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ASENATH ON THE REEK

When we asked Michael Gibbons to read one of his favorite passages about climbing Croagh Patrick, he picked the following excerpt from Asenath Nicholson's 19th-century account in *Ireland's Welcome to a Stranger*.

... Reaching the foot of the mountain, a cabin woman met me, and offered her bright lad as a guide, for any trifle that the lady "might please to give". I offered as a trial twopence-halfpenny, for I did not intend taking a guide if possible to avoid it. "Oh, he shall not go for that; but as you are a lone solitary cratur, he shall go cheaper than he ever did, and that's for a sixpence." I happily got rid of the annoyance in this way, and heard, after passing the door, "She'll be destroyed." I went on, and enquired of another the best path. A man answered, "And do ye think ye could reach the top alone? No mortal bein' could do it. But one man ever did it, and then declared he wouldn't do the like again for all the parish. But I have as sprightly a little gal as is in all the country, who will show ye every inch." I made the same offer as to the woman, and received the same answer, and I found him willing to run the risk of having me killed, which he assured me must be the case, rather than lend me the guide for a trifle. I mention these two cases, as the only ones I now recollect in all Ireland, who refused me a favour for a small equivalent.

It was now two o'clock: three Irish miles from the main road was the top of the mountain said to be. I looked up, the sun was shining, the air was breezy, my strength and spirits were good, and why should I hesitate, when I had so many times in Ireland done more out-of-the-way "impossibilities." I went on, but soon was lost in miry bog, and intricate windings of deceitful paths, for two hours. At last I lost a beautiful Testament, which had been my companion for many a mile; and when looking for that, a man called out, "Ye aren't thinkin' ye can go up the mountain tonight? Darkness'll be once before ye reach the top, and ye'll perish there. Go home, and some long day bring a friend with ye. Ye're out of the path; the fowls might pick yer bones

Opposite: Belclare with Croagh Patrick ahead, late 19th century. (Wynne Collection)

upon this mountain, and not a ha'p'orth be heard about it." This looked a little discouraging, and I sat down to consider. I looked up at the dizzy height above, then at the sun; thought what a prospect I should have at the top, of the beautiful islands, the sea, the lakes under my feet; and I made the fruitless effort to find the path. It was a fearful undertaking, and I record it not as proof of valour or wisdom; it was the height of folly, if not recklessness. By crawling and pulling, a little was gained, until ahead I saw a white track, taking a circuitous route around a smaller mountain, which was to lead to the great one in view. I reached it and sat down; the prospect here was beautiful, was grand. I solaced my eyes and endeavoured to make up my mind that this would answer without proceeding. But this could not satisfy me. I was in Ireland, on the side of one of its loftiest and most celebrated mountains, and though a dangerous ascent, yet younger and older feet had reached the top, and what others had done I could do. But I was alone and the hour was late. What if some joint should be dislocated, or I should stumble and go headlong? I might suffer days, and die at last unheeded. "I will go a-few yards more and then stop." The few yards more were attained. I sat down and said, "Am I tempting my maker?" A little refreshed, and another point was gained, till a dizzy and almost perpendicular steep, with white round stones for a path—which had been washed by water till a channel was formed, in which lay these stones—was my only road. I made a desperate effort, crawling and holding by the heath where I could, till, almost exhausted, I ventured to look again, and saw a large pile of stones upon the top, and knew they must be the stations around which the devotees performed their penances. Another effort, and my feet stood upon the grand pinnacle.

The first sight was so picturesque and dazzling, I supposed my eyes were deceiving me, that the almost supernatural exertion had dimmed the true vision, and false images were flitting before them. Not so. A true map of the most varied finish was beneath me. Hundreds, yes, thousands of feet below me were spread out lakes and islands in the ocean. Fifty islands I counted on my right hand, bordered with various colours, some fringed with sand, some with gravel, some with grass reaching to the water's edge. On the left was the bold island of Clare, looking like some proud King over all the rest. The sun was shining in full splendour, giving to all the appearance of a fairy land. The top of the mountain is oblong, and so narrow, that, had the wind been violent, I should have feared that I could not retain my footing, for the descent on every hand was almost perpendicular.

Here is an ancient pile of stones, and a kind of altar, on which the prints of St. Patrick's knees are shown, which he wore in the stone by constant kneeling. Here, by some mystical virtue or power, he banished all the serpents; and whether, like the devils entered into the herd of swine, these serpents had the privilege of entering into some other animals, or into men, certain it is, that they do not show themselves in any tangible shape in Ireland. The sun was declining. I sang, and called to the inhabitants below; but they neither answered nor heard me. The descent was now the difficulty. There was another and safer path on the other side, but this I did not know, and the frightful road was undertaken. One misstep of my slippery Indian rubbers, one rolling of a stone on which I was obliged to step, would have plunged me headlong. I felt my dependence, yet my nerve was steady. I trembled not, nor was I fearful; yet I felt that the cautions given by the schoolmaster and the others near the mountains were no fictions. The sun had not two hours to shine on the pinnacle, and I on its slippery side, nearly three miles from the abode of men. God's mercy never to me was more conspicuous than when I found myself unhurt at the bottom." ✱