



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 26, 1862.

No. 7.

CROHOORE OF THE BILL-HOOK.

BY JOHN BANIM.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

The night began to fall on them while thus engaged, and the night's impressive silence to spread around; and the rocks at each side grew browner; and the horrid yawn of the cave blacker and blacker.

A dim lurid light appeared some little distance in the cavern, flashing upward, and half showing a well-known face, and lending kindred lustre to the two red eyes that fixed watchfully upon them.

Andy Houlihan had the gun in his hand, and in mixed terror and desperation, immediately, and without bringing the piece to his shoulder, pulled the trigger; it recoiled with violence, and he measured his length among the rocks.

Who fired the shot? he hastily asked. Myself, and sorry I am to say so, answered Andy, feeling his bones.

At Crohoore, was it? continued Loughnan, in a close whisper. Aye, a-roon. Did you hit him? Och, to be sure I did; but what hurt was that to the likes of him?

Where's Pierce Shea? Where's Pierce Shea! musha, you unloocky bird, duv you come out o' your hole to axe me that question? It was all your doings. Let yourself tell me where's the poor gorcoon, or—

Here, man, here, take the light from my hand—look for him in the left windin' o' the cave—hurry, hurry! and Loughnan was quickly on the back of his 'sort of an old horse; but tho' the wretched animal could not plead the slightest inebriance of flesh for an excuse for his tardiness; though Paddy was armed, or rather heeled with one rusty spur; and even though they faced homewards, a circumstance, as all travellers know, of power to inspire horse-flesh with its best mettle; still did not 'the sort of an old horse' evince much sympathy with his master's visible wish to be far away from the cave in as short a time as possible.

Many a pause Andy made, as he crawled or groped through the dangerous intricacies of the cavern, to look about him for his foster-brother, and shout his name to the dense mass of rock; but the echoes running through the twinings and hollows, which he translated into a thousand terrible voices and meanings, were his only answer.

And a wild burst of sorrow, sincere as was ever sent up over a departed friend, Andy raised his beloved Pierce, and placed his head on his shoulder, with intent, after a moment's rest, to convey him to the surface of the earth, as a first step towards the only solace he could now know, that is, 'decent Christian burial' for the remains of his death.

Andy made little opposition. The cool night air much revived him, and he asked how long it had been since he entered the cave, and if anything had happened outside. A thrill of seeming alarm shook him when he heard of Loughnan's hasty, and affrighted departure; but he grew half frantic at Crohoore's escape, and bitterly accused Andy of negligence and want of courage.

Andy's time came for asking questions; but Pierce seemed very unwilling to give any account of his own adventure; and, while his foster-brother still continued to urge him, Jack Doran and old Ned Shea appeared; they had for some time been seeking him out, with a led horse for his accommodation homewards, of which, in a very exhausted and harassed state, he availed himself, and all returned to Clarab.

Doran, in compliance with Pierce's request of the morning, had led to his father's house the assassin of Ballyfoile, who, he added, now fully confessed that Crohoore was his employer; but the man either pretended to be, or really was, totally ignorant of any of Crohoore's affairs; that person having merely sought him out, and with a weighty fee hired him for a specific purpose.

It was hoped, however, that, when brought to justice for his offence, he would give more ample and satisfactory information. Pierce visited him on his arrival at home; the fellow was dogged and saucy, and laughed with brutal levity at everything. He was confined in a place lately constructed for a cellar; it had no window, and the door and bolts were strong; Pierce, disgusted with the ruffian, locked and bolted the door, and put the key in his pocket.

The next morning he re-opened the door, for the purpose of conveying his prisoner to Kilkenny gaol, but the apartment was empty; and the name 'Crohoore-na-billhoge' scrawled in bad characters on the wall, and, as if written with blood, seemed plainly to indicate by whose agency the prisoner had escaped.

CHAPTER IX.

The last recited adventure made a deep impression on Pierce Shea; he grew gloomy and thoughtful, and confidentially acknowledged to his foster-brother, that he was in some degree a convert to his often urged opinions, and that they spent their time and energies in pursuit of one who, to all appearance, was protected by unearthly friends and agency. Andy heard this confession in profound silence, but with a catching of breath, and an expression of face, that indicated a terrified triumph in the late belief it imported, and as if he was mortally frightened at a result he had himself so industriously labored to produce; then he left Pierce's presence, his lips compressed, and his eyes bent studiously on the ground, and disappeared, Pierce could not surmise whither.

Pierce, said Rhia Doran, when Shea spoke to him also on the matter, 'the girl is not in her natural senses and feelings.'

What do you mean? Aye, worse, a thousand times, Pierce. That is no answer, Doran; speak plainer. High hanging to me!—resumed his friend, as if angry with himself; 'see what I have done now; I forgot who I was speaking to; never mind me, Pierce, ma bouchal, and just put it all out of your head.'

Jack, you must go on. Not I, Pierce; I don't want to make your mind worse than it is.

Why, Doran, 'tis neither fair nor friendly, though I think you a fair and friendly fellow, to keep anything concerning Alley from me; therefore, I insist on your explanation; you shall not leave this till you satisfy me;—they sat, as usual, in the house of Pierce's father, and at a late hour of the night, over their glass.

Well, a-riach, sure I can just stay where I am then; replied Doran, coolly sipping his liquor; 'for I had rather sit here a twelvemonth than finish what, like a cursed fool, I so heedlessly began; because, though there may be no truth in it, it would only increase your troubles, Pierce, my boy, and I like you too well to be the bearer of unwelcome tidings.'

Harkye, Rhia Doran, I know you for a true friend—your actions are before me, and show it, but my situation and feelings cannot bear crossing or trifling with; and, though we were to break squares for ever, you shall fully quell or fix the doubt your words have made: here—this moment—on this spot—go on, Doran, he grew pale, and trembled in passion.

Well, then, sooner than it should come to that, Pierce, and that I should find such a reward for—no matter: I'll satisfy you; but don't think you have threatened me into compliance, Pierce Shea; I suppose you know me well!

enough to believe that neither yourself nor any man alive can bully me.'

I know and believe it; that's enough for you, Doran; go on now, and for the love of heaven do not keep me in this torture.'

Well, remember you forced me to speak out, in spite of my wish and inclination.'

I will, I will remember; I acquit you beforehand of all share in the pain or injury your words may inflict; only be plain and aboveboard, and do a friend's duty by me.'

Why, then, since you must have it, my poor fellow, 'tis thought that, if Alley's not charmed and bludgeoned by something not right, she lives with her father's murderer, of her own free consent.

Aye, said Pierce, during the pause which Doran here made, as if to note the effect of his news on the hearer: 'aye, I guessed what would come out;' he spoke in a stifled voice, his hands clenched on the table, and his eyes fixed on his friend.

For, continued Doran, 'unless the villain has her in some stronghold, or prison, and that's no way likely, seeing that their retreat is in the neighborhood, and that none of us have ever heard of such a place, surely she could long ago have made her escape, during one or other of the occasions when Crohoore was absent, and you know yourself he has often been absent, and night after night no watch on her; surely the girl might have easily run home to you, if, as I said before, she isn't ether—'

Where did you hear all this? interrupted Shea, still successful in a strong effort to keep down his feelings.

From friends of your own, Pierce; friends to the marrow of their bones, who are not afraid or ashamed to repeat their words to your face, and do more, may be, if along with their regard for you they saw reason why; you know the boys! mean.'

I do, said Shea, his eyes now turned away fixed in stupefied abstraction on the floor.

I have lately got them into good order and spirit, pursued Doran, 'and never fear them for helping a friend, along with doing a little business, if—' he again paused, and laid his hand on Shea's arm—'if that friend could be trusted, Pierce, my lad.'

May God defend me from the truth of what you say!—at last exclaimed poor Shea, giving vent to the bitterness of soul that his friend's touch had, perhaps, freed from its hitherto stern self-command—'that, that would be the heaviest stroke of all!—Doran, I could bear to see her a stiff corpse, the cheek pale and cold, and the eye closed, never more to open—I could lean over her grave, and look in as she was lowered into it, and listen to the clod striking on her coffin—but that I could not bear!—It would drive me mad—it has driven me mad! As he spoke, he grasped and desperately wrung Doran's hand, the tears choking his utterance and gushing down his face, and he now let fall his head upon his friend's extended arm.

A heavy curse light on my tongue! cried Doran, his voice also broken from emotion; 'but Pierce, dear, sure it was only the people's thought—what they all say—and I, for one, don't believe a word of it.'

I know you dare not believe it! replied Pierce, starting on his feet, his tears scorched up, and his tone and manner entirely altered—'you dare not, man, believe a word of it, nor anything like it; I will suffer no living creature to believe it of Alley; there never was one whiter from shame and sin than was my poor Alley. Deny it, you or any man, and I will send—'

I see you want somebody to quarrel with, said his companion, in an offended and reproachful tone, 'but I shall not, Pierce, mind anything you say to me in your present fury;—and as this my reward for all I have gone through, unasked, and of my own accord, for your sake and hers? and when you were lying on your back, Pierce, not able to wag a finger in your own cause, and without another friend, or another tool, to stand up for you?'

The young man's brow relaxed, and the natural reflux of his better feelings again brought tears into his eyes, while he sat down, offered his hand, and said—

I ask your pardon, my dear Doran; I should have recollected—if I could have recollected anything—it was a friend that spoke.

It was Pierce, replied Doran, warmly returning his pressure; 'and now put the foolish words out of your head; I would not myself hear an ill word said of poor Alley; put the thing out of your mind; there's nothing in it.'

That will not be easy for me to do, Jack, said Pierce; and he was right; it was no easy task to pluck out the thorn that now festered in his heart's core; he was never before, great as were the griefs and horrors he had encountered, so truly miserable. 'But,' he resumed, 'you said something just now—what was it?—I heard you very imperfectly—of your—'

friends having it in their power to be of use to me; how, Doran? and what do you mean?'

It's now useless talking it over, Pierce;—but all they have told me I'll tell you; and more you cannot expect. They give me to understand, in the first place, that they have a clue to Crohoore's retreat—'

Where?—where?—how have they been able to discover it? I thought they had long ago given up all interference in the matter.'

You see, Pierce, that was when I had little or no command over the boys, and when I was only getting by degrees into their good opinion, and they were without much union or courage; but now that I am their lawful captain for the parish of Clarab, and have led them on one or two little expeditions, with every success, their spirit is up, and their services at my back, under certain terms that you alone can take or leave; so that they are no fools, and don't care a black-berry for fairy or tithe-proctor, and would just face the ould lad with his horns on. As to where and how they made this discovery, I do not know; in fact they have not made me the wiser, nor do I insist on a point that has nothing to do with our lawful business; only this much they say, that if you, Pierce Shea, will step in among them, one of these fine evenings, and behave like the lad of mettle they and I know you to be, it will go hard but in a night or two Alley will stand before you, and Crohoore-na-billhoge have his lodging in the stone jug of Kilkenny.'

What do they want me to do?—join them?—take an oath? asked Pierce after a pause.

Whisht, man—wall have ears;—never mind particulars now; only can't you just hear what the poor gorcoons have to say to you, and then judge for yourself?'

Where are they to be found?'

I can find them for you; we may as well look for them together, said Doran, carelessly; 'but follow your own bent, Pierce, a-riach; I wish to advise you to nothing, one way or the other.'

How soon can we meet?—to-morrow night?'

To-morrow night, sure enough, they will be near at hand; about ten, I think.'

Very well, muttered Pierce, dropping his head on his breast, and again relapsing into silence: but his set teeth, his rigid features, and unsteady eye, showed the agitated nature of his reflections. After an unbroken pause of more than two minutes, he rose quickly, snatched a candle, and repeated—

Very well; let us go together; and you had better be out of the house at the time, Doran, waiting for me at the broad stone in the bosheen, to escape my father's suspicions; good night.'

I will, said Doran, 'but cannot wait long; good night; they joined hand.

You shall not wait a moment; my mind is made up; I'll engage in anything—any risk, any fellowship—I will rush on death, for present satisfaction and ease of mind; ten, you say?'

Ten, exactly; good night, Pierce.' They exchanged a hearty shake of hands, and retired to their separate chambers.

At ten o'clock the next night, and by the broad stone in the bosheen, the friends accordingly met. Few words were exchanged between them; and Doran rapidly led the way, often stopping to look about him, over lonesome and broken paths, with which Pierce was not well acquainted, until, after half-an-hour's forced march, they stood before a miserable hut, that was built in a deserted waste, covered with furze and rock, a hill rising at its back, and no other human habitation within view.

Light glanced through a clinkly door, and through a hole in the side of the hovel, that, as usual, served at once for window and chimney; and from within issued a confused clatter of wild mirth, loud talking, the dull music of the bag-pipes, and stentorian singing.

There is the place, said Doran, as they paused some distance from the door. At the sound of his voice, a tall figure started from behind a thick clump of furze and rock within a few paces of them, and asked—'Who's there? and what sort o' night is it?'

It's a fine night, answered Doran, in a whisper, though the clouds were low and swollen, the wind muttering, heavy drops falling, and not a star to be seen.

An' so it is, said the challenger; 'go your ways, and God be wid ye;—and he instantly disappeared.

Come on, then, Doran resumed, and they walked up to the door of the cabin. 'Stop a moment, said Pierce, as his friend felt about the door for the knotted string that moved the wooden latch—I did not quite expect this; I do not like to enter such a place.'

Nonsense,—trash,—childishness! retorted Doran, in a quick, sharp tone—'the heart to change now! doubts and fears to come now!—what can you fear in my company? are you a man?'

He held him by the breast-of-the-coat with one hand, with the other violently pulled up the—'

heavy latch, the door swung wide open, and they walked in briskly.

There was an immediate cessation of all sounds among the inmates of the cabin, and eight or ten men springing up, and thrusting their hands into their bosoms, showed, by their scowling brows and ferocious looks, nothing of hospitable welcome to the supposed intruders, until Doran's password,—'It's fine weather, boys,' and their instant recognition of him, caused an instant relaxation of feature, and 'cead mille faultha, Rhia Doran,' was shouted in no gentle accents from every tongue.

When the enthusiasm of his welcome had somewhat abated, Pierce observed glances of constraint, if not of suspicion, at himself; but as soon as Doran, sitting, or rather resting with one thigh on a rude table, round which the men were grouped, and assuming an air of careless good-fellowship as he looked about him, had passed something in a quick whisper, room was made for Shea; and 'sha-durth, a-bouchal,' (your health, lad) addressed to him, as in rapid succession they quaffed their liquor, proved that his friend, or his own name, had sufficient influence to change into cordiality and interest whatever disagreeable feeling his entrance might have caused; in fact, the men lost all constraint before him, abandoning themselves, in a few moments, to their natural manners and noisy humor.

Being seated, he had leisure to examine the kind of place in which he was, and the description of persons amongst whom he found himself. The whole extent of the interior of the hovel was a single apartment, not exceeding fifteen feet in length, and ten in breadth, and scarcely of sufficient height to allow a tall man to stand erect in the middle of the floor; the mud walls were unplastered; and the straw that had been mixed with this primitive material, to keep it together, started and bristled out at every side; overhead the puny wattles of the roof, black, and shining with smoke and soot, badly connected the insignificant covering of heath; the floor, full of inequalities of bedded stone and uneradicated fuzze, differed but little from the open moor without, from which it had only recently been deducted; and everything in fact, showed a hasty and careless construction.

Closely by one wall ran a rough deal plank, supported by piles of loose stones, forming the seats upon which, at a narrow table, about a dozen men were crowded; and, at the other side, large stones, without any plank or board, supplied seats to some half-dozen more. There was no chimney; but two benches, made of slate and clay, enclosed an area, within which a few sods of turf emitted a feeble blaze; and sitting very near, crippled up into a lump, her knees reaching higher than her head, her bleared eyes steadfastly fixed on the decaying embers, and her whole air and position showing an unconsciousness or carelessness of the dinning noise, was the hostess of this lowly aberge. In the corner to her left appeared an enclosure of rough stones that fenced in the heath on which she lay; and, in the other, a roughly-constructed and uncouthly-shaped barrel, from which, by the agency of spigot and faucet, she drew, in wooden noggins, and as her guests claimed it, the stout, though now exploded shebeen.

At one side of Pierce Shea, and immediately next him, sat a prim looking little fellow of middle age, with a large, bloated, goat's-hair wig, that, cocking up behind like a drake's tail, laid the roots of his skull visible, with a red silk handkerchief under his neck, remarkable when contrasted with the bare and scorched throats and breasts of the others; and altogether he had a way about him very different from, if not superior to, his companions; a look of self-defined and long established wisdom and importance; as well he might, being by day the only schoolmaster of the district, and, by night, the only writer of notices, regulations, and resolutions, orator in general to the reformers of Claragh, as Clootz was to the human race. Opposite to him, in appearance as well as situation, sat a tall, bony, squalid being, of a meagre sallow face, hung round with an abundance of coal-black hair, bent brows of the same sable hue, shading deep wild eyes, his beard four weeks unshaven, and his habiliments from head to foot, only the tattered remains of a vesture, that, in its day, had been but indifferent. Pierce thought he should recollect to have before seen this man, in the following situation:—

Passing by a cabin, which it was known the tithe-proctor had recently spoiled, a heavy shower of rain overtook him, and he knocked at the door for admission, supposing it to be secured. A husky voice desired him to come in; he did so, and beheld such a scene of misery as his eyes had never before experienced. The large waste den, with its sides rough as a quarry, and the black roof, dripping rain and soot, did not contain a single article of the most common domestic furniture; and on a small bundle of straw, at one side, lay a shivering girl of some nine or—'