the kitchen with the saucepan and emptied the remains of the gruel on to a plate. Then she uttered a cry. There were two gold sovereigns among the dregs of the gruel. She ran back into the bedroom and looked at Patsa. Then she saw that he no longer had the yellow muffler around his neck, but that it was lying on the bed. She snatched at it, held it up and then learned what she had been trying to find out for years, poking around the house. It was in the muffler he had hidden his money. It was now ripped and torn in many places and she could see the marks of the little round beds made by the sovereigns.

Then the simple, stupid woman grew as cruel and cunning as a weasel when she realised that Patsa had swallowed his gold in order to take it to the grave with him. He was looking up at her with a queer look of joy in his little green eyes, in spite of his pain. He was enjoying his last perversion with his gut full of gold. He opened his mouth and wagged his yellow tooth in her face.

Then she uttered a wild cry and ran out of the house as fast as her old legs could carry her. She reached a neighbour's house, stood on the floor and cried out, panting:

"Give me, for the sake of God's mother, the oil ye bought for the sick cow, for I must make that old ruffian scutter before the devil snatches him or I'm a beggar woman."

"Yerrah, what ails ye, woman?" said the neighbour.

"Hand me out that bottle of castor oil," said Nuala, "and I'll walk barefoot around the seven temples of the Romans and pray for the souls of your ancestors."

"Jesus!" said the neighbour. "He's put a spell on ye. Is it out of yer mind ye are? Sure ye wouldn't give him that dose that is stronger than the dynamite they have for blasting quarries? Let him die in peace."

"By the fires of hell," she said. "He'll die in peace all right, but he'll die with an empty gut, if I have to rip him with my

limpet dagger. And I'll make him lose his gold before the sun goes down."

So then she told the neighbour what Patsa had done, and the neighbour forthwith gave her the pint of castor oil and with it a still stronger concoction made from the juice of limpets and sea-rock weeds. They mixed the two together and went back to Patsa.

When he saw them coming, carrying the horrible mess in a spouty jug, he realised their purpose and made an effort to raise himself and defend his gold. But they laid him flat on the bed, using him roughly and shouting:

"Open your gob now till we empty you, you skinful of lechery."

"Take care now and make no noise or we'll slice your instrument with a jagged razor."

"Aye!" they cried, again and again, and they terrified his dying eyes and his ears with the devilish looks on their faces and the threats that came from their lips.

So he lay still and allowed them to close his nostrils and to prize open his jaws and to pour the jugful down his throat. Then they slapped his belly and gave him a great tumbling and whacking fore and aft, till he began to rumble like a ship's cargo broken loose in a gale. Then they lifted him out of the bed and seated him and he began to void himself.

"Hey! Hey!" said Nuala. "I knew how to doctor him. Will ye listen to him now? Playing on his drum like a heifer in spring grass. Work away now, ye devil, and I hope yer fundament comes out."

"Aw! Aw! Aw!" cried Patsa. "Have pity on me."

"Devil a pity," cried Nuala, giving him a great whack between the shoulder blades. "Deliver every one of them or I'll cut ye open from navel to gullet."

"Aw!" said Patsa, recovering his speech as he became empty. "The Jews crucified our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, but they never jalloped his dying breath."

"Will ye listen to him blaspheme?" said Nuala. "By Christ! Ye drove the heart crosswise in me long enough with yer curses, but I don't give a straw for ye now or yer curses."

Patsa began a long litany of curse. But they, taking no notice of his curses, flung him back on the bed when his labours had ceased. Then they carried off the pot with great joy.

They salvaged the gold and before night came the whole neighbourhood knew of their exploit, for Nuala and her friend promptly got drunk and then returned to the house with a jar of whiskey. Other cronies came and they shook the rafters through the night with their singing of bawdy songs, while Patsa writhed in agony on his bed, listening to them.

A little after midnight, he heard his wife in her drunken gaiety begin an exhibition of her talent for the amusement of her mates. Patsa uttered a loud shriek of rage and died.

So that those foolish people who consider cunning a desirable quality, should take a lesson from the sad end of the wise Patsa, who died, raped of his gold, amidst the revelry of drunken hags.