



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. VI.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 1856.

NO. 28.

LEGENDS AND TALES FROM IRISH HISTORY.

(From a forthcoming work, by Mrs. Sadlier.)
THE BATTLE OF OCHA, A.D. 433.

The monarch, Laogaire, being killed by lightning somewhere on the plains of Kildare, the estates of the kingdom assembled at Tara, in order to elect a successor for that great prince, who had governed Ireland for thirty years. Two rival candidates asserted their claims to the monarchy. One of these was Oilioll, surnamed Molt, son of the renowned hero, Dathy. The other was Lughaidh, son of the deceased king. The latter was at once set aside on account of his age, not having yet attained the legal age for ascending the throne; which in ancient Ireland was fixed at twenty-five. Still there were other princes of the family of Laogaire, who might have been eligible for the office; but the truth was that Oilioll had a powerful party in the national council, so powerful, indeed, that their will was almost law to the rest. Of these friends of Oilioll, the chief were his father-in-law, Angus, king of Leath-Mogha, and his own kinsman, Amalgaidh, king of Connaught, a prince of great military prowess, who had been victorious in no less than nine sea-fights, as historians gravely assure us. These two princes carried all before them in the supreme councils of Ireland at that time; and they having warmly espoused Oilioll's cause, the scale was speedily turned in his favor.

The discomfited adherents of the Hy-Niall dynasty were obliged to submit for a time; but their submission was sullen and sat awkwardly upon them. It was the passive submission of the chained tiger, eagerly watching for a chance to spring on his keeper. Years passed away, and the young son of Laogaire was a wanderer amongst the princes of Ireland, endeavoring to strengthen his party by every means in his power; he was now approaching the legal term of his minority, and burned with impatience to recover the throne of his father from him whom he called a usurper. By the time his majority had arrived, he saw himself at the head of a powerful army, composed chiefly of subsidiary forces from Leinster and Dalriada.

It was then the custom in Ireland for a prince who thought himself unjustly debarred from the throne, to send ambassadors to the actual occupant, demanding a formal renunciation in his favor—that is, if he found himself in a condition to enforce his claim. Lughaidh, therefore, sent some noblemen of his party to the reigning monarch, calling upon him to resign the crown to the rightful owner. Oilioll made answer that, as his father had reigned before Laogaire, he considered himself as better entitled to the crown than any descendant of that monarch; and that, in pursuance of that conviction, he was well prepared to defend his rights.

This was no more than Lughaidh had expected; but it added fuel to the fire of his jealous indignation, and he at once summoned the princes, his auxiliaries, to join him with their forces. Oilioll on his side was not idle; his household troops were numerous and well-appointed; these he led to the field in person, and with him marched his faithful friend, Amalgaidh, at the head of the Connaught legions; Angus with the chosen warriors of Leath-Mogha, and other valorous chieftains of lesser note, with their respective followers.

Lugha was but little behind the monarch in the number and equipment of his troops, and that little was more than made up by the extraordinary valor and chivalrous devotion of those who were willing to sacrifice all, even life itself, in defence of his rights. On the side of Lugha were the young prince, Fiachra-Lonn, of Dalriada, with his matchless bands of trained and hardy soldiers—Criomthan, son of the king of Leinster, at the head of his father's chosen troops, Murtough-Mac-Erca, Fergus Kerbeoil, and many other princes and chieftains of high birth and higher renown. The noblest and bravest of the sons of hapless Erin were ranged against each other on that fatal day.

It was on the plain of Ocha, in the present county of Meath, that the two armies came in sight of each other. After a sullen and ominous pause, during which the rival princes and their respective supporters seemed concentrating their fierce ire, a general engagement took place. The demon of war presided over the scene, for the combatants fought on either side with infuriate rage. Victory seemed now leaning to one side, now to the other; now it was the trained and practised cohorts of Leinster that made Oilioll's line quiver; anon they were themselves driven back by the fierce warriors of Connaught, with the cry, of "Hy-Fiachra and Connaught;" and again, quick as lightning, did the wild daring of the Dalriadians sweep down all before it. "Hy-Niall and Dalriada," was the word of fate to the doomed monarch, Oilioll, who, seeing, at length, that the overpowering valor of the fierce Northern warriors was

likely to decide the fortune of the day, made a last effort to regain the ground he had lost. In vain did he and his gallant friends perform prodigies of valor; fate, it would seem, was against him; and driven at last to despair, he shouted to his household troops to follow him, and rushed into the thickest of the fight.

"This slaughter is dreadful," said the monarch; "I will seek out this rash Lugha, and kill him, or die in the attempt."

Rushing on with headlong speed at the head of his men, cutting their way as they went, he at length encountered Lugha, and challenged him to mortal combat. The prince was nothing loath to accept the challenge; and the armies on either side, or what then remained of them, paused as if by tacit agreement to witness the combat of their respective chiefs. After a long and fierce struggle, the fiery valor of the younger prince prevailed, and Oilioll fell to the ground covered with many wounds. This decided the fortune of the day, and Lugha was unanimously saluted as king, the pagan warriors on either side believing that the gods had declared in his favor, the more so as the unfortunate Oilioll had been a convert to the Christian faith.

This battle of Ocha was to the Irish of that day what the battle of Flodden was to the Scotch in later times; for the flower of the Irish nobility were left on the field. Even the victors had suffered so severely that their victory was dearly purchased.—From one end of Ireland to the other the wail was loud and long,

"For the flowers of the forest were a' wed awa."

Of all the battles that had been fought in the kingdom for years and years before, the battle of Ocha was at once the most disastrous and the most important in its consequences. By it the monarchy was restored to the race of Niall, by whom it was held for several centuries after; and so memorable was it deemed that future annalists made their chronological calculations for many an age, from "the bloody Battle of Ocha." Alas! for the dark doom that rested on the fortunes of Ireland, in those remote times as in later ages:—

"How oft has the Banshee cried,
How oft has Death untied
Bright links that glory wove.

We're fallen upon gloomy days—
Star after star decays—
Every bright name that shed
Light o'er the land, is fled."

Such might have been the mournful complaint of some bard of that day, brooding over the misfortunes of his hapless country in the spirit which prompted Moore, when he wrote the song, or rather dirge, from which the above lines are quoted.

ST. KIERAN AND THE HEIR APPARENT.

(A Historical Legend of Lough Ree—A.D. 538.)

In all Ireland there is not a wilder or more desolate scene than that in which the great St. Kieran founded his magnificent abbey of Clonmacnoise, the Iona of Ireland, as it has been very justly styled.—"The solitary hopelessness of the bog is all around; and nothing interrupts the silence of the waste but the pipe of the curlew, as it whistles over the morass, or the shriek of the heron, as it rises lazily from the sedge bank. If ever there was a picture of grim and stern repose, it is the flow of the Shannon from Athlone to Clonmacnoise." That wide expanse of the Shannon, known as Lough Ree, is fully fourteen miles in length, and is thickly studded throughout with islands of varied size and form. The scenery along its margin is never grand; and rarely, if ever, beautiful; its uniform character being wildness and desolation, seldom softened by fertility or cultivation. Here do silence and solitude reign unbroken; the natural loneliness of the place being now much increased by the measureless waste of broken wall and pointless arch, and shattered column—the remains of the greatest of Irish monasteries. Well and wisely did St. Kieran select this site for

"—the deep solitudes and awful cells,
Where heavenly, pensive contemplation dwells."

But we are wandering from our purpose, which is to describe scenes and events antecedent to the foundation of Clonmacnoise.

It was in the reign of the monarch Tuathal Maolgarb, when Dermot MacCearbhaill was by many regarded as the rightful possessor of the crown. The king himself had, doubtless, his own notions on the subject, perhaps of a similar nature, for he issued a proclamation to the effect, that Dermot was to quit the kingdom forthwith; and that whosoever could succeed in slaying him, if he ventured on Irish ground, should be rewarded with royal munificence. Somehow the reward was never claimed, although it was whispered about in an underhand way, even at court, that the doomed Roydama (Heir-apparent) had been seen more than once in one disguise or another, not many miles from where they stood, who told the tale. These reports were studiously kept from the

royal ears, for the royal temper was, as might be supposed, none of the mildest, and his courtiers had no mind to arouse the sleeping lion by telling him of Dermot's audacious disregard of his mandate, when they had not his heart to present as a peace-offering, that organ being the proof, or pledge which Tuathal required.

It was just at the time when Inathal had begun to flatter himself that his dreaded rival had, at last, betaken himself to realms beyond the seas, never again to disturb his arbitrary rule in Ireland, that two men of widely dissimilar appearance met one morning on a small island amongst the waveless waters of Lough Ree. They were both young; the elder not much over thirty, although the gravity of his mien, and the subdued expression of his mild features gave the idea of his being some five years older. He was clad in a long gown of coarse cloth, girded at the waist, and on his head was a small, closely-fitting cap, barely sufficient to cover his shaven crown; for his crown was shaved, and his whole exterior was that of a man consecrated to religion, and caring little for the world wherein he was undergoing his probationary term. His form was somewhat bent, evidently rather from the habitual attitude of recollection and humility, than the weight of years. The other was a man in the meridian of life and in the prime of manly beauty. His tall form was straight as the young cedar, and his features noble and majestic, with eyes of darkest hazel, and hair of a shining, auburn color. He could not be more than five-and-twenty, for the elasticity of youth was in his step, and its ardor in his flashing eye. There was that about the young man which would have told of courtly training and martial pursuits, had not his peasant's garb belied the semblance which his mien put forth.

When the two, thus described, met face to face on the bleak island shore, they both came to a dead pause. The one looked fixedly at the other, but neither spoke till a mutual scrutiny had taken place. The younger and taller of the two at length extended his hand, which the other took with much coolness and apparent indifference.

"Thou art Kieran," said the youthful peasant, for such he seemed.

"I am," was the reply; "God save thee, honest man."

"Thanks, holy father; in thy heart, at least, dwell mercy and compassion. I am poor, very poor; food hath not crossed my lips since yesterday noon; for God's sake extend thy charity to a poor, houseless wanderer."

"And welcome, friend," replied the Saint, for the monk was St. Kieran himself. "I have some ash-cakes in my pouch, which I am willing to divide with thee, and the water of the lake will quench thy thirst. It is not yet my hour for eating, but sit thee down, poor man, on this rock, and eat while I make my noon-day orisons."

The young stranger sat down accordingly, and ate with a greedy appetite the hard, dry cake given him by the Saint; then stooping to the lake, lifted some water in the hollow of his hand; this he did several times, till his thirst was sufficiently slacked; when, raising his eyes to heaven, he ejaculated a fervent thanksgiving, and then calmly resumed his seat.—Full half an hour had elapsed, when the Saint arose from his knees, and then turning to his companion he said:

"I have come hither from Innis-Anguin, to take up my abode in this still wilder spot, and I am about to build an oratory. Thou art a young man, and a strong man; wilt thou lend me thine aid?"

"With all my heart," was the reply; "whatsoever thou sayest, I am willing to do. I am stronger than thee, holy Kieran, and I will put up thine oratory, if thou wilt but tell me how I am to do it."

The bargain was made, and the two friends sallied forth to commence their work. St. Kieran having previously conveyed some stakes from the main land, he and his companion went to work with right good will. The unknown seemed wholly intent on his self-imposed task, never allowing Kieran to do any part of it but what was comparatively light and easy. Once when he raised his eyes to ask Kieran playfully if he would not recommend him to further employment of a similar nature, he was taken aback by the pitying look wherewith the Saint stood watching his toilsome labor. Blushing to the very temples, his dark eye lost its sudden fire, but he still made his request with a forced and dubious smile.

"Nay," said the Saint, "it were hard to commend unto others a workman so little skilled in such matters. But good will makes up for thy deficiency—at least with me. That is hard work, Dermot, for one of thy birth and breeding, but it will soon end. Be of good cheer!"

"Ha! thou knowest me then!" and the young

* Cakes baked on the hearth, under the hot ashes.

† Now Hare-Island, in Lough Ree.

man let the stake which he was planting fall heavily to the ground in the shock of hearing his own name—that most dangerous name—thus unexpectedly pronounced.

"Assuredly I do, Dermot Mac Cearbhaill; it needs no superhuman knowledge to read thy lineage, so plainly visible on every feature. But let me help thee, Roydama, to plant that stake; it is too rough for thy delicate hands."

"Not so, father," said the generous prince; "it would ill beseem my father's son to stand by and see the servant of God engaged in such work."

The Saint said no more, but stood looking on in silence, while the Prince strained bone and muscle to accomplish his task, pausing ever and anon to wipe the large drops of sweat from his heated brow.—When he had planted the required number of stakes to form the oratory, Kieran, coming forth from a neighboring fissure in the rocks where he had been engaged in ecstatic prayer, held out his hand to the prince, and pointing towards the sun, now nearing the western horizon, invited him to sit down by him, and share his meal, "for," said he, "sunset is the hour for my daily repast."

The prince bowed profoundly as he touched the venerated hand; and having seated himself on the projecting rock beside the Saint, the latter blessed their homely fare, and gave Dermot much the larger share, silencing his objections with a peremptory mandate. For a while the meal proceeded in silence; but at length Kieran spoke in a dreamy sort of way, as though but carrying out the sequel of his previous thoughts:

"One who is so kind and so compassionate, must needs make a good king. And yet—yet—the stain of blood is on his hand. Dermot Mac Cearbhaill what is this?"

The last words were evidently addressed to the prince, whose countenance changed and fell as the Saint turned his eye upon him. That piercing glance sank into Dermot's heart, and chilled its inmost recesses. He tried to speak, but his voice failed him, and he answered not a word.

"How is this?" repeated the Saint sternly, "I have prayed for thee, Roydama, that thy father's throne might be given unto thee, and the Lord hath heard the prayer of His unworthy servant; but there is blood on thy soul, O Dermot—thou hast taken vengeance into thine own hand, and the Lord of hosts is angry. Couldst thou not wait on Him to whom vengeance of right belongeth?"

"Nay, father Kieran," stammered the prince, feeling it necessary to say something; "for myself, I have shed no blood, and surely the sins of my fathers will not be held against me. Tuathal is a tyrant and a usurper;—merits he not an evil doom?"

"It may be so," replied the Saint solemnly; "but woe be to him who is the instrument of that doom. Say no more, Dermot; I will hear no more denials. I am sorry for thee, prince, for my heart warms to thee, and I have good hopes of thy reign; but murder—murder—oh, my God! hold not this foul crime against him!"

"It is hard to be suspected thus," began Dermot, with a flushed cheek; but instantly recalling the Saint's stern mandate, he bit his lip and remained silent. Kieran sat for some time in an attitude of deep thought, his eyes fixed on the rising moon, as she gradually showed her silver disk above the horizon. After a little, his thoughts seemed to take a softer, perhaps a pitying character; rising from his seat, he asked the prince whether he had any shelter in view for the night.

"Holy father, I have not," he replied, with more bitterness than he had yet manifested. "If a sinful mortal might be permitted to liken his condition to that of the Lord of lords, I am even as He was, when on earth—blessed for ever be His name! I have not a stone that I can call my own whereon to lay my head. Thanks to the cruel persecution of him who sitteth on my father's throne, and reveals 'in my father's halls."

"Say nought of that, Dermot, if thou wouldst lodge with me. I know thy wrongs, and God knows them too; but they are even now terribly avenged—alas! for him who sent forth the blood-hound on the chase. But thou hast served me this day, Roydama of Ireland, with heart and hand, and to-night thou shalt share my shelter, such as it be."

So the two wended their way to a small cave, which Kieran had found amongst the rocks, and where the Saint had made a bed for himself of the soft moss gathered from the rocks. The only additional furniture was a stone, which served as a seat and a rude cross formed of two branches of a tree, which hung at the foot of the couch aforesaid. Having made their evening devotions together, the Saint, pointing to the mossy bed, told Dermot it was time for him to seek repose.

"And thou, holy father?"