

“The Prisoner Of Glenbeague; Or, The Maniac Of The Catacombs.
A Legend Of Ireland.” by **Anonymous**

Thanks to **Dr. Dick Collins**, of Inchigeela, Co. Cork, Ireland, who supplied this etext and its notes to **The Literary Gothic**.

Text: from *The Dublin Newsletter*, 24 August 1842. pp. unknown. See Dr. Collins’ note below.

NOTE: double-click underlined words for explanatory notes.

A LITERARY GOTHIC etext.

This etext may not be copied, stored, or retransmitted in any form.

[Editor's Note: I found this story in a bound copy of the *Dublin University Magazine* for 1844, which I bought in Killarney, Co. Kerry, in November 2002. It is on a single sheet of paper, torn along the right edge. There is no publisher's or printer's name on it, no page numbering, and the story is anonymous. The title of the magazine, and the date, are printed along the edge of the first side. The print is fairly poor, in three columns, but there are relatively few printer's errors, which are noted in the text. Although the text survives whole, the paper itself is in very poor condition, and proved utterly resistant to scanning. Rather than subject it to more damage, I copied the text by hand.

The story begins at the top of what is obviously a right-hand page, judging by the ragged left edge; it occupies five and a half columns, and is followed by eight lines of an article entitled 'The Land Question: A Challenge [sic] for a Protestant Nation.' I assume the page had been torn out and kept for the sake of this story.

Besides this sheet, I have no knowledge of a periodical of this name, and this may have been the only issue. Given the nature of the material, it may well have been suppressed very quickly. There was a well-known and very popular print, *Saunders Weekly Newsletter*, which ran for over a century in Dublin, and specialised in gruesome tales of Resurrection Men (or 'Sack-'em-ups,' as they were known here). The title *The Dublin Newsletter* may be a parody/plagiarism of Saunders, but 'newsletter' is hardly a rare word, and there may be no connection at all. If anyone knows anything at all about it, I'd be very pleased indeed to hear from them!

Predictably, I can find none of the names of places in the Irish Gazetteer, and the Irish-sounding name 'Tonach' seems to have been a pure invention. There is a

Glenbeigh in Co. Kerry, which was becoming a popular holiday spot at this time, but I doubt if there is a connection. There are no detectable 'Hibernicisms' in the language, which on the whole I judge as pretty poor and imitative. Indeed, there is very little Irish at all about the story, which seems more Crookenden than Croke Park. This chimes well with the 'Protestant Nation' tag: the Anglo-Irish at the time were often 'more English than the English,' and keen to decry their Gaelic past, but often they knew very little about it -- Le Fanu was the exception, and not the rule, in this respect.]

Long and fierce was the battle fought that day;-- now, as the night closed in over the blood-soaked field, the moans of the dying mingled with the shrieks of the kites and ravens, that gathered to quaff the blood of the vanquished. Bitter were the sighs that arose from the throats of the on-lookers, the women and old men who saw their husbands and sons stretched out upon the sodden, stinking grass;-- and yet more bitter still was the taste of defeat for young Lord Ronald of Knockavod, as he knelt at last before the enemy of his kin. Not for himself did the tears sting behind his eyes -- no! But for his family, left unprotected against the brutish victor, and for his men, who had shed their very life's blood in a just dispute.

Justice was now o'erthrown by the might of a tyrant and an usurper!

An evil triumph was in the eyes of Baron Tonach of Glenbeague, an ill-omened light for the noble and frank young captive.

"Lord Ronald, thy cause is lost," sneered the baron. "Acknowledge my right as victor, or it will go the worse for thee."

"I care nothing for my own safety, nor even for my life," said Ronald, his voice clear and brave, "but only for my people, who have done nothing to thee but fight for their lord, in obedience to the laws of war. Only spare them their lives and their property, and I give myself utterly to your power."

"A generous gift, my lord," said the baron, "were it not that thou art already my chattel, my spoils, to do with as I will. Nonetheless I shall show that I can be merciful, even to such as these. Yield thyself entirely to me, in charter of thine own hand, as lord of all wherewith thou art possessed, and thy people shall suffer no more at my hands. Your lands are mine by right of conquest;-- sign now the deed that shall make them mine by right of law! Refuse me this, and I shall inherit your land -- but it shall be a land devoid of souls!" And he waved an imperious hand towards the edge of a nearby ravine.

Baron Tonach's meaning was immediately clear to Ronald;-- for he looked up, and saw his bravest, most loyal companions of the fight forced in a line, staring down into the ravine, with Tonach's henchmen preparing to throw them headlong to their doom!

"I shall yield," said Ronald, "on that condition. Release my men, and I shall sign what document soever you wish."

"Rather sign first," said Tonach, "then shall your men be freed."

A grey-bearded minion shuffled up to where Tonach stood, carrying a parchment, a quill, and a pot of ink. Tonach cast the parchment to the floor, where Ronald read the price of his defeat, already written before battle had been waged. Ronald was a man of the noblest heart, raised in the ways of truth and honour; his word being pledged, he did not hesitate to execute it, though it meant his certain death.-- Did we say certain? Nay! though it meant a terrible and uncertain death, at the whim of the brutal and vengeful Tonach.

He took the pen;-- he signed;-- his hand trembled not a whit while he gave away his patrimony. With a cry of triumph Tonach grasped the parchment from his hands, and laughed a demonic laugh.

"Lord Ronald, I thank you for so kind a gift! And now that I have it, I must pay those who supported me this day, without whose arms and prowess I would never have stood here, the victor of a famous battle, in possession of all your lands. And since they will accept nothing but land for their troubles, I must find them land -- land owned by nobody else -- or land owned by the dead!" He turned towards the ravine, and gave a signal with his hand. "What need have I for your men now, Ronald? It is their land I need. And what need have I for you? Take him away!"

Uttering a cry of despair, Ronald was dragged away between two burly ruffians towards the grim Gothic pile of Glenbeague Castle, the moans of his dying retainers still ringing in his ears. He scarcely noticed what progress they made to the blood-soaked walls of that ancient fortress. He was conscious at one point that the blessed light of the sun and the pure air of the fields had given way to a dank and miresome darkness, and conscious too of a sensation of descent, indicating to his battered senses that he was being carried down an old and worn stairway, of the sort that spirals its way into the bowels of the earth. Cries of prisoners, pleading for mercy, assaulted his ears on all sides, and then were left behind him, as they continued their immutable and seemingly unending course away from the surface of the world. At last, after

what seemed to the young nobleman an eternity of descent, the ruffians paused;-- there was the creaking of a door as it opened;-- and Ronald was thrown unceremoniously into a foul and filthy cell, strewn with rotten straw. By the light of a lamp they chained him to the wall, and then left him alone, taking the lamp with them.

In the infernal blackness which ensued [sic] Ronald could not, by mere visualisation, ascertain for himself the dimensions or the nature of his confining limits. The chains that bound his hands prevented him from moving them more than a foot or so above his head, and no ceiling was to be felt within this extent. By moving his feet, which his gaolers had not bound, and extending his legs, he was able to bring them against the heavy wooden door of his cell. Similar investigations to each side of him brought the same result. By these operations he was able to calculate that his place of confinement measured no more than five feet from the door to the wall to which his chains were affixed, and five feet from side to side, with the upward extent being unknown. In size therefore it was more like a tomb than a dungeon. The close fetid air he was forced to breathe confirmed its smallness: never the less, a sharp stream of coldness blew onto the back of his neck like the winds of December, suggesting that the walls were not as solid as might formerly have been thought.

Long hours seemed to pass as Ronald lay there in his lonely agony, -- though not a thought did he give to his own present situation, but instead devoted all the grieving of his great and compassionate heart to the sufferings of his men and their families. Then the men returned;-- he heard them at the door of his rank and noisesome cell, but they did not enter;-- rather they stayed outside it, and Ronald heard the dread sound of bricks and mortar being piled together at the door. This then was his fate!-- to be immured here, his presence unknown to all but his tormentors,-- left either to starve to death slowly among the rats that infested the dungeon, or, what was far worse to his heart, to be kept alive by donations of foul nourishment and ditchwater, the longer to remain in his torture.

The men were swift at their work; not a word did they waste on the poor captive within. When they had gone, Ronald cast his eyes upwards, towards where he knew that Heaven must be that he would never see again in this mortal life, before he exchanged it for an immortal one; and he prayed that Father who looks over all captives to keep his heart strong and his soul pure, that he might not sin by despair in his horrible predicament, and thus forfeit forever the bliss he hoped for!

His supplication finished, Ronald composed himself to rest, that he might view his situation with clearer mind. He did not sleep, for sleep comes not easily to the

captive in his cell;-- but for an hour or so he was quiet, and said nothing more. At last he had conceded to himself the hopelessness of his position, and he repeated his prayer, as previously mentioned, for the comfort it would give him, committing himself to that Providence that never fails a devout heart. And his prayer was heard; for at last he sank into blessed sleep, a respite from his sorrows, and from the exhaustion of the day. He awoke to the same choking blackness as before. He did not know how long he had slept, what time of day it was, whether indeed it was day or night, for there was naught but the darkness and silence of the tomb. Yet, what was this? -- Even in the utterly black darkness and abominable stench of his cell, it appeared that young Ronald was not alone! For now a voice came to his ears, seeming to originate from somewhere behind him, -- soft, weak, fluting with age, but a voice, nonetheless!

"Who art thou, who are so unfortunate as to share the fate of Torquill of Benallen?"

Amazed and almost affrighted, Ronald looked around him, in so far as his chains would permit it; but in the darkness he could gain no visual clue as to the speaker. He thought it must be an illusion of his wounded brain, or, worse still, the voice of the Tempter, come to undo all the good that prayer can do in a pure and candid soul. He whispered a prayer to Heaven, and listened intently for more. At length the voice repeated its burden of a message:--

"Who art thou, I say, who bears company to Torquill after so long alone?"

"Who art thou," he whispered back, "who thus addresses Ronald of Knockavod?"

"Ronald of Knockavod!" quoth the voice. "Then thou art indeed unfortunate, for if thou art the lord of Knockavod thou art also hereditary ruler of Benallen, and my liege lord;-- and I perceive thee here, walled in alive as a prisoner in the castle of your family's greatest enemy, Tonach of Glenbeague!"

"Alas! what thou say'st is but too true," lamented Ronald; "and yet even here the hope of Heaven should guide us and inspire us to courage!"

"True, Lord Ronald," said the voice of Torquill. "Our Saviour is never far from those that love him, and he is never so swift to hear as when a captive, made such against justice, calls to him for succour."

Ronald was right glad to hear the voice speak so;-- for he reasoned, correctly, that no demon or other purveyor of temptation would talk in such tones of the

Saviour of Mankind. Heartened, then, he made bold to address the voice that had identified itself as that of Torquill of Benallen, and to ask him what he did here.

"Ah," sighed Torquill, "that is a strange and terrible tale. Long years ago,-- I have forgotten how many,-- the lord of Glenbeague had a wife. The fairest of women was she, shining bright among the maidens like the star that lights the darkness;-- her hair as gold as the dawn, her lips like the holly berry, and a figure of surpassing symmetry. I, who was castellan of this castle, loved her; and alas for her! she loved me in return. Do not think there was aught sinful in our love, Ronald of Knockavod! Her husband was a brutish animal, whose carnal lusts and dark appetites did not stop at the merely human, but aspired even to the Infernal Arts of Our Saviour's enemy; such an one could never have had the love of my Nora, though he possessed her as a wife! Our love was pure and chaste, but when we were found together by Darra of Glenbeague, no such defence would help us. The Lady Nora was exiled to the highest tower of Glenbeague, in the company of a foul and hateful old crone, once nursemaid to Darra;-- I was brought here, to this deepest of subterranean prisons, and left here behind stone and cement to die whatever death would bring me release! The fair hand and lovely face of Nora must long since have withered and crumbled, and she one to her rest; but I remain! Such is the justice of the lord of Glenbeague!"

"Such, too," groaned Lord Ronald, "is the fate that Tonach, present lord of Glenbeague, has ordained for me!"

"Ay," responded Torquill, ["]such was ever the custom of that cruel and visionary race! Many is the good man who has been buried here, still living, a prey to the rats and starvation, because he has incurred the displeasure of the lords of Glenbeague! Long years have I been here, and I have known many hundreds of such; their bones still lie where they were put, alive, in cells like unto thy own. If thou would'st know where thou art. Ronald of Knockavod, picture to thyself a catacomb of the living and the once-living, stretching many fathoms into the earth!"

Ronald shuddered with horror as he did as Torquill bid him.

Now Ronald was well-versed in the history of his nation, and he knew that Darra of Glenbeague was the grandfather of Tonach, whom we mentioned previously as holding the castle in such tyranny; and he marvelled therefore that Torquill had lived so long in this dreadful place, immured as he was and left to perish of hunger. He asked the question, and Torquill answered:--

"In his haste to destroy me, Darra did not first survey the cell to which I was destined;-- I was brought here by lackeys, tormentors and ruffians, who did their work and then left me alone. So careless were they that I soon had the gyves from my wrists, and with the hard metal I carved away the rotten mortar that lay between two great stones, that comprised the wall of my tomb. I found myself in another cell, where the fate of the inmates was not to be treated in the terrible way that was my own destiny; and they provided me with enough food to live on, until now."

"But did'st thou never seek to escape from this place?" asked Ronald.

"I did," replied Torquill; "but I soon learned that there was no way to go from here, unless through the walls that are many yards thick, or through the very guard-posts that were set up to keep the prisoners! I had no choice but to stay, and live on what Providence was pleased to send me. Many long years have I remained here in safety, unknown to my gaolers, and to those who would have been my executioners; and now, an old man, and weakened by a life of privation and horror, I seek only to survive here in these catacombs."

"I have no food to give thee, Torquill of Benallen," said Ronald sadly; "if thou would'st continue thy subterranean life, thou must needs look to others for thy sustenance."

"Alas! they are gone," exclaimed Torquill, in despair; "a few days past, guards came and removed all the remaining prisoners to other quarters, and began to construct walls and barriers in my ancient place of confinement. Now I alone am left, and my former means of egress to the cells of the living are gone! I am too weak to use my former shackles as a masonry-tool;-- I must needs perish alone!"

"Nay," said Ronald, who was ever eager to give comfort to others though his own heart knew none, "nay! thou art not alone;-- am I not here with thee? And, though I am a prisoner like thee, and doomed to death by cruel men, yet perhaps I may still conceive of some way to comfort thee, aged Torquill!"

Torquill of Benallen was silent a long space; and at last he sighed, and whispered to his companion, "Ay! Ronald of Knockavod, thou art here with me;-- and as long as I have thee, perchance I shall never lack for sustenance."

"I promise thee it shall be so!" exclaimed Ronald. "Now, my aged and venerable friend, tell me: hast thou still the shackles thou didst use to carve a way out of thy cell?"

"I have."

"And is there some way, open to thee, that thou may'st give them to me:-- for my young hands may get good use of them, though your old arms may not."

" 'Tis nobly said, my lord!" cried Torquill. "The hole or crevice, through which I am now conversing with thee, my noble young friend, is scarcely wide enough to allow me to pass them through it. Yet be patient for a little while, and I shall see if there is still strength enough in these withered limbs for such a task as to widen the crevice, using the shackles already mentioned, so as to permit their passage through it."

"Do so, my good Torquill," encouraged Ronald. "Providence lend strength to thy arms!"

"May the Lord provide!" was Torquill's devout answer to this.

The venerable captive fell silent a long while, but Ronald could hear quite plainly the scraping of the iron on the mortar, and the occasional louder sound as a piece of the mortar, dislodged by Torquill, fell to the stony floor of the adjoining cell. Soon he heard a sigh of satisfaction from the old man, and felt his bony hand upon his shoulder.

"The hole is now sufficiently large," said Torquill, ["]to permit me to pass thee the gyves or shackles I mentioned to thee. But, Ronald! a fear misgives me! Thou art young, and strong, and vital, and hast a lust to live;-- how can I know that, once thou hast gained access to the compartment, wherein I now am, that thou wilt not attack me and kill me?"

"Venerable Torquill," said Ronald kindly, "thou hast my word it shall not be so, but that I shall make all effort to escape from this place, and in doing so I shall certainly restore thee in thy turn to the upper air and the light. But if thou would'st have a pledge of my word:-- when the gaolers conveyed me hither, they did not concern themselves overly much to search me; and thus by their dereliction they left me with a knife, a sharp and long shkeeandoo, which is presently concealed in the bodice of my war-dress. Its finely wrought blade would soon break on the coarse fabric of these walls, but it is enough for a man to defend himself with. Here: I give it to thee, that thou may'st have some protection against my supposed perfidy, even though such base betrayal is farthest from my thoughts."

So saying, Ronald reached with difficulty into the bodice of his war-dress, and drew forth a long and magnificent battle-knife, which he gave into Torquill's hands.

"I am satisfied," said Torquill. "And to thee in thy turn I give the shackles, honed into a tool, wherewith thou may'st free me from my captivity, and allow thyself to leave thy living tomb."

"I thank thee, venerable Torquill."

Ronald took the shackles from the old man's hands, and felt them with his own. They had indeed been honed, as Torquill had remarked, into a kind of chisel or adze; and turning a little behind him, the young nobleman was able to attack the mortar that held in the chains, that bound him to the wall. Long and arduous were his labours, and sore were the wounds the work inflicted upon his hands, but at last he had success of it, and could turn his body completely around, to continue the work of making a doorway in the wall.

All the while he was working, Torquill encouraged him with words of succour and kindness, calling him his deliverer and his saviour -- words which Ronald was quick to rebut [sic], since mankind could have but one Saviour, and in Him alone should they both trust. So Torquill piously changed his address to stories, recounting many ancient legends of noble captives, and how they had triumphed at last over their adversity by their strength and their resolve. These Ronald found much more to his liking, and, inspired by the examples he heard, redoubled his efforts against the wall, so that soon he had made a hole large enough for himself to climb through, and join Torquill in his chamber.

"Be ready, Torquill," he said; "I am about to climb through."

"Even so," whispered Torquill.

Ronald entered the enlarged crevice, and, although with difficulty still, was able to insert the upper half of his body into it. Torquill's hands assisted and guided him, so that he was soon through; and then, at the old man's behest, he sat on the dank and stony floor, to recover his breath a little before going on with their task. As he did so, a sudden and terrible blow descended upon the side of his head, and he fell immediately into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, Ronald was bound fast, still in utter darkness. The sound of shuffling feet was nearby, and he called out, "Who is there? What base coward has

done this to me?"

"Art thou then awake, young Lord Ronald?" asked a voice, which Ronald instantly recognised as that of the aged Torquill. "Ay, I hear that thou art. Do not try to move:-- I have bound thee in the rags of the others who were brought here to die; they are but cloth, but they are as good as chains to thee."

"What hast thou done?" asked Ronald.

"Done, my lord Ronald?" exclaimed Torquill. "Why, nothing but what I have told thee;-- I have survived here, alone among the living and the dead, all these years. The others have gone their way, and I faced the dread prospect of starvation;-- but I prayed to Heaven, and it sent me its Providence;-- therefore I aided thee in thy escape, and I have bound thee, that thou may'st more easily aid me in my turn. Now thou shalt be my sustenance."

"I do not understand thee, venerable man," exclaimed Ronald, "did I not say that I would help thee leave this place? What need to bind me and keep me like a prisoner, or like a felled ox, ready for butchery?"

"Oh, that is good," chuckled Torquill; "yes, yes, that is very good. Fool!" he rasped, with sudden fury, "know'st thou not there is no escape from this place! There is only darkness and foulness and the hushed voices of the dead, and, sometimes, there is one comes who shall be my sustenance!"

["I tell you that all these long years I have fed on their bodies, on the delicious cuts of flesh I have taken from them and devoured -- here -- in the fastness of my hiding-place. And so good is the savour of such viands, that I heartily doubt me, if I were offered the choice of remain[ing] here, or returning to the upper world, with its fruits and its pies and its wines, but I would not choose to remain here, THE MANIAC OF THE CATACOMBS, and live out my days on my chosen food!

["Thy life for mine, Ronald;-- thy life for mine! It is a fair exchange.

["I shall not starve as long as thy flesh remains to me; and with this pretty knife thou hast given me, my task shall but be the easier.-- Prepare! I shall take thee piece by piece, the better to keep thee fresher, against the time when there shall be no more food for Torquill. Prepare! I say."

Ronald heard the sound of his knife, as the Maniac sharpened and whetted it on a stone of the dungeon. Then, when the noise stopped, and was replaced by the shuffling sound of Torquill's feet as they approached him, his soul gave vent to one long, last howl of horror and despair, as he realised he had fallen into the foul and murderous hands of a CANNIBAL!

First posted online 8 Feb. 2003 at The Literary Gothic
www.litgothic.com