

## The Blind Romeo

Ireland

*The bonds of friendship that existed among the itinerant harpers were rarely as strong as on this occasion, and it is a pity that we know little else about these two harpers than is given here. Keenan was obviously an athletic individual, and I think it was this rather than his music which inclined the governess towards him.*

Owen Keenan was a blind harper who regularly played at the residence of the Stewart family near Cookstown, Co. Tyrone. There was a French governess residing with them, and Keenan was so carried away by his feelings for her that, one night, he stole a ladder and climbed in through her bedroom window. The governess had always viewed Keenan with a simmering passion, so it was hardly surprising that they were found exhausted in each others arms the following morning. This so deeply offended Mr Stewart that he had Keenan committed to Omagh gaol on the charge of housebreaking, which was the only illegal thing he had done.

At that time, in the Barony of Tirawley, Co. Mayo, there lived a very good blind harper called Hugh Higgins. He was the embodiment of a gentleman harper, was uncommonly genteel in his manners, and spared no expense in his dress. He travelled in such a manner as did, and always will do, credit to an Irish harper. On hearing of Keenan's misfortune he set out for Omagh with some of his followers. When he arrived at the gaol he found that the keeper was away, and that his wife was left in charge of the prisoner, but Higgins' fine appearance and retinue readily gained him admission to the gaol. Now the gaoler's

wife was a virtuous woman, but she had three great weaknesses, music, wine, and above all flattery, for although she was now well past her prime she had once been thought a great beauty.

Higgins hadn't been there an hour before his charm asserted itself over the poor woman, and she readily accepted his offer of wine for herself and the turnkeys, who couldn't believe their luck, and were soon so drunk that they would not have noticed if the gaol had burnt down around them.

Higgins began to play for her, and she soon fell under the spell of the music and the wine. So she didn't notice when Higgins slipped the keys to Keenan, who released himself and marched out into the moonlight, with a boy of Higgins' on his back to guide him over a ford of the River Strule, which flowed beside the gaol.

After playing on for some time Higgins left the besotted woman asleep in her chair, and made haste for home before the deed was discovered. Owen Keenan, meanwhile, went direct to Cookstown to see his lover. He scaled the walls to her bedroom once more and, before the dawn could betray them, carried her off, and he married her soon after.

They both emigrated on the next available ship to the United States, where it is said that Keenan's French wife took advantage of his blindness and repeatedly proved unfaithful.