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TURLUGH O'BRIEN;

OR, THE FORTUNES OF AN IRISH SOLDIER.

CHAPTER V.—NARRATING ALL THAT BEFELL GRACE WILLOUGHBY IN THE WOOD OF GLINDARRAGH.

The young lady traversed the Castle-yard without observation, and with a light step, and a heart charged with no graver feeling than girlish curiosity and love of frolic, she passed under the castle-gate, and down the narrow road leading from the castle to the old bridge, which, with five high and narrow arches, crossed the river within some hundred yards of the old building. The sun had still some twenty minutes of his course to run, and was beginning to sink among the piles of crimson clouds, which, like a gorgeous couch, seemed softly wooing the god of day to his repose. The young lady, in her rich, red mantle, paused for a moment, and, leaning over the grey battlement, looked up the chafing wayward stream. On one side rose the hoary walls and massive towers of the castle, with its narrow windows glittering in the red sunbeams, and its ivy nodding and waving in the light breeze of the evening. On the other hung the wild wood of oak and thorn, whose branches gnarled as the twisted horns of the wild deer which had once strayed proudly among their glades, overhung the wimpling flood, and caught the gliding and mellow light of the departing day. Between these objects, thus closing in the view, the dim hills and the far off peaks of the mighty Galties, faintly caught the level light in the filmy distance; and all seemed wrought with such a wondrous harmony of coloring, and such a melting softness of outline and shadowing, that, with the fresh sounds of the sighing breeze and rippling water, and the distant baying of village dogs, the loving of the far-off kine, and the softened beating of the mill-wheels, mingling in the varied hum, and gently filling her ear with murmur not unmusical, she felt her heart moved within her with the tenderest joy and sadness, and rapture, blended in strange absorbing ecstasy; so that as she looked at the loved scene of all her brief existence—the old towers among which she was born; the river, whose hoarse voice and changeful moods, and fitful eddies and dark nooks, had been her familiar and, as it seemed, her kindly companions, from the time that memory had traced its earliest childish records; and the dear old wood where, with her fond nurse, she had wandered in the long autumn days, and gathered her infant treasures of bramble-berries and fraubuns. As she looked at all these familiar, friendly scenes of her untroubled and gentle life—the home of all her store of happiness remembered or to come—tears, pure tears of tenderest joy rose in her dark eyes, quivered like glittering diamonds on her long lashes, and one by one fell on the bosom of her own loved stream, and mingling in the rejoicing current, seemed to blend her fond remembrances and gentle affections still more dearly than ever with its chafing waters. Alas! in all the fond security of a home, never yet clouded by one fleeting trouble—in all the trusting repose of a pure young heart, that never yet was grieved by disappointment, or wrung with the pangs of fear and sorrow—guileless as an angel stooping from Paradise over this vexed world, the fair girl looks upon the chafing river, and never dreams that such a thing as danger haunts the dear scenes of her childish sports.

This reverie or rapture is broken; she has on a sudden heard the song again; and with a half laugh, and a sudden start, resolved no more to forget the purpose of her ramble, she lightly descends the steep side of the bridge, and wanders by the river's bank through the hoary trees, among whose trunks and boughs the level light is streaming; and now she approaches the very spot where the songstress pours her melody;—but, ere she reaches it, the object of her search is, as ill-fortune wills it, in motion—is gone—a screen of brushwood hides her effectually; and still the lady follows.

The sun had almost touched the verge of the distant hills, and the loneliness of the place—altogether, mayhap, with the ominous associations connected with the wild, sweet minstrelsy which lured her on—had already inspired, to allay the curiosity which had led her thus far, some little admixture of doubt and fear. She looked back; there was light, she thought, sufficient to see her home again, ere the sun had sunk, and to allow her time to pursue the invisible minstrel as far as the nearest screen of brambles, from under which, it seemed, the sounds were rising. She now approached it closely; the sounds were almost at her ear; and peeping through the bushes, she discerned a portion of the figure from which they proceeded, huddled up in a sort of bow, or rather lair. All she could distinctly see was the hand of the singer which held a twig, with which the emphasis of the fierce and plaintive song was marked. On a sudden, as she watched this form, a sharp whistle reached her ear from some distance behind her. The

figure started up, fully confronting her, and not a female, as she had expected to behold, but a wild, shock-headed boy stood gazing with a grin of something between wonder and ferocity full in her face. He was a mass of rags and filth, with the exception of a torn embroidered waistcoat, which might have fitted a full-grown man, and which descended, in very incongruous finery, to his very ankles, supplying his only stitute for the combined appliances of coat and vest.—There was something savage and repulsive beyond expression in the face and bearing of this brawny urchin—an impression which the young lady felt considerably enhanced by observing the long straight blade of a skean shining under the folds of his vest. The beautiful girl, her lips parted with affright, her light form thrown back, and her head raised, stood like a startled deer, irresolute, and gazed at the squalid ruffian figure before her with a fascination which seemed reciprocal, for he also stood motionless, and started in return upon her with a look of mingled curiosity and menace.

As they stood thus, the whistle was repeated; and the boy, without more delay, dived into the thickest of the underwood, and was lost to her sight. The apparition had appeared and vanished again with such astounding suddenness and rapidity, that, were it not that the sprays of the branches were still quivering where he had plunged through the thicket, she might have doubted whether the spectacle had not been indeed but the ideal creation of her own fancy.

Too late repenting the rashness which had led her to so sequestered a spot at such an hour, and unattended, at a season when, though danger had never approached herself, she well knew it to be abroad and busy, she began, flushed and agitated to retrace her steps through the wood toward the old bridge, which, once regained, she would feel herself again secure. But that bridge was not to be regained, poor girl, without the deadliest peril that ever yet were innocence and weakness exposed to. The danger moves between you and your home. Alas! urge your speed, fair girl, as you may, you do but approach it the faster; the danger is before you—moves towards you—see, it comes—it is here.

As she pursued her homeward path with rapid tread and beating heart, she came on a sudden—passing the corner of a dense mass of furze and brambles, full in front of a figure, in dimensions much more formidable than that she had last encountered, and in aspect scarcely less repulsive—a huge, square-shouldered fellow, arrayed in a blue laced coat, three cocked hat and plume and jack boots, affecting a sort of demi-military attire, with a sabre by his side, and a pair of pistols stuck in his belt, occupied the pathway directly before her.

At her sudden appearance he had instinctively laid his coarse red hand upon the butt of one of his pistols; but one second sufficed to draw it again, and with a "ho-ho-bum!" he set his feet apart and his arms akimbo, as if prepared to dispute her passage, and eyed her with a look half-jocular, half-brutal. If the manner and bearing of this personage were calculated to alarm the young lady, there was certainly in his visage very little to reassure her. His face was large and broad, and suitably planted upon a powerful bull neck; a pair of glittering, piggyish eyes were set apart in his head; his nose was drooping and somewhat awry; and a quantity of coarse reddish hair occupied his upper lip and chin, between which were glittering the double row of his tobacco-stained teeth, as he grinned facetiously in the face of the affrighted lady.

"And where are you going, my colleen dhas, in such a murderin' hurry?" inquired he, in a strong brogue, while at the same time he extended his arms to prevent the possibility of her passing him; "where is it you're going, my colleen beg, in all this foosther," and approaching her still more nearly, he continued— "Oh! Colleen, it's not goin' to leave me, An' breakin' your promise you'd be, An' forgettin' the kisses you gave me In under the crooked oak tree?"

The young lady's color came and went with mingled alarm and indignation, and her heart beat so fast that she felt almost choking, as this coarse and ruffianly figure drew nearer and nearer to her; with a violent effort, however, she mastered her agitation sufficiently to reply in a firm tone—

"I am going home, sir, to the castle;—I am Sir Hugh Willoughby's daughter. Pray, allow me to pass on."

The fellow uttered a prolonged whistle of surprise, and then repeated with a grin— "Sir Hugh Willoughby's daughter!—oh, ho! so much the better, my colleen oge. Come, lift up the hood, and give us a peep, for they say you've a purty face of your own, acushla."

"Sir, I pray you, suffer me to go on my way, urged she, now thoroughly alarmed at the insolent familiarity of the fellow. "Sir, it is growing late, and the twilight is falling; do, sir, I entreat, allow me to go homeward."

"Late—to be sure it is, darlin'," responded he,

with a chuckle; too late to let you pass without paying your way, my girl. There you stand—the purtiest girl in the seven parishes, as I'm fould; and here stand I, a dashin' officer of the king's militia, an' as fine a fellow, my darlin', as ever a purty wench need desire to look at.—Here we are, all alone, my beauty; an', sure enough, the twilight is fast falling, an' the bushes all round."

"Sir, let me go—I must go home," said she, trembling violently, for she perceived that his jocular manner had given place to one of savage and sullen determination, which rendered the familiarity and the endearment of his language but the more menacing and repulsive. "Sir, you will let me go—I know you will; you are an officer and a gentleman?"

"Too old an officer not to know when I'm well served," replied he, advancing; "and too much of a gentleman not to thank fortune for her favors. Come, come, sweetheart no nonsense."

"Let me pass—let me pass," said she, almost breathless with terror; "let me go, for these are my father's woods, sir. How dare you bar my passage?"

"Come, come, come, none of your nonsense;—this sort of balderdash will never go down with me," replied he sternly, "Monam an dhuil! what's your ould father to me; I wish I had him for five minutes here, foot to foot, and hand to hand, the bloody ould dog, and you'd see what crows' meat I'd make of him. Look in my face, darlin', thanim an dhuil! you'll see I'm in earnest; an' I tell you what it is, mavourneen, it's often I shot a better woman than yourself."

Headless of every menace, while in an instant, a thousand thoughts and remembrances, and a thousand agonised appeals whirled in frightful chaos through her mind, the young girl, in wild-est terror, uttered shriek after shriek, while at the instant her wrist was grasped in the massive gripe of her assailant.

Oh! for some pitying angel to rescue kindred innocence and beauty. Oh! for some stalworth champion, with righteous heart and iron arm, to hew and crush the cowardly monster into dust. Oh! good Sir Hugh come, come—in heaven's name, spur on thy good steed rowl-deep, spur on—spur, till thy way is tracked with blood and foam—ride for your life—for your life, Sir Hugh—thy daughter—the praised of every tongue, the pure, and bright, and beautiful, the idol of thy pride, and love, and life—thy child, for whose sake thou dost hold thy life-blood cheap—thy child, thy child, is struggling in a ruffian's grasp. Oh! for a messenger of mercy to peal this summons in his ears, and ring the alarm through all the chambers of his heart.—Oh! beautiful Grace Willoughby, art thou then, indeed, defenceless? Not so; for at the very moment when the hand of the brawny villain had grasped the tiny wrist of the beautiful lady, a deliverer appeared.

Through the wood of Glindarragh there wound an old bridle-track—it scarcely deserved to be called a road—which, entering the wooded grounds about a mile away, followed its wild and sequestered course among the thick trees and brushwood, until it debouched upon the more frequented road just by the Castle-bridge.—From this lonely road, which passed scarcely two hundred yards behind the spot where Grace Willoughby held parley with her insolent and ruffianly assailant, an unexpected deliverer appeared.

"Holloa, fellow! forbear thy rudeness; or, by the mass, I'll teach you a different behavior!—Do you hear, scoundrel?" cried a deep, stern voice, in a tone less of anger than of haughty and contemptuous command.

There was something in the suddenness, as well as in the tone of this interruption, which instantaneously diverted the attention of the ruffian from his intended victim, who, half dead with fear and agitation, staggered backwards, and supported herself, almost breathless, against a tree. At the same moment that he relaxed his grasp, he had turned in the direction of the speaker, and beheld, some thirty yards away, at the far end of the little glade in which he stood, mounted upon a powerful black charger, blazing in the splendor of a gorgeous military uniform, the figure of a tall man, of dark complexion and singularly handsome features, the character of which was at once melancholy and stern. His own black hair, instead of the monstrous peruke then fashionable, escaped from beneath his broad leaved, white plumed hat, and fell in clusters upon his shoulders; his burnished cuirass reflected the last red rays of the half-hidden sun, and his scarlet skirts, which, falling from beneath it, reached to the tops of his huge jack-boots, glowed and glittered with gold lace; his buff leather gauntlets reached half-way to his elbows, and his good sword danced and clanged by his side.

Before time for further parley had elapsed, this cavalier was within ten steps of the burly militia-man; and in an instant springing from

his military saddle, confronted him upon the sward.

"Stand there, good Roland," said he, throwing the bridle on the horse's neck, and instantly strode up to the ill-favored fellow in the blue suit, who, nothing dismayed, awaited his approach with no other indication of emotion than a glance to the right and left, as if to see that, in case of a scuffle, his movements might be unembarrassed by branch or bramble; and, this precaution taken, he drew his beaver with an air of grim determination firmly down upon his brows, and resting his right hand upon the butt of one of the pistols which stuck in his belt, he set his left arm akimbo, and squaring himself while he planted his feet asunder firmly in the soil, he eyed the young soldier with a look of ferocious menace and defiance.

"Who and what are you, sirrah, who shame not to offer rudeness to an unprotected girl?" demanded the stalwart cavalier, in the same deep tones of contemptuous command. "Forbear, scoundrel, and begone, or by Saint Jago! your punishment shall be sharp and lasting!"

"Fish! man; do you think to bully me?" rejoined the ruffian, with a darker scowl. "I don't want to be at mischief; but if you put me to it, I'll blow a brace of holes through your purty face, ma bouchal, and give you to the others."

The dark eyes of the soldier flashed fire, as with the speed of light, his sabre gleaming in his hand, he sprang upon his brawny adversary.

"You will have it, then?" roared his opponent, while at the same instant he levelled one of his long horse-pistols in the face of the advancing dragon; but as instantaneously a whirring sweep of his adversary's sabre, missing his fingers by scarcely a hair's-breadth, struck the weapon so tremendous a blow, that it leaped from his hand, and spinning through the air as if hurled by the arm of a giant, it plunged far away into the stream, flinging the foam from it about a yard high into the air, and before the weapon had yet touched the water, the swordsman, dashing his sabre hilt into his antagonist's face, struck him so astounding a blow, that he rolled over and over headlong upon the sward; and in the next instant, ere he had recovered his senses, the triumphant soldier had planted his knee upon his breast, and secured the remaining pistol of his fallen opponent. All this happened with the rapidity of lightning.

"And now, what have you to plead why I should not rid the earth of you this moment?—Speak, miscreant:—what mercy have you a right to look for?"

The swarthy dragoon cocked the weapon while he thus spoke, and eyed his truculent foe with a look of the deadliest significance.

The prostrate object of this menacing address in return, stared with a vacant look, which gradually kindled into astonishment, and almost joy, in the face of the stranger; and in a brief interval of a second or two, in a tone which bespoke the extremity of wonderment and surprise he replied by a few hurried sentences, and, as it seemed, of vehement interrogatory, in the Irish tongue.

"Hey day!" cried the officer, rising hastily, so as to relieve the defeated combatant, and drawing himself up to his full height, and folding his arms, he coolly looked down upon the swollen and bloody face of the soi-disant militia-man, with a smile, or a sneer—it might be either—while he calmly added—

"I little expected to have met you here, Mr. Hogan. Get up, and shake thyself, man; this is but child's play compared with what we have both encountered in other countries. You were not wont to be so easily upset, though, sooth to say, you seem to have had a tolerably heavy buffet."

"I've met my master, that's all," said the fellow, as he pressed his broad hand upon the wound he had just received, and then looked gloomily upon the blood which covered his fingers; "but no matter; I take it in good humor; and, as you say, it's not the first time I've seen the color of my own blood."

"Not the first, but marvellously nigh being the last," rejoined the tall soldier, contemptuously. "Get up, sirrah, and begone! I spare you for the sake of our former acquaintance; though as you well know, your pranks in Flanders would have been better requited by a rope's-end, the wheel, or the gibbet, than thus. Up, sirrah, and depart!"

So saying, he discharged the pistol among the trees, and handed the smoking weapon to the wounded man, who had now arisen, crestfallen and bloody, from the ground.

"There—take it; and let me see you walk down your pathway as far as the eye can follow," continued he sternly; "and, for old acquaintance sake I tell you, that if I see you attempt to load again, or even so much as stop to look back upon me, I will send a leaden messenger after you, straight enough to find you even through a key-hole. What I say, I say—and so good night."

"Short courtesy—short courtesy, sir," rejoined the fellow; "but it's all one to me. It was your way when you were little more than a boy; and soft talk doesn't come with years and hard knocks. But, never mind; I owe you no gratitude for this night's work, and mean you no wrong.—So good night, and no harm done."

Having thus spoken, the ill-favored personage in the blue-laced coat turned upon his heel, and strode rapidly down the little path, without once turning or pausing on his way until he was lost among the deepening shadows and thickening brushwood in the distance.

"And what has become of the girl?" exclaimed the dragoon. "I had well nigh forgotten her. Ha, by the mass, swooned or dead! I trust the villain has not hurt her."

In truth the poor girl, terrified by the peril from which she had just escaped, and scared and shocked by the scene of violence—the first she had ever witnessed—which had been enacted in her presence, but the moment after, had indeed lost all consciousness, and sunk in utter insensibility at the foot of the oak tree, against which she had leaned for support.

From the shallow river brink he took water in his hand, and throwing back the crimson hood he dashed it in her face; and, as consciousness slowly returned, he had ample leisure to admire that miracle of beauty. Pale as monumental marble were the matchless features, round whose beautiful stillness wanted her rich golden ringlets in the fitful breeze of evening; her small and classic head rested on the high knotted roots of the old oak tree, all unconscious, and nothing dreaming of dangers, bygone or to come; and in the perfect features, and the softly oval face, moveless though they were, there reigned a look so sweet, so heavenly, and withal so noble, that she seemed an existence too guileless, pure, and lofty for this earth, a native of another sphere, a messenger of preternatural grace and goodness, arrested in her beautiful and bounteous wanderings, even in the wild wood where she lay, by some too potent magic looked in enchanted slumbers. And he, the handsome stalworth warrior, who bends over her with haughty brow and eyes of fire, might seem the predestinated champion, chosen and appointed from his birth to break the spell of the enchanter's power, and set the heavenly captive free again. He watches her with a fixed, stern look, in which is seen something of wonder and admiration, as well there may; for in all his wanderings in foreign lands and splendid courts, it never yet has been his fortune to behold a face that could compare with that on which he gazes now. Yes! the spell is broken—the glow of life returns, in the faintest, finest tint; like the first blush of the coming morning it steals over her death-like cheek, and gently flows into her parted lips in ruddier streams; and now the long, dark lashes tremble; and now she sighs from the very depths of her innocent, true heart; and now her eyes are opened—beautiful eyes! dark, lustrous, soft—she looks around in wild alarm—she essays to rise—she draws her mantle closely round her, and glances round in fearful haste, but the dreaded form is no longer there, her defender stands beside her; and she knows that she is safe.

"The darkness of night is fast descending—you may have far to go," said he, gravely and respectfully, after a pause of a few minutes had allowed her time fully to recover her scattered recollections. "Pardon me, when I say it were meet for you to pursue your way as speedily as may be; you shall have my protection until you have passed this dangerous cover. You are still faint—prithce lean upon my arm. So your path lies this way—'tis well, then, our way lies together."

Thus speaking, he led the beautiful and trembling girl through the pathway she had that evening so joyously traced; and side by side in silence they reached the road, and stood upon the antique bridge—his good steed following in his master's steps with the submissive docility and affection of a well-trained dog, now snuffing the crisp grass by the path-side, and now with cocked ears and glowing eyes lifting his head to catch some distant sound.

Never since the five tall arches of Glindarragh bridge first rose from the dark flashing waters of the chafing stream, did its grey battlements enclose two nobler and more handsome forms.—Never yet did glittering court or gay saloon behold a pair so neatly matched for grace and stately beauty, as did that wildly-wooded steep old bridge in Munster: and never yet was beauty of two different orders more gracefully contrasted than in the youthful soldier and the fair girl, on whom, as side by side they traversed the broken road, the last flush of the glorious sunset fell in soft splendour. He so tall, so dark, so stern—his glossy black hair flowing to his shoulders—his face colorless, except for the clear olive tint, which might almost become a Moorish prince, so clear a dark was its hue—his eyes so full of speaking fire—his mouth so finely chiselled and so stern, darkly surmounted with