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THE FATE OF FATHER SHEEHY. A TALE OF TIPPERARY EIGHTY YEARS AGO.

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CHAPTER IV.—LAW AND JUSTICE AS OPPOSED TO EACH OTHER.

The first trial that came on was that of Edward Meighan, the alleged murderer of John Bridge. When placed in the dock, the sunburnt face of the prisoner wore a satisfied and even an exulting smile, and there was triumph in the glance which he cast around.

The two magistrates whom we have seen discussing the question of attempting to bribe Meighan knew not that one of their brethren had already tried, and failed. This fact they only learned in the course of the day.

Early in the morning as Meighan sat alone in his dreary cell, thinking of his approaching trial, with the sad forebodings so natural to a husband and a father in such a position, the door opened, and in came—not the jailer, but one of the magistrates, whom Meighan well knew.

Meighan, said the gentleman, you are aware, I suppose, that your trial comes on to-day.

Of course I am, your honor—I know it well.

Has it ever occurred to you that you have it in your power to escape even a trial?

Well, no, sir, said Meighan—how could I think of such a thing—once in here? and he looked around him with a visible shudder.

Once in here, there's no getting out without a trial—every one knows that.

And yet there is a way, returned the visitor, speaking slowly and distinctly. It is in your power—and I put it to you as a husband and father—ay! and as a son, if you are not bound to war! off the impending danger?

I don't know, sir, till I hear how I'm to do it, then I'll tell you whether I'm bound or not. You know me, sir, and I know you—it's many a long day since you knew I was neither afraid or ashamed to profess my religion, and it's just as long since I knew that you had no love for Catholics, and would go any length to see one of us out of the way.

There was an angry flush on the cheek of the magistrate, but he chose to assume a smile. This is bold talking, Meighan, he said, but it is quite characteristic—let us, however, come to the point at once. What hopes have you, in case you stand your trial?

Well—not much, your honor, not much. There's no one knows better than yourself that innocence is no security now-a-days. To be sure I have witnesses plenty to prove that I had nothing to do with this murder—even if the deed was done, but that won't save me, I know well—nor his reverence neither, God help us both!

You say you have no hope, said the visitor, not seeming to notice his last words—Well, here I stand who can set you free, even without a trial, and restore you to the wife and children and aged father who are depending on you for support.

Meighan's eye glistened, and his cheek glowed. And what would you have me do, sir? what price would you lay on my freedom?

Only turn king's evidence, confess yourself guilty, and swear that Sheehy employed you to make away with Bridge, and you are a free man—ay, and a rich one!

Don't say another word! cried Meighan, don't insult me any farther. I guessed what you were at from the very beginning. If I wasn't a prisoner, you daren't make such an offer to me. Och! then, this is the worst of all, indeed it is! and the poor fellow's tears burst forth like rain, notwithstanding all his efforts to restrain them.

Then I suppose you reject my proposal? said the magistrate coldly.

Reject it? said Meighan, in a voice half choked with emotion. Oh! indeed I do then reject it. Although I am in jail for murder (here he made the sign of the cross on his forehead), God hasn't given me up that way.

Life is very sweet! said the magistrate, and it is the part of a fool throw it away.

Well! I'd throw away a thousand lives if I had them, exclaimed the prisoner fervently, before I'd consent to swear away any one's life, and the priest's above all—och, then, Father Sheehy! he added, clasping his hands together, did any one ever hear such a thing as them to ask Ned Meighan to turn informer against you—you that's as innocent as the babe unborn—

och, then, is there justice in heaven, for if there isn't God help us all. Ay, that 'd be a hearing and a seeing, sure enough—Ned Meighan confessing himself guilty of such a crime—such a black crime as that, and swearing that Father Sheehy bid him do it. I'll just tell you what it is, sir, he added with a sudden change of manner—the sooner you take yourself out of my sight, I'll be all the better pleased.

But remember your wife and children, and your old father.

I do remember them, and I could never look one of them in the face if I thought even for a minute of doing the likes of that. If it's God's will they must all bear up agin their heavy loss when I'm taken from them, but they'll never have it thrown in their faces that I done anything for them to be ashamed of—and that 'd be the shame of the world if I tould a lie, and swore to it, to add a few years to my life.—Don't be uneasy about my family—for I know they're a great trouble to you all out—but just go your ways. I'll not spake another word while you're in the place, so you'll be only losing your time.

Well, depend upon it, both you and the priest shall swing for it.

And if we do, too, we're not the first that suffered in the wrong—nor we'll not be the last either, while the law is in the hands of you and the like of you.

Two hours later, poor Meighan stood in the dock, and what wonder was it that his fine, manly face wore a look of triumph. But a saddened expression soon came over every feature, when in a corner of the court-house he recognised his aged father leaning on his stick. A glance of mournful meaning was exchanged between them, and then the old man raised his eyes to heaven, and pointed upwards with his finger. Just then the trial commenced. The witnesses for the prosecution were Mrs. Brady (reader! it was the miserable prostitute Dunlea, who had borrowed the name of the soldier Brady with whom she then lived, in order to give a show of decency to her evidence)—Toohy, the notorious horse-stealer, and the vagabond Loneragan. These worthies all swore that Meighan had murdered Bridge, on the night of the 24th of October, by striking him on the head with a bill-hook, at a signal from Father Sheehy. Oh, then, glory be to God! cried the prisoner when he heard this sworn for the first time, if that doesn't beat all the swearin' ever man or mortal heard—oh—oh!—isn't it a wonder that the ground doesn't open under their feet an' swallow them up.

Silence there! cried a stentorian voice, not another word. The prisoner was silent, but a deep groan burst from the oppressed heart of the poor old father, and he was heard to murmur, Wirra! wirra! is it him—is it Ned to split any one's skull—oh, sweet mother Mary, are you listenin' to that? Silence in court, roared the loud voice again, and all was still save the witness on the table. It was Toohy, who, dressed up for the occasion in a superfine blue coat, with black silk vest and knee breeches (as an eye-witness described him) made a very respectable appearance. Then followed Loneragan, who being no more than sixteen, and small in stature even for that age, was equipped in a long blue coat, reaching to his heels, with a view to make him appear older. All three had their lesson well learned, and there were no lawyers bold enough to cross-examine them, at least so as to test their evidence, and so the prosecution was triumphantly closed. Well! but we have plenty of good, decent witnesses, said the father of Meighan in a low voice to those about him. Thanks be to God! poor Ned has no want of evidence—these wretches 'll not have it all their own way.

Hush! hush! Atty, said a friend near him, in a low whisper. God help us all; there's not much law for us; any one of the blackguards that we heard swearin' sich barefaced lies will be worth half a dozen of Ned's witnesses—for all they'll be swearin' the blessed truth. But, hush! we must keep silent or we'll be put out.

The witnesses for the defence were numerous and of good character, and furnished overwhelming proof that Edward Meighan did not leave his own house all that night, when Bridge was said to have been murdered. Ay, it was proved beyond a doubt that the same Bridge had not been murdered, nor even molested on that night, having been seen by more than one individual some days later, and two men of fair, unblemished reputation swore positively that he had told them he was about to leave the country for fear of being taken by the soldiers. Such a body of clear, direct testimony in his favor might well lead the prisoner to reckon on an acquittal, and it was not strange to see the old man, his father, raise his hands and eyes to heaven with a fervent thank God! when the last witness for his son had left the table. As for Meighan himself he was thinking at that moment of the priest, and, knowing that the two cases were so closely connected, he, too, thanked God that Father

Sheehy might yet escape. But all this was soon changed—the judge rose to charge the jury, and while he dwelt on the positive evidence for the prosecution, he declared all the other unsatisfactory and deserving of little or no attention. A faintness came over the prisoner, and he leaned heavily against the railing of the dock, but in a moment he turned and looked towards his father. The poor old man was still there, leaning on his stick—his thin white hair thrown back from his forehead, and his eyes fixed with a wild, eager stare on the door where the jury had disappeared; nor did he once look at his son while the jury-box was empty, probably fearing that the sight might draw from him some exclamation which might attract observation, and be the cause of his being expelled from the court-house.

After a short deliberation the jury re-entered their box, and pronounced Edward Meighan guilty of the murder of John Bridge. A wild scream was heard from the body of the court-house, and poor old Meighan was seen lying pale and motionless in the arms of a bystander. The unhappy prisoner, forgetting even the awful words he had just heard, thought only of his father.

Och, then, isn't there some good Christian there that'll see to the poor old man—the poor heart-broken old man?

Ay, in throth is there, Ned, said one and another, and several sturdy farmers gathered around the old man. Don't be frettin' about him, for he'll never want a friend—God pity him an' you—an' us all for the matter o' that!

Well, said poor Meighan, with a faint attempt at a smile, well, sure enough if this is law it isn't justice—but it isn't the same in the other world—there we'll get justice—and sure that's comfort. There'll be no perjured witnesses heard there. I suppose there's no use in me saying anything more, even if I was allowed—for what could I say only repeat again, which I will till my last breath, that I never harmed John Bridge, nor any other man—and God knows that as well as I do.

Take him away, shouted a loud authoritative voice, and bring in Nicholas Sheehy.

A low murmur of indignation ran through the court, notwithstanding that scarcely any of the friends of the prisoner were present. The sound rose higher and higher during the time that intervened between Meighan's removal and the entrance of the priest, but when the latter was brought in and placed at the bar many voices were heard in various parts of the court-house crying out:

May the Lord deliver you from your enemies, Father Sheehy dear—but, ochone! you've only a poor chance after how they've thrated Ned Meighan!

The perjured villains, cried others—they'll swear whatever comes before them, and a man's life isn't worth twopenny in their hands.

But all these friendly voices were speedily silenced—the prisoner was forbidden to speak—and the trial commenced.

While the first witnesses were examined, Father Sheehy appeared to listen with an expression of earnest curiosity on his face, but he remained perfectly silent. From time to time as the wretched witnesses proceeded with their respective tales, he was seen to raise his hands and eyes to heaven in mute astonishment, as though wondering how any human being could imagine and relate such barefaced falsehoods—sworn to, moreover, on the Holy Evangelists. There was a mournful look in the eyes, and a paleness on his cheek which denoted a failing spirit, but still he bore it bravely, considering his recent imprisonment, and the announcement of Meighan's conviction, which had reached him just as he entered the dock. The witnesses were the same who had sworn against Meighan; and when Moll Dunlea made her deposition, and swore positively that she had heard the prisoner tell Meighan to give Bridge a dose (meaning to strike him with his weapon.) Father Sheehy was heard to murmur in an under tone—Thou knowest, oh Omnipotent God, that I never saw this unhappy woman till this present moment, though from her scandalous life I was obliged to excommunicate her.

Yet, though the scandalous creature and her worthy accomplices swore in the most positive manner that Bridge had been murdered with his consent and approval—and though Meighan had been so lately condemned on the same testimony, notwithstanding his having abundant proof of being entirely innocent, yet still did Father Sheehy appear to hope on, while a shadow of hope remained. He had just drawn himself up to his fullest height, after the examination of one of these hired witnesses, when he heard Patrick Herbert called, and forthwith that individual appeared on the table. A mortal paleness overspread the face of the prisoner, a sudden faintness came over him, and he would have fallen to the ground had he not caught the railing of the dock.

Why, he said in a low voice, leaning over to his lawyer, why this was one of my witnesses—he knows very well that I wasn't within some miles of the spot where they say Bridge was murdered, on the night in question. Good God can he, too, consent to go against his conscience?

Alas! he found that Herbert had been gained over by the threat of a prosecution for Whiteboyism, if he persisted in giving his testimony for the priest, and the crown lawyers fearing that the prisoner might have other witnesses brought forward in his place, if his dereliction were known to him in time, had purposely kept it concealed. Herbert was evidently a man of a timid, irresolute character, and now when he was swearing in direct opposition to his conscience, there was a tremor in his voice, and an agitation in his whole demeanor that spoke a mind ill at ease. It is true, his testimony was not very important being rather of a negative than a positive character, but still the desired end was gained, the prisoner was robbed of one of his best witnesses. Once, and once only, Father Sheehy forgot himself so far as to speak to him. Herbert, Herbert, said he, do you forget that God sees and hears you? The judge sternly commanded him to be silent, and Herbert went on, though his varying color and faltering voice showed how deeply he felt the appeal. But he never once dared to raise his eyes towards the prisoner, but kept them cast down, while he hurried over the shameful business in hand scarcely making his replies intelligible, from the low, indistinct tones in which he spoke. As he was quitting the table, the full, deep voice—the well-known voice of the priest again reached his ear.

Thank God! your conscience is yet alive—I see you are already tortured! Go, poor man—go and do penance; and may God forgive you as I do.

The prosecution was closed and the defence commenced. Few were the witnesses called, but they were well worthy of credit, and their testimony, if not conclusive, was, at least, strongly presumptive of the fact that Father Sheehy was innocent of the crime laid to his charge. Still nothing very important had been gained for him, and his lawyer began to manifest a certain degree of impatience, when Mr. Keating, of Turbid, was called, and instantly ascended the witness table. Mr. Keating was a man in the prime of life, with a singularly handsome countenance, whereon was stamped the candor and uprightness which belonged to his character, together with that look of benevolence which lends such a charm to the human face divine. His fine person was attired in those rich but unostentatious habiliments which distinguish the man of education and of good standing in society from the ephemeral fops who, having little else to recommend them, seem to devote all their energies to the one great business of 'dressing fashionably.' When Mr. Keating had bowed to the court he turned and saluted the prisoner in the dock with as much respect as though he stood at the altar. A cheerful smile lit up the wan features of the persecuted priest as he returned the salute, and, moving a step forward, he seemed to await what was coming with renewed hope. He glanced towards certain of the magistrates, where they sat near the judge, and he could see that they regarded Keating with a scowl of suspicion and dislike. Of course they hate him, thought he, for they know that his testimony cannot be set aside, and must be conclusive in establishing my innocence. But he can set them at defiance—his character and station place him beyond their reach—heaven bless him and his!

The testimony of Mr. Keating was to this effect, that Father Sheehy had slept at his house on the night when the murder was said to have been committed, and that he could not possibly have left the house during the night without his knowledge. Being asked could he then swear positively that the prisoner had not gone out in the night, he answered, Yes, I can—on my oath, Father Sheehy went to bed at a rather early hour of the night, and did not leave it again till the following morning was somewhat advanced.

Thanks be to God! murmured the prisoner, they cannot go beyond that? And he saw with satisfaction that even the judge seemed strongly impressed with the conclusive nature of this evidence.

From the body of the court-house arose an enthusiastic shout of gladness, that made the roof ring, many voices, too, were heard calling out, Long life to your honor! it's you that can tell the truth. Success to you, Mr. Keating! Many's the good turn your honor done before now, but this is the best of all! God reward you, sir, cried another, while several were heard to say; And sure I could swear to the same thing—I was talking to him that evening on the lawn at Turbid! and so forth.

Mr. Keating was cross-examined according to the most conclusive method of making a witness perjure himself, but not a particle of contradic-

tion could be elicited from him—his evidence was plain, unvarnished truth, and he was not the man to be embarrassed by the quibbling, or quirking, or punning of a crown-lawyer. Seeing that his inquisitor had paused, and manifested no intention of renewing his examination, the witness said—

I presume, sir, you have nothing more to ask of me—may I be allowed to go down?

Ay, you may go, said the man of law snappishly, we have done with you.

Just then stood up the rector of Cloughera, the Rev. Mr. Hewitson, and his rubicund face was bursting with importance. Is not this, said he, James Keating, commonly called, of Tubberett or Turbid?

Why, certainly, Mr. Hewitson, that is my name, and the name of my residence, replied Keating, with evident surprise, I should think the question was altogether superfluous here; there are few in this assembly to whom I am unknown.

Well, said the portly dignitary of the established church, deliberately unfolding a written document, and glancing over its contents, such being the case, I have to inform this worshipful court that said James Keating is on my list of disaffected and dangerous persons.

I? cried Keating in amazement—I am your list?—why, in the name of all that is sacred, how came I on your list of disaffected persons? Who has dared to accuse me of crime? He spoke with warmth—the honest fervor of indignant innocence.

Pray be cool, sir, said Hewitson, with a sneering smile—you are down here in black and white (laying his finger on the paper in his hand) as having been accessory to the murder of a sergeant and a corporal at New Market. As a natural consequence, your evidence is inadmissible.

Gracious God! exclaimed the prisoner, what thou endure this?—wilt thou suffer this innocent man to be made the victim of these men's hatred of me?—is he to be involved in my ruin, because he loved justice, and gave testimony to the truth! Oh, Lord—oh, Lord! I beseech thee that thou save him from the vengeful malice of our enemies. Do with me as thou wilt—I am a poor insignificant individual, whose life is of small moment to any one—but, oh, my God, his life is valuable, and let not the persecutors of our faith take it away! He spoke almost aloud, at the same time covering his face with both hands, as though to shut out the visible world, and for a moment there was a death-like silence in the court. It was but a moment—cries and sobs were heard around, and Mr. Keating spoke, but he spoke not for himself—thought not of himself. Turning towards the prisoner he said:

Father Sheehy, they have devised this plan to deprive you of the value of my evidence—may the All-merciful God protect you, for your last earthly hope is thus wrested from you.

Take him away!—take him away! shouted Hewitson. Handcuffs here quickly for the prisoner Keating! And instantly two constables advanced to seize him.

Stand back yet a moment, said Keating, waving his hand with an air of dignity that awed the men; I must say a word at parting. My lord, he said, bowing respectfully to the judge.

I address myself not to that man who has so conveniently found my name on his list—with him I have nothing to do, but to your lordship, and this honorable court, I must be permitted to say that, on the word and honor of a gentleman—nay, on my solemn oath, Father Sheehy is as innocent of the crime laid to his charge as I am of this newly-coined indictment, and I think even those who are prejudiced against this persecuted priest must see that this accusation has been brought against me solely to deprive him of the benefit of my testimony, which they dared not attempt to set aside. Whatever comes of it, with regard to myself, I will bear my fate as a Christian and a man, and as I now see that my reverend friend is doomed, and perhaps myself, too, I can only pray that he and I may meet in that world where Justice reigns supreme. Men! you can now put on your irons—Catholic gentlemen are well used to such ornaments in these ascendancy days.

My lord, said Maude, rising from his seat behind the judge, for Hewitson was literally speechless with anger—my lord, is not this man's insolence deserving of punishment?

Which he is about to receive, said the judicial functionary, with a bland smile. You seem to forget, my excellent friend, that he is to be taken to prison forthwith, and there kept in chains, until such time as his trial comes on.—Our reverend friend here has ordered him to prison, so rest contented? Maude bowed, and smiled, and resumed his seat. Keating was quickly handcuffed, and carried off to solitary confinement—but before he went he bade adieu to Father Sheehy, and requested him to pray for him and his family.