

The Conversion of Austin Harrison

*Originally published in the January 1918
edition of The International.*

"Austin, among the flowers in Covent Garden."
— Gwendolen Otter.

Henry, more than any other Norman name (Gk., Hen, one; Lat., Ricus, a rich man; Henricus, Henry, "one rich man"), has become English. Harry the Fifth was a sort of incarnation of Mars, and Harry the Eighth of Jupiter; these be thy Gods, O England!

Harry is the very name of the true English type, the devil-may-care, go-as-you-please, breezy, rascally, loveable Englishman. Every Harry has to live up to it. Harry Lorrequer! Harry Vardon! Harry Lauder!

Henry is a rather serious person; but Harry is a darling. Even Old Harry is a jolly devil, not in the least sinister like Mephistopheles, or malicious like Old Nick. "Playing Old Harry" with anything is a sort of practical joke.

So Harry's Son, or Harrison, is English of the English. Austin lends a touch of classical refinement, for his father called all his sons after Romish Saints to prove how tolerant a Positivist he was, though his own name Friedrich, or Frederic, had been bestowed in a passion of admiration for the Great Frederic of Prussia. (One should here deny emphatically the absurd American rumor that Austin Harrison is the son of Frank Harris).

I do not remember when I first met Austin Harrison, and I do not know to this hour if his eyes be blue or brown. But he always seemed to me to be too quietly dressed. He had gone to the best tailor and been dealt with gently but firmly. His moustache was too well trimmed; his face too innocent and boyish.

I found him the most delightful of companions. He is almost absurdly loveable. I never knew him to do an unkind or ungenerous action. He has no "brains." I never met anybody so incapable of intellectualism of any sort — and he aspired to it with most forlorn devotion! It was the perfect English stupidity made somehow aware of its own defect. But, also, he was never wrong. He would take six false premises, commit the errors of *petitio principii*, *non distributio medii* and *quaternio terminorum*, and come out with a conclusion which was a contradiction in terms, and would turn out to be exactly correct. This is no unique gift; all true Englishmen have it. England has provided the Pax Britannica for India, the only possible government for that pandemonium of races and religions, upon the postulate that Sir Rabin-dranath Tagore is a "dirty nigger." If any one in India were to deny this, we should have as many lynchings there as we have in Georgia, at the best; at the worst, a revolt every few months.

Just before the war, we were biting our nails all the way round Princes, at Mitcham, for the Irish Question had become acute. Austin, with his incomparable instinct, proposed to me to kidnap Sir Edward Carson. I was too young and frivolous in those days to take it up; I did not know then as I do now how perfect was his statesman's instinct. If I had agreed to his proposal, I think it might have aborted the European war. A nation would have thought twice about mobilizing if we had been having that kind of a tea-party.

Well, I failed; the blood of countless millions is on my head; the war began.

Austin Harrison immediately set his intellect to work, produced the most fantastic nonsense ever penned, and earned for himself the enduring title of "the boy bigot." His main theory was that the German nation was as surprised and excited as he himself was by the work of von Krafft-Ebing, and been overcome by collective sadistic mania. He had been some years in Berlin, but did not

even know that the German Emperor was not Emperor of Germany. He had never heard of the Free Cities. But his conclusions were as infallible as ever. I remember some one — Lord Howard de Walden, or my memory is at fault — saying one night, angrily: "The man's an ass!" Frank Harris smiled softly, "Yes, but he is Balaam's ass!" he cried, and Freda Strindberg's murmur about Lucius passed unremarked, amid the general appreciation of one of the truest and wittiest repartees ever made.

So now "Austin, among the flowers in Covent Garden," has been over to Ireland, and his Godlike intuition about Sir Edward Carson has been confirmed by all he saw and heard. The Nigger in the Wood-pile is the Ulsterman in England. Let me here quote a few phrases from the November "English Review."

"Boy Scouts in Sinn Fein uniform guard the coffin, and around it we watch the endless procession of mourners filing silently past, the rich and the poor, the old and the young. For days they had filed so past and far into the night. One cannot walk about without seeing the anguish on men's faces, the look of despair. The scene fills me with shame. This Thos. Ashe, a young schoolmaster, has suddenly become the hero of all Ireland. In Lewes Gaol he wrote a little poem, each verse beginning with the words: 'Let me carry your Cross for Ireland, Lord!' A man evidently. A martyr! Another of Ireland's martyrs! Why? In Heaven's name, why — and at this juncture? It hurts me to watch these patient Irish salute the dead man. We hurry away."

"Friends of mine on the Press whispered to me that there was a conspiracy of silence imposed upon Fleet street, and this gave me to think furiously, for at that moment it suddenly occurred to me that Sir E. Carson had recently assumed control of Intelligence and Propaganda, and that only a week or so ago The Northern Whig, which is the Ulster Unionist organ, had savagely attacked the Irish Convention, contrary to the instruc-

tions issued to the Press to say nothing prejudicial to that body, and consigned its labors to the waste-paper basket."

"The Lord Mayor of Dublin told me he had traced the authority for continuing forcible feeding after Ashe's death to London, not to the Castle."

"Ninety per cent of non-Ulster Ireland is Sinn Fein."

"Sinn Fein have learned that the enemy to conciliation is not so much England or the Castle, but the Protestant Irishmen associated with Unionism who control affairs in England. This is not a paradox; it is the truth."

"No doubt the spectacle of Young Ireland refusing to fight for democracy is horrible, but all men in Ireland are agreed that such a spectacle would never have arisen but for Sir E. Carson's revolutionary policy in 1914, which once more threw Ireland into extremism. Now the change in Ireland's attitude is that she realizes this. If Mr. Redmond and his party are today phantom representatives — and they are — it is because of Sir E. Carson and of that baneful policy which made Ulster the key of Unionism."

"When the Irish Times calmly writes that 'failing such assurances he (Mr. Duke) must be asked to transfer his responsibilities to stronger hands,' we have a pure example of the Protestant Irish Party terrorism which is the cause of all the trouble. It is Trinity College speaking. It is Ulster politics. It is the Carson monopoly which runs Ireland, thus helping to poison feeling in Ireland by attacking the English civil administration."

"Sinn Fein is the reaction to Sir E. Carson's revolutionary movement. Now, this from the English or Imperial point of view is a healthy sign. It is the index finger of the solution. It means that the opportunity has come for true Imperial statesmanship."

"I am perfectly clear that nothing can be done now so long as Castle government remains, because all Nationalist Ireland recognizes now that Castle government is itself controlled by Ulster Unionist politics in England."

And that is the healthy sign. To ask Nationalist Irishmen today to trust us so long as the author (and his following) of the threatened Ulster revolution of 1913-14 controls the English attitude towards Ireland in the British Government is useless. As well ask Sir E. Carson himself to trust the German Emperor, although he may place confidence in his imported German rifles. The change of attitude in Ireland means England's chance. It is to show the Irish that we here are not going to be dictated to by a handful of Irish Protestant politicians who, under the cloak of anti-Popery, control the English attitude and so frustrate all hopes of settlement."

"Nor have I the smallest doubt — and I have had unusual opportunities for studying all features of the Irish situation in three successive visits — that the moment Sinn Fein was made responsible it would astonish even Irishmen by its progressive responsibility."

"The whole world is watching England's attitude. We must now decide. I say it with sadness and with full responsibility that if we allow ourselves here to be carried away by the Minority Ulster attitude we shall drift into disaster and irredeemable catastrophe. We, too, must see to the Huns in our midst, or this great fight will have been fought in vain. Ireland is ready for settlement. Failure on our part to do the simple and right thing now must prejudice our cause before the eyes of the world, and may yet imperil our Imperial truth."

I will ask Mr. Harrison to compare with this my own article, "Sinn Fein," in the September "International" written under the nom-de-plume of Sheamus O'Brien, and "England's Blind Spot," in the "American Weekly," of April 18, 1917.

And now I will quote one other passage. He has told me something; I should like to reciprocate.

"At four p.m. on the Saturday Irish friends come to tell us that the sands have run out of the glass, and that on the morrow Ireland will be plunged once more in tragedy and very likely in the throes of revolution.

"Then the good news comes — Mr. Duke has returned; the prisoners are to have political status. It circulates through the city like wildfire long before the late evening editions can publish it. Within an hour all Dublin knows that the crisis is over. Men smile again. I go out to find the relief and happiness everywhere. That evening Dublin sleeps in peace."

Do not you see, Austin, my Austin, that the Irish are the proudest people on the earth? You cannot bribe us by material advantages; we want *political status*.

The same thing applies, incidentally, to Germany; before any solution is possible, we must drop the "Saxons" and the "Huns" into the abyss with the "Irish Rebels," and "blackguards," and "cattle-maimers," and "traitors," and "moonlighters," and all the rest of the silly abuse. The Pharisee who began his prayer by thanking God that he was not as other men are didn't get far on the road to heaven. Come; it is time we were done with hysteria; let us rather discuss the merits of the baffle once more "among the flowers of Covent Garden."

P.S. — We can do nothing while Lloyd George and Carson are in power. They are lawyers, and so technically gentlemen; but we cannot afford to lose the Empire on a technicality. A. C.