**Transformation of Martin Burney**

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In behalf of Sir Walter’s soothing plant let us look into the case of Martin Burney.

They were constructing the Speedway along the west bank of the Harlem River. The grub-boat of Dennis Corrigan, sub-contractor, was moored to a tree on the bank. Twenty-two men belonging to the little green island toiled there at the sinew—cracking labour. One among them, who wrought in the kitchen of the grub-boat was of the race of the Goths. Over them all stood the exorbitant Corrigan, harrying them like the captain of a galley crew. He paid them so little that most of the gang, work as they might, earned little more than food and tobacco; many of them were in debt to him. Corrigan boarded them all in the grub-boat, and gave them good grub, for he got it back in work.

Martin Burney was furthest behind of all. He was a little man, all muscles and hands and feet, with a gray-red, stubbly beard. He was too light for the work, which would have glutted the capacity of a steam shovel.

The work was hard. Besides that, the banks of the river were humming with mosquitoes. As a child in a dark room fixes his regard on the pale light of a comforting window, these toilers watched the sun that brought around the one hour of the day that tasted less bitter. After the sundown supper they would huddle together on the river bank, and send the mosquitoes whining and eddying back from the malignant puffs of twenty-three reeking pipes. Thus socially banded against the foe, they wrenched out of the hour a few well-smoked drops from the cup of joy.

Each week Burney grew deeper in debt. Corrigan kept a small stock of goods on the boat, which he sold to the men at prices that brought him no loss. Burney was a good customer at the tobacco counter. One sack when he went to work in the morning and one when he came in at night, so much was his account swelled daily. Burney was something of a smoker. Yet it was not true that he ate his meals with a pipe in his mouth, which had been said of him. The little man was not discontented. He had plenty to eat, plenty of tobacco, and a tyrant to curse; so why should not he, an Irishman, be well satisfied?

One morning as he was starting with the others for work he stopped at the pine counter for his usual sack of tobacco.

“There’s no more for ye,” said Corrigan. “Your account’s closed. Ye are a losing investment. No, not even tobaccy, my son. No more tobaccy on account. If ye want to work on and eat, do so, but the smoke of ye has all ascended. ‘Tis my advice that ye hunt a new job.”

“I have no tobaccy to smoke in my pipe this day, Mr. Corrigan,” said Burney, not quite understanding that such a thing could happen to him.

“Earn it,” said Corrigan, “and then buy it.”

Burney stayed on. He knew of no other job. At first he did not realize that tobacco had got to be his father and mother, his confessor and sweetheart, and wife and child.

For three days he managed to fill his pipe from the other men’s sacks, and then they shut him off, one and all. They told him, rough but friendly, that of all things in the world tobacco must be quickest forthcoming to a fellow-man desiring it, but that beyond the immediate temporary need requisition upon the store of a comrade is pressed with great danger to friendship.

Then the blackness of the pit arose and filled the heart of Burney. Sucking the corpse of his deceased dudheen, he staggered through his duties with his barrowful of stones and dirt, feeling for the first time that the curse of Adam was upon him. Other men bereft of a pleasure might have recourse to other delights, but Burney had only two comforts in life. One was his pipe, the other was an ecstatic hope that there would be no Speedways to build on the other side of Jordan.

At meal times he would let the other men go first into the grub-boat, and then he would go down on his hands and knees, grovelling fiercely upon the ground where they had been sitting, trying to find some stray crumbs of tobacco. Once he sneaked down the river bank and filled his pipe with dead willow leaves. At the first whiff of the smoke he spat in the direction of the boat and put the finest curse he knew on Corrigan—one that began with the first Corrigans born on earth and ended with the Corrigans that shall hear the trumpet of Gabriel blow. He began to hate Corrigan with all his shaking nerves and soul. Even murder occurred to him in a vague sort of way. Five days he went without the taste of tobacco—he who had smoked all day and thought the night misspent in which he had not awakened for a pipeful or two under the bedclothes.

One day a man stopped at the boat to say that there was work to be had in the Bronx Park, where a large number of labourers were required in making some improvements.

After dinner Burney walked thirty yards down the river bank away from the maddening smell of the others’ pipes. He sat down upon a stone. He was thinking he would set out for the Bronx. At least he could earn tobacco there. What if the books did say he owed Corrigan? Any man’s work was worth his keep. But then he hated to go without getting even with the hard-hearted screw who had put his pipe out. Was there any way to do it?

Softly stepping among the clods came Tony, he of the race of Goths, who worked in the kitchen. He grinned at Burney’s elbow, and that unhappy man, full of race animosity and holding urbanity in contempt, growled at him: “What d’ye want, ye—Dago?”

Tony also contained a grievance—and a plot. He, too, was a Corrigan hater, and had been primed to see it in others.

“How you like-a Mr. Corrigan?” he asked. “You think-a him a nice-a man?”

“To hell with ‘m,” he said. “May his liver turn to water, and the bones of him crack in the cold of his heart. May dog fennel grow upon his ancestors’ graves, and the grandsons of his children be born without eyes. May whiskey turn to clabber in his mouth, and every time he sneezes may he blister the soles of his feet. And the smoke of his pipe—may it make his eyes water, and the drops fall on the grass that his cows eat and poison the butter that he spreads on his bread.”

Though Tony remained a stranger to the beauties of this imagery, he gathered from it the conviction that it was sufficiently anti-Corrigan in its tendency. So, with the confidence of a fellow-conspirator, he sat by Burney upon the stone and unfolded his plot.

It was very simple in design. Every day after dinner it was Corrigan’s habit to sleep for an hour in his bunk. At such times it was the duty of the cook and his helper, Tony, to leave the boat so that no noise might disturb the autocrat. The cook always spent this hour in walking exercise. Tony’s plan was this: After Corrigan should be asleep he (Tony) and Burney would cut the mooring ropes that held the boat to the shore. Tony lacked the nerve to do the deed alone. Then the awkward boat would swing out into a swift current and surely overturn against a rock there was below.

“Come on and do it,” said Burney. “If the back of ye aches from the lick he gave ye as the pit of me stomach does for the taste of a bit of smoke, we can’t cut the ropes too quick.”

“All a-right,” said Tony. “But better wait ‘bout-a ten minute more. Give-a Corrigan plenty time get good-a sleep.”

They waited, sitting upon the stone. The rest of the men were at work out of sight around a bend in the road. Everything would have gone well—except, perhaps, with Corrigan, had not Tony been moved to decorate the plot with its conventional accompaniment. He was of dramatic blood, and perhaps he intuitively divined the appendage to villainous machinations as prescribed by the stage. He pulled from his shirt bosom a long, black, beautiful, venomous cigar, and handed it to Burney.

“You like-a smoke while we wait?” he asked.

Burney clutched it and snapped off the end as a terrier bites at a rat. He laid it to his lips like a long-lost sweetheart. When the smoke began to draw he gave a long, deep sigh, and the bristles of his gray-red moustache curled down over the cigar like the talons of an eagle. Slowly the red faded from the whites of his eyes. He fixed his gaze dreamily upon the hills across the river. The minutes came and went.

“‘Bout time to go now,” said Tony. “That damn-a Corrigan he be in the reever very quick.”

Burney started out of his trance with a grunt. He turned his head and gazed with a surprised and pained severity at his accomplice. He took the cigar partly from his mouth, but sucked it back again immediately, chewed it lovingly once or twice, and spoke, in virulent puffs, from the corner of his mouth:

“What is it, ye yaller haythen? Would ye lay contrivances against the enlightened races of the earth, ye instigator of illegal crimes? Would ye seek to persuade Martin Burney into the dirty tricks of an indecent Dago? Would ye be for murderin’ your benefactor, the good man that gives ye food and work? Take that, ye punkin-coloured assassin!”

The torrent of Burney’s indignation carried with it bodily assault. The toe of his shoe sent the would-be cutter of ropes tumbling from his seat.

Tony arose and fled. His vendetta he again relegated to the files of things that might have been. Beyond the boat he fled and away-away; he was afraid to remain.

Burney, with expanded chest, watched his late co-plotter disappear. Then he, too, departed, setting his face in the direction of the Bronx.

In his wake was a rank and pernicious trail of noisome smoke that brought peace to his heart and drove the birds from the roadside into the deepest thickets.