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GEORGE HENRY MOORE
HIS EFFORTS TO SAVE HIS TENANTS
WHEN CORANNA WON THE CHESTER CUP

Somewhere in that wild and lovely stretch of wooded country that clothes the shores of Lough Carra in Co. Mayo and within sight of the now roofless walls of Moore Hall, stands a little hill called Drimeenashinna.

It was this remote little hill, which decided the result of the Chester Cup of 1846, and with it the fate of thousands of Mayo's starving people.

Ireland lay in the throes of the great potato famine of '46 and '47. All over the country conditions were appalling, but nowhere were they worse than on the estates of George Henry Moore of Moore Hall in south Mayo.

There the population, which subsisted completely on potatoes, faced annihilation. But in one respect they were luckier than most other tenants – they had Moore for their landlord.

Born in 1810 of a distinguished English family, which had settled in Ireland during the reign of Elizabeth, George Henry Moore was one of the greatest Irishmen in history. Brilliant, cultured and travelled, he was also the greatest horseman of his time.

With his fellow landlords he and his brother, Augustus had raced and hunted, gambled and duelled during those halcyon years of Irish landlordism, which preceded – and produced – the great famine. For both of them that wild reckless life was to come to an end. In 1845 (one year before the famine took hold) Augustus was killed riding Micky Free in the Grand National and disconsolate with grief, George shut himself up in Moore Hall.

Perhaps it was being suddenly thrown upon himself in this way that caused him to realise the terrible catastrophe that was about to overwhelm his country. At any rate he underwent a complete change, and with the same boundless energy that he had previously devoted to sport, he now threw himself into saving his tenants.

But he was not a wealthy man and he soon found that his resources were far too slender for the task. Even the money he raised by mortgaging his estates was being rapidly swallowed up and the famine was getting steadily worse. And it was then that he conceived the daring plan of entering his horse *Coranna* for the Chester Cup and backing him to win.

Expert judge that he was, he knew the horse would only hold a very good chance if he could only get him really fit. But to do so was a problem for *Coranna* was a very long low horse of enormous girth and strength that required as much work as two horses to get his weight down.

To do this he decided on the novel idea of making the horse finish all his gallops up against the little hill of Drimeenashinna. Like most men who have conceived a plan on the outcome of which much depends, Moore at first tended more towards doubt than hope. But as the weeks went on his confidence mounted steadily, and by the beginning of April 1846, *Coranna* had come to hand so well that even the cautious head-lad Micky Walsh was forced to admit that he would “take a dale of batin”.

But appearances can be deceptive and it was not until he had done a final trial in which he carried nine stone over the full distance, that Moore decided to send him to Hednesford to await the race. At that time there were no railways in Ireland, and a few mornings later the first stage of the long trek by road to Dublin was begun. Patsy Gallagher, the groom leading *Coranna*, with Micky Walsh, Kilcoyne and Keville, the smiths coming behind on a side car.

Although it was late spring there was a strange silence in the deserted fields as they passed, for the shadow of death lay over the land. At Lanesboro (*on the Shannon at the northern end of Loch Ree*) where they crossed the Shannon the little party narrowly escaped disaster as the horse frightened by the hollow echo of his own hooves on the wooden bridge, reared suddenly and almost toppled into the river. Eventually the long journey to Hednesford was completed and a week before the race Moore himself left Moore Hall to join them, arranging with his mother to send word immediately of the result. He had collected £365 of which Lord Waterford and other friends had “stood” £170 and with it quietly backed *Coranna* to win over £20,000.

May 6th 1846 dawned bright and clear for the Chester meeting and it was in brilliant sunshine that *Coranna*, with Frank Butler in the saddle, cantered down to the post. There were 31 runners which included some of the best stayers in Europe but it's doubtful if ever so much depended on any one race before or since. In addition to his own weight of 8st 9lbs *Coranna* literally carried the fate of thousands of men, women and children.

From the start the field soon settled down and *Lady Wildair* went on, followed by *Brother to Sir Henry*, *Pedometer*, *Miss Burns*, *Glossy*, *The Magnet*, *Intrepid* and several others close together with *Best Bower*, *Vol-au-Vent*, *The Baron* and *Coranna* lying close behind them in the centre. *Valerian* pulled up and *Flahowlagh* tailed off.

As they went away again on the second and final circuit it was still *Lady Wildair* in the lead but the pace and distance (*2 miles 2 furlongs*) began to tell and many of the early leaders began to drop back. Coming for the last bend it was still *Lady Wildair* some ten lengths in front with *Brother to Sir Henry*, *Glossy*, *Intrepid*, *Queen of Tyre*, *Pedometer*, *Roderick* and *Coranna* on the outside lying close together. *Lady Wildair* tired and fell back and *Brother to Sir Henry* and *Glossy* took up the running. Then as he breasted the straight, Butler challenged on *Coranna*.

Tradition still recounts how he spoke to the horse, reminding him of all that depended on them both that day, and then with a stinging cry of 'Drimeenashinna' put his mount to the effort. As if conscious of what was at stake, *Coranna* streaked forward and rapidly joined *Brother to Sir Henry* and *Glossy*.

The three came racing neck and neck up the straight to the swelling roar of the crowd. On they came without an inch between them in what was perhaps the greatest finish ever in the Chester Cup till they reached the stand where *Brother to Sir Henry* got his head in front. With only a few strides more to go he had increased his lead to a neck and the result seemed a foregone conclusion so that the defending '*Sir Henry wins*' resounded over the course.

But his training against the faraway little hill had given *Coranna* an enormous finishing reserve and with a final supreme effort Butler shot him forward to win by nearly a length. It was a magnificent performance for *Coranna* was conceding 3st 13lbs to *Brother to Sir Henry* who was second and 16lbs to *Glossy* who was third.

As it happened Moore was delayed in London by business that morning, but determined to see the race he hired a special train and he always recalled it was the greatest moment of his life when, as the train came thundering alongside the course, he was just in time to see *Coranna* challenge and glimpse the blue birds eye flashing past the post.

Three days later at Moore Hall news of the result was anxiously awaited, for although Moore had tried to keep his project secret, word had got round, and by evening a great crowd of tenants were on the lawn tensely awaiting the return of the messenger who had been dispatched on horseback to meet the mail coach at Ballyglass, some miles away.

A sudden excited murmur from the crowd outside warned Mrs Moore that he was returning and coming out on to the steps of the hall door she waited with forced calm as the boy galloped up and handed her the envelope. With trembling fingers she tore it open, the sea of waiting faces below her, white and tense in the gathering dusk, and then as she waved happily, a great wild cheer broke from the pent up throng. Again and again it was repeated, shattering the mantle stillness of the summer night.

With part of his great win, Moore joined with the Marquis of Sligo and Mr Robert Blosse in chartering the *Martha Washington* which brought four thousand tons of flour from New Orleans to Westport in July 1847 and he had the satisfaction of knowing that of the seven thousand odd men, women and children who were his tenants, not one was lost through hunger or want during that dreadful time.

Following the famine, Moore devoted himself exclusively to politics for many years. In 1846 Moore stood for election to Parliament but was defeated. The following year he was elected M.P. for Mayo and headed the poll. He began his political career by

pressing the English Government for immediate relief for the starving population of Ireland.

In 1857, he again, took up racing and in 1861 his great sprinter *Croagh Patrick*, which he had bred at Moore Hall, won the Stewards Cup at Goodwood and the Chesterfield Cup the following Friday.

The stresses and strains of his great life had taken their toll, and he died prematurely on 19 April 1870 age 60, having been described by his novelist son 'as wonderful as any character ever invented by Balzac or Turguenev'.

Moore Hall is now a lonely ruin, forlorn and deserted except for the nestling jackdaws and the wandering cows that sometimes seek the shade of its skeleton walls from the burning heat of summer. A sapling grows from the topmost chimney, and the wild ivy has all but obscured the once proud motto – "Fortis cadere cedere non potest".

Coranna's box is roofless and his stall broken and gone. . Only the little hill at Drimeeshinna is unchanged, brooding and aloof, its stands apart from the tide of human change and dreams, perhaps of the glory that once it knew. For though few in the neighbourhood today remember the part it played in that long forgotten epic of the past, there are those who say that sometimes at the dead of night a strange sound is still heard there – a sound of thundering hoof beats and the distant echo of a mighty rising cheer, as when *Coranna* won the Chester Cup one hundred and eight years ago.

Acknowledgement :

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