

CHAPTER XXXI.—IN THE CHURCHYARD.

Monsignor McGrudder was staggered. He could swear he had heard singular noises in the churchyard outside his window. He was sitting later than usual, examining the plates attached to Miss Stokes' edition of the *Notes on Irish Architecture*, in his old-fashioned chintz-covered arm-chair, in the room which was at once his study and bedroom at the back of the new cut-stone Presbytery, looking out on the graveyard. The antiquated armchair, with arms like lofty fortifications and cushions like fragments of a feather-bed, was the only article of furniture at all old-fashioned in the room. The Monsignor had found himself unable to sacrifice this relic of old simplicity, this ancient seat of homely comfort, to the more ambitious requirements of his new Italian dignities. His old friend in chintz survived amidst the brass-mounted bedstead, mirrored wardrobe, and polished birch appointments of the bedroom in the new Presbytery, even as the worn, plain, old silver chalice, which was handed down from the Penal Days, was still to be seen among the gold and jewelled cups of the Emancipation times in the sacarium. The rest of the room was equipped in a style of costliness, which wanted nothing but a woman's taste to make it elegant. A black and yellow Japanese folding-screen gracefully marked the transition from the region of the bed to the region of the books. The bookcases were of shiny oak; the volumes themselves splendid in gold-printed half-calf; the two regular library-chairs covered with stamped white leather; the fire was in the custody of brass dogs, in a dainty prison of glossy white and black tiles, and any indiscreet glow that escaped from it fell into the respectable arms of a fluffy white hearthrug which suggested something of the animal life of the North Pole as well as just a suspicion of the want of animal heat appertaining to those latitudes as well. Please don't do the Monsignor the injustice of supposing that he lolled in all this luxury like an Epicurean philosopher. He found the old armchair the most luxurious article in the room—that and a few old books hidden in the basement of the bookshelves because of their shabby exteriors. He would have given up the Presbytery for a cabin of thatch in the mountains, cheerfully, if the necessities of the Church had demanded it. But the Church did not demand it. The Church, on the contrary, demanded once more a position of splendor and power in the land, and demanded that he, as one of her empurpled captains, should prove himself equal to her more exalted fortunes by holding his head as high as his predecessors of the Penal Days had held theirs low. He accordingly built the cut-stone Presbytery, as he placed the purple edging round his buttons, because the rubric so ordained; and he bought the birchwood wardrobe, as he contemplated himself in its glass panel, in his tasselled biretta and soutane, simply as portion of the statelier finery that beseeemed the Church's new career.

The Monsignor applied himself again determinedly to the engravings. He examined with the genuine archaeological eye, which is (necessarily) rather that of the stonemason than the enthusiast, the zigzag lacework tracery of a recessed doorway in King Cormac's Cathedral on the Rock of Cashel; but, before he had half-mastered the details of the pattern, the sound from the graveyard again struck his ear. He threw himself back into the capacious feather-bed bosom of the arm-chair to consider what it was like. At one moment he thought it resembled a muffled cry, and at another it seemed to sound more like weird diabolical laughter. He lifted the green jalousie of the window overlooking the graveyard and looked out. The night was pitch-dark. A nipping wind was blowing the few last leaves of the elm-tree outside against the window panes, and (a thing that struck the Monsignor more uncomfortably than the ghostly tapping of the leaves) was beating a sort of chattering tattoo between the ill-jointed sections of the window-frame. As his eyes came to forage more expertly in the darkness, the skeleton arms of the moaning elm-tree, and here and there an indistinct gray blotch of tombstone with stiff plumes of cypress standing over them like mourners, began to come out in gloomy silhouette, and then a bright eye of light which caused him to start back. He had noticed that mysterious eye in the darkness more than once before during the last few nights. He pressed his face close to the glass again in order to fix its exact position. It looked a mere spot of light; but the surrounding gloom intensified its thin ray until it ex-

tended like a mystic white shining sword across the graves. He was now certain it proceeded from the Tower which rose in the graveyard at the rear of the Chapel, separated only by a stretch of grassy mounds and mouldering tombstones from the back windows of the Presbytery. Monsignor McGrudder was an ardent partisan by pen and deed in the never-ending wars as to the origin of the Irish Round Towers—those Irish Sphinxes at whose base a thousand devastating invaders have swept by, with fire and sword, and left them still lifting their graceful stone fingers silently to the sky, putting to the puzzled generations the conundrum who built them, how or when or why?—a type of the still greater mystery how the Irish race itself has survived all the salt tides that have ebbed and flowed over it, miserable age after age, and has kept its well-spring pure in the deep living heart of it? The Monsignor was of the school that insists the Round Towers were Christian bellfries built with an eye to serving as the strong box for the valuables of the adjoining churches in case of a raid by the freebooting Danes. In testimony of the faith that was in him, and in proof of the eligibility of such structures as bell-towers, he himself built a Round Tower at the rear of the chapel, in the upper chamber of which, pierced by four large apses towards the main points of the compass, he hung the bell. Opinions differed about Monsignor McGrudder's Tower almost as much as about the ancient conundrums after which it was modelled—differed as to whether the architecture of the Round Tower was ever caricatured more abominably than by this lanky stone beehive; differed especially as to whether the structure was not more effectual in smothering the clangor of the bell than in publishing it. The Monsignor, however, it is scarcely necessary to add, was as much pleased with his tower and his bell as with his theory. It was at once his strength and his weakness that whatever he, in his biretta and purple-edged buttons, believed to be right was in his eyes a dogma, wanting only the vote of an Ecumenical Council to be *de fide*.

"A light in the Tower at such an hour!—oh, it must be Mrs. Lehane, the chapel-woman! Somebody's dead, perhaps, and she's arranging to have the funeral bell tolled to-morrow." And he returned to the wavy stone tracery of King Cormac's recessed doorway. But he could see nothing in the engraving but his own Tower, with the phosphorescent blade of light, like Death's sickle, glittering over the shuddering graves. He looked around the room, and found it chilly. In his zeal for the Church's speedy rehabilitation in the matter of presbyteries, the Monsignor, being his own architect, had unfortunately hung the door of his room on the wrong side, and had, moreover, left the door-handle open to the seductions of any wanton winter wind that chose to demoralise it; in addition to which the fire-grate had to a large extent lost in warmth what it had gained in elegance; so that at this moment almost as icy a blast was moaning about the room as in the graveyard. He stamped his foot two or three times with annoyance at finding that he felt nervous and uneasy. His wrought-iron frame had never been quite the same since the day his authority had been flouted to his face on his own altar. Though he followed up his anathemas against the secret society with unflinching vigor in sermon and confessional, he had an uneasy consciousness that the young men were not afraid of him—that his diatribes only made the reckless more reckless, and that the remainder quietly listened to him within the church doors, and went their own ways the moment they crossed the threshold. To a priest conscientiously alive to his responsibility for the eternal salvation of all these young souls, the failure of his authority was as saddening as it was astounding to the high-stomached churchman. He could not in his heart, nor even in his face or frame, conceal the effects of the blow which he—the haughty purpleman, who had rolled in Cardinals' carriages to the houses of Roman Princesses—had sustained from little Danny, the miller's lame man. Even at this moment he felt that it was little Danny, and not the churchyard sounds and chills, that was unnerving him. While he lay back in his arm-chair irresolute, a continued low, wailing croon was heard from the darkness. This time the sound was unmistakable. It was still going on, in a muffled cadence, and the cry, dirge, diabolical chorus, or whatever it might be, proceeded beyond doubt from the graveyard.

(To be continued.)

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