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SHAWN NA SOGGARTH; OR, THE PRIEST-HUNTER. AN IRISH TALE OF THE PENAL TIMES.

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CHAPTER XXVI.

On reaching Arthur Ffoliot's quarters, Shawn found that he had left them half an hour previously. But loitering about in the neighborhood, he met him shortly after, returning from a fruitless visit to the castle, where he had been denied access both to his father and Sir John, though he knew the former was there at the time, so that he was just in a proper mood for receiving the ruffian's communications.

Accordingly a prolonged interview ensued, in the course of which, by adding to the threats he might have really heard Sir Robert use at different times—designedly misdating their periods—detailing, with embellishments, some violent expressions used publicly by Sir Robert a few days previously, and artfully connecting them with some appearances he pretended to have observed the preceding day at the ball, and still later ones, (the mere coinage of his brain) he asserted he had witnessed in the evening, Shawn managed to leave not a lingering doubt on the mind of his eager auditor but that Sir Robert it was and none other, that had conveyed away his sister. The ruffian had also, by his, for the most part, fabricated narrative, greatly stirred up the angry feelings of Arthur against Sir Robert in other respects.

"Then, by Heaven, exclaimed Arthur, as the vile detail closed, "I have a longer account to settle with the villain than even I calculated on."

"But, Captain Ffoliot, jewel," said Shawn, with half real, half feigned fear, "I throw myself on yer mercy, never to let man, or mortal to know that it was me that gey you the information, as if that was want known, yer honor knows my bred ud be baked with Sir John and yer father, an' that I might fly the country at wanst, an' I hadn't the laste notion o' sayin' a word o' what I heard an' saw, till I saw the cruel takin' yer honor was in this mornin'."

"The disclosure shall never pass my lips unless with your own consent; and here is a small compensation for information so timely and so completely in accordance with my own suspicions. You shall receive more befitting reward hereafter; and in the meantime have your eyes and ears about you." He reached him two gold pieces, the contents of his purse; and the ruffian took his departure, leaving his willingly imposed auditor in a state of high excitement and exasperation, while he himself pursued his way with chuckling and exultation.

He had, that day, acquired favor and remuneration he could not have calculated on, with a prospect of still more of both; and, smacking his fingers, he said to himself, "the luck didn't turn with you yet, Jack; an' now, if I could pin them troublesome thieves o' priests, an' get round Sir John, (for he had no faith in Baker's capability of changing the baronet's opinion so easily, whatever the attorney's belief might be) wouldn't I stand as high as ever for my loyalty—an' who dare sneeze at me?"

Inspired by this exaltation of spirit, or, perhaps, only recalling a plan that might have occurred to him before, while pondering over some hot drink he had ordered for himself, in a low haunt of his, in the skirts of the town, a plan, the most promising he had ever formed, struck him for getting, at least one of the priests into his power; and he proceeded at once to put it in execution.

"Well, if you don't nick the vagabones this time, you may hang your thrack, Jack," he said, rubbing his hands, exhilarated as much by the conception he had formed as by the drink he had taken, as he set forward for his sister's, in high spirits, and confident of success at last. How little he thought he was rushing on his own fate, too, while planning and preparing the destruction of others.

Poor Nancy was sitting near her cabin door, occupied with her wheel, while her children were employed, one in peeling dried rushes for the purpose of making lights, and the other in making lines in the ashes with her switch.

"Mammy," said the elder child, "whin I take these to Mrs. Nally (the house-keeper at the rectory) maybe I'd get another silver hog (a shilling) as I did the time afore."

"No, Cisley, ashore, I'm afeared you won't see the darlin' Miss Maria, this time as I know she's goin' to God, fast. May the angels be her guide, an' ogh an' ogh, the more's the pity that so young a mornreen, an' so beautiful an' good intirely should be taken away, an' so many, that could be spared, left behind."

"But don't ye say, mammy, that she's goin' to God; wouldn't we be all happy, if he took us?" asked the elder child.

"Yis a haskya, it ud be well surely, if God would take such miserable crathers as us; but the jewel, Miss Maria, had many comforts in this world itself, an' was a blessin' to every wan near her. But it is the like ov her that ud go the soonest."

"Well, mammy," said Cisley, flinging down the rushes, and nestling her head in her mother's lap, "if we wor to pray to God, maybe he'd lave her to us, as you say he's always too good to us for what we deserre an' ould Ned ses he'd be willin' to lis'en even to little childreen, if we knew how to pray to him."

"An' I ould pray, too, for the lady that gey me the frock last Christmas," said the younger, placing her head opposite her sister's.

"But, my darlin', said the mother, stopping her wheel, and fondling each with either hand, "I'm afeared, if God's inclined to make her an angel at wanst, (blessed be His holy will) our prayers wont stop Him."

"Sure let us thry anyhow, mammy. ould Ned ses that good prayers can never do any harm; an' I was dhramin last night that Miss Maria was dhrest so grand, an' goin' to be married by Father Bernard."

"I'm afeard, ashore, as dhraimes, they say, always goes be contrairy, that that was bad sign."

"Maybe so, mammy; for in a mint afther, I thought the bould wicked man that bate you and freckoned mesel' and Bawneen, whin she was sick, was ketchin' me by the throat;—the child sprung to her feet at the recollection, and looked wildly round.

"Don't be freckoned by a dhrame 'a chorra machree,' it'll be many a long day, please God an' the Vergin, afore that bould man darkens our doors again."

Nancy was drawing the alarmed child towards her with all a mother's fondness, while she was yet speaking, when Shawn tottered in, pallid as a corpse, and apparently weak as infancy.

"Nancy, you wor astray," he said, in a thin, weak voice, as he sank on a stool, "I'm come to visit you agin, sooner nor you expected. I'm come, I'm afeard, a dyn' man, but, I thrust, a better man, too."

"O, may God and the saints grant id," she ejaculated fervently, edging at the same time Cisley behind her, while the younger fled screaming into the room behind the kitchen.

"Yis, Nancy, I feel I'm dyn'," he m'fter gettin' a grate beatin' about the heart—he grasped and placed his right hand on his left side—"an', though I'm a disgrace to yourself an' all my family, (though God, he knows, this misfortunate night, any how, I was on no bad scheme) where would I seek a shelter but with the daughter o' my own father? Oh, my heart—a dhrink—a dhrink, a dhrink, Nancy, for the sake ov our father in the grave."

"Mammy, mammy, don't go near the bould man—don't—don't. He'll kill us all," screamed both children.

"Be the hush, ashores. Bawneen, don't cry a chorra machree. Sure he's our own flesh an' blood, afther all, for as bad as he is; an' maybe God has touched his heart at last, an' that this is the blesseddest day for himsel' and oursels that ever kem."

The drink was tenderly, nay, almost affectionately, supplied; and, after swallowing it, he said, as if somewhat revived, "God bless you, Nancy, you wor always thinder-hearted, tho' it's little I deserre at your hands, sure enough."

He leant his head against the chimney side, closed his eyes and appeared to fall into a broken slumber, during which he started repeatedly, mingling heavy groans with exclamations of remorse and contrition, promises of atonement and passionate entreaties for pardon.

The single-minded sister, after having, with some pains, stilled and somewhat reassured the frightened children, listened with eager delight to those apparently conscience-wrung expressions. Then both mother and children sank on their knees together, to offer up a whispered but most earnest prayer, with the object that God would grant, that, if her brother was to live, his repentance might be sincere and lasting, and that if he was to die, the Vergin and the saints would intercede that his death might be happy, notwithstanding all his crimes against them.

"Now, mammy," whispered Cisley, in a tone scarce above her breath, after the prayer was concluded, "let us say another for Miss Maria."

"With all my heart, ashore."

A second prayer was offered up for Miss Gordon's restoration to health; and if the sincerity of the offerers could have obtained from heaven its object, the beautiful, the gentle and kind-hearted, would have felt the benefit of it, even in this life.

After having remained in this presently disturbed slumber for nearly an hour, in the course of which he had, more than once, managed to take an unobserved view of the effect his per-

formance was producing on his sister, Shawn raised himself a little, and, opening his eyes, said, in a fainter tone than before, "Nancy, I'm gettin' waker an' waker—O, my heart—will ye help me to the bed, that I know I'll never rise from? My death is here"—he placed his hand on his left side—"an' I deserre it well."

The unsuspecting sister helped him to rise, and, with difficulty—for his steps were heavy and slow and tottering—assisted him to her humble and only bed, "as," though she, "mesel' an' the childher can sleep very well round the hearth, for wan night."

He was scarcely stretched when, groaning and writhing more severely than before, he said, in the same faint tone, "Come near me, Nancy.—There's not wan undher the sun now, barrin' yourself, cares a thranceen whether I live or die. I'm afther laiden a wicked life, sure enough—may the Lord forgive me—but, vagabone as I am, I have somethin saved still, an' it's the last I may lave id to yourself, an' the childher, afther all the throuble an' disgrace ever I cost ye."

"No, John. It was terribly got, an' I'd be afeared it—"

"It ud bring a curse with id, you wor goin' to say; but it wouldn't, Nancy. Whin it ud go into your innocent hands, it ud go well, an' help to rise yourself an' your infants from poverty."

"But, please God, you will live yet yourself, John, to rise yourself an' use id for your sowls' sake."

"No, Nancy, the death is on me—he gasped as for breath—"an' little loss, if I was fit to die. But can even God forgive me, afther all the wicked I did?"

"John, usen't the clargy—haven't we heard that God'll forgive even the murderer?"

"Oh—oh—"

"I didn't mane to say, John, that you wor out an' out as bad as a murderer, only that God can pardon even the worst ov us, if we repent from our hearts."

"Nancy, you may say anything. Since the day you reminded me, afore, how we used to pray together, whin we wor childher, the thought is ever and always runnin in my mind. O, if I could pray now whin I want it most."

"An' canst you, John? Sure I'll join you."

"God bless you, Nancy, an' forgive me, if I can be forgiven—O, my heart—my heart—yeena deea throcharya urrin"—(God have mercy on us)—he struck his breast several times with fervor. Then after a moment's pause, fastening his eyes on her face, and clasping her hand, he said in a tone slower and more solemn than before, "Nancy, I'd die happy, I think, if I could wanst get the rites of the church. Is there no priest to be got for love or money, that ud raise his hands over me?"

"John, I don't want to aggravate you an' you dyn'. But you know—you know it was yersel' that lint the heaviest blow to banish thin ye want so badly now."

"Isn't that what's on my heart, heavier nor the battin' this minit? But, Nancy, O, it's a cruel thing to be burnin' for ever—for ever."

A shuddering at the fearful allusion, came over his innocent and simple-minded sister, as she said hesitatingly, "John, I may be wrongin' you;—but, afther all, I'd be afeard, God forgive me, even if I knew where there was a holy man—I'd be—a most afeard to thrust you."

"An' what bether do I deserre, Nancy?—But keep in mind that I'm still yer own brother; the son o' the same father an' mother, and that, as you said before, we used to say our prayers together at our mother's knee, when we wor childher, Nancy; besides that (he grasped her hand earnestly again) bad as I am, a dyn' man is like to tell the thruth—O, my heart! Nancy, feel my pult (pulse)—it's nearly over," he ejaculated, faintly.

He closed his eyes again, breathed more heavily and, after a few minutes, struck his breast fiercely, and affected to rave as of absolution, while his harassed sister's mind was agitated by a severe struggle, between doubt and fear and inclination. At length, a louder burst of apparent agony, succeeding a short interval of almost unbreathing quiet, impelled Nancy to set out at her best speed, accompanied by her eldest child (the other had fallen asleep) for a cottage at some distance where, she was aware, Father Bernard and his nephew were to be located for that night; the latter clergyman had been sojourning in the district for upwards of a month previously.

She found both clergymen arrayed in the garb of female peasants, as she was admitted without ceremony or mystery, when her voice was known—and, having explained the cause and object of her visit, with some doubt and hesitation, Father Bernard said, promptly, he would return with her at once.

"Sure, Father Bernard," said his nephew earnestly, "you will pause before you venture within the clutches of so vile and dangerous a man?"

"If he has been a vile and long continued

sinner, then has he more need of one to awaken him at his dying hour, David?"

"But take care that the assault and the death-repentance are not altogether feigned, as a portion of one of his villainous schemes."

"If so, David, we must but trust to the arm of the Almighty; but what does his religious and honest minded sister say?"

"Do not go near the villain, dear sir, whatever her affection may tempt her to believe or say," interposed Father Davy.

"Speak on, Nancy, I will depend my life on your truth."

"Thin, I think, Father Bernard," said Nancy, after a moment's pause, "my misfortunate brother is on his death-bed; an' I hope—I'm sartin that God an' the Vergin's touched his heart at last, an' only I'd be afeard to advise, I'd say it's a pity his sowl should be lost for ever."

"Then, whatever comes of it, I will go with this honest woman, as well for her own comfort as to try to win one guilty soul from the enemy of man."

"Then, dear sir, if you think it right that even he should have a clergyman, let me go to him," said the friar imploringly, "as, should misfortune occur, my loss will be but of little importance in comparison with yours."

"No, David, though I know your zeal, you have not had sufficient experience to deal satisfactorily with such a death-bed as his."

CHAPTER XXVII.

In accordance with this resolution, Father Bernard, accompanied by Nancy and her child, set forward for the cottage. Unfortunately for himself "coming events did not cast their shadows before." No presentiment of the fearful fate that awaited him so closely, flung its heavy shadows over his mind; and he would, on no account, permit his nephew to accompany him, but directed him to remain on an eminence, at some distance from the cabin, and commanding an extensive view around, to give timely warning, should other steps boding danger approach. He felt—indeed, believing as he did, could feel—no fears of personal danger from a person in the state her brother was described to be in by Nancy, on whose sincerity and trustfulness he had the firmest reliance; and he dreaded that the hotness of his nephew's temper would but irritate and, possibly, prevent the dying man from feeling and expressing that unalloyed and profound repentance required by his manifold crimes.

When the priest entered the little room with Nancy, Shawn was breathing heavily and muttering some broken and half distinct expressions of remorse; and, beckoning the sister aside, Father Bernard softly approached the bed, and was bending close over the pretended dying man when the ruffian, starting up with a yell, grasped at his throat, exclaiming, "By the glory ov hell I have him at last." The neck fastenings of the priest's cloak, however, gave way, and utterly unexpected as was the assault, conceiving at once his danger, he flung off the cloak and darted to the door. But he had scarcely passed through it when the hands of the ruffian were on his shoulders, and he was pulled to the ground beneath the powerful grasp. Father Bernard's frame, though slight, was, however, inured to exercise and peculiarly active for his years, and he struggled with desperate energy while Nancy excited and emboldened by the emergency, boldly seized her rife brother by the collar with both hands, so that, the next moment, Father Bernard was free'd from his grasp, and gathering himself up from his prostrate position, despite his assailant's exertions. Rendering more infuriate by this check, Shawn, at the same moment, flung his sister violently from him and, grappling with his victim again, prostrated him once more, and was trying to place a knee on his chest when Nancy, acquiring further courage from the imminence of the priest's danger, struck the ruffian on the hands with her tongs, which made him relax his grasp for an instant; and profiting of the momentary intermission, Father Bernard regained his feet with a celerity only desperate fear could have lent him, and, striking his assailant one powerful blow on the temple with his clenched hand, sprang towards the outer door.

All the savageness of Shawn's murderous nature was now, however, aroused by the unexpected struggle and the blows he had received, as well as by the fearful screaming of the mother and children, which might draw some stragglers to the cabin, if the struggle was not promptly terminated; and, recovering himself instantly, he drew from his breast a dagger, which he generally carried about him.

Father Bernard might, notwithstanding, have still escaped but that, in his headlong haste, he stumbled against one of the children that was standing in the doorway, and who, unfortunately, sinking beneath the shock, brought him down beside her. The screams now rose louder and wilder; and before Father Bernard could move to offer any defence, the murderous ruffian plunged the dagger blade twice in his neck, shouting,

with a fearful imprecation, "to heaven or to hell with you now, as you wouldn't surrin'dher quietly!"

The blood spouted on the face and clothes of the child that, shrinking back and gathering herself up, remained as silent as the murdered man himself, who never spoke after receiving the blow. He merely uttered a single groan of mortal agony, flung out his limbs once convulsively, and all was over. The threshold was overflowed with his life blood and with its ebb passed away to that remote land—yet how brief the passage—where proscription and persecution are unknown, a spirit burning with as high an enthusiasm for the faith of its fathers, and as pure and warm a zeal for country, as ever glowed within a human breast. The murderer after inflicting the fatal blow, deliberately wiped the dagger blade and, shaking it towards his sister, walked away, swearing that, if she uttered another shout while he was within hearing, he would return and bury it in her body too. Nancy, however, required no such threat to prevent her from giving an alarm at once. She was incapable of sound or motion. Mute and rigid, as if she had been turned to marble on the spot, she stood erect, with arms out-stretched and eyes fastened on the bloody spectacle at her threshold, while the blood-stained child crept noiselessly to her side from beside the corpse, and the other joined her from the room with equal noiselessness.

When she had recovered somewhat from her waking trance, she fell on her knees, and wildly and passionately implored the Vergin and the saints to intercede, and the Saviour to grant, that the curse of the Almighty might not pursue herself and her childher for ever, for her having been the means of tempting the holy man into her now desecrated cabin, and for having a brother whose name was to be accused to all posterity.

After having prayed for a few moments, she arose and prepared to go to the rectory, to detail her fearful intelligence. With averted head, she placed her only quilt over the body; and still, in passing out, she recoiled thrice shudderingly from the threshold, and it was only, by covering her eyes with her hands, that she at length brought herself to step over the body.

It was nearly an hour after the terrible deed had been done, that the benevolent rector was informed of the murder, by the still terrified mother, who was accompanied by both her children; the friar having been obliged to retire to some distance from his station by the approach of some horsemen on the neighboring road, had neither heard the screams, loud and wild as they had been nor observed the departure of the murderer.

Mr. Gordon was greatly shocked and enraged by the terrible and unprovoked crime. He made the agitated woman repeat the nature of the assault and the utter absence of all necessity for the bloody deed, at the broken intervals her agitation would permit, and in a low tone, least they should disturb his slumbering daughter, who was sinking fast. Then pecciling down her information accurately, he said earnestly, "With this evidence it will be hard if we have not justice done on even such a murderer as Shawn, either through Sir John, or higher authorities."

The somewhat reassured mother, having now disburthened herself of her fearful information, and been supplied with some much needed refreshment for herself and children, returned with them to the cabin under the protection of Mr. Gordon's stout servant, armed to the teeth.

By this time some of the nearest of her scattered female neighbors had ventured into the cottage; and, by her directions, for she could not bring herself to put her own hands on the body, the ceremonials, customary immediately after death, were bestowed on it. The murdered man was "washed and laid out" as decently as the humble materials afforded by the cabin or the neighboring ones would permit, amid the low but vehement and reiterated imprecations of the females on the actor of the bloody deed.

The wake, however, was, of course, much more thinly attended than even had been Sir Edmund's, particularly as the near road was patrolled by a party sent by Sir John, on hearing of the occurrence, lest there should be any outburst in consequence. Even Father Davy, though he performed a tearful mass for the dead, with a few of the peasants, by the lake side, was prevailed on not to venture into the cabin, anxious as he was to behold the venerated dead before he should be coffined. As the mists, however, began to rise slowly from the bosom of the lake, as if reluctant to unveil her beauties, and the grey dawn succeeded the faint starlight—this was the hour arranged for the burial by the few wake attendants, as being that most appropriate for concealment—he did venture in to attend the funeral, disguised in the cloak and head gear of a female; and, in less than half an hour after, the small procession was on its way to the abbey. But so little compunction did Shawn