

NEW CROSBIE GARSTIN BIOGRAPHY

THE WITTY VAGABOND

A BIOGRAPHY OF
CROSBIE GARSTIN (1887-1930)
AUTHOR - ARTIST - ADVENTURER



DAVID TOVEY

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126 black and white illustrations (including many unpublished drawings and caricatures from the family archive and from manuscript notebooks of his poems)

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Crosbie Garstin, the eldest son of Newlyn School artist, Norman Garstin, led an extraordinarily adventurous life, and his death, in a boating accident at Salcombe in 1930, aged just 42, has been shrouded in mystery.

Declaring "All the world is my field of glory / Upon her hills will I carve my story", the "vagabond", as Crosbie tended to call himself, set out in February 1910 to make his fortune in America and Canada. For two years, he worked there as a horse-wrangler, cow-puncher and broncho-buster, as a stooker and member of a threshing gang during harvest time, as a sawyer and lumberjack, as a navy in mining camps and as a gold miner and speculator.

Then, in May 1912, he went out to South Africa, where he was a bush ranger in Bechuanaland, covering an area of 3,000 square miles, before setting up a cattle ranch. Battling throughout his time in South Africa with severe drought conditions, the outbreak of War in 1914 was a welcome relief and he returned to England to enlist in a colonial cavalry regiment, serving in France (where he saw front line action on a number of occasions), Ireland (at the time of the Easter Rising) and Italy. His considerable skill as a horseman led him to be appointed Riding Master, and, at the end of the War, he stayed on to supervise the demobilisation of horses.

Whilst his adventures did not result in the desired fortune, he nevertheless acquired a wealth of fascinating experiences and a huge fund of anecdotes, which he incorporated later, often in an amusing and self-deprecatory manner, into his poetry, short stories and novels.

Crosbie's literary output was exceptionally varied. He made his name initially as a poet, and his verses showcased a range of styles. Particularly popular were those in a sea-shanty style, which were subsequently set to music by various leading composers of the day. He then won considerable acclaim for his comic war pieces, entitled *The Mud Larks*, which were published by *Punch* under his pseudonym 'Patlander'. His comic travelogues, spiced up with light verse and his own amusing pen and ink drawings, were also highly regarded. However, he is best known for his adventure stories. Many of these, drawing on his own experiences in America, Canada and South Africa, were published as short stories in a wide range of international periodicals, but his greatest success was the Penhale trilogy of novels, a brilliant evocation of eighteenth century Cornwall, which made his name in America, where it was serialised in the *Ladies Home Journal*. His final novel, *China Seas*, a romantic adventure, was made into a Hollywood blockbuster, starring Clarke Gable, Jean Harlow and Wallace Beery.

Despite being hailed on his premature death as a "beloved, gifted, famous author and poet", a "serious and conscientious artist", "a blithe and heroic spirit" and "in every way a notable son of Cornwall", Crosbie Garstin is now little known. Accordingly, a re-assessment of his life (and supposed 'after-life') and his literary output is long overdue and, as his family kept nearly every letter he wrote, his adventures can often be recorded in his own words, in his own inimitable, witty style. He emerges as a consummate story teller and an amusing raconteur, with the eye of an artist, the soul of a poet, the ear of a mimic, the wit of an Irishman and the irreverence of a renegade.

Garstin extracts

For those unfamiliar with Crosbie Garstin, the following pages contain some extracts from his works, which will give you some indication of what to expect.

1. Extract from short story, *A Billion Bushels*, describing his final night threshing in the Qu'Appelle valley, Saskatchewan

"We were threshing out the butt-end of the last job one season in the Qu'Appelle Valley when, first of all, night caught us and then the snow. It was so dark and blinding that the field pitchers were pitching miles wide of the racks, the teamsters were blundering into the belt, scaring seven bells out of the horses, and we spikers were in danger of putting ourselves through the cylinder in mistake for sheaves. As we were so near the end, all hands were unwilling to stop, so the Boss set light to the straw pile to throw a little illumination round about. The pile must have been fully thirty feet high and it made a royal blaze. The wind got hold of the flames and they shot in to the air in sheets. In a minute the straw pile was a solid pyramid of roaring red fire topped by a fountain of sparks. It was an unforgettable scene. The loaded racks rocking up out of the driving snow, teamsters shouting, wild-eyed horses plunging and bucking; the Boss standing on top of the separator shouting to the invisible field pitchers, snow powdering him till he looked like a sugar man; the engine panting; the wet belt slapping and slithering and, above all, the great red flame pyramid roaring like the breaking sea and painting the whole wild scene blood coloured."

2. Extract from his short story, *Lion, Lion*, about an incident during his time as a bush ranger for the Tati Concessions

Garstin also had to deal with lions or any other wild animals that were threatening any of the settlements within his jurisdiction, and this was the subject of his nicely balanced short story, *Lion, Lion*. This tale combines Garstin's usual self-deprecatory stance, with a tilt at the swank and swagger of the typical big game hunter back on home soil, who, filled with liqueurs and with his back to a London Club fire, tells tall stories of his lion shooting exploits. By contrast, Garstin recorded how, to his consternation, he was informed by Ramadalla, a boss-boy of one of the Tati Concessions cattle posts, that a lion, probably of some age, was hanging around that camp. It appeared every evening, rubbing round the stockades, and had caused the camp to adopt a siege mentality. Feeling the need of some support, at various levels, Garstin took with him a case of whisky and his friend, Page-Parsons, who knew about the whisky but not the principal objective. After arriving at Ramadalla's camp and forcing him up from his feigned sick bed, they set off at dawn to stalk the lion - "P-P on the right with a Lee-Enfield, myself in the centre with an Express and Ramadalla on the left with an arquebus, which had done good work at Agincourt and which, crammed with black powder, nails, rocks, pots and pans, was still capable of ventilating the toughest lion at ten yards. Keeping anxious eyes on the thicket (reputed to be its headquarters), we moved slowly towards it down the *vlei*. All of a sudden, without the slightest warning, up got a big yellow thing out of the long grass at my feet. I was so astonished I let off the Express without hardly taking aim. Simultaneously, a Lee-Enfield bullet zipped through the grass in front of me and a storm of tin tacks and pot legs whirled over my head. The lion gave a short-circuited 'Woof' and rolled over. We closed in cautiously but he was stone dead. And never have I seen such a lion. He had no teeth, he had no claws, he was very nearly bald, his mangy hide was stuck full of spear grass and porcupine quills....He wasn't after any calves, he couldn't have stalked a sick ewe-lamb if he'd tried. Deserted by his kind, all he wanted from the *kraals* was company." Despite the poorness of the specimen, each of the three claimed to have fired the telling shot, but when they looked the lion over, they couldn't find a bullet wound of any sort. They had all missed. "The poor old gentleman had died of fright."

3. Extract from his unpublished short story, *Getting There*, about his trip from Bishop's Stortford with his cavalry regiment to the Front in April 1915

"We were off at last, off to the real thing, off to France; "battle, murder and sudden death". The column wound down the hill, over the downs into the town, and clattered through the sleeping streets. A lone policeman, standing in the shadow of the Town Hall, saluted, and was cheered heartily. We cheered the swinging sign-boards of our hostelrys, the *Black Bull*, the *King's Head* and the *Three Feathers*; we'd drink their tap-rooms dry when we came back from Berlin, we shouted. A cat, that slipped across the street before the advancing hooves, came in for its round of applause. At one window, a candle suddenly glowed, the sash was thrown up and an old man thrust his hairy head out - we could see his old wife sitting up in bed behind him, her shadow gigantic on the wall - "Good luck, boys, good luck!", he croaked; we cheered him to the echo, and clattered on to the station. Dawn was breaking pearly in the east when the last horse was entrained. The engine whistled, the station master and porters waved their caps. With cheering heads jammed through every window, the train pulled slowly off the siding, as the first sun ray set the church vane twinkling. We rumbled through the suburbs of London, blinking awake to its workaday, everyday round. A few half-dressed women at back windows kissed their hands to us, and a baby waved a penny Union Jack."

4. Extract from the war poem, *The Trooper*, bemoaning the cavalry's lack of front-line action

*"Now here I am like a blinded mole -
Toil in a furrow and sleep up a hole -
Dug in a grave twelve foot by three,
My strappings bust and my spurs all rust,
With nothin' but two mud walls to see,*

*Sluiced with the drivin' sleet:
Me! that was in the Cavalry,
The saucy, swaggerin' Cavalry.
Sloggin' my two flat feet!*

*I longs all day and I dreams all night
Of a slap-bang, Tally-ho open fight;
One fair chance on the open plain,
Then knee to knee like a wave of the sea
We'll blood our irons again and again
In thunderin' squadron-line....."*

5. Extract from the *Mud Larks* story, *The Messless Mess*

"Our mess was situated on the crest of a ridge, and enjoyed an uninterrupted view of rolling leagues of mud; it had the appearance of a packing-case floating on an ocean of ooze. We and our servants, and our rats and our cockroaches, and our other bosom-companions slept in tents pitched round and about the mess.

The whole camp was connected with the outer world by a pathway of ammunition boxes, laid stepping-stonewise; we went to and fro, leaping from box to box as leaps the chamois from Alp to Alp. Should you miss your leap, there would be a swirl of mud, a gulping noise, and that was the end of you; your sorrowing comrades shed a little chloride of lime over the spot where you were last seen, posted you as 'Believed missing' and indented for another Second Lieutenant (or Field-Marshal, as the case might be).

Our mess was constructed of loosely piled shell boxes, and roofed by a tin lid. We stole the ingredients box by box, and erected the house with our own fair hands, so we loved it with parental love; but it had its drawbacks. Whenever the field guns in our neighbourhood did any business, the tin lid rattled madly and the shell boxes jostled each other all over the place. It was quite possible to leave our mess at peep o'day severely Gothic in design, and return at dewy eve to find it rakishly Rococo.

William, our Transport Officer and Mess President, was everlastingly piping all hands on deck at unseemly hours to save the home and push it back into shape; we were householders in the fullest sense of the term."

6. Extract from letter to his parents about being the leader of the first troop to relieve Lille

"The whole population of the Lille suburbs were in the streets gone clean mad with joy. I could hardly push through them. They kissed our horses and kissed our field-boots, threw bouquets at us, sang, danced, shouted cheered and wept - really most affecting. I managed to ram through them somehow and got up to the south gate of the actual city walls. The Germans had blown the bridge down but I got in afoot on the debris and was met by many hysterical burgesses who wept and kissed me - much to my embarrassment.

I managed to extract what information I wanted out of them and climbed back to find the ladies had in the meantime decorated every available inch of my saddlery with red roses - the bewildered expression on my horse's face being too funny for words."

7. Extract from a late *Mud Larks* story whilst in charge of the demobilisation of horses

"Yesterday morning, a freckled child, dripping oil and perspiration..., stumbled into 'Remounts' (or 'Demounts', as we should more properly call ourselves nowadays) and presented me with a slip of paper which entitled him, the bearer, to immediate demobilisation on pivotal grounds. I handed it back to him, explaining that he had come to the wrong shop - unless he were a horse, of course. If he were and could provide his own nosebag, head-stall and Army Form 1640, testifying that he was guiltless of mange, ophthalmia or epizootic lymphangitis, I would do what I could for him."

It turned out that the young man had been sent to be Crosbie's chauffeur for the day, but the car provided had seen better days. "Where it was not dented in, it bulged out; most of those knick-knacks that really nice cars have were missing, and its complexion had peeled off in erratic designs, such as Royal Academicians used to smear on transports to make U-Boaters imagine they were seeing things they shouldn't and lead better lives."

Shortly after setting off, the windscreen detached itself and flopped into their laps, but then it transpired, as they went down the steep hill, with two hairpin bends, into the village of Baillleul-aux-Hondains, that the brakes had failed.

"I looked about for a soft place to jump. There was none; only rock-plated highway whizzing past.

We took the first bend with the nearside wheels in the gutter, the off-side wheels on the bank, the car tilted at an angle of forty-five degrees. The second bend we navigated at an angle of sixty degrees, the off-side wheels on the bank, the near-side wheels pawing thin air. Had there been another bend we should have accomplished it upside down. Fortunately there were no more; but there remained the village street. We pounced on it like a tiger upon its prey.

"Blow your horn!" I screamed to the child.

"Bulb's bust," said he shortly, and exhibited the instrument, its squeeze missing.

I have one accomplishment - only one - acquired at the tender age of eleven at the price of relentless practice and a half-share in a ferret. I can whistle on my fingers. Sweeping into that unsuspecting hamlet I remembered this lone accomplishment of mine, plunged two fingers into my cheeks and emptied my chest through them.

"Honk, honk," blasted something in my ear and, glancing round, I saw that the child had swallowed the bulbless end of his horn and was using it bugle-wise.

Thus, shrilling and honking, we swooped through Bailleul-aux-Hondains, zig-zagging from kerb to kerb. A speckly cock and his platoon of hens were out in midstream, souvenir-hunting. We took them in the rear before they had time to deploy and sent a cloud of fluff-fricassee sky-high. A Tommy was passing the time o' day with the Hebe of the Hotel des Trois Enfants, his mules contentedly browsing the straw frost-packing off the town water supply. The off-donkey felt the hot breath of the car on his hocks and gained the *salle-a-manger* (via the window) in one bound, taking master and mate along with him.

The great-great-granddam of the hamlet was tottering across to the undertakers to have her coffin tried on, when my frantic whistling and the bray of the bugle-horn pierced the deafness of a century. With a loud creaking of hinges she turned her head, summed up the situation at a glance and, casting off half-a-dozen decades "like raiment laid apart," sprang for the side-walk with the agility of an infant gazelle. We missed her by half-an-inch and she had nobody but herself to thank...."

8. Review of his poetry compilation, *The Ballad of the 'Royal Ann'* (1922) in the *Daily Telegraph*

"It is really refreshing, by way of a change, to come across a poet, who is not afraid of melody, but, possessing a 'singing voice', lets it go with a will, when theme and inspiration serve. The contention of the 'vers libristes', the 'imagists', and all the other tired contrivers of unmelodious and unmetrical pieces, appears to be that all possible combinations of quantity and accent are exhausted, and that nothing is left to the idle singers of an empty day but metres which no man can measure, and songs which no composer could possibly set to music. To all such heretics against the high traditions of English prosody, we should like to oppose the brave chanties, and strong reverberating cadences, of Mr Crosbie Garstin's manly and stimulating muse. Mr Garstin's is a sea-going imagination, and the best of his songs are celebrations of the perils and adventures of the sea. But he does not echo old songs; the wind and the sunlight fill his fancy with new and stirring strains, and even when he adapts an old melody, he turns it to a fresh suggestion."

9. Reviews of his first travelogue, *The Coasts of Romance* (1922), about Morocco and Moorish Spain

The book was widely reviewed, not only in this country but also in America and the colonies, and was universally praised. Its combination of a witty and irreverent take on history and geography, amusing personal anecdote, shrewd observation, lyrical description, light verse and comic illustration made it 'sui generis', with only Mark Twain's famous *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) being considered vaguely comparable. The *New York Tribune* called it "one of the most delightful accounts of travel we have ever seen", whilst *The Mail*, Sydney hailed it as "a perfect little gem - a mine of interesting information, a brilliant series of pen pictures, and a fund of fresh and infectious humour." The *Manchester Guardian* commented, "Mr Garstin is not a deeply reflective traveller, but he has wit, a sense of the odd as well as of the picturesque, and can write a sparkling page", whilst *The Bookman* concluded "It is delightfully unorthodox, contains nothing that you would look for, or find, in guide books, and withal is admirably calculated to stimulate the wanderlust and attract visitors to its picturesque background." Critics invariably included examples of Garstin's humour in their reviews, and it is telling that each one found something different that had tickled their fancy. Nearly all reviews mentioned Crosbie's nom-de-plume, 'Patlander', as confirmation of the style and quality of humour and light verse that could be expected, but his illustrative skills were less well-known. *World' Work* commented "Mr Garstin has a Puck and an Ariel in his pen. It is difficult to say which is the more charming, drawing or writing".

10. Comment on *The Owls' House* in *Some Younger Novelists*

"Mr Garstin is already well known to all readers of 'Punch' as Patlander. His first two books will scarcely prepare the reader for 'The Owls' House', although adventure is the motive in each. But 'The Owls' House' is a much bigger thing altogether - a great strapping, full-blooded, mightily vivid tale of life in Cornwall at the end of the eighteenth century. It is one long stir of adventure; smuggling, wrecking, horse-coping, the press gang, Admiral Rodney's sea fight, pirating, love making, every ingredient that makes for breathless romance is here...The wild life is sketched with unerring hand, there are scenes of strife and magnificence which are almost Elizabethan, one breathless moment follows another, and the reader experiences every kind of thrill. It is a book to draw children from play and old men from the chimney corner."



Flamenco Dancer



On the road



Captain James Cook rediscovers Waikiki.



A Lady of Hué.



San Francisco takes a stroll through his home town.

Illustrations by Crosbie Garstin from his travelogues

David Tovey