

CANON SHEEHAN

A SKETCH

By REV. MICHAEL J. PHELAN, S.J.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN AND HIS WRITINGS.

"Sheehan is the greatest living novelist."

—Count Tolstoy.

IT is now twenty years since I first met Canon Sheehan, then Curate of Mallow. Various incidents have since brought us often together. From the first I have been a careful and delighted reader of his books. On more than one occasion I was a visitor under his hospitable roof, where, the labours of the day being over, we spent the evening hours in freely discussing many topics of interest. It was during these visits the idea of writing this little sketch matured. I have since learned with pleasure that his publishers have determined to bring out shilling editions of his works. Thus, the teachings and the thoughts of Canon Sheehan will find their way into the homes of thousands who have not made his acquaintance before. These works, or their success, he never obtrudes, so that a person might live with him for weeks without knowing that he had written a line; but should you introduce the subject, and evince interest, you are treated with unreserved frankness, and everything placed before you with the artless candour of a child.

These facts constitute my credentials, and afford an assurance to the reader that I speak with some knowledge of the man whose name forms the title of this little book.

Those who know Canon Sheehan at a distance, and through his writings only, may be astonished at the prolific output of his pen; but when told that he is, besides, the conscientious pastor of Doneraile, a parish extending thirteen miles by seven, involving a multitude of serious official duties; they have still greater reason to wonder.

In person he is rather slight and above middle height, the shoulders marked with the student's stoop; his features are angular, delicate, and penetrating, the head well poised, and the whole countenance showing reflective power and masterly self-possession. His pages so accurately mirror his mind, that for those acquainted with his works, there is scarcely any need to portray the man. They are prepared to hear of a character evenly balanced, a temperament sensitive in the highest degree and gentle as a saint's, a soul whose chords are as delicately attuned as the strings of an Æolian-harp that responds to the lightest touch, and vibrates to the faintest sigh of the midnight wind. The whole personality is glorified by the light of the supernatural which shines through all his works and thoughts. No matter how common-place or un-inspiring the subject may be, some beautiful thought of Our Lady or her Son comes breaking through, warm as the yellow crocus glowing above the chill surface of the April clay in his own garden. When you close a volume from his pen your uppermost thought is, there is a priest that makes his meditation and never omits his evening Rosary. In keeping with the rest of his beautiful character is his childlike simplicity. The incense of flattery and the applause of the world's greatest men have failed to disturb the equipoise of his mind. In habits of life he is almost ascetic. Order, taste, precision may be seen in all his surroundings; in this he differs from those literary men, dreamers wrapped in the elysium of their own imaginations, who have no thought to spare for neglected toilets or disordered tables.

Canon Sheehan's home is a model of regularity; his library is unique, not only in the number, but especially in the quality of his books. The trashy ephemeral, no matter how loudly boomed, finds no place. The works of all his favourites are complete, and each has its proper place assigned. Carlyle, Macaulay, Dante are so definitely arranged that, blind-folded, their owner could place his finger on any book he wanted.

The same taste and regularity are observable on every side. In the well-trimmed garden no weed dare show itself, and everything is in its proper place. There are two summer-houses, where most of his reading and thinking are done; but penwork is reserved for indoors, the dining-room being his sanctum in winter, and the small library facing the morning sun in summer. There was a time when he seldom took up a pen till the evening lamp was trimmed and the fire crackled, but with increasing years and fame the passion for literary work has grown, and I fear, for his health's

sake, has overmastered him. The number of sheets turned from his pen today is enormous. Hour follows hour in that silent house, but a listener at the door of his room might hear the pen ceaselessly flying across the paper as the well-stored mind unlocks its hoarded treasures and pours them over those pages to which we owe so many an hour of pure delight.

It is now time to endeavour to examine the mental equipment he brings to his task. (1) He has a power of observing that nothing escapes. The antics of the street arab are as carefully noted as are the reddening hues of sunset, the hoarse beetling of the Atlantic, or the sigh of the waving pines before his own windows. The appetite of this receptive power is enormous. (2) He has a memory that is wax to receive and marble to retain. Nothing eludes it—a fact, a story, a droll incident once caught is held for ever. It stretches down to his childhood, and casts forth vividly on the canvas of to-day pictures of forty years ago. (3) An intellect stored with knowledge drawn from a variety of sources—books, men, travel, and observation. Not only does he show himself an omnivorous reader but from childhood he must have been a keen observer, a musier, and a dreamer. Hence every brain-cell is packed. (4) His power of penetrating analysis pierces through and through. No fibre or folding of the human heart escapes when he turns on the Rontgen rays. Without this gift a successful novelist he could never be. (5) But far rarer is his power of transmitting, by the alchemy of genius, all this knowledge drawn from external sources. It is not cast forth from his head as from a lumber room; it is ruminated, digested, and assimilated into the life blood of his own thoughts, and then sent out palpitating with natural life.

As the butterfly catches and retains the seven colours of the spectrum on its downy wings, as the bee manufactures honey out of the stray drops on the sycamore leaf or the juices sucked from the chalice of the lily, so the laboratory of his mind, fed from a score of sources, distils the rich stream of reflection over every page. This fertility is, perhaps, his most striking characteristic. There is not a barren page in any of his works; from any single book you might gather a string of the rarest pearls of human thought. The most trivial incident taps some hidden fountain and sets it flowing. A robin hops in his garden and lo!

"I was pulling up some withered asters today. A robin came over in a friendly way and looked on. I was grateful for the pretty companionship. It was familiar, and I hate stand-off and stuck-up people. I knew he admired my industry, if not my skill. He looked very pretty with his deep brown back, and scarlet breast-plate, and his round wondering eyes watching mine. Alas, no! he was watching something else. A rich, red, fat worm wriggled from the roots of the dead flowers. Robin instantly seized him, flung him down, bit him in halves, then in quarters; then gobbled up each luscious and living morsel, and looked quite innocent and unconcerned after the feat. He had swallowed as much raw meat as a grown man who would dine off three or four pounds of beef-steak; and he was his own butcher. And this is the wretch that poets rave about.

"But, hark! that ripple, that cascade of silver sound, as if from the throat of an angel ! Not the shrill, continuous anthem of the lark, as he shivers with the tremulous raptures of all the music in him; nor the deep bell-tones of the blackbird, as on a May morning he makes all the young forest leaves vibrate with the strong, swift waves of his melody; but a little silver peal of bells on a frosty morning. Who is it? What is it? An Oread from the mountains, who has lost her way hither; or a Hamadryad from yonder forest who is drawing out her wet tresses after her revel in the silver cascade? No, but that butcher, that cannibal—that glutton. I'll begin soon to believe that prima-donnas drink; and that poets eat like mortals." (*Under the Cedars and the Stars*, p. 80)

When the hour comes to clothe his thoughts with language, his power of expression is so lucid that each stands out like a crystal cube.

(6) But his writings receive their crowning glory from the light of the supernatural thrown over all. Every page exhales the spiritual aroma. The priest, the man of God, is always in evidence.

With most authors it is by re-writing, retouching, erasing here, developing there, that the idea is made to stand clear-cut as it lives before the writer's mind. Newman lays down a rule for a writer: "He should write sentences over and over again till he expresses his meaning accurately, forcibly, and in a few words." How he carried this advice into practice himself we know from his life. "I have to correct, re-write, transcribe. Oh! what a trial it has been to me. . . . This book ("The Grammar of Assent") has tried me most of all. I have written and re-written it more times than I can count."

Gibbon, even when he had written the "Decline and Fall," wrote his autobiography six times before he sent his sheets to the press. The task of recasting and retouching is known as polishing the diamonds of thought, and is one of the most delightful occupations of a literary life. As it is only by incessant rubbing and shaping the lapidary brings out the perfection of the jewel, so a similar task ordinarily awaits the writer that ambitions success. He is impressed with Michael Angelo's dictum, when asked why he spent patient hours in small details called trifles: "Trifles make perfection, and perfection is no trifle." To all this Canon Sheehan forms a singular, perhaps a unique, exception. His thoughts stand so definitely arranged in his mind, and the correct word to express the idea comes so unerringly, that he has never to re-write a line. When he revises the sheets he scarcely ever has to dot an i or cross a t. He writes with marvellous rapidity, and in a penmanship that must have earned him many a blessing from the printers. More remarkable still is the fact that he is engaged on three works at the same time. He says that it frequently happens to him, in evolving the plot of a story, he comes to a dead wall, and has to cry "Halt!" He cannot just now see further, so he throws that work aside and begins another. Once more he finds himself in a cul-de-sac, so he begins a third. Perhaps the first chapter is not finished when the light shines on his first difficulty; he sees his way through the thicket, and a clear path is bright before him to the end.

It would be interesting to have a complete list of those who began their literary careers in the columns of the Irish Monthly, and afterwards found fame. Katharine Tynan, Hilaire Belloc, Alice Furlong, Dora Sigerson, Oscar Wilde, and M. E. Francis are a few of those who graduated under the gentle aegis of that most painstaking of editors, Father Matthew Russell, S. J.

During twenty years the initials P.A.S. were familiar to the readers of the Irish Monthly; these letters stand for Patrick Austin Sheehan.

Father Russell discharged more than the mere duty of editor towards his contributors. He was their guide, adviser, friend. It was not his fault if the seedling of promise grew not to a full and beautiful flower. Many a timid aspirant to literary fame doing splendid literary work today would never have been heard of but for the unselfish labour, fatherly interest, and encouragement of Father Russell.

While on the English mission Canon Sheehan was impressed by the fact that the novel was the main channel through which men most successfully poured their views and convictions over the minds of others, so he determined to use it in order to secure a hearing. Had he published his thoughts in volumes of essays or sermons, they would probably have shared the fate of their class, and his name never have been heard of by those millions whose hearts and minds he has now reached.

I think that the majority of readers will admit that in each new work he improves on the former. The born artist was in him, and when the dramatic instinct was called on, it responded to an extent that astonished and delighted his admirers. He did not creep nor walk, he bounded to fame.

Many people maintain that "My New Curate" is his best work, but to this opinion I cannot subscribe. It had this great advantage, that in it the author broke ground entirely new and it had all the relish of freshness for the public taste. But I consider the workmanship shown in "Luke Delmege" is a distinct advance. "Doctor Gray" surpasses "Luke." The characters in this book are as distinct from each other, and as defined, as are the colours of a maypole. They are drawn with so much skill that our acquaintance with each one becomes perfect, and they seem to stand out of the page and speak to us. But it is in "The Queen's Fillet" the author touches, so far at least, the zenith of his art. The French Revolution presented a world of rich materials to the novelist. With what delicate taste the characters are assorted! The architecture of the story, how beautifully finished! In "The Queen's Fillet" not a diamond of the mosaic is out of place. When the final chapter is read, you close the book with the conviction that it contains the most perfect picture we possess of that master-human tragedy.

CHAPTER II.

THE PARISH PRIEST AND "MY NEW CURATE."

As I have already said, the Canon is a parish priest as well as an author. As one might expect, his church is a model of neatness, the vestments are rich and beautiful, the altar requisites perfect, and his own punctuality unfailing; the striking of the hour finds him vested and moving to the altar; to his confessional he is most devoted, and the school

can always count on a daily visit. No pressure of work is allowed to rob his beloved babies of their half-hour. To the tiny dots he is a divinity; to him they pour out their childish joys and sorrows, they crowd around his confessional, and their faces glow with pleasure when he enters the schoolroom. His love of children is shown by the fact that he has handed "over the proceeds from one of his works to support a cot in the Children's Hospital, Dublin. The first seven months' sale of this book brought the superiors of the hospital £97.

Those who know Canon Sheehan best assure me that every penny spared from his income as pastor is given in charity, generally by methods and ways devised to keep the donor's name a secret. He could not sleep if he thought there was a hungry person or a barefooted child in his parish. Surely there is no income a priest might claim with more honest pride, or devote with a safer conscience to his own personal use than that derived from his pen; yet not a coin from the proceeds of his works touches Canon Sheehan's fingers, for he has handed over the entire profits to the bishop for charitable works in the diocese.

I had read four chapters of "My New Curate," then for the first time appearing as a serial in the *American Ecclesiastical Review*, when I met the author and referred to it. He asked my opinion. I told him that, though I thought I knew him, I never suspected that he had a ray of humour in his composition. He answered, "I never dreamt that I possessed it myself till I wrote that book." In the writing the unsuspected vein disclosed itself. He then told me the origin of the work.

The editor of the *American Ecclesiastical Review* called on him and spent a night. During the evening he asked him to write something for the *Review* with a sparkle in it, as well as a substratum of pastoral theology, saying that American priests were hard-worked, and required a flash of humour to light up the pages of a serious review. The host assured him that he had never attempted anything of a light nature. Then a thought flashed upon him. There was a small bundle of manuscript stowed away in a back drawer. He had written it partly for amusement, and cast it aside. "The very thing I want," said the delighted editor, when he had read it. "Continue that." The tied-up bundle contained the first five chapters of "My New Curate."

This leads to an interesting feature in Canon Sheehan. His mind absorbs facts, stories, and impressions like a blotting-pad. Yet, in many cases he loses all memory of their origin. A dignitary of his own diocese asked him where he got the original of "Daddy Dan." He had not the faintest idea. His friend then reminded him that twenty years before he had supplied him with the whole character by describing a well-known Southern parish priest, then dead. That friend assured me that the Canon reproduces, in "My New Curate," that good parish priest to life; yet when he wrote he had forgotten the source from which he drew. Another illustration of this is the case of "The Queen's Fillet." Three of us sat at table. I asked the Canon what works he had read on the French Revolution that enabled him to master the details so thoroughly. His answer was: "I cannot tell, but. I have been reading books on that subject for the past twenty years." The third man had not read "The Queen's Fillet," but was an earnest student of that portion of French history of which it treats. I had previously given him a brief outline of the story, and he declared the materials for the plot must have been taken from "Talleyrand's Memoirs." I asked him to tell the tale as preserved by that astute statesman. It tallied in almost every detail with the story as told by the author of "The Queen's Fillet." Yet the Canon has no recollection of ever having read the "Memoirs." Here is a striking case of lapse, doubly striking in a mind steel-ribbed in its strength on every other side.

The diversity of judgment between the author and his readers on the relative merits of his various works is also striking. "Luke Delmege" and "My New Curate" are travelling through the European languages, and enchanting thousands who never heard the name of their elder brother, "The Triumph of Failure," yet that same eldest child holds first place in the parent's affection. "There is," he once said to me, "more thought packed between the covers of that book than could be found in a dozen 'New Curates.' But then," he added, with a smile, you see, the public will have a touch of nature."

Through a decade and a half of years the world continues to bestow its garlands on these two favourites, yet time has failed to dislodge the eldest child from the warmest corner in the parent's heart.

Divergence of judgment between authors and their public is not peculiar to Canon Sheehan.

Charles Dickens had touched the altitude of his fame before going to America. The creations of his fancy were delighting millions, yet in his private letters home he has scarcely a word about his novels—and it might well be

pardoned—while he gushes like a schoolgirl about his elocutionary powers. His mind was full of a subordinate accomplishment, on which his admirers scarcely bestowed a thought; while he is silent about those immortal characters with whom they laughed and wept.

The late Archbishop of Cashel was a favourite pupil of the great Father Passaglia, when his lectures on theology were drawing thousands of students to Rome. Young Croke was then prefect of the class, so it was his duty to accompany the professor and carry his books to and from the lecture-hall. There was many an interchange of thought between master and pupil. In the very blaze of his fame Passaglia was modestly silent about his powers as a theologian; but on one subject his vanity found a vent. As he paced his room, he frequently said: "Ah, Croke, do you know that I am a great Greek scholar?" Croke did not know, nor ever met anyone who did.

Passaglia, the theologian the world knew and admired; but Passaglia the Greek scholar remained unknown to all but Passaglia himself.

Dickens, bubbling over the triumphs of his elocutionary powers; Passaglia, patting himself on the back as a wonderful Greek scholar; and Canon Sheehan, hugging his eldest child and pitying the judgment of a world that at first gave his second work such a chilling reception—these afford reflection to the moralist.

CHAPTER III.

CANON SHEEHAN AS A POET.

WE have small space to speak of Canon Sheehan as a poet. He has issued but one slender volume from the press, under the title "Cithara Mea." These poems are for the most part somewhat transcendental and above the level of the man in the street; yet they have attracted attention in strange quarters, and some people of highly cultured taste think that he might rest his fame on them alone.

There are many other fugitive pieces from his pen scattered through the Irish Monthly and some American magazines which some diligent gleaner may yet gather up and publish in a complete form.

There is one which our readers will thank the Catholic Truth Society for rescuing from oblivion and giving to its readers, I mean Canon Sheehan's paraphrase of the "Magnificat" which appeared some years ago in the Ave Maria.

As a hymnologist, he has not written as much as he ought; yet here in his own words is a hymn to the Sacred Heart which will be appreciated by the choirs of the country, together with a lovely tribute to the Blessed Virgin.

O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Who would not love Thee, on Thy throne of pain,
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Warm from the wine-press fell Thy Blood like rain.
Crushed like the grape-vine in the hands of death,
Shuddered Thy life as failed Thy fluttering breath,
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Keen was Thine anguish under Calvary's dread smart.
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Who would not love Thee enthroned in heaven above,
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Who would not love Thee,
Fount of light and love,
Angels adore Thee in Thy halls of light,
Seraphs be-praise Thee through the day and night;
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
What tongue can tell the bliss Thou dost to them impart.
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Who would not love Thee in our prisons here
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Only the lowly know that Thou art near.

Yet, neither Calvary nor Bethlehem sweet,
Naught but that heaven where Thy blisses meet,
O Sacred Heart, O Sacred Heart,
Can so entrance those souls that even death from Thee can't part.

QUEEN OF THE STARRY SKY.

Queen of the starry sky,
Lean to our darksome earth,
Mother of God most high,
Whose lowly birth
Rescued our fallen race
From sin and death,
Turn thy sweet virgin face
To our earth beneath.
Rose of the mystic bloom.
Whose golden petals bright
Sprang from the lowly tomb,
In pearls of glowing light;
Breathe on our night of life,
Thy magic sweetness pour,
We, in our deadly strife.
Thy grace implore.

(Chorus—Queen of the, etc.)

Star of the midnight gloom,
Whose pure and silver ray
Pierces beyond the tomb,
And lights the eternal day.
When in God's sunlight,
All dangers safely past,
Opens in portals bright
Our home at last.
Queen of the starry sky,
Lean to our darksome earth,
Mother of God most high,
Whose lowly birth
Rescued our fallen race
From sin and death,
From thy sweet virgin face,
To our earth beneath.

CHAPTER IV.

CANON SHEEHAN'S CRITICS.

THE office of critic is useful both to the author and to the public when he holds the fair, unbiased, judicial balance and apportions praise and blame according to the recognised principles of justice.

But this function is sometimes usurped by small souls that they may pour out the rancour that naturally rises to the surface when they find themselves in the presence of a character grander and broader than their own.

"Criticism," says Dr. Johnson, "is a study by which men grow important and formidable at a very small expense. The power of invention has been conferred by nature on few, and the labour of learning what may by mere learning be

obtained is too great to be willingly endured; but every man can exert such judgment as he has upon the works of others; and he whom nature has made weak may yet support his vanity by the name of critic."

Yes, it requires little intellect and small knowledge to pull down what others have built up. It was inevitable that the jealousy of coarse and vicious natures would be aroused when a light appeared that rose suddenly and swiftly shot to fame.

While Canon Sheehan has little to complain of from the high-class reviews especially abroad, at home his works, particularly in the early part of his career, were subjected to venomous and most ungenerous attacks.

I wonder had the critics already tapped his blood or was it the gift of prescience enabled him to write the following dialogue in "My New Curate" -

"There is but one thing for you to do; you must write a book."

"Look here, Father Dan," said he, "I am not much in humour for joking, any priest that would attempt to write a book nowadays should have the spirit of the martyrs who stepped into the sands of the Coliseum, and saw the brutal Romans in the auditorium and the wild beasts in the cages beneath. Don't you know that the ablest professors in your own time in Maynooth never ventured into print, they dreaded the chance shots from behind the hedge from the barrels of those masked banditti called critics."

In the publication of "My New Curate" a new star was seen to light in the firmament, and generous souls thanked God; with minds of smaller calibre it was the old trouble:-

"If we let him alone all will believe in him."

So the new prophet was doomed to be stoned.

By the time "Luke Delmege" appeared, the weapons were sharpened and the war whoops went up.

An eminent spiritual writer compares a charitable person to a bee which is blind to the dark spots that may here and there disfigure a meadow, and has eyes only for the beauty and the colour of the flowers. Send a beetle over the same ground and while to the flowers he is stone blind, the moment a black spot is espied, he folds his wings and alights on it with a satisfied buzz of delight.

Many of Canon Sheehan's critics could see in his works blemishes, and blemishes only. Their retinas, steeped in the vinegar of jealousy, became so shrunken as to be incapable of holding anything bigger than a speck, the larger perspective was beyond them. And what were the crimes that stirred their unrighteous wrath?

When the splutterings of malice and jealousy are brushed aside, they are found reduced to two.

Though in conversation and intercourse with others no man is more free from the faintest suspicion of vanity; yet in his early writings he showed a tendency to quote from German philosophers and authors unfamiliar to the ordinary reader. This savoured of pedantry and betrayed vanity. Now, vanity is the most harmless and forgivable of human frailties, and is the peculiar outgrowth of simple minds. The proud man and the deep schemer are never vain.

When this defect was viewed through the critics' lenses it appeared a hideous deformity of Alpine dimensions:

Then, he did not give his characters Irish names.

Lo! Here we have his two-fold guilt. The thousand beauties of elevated thought that sparkle through his pages, the graceful imagery, the tuneful periods, the flashes of racy humour, the spiritualised light that shines through all his works were forgotten; the beetles discovered a dark feeding ground to prey upon, congenial to beetle nature, and what cared they for flowers or honey?

Such men forget that in this world there is nothing perfect, that even in the sun there are spots; but surely the sun is not all spots. Michael Angelo's sculptured wonder—Moses—has a fracture in the knee. In Di Vinci's Last Supper the divine form of Christ is without a head. Judged by such canons, of criticism Moses would be all a fracture, and Di Vinci's masterpiece a headless monster.

Such vicious puffs failed to blow out the blaze of a reputation that grows brighter with years.

Yet what silent agonies must not the gentle recluse of Doneraile have endured as he paced his garden and read these attacks?

But probably the strangest feature in all this gratuitous criticism is its inconsistency.

From the annual meeting of the Catholic Truth Society and sometimes from the Maynooth Union comes the cry "We want great authors." We want men of first-rate ability consecrated to the service of God with pure pens to stem

the tide of corrupt thought that flows today like corrosive poison over the young intellect of Ireland, men who could drape truth, beauty and virtue in all the attractiveness that crisp English and brilliant imaginations could lend, men who could beat back the demon of evil literature that daily tightens its grasp on the throat of Catholic Ireland.

Yet when such a writer does appear what do we give him? Bitter, unjust and unscrupulous criticism.

For when, as in the case of Canon Sheehan, the verdict of the literary world is on his side surely there must be some injustice in the manner in which he has been assailed by his own co-religionists.

And let us ask where in the eyes of his home-critics does he fail? Is it in style? No one yet has attempted to find fault there. Is it in his intense Catholicism, never wavering in its preachment of the strictest dogmatic teaching; although Canon Sheehan knew that, perhaps, the majority of his readers were non-Catholics. Is it in its attractiveness? But no writer has ever yet blended the sublime and the humorous as he has. Cardinal Newman always held that the "Bride of Lammermoor" was the greatest of Scott's novels. His reason is that the deepest tragedy and most laughable humour march side by side through the pages of that book. Cannot the same be said, and in a higher degree, of Canon Sheehan. He has blended tears and laughter in a manner no modern writer has approached. And no one has attained such world-wide success in novels that do not contain one single line that could be construed into erotic suggestion.

Where then is his fault? In this He has succeeded.

The world says so. Posterity will repeat it. This is the head and front of his offence.

We well may ask what right have we to complain if our best writers fly to England, America and Australia and devote themselves to the secular press or by writing non-Catholic, and in some instances bitter anti-Catholic works, and reap a rich harvest of their labours, free from all invidious criticism and helped on by every encouragement of their compeers in the press.

Oh Lord! What an array of Ireland's most gifted children have either sold their talents to the secular press, many alas, doing Satan's work abroad.

Let us then treat our authors as they are sure to be treated elsewhere. Let us encourage young Irish genius to dip its pen in the old holy well of Catholic truth and give us works racy of the soil and redolent of its faith. Then we shall have no cause to complain of the poverty of our Catholic literature.

But critics can pursue their quarry just too far. Charity or refinement may restrain a man for a long time, but not for ever. Trampled authors will sometimes turn and teach the lesson that jibbeting is a game two can play at.

On the appearance of "Luke Delmege" a deluge of criticism was poured upon his head.

"Under the Cedars and the Stars" came next. In that book he has a revenge worthy of Swift at his best, but Swift without his coarseness. He draws a picture of the critics' Inferno, Dantesque in its ghastly weirdness.

"And lo! we came unto a horrid lake, black as midnight seas, but still as a mountain pool, which sees nought but the eye of heaven. Far away on the shore, a spirit doleful read a book, and his words came to us wearily, like the cry of a lonely bird, that wings his way at twilight across the sedgy marshes. And lo! the oily surface was agitated, and there appeared, struggling as if suffocated, the inky heads of the tormented. When they had shaken the thick blackness from their eyes, they stared at me and shrieked. . . . And one lifting himself above his fellows, whilst the inky fluid rolled down his shaggy breast, and he turned from side to side in grievous pain, said, In an evil hour we took up our pens and dipped them in vitriolic acid, and poured the contents lavishly on the heads of an evil race of men called poets. There was no one to check us in our course of homicide; for all men feared us; and now, alas we are condemned to this frightful punishment for our iniquities in the light. This lake of Stygian horrors in which we are immersed is a lake of printer's ink. Every half hour there drips from above a tiny rain of vitriol that burns our bald scalps, and streams into our eyes and blinds us; and we are compelled ever and again to eat and swallow and disgorge our own writings in the Yellow and Blue.'

"And lo! as the wretch spoke, I saw a mist gather above their heads and a thick rain fell. I saw each drop alighting on their bald scalps, and burning a hideous blister there, until their faces ran with blood and fire, and they flung with their hands the inky fluid on their heads to cool the burning torments which they suffered; and then plunged in the slimy waters and disappeared." (Page 227). There he leaves the poor suffering critics, smothered not only in boiling ink, but also in laughter and mild contempt.

CHAPTER V. VINDICATED BY THE WORLD'S VERDICT.

WHAT readers outside the shores of Ireland think of Canon Sheehan's writings can be seen from facts that speak with an eloquence beyond

all question. An Irish Jesuit drove up to the door of an Austrian parish priest, and found him reading "My New Curate" in German. "How like is humanity the world over!" he exclaimed. "The book might be a perfect picture of clerical life in Austria."

A Hungarian Jesuit, speaking to an Irishman, paid a most remarkable tribute to Canon Sheehan when he said: "His books read like a continuation of the Acts of the Apostles."

An American priest went to visit a neighbouring cleric. He was met at the door by his friend, holding a book in his hand and tears streaming down his cheeks. He had just been reading Doctor Gray's sermon.

An English parson wrote to say that, having read Canon Sheehan's works, it required a strong dose of controversial theology to keep him from becoming a Catholic. Another said he could never understand the Irish people's love for their priests till he had read "My New Curate."

An Irish Bishop declares that he finds the same spiritual fragrance from Canon Sheehan's pages that he does in the Spiritual Exercises.

Instances such as these might be quoted by the score. This is the verdict of a world unbiased by envy or prejudice.

We now turn to listen to what the best literary critics of Europe have to say of the pastor of Doneraile.

A list of thirty-four notices from German reviews of "Luke Delmege" lies before us. Let us take the first two:—"This novel has but one fault, and that doubtless 'per accidens'—namely, it lacks the "Made in Germany.' If it bore that imprint how proud might we German Catholics be of such an apparition in our belletristic literature.

"Yet its Anglo-Irish origin deducts nothing from our joy; for the good and beautiful is, like truth, a common possession of all nations, and is international in the noblest sense of the word. ' Luke Delmege ' is, indeed, the finest Catholic Novel which has appeared during the last ten years; more significant than Coloma's Lappalien ' or any of Fogazzaro's novels; it even surpasses Sheehan's earlier work "My New Curate," and "The Triumph of Failure," although it was these that laid the foundation of the author's fame in Germany. The subjects are taken from the life of the Catholic priesthood; and here the author seems to have borrowed many colours for his painting from his own spheres of experience and observation. It is not so much in the description of outward occurrences as in the depiction of spiritual vicissitudes that lies the charm of this novel; and in the latter respect the book is a truly wonderful masterpiece, yes, we should be at a loss to find a counterpart to "Luke Delmege" in modern Catholic literature. We are of opinion that it would be useless to give an analysis of its contents. It would be impossible to represent even in the remotest fashion the striking glorification of the Catholic clergy which is the guiding strain throughout.

The author's skill rests on the summit of perfection."

(Otto von Schaching, Deutschen Hausschatz.").

Again:-

"How Luke Delmege goes his way as man and priest; how he realises the great mistake of his life; how the outward world sinks, and the golden kernel of a priestly vocation advances ever more brilliantly— from without, an apparent descent; from within, an ascension—all this is masterfully depicted. With psychological subtlety is drawn the Canon's personality, which elevates itself to the height of true heroism in the culminating scene of the novel wherein the author displays all his genius.

"Luke Delmege" is a delightful treat. And yet another thing stands forth like a golden sun over the entire book. It is the love of the people from which one has sprung, the love of one's native soil. If we want to make comparisons it can only be with Coloma's Lappalien,' and Frenssen's *Jorn Uhl*. He has the former's fine characterization and chiselled style of narration, and the latter's earnestness of conception before which even the small, the silent, inward being appears vast. Should we wish to give a final judgment then it would be: that this is altogether a truly great book, a pure delight, a bath for the soul and a priest's book of the first order, which must not be found wanting in any corner of land or town."

(A.E.M. in der Katholischen Kirchenzeitung.)

The others run in the same strain, all breathing admiration, heaping garlands on a book that Canon Sheehan's own

countrymen attacked with a fierceness that bordered on savagery.

Here, too, is the opinion of Professor Pastori in his preface to the third edition of the Italian translation of "My New Curate":

"Io retengo come verita dimostrato che il 'Mio Nuovo Curato' sia il pui grande lavoro litterario uscito in Europa dopo ' Quo Vadis.'"

"I maintain that it has been truly proved that "My New Curate" is the greatest literary work issued in Europe since ' Quo Vadis.'"

It may surprise the readers of this sketch to learn that this work has been dramatised in America.

The theatrical manager arranged to have it staged once a week during last winter in Boston; it proved such a draw that at the demand of an enthusiastic public it was quickly billed for three nights a week.

We feel confident there is a big surprise in store even for the Canon's most ardent admirers, and, many an exclamation of delighted astonishment will accompany the reading of this long list of victories.

It may be questioned whether there is another living novelist whose works have been translated into so many languages. And we must bear in mind that the book that can bear translation without losing its value carries the hall-mark of immortality.

Here is a *list of the tongues through which Canon Sheehan is speaking into the world's ear: his books have been translated into the following languages—

"My New Curate." —French, German, Dutch, Italian (3rd Edition); Spanish, Hungarian, Slavane, Ruthenian.

"Luke Dehnege."—French, German (5th Edition); Hungarian.

"Glenanaar." —French, German; Hungarian,

"A Spoiled Priest."—German and Dutch.

"The Queen's Fillet."—German and Dutch.

"Miriam Lucas."—German.

"The Blindness of Dr. Gray."—German.

"The Triumph of Failure."—German.

His works are today read in all the dialects of the Slav language. Many a wounded Bulgar and Servian soldier are forgetting the sorrows of Salonica and the hardships of Adrianople in laughing over Jim Deady's pledge or the advice of the three inseparables to the newly ordained Luke before he faced the ordeal of Canon Murray's table.

Where is the Irish heart, especially the heart of the Irish priest that does not swell with honest pride at the thought of this world-wide conquest by a child of our soil.

Had the "masked banditti" succeeded in breaking the purpose of his life, had they struck his hand nerveless in the beginning of his grand career, God alone could measure the mischief they would have done.

The waves of pure thought that to-day are flowing over the world's intellect would have been dammed at their source and, certainly, humanity would be the poorer.

Thank God; despite their attacks, he took his courage in both hands, and though often with a sinking heart and bleeding spirit he steadily pursued his high vocation and continued to pour Catholic ideas into the minds of thousands who were strangers to the light till he spoke. The star of his destiny beckoned him onwards; he arose and without counting the cost he followed it.

CHAPTER VI. "THE TRIUMPH OF FAILURE."

HAVING heard the author's own opinion of this book, we felt assured that we missed a great deal of both the purpose and the beauty of the work in the first reading; so we were tempted to take it up again; and were well repaid.

It would be difficult to name a finer psychological study in literature. It reminds one of St. Augustine's "Confessions," and Newman's "Apologia." No wonder that it is a favourite in the German universities, and that the volume before us bears on the title page—Fifth Edition.

Geoffrey Austin tried to do without God by seeking contentment in philosophy. But doubts, contradictions, and scepticism formed a poor substitute for the Only Truth.

The soul that cried for Christ was bid to be content with Kant and Spinoza; like a caged bird he beats his wings

against the bars on every side. Fortune betrayed him, human friendships proved frail reeds and broke, philosophy mocked the passionate longing of his heart for truth and peace. At last he rises from the early grave of his idol—the youthful apostle of social reform—Charlie Travers—a new man. His eyes are opened to the delusions he pursued, his heart is chastened by many a sorrow having sounded all the shallows he finds himself in the harbour of peace. *Per Crucem ad Lucem.*

The efforts of the natural man meet nothing but failure, but by that failure the supernatural triumphs. It may be doubted whether the author ever wrote anything to surpass the splendid apostrophe he puts into the mouth of Geoffrey at page 333 beginning with "I knew thee Alpha and Omega!"

A passionate and now chastened heart empties itself out over three pages in a lava tide of eloquence and poetry that never for a moment slackens. The limits of space will permit but a few passages:—

"Thou speakest and all men should hear, and yet heard only in the silence of midnight, when thy whispers break on the bruised heart; and the thunders of Thy voice ruling the rebellious spheres, break down into faint ripples of sound that wash on the sandy shore of deserted and desolate souls Thou art everywhere the reason shoots its inquisitive rays, or imagination poises its wings they needs must touch Thee—the Immense, the Infinite. The finger of science is guided by Thy hand; and it is Thy hand that glides over the glowing canvas, and touches the ivory keys. It is Thou Who makest eloquent the dumb of speech, and makest fertile the barren of mind, weaving out of the stammering of sucklings praises that rival the melodies of Thy throne, and out of the babblings of human speech adoration that makes envious the courts of , Thy heavens Thou hast followed me through life, chasing me with persistence as if Thy love was hatred. Thy name has flashed across me in most unexpected places, blinding me with excessive light. I have shut the windows of my soul against Thee; but Thou hast pierced them with the lightning of Thine eyes. I have closed my ears against the soft breathings of Thy inspirations, only to hear the thunder of Thy threats. And now run down, beaten, subdued, the rags of nakedness not hiding my grievous sores, I stand before Thee humbled and ashamed confessing myself the least victim of Thy unswerving, Thy pitiless love."

The sight of Geoffrey Austin "run down" at last, breathing forth gratitude and admiration at the foot of the cross naturally suggests to the mind a picture strikingly similar where the stormy passions of youth and the stubborn pride of manhood lie conquered, and a grateful soul now serenely tranquil lies bathed in the sunlight of love breathing out its affections into the ear of God. It may be found in the ninth book of St. Augustine's "Confessions." It opens with these words:-

"As the day now approached on which she (his mother) was to depart this life, that she and I stood alone, leaning on a certain window from which the garden of the house we occupied at Ostia could be seen." That sentence has inspired an immortal picture. The clear cut features of Augustine, the lofty brow, the finely chiselled mouth, the uplifted eyes with the light of rapture in them, all are there. There too we see the calm serenity, the peaceful joy in Monica's face. Her prayers and her tears have triumphed. Her son is won to God. Her task is accomplished. No earthly fetter now binds that spirit that yearns to be dissolved and to be with Christ.

These two figures of mother and son as they lean on that window bathed in the sunset glow are familiar to us all.

As they speak of God that evening he tells us their souls were surcharged with love and wonder till speech seemed a profanation, and their thoughts soared upwards in silence and they lost themselves in the thought of God's majesty, till "they did gradually pass through all corporal things and even the heaven itself, whence sun and moon and stars did shine upon the earth; yea we soared higher yet and by inward musings and discoursing and admiring Thy works."

A happy inspiration prompted the artist to seize upon that moment of rapture and transfer it to canvas.

Both these beautiful effusions:—of St. Augustine and of Canon Sheehan were uttered at those rare times when a writer finds himself in Patmos and genius transfused by the light of faith dares to open its unabashed eye and pierce even unto the white splendours of the eternal throne.

Here we see two young men who thought to fly from God, yet who at the end of the struggle find themselves prostrate at the feet of Christ with broken wings and bleeding hearts filled with shame for themselves, and overpowered by the wonders of God's love that had pursued and conquered them.

Canon Sheehan's "I know Thee, Alpha and Omega" and St. Augustine's "This heart hast made me for Thee, O Lord, and Thou alone canst fill it," voicing the triumph of failure speak from two scenes that should hang together as

companion portraits warning rebellious youth for all time that there is no rest for the human soul outside the peaceful sanctuary of the Sacred Heart.

CHAPTER VII.

FAREWELL.

CANON SHEEHAN has treated a great variety of subjects in his novels, but many of his readers might be disposed to regret that he was ever tempted to leave the field wherein he garnered such a harvest of fame. Canon Sheehan, the chronicler of the everyday lives of Ireland's priests and people, whetted our appetites so keenly that we grudged him to the new fields of enterprise towards which he turned his face.

In the clerical novel he found his natural metier. While he walked through our rural parishes showing us the lives of our dear people in sunshine and in shade, we blessed our charming guide. On his clerical novels his more lasting fame will rest, outside them "The Queen's Fillet" is the only work of fiction in which he has achieved great success, yet we miss in it the natural aroma that exhales from those pages dealing with Ireland's priests and people. The scent of the woodbine and the smell of the turf fires are absent.

One feature of Canon Sheehan's novels disappoints us. I refer to the inevitable failure of all his heroes. Did it ever dawn upon the author that when he selected as a title for his second work, "The Triumph of Failure," he crystallised the destiny of many of his own heroes in those four words? Failure triumphs over them all.

When the end of each work looms in sight, the sunlight gradually dies out of the pages, and the leaden grey of evening deepens till the sombre darkness of failure settles down on the leading figure, and the banshee begins to cry. The weary sigh that all is dust is the burden of his plaint.

Poor Luke comes forth from his alma mater radiant with the glory of being the "first of firsts."

Like a young giant he strides to victory. What mountains of difficulty will not go down before him! Then, as years roll by, we watch the hand of time brush the laurels from his brow. Star after star goes out in the heaven of his dreams. He folds his arms, sighs *cui bono?* And the banshee wails again.

Surplined in foam, the waves chant a hoarse *De Profundis* over the shattered hopes of Father Letheby, that lie strewn among the wreck of the *Stella Maris*.

In *Doctor Gray* we see a man struggling against the mistrust of his people and a host of griefs. When the last chapter is reached the author puts an immortal sermon into his mouth. The pastor stands before his people, and bares a royal heart they never knew before. In the frigid champion of the law they discover an unsuspected treasure of love. Hearts that lay-congealed are bubbling, the fountains of the deep are breaking, and the spirits of pastor and people, long estranged, now rush towards each other and embrace. But just as the ice-wall that separates them melts, and the dawn of a new life of trust and love begins to break, the actors are bidden off the stage, and the banshee cries once more. It may be dramatic to drop the curtain at that precise moment, but it sends a gulp of disappointment to the throat of the reader: -

To those of us who know the child of genius with high strung nerves, the literary recluse immersed in thoughtful reflection, the Irishman whose temperament reflects our changeful skies, and, above all, the priest in whose ears for ever sounds the sad refrain, *Quid prodest?*—what doth it profit?—to us it is no wonder that the serious shade should occasionally creep over his writings, and the tearful plaint should, now and then, break through his song. But why border the closing pages of every story with deep mourning?

This note of sadness jars upon the spirit of our times when the very air is instinct with the pulses of a new life, and the music of awakened hope is singing through the heart of Ireland.

However, this is but a small matter of taste. The services of his pen to Catholic Ireland can scarcely be measured in our time.

We live too near his day to appreciate him fully. The perspective of history is required to do him strict justice. To the next generation belongs the proper appraisal of his worth.

Previous to Canon Sheehan's advent in the world of letters, the reading public had to take their pictures of the Irish priesthood from Lever and Carleton. It is by contrast with these writers that we can best measure the service he has rendered. He found the Irish priest of fiction, God knows, low enough. He has raised him up and placed him on a

pedestal. When the reader becomes acquainted with the priest as drawn by Sheehan, the caricatures of Lever and Carleton read like literary nightmares. He will lay down the book with a prayer that God will enable every priest to live up to the high standard there set before him.

But perhaps the greatest fruit of his life-work lies in the fact that he has shown what an Irish priest can achieve in the world of letters.

He broke new ground; single-handed he carved a path to fame, even despite the slings and arrows aimed at him. Today, standing as he does on the summit, he holds out a beacon light and waves an encouraging hand to the priest of the future. The higher walks of literature knew but few of them in the past. This was inevitable. The penal laws left a huge legacy to the priests of the last century. Churches, schools, and convents had to be built. That task was scarcely accomplished when they were called on to throw themselves into the forefront of the fight for the people's homes and lands. But the priest of the future is free, thank God, to engage in the battle where mind wrestles with mind.

A University has come to equip them for the task, and we may confidently look forward to seeing many treading on the path Canon Sheehan has opened.
