

"RED MICK," THE PRIEST HUNTER

A Tale of the Penal Days.

BY PATRICK SWEENEY.

CHAPTER I.

"Ah! weep those days the penal days. When Ireland hopelessly complained. Oh! weep those days, the penal days. When Godless persecution reigned."

Beautiful was the night as ever visited the green vales of Munster. Midnight was approaching. A full moon shed its bright rays on all the earth; and hill and mountain, and vale and wood looked lovely in the twilight.

This was at the time when the hateful and abominable system known as the penal code was being applied in all its rigor in Ireland. In any other country the result of these persecutions would have been the loss of all religion; but in Ireland they seemed to make the people more steadfast than ever in the national faith. They loved that faith when they were free to practice it; but now, when its exercise was forbidden, they loved it with a deeper and more earnest love, and were ready to make any sacrifice in its defence.

A great silence overspread the wooded country to the south and the bare mountains to the north. The only sound that could be heard was the sound of the river that tumbled away over its rocky bed to the sea.

A shy, quiet figure passed on towards the mountain side. It was that of an old man, dressed in the fashion prevailing among the peasantry of the time. He was not a peasant, though, but Father Eoghan McCarthy, a Franciscan friar, disguised, of course, and on his way to offer up midnight Mass. He was about sixty years of age, of medium height and stout build; his limbs were straight and strong from vigorous exercise; and when he raised the slouch that which almost completely hid his face, a striking cast of features was revealed—a broad, high forehead, strong mouth and determined chin, the whole blended with a lofty asceticism which well suited the priest.

He appeared very anxious to avoid the highways and to take unfrequented paths. He thought he was tolerably safe to night, and that he had eluded the vigilant eyes of the priest-hunters; but he was mistaken. At a distance behind him, hidden among the trees, was another figure—like the first in many respects—but in others its very opposite. He was, like the priest, dressed in peasant fashion; but had a diabolical cunning in his little eyes and a debauchery in his face which are far from characteristic of priest or peasant in Ireland. He was notorious as a priest-catcher, which trade he had followed for some time, and was called "Red Mick," on account of the color of his hair. He had not been unsuccessful in his profession. Already he had captured and handed over to the authorities six priests.

At length Father McCarthy had reached a huge rock or boulder, behind which some bushes were carelessly thrown, as if they hid nothing; but in reality they covered a slit in the ground through which he passed cautiously. He entered an underground cavern which was quite full of people, men and women. They were all peasants, and numbered between seventy and eighty, and all were in an attitude of prayer—the men with one knee bent and all kinds of rude weapons in their hands, ready to defend themselves and their womankind should the soldiery discover their whereabouts and attack them.

As Father McCarthy entered, all looked reverently towards him, and prayers and blessings were fervently uttered. A rushlight at one end of the apartment lit up one corner with a dim light. The rest was in total darkness.

Father McCarthy stepped up to this corner and divesting himself of his peasant's garb assumed the brown habit of his order. Soon a rude altar was erected, candles were lighted, and presently priest and people in that rude church, sculptured by nature, were offering to God the sacrifice of salvation. Mass had been offered up many millions of times since the beginning of the Christian era in stately temples and under domes on whose erection vast wealth was spent; but it is not too much to say that it was never more acceptable than now when a hunted and persecuted people gathered together at the peril of their lives and liberties, to profess the faith that was in them, and to defeat the laws that were wontonly framed to degrade and brutalize them and to extinguish the religion they loved.

After Mass the priest addressed the people. He spoke in the Irish language, and its soft accents fell like dew on the hearts of the congregation. "I am proud to meet you here to-night," he said; "your presence shows that penal laws will never crush the old faith out of Ireland. This is a dark and cruel time for our country; but the hour before dawn is always the darkest. The time is surely coming when these laws will be repealed, and when that time comes we shall have the consolation of knowing that we, by remaining true to our old faith, and by resisting wicked laws, have contributed to that repeal.

There is no necessity for me to exhort you to fidelity. You have been and you are faithful, and I trust you will be so till the hour of deliverance comes."

He said more than this, and was listened to with the greatest attention. When he had done, and the time and place for the next meeting had been agreed upon, the people in the cave began to take their departure. They went in groups of two and three. They would not go together, because they had always to count on the priest-hunters being on their track, and to conduct themselves accordingly. It was the custom for the priest to be the last to leave.

When Father McCarthy had entered the cave, "Red Mick" was not many yards behind. He deliberated anxiously with himself as to what course he ought to pursue under the circumstances. To bring the soldiers and magistrates on the whole congregation, priest and people, appeared to him the most heroic action he could achieve. But there were risks. To go and fetch the soldiers would take time, and he greatly feared that before they could have reached the cave priest and people would have left it. If he remained where he was until the Mass was over he could, he was certain, capture the priest alone. He knew from experience that he would be the last to leave the cave. To enter while the divine mysteries were being celebrated, or indeed to give those inside any hint that one of his calling was in proximity to them, he knew would be most foolhardy. His plan was therefore arranged. He would remain outside till all had left and wait for the friar and capture him.

The Mass was over, the people departed. The priest-catcher, the only visible human being on that mountain side, still watched from behind the rock—watched and waited for his quarry to appear, and he held himself in readiness to pounce upon him. But no priest appeared. "Red Mick" waited and waited, and then began to indulge in strong language. His patience was well-nigh exhausted. He was numb from being so long in one place without moving, and he had no liquor wherewith to heat his blood. What could have happened to the priest? He surely did not pass out unknown to "Red Mick"; and what would he have been doing so long in the cave. "Red Mick" feared to go in, lest by any possibility enough peasants might have remained there to make short work of him—as he expressed it. He would wait another quarter of an hour, but not a second longer. If the priest did not appear he would give up the hunt as fruitless. The time was gliding rapidly away. The quarter of an hour was nearly out, and still no priest appeared.

At last, as "Red Mick" was about to give up the chase, a well-remembered figure appeared at the mouth of the cave.

Ah! how well he knew him. The pale, ascetic face, the intellectual forehead, the kindly gray eyes and the set, stern mouth and jaw and well-developed form. It was Father McCarthy. He was walking carelessly, his slouch had drawn full over his face. He did not suspect that danger was so near. "Red Mick" remained behind the rock. He drew a loaded pistol from his pocket and as the priest approached he stepped forward and confronted him.

The priest was taken by surprise, but he was always ready for the worst. He did not think the fellow's pistol was loaded, and with promptitude he decided to give him a bold front.

"By what authority do you command me to stop?" he said.

"In the name of the law, as I told you," said "Red Mick."

"I am quite sure you have no right to stop any peaceable person in that rude manner," returned the priest in calm accents; "and I beg you will allow me to pass on."

With that he turned aside to avoid "Red Mick," but that worthy changed his position and placed himself directly before him, at the same time raising the loaded pistol, which up to this he held at his side, and presenting it at the priest—

"You must stop," he said, in commanding accents.

At this moment there was a slight rustle behind the priest, and as the moon, which had been momentarily hidden by a cloud, shone forth, it revealed a man in the act of placing himself between "Red Mick" and Father McCarthy.

In another instant a pistol shot rang out on the night air, and the new-comer was lying on the heather of the mountain between the priest-hunter and the priest.

"Red Mick" gave one swift, piercing glance at the figure lying on the ground, and, quick as the lightning's flash, before the priest had comprehended the situation, he had dropped the smoking pistol from his hand and fled away.

As soon as the priest had recovered from the shock which he had received, he bent over the prostrate figure and lifted it in his arms. He found that he supported in his hands the dead body of a man who was alive and strong but two minutes ago, who less than an hour ago had knelt down in the cave beyond to assist at the holy sacrifice, and who only ten minutes ago was conferring and arranging about the next Mass with him who now supported his mortal remains. He laid the dead body tenderly on the bed of heather, under that cloudy sky, with the moon shining full upon the calm, tranquil features, and he prayed for the eternal repose of the departed soul. He prayed also for the unfortunate man who had stained his

soul with this foul murder, and he repented again and again, "Greater love than this no man hath, that he lay down his life for his friend." He covered the dead body with his own cloak and went to the nearest farmer's house and detailed the sad circumstances.

CHAPTER II.

Knelling and motionless, wildly they pray, but they pray in their souls, for no scintillas have they. Stern and standing, oh! look on them now; Like trees to a tempest the multitude bow, Like the swells of the ocean is rising their vow. —DAVIS.

The news of the outrage was not long in spreading over the country, and soon the dead man was being waked in the capacious barn of the nearest farmer, and the room was crowded with country folk—the women praying or "keening" over the corpse; the men discussing in whispered tones all the circumstances attending the death.

The result of the conversation among the men was a vow that they would have revenge on the man who killed their comrade. Their passions were so excited that nothing less than the death of the priest-hunter would satisfy them.

Father McCarthy wished to officiate at the dead man's grave, but it was only at night that he could be out with any degree of safety. If he showed himself during the day the soldiers or priest-hunters, or both, might pounce on him. It was, therefore, decided that the burial should be at midnight.

It was a strange scene. The moon looked down with its white light on the half-open grave and on the men who dug it, bending themselves willingly to their task. In the distance the sea dashed against the bar and the cry of the curlews could be heard. But beside these not a sound could be discerned save that of the implements which dug the grave.

The priest, in his Franciscan robe, was standing quietly while the grave-diggers were at their work. As soon as the grave was made the coffin was lowered in without a word, and Father McCarthy read the office for the dead. All were kneeling bareheaded now, and at that open grave, in presence of the dead, the men renewed, in whispered but determined tones, the vows of vengeance which they had already made.

The remains were covered in. Father McCarthy addressed a word of consolation and encouragement to those present, and all took their departure—each one going to his own way home.

The friar had no home. He divested himself of his habit, dressed himself like a peasant, and, after a last prayer at the grave of the man who had died for him he turned away. Over fields and roads and hills and valleys he went till he had reached the sea.

It was now near morning, and the moon no longer shone. It was intensely dark. With much difficulty he groped his way along the strand till he reached an opening in the cliff between the rocks.

He entered and found himself in a long, narrow passage, very high. He walked along till he reached a second passage running off at right angles to the first. He turned into this, and after going a short distance observed by the light of a candle which burned in a niche in the wall a rude bed raised on some stones and lying on it a man. He had only partially undressed. Father McCarthy observed him closely at first, to make sure he was fast asleep, and then he looked into a hole in the rocks over his head, and from that he drew forth a loaded pistol. The man who lay fast asleep was "Red Mick," the priest-hunter, and the pistol which Father McCarthy held in his hand was the identical one which had done such deadly work a few days ago. Father McCarthy had his enemy in his hands now, and he might deal with him as he pleased. It was evident that this was not the first time the priest had been in this apartment. He knew its every nook and cranny. He knew that "Red Mick" had visited the scene of the murder since, for the pistol which he now held in his hand had been dropped by the priest-hunter. Father McCarthy bent over the bed and gave his enemy a shake. "Red Mick" started in his sleep, but he did not open his eyes, and soon he composed himself again. The priest again shook him up—this time more vigorously—and soon he opened his eyes in a dazed sort of way. He regarded the figure standing over him for one brief instant with a fixed stare, and then when he had thoroughly got hold of the fact that a peasant with a pistol in his hand was standing over him, he jumped straight out of bed, and in an instant was standing on the floor and crying,

"Have mercy on a poor old man! Oh, no! Don't shoot me!"

"Stop," said Father McCarthy; and when the priest-hunter had heard one syllable from the familiar voice, and looked more closely at the figure before him, he knew that it was the priest, and he was relieved somewhat.

But he still whined for mercy. "Oh, Father, you would not kill a poor old man. You would not, indeed, Father! Oh, no!"

"Listen to me," commanded the priest. "I have not come here to kill you. I have come to save you, and if you pay attention to what I have to say, no harm will come to you."

He paused, but the priest-hunter said nothing.

"Do you know what you did on the night you tried to capture me?"

"Oh, Father! I didn't mean it—I didn't, indeed. I would not touch you with that pistol for all the world, nor Pheilm O'Neill (the murdered man)

either, but I thought there were more men in the cave, and that they would come out and kill me."

"I cannot say that what you have told me is false," said the priest; "neither do I believe it is true; for your life for many years has been a lie. What I came to speak to you is a different matter, though closely connected with the murder. The men who attended Pheilm O'Neill's burial have registered a vow that they will wreak vengeance on the man who killed him. I was present at the burial, and I heard their vow, though they thought I did not."

"Red Mick" said not a word, but regarded the priest in silence.

"If you wish to protect yourself against the vengeance of these men," said the priest, "you will leave this place without delay. They have sworn to kill you, and they will redeem their oath. That is why I came here to tell you. Now, leave in time, and don't let any one see you again in this part of the country. I will look after this pistol. I think it will be safer in my keeping than in yours. If you take my advice you will have said good-bye to your old haunts in an hour from this."

The priest said no more. In another instant he was gone, and the priest-hunter was left alone.

For some moments he was thinking of what had occurred in a confused half-dazed fashion, as if it were all a dream. This priest saved his life before, he remembered, and it had sorely puzzled him at the time why he had done so, but now that the same thing had occurred over again the riddle was become less difficult of solution. He thought of the priest's action, and the thought did him good. He began to realize how far above him was this gentle, pious, unobtrusive man whom he had been trying to hound to the death. He thought of times that were now long gone, before he had dreamt of priest-hunting, when he, too, had great faith and piety, and when he prayed with fervor and enjoyed his relaxations with an easy conscience. But latterly he had no conscience at all. His voice was stifled. Now, however, it asserted itself again. He ran to the opening and called for the priest. But no answer came. He went as far as the sea shore. It was all the same. No priest. He had gone, and "Red Mick" had no way of ascertaining what direction he had taken.

He returned to the cave, and for the first time in many years he asked God to pardon him his sins. The priest's high example, his anxiety to save him from a death which he deserved, and his generous return of good for evil had effected a revolution in the man's soul. He left the place forever, gave up his old pursuit, and began a new course of life.

He never again saw Father McCarthy in this world.—Belfast Irish Weekly.

What is Faith?

What is Faith? We answer, in the words of the great Cardinal Newman who gives the following definition, or rather description, of the first of the theological virtues: "Faith is not a mere conviction in reason; it is a firm assent, it is a clear certainty, greater than any other certainty; and this is wrought in the mind by the grace of God, and by it alone. As, then, men may be convinced, and not act according to their conviction, so may they be convinced, and not believe according to their conviction. They may confess that the argument is against them, that they have nothing to say for themselves, and that to believe is to be happy; and yet, after all, they avow they cannot believe, they do not know why, but they cannot; they acquiesce in unbelief, and they turn away from God and His Church. Their reason is convinced, and their doubts are moral ones, arising in the root from a fault of the will."

"In a word, the arguments for religion do not compel any one to believe, just as arguments for good conduct do not compel any one to obey. Obedience is the consequence of willing to obey, and faith is the consequence of willing to believe; we may see what is right, whether in matters of faith or obedience, of ourselves, but we cannot will what is right without the grace of God. Here is the difference between other exercises of reason and arguments for the truth of religion. It requires no act of faith to assent to the truth that two and two makes four; we cannot help assenting to it, and hence there is no merit in assenting to it; but there is merit in believing that the Church is from God; for though there are abundant reasons to prove it to us, yet we can, without an absurdity, quarrel with the conclusion; we may doubt it, if we will; and grace alone can turn a bad will into a good one."

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men. But with much more reason should we soften our resentment when we consider that our forefathers were often the dupes of the victims of political intrigues; that they, too, had their passions to subserve, that they had their pride to gratify.

The denomination which regrets nothing of the past either must consider that its members were more superhuman than the Apostles, who had much to regret, or it took such a small part in the great theater of the world that it was never tested by the ordeals of power and prosperity. These have ever been too much for men, as they were too great a trial for angels. Let us all grant that grave wrongs have been done; but let us leave their just retribution to the law divine.

"We may certainly feel righteous indignation at wanton insult; we are justified in feeling keenly a profanation of that which we hold most sacred, even when the insult and the profanation happened long ago. But if the rein must be given to passion, so as to accentuate a principle, let passion seek the right victim. As a sympathizer with downtrodden Ireland I may hate Cromwell; but how can I hate the author of the "Christian Year?" As a sympathizer with the exiled Huguenots I may hate Louis XIV.; but how can I fail to admire the founder of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul? The men of a few centuries ago were in some respects semi-barbarians tinctured with the Christian faith; which do we wish to honor, their barbarism or their Christianity? Or let us say that they were men, victims of ignorance often, always subject to passion, who, nevertheless, were the channels of religion to us; which do we desire to emulate, their human frailty or their divine faith? Or they were martyrs; with a prayer on their lips for their persecutors they gave up their lives for their sacred convictions; shall we do them honor by hating the decadents of those for whom they prayed? If Christians would extend to Christians one half the love they lavish on idolaters they would be much more Christ-like.

"That unanimity which nature so forcibly suggests, grace through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit demands. God's Holy Spirit dwells in hearts which pour forth their burnings on the Protestant hymn or thrill with emotion before the mysteries of the Catholic altar. Such hearts will ever tend to beat in unison, whatever clashing churchmen may say or do. When divisions come among them, let them remember that they are the ones who really suffer, and they will be the first to welcome the healing of the wounds by reunion."

Of all the evils that afflict mankind at the present day drunkenness is undoubtedly the greatest. Besides this, all other evils sink into insignificance. War, famine, pestilence, are only shadows in comparison. These have their time and reasons, and like all things human, ultimately decay and perish, but drunkenness abides with us forever. It is the eternal companion of humanity, a demon-spirit which defies exorcism.

No human tongue or pen can adequately describe its powers and ravages. It is more like an exotic from hell than a natural growth of earth. In its universal destructiveness it ranks next to the grim monster Death himself. With its mighty scythe it mows down battalions of the human race, and sweeps them into the whirlpool of destruction.

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Our Aftax Wine is extensively used and recommended by the Clergy, and our Claret will compare favorably with the best imported Bordeaux.

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