

TESTIS IN COELO FIDELIS

The True Catholic and Family Chronicle.

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MAY 8, 1863.

No. 39.

THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK.

A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER VIII.—THE EVENS OF A NIGHT.

The next day was Christmas Eve, and after that came Christmas Day, but the Christmas joys were clouded in many a household in and around Cashel by the awful death of the country's favorite, the gay, the generous, the all-beloved Harry Esmond. The comforts that surrounded many an otherwise cheerless hearth that Christmas-tide were the gift of him and his gentle wife, and how could the poor forget that there was sorrow at 'the big-house,' yea, the heaviest of all sorrows. They could not forget, and they did not forget, that one of the noblest gentlemen in Tipperary lay cold and dead that day, that a bright had already fallen on the young life of their most bountiful benefactor. Few houses there were in all the country side in which the Rosary was not said those nights for "rest to the poor young master's soul," and many a fair frolic was "nipped in the bud" by the timely admonition of some grave senior, "Wisha, how could you think of the like an' the young master a cowl'd corpse the day—och! more's the pity."

And when St. Stephen's Day came, and the 'Wren-boys' perambulated the town and its vicinity bearing that diminutive specimen of the feathered tribe aloft in triumph amongst green boughs ornamented with gay streamers, the frolicking, noisy crowd hushed their obstreperous mirth whilst they passed in front of the Hall.

"Whisht, now, boys, whisht! bad cess to you, don't you know what's in there? Not a word, now, not a word for your lives!" "Och! then, sure, it's the first time we ever passed that door without a big piece o' silver. God rest his soul that's gone."

Such were the exclamations that stopped the bellowing mouths of the juvenile mob, but the seniors of the troop need scarcely have uttered them for the youngest there would have neither laughed nor sung whilst passing the house of Death—that one, least of all. A few perches past the Esmond gates, however, and the wild chorus rose higher than ever—

"The wren, the wren, the queen of all birds, St. Stephen's Day was caught in the furze, Altho' she is little, her family's great, Rise, fair lady, and give us a trate."

This refrain, repeated in recitative with the utmost rapidity of utterance by some scores of quavering voices, was anything but musical in its character, yet heard from afar it was not without a certain wild melody, like the murmur of waves on the sandy beach. As a lay of the olden time the 'Song of the Wren'—unfortunate to some, was right welcome to others, bringing back long-vanished scenes, and the simple joys of other years when life was warm and young. The mourners heard it and it made their sadness deeper yet, by contrast with the bright untroubled past; faint and far it came to the ears of the new-made widow and Mary Hennessy, where they sat, hand locked in hand, beside the bed whereon lay the shrouded form of Harry Esmond now decked in the mournful habiliments of the grave, awaiting its burial on the morrow;—then did the two pale friends look into each other's eyes, and the weight of present woe crushed heavier on their hearts as memory brought back the merry Christmas times for one of them, at least, were to come no more. The same thoughts came back with the same familiar sound to Maurice Hennessy on his daily rounds, and to Phil Moran at his desk, and he dropped the scroll over which he had been musing—it was the official report of the Coroner's Inquest—and a shadow fell on his thoughtful brow, and the tears welled up from his inmost heart, as he murmured "Poor, poor Harry! friend of my boyhood's years, how often have we laughed together at the merry pranks and mischievous drolery of the Wren-boys! They will miss your open hand to-day. So they ought—so they ought," he added, starting up and pacing the room to and fro with hasty strides, "they'll all miss him, and that not to-day or to-morrow either—and that they may, from my heart out. When any one could be found amongst them hardened enough to murder young Harry Esmond they deserve the worst that can come upon them. Such a deed is enough to draw down a curse on the whole country."

"True for you, sir," said his clerk, a thin-faced and rather cadaverous individual who had the ungainly peculiarity of never looking any one straight in the face; "if it had been the old gentleman now a body wouldn't have cared, but his tenantry hadn't that good luck."

"Good luck, you rascal!" said his master turning sharp round, "how dare you say such a word in my presence?"

"Why, then, upon my credit, sir, I meant no

offence," whispered the clerk, "but if it was old Esmond that got the bullet in place of Master Harry, I'm thinking, sir, there would be more dry eyes than there is the day."

"Silence, sir," shouted Moran, "don't let me hear any more of such talk, but go on with what you are doing?"

"I will, Mr. Moran; but to tell you the truth, sir, if it was the old fellow that was popped, I wouldn't make out the warrant so—so cheerfully."

"Cheerfully! you villain, why, you look for all the world like a hangman!—or rather like one whose own neck was in danger."

"Oh God forbid, sir, God forbid," and the cadaverous clerk, whose name was Ned Murtha, put up his skinny hand to his neck, as if to make sure that it was not in danger. "But then I wish Mr. Boland had got the warrant made out at home."

"And why so, pray?"

"Well, you see, sir, it's the first warrant of the kind I ever made out, and I can't—I can't warm to the job at all, at all. 'Deed I can't, sir!"

"Nonsense, man, nonsense! don't you think the fellow that shot Harry Esmond deserves to swing for it?"

"I know, sir, I know, but then—but then I don't care to have a hand in any one's death."

"Go on with your work, I say—no more idle prate—there is no time to be lost."

Moran seated himself at his desk, bent again over his papers—silence reigned for a few minutes, when an exclamation from Ned made the lawyer turn quickly, just in time to see that eccentric individual throw down his pen and jump from his perch on the high office-stool.

"Confound it, Ned, what's the matter now?" cried the attorney.

"Well, it's a folly to talk, Mr. Moran," said Ned, looking every way but at him, "I can't nor I won't write them words, sir, in regard to Jerry Pierce!"

"You will not, eh?"

"No, sir, I wouldn't do it for all you're worth. It's against nature, so it is."

"And why against nature?"

"Because, Mr. Moran! Jerry Pierce is a first and second cousin of my own, and—and—oh Lord! if it was only the old fellow he had shot—no—no—I didn't mean that, Mr. Moran, I didn't, indeed, sir! for I won't believe he shot e'r a one, at all, till I'm sure of it. But don't ask me, sir, if you please, to make out the warrant—Jerry and myself are too near akin, sir, for me to do it, let it be as it may. And besides, Jerry saved me a horsing' onst. when we were at school together, by reason of taking the fault on himself to screen me, and he as innocent as the child unborn."

Poor Ned took out a blue handkerchief spotted with white, and giving it a very determined shake before he applied it to its legitimate purpose, blubbered out—"No, Mr. Moran! I can't do it, sir! if I lose my place for it."

"Well, well, Ned, you shan't lose your place for it," said Moran coughing down his emotions—lawyer as he was, there was a large infusion of the milk of human kindness in his heart—"go and tell Branigan to come here—he'll make out the warrant, and you can copy that deed he was going to commence. Hurry, now, hurry!"

"I will, sir," said Ned, but he only said it, for his journey to the next room occupied considerably more time than the distance seemed to warrant.

"Ned Murtha!" said Moran to himself, as the door closed behind him, "there's more of a heart in that ungainly body of yours than I ever gave you credit for!"

The reader will see from this that a warrant had been issued immediately after the Coroner's Inquest for the arrest of 'Jeremiah'—commonly called Jerry Pierce, late butler at Esmond Hall. The verdict on which this warrant was founded could nowise have been returned but for the evidence of Mrs. Esmond touching the mysterious words of Pierce, and his no less mysterious conduct on the fatal day of the murder—this, coupled with his sudden disappearance, furnished very strong presumptive evidence that, if not the principal in the atrocious crime, he was, at least, cognizant thereof, and, therefore, accessory. It was an awful suspicion, considering the relation which had existed between the supposed murderer and his victim—the unvarying kindness of the master and the apparent fidelity and gratitude of the man. In fact no motive could be assigned for the perpetration of so foul a murder, and hence it was that the whole country cried shame on the murderer, and one general feeling of horror and of indignation pervaded the minds of all. Rich and poor were alike in-

* All our readers may not understand the nature of the service rendered on this occasion. In country schools in Ireland when a boy was convicted of any capital offence, he was hoisted on the back of another boy, and castigated to the master's 'heart's content.' This punishment was technically styled *horsing*.

terested in this mysterious murder—the rich naturally inferring from it that no man's life was safe amid a population so prone to deeds of blood, that not even the best of landlords was safe from their capricious malice: the poor, on the other hand, lamenting the loss of their generous friend and most bountiful benefactor, the darling of every heart, and filled with shame and confusion to think that a man could be found in Tipperary to shoot him in cold blood. "One of themselves, too"—that was the worst of it.—There had been murders committed even in that part of the country, where the murderers were regarded with compassion rather than abhorrence, because they had but executed the general thirst for vengeance on some hard-hearted, tyrannical landlord, the scourge of his miserable tenantry, and the avowed enemy of the people; in this case, however, there was no sympathy for the murderer—all the popular feeling was against him; in all that eastern district of Tipperary there was not man, woman or child who did not execrate the deed, praying with all the fervor of grateful love for the repose of Mr. Esmond's soul, and that God might comfort his desolate widow and her unconscious orphans.

Of the many humble homes to which the untimely death of young Harry Esmond brought tribulation there was none where grief weighed so heavily as in that of Bryan Cullenan. The news had come like a thunderbolt on Cauth and Bryan, and both equally felt the crushing blow, but its effect on each was diametrically opposite. Bryan hastened at once to the Hall, "satisfied himself," as he said, "with a good cry over the poor young master," and prayed long and fervently beside his cold remains, the tears streaming from his aged eyes on the Bridgetine beads he was telling for the repose of that dear soul. During the three days and nights that the vigil of death was kept in Esmond Hall, Bryan spent the greater part of his time there, now giving out the Rosary and the Litanies amongst the country people who thronged the kitchen and the servants' hall, now kneeling, absorbed in pious meditation, beside the state-bed on which the body was laid out, that mournful privilege being tacitly conceded to the old man of the Rock.

Cauth, on the contrary, never went near the house of death. A certain gloomy wildness seemed to have taken possession of her and she talked incoherently to herself with the strangest gesticulation. That was only when alone, however, for to Bryan she was unusually silent all those dreary days. Once when the old man asked was she not going up "to see the poor young master before he was laid in the cold clay where none of them could ever see him any more," she turned on him sharply with

"Don't be botherin' me, Bryan Cullenan;—what for would I go up there?"

"Wisha, Cauth, what for does any one go up there?" said Bryan, much amazed; "myself thought you had a great wish for the quality at the hill."

"Who says I haven't?" she returned still more sharply; "go your ways, now, Bryan, and let me alone. I hate to hear people makin' fools o' themselves, talkin' of what they know nothing about."

Poor Bryan was fain to do her bidding, and went his ways to the Rock, wondering much what manner of woman Cauth might be who professing so much love and gratitude for 'the young mistress' appeared yet so little touched by the dread sorrow that had come upon her.

"Ay, go your ways, old man," said Cauth when she found herself alone, "it's little you know about them you're leaving behind. 'Och, she moaned, 'if I hadn't gone next or nigh them—if I hadn't loaded them with blessings; maybe this heavy curse wouldn't have come down on them—sure I might a known how it'd be—why wouldn't I go and see him, inagh!—och, then, God help your wit, you poor foolish old man, isn't it on my two knees I'd walk from here to there, and back again, if it could do himself or herself any good—but, fareer gar! it couldn't—no, no, no! it couldn't, and it 'd break my heart entirely to see my poor darlin' young gentleman lyin' there kilt and murdered forens! my eyes—it would! it would! Och, the black villain—the black villain—sure the devil himself had a hand in him, or he couldn't do the likes o' that—he couldn't spill the blood of one that never done any one any harm—one that had the blessin' of the poor, and the good wish of high and low."

That night when

The iron tongue of midnight had told twelve,

it so happened that Bryan Cullenan found himself alone for a short space with the sheeted dead. The ladies and gentlemen were taking some refreshment in the next room, and Mrs. Esmond had been prevailed upon with much ado to lay down her weary head, even though sleep, that ever forsakes the wretched, and "flies from woe," was little to be expected for one so utterly woe-begone.

All at once Bryan's solemn meditations were

rudely interrupted by the sight of a tall figure, standing by the bed, wrapped in a great coat, the cape of which was thrown over the head after the manner of a hood. Bryan's heart sank within him, and his tongue clave to his palate, so that he could not speak, even if he would.—With his eyes starting from their sockets he watched the motionless form, as it stood with head bent forward, and hands—they were large, bony hands, too—clasped tightly together, back side up, as they hung at arm's length in front. The attitude was one of mournful contemplation, but no sound was heard, not even a sigh from the unseen lips. But as Bryan gazed with his heart in his eyes, he saw some sudden emotion shake the huge frame of his mysterious fellow-watcher—one long low moan was heard, like the wail of a tortured spirit and the figure turning towards Bryan, raised a finger in admonition and passed slowly from the room. Oh! the horror of that moment! the icy shiver that ran from the old man's heart through every vein of his body, as, glancing up into the face which he supposed was that of a supernatural being, he recognised the murderer—Jerry Pierce!

Bryan used to say in after days that he often wondered how he got over the fright of that moment. He whose days and nights, too, were not seldom passed amongst the dead—he that could sleep contentedly amongst the graves on the desolate Rock of Cashel, no whit alarmed by the possibility of some of their occupants

"Revisiting the glimpses of the moon,"

he was paralyzed with terror by the sight of that mortal man. His first impulse was to cry out and give the alarm now that he found his tongue unloosed from the spell of that dread presence; but Bryan was a cautious man, an exceedingly cautious man, and he made it a rule in every emergency to "think twice and speak once," so he thought twice then, and concluded—just as 'the quality' came in again from the other room firstly, that there was no great chance of catching Pierce by that time, and secondly, that it might be the death of the young mistress if she came to hear that the murderer of her husband had been there in the silent midnight to look upon the lifeless remains of his victim. So Bryan crept from the room unnoticed by any one, and was making his way to the kitchen when in the hall he found a crowd assembled round one of the maid-servants who seemed obstinately bent on fainting away directly, from which overt acts of her fellow-servants, aided by a number of the wake-people from below, were violently endeavoring to dissuade her.

"Och, let me alone!" hysterically cried or rather sobbed the entirely overcome damsel, as she wriggled and twisted in the arms of the sympathizing assistants; "sure I'll never be the better of it!—never—never—och! I'll faint!—I'll faint!"

"Wisha, don't now!—don't, agree!—you'll be over it soon, please God!—it's only a weakness over it."

"What did you see, a colleen?"

"Och, och! what did I see?—why, I seen—I seen—Jerry Pierce!—Och, I'm goin'—I'm goin'—"

Exclamations of horror were heard on every side—"Jerry Pierce! the Lord in heaven save us!—ah, then, where did you see him, *acushla*?" "I met him—on the stairs abroad—comin' down—ah—the cape of his big-coat up over his head—oh, oh!—and his eyes lookin' at me like—like live coals."

"Oyeh! it's his fetch you seen!—ran round the circle in a loud whisper—'it's well if she does get over it, the cratur!'"

"There! there! she's gone!"

"If she is, she can use her feet well—and her tongue too," said Bryan to himself as he passed on towards the kitchen, cruelly indifferent to the precarious condition of the fainting fair one, but much occupied with the thoughts of the apparition which had frightened himself no less than her. Notwithstanding Bryan's silence, the news soon spread all over the house, and every soul in it, with the single exception of its widowed mistress and Uncle Harry—of whom all stood in too much awe to tell him anything—had heard the awful tale of Jerry Pierce's fetch being seen walking about the house. Then did Mary Hennessy and Bella Le Poer remind each other of the shadowy form they had seen only ten or twelve days before, and coupling that with this, they shudderingly concluded—as did most of those at the wake—that this appearance was possibly in advance of the wretched man's impending doom.

There was another that saw Jerry Pierce that night—a comely, dark-haired damsel, by name Celia Mulquin, who kept house for her uncle, a road-contractor, named Larry Dwyer, within a stone's throw of the Esmond gate. The uncle and his two strapping sons were long since a-bed and sleeping soundly, as evinced by the somewhat ununusual chorus executed *en trio* by that number of nasal on the loft which covered 'the room'—another over the kitchen being Celia's

sleeping apartment, both reached by a ladder;—the middle space, or that end of the kitchen where was the fireplace, shaded from the door by the jamb-wall, had no covering over it but the thatch and wattles of the roof.

Celia was sitting in a very desponding attitude before the yet unranked fire, locking with fixed unconscious eyes down into the red greshagh, the ashes of the burned sods which had all day long made 'the back' for the light 'slane turf' that formed the fire. It was hard to say what Celia was thinking of just then, but it must have been something very painful to her heart, judging by the paleness of her round fair cheek, and the sad expression of her soft blue eyes. By and by the vacant look vanished, and a world of sorrow was suddenly in motion all over the girl's smooth features. Tears began at length to miss on her eyelids, and, raising the two corners of her checked apron, she hid them to her eyes, her chest heaving violently under the colored kerchief so modestly folded over it. Suddenly she started—turned her head in the attitude of listening—then stood up and crossed herself, her eyes fixed with a frightened look on the little window that pierced the front wall of the house a few feet from the ground.

"Christ save us!" muttered the girl, "who can it be at this dead hour o' the night!—why, sure—sure it can't be him!"

The pilot deepened on her face, but she stepped on tiptoe to the window; nothing was there to be seen but the pitchy darkness of the night; a tap was now heard at the door, and thither went Celia with the same stealthy pace. Putting her ear close to the door she listened for a repetition of the sound—it came not again in the same form, but a voice spoke through the keyhole:—

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Celia knew the voice, and it brought the rich color back to her cheek, though the flush passed away as quickly as it came; for a moment she stood irresolute, but her soft woman's heart prevailed, and she opened the door with as little noise as possible—Jerry Pierce stood without, but the next moment he stood within, close by the jamb-wall. "The girl retreated as far as the front wall would let her, but that was only a few feet.

"Celia," said the man in a thick, hoarse whisper, "are you afraid of me too?"

"I'm not afraid of you," she answered in the same low tone; "I know you'll not harm me—but—but—oh! what—what brings you here, you poor misfortunate man?"

"Bekase, I'm hunted like a wild baste already, an' they'll be apt to hunt me down soon, an' then I could never say to you what I *must* say dead or alive. Are they all gone to bed?"

"Hours and hours ago—don't you hear them snorin'?"

"May I sit down, then, for a little start by the fire?" whispered the deep voice; "I'm shiverin' with the cold, Celia; an' it'll be long, long before I see your face again—maybe never!" The girl could not resist this sorrowful appeal, so placing the light in a position which threw the broad fire-place and the greater part of the kitchen in shade, she proceeded to hang a thick cloth before the window, so that none could look in from without, and then placed a low seat for Jerry in the corner just by the jamb. Taking her own station on the opposite side of the fire, she sat with her eyes cast down, her cheek and lip pale as ashes, and her clasped hands resting on her knees. For a few moments both were silent, Pierce cowering over the fire while his large limbs trembled partly with cold, partly with misery and agitation.

"Maybe your hunger?" questioned the girl in a choking voice, without raising her eyes, and without naming his name.

A sort of low convulsive laugh gurgled in the man's throat, as, starting at her voice, he replied—

"No, I didn't come here to ask charity—I had my supper—thank—to them that gave it to me."

"Well, what—what—did you want with me?" still without looking up.

"Want with you?" repeated the man in a half angry tone, but the next moment he added somewhat more mildly, "Oyeh, Celia, it's althered times with us when you'd ax me such a question. But och! och! sure the fault isn't yours—mavrone, mavrone, it is not."

"I ask you again what did you come here for?"

"I'll tell you that—do you believe me guilty of what's laid to my charge?"

"How can I disbelieve it?" asked Celia sadly. "An' och, och! but it's the hard thing to think that—that—"

"That what?"

"That you'd be guilty of the likes of that?"

"But you think I am?"

"Wisha, God help me, what can I think?—And the tears began to fall unheeded from Celia's eyes.