



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XIII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 1868.

No. 31.

THE HERMIT OF THE ROCK. A TALE OF CASHEL.

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CHAPTER I.—HALLOW-EVE IN BRYAN'S HOUSE.

A raw, cold evening was that of the last day of October, in the year 18—, a short time after the memorable 'year of Emancipation'—as the twenty-ninth year of this century is distinctively called amongst the Catholic people of Ireland. The crops were all gathered in from the rich level fields around the city of Cashel—the last potato-heap was covered out of doors, and the last load of that valuable esculent garnered in for present consumption in the farmer's household. The rich man's barns and haggards were full, and so were his byres, while even the poorest cottier had his slender stock of potatoes and turf stored away—his sole provision for the coming winter. The ancient city of Cashel, shorn of its former splendor, and dwindled down, in the vicissitudes of time, to the dimensions of a moderately-sized country town, lay dull and indistinct at the foot of the old Rock which sheltered it from the increasing violence of the wind that came sweeping from the north over the far-spreading plain. And the Rock itself loomed in solitary grandeur over the silent town, crowned with the solemn mementoes of departed glory, the ruins of many a stately edifice of other days, whose shattered walls were traced in broken and irregular lines against the gray lowering sky.—The piles of masonry so varied and distinct, one from the other, in the light of day, were merged in one dark solid mass as the evening mist gathered thick and heavy around them on their rocky perch. But still like a spectral head rose over all the weird pillar-tower, lone 'chronicle of Time' keeping ward ever, through the garish day, and the still night-watches, over the buried dead who sleep around and the ruins of ancient art.

'The proud halls of the mighty and the calm homes of the just.'

The lights in the city came out one by one, twinkling like stars through the gathering gloom. So, too, in the group of mud cabins that cover immediately beneath the great Rock, in unsightly contrast with the mouldering monuments of human grandeur towering above. Each in succession gave its faint glimmering light to the dull wintry eye, but still the Rock remained shrouded in darkness; the royal palace of Munster's kings and the lordly dwelling where princely ecclesiastics ruled of old are dark and silent now as the graves that contain the ashes of their lords, nor light nor sound comes forth from the ancient abbey, that stands close by, all alike wrapped in the solemn mystery of the Past, typified by the deepening gloom of the hour and the silence of death that reigns for ever in the lonely place.

The last tint of daylight was vanishing from earth and sky when the door of the smallest and poorest of the cabins at the foot of the Rock was opened with a quick, eager motion, and a woman might be seen in the aperture, her small figure dimly revealed by the light of a resin-candle, which flickered through the smoky atmosphere of the miserable hut. Throwing the skirt of her blue druggot gown over her head, she made one step beyond the threshold, then stopped as if checked by a strong and sudden impulse. She cast a half-frightened, half-anxious look at the frowning walls above, and then a longer and more earnest one at the iron gate leading up the steep ascent to the ruins, muttering drearily to herself—

'Isn't it a queer night for any Christian to be up there—of all places in the world? Sure I know well nothing good can come of it, and many's the time I told him him so, the wretched creature.'

As she stood in an attitude of fixed attention, with eye and ear strained to the uttermost, there came from the neighboring town certain loud noises like the banging of doors rapidly and often repeated. Shouts of laughter and merry voices came loud and distinct to the ear of the lonely watcher. A change came over her withered features as she listened, and a smile of strange meaning, half sorrow, half mockery, wreathed her thin pale lip, and shone in her dulled eyes.

'Ay! sure, it's Hol'ev' night!' she muttered, 'an' the fun is beginnin' already. The boys an' the girls are abroad in the streets playin' their Hol'ev' tricks. They're pullin' their cabbage-stalks now in the dark, to see whether their sweethearts 'ill be crooked or straight; and they're standin' outside the doors with their mouths full of water listenin' for the first name that's spoken within. And some of the girls are washin' their shifts, I'll go bail, at the south-runnin' water below; and it's them will spread the fine supper when the rest of the house is all asleep, to see who'll come in to eat it, and to turn the shift that's a-dryin' by the fireside. Vo! vo! vo! it's little they think of the troubles that may be in store for them. It's little I

thought of them, either, when I was like them. An' many's the trick I played of a Hol'ev' night—and didn't I see—oh, didn't I—didn't I—oh wirra! wasn't my stalk always the straightest and purest—it was—it was—but what came of it?—oh Lord! what came of it?'

Forgetting apparently her interest in the Rock, whatever it might be at that hour, she wrung her hands, and bursting into a passionate flood of tears, retreated into her dismal dwelling, and hastily closed the door, still repeating to herself in the same wild way, 'What came of it all? what came of it all? Ah! she suddenly added what a startled glance around the smoky hut, 'what better could come of it, didn't I rake the haystack in the Devil's name the very last Hol'ev' before—before—' she did not finish the sentence, but squatting down by the smouldering fire on the hearth, she clasped her hands in front of her knees, and her head sank on her chest in an attitude of helpless, hopeless, incurable woe.

The woman was first aroused from her lethargy by the raising of the door-latch, and then she started up with the energy and vivacity of youth to accost an old man, much older than herself, although she, too, was, or appeared to be, in close proximity to the vale of years.

'Wisha, Bryan Cullenan!' said she, 'what sort of a man are you, at all, that you'd think of stayin' up there among the dead afther the stars in the sky of a Hol'ev' night? There isn't man or woman in Tipperary would do it except your four bones!'

Excited as she was, she did not forget the old man's comfort, such as it was. She was down on the hearth, blowing the turf fire with her apron, and seeing it begin to emit a cheerful blaze, she drew over to the hearth a small and very rickety table, barely large enough for two cups and saucers, two plates, a third cup containing some coarse brown sugar, a diminutive milk pitcher minus the handle, and a plate containing a tempting pile of the ever-welcome potato-cake cut in triangular slices, being the four parts of a small circular cake, each piece slit in two and carefully buttered. A small white loaf, a much greater delicacy, stood also on the table. This was 'the big supper' of Halloween, and the old man's dim eyes brightened as he watched the preparations, for tea and white bread were luxuries seldom seen in that poor dwelling.

Slowly old Bryan took his seat on a low stool by the fire, and leaning over it spread forth his hand to catch the welcome heat. He seemed to have forgotten the abrupt question which had greeted his entrance, but it was not so, for when the woman began to repeat it in a sharper tone, he raised his head, and looking at her with a somewhat sagacious smile, said:

'You think I'm losing my hearing, Cauth, aroon, but I am not, thanks be to God! I heard what you said, mavourneen, but I wonder at you to say it. Sure you know well enough that every night is the same up there—pointing upwards with his thumb—do you think them that are abroad on Hol'ev' night has power to go next or near the holy walls and the blessed graves on the Rock of Cashel? Ha, ha, ha!' he laughed or rather chuckled in a faint wheezing voice, 'I'd like to see them showin' their noses where so many saints lie waiting for the last trumpet—it wouldn't be for the good of their health if they did, and they know that well. Fairies, indeed, on the Rock of Cashel! ha, ha! there's spirits enough there I'm thinking to keep the place to themselves.'

'Christ save us!' said Cauth, setting down the little black crockery tea-pot on the table with a haste that came near upsetting all, 'Christ save us; and she crossed herself with a visible shudder, 'can't you let the spirits alone?'

'What harm am I doin' them, aroon?' asked Bryan innocently.

'Who says you're doing them harm?' cried Cauth tartly. 'But don't be talking about them—you're enough to frighten one out of their wits, so you are. Sit over now and take your supper.'

'I will, mavourneen, and God bless you; but what makes you so feard of the spirits, Cauth? Did you ever see one?'

'See one? and Cauth shuddered again. 'If I did it isn't alive I'd be now. Can't you talk of something else, you coathravy old man you?'

'What will I talk of, then?' said Bryan with a sort of solemn humor that contrasted oddly with the churchyard gravity of his look and manner. 'What will I talk of, Cauth?'

'I was askin' a while ago what kept you so late on the Rock the night?'

Although Cauth said this, it was evidently more to change the topic than from any interest in the probable answer. Her eyes were fixed gloomily and vacantly on the blazing turf before her, and her thin lips kept moving as though she were communing with herself.

But Bryan was never the quickest of perception, so he heeded not the other's abstraction, but answered in good faith:

'I was workin' ever since I went up this

mornin' at the Archbishop's tomb in the choir above. There was some bits of the beautiful carving gone off the front of it this time back, and, as luck would have it, I found some of them among the rubbish. So I was fittin' them in here and there, and—'

'And you're a great fool for your pains,' broke in Cauth, starting suddenly from her reverie with the air of one who would fain get rid of her own thoughts: 'now what good does it do for you to be spendin' your time up there from mornin' till night, and sometimes from night till mornin', in that fearsome old rookery where there's nothin' but stones and bones and grey walls?'

'Woman!' said Bryan with a sudden assumption of dignity and a solemnity of tone that awed Cauth into wondering silence, 'woman! what's that you say? Who are you, that dares to speak so lightly of God's holy place, and the consecrated walls—and the bones that will come together and rise in glory at the Day of Judgment?—why wouldn't I look after them, for if I don't who will?'

'Well you said it, Bryan Cullenan!' murmured Cauth, her head drooping on her chest, and her hands clasped convulsively as they rested on her knees; 'well you said it—who am I?—ay! who am I! There's times when I hardly know myself.'

It might be that the old man was accustomed to these fits of abstraction and abrupt changes of manner in the one companion of his solitary life, for he answered soothingly as though he spoke to a little wayward child: 'Well, never mind, Cauth! never mind—I'm so much of my time all alone on the Rock above with only shadows round about me that I most forget how to speak to flesh and blood like myself. But why don't you take your supper, Cauth?'

'I'm not hungry,' was the curt reply.

'But you know it's Hol'ev' night, Cauth, an' you can't but eat something, if it was only for company-sake, and in honor of the night. Why, the Fairies you were talking of a while ago—'

'No, I wasn't talkin' of them—will you whisht now, Bryan; or you'll get yourself into trouble this blessed night. Fair may they come and fair may they go; sure myself wouldn't make so free as to mention their name good or bad. But as for eatin'—I couldn't do it, Bryan, I couldn't—my heart is too full thinkin' of the days that'll never come back, and—and—' she stopped, reached out her hand, and taking the cup of tea that stood untasted on the table, gulped it down with feverish avidity, then pressing her eyelids very close together, she forced back the tears that were gathering in her eyes, and started to her feet, exclaim:

'Well, there now, haven't I the poor memory of my own? sure, I've something better than tay for you, Bryan.'

Going to a little alcove in a corner of the hut, Cauth drew out, with an air of great importance, a black bottle, which she placed on the table with a dreary attempt at a smile, saying at the same time, 'If you're done with them things, Bryan, I'll take them away.' Bryan nodded assent, with his eyes fixed inquisitively on the bottle.

'What's in it, Cauth?' he at length inquired.

'Some of the best potheen in Tipperary, Bryan, and you're to drink the master's health in it this good Hol'ev' night. Them's the orders.—And see here, Bryan—taking a small paper package from the cup-board—here's lump sugar, no less, for the young mistress said, with a sweet smile on her face, that old Bryan—meaning you, av coorse—must have his punch the night as good as the master himself. The Lord's blessing on her every day she rises.'

'Wisha, amen, Cauth, amen, from my heart out,' said the old man, with a fervor little to be expected from him, a gleam of joy brightening his aged eyes at the thought that poor and old and lonely as he was there was one amongst the rich and the young and the happy that did not forget him amid all the luxurious festivity of her own stately mansion. Oh! how glad the rich can make the poor.

'Was she here the day, Cauth?' said Bryan, more cheerfully than his wont.

'No, but she sent for me this morning and gave me as much tay and sugar as 'ill do us every day for a month, and this bottle for you, Bryan, on account of its heavin' the night it is, an' the lump sugar to sweeten the punch. An' see here—maybe you don't call them Hol'ev' apples? as she drew forth a tiny basket of the finest Russetins—or, as she called them, 'rusty coats,' time out of mind the favorite Halloween apple in Ireland.

'Isn't God good to us, Cauth?' said the old man, drawing his stool once more to the fire, with the cup of punch in his hand (Bryan's cottage contained neither glass nor goblet) and Cauth opposite with another cup containing a small quantity of the same exhilarating beverage—it was seldom either indulged, or cared to indulge, in the dangerous luxury for which mankind is indebted to John Barleycorn. 'Isn't God

good to us, Cauth? to send us such a friend as the young mistress? and see what a fine load of turf we have by us—enough to put us over Christmas anyhow. It's Dan O'Connell we may thank for that, and a trifle I've by me ever since for a sore foot. Ah then, did I ever tell you, Cauth, of the day I showed him over the Rock?'

Cauth answered in the negative, expressing a wish, at the same time, to hear all about it:—turning to a pile of turf in the corner behind her, she replenished the fire, and with a well-worn heather besom swept up the ashes from the hearth.

'You mind the day, Cauth?—Cauth nodded assent, it was one of the brightest and purest days that came in September, and I was hard at work scrapin' the moss out of the letters on King Cormac's tomb—you know where it is, Cauth, just in between the wall of his own Chapel, God rest his soul! and the Cathedral—well, I was workin' away as hard as I could, sayin' a trifle of prayers, too, for the good king's soul, though thinkin' to myself that it's little need he had of them, most like—when somebody says, just right behind me, 'Hillo, Bryan! you're at your old trade still, I see' and I started like and dropped the chisel out of my hand. When I turned about who should I see but the Counsellor himself, as large as life, looking down at myself with that comical look of his that would make the dead in their graves laugh if they could only see it. He had two gentlemen with him, and I knew in a minnit that one of them was Tom Steele, for I seen him once afore. So I gets out from my crib as fast as I could, and I takes off my hat and makes the best bow I was able, and says I, 'you're welcome back to Casbel, Counsellor.'

'Thank you kindly, Bryan,' says he, 'I see you haven't forgotten me.'

'Forgotten you?' says I back again, 'sure that's what no one ever does that once gets an eyeful out of you?'

'With that the Counsellor laughed again, and the other gentleman laughed too, and says Dan to me: 'Well, Bryan, for a man that's so much alone you keep the use of your tongue to admiration. But come, can you spare time to show us through the place? You know when I was here before I hadn't time to see half what was to be seen—it was when I came down to one of those murder trials in Clonmel,' says he to the strange gentleman, 'and I was hurrying back at full speed for a general meeting of the Association that was to come off next evening,'—but what's the matter with you Cauth?' seeing that she laid down the cup and leaned back against the wall.

'There's nothing the matter with me,' said Cauth testily, though her pale lips could scarce articulate the words. The next moment she sat up as before, and mentioned for Bryan to go on with his narrative.

'Well, I will, Cauth, I will—but—but I'm afraid you're not able to sit up—you look as pale as a ghost.'

'Can't you go on with your story and never mind me? You were saying the Counsellor asked if you could spare time to take them through the ould place.'

'Yes, and of coorse I said I'd be hard run for time if I couldn't take him over the Rock. My work, says I, can stand—there's no one to hurry me, and I'm my life-long to do it.'

'Very true, Bryan,' says the Counsellor, as we turned into the ould Cathedral; 'do you know, Steele, says he to Tom, 'that this is our Irish Old Mortality—let me see—was that the word—yes, that was it—Old Mortality—this, says he nodding his head at myself, this is our Irish Old Mortality. With that the gentlemen looked at me and smiled at one another, and though I didn't know from Adam what Old Mortality meant, I thought it couldn't be anything bad, or he wouldn't say it, so I took of my hat again and made a very low bow.—You: honor, says I is very kind and condescending to speak so well of a poor old creature like me.'

'Not at all, Bryan, says he, not at all, you're a great man, and a useful man in your own way, and, moreover, you and I are, to some extent, fellow-laborers.' Them were his very words, Cauth, as I'm a living man this night.

'Why, dear bless me, how can that be?' says I, looking at him close to see if he was making fun of me or not.

'Because, says he, Bryan, you and I are both working for the future of our country—we are both clearing away the rubbish of ages—both working for the honor and glory of the Old Land!'

'Wisha, Bryan, did the Counsellor say that?'

'As true as you're sittin' there, Cauth, he said them words, and don't you think but it made my heart jump with joy? I declare the tears came into my eyes so that I could hardly see the way before me, and I most forgot what I was about till the Counsellor says with that fine hearty laugh of his, 'Why, Bryan Cullenan, where are your wits gone? I think I must turn guide myself. Where's this Myler McGrath's tomb is?'

and he walked straight to it, and began to explain the inscription to the other gentlemen. I had no need to speak a word there, for they all knew more about the Archbishop than I did myself. But they wanted to take a rise out of me—I could see that—and so Tom Steele says to me in his big voice, 'Bryan,' says he, 'do you know that Myler McGrath was the first Protestant Archbishop of Casbel?'

'I do, your honor, says I; I knew it ever since I was the height of your knee.'

'How does it happen, then, that you take such good care of his tomb as I am told you do?'

'For a very good reason, your honor, says I looking him straight in the face, 'because he recanted his errors before he left this world, and had all the rites of the Church.'

'Nonsense, man, how can you be sure of that?'

'How can I be sure of that,' says I; 'your honor might as well ask how can I be sure that the blessed sun will go back the night to set where he set last night, behind the western mountains? Only I'm sure, and double sure that the Archbishop died a good Catholic, do you think I'd sleep many's the summer night, as I do every year of my life, right here in the choir beside his tomb?'

'Bravo, Bryan, bravo,' cried the Counsellor and the other gentleman, clapping their hands, and laughing till you'd think they'd split their sides. 'What do you think of that, friend Tom? Come, come, now, look Bryan straight in the face and tell him old Myler did right to conform to the religion prescribed by the Virgin Queen, or wrong to return to Catholic unity when he felt himself at the gates of death. Speak now, my man of Steel, or ever hereafter hold your tongue.'

'Pshaw!' said Tom, turning on his heel and walking away down the aisle, 'let the old hypocrite lie where he is—be that where it may. It matters little now to us when he was right, or when wrong.' At this the others laughed again, and myself was afraid they'd make him angry, but they knew him better than I did, for when the Counsellor called after him to come back and look at one of the old monuments in the wall before they'd leave the choir, he went back as cheerful as could be, and looked just the same as if nothing at all had happened. So I took them all round and showed them everything I could think of, and by the time we got to the old tribute-stone near the gate, with St. Patrick rising up from it on one side and the Crucifixion on the other, they were all partly well tired, I'm thinking, and down they sat on some big stones that were lying a one side on the grass, just where they had a fine view of the whole, and a beautiful sight it was, too. The sun was beginning to decline westward, and the shadows of the grand old walls were all around us, with here and there the shape of a window or a door of clear sunlight shining like yellow gold on the green grass. Then the Counsellor pointed out to the others all the elegant arches, both round and pointed, as he said, and the pillars within and without, and the beautiful mullions, as he called the stone divisions where the windows used to be, and he spoke of the carving over the doors and told the meaning of everything just all as one, Cauth, as if he was at the building of it all—and they talked a long while about the ould Round Tower, and what it was for, and one said one thing and one another, but the Counsellor said it was easy to see what it was built for, and that was to keep the rich vessels of silver and gold belonging to the Church in the ould war-times.

'Don't you see,' says he, 'that there's an under-ground passage from the Church to the tower—well, doesn't that prove what I'm saying to be true. Where would be the use of constructing an under-ground passage—that wasn't the word he said, Cauth, but I disremember the other—I know it began with sub something or another—no matter, anyhow, I suppose it means the same as under-ground—where would be the use,' says he, 'of constructing an under-ground passage to the Tower through the solid rock, if it was not for the purpose I have mentioned?—The others seemed to give in to that, and after discussing a while longer, they stood up to go. They turned to take another look at the ould walls and sure enough I never seen them looking so grand or so beautiful. The Counsellor's face would do you good to see it, Cauth, as he watched the sunshin' dancing and glancing hither and thither among the broken arches, and the pillars, and things, and says he then, taking out a fine elegant white silk handkerchief out of his pocket, and wiping the tears from his eyes, says he, as if partly to himself, 'and such is Ireland—grand and venerable even in decay—Casbel is Ireland—Ireland is Casbel—royal still, though their greatness be of the past. But their glory shall not fade for ever—look at the sunbeams on the ould walls,' says he, turning to the other gentlemen, 'well, even so it is with our native land, the light of hope has never left her, and now the sun of prosperity begins to shine again—'