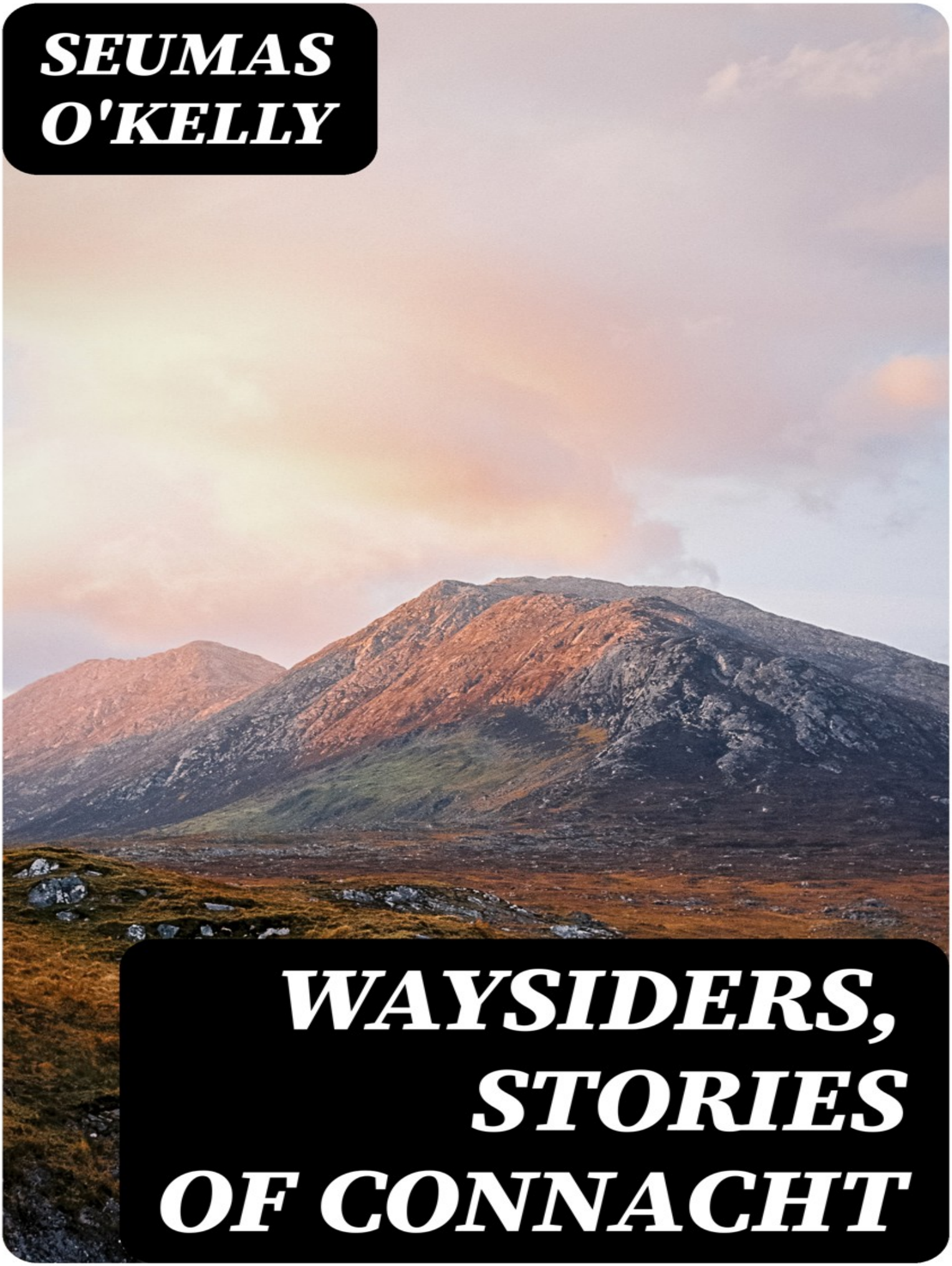
SEUMAS O'KELLY



WAYSIDERS, STORIES OF CONNACHT

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Waysiders, Stories of Connacht

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THE CAN WITH THE DIAMOND NOTCH

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[Illustration: *Festus Clasby*]

The name stood out in chaste white letters from the black background of the signboard. Indeed the name might be said to spring from the landscape, for this shop jumped from its rural setting with an air of aggression. It was a commercial oasis on a desert of grass. It proclaimed the clash of two civilisations. There were the hills, pitched round it like the galleries of some vast amphitheatre, rising tier upon tier to the blue of the sky. There was the yellow road, fantastic in its frolic down to the valley. And at one of its wayward curves was the shop, the shop of Festus Clasby, a foreign growth upon the landscape, its one long window crowded with sombre merchandise, its air that of established, cob-web respectability.

Inside the shop was Festus Clasby himself, like some great masterpiece in its ancient frame. He was the product of the two civilisations, a charioteer who drove the two fiery steeds of Agricolo and Trade with a hand of authority. He was a man of lands and of shops. His dark face, framed in darker hair and beard, was massive and square. Behind the luxurious growth of hair the rich blood glowed on the clear skin. His chest had breadth, his limbs were great, showing girth at the hips and power at the calves. His eyes were

large and dark, smouldering in soft velvety tones. The nose was long, the nostrils expressive of a certain animalism, the mouth looked eloquent. His voice was low, of an agreeable even quality, floating over the boxes and barrels of his shop like a chant. His words never jarred, his views were vaguely comforting, based on accepted conventions, expressed in round, soft, lulling platitudes. His manner was serious, his movements deliberate, the great bulk of the shoulders looming up in unconscious but dramatic poses in the curiously uneven lighting of the shop. His hands gave the impression of slowness and a moderate skill; they could make up a parcel on the counter without leaving ugly laps; they could perform a minor surgical operation on a beast in the fields without degenerating to butchery; and they would always be doing something, even if it were only rolling up a ball of twine. His clothes exuded a faint suggestion of cinnamon, nutmeg and caraway seeds.

Festus Clasby would have looked the part in any notorious position in life; his shoulders would have carried with dignity the golden chain of office of the mayoralty of a considerable city; he would have looked a perfect chairman of a jury at a Coroner's inquest; as the Head of a pious Guild in a church he might almost be confused with the figures of the stained glass windows; marching at the head of a brass band he would symbolise the conquering hero; as an undertaker he would have reconciled one to death. There was no technical trust which men would not have reposed in him, so perfectly was he wrought as a human casket. As it was, Festus Clasby filled the most fatal of all occupations to dignity without losing his tremendous illusion of

respectability. The hands which cut the bacon and the tobacco, turned the taps over pint measures, scooped bran and flour into scales, took herrings out of their barrels, rolled up sugarsticks in shreds of paper for children, were hands whose movements the eyes of no saucy customer dared follow with a gleam of suspicion. Not once in a lifetime was that casket tarnished; the nearest he ever went to it was when he bought up—very cheaply, as was his custom—a broken man's insurance policy a day after the law made such a practice illegal. There was no haggling at Festus Clasby's counter. There was only conversation, agreeable conversation about things which Festus Clasby did not sell, such as the weather, the diseases of animals, the results of races, and the scandals of the Royal Families of Europe. These conversations were not hurried or yet protracted. They came to a happy ending at much the same moment as Festus Clasby made the knot on the twine of your parcel. But to stand in the devotional lights in front of his counter, wedged in between divisions and subdivisions of his boxes and barrels, and to scent the good scents which exhaled from his shelves, and to get served by Festus Clasby in person, was to feel that you had been indeed served.

The small farmers and herds and the hardy little dark mountainy men had this reverential feeling about the good man and his shop. They approached the establishment as holy pilgrims might approach a shrine. They stood at his counter with the air of devotees. Festus Clasby waited on them with patience and benignity. He might be some warm-blooded god handing gifts out over the counter. When he brought forth his great account book and entered up their

purchases with a carpenter's pencil—having first moistened the tip of it with his flexible lips—they had strongly, deep down in their souls, the conviction that they were then and for all time debtors to Festus Clasby. Which, indeed and in truth, they were. From year's end to year's end their accounts remained in that book; in the course of their lives various figures rose and faded after their names, recording the ups and downs of their financial histories. It was only when Festus Clasby had supplied the materials for their wakes that the great pencil, with one mighty stroke of terrible finality, ran like a sword through their names, wiping their very memories from the hillsides. All purchases were entered up in Festus Clasby's mighty record without vulgar discussions as to price. The business of the establishment was conducted on the basis of a belief in the man who sold and acquiescence in that belief on the part of the man who purchased. The customers of Festus Clasby would as soon have thought of questioning his prices as they would of questioning the right of the earth to revolve round the sun. Festus Clasby was the planet around which this constellation of small farmers, herds, and hardy little dark mountainy men revolved; from his shop they drew the light and heat and food which kept them going. Their very emotions were registered at his counter. To the man with a religious turn he was able, at a price, to hand down from his shelves the *Key of Heaven*; the other side of the box he comforted the man who came panting to his taps to drown the memory of some chronic impertinence. He gave a very long credit, and a very long credit, in his philosophy, justified a very, very long profit. As to security, if Festus Clasby's customers had not a

great deal of money they had grass which grew every year, and the beasts which Festus Clasby fattened and sold at the fairs had sometimes to eat his debtors out of his book. If his bullocks were not able to do even this, then Festus Clasby talked to the small farmer about a mortgage on the land, so that now and again small farmers became herds for Festus Clasby. In this way was he able to maintain his position with his back to the hills and his toes in the valley, striding his territory like a Colossus. When you saw his name on the signboard standing stark from the landscape, and when you saw Festus Clasby behind his counter, you knew instinctively that both had always stood for at least twenty shillings in the pound.

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Now, it came to pass that on a certain day Festus Clasby was passing through the outskirts of the nearest country town on his homeward journey, his cart laden with provisions. At the same moment the spare figure of a tinker whose name was Mac-an-Ward, the Son of the Bard, veered around the corner of a street with a new tin can under his arm. It was the Can with the Diamond Notch.

Mac-an-Ward approached Festus Clasby, who pulled up his cart.

"Well, my good man?" queried Festus Clasby, a phrase usually addressed across his counter, his hands outspread, to longstanding customers.

"The last of a rare lot," said Mac-an-Ward, deftly poising the tin can on the top of his fingers, so that it stood level with Festus Clasby's great face. Festus Clasby took this as a business proposition, and the soul of the trader revolved within him. Why not buy the tin can from this tinker and sell it at a profit across his counter, even as he would sell the flitches of bacon that were wrapped in sacking upon his cart? He was in mellow mood, and laid down the reins in the cart beside him.

"And so she is the last?" he said, eyeing the tin can.

"She is the Can with the Diamond Notch."

"Odds and ends go cheap," said Festus Clasby.

"She is the last, but the flower of the flock."

"Remnants must go as bargains or else remain as remnants."

"My wallet!" protested Mac-an-Ward, "you wound me. Don't speak as if I picked it off a scrap heap."

"I will not, but I will say that, being a tail end and an odd one, it must go at a sacrifice."

The Son of the Bard tapped the side of the can gently with his knuckles.

"Listen to him, the hard man from the country! He has no regard for my feelings. I had the soldering iron in my hand in face of it before the larks stirred this morning. I had my back to the East, but through the bottom of that can there I saw the sun rise in its glory. The brightness of it is as the harvest moon."

"I don't want it for its brightness."

"Dear heart, listen to the man who would not have brightness. He would pluck the light from the moon, quench

the heat in the heart of the sun. He would draw a screen across the aurora borealis and paint out the rainbow with lamp black. He might do such things, but he cannot deny the brightness of this can. Look upon it! When the world is coming to an end it will shine up at the sky and it will say: 'Ah, where are all the great stars now that made a boast of their brightness?' And there will be no star left to answer. They will all be dead things in the heaven, buried in the forgotten graves of the skies."

"Don't mind the skies. Let me see if there may not be a leakage in it." Festus Clasby held up the can between his handsome face and the bright sky.

"Leakages!" exclaimed Mac-an-Ward. "A leakage in a can that I soldered as if with my own heart's blood. Holy Kilcock, what a mind has this man from the country! He sees no value in its brightness; now he will tell me that there is no virtue in its music."

"I like music," said Festus Clasby. "No fiddler has ever stood at my door but had the good word to say of me. Not one of them could ever say that he went thirsty from my counter."

Said the Son of the Bard: "Fiddlers, what are fiddlers? What sound have they like the music of the sweet milk going into that can from the yellow teats of the red cow? Morning and evening there will be a hymn played upon it in the haggard. Was not the finest song ever made called *Cailin deas crúidhte na mbo*? Music! Do you think that the water in the holy well will not improve in its sparkle to have such a can as this dipped into it? It will be welcome everywhere for its clearness and its cleanness. Heavenly

Father, look at the manner in which I rounded the edge of that can with the clippers! Cut clean and clever, soldered at the dawn of day, the dew falling upon the hands that moulded it, the parings scattered about my feet like jewels. And now you would bargain over it. I will not sell it to you at all. I will put it in a holy shrine."

Festus Clasby turned the can over in his hands, a little bewildered. "It looks an ordinary can enough," he said.

"It is the Can with the Diamond Notch," declared Mac-an-Ward.

"Would it be worth a shilling now?"

"He puts a price upon it! It is blasphemy. The man has no religion; he will lose his soul. The devils will have him by the heels. They will tear his red soul through the roof. Give me the can; don't hold it in those hands any longer. They are coarse; the hair is standing about the purple knuckles like stubbles in an ill-cut meadow. That can was made for the hands of a delicate woman or for the angels that carry water to the Court of Heaven. I saw it in a vision the night before I made it; it was on the head of a maiden with golden hair. Her feet were bare and like shells. She walked across a field where daisies rose out of young grass; she had the can resting on her head like one coming from the milking. So I rose up then and said, 'Now, I will make a can fit for this maiden's head.' And I made it out of the rising sun and the falling dew. And now you ask me if it is worth a shilling."

"For all your talk, it is only made of tin, and not such good tin."

"Not good tin! I held it in my hand in the piece before ever the clippers was laid upon it. I bent it and it curved,

supple as a young snake. I shook it, and the ripples ran down the length of it like silver waves in a little lake. The strength of the ages was in its voice. It has gathered its power in the womb of the earth. It was smelted from the precious metal taken from the mines of the Peninsula of Malacca, and it will have its gleam when the sparkle of the diamond is spent."

"I'll give you a shilling for it, and hold your tongue."

"No! I will not have it on my conscience. God is my judge, I will break it up first. I will cut it into pieces. From one of them will yet be made a breastplate, and in time to come it will be nailed to your own coffin, with your name and your age and the date of your death painted upon it. And when the paint is faded upon it it will shine over the dust of the bone of your breast. It will be dug up and preserved when all graveyards are abolished. They will say, 'We will keep this breastplate, for who knows but that it bore the name of the man who refused to buy the Can with the Diamond Notch.'"

"How much will you take for it?"

"Now you are respectful. Let me put a price upon it, for it was I who fashioned it into this shape. It will hold three gallons and a half from now until the time that swallows wear shoes. But for all that I will part with it, because I am poor and hungry and have a delicate wife. It breaks my heart to say it, but pay into my hands two shillings and it is yours. Pay quickly or I may repent. It galls me to part with it; in your charity pay quickly and begone."

"I will not. I will give you one-and-six."

"Assassin! You stab me. What a mind you have! Look at the greed of your eyes; they would devour the grass of the fields from this place up to the Devil's Bit. You would lock up the air and sell it in gasping breaths. You are disgusting. But give me the one-and-six and to Connacht with you! I am damning my soul standing beside you and your cart, smelling its contents. How can a man talk with the smell of fat bacon going between him and the wind? One-and-six and the dew that fell at the making hardly dry upon my hands yet. Farewell, a long farewell, my Shining One; we may never meet again."

The shawl of Mac-an-Ward's wife had been blowing around the near-by corner while this discussion had been in progress. It flapped against the wall in the wind like a loose sail in the rigging. The head of the woman herself came gradually into view, one eye spying around the masonry, half-closing as it measured the comfortable proportions of Festus Clasby seated upon his cart. As the one-and-six was counted out penny by penny into the palm of the brown hand of the Son of the Bard, the figure of his wife floated out on the open road, tossing and tacking and undecided in its direction to the eye of those who understood not the language of gestures and motions. By a series of giddy evolutions she arrived at the cart as the last of the coppers was counted out.

"I have parted with my inheritance," said Mac-an-Ward. "I have sold my soul and the angels have folded their wings, weeping."

"In other words, I have bought a tin can," said Festus Clasby, and his frame and the entire cart shook with his

chuckling.

The tinker's wife chuckled with him in harmony. Then she reached out her hand with a gesture that claimed a sympathetic examination of the purchase. Festus Clasby hesitated, looking into the eyes of the woman. Was she to be trusted? Her eyes were clear, grey, and open, almost babyish in their rounded innocence. Festus Clasby handed her the tin can, and she examined it slowly.

"Who sold you the Can with the Diamond Notch?" she asked.

"The man standing by your side."

"He has wronged you. The can is not his."

"He says he made it."

"Liar! He never curved it in the piece."

"I don't much care whether he did or not. It is mine now, anyhow."

"It is my brother's can. No other hand made it. Look! Do you see this notch on the piece of sheet iron where the handle is fastened to the sides?"

"I do."

"Is it not shaped like a diamond?"

"It is."

"By that mark I identify it. My brother cuts that diamond-shaped notch in all the work he puts out from his hands. It is his private mark. The shopkeepers have knowledge of it. There is a value on the cans with that notch shaped like a diamond. This man here makes cans when he is not drunk, but the notch to them is square. The shopkeepers have knowledge of them, too, for they do not last. The handles