

## A MEMORY OF PENAL DAYS

The turf fire had burned down to a heap of luminous ashes, and the frost was forming fantastic pictures on the panes, as Patrick O'Boyle sat in the wide window-seat and peered anxiously into the night. All day heavy showers of snow had fallen, and the track across the valley was long and rugged for the feeble feet of Father John; but in the eyes of the boy who came with his dying mother's request upon his lips, there was such passionate entreaty that the tender heart of the old priest went out to both in their trouble. When had he turned a deaf ear to an appeal, or let a sick call go unanswered, though the journey were far, and the danger he ran enough to make a strong man quail? He was worn with age and many sorrows; with secret hiding, and the ever-present dread of bringing disaster upon those who gave him shelter, for these were the days when lawless men walked abroad, and valued the head of a priest at the same price as that of a wolf.

That was why the deadly fear made Patrick O'Boyle's face grow pale as he watched Father John setting forth with his young guide—the loving haste of the boy keeping him some paces in advance; while the old soggarth, thrusting his stout stick into the snow at every step, limped painfully and slowly after. He had held a station that morning in Hugh Hagan's of Derrybeg; and down in the herdsman's cottage at the Crossroads the room was being prepared for midnight Mass. There were so many avenues of escape in case of alarm that that humble abode was chosen in preference to others more commodious; and up in the rafters among the thatch the sacred vestments lay hidden. In a little while the pious people would be stealing along by hedge and river bank to share in the blessing they must seek by stealth. The priest-hunters had been unusually active of late, and in the town that forenoon Sam Young, the yeoman captain, was heard to boast as he swaggered through the market place that there was rare sport waiting on him and his merry fellows whenever they chose to follow it, and prime news might be looked for before another daybreak.

Patrick O'Boyle recalled this as he leaned forward in the window-seat, his strained gaze fixed on the white road winding away in the distance. He dared not light the Christmas candle on the birth-eve of the Redeemer, lest the glare should bring a suspicious eye upon the house; nor venture beyond his threshold lest the open door should tempt some belated yeoman reeling homeward from his revels. Once under his own roof he had no fear for the priest's safety. Down below in the cellar, that had been a still room, Father John's prayers could rise to heaven undisturbed; and his sleep there, as he had often assured his host, was sweet and peaceful—blotting out all memory of his persecuted old age, and leaving him a happy child again in his dear mother's embrace. Now he wandered unprotected in the valley, and the sleuth-hounds were upon the trail of such as he.

To the watcher at the window the moments dragged drearily enough, and drowsiness threatened to overcome him, when, to his relief, he noticed a figure, thrown into bold prominence against the background of snow, creep cautiously up the leaning and knock softly on the pane. In haste Patrick rose to confront his visitor. He had recognised the herdsman from the Crossroads, and one question only could be first between them.

'What is your news, Phil—good or bad?' he cried, hoarsely.

'Bad, I'm afraid,' said the herdsman in a whisper; 'for word's gone the rounds that the yeomen are out an' after Father John. I've sent all the neighbours home, an' now I'm goin' with my wife to her father's place; there's a fear on her, an' she can't stay. Maybe it's a false alarm, but God help us an' the poor country these bitter times! They say Captain Sam's at the end of his tether, an' his men are callin' for more pay; so he swore to them that he'd have a fine string of shaven heads for their Christmas sports. Some traitor must have told about the station an' the midnight Mass.'

Patrick O'Boyle ground his teeth and raised his strong, clinched hands on high.

'Is this never to have an end, my God?' he cried. 'Do You hear me, this holy night, that is turned by wicked men into a night of evil and terror? Or is Your heart so turned against Your own people that You will not listen? Oh, why, my God—why? Are our sins so red that You cannot forgive? Then punish us as we deserve; but the old priest—he is sinless

and in the snare of the torturers. Ah, save him, save him, merciful God!'

Tears streamed down his cheeks, and heavy sobs stopped the sorrowing supplication.

'Amen!' said the herdsman, as he turned to go. 'But, O my soggarth! it's you were kind and good always, an' the heart in you never hardened to the poor sinner. Mavrone! mavrone! that it's hunted down you should be, an' you so frail an' lonely! What use is our heart's blood, that is yours, when we can't spill it to save you?'

'God is everywhere,' said Patrick O'Boyle in changed tones, unlike his wild utterance of a moment before. 'He knows best the soul that is fitted to enter His kingdom. Life and death are in His hands.'

He went back to his post again, and gazed forth with an added eagerness, until his breath melted the festoons of frost and transformed them into tiny rivers of moisture.

Suddenly he started. Was that a faint, far-away tinkling, or perhaps the throbbing of his own leaping pulse? No: the sound rose and fell in rhythm, like the swinging beat of a bell; and as he marvelled a light shone out from the herdsman's cottage—a steady light, not that of a candle nor the flickering glow of a fire, but a clear, all-pervading radiance that seemed to shine from every corner of the house at once. What could it be? he queried, crossing himself devoutly. Had Father John returned in safety to prepare for the midnight Mass? He would go and see.

So he stole gently from the house and crossed the hard, white road as noiselessly as a shadow, until he stood under the low little window from which the haunting chime seemed to come most clearly. An uncontrollable cry burst from him, and he fell on his knees in the snow. He could look quite easily into the room where stood the deal table decked as an altar, with the covered chalice resting thereon. But Father John, standing with bent grey head in the Confiteor, seemed changed somehow. The torn vestments were the same, the slender figure and trembling tones had the old pathetic familiarity; but the face, which, as the priest turned round, he could see distinctly, had a high look of holy joy too pure for earth. It was full of a rapturous glory, trustful and serene; and as he knelt outside in the cold night, all fear and bitterness passed away like a dream from the heart of Patrick O'Boyle. Half-unconsciously he answered the Mass, as he had been wont to do in secret; and through it the sweet, soft chanting of angel voices hovered in the air—

'Gloria in Excelsis Deo,—  
Gloria, gloria!'

His own voice sounded clear and unfaltering; and at the lifting of the Host, the Mass bell rang in a silvery monotone that made a music earthly ears were unworthy to hear. As Father John gave the last blessing, the watcher saw him look toward the window with a smile as loving as it was fleeting; for in a second the light that filled the whole house died out, leaving the place in darkness.

Patrick sprang to his feet, and rushing to the door, knocked sharply. There was no response.

'Father John! Father John!' he cried, 'come with me quickly! The soldiers are out!'

Still the silence and darkness brooded around him, and far off could be heard faintly the sound of hoarse shouting.

'O Father John, do open the door and let me in, I beg of you! They're coming along the high road. I hear them singing—can't you hear it, too? But we have time, if you will make speed.'

He leaned heavily against the door, waiting until it should open. And it opened gently and slowly. He stepped into the kitchen, where his imploring call echoed back from emptiness. He groped his way through the room over to the window, outside which he knelt so short a time previously, still begging the old priest to hasten. A faint glow from the road showed him that the house was without occupant save himself, and he strove to understand what had happened. Nearer and nearer came the wild singing of the yeomen. What quarry had they found to-night that their jubilation was so assured? He closed the door securely and stooped low, beside the window, to watch them pass.

They were almost upon the house now, and his eye caught the gleam of their swinging lanterns. Two of them, shouting loudest and most vilely, drew along the road a hurdle, which heaved from side to side as it met the rugged snow-covered stones. A huddled black figure stretched upon it swayed with