

The Shannonside Series
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THE MYSTERIOUS PILGRIM OF ASKEATON

The house in Askeaton Castle where the
Pilgrim first lived —
the old Hell-Fire Club.

THIS is a story of young love, of a clandestine marriage, of a jealous father. It is the tale which involves an Italian and a Spaniard, and a morbid blood-hunt across a Continent. And of murder - of cruel, bloody murder.

Let us begin the story where it ended. In Askeaton Abbey - that splendid limestone structure, lately restored by the Board of Works. Among the repairs which the Board had to do was to insert two new stone pillars in the cloister surrounds. The previous pillars had been taken away quite deliberately.

The pillars had been taken in the year 1784 under most unusual circumstances.

FitzGerald, in his history of Limerick refers to that incident by noting that "the crew of a French ship, which lay at anchor in the Shannon, having visited the Abbey, contrived to loosen and take away the pillar stones of two of the cloisters as models of beautiful architecture".

FitzGerald was partly right. But if he had bothered to ask one man who lived nearby, oh what a story he would have had.

It was not until 1853 that the full story unfolded. And yet, the story had been there all the time, for anyone to see. A story which puts Romeo and Juliet to shame for its pathos and depth.

PHIL

The man who had the story was Phil Rourke of Borrignone, outside Askeaton. He was already ninety when he was interviewed in the early part of the last century. An uncle of his had died aged 107, possessing a clear recollection of the Siege of Limerick to his last breath.

Phil Rourke had been Parish Clerk and Schoolmaster in Askeaton until he became too feeble to work further. He was, through the 1700s, one of the most literate men in the area. He was possessed of a healthy curiosity.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Phil Rourke took special notice of the stranger who was put ashore by a foreign ship in the year 1767. The stranger was secretive, wealthy, and inquisitive. He had a flat of sorts fashioned for himself in the old house in Askeaton Castle - the house where the Hell Fire Club had once practised.

But after a month, the stranger was gone. Who he was, where he had come from, or where he went, nobody knew. As months passed, the town lost interest in him and busied itself with other things.

Twelve months later, in a fierce storm, as rain lashed the Estuary, Phil Rourke was awoken by frenzied banging at the door of his little cabin, the school-house near the chapel. In the light of a thunderbolt, he saw before him the face of the stranger. And what a face! How it had changed! His hair had gone grey, and was matted around his shoulders. His beard was unkempt. And his features were grey and sickly. Phil Rourke did not know whether it was the body or the spirit of the stranger which stood at his doorway in the raging storm. The stranger collapsed in the door, and slept like the dead from exhaustion.

GOLD

In the morning, a little refreshed, the stranger insisted that Phil Rourke take from him his purse of gold, and to use to buy whatever necessities might be needed during the few years of life the stranger had left. He was, he said, determined to own nothing of his own, and to devote himself to matters of his soul.

For the next sixteen years, the stranger never left the ancient abbey. Except, that is, for once each year when, unannounced, he would depart for a month after Christmas. Where he went, even Phil did not know. And on his return, the stranger would evade Phil's questions. He would mutter in a foreign tongue whenever Phil would raise the subject.

But travellers told Phil that they had seen the stranger praying by an old church in another part of the country.

For this, Phil dubbed him 'The Pilgrim'.

For sixteen years, Phil fed the Pilgrim a diet of bread and water - all he would allow himself to eat. And yet, the Pilgrim insisted that his money be used to supply all of Phil's own wants.

January of 1784 came. It was the time for the stranger to go on his pilgrimage. But this time, his health failed him. Phil would read prayers to him in the evening time for comfort, as the Pilgrim had refused to call a priest.

Then one evening, as Phil was reading, the pilgrim reached into his cloak and produced a pocket-book, which he handed to Phil. He told Phil to keep it until its owner comes for it, as it is unlikely that he should live that long. He had written to its owner, but he feared he would not come in time. Then he asked to see a priest.

DEATH

When Phil returned with the priest, he did not find the pilgrim in his cell. Instead, he discovered him, face down in the roofless chapel of the old abbey. And within moments, the pilgrim was dead. And in that spot where his body parted from his soul, they buried him.

A stone slab was placed above him which read

**BENEATH LIES THE PILGRIM'S BODY, WHO
DIED**

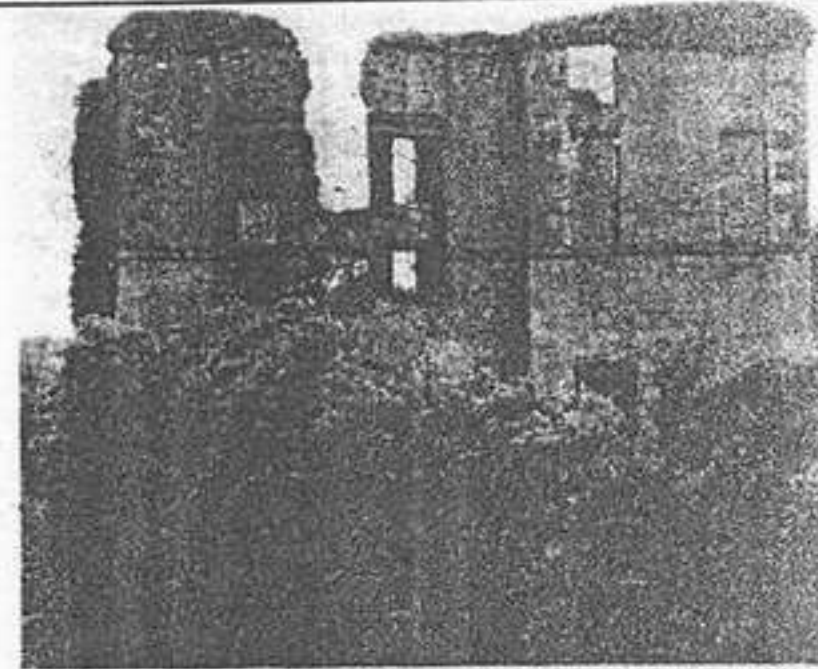
JANUARY 17, 1784.

And there our story could end. It is strange enough as it stands. But further mystery was to be added some six months later.

VISIT

It was a clear moonlit night, a balmy Summer night. Phil Rourke was seated outside his cottage looking out over the confluence of the Deel and the Shannon. Suddenly, he saw a boat, full of heavily-armed soldiers, rowing their way toward him. The men got out. Three of them came straight toward him, while the others headed directly for the abbey.

Phil fled indoors and doused the light, hoping that he had not been seen. But, seconds later, a heavy knock came to the door. In terror, Phil answered the command, and flung the door wide. What confronted him nearly cost him his senses.



In the full light of the moon stood the living image of the pilgrim - curled hair and beard, dark features, haughty look, deep eyes. And yet, this invader was a young man, whereas the pilgrim had been quite old. Instantly, Phil knew what to do. He produced the note-book and handed it to the stranger, saying that he whom he sought had left it for him. When the stranger realised that the old pilgrim was dead, he hastened with Phil to the abbey. The soldiers at once stopped the gambling and smoking, which they had commenced and watched respectively as Phil and the stranger prayed at the grave of the pilgrim.

The stranger quickly broke off his prayers, and began to read the papers with the aid of a lamp. One of the inclusions was a rough sketch of the cloister of the abbey. The stranger groaned 'my mother', and at once ordered his men to dig in certain places. Two of the cloister pillars were pulled down to facilitate the work.

JEWELS

Their labour was not in vain. And within a few minutes, they had unearthed a box. An old cask. It was full of jewels and coins which glistened in the moonlight. The stranger glanced at it, but ordered the work to continue.

At length, one of the soldiers who had been loosening a pillar, found at its base a small box, like a handsome oval snuff-box. The stranger grabbed it and opened it. It contained a little picture and a black ring.

Immediately, the stranger ordered them to cease, and they gathered up the box and, astonishingly, the pillars, and took them back to their boat, and away.

And there, too, our mystery could end. The people of Askeaton were outraged the following morning to see what had been done to their abbey. Phil Rourke judged it prudent to say nothing. In particular, he deemed it prudent not to tell anyone that the leader of the raiding party had dropped the pocket book and sketches, and that he, Phil, had picked them up and now had them in his cabin.

And so it was, decades later, in Phil Rourke's ninety-first year, that the papers were discovered to be in Spanish, and were first translated. And this is the incredible story which they tell.

SPAIN

In the mid seventeenth century, one of the richest and most noble men in Barcelona was one Don Martinez de Mendoza. He owned a huge fleet of merchant ships which plied the routes to America. He had one child, a daughter, whose name was Beatriz. Beatriz, it was said, was among the most beautiful young ladies in Spain.

As was the tradition then, her father tried to arrange matches for her with the other rich men of the area. Fat men, old men, ugly men - they were all suggested by Don Martinez as suitable husbands for his daughter. But the heart of Beatriz already lay elsewhere.

The fair Beatriz was in love with a young Italian, a brilliant sailor, captain of her father's largest ship. The young man was from Genoa, and was completely fascinated by Beatriz as she was with him.

When the young captain visited the Mendoza villa, he and Beatriz made the most of what few moments that could snatch together. They resolved to marry, but each knew that Don Martinez would never agree.

Eventually, with the help of her uncle and her lady-in-waiting, Beatriz secretly married her sailor lover. But still, Don Martinez was not told. So proud was he, that, in fact, he had suspected nothing, and had seen the attention which his captain had paid to his daughter as nothing more than the proper courtesies of an employee to a member of a merchant family. Beatriz hoped that the day would not be too far off when she could tell her father the truth.

Shortly after the wedding, the young Genoese sailor led his employer's fleet away on a long trading mission. While he was away, Don Martinez pestered his daughter about marrying one or other of the local nobles. She was running out of excuses.

CHILD

The return of her husband, however, eased her mind, and they spent that winter in snatched moments of bliss. When Spring arrived, however, the sailor had to go to the West Indies again. The torment in Beatriz' heart was immense - particularly as she was now pregnant.