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LARRY GORMAN AND THE CANTE FABLE¹

EDWARD D. IVES

HERBERT Halpert's work in collecting and making other collectors conscious of the *cante fable* in America is well known.² In "The Cante Fable in Decay," he suggested two reasons why we have not found more *cante fables* here. First, folk-song collectors have not asked for tales and folktale collectors have not thought to ask for tales with songs in them. Second, many of the ones we have found are so corrupt as to be unrecognizable. Often, he goes on to say, "the rhyme itself is all of the story that is told while the narrative details are relegated to a purely informative function and may or may not be given—depending largely upon whether the collector asks for elucidation of the rhyme."³ It is interesting to me that in my collecting work in Maine, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, I have found sixteen rather clear examples (some of them with many variants) of one type of the *cante fable*: the humorous anecdote with the verse for its clincher. In almost every case I was first told the story and then the rhyme; in most cases the whole *cante fable* was volunteered before I had thought to ask for it. Further, all of them are clustered about the gaunt figure of Larry Gorman, the Archpoet of the north-east lumberwoods.

First of all, who was Larry Gorman? Lawrence Gorman, "the man who makes the songs," was born in Trout River, Lot Thirteen, on the west end of Prince Edward Island in 1846. As a young man he worked on his father's farm, in the many shipyards along the Biddeford and Trout Rivers, as a fisherman, and as a hand in the lobster factories along the shore from Cape Wolfe to Miminegash. Up to about 1885 he spent many of his

¹ I would like to thank the Coe Research Fund Committee of the University of Maine for their several grants to me which have made possible my study of Larry Gorman.

² Herbert Halpert, "The Cante Fable in Decay," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, v, 191-200 (1941). See also his article, "The Cante Fable in New Jersey," *JAF*, LIV, 133-143 (1942).

³ "The Cante Fable in Decay," 197.

winters in the lumberwoods and his springs on the river-drives, mostly along the "Sou'west" Miramichi River in New Brunswick. Then he would return to "The Island" in the summer. About 1885 he moved permanently to Ellsworth, Maine, bought a house there, was twice married, and worked in the woods and on the drives along the Union River. In the early 1900's he moved to South Brewer, just across the Penobscot from the great lumber port of Bangor. He died in Brewer in 1917 and lies buried now in Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Bangor. All through his seventy years, wherever he went he left behind him a trail of stories, songs, and consternation. He had a keen mind, a sharp tongue, a knack for impromptu versifying, and (judging from the number of beatings he is supposed to have taken for his pains) a resilient constitution. He was apparently fearless, or else he was simply incapable of abstaining from making up a verse (or twenty verses, for that matter) when he saw the opportunity. I have been able to recover about two score of his songs, many of them complete and many of them with their tunes. In addition, there are the following examples of the *cante fable*.

I have tried to limit myself to those examples where the introductory story and the verse are mutually dependent, excluding others where the introduction is only an explanation of local allusions. Take, for example, the following: Larry walked into the kitchen of the place where he was working at the time and sat down to read by the light of the lamp there. The cook, having finished her work, picked up the lamp and walked out with it, leaving Gorman in the dark. The next day Larry delivered himself of the following song:

I'm a poor and blighted old maiden,
I'm banned from the pleasures of life;
I try to look nice and engaging,
But no-one inquires for a wife.

In order to show my high breeding,
A stranger I treat like a tramp;
When he calls in to have a night's reading,
I always refuse him my lamp.

This is not a *cante fable*. The introduction serves only to explain why Larry wrote the song; the song could presumably stand alone, but it is more amusing when we know the background. As a matter of fact, these verses are probably a fragment of a longer piece. However, the following is a very clear example of a *cante fable*: Larry was fishing one season off Lot Seven shore on P.E.I. with a fellow by the name of Matt, who had a wife who was terribly religious. One day when they pulled in the nets they found a small anchor in it, which just happened to be one Matt had lost some time before. When he told his wife about it, she was simply transported with joy. Later that day, someone asked Larry what luck he and Matt had had, and he replied,

" 'Tis to the Virgin we must pray
And every day must thank her;
Matt went out to fish today
And caught his little anchor."

Here the story *requires* the verse to complete it and would be pointless without it. The verse here would be meaningless without the story leading up to it. Let me be the first to admit that the line is often going to be finely drawn, but drawn it must be, to avoid including every explanation of local allusion as a *cante fable*.

Perhaps the best known *cante fable* that is told about Larry Gorman is a well-known humorous "grace before meat."⁴ I have heard this story told about Gorman at least twenty times, the circumstances varying only slightly. Here is a typical version, sent me by Peter MacDonald, a former resident of the west end of Prince Edward Island now living in Rumford, Maine: "He went to the home of John McCollister [of Mimine-

⁴ See Halpert, "The Cante Fable in Decay," 194 (a version from Minnesota); B. A. Botkin, *A Treasury of New England Folklore* (New York, 1947), 185; Newman Ivey White (general editor), *The Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, 1 (Durham, N. C., 1952), 702; Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, "Local Rimes and Quatrains of the Northeast," *Bulletin of the Folk-Song Society of the Northeast*, number 3 (1931), 19; Kenneth Porter, "Some Examples of 'The Cante Fable in Decay,'" *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, xxi, 100-103 (June, 1957).

gash], who had two young daughters who were getting supper . . . and they were having porridge and just then a team drove in with two young men, so immediately they changed the table set-up and got a different supper for the young men and when they sat down to eat, they asked Gorman to say Grace and immediately he replied:

'Oh Lord be praised, I am amazed
How things can be amended,
With cake and tea and such glee,
When porridge was intended.'

Several other people told me the same story, identifying it with McCollister and/or the town of Miminegash, some even identifying Gorman's companion. Another slight variation has Gorman seeing the woman of the house whisking away the porridge at his arrival, while still another tells of his watching the substitution being made when the minister arrived. All of these versions come from Prince Edward Island. In Maine the same story is usually told in the following way: "Some officials made an unexpected visit to a camp. The cook made a quick change of menu for dinner. Larry Gorman, aware of the change, on coming to his seat at the table remarked:

Lord be praised! I am amazed!
How quick things can be mended!
Tarts and pies for us P.I.'s
When codfish was intended."⁵

We even find the same story told about Mike Gorman, who often claimed to be Larry's brother or nephew but was neither. It is said that he was wangan-man on the drive for The Great Northern Paper Company one time, when Fred Gilbert, boss of the operation, appeared on the scene just at lunchtime. All the good food had been sent out to the men on the logs, but somehow the cook scurried around and got up a good meal. When it was set before them, Mike sang out,

⁵ *The Northern* (April, 1926), 5. (This was the company paper of The Great Northern Paper Company from 1921 through 1928.)

"The Lord be praised, I am amazed,
How quick things can be mended;
Tarts and pies for us P.I.'s
When codfish was intended."

Clearly, then, we have here an example of the localization of a more general tale, localized so well on Prince Edward Island that several people even used the same names.

How many of the other *cante fables* told about him are more general tales that have been localized I cannot yet be sure. I am quite certain that the following one is not original with Gorman: Back on P.E.I. (this story was told me by the late Herbert Rice, woodsman, of Bangor) one of Larry's neighbors stole sheep from MacMillan, but he could not catch the old ram. Larry was there for a meal one day, and the fellow asked him to say grace. Larry complied:

"Lord bless the meat that we do eat,
Ham and I together;
God send him speed that he will need
To catch MacMillan's wether."

Louise Manny reports the same story localized in Miramichi, as does William Doerflinger, who attributes it to another Miramichi poet, Bill Day, although he acknowledges that some people have attributed it to Gorman.⁶ I have never found this same story elsewhere, but a short time ago a man gave me the following verse, which is clearly related to it: John Clark was a tin peddler here in Maine. One time on his travels, he was having supper with some people named Robertson, a pious lot who were known sheep thieves. As they all sat down to supper, they asked Clark to say grace:

"God bless the sheep meat that we eat,
Caught by Sam Robertson and his brother;
God give them grace to run the race
And try to catch another."

There are several other rhyming graces attributed to Gorman. My favorite of them all is this one from Prince Edward

⁶ William M. Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys* (New York, 1951), 254.

Island: Larry was working for a man by the name of McElroy, who ran a lobster factory. At that time, all of the canned lobster was shipped to England, and one day one of the shippers came to the factory and McElroy invited him to lunch. Everyone ate in one long room, and when McElroy and the shipper came in, McElroy said, "Larry, you say grace." Instantly Larry got up and said,

"Oh Lord above, look down upon us
And see how we are forgotten;
And send us meat that is fit to eat,
Because by Christ, this is rotten."

At another time he came out with the following verse; the story has been lost:

Oh Lord above, look down with love,
And pity us poor creatures;
And give us meat that we may eat,
And take away fish and potatoes.

Another story tells of Larry working for a P.E.I. shipbuilder by the name of Robert Bell. Bell liked everyone to be right on time for meals. One day Larry came in to lunch late; he just slid into his place and started eating, but Bell caught him and, as punishment, demanded he say a grace. Larry complied:

"Oh God above, look down with love,
Not eyes like Robert Bell;
And give us meat that we can eat,
And take these herrings to hell."

The preceding three graces are obviously variations on a theme, the second and fourth lines changing to suit the circumstances.⁷

Similar to the rhyming grace is the rhyming toast, of which the following is a fair example: John Plestid of Arlington, P.E.I., was holding a "work frolic"; everyone worked around the place during the day, and then in the evening there was a

⁷ For an interesting parallel from New York, see Norman Studer, "Yarns of a Catskill Woodsman," *New York Folklore Quarterly*, ix, 188-189 (1955).

The verse is often found alone, but just as often some variation of it is worked into a story like this one (which I have collected three separate times: twice in Lot Seven, P.E.I., and once in Rumford, Maine, from a man who had come from Lot Seven): One time after Larry came out of the woods wearing a winter's growth of beard, he went to a boarding house in order to get a room. The landlady let him in, but she went on at some length to say that there was one person she would never let set foot in her boarding house again and that was that Larry Gorman. Larry agreed with her, saying that all that fellow would do would be to make a nasty song about her. Later on, a friend, who recognized him in spite of the beard, asked him how he had got on with the woman. Larry replied,

"She treated me very kindly,
But her eyes stuck out like prongs,
Abusing Larry Gorman,
The man who makes the songs."

Another version tells of his passing through Blackville, New Brunswick, on his way to the upper Miramichi. As he and his friends passed by a local boarding house he knew, all the boarders ran to the windows to look out at him, so Larry sang out,

"As I went by McKenzie's
Their eyes stuck out like prongs,
Saying, 'There goes Larry Gorman,
The man that makes the songs.'"

A variant of the preceding group is the story that tells of Larry stopping at a farmhouse to ask for a meal. The lady gave him bread (stale) and tea (weak). "But," she said, "I'd never give that Larry Gorman a meal if he came here. He made up a song about my husband once." Larry finished his meal and then said,

"She told me that her bread was fine
And that her tea was strong,
Not thinking I was Gorman,
The man who makes the songs."

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I picked up this story from the late Herbert Rice of Bangor. William Doerflinger found a version of it in Boiestown, New Brunswick, where the teller *sang* this verse and the preceding one as part of the same story.⁹ This makes the only record I know of where one of these *cante fables* was really sung or where the song part consisted of more than a single verse.

There are six other isolated *cante fables* that I have heard about Gorman. Arthur Dalton of Rumford, Maine (formerly of Lot Seven, P.E.I.) told me this one: "One night he was a . . . he fished 'round some shore down there on Prince Edward. And they slept in a . . . sleeping place they called the ram-pasture. And through the night some guy—stranger—come in, you know, and the bunks were all full and he lay down on the floor. And Larry woke up in the morning, he looked up and seen him. And then, right . . . right the moment he seen him he says,

'A stranger to the pasture came
And slept upon the floor;
He certainly made a grave mistake,
For there are fleas galore.' "

Irving G. Frost of Bar Harbor, Maine, who had worked for many years in the woods and on the drives along the Union River, remembered this one: "Larry was working for a fellow name of George Davis down there in Ellsworth and he was coming out of the woods one night and there used to be some Jew fellows who went around to the camps selling the fellows clothing. When Larry came into the camp he saw this Jew's pung there:

'The French and the Irish, the Jews and the tramps,
They all find their way into Davis's camps.' "

Louise Manny of Newcastle, New Brunswick, published the following story:

A good story is told locally about Larry's skit on the Miramichi lumber operations, in the days of poor wages and hard times, sung to the tune of a popular song of the 1880's. Larry had gone to

⁹ Doerflinger, 258.

work for Hutchison, had made up a song going in to camp and was sitting in the camp singing with typical disrespect:

"Here's young Hutch,
He don't say much,
But tells us to keep sober,
We'll get our money by and by,
When these hard times is over."

But Larry did not notice that the dreaded Richard Hutchison, whose temper is still a Miramichi tradition, had come in and was standing behind him. The song ended, Larry turned, the woodsmen with bated breath waited for his annihilation, but Hutchison laughed and said, "That's a good song, Larry! D'you know any more?"¹⁰

I collected two other *cante fables* in Miminegash, P.E.I., both of them told about people who had lived in the area. One time Larry went to dinner at the home of some people by the name of Sentner, who were distinguished in this fishing village because they were not fishermen but farmers. Larry evidently expected to eat rather well there, but he was served fish instead of the meat he had hoped for. Later on when a friend asked him how he had fared, he replied,

"Lord be praised, I am amazed
How Sentners got their riches;
They sold their meat to buy some fish,
The dirty sons of bitches!"

Another time Larry went to dinner at the house of James Alfred Rix, and Rix's wife made the mistake of feeding the poet fish. He looked at his plate and said,

"Oh herring, oh herring, what brought you here?
You swam the seas for many a year.
They brought you here for lobster bait
And not for us poor devils to eat."

Peter MacDonald of Rumford, Maine, formerly of Waterford, Prince Edward Island, had visited Larry in Brewer once

¹⁰ Manny, 8-9.

about 1908. During the course of their conversation, Larry asked him about things back on "The Island," particularly about people and places he had known; occasionally he would remember a song he had written about some person MacDonald named. Among the stories he told him was the following:

And then he told me this one. He asked me if I'd ever been in Charlottetown (that's the capital of Prince Edward Island—beautiful little city. Beautiful city!). And he said he was working there and he used to go down to Mrs. Yeo's to have his laundry done . . . And he was going through government park carrying his laundry. And this fellow and girl were sitting on a bench in the park and one of them said, "That's Larry Gorman." *She* said. So he holered out, "Larry, come back and sing us a song." So he turned right around immediately and walked back, and he said,

"As I was going down to Mrs. Yeo's
With my shirts and underclothes,
Heard a voice (not very strong)
Saying, 'Come back here and sing a song.'
I turned around all in surprise,
Saw goose and gander in disguise."

How did all these tales come to swell the legend of Larry Gorman? First of all, Gorman is without doubt the best known of the folk poets of the Northeast. He is known through much of the Maine-Maritimes area, and many people who may know nothing more about him know at least that he had a great reputation as a wit and song-maker. Anyone who has collected songs here in the Northeast has probably heard his informant say, "And that one's by Larry Gorman!" about anything from "The Jam on Gerry's Rock" to "The Red Light Saloon." Even such an unlikely piece as "Peter Emberly" has been and still is attributed to him, as far a cry as it may be from his style. It is small wonder, then, that humorous anecdotes with biting verses in them came to be told about a man whose forte was humorous and satirical song.

Second, while at least one, probably two, and perhaps more of the pieces are localizations, many of them seem to be origi-

nal with Gorman. He probably did make up most of the verses; certainly there is nothing in their style that could gainsay his authorship. In fact, he probably made up the stories too. Larry Gorman did not invent forms; he took traditional ones and adapted them to suit his purpose, and there is abundant evidence to show that this type of *cante fable* was a perfectly traditional form. It is possible that some of the incidents are true, that they happened actually as reported in the story, but it is not likely. Most of the situations are a bit unrealistic; for example, it is hard to imagine anyone being fool enough to ask Gorman to say a grace, especially under any circumstances that could be considered even slightly compromising. Almost all of the stories have a certain "after the fact" quality; they are what *should* have happened, what someone *said* happened.

Finally, whether he was localizing a more general tale or telling an original one, we can be sure that Larry Gorman told these stories about himself wherever he went. We have direct evidence of this: he told Peter MacDonald the story about "goose and gander" and a couple of others on the occasion of his visit, and other people have heard him tell them. He loved to spend an evening singing songs, and best of all he liked to sing his own songs. In Maine, if someone called on him, say someone from P.E.I., Gorman would go back over people they both knew and recall verses he had written about them. For such a purpose, this type of *cante fable*, anecdotal and endlessly adaptable, with its emphasis on situations where the pompous, the pretentious, and the penurious are discomfited by witty, impromptu verse, would certainly add cubits to the stature of "the man who makes the songs." And stature was what Gorman wanted.