

## AN IRISH VAMPIRE ?

By R. S. BREENE

THE following story was told to me many years ago by persons who were supposed to be relatives of the priest who figures in it. As far as I have been able to find out, I see no reason for doubting that what I am setting down here is approximately a statement of fact. One consideration would have much weight with me in leading me to accept at least the intention of truth in the narrators. The incident happened in a county in Ireland where the vast majority of the inhabitants have always been ardent Roman Catholics. People of this sort would never dream of inventing such a story about an ecclesiastic. So strong is their veneration for the priesthood, and their belief in the sanctity of their parish clergy, that it is almost impossible to understand how such circumstances as I here narrate could be associated in the popular mind with the name and memory of one who had received Holy Orders. Yet it was from Roman Catholics who described themselves as eye-witnesses that the information was derived. Again I have read that vampirism only appears in countries which are spiritually in a backward condition, as in some areas of Eastern Europe. Now though, as I have said, the people amidst whom these events took place were Roman Catholics, yet they are not of a high type. The country is wild, isolated and mountainous. Even in recent years numerous terrible crimes of violence have been reported from the neighbourhood, some of them of a peculiarly senseless character. I was myself shown, some years ago, a spot marked with a white cross upon a stone by the roadside, where a lad of about twenty years of age had a few nights previously kicked his father's brains out, on no apparent provocation. One would almost have said, on examining the evidence in connection with the case, that there had been something very like demoniac possession. I have never since been in any part of Ireland where the inhabitants generally seemed to be so conscious of the interpenetration at all times of the things that are not seen with the things that do appear. One felt them to be in touch with a realm of being that we know nothing about in the outer world. They were crude, brave, and, as we would say, super-

stitious. The element of fear, the fear of the unknown, was always to be felt. The most of the inhabitants of the district were poor, but a number of farmers were able to live in a certain degree of plain comfort. The publicans and the farmers generally gave one son to the Church.

A member of the family of M——, a farming connection, had been ordained to the priesthood, and eventually was put in charge of a little hill parish by the local Bishop. He is reputed to have been a quiet, inoffensive man, not given much to the companionship of his flock, and rather addicted to reading and study. His parishioners listened with edification to his sermons, brought their children to him for the rite of baptism, made their confession to him at intervals, and took the sacred bread of the Holy Communion from his hands on Sundays and the greater festivals of the Church. He did not often conduct stations at their houses, as did some of his colleagues in other parishes, who were more gregariously inclined. He was hospitable to strangers, and had frequently placed beds in his little parochial house at the disposal of belated travellers and even tramps. Yet no one in his immediate neighbourhood would have thought of going to see him socially. They went to him on the Church's business, or they did not go at all. He was, in a word, respected, though not greatly liked.

When he had little more than passed his fiftieth birthday he suddenly fell ill and died, after a brief confinement to his chamber. He was buried with all the simple pomp that surrounds the obsequies of an Irish country priest. His body, I should have said, was removed before the funeral to his mother's house, which was several miles distant from his parish. It was from there that the funeral took place. It was a sad picture when the body came home to the aged mother, whose chief pride in her later years had been her "boy in the Church," the priest; and it was sadder still when the coffin set out once more from the whitewashed farmhouse, to carry its occupant upon his last journey to the rocky graveyard in the hills where all his kin had laid their bones for generations. According to custom, all the male and female members of the connection accompanied the corpse. The bereaved mother was left to her thoughts for the rest of the day in the house of death. In the afternoon she allowed the maid, who did the rough work about the place, to go across the fields to her own people for a few hours. Mrs. M—— was as brave as any other woman of her class, and in her trouble she wished to be alone.

Meanwhile the funeral cortège wended its slow way (a long procession of traps, jaunting-cars and spring-carts) towards its destination in the mountains. They did not waste much time in getting their sad task over and done, but they had a long road to traverse, and the sun was already declining in the heavens as they climbed the last succession of hills on the way to the homestead they had left in the morning. It was a priest's funeral, and, both going and coming, they had not cared to halt at the scattered public-houses they had passed on the wayside, as they would most certainly have done, and done frequently, in the case of anybody else's. They were all sober, but many of them, particularly the womenfolk, had fallen asleep. Night was already in the air. The shadows were lengthening below the hill-crests, but upon the white limestone highway everything was still in broad daylight. At the foot of a slope the mourners in the first cars suddenly became aware of a solitary figure coming down towards them walking rapidly. As the distance between them and the pedestrian lessened they were surprised to see that he was a priest. They knew of no priest who could be there at such a time. Those who had taken part in the ceremonies at the grave had not come so far with them on the return journey. They began to speculate as to who the man could be. Remarks were exchanged, and meanwhile the new-comer had met the foremost car. Two men were awake in it. There could be no mistake. *They saw at once, and quite clearly, that they were face to face with the man whom they had laid in his grave two or three hours before.* He passed them with his head slightly averted, but not sufficiently to prevent them from making absolutely certain of his identity, or from noting the intense, livid pallor of his skin, the hard glitter of his wide-open eyes, *and* the extraordinary length of his strong, white teeth, from which the full red lips seemed to be writhed back till the gums showed themselves. He was wearing, not the grave-clothes in which he had been attired for his burial, but the decent black frock-coat and garments to match in which they had last seen him alive. He passed down the long line of vehicles, and finally disappeared round the turn of the road. Some one in every loaded trap or car had seen him; in short, most of those who had been awake and on that side. A thrill of terror passed through the whole party. With hushed voices and blanched cheeks they pushed on quickly, now only anxious to get under some sheltering roof and round some blazing hearth before dread night should fall upon them.

Their first call was at the M—— farmhouse. In the front was a little porch built round the door, a small narrow window on either side. About this they gathered, and hurriedly decided to say no word of what had happened to the bereaved mother. Then some one knocked, but received no answer. They knocked again, and still being denied admittance, they began to be uneasy. At last some one thought of peeping in through one of the little side-windows, when he saw old Mrs. M—— lying face downward on the floor. They hesitated no longer, but literally broke in, and it was some little time before they were able to bring her round again to consciousness. This, briefly, is what she told them.

About half an hour earlier, she had heard footsteps on the flags outside, followed by a loud challenging knock. She was surprised that they should have returned so soon, and, besides, she had been expecting the sound of the cars approaching. She decided that it could not be any of the family, and so, before opening, she looked out at the side. There to her horror she saw her dead son standing in the broad daylight much as she had last seen him alive. He was not looking directly at her. But she, too, noted the extraordinary length of his teeth, the cold blaze of his eyes, I might say the wolfishness of his whole bearing, and the deathly pallor of his skin. Her first instinctive movement was to open the door. Then fear swept over her, swamping even her mother love. She felt her limbs giving way under her, and quickly sank into the oblivion in which she lay until they found her.

This is the story as it was told to me. If there was a sequel, I never heard it. Was this a case of vampirism? It has not been altogether unknown in Ireland. At any rate I have thought it worthy of record.