

STONE AND NAPOLEON.

A CHRISTMAS REVERIE, 1797.

SCENE: - A room in a house in Paris.

Speaker: Theobald Wolfe Tone, emissary of the United Irishmen.

The Noel bells are silent. No sweet hymn
Travels in softening swells the distance dim:
In song, to-night, no neighbouring belfry breaks;
Yet a dear memory half my being takes
O'er the black waste of waters to my isle.
Strange paradox of phantasy! The while
Not in her, I am of her. Sadly, I
Seeing a land of desolation sigh! -
Here, have I wrought, like one pent in a cave
Shut from the rush of native wind and wave -
Have delved for light, have loosened slab and spar;
Till, thro' a long deep crevice shines a star,
Unknown to me - whether of eve or dawn,
Beneficent or baleful - thine, Napoleon!
Oppressed, I left the human noise and gloom,
Passed the old porter's lodge, and in my room
Have pondered many problems - Life and Death,
And Time's quick changes; here a people's breath
Hath blown aside the hollow stalk of kings,
A plant effete. Alas, how feebly rings
My own small cry; and so, with padded door
To-night I sit. Ghosts rise upon the floor -
Dead Irish heroes; and one whispers me: -
Why grievest thou, friend Tone? asked anxiously.
Why, Erins, why? Dear ghosts, I cannot say,
But this I know; thoughts otherwise than gay
Mar all my moods. My laugh becomes a sigh.
Sad voices fill mine ear; sad sights mine eye -
Days of misfortunes. So too, when I sleep
Most woe-begone, oft do I crouch and creep,

And ask and plead – the day’s ambassador
Retook on dreams his way from door to door,
To win that worn-out answer; Wait, and wait! -
The wind-up of all purpose, early and late -
But now I should be glad, ye say, nor grieve;
So should I be, dear ghosts, this Noel eve –

For I have seen Napoleon! With high head,
Along the Rue Chantereine to-day, I sped
With Tennant and Lewines. We found the place,
A soldier’s simple home, yet girt with grace
And beauty; with soft hangings, golden warm;
Choice paintings, many a classic chiselled form:

And silent as his statuary, the Man -
Italia’s scourge! O rare young Corsican,
Thou hast the look of single purpose set
Deep in thine eyes! Thy rivals I have met -
Hoche, fiery-hearted, rapid-eyed Desaix,
Both charmed me much; but thou in sheer dismay
Did’st leave me mute, as if by palsy struck;
One only feeling left – would the old sad luck
Be mine again? For here, methought, stood one
Fit for the worthiest work beneath the sun.

O Erins, our redemption! – I see unfold
The evening mist across my chamber rolled;
I watch it pass and part. Therefrom, methinks,
Gleam out the stony features of a Sphinx,
Piled passionless; so looked thy face outworn,
O Buonaparte! To-day in old time scorn
Of men and things; but who can truly judge
Of aught concealed? The placid mountain ridge
May cover glowing ore or worthless flint;
So too, thy face may mask glad tidings in’t
For me and mine, in heart and hope bankrupt,
Since the successive shock of storms abrupt
Shattered our ships. – O wicked winds of Brest,

The memory of that week's awful unrest
Will dull my brain for ever. Poor dear Hoche!
Not mine, a baffled comrade's hot reproach
Upon thee, done to death. Thy rival star
Now walks thy vacant circle of red war,
And to it I must turn; towards it, turned
I miss indeed, the sympathetic light that burned
In thy bold fearless eyes for those unfree,
They bleeding Celtic brethren oversea:
And mark, instead, in Buonaparte's grey eye
A glare that never softened to my cry!
Much mystery, I fear. Men, caught at night,
Groping for some safe passage, left or right,
Along an unknown track with new fears go,
Suspicious, if leaves rustle or winds blow:
Till every dim small terror on the way
Affrights, more than the grievous ones of day
Of pit or stream. Yet, Erins, I will on!
Undaunted, I will seek this Corsican,
Will say to him: Would'st smite thy bitterest foe,
Mine also, and my country's, be thy blow,
For fadeless laurel or for passing crown
I care not, reck not – men's thoughts are their own -
But know that not for flaming roofs afield,
Will foeman in the leaguered castle yield:
Look to within, liveth the old host,
Who sighs to win a home not wholly lost -
Trust him to open! ... As I reason so,
I hear the living come, the dead ones go!

P. J. McCall.