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CROHOORE OF THE BILL-HOOK. BY JOHN BANIM. CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

No doubt seemed now to exist of the identity of the cruel assassin. The news had spread by this time; the neighbors crowded in to gratify, although to shock their eyes with the evidences of the thrilling story; and amongst them came one whose words served to fix upon Crohoore the last crime attributed to him.

He told, that, having been in search of a stray sheep, he was returning home about two hours after midnight, along the road that ran at the foot of the descent on which stood Anthony Dooling's house, and there heard the quick tramp of a horse's feet behind him; and that, surprised at so unusual an occurrence, and frightened, too, on account of the fame of a desperate band of night-robbers then in existence, he had retired under the shade of a ditch to observe the horseman. The frosty moon was bright, and, whilst the rider passed, he recognised the remarkable person and face of Crohoore; and, though the horse went rapidly by, he had opportunity enough to note that, before him, the shingawon held with one arm something like a human figure enveloped in dark drapery. The man called after him, but Crohoore, without looking behind, put his horse to full speed, struck into the fields, and distinctly made way up one of the opposite hills, and then descended from view at the other side.

With this clue, Pierce Shea determined on immediate pursuit. He provided himself with arms; equipped, in like manner, Paudge, Shamus, and his foster-brother, Andy; and, mounted on good horses, they set out without loss of time, resolved to persevere till the last till they should have secured the murderer, and rescued Alley, if—and the thought was heart-breaking to poor Pierce—it was not already too late to save her from a fate worse than direst death.

'An' they spent all that day an' night,' said the narrator of this tale, the same aged retainer of the family who, at the wake, gave the circumstantial account of his master's death here set down, to a circle of attentive and affrighted hearers, and amongst whom we still suppose him speaking:—

'They spent that day and night, and a good part of the next day, among the bogs and mountains, and they came home as empty-handed as they went out, and worse, by far; for they brought poor Pierce Shea dead to his father and mother, and he's now lyin' in the boith of a great fever, ravin' like mad; swearin' that he's up to his knees in poor Doolin's blood, and callin' to them to take the bruised head out of his sight, and thinkin' he sees his poor Alley strugglin' wid Crohoore, and cryin' out to him to save her; so that they're forced to have Andy Houlohan, his own nurse's child, and another of the strongest they can find, to hold him down in the bed; and little wonder it is, God held him, that his thoughts should be runnin', on the sight he saw.'

The listeners glanced for a moment at the disfigured bodies, and turned their eyes away again in haste.

'I'm tould,' continued the old man, 'by one of the boys that went wid Pierce, that they met the cursed shingawon on the hills, that Pierce was withiu arm's length of him, and that he split away like any sheeog (fairy); the boy himself was so tired and kilt, I couldn't get the whole story from him; but to-morrow I'll know all about it. One thing is sartin, they cum home widout tale or tidings of Alley Doolin'; there's no knowin' where Crohoore has hid her, but it's not far away, I'm thinkin'.'

'That Crohoore was always a bad sight to me,' said an elderly dame, stooping across, looking cautiously around, and whispering as if she feared the walls would hear her. 'I never cared to see him crossin' my road; there was something, not right about him; and the look of his two eyes wasn't like any other Christen's I ever seen; if you said 'God save you,' to him, he was never the one to give you a civil answer; I couldn't for the life of me, think well of him, Mickie, a-roon.'

'Myself always had the same mind of the cul-lan,' rejoined Mickie, or Michael, 'since the first hour I ever set eyes on him. I was in the field wid my poor ould master that's gone—rest his soul! (bending his head reverently towards the bier) 'when he found the unlucky sheeog in the trench; it's the six-acre field at the back o' the haggart; and Mickie, says the master to myself, see what God has sent us this mornin', as he tuk up the brat at the same time; that mornin' is now twenty-an'-three years ago, come next shrofts, and the poor soul little thought he was goin' to be the provider for his own murderer, when he spoke the words I tell you; no, I could never bear him since the first moment; for when the master held him in his hands and looked in his face, tho' I'm sartin sure he was then no more nor eight or nine months born, the thing grinned up at him like a little ould man; and it came into my head he belonged to the

good people, from that out, tho' I never tould my plain mind to anybody, just for fear of what you guess yourselves.'

'Well, a-roon, when Crohoore was only a weeny garcoon, he was too sharp and knowin', for the ouldlest amongst us; and he never did like the other brats o' boys at his age, but always went inopin' by himself; and when every soul was asleep around him, many is the night he passed out in the most lonesome places; sayin' whenever he was missed, hew as after the rabbits, it was no sich thing. One time—I'll never forget it as long as I live—I was a little bit bearty (tipsy) and, as the dool would have it, he came across my path and I gave him a kick; to be sure I done it without raison, but the rest of the boys had a fashion of making him stand out of the way, and the liquor, that puts the fool on the best of us, being in my head, I thought I might as well have a bit o' fun as another; so I made the kick at him; but—and may I die in sin if it isn't the blessed truth I'm tellin'! that very night the one cow I had was fairy-struck and died.'

'As sure as the day, Mickie,' said Anasthause Farrel—a little old skeleton of a woman with a cracked, squeaking voice, and one side of her face a dirty purple hue, and the other pale as a corpse—as sure as the day, what you're for sayin' is only the sartin truth; it now comes into my mind that just tin years apast, Crohoore (save us and keep us) once brought a cock, and set him to fight again my cock, as fine a bird, of a common cock, as ever you seen; well he set them at one another 'till the life was amost gone from the both; I cotech him in id, and gave him a luggin'; and it's now I think of the look he gave me; and, as I'm a sinner afore God, that very day myself got the fairy-blest along the side o' my face—the marks is here to this very hour; and she held out the side of the face alluded to, that her neighbors might have ocular testimony of Crohoore's supernatural power.

The idea that he was connected with the 'good people' had before been no more than an interesting presumption, which it was pleasant occasionally to glance at over the winter's fire-side, but now, under Mickie's guidance, it seemed to seize upon the minds of all his gossiping auditors; they hustled nearer, took rapid pinches of snuff, or 'shoughs' of the pipe, breathed shorter, lowered their voices, and went on.

'The Lord save us,' said one, 'isn't it a wonder he didn't get the 'good people' to strangle his ould master and mistress, and nobody the wiser, because no marks 'ud be left, and not go to the trouble of doin' it himself, afther such a manner?'

'It's not the laste wonther,' rejoined Mickie, who gave the law in fairy lore; 'the good people, they say, han't the power to take away a life; they can only spile and wither a body, entirely, like Anasthause, there, but a death-blow must be struck by some livin' Christen soul.'

'Well, well, that may be as you say it, a-roon,' rejoined the former speaker; 'but don't you think it the most likely thing for him to have our poor Alley among them?'

'You just guessed my mind; I'd hold a good heifer, if it was God's will I had the like, that this blessed moment she's in some o' the green raths (little hills) they live in; sure well we know they're to be seen in plenty the very road he tuk her,' answered Mickie.

'An tell us, Mickie; you have as good a right to know id as any other in the world, because you lived under the same roof wid the both ever since they were wreenuchs; I had it many a year ago, that Crohoore was dyin' in love wid Alley.'

'You hard no more nor the truth, Maughan; 'twas plain to be seen as the daylight; and I often was by when poor Tony—rest his soul—gibed Alley herself about id; tellin' her, as he chucked up her darlin' chin, that if she was a good colleen he would give her Crohoore for a husband; everybody laughed at id; but myself, though I never said a word afore, always thought it 'ud end bad in the long run. Alley, poor creature, was kind and tender-hearted, and, while the one and the other had their pluck at Crohoore, she never gave him a sour look or angry word; maybe he bewitched her, by gor; for it was the boith o' wonther to see her so sweet on such an ill-come shingawon that everybody was afear'd of; and as for himself he never cared to do any thing right that any other body bid him, but one word from Alley 'ud send him forty miles in the dead o' the night time.'

'It's sartin sure, I'm thinkin', that the news of her goin' to be married to Pierce was one reason for Crohoore's doin' what he done; and so he whipt her off, and tuk his revenge at the same time; for, between ourselfs, Tony Doolin' was often a hard master to him; to be sure he well deserved it, for an idle lazy rogue, as he was; but it's what I'm goin' to say, is this.—About a month or so ago, one night, he went off on his own business—you know what I mane—and Tony found the cows strayin' about, and some time afther met Crohoore comin' over the

style into the haggart (part of a farm-yard; so he says no more but gives him a clipe of his stick that tumbles him into the litter: and it's well I remember Crohoore sayin', when he passed me afther gettin' up, 'ma horp-an-droul (an unprecation); you'll pay for all this, together!'—and sure he brought his own black words to pass.'

Thus did the gossips run on with their shanachus till the long night wore away. The crowd of people left the wake one by one, as the morning approached; and at length there remained but three or four women, who, with half-shut eyes, and heads drooping and nodding for want of rest, scarcely attended to the melancholy and still-uttered Keentheechnaun. The wild song was chaunted by a tall worn woman, with matted locks and a haggard face. She changed abruptly from her praises of the deceased into the most dreadful maledictions against their murderer, and then the women were somewhat aroused; but when suddenly starting up, and pausing for a moment, she exclaimed, 'See him! he comes to hear my curses, and to look on his work!' they, too, sprang to their feet, and beheld the witch-like poetess, with eyes starting from their sockets, and her skinny arms extended, pointing at a person who stood so close to the corpse that his hand touched the old man's head. He was carefully muffled up, and his face turned away, but a second look at the diminutive figure told who he was.

A momentary pause of terror ensued; and Crohoore—for it was no other than he—taking advantage of their inaction, flapped his broad-leaved old hat over his face, as if to hide some strong emotion that visibly shook him, and then turning and walking rapidly to the unobstructed door, escaped.

The woman at last shrieked wildly, and called for assistance; but, when assistance came, the intruder was beyond reach. No one could tell or conjecture how he had entered or approached the house; and, when the women were angrily questioned as to why they had not given timely alarm, they solemnly and earnestly averred, one and all, that their senses had become paralyzed, fairly-stricken, in fact, by his presence. Anasthause was among them, the most eloquent and impressive of the group, for she declared that, the moment she saw Crohoore, the purple side of her face had grown scorching hot, and the ghastly side 'cauld as the clay'; and once more she preferred, in support of her assertion, and to sight and touch, the two-handled face, that looked like an ill-baked cake, burned on one side and left raw on the other.

CHAPTER IV.

On the night of the murder of her father and mother, Alley Dooling was startled from a sleep more than usually profound, the consequence of her exercise of the day and night, by becoming sensible of rough personal violence. When first awakened, she strove to look around her, but her eyes were blindfolded; then she tried to rise, but a strong hand pressed heavily on her chest, and some person was in the act of squeezing violently round her mouth a tight folded linen cloth; so that not only was she effectually prevented from screaming, but scarcely could she even breathe. Her arms and ankles, too, were firmly bound, and all struggles to free herself, to speak, or give alarm, proved ineffectual.

When the bandage round her mouth had been well secured, the weight on her chest, so far as her bewildered senses could comprehend what was going forward, ceased to inconvenience her, and along with her day-clothes (in which, with an idea of being ready dressed for Pierce Shea's early call, she had lain down) poor Alley was wrapt in the coverlid of the bed, and then lifted up by a powerful arm.

During all this she had heard no voice; short thick breathings, as of one hastily and laboriously employed, alone came against her face; but, as she was raised up, an indistinct curse, grumbled in a low murmur, reached her ear, and she became convinced that she was treated in this ruffian sort by one not of her own sex. Suddenly disturbed in so frightful a manner from her sleep, excess of terror at the discovery completely overpowered her, and she fainted away.

The cold and pinching blast of the winter's night restored her to animation; but her thoughts continued vague, as if in a terrific dream, and she was just sensible of being borne rapidly along, in the lurch of some person of great strength. The bandage that had been tied across her mouth loosened and fell off for a moment, and she screamed aloud; and suddenly the person who bore her stopped, and it was again fastened on with such increased pressure and violence that Alley's breath and senses again failed her, and she relapsed into a swoon.

When recovered from the second fit, eyes and mouth were both free, all muffling having been removed; her self-possession gradually returned, and she could ascertain her situation. She was on horseback, and a man's arm, from behind, passed round her waist. The frosty air had be-

numbed her flesh, and tingled even through her bones; her teeth chattered, and every joint shook with weakness, fright, and cold. Fearfully and slowly did she now turn her head to look into the face of her conductor. The moon flared broadly upon that face as her eyes fixed on it, and discovered the hideous features of Crohoore, deadly pale, distorted with passion, and stained with blood. Only a few inches' space was between them at this dread recognition, and his small red eye shot fire into her blue one during the hasty glance in which it was made.

Shrieking, and sickened at the bottom of her soul, Alley turned away her head. All the hints she had previously received of his dark and savage nature, and all the warnings to keep him at a distance and be on her guard against him, recurred to her affrighted memory, and she gave herself up as utterly lost. She shrunk from the rude clasp of his arm, she writhed, she loathed his touch, his nearness to her, his very existence. She could not bring herself to speak to him, although the speech were for mercy, and although persuasion was her soul's only hope in her present terrible circumstances, and more terrible prospects; so that for some time not a word was uttered between them.

At last, however, the master-impulse humbled every other feeling; and suddenly turning round, Alley exclaimed:—

'In the most holy name, Crohoore, where are we going, and where are you dragging me?'

'You're going to your ould home, Alley, where woe and sorrow wait to meet you,' he answered.

'What do you mean by that?' she resumed. 'Crohoore, as you hope to see the light of the world to come, carry me back to my own home—to my father?'

He remained silent; from what motive, whether sullenness or cruelty, or from abstraction of thought, it was impossible to discover. Alley could only repeat her passionate adjuration, to which the dwarf at length replied:—

'Alley, Alley, you and myself, this night, are two unfortunate, miserable creatures!' and then he immediately increased the speed of his horse, holding Alley tighter on her seat, and from the swiftness of their course, and her exhausted and agitated state, she could not continue the conversation.

She imagined, however, that she recognized the country on each side as they passed along, and that she was contiguous to her father's house; but even this the speed and her flustered state of mind rendered doubtful. In a little time they proceeded at a less violent rate, and then Alley thought she heard a voice calling from behind, and she screamed for assistance; whe Crohoore, with much dexterity, holding her on her seat by pressing his elbow against her breast, put his hand on her mouth, and resumed a full gallop.

Dashing from the road into the fields, they had to go over the flat country, and with scarcely slackened pace ascended one of the low chain of hills which, Alley now perfectly recollected, were situated but about a quarter of a mile from her father's house. Descending on the other side, they rapidly traversed a large extent of wild and dreary bog; again ascending and descending other small hills and continued for some time their journey among them. It was remarkable with what certainty Crohoore travelled a waste of marsh and mountain so pathless and difficult; his rein was, indeed, now and then tightened in consequence of the difficulty of the footing; but not for a moment was he at a loss to make out the proper and only way through bogs, where a single false step, at one side or the other, would have sunk his horse to the shoulders and something baffled, if it did not entirely impede his progress.

Alley employed such occasional relaxations of speed in endeavouring to move the pity of her stern guardian; but he persevered in a deep and unaccountable silence. Once or twice they passed close by a cabin, of which a few were scattered at a distance from each other through those desolate places, scarcely distinguishable in the moonlight, on account of their similarity of colour, and, indeed, material from the turf-clamps, tufts of rushes, or barren knolls, by which they were surrounded; and still hoping to bring some person to her relief, Alley, in approaching these wretched hovels, cried out with all her might, Crohoore not now interfering to prevent her. But her cries were unheard; or if heard, the inmates only crossed themselves, and prayed to be delivered from the unhallowed wanderers of the night.

They had crossed over one range of hills, and they again pressed against another range, of what the inhabitants call mountains, but which were not of sufficient elevation to lay claim to that title; they were, however, abrupt, fatiguing to ascend, barren and dreary, chequered with heath and furze, and here and there a stunted oak, the relics of the large woods, that about fifty or sixty years before had overspread the

district. Through these wilds Crohoore for some time journeyed, and at last, after looking long and carefully round him, suddenly halted, dismounted, and helped the suffering Alley also to descend from her irksome situation. He placed her on her feet, forgetting that, from cold and fatigue, and misery of mind, as well as from the bonds which tied her ankles, it was impossible she could stand; and so Alley no sooner touched the ground, and was deprived of his support, than she fell prostrate. Instantly he stopped to raise her, and his savage nature seemed touched with pity; for low moanings escaped him, when he saw her tender ankles cut and bleeding from the pressure and friction of the rude cord that bound them. Still on his knees, he hastily undid that cord; then gave liberty to her arms also, and led her a step forward.

Alley, un mindful of everything but her misfortunes, had not observed that they were at a door of a miserable cabin, at which Crohoore stopped, and, with the butt end of a pistol which he drew from his breast, knocked loudly. There was a long pause, and no answer. He knocked again, still louder, and to his second summons a squeaking, querulous voice sounded from within, asking who was there?

'It is I—Crohoore,' he answered; the harsh voice screamed some observation in a dissatisfied cadence; footsteps were then heard inside, and lights shot through the chinks of a badly-made and half-rotten door, which, after many shakings and creakings, at last half opened.

From the vision that appeared, Alley drew back in natural terror. She had heard tales, such as all country girls hear, of witches scudding on the blast, and hiding themselves in holes and corners to do deeds of wickedness; and she thought just such a being stood before her. It was a crone much under the middle size of women, and made still lower by a bend in her back, which sent her shoulders and head forward and down, almost to a level with her hips. Her face might seem a parchment mask, loosely adapted to the staring bones, and therefore shrivelled up into innumerable wrinkles, which ran lengthways and crossways, and here and there, without union, beginning, or end, when open, showed bloodless gums, without teeth. Matted grey hairs hung down the cheeks, escaping from an old red handkerchief that entirely covered her head, and was knotted under the stringy throat. The rest of the figure, with its costume, does not invite description; it was withered sin and bone foul and disagreeable, with but a few shreds of covering. The only trait about the animate mummy which interested, and to which one would turn again, though not for gratification, was her eyes; they indeed possessed a strange vivacity, if not energy, unfitted and unnatural to such a carcass.

She held up a lighted rushlight as Crohoore entered, bearing, or rather forcing in, his instinctively resisting companion. The beldam viewed them closely, a moment, with half-shut eyes; then the wrinkled lids suddenly expanded, and while her looks, flashing on Crohoore, expressed all the impotent frenzy of age, she squeaked out in the shrillest key,—

'Villian o' the world! I and you dared disobey my commands? didn't I warn you, on peril of the hereafter, not to lay hands on Alley Dooling? Ugly shingawon!—be your misdeeds on your own head!'

'Whisht, whisht, now, asthore,' said Crohoore hastily, though not angrily; and then he whispered something, a few words only, yet they seemed to convulse his frame through every fibre.—The hag whispered in her turn, and his paroxysm gained its height; he started back, trembled still more violently, grew more deadly pale, and cast a mournful, or, at least, strange glance on the poor terrified Alley. She, eagerly catching at the change that took place in the features of her extraordinary conductor, again tried every appeal to divert him from the infamous intentions she believed he held towards her. Flinging herself on her knees, and using the Irish language, the sound and idiom of which she conceived might have most effect on him—

'In the name of the God of Heaven, Crohoore,' Alley said, 'be not to me, the only child of your old master and mistress, the villian you intend to be! think, and repent in time! restore me to my father this blessed Christmas morning, and you shall not only be forgiven, but, I swear by my father's soul, you shall be rewarded!'

During this address Crohoore groaned fearfully, staggered backward, leaned against the damp wall of the wretched hut, spread his hands over his face, and Alley saw, with astonishment and delight, tears of she hoped, pity and repentance forcing their way through his fingers, and running along the backs of his hands. 'You will, Crohoore,' she then continued, clinging to him, 'you will take compassion on me, and bring me home again to my poor father?'

But now the wretched girl was, for the first time, to learn the extent of her misery. Crohoore uncovered his face; which horror, grief,