

VOLUME II

CHAPTER 8

THE MEETING of the voters announced to take place was held in a sort of large room over a schoolhouse, but now rented by the landlord of the rival hotel to the Kilboggan Arms, and used by him for various purposes—some of them, indeed, if report be credible, not calculated to bear the light of day in a political sense. There was an entrance through the tap of The Harp; and this was thronged by an unusual number of customers. All of these, having drunk their glass in the bar, slipped through a door opening into the yard of the public-house, and crossing it, found themselves at the entrance to a long, low room, dingy and cobweb-hung, having a sort of raised platform at one end.

Long before the hour the voters had been gathering in knots of three and five; and when Ned Shea and his cousin Barney, with whom was the accomplished Mr. Daly boiling over with excitement and energy, arrived, the big room was nearly filled. Daly leading the way, they shouldered through the crowd up to the platform. Beside it stood a young fellow with a pocket-book in his hand, in which he was evidently writing down the names of those present. Barney looked round and round until he caught sight of some one particular person in the corner; then he leaned forward and caught the sleeve of the reporter.

“Do you see Finlay, the teacher, beyond?” he whispered. “Put down his name, my boy.”

“Well, well, now; and he has just asked me not to do that same,” answered the reporter, looking up with a puzzled stare.

“You’ll do it, ma bouchal,” was the quiet reply of Shane; and there was a glitter in the look he turned on the young man that impelled him to unquestioning obedience.

The person whose name Mr. Shane was so anxious to have thus honoured was a member of the body of national-school teachers. He had

been appointed by Father Corkran; and like most of his class in the Catholic provinces of Ireland, held his wretched situation entirely at the will of the priest, and was liable to be turned out at a moment's notice. As a matter of course, he lived in a state of abject submission to the whims of his patron; and instead of holding a position inferior only to that of the clergyman in public esteem, his very scholars despised and looked down on him as no better than a servant. Shane knew he was a creature of the parish priest, and that he had come to the meeting unknown to his master, or had been sent to it by him as a spy. Therefore his action as above related.

In a very short time the room was filled by the big frieze-coated men; and Ned Shea, who had been counting them as they entered, advanced to the front of the platform. Striking his ground-ash stick on the floor, he looked round the room. In an instant perfect silence prevailed; and he began in a loud clear voice:—

“Boys,—I don't need, I suppose, to tell you for what purpose we are assembled here. You know what Mr. Hogan wants of us; and you know Kilboggan. The Land Tenure we'll never get without Home Rule first; and to get Home Rule is now the heart's desire of every Irishman, whether he owns one sod of land or no. I have a lease for a hundred and ninety-nine years, and he can't touch me; but it's not so with ye. An' what do ye look forward to, an' what do ye expect to get for the money ye put in the land?” (“Compensation, wisha!” interpolated an old farmer in a tone of concentrated bitterness). “That's not enough. As for trusting the word of this London fine gentleman, that's come over now with his palaver, we know the Wyldoates breed too well for that.” A laugh followed this; and the black-thorns and ground-ashes were grasped tighter in the great brawny fists of their owners. “But for Father Corkran he would not have a chance. He's against Home Rule, so he is; and he's always, like plenty more of the clergy, played into the hands of the landlords.” (“Aye, did he,—true for you, Shea.”) “Home Rule doesn't seem to suit the clergy at all: why I can't tell; but from the first I see they're against it,—or if they're not against it, they're not for it—they think we ought to demand the University first. Well, I say, let those that want the University ask for it; we have no call with that; and those that have call to it don't seem to care. We want Fixity of Tenure and Home Rule; and it's to Mr. Hogan and men like him, we must look, and not an absentee like Kilboggan, that's draining every penny out of this country to spend it in London and France, and all them foreign parts.”

A burst of applause followed Ned Shea's deliverance; and he sat down to make way for his impetuous cousin. Barney, who stalked up to the extreme front of the platform and with one hand under the tails of his great frieze cothamore, and a sardonic grin on his florid countenance, began:—

“Father Corkran condescended the pleasure of his company to dinner at the Castle yesterday. Oh, begor—thruth I'm spakin’,” he added, seeing the surprise on the faces of the “mountain’y” people, to whom this important political item was news. “And,” continued the orator, turning his face in profile to the audience, and looking out of the corners of his blue eyes with an inimitable expression of drollery, “the new chapel will be purceeded with immadiately.” A chorus of laughter showed that his intelligence was fully appreciated. “And the weather bein’ so bad for canvassing, ’tis likely his reverence will have his new covered car home soon. Faith, boys,”—and here Barney dropped the sardonic bantering style, and turned full front to the audience, —“if this goes on, in a very short time his reverence will be indipindint of weddings even.” (“Easy, Barney—be easy, now!” remonstrated his cousin.) “Every thing,” roared the speaker, “that he can grab for himself; an’ the country can go to the divle! He has sold the votes he can command to Wyldoates just as you or I'd sell a bushel of spuds; and let him, too—let him sell the beggarly wretches he has his paw on; but he'll not get a vote out of Ballinagad.” (“No, no—not one!” resounded from the hearers, and an indescribable din of excited shouting and tramping deafened Barney for a moment.) “Stand up for your rights, boys, and let them see there's life in Peatstown yet! Never heed sweet words or promises; be warned by Morty Sinnot.” (Morty Sinnot was a farmer who had been evicted shortly after an election; notwithstanding the promises of the *candidate*, on which he foolishly relied, and which the *member* found it convenient to forget.) “And leave Father Corkran where he is. I wish him joy of his chapel and his ground; he may build the house—let him take care lest another man live in it. The days are gone by when the soggarths stood up for the cause. They got the Protestant Church turned out, but they have not got the money; and there's the last of them. They're afraid of Home Rule; they're afraid to lose the little beggarly cringing importance they have, in this way of politics, with the landed gentry. 'Tisn't for us they're working now,—’tis for themselves. I always said it,” he shouted: “as long as the soggarth by rowing in our boat suited himself and his own aims, he did it; but now we're pulling in opposite directions entirely.”

“You’re wrong now, Barney,” spoke a shopkeeper, in the crowd. “The priests are working for us when they are working for Catholic Education. And the Catholics ought to have a college as good as Trinity. Why should a man be forced to send his son among a swaddling crew, or go without college education altogether?”

“Augh!” replied Shane; “there’s lots of Catholics talking and pretending, and all the time their sons are in Trinity College, and they’d rather put them there than to any Catholic university. Hasn’t Father Corkran got his own nephew there? Answer me that! Sure every great man we have got his education in Old Trinity; and it’s proud of her, Protestants and all, we ought to be. Where did O’Connell and every one of them larn what they knew? Answer me that! Look at Wyldoates himself—a Trinity man. And Father Corkran supporting them. Arrah! where’s the use of my talking at all?” he burst forth in a fit of uncontrollable excitement; “Home Rule and O’Rooney Hogan for ever!”

Then came Mr. Daly, the ex-American; and he, assuming his very best Yankee accent for the occasion, dilated at length on the merits of the Ballot system; “high-falutin” as his speech was, he did some good by explaining the working of the machinery, which he illustrated on the wall with a piece of charred stick, and by following the programme laid down for him by Hogan. Others succeeded; most of them detailing their own grievances, all declaiming against their landlord, and vaunting the universal panacea, Home Rule.