

The Story of Knight Owen

From "The Story of St. Patrick's purgatory," by Shane Leslie, 1885-1971

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Now a very marvellous event befell the island called after the cave of Patrick, in the second century after the coming of the canons regular, which filled the minds of men with amazement and dispute. A certain knight named Owen came to the bishop desirous to do penance for his sins, and even to meet the terrors of the cave. Though there were many in those days that passed to and fro from the shore to the island, there were few found who dared descend into the prison-house, for some had never returned.

So great were the sins of Owen that he had despaired of his own salvation till a certain father of St. Dominic, who met him at Rome, gave him comfort and absolution. This old man prayed him to have sure confidence in the mercy of God, and soon after he himself died.

When the Bishop had heard the story of Owen's life, so terrible did it appear that he was afraid to let him go into the cave. Though he strove for long to dissuade him from his purpose, yet Owen only showed himself the more eager to accomplish the vow he had vowed. In the end the old Bishop blessed him and sent him away with letters to the Prior. The Prior was equally fearful, for he had the record by him of many who had entered the cave, and, failing in the spiritual combat, had been strangely done away with. Owen's heart proved tougher than the Prior's, and he gained leave to go on his uncertain quest. The Prior laid a fast of fifteen days upon him, and bade him pray the while to the Saviour to protect him from exceeding danger. So Owen prayed and fasted after the valiant fashion of that day, and on the fifteenth he was led into the little chapel to hear the most salutary Mass. Once more the Prior strove to turn him from his purpose, and again Owen withstood him for his own soul's good. When his words fell vain the Prior gave the knight the most Blessed Sacrament and bade him keep the Holy Name on his tongue, for that alone would avail him should he stand near the gates of hell. Then, at a word, the canons drew his clothes from off him, signifying that his past life was stripped away. Three white albs of their own were laid on him in reverence of the Holy Trinity, and then was he laid out as though dead to the world of sin, while two of the canons commenced to chant the Office of the Dead. Faint with his fasting Owen passed into a trance and therein heard his own dirging. The pangs of death seemed to have laid hold upon him, but in his heart he was comforted hearing the words — libera me Domine de morte eterna. The Prior spoke, and two canons, raising him to his feet, led him slowly to the cave-mouth. Behind followed the whole community clad in white robes, praying that he might not be like to them who go down into the pit. A porta inferi erue eum. Then the Prior threw holy water over him and took leave as though of a dying man. Owen, half resting on the arms of the monks, moved into the opened cave. The doors were closed and locked, and the shadows came over his head.

For a little while he stood upright in a horror of deep darkness, till a great weariness compelled him to lie down to rest. Forgetfulness and dreaming befell him. He seemed, in his wandering mind, to stand upright and to feel his way through the gloom. Once again the ground failed him, and he fell wildly on the stones. A cold sweat wrapped his body, for he felt sure that this was the outer pit. When he opened his eyes they were filled with a soft light that showed twelve men before him in the garb of religious. On each was marked a great cross. They were watching him kindly. One, who had the air to be their Superior, by the chain which touched his neck, greeted Owen, and assured him that it was God who had

put so excellent a wish in his heart to visit the fields of Purgatory. Let him but keep the Holy Name on his tongue and refuse the temptations of evil spirits, and all would be well. But were he to suffer himself to turn but for a moment and look back he would come near to eternal loss. As he spoke clouds covered the speaker and his companions. Light and darkness passed before Owen's eyes in strange comminglement. At last the movement was withheld, and he saw an endless throng of faithful souls kneeling in prayer and supplication. As far as his eyes could reach stretched the wonderful company. Their bodies seem to tremble in an unseen flame like the fields that quiver in the heat of summer, and no wind blowing through them. At first they seemed to keep a fearful silence. Then there fell on Owen's ears a low and piteous cry, as it were the sweet impatience of a child in pain. Over their yearning desolation brooded the shadow of an infinite happiness.

Then Owen remembered how it was written of old time that men must be purged by the exceeding mercy of God before they can bear to enter His sublimity. These were the wide, all-receiving fields of Purgatory, and these, like swarms of starlings crying in the misty reeds, were the children of men. Not far from the very spot where he stood he could see his beloved friend and confessor, who had comforted him in Rome, and whom he knew not yet to be dead. He was kneeling in the hooded robe of his order, with such joy in his face that Owen would fain have crept into the shimmering heat and knelt by his side. Even as his friend was speaking Owen was wrapt in darkness again, and came thence to a very fearful vision. All round him he heard the most piteous cries, and they were all the more terrible that he could not see whence they came. There followed a harsh sound of moving winds and of flame, and a dry wind blew into his very soul. He found himself hurried forward into a widening lake. In his dire anguish he spoke the Holy Name with his tongue. For a moment he was still again, and the crying fell away. By now his heart was utterly broken and spent. There passed little save fierce fear in his mind, and all his past life was slipping away like a dream. He cried exceedingly on the Blessed Virgin and her Son. He saw he was by the shore of the lake now, and felt himself lifted and crossing by a stone bridge, most narrow and perilous. On either side of him lay a seething mist of fire, and in the fire were living men. Behind loomed strange shapes and beings, such as he in the nether sea. Their noise was as the moan that is everlasting. Through and over and round them wound a belt of fire, like a great worm that cannot die. Often Owen was near slipping in the red flood for very fear of heart, but he ever remembered to be saying the Holy Name till he reached the further shore. He was standing now on the edge of a beautiful garden, so lovely that he could stay and watch its peace for ever. The air was filled with an surpassing sweetness. Time itself seemed to be standing still. Neither was there any season, for the trees were loaded at once with mellow fruit and young leaves. How long he stood in this beatitude Owen knew not. Half a thousand years might be passing and not one leaf rustle against another.

Suddenly a very soft music sprang up in the distance, filling the quiet air with unebbing harmony. As the sounds thrilled his heart Owen saw a great company passing through a distant glade. A long procession moved over the quiet grass. They were men who had laboured and made an end of their labouring. Saints, popes and kings passed in glorious succession carrying the emblems of their rank. Behind them came the great religious orders in their robes, and after them again the great order of toilers bearing the humble emblems of their work. In the midst of these again was the white bodyguard of the King. These were they who had passed through the river of strife and plucked the reeds of martyrdom at the water's edge. With them was as a Rising Sun that departed not.

Owen fell back into a quiet and death-like sleep, where he lay till he heard the voice of the Prior calling him from the cave's mouth. "My son, my son, hast thou perished?" He strove to make reply, but the weakness of his flesh would not allow his tongue to move. Three times he lifted himself up, and each time he fell back exhausted. Weak as he was his mind was well awake, and he heard the canons talking

softly to one another outside, while the Prior moved his heavy bunch of keys. Silence and darkness followed till the Prior descended with men bearing torches, and Owen knew he had returned to the land of the living.

When he had sufficiently recovered his strength he vowed to remain as a religious on Saint's Island for the rest of his life. So on an evening they brought him to the stone causeway leading over the water. As he passed this narrow bridge a sudden remembrance fell upon him of all he had suffered in his vision and of the troubled waters he had seen at his feet. For a moment horror had bowed him down, and he would have fallen if the Prior had not held him from behind. But once his feet had touched Saint's Island the bright joy of his dream re-echoed in his heart. Once more he seemed to move across the scented meadows into the presence of the King, who abideth in His tabernacle for ever surrounded by the witness of the dead and the praise of the living.