

The Irish Brigade at Cremona

[Barry O'Brien in The Dublin Freeman.]

In 1701 the War of the Spanish Succession began. The King of Spain, Charles II., weak, sickly, imbecile, had no issue. There were rivals for the Throne in France and Germany. Louis XVI. had married Charles's elder sister, Maria Theresa, the Emperor Leopold his younger sister, Margaret. Louis claimed the throne for his son, the Dauphin, Leopold for his son and heir, Joseph. To avert a conflict, a Partition Treaty had been made, under which certain parts of the Spanish dominions were to go to Louis's grandson, the son of the Dauphin, Philip of Anjou, other parts were to go to the young son of the Emperor, the Archduke Charles of Austria. In November, 1700, Charles II. died, when it was found that he had made a will, leaving all his dominions to Philip. Louis accepted the will and refused to carry out the treaty. Leopold protested, and in September, 1701, declared war against France. Before the end of the year Europe was in a flame.

Two years before the outbreak of this war, when, on the fall of Limerick, all hopes of Irish National independence were for the time extinguished, 15,000 Irish soldiers, under Sarafeld, left their native land to take service in the armies of France. All students of his day know that these exiles formed the nucleus of the famous Irish Brigade, whose deeds are among the proudest memories of the Irish nation. In 1701 they had distinguished themselves on the battle-fields of Europe, at Marsiglia, at Strasbourg, at Landau. Now they were destined to take the field once more and to add fresh laurels to those they had already won.

In the winter of 1701 the armies of France and Austria were in Italy. The French headquarters were at Cremona, then a Spanish possession. The Austrians lay to the northeast and southwest of the town, one army occupying the country between Mantua (held by a French garrison), and the river Oglio, the other commanding the course of the river Po from Cremona to Ferrara. Could the Austrians seize Cremona, they would destroy the main French army opposed to them, isolate the French garrison at Mantua, and become masters of the whole Duchy of Milan. To the capture of Cremona, then, the Austrian Commander, Prince Eugene, bent all his energies, and resources. Cremona was held by a French garrison of about 8,000 strong, including two regiments—Dillon's and Burke's—of the Irish Brigade. It was well fortified. Its natural position was strong. Bounded on the south by the river Po (which was crossed by a bridge of boats, protected on the southern side by a redoubt work, and strengthened by formidable works on the north, east, and west, it could scarcely be taken by assault. Eugene, one of the most successful captains of his age—resorted to stratagem.

On the north side of the town, not far from the gate of All Saints lived the Chevalier Cassioli by name. His house was a spy in the Austrian camp. Cassioli was corrupted. Every day he furnished Prince Eugene with accurate information of all that went on near Cassioli's house as an old soldier, one used as a sewer. The Chevalier of this aqueduct suggested a brilliant idea to Eugene. Why not send soldiers through it into Cremona? The co-operation of Cassioli was invited and readily given. He persuaded the Governor that the Austrians caused him serious inconvenience. It was to be cleared up, he said. The Governor fell into the trap. The aqueduct was cleared and the French grating at the extreme end (the Austrian end) was removed, and the men innocently prepared for a ruse de guerre were sent to make a passage through the aqueduct into Cassioli's garden. Then men were sent to the aqueduct, well-near St. Margaret's gate. Eugene and General Mareschal de Villeroi, on the night of January 31st, 1702, to co-operate with men outside in breaking through the aqueduct, well-near St. Margaret's gate. Eugene and General Mareschal de Villeroi, on the night of January 31st, 1702, to co-operate with men outside in breaking through the aqueduct, well-near St. Margaret's gate.

French up in the citadel in the extreme west, and isolate the guard at the Mantua Gate in the southeast. Then Mercel would dash for the Po gate, overpower the guard, and seize the position, whereupon Prince Van demont, with the main body of the Austrian Army, 5,000 or 6,000 strong, stationed at the south, would march across the bridge of boats, enter at the Po Gate, reinforce Eugene, overwhelm the French in the citadel, and reduce the town to submission. It was a well-conceived plan, and, up to a point, well executed.

The French were taken utterly by surprise. Marshal Villeroi seems to have thought that the town was impregnable. He scarcely took any pains to keep watch or ward. Cremona would take care of itself. That was his view. On the east of the town, near the Gate of St. Margaret, a wall had been built to bar the ingress of the foe; but no sentinel was placed on the spot. Like carelessness was shown almost everywhere.

The French, light-hearted and fearless, had given themselves up to amusements and festivities. Cremona presented rather the aspect of a pleasure resort than a threatened town. Marshal Villeroi did, indeed, ask for the last reports of the night before retiring to rest. The reports were satisfactory, all was well. So assured, the Marshal laid his head on his pillow and slept like a top. At daybreak, on the 1st of February, he was aroused by the sound of musketry. Dressing hurriedly he mounted his horse and rode for the Central Square. But he was at once surrounded by Austrian cuirassiers and struck to the ground. Then Captain McDonnell, an Irish officer, in the service of Austria, rushed forward and saved the Marshal's life. "I am Marshal Villeroi," said the French Commander; "take me to my men and command your price!" "I am Francis McDonnell, of Bagin's Regiment," replied the Irishman, "and you are my prisoner;" and forthwith he handed the French Marshal over to the Austrian General of Division-Scharenberg. Eugene had in fact seized the town house before Villeroi was out of his bed.

Though stunned by the suddenness of the attack, the French quickly rallied, and fiercely attacked the foe. The Chevalier D'Entragues, Colonel of the Regiment des Clairvieux, was first a-bore. At the head of his men he dashed for the Central Square, sweeping the Austrian Cuirassiers from his path. Then the Austrian Infantry came up. There was a desperate struggle round the Town House. D'Entragues was killed and his men were routed. The Marquis de Crenant succeeded Villeroi in command. He was immediately slain. The Marquis de Mongon succeeded De Crenant.

Leading a fresh attack upon the Town House he was unhorsed, trampled upon, and made a prisoner. Every attempt to dislodge Eugene failed. The French were repulsed at every point. It remained only to seize the Po Gate and the Austrians would be masters of the town.

The Po Gate was the key of the situation. All depended on what happened there. If it were seized, then Vandemont's forces would pour like an irresistible flood into the town, sweeping all before them. If it were held, the French would get time to rally, the Austrians would remain without reinforcements, and the situation might be saved. In an instant Mercel was at the Po Gate. Before him he saw a barrier in the form of a palisade. He ordered his men to hold their fire and to take the position by the bayonet, reckoning, doubtless, on an easy victory over his sleeping guard. The Austrians advanced quickly. Already they are at the barrier. One rush and the unsuspecting guard shall be at their mercy and the Po Gate in their hands. "Charge!" cry the Austrian officers. The men dash forward. The next moment a raking fire from behind the barrier drives them back, in their turn surprised, scattered, dismayed. The Po Gate was held by a handful of Irishmen of Dillon's Regiment, who were wide awake. Late the night before Major O'Mahony, who commanded the regiment, had visited the guard. He told them to keep a bright look out, and to be up at cock-crow in the morning, when he would review the regiment at the Gate. The men obeyed orders, did their duty, and were ready for the morning. Though staggered for the moment by the suddenness of the attack, the Irishmen were not taken by surprise.

take the barrier at the point of the bayonet. Again they were driven back. They thrust their bayonets in between the bars of the Palisade, but the assault at the point of the bayonet was repelled at the point of the bayonet. Mercel then attacked St. Peter's rampart and battery on the Irish left, commanding the Po Gate. The French guard were taken unawares and the position was seized. Mercel immediately turned the guns on the barrier. The Irish were now in sore straits. They could not shelter themselves from the fire of the battery. They were at the mercy of the Austrian General. They had but one hope—namely, that their comrades who were in barracks close by would be awakened by the sound of musketry, and would hasten to their help. Upon this they counted, and they did not count in vain. At the sound of firing the men in the barracks sprang from their beds, seized their muskets, and in trousers and shirt, with O'Mahony at their head, shouting "To the Po Gate; to the Po Gate," dashed forward. Welcome was the sound which soon broke upon the ears of the men behind the barrier. At a moment when all seemed over a wild cheer which they well knew rent the air. The Austrians in front stood still, and then wheeled round. Mercel suddenly turned the guns of the battery from the barrier towards the town. Again the wild cheer was wailed on the breeze, and the Gaelic cry "Faugh-a-Ballagh" was heard above the din of battle. The guard at the barrier then looked upon a sight which cheered their hearts. They saw men half-dressed—men in shirts and trousers—fighting desperately at the rear of the Austrians, and struggling splendidly to force their way to the barrier itself. Then the battery on the left was attacked, and men in white sprang up the ramparts. The situation was clear. A fierce attack had suddenly been developed on the Austrian rear flank. The object of the attacking party was unmistakable. It was to recapture the battery, and cut their way to the barrier. On the rampart the eyes of the men behind the barrier were now fixed; for those who held the battery would in the end hold the gate. Upward pressed the men in white, and backward went the Austrians before them. Cannon, muskets, bayonet, all were brought into play, but onward and upward still pressed the men in white. Again and again the Austrians wavered. Again and again they rallied, but those fierce warriors who had turned out of their beds to light, and who with bare feet and torn rags, scrambled forward, could not be driven back. At length, as the rays of the morning sun fell upon the scene, Major Wauchop, commanding Burke's Regiment, recaptured the battery, and stood upon the ramparts' height triumphant. Once more the guns of the battery were turned, this time, however, away from the town, and facing full over the river to threaten the adversary foe. Below, in front of the palisade, the fight raged furiously, until half-naked men, grim and bloodstained, waving their muskets on high and hoarsely shouting the war-cries of their nation, clamored over the barrier, and the soldiers of Dillon's Regiment joined hands with their comrades. The Po Gate was saved. The Austrian General Mercel was borne from the rampart mortally wounded.

Baron Friberg now took command and quickly renewed the attack on the barrier. But Dillon's regiment stood between him and it. At the head of the Imperial Cuirassiers he charged the Irish, who reeled under the shock of these splendid veterans. Friberg, waving his sword on high, shouted to his men to press forward through the broken ranks of their retreating foes. O'Mahony rallied his men, striving to close the horrible gaps which the cavalry had made. Burke's regiment hastened to the support of their comrades falling on the Austrian flank. But onward rode Friberg, O'Mahony, helped by the operations of Wauchop, had once more got his men well in hand. Their ranks were closed, and vainly now the Austrians strove to break that front of bayonets. It was a fearful struggle—the linen shirt and steel corselet, the naked footman and harness cavalier—Friberg was the central figure of the fight. Risking everything he cheered his men by word and example. He had ridden in the very midst of the Irish, and his very presence, his very example, his very courage, his very valor had saved the town.

ling and heroic courage of the man, and seeing what Friberg did not see, the imminent danger to which he was exposed—for the Irish were now gathered around from all quarters—rushed forward, seized the reins of the Austrian's horse, shouting "Quarter for Friberg." But Friberg answered, "No quarter for anyone to-day," and driving his spurs into his horse's side, plunged forward flinging O'Mahony from his path. In the next moment he fell to the ground shot through the heart. The fall of Friberg demoralized his men. The Irishmen redoubled their efforts, and slowly but surely back went the Imperial Cavalry. The Po Gate was again saved. Wauchop held the battery, and O'Mahony the palisade.

It was now noon and Vandemont had not yet crossed the Po. O'Mahony, having withdrawn the men from the fort on the further side, had destroyed the bridge of boats, leaving Wauchop guns, to command the command the river. What was to be done? Eugene had got into the town, by a stratagem. He now resolved to break down the resistance of the Irish by a stratagem. He sent Captain McDonnell, under a flag of truce to O'Mahony, offering the Irish the highest terms he could give if they would surrender the gate, and enter the Austrian service.

O'Mahony gave a practical answer to this message. He made McDonnell prisoner. "You have come," he said, "not as an ambassador to treat but as a surner to seduce. Your mission is unworthy of you and of your prince. He will have to take the Po Gate before he gets you back." On learning McDonnell's fate, Eugene tried another ruse. He sent Count Commercial to Villeroi, saying that the efforts of the Irish to hold the Po Gate were hopeless, and that if persisted in would lead to the utter annihilation of the force. Under these circumstances he urged Villeroi to stop further useless effusion of blood, by ordering O'Mahony to surrender. Villeroi replied "I am a prisoner. I can give no orders. Let the men at the Po Gate do what they like."

The men at the Po Gate cried no surrender, and stoutly defied the foe. O'Mahony, having strengthened his position at the barrier, now resolved to take the offensive. He ordered Captain Dillon, with a detachment of Dillon's regiment, to force a passage to the gate of Mantua with a view of threatening the Austrian left flank. But Dillon was driven back with great slaughter. Again and again the attack was renewed, and again and again repulsed. At length O'Mahony led the attack in person pushing vigorously forward, until he got jammed half-way between the two gates by an Austrian force in front and rear. But he was resolved not to turn back. Relying upon succor from Wauchop (which quickly came) he pointed his sword towards the gate of Mantua, and fiercely shouted, "Forward!" Fiercely his men obeyed and stoutly the enemy resisted. But the Austrian were now hard pressed in another part of the town by the French, who, issuing from the citadel on the west, had pushed their way northward and seized the aqueduct, thus co-operating with O'Mahony, who was forcing his way upward from the south and east. The tide of battle had at last turned in favor of France. The position of Eugene had become perilous.

Hopeless of aid from Vandemont without, and his line of retreat threatened by the half-circling movement of French and Irish within it, was no longer a question of holding the town, but of getting safely away. A retreat was sounded, and the Austrians, attacked upon every side, fell back all along the line. O'Mahony had already reached the Gate of Mantua, and was still pressing forward when Eugene, by supreme skill and gallantry, succeeded in holding the French and Irish in check, while his routed army flew through the Gate of St. Margaret's. The fight had raged from dark to dark, but the morning's sun found the French flag flying once more from the Central Square, and the ramparts guarded by those Irish exiles whose valor had saved the town.

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THE CATHOLIC CHRONICLE FRANCE THE SHAH AT NOTRE DAME: Muzaffar-ed-din made a very respectful round of the Cathedral of Notre Dame last week. The Shah was especially interested in the beautiful rose-window, the chapels and the Treasury. He was piloted by the First Vicar, the Prefect of Police, and by General Nazare Agha, the very urbane Persian minister in Paris, who is an Armenian Catholic. The Shah ordered to be sent out to Teheran a small organ modelled on that of Notre Dame. Before leaving the Cathedral the Shah gave a sum of twenty pounds to the First Vicar for the poor of the parish. Muzaffar is by no means an unintellectual Oriental. He knows ancient and modern Greek, several Asiatic languages and has a fair command of French. He takes a deep interest in everything appertaining to Persian history and archaeology, and he spent a whole afternoon the other day in conversation and study with M. Oppert, a leading Oriental scholar of Paris, who is able to speak to the Shah in Persian.

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THE SHAH AT NOTRE DAME: Muzaffar-ed-din made a very respectful round of the Cathedral of Notre Dame last week. The Shah was especially interested in the beautiful rose-window, the chapels and the Treasury. He was piloted by the First Vicar, the Prefect of Police, and by General Nazare Agha, the very urbane Persian minister in Paris, who is an Armenian Catholic. The Shah ordered to be sent out to Teheran a small organ modelled on that of Notre Dame. Before leaving the Cathedral the Shah gave a sum of twenty pounds to the First Vicar for the poor of the parish. Muzaffar is by no means an unintellectual Oriental. He knows ancient and modern Greek, several Asiatic languages and has a fair command of French. He takes a deep interest in everything appertaining to Persian history and archaeology, and he spent a whole afternoon the other day in conversation and study with M. Oppert, a leading Oriental scholar of Paris, who is able to speak to the Shah in Persian.

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