THE SEVEN BISHOPS

A LEGEND OF OSSORY RECORDED BY ROSE SPRINGFIELD

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Story told by Old Keefe in Keefe's kitchen at Ballinvolleer, and by the schoolmaster at Ahenny, and Mick Mac Carthy when I was driving him to hunt with the Mount Uniacke Hounds near Youghal. Practically word for word the same in each case.

HERE was once, long ago, a very holy man. He was riding through the wild places of Ireland teaching the people holy things. As he rode at the back of Slievenaman he was coming close to Drangan when he met a very wicked woman carrying a basket.

"What have you in the basket, woman?" said the holy man.

"I have seven puppy dogs," said the wicked woman.

Now the holy man knew who she was, and that her name was Petticoat Luce, and that she was a very wicked woman, for nothing was hid from him because he was so holy.

"Open your basket!" says he to her.

"I will not," says she. "as cocky as the nose of the drawing-room bellows!"

"Open it at once," says he, "making the sign of the cross at her. So she opened it, and there were seven boy babies all alive.

"Give me those babies," says he to her, "and I will bring them up to be holy men."

Well, she struggled against his will, but he pointed his fingers at her, and said he would "put horns on her so that she would turn into a puckhorn goat." So she gave up the babies and the basket and all, and he mounted his horse with them to ride away. But before he went, he said:
"Oh wicked woman, I will give you another chance for your soul. Go to Bay Lough by the old road across the Knockmealdowns to the river Blackwater, and stay there and repent of your sins!"

Well, off he rode, and he went to France, and he gave the seven baby boys a grand education, and they all became bishops. Well, when he was dying, he said to them: "Go back to Ireland, and finish the work I began there when I was interrupted by having to educate you and make you into bishops." And then he died.

Well, they went back in a great ship to Ireland, and they landed in Waterford; and there was a terrible thunderstorm that night and it was very dark, and the only light were the flashes of lightning, and they lost their way in the darkness and the rain and found themselves at a castle on the banks of the river Suir, and the name was something like Grania Castle(1), and a lovely lady lived there named the Countess Eva. They asked for shelter, and she bade them welcome and put them up for the night. When morning came and the storm was over they started off and when they had gone some distance they separated so as to preach in different places.

Now, when they had gone, some of the Countess Eva's knights said to her: "Those were no bishops. They were spies from the king of France who will come and take everything from you when they tell him how grand the valley of the Suir is." Now the Countess Eva got a great fright at these words and said to the three knights: "Go after them as fast as you can and kill them. One knight was named M——, and one K—— and the third——, and they hurried after the bishops. They caught up one at Faugheen and killed him. They caught up another at Ahenny and killed him. They caught up another at Kilvemnon and killed him. They caught up another at Killamery and killed him. It is not known for certain if they caught the others and where, or did they escape.

When the knights got back to the Countess Eva, they found she had discovered they were real bishops, and said to them: "God help us now, 'tis a curse will come on us!"

And true enough: her beautiful castle became a ruin, the river Suir on which it stood filled with reeds so that no big ships could get up it now, and she killed herself by setting fire to her long golden hair. And the knights had a curse come on them too, for wherever you meet a family of the M——s, rich or poor, there will be a fool in every generation, so that people, when they see a fool or an imbecile say: "He, or she, must be a M——." And the

(1) "Granny Castle" on the bank of the Suir (parish of Kilmacow). Tradition considers it as the residence of Mairghread Ni Ghearoid, "the Countess of Granny."
K——s can be known at a glance, as there is something wrong with their eyes, either blind of one eye, or with a pearl in one eye, or with a squint in one eye, but all the time only one eye, and so it is in every family of K—— to this very day.

And the third knight—— was cursed to have a “short step” and so it is in all his descendants of every class even to to-day, and you can tell even if you do not see them or know who they are, when you hear the “short step.”

And the people of the country set up crosses where the bishops were killed of carved stone, of the same pattern as they have in France, with a line that has no beginning and no end to show that the power of God goes on for ever.

But Petticoat Luce did not care for God or holy men, so she had to stay at Bay Lough and could not get away. Still, she kept on being wicked, and she had an enormous son who lived in Bay Lough and was so big that he “could eat a bullock at one meal,” and when he spit, the spit was so big that the lake would almost overflow, and his spit was so bitter that no dog, or cow, or heifer, or bullock will ever drink of the water no matter what a drought there is on them. And every New Year’s Eve, he comes up and he says: “Is this the day after the Day of Judgment?” When he finds it is not, down he goes again, till the next eve of New Year.

And Petticoat Luce went on growing more and more wicked, and when the people were going on the roads on their dray carts and ass carts, she would beg them for a lift and climb on at the back whether they wanted her or not, and when she got on the carts, she was so heavy, though she looked as thin as a lath, that the horses and asses broke into a lather of sweat and could not pull the load at all, and the people got so frightened that they left off using that road and made one higher up the hill away further from Bay Lough.

And the holy man heard of this—even in France—and he sent back word that she had lost that chance and now she must go to the Red Sea and remain there until she could drain it with a tailor’s thimble, and sometimes, when the sun dips below the horizon, a green beam shoots up, and you can see her hand and the tailor’s thimble on her finger.

Now the cross at Ahenny is in the graveyard, and a man from Kilmacoliver was passing by one day (and he was so mean that his soul was as narrow as a knitting needle, and if you had a cold in the head, he would grudge it to you) well, when he saw the cross, he said to himself: “That would make a grand hone for my scythe if I sawed off an arm of it.” He went home and got his saw, and he began to saw it off, and he looked up and saw his house on the opposite hill at Kilmacoliver was on fire, and he dropped his saw and ran to save his house, and when he got there it was no fire, only the setting sun shining on the windows. Still
and all, he would not be warned, and he called his son who was a young lad to go back with him. And the young lad was to carry back the arm of the cross when it was sawed off. And they went back, and he picked up the saw, and began to saw again in the same notch, and as he sawed, drops of blood fell from the notch he had made and fell on him, and he gave one mighty skirl that was heard as far as Mullinahone, and the echo of it as far as Grangemockler and Tour, and even to Kilcash, and he fell down with the falling sickness, and the young lad ran off for help; and then the people came, he was wriggling like an eel, but no matter how he twisted the blood drops still fell on him, and each place they dropped on was burned through to the bone, and in the latter end he died, and it was as well.

COMMENT BY FRANCOISE HENRY:

This story is an interesting version of a tale which is told with many variants all through S. Kilkenny and S. Tipperary. The seven boys are generally said to have been born "at one birth." They are educated abroad, often in Rome, and come back as bishops or "students." They are often said to have been killed, in circumstances similar to those recalled above, at the "ford of the heads" (ath-na-gceann) in Lismatigue (parish of Aghavillar, Co. Kilkenny). A certain number of the high crosses of S. Ossory are mentioned as marking their burial place. The list varies, but includes nearly always the crosses at Ahenny (the old Kilclispeen), on the border of Co. Tipperary, the cross at Killamery (Co. Kilkenny) and sometimes those of Dunamaggan (Co. Kilkenny) and Kilkieran (Co. Kilkenny).

The seven ecclesiastics carved on a panel of one of the Ahenny crosses are considered locally as the portraits of the "seven bishops." But it would be difficult to identify with a local legend the carvings of Ahenny, as they seem to illustrate a more widespread story which is the subject of another series of carvings on the cross of Dromiskin (Co. Louth). It may be on the contrary the carvings which helped to give one of its features to the story.

2 F. Henry: "La Sculpture Irlandaise," Plate 35.

(If anyone knows any variations of this legend of "The Seven Bishops" or has any fresh interpretation of it, will they please write to The Editor, "Old Kilkenny Review," c/o. "Kilkenny Journal.")