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CROHOORE OF THE BILL-HOOK.

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CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

The time of our story is placed in that period when white-boyism first began to appear in Ireland. Laboring under the excessive penal code then in almost full operation, though since partly repealed, and excluded by one of its enactments from even an opportunity to become educated, and so gain an enlightened, or, at least, temperate view of their own situation, the Irish peasantry, neglected, galled, and hard-driven, in poverty, bitterness, and ignorance, without competent advisers, without leaders a step above themselves, and scarcely with an object, wildly endeavored to wreak vengeance upon, rather than obtain redress from, the local agents of some of the most immediate hardships that maddened them. First of all, there was, doubtless, religious frenzy to urge them on. They saw their creed denounced, their form of worship, under heavy penalties, interdicted, and they knew that some years before their priests had been hunted like foxes, and forced to hide in caves and other places of concealment, from the keen scent and vengeance of the most insignificant professors of the rival religion, who, with impunity, took arms in their hands to enforce the rigid letter of an almost exterminating law, still of their knowledge unrepealed.

In the very district in which the scene of tale is laid—and the anecdote is put forward as one laying claim to strict belief—a rustic congregation once assembled, with their pastor, in the open air, to perform their pious devotions, when three or four mean mechanics of the other profession appeared, with guns in their hands, fired among the crowd, killed some, and wounded the clergyman, as he preached to his flock in the wilderness.

Such occurrences operating upon the mind of the persecuted and uneducated peasant, who had not intellect or patience to weigh logical distinctions, begot a hatred to the opposite creed, as rancorous as it was whole and entire; he hated it because it was the privileged one; because his own was persecuted; because he attributed to its spirit the civil excommunication against him and his revered priests, and even the petty gratuitous annoyances he suffered from its lowest professors. And in such a state of feeling he found himself, while already ground down by unnatural rack-rents, compelled to contribute to the support, in splendor and superiority, of the law-established church; in fact, to pay to its ministers the hard-earned pittance he could not afford to his own; and this view of his situation first helped to make the Irish peasant a whiteboy.

But perhaps the exquisite tyranny of the merciless being into whose hands the collection of tithes had fallen, gave the immediate spur to his headlong, and often savage course; and, with this supposition, Peery Clancy, tithe-proctor, at the era of our history for the parish of Clarah, stands at once before us.

Having failed in every speculation of early life, and become old without credit to himself;—having been twice in jail, once for debt and once for sheep-stealing. Peery Clancy, at fifty years of age, blazed forth a tithe-proctor. He was a waddling, lively old fellow, with a curious struggle of expression in his hard features, and a queer jumble in his manners. The stern bully was on his pursed brow and in his clenched teeth—but, when you looked fixedly at him, there appeared, in his rambling eye, a shuffling consciousness that he had not earned your good opinion, as well as in the general wincing and uneasiness of his person, particularly in the awkward rising and falling, and see-sawing of his arm, as he spoke to you, something like the fidgets of a shame-faced child, that often dreaded and deserved a whipping. A certain air of purse-pride ran, meantime, through all this; and, once in his presence, you would disagreeably feel he was a man who, however aware he might be of the contempt of the world, possessed, in spite of obloquy, or even of the threat and danger to which he stood exposed, resolution of character to act his part without flinching.

His clothes, of good texture, were made half after the country fashion, half after the town;—he wore his hat hangingly, with the fur brushed the wrong way, to convince, at a look, that it was superior to the common felt vulgarly worn; and his many-colored silk handkerchief, his coat of good broad-cloth, composed of as much material as would make two of our modern cut, and his kerseymere small clothes and leggings, really gave him the look of wealth and superiority.

A round thousand, earned, principally, by squeezing from the very, very poorest, their last acid shilling; they were his best profit; his fat of the land, his milk and honey. Such as could at once afford to pay his exorbitant demands, did so, no matter how unwillingly, and got rid of him; but the wretched being, who, from the rising of the sun till many hours after his setting, was bent beneath the first imalediction of heaven, yet gained thereby but a scanty supply of the

meanest food, rags for his covering, and despair for an inmate (among many others) of the hovel, that did not keep off the inclemency of the weather—this was the prey Peery contrived to gripe—and the gripe never relaxed till he had crushed his victim.

He called for his tithe. Perhaps the time was not auspicious to dispose of the little crop, or perhaps it was not matured; any cause, no matter what, Dermid could not pay him; and Peery as an indulgence, suggested a note of hand. If Dermid could write his name, the bill was executed in form; if not, after many bungling attempts to feel or hold the pen in his horny fingers, he set his mark to it. Time wore on; the bill came due; but the amount was still not in the way, and Peery vouchsafed some of his rude jests to the daughter or wife, which, though they made them blush, were taken as a mark of goodwill by Dermid, who, forcing himself to laugh, handed a douceur, and the note of hand was renewed.

Meantime the crop had been unprofitable, or the landlord has seized it for his rent; and from the unexpected smallness of the receipts, or the law costs attending the seizure, to say nothing of various other casualties, there is no provision to meet the assiduous Peery, who again makes his appearance. Dermid sells some of his potatoes; and, by stinting himself and his family of even this miserable and only food, he gives another douceur. When payment is a third time demanded, he is worse off than ever; Peery sees the state of his affairs; he begins to scowl; and insists that he must be paid, and then abruptly departs to put his threats into execution.

The demand may not exceed—how much will the affluent or easy reader think?—one pound. Peery issues what is called a citation to the ecclesiastical courts; this increases the sum more than double; there is a decree, and this, again, is followed by a civil process. The law generally allows one shilling and one penny (Irish) for the trouble of filling the blanks in the process; and Peery, as generally, takes the troubles on himself, that is, fills them himself, and pockets, to use his own language, the thirteen. The same sum is also allowed for the service upon the party; Peery employs a needy understrapper to serve, at twenty pence per day, and two throats of whiskey, one hundred; and here again jobs the difference. Thus Dermid incurs still more debts, and Peery makes still more money. The understrapper promising the whole weight of his vast friendship on the occasion, than which nothing is farther from his power or will, contrives to pick up a shilling, too, at the very moment he serves the process.

The sessions come on. Dermid vainly prays for indulgence. By some desperate shift he contrives to scrape together the sum first demanded, but learns, in affright and consternation, that it is now trebled. He cries out that he is ruined; wrings his wretched hands; perhaps the broken-spirited and contemptible man weeps; and perhaps, at that very moment, reminded by Peery, 'that sure his well lookin' wife and daughter might asily get him the money.' Full to the chin with rage he cannot vent, Dermid returns home. His case comes before the county barister; and, as the mild and sapient lawyers of the session-court term it, he is decreed; his only horse or cow is carried off; Peery brings the animal to the public street-auction, and, at one fourth of the value, knocks it down to—himself; and then sells it at a good profit; charges his reverend employer with the expenses for the recovery of Dermid's tithe; against this charge sets the auction-price of the horse; and it sometimes happens that the clergyman is a loser by the transaction.

Need it be observed that, through the whole course of this affair, Peery, and Peery alone, had the advantage? He got the two douceurs from Dermid; he filled the process; he got it served at a profit of eight hundred per cent; he gained two pounds, at least, on cow or horse; and, at last, bamboozled and robbed his reverend employer; and sat down in the evening, over a poor a bumper of whiskey punch, to drink long life to the minister's tithes, and may they never fail him.

This is no fancy sketch. The man and the statements are carefully copied from the life and the facts; and it is not doubted that exactly at the time of this narration, such a man as Peery did not figure, we can only engage to produce, at a fair warning, as many living fac-similes as may be specified; observing, that an original for our picture, at the present hour, ought to entitle us to lay claim to an original for it half a century earlier; for society may have improved, the arts and sciences may have advanced, the Bastille may have been torn down in one country and the Inquisition abolished in another; but the Irish tithe-proctor of fifty years ago, and the Irish tithe-proctor of fifty years ago, are individuals of one and the same species.

And what has become of Dermid? Why, he attended the sessions-court to hear himself de-

creed; he attended the sale of his 'baste,' to see it knocked down for a song; he turned towards his home, hastily concluding, that, for the poor man and the papist, there was no law or mercy in the land; he continued his long walk, pondering over this bitter, desperate and obstinate thought; he brought to mind, at the same time, all the life's labor and sweat he had uselessly expended; he crossed the threshold of his puddled hovel, and heard his children squalling for food; and then he turned his back upon them, gave a kick to the idle spade he met on his way; sought out some dozen Dermids similarly situated with himself; between them they agreed to take the tithe-proctors and the law of tithes into their own hands; proposed silly oaths to each other; and the result was, 'the boys' of whom Jack Doran made mention, called, apart from the abbreviation, whiteboys.

CHAPTER VII.

Rhia Doran strictly adhered to the voluntary promise he had given old Ned Shea, and sought Crohoore in every place that could be supposed to afford him secrecy and shelter.

As before stated it was the general opinion that Crohoore had not removed from the neighborhood, being frequently seen, even at a late period, always alone, and walking at a quick pace, with his short gun in his hand, and from those who thus casually encountered him, or who averred so, not seeming to shun any observation. But his absolute pursuers vainly looked to meet him; their path he never crossed; and while Rhia Doran put all his wits to work, and in every way availed himself of the assistance of his subjects, over the extensive range of country under his obedience—thus, it might be said, having on the alert every eye for six miles round—all proved to no purpose; Crohoore-na-bilhoge, or Crohoore of the bill-hook, the surname given to him since the murder, was still at large.

But, notwithstanding the allegiance due to King Doran, a principle had gone abroad powerful operation in Crohoore's favor, and served to counteract the general zeal that might otherwise by determined combination, have speedily delivered him into the hands of his pursuers; and this was nothing else than a now firm opinion, established in the minds of the population of the whole country, of the broad hints given at the wake and fully credited (as we have already seen) that Crohoore lived in constant intercourse with 'the good people,' and was under their sovereign protection.

It happened about this time that, having received private and anonymous intelligence (the informant, divided between his fears and his conscience, thus subtly trying to cheat the devil in the dark) that Crohoore might be come on in a particular direction, Doran led a select party to the ground, and remained anxiously on the watch. It was night. For some hours they guarded, together, one point; and then the leader left a sentinel there, and withdrew his main body to search in another and nearer quarter. The man thus posted alone, having been wearied with much previous fatigue, unconsciously dropped asleep. How long he slept is unknown, when he was flattered with a smart slap on the shoulders, and desired to stir himself.

'Yes, yes, a-rich, I'm comin';' said the man, scrambling up; 'and ye have the bloody dog at last, have ye?'

He was now on his legs, and facing round, saw, instead of the comrade he had expected, 'the bloody dog' himself, standing within a few yards of him, his short gun held to his hip, as if prepared for instant action. The valiant as well as watchful sentinel started back; Crohoore advanced a step on him, and spoke in a cautious tone:—

'Stand where you are, man; I have no mind to harm you. Thady, where's the little sense I thought you had? Jossing your night's rest to no purpose? Mind your own callins, Thady Mul-downy, and never mind me; I give the advice, let you follow it, or, as sartain as we both stand here, you'll live to sorely rue it. Jack Doran and the other boys are down at Tom Murphy's barn, lookin' after me, and that's all they'll have by it, as yourself sees; go to 'em; say I sent you; say you were spakin a bit to me, and tell 'em the same words I tould you. Go your ways, Thady, and remember the friendly warnin I give, and keep to your warm bed, by nights, for the futur; he waved his arm in the direction he wished Thady to travel, then turned on his heel the opposite way, and to Thady's mortal joy was quickly out of view, who, by the way, attributed to Crohoore's clemency, only, the remains of the breath, by aid of which he continued to mutter all the while his bugbear was visible, 'Lord save us; Lord protect and save us; praise be to God!'

Running with all his might, Thady gained the barn mentioned by Crohoore, and there, indeed, found his companions where he had been told to look for them. He did not fail to relate the adventure with some little additions, calculated effectually to disguise the fact of his own drowsi-

ness and subsequent inanity; and from this night forward, few were found willing to engage personally in the pursuit after Crohoore. The hint given to Thady Malone appeared to have reason in it; mortal might, when put in competition with a person who was concealed and fondled by the mischief-doing 'good people,' seemed not only useless, but extremely dangerous in the main; and so, except Rhia Doran himself and one or two others, who were either superior to the general superstition, or wished in the teeth of their qualms to establish a character for unparalleled courage, all refrained from an experiment which was likely, if persevered in, to entail danger on all.

Doran, however, continued fixed and faithful to his purpose; he was invariably on Crohoore's track whenever he could indifferently hear a whisper of his probable motions; and to those who wondered at his fool-hardiness, and still more at his exemption from hurt or harm, he jocosely said he had got a cure from a fairy-doctor that preserved him in a whole skin; and this plea, although it might have been meant in jest, was argument sound and good with those who boasted no such talisman against the fantastic nonsense of the spiteful little race, whom they thought mischievous, while they pronounced them 'good' and who thus, like all dangerous despots, came in for that

"Mouth-honor, breath, Which the poor heart would fain deny, but dare not."

Perhaps Doran gained, by his assiduity, one or two points of some value to him, apart from the self-gratification and reward of doing a generous and humane action. In the first place, his readiness to forget old grievances, incurred from Pierce Shea and Alley and her father, brought him 'golden opinions from all sorts of people; his coming forward so actively to guard their interests in adversity, and to venture his limbs and life in their defence, who, having once been his friends, changed into his bitterest foes; this made a popular impression, the ferrency of which no words could express, and, even by the soberest of his neighbors, Jack Doran's bad qualities were now forgotten. Another advantage resulted, that, in all probability, he prized still more.—'The boys' of the district applauded his intrepidity to the skies, and whispers arose, not lost on Doran's quick ear, that the whole barony did not contain another man so fit to lead them on nocturnal expeditions of a different kind; to concentrate their strength, and direct their half-conceived views; in fact to be their captain.

Things were in this state when Pierce Shea, after his illness of two months, was at length able to resume, in his own person, the pursuit after Alley and the murderer of her parents.—Doran's manly conduct had reached his ear from a hundred admiring tongues; his father brought them together; Pierce could not avoid feeling gratitude and full forgiveness towards his old rival; and, when Doran once more renewed his offer to join him in all future operations, a band of amity was immediately formed between them; his hands were over and over shaken; old Ned shouted forth his joy and approbation; the cup was more than once pledged to success; and the young men called each other the greatest friends in the world.

But seemingly assisted, and cautiously followed, by Andy Houloban only, who at length remained the sole creature that from duty or love (other motives were out of the question) would venture to track Crohoore through his own green raths, in some one of which they firmly believed him a resident—the united efforts of Shea and Doran proved useless as ever. Almost night after night, and sometimes day and night, they were on foot, or on horseback, over the country; confused rumors of Crohoore's appearances incessantly, tho' indirectly, reaching them; and some of these reports seemed sufficiently bewildering and startling. It was averred, though none dared come forward to authenticate the statements, that the shingawn had frequently been seen, at one moment, down by a certain hollow, and, as a comparison of notes demonstrated, at the next moment, and by a different person, many miles away, sitting on as certain a stone, on the top of as certain a hill, his lank red hair fluttering in the wind, and his red eye turned wistfully off, as if watching the progress of some of his many accommodating messengers, through the extreme distance.

Andy Houloban need not have given to his foster-brother a more unbounded proof of devoted affection, than by at present treading in his footsteps. On proper ground, Andy could have braved and despised, as readily as any man, substantial danger from bludgeon, alpeen, or pistol; but let it not be supposed that an iota of courage now came to aid his love. Of all human beings, arrived at years of maturity (we will not say discretion) Andy Houloban yielded to supernatural creatures of every denomination, whether thigba, banshee, fetch, sheeog, or phooka, the fullest credence and dominion, and professed the strongest aversion to a rencontre with any of them, of what class soever.

So, on he followed, picking his steps as cautiously as if the ground were strewn with new laid eggs,—or, to use his own expression, 'as a hen walking over a stubble-field;' on through thick and thin, night and morning, after Shea and Doran; still no Crohoore was found; the prepossessions of the country-people continuing to obstruct all regular inquiry; and, finally grown inveterate, now refusing to supply even their former reports of accidental meetings with him.

But if they conceived that Crohoore ought not to be meddled with, in consequence of his close connexion, identity indeed, with the good people, the magistrates of the country seemed of a different opinion. Daring robberies had lately become very frequent; the houses of the rich were broken open at night, and plundered of everything valuable; the very poorest were despoiled of their little pittance; and all this was perpetrated by some unknown and undiscovered gang, every trace of whom had hitherto evaded the civil powers. Now, however, from the stories the magistrates had heard of Crohoore, it struck them, that a person showing such resolution, closeness, and cleverness of character, was very likely, whatever he might lack in personal prowess, to be the leader of exactly such a band of secret and adroit desperadoes; and this strong surmise was confirmed by accounts of his having been often met in the direction where the outrages happened. A reward, immediately subsequent to the murder of the Doolings, had been offered for his apprehension; but the new suspicions mentioned made him an object of increased interest, and the posse comitatus were accordingly straining every nerve on the look-out.

Crohoore-na-bilhoge baffled, however, his new pursuers, as well as his old. Sometimes, our friends, Shea, Doran, and Andy, fell in with the other party, and all united, following up some hint proposed on either side, in common chase and common cause. But all efforts went for nothing; the game left them still at fault, and—it was rather extraordinary—without seeming to be a whit more in dread of apprehension; for to the country people, if they were belief-worthy, who dared not molest him, and who chanced to stray out at night, his appearance was so frequent as ever; they, meantime, keeping all that snug among themselves.

It were but a dull repetition here to give in detail the trifling circumstances in attendant upon the daily and nightly search of Pierce Shea and Andy, and their new friends; as, up to a certain evening, their toilsome occupation differed only in the different route chosen. But, upon the evening alluded to, an occurrence took place worth recording.

The month of March had begun, when a man from a remote district, sufficiently out of reach of the supernatural tyrants of Clarah, their jurisdiction, or anything to be feared from it, came to Shea's house, where Doran now constantly lived, with information that, but a few hours before, he, the informant, saw Crohoore pass along the hills in the direction of Castlecomer, a village some miles distant. Shea, Doran, and Andy, instantly set forward, pressing their spy to join them; but he declined the adventure; even he thinking that he had run just enough of hazard by pointing out the way; and Andy agreed with him, and thought it reasonable.

Our friends engaged in this expedition more ardently, and with more hopes of success, than for a long time they had felt; and their depression was proportionally strong as, after another night of useless toil, they wended homeward, in the cold gray morning, through the little glen of Ballyfoile.

This place, four miles north-east of Kilkenny city, is a romantic dell, formed by hills of considerable height, and of abrupt and almost perpendicular descent, having rather an appearance of art, from the similarity of their form, and, at some points, approaching each others' bases so closely, as not to leave more than eight or ten paces between, while at no part are they more than forty yards asunder. They are clothed to the summit with thick and nearly impenetrable furze-bush, tangled underwood, and dwarf thorn, and, adown their sides, indented with deep channels, formed by rushing waters from above, when after heavy rain, it falls, with cataract speed, to swell the little brook that, at other times, just trickles through the narrow green slip of valley below. There is nothing of sublimity or grandeur about the spot; yet, to a spectator placed midway up the glen, there is much to create interest. Peint up so closely, no continuous scenery at either hand, nothing but the firmament visibly overhead, and from much abrupt curving, shut out from all view at either end, he would (if a simple and contemplative character, easily to be acted on by the ever-changing and wondrous aspect of nature) feel that there hung about the place a strange and unusual air of loneliness, making it the fit abode of the prowling fox, and timid rabbit, its only inhabitants. About ninety years ago this glen was dark and intricate wood of spreading oak, affording