

## THE BURNED CONVENT.

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From the Pilot.

The most serious illegal outbreak of modern times in New England was what is known in history as "The Burning of the Convent." This Roman Catholic educational and conventual institution belonged to an association of Ursuline Nuns. The convent at Charlestown was founded in 1820 by the Rev. Dr. Montignon and the Rt. Rev. Dr. Cheverus, then Bishop of Boston, the friend of Channing and other Protestant divines, and an eminent scholar and preacher.

Connected with the convent was a school for the thorough education of young ladies, and so popular did this academy speedily become that it was crowded with scholars not only from New England, but from all sections of the Union; from the British Provinces and even from the West Indies. At the date of the riot the school contained some sixty pupils—not a few of them from the most aristocratic Protestant families in Boston and vicinity; among these pupils were connections of the Cabots, the Milton Russells, and others as well known.

It will be easily understood that the sentiment of their Protestant neighbors—the sturdy, but by no means always finely cultured descendants of the Puritans was neither altogether kindly or hospitable. The very name Convent suggested to them all sorts of Middle Age horrors. Added to this was the fact that the income from the school was so much money contributed to the revenues of a Church of which they were always jealously afraid, and, by inference, reducing just so much the financial well being of Protestant institutions.

Moreover, stories of awful punishments, savage penances, under ground cells and starving victims, nightmares, inspired by pious faith in the legends of the "Book of Martyrs," were industriously circulated by ignorant and designing persons.

In the summer of 1884, rumors were prevalent of tortures perpetrated on sick inmates of the institution; and mischievous, if less horrible, tales of increased efforts to proselyte Protestant pupils of the school; the simple fact being (and of the truth of this the reader can easily satisfy himself) that not a single pupil at the convent-school ever became a nun, or was converted to the doctrines of the Roman Catholic faith, and no efforts were made in that direction.

But the spark that produced the final and fatal explosion was the public misapprehension of the story of Miss Elizabeth Harrison, known in conventual life as Sister Mary John. This young lady—a native of Philadelphia—was, at the date of which I write, a member of the order in full communion. She had near relatives in Boston who frequently visited her. She was a teacher in the school, and enjoyed the confidence and affection of Protestant pupils, and it is the uncontradicted fact that she was not subjected to the slightest personal restraint, but could have left the institution at any time at her own will.

But, through her own over strained sense of professional duty, she was simply overworked, a case of what is now known as nervous prostration.

This will be understood when we add that Miss Harrison had been for months in the habit of giving fourteen music lessons a day of forty five minutes each, quite enough to wear out a strong man in a short time.

In the July of this year the young lady had a head trouble of a nature so serious as to produce mental derangement, these facts were afterward proved in court by the testimony of such witnesses as the eminent

Doctors Warren, of Boston, and Thompson, of Charlestown.

One afternoon the Superior of the convent—a lady described by Dr. Thompson as "thoroughly educated, dignified in her person, elegant in her manners, pure in her morals, of generous and magnanimous feelings, and of high religious principles"—entered the school, and seeing that Miss Harrison was in danger of serious illness, advised her strongly to give up her work at least for a day. To this she replied by a burst of laughter; before evening she was in a state of absolute insanity, and in this condition stole from the building and ran to a neighbor's house.

It must be borne in mind by the reader that at one of the trials resulting from the riot, the fact of Miss Harrison's temporary insanity, as also that up to her illness she had been one of the happiest and most contented, as she was one of the most intellectual and refined, inmates of the convent, was clearly and abundantly proved.

It would seem that much of the subsequent trouble was due to the excitability and strong religious prejudices of a Selectman of Charlestown a man who, when the institution was first established, called on the superior and threatened to pull down the building about her ears; it should be added that he afterwards expressed regret for the violent speech. But he was again, and very effectually, stirred up by this now tale of persecution. This man went himself to the house to which Miss Harrison had fled in her delirium, and took her thence to the residence of a friend of his in West Cambridge (now Arlington). Here on the following day she was visited by her brother, who, at her urgent request, brought Bishop Fenwick to see and talk with her. Bishop Benedict Fenwick—the successor of Dr. Cheverus as Bishop of Boston—was a prelate who enjoyed the respect of the entire community—of all religious denominations. This gentleman afterward testified under oath that he found Miss Harrison in a condition of absolute mental derangement; that his sole object in seeing her—much against his own wishes—was to take her to the convent, and after having her properly dressed—her clothing was in great disarray—restore her to her friends, supposing she had become dissatisfied with her residence there; but when this was proposed "she begged and entreated to be allowed to remain."

The end of this most unfortunate episode was that the innocent cause of the trouble, when restored to her home at the convent, declared that "she did not know what it all meant," and entreated those who called on her to refrain from any reference to her absence, as she was not responsible for anything she said or did. Afterward, as a witness at the trial of a rioter, she declared that had any one predicted her actions, she would have deemed them impossible, that everything had been done for her comfort and happiness, as for those of the other inmates, that she had been for the time insane and had little memory of what had occurred. So much for the facts, now for the results.

The first of these was almost ludicrous, despite its abominable injustice and cruelty; the convent gardener was assaulted by a band of conspirators and nearly beaten to death! A few days after Miss Harrison's return, the Selectman of whom I have written called at the convent and brutally assured the superior that unless the "Mysterious Lady" could be seen and conversed with by outsiders, the convent would be destroyed.

By appointment of the lady-superior, the building was visited on the following Monday by the five Charlestown Selectmen, who proceeded to ransack it from attic to cellar, spending three hours in searching closets, chambers,

even paint-boxes and drawers, assisted by the superior and Miss Harrison herself.

Needless to say, they had their labor for their pains, and left declaring themselves perfectly satisfied: they even went so far as to say that not only was there nothing to condemn, but a good deal to praise, and adjourned to the house of one of their number to prepare a public statement for the papers to this effect. The rest of the story is brief, sad, and bitterly disgraceful.

The Selectmen had delayed action too long. At about 9 o'clock on the evening of that day, the superior was alarmed by the uproar on the Medford road; and shortly a mob of men and boys appeared in front of the building shouting, "Down with the convent!" After arousing those of the inmates who had retired, the superior opened a window in the second story, and demanded the reason for the assembly, assuring the rioters that they were disturbing and alarming the children of some of their most respected fellow-citizens.

To this the leader replied that they had no wish to injure or frighten the children, but that they must see the nun who had escaped. On going to the young lady's room the superior found her in a state of unconsciousness from fright. Returning to the window, the superior told the rioters of this, assuring them that the place had been visited that day by the town officials, and that if they would wait till the next day, full assurance of the entire satisfaction of the Selectmen with what they had found regarding the condition of affairs in the institution would be publicly given.

The leader asked her if she were protected, to which she replied: "Yes, by legions!" referring, of course, to spiritual guardians. By this time the number of the assailants had been largely increased by accessions from Boston, and neighboring towns and the Superior's answer was answered by uproarious shouts and insulting and indecent remarks, they called her a liar and an "old brass figure head," adding that they had with them one of the Selectmen, who had himself opened the gates for their entrance.

Then the same official who had made himself prominent in the first days of the excitement came to the front, advising the Superior to trust herself to his protection. With the former knowledge of this gentleman's disposition and proclivities, the lady declined the offer, requesting him, if his intentions were friendly, to disperse the mob.

To give this personage the small amount of credit he deserves, it may be said that he made some slight efforts in that direction, assuring the rioters when they shouted for torches to fire the buildings, that such action would insure their recognition and subsequent arrest. After which he retired from the scene, as he does from our story.

Directly after the disappearance of the official, a gun was fired by the mob as a signal and at about 11 o'clock the fences were destroyed, and a bonfire lighted—a pre-concerted sign for the assemblage of all the rioters. At almost the same instant, the church bells of Boston and Charlestown were set a ringing as for an alarm of fire (this was long before the electric alarm system).

Engines from both towns soon appeared on the scene, one from Boston drawing up in front of the convent, when it was seized by the mob and prevented from doing anything in the way of protection. It was ramored, and very generally believed, that Boston was ready at this point to furnish means for the suppression of the disturbance, but that such action was prevented by the closing of the drawbridges between the two towns.

The arrival of the engine that reached the scene was immediately followed by a general assault on the building with bricks, stones, clubs and such other weapons as came to hand. Then there was a pause, the assailants waiting to see if the attack would be met by active resistance. The Superior took advantage of the brief respite to assemble the inmates and instruct them as regarded measures of escape from the evidently doomed structure. This was accomplished by a retreat through the garden in the rear, and over the adjoining fences; sixty children and the nuns of whom one was in the last stages of consumption—escaping to the shelter of friendly houses in the neighborhood. It is sad to relate that Miss Harrison—the innocent cause of the trouble—was reduced by fright and excitement to a condition of raving insanity.

With admirable fidelity and self-devotion, the Superior remained to the last—visiting, it is said, every room and calling each inmate by name, to be sure that no one was left behind.

Then the work of destruction began. A horde of ruffians presently poured into the building, ransacking every room despoiling trunks, drawers and cupboards, stealing watches and valuable jewelry, and with the true mob spirit, demolishing what they could not carry off, pianofortes, costly and splendid harps—not even sparing the adornments of the sacred altar, the gift of the Archbishop of Bordeaux.

Then the wretches heaped the wreck of the furniture in the middle of each room, and set fire to the different piles—casting into the flames books, costly vestments—even the Bible and the Cross—and left the building to its fate.

Not satisfied yet, these pious representatives, not of Protestantism, but of the spirit of intolerance which has too often disgraced religion in all ages, proceeded to burn the Bishop's cottage, and the convent farm-house, winding up—O shame that we must tell it!—with the deliberate desecration of the convent cemetery; tearing open the tombs, robbing the sacred vessels there, wrenching off the coffin plates, and scattering to the night-winds the ashes of the long-buried dead.

In the words of a reliable and admirable writer, "not a hand was lifted to stay these abominable proceedings by any one of the vast multitude outside; the firemen, who declared frequently that they could prevent the flames if allowed, were hindered from acting, although their sincerity may be suspected from the fact that an engine returned to Boston decked with flowers stolen from the altar. The magistrates neither made any remonstrance, nor read the riot-act, nor demanded help from neighboring towns, nor asked for the services of the marines at the Navy Yard, nor made a single arrest during all the seven hours of the riot. And though the outside multitude, who took no part in the crime, were all Protestants, not one of them dared to protest against this outrage, not only upon weakness and defencelessness, but upon civil liberty.

It has always been asserted, and I think was never denied, that the Association of Boston Truckmen were the leaders of the Boston contingent of the assaulting hordes. Many readers will recall this formidable body—always prominent in civic pageants—resembling not a little, in their white frocks, a ritualistic procession; but representing the flesh and the devil, rather than the Church Militant.

This is the authentic story of the burning of the convent, an episode in Massachusetts history to be remembered and deplored with its dark record of Puritan persecutions, and hanging of reputed witches at Salem, "the times of ignorance—at which it