

The Cardinal and the Countess

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EVERY Sunday afternoon during the 'Eighties of the last century, several people, mostly literary, got off the steam tram at Tallaght, Co. Dublin, and sauntered along a side road to a pleasant farmhouse near Clondalkin, in which Katharine Tynan lived with her father and sister. She was already a writer of some reputation for she had published her first book, *Louise de la Vallière and Other Poems*, in London. Among the guests was a lanky youth, with loose black bow and a dreamy look — 'Willie' Yeats. He and a few more talked about poetry in Miss Tynan's study, while the others played cards with her father in the living-room.

'Mosada', a one-act play by Yeats, appeared in the *Dublin University Review* in 1887 and it was published privately in the same year. Katharine reviewed the play in the *Irish Monthly*. Professor Roger McHugh, who has edited the letters which W. B. Yeats wrote to her, tells us that she hailed it as a work which was 'strong and joyful with the consciousness of power' and 'augured a high place for its author among the poets of the world if its promise was fulfilled'. The play, though naive, shows real dramatic tension and I have always thought it regrettable that the poet excluded it from his own canon. A Moorish girl has been imprisoned in a dungeon of the Inquisition and is awaiting torture and death at the stake as a heretic when her plight is discovered by her Christian lover. John Butler Yeats was so proud of his son that he had the play privately printed, complete with portrait-sketch. He presented a copy to Father Gerard Manley Hopkins, who had become a University lecturer in Dublin. Being an Oxford convert, Hopkins must have been annoyed with the theme for, in his one brief meeting with the young poet, he was chilly and aloof.

Few know that W. B. Yeats, in his early years, proposed to Katharine Tynan one afternoon in her study and was promptly

rejected. No doubt she was flattered and embarrassed for she hurried him into the next room, where her sister was, gave him a playful slap, and there the matter ended. The little scene was described to me long after by her sister, Mrs Tynan O'Mahony, who added that 'Kate drew the line at a mixed marriage'.¹ However she was broadminded, became a courageous defender of Parnell after his downfall, and later married Henry A. Hinkson, a writer and ex-Trinity scholar. When Yeats settled down in London, he corresponded frequently with his friend in Clondalkin, and told her of his new play, which, curiously enough, was then called *The Countess O'Shea*. The first version was published in the volume, *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, in 1892. I can remember an absurd scene in which the stage was crowded with sowlths, tavishes, cluricauns and other spirits. Katharine Tynan did not find anything wrong with the idea of a woman sacrificing her own soul to save those of many others, for she paid a compliment to her friend by writing a fine ballad, 'The Charity of the Countess Cathleen', which appeared in her own book, *Ballads and Lyrics*, published early in the 'Nineties.

When Yeats came back to live in Dublin for some time in 1898, scenes from *The Countess Cathleen* were given at the Chief Secretary's Lodge, arranged by a group of titled ladies: but the poet could not attend as he had become secretly a member of the I.R.B. When the play was in rehearsal for its first public performance, rumours were in circulation that it was unorthodox and his friend, Edward Martyn, became alarmed. However, Father Finlay, s.j., and an English priest, Father Barry, found nothing objectionable in it. Indeed Father Barry quoted in justification of the theme a text from St Paul: 'I must be anathema to the brethren.'

Suddenly the unexpected happened. Frank Hugh O'Donnell, a turbulent member of the Irish Party, who had quarrelled with Parnell, became interested in the new literary movement. He had published a long ballad in the style of Macaulay on the legend of Ailech and the slim book went into a second edition. The late Joseph Hone, in the official biography of Yeats, tells us that for a

¹ In the Irish context one between a Catholic and a Protestant. [Ed.]

time Yeats was amused by O'Donnell, and it is possible that he may have said something too critical about his verse. At any rate, O'Donnell wrote a pamphlet called *Souls for Gold*, in which he attacked *The Countess Cathleen* as an insult to Irish womanhood. The pamphlet was dropped into letter boxes in Dublin, and Hone adds, without giving any proof, that 'the crusade was elsewhere supported by a generous supply of porter'. One newspaper had long, violent leading articles about the play. Finally Cardinal Logue, who had been approached, issued a letter to the effect that, if the play were as the pamphlet described it, no Catholic should go to the theatre. According to legend, the Cardinal exclaimed, when a reporter asked him if he had read the book, 'Good gracious, I would never dream of doing so!'

In defence of the Cardinal, it may be said that the careful wording of the letter justifies his action. The extracts given by F. H. O'Donnell in his pamphlet would suggest that the play was a deliberate attack on Irish Catholicism. Here is the opening:

(The cabin of Shemus Rhua. The door is at the back. The window is at the right side of it, and a little shrine of the Virgin Mary hangs at the other.)

SHEMUS Satan pours the famine from his bag,
 And I am mindful to go pray to him,
 To cover all this table with red gold.
 . . . I would eat my supper
 With no less mirth if chaired beside the hearth,
 Were Pooka, sowllth, or demon of the pit,
 Rubbing his hands before the flame o' the fire.

(*The little shrine falls*)

MAIRE Look! Look!

SHEMUS (*kicking it to pieces*)

 The Mother of God has dropped asleep,
 And all her household things have gone to wrack.

No doubt this opening could have been dramatically effective if the young poet had not tried to combine shock tactics with the subtlety which he had learned from the Belgian dramatist, Maeterlinck, who employed symbolic signs in his experimental plays. But an audience would not be able to realize, without some preparation, that Shemus was already a demoniac. In that popular Abbey play, *The Righteous are Bold*, Frank Carney prepared the audience for the action of a young girl, who had returned

home from 'pagan' England possessed of a demon: at the climax of the play she smashed a plaster-cast statue of the Mother of God. Every evening, for three months, a packed audience was thrilled by the dreadful act.

F. H. O'Donnell, rightly critical, though his language was violent, attacked another episode in Act II:

FIRST MERCHANT And whence now, brother?

SECOND MERCHANT Tubber-vanach cross-roads,
 Where I, in image of a nine-monthed bonyeen,
 Sat down upon my haunches. Father John
 Came, sad and moody, murmuring many prayers.
 I seemed as though I came from his own sty.
 He saw the one brown ear — the breviary dropped
 He ran — I ran — I ran into the quarry;
 He fell a score of yards. The man was dead.
 And then I thrust his soul into the bag,
 And hurried home.

It is reasonable to assume that Yeats had not as yet read *Hamlet* or he would have remembered the famous passage when the Prince sees his stepfather at prayers:

Now might I do it pat, now he is praying:
 And now I'll do it.

Thinking over the matter, however, Hamlet decides to kill the King:

When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
 Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed:
 At gaming, swearing; or about some act
 That has no relish of salvation in't.

O'Donnell's comment, if too obviously sarcastic, is certainly amusing:

Good old Father John, in spite of his prayers and his breviary, killed by the devil in the shape of a brown pig! How Irish! How exquisitely Celtic!

O'Donnell is certainly right in pointing out Yeats's sheer ignorance of Catholic belief. The poet declared that he was a religious man but there is no indication in his *Autobiographies* that he ever went to Sunday School or knew anything about the Christian religion. His soul-stirrings led him not to the Bible but

to Mrs Besant. When the play was produced at the Antient Concert Rooms there was no disturbance except for a few protests at the end. However, when Yeats revised the scenes for the edition published in 1901, he was shrewd enough to withdraw the passages to which O'Donnell had objected, but he can hardly be blamed for making no mention of that irascible critic.

In 'The Stage Irishman of the Pseudo-Celtic Drama', F. H. O'Donnell expanded the attack and this time turned his attention to that lyrical drama, *The Land of Heart's Desire*. He quotes from the episode in which the Fairy Child sees the crucifix on the wall, shrieks and covers her eyes.

THE CHILD What is that ugly thing on the black cross?

FATHER HART You cannot know how naughty your words are.
That is our Blessed Lord!

THE CHILD Hide it away!

BRIDGET BRUIN I have begun to be afraid again.

THE CHILD Hide it away!

FATHER HART We must be tender to all budding things,
Our Maker let no thought of Calvary
Trouble the morning stars in their first song.

(Puts crucifix in inner room)

Here is the comment of F. H. O'Donnell:

In meeting blasphemous twaddle of this sort, the doubt which naturally presents itself to healthy minds is, whether the author wrote as cynic or as booby, whether he meant to make the Priest ridiculous and odious, or whether he really thought he was writing something fine, and noble, and true to Irish nature and religion. Search the whole of Ireland, in any epoch, and conceive the possibility of an Irish priest, in order to appease the frantic dislike of an impish urchin, actually taking down the Symbol of Redemption, and, in spite of the protests of his Christian flock, hiding it away 'out of sight and out of mind'. On the contrary, a priest, like the flock, would have suspected brimstone on the instant, and the Child of Evil, instead of being gratified by the disgrace of the 'ugly thing on the black cross', would have got exorcism and holy water. I do not raise any religious question at the moment. I look only to the truth of Art.

In 'The Ballad of Father Gilligan', Yeats had shown sympathy towards Irish priests. In the play we are left in doubt whether the strange child is human or not. For Maurteen says:

Some strangers came last week to Clover Hill;
She must be one of them.

The fact that Father Hart becomes suddenly aware of the gruesomeness of the Christian symbol seems to me quite credible.

In this later pamphlet, O'Donnell avoided discussing the Countess's sacrifice of her soul: no doubt someone had pointed out to him St Paul's words. As a politician, he emphasized the accepted chastity of Irish women throughout the centuries and denounces another scene from *The Countess Cathleen*:

A WOMAN What price, now, will you give for mine?

FIRST MERCHANT Ay, ay,
Soft, handsome, and still young — not much, I think.
(*Reading in a parchment*)
She has love-letters in a little jar
On a high shelf behind the pepper-pot
And a wood-cased hour-glass.

WOMAN O, the scandalous parchment!

FIRST MERCHANT (*reading*)
She hides them from her husband, who buys horses,
And is not much at home. You are almost safe.
I give you fifty crowns.

(*She turns to go*)

A hundred, then?

Going, going, gone! An Irish wife — an unchaste Irish wife — secured for hell for a hundred crowns! The Celtic Muse of W. B. Yeats is tireless in its flattering appreciations of the Irish nation. Its men, apostate cowards; its women — such as this; its priests, the prey of demon swine; its shrines, kicked to pieces by its Celtic peasantry; the awful majesty of the Christian God flouted and mocked by spirits from the pit! What is the meaning of this rubbish? How is it to help the national cause? How is it to help any cause at all? Mysticism? Nonsense! This is not Mysticism. The great mystics are intellectual and moral glories of Christian civilization. This is only silly stuff, and sillier, unutterable profanity.

When Yeats revised the second version of *The Countess Cathleen* in 1894, he told readers that he had read the story in an Irish newspaper and later discovered that it had been translated from *Les Matinées de Timothé Trimm* by Léo Lespès, who gave it as a variant of an Irish story. It is possible that the French writer took the name of the hero from Corporal Trim in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. A like theme can be found in Larminie's *West Irish Folk Tales and Romances* — a remarkable legend entitled 'The Woman who went to Hell'. Yeats gives the story in French in

the appendix and it is interesting to note how closely he follows it. For instance, the scene in which the Steward brings an inventory of goods to the 'Comtesse Ketty O'Connor' is followed closely by him. Curiously enough, a similar scene will be found in *The Duchess of Malfi*, a play which Yeats mentions in his Preface.

Although Cardinal Logue had taken the side of Frank H. O'Donnell, that outspoken ex-politician did not thank him. In 1902, he published a book entitled *The Ruin of Education in Ireland*, in which he anticipated, in all but the violence of his speech, the new age of ecumenism. He pleaded for the rights of the Irish laity to have an undenominational University if they wished, and he denounced the secrecy with which the Catholic Church in Ireland concealed its great wealth. He then hurried to give some details:

Costly and imposing churches have been bestowed by dozens upon hamlets and villages. In the little town of Letterkenny there has just been consecrated a superb structure, loaded with Munich and Carrara art, at the cost of £60,000; in the petty town of Armagh, containing five or six thousand Catholics, a vast cathedral, for £100,000, crowns the summit of the most conspicuous hill procurable; and only last year a giant fancy fair, under the personal presidency of his Eminence Cardinal Logue, produced for its further adornment with stained glass windows and Carrara marbles, the net and enormous return of £30,000, not one penny of which was allowed to be diverted to the missing requisites of Catholic University education. Penury, misery, and dilapidation continued to be the lot of the wretched edifices which still house what we are told is the burning aspiration and the crying need of the Catholic intelligence of Ireland.

He then addressed the Commissioners of Education:

I need not add, as it is known to the Commissioners, that out of the bulk sum of nearly £400,000 placed by the vote of Parliament to the disposal of the trustees of Maynooth after the Irish Church Act, not £10,000, not £1,000 have found their way towards the very scantiest University requirements of the laity in Ireland. Clergymen, too, have made their wills during this period, and have left sometimes enormous accumulations even in poor and distressed parishes. I remember a parish priest in Galway who left £35,000. I remember a parish priest in a terribly poor parish at Dungarvan who left £10,000. A priest in Meath left £35,000. A parish priest died the other day in a distressed district of Donegal who left £35,000. Will the Commissioners inquire if any of these opulent and clerical testators remembered the 'bare walls' of the Catholic University?

In his final chapter, O'Donnell attacked the clergy for their boycott of the Irish language:

While the faithful flocks were still struggling out of the fluent knowledge of Irish into the stage in which they knew neither Irish nor English well, the venerated pastors, prepared for the highest spheres by the foreign and domestic ignorance of Maynooth, were triumphantly advancing to the oratory of the hustings and the manufacture of 'Mimbers' of Parliament. The stentorian blarney of O'Connell, which the imagination of Bulwer Lytton entrancing 'the hosts around', was really little more than dumb show to hundreds of thousands in his monster meetings; but it rendered him the darling of a sympathetic clergy. Everywhere, outside of the towns, and often inside of them, the gospel of the day was expounded to devout audiences, who merely failed to understand the speech of the expositor. So long as the flock hated Protestantism or Protestants, performed with traditional acceptance their religious obligations, and revered and obeyed the blessed magicians, 'who could make turkey-cocks of them', so long was everything for the best in the best of all clerical worlds. Maynooth was satisfied, beatified. The bishops nominated the representatives of the people. A thousand public meetings, equally pious and parliamentary, continued to proclaim that Ireland 'had been, was, and ever should be', the Island of Saints and Doctors — Doctors who knew the elements and Saints who sampled whiskey!

Cardinal Logue could hardly have read this book by an extreme Catholic with any pleasure.

ARIEL, Volume 3, Number 4

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