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FOR THE CATHOLIC EXPOSITOR.

THE PRIEST HUNTER,

A TALE OF THE IRISH PENAL LAWS.

BY T. D. M^C. GEE.

— The victim of that canting crew,
 So smooth, so godly,—yet so devilish too;
 Who, armed at once with prayer books and with whips,
 Blood on their hands, and scripture on their lips;
 Tyrants by creed, and torturers by text,
 Make *this* life hell in honour of the *next*.

MOORE.

THE most arbitrary queen that ever sat on the throne of England was Elizabeth. Every year of her rule in Ireland (like the hours of an April day,) was marked by some changing storm, some threatening tempest of the royal fury, whose only regrets, were the tears of bitterness shed over the frustrated projects of her revenge. Never since the days of Draco were such wanton deeds permitted and patronized by law, as under the detestable Irish Penal Code, chiefly instituted, and improved upon in that age. It was not deemed chastisement sufficient to take from the Catholic priest his dwelling, to drive the worshippers from the gorgeous cathedrals—monuments of the piety of their ancestry—but having reduced the anointed viceregents of heaven to the condition of hunted beasts which have no where to lay their heads, they pursued them with horse and dog into the mountain fastness, and sang a jubilee of praise at their deaths.

It was a fair May afternoon in the year 1593, and in a part of the county of Waterford, bordering on the Atlantic, that two young friends

sat beneath the shadow of a solitary tree on the brow of a hill, at whose base the western mail-coach road wound, and continuing its serpentine course was lost in the heart of the distant highlands. The fields undulating for miles around, presented a glorious velvet green to the eye, the air breathed thick of the incense of the primrose, the daisy, and blue bell, that studded every inch of ditch and meadow; the voice of the red-breast and the grateful skylark trembled through the young tender leaves; and surely if anything could make the peasant forget his starvation or the sick poor, their dolorous sufferings, it would be gazing upon such scenery. It wanted an hour or more of sunset, and the fantastic splendours of an Irish sky were seldom more prominent and brilliant. Men talk of the cloudless skies of Italy and Spain, but give me such clouds as break and refract the beams of the sun, that now command in their regal purple, and now attract in their silvery moonbeam aspect. In its evening changes an Irish sky is a lovely sight, whilst like the dolphin it becomes more

dazzling as the lamp of life goes down. But the two friends! A young and strongly framed man sat on the grass weaving a crown of wild flowers. He was clad in the home-spun, comfortable cloth of pure native manufacture, for which his tailor had done but little in the matter of style. A long-waisted coat with skirts of absurd shortness, was fastened round his waist by a leathern strap, confined in a plated silver buckle of formidable dimensions: a pair of loose pantaloons covered his nether proportions, and substantial *brogues* completed this portion of his attire. He wore a cap of faded velvet, in which was fantastically stuck the pinion feather of a raven's wing. At first one might mistake this personage for a squireens lackey, since many of the gentry having the proverb in mind that, they can do what they choose with their own, are very unscrupulous, nay, evidently delight, in mutilating the clothes of their menials. But this last appendage, of the black feather, as well as a certain unsettled look in his otherwise handsome face bespoke him as one of a numerous and favoured class—the idiots, or *naturals* of Irish life. He was weaving a crown of wild flowers, and all the time looking in the face of his companion, a young girl of singular beauty and softness of feature, who sat at a little distance, regarding him with an air of mingled pity and tenderness. Meelian More was such a maiden as one seldom meets, but in the south of Ireland. Her fair flaxen hair fell over a cheek and neck rounded to the perfection of statuary, and the glance of her deep hazel eye was the very essence of candour, spiced but not deteriorated, by an arch recognition of admiration. And her heart was as full of pity, and her little head of wisdom, as was her eye of mirthfulness. She was of the middle size, neither pos-

sessing what is called a commanding stature, (a very questionable qualification,) nor so small as to wear a look of dependance or helplessness.

The natural held up his half finished coronet, and exclaimed, "Well, as sure as my name is Corny, that's a beauty; they say Miss Meelian the Queen wears a crown, but not half so nice a one as this."

"She can't find a workman like you, Corny."

"No, no, by the Powers she can't, that's true," said the simpleton, "and then where's the materials like these to be found there? What's their goold and silver, to this primrose, and this lily? ah, ah! and then the Saxon hasn't half so fair a head to wear it as you have, Meelian."

The artless girl blushed at the compliment of the idiot, who busily continued his work, humming all the time a wild wayward ditty, born of sorrow and nature's inspiration in the mind of some unknown rustic bard. The sympathetic feelings and tastes of our nature are easily awakened and put in motion; Meelian More began to hum too, gradually her voice grew strong and clear, and in the full deep tones of melody, words like these might be heard—

"My Country! my country, oh, bright
are thy fields

And the streams that gush down from thy
hills,

That fling back the sunbeams like battles
broad shields

When thy voice war's dread clarion fills.

But alas, that the star of the Desmond has
set,

That false friends done the work of his
foes,

And the graves of the valiant we ne'er can
forget,

Are moist with the tears of our woes."

"Go on, Meelian, I love to hear you sing. They say I am a fool, but I know what's music for all that."

"I have sung all there is of the song."

"Indeed?" said the simpleton, and his face assumed a melancholy blankness. He dreamed not of asking for another.

"You are as fond of music as flowers Corny?"

"Oh, yes, I love everything that's sweet and fair. My mother, because she's good to me and you. I only hate that gallows-bird 'Squire Powell."

"And why him?"

"Because he watches out for my uncle, Father Moran, he wants to get his head off, the *buddagh*. If I ever catch him at 'five finger rock' I'll teach him a lesson, the imp of darkness." As he spoke, a smile of satanic fury settled on the face of the simpleton. He continued, "Just to see the poorould priest with his long white hair, and his oak staff flying bare headed amongst the mountains, for fear of this divil of a 'squire, and his red coat rascals. Maybe the fool don't know this."

Meelian put her finger to her mouth in an attitude of silence. The sound of horse hoofs were pattering up the road.

"They're coming," said Corny, jumping to his feet, "*he's* at our house to-day, but they'll find the nest empty when they arrive."

"I'll meet *him* at the cross-roads, on *Sluene Slua-shee*," said Meelian, as taking the flower-crown from the hands of the idiot, she tripped lightly to her home farther downward on the hill-side. Corny stood still a moment, and then darted across the fields, and skimming their surface with his long legs, and bounding over the ditches in the gray of the twilight like an errant sprite.

The cabin of the Widow Sullivan might have been called a cottage. It was small but neat and well furnished. Alone it rose on the tall range of hills that extend from *Pobble O'Keefe*, (the land of *O'Keefe's* peo-

ple,) to the ocean, and have been al- luded to heretofore. Opposite a smouldering fire in its best room was placed a small sized round oaken table, supported by one leg, and beside this table sat a venerable man, of at least three-score years. He might not have been so old, but sorrow had made more wrinkles upon his brow than time. His white hair flowed in 'a *coolin* of silver beauty. His eye was mild and piercing, and though his person was stooped with age, and his shabby grey-black ha- biliments all stained and travel-worn, that eye, whither from fear or native energy, was bright and sleepless as though he had risen from a refresh- ing sleep. Opposite him sat the widow, his hostess, between whom there was a striking resemblance. The same look of watchfulness com- pleted the similarity. The priest spoke first.—"You say that Corny is watching on the hills." Yes, the poor boy has been there some hours," said the widow, with a marked em- phasis on the word *poor*. "He is as faithful as a wiser head."

"I think" said the priest, "I might lie down and have an hour's sleep. I have'nt slept for many nights but on the dewy heath or cold floor of the caves on the shore."

"Yes," said his hostess, "it would be better, and I'll look out for the boy."

The priest rose to retire, and dis- covered that one arm was fractured: he had fallen amongst the cliffs, in one of his chases. His sleeping- chamber was a simple small room, with plain white walls and a low bed, occupying one half of the floor. A rudely carved wooden crucifix hung over the pillow, and a small bottle filled with holy water was suspended with a cord from the same nail. The priest was lost in fervent prayer. His wounded arm resting on the counterpane, and the other stretched upwards in supplication.

A loud knock at the door thrilled his frame, and made the widow start to her feet: at the same time horse-hoofs might be distinctly heard advancing along the road. Corny entered in haste, and pointing to the back-door, said: "Let *him* fly!" Then sweeping round his long arm he pointed to the road at the front of the house, and added,—“Powell—the soldiers!” It was enough. The widow threw her cloak over the form of the aged priest, and he disappeared in the upland’s gloom, whilst the “Priest Hunter,” and his minions burst into the habitation of the widow. The fragments of a meal were on the table, and Corny sat down with an air of self-satisfaction, and busied himself with his supper.

Aminidab Powell was about forty-eight years of age, of an ordinary size, but slight, subtle, and ghastly looking in his whole air and manner. He was the scourge of the neighbourhood, and feared as much as he was hated by the populace. But he never committed cruelties but those that brought reward in their train of desolation. He was besides a zealous servant of the Church, and a loyal subject, and had but to obtain two or three heads of priests to complete a dozen,—twelve good reasons for his official promotion. Half a dozen lewd and corpulent ruffians, in dress half military, followed eternally at his back;—they were inseparable, and people called them Powell’s blood-hounds.

When Aminidab Powell, Esquire, one of her “Majesty’s” Justices of the Peace gazed round the empty rooms, his small eye flamed with rage; and his words as he spoke almost choked him.

“Tell me, miserable woman, where is this servant of the devil—this priest Moran;—where is he gone. Answer me, or I’ll order these men to assist your memory with the bayonet.”

Before the widow could reply, Corny seized a wood cleaver that lay in the chimney corner, and advancing towards the squire, he brandished it fiercely round his head, and pointing to the open door, shouted in a voice of fury—“begone!”

The priest-hunter fell back precipitately on his blood-hounds, and two of the foremost presented their arms at the poor witless son, who stood still and mute, holding the deadly weapon between his mother and the enraged pursuers.

“Hold in God’s name!” cried the frantic widow, “do not kill my son; my innocent, gentlemen he is an idiot, a natural, do not take his life.” and she flung herself upon the pointed muskets.

“Stand back, or we’ll have your life too”—said the blood-hounds. “Stand back, we tell you, he is a traitor. Did he not threaten the life of her Majesty’s Justice?”

“Oh, spare my foolish boy. Corny, my child, put down that ugly thing and ask the squire’s pardon.”

“No,” said the idiot, in a firm voice.

“Shoot him down, men,” said Mr. Aminidab Powell.

“Oh do not, if ye are men: if ye are fathers spare him; let me die first.”

“Well,” said the Justice, with an ironical smile, “shoot her and quickly. Satisfy the lady’s demand first, by all means.”

At these words, the arm of the idiot fell powerless by his side; the wood cleaver rung upon the hearth stone, and his whole face assumed an air of horrid stupefaction. He was pinioned in a moment, and the two soldiers stepping a little backwards, prepared to fire.

“Stop,” cried the idiot,—“I will show you where the priest is hid.”

There was a deathlike pause.

“Corny,” said his astonished mother, “let me die in peace. I that

have reared you, and toiled for you night and day, that have watched over your long infancy, and been father and mother to you both. Would you disgrace your father's name and break my heart, to inform on your uncle; to betray the anointed of God!"

"Yes I will," said the idiot.

"Do not or *you* will kill me: better let these hard-hearted men shed my blood than you."

"Woman," said the Justice, "hold your peace. We will not shed your blood." Pinion her in his stead. "Mount him before you, Corporal; and idiot, if you try to befool us, we'll hang your mother across the beam, and you at the other end of the rope to balance her."

Saying this, they rode from the door, leaving the widow in a fearful state of anxiety and alarm. She tried in vain to free her arms, but giving up the effort she walked to the door, and sitting down on the threshold, listened with intense eagerness to every sound that broke the stillness of the midnight wind.

Meelian More had in the mean time reached the cross roads of Sliene Slua-shee, and sitting down on a rough block of fallen rock by the way side, awaited the coming of the priest. It was nearly two hours in the night, and the moon was just rising in the distant east. Around her disk the ominous circle that forebodes a storm was drawn, and though there was hardly a breeze upon the hills, the rain-charged clouds were driving athwart her light with stormy velocity. The young girl gazed upon the dark and brooding sky, where the elements seemed conspiring against the earth, and their round upon the dark and desolate mountains, and a vague feeling of terror came across her mind. So lonely and so brave she seemed by the dim light struggling through its clouded drapery, one of the fairies, for which Sliene Slua-shee was noted

and named. A panting breath sounded on the steep mountain path. She started to her feet, and in a moment the aged priest was at her side. He gave an involuntary start at this strange meeting.

"I have brought you something for your cupboard in the cavern, father," said the brave young girl, and she held up a small basket to the astonished priest.

"God bless you, my kind child," said Father Moran, with a sorrowful smile, "priests cannot fast, more than the laity."

Meelian bowed meekly to the blessing, and the old priest taking the parcel from her hand, shook it kindly in his, and while his little benefactor tripped fearlessly as a goat down the hill side, he returned to his cold rocky couch in the mountain caves, where he slept as soundly as though no persecutor was upon his track. The poor ingenuity of bigotry could not afford him safety, even in such a dwelling.

It might be two or three miles from the cross-roads to the home of Meelian More. The clouds gradually grew darker, and the wind gushed and moaned through the mountain passes like surging tides amongst the hollow cliffs of a sea-coast. Gradually it swelled louder, and as she reached her door, she heard in a lull of the storm the quick crackle of musketry. Tremblingly she entered, and casting herself on her knees, prayed for the safety of the good priest. Alas the danger was *to one even more* defenceless! When the Priest-Hunter and his party left the house, they supposed it impossible that the *natural* could have designed to mislead them. They therefore followed him directly to the sea-shore, the Justice riding by his side, and in the most artful manner inquiring into the whereabouts of the retreat.

"You say there is over a score of

men watching this den of the idolator."

"Yes!"

"Who are they?"

"I don't know that: I never got near enough to see them: they hide in the rocks."

"Ah, ah, sirrah, but you do know—come, confess, and I'll absolve you as well as the priest."

The idiot scowled at his tormentor and remained for a moment silent. After a little time they came to a perpendicular rock, whose eastern brow beetled over the wide Atlantic far down in whose depths its base was planted. Here the party halted, and a council was held. In consequence of the force as stated by their informer, it was agreed not to attempt to seize Father Moran that night, and as the presence of all might be suspicious, if perceived by any one in the neighbourhood, it was agreed that the blood-hounds should draw up in the shadow of the cliff, and await the return of the Justice, who was eager to explore the retreat in person.

The idiot and the Priest-Hunter ascended the hill together, the former keeping his companion between him and the sea, and all the while verging to the brink.

"From what point can we see it?"

"A little further that way."

"Why you fool, we can only see the ocean from there."

"You will be at your journey's end."

A sudden fear seized the heart of the Justice, and he looked upon the strong giant frame of his guide.

"Fool, villain, you have deceived me!" and he sought to spring aside and escape. Cory seized him in his arms, and bearing him to the highest pinnacle of the cliff, he pointed to the sea.

"Look there, it is white and noisy to-night, it does not want to receive you, it spurns the Priest-Hunter, and

the murderer!" and the revengeful idiot laughed wildly at the rising anger of the waves. A faint moonbeam fell on the pallid face of his victim. "Ho!" he continued, "the very moon is hiding her face, she does not want to light you down there; but the Frolics, they say, can see in the dark."

The Justice made a desperate effort to escape and screamed so wildly, that the soldiers heard him, and were rushing to his assistance.

The idiot continued, "see down there: about half way is a sharp point, the half-way house of the sea-gulls where they rest in coming up. If you stop there, you will be divided for the fishes, do give them all a share, and lifting the writhing bigot in his arms, he dashed him from the eminence, at the same moment that three musket shots pierced his body, and the victim and the avenger fell into a common grave.

The maiden heard the sound at her cottage door, the priest in his mountain cave, the anxious mother sitting on the threshold. All started, they felt it the echo of the voice of death. But *whose* death they dreamed not.

There stood two mourners on the strand at morning—two victims were left by the ebbing tide. One was disfigured and bruised. Half of his features alone were left, and they were horribly distorted. The face of the idiot wore a smile of triumph. A stream of blood had left its trace upon his clothes, but the foam of the salt ocean had washed it from his face. The priest and Meelian More turned with heavy hearts to the cottage of his mother. They found her dead upon her own threshold, and her arms still pinioned. The blood-hounds had murdered her on their return, saying:

IT WAS BLOOD FOR BLOOD.