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SHAWN NA SOGGARTH; OR, THE PRIEST-HUNTER.

AN IRISH TALK OF THE PENAL TIMES.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

Meanwhile, Ned Cormick had reached the parsonage, and, late as was the hour, was admitted at once into the presence of Miss Gordon, whom he wished to see first, on his sending her a message that he had something of importance to communicate respecting Ellen Lynch.

The fair girl was seated at a table, on which was a profusion of flowers of various hues and delicious fragrance. There were on it, also, scattered sheets of manuscript music, and many beautifully pencilled sketches, finished and unfinished; and nearest to where she sat was a paper on which she had been pencilling some fugitive thoughts, and on which were apparent the traces of tears.

She bade old Ned welcome in her wonted sprightly tones; but it was evident even to his dim eyes that she was much and sadly changed since he had last seen her. In fact, the insidious and relentless disease, which was feeding on her beautiful form, and wasting a mind as beautiful, had made great inroads within the last few months.

The rich glow of her cheek had diminished to a small speck of intense red in its centre; and the ivory hue of her forehead had assumed that unearthly fairness incident to her disease. Her bright eye had become more lustrous, and feature and hand had thinned but perceptibly.

"I was comin to you, Miss Maria," said Ned, after finishing a glass of brandy she had ordered for him "to beg my own mournin—from my Diana, to get his reverence to protect me from being turned out of my little cabin to-morrow, as I udhurther I'm like to be."

"And so he shall, or you shall have a refuge here, my poor Ned."

"Then may heaven's blessing be on you, by day and by night, my darlin, till you're an angel in the blessed choir."

"But what of Miss Lynch, Ned? Speak quick."

"You shall hear, my fairest of darlins. I was about to have a minute's talk with my old friend Katy, on my way here, about my little rose-bud—well that voice;—but when I was turnin down the path to the cottage, lo and behold you! what should I hear but horses comin' thunderin' like the Throjans of ould. So, stoopin' behind a tree, I saw four of them dismount and stall like thieves down to the cottage; and I could undherstand by the whisperin' o' what remained, though I was thrimblin in every limb, like king Priam when he saw the ghost, that some one was to be taken away. And, sure enough, it wasn't many minutes, though I thought it long enough, Miss Maria, till the four returned with Miss Ellen Lynch between them, and puttin her before one o' them, galloped away with her like a blast."

"Take care, old man; are you certain of what you say?"

"I'm as certain of it as that Homer was blind, or that Throy was sacked. Didn't I hear her voice orderin them to let her loose, and askin' them where they were bringin' her?"

Maria now rang, and requested her father to be sent to her. He was engaged writing in another apartment, but he immediately attended her summons.

"Well, Maria, my love," he said, entering—"ha, Ned! why something serious must have induced you to give up the cultivation of the muses at this hour of inspiration."

Maria now detailed Ned's intelligence.

"And have you any idea whither Miss Lynch was conveyed?" asked the rector.

"Why, your reverence, I heard them namin' the castle; and I suspect (sinking his voice to a whisper) it must be to—Sir John's castle she was carried away, like fair Helen o' Throy."

After a few more questions asked and answered, Ned was dismissed to partake of the housekeeper's hospitality, and thereafter to enjoy the luxury of a better bed than he had slept on for many a month, as Miss Maria would not hear of his leaving the rectory for that night.

"Dear papa," she said, laying her hand on his, after Ned had left the room, "I have a request to ask of you—the most earnest I have made since you permitted me to attend the dying hours of poor mamma. The rector's lady had fallen a victim to fever the preceding winter."

The tears started to her father's eye, as he rejoined, in a solemn tone: "Peace be with her, Maria: there are few requests she would have refused you—but what is your present one, my love?"

"It is," she said eagerly, "that you will em-

ploy every energy, and exert all the weighty influence of yourself and friends as strenuously as if it was for the restoration of our own Maria, to recover from the hands of her lawless and ruthless abductors, the gentlest and the dearest, though most ill-fated, playmate of my infancy.—O! were I a man, Sir John, in this instance, though entrenched in tenfold his power and influence, should answer to me for the safety of my beloved and foully treated friend. God knows what fate they intend for her—and her eyes flashed with a fiercer brilliancy.

"But you must remember, my love, that I am a man of peace," said the fond parent, tapping her cheek; "yet, though I may not fight for her, I pledge myself that neither exertion, nor pocket, nor influence, shall be spared for the recovery of the dear girl; and Sir John may find, that is, if we can trace the outrage clearly to him, if not my own influence, that of those who will befriend me may be sufficient to shake him from his place of power."

"I should have known, dear papa, that your own kind heart would need no spurring; and, should she be recovered, were I to die to-morrow, it would soothe my last hours, the reflection how often she and you would speak of one, whose memory would, I know, be so dear to both."

"Maria, my own love, you must not speak in that strain; you are agitated. The dear girl shall be restored to spend many, many a day of happiness with her playmate—with us all, please God." The fond father kissed her forehead, and the big tear fell hot upon her neck.

"Dearest papa," she said earnestly, as she took his hand in hers, "I did speak thoughtlessly, and have to crave your pardon for my selfishness. I should have gladdened your ears with the music of hope and happiness instead of evil boding. Yes, years of happiness will still be ours, even in this life, I trust. But I must keep you strictly to your promise."

"Maria, you know I seldom leave a promise unredeemed, if within my power; and to show you how intent I am on fulfilling my present one, I shall, after concluding my letters at early morn, set out to the castle again."

"May the Almighty favor your exertions," she exclaimed fervently.

"Amen, my love," he rejoined; "and now, Maria, as you have been much agitated, and I am to be an early riser, I think rest will answer both."

"Good night then, papa."

"God bless my child for ever and for ever"—he kissed her forehead again, while a slight shuddering passed over him as the unbidden thought arose, what a dreary blank the world would be to him if, after the loss of her mother, his beautiful, loving and enthusiastic child were to pass away from him.

Accordingly, at as early an hour as on the preceding morning, Mr. Gordon made his appearance again at Ingram Castle.

"Ha, Mr. Gordon, again!" exclaimed Sir John, as he met him in the area; but not, I trust, on the same petticoat errand; the consciousness of Ellen's abduction suggesting the cause of the present visit.

"On precisely a similar errand, Sir John, tho' a greatly more serious one."

"Surely, then, Parson Gordon, you seem determined to achieve for yourself the title of a squire of dames," said the baronet, with his grim smile.

"What any man, Sir John, may choose to designate me for the performance of my duty is of slight importance indeed; but I am now come on a matter of serious, very serious import.—The disappearance of Bessy Andrews, with the uncertainty whether she herself might not have been a consenting party, though it was, of course, an affliction to her honest and straightforward parent, was, in other respects, a matter of comparatively slight importance. But the tearing away from her home of a lady so highly descended and connected as Miss Lynch (whose only crime seems to be not professing the same creed with us) is an offence that comes home to the bosom of every man that has a wife, a daughter, or a sister, and which surely must be sharply looked after by those who wield the authority of the province."

"You know, Mr. Gordon, I allow no dictation, and you are speaking in riddles. If Miss Lynch has flown, or been conveyed away, what have I to do with the matter? I am not as interested about the flight of young ladies as my friend Mr. Gordon."

"Sir John, this irony is mistimed. I would not wish to address you in a tone unbefitting my own character and your authority. But Ellen Lynch was the earliest companion of my daughter, and I feel a deep interest in her—"

"Your sympathy for papists, Mr. Gordon, is pretty generally known and, to some extent, appreciated, I believe, in high quarters. You seem inclined to increase your celebrity too, in that respect—eh?"

"I care not, Sir John, while I am pursuing what I conceive the duty of a Christian clergyman. I have pledged a solemn promise to recover Miss Lynch, if possible, and I shall strain every nerve to fulfil it."

"Then for what purpose came you here on such a fool's errand?"

"Because you are at the head of all authority here, and, of course, the outrage should be first laid before you for redress; and then, Sir John, (in a low tone) I think we have proof that it was in this direction the lady was conveyed."

"Ha! beware what you say, sir."

"I speak, Sir John, neither rashly nor unadvisedly; and more than that, there are strong grounds of suspicion that the castle was her first destination."

"By heaven, Mr. Gordon, you seem to have come determined to beard us. But you shall soon find that your hand is in the lion's mouth.—The protection of the cloth you rely on may be soon withdrawn, when your zeal for suffering papists is more firmly impressed on the heads of the church."

"Sir John, your threats are as misplaced as your irony. I have never been afraid to exhibit my opinions or acts. But I have not come to bandy words, Sir John, nor to stir up your anger; and, as I shall always speak openly and candidly, I suspect Ffoliot has his finger in the business deeper than you, as he was seen at the cottage yesterday; besides that, I really can't conjecture what interest you could have in dragging with ruffian violence, from her humble and desolate home, a helpless and persecuted orphan. I appeal to you then, Sir John, as the chiefest in authority, as a Christian and as a man, to order her immediate restoration."

The baronet's brow was contracted till the lids almost concealed the eye, while its dark hue was deepened to the blackness of night, as he said in that calm, collected tone, that sometimes speaks the extremity of wrath—

"I have listened to you, sir, uttering language, that man never before dared address to me. I always deemed you were a fool; but I now find you a meddling and presumptuous fool; and you must be crushed. Know me then, henceforth, as your inveterate foe; and there never yet was foe of Sir John Ingram's that he did not find means to crush. A gleam of foolish light shot from the baronet's eye, as, anticipating his revenge, he uttered the last words with fiercer energy."

"Then in return for your threats, Sir John," rejoined the rector, a good deal heated by the tone and tenor of the last rejoinder, despite all his resolves to be calm, "as I cannot alter your purpose, recollect that, humble as I may be in your eyes, I possess friends—relatives of high standing and who, I am proud to say, though we differ in politics, would not for a moment lend their sanction to so lawless a proceeding as that I now complain of; and I give you fair warning that as far as their influence (an influence, thank God, I can command in such a case) can extend, this matter shall be sifted with the closest scrutiny, and that, with my own unremitting exertions, it will go hard, if she remains on Irish ground, if the dear girl be not speedily recovered, to the disgrace and discomfiture of those who had the unmanliness to take any part in the abduction of the forlorn and unprotected orphan. We understand each other now, though I would still prefer appealing to—"

The baronet stamped and looked as if he could have directed the summary judgment and execution on the unfearing clergyman, that had been practised by his ancestors; but he spoke no further, merely waving his hand for the dismissal of the kind-hearted parson, who forthwith proceeded to commence his benevolent exertions for the recovery of his favorite.

CHAPTER XXV.

Sir John's annoyance had, however, only commenced for the day. It was scarcely an hour after Mr. Gordon's departure, when a courier, in rapid haste, brought him a second severe reprimand, for his remissness and want of energy in enforcing the penal statutes. The account of the attack on Ffoliot's house, and the elder Ffoliot's death, had reached the executive with a rapidity not usual in those days of slow travelling; and the reprimand was forwarded with equal rapidity.

The baronet's study bell was furiously rung, after he had read the despatch throughout, and Shawn instantly summoned to his presence.

"So ruffian," said Sir John, as that worthy made his appearance, "it appears that I must continue to be persecuted for your drunken negligence of the business you are employed for.—See here how accurate the charge is."

He read a portion of the despatch, stating that government had received a second communication, to the effect that Father Kilger and his nephew were still openly and daringly officiating in Ballintubber by day and night, within door and without door, and that, as a necessary con-

sequence, any outrage or assault on life or property, was not to be wondered at—but, by the bones of Black Dick," concluded the baronet, in a tone of fiercer vehemence than he had at all ventured to assume towards Mr. Gordon, "if you have not the district cleared of both uncle and nephew before another week passes, I shall take speedy measures to rid the country of you."

"But your noble honor, Sir John, how can I—"

"Not a word, ruffian. I give you a week.—Make use of it; and, Ffoliot, you're come in time (addressing the latter, who had just entered) to witness my ultimatum to this fellow—and for other purposes, too," he added, as Shawn made his sullen exit. "Look at this morning's compliments."

The baronet reached him the despatch to read; and having strode from window to window, without giving him time to examine it, exclaimed impatiently. "How, in the devil's name, did the intelligence reach them so fast? Some scoundrel must be spying on us; and what can we do to show we are not sleeping on our posts?"

"I know not, Sir John. It is really curious—and to rebuke us for want of zeal, who have incurred the hatred, and provoked the assaults of the rebellious for our well known and untiring loyal exertions."

"Then the cursed nonsensical affair of that girl," observed the baronet, without apparently having heard or heeded his companion's observation. "I wish the puling chit had been left to vegetate in her cabin. Do you know, early as it is, I am after having had a visit respecting her abduction from that troublesome fellow, Gordon, who presumed to beard me openly and even bandy threats—so much the worse for him, if I am a true descendant of Black Dick, though the fool may be troublesome still."

"I too, Sir John, have had my annoyance this morning on that score. That foolish boy, Arthur, has been raving furiously for the last hour about her withdrawal from the cottage, however he received the intelligence—accusing me loudly of having been the planner of the abduction, and even threatening to fling up his commission, and set out in pursuit of her, unless she be instantly restored."

"Then, sir, I must say you have earned that annoyance; she will, however, be this evening in the hands of that pirate or smuggling fellow, on her way to another country, and then, I suppose, the young fellow's hot spirit may be cooled."

"Do you know, Sir John, that, since we were speaking last night, I have been thinking that you were, perhaps, too precipitate in arranging with a total stranger respecting so delicate a transaction, and that we had better take a day or two to make inquiries—"

"Not an hour, by heaven," exclaimed the baronet, stamping fiercely. "Either she returns to her cabin to-night, or she goes on board with Jans Schrooter. I have been trepanned into lending my sanction to the forcing away a powerless girl, who could be to me of scarcely any importance; and my determination is to make an end of the paltry transaction in the speediest possible available manner."

"But if the stranger should betray us, Sir John?"

"Betray me, Mr. Ffoliot! I tell you, as I told the fellow himself, than no one dare betray me here, though an o'ld one there may be that, depending on the protection of his gown, would presume to beard me; and I would not, for a thousand pounds, after what has passed between us, that one should discover that the girl had been here. I know also that, though a fool, he is a persevering one, and that, as he stated, he has friends high in power, and who, I have reason to know, would not spare to hit hard at me, besides that fools have sometimes a sharp scent."

"Then I see, Sir John," said Ffoliot, aloud, after having muttered something between his teeth about wilfulness and obstinacy, "that it only remains for us to be circumspect in having her conveyed to the sea."

Some minor details, regarding the removal of the persecuted girl, were then arranged between the distrustful and ill-mated, though generally combined, pair; and they parted with no increased cordiality towards each other.

While this interview was taking place, Shawn was proceeding along one of the roads leading from the castle in a sullen and thoughtful mood; venting curses internally on Sir John and both priests at one moment, and the next, pondering some scheme for entrapping the latter, who had foiled him so often before when he had been certain of their capture. He was in this vein, when he saw approaching him Attorney Baker, who was soliloquising in as irate and dissatisfied a mood as himself, after having had repeated communications with Ffoliot and Sir Robert during the past few days.

"Yes, the damned, close-fisted, grasping, upstart would fain have everything to himself, and with the least possible expense," the attorney

was repeating to himself, if his thoughts were shaped into words; but curse me if I wouldn't work out the property for the baronet himself, thankless and overbearing as he is, if I hadn't hopes that Adam Baker might manage still to edge himself in between both for at least a considerable share of it. Aye, the fool Sir Robert is running fairly mad; and, what between dicing, drinking, libertinism and the turf, together with allowing himself to be cheated by every one around him, he is, at this moment, sunk to his chin in debt, notwithstanding his broad green acres—and gloriously broad and green they are (the attorney's eyes glistened at the thought)—pry such a fool should have got them for shifting his faith from the Pope to the King, and praying to nobody instead of to the saints. Well, we must good-naturedly try to assist him in his praiseworthy exertions to rid himself of their incumbrance; and I think a few thousand proffered in the nick of time when the pinch comes next week (as his confidante, Bryan Gaven, tells me will be the case) may give me a firm footing, after which an entire deed of sale might be easily accomplished, if I should not be forestalled by that skilful Ffoliot, who has the money, and knows the value of the property as well as myself. Sir John, I know, is too confident, and will carry too high a hand to dabble in that underhand way. However, our comfort is, that Ffoliot, I fancy, can be no favorite, in any respect, in Lynch Hall. At all events, I shall watch his movements just now, as closely as the hound does the fox's—"

"Ha, honest John, something has disturbed you," said the attorney aloud, as he came front to front with Shawn.

"Why, Mistor Baker, to tell the truth, there was the devil's kick up a while ago at the castle."

"On what account tell me?" asked Baker, with almost breathless eagerness. Then checking himself, he continued in a calmer tone, "that is if there was no secret in the matter; if there was don't mind me, John."

"I believe the whole matter is no great secret by this time, an' so I'll tell id, and I'm sure you wouldn't betray me, any how. Miss Ellen Lynch, as I could hear, was forced away from the cottage, last night; then Mistor Gordon was at the castle a while ago, charging Sir John and Mistor Ffoliot with having a finger in the pie; and then himself an' his noble honor had grate words I undherstand. Then comes a letter from the government making out that myself an' Sir John was favorin' a couple of priests here, an', of course, helpin' the murders and disturbance; an' I laid id to yourself, as a loyal man, Mistor Baker, whither that was fair play to me, after all the times I ventured my life, to show my loyalty."

"Surely, Sir John would allow neither himself nor you to lie for a moment under such an imputation."

"To be shure he wouldn't, Mistor Baker, if he wasn't intirely bothered; but I think the carryin' off o' the girl—whomsoever had a hand in id—put him chane out ov his sins; an', to tell the truth, the matter is a quare one altogether, as Cornet Ffoliot told me, afore I went to the castle at all, that he was quite sure it was Sir Robert that had put his sister out of his reach, and that he should account to him for id. Any way you see Mr. Baker I'm the sufferer."

"Yes, John, I see clearly that you are suffering for your loyalty, though I'm confident, if you act consistently with your hitherto exemplary conduct, that your annoyance will be amply compensated for. But you are quite certain that Cornet Ffoliot had an impression it was Sir Robert that had transferred—that is removed his sister?"

"Am I certain that the sun is shinin' now, or that I'm after getting the abuse of a dog from Sir John, though he'll repent of id as he did afore?"

"There is no doubt but that he will, and speedily, and make reparation, too—but don't you think it most probable, my worthy John, that it was Sir Robert that had his sister conveyed away, as he was acting contrary to his wishes—eh?"

"Betune ourselves, Toney Baker, that's all in my eye an' Betty Martin. Sir Robert does not care a thraneen where she is. But wherever she is they know id at head-quarters (the castle)."

"At all events, John," said the attorney, after a moment's pause, "I think it could do no harm, if the cornet's suspicions of Sir Robert were stirred up. I feel certain that it would be well taken at the castle to direct the suspicion in that channel; and—and it might, or might not be an advantage to others, too, and those that wish you well."

"Whew! Toney Baker, I'm beginning to smell a rat," responded Shawn, with one of his villainous grins.

"Why, John, I always knew you had a good nose. I always, besides, appreciated your loyalty