OWEN ROE O'NEIL

or THE BLOW OF THE HAND

M. A. Manning.

I.—THE CARDINAL WAITS.

"Why be his horse so long in coming?"

An old man, much older in care than years, looked anxiously forth from a window in his house at Rueil, a few leagues from Paris. Thin, lathy, in the sweeping robes of a Cardinal of the Church of Rome, he looked taller than he really was. Motionless, statuesque, this silent watcher. The heavy curtain was drawn back by one hand—a long and shapely hand; a bit cruel, withal—the other played with the jewelled order that hung from the ribbon around his neck. Moments passed, yet not a stir. The trees outside, a long avenue of stately elms, rustled, and the watcher fancying he heard the faint sound of hurried footfalls leaned forward—but it was only the wind making sound among the boughs. The white moon showed the winding avenue, and the grass sward, and the fountain playing softly. Not a human being was there, no man came or went.

Silence profound. Within a log fell in the grate, and the sparks flew upward, no other sound in that chamber—where every heavy piece of oak on furniture was as stiff and grim in the half light as the figure of the Cardinal himself. Another wait, and the watcher dropped the curtains and glided to the fireplace and peered into the bright embers.

A curious face, a medley of all that is good and firm struggling with all that urges men to do great things—great things that are not always good things. He lifts his head, and there is the face, that same forehead and chin, the same eyes that look out at you from that wonderful canvas in the Louvre to-day, the face of Armand Du Plessis Duc De Richelieu, the founder of the greatness of France, one of the world's most notable men, one who having put his hand to the plough never looked back, no, not even when on his death-bed he gave to his country the legacy of a disinterestedness that was always impeached but never found wanting.

The flickering light throw deep shadows on that wonderful face. Eyes that never told the workings of a soul or brain; the long refined nose, the close-pressed lips and firm chin; a face with a dash of ferocity too; the face of a man seeing far beyond the limit of his own time; one who would watch the execution of his own brother, if that brother had lifted a hand against the King or the power or prestige of France.

And to-night in his house that stood in the silence of the country, the great Cardinal waits and watches for some swift courier who bears news what his army in Artois, an army of 100,000 picked troops, under three Marshals of France, does against Colonel Eugenio O'Neill, who, with 1,500 Spaniards and 300 Irish exiles, holds the town of Arras for his Catholic Majesty, King Philip IV. of Spain.

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Strange that this man, this Irish refugee, this soldier of fortune, this Owen Roe O'Neil, should hold in check the might of Louis XIII of France, and keep at bay the best-equipped army he had ever sent forth to battle.

Nearly two hundred years afterwards a man, great as Richelieu himself, but who never left so many lasting monuments to his genius, or built up so many benefits for his people, stood on a rugged cliff at St. Helena, and gazed on the blood red lines of the setting sun, and gnawed his heart out that he had not hearkened to the pleadings of Wolfe Tone, and landed on the shores of Ireland with that vast army of Egypt that was thinned by the Mamelukes, and rotted in the tents before Acre. Napoleon knew his error too late. And there, on that July night, in the year of Our Lord, 1640, the fear fell on Cardinal Richelieu that he had underrated the force of character and the military genius of this Owen Roe O'Neill, this Ulster Knight of the Bloody Hand, who was driven to military service in a foreign land because England had gripped the throats of the Ulster Earls, and driven them forth by force and fraud.

The figure of the Cardinal glided to a corner deep in shadow, where stood a heavy chest, iron-clasped and padlocked. He opens it, and takes forth a letter with many seals. It is a memorandum from Owen Roe, written many a long year ago, setting out the advantages of harassing England by a French invasion of Ireland, for Owen knew even then that France it was, and not Spain that could wipe out the marks of the Pale, and send the Stranger and the Undertaker back to their homes across the sea. Owen felt this in his heart, just as Wolfe Tone felt it a hundred and fifty years afterwards, and both their instincts pointed true as the North Star.

Seated in his chair the Cardinal reads this letter again and again. Is it too late to enlist this gallant Irishman in the service of his Master, Louis, the wayward one, the swayed of passion and passing fancy? The lines of care deepen as he reads, and then the twitch of pain, and the dark tinge under the eyes and the shadow of death that has already fallen upon that great soul—greater than Mazarin, the Italian, the intriguer; Wolsey, the master mind; or Ximenes, the Spaniard, that built up a dynasty out of chaos.

Curious that this Irishman who prayed his help for Ireland with a soldier's openness ten years before should stand in his path this night.

The Cardinal's eyes fall upon a little silver crucifix, the gift to him of the Capuchin Friar, Joseph, that faithful soul who lived for Richelieu; his confidant and friend. A tender smile lights up the white, cold face, for Richelieu loved this dead monk, loved him for he knew that he was the one man in all France who lived believing him, and died with his trust in him full and fervent. If he were only alive that night, he would be dispatched, a ready and subtle messenger to this Irish soldier. Joseph could wheedle, Joseph could promise, Joseph knew men's motives and could buy and sell favors. But the Cardinal's second self, was dead for two weary years, and in his place he had the service of Mazarin, the soft-voiced Italian, whom he first met in Matua when he was the representative of the Court of Rome at Turin. Richelieu knew the Italian's talent; it did not lie in the ways of the humble Capuchin, this Joseph Du Tremblay, who was the right arm and half the heart of the terrible Minister of Louis.

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The vulgar notion is that Owen Roe O'Neill was some rough, keen-witted, mountain fighter, a clansman, a Rob Roy MacGregor of a certain pattern. It is to our shame we do not know him better. The greatest power in this seventeenth century was that grim, unrelenting Cardinal, the brain that directed France and swayed Europe. Yet on that July night, 1640, he realised fully that this Irish soldier, who fought his armies in Flanders, was a force he had to absorb or crush.

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The Cardinal replaced Owen's letter in the chest, and once more drew back the heavy drapery that hung before the window. Out into the night he peers once again. No courier comes clattering along. Is it a presage of defeat? Can this handful of Spaniards and this Owen Roe O'Neil have, by some awful mischance, humbled three Marshals of France? It is impossible.

Up and down the room he paces. His tread falls lightly upon the thick carpet, but the rustle of his robes is a monotonous murmur.

The solitary table in this room is littered with memoranda, returns of the strength of his armies, accounts of the whisperings of plotters — for his spies are everywhere—correspondence with his secret agents in Scotland, where he is stirring up the Covenanters against King Charles I. of England; reports from his ministers in Vienna and Brussels, details of conspiracies that could bring many a proud head to the block. They are forgotten. To-night he rages that he has been so remiss as not to have secured to his service this man who holds the walls of Arras against Louis for his hated enemy, Philip IV. of Spain.

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He was meant for a soldier, this Cardinal Richelieu. As a young lad he entered the College of Navarre to study the arts of war, but his elder brother resigning the Bishopric of Lucon—a See that was almost hereditary in the family—he became a divinity student, and, qualifying himself in a few years, succeeded to the dignity in 1607 when only twenty-two years of age.

Marie de Medicis, the Queen's mother, saw the young divine, heard him debate in the States-General, marked him out for Royal favor, and from being her almoner he rose in 1624 to be Chief Minister of the Crown, a position he never relinquished until death laid its hand upon his heart.

And this was the man whose armies were being held in check on that July night, 1640, by an Irish exile.

To the King he had said — "I will crush the Huguenots; I will bend the necks of the haughty nobles of France who will not brook the Royal authority; I will humble Austria. France shall be France from Flanders to Rousillon." And he kept his word. From the fixed purpose of his life he never wavered. He had to walk over thousands of bodies; he had to let the axe fall on many a noble neck; he had to bound the Queen-mother out of France, and humble the woman's pride of Anne of Austria, the Queen of Louis his master. He did it all. No show of remorse, always and ever looking forward—never looking backward.

This was the man of craft and steel who paced the room in that house in Rueil on that July night two hundred and sixty years ago, waiting for the word that this Ulster O'Neill, this soldier of fortune had been buried beneath the ruins of Arras, that fortress town away in the north-east corner of the land that must become part of France.

Of his own resources this Cardinal Prince, who could wield a sword, and parry and thrust with a rapier against many a Court gallant, had taken Rochelle, and broken the Huguenot power for ever; had secured the Duchy of Mantua for a French nobleman, had humbled the Duke of Orleans, the King's own traitor brother; and, when State reasons demanded, had faced the scorn of Europe, and fought with Gustavus Adolphus, the Lutheran King, against the Catholic League.

And this master-mind, the Cardinal who never turned aside from the path he once marked out, was, on that July night, awaiting the word that Owen Roe O'Neill, the Irish soldier who kept King Philip's standard afloat above the walls of Arras, was trampled beneath the heel of his vallant marshals.

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At last! There is the clatter of iron hoofs; the sentinel's quick challenge, and the ready answer; a footfall on the staircase, and the courier from Marshal Melleral stands in the Cardinal's presence.

One glance of that cold eye is enough. There is failure written in the face of the messenger. He hands his despatches, and awaits half-awed, fearful.

The Cardinal breaks the seals and reads. It is a curious document. It pleads excuses for defeat, for this Irish O'Neill has again and again given heart and hope to the garrison that holds out so bravely for Philip of Spain. The French commanders could come to no decision as to a final assault. They left the matter to Richelieu's decision.

The great Minister knew his men, so he wrote,—"Your business is war and mine is to govern France, if you fail in taking Arras I shall take your heads."

"You will set out at daybreak," he said to the weary courier. "No more."

Aye! Owen Roe still held out. Brave heart, with the best blood of Ireland in your veins!

Richelieu's lips were close-pressed, and the face was haggard, as he sank into a deep chair and gazed into the heart of the embers. The light flickered and died out. From behind the heavy curtain drawn across the window the grey light of the dawn peeped timidly. A solitary ray of the young sun struggled into the silent room, and lit on the white-streaked hair and pallid face of the Cardinal Prince sitting there thinking, thinking. For in spite of all his King's men and his ordnance, this exiled Irishman, this Owen Roe O'Neill still held Arras for his most Catholic Majesty, Philip IV. of Spain.

II.—FOR MY LORD THE KING.

At midnight I gazed on the moonless skies;
There glisten'd mid other stars blazonries,
A sword all stars; then heaven, I know,
Hath holy work for a sword to do.
Be true, ye clansmen of Niall Be true!

To-day the mills and factories burr and hum in this prosperous French town. Lace and that textile named after the place are turned out in goodly quantities. There are fine promenades and open spaces, squares and parks; a grand Cathedral uplifts its noble spire, and a City Hall stands in Gothic beauty. Rising grim and threatening is the citadel designed by Vauban, prince of fortress builders, but it has outlived its time, and is useless. The citizens call it the Useless Beauty, but they will not allow a stone to be touched. It reminds them of many a glorious episode in the past, of times of danger, when the bells clamoured and the townsfolk took up ready arms and battled for their freedom and their privileges. You will learn from the first man in the street that Robespierre was born there, as was Lebon, a father and a fiend of the French Revolution. Once a week its squares and streets are thronged with thrifty peasantry who bring corn to the buyers that flock to the great market—to the same squares that resounded to the clang of steel in the long ago when Owen Roe held the fort; the same squares that ran with blood in the days of the Revolution, when Lebon scrawled the death warrants of his own flesh and blood and greased the slots of the guillotine.

The Arras of two hundred and sixty years ago was a beleagured city, held by Don Eugenio O'Neill — Owen Roe. And this is how it came to pass.

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When the Emperor Charles V — he who was Charles I of Spain, and assumed the former title when he succeeded to the throne of the vast German Empire—laid down his sceptre, and retired into a convent in 1556, he partitioned his kingdom. To his brother Ferdinand he gave the German Empire—that is our Germany, Austria, Bohemia, and Hungary. To his son Philip I he gave Spain and the Netherlands, or the Low Countries, as the French called them. Philip was succeeded by his son Philip III., who, in turn, was succeeded by Philip IV., the monarch for whom Owen Roe O'Neill held Arras. He came to the Spanish Throne in 1621, and for over forty years waged a series of devasting and unfortunate wars.

Faults these Philips had, but their Spanish Court was ever open to the Irish exile, to the O'Donnels and O'Neills, and all the others who fled from the Isle of Destiny.

Ferdinand reigned in Vienna, the Spanish Archdukes held Court in Brussels, Regal Court in a way, although politically subject to the powerful Spanish Monarch. To this capital of the Spanish Netherlands flocked the Anglo-Irish to serve under Colonel Preston—one of the Gormanstown Prestons—and the old Irish who came in twos and threes to take service under this Don Eugenio O'Neill, their Owen Roe, the man in whose veins ran the richest and the reddest blood of Ulster. The Anglo-Irish were permitted to leave openly. It was part of the English game to thin them down. But the clansmen of O'Neill left the Old Country in darkness of night, or in light vessels that flew the Spanish flag and traded as peaceful merchantmen to Galway.

Owen's reputation as a captain grew and grew, and the name of the great soldier was born to Ireland and whispered amid the Northern hills and by lips grown weary of servitude and persecution, whispered as the name of one who might, in the days to come, swoop down upon the shores of Donegal and raise the standard woven with the bloody hand of Ulster. With arms too; arms supplied by Spain; or by France, the great Cardinal, in whose heart lurked no love for England, or by Rome, where many Irishmen moved around the Chair of Peter, humble friars without worldly goods or treasurer, but men whose fame as scholars, thinkers, and writers illumes the history of the Christian Church.

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Owen lay in the town of Arras at the head of 1,500 trained Spanish soldiers, and three hundred Irish exiles. It was the 15th June, 1640. The quaint old place was ill-fitted to resist siege or assault, for the ramparts were decayed, and thick woods grow near the old walls, certain shelter for storming parties. For then there were no shrapnel shells, that, bursting, brought swift death, and made the splinters from the tall stems every one a messenger for gaping wounds. The round shot from the guns would be useless among these dense pines and elms.

No attempt on Arras was feared or expected. Cardinal Richelieu in his hate of Austria, in his lust for these provinces of Artois and Flanders, would strike at Doua or Bethune. Already the French King's army was threatening those very places. So the garrison of Arras was drained to strengthen Bethune, and Owen Roe O'Neill was left to hold the old town that Cæsar sat down before just sixteen hundred years previously.

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The Cardinal, who eked out the lion's skin with the fox's, planted surely and secretely. On Flanders he would hurl the splendid army he had collected, old veterans who fought at Rochelle and held the breakwater against the English mastiffs, the veterans who had crossed the Alps with him to prop up the Duke of Nevers in Mantua; the veterans who swept down on the Duke of Montmorency when he dared to take up arms against the great Cardinal, and saw the noble head of the son and grandson of two Constables of France laid on the block in that courtyard at Toulouse on the very day he was tried for treason to France—that is, treason to Armand du Plessis, Duc du Richelieu.

Ave, on Flanders—but where was the point of attack? Doual or Bethune said the Cardinal Infant and his Chief, De Silva, Doual or Bethune they told Owen Roe, but he was not so sure.

III—HOW OWEN ROE HELD THE FORT.

Sing we the song of the war-time,
when sword kissed sword as they met,
And a nation smiled through her weeping, and laughed while her tears were wet;
Of dawns when men rode forth singing, of nights when the stars overhead
Shone down on the battle harvest and the face of the silent dead.

It was this 15th of June, in the year 1640, when the bells of the old tower of Arras rang out a wild alarm. Citizens hurried hither and thither. Women came forth from houses white with terror and clutched their children closer to their breasts, or look forth from their windows round-eyed in their fright. From the fields outside men hurried into the town and brought their tales of wonder and surprise. For from the towers of the Monastery of Mount St. Eloi, just two leagues outside the city's walls, watchers had seen the glittering arms of a moving host of men coming from the south, and from the east came another, moving along the ground, a broad band of steel.

Richelieu had struck where the blow was least expected, and his Marshals Melleral and Chatillon came with their mighty hosts to do the work he designed so completely.

The men of Arras were brave men, and the women had noble hearts, but the surprise was so overwhelming that for days the unfortunate people were bereft of reason. Panic reigned supreme. What could a handful of Spanish troops, three hundred Irishmen and a horde of untrained townsmen do against this splendid army of France, a body of 100,000 fighting men toughened by hard wars, and led on by two of the greatest captains of the age?

Then came orders from the Spanish King's brother, O'Neill was to command in Arras, and to hold the town for his Majesty King Philip IV. So Owen Roe issued his orders, and saw that they were obeyed. In two days order reigned in Arras, and then began the defence in real earnest.

A defence memorable in the history of sieges. The French commanders cut off the town from all hopes of relief by lines of fortification and entrenchments that encircled the place, a vast ring of fifteen miles.

Forth from the town would O'Neill's Spaniards and Irish creep when the summer night darkened, and then the battle cries and blasphemies would be heard in the thick smoke, and many a Swede or Swiss who served the Cardinal would sink down in the deep trenches, their last thought on some far-off hill, or in another land, and a deep red wound in the side that let life out. Then would be given blow for blow, and when the Irish and Spaniards would come back to the gates of the town bearing their dead with them, their was no need to tell the listening citizens how they had done for Philip IV.

Then came the Cardinal-Infant with a vast army to relieve Owen Roe, who held the power of Melleral so bravely in check. Now began the most curious spectacle in warfare—the investment of a besieging force. The French answered by moving closer to the town and their cannon thundered an awful bombardment. Houses were shattered, breaches were made in the walls. But Owen Roe's Irish Brigade held the yawning breaches, and the citizen soldiers stormed the French batteries. They were driven back, but again and again they came on until the ditches were covered with their dead.

(To be Continued.)

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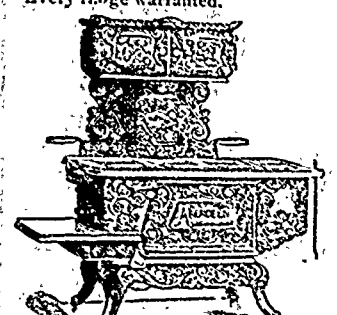
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