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REDMOND O'CONNOR:

O. R. THE SECRET PASSAGE.

A PAGE OF IRISH HISTORY.

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

CHAPTER XI.—THE MINSTREL'S VISIT.

The next morning, long before the sun penetrated through the bars of the lofty prison, Alice stationed herself at the narrow window to get a view of the outer world. The room in which they were confined was situated in one of the towers of the castle, which abutted on the stream; she could see it rushing over its bed of rock at an immense distance below. On the other side of the stream, and sheltered by a circle of green mounds, were the ruins of an ancient chapel—the walls still standing, traces of recent burning marking their gray sides. Further up the stream, and on the same side with the ruin, were a number of cottages scattered along the bank. Alice could see that they were inhabited, for each sent up its volume of blue smoke into the clear morning air. As the morning advanced, a woman would be seen moving from one to the other, and half-dressed children leaped and gambled on the green. This was the first sign of civilization she had seen in many months, and her heart grew light as she reflected on the proximity of her countrymen, though she was well aware they could render her no assistance. She even began to doubt the stories she had heard of Wingfield's cruelty, as she saw those peasants going about their peaceful labors. Yet it was not with his hearty consent that those poor people remained in their homes. Hundreds of their brethren had been driven to the mountains by his oppression, and it was alone through the influence of the chivalrous Clifford that this sorry remnant was permitted to remain.

Her meditations were interrupted by the entrance of the old woman with her breakfast, who, informing the nurse that she should require her services in another part of the castle, leaving Alice in utter solitude. A suspicion that all was not right flashed across her mind as she coupled this proceeding with the words of the old woman the previous night. Drawing a small and beautifully mounted stiletto from her bosom, she looked upon its thin edge long and earnestly; then looked up to heaven, as if mentally begging assistance, and, as if she had formed her resolution, placed it back again in its hiding place to await the event. The room which she occupied had evidently belonged to a lady. Several articles of a lady's toilet lay scattered on a small dressing table, and on another table, near the window, was a half-finished piece of embroidery. As she examined the quaint figures and devices, she shuddered to think what may have been the fate of her whose needle had wrought it thus far.—Taking a *clairseach*, or small harp, from the wall, she strove to drown in its swelling music the memory of her own misfortunes. She had been about an hour thus employed when a light tap came to the door, and Clifford entered, dressed in all the finery of an English gentleman of the period.

"I hope I am not intruding on your privacy," he said as he bowed to Alice.

"Wingfield needs not to intrude in his own castle," answered the girl.

"It is not Wingfield, fair lady, but one who would willingly lay fame and fortune at your feet, and who would not give you any pain for a dozen castles such as this."

"Then you will best show your sincerity by making known your business without the aid of such flattery, which is loathsome when it renders misfortune more miserable."

"Nay, lady, Robert Clifford is unacquainted with flattery, and I hope I could get even some of your people to vouch for my sincerity and honor."

"Honor!" exclaimed the high-minded girl, her eyes flashing with disdain. "I have indeed heard of you as the companion of one who, by dark plotting with a traitor, got possession of this castle and put to death its rightful owners! Such deeds may commend you to your kind, but not to any one who loves truth and justice."

"But not too hasty in arriving at such a conclusion, I beg. That tale is not so bad as is reported; and, but that there is a seal upon my lips, I could tell you what would somewhat alter your opinion. 'Tis true, O'Connor was put to death, but I pledge my word, as a soldier, that I had not come up at the time. Since then I have endeavored to lighten the burden of his people so far as I could, and I believe not without some success."

"If that be true, and I have no reason to doubt your word, I pray heaven to reward you for it. But what offence pray, have you committed, that we are thus torn from our home by a band of armed ruffians?"

"A slight offence it may be, but one which appears great in the eyes of our sovereign mistress. You are a professor of the Popish faith, which amounts to treason; and your protector

leads a band of outlaws against the liege subjects of her Majesty. Those crimes are punished with death; but if you will place yourself under my protection, you shall, within three days, be set at liberty, and be made one of the brightest ladies of the realm."

"And what if I do not choose to accept of this brilliant offer?"

"Captivity without a hope, and perhaps death."

"Then before I barter away my faith, I will choose the latter."

"I hope you will think better of this, lady;—so you will have time to determine."

So saying, he opened the door and retired, just as old Nan disappeared down the stairs.

We will now conduct the reader to another part of the castle where a young girl is sitting, gazing out on the green fields in the vicinity.—Between her hands is a harp, and as she sweeps her fingers across the strings, a single tear courses down her pale cheek. The green fields lie temptingly before her in all their summer beauty, and the light in her dark eyes grows brighter as she thinks how often she traded them in the innocence of childhood.

A cat-like tread approaches; she turns to the door as it opens, and the reverend missionary, whose devotion to the wine-cup, on the preceding evening, we have noticed, enters. An expression of melancholy is on his countenance, as if come on some disagreeable errand, and he slowly ejaculates—

"Peace to thee, my daughter. I am an humble preacher of the Word, and am come to draw thee from the bonds of sin and the depths of iniquity."

Here he seated himself to watch what effect this introduction would have on the lady.

"Has any one sent for you?" she demanded with a look of ineffable scorn.

"None, but my master," returned the hypocrite, not noticing her manner. "I heard thou wast about to suffer for thy perseverance in the superstition of Romanism, and therefore am I come to draw thee from the errors of thy ways and not suffer thee to be cut off in thy sins."

"And who meditates such a crime? Am I not freeborn, and answerable to none but God for my belief?"

"Thy first question I will answer, my daughter. Thy doom is sealed by those men of Belial, who hold thee in durance, and for whom nothing is too wicked. As I left the court-yard, they were even laboring at the scaffold."

He watched closely the features of the fair prisoner, to see if any sign of trepidation was there, but they remained as calmly stern as before.

"The will of God be done!" she at length sighed. "I will then be free from their persecutions and their wiles."

"But, bethink thee! thou art young and fair and should not be tired of life. I can yet save thee, if thou wilt accept of my poor services."

"And how, pray?"

"I can accuse this wicked man of holding intercourse with the rebel Irish, and ere a week is over his head will grace the walls of Dublin. I think I could gain a few days' reprieve for thee, while I take steps to convey thee out of the reach of his wrath. I will carry thee to England, where thou canst live as becometh thy rank. Think! my dear lady; the nummeries of Popery are fast falling into disuse; its abettors are forced to fly beyond the seas, or punished as their crimes deserve. Would it not be better to live in luxury with one who would be able to protect thee, than throw away thy life for a sinking cause?"

"And who would be this precious protector?"

"One who would give his life to serve thee," said the preacher, laying his hand gently upon that portion of his breast which might have covered his heart, had he been gifted with such an organ; "even I myself."

"Foul wretch!" exclaimed the girl, stamping with her little foot upon the floor. "Begone on the instant, or I will compel thee. I will show thee that an Irish maiden scorns thy loathsome presence!"

"Nay, I will not go, till I have a more kindly answer." And with the words he grasped her in his arms.

"Depart from me, fiend!" she exclaimed, struggling to free herself.

"Never, till thou art mine."

"Then may God forgive me!" she cried, as, drawing a small dagger from the folds of her dress, she plunged it into his breast. He fell with a groan to the floor, just as Wingfield rushed in, and, with the air of a madman, seized him by the hair, and dragged him from the room, while the lady sank on a chair, and gave vent to her feelings in a flood of tears.

Calling a couple of soldiers to his aid, the enraged Wingfield dragged the unfortunate wretch to the battlements. His wound was slight, the dagger having struck against the breast bone;—and he shrieked and prayed for mercy, but in vain. Without space for even a prayer for mer-

cy on his soul, he was hurled from the battlements, and dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

"Now, may the devil fly away with you!" exclaimed the exasperated tyrant, as he gazed down upon the mangled remains. "I will teach you love making! By the rood, a bold hypocrite to betray me under my very nose! 'Sdeath! we thought the Popish monks were bad, but they would at least leave us our women. Go, Bates," he said to one of the men, "and see what your fellow wants, whom I see prowling about the gate."

The man returned in a short while, saying that it was a wandering minstrel, who sought refreshment.

"That is another set of lazy drones whom I would clear from the country, had I ought to do with it ruling. But go, admit him, and get him some refreshment; I would learn some news of the state of the country."

In a few moments, he followed his retainer to a long room in the basement, which had been used by the former proprietors for the accommodation of strangers, and still retained the name of "the stranger's hall." Here he found the minstrel busily discussing the merits of some oaten bread and ale, which was set before him; while his harp and staff were leant against the wall.

"Whence come you, good fellow?" inquired Wingfield, eyeing the stranger closely.

"From Armagh, my lord," said the stranger, rising.

"Nay, sit still, good fellow, and tell me what news from the North."

"There is nothing new, my lord, since the defeat of Burrough."

"What?" exclaimed Wingfield, "Burrough defeated! That cannot be, man. He left Leinster with a force fit to crush all the rebels in Ulster."

"Nevertheless, it is true," continued the minstrel. "He and Kildare are sleeping in Belzebub's bosom, ere this."

"Ha! are you, too, a rebel? What said you of Belzebub?" exclaimed Wingfield, quickly.

"I did but misquote the sacred text, my lord," replied the minstrel humbly; "I meant the bosom of Abraham."

"I forgive the slip, good fellow; but continue your story."

"I have not much more to say, my lord, but that her Majesty's troops got well thrashed, and were obliged to fly to Armagh with the loss of their baggage."

"And what is the arch rebel, Hugh O'Neil, doing?"

"Nothing, my lord, but pushing on the siege of Portmore."

"By heaven, I think that is plenty! The next thing we hear the rebel will be on our own borders. But hark, good minstrel. Have you heard anything of a certain Redmond O'Connor, on your travels? Report says that he is in the rebel army."

"I cannot say for certainty, my lord; having little acquaintance with the north country people."

"So much the better for you."

At this point of the conversation, Clifford entered, and scrutinized the stranger keenly.

"What luck—what luck, Clifford?" asked Wingfield.

"By my soul, she is firm as the cliffs of Dover. Not a word of encouragement could I get from her; but I hope a few days in 'solitary confinement,' as the Provost Marshal hath it, will bring her to her senses. Your proxy, it seems, had no better fortune."

"No, curse him; he well nigh scared the poor thing to death, and 'twill be a week ere I can venture to her presence. I only pray that I may catch another of the prowling wolves in these parts; I will hang him from the highest tree in Glendarg. I will henceforth live according to my own religion—pleasure in this world, and my chance in the next. In the meantime, I have sent this palvering hypocrite on an embassy to his infernal highness. But this singing fellow has finished his meal, and will tell what fortune has in store for us, and in good rhyme too. Can you tell our fate, sir minstrel?" he inquired, turning to the stranger, who was slowly tuning his harp, with an air of abstraction.

"Aye, my lord; the spirit sometimes compels us to tell that which we would gladly leave in darkness. But since I have eaten of your cheer, I must grant your request, though 'tis sorely against my wishes."

So saying, and as if from an impulse of the spirit within, he fixed his dark, piercing eyes on Wingfield, and in a low, mournful strain, sang the following lines:—

"Let the dark feathered eagle of Wingfield beware! He hath carried the innocent lamb to his lair; In the track of the lamb, the avenger doth lie, And the fox and the eagle together shall die."

"Devilish plain that," remarked Wingfield, with a ghastly smile. "But who is the fox? most sage prophet of evil!"

"The vision is departed," replied the minstrel,

"and I have said my say. Have you any desire to know your fortune?" he asked of Clifford.

"Not I, by St. Edward! I have heard enough to make me dread an echo of the same tale."

The minstrel, slinging his harp on his shoulders, and apologising for the abruptness of his departure, bowed profoundly to the Knight, and took his leave. As he crossed the court yard, he turned, and glanced his eye over the range of the castle windows. A female face appeared at that opposite to where he stood. It was the face of Eileen, the wife of MacCostelloe. The minstrel raised his forefinger to his lips, and continued on his way.

"God's death!" exclaimed Wingfield, who had observed this movement, "I would be sworn that fellow is a spy! Did you see his motions?" he inquired of Clifford.

"I was engaged in solving the meaning of the 'fox,' which the juggler sang of, and now I understand; it is the fellow MacQuaid. He goes by that respectable appellation among his countrymen, who, it seems, entertain a very just appreciation of his cunning and double-dealing."

Wingfield did not seem to comprehend those remarks, though every word fell distinctly on his ear, and he whistled carelessly, as he walked away; but, understanding that the minstrel was bound for Dublin, he immediately dispatched a couple of his most unscrupulous followers to way-lay him on the road, as a reward of his prophecy.

"Superstitious hound!" muttered Clifford, between his teeth, "the bark of the rhyming fool has hit you to the quick."

CHAPTER XII.—O'CONNOR'S RETURN.

The minstrel, as soon as he got within the shelter of the woods, leaving the wooden bridge on his left, hurried down stream for a mile, till he found a place where the torrent was fordable; then, taking off his heavy boots, and unslinging his harp, he secreted them in the hollow trunk of an aged oak and dashed across the stream. He removed some rubbish from beside a fallen tree on the other side, and took from thence a pair of light shoes and a pike. Speedily donning the shoes and seizing the pike in his hand, he started on the road to Ulster. His pursuers took the road to Dublin, and, after three hours' marching and countermarching, found themselves at fault and returned to their master, minus the minstrel, who continued his flight, and, ere sunset, had left the Red Castle many a mile behind. It was then, for the first time, that he sat down to rest on the way, and taking some bread from a wallet by his side, he proceeded to make to make his frugal supper, with the aid of a draught of water from a spring near by. No traveller passed these roads except the troops of the haughty English barons, or the bands of desperate outlaws on their nocturnal expeditions. He travelled for more than an hour after dark without meeting any human being, till at last, as he gained the summit of a gentle eminence, the jingling of arms fell upon his ear. He stopped and listened; the trampling of horses was heard distinctly, and in a few moments he could detect the outline of a body of men advancing from the North. He was about to conceal himself in the bushes when he heard them converse gaily in the Irish language, and this reassuring him, he stood his ground.

"Whom have we here?" demanded a hoarse voice from the front, as they approached.

"A true man," answered the minstrel.

"Then, advance and show your face; there is nothing like the proof."

The speaker was Henry Tyrrel; and, as the minstrel doffed his cap, he exclaimed, joyfully—

"By the rood it is Brian MacCostelloe!—Why, man, we thought you were with St. Peter!"

O'Connor now rode up to inquire the cause of the delay, when he, too, recognised the minstrel.

"Why, this is Brian of the hill, and no other," he said, grasping his hand. "But where is Alice, Brian—is she safe?"

MacCostelloe explained in as few words as possible how he had traced the horsemen from his own door to the Red Castle, and how he was, in the guise of a minstrel, admitted within its walls and saw his own wife.

"I think," he concluded, "I acted my part bravely. I told his fortune for him, and if he sleep soundly after it, I am no true prophet.—There was another dolt there who, I thought, was paying attentions to my poor Alice, for which, with the blessing of God, I will break his bones. I was on my way to the North to acquaint our master of it, when I so luckily met ye; and a gallant band ye have."

"Ha!" cried O'Connor, rubbing his hands, "I have now a double motive for revenge, and, were it to me, if I do not wreak it on Wingfield's head. Push on, men, push on; for every moment seems an age."

A led horse was brought for the quasi-minstrel, and they again pushed rapidly forward.—The party consisted of twenty horse and eighty foot; all picked men. They had marched al-

most night and day since leaving Ulster, so eager was their young chief to regain his lost patrimony. They were accompanied by young Barnswell, whom O'Neil had honorably liberated, and who was returning home, a sadder man than the day he set out to devour Tyrrel's handful of troops.

At day break, they reached the end of the by-road which led to Castle Dearg, and the party halted while the chiefs consulted on the best plan of approaching the place. Barnswell had rode up to take his leave, and as he took the young chief by the hand, he said earnestly:—

"You have spared my life, Sir Redmond, and the O'Neil has shown me an example of generosity, which I will not soon forget. I cannot raise my hand against my rightful sovereign, but may heaven witness it, if I raise it against O'Connor's cause."

So saying, he turned about his charger, and galloped from the spot.

A short consultation was held, and it was agreed that, to prevent surprise, Tyrrel should lead the infantry by the main approach, while O'Connor and the cavalry should penetrate by a bridle path through the wood, and meet him on the high ground in front of the Castle.

O'Connor and his party proceeded slowly and cautiously, until they came to a deep, circular ravine, about one hundred rods in diameter, and surrounded by the waving giants of the forest.—The knight rode in the van of the party, and as he approached the edge of the ravine, he stopped for a moment awe-stricken by the scene which presented itself. In the very centre of the dell, were a number of men, women, and children kneeling among the dense underbrush, and so intense was their devotion, that they had not noticed his approach, nor that of his party, who came up one by one, and knelt beside their brethren.

In the centre of this group of peasants was an aged priest, in soiled and tattered vestments, offering sacrifice to the God of heaven. The altar upon which this sacrifice was offered, was in keeping with the place, and the worshippers. It consisted of a huge, flat stone, about eight feet long; one end resting on the ground, and the other supported on two smaller stones, set one at and about two feet high, thus keeping the altar in a sloping position. The stones were covered with a coating of grey moss, the accumulation of centuries, probably since the Druids had used them for the purpose of offering bloody sacrifices to their demons. Having consecrated this Druid altar to a far different use, and spread a worn napkin over its grey surface, this good shepherd, hunted from place to place, and a price set upon his head, yet managed to evade his foes, and gather his scattered flock, to partake with him of this greatest of God's gifts to man. Did his hood lend him this death-defying zeal? Was it superstition that collected them, at the peril of their lives?

The Mass was approaching its conclusion; the priest raised his hands and eyes to invoke a blessing, and turned to impart it to his kneeling flock. For a moment his eyes rested on the kneeling cavaliers. It was but for a moment. One hand was extended toward them, as if to divide with them the benediction, and the Mass was read. A scene of confusion followed, when the people observed the strangers, as they thought, ready to pounce upon them. The women, grasping their little ones in their arms, ran wildly through the woods to seek concealment. The men seized their stout oaken staves from the ground, and like the stag at bay, prepared to sell their lives as dearly as they could. O'Connor at length stepped forward, and taking off his helmet, a wild cry of recognition rent the air, and all crowded forward to welcome their young chief. The priest was the first to throw himself upon his neck.

"O my son, my son!" he cried, "what joy to have thee once more among us! now, indeed, have our prayers not been in vain, and we will yet live in peace, since thou art here to protect us."

The priest released the young chieftain, who turned once more to the people, who were eagerly awaiting a word from his lips.

"Good and true friends of O'Connor," he said, "you see before you, the son of your murdered chief, come at last to avenge his and your misfortunes. The next Sabbath sun shall see you kneeling in the hall of the Red Castle, God willing. But be not over zealous, my friends; we would beleaguer the Castle as quietly as may be, and to-morrow, mayhap, we may give you an opportunity to measure arms against the Sassenach."

"Death for O'Connor! Death to the murderer!" was the wild response, as the young chief again mounted his horse, and led his party from the spot, the male portion of the peasants following in his rear. Crossing at a place where the stream was fordable, and scaling the precipitous bank, he found Tyrrel's party drawn up without the range of the enemy's weapons, and eager to be led at once to the assault. The walls were literally lined with troops, bewildered at this sudden appearance of an enemy, and expecting an immediate attack. O'Connor was too wary to risk his handful of men against stone walls, ex-