



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. IX.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 8, 1859.

No. 48.

REDMOND O'CONNOR;
OR, THE SECRET PASSAGE.
A PAGE OF IRISH HISTORY.

(From the N. Y. Irish-American.)
INTRODUCTION.

In the dark pages of Irish history, since the Norman first set his mark upon its records, there is one upon which the mind of the patriot loves to linger—the last glorious struggle of Hugh O'Neil. The Reformation had been firmly established in England, and "good Queen Bess" beholding, with a maternal eye her Irish subjects, determined to introduce the new found gospel among her step-children. Zealous "preachers of the Word," panting for the conversion of the "heathen" to the true light, and the conversion of Irish gold into English, were despatched to put those pious plans into execution. History tells the means they used to accomplish these cogitate ends, and the handful of Protestants now in Ireland—the real, imported stock—shows plainly how they succeeded. In the English province those missionaries "commenced their labors of love." The few religious houses which had escaped the rapacity of the "bluff Harry," were soon robbed of their treasures, their inmates butchered or scattered, and their lands bestowed on the needy crows, who hovered upon the track of the immaculate wolves. From this base the operation extended slowly toward the other provinces. The Queen's ministers seconded faithfully the views of their spiritual head beyond the Channel. No mercy was shown the "wild Irish;" for them there was no alternative but the "Reformation" or the sword. The latter was their choice. For a time all eyes were turned to the South, where a meteor arose, dazzled for a moment, and sank in a sea of blood.—The brave Garret Fitzgerald, with a few adherents, stemmed for a time the sweeping torrent. Slowly, gradually they fell; their bravery was unavailing. English gold and cunning were too powerful for the unsophisticated chiefs.—Their great leader fell at last, through the wily plans of his infamous neighbor, Ormond. Again did persecution rage with redoubled fury. Younger sons of the rapacious nobility of England, and fortune-seekers of every shade, were invited to proceed to Ireland, and take possession of the forfeited estates of the unfortunate chiefs. The island was soon swarmed with those adventurers. Some ensconced themselves snugly in the places of the butchered "rebels." Others, not so lucky in finding them already vacant, denounced the owners, hung them without even a show of trial, and took possession of their properties, under some one or other of the many statutes "in such cases made and provided."

Things were in this deplorable condition, when another great light—a hero in truth—arose in the far North, eclipsing every other, and by the force of his own powerful mind and a handful of half-armed peasants, dispelling the idea of Anglo-Norman invincibility, and making even the proud Elizabeth quake on her throne. This was "the truest, the last of the brave"—the fiery Hugh O'Neil. After seven years of preparation the mask of the courtier was thrown aside, and the champion of freedom stood before the world in his real character. The most powerful nobles of Ulster owned him as their chief, and ranged themselves beneath his standard. The oppressed from all quarters flew to him as to a father, for counsel and assistance, and never without success. Tyrone was their refuge, and its chief their counsellor. Wave after wave of the haughty Britons dashed in vain against this rock of Ulster. Host after host were made to bite the dust, and England's bravest generals sunk before the master spirit. But the superhuman efforts of a few noblemen could not counterbalance the unbounded resources of an empire. Deceived by their nominal allies, and fighting almost hopelessly against overwhelming odds, this hardy band still held out, until they wrung from the unwilling victor terms alike advantageous and honorable.

Reader! amidst such scenes of strife is our humble story woven. We have borrowed a single page from the history of those times, in order to lay before the persecuted Celt a faint picture of the sufferings and triumphs of his fathers. Let him compare those sufferings with the fleeting shadows on his own path, and reflecting over the example bequeathed him, and resolve to persevere unto the end.

CHAPTER I.—THE BULL-RING.

It was a beautiful evening in early spring, in the year 1597, when King Philip, of Spain, entered the ancient city of Salamanca, on a tour through his kingdom. The streets were lined with evergreens, and flags and banners hung from beautiful arches thrown across at every corner. The windows were crowded with curious faces, eager to catch a glimpse of their beloved monarch; while the municipal authorities, in their robes of office, stood at the principal gate to receive him.

The royal cortege at length made its appear-

ance. The cannons roared from the walls their thundering welcome; strains of delicious music filled the air and mingled with the loud *vivas* of the people. The King rode on a milk-white steed, richly caparisoned; on his right and left were the principal grandees and knights of his suite. After them came a guard of chosen troops, clad in glittering mail and armed with heavy, wide-mouthed pistols, Toledo blades, and maces or battle-axes. They were followed by a crowd of nobles, knights and citizens of the province, who had come to pay their respects to their sovereign. He was conducted to a splendid building, fitted up for his accommodation, on one side of the principal plaza or square of the city. A rich banquet was prepared by the citizens, of which the king and his principal nobles partook; while musicians stationed on a lofty gallery, enlivened the scene by their martial strains. The streets of the city were illuminated with blazing bonfires, around which the light-hearted citizens danced, sang, and listened to the tales of strolling minstrels and jongleurs from all parts of Spain, who were drawn thither to witness the jousts and tournaments which were to take place in honor of the King's visit. Amid the other sounds could be heard the noise of saws and hammers in the plaza, where a number of workmen were engaged in erecting a temporary amphitheatre for the bull fight, which was to come off next day; as the King had decided to be present at this favorite amusement of the populace before presiding at the jousts of the nobles.

Shortly after sunrise next morning the people began to wend their way to the plaza, eager to procure seats, before the arrival of the King.—The ring was strewn with sand to prevent slipping, and was surrounded by a paling of stout planks about six feet high, set firmly into the earth, to protect the spectators from the fierce monarch of the arena. Galleries rose up on every side almost to the second stories of the surrounding buildings. On the side next the lodgings of the King, there was erected a beautiful pavilion, covered with crimson cloth, and surmounted by the gorgeous arms of Spain and the Indies, on a groundwork of green silk, edged with gold. From the rear of this pavilion was had a platform from the gallery to the balcony of the building in which the King had slept the night before. This platform was covered with the richest velvet, and railed on each side with a net-work of curious workmanship.

Underneath the galleries a savage bull was confined in a pen provided with a sliding gate to admit him into the ring. Opposite to this was another gate which served as an entrance for his human antagonist.

As the hour drew near, the galleries and windows of the houses were thronged with eager spectators. The most beautiful ladies of Castile and Leon graced the ring with their presence.—In one corner of the gallery, a number of students belonging to the Irish College were collected to witness the sport. These consisted of the sons of the Irish nobles who were deprived of the means of education at home, by the cruel laws of Elizabeth. Their warm Celtic blood bounded with the enthusiasm of the moment, as they recalled the tales they had read of the time when their own monarchs presided over the manly games of Taitlen, and with their royal hands rewarded the victor. But these glories had long fled; and at the time we speak of, the hardy sons of Ireland were scattered over Europe in pursuit of that fame which they could not win at home.

The hero of the day at length entered the ring, mounted on a fiery Andalusian steed, and a murmur of admiration arose from the spectators as he rode slowly around. It was no wonder that the ladies lifted their veils to get a better sight of his person; for Benito Murillo was called the handsomest man and best horseman in Spain. He was dressed in a suit of scarlet, edged with gold, and wore on his head one of the low-crowned hats of the period, from a golden clasp in front of which rose a solitary eagle's plume. The breast of his coal-black steed was covered with scarlet cloth, intended to excite the rage of the bull. Benito's calling was low, yet there was many an envious look cast upon him as he received the piercing glances and approving smiles of the dark beauties.

The King at length took his seat amid the cheering of the populace and the waving of the ladies' handkerchiefs. Benito, putting his long spear in rest, took his place at the side of the ring opposite the bull. When all was ready the gate was drawn aside, and the savage beast rushed furiously forth. He stood for a second, as though bewildered, pawing up the sand, and looking with furtive glances from the crowd above to the horseman in front of him. At length, fixing his lurid eyes on the latter, with a bound like that of the tiger, he rushed forward. The movement was foreseen, for a jirk of the rein brought the horse, with a side bound of his course, and the infuriate animal rushed madly against the pal-

ing, which trembled with the shock. Ere he had wheeled for another charge, Benito was at the opposite side of the ring. They continued thus nearly for an hour; the bull becoming every moment more furious and the horse more restive. At length Benito advanced cautiously, his spear uplifted, to strike the decisive blow; but just as he was in the act of hurling it the horse gave a sidelong bound, and his rider lost his seat. In falling he grasped the stirrup-leather, and the horse plunged madly round followed by the savage bull.

Consternation sat on every countenance. A scream was heard from the gallery, as the young mistress of Benito was carried fainting from the crowd. His danger was imminent; for, should the girths break, he would be instantly gored or trampled to death. The King was the first to break the fearful silence.

"Will no one save the man?" he cried; "a thousand crowns to him who rescues him!"

No one seemed disposed to enter the ring, and for a moment dead silence prevailed. Then there was a stir among the students beforementioned, as one of their number grasped a spear from a man-at-arms who stood near, and rushed to the front. Getting down on one knee upon the edge of the paling, and grasping a firm hold, he awaited the approach of the horse. The suspense was dreadful. The bull had gained the inner side of the ring, and was within a bound of the unfortunate Benito! The horse at last approached, and as he passed, the young man dropped behind the saddle. To rein back the animal was the work of a second, and as the bull passed, the spear was plunged between his ribs, and he rolled over in the death-struggle. One long, wild shout of applause rose up from the assembled thousands as Benito embraced his deliverer. The victor was conducted to the presence of the King. He doffed his hat and bent gracefully on one knee. He was about twenty-one years of age, with dark eyes and features of almost feminine beauty. His long, raven locks hung down on his shoulders, and a slight moustache covered his proud lip.

"What is thy name and country, brave youth?" asked the King.

"Redmond O'Connor, your Majesty," answered the young man. "I am a native of that part of Ireland called O'Faly."

"Now, by my crown, thou comest of a right noble family, and well deserves to be a countryman of my faithful allies, who are so nobly combating for our holy religion. Kneel down, young sir; I would reward thee as thou hast deserved."

The youth knelt, and the King, drawing his golden-hilted sword, struck him lightly on the shoulder.

"In the name of God and St. Iago, I dub thee Knight. Rise up, Sir Redmond; I know thy countrymen, and have no need of bidding thee be brave and true. Thou shalt have a horse and armor, as becometh thy rank, and we will be pleased to see thee, with the young Knights of our own realm, taking part in the morrow's tilting."

Sir Redmond bowed low and retired from the royal presence, scarcely believing the reality of his fortune. The sports of the day were soon over, and he was surrounded by his young countrymen, who heartily congratulated him on his noble exploit and its reward. He had finished his education, and had been for some time expecting a letter from his father, commanding him to return home, and he now resolved to proceed at once to Ireland, raise his kinsmen and join the northern princes in their struggle for liberty.

As he was entering his lodgings, a man put a sealed note into his hand. It was an invitation from Benito Murillo to attend his wedding, which was to take place that evening. He wrote an answer, and giving it to the messenger, went to make his preparations for leaving Spain at as early a day as possible. His few effects were easily collected, and after taking an affectionate leave of the pious fathers of the college, he returned to his lodgings, and putting on his gayest attire, hastened to the chapel indicated in the letter, and arrived just in time to hear Benito and his beautiful companion pronounced man and wife.

"Let me present my wife to my deliverer," said Benito, leading forward his bride to where O'Connor stood by the chapel door.

The young girl took his hand, and with tears of gratitude standing in her dark eyes, pressed it to her lips; while her friends thanked him again and again. The blessings invoked by those poor people on his head, seemed even a greater reward than the honors bestowed by the most powerful monarch in Europe.

"Thou wilt accompany us, I hope?" said the bridegroom, when the congratulations were over.

"Most willingly would I, brave Benito, but that I must prepare me for the morrow."

"And thou wilt tilt with the best Knights of Castile!"

"With the blessing of our Lady, I will try my luck," answered the youthful Knight, smiling.

"And wilt thou allow me to be thy esquire?"

"With pleasure, Benito; I am but a stranger, and have none else to do that good office for me."

"Then I will be with thee by the morning light. Stranger or no stranger, thou hast saved my life, and, mayhap, the life of my tender Catherine, yonder; and if my poor services can be any recompense, they will not be withheld. But I see my friends are impatient, so good bye and pleasant dreams."

With this they separated, the Spaniard to his marriage feast; the Irishman to his solitary chamber.

CHAPTER II.—THE TOURNAMENT.

The next morning, shortly after the young knight arose, a servant in the royal livery appeared at the door; he led a beautiful black steed by the bridle, fully accoutred, and a rich suit of knight's harness piled on his back. On his arm the man carried a beautifully polished shield, with the arms and device covered with a veil of thin gauze.

"I come in the name of his Catholic Majesty," said the servant, bowing, "to present Sir Redmond O'Connor with this steed and armor, as a token of his Majesty's regard and friendship."

With these words, he delivered them to Benito, who came up at the moment; and the knight, after making fitting acknowledgments of the gift, withdrew to don his new attire. The noble armor was complete, even to the spurs, and fitted his lithe figure to a hair. He took the covering from the shield, and revealed a fierce bull's head, painted of a blood-red color, with the single word, "Cave," in golden letters underneath.

Having completed his equipment and hired a horse for the use of Benito, O'Connor mounted his beautiful charger and rode slowly toward the outside of the city, where the tilt-yard was situated. Thousands of people were already assembled, and the King was already seated on the splendid throne prepared for him, when Sir Redmond rode up, and took his place with the other knights outside the paling. Titters, sneers, and not a few oaths, ran through the crowd of plumed champions, as they looked upon the youthful features and slender build of the stranger. He noticed all this, but heeded it not.

A loud flourish of trumpets was heard as a powerful knight entered at the opposite extremity of the lists, and a dead silence reigned throughout the vast multitude while a herald herald stepped forth and delivered the following challenge:

"Oyez! oyez! oyez!—I, Rodrigo, De la Vega, Knight of the Order of St. Iago, do gage my body in knightly combat against all comers, to prove the beauty and virtue of the ladies of this realm of Spain over those of any other nation whatsoever."

The herald, having delivered his challenge, retired, and the trumpet sounded a loud defiance. It was answered by another from without, as the Count Eugene de Bois Verde, a French Knight, entered the list to uphold the beauty of his countrywomen. None were allowed to enter the lists, except the combatants and their esquires, who stood ready with fresh lances, should they be required.

The knights took their places at opposite ends of the lists. It was a friendly passage, and flat piece of wood, similar to the button on the end of a foil, was fixed on the points of the lances to prevent injury.

The King, having waved his hand from the balcony, the trumpets sounded the onset, and, like lightning, the champions met in the centre of the lists. The lances flew in splinters, and amid cheers and clapping of hands, they wheeled to receive fresh ones from the squares in waiting. At the signal, they again left their posts, but not with the same fortune. Count Eugene rolled over on the ground, and the victor retired amid the acclamations of his countrymen. Having refreshed himself, the trumpet again sounded the defiance, and Sir Thomas Brownly, an English Knight, entered the lists to compete with the proud Spaniard. Enthusiasm was now aroused to the highest pitch as the Briton cast the button from his lance and prepared for mortal combat. The Spaniard, nothing daunted, followed his example. The lances were placed in rest; the signal was given, and the ground trembled, as they met in the centre, with a shock like that of an earthquake. The Englishman was hurled a spear's length from his saddle; and the Spaniard, springing lightly from his horse, held a shining poniard to his throat.

"Yield, Sir Thomas!" he shouted to the prostrate knight.

There was no response; and the squires coming forward undid the fastenings of his helmet.—Streams of blood poured from his mouth and ears. He was quite dead, having ruptured a bloodvessel in the fall. There was no sympathy manifested for his fate, he having chosen the combat, a *l'outrance*, himself.

The gallant victor again took his place, as if

nothing had happened, and his trumpet again sounded a loud defiance. No one seemed willing to couch lance against such an accomplished tilter; and it was not till the trumpet had sounded a third time, that a movement was observed among the knights collected at the other extremity of the lists, and the youthful O'Connor slowly entered. A murmur of surprise ran through the vast multitude as they observed his slender frame. Even the King leaned forward from his seat in astonishment.

"Now, by our Lady!" he said, turning to one of his grandees, "this youth sits his horse right manfully, and 'tis almost a pity to let him venture on such a desperate errand. I thought he would be content to compete in the evening with the younger knights. But see! they are already placed! and I almost wish him success."

All looked upon the youthful champion with admiration, mingled with pity, as he fearlessly awaited the signal for the onset. The King at length waved his hand: the trumpet sounded, and the combatants started. As they neared each other, the most intense anxiety reigned around, and when the lances flew in splinters against the burnished shields, a wild shout of delight arose from the crowd, with clapping of hands and shouts of, "Well done, Sir Irishman!—gallantly passed!"

The youthful knight returned to his place, and choosing a tough lance from a bundle presented by Benito, he awaited the signal with the same coolness as before. A slight smile curled his lips as the esquire of De la Vega adjusted that knight's girths. It was evident the Spaniard had some misgivings as to the result, for he examined and cast aside several lances before he met with one to satisfy him. At length he took his place, and with the first sound of the trumpet the champions again started. O'Connor carried his lance steadily for the shield of his opponent; while he, on his part, aimed for the young knight's helmet. The lance of the Spaniard passed by his youthful adversary, while he himself went tumbling to the ground.

"I yield myself vanquished," he said, raising and taking off his helmet to cool his brow; while the victor was carried before the King.

"Gallant youth," said Philip, taking a gold chain from his neck and placing it on that of the knight—"receive thy further testimony of our admiration for this prowess. Thou hast proved thyself worthy the honor of knighthood, by overcoming one of our bravest knights. Hast any favor to ask? If so, and 'tis within our power to grant, it shall be thine."

"If your Majesty would allow me," answered the youth, "I would wish to give some of your knights by the wicket a chance to try their skill at tilting."

"Thy request is granted; and our own herald shall say thy bidding," answered the King.

O'Connor retired from the royal presence, and dictated to the herald what he wished to say.—The herald stepped forth, and proclaimed as follows:

"I, Redmond O'Connor (by the favor of his Catholic Majesty), Knight of the Order of St. Iago, to prove the superiority of Irish ladies, in virtue and beauty, over those of any nation whatsoever, excepting this realm of Spain, do gage my body in mortal strife, or friendly joust, against the champion of any nation of Christendom, always excepting the good knights of his Catholic Majesty."

Loud bursts of applause greeted this announcement. The youth, by excepting Spain, had gained the sympathy of all. A knight, with his shield covered, now entered, and requested to run a friendly passage for the honor of England. No one could guess who or what he was, as he kept his vizor closed. He was of a gigantic frame; and the people were fain to blame the youth for not resting on his first laurels. He himself was the only one that awaited the result with confidence.

At the first meeting both reeled and fell, and O'Connor, rising, prepared to decide the combat on foot. Both champions felt chagrined by their ill-luck, and the combat was renewed with animosity. The stranger pressed hotly upon the youth, who defended himself with the same coolness he had displayed throughout the day. At length the stranger, in his eagerness, lost his self-possession, and his opponent, avoiding a thrust aimed at his neck, gave him a blow on the casque that made him measure his length upon the grass; while the air was again rent with the acclamations of the spectators. The helmet of the fallen knight was removed, revealing a war-worn, stern face, with a close-cut beard, and black, curling hair. As he recovered from the effects of the blow, he looked up into the victor's face with a scowl of malignant meaning, and, rising slowly, departed as quietly as he came.

The King had signified his desire of putting an end to the games for the present, and the people began to disperse. At this moment a man was seen, mounted on a tall, bony mule, making his way through the crowds. He was dressed dif-