



# CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

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## LEON GONDY.

### A LEGEND OF GHENT.

#### VI.

Next morning, Leon did not appear at breakfast time; but two letters were handed to the old merchant, one for himself, and one for Edith—they were in the handwriting of the French clerk. Old Karl opened his anxiously; Edith hers tremblingly. He bounded at once from his chair; she wept with mingled pride, joy, and grief.

The letter to the old man was brief:—  
‘I cannot allow my benefactor to turn his friend’s child from the door for my fault. I love your daughter, and shall never love another woman. I thought her mine, and looked forward to a brilliant and happy future in her society.—I find that my happiness is your sorrow. You have other wishes; and though I know well you would keep to your word, I cannot build my joy on your regrets. I make here a great, a bitter sacrifice to my benefactor; but I do my duty, and the sentiment of acting rightly will be some compensation. I shall be on my way to Bruges before you receive this letter. Please send me thither an order to receive my quarter’s salary, as I have not money enough to enable me to reach home.’

The old man bowed his head, and wept. A moment after, he handed the letter to Edith, and took hers. It was much like that to him, and ended thus: ‘My dear Edith, you will regret your poor Leon, but you will make your dear father happy. He will die a joyful old man, with his friend’s child near him. Forget me; it is your duty. Think, if you will, that I love you not, and set your whole heart on loving Karl.’

‘A noble boy! a generous boy!’ cried old Karl.  
‘My husband!’ cried Edith, clasping her hands; ‘noble and generous indeed. But the sacrifice is useless; I will never be the wife of any man but Leon!’

‘But, Edith,’ put in the youth in a timid voice, ‘he leaves you; he gives you up; you cannot be willing to recall him.’

‘No,’ said the old man; ‘that is my duty. He shall come back. I cannot make so rare a man miserable for a whim—a caprice. Edith, my dear, hurry the preparations for your marriage; it shall take place in a week. My son, you must resign your hopes; be a man; take example by him, and shew only one-half his noble courage. The love of an old man will be doubly yours. My life, my fortune, are at your disposal.’

‘I will have courage!’ said young Karl impetuously. ‘Go, bring him back, marry them, and then I will travel for a month or two in search of a wife. By your aid, I shall soon find one.’

‘Now you are my brother’s child,’ replied Karl warmly, while Edith kept coldly aloof.

‘Do you not forgive me?’ said young Karl.  
‘I will forgive you when my husband has returned,’ answered Edith very coldly.

The old man looked at her with an anxious and wondering glance. ‘It is not his fault if Leon be gone,’ he said in a deprecating tone.

‘It is, my father,’ said Edith firmly. ‘He was well aware that we were affianced, and yet he made advances to me which he knew you would encourage, if you could. His conduct has not been generous, and he has not acted the part of a man.’

Young Karl bit his lip, and looked half inclined to be angry; but the banker changed the subject to that of his journey, which was to be performed on horseback, with four armed attendants, as the road was not safe, and they had to pass through a thick wood. Karl had never before ventured that way, except in company with many other traders; but his feelings towards Leon were too strong to allow him to think of anything else. He gave a few cautions’ instructions to Edith, placed her in the charge of the old attendant, handed young Karl a full purse, and then, after one or two adieus, departed on his way, in a hopeful but serious mood.

#### VII.

About a day’s journey from Ghent, there was, in the days of which we write, a thick wood.—On one side, it climbed a gentle hill; on the other, it descended to a winding river of small dimensions. At the spot where the scene is most picturesque, and where now there is a railway station, stood a small round-side inn, where carter, packman, and retard-d travellers were sometimes wont to stop, but which bore a very ill name in the country—some even going so far as to call it the Devil’s House. It had certainly an evil look about it. It appeared half in ruins, or rather its upper story had never been finished, and the windows were all stuffed with hay, rags, and fagots, presenting to the eye a most venerable and uninviting aspect. A sign creaked with a dismal sound over the door, and a pool of musty water, fed by a spring, was dis-

puted by a pig and a flock of ducks, when horses were not driven there to drink. A wretched looking girl served as hostler, chamber-maid, waiter, &c.; while the landlord was a man of about fifty, common in look, and with an expression of vulgar sensuality peculiarly repulsive. A low, small forehead, a large mouth, and a nose flattened by some accident, were marks of themselves sufficient to terrify the pacific. There is much in a landlord; and an inn rarely fails where there is a jolly, merry, stout host, of smiling aspect, to welcome the weary traveller.

For several months the inn had assumed even a more dismal and deserted aspect than usual.—There was no provender to be had for horses, and scarcely food for man. The landlord looked wretched, the girl pale and half-starved. They seemed hardly in their senses, for all guests that came they treated gruffly; so that few stayed, especially as with the decreased accommodation the charges became exorbitant. The master stood the greater part of the time at his door smoking, while the girl sat by the fireside, her head resting on her knees. She was always thinking; an occupation which Peter Krubingen did not relish, for he would often interrupt her savagely, and then, as if recollecting himself, change his tone, and speak gently.

On the evening of the departure of Leon from Ghent, a scene of this kind occurred. The girl was seated by the fire, musing; the man had been looking at her for some time, with a scowl of the most threatening character.

‘Poleska,’ he said savagely, ‘what are you sitting with your eyes fixed on the fire for?’

‘I was thinking,’ said the young girl, who was of Polish origin.

‘Of whom?’

‘Not of you.’

‘Of whom then?’

‘I dare say you can guess.’

‘Poleska, you know very well what my intentions are. Once our affairs settled, I shall return to my own country, and make you my wife. You will be a proud and happy woman, Poleska, if you are wise and discreet. But stop this sobbing and musing, or it will be worse for you.’

‘What can you do worse than you have done? You found me a poor orphan of seven years old; you gave me a home and shelter, and made me your servant, to wait on you, on your guests, ill-fed, ill-clothed. When I became a young woman, you fancied I was pretty, well-favored, and you offered to make me your wife. I refused—for a good reason, and you seek to win me by ill-usage and brutality; but, Peter Krubingen, I will never be your wife!’

The man looked at her in a scowling way, and then turned his back, muttering something to himself not very flattering to the girl, whom, however, he did not seem to wish to exasperate. At this moment, a traveller on foot, plainly clad, a stick in one hand and a small bundle in the other, came up, looked at the inn, and then walked carelessly towards it.

‘What is there for your service?’ said Peter Krubingen gruffly.

‘I want a crust of bread, a mug of beer, and a bed,’ replied the traveller, a young man of goodly aspect, who stared with extreme surprise as he observed the landlord stand full in the doorway.

‘You will find very bad accommodations here, my master; I would advise you to walk on further.’

‘What?’ said the other; ‘I think I must have misunderstood you. At all events I go no further; I must rest here this evening. I have walked twenty miles, and am not inclined to cross the forest in the night.’

‘I tell you, my master, that you must sleep hard, eat black bread, and drink ill, if you stay here. I am giving up business, and am sick of waiting on my fellows.’

‘I am sorry for it; but my legs refuse to carry me further, so let me pass, and remain an honest host for another day,’ replied the youth; and he brushed past the landlord, threw his bundle on a table, and sat down on a bench.

Poleska quietly rose, gave him bread, cheese, and, to his great surprise, a jug of good wine. Peter looked on all the time with a dissatisfied and scowling glance. The young man, considerably puzzled at what he saw and heard, roused himself from his fatigue and lassitude, to watch. He saw at a glance, from the faces of the two, that there was a mystery to be discovered, and at once suspected that there was a crime concealed under all. He tried to detect places of intelligence between the two, but failed. He thought, on the contrary, that the man looked menacing, and the girl defiant, while it was clear she was overcome with profound melancholy.—Always generous and thoughtful, Leon Gondy—for it was our fugitive—determined to fathom her secret if possible; but he perceived that the host watched them, and he endeavored, accordingly, to appear unconcerned; presently, he asked for a room, as, he said, he was tired.

‘A room?’ said Peter Krubingen, sneeringly;

‘I told you, you would be ill accommodated here. I have no room; you must sleep on a bench.’

‘I will sleep on a bench,’ replied the young man, quietly.

‘He can have my room, and I will sit up,’ said Poleska. ‘I have no inclination for sleep.’

Peter Krubingen looked savagely at her, but the girl bestowed no notice on him, turning to gaze once more at the empty fireplace. The landlord muttered something, and left the room. Poleska rose and crossed over to the door, whence the stairs by which he was ascending could be surveyed. The landlord was at the top, stamping and growling as he went.

‘Are you a stout and bold youth?’ said Poleska, without turning her head.

‘What mean you?’ exclaimed Leon, speaking, however, in a low tone.

‘Would you prevent a great crime?’ she continued, still without turning.

‘If it were in my power,’ said the young man, whose pre-visions were clearly realized.

‘Go to your room; you will be locked in, but here is a master-key. Bolt and bar yourself in; and when morning comes, descend, go round the house, and under the first oak you will find me—I will then explain my meaning. But I had almost forgotten. Under the mattress, you will find arms; they may perhaps be needed: take them.’

‘I will follow your advice in all things,’ replied Leon, quietly.

‘God bless you, my gallant youth. But exchange no look of intelligence with me; let no glance but that of scorn escape you. He is cunning, deeply cunning; and all will be lost if he suspects us.’

The step of Peter Krubingen was heard descending, and Leon was silent. He poured himself out a glass of wine, and drank it off as the other came into the room. After rapidly examining the countenances of both, the landlord informed Leon that his bed was at his disposal. Leon looked round, and took up a small oil-lamp. Poleska never moved.

‘Are you not going to show the stranger his room?’ said Peter Krubingen in a brutal tone.

‘There are not so many but what he can find it,’ replied Poleska sulkily.

‘Go and show it,’ repeated the host, in a still more surly tone.

Poleska took up the lamp, and preceded Leon. Arrived at the top of the stairs, Poleska silently pointed to a door, saw the young man in, then locked it on the outside, and took the key down stairs. Leon paid no attention to this, but proceeded to examine his room. It was small, and contained nothing but the bed, a chair, and a box; there were strong bolts on the inside, and a bar, of which Leon at once made use. He then turned up the mattress, and found a poniard, and a pair of loaded pistols, of the usual unweildy make of the day. These he placed beside his bed, and then lay down in his clothes.

#### VIII.

To sleep under the circumstances was not an easy matter. Leon had much to think of.—From an overwrought sense of duty, he had given up his fair bride, and the brilliant fortunes that awaited him with her; he had abandoned a post occupied with honor for more than a year, and was returning home to begin the world anew, with a very unsatisfactory account of himself for his father. In the inn where he had thrust himself, he did not feel in much danger, but still his position was not an agreeable one. He was engaged in an adventure of which he could not see the end; he did not hesitate, however, but resolved to try his utmost to do a good act, tho’ not at all able to fathom the mystery by which he was surrounded. Strange ideas, wild thoughts, visions of varied character, filled his mind; he thought of Edith, of his long and happy engagement to her, of his blighted hopes, of his rival, and of the good old man to whom he had sacrificed his dearest feelings.

He had seen him that day, and guessed his errand. While walking along the road, he had heard horses’ footsteps behind him; and not sure who the strangers might be, he had concealed himself behind some bushes; glad was he when he recognised Karl Rosenfelt and his armed attendants. He knew at once, that in the first generous impulse of the moment, he had determined to bring him back, and keep to his promise; but Leon felt that to show himself was to be dangerous and weak; and stifling a heavy sigh, he remained in his concealment. He was so convinced that the union between young Karl and Edith was necessary to the old man’s happiness, that he was determined at any price not to stand in the way. To give up a bright future, thus within his reach, was painful indeed; but Leon Gondy was deeply impressed with the conviction that he was doing right, and to him this was compensation for much of his disappointment and suffering.

The old man had passed rapidly, and Leon Gondy had continued his journey. He had made up his mind to return to France, and there

in the pursuit of commerce, and by strict attention to his business, to try to bring about that oblivion of the past he so much desired; but an adventure, more like romance than reality, had now checked him on his way, although at this he rather rejoiced than otherwise. To him, it was so pleasant to have some honorable and legitimate excuse to remain near Edith, that even he was pleased at his present danger, and at the mystery which environed him, on that night—the most memorable of his life.

He remained some hours musing—how long he could not stay—but at last he fell asleep, sound asleep, but not for long, as when he awoke it was still only the dawn of the day, and he remembered his promise. He leaped out of bed, dressed as he was, took the pistols and dagger, and unbarred and unlocked the door. There was not a sound in the house. He listened carefully, but he neither heard nor saw anything; he then turned to the window, and looked out. He saw before him a narrow opening in the forest, and about a hundred yards distant, the ruins of a mill; it was a quaint-looking, old-fashioned building, and had probably in its day been the property of some good staunch miller, but now it was a remnant of times gone by. The morning was bright and sunny—birds chirped, the wind shook the leaves of the trees, the dew sparkled bright in the rising sun, and that peculiar steam which rises from the ground on such occasions, created a slight fog. All was perfectly calm and still, and Leon felt a revulsion of feeling as he thought of crime haunting that spot; he, however, remembered his promise, and, taking his stick and bundle, began calmly descending the stairs.

It was about four o’clock; the house was already open, but not a soul was to be seen; this made Leon almost hesitate. Had not a trap been laid for him?—had the girl deceived him? He could not believe it, and so he went on his way. He left the house—he had left the amount of his score in his bedroom—and went round to the back. At a little distance, under a tree, he saw Poleska; her arms were folded, and she seemed musing deeply. As the young man neared her, she started. ‘Many thanks, stranger,’ she said, in a low tone; ‘but follow me quickly: we have no time to lose.’

In a few minutes they had reached the mill, and Poleska, pointing to a stone, made sign to Leon to sit down.

‘I have trusted in your open countenance, stranger,’ she began. ‘For months, a secret has weighed upon me; I have been, by my silence, the accomplice of a crime. Day and night it bowed me down, until I can bear it no longer.—I have resolved at last, at all risks, to prevent its accomplishment by revealing the truth. It may cost me my life, but I care not. It would be better to die than live eternally face to face with remorse.’

‘Young girl,’ replied Leon, ‘no harm shall happen to you. Whatever you have to reveal, speak boldly. There are laws and magistrates who will protect you.’

‘No laws and no magistrates can protect from what will happen to me; but it matters little: the worst has happened to me already. But listen.’

Leon did, and heard a story which made his heart beat, his cheek bleach, and that filled him with wonder, indignation, and, at the same time, with hope. When Poleska concluded her tale, he leaped up, grasped her arm convulsively, and spoke: ‘Open the door quick, Poleska! You have saved my life, and given me more joy than I can explain.’

Poleska, wondering at what she heard, gave him a large key; Leon took it, and opened the door quickly. Before him was a short, dark passage, and then another door, but only barred on the outside. The young man laid his hand upon it; at that instant, he heard a piercing shriek, the door behind him was violently fastened, and he remained in total darkness.

#### IX.

A week later, old Karl Rosenfelt returned to Ghent in a very bad humor. He had found no trace of Leon at Bruges. Seven days of travel and ill temper had somewhat modified his admiration of the young man’s sacrifice. At all events, as Leon had departed, he could not see any reason for hesitating to make his friend’s child happy. He had, therefore, in his own mind, settled the marriage of Edith and young Karl; in fact, he was—so variable is the human mind—rather pleased at bottom at the turn events had taken. He had not sent Leon away; he had chosen himself to depart.—He would have fulfilled his promise, had the young man called on him to do so; he would, under any circumstances, have remained his friend, if the other had allowed him; but he had disappeared mysteriously, and left no sign; and old Karl Rosenfelt began to imagine that there was too much of the romantic Frenchman about him, and that his romances and poetry had spoiled his character.

During the absence of old Karl, the young people met frequently, but every effort on the part of the youth was vain—Edith would have nothing to say to him. She answered him in monosyllables, and no oftener than was strictly necessary. The young man was furious, though he tried to conceal his mortification; still he persevered, altho’ he was oftener absent than usual, seeking amusement in more friendly society.

On the morning of the return of old Karl, they were together, and the merchant’s adopted son was striving to make himself agreeable to the young girl.

‘It is not my fault, Edith, if you are lovely; it is not your fault if your charms have had so powerful effect on me. It is so sweet to love one like you.’

‘Is it?’ replied Edith, coldly, and with even something of a sneer on her lip.

‘I can well understand that Leon, accomplished and elegant, besides long known, had advantages over me; but when you come to know more of me, you might—’

‘I shall never forget Leon; never think of any man but him as my husband,’ continued Edith.

The young man ground his teeth, and turned to go. At the door he nearly stumbled over and upset his patron.

‘Whither away in such a hurry,’ said the banker.

‘To leave Edith to herself. I try in vain to please her, and I wished to avoid offending her with my presence.’

‘Tut! tut! you are a boy. Edith will be reasonable. Leon is gone; gone for ever; I have not been able to find a trace of him either at Bruges or on the way.’

‘Poor Leon!’ said Edith, bending over her work: ‘murdered, perhaps, in the wood, the victim of Karl’s generosity!’

Young Karl started, and bit his lip. The tone was so bitter, that he felt himself hated, and a strange, almost a sinister smile passed over his face. The banker, however, motioned him to a seat, and opened the conversation.

‘My dear Edith, and you, my son, listen to me. I am an old man. I have everything in this world smiling around me; Providence has been very good, and yet I am not happy. I ask for one blessing, and that is the union of my dearly cherished child with the child of my foster brother. Reflect, Edith, Leon has gone freely, of his own accord. He will not return. He has slipped away mysteriously; and the rendezvous at Bruges was evidently only contrived to draw our attention from the real route he has followed. Now, then, nothing stands in the way of my happiness but your will, my child.—I am sure you will not refuse to please your old father’s heart.’

‘By doing what, father?’

‘By consenting to a union with the son of my foster brother Paul.’

‘My father, you could not ask me to do anything more painfully disagreeable. It is not indifference, it is not want of affection—it is invincible repulsion and dislike I feel for him.—Something stands between him and me, which, if plainly described, would be called hate. If, under these circumstances, you still wish our union, I will try and make up my mind to it, as I would make up my mind to death and ruin.’

‘Edith, what have I done to merit your hate?’ said young Karl who was very pale.

‘I cannot explain to you, but I know my feelings. My father has compelled me to divulge them. I now leave myself to your bands, and trust to your generosity.’

The banker had not replied; he was in a passion. The working of his face showed the agitation of his mind. At last he trusted himself to speak.

‘Edith, I have been too good to you. I have weakly allowed this young Frenchman to steal away your heart. You no longer love me, or how could you speak of hating my friend’s child?’

‘I cannot help it father; it is a feeling I cannot resist. It came on me almost with the first sight of him; but it may pass. I will do my best to conquer it. You have been a kind, good father, and had you not shown your feelings too much to Leon, I should have been a happy woman. But Leon has gone; and, although altogether unchanged, I will, if one month hence you wish to force me, take the hand of one whom I shall never respect or love!’

With these words Edith, who was ready to choke with emotion, hurried out of the room, leaving Karl and the young man together. They were silent for a few minutes, and then the banker, taking young Karl’s hand, bade him be of good cheer, for that feelings so violent never lasted long.

‘My uncle,’ replied the youth, bending his eyes to the ground, ‘it is my firm belief that she will never change. I had better retire. I have already driven away a friend: I have made your daughter unhappy; I see no wiser course before