

A REMARKABLE CAREER

CHARLES BIANCONI

The fact that the present Lord Mayor of Dublin is named Nannetti and that he is the son of an Italian father, recalls to mind a man of Italian birth who, seventy or eighty years ago, had a most remarkable career in Ireland, rising by his own unaided efforts from the lowliest circumstances to a place of honor and distinction in his adopted country. Ireland is the last country in the world one would think of as offering a field for the ambitious youth, yet Ireland was the scene of the extraordinary rise of Charles Bianconi.

Charles Bianconi landed in Dublin at the age of sixteen in the summer of 1802. He came from near Como, in Italy, was the son of respectable parents; but, because of a dislike for study and a certain strain of wildness in his nature, he was bound apprentice to one, Andrea Faroni, a dealer in prints, barometers, etc. This man got a goodly sum for the maintenance of young Bianconi, and it was stipulated that the lad should be brought to England, but, instead of going to London, Faroni went to Dublin. He had three other boys besides Bianconi 'bound out' to him in similar fashion. Landed in Dublin, Faroni at once set to work making small leaden picture frames. He had brought from Italy some cheap religious pictures. These he fixed in the frames, and then, says Bianconi himself, 'all was ready for what seemed a singular operation. We were to sell those for him in this strange land, whose language we did not know. He pushed us into the street, however, and I can never forget the ludicrous figure I cut there with some of those things in my hands saying 'buy,' to everyone I met. When asked the price I could only point to my fingers for the number of pence I wanted. I soon, however, picked up a little English, and I was then sent off into the country every Monday morning with two pounds' worth of these pictures and

Four Pence Pocket Money

understanding that I was to return the Saturday evening following. It should be borne in mind what kind of an Ireland it was this young Italian boy was traversing at that time. The penal laws were still in full force. The bloody rebellion of '98 was only four years suppressed, and echoes of it still lingered in many places. The infamous Act of Union had just been passed. Robert Emmet's daring attempt at insurrection in Dublin was still in the seeds of time. Napoleon Bonaparte was at the height of his power, and threatening to invade England. On all sides was a disturbed state of public feeling. This is well shown by Bianconi's autobiography, which records:

'In this way I traversed all the County Dublin, and went even as far as Wexford and Waterford. In Waterford I found the demand for my small prints very considerable; but besides the Scriptural pieces I had portraits of the royal family, of Bonaparte, etc. Once when in Passage, a small place south of Waterford, I was much surprised to find myself arrested by order of an over-loyal magistrate for the treasonable act of selling Bonaparte's likeness. I was kept all night perishing in a guard-room, but in the morning I was set at liberty.'

When young Bianconi's eighteen months' time was up his master offered to send him home, but the youth would not think of such a thing. Instead he set out selling prints on his own account. He worked hard, but, he says, 'I felt neither discouragement nor fatigue, for I felt that I had set to work to be a great man.' And

A Great Man Indeed He Became,

struggling upward step by step until he had become a man of world-wide fame. He took hold of many things, and entered various lines of business on his upward way. He became like the Norman lords, more Irish than the Irish in many ways. He settled in the town of Clonmel, in Tipperary—a town noted for the pride and arrogance of the Cromwellians who formed the so-called upper class of Protestants, which looked down upon, despised, and when they could, terrorized, the Catholics. Bianconi mentions an instance of this. 'While living in Clonmel,' he says, 'I came to know of a practice that was most unfair. On a certain day the Protestant shopkeepers used to go about levying a tax on the Catholics who ventured to open shops within the town walls. They used to thus wring from each Catholic shopkeeper three or four guineas, which was called intrusion money. At length a sturdy old lady, a Mrs. Ryan, refused to comply with the demand. They seized her goods; but she courageously tried it out at law and won. This led to the abolition of the tax. Catholics, too, had to pay a toll on all bought mer-

chandise, while the Protestant townsmen went scot free. When these vexatious imposts had to be given up it is hardly possible to tell how the trade of the town improved.'

Here is another episode which shows the character of the man. 'In the main street,' he writes, 'was a public news-room to which I was a subscriber. I was often disturbed and hurt by the loud and consequential talk carried on there by the shoneen Protestant gentry, while I and my fellow-Papist members were not allowed to speak above a whisper. This I resolved not to submit to; for, having paid my subscription, I held myself entitled to all the rights of the place. Others followed my example, and soon it would not be easy to know, there at least, who were the privileged administrators of the penal code and who were not.'

Indeed, Bianconi was a sterling Catholic in every way. Prosperity made no change in him as it does in too many. He taught catechism regularly in the church. He visited the poor in their hovels and the sick in the hospitals. Every Saturday night, no matter what pressing worldly work waited on him, he was to be seen on his knees at confession in the old Franciscan church. He was, as we have said, interested in many paying concerns, but what made his name

A Household Word

throughout Ireland, and his fame world-wide, was his car system. 'Up to the year 1815,' he writes, 'the public accommodation for the conveyance of passengers in Ireland was confined to a few mail and day coaches on the great lines of road. From my peculiar position in the country I had ample opportunities for reflecting on many things, and nothing struck me more forcibly than want of a cheap and easy means of locomotion. This want was felt chiefly by the market towns and by the farmers; it led to a great loss of time. For instance, a farmer living some miles from a market town spent one day going there, another doing his business and a third returning home.'

In Ireland every sort of conveyance is a car, and particularly is the name applied to the side-car or jaunting-car. It was cars of this latter type, lines of which Bianconi established. Soon he had a regular service of such cars (it must be remembered that this was before the days of stream travel) all over the south and west of Ireland. In his employ were hundreds of men, and he pursued with them a humane, just and enlightened policy, which if followed to-day by other employers would prevent many of the strikes which disturb the business relations of the world. 'I carefully choose my staff,' he writes. 'They are advanced progressively according to their respective merits, and as opportunity offers. In case of old age or accident they are pensioned off on full wages, and only their own wilful, improper conduct can deprive them of this reward. As to the popularity of my service, I never yet did an act of generosity or common justice, publicly or privately, that I was not met by manifold reciprocity. I do not treat my men as slaves, but as fellow-citizens, differing from me only in gradation. I make them feel that in doing their work they confer on me a greater benefit than I do on them by payment of wages.'

In 1844 Clonmel elected Bianconi mayor—

The First Catholic Mayor—

for generations. The Tories whose power was thus overthrown were furious, and the old corporation even made away with the official paraphernalia; so the new mayor had to buy his own chain of office. His mayoralty was a great success. Whatever he undertook to do he did it efficiently. He was not a mayor for revenue only. In fact, he took no salary for his years of office but sent the money to be divided among the poor schools of the town.

One of Bianconi's dearest friends was Daniel O'Connell, who sent him once a characteristic piece of advice. As Mayor of Clonmel, Bianconi had to sit on the bench as a magistrate and hear and decide petty cases. He was naturally anxious that his legal decisions should be really legal. He wrote to O'Connell for advice, and the immortal Liberator, who could drive a coach-and-four through the most drastic Act of Parliament, replied:—'If you wish to discharge the duties of the mayoralty with perfect satisfaction, act upon your own common-sense, and do not look into any law-book!'

But to the longest and busiest life there comes an end, and the unwearied brain of Bianconi, and the tireless heart at last grew weary and tired, and in the summer of 1875 the great Italian-Irishman passed away from the scene of his many labors to receive the reward of a life spent in doing good to his fellow-men. He should never be forgotten by the country of his adoption, for though he was no political leader, he, in his own way, strove to better the condition of Ireland and her people.

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