

CHAPTER ONE

A century in the life of a man or his family can seem a long time. And yet, measured against the life span of his country or the history of the world, a hundred years is but a grain of sand on the seashore of time.

Arbitrarily, this chronicle begins with the year 1845. Ireland, its economy mired in the expanding British imperialism, was at the peak of the greatest population growth in its history. The census for that year showed 8,295,000 Irishmen, representing an increase of 1,582,000 for the previous quarter century. Because of the calamity about to be related and internal and external forces brought into play at later dates, Ireland crawled out of its mid-nineteenth century misery with twenty five percent less people, starting a downward trend that cut its population in half in the past one hundred years.

In the eternal annals of Hibernia, a major chapter always will belong to the year 1845- because it will be remembered as the start of the great Irish famine.

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The Poor Relief Act, altho it had been enacted in 1838 over the most vicious resistance the land owners and conservatives of that day could muster, had but recently been put in force thruout the country.

Public works projects, not unlike those which were inaugurated in the United States of America in the great depression of 1933, sprung up thruout Erin and for lack of a better name, probably, the headquarters of the projects were called Workhouses. Without the impending dread of the Potato Famine, Ireland had sunk to a low economic level. An official report written at the time and authorized by the commissioners pf the Irish Poor Inquiry said:

"Total number of persons for whom Workhouse accommodations will be required are 5,014,000, at an annual expense of 19, 550,000 pounds sterling. It is further estimated 6,260 workhouses will be required, at a cost of 43,876,000 pounds sterling."

The unpopular Sir George Nicholls, who had been one of the English Poor Law commissibners, was dispatched to Dublin to become one of the administrators of The Irish Poor Relief Act. Arriving in Dublin, Sir George

had immediately perceived that a main difficulty would be to induce the landlord class to accept and cooperate in the administration and enforcement of the new measure. Taking counsel with a Mr. Harkness, one of Sir George's chief subordinates, Mr. Harkness advised that cooperation of itself was about the easiest condition to obtain.

"But, how?" Sir George persisted. "

"Ram it down their god-damn throats," Mr. Harkness answered blandly.

As might be supposed, the policy did not tend much to popularize The Poor Relief Act in principle or Sir George and Mr. Harkness in particular among the landed gentry of the country. Another instance may serve to illustrate the peculiar disposition of at least one member of Irish officialdom as it was demonstrated by Mr. Harkness. It subsequently became one of this official's duties to attend a meeting of the landed class in a town in western Ireland. Although he was received with a studied cordiality, Mr. Harkness, blasé as ever, quietly took his seat at a table and started reading a newspaper.

The discussions got under way. Mr. Harkness continued reading. At one point in the deliberations a legal question was raised and the presiding officer

sought from Mr. Harkness a legal opinion concerning a point of debate. Reaching across the table, Mr. Harkness picked up the Poor Law Compendium, tossed it over to the official, snarling, and retorted;

"You will find all the information you require within the covers of this book."

"Come, Come, now Mr. Uppity", rejoined the official, "it is your duty to inform and advise us, and you are damned well paid for it".

This nettled Mr. Harkness no end.

"Damned well paid for it, did you say?"

"I assure you gentlemen, if there be more than one present, if I was not damned well paid for it, you would not have the pleasure of my company today".

The first effects of the Great Famine had hardly been felt in rural Ireland, when elsewhere in the country an economic and political crises was developing for what came to be known as the Railway Mania, probably the original stock selling fraud of modern times. Single and double track rights of way were projected out of Dublin in every conceivable direction and under the influence of lawyers, engineers, and contractors, shares were oversubscribed in the mad rush to get aboard the railway stockmarket easy street. Nearly every person with a schilling or more with which to speculate

was clipped. When the bubble burst, a huge fabric of fraud and deceit, resulting in heavy losses to those who could afford to lose least, was discovered to have fed on the credulity of the public. Large sums were discovered to have been invested and spent for worthless and impractical projects, and, while most of the promoters of the schemes escaped en masse to the continent the hundreds of thousands of investors, broken in spirit and pocket, were left behind to chew the bitter cud of their folly. The injurious effect on the victims was felt for many years.

More than one third of Ireland's population at that time was almost wholly dependent upon potatoes for their daily subsistence. This important minority consisted of three economic classes, varying only in the degree of their wretchedness, as follows:

(1) Cabin dwellers with farms, and the word "farm" is applied advisedly, which averaged one to five acres.

(2) Tenants, called cottiers, who worked for shares for the farmers and who seldom gained plots larger than an acre.

(3) Below the hardship scale of these two classes were the laborers who sometimes hired small patches of ground and depended in part for odd jobs he might get thru the year.

Of the 690,000 so-called farms in Ireland in 1845, the number whose holdings encompassed less than five acres was 310,000. Besides potatoes as the main crop, a few farmers in class (1) were able to grow barley or oats, keep a cow and a hog or two, as well as a few fowl. Heavy rents many had to pay combined with the uncertainty of crop yields to maintain a continuous mortgage on the future of <sup>most</sup> so-called farms, and at the subservience of the system.

About that time, too, a national movement for the liberation from the ancient yoke of England was reactivated. Banded together was a group of ardent young men, including tradesmen, college and university students, some highly gifted in the arts of revolt and rabble rousing, and they became a new and potent force in the life of Ireland. They now are well remembered in history as the Young Ireland Party. The masthead of *The Nation*, a party periodical, proclaimed this motto: To create and foster public opinion in Ireland, and make it racy of the soil."

One chronicler of the day characterized *The Nation* in these words: "Judged by its Palmiest days it may be doubted whether *The Nation* has ever been surpassed by any journal in its class in Ireland, in regard to purity of tone, force, freshness and vigor of its leading

editorials or in the rare excellence of its ballad poetry.

Among The Nation's many contributors were students of Trinity College, Dublin, including ~~young~~ *my father*, Patrick Butler, son of a County Wicklow tenant farmer, who often had heard this ballad to St. Patrick echoing across the Irish Moor:

"There is not a mite in Ireland's Isle  
Where the dirty vermin muster.  
'Cause whereere he put his dear forefoot  
He murdered them by the cluster.  
Now, the Wicklow hills are very high,  
And so are the hills of Hoath.  
But there is a hill, much higher still;  
Aye,  
Aye, higher then them both.  
'T'was up on the top of this high hill  
That St. Patrick preached thessermint;  
That drove the frogs into the bogs,  
And killed off all the varmint.

But, the voeal talents of young Patrick Butler and his college contemporaries in the Young Ireland Party were not wholly restricted to singing ballads. When the first evidence of the great famine was perceived in the autumn of 1845, the young party members took to the hinterlands, investigated the causes and effects of the calamity with unusual diligence and brought

their findings and reports to the proper authorities with demands for government action in the crises. Patrick Butler was as voluble as the others. Among the first places he had visited was the farm of his elderly parents, whom he determined to be as badly off as the thousands of other tenant farmers in the Dublin area. The financial burden for his aging parents support fell almost at once on the shoulders of young Patrick, and he did his best to insure that their want was not too severe.

Rainy weather, weak seedlings, and <sup>an</sup> earlier than usual frost were ascertained to be the obvious causes for what happened to the potato crop, yet the calamitous visitation assumed a completely different form from anything the Irish had previously known.

First symptoms of the scourge were detected in the shape of small brown spots on the plant leaf. The spots increased increased in size and number, within a week, the foliage withered and the normally rich verdure of the Emerald Isle was reduced to a blackened smudge devastating the whole countryside. Every remedy which science or experience could suggest was tried in vain to halt the blight. Altho the full impact of the calamity was not felt until the following year, its range in 1845 was far more devastating and amounted, in fact to an almost complete destruction of the crop.



But the end was not yet in sight.

Father Matthew, founder of a temperance movement which then bore his name, wrote on August third, 1846: "A week ago I passed from Cork to Dublin and the potato crop appeared to bloom in all the luxuriance of a beautiful harvest. Returning today, I beheld with sorrow one wide waste of putrifying vegetation. In many places the wretched people were seated on the fences of their decaying gardens, wringing their hands, and wailing bitterly the destruction that had left them foodless and destitute."

Among the additional reports which sickened young Patrick Butler and his college and party acquaintances was this one, made after an investigation to the then Duke of Wellington, which said, in part:

"One village visited seemed to be deserted, so some of the hovels were entered. In the first of these six famished and ghastly skeletons, to all appearances dead, were huddled in a corner of some filthy straw. Their only covering was a ragged horseblanket. Approached in horror, a low moaning gave signs of life. They were in fever, four children, a woman and what had been once a man. In a few minutes more than two hundred such phantoms were discovered. Such frightful spectres no words can describe. Their demoniac yells rent the

skies as they cried out in agony against their hunger, and the images become fixed upon the bystander's brain forever. A mother was seen to drag out the corpse of her child, about twelve, completely naked and she left it partly covered by a few stones. In another hovel, a doctor found seven wretches, unable to move, under a single cloak; One had been dead many days, but the others were too weak to move either corpse or themselves. <sup>2</sup>

In the midst of this soul destroying deprivation, Patrick Butler was graduated from Trinity College. He had a Civil Engineering degree in his pocket, which were otherwise empty; everywhere the delirious screams of the starving and the stench of the decaying bodies of the wretched engulfed him.

At twenty three, young Patrick was a fairly robust man. He had a strong masculine face, deepset blue eyes, a tawny shock of hair, and altho he exuded confidence he gave the impression of a person who constantly suffered from some strong agitation. He kept himself generally well groomed and trimly clad and there was something of refinement in his bearing. The well of sympathy he felt for his stricken countrymen ran deep, but he was not the type of man to wallow in the affliction. After long meditation amidst the squalor of his surroundings he began to chart the

course of his future. If there is a limit to human endurance, young Patrick and a more than a million other young Irishmen were either approaching or had surpassed it. It was the first time in a hundred years that a Butler had left Ireland. It was the first of two times that Patrick Butler was to leave the "aulde sod" - and, be glad of it.

Patrick Butler crossed the Irish Sea in the steerage of an inter-island schooner which docked at Liverpool late in November 1846. British merchantmen were doing a thriving business bringing into the country victims of the Irish Famine and returning to Ireland, their holds laden with what foodstuffs England could spare from her own meager hoards. Pat Butler got employment as a government surveyor, but reports from his parents, who had chosen to suffer it out back in County Wicklow disturbed and dismayed him. And so after a few months in England Patrick returned home. Continuing to work in the government survey, He was able to supplement his earnings by engaging in professional wrestling matches in Dublin, at county fairs and at other places of amusement. An adept at collar and elbow, and finger hold wrestling, which was the mode of that day, he was able to hold his own with the best competitors of his weight, about 165

pounds.

By 1852 Patrick had witnessed the greatest exodus of a people from their homeland in all history. By that year, when conditions resulting from the famine were presumed to have returned to some semblance of normalcy, the population had declined from a high of 8,295,000 to 6,198,000 . Famine and disease had taken a dreadful death dealing toll, and the economic impact which resulted had started one of the most stupendous migrations of modern times. A report written by the Colonial Land/<sup>and</sup> Immigration Department Commissioners said that for the six preceding years 1,174,311 Irishmen emigrated to the United States and Canada, and of these 926,000 put into the ports of New York and Boston. In the years 1852 to 1853 the number exceeded 300,000 to the United States alone.

One of these was Patrick Butler. It was his permanent farewell to his native land. More than a million sons of Erin had broken the frontier ahead of him, so that his arrival at Boston forty-nine days out of Liverpool hardly caused a ripple.

If Patrick Butler's arrival was uneventful in the autumn of 1852, at least it was commemorative of one of the most dramatic and romantic eras in the history of the American Merchant Marine.

Patrick was one of the hundreds of thousands who made the trans-Atlantic crossing by Clipper ship, concerning which many a saga of the seas has been written.

It was in the heyday of Donald McKay, another Irishman, builder of the famous clipper ship Flying Cloud one of the hundreds of American keeled vessels which dominated world sea commerce during the middle of the nineteenth century. They had brought to America emigrants by the hundreds of thousands, bore tens of thousands more to the California and Australian gold rushes. They served the illicit opium and slave trade, cargoesd wheat from Australia to England and helped open the Orient to American commerce.

More important, it was the first time in human record that a powerful people had sailed to the ends of the earth in such great numbers, seeking business, and in peace. The pioneering and adventuresome spirit held sway and for a time Patrick Butler gloried in the midst of it.

The Know Nothings, a then resurgent political movement opposed to Roman Catholics, was spreading its vilification across the Atlantic Seaboard and al-  
 the Patrick Butler had never heard of Horace Greeley, the <sup>lord</sup> ~~lance~~ of the west overcame him, and he was able to

make his way mostly on foot sometimes riding with the  
 Overland Caravan to a Dutch settlement near Bethlehem  
 Pennsylvania. There he hired out to a farmer for  
 eight dollars a month. He stayed more than two years  
 and had a hundred and sixty dollars in his jeans  
 when he arrived by stage coach at Galena, Illinois  
 in 1854. The following year Patrick married Mary  
 Anne *Saffrey* a striking brunette, whose parents  
 had brought her to Illinois from Dublin six years  
 earlier.

P137

6 years out  
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Pat and Mary Anne Butler were ready for  
 whatever the future held for them.

(This is the end of Chapter One of the Butler  
 Story)