

The Geraldine's Fate.

AN EPISODE OF IRISH HISTORY

(CONCLUDED.)

The Knight fell back in amazement. "My lady," he said slowly and painfully, "a woman hath the privilege—"

"Herd her not, my friend," cried the Earl, "she is distraught. Her very language shows it. Give us thy counsel. The English are upon us. A troop is riding from Kilmallock, and will be here at once. What can be done?"

Sir Henry went to one of the casements which looked to the north-west. In a moment he returned. "They are not yet near, my lord, if they came by the road."

"Yes, yes!" answered the Earl, "then there is time for escape."

With haste the Earl and Countess moved down the stairs, followed by Edmond and the Knight, who carried some skins and blankets. There was still no trace of the English.

"What would be our safest direction?" asked the Earl hurriedly.

"Towards the hills, where also there are cabins for shelter," said Sir Henry, as he handed the blankets to the servant.

Edmond moved towards Slieve Ragh, the Earl and Countess following. It was fortunate that the snow was again falling, for it blotted out their tracks.

The Knight looked after them for a few moments then bolted the door, and returned to the Hall, where he sat by the casement watching for the English.

In a short time, though it seemed shorter to him, he noticed them coming on the road from Eiton. As they approached the castle they halted, and their leader evidently proceeded to give them instructions, for they separated and rode through the fields to occupy different posts surrounding the castle.

Then Captain Zouch rode to the door, and knocked loudly. For a time there was no answer. He knocked, if possible, still more loudly. Sir Henry put forth his head through the casement.

"What is the cause of all this uproar at this peaceful season?" he demanded angrily.

"In Her Grace's name, open," shouted Zouch.

Sir Henry left the casement and moved slowly towards the winding stone stairs to open the door. In the meantime Zouch had dismounted, handed his horse to a trooper, and drawn his sword. When the door opened he attempted to rush through but the knight, light in hand, barred the way.

"Sir," he said slowly, "I allow no man to enter my house in this guise."

"Thou knowest, thou rebel, thou pitiful harbinger of rebels and outlaws, stand aside! Your time will soon come."

"I allow no man to address me in this wise," said the knight, dropping the light, snatching the iron bar, and jumping backward as Zouch made a furious lunge at his heart. Zouch followed, but at sword play he was no match for his opponent. In a moment his sword fell from his grasp, and his arm fell by his side, broken.

"To me! To me!" he shouted. Three of the troop rushed through the open door, one grasping the light. "Shoot me this knife!" he yelled. "Quick, quick."

Sir Henry jumped to the winding stairs, grasping a long spear that lay in a corner, and bringing it with him. He moved as quickly up the stairs as if he had never been lamed. At the corner he turned round. One of the troopers with an arquebus was crouched behind him; his companions were following, and Zouch held the light with his injured arm as far forward through the door as he could. One thrust of the spear in the throat, and the first

soldier fell. Another stepped over the body to meet with a like reception. The third hung back. By the light he looked closely to the look of his arquebus, and then moved forward with caution. Zouch in his impatience swore horribly. Owing to the turn in the stairs the soldier could see no portion of Sir Henry's body. He moved back again saying:—

"The bodies of these wounded or dead men must be removed. Help is wanted."

Zouch moved to the door and shouted for assistance. Four men answered his call. He commanded them to go forward and remove the bodies, while the other soldier kept his arquebus pointed at the turn of the stairs. In a short time they removed the bodies. The Captain asked for a volunteer to force the stairs. One, a Devon man, named Carew, offered to go forward. He moved slowly, his weapon pointed before him. As he neared the turn, out flashed the terrible spear and pierced his chest. With a horrible groan he fell into the arms of his nearest companion. The three behind moved back. Then Zouch ordered the men to commence firing up the stairs in the hope that a shot deflected from the walls might take their opponent somewhere in the body, and disable him. But this seemed to no purpose as far as could be ascertained, and after some time they were ordered to desist.

Zouch now held a consultation with the men as to what was best to be done, and it was suggested to him that if some straw were brought from the haggard and lit at the foot of the stairs, the defender would be smoked out.

Some damp straw was brought in, placed at the foot of the stairs, and with much difficulty lighted. After some time they removed the straw and rushed one after the other up the stairs. There seemed none to oppose them. Zouch followed and commanded them to search the great hall, but Sir Henry was not to be found. It was plain he had moved up higher on the stairs—perhaps to the battlements. Additional lights were procured in the Hall and they proceeded cautiously upward, but met with no opposition. The servants who slept on the other side of the castle were long since aroused, but held to their quarters in fear and trembling. The soldiers at length arrived at the door which communicated with the battlements and they found it locked or bolted on the other side. It took some time to burst it open, and the first man that stepped through fell back on his comrades, the spear almost through his body. They could not see their antagonist, therefore their arms were quite useless. Zouch ordered some straw to be brought up; it was set on fire, and some thrown through the door.

The point of the spear was at once seen pitching it over the battlements. A soldier advanced cautiously with arquebus in hand, looking out for some portion of the knight's person. In a moment he fired and a two-ounce ball was lodged in Sir Henry's chest. He fell at once on the shingle which covered the roof, and the soldier ran forward and dispatched him with his dagger.

Edmond paced on the side of the hill and looked backward towards the castle. He noticed a powerful light blazing at the windows. After a while the light burst through the roof, and the Earl saw at once the place was on fire. He remained gazing at it for a long time; then he turned to his wife and said:—"This is a merry Christmas surely. I trust Sir Henry is safe." He did not know it was the knight's funeral pyre.

In a few months he himself lay dead in a mean hut in the mountains of Kerry, having been tracked and hunted down by those who should have died in his defence, and for a short time the English had a peace of their own fashion in Desmond.

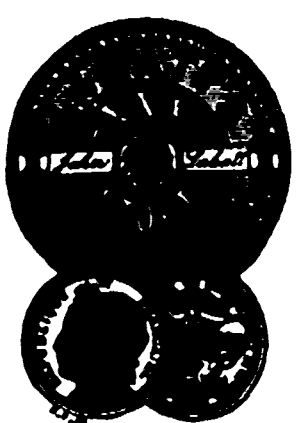


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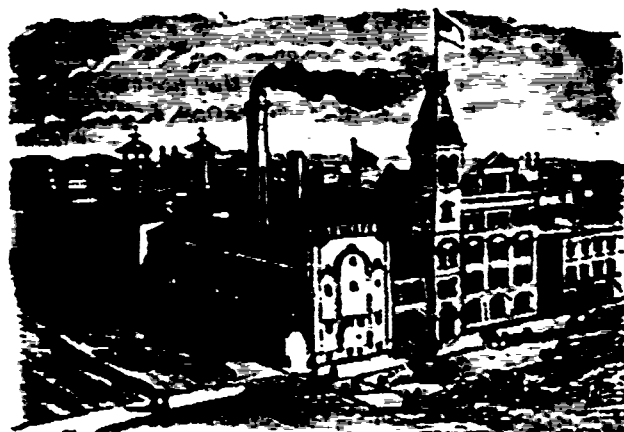
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