

[*The London Daily Telegraph*]

THE LIFE DRAMA OF THE PARNELLS

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THE evidence which Captain O'Shea gave before the Parnell Commission as to the authenticity of the signature of the Pigott letter published in the *Times* was proved to be false, and his vengeance was balked; but the next time he appeared in a court of law, he had the law and society on his side, for he was suing for a divorce from his wife on the ground of her adultery with Parnell. It is difficult to say what were the motives and events which had transformed the outward relations of the two men. The disappointment to both in the expected results of O'Shea's forced election by Galway probably had a good deal to do with it. There is reason to believe that some dispute over an inheritance may have contributed. Mrs. O'Shea lived for a great part of her life with her aunt, Mrs. Wood. Mrs. Wood was the widow of the long-dead Alderman of the days of George IV, and lived to a great age—something between ninety and a hundred. She had inherited from her husband a large fortune; but there were, unfortunately, nearly as many heirs as there were thousands in the fortune, and many disputes were the result. Whether the interests of Captain O'Shea and his wife came into conflict as to this inheritance it is difficult to say; all these things will perhaps never be fully revealed.

Perhaps, however, the chief cause of the divorce proceedings was that they were strongly desired by Mrs.

O'Shea. For years she had been the wife of Parnell in everything but name; she had been subjected to all the insults, the furtive living, and all the other humiliations which society inflicts on women in that questionable position. She, doubtless, felt that anything was better than such a life, and was consumed by the desire to 'regularize' her position, even at the cost of such a terrible exposure. Parnell, probably, had other views, knowing better than any woman could the risk to his political position such an exposure would involve. But nothing is more remarkable in this tragic love story than the complete subjection in which this man of iron and of ice stood to this woman. He seemed to have his will paralyzed in her presence. The first solicitor to whom Parnell naturally resorted was the late Sir George Lewis, the confidant of thousands of stories of domestic squabbles; and there are legends of strange interviews between Parnell, Mrs. O'Shea, and Sir George Lewis, in the old-fashioned offices in Ely Place, where Sir George Lewis received his clients. In these interviews, Mrs. O'Shea insisted on stating her views; her opinions are said to have been entirely erroneous; but Lewis had to sit and listen patiently, with Parnell standing by, silently, and, if not approvingly, at least submissively; the mouth of the solicitor was closed. The end was that Sir George Lewis was left—doubtless at Mrs. O'Shea's suggestion—and another solicitor was employed. And instead

of fighting the case — which might have meant that the divorce would have been refused, and Mrs. O'Shea would have still remained Mrs. O'Shea — the case was undefended.

The whole world put its ear to the door of the divorce court when this historic case came to be heard. The absence of all defense deprived the trial, of course, of a good deal of its interest; but Captain O'Shea supplied plenty of material for even the most voracious reader of scandal. Cold, collected, adroit, aiming his every blow with deadly skill, Captain O'Shea, in his evidence, managed to make Parnell appear not only odious but — what was perhaps worse — very ridiculous. The stories came out of Parnell taking houses under false names; he was represented as first being the friend of the husband and then the lover of the wife; all this told sentimentally against Parnell.

But the little episode which was afterwards most fatal to him and used with the deadliest effect was the description of a visit which O'Shea paid to a house in Medina Terrace, Brighton, immediately after he had seen Parnell enter. He could not, he said, find Parnell, and when he appealed to the landlady she replied that if Parnell were not in the house, he could only have gone out by a fire-escape. The picture of a great and almost omnipotent political leader slipping down a fire-escape in order to escape the pursuit of a betrayed husband caught everyone's fancy; the incident stuck in the public mind; was the subject of innumerable jokes in caricatures, and figured in some of the bitter speeches made against Parnell in the terrible struggle between him and some of his party, which followed. Many years after the divorce, the late Sir H. Beer-bohm Tree was entertaining Captain O'Shea at supper, and, in the course of

conversation, he made the remark that it was true of England, as of France, that 'ridicule alone killed,' and that of all the episodes which were detailed in the divorce case against Parnell, the one which had undoubtedly done more to destroy him than any other was the episode of the fire-escape. O'Shea assented, and then added the ironic comment on it all: 'And the best of it was, there was no fire-escape.' What, then, was the explanation? Was it that, as might at first sight have been thought, O'Shea — for the purpose of killing the enemy he hated — had invented the whole episode? No; what happened was that the landlady had used the phrase as a mere *façon de parler*. She did not mean that there was a fire-escape on the house — for there was none — but that Parnell's exit had been so rapid and so mysterious that one might have imagined he had got out on a fire-escape. Parnell, himself, always indignantly denied the story.

For a time it looked as if Parnell had never shown his consummate power of concealing his emotion more than during the period which preceded the divorce case and during its progress. He was seen by an acquaintance passing down the Strand, quite openly reading the details in an evening paper on one of the days of the trial, and he never betrayed any sign of losing his characteristic frigidity and serenity. Possibly, he underrated the effect of the proceedings on public opinion. It was his weakness, as well as his strength, to be unable to see any point of view but his own, and to be indifferent to the opinion of others, and, above all, to the opinion of any people but his own. He felt sure that they would stand by him.

And that, doubtless, was their almost universal desire. Cool-headed politicians in his party believed that a