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TURLOUGH O'BRIEN;

OR,

THE FORTUNES OF AN IRISH SOLDIER.

CHAPTER XL.—THE HOUR OF DEATH.

Next morning Caleb Croke, the wrinkled forehead surmounted by a velvet cap, from under which a few scant white locks escaped, and his keen grey eyes peering through the spring spectacles which compressed his nostrils, at a letter which he had but just opened, sat in his usual chair of state, before a desk piled with papers and parchments. Directly opposite to him, and almost as grimy as the dingy wainscoting of the dark apartment, sat his confidential clerk—a lank, starch, sanctimonious-looking gentleman, somewhere about fifty, and with a slight squint, which made his face anything but a 'letter of recommendation.' This sallow and somewhat sinister-looking official, pursued his scribbling in industrious taciturnity, and without ever raising his eyes for a moment, except to dip his pen in the ink, on which occasion, as often as it occurred, he shot a single, stealthy glance at his employer's countenance, and forthwith again applied himself to his monotonous task.

Croke had no sooner concluded his letter, than he shook his head, sighed, and muttered some half-dozen bitter ejaculations within himself, then rose in great trouble, and having taken a turn or two up and down the chamber, exclaimed—

'This is the sorest blow of all—the deed destroyed—and just at such a time—the villains—the robbers!'

And with these broken exclamations, he stood sometimes scratching his head, sometimes wringing his hands, the very image of perplexity and dismay.

'Well,' said he, at last, 'I all along had my suspicions of that priest—what possessed me to disregard them? Good heaven, why did I trust him, and with such a commission! I ought to be kicked, and cursed, and burnt for it.'

The door opened at this moment, and the priest himself, Father O'Gara, entered the room. The constrained, suspicious, and disconcerting reception which awaited him, was so far from repelling the young ecclesiastic, that without awaiting even the ceremony of an invitation, he seated himself, and at once opened the subject of his visit. The conversation that ensued was long, animated, and earnest. Its results we need not here detail; suffice it for the present to remark, that before it had proceeded for more than five minutes, the grimy clerk on a sudden remembered a notice which he had forgotten to serve, and with his principal's permission, hurried out of the room.

Meanwhile a scene of agony, almost of terror, the last farewell of two beings, who had been for many a year to each other dearer than all the world beside, filled Sir Hugh's dark and desolate cell with sobs, and prayers, and blessings. We shall not attempt to describe it.

And now the hour of noon drew near—the awful hour which was to consign Sir Hugh Willoughby to the hands of the executioner. Every stir in the castle-yard—every sound upon the stairs, was listened to in the breathless agony of suspense by his distracted child; every coming moment was dreaded as the herald of death.—Pale, but calm and resigned, the old man sat in his grim prison, whose damps and gloom might meetly have foreshadowed the chill shadows of the tomb to which he was hurrying. In praying he had sought and found that heroism which more nobly, and far more securely than human pride and resolution can sustain the heart of man thro' the terrors of such a scene.

In misery uncontrollable, and wildest despair, poor Grace wept, and trembled, and clung to him, and sobbed, like a creature bereft of reason; and through these dreadful moments, the brave old man strove, though in vain, by words of fortitude and comfort, to calm the wild transports of her breaking heart.

At length the dreaded sounds were actually heard. The ill-omened scream of the rusty lock, the clanging and rattling of chains and bars, along with gruff voices upon the passage, the door itself rolled back, and the gaoler entered; but oh! praised be heaven, is it possible—with a reprieve!

Yes, Sir Hugh Willoughby, though still under sentence, and a prisoner as before, is again relieved until the king's further pleasure shall be known.

Oh! who can describe the overwhelming delirium of joy which welcomed this unlooked for respite, and in the intoxication of deliverance from present ruin, hailed the precarious boon with all the rapturous ecstasy which might have greeted an entire deliverance on the king's full pardon.

The first rapture of his sudden rescue had for some time subsided, and in calmer happiness now, Sir Hugh and his darling child mingled their

and tears, as, hand locked in hand, the kind words and fond looks of dearest affection were exchanged between them; when once more the prison door flew open, and breathless with eagerness and haste, old Caleb Croke, supported by Father O'Gara and Turloch O'Brien, stood in the scanty light which struggled through the bars of the dungeon.

'My dear old patron—my admirable friend—worthy knight,' cried Croke, scarce intelligibly, through want of breath and extreme vehemence, while the tears, spite of all his efforts, coursed one another down his rugged cheeks, 'I'll never forgive you; how could you think of being hanged, without letting your agent, and honest, trusty, humble old friend, Caleb Croke, whose fortune you made, and whose fortune and whose self you have as good a right to command as if they were, in fact, as they are in right, and in gratitude, your own—without letting him know a word about it; confound me, I say, if I ever forgive it.'

As he thus spoke, he wrung his old benefactor's two hands in his own, with a vehemence which was all but dislocating.

'But it's all settled, now,' he continued, with unabated impetuosity; 'all settled, all right—the deed—the settlement that was burnt, you know—but, no, you don't know—egad, I forgot, but no matter—it's found again—that is—not it—but an attested copy, which is all one, you know; and—and—'

Here honest Caleb was taken with so obstinate a fit of coughing, that he became utterly unintelligible; and Father O'Gara, consulting the anxiety of his hearers, and undeterred by Croke's deprecatory gestures, took upon him the office of spokesman forthwith, and thus proceeded:—

'And to the preservation and discovery of this deed, under God, you are indebted for your reprieve—and for more, for your perfect security against ever suffering the execution of the sentence under which you lie. The wretches who conspired your death aimed in reality at your estate, and finding that that is limited to another on your death, are resolved to enjoy it at least during your life; and to extend the term of this enjoyment, they, of course, desire to protract that life, with which it ends. But, sir, there is more—'

'Let me—let me—young gentleman—let me,' insisted Croke, who had now recovered breath—and, with gentle violence, pushing back the young priest with his open hand, he continued—'yes, indeed, there is more, as he said—a great deal more. This young man, this Colonel Turloch O'Brien, has behaved, I will say it, though he nods and frowns at me all the while, nobly, ay, sir, nobly. The French court had, it seems, long since promised him their interest in seeking the restitution of his Irish ancestral patrimony—of which you know Glindarragh is a chief portion. The ambassador was prepared to press this upon the king—but he has waived his claim to your forfeited life interest, on condition that you shall be liberated immediately upon bail.—The terms are agreed to—and, at this moment, the necessary bonds are being drawn up. I ought to add—because the thing tells handsomely for him—that Colonel Sarsfield requested to be your second bail; so, please God, by to-morrow morning, you shall be once more a freeman.'

What followed, we need not detail—nor yet all that passed between the beautiful Grace Willoughby and the brave and handsome soldier whose proud but generous heart she had irrevocably won.

Turloch O'Brien remained with Sir Hugh until the hour arrived when the prison rules of Dublin Castle obliged Grace Willoughby to leave her father for the night; and, accompanied by her woman, she took her leave, and returned in a coach to her apartments in the Carbrie. There we shall leave her, in the deep solitude and silence of the night, to commune with her own heart—and to calm, if possible, the tumult of its sweet and bitter emotions and remembrances.

The young soldier, being thus alone with Sir Hugh, opened fully to him the purport of his interview with Grace in the castle garden.—Deeply, however, to his mortification and disappointment, the young man found his proposal coldly though not unkindly, listened to. Sir Hugh Willoughby had his pride and reserve as well as Turloch O'Brien; and in his fallen fortune he could not bear the thought that his family should be beholden either for rank or wealth, to the generous forgiveness of an hereditary foe. The strong and unfavorable prejudices with which he at first regarded Colonel O'Brien, had, it is needless to say, long since entirely disappeared; but his present humbled position was not the attitude in which to entertain an offer, which, in his eyes, wore too much the appearance of an obligation.

Pained and chagrined, though not actually offended at what, under all the circumstances, seemed to him the unreasonable conduct of the

knight, Turloch O'Brien was constrained to take his departure with perplexing doubts, and dark anxieties for the future.

'Well, Sir Hugh Willoughby,' he said, with a proud but melancholy air; 'to speak frankly, I did not anticipate so cold an answer to my suit; it pains me the more that I may not see you for many months again. To-night I proceed to take, in person, the command of my regiment—and so it is even possible, in times so troublous and uncertain as the present, I may never see you more. Farewell, Sir Hugh—farewell; we part, at least, as friends.'

As Turloch rode slowly through the moonlit-streets, chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy, he found himself under the walls of the now quiet Carbrie; and, as his eye wandered on among the gables, and vanes, and projecting beamheads, which varied the front of the antique structure, something more than the romantic influence of the misty moonshine under which the old fabric was shimmering, induced him to draw bridle, and break the rapid pace of his steed into a walk. He checked even this moderate motion, as he reached that part of the mansion in which Sir Hugh's lodgings were situated, and looked up, with passionate regret, to the quaint casements, within which he knew his beautiful Grace was, even at that moment, mayhap, thinking of her own true lover.

At such an hour, and under such circumstances, of course he dared not ask to see her; and once more he was about to put his horse in motion, and pursue his melancholy night ride, when a light gleamed from an open lattice, and a small hand was extended to close it. When did a lover's eye deceive him?

At the first glimpse of the form thus casually revealed, his heart swelled in his bosom—and with graceful gallantry, he raised his plumed hat. The gesture caught her eye, for she looked down upon him—then hastily withdrew, and then as hastily returned.

Pressing his hand to his lips, as he looked upward at the loved form but dimly visible, he said, in the low, thrilling tones of deepest passion, only the words—'till death—till death.'—She waved her hand—lingered for one moment, and in the next was gone.

For a minute and more he continued to gaze, locked in fond fascination on the now darkened casement, where he had seen, but for a moment, the loved form and face which haunted his imagination every hour, in day-thoughts and in dreams; then, sighing, he drew his hat upon his brow with something of a scornful mien.

'Till death,' he said, 'ay, till death; and unless this hand hath lost its cunning,' and he raised his gauntlet-gloved right hand, 'and unless thou, my brave Roland, hast lost thy fire and mettle, death may still be many a year removed; and if it be—in spite of fate, she shall at last be mine. On—let us on; danger has been our comrade through many a rough year; and if, thro' those that are to come, thou bearest thy master well and safely as before, then what power on earth can keep her from me? Away, away, my brave Roland!'

As though he understood his master's words, the noble steed startled his ears, and snorting, broke into a plunging canter; nor was the reverie in which the young soldier was lost for one moment interrupted until it was dispelled by the challenge of the sentinel at St. James's gate.

CHAPTER XL.—THE FAREWELL.

A few nights later, Sir Hugh Willoughby, now once more a free man, was pacing, with agitated steps, the floor of his apartment adjoining the Carbrie. His cloak and hat lay ready, upon a chair, to be donned at a moment's notice. His face was pale, and wore a character of mingled anxiety and grief, and in manifest impatience he glanced from time to time at his watch, and listened for the sound of foot-falls or of voices at the door. He had communicated the nature of his engagement, whatever it might be, to no one; simply stating that business would call him forth upon that evening, and directing that so soon as a gentleman at the street door should inquire for him, he should at once be apprised of his arrival.

The night was unusually dark; and, as it wore on, Sir Hugh's uneasiness visibly increased.—Dark as it was, he frequently looked from the windows, in the vain endeavor to penetrate its gloom, and would then in silence resume his restless walk, with, if possible, increased agitation and dejection.

In all this there was a mystery, which, however much it might pique her curiosity, or however nearly it might interest even higher feelings, his fair daughter attempted not to penetrate.—She saw that the old knight was resolved that the purpose of his melancholy and agitating expedition should remain unknown; and she sought not to trouble him with inquiries which might possibly offend.

At length a smart knocking at the chamber door announced that a gentleman awaited Sir Hugh at the entrance.

In silent haste the old knight put on his cloak and hat; took his daughter tenderly by the hand and kissed her; then, having gazed in her face for some moments with a look of melancholy irresolution, as though he were uncertain whether or not to speak some matter that weighed heavily upon his mind, he turned abruptly from her with a sigh, and hurried from the chamber, leaving her, if possible, more than ever anxious and perplexed. We must follow the knight down the staircase of the old house, which he traversed with the heavy tread of age, and forth into the dark and now comparatively deserted streets.—A single form, wrapped like his own in a mantle, awaited his reproach, close to the entrance of the house.

'Sir Hugh Willoughby?' said the stranger, inquiringly.

'Ay, sir; the same,' answered the knight dejectedly. 'I thank you for keeping tryste with me. Shall we now proceed?'

'If you desire it. We can easily have a coach,' said the stranger. 'I fear you will find the way somewhat longer than you reckon upon.'

'No, no,' answered the old man, hastily.—'I would be entirely private; none but thou and I shall know of this visit. God grant me courage for the mournful—the terrible interview. Let us on—let us on, my good friend; I pray thee, let us on.'

'Then, lean at least, upon my arm,' responded his companion.

The old knight accepted the proffered courtesy, and thus in silence they began to tread the dark and sinuous ways, which, diverging from the High street, in a southerly direction, soon lost themselves in a confused labyrinth of narrow and complicated lanes, among which Sir Hugh followed the guidance of his companion.

Pursuing their way thus steadily and in silence, the two pedestrians at length arrived at a desolate and deserted-looking place, where the street which they followed became gradually thiolly-built and broken, and at last terminated in a lonely area, in whose foreground were visible only some partially constructed or half-ruinous fragments of houses, while behind them loomed, in a heavy mass, against the gloomy, starless sky, the peaked gables and ponderous chimneys of a massive old mansion, with a few scattered and tufted trees dimly grouped around it.

We have already introduced the reader to this desolate-looking tenement—the same in which we have seen, in an earlier chapter of this tale, Miles Garrett and Father O'Gara confronted, in resolute and fiery debate, about the poor, heart-broken lady, who had found, in her misery, but one human friend.

'We must be near it now,' said Sir Hugh, in an agitated whisper; for the clank of arms and the challenging of the guard at some little distance, borne to the ears upon the night breeze, assured him that they had well nigh reached the extreme verge of the city.

'Yonder is the house,' answered the priest, for he was the knight's conductor; 'yonder is the house; and I should have called earlier to guide you hither, had it not been that she—the poor lady—was asleep, and the honest woman who attends her prayed me to await her waking;—which I did. Here, then, ends our walk.'

They now stood beneath the dark walls of the sombre mansion; and the priest, applying a latch-key, effected their entrance, without any other sound than that of gently opening and closing again the massive portal; and thus they found themselves cautiously mounting the broad staircase, in unbroken silence. A dim light, burning upon the lobby, showed them the door of a chamber, into which the priest, with a sorrowful countenance, slowly entered; and the old man, with head inclined and broken steps, followed like one in a dream.

From an inner door, at the farther end of the apartment, a decent looking female looked in upon them, and beckoning her to him, Father O'Gara asked—

'Does she wake or sleep now?'

'She's awake ever since you left,' answered the attendant in a whisper; and, with a shake of the head, she added—'and her next sleep, I'm afraid, will be a long one. Poor thing—it's nearly over with her now!'

'Go down stairs, my good woman, and wait there until I call you,' said the priest, gently, 'for she must now consult the peace of her troubled mind, and we need not to be undisturbed.'

Without speaking the woman promptly and reverently obeyed. The chamber door was closed and Father O'Gara, returning from the sick room, whither he had gone alone for a moment, said—

'Come, Sir Hugh, she expects you.'

The old knight followed him almost mechanically into the chamber of death.

There lay upon the bed which he approached, wreck of that beauty of which he had once been so proud—all that now remained of the young and happy bride he had loved so fondly. At

sight of him—remembered, oh! how well, through all the blighting changes of grief and years!—the wasted form started up in the bed; and, with one piercing scream, clasped her poor thin hands across her eyes.

'Oh, let me kneel, let me kneel; help me to kneel!' she cried, struggling ineffectually to rise from the bed; and, stretching her wasted arms imploringly towards him, 'Oh, Hugh! Hugh!' she cried again, clasping her hands over her face, and sinking forward in the bed, with the weakness of coming death—she presented such a type of heart-broken agony and humility as must have touched a Stoic.

The old man wept bitterly; and, for a long time, through his sobs, could only repeat—

'Poor Marian! poor Marian!'

After a long silence, the poor creature again struggled to speak—

'Oh, Hugh, I dare not ask you to forgive me now; but, after I am gone, Hugh, you will forgive me then! Will you wipe away the remembrance of all the misery and sorrows, and think of the times—the old times—when you saw me first, Hugh—the happy times, that you can remember without remorse?'

The old man wept so bitterly that he could not answer.

'All I dare to ask, Hugh, is that, when I am dead and gone, you will sometimes try and think of those days, and remember me as if I died then, died in those happy times!'

Crying as if his heart would break, the old man could not answer, but took the cold, emaciated hand of her whom he had once loved so well, and pressed it, and wrung it in his own, while he sobbed and wept on still in silence.

Oh! who could describe, what words can tell, the wild scream of fearful joy and wonder that broke from her at that touch!

'My hand! my hand! Oh, God Almighty!—he holds my hand again! I am forgiven! I am forgiven!'

And, as she spoke, the fountain of her tears was opened; and, with a long, deep siver, she lay weeping and sobbing as though her poor heart would burst.

'Poor, poor Marian,' said the old man, still crying and wringing her hand as he spoke, 'you are forgiven; you are, indeed, forgiven. Oh, Marian, Marian, I never thought to have seen you thus.' And they both wept on for a time in silence.

'And the child, Hugh,' she said at last, in a tone which, though almost a whisper, yet cut him to the heart.

'Is well and very beautiful; like, very like what you were, Marian,' he answered, while his tears flowed on; but, perceiving that the grasp with which she had tremblingly clung to his was fast growing cold and feeble, he added, pressing her hand as he had once pressed that self-same hand in scenes and times so different—

'Marian, Marian, my poor Marian, would it comfort you to see her?'

'Oh, no,' she answered, desolately, but very gently; 'no, no, I am unworthy; I could not; no, no. But,' she continued, after a while, with a most mournful humility, 'I have one last request—my jewels; they are under the pillow; take them, Hugh, and give them to her; and when you see them on her, you will, may be—may be, sometimes think of me, and of my penitence, and the mercy you showed me; and then, too, may be you will look back in memory to the better times, when poor lost Marian wore them herself. Won't you come again to-morrow, Hugh? for I am too weak to tell you all to-night; you'll come again and see me in the morning, won't you? and though my heart is broken—broken, Hugh, I'll cry with very joy to see you when you come. You're not going yet. Press my hand again; hold me, Hugh; oh, let me feel your hand. Forgiven, thank God; all forgiven, all forgiven!'

Murmuring these words, she sank gently, gently into sleep; it was the last long sleep; his hand still locked in hers, and the tears still wet upon her long, dark lashes. Yes, poor Marian! the troubled spirit and weary head at last sleep sound and sweetly. There is no more sorrow and contempt for thee. Poor fallen lady! the pangs of grief; the dreams of old times, will flutter thy poor heart no more. No sting of contumely will ever tinge that pale cheek; no old remembrance, stealing like soft music o'er thee, will ever wet thy lids with tears again. The last thou wilt ever see he glittering there serenely. Yes, hold that thin hand still, Sir Hugh, and look in that pale face; though it knows thee not, though it never will smile even on thee again; what sight and touch will ever stir thy heart like these! Could tongues of angels plead with the proud heart with half the eloquence of that cold, fixed face?—could a giant's grasp shake thee like the chill touch of that little hand?

Hour after hour, in the silent chamber of death, by the side of that last sad relic of her whom he had once loved so proudly, sat old Sir