

# THE FRIAR'S HEAD

A Story of The Penal Days in Ireland.

(By P. J. Coleman, in Rosary Magazine.)

(Continued.)

Keenly the beggar eyed every face that passed him at the gateway of the abbey; loud and voluble rose his monotonous prayer for the dead, and grateful his thanks to the kind ladies and gentlemen who dropped silver in the hat. And by the grave, when the coffin had been lowered and the clouds fell with hollow sound on its lid, he knelt in fervent prayer, yet eagerly, in his apparent piety, scrutinizing every person who stood about.

When at last all was over and the last mourner had withdrawn, leaving only a few scattered peasants kneeling here and there at the graves of their kin, the beggar hobbled out of the graveyard and took the road to Boyle. Thence he struck out for Kingscourt, and by nightfall was with the Viscount.

"Well, Your Honor," he whined, "he's not at the Hall. I watched an' watched all around, an' I'm sure he isn't there. I stood at the gate of Kironan an' eyed every one that went in. But he wasn't there."

"Ha! too many prying eyes about on so public an occasion to be good for his safety," commented the Viscount. "I might have known as much."

"But I got word at the Hall that he was there lately, an' I have a fine plan to catch him."

"Yes, Bagshaw?"

"Yes, Your Honor. It seems that Miss Christine knows where he is."

"How did Miss Christine look? Of course you saw her at the grave?"

"I did, Your Honor, an' sorry I was for her, though I do say it myself. She looked that worn and weebegone, lanin' on the arm of her cousin, Richard Taaffe, that her distress melted a heart of stone."

"Faith, your sympathy commends you, knave," laughed the Viscount. "A priest-hunter's heart is a tender thing! But your plan?"

"Well, I told a cock-an'-bull story of Mister Nicholas Blake bein' sick near Castlereagh an' askin' for a priest. It seems that Miss Christine knows where he's hidin' and will send word to him to go to Mister Blake."

"An excellent plan. We may trust her susceptible nature to aid a fellow Papist in extremity."

"So I'll watch the road between Boyle an' Castlereagh, an' if I don't nab him at last, me name is not Bill Bagshaw."

"Good! good! It seems feasible. Try it, and good luck to you. But what of Birmingham? Have you seen him lately?"

"No, Your Honor, but I suppose he has his own plans. If he goes astray in them, it's not for me to set him right, wid fifty guineas at stake."

"Ha, I see," sneered the Viscount. "Two of a trade never agree, or, as some say, when thieves fall out, honest men get their due. Well, go, honest man, and if you bring me this fellow's head in a day or two I don't know but I'd double that fifty guineas to mark my approval."

The spy rubbed his hands in lupine avareness.

"Thrust me, Your Honor, thrust me, an' I'll do the trick. As long as the fox runs, he's caught at last."

"All right, Bagshaw, see that you catch him."

With quick parting injunction the Viscount repaired to the dining-room to join his fellow Bucks at their potations, from which he had been summoned by Bagshaw's arrival.

VI.

It was Sunday, the day after the burial of Sir Lucas, when a young man from Taaffe Hall paused on the road at the foot of Keash Hill, some miles from the Hall.

Keash is a beautiful hill in Sligo, not far from the old town of Ballynote. A rounded mass, it keeps sheer from the green plains of Corran to a considerable height and dominates the landscape like a giant warden. Its green activities are a patchwork of fields separated by stone walls and hedges. Golden crops of oats in autumn, interspersed with ripening wheat, plots of flax and darker patches of potatoes vary the magic coloring of its slopes. With here and there a white-washed cabin or a flock of grazing sheep showing sharply and vividly against the verdant background. Towards its summit the verdure falls away, giving place to a perpendicular escarpment of bare, gleaming granite, visible for miles, like a massive castle crowning the green hill. This fortress-like aspect is further heightened by a row of arched caves yawning, black and forbidding, like Gothic gateways, in the face of the cliff. Small wonder that the fanciful Celt has woven many a beautiful romance about the hill and its castellated crest, many a tender legend of fairy and wizard, of warrior and lover turned to stone and held in petrified distance deep in the heart of the haunted hill. When the moon shines on that ghostly rampart of naked rock and the wind moans in the gloomy recesses of the caves that strike far into the hill, he is a brave man or a foolhardy who will adventure near this abode of spirits.

Here from Taaffe Hall came Father O'Rourke, making his lair with the wolves that even then infested the caves or Coves, as the people called them. And hither on this peaceful afternoon, while the lovely land around slept in Sabbath beauty and calm, hurried the messenger from Christine Taaffe.

To reach the Coves was an easy task, and there, seated on a narrow terrace of clay, trodden hard by the

hoofs of sheep and looking westward over a gorgeous panorama of mountain and lough, woodland and general plain, he found the priest, breviary in hand, his back leaning against the cliff amid a tangle of ivy and lichen and wild flowers rooted in crevice and crack.

The priest recognized him with a smile and rose to meet him.

"You're welcome, Shaun," he said. "It's not exactly the welcome I'd wish to give you. My home is with the wolves, but, looking aloft and waving his hands in comprehensive sweep, when did hand of man fashion cathedral like to this of the Almighty?"

"It's grand, yer Reverence," said Shaun, who had all the Celt's love for nature, "but it's awful lone-some away up here."

"What matters it, my boy? God is here, and a loyal and devoted people surround me. I am not forgotten, nor do I need anything. The poor have large hearts, and share their pittance with me. But, this note? From Christine, I see," he smiled, as he unfolded the paper and read:

You are urgently needed at the home of Nicholas Blake, near Castlereagh. Go in the name of God. A messenger was here two nights ago. May the Virgin have you in her keeping.

Your heart-broken "Christine."

"Tell her I will go at once, Shaun," said the friar, when he had read the note. "And tell her, too, that I will see her at the Hall as soon as I return. Was the funeral large?"

"Twas grand, yer Reverence. The gentry were rare in scores, me lord and me lady from the five counties. Oh, 'twould do yer eyes good to see them all on horseback, doin' honor to the poor Master. But, yer Reverence," he added, falling on his knees, "give me yer blessing before you go."

The priest blessed him and seized his hand in a parting grip.

"Tell Miss Christine to be brave," he said.

"Yes, yer Reverence, and oh, Father James, avic, be careful on your way. The country is full of spies, had luck to them!"

"I'll be careful, Shaun. God bless you!" And from his eye he watched the young man plunge down the hillside, until he was lost in the blue distance.

Castlereagh is distant from Boyle some twelve miles, and French Park lies about midway—a little hamlet of thatched cabins for the most part. Late that night, rain having set in, the single inn of the village, displaying on a swinging sign the painted arms of the DeFreynes, was crowded with a motley assembly of farmers, jobbers, itinerant musicians and ballad-singers, all bound, from near and far, to the fair of Castlereagh to be held next morning. Most of them had live stock—cattle and swine of the famous Roscommon sheep—and these, which had been driven long distances, were penned in barn or stable-yard, each carefully raddled or branded with its owner's mark to distinguish it from the general flock or herd. These shrewd farmers were resting on the way, to have their stock in good condition for the next morning. Tap-room and kitchen were crowded with men, some laughing and joking, some discussing prices, some rudely boisterous over their foaming potters; while the stout landlord in wig, knee-breeches and apron bustled in and out; so that few noticed the entry of a handsome young man of dark complexion, wrapped in a cloak of frieze, a box strapped over his shoulders.

He took off his hat as he entered, the rain pouring from its rim, and, going to the open fireplace, threw back his cloak, from which at once came a mist of steam.

"Tis a wet night, boys," he said, addressing those nearest him.

Then, unstrapping his box, he set it on end, in a corner near the chimney, and seated himself on it. Then, from the opposite side of the kitchen, a young man so like him in stature, face and complexion that they might be taken for twins, crossed and joined him.

"A wet night for the road," said he. "Goin' to the fair, I suppose?"

"Yes, but I only stepped in here until it clears. I want to make Castlereagh some time before morning."

"Come far?" asked the young man.

"Yes, from Corran."

"I thought so. I saw you there this mornin'—at the Coves."

The peddler started. "You were at the Coves this mornin'?"

The young man leaned over and whispered in his ear. "Do not be afraid. I was one of the sentries guardin' agin' the red-coats when you were sayin' Mass there at dawn. My name is McDonough. I am a friend and you can trust me."

The peddler grasped his hand and wrung it. "God bless you," he murmured. "Are there many of us here?"

"Nearly all are of the old faith; but in a place like this you can never be sure."

Then his handsome face grew suddenly dark and the smile left his lips, as another entered—a burly fellow with red hair, heavy aquiline features, a furtive eye that peered restlessly from under shaggy brows. On his back he carried a set of bagpipes in a goatskin and he clutched a stout stick in his hand.

"A piper! A piper!" went up a hoarse chorus of greeting from the tipsy ones. "A piper! He'll give us a tune!"

"A recumbent, a recumbent!" cried the former and cut-throat! said the young man half aloud. Then, leaning

towards the peddler, he whispered in his ear. "Tis Bagshaw, the priest-hunter! He thinks to disguise himself that way. But I know him!"

"Heavens!" blurted out the peddler, "he's after me."

"Yes, but he'll never get you, or my name's not Tom McDonough. If I only say the word he'll be torn limb from limb."

"Peace," whispered the peddler, young man.

"Has he ever seen you?" asked the peddler. "No, but he knows I travel as a peddler. When last I was taken 'twas by another chap named Birmingham."

"Never mind! I'll fix him," whispered McDonough. "Just follow me when I speak out loud."

Then crossing the kitchen to a friend he said in his ear. "Phelin, you keep the piper here in the kitchen while I take my friend out in the yard. Don't let him follow us."

"All right, Thomans, me boy. But who's your friend? He's so much like you he could pass for your brother."

"He's one of the old stock—a gentleman in disguise. You watch the piper, while I take him into the yard."

Then, recrossing the kitchen carefully and pausing before the peddler, he called aloud. "Mr. O'Connor, you say you'd like to look over my stock. Come on out to the yard an' I'll show 'em to you."

The peddler arose and all eyes were centred on the twin, so alike in height, lineament and complexion. The piper started and his blue eyes burned beneath his long blue shaggy brows. He was fain to follow, but Casey interrupted him.

"Come, mister piper, give us a tune! 'The Wind that Shakes the Barley,' 'Burke's March,' or, maybe, better, 'The Boyne Water.'"

"The Boyne Water?" laughed the piper. "Would ye have me killed by the boys?"

A roar of laughter greeted his remark.

"Well, then, 'Geese in the Bogs,' or 'Rory O'More,'" said Casey. "We'll have something; so would-be piper unsling his goatskin, an' adjusted his left arm, crossed his knees, and, after a preliminary skirl on the chanter, struck up 'The Connaughtman's Rambles,' while half a dozen laughing men leaped up and began to foot it vigorously. Others gathered around in an applauding circle, punctuating the rattle of the brogans on the flagged floor with yells of approval and partisan encouragement.

"Good boy, Mike! You're the boy can do it," shouted one.

"God bless yer two feet, Brian, me boy," yelled another.

"Faster! faster!" called a third while the landlord poked his rubicund face in at the door, beaming on musician and dancers.

"May yer whistle never be dry," said yet another, bringing a pewter of ale to the piper. "More power to yer elbow, piper. 'Tis yer self can do it!"

"May it choke him!" mumbled Casey, as the piper raised the beverage to his lips for well he knew that some discussing prices, some rudely boisterous over their foaming potters; while the stout landlord in wig, knee-breeches and apron bustled in and out; so that few noticed the entry of a handsome young man of dark complexion, wrapped in a cloak of frieze, a box strapped over his shoulders.

When, at last, in the distraction and excitement of the dance, McDonough returned to the kitchen, even his friend Casey did not recognize him; but a spark of satisfaction kindled the piper's furtive eye as he caught sight of him at the door. McDonough, in that brief interval in the yard, had completely changed; instead of the peddler's shaggy clothes, he wore the piper's leather breeches, gaiters, frieze ulster, slouch hat, and carrying the peddler's pack on his back, he passed among the folk in the kitchen for that individual himself. The deception was further heightened by his retiring to the corner previously occupied by the peddler, and there seating himself morosely and abstractedly on his upturned box. All this the piper noticed from beneath his shaggy brows, while he fingered the keys of his pipes. And his satisfaction and assurance as if unobserved, the peddler produced a long rosary about his neck and with an ostentatious sign of the cross proceeded to say his beads in the corner by the fire. This, however, was but McDonough's by-play to deceive the priest-hunter, and the deception prevailed.

When Casey at last grew uneasy about his friend's prolonged absence in the yard, he, in an opportune moment, joined the peddler in the corner.

"Where's McDonough?" said he.

"Whist, Phelin!" murmured the latter warily. "I'm McDonough. Don't you recognize me?"

"The devil a bit of it," smiled Phelin.

"All the better," murmured McDonough.

"Where's your friend?"

"On the road to Castlereagh, drivin' me few sheep ahead," whispered McDonough.

"But why the change in clothes? Why all this mystery?" queried Casey.

"There's good reason for it, never fear," whispered McDonough.

"I suppose there must be, wid all this masqueradin'."

"There is, but I must ask you to take no further heed of me. Leave me alone here in my corner, and, if I have the house before you, please do not follow me, but go on to Castlereagh alone be yer self. I'll meet you there in the mornin' at Mulligan's."

"All right, Thomans," agreed his friend, and thereafter he mingled with the dancers and kept the piper busy for the greater part of the night.

Dawn came fresh and balmy, and one by one jobber and farmer had taken his departure, each with his horse or handful of heifers, pigs or sheep, when the peddler awoke from a brief sleep in his corner by the fire, yawned, rubbed his eyes, looked around at the deserted kitchen and the turf that had smouldered to white ashes on the hearth. Then, calling the landlord, he paid him the pittance for his night's shelter, took up his pack, slung it over his shoulders and strode forth into a world of green, sparkling clean and sweet after the night's rain.

For a moment he stood bare-headed, thanking God for His beautiful handiwork of amethystine hill, golden meadow, verdant woodland, for dew-spangled hedge and wayside blossom opening its fragrant heart to greet the morning. The breeze blew fresh and filled with the odors of Araby. The sky was a delicate sapphire above him, and down from its pellucid depths rained a delicious melody, where innumerable larks were singing at heaven's gate. Then, reverently crossing himself and donning his hat, he set off, but not towards Castlereagh. Instead, he struck out northwards towards Ballagh, through a forest of sycamores, giant oaks, elms and venerable ash trees, vaulting the road with verdure, and ringing with song of thrush and linnet.

But, unseen of him, another figure followed behind—the quondam piper, who had been lurking behind a hedge near the inn, watching for his departure. Steadily he crept after him, dodging from bush to bush, now hiding behind a wayside tree, now slipping into the wood and keeping cautious progress abreast of him.

Once or twice the peddler paused to scan the road behind him or take in the beauty of glade or glen; but he was alone—alone in the green heart of the forest.

Not alone, for he had the companionship of God's gentle creatures. Occasionally a rabbit would scurry across his path, a hare would dart timidly into the wood, or a covey of partridge rise with great whirr of wings and chatter of alarmed voices from green patches among the trees. These were guiltless things; but an evil shape cradled near—a serpent in human form. And the peddler knew it not. He had deliberately taken that road to draw the pursuer from the priest, who had gone to Castlereagh with his sheep. If he had suspicion of being pursued, he saw not the shadow that followed.

He was sure that that shadow was following him, the supposed priest, and skulked somewhere in the fragrant world of green, by evil impulse and fell purpose marring God's beautiful work.

But the shadow was closer than he reckoned, for presently it slipped forth from the wood, as he threw himself prostrate on the grass and leaned far over a spring to drink of its bubbling water. For a moment, unheard, unseen, the shadow hung over its victim, gloating with malevolent glee over the doom so imminent. Then a shot woke the echoes of the forest, startling bird and rabbit; the peddler pitched with a moan into the spring, and a tinge of red dyed and deepened in its crystal depths.

"So ho, me bould friar! I have you at last," laughed Bagshaw, as he deliberately loaded and primed his pistol a second time, and a second time emptied it into the back of young McDonough.

With ghoulish glee the priest-hunter watched his victim's writhing agony. It was soon over and the young farmer from Corran lay cold and still amid the cresses that bordered the spring.

"Not for yer head, the proof of my work," gibbered the ghoul, as he dragged the body into the wood and laid the neck over the stump of a felled tree—an ideal headman's block. Unbuttoning his coat, he took from a leather belt about his waist a butcher's cleaver, and slowly and carefully, with a few deliberate strokes, chopped the head from the body.

Then, dragging the body further into the forest and covering it over with green branches, he washed the bloody head in a little brook sparkling amid the fern, placed it in his goatskin sack with the pipes, and set off for Kingscourt.

VII.

The great facade of Kingscourt was ablaze with lights when Bagshaw reached it that night, with his gruesome burden. Every window picked out in gold against the purple-black of the enveloping night, and from within came a burst of merry voices, silvery laughter and wailing violins. Kingscourt was doing honor to its lord, or, rather, the lord of Kingscourt was doing honor to himself, for with dance and feasting he was celebrating his fortieth birthday, and the elite of the Cromwellian gentry was gathered in his hospitable halls.

He lived in lavish style, and when it pleased him, money flowed from his purse like water—what though the coined sweat of half a county? But that was only a fillip to the Viscount. For distinguished services to the Lord Protector that peasantry and all that rich confiscated territory had been given to a remote ancestor who had ridden as a trooper behind the indomitable Oliver. And peasantry, especially those of a subject race, were regarded merely as pawns in the game of idle luxury and extravagance since practised by the Kingscourts.

To-morrow the ball would be followed by a stag hunt on the plains of Boyle, and the Bucks and their ladies, who were now laughing and roystering within, would be out in all the bravery of scarlet and buckskin. To-night, however, joy reigned unconfined and the brilliant halls were filled with the youth and beauty of the land, superbly indifferent to the woes of the people who looked

ed on with sullen contempt and murderous rage. Since the glorious days of Sarsfield and Limerick, some thirty years before, that people had not dared to lift its head in protest, but lay in ignoble bondage, while their old masters, the officers of the Irish Brigade in France, were filling Europe with the fame of their prowess.

True, they had had a brief gleam of hope in the night of 1798, when the brave Highlander, against the Hanoverians usurped and the House of Stuart seemed like to come into its own again. But that gleam had died out in the gloom of defeat, since when they had hugged their chains and eaten the bitter bread of despairing bondage. Yet in their hearts they still despite the defection of James at the Boyne, cherished tender memories of the Stuarts, and spoke in allegory of the hopes of Celia Ni-Gara, the Little Black Rose, Kathleen Na Houlihan and other veiled names for their beloved Erin; while itinerant bards and hedge-schoolmasters voiced their dreams in euphonistic strains and inflated doggerel.

Bagshaw, the goat-skin on his back dripping blood on his coat, paused irresolutely on the lawn before the house. This was his hour of triumph for which he had waited so long, but it was also the hour of his master's pleasure, and to interrupt him in his pleasures was a thing not to be rashly adventured. The Bucks were around him, fair ladies smiled upon him, wine was flowing, and the sight might not please him at such an hour.

For a while the priest-hunter stood there in the shadow of the hanging-oak, uncertain what to do. He heard the leaves of the tree lipping above him in the soft autumn night like the ghostly sighs of the victims who had met death from its branches. He shuddered at the thought and a cold chill went down his spine. But that fate, at any rate, would not be his. The Master of Kingscourt was capricious and might, after all, refuse him the hundred guineas he had hinted at at their last interview. Nay, he might refuse him even the fifty guineas originally promised for the friar's head. But one thing was sure—he would not hang him, as he had threatened to do in case of failure. He had with him the bloody proof of his loyal service and—well, after all, the Master was a gentleman and would not go back on his word. With which comforting assurance he made his way to the servants' quarters back of the house and, entering, requested a pompous and powdered butler to notify the master of his arrival, with good news.

Much against his will the grumbling lackey went off to do this dirty bagpiper's behest; but even at the most bigoted homes bagpipers, harpers and travelling musicians were always welcome, especially at moments of mirth and revelry.

"Who is he?" asked the master with asperity, when summoned from the banquetting hall by the butler.

"His name's Bagshaw, sir, an' he says he has good news for you."

The Viscount's eyes flamed with fiendish delight. Good news from Bagshaw meant but one thing.

"Show him to the library and give him some whisky," said the Viscount. "I'll join him in a few minutes."

Excusing himself to his guests, the Viscount hurried from the banquetting hall to the library. He was in an exultant mood, and made an exquisite picture of luxurious wealth. His handsome face was slightly aflashed with wine but he carried himself with dignity and looked every inch the noble in coat and waistcoat of rich pink and silver brocade, powdered peruke tied at the neck with a broad bow of black ribbon, crimson satin breeches with gold buttons, white silk stockings, red morocco shoes with gold buckles, and dainty lace ruffles at throat and wrists.

"So you have good news at last, Bagshaw?" he asked smilingly.

"The devil a better news in the world, Your Honor," returned Bagshaw, rising and throwing his master a bobbing curtsey and an obsequious smile. "I caught him on the way to Castlereagh," he went on, tossing his head toward the sack lying at his side on the floor. "I saw there was no chance of takin' him alive, so I gave him the pistol in Lord De Freyne's demense, and here is he, himself, never to bother you again."

Before the Viscount knew what he was about, the fellow stopped, picked up the sack, from which he had already removed the pipes, turned it upside down and shook it, when to his horror the bloody head rolled out to the Viscount's feet.

(To be concluded.)

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