

MARTYR

SYNOPSIS

Ireland, 1725. The country is in the iron grip of the Penal Laws, and for a chosen few men of questionable character, hunting and killing Catholic priests has become a profitable endeavour. John O'Muldowny is one such rogue -- alongside the obvious financial gain, it's turned out he's got quite the knack for it.

Finding his latest holy quarry entrenched in a 'priest hole', John ties him to the back of his horse and drags him into the midland woods. John is not a man immune to spirituality. He actually has some existential questions of his own, namely; if God is all powerful, why is he being allowed to capture and bullet-riddle priests with reckless abandon?

Bringing the Priest to the site of a lightning-shattered oak tree, John issues a challenge to the sky: he will give God three minutes to reveal himself and save the life of His messenger on Earth before he executes the Priest with his musket pistol.

FADE IN:

INT. PRIEST HOLE - DAY

Darkness. Shallow, stifled BREATHING.

THE PRIEST, late fifties, crouches in a cramped underfloor chamber, grimy, sweaty, crooked.

He presses his hands against his mouth, eyes clamped shut.

SUPER: IRELAND, 1725.

Above him -- muffled RAISED VOICES. Then BOOTSTEPS.

Shadows skim across the Priest's face through slits in the floorboards above.

The boards CREAK, STRAIN -- the Priest lifts his head --

An EXPLOSION of light as the trapdoor is pulled open. The Priest squints against the glare.

The SILHOUETTE of a MAN stares down into the hole -- JOHN O'MULLOWNY, mid-thirties, with a face that finds a sneer far easier than a smile.

The spill of light behind his head gives him an almost saintly aura. He CLICKS his tongue twice.

JOHN

There ya are, Father Rat. Enough
playin' shy.

John bends down, his weathered features catching the light.

JOHN

What's the use of that collar if you
can't heel to the leash?

EXT. LOWLANDS - DAY

The winter sun hangs low in the sky, struggling through the chinks of bare tree branches.

John sits atop his black horse as it CLOMPS through the rugged lowlands.

Two metres behind -- the Priest, tied to the horse by yellowed rope, both hands bound.

He struggles to stay on his feet as the horse drags him on.

John glances back at the Priest -- their eyes meet. John SPITS, turns away.

EXT. WOODLAND - DAY

John yanks the reins -- the horse SNORTS and slows. The Priest stumbles to a stop, breathing heavily.

Before them is a GIANT OAK TREE, carved in half down to the roots, as if a celestial knife has sliced through it.

The two halves of the tree have collapsed equally on either side, levelled to the ground.

JOHN

Storm split this tree in half a month ago. People been running their jaw saying it was the work of God, a warning on account of all the priests we've been stringin' up.

The Priest surveys the shattered tree in silence.

JOHN

Could be. Could be a stray bolt. Either way, I thought holy ground might give ya a puncher's chance.

John hops off his horse, pulls out a knife -- he cuts the rope connecting the Priest to the horse, then drags his quarry towards the tree.

John shoves the Priest to the ground near the trunk -- yanks out a FLINTLOCK PISTOL, looms over him.

JOHN

The Lord has three minutes to save your soul 'fore I blast it out of the back of your head.

John pulls out a pocket watch from his overcoat and CLICKS it -- the HANDS start twitching clockwise.

JOHN

Three whole minutes is overly generous for something that calls itself 'God' -- but my one weakness has always been my kindly heart.

He sneers up at the sky.

JOHN

You hear that? Arm your red right hand. I'll arm mine.

He COCKS the hammer of his musket pistol. The Priest rises, leaning on the fallen tree, hands still bound.

THE PRIEST

Tell me your name, if you would.

JOHN

John.

THE PRIEST

John what?

JOHN

John the angel of death. You're wasting precious time here Father, if I were you I'd get to prayin'.

THE PRIEST

I've done enough of that for one lifetime. I trust He's heard.

JOHN

Alright.

(pause)

Then maybe you should pray to me.

The Priest looks hard at John.

THE PRIEST

What do you seek to prove?

JOHN

Not a matter of provin'. I just want to rattle His cage. Wake Him up a little.

John spreads his hands to the sky.

JOHN

I've killed three already. What are you waiting for?

There is no response but the slow drifting of the sky and the stillness of the woodland around them.

The Priest stares at John a moment. Then nods.

THE PRIEST

Unnerved by His silence. As so many before.

JOHN

I'd be more unnerved if I were two minutes shy of a bullet.

THE PRIEST

I do not fear returning to the Kingdom.

JOHN

You're a touch different than the last prick then. Poor whelp beshat himself when I pulled the pistol.

John SNICKERS at the memory.

THE PRIEST

You hold that gun like a grudge. What brought you to hunting priests?

JOHN

Nothing more sinister than self-interest.

The Priest waits.

JOHN

This is how you choose to spend your final mortal moments? Story time with ol' Johnny boy?

He laughs. The Priest keeps looking at him. John shrugs.

JOHN

Stole a horse. Stole some more. Got shackled.

THE PRIEST

And swerved the noose?

JOHN

Night before I was set to swing, the Sheriff of Mayo cut me a deal. Said they could use a man of my talents to hunt down men of your talents.

THE PRIEST

And your life was spared in return.

JOHN

I look like a ghost to you?

THE PRIEST

No, John, you do not.

(pause)

When you found yourself alone in the cell, hours from death, did you pray?

John SPITS at the ground, doesn't respond.

THE PRIEST

Whom did you pray to?

Once more, John doesn't respond.

THE PRIEST

You have received your answer. Clearer than most.

(pause)

Kill me if you will, but you are merely repeating the question.

John frowns, gauges the Priest.

JOHN
If my life was spared just so I could
kill you and your collared friends,
it probably wasn't God who spared it.

John glances at his pocket watch. The hands TICK past '12'.

JOHN
Either that or He fancies you a
martyr.

The Priest looks John square in the eye.

THE PRIEST
Martyrs are not born, they are made.
By men. Someone had to carve the
cross. Twist the thorns. Hammer the
nail.

John starts to speak -- doesn't. A moment between them.

THE PRIEST
God doesn't just walk beside the
strong. He also carries the weak.

John lifts the pistol.

THE PRIEST
John, you are already forgiv--

CRACK of the gunshot.

A FLURRY of crows take flight.

The Priest slumps to the ground, a cut-string puppet. Blood
pools in a halo around his head.

John looks to the sky.

FROM ABOVE: We see now the full shape of the lightning-split
oak tree -- divided and fallen into two perfect halves.

The two halves exactly mimic the shape of giant LUNGS.

The leafless branches look like BLOOD VESSELS.

The Priest has fallen in a bloody heap just below the trunk,
right where the HEART would be.

EXT. WOODLAND - LATER

The Priest's body, bound atop John's black horse, jolting
and swaying with each step.

John walks beside, leading the horse, rope coiling his hand.

Behind them -- the giant split tree, branches CREAKING gently in the gathering wind.

Lying discarded in the open tree trunk -- John's flintlock pistol.

The first SPLATTERS of rain hit the metal of the gun barrel.

Thunder ROLLS in the distance.

FADE OUT.