

VOLUME II

CHAPTER 9

“On ne voyait, à la naissance de l’église, que des Chrétiens parfaitement instruits dans tous les points nécessaires au salut. Au lieu qu’on voit aujourd’hui une ignorance si grossière, quelle fait gémir tous ceux qui ont des sentiments de tendresse pour l’église, . . . on n’y était reçu alors qu’après avoir abjuré sa vie passée, qu’après avoir renoncé au monde, et à la chair, et au diable. On y entre maintenant avant qu’on soit en état de faire aucun de ces choses . . . Enfin, il fallait autrefois sortir du monde, pour être reçu dans l’église, au lieu qu’on entre aujourd’hui dans l’église au même temps que dans le monde . . . On les voit maintenant confondus et mêlés, en sorte qu’on ne les discerne quasi plus.”

—*Pensées de Pascal.*

PEATSTOWN, we have said, was built on the river, and consequently lay low in a hollow flanked by hills, or at least what were hills by courtesy, for in reality they were very modest eminences. The main street of the town lay parallel with the river, and was a continuation of a road that led straight up the high ground past the parish chapel and the graveyard, which sloped to the very edge of the highway—from which, by just leaning a little forward over the railings, you could read the inscriptions on the weather-stained tombstones. The road, however, ran on direct and straight; and of course soon parted company with the erratic stream, which bent and twisted at its own unstable will, past meadow-land and fallows, cornfields and bog, far off to the west, to lose itself at last in the broad bosom of the Shannon.

On the river side, as you went towards the chapel, which crowned the height and looked down on the sleepy little town, stood a long, low,

slated house, built below the road level, with brass-barred windows, and a hall door, to enter which you descended a couple of granite steps. At the end of this house, and behind it, ran a garden, whose low, moss-grown wall overlooked the stream at the back—the brawling of which came pleasantly in the open windows in summer time, and mingled harmoniously with the song of the bees at work among the lime trees and the lavender hedges. Dead creepers overhung the walks, and long withered arms of clematis and jessamine stretched themselves down to meet the flood plashing by below. The garden was laid out in terraces; and big white vases full of geraniums, pinched and blackened by the frost, stood exactly at each corner of the prim gravel walks. In the centre was an arbour—arches of wood-laths crossed, covered with ivy and creepers; in which stood a plaster-of-Paris Madonna, sadly weather-beaten and discoloured, chipped and cracked. Hens and chickens roved through the garden, picking up a supplementary and scanty diet among the weed-grown beds; and a surly terrier, chained to an old wooden box, lay with eyes fixed in hungry expectation on the kitchen door.

It was nearly half-past nine; and Father Corkran, the owner of the house, having finished breakfast, seated himself by the window with the *Peatstown Torch* for a quiet couple of hours, before proceeding to the chapel to preach the midday sermon. He had scarcely got half-way through the very first column when he startled violently, and turned over the page, and began to read and count a number of names printed in a double column. He threw down the paper before he had finished, and going to the fireplace, rang the bell furiously. A little girl opened it, and looked timidly in.

“Cattey, did you see the schoolmaster go up to the catechism yet?”

“No, sir.”

“Call down to his house this moment, and bid him to come up to me, and not to lose a minute. I’ll put a stop to this work. This wretched insect!” he growled; “to think of his audacity!”

Then he walked over to a press in the wall, and unlocking it, took out a thick memorandum book, which he unclasped. He seated himself then at his desk, and turned over the leaves until he came to a page on which were two columns of names; before some of these there were crosses in red ink affixed. Then, taking up the paper again, he proceeded to copy down a number of additional ones from the list of those who attended the Thursday night’s meeting. Some of the names—among them

Barney Shane's—were already included in his reverence's own collection; and to these he affixed a red-ink cross, or a second one if they were already so decorated. This list of sinners kept Father Corkran's memory green; and whenever opportunity served, he found a means of paying off the offenders on his own account, or, as he would call it himself, of being the instrument of Divine justice or vengeance. If a lease expired and the tenant prayed for renewal, a word from Father Corkran went a long way with the agent in either direction. If a bill was due at the bank his reverence was well aware of the fact, and the manager was sure to abide by his advice. Then, if the farmer was turned out, or the little shop-keeper sold up, the general verdict referred the catastrophe to Providence, whose inscrutable ways and means were never questioned. The tenant-farmer or the little huckster, had "*gone against the priest*"; and, as is well known, that sort of conduct is "*unlucky*."

His reverence had scarcely finished his task and replaced the memorandum book on the shelf of the press, when a knock at the door announced the arrival of the person for whom he had sent.

"Come in," said Father Corkran, in a short gruff tone, flinging himself into his easy-chair by the fire as he spoke, and turning a scowling face full on the new comer.

The national schoolmaster was an insignificant looking man of about thirty years of age, shabbily dressed, and with a nervous expression of eye. He entered timidly, with his hat in one hand and with the other fumbling with the lock of the door. No salutation of any kind was exchanged.

"What's this I hear, sir? Is this your name at the meeting at the Harp on Friday?" and his reverence, pointing with his index finger to the newspaper, seemed, threatening as was his tone, to be willing to admit that there might be some doubt on the question—that his senses might be playing him false.

The schoolmaster's eyes drooped submissively before the angry glare of his patron, and he answered, "It is, your reverence."

"And how dare you,—you!" he thundered, with concentrated scorn, "attend any meeting without my permission and approbation?"

"I didn't think it any harm, sir," was the deprecating answer.

"If ever you presume to attend any such gathering, or to busy yourself with anything of the sort again, without first consulting me, I'll turn

you away on the spot, mark my words,” and he shook his forefinger threateningly. “Begone now!” and pointing to the door with the gesture he might have used to an ill-behaved dog, he dismissed the terrified schoolmaster, who, glad to get off so lightly, took himself away as fast as possible. He was too well used to his ruler’s tyranny to mind such outbursts; and his only feeling was one of thankfulness that Father Corkran had not selected the schoolroom to humiliate him in the presence of his scholars, as he was in the habit of doing.

Last mass was unusually well attended this particular Sunday; it being known that Father Corkran had been in treaty with the Wyldoates faction, a manifesto from the altar of more than usual interest was accordingly expected. All the parishioners of any standing were in their accustomed places; and when mass was finished, the kneeling crowd at the sides thronged up to the rails of the altar almost simultaneously, so eager were they to hear the declaration. The usual prayers after mass were totally unheeded; and all eyes were fixed anxiously on the sacristy door. After some five minutes’ or so expectation—for Father Corkran was above mere punctuality—the sacristy door swung wide open, and the parish priest, clad in black soutane (no alb), walked forth.

He ascended the steps of the altar, and stood with his back to it, looking steadily for some moments at the people before him. His unusual vestment, the wrathful frown on his face, all were pregnant and ominous of indignation pent up; and ready to burst forth. A pin might have been heard to fall; and the heart of every listener beat faster, whether in expectation, dread, or defiance. After this impressive pause, he began, in a distinct and deliberate tone, grating and hideous to the ear:—

“It was not my intention to address you to-day on the subject that is, no doubt, upper-most in the minds of all of you: I mean, the election. But circumstances have occurred that make it necessary I should deviate for your guidance” (he emphasized these words) “from that purpose. There are times when it becomes a duty—and I will be the last to shrink from a duty, however painful, which a man owes to himself and to others” (here he paused an instant),—“I mean that he should speak out when he will be criminal if he remain silent. As I said, I did not intend to address you at all on this matter, foolishly confident as I was that no one else would take on my place—would have the *brazen audacity* to attempt to influence your opinions. There are, it seems, in this town”—(these words

were hissed out with all possible bitterness)—“ill-minded, ill-conditioned men who have determined to go on presuming on my forbearance as far as I will let them. And lest the simple, honest, disinterested electors should be led astray by disturbers of this class, I have resolved to expose their schemes.

“You have two candidates soliciting your votes. Now, there never was a time when Irishmen were more urgently called upon to send honest, upright men to Parliament than the present. A great deal has been done for Ireland in the last few years, and a great deal more remains to be done. The incubus of the Established Church, which was supported by the plundered revenues of the Catholics, has been got rid of. The honest, hard-working farmer has obtained some measure of justice, which must be still further complemented by Fixity of Tenure before he can be secured in the fruits of his toil; and there still remains the great question of religious Education for your children.

“To those rulers who have given us so much, it is, then, that we are to look for more; and we shall best show our gratitude by sending in a fit and proper person to co-operate with them in their good works—one who will have your interest at heart, not his own, who will not make promises without meaning to keep them, and who will not offer himself to this minister or to that for the highest penny. We hear a great deal of what is called *pay*triotism—bless the mark!—these times: well, I think myself as good a patriot as any of these fellows who shout ‘Home Rule,’ ‘Ireland for the Irish,’ and the rest of it—all blatherum. ‘We’ll have no one but a Home Ruler,’ says Mr. Barney Shane and Mr. Ned Shea”—(immediately every eye in the chapel was turned full on the Sheas’ seat, to the consternation of the family). “There are good Irishmen and bad Irishmen; and I prefer any day a good *Englishman*, who belongs to a family traditionally good, because, therefore, we have the greater security that he will be good himself—to any place-hunting, pettifogging blackguard who calls himself an Irishman. The candidate who has a fortune and position—who commands the respect of ministers, and is at the same time independent of them—has in this fortune and position a guarantee of his fidelity to his principles, and is therefore the one entitled to our support.

“Mr. Wyldoates, I do not hesitate to say, is that candidate. He has a fortune, and can despise office so he is not likely to throw you over for a paltry situation—the price of a vote adverse to your interests. He is

pledged to support your just demands: and to give you a sample of what he is prepared to do for you, the right”—(here his voice was raised, and directed towards the side-aisles)—“the right of turf-cutting will be conceded to the Sandy-Row people.” (Murmurs of applause.) “And moreover the lot for the building of the new church is promised, and a donation of one hundred pounds already given; and the works will be at once commenced.

“I don’t need to tell you that where tradesmen are employed at high wages, as they will be, their money soon finds its way to the pockets of the grocer and baker and butcher, and of course the publican. Mr. Wyldoates does not go in for Home Rule—that mischievous, iniquitous agitation, the work of a few political desperadoes who have broken up the Liberal party in Ireland, retarded Mr. Gladstone’s wise legislation, and done more harm to their country than all its enemies. What would they do with Home Rule? Sell it again, as they did before. They know that their project is a sham; and they are not even of one mind as to the form that sham is to take. Some call it Home Rule, others Federation, others Repeal. Have nothing to do with schemes or schemers, till you know more about them. Be warned!” Then looking at a paper he held in his hand, he continued, after a pause: “This is a requisition that has been presented to me, asking me to convoke a meeting of the parishioners to choose delegates to send to the meeting on Wednesday. Some very wise people in their own estimation have thought fit to propose this county meeting, for the purpose of determining whether the adoption of the Home Rule programme shall be the test of qualification for our future member. I see no obligation for your sending delegates at the bidding of these self-constituted authorities. If any movement of the kind were to be made here, I think I (his anger rising to apoplectic pitch) ought to be the best judge of its necessity. But there are some people for whom nothing is too hot or too heavy, the devil is so busy with them. They are the black sheep, who, if allowed to go on unchecked, would soon infect the whole flock. Let them not, or their abettors, push me too far. I have put down disturbers before. I have peeled the skin off them, and I’ll do it again.” (Here Mrs. Shea left the church, sobbing hysterically.) “Is it to them you go for advice or assistance in any extremity? No: to your priest. Whose influence in every way is oftenest asked for? Mine. ‘Men may come and men may go’”—(his reverence, we may be sure, was ignorant whence he drew his apt quotation),—“but who have you always? who have you at the last? Your priest, the true shepherd. Go not with the

hireling. You have known men in this parish who went against their priest; and you have yourselves seen their fate: swept away like the froth of the river!" (Frightful groaning from the side-aisles.) "And as the true shepherd knows his flock, and his flock know him, I shall mark out the black sheep, and *remember* him among you who does not heed my voice."

Then, after a genuflection at the foot of the altar, the parish priest returned to the sacristy. The people dispersed; the men crowding together—some laughing, some indifferent, a few frightened; the women for the most part in consternation, and foreboding the advent of the general judgment at least—one or two of them, defiant and reckless, maybe revengeful, cackling shrill sedition from beneath their blue hoods, the cynosure, the while, of their more impressionable sisterhood. In spite of the cold drizzle of rain falling without, the crowd delayed a long time in the churchyard, intensely excited by the parish priest's heavily shotted defiance, the women recalling to each other, with fearful groans, all the terrible "judgments" that had heretofore overtaken rebels to his reverence's authority, and connecting Hogan in some vague way with the enemies of the Church, scientific, politic and other, who were condemned in general terms diurnally in the *Enfranchiser*, and in particular, and by name, three or four times per annum in the pastorals. At last they scattered, some home to the town, some by car or on foot away to the hills, murky and cheerless in the all-encircling gloom.