OWEN ROE O'NEIL

or THE BLOW OF THE HAND

M. A. Manning.

(Continued from last week.)

The great Spanish army made a noble effort to break through the French lines, and the garrison under Owen Roe could hear the roar and shock of battle. They waited and hoped, but Mollieral waved back the attack. Ten thousand men lay dead about Arras the night he did so.

Then came the mandate from Richelieu—Take Arras or I shall take your heads! The Marshall worked with frantic zeal. He blew up the gates and poured his troops into the town. Hand to hand did Owen Roe and all that was left of his Irish soldiers meet them, hand to hand and eye to eye, backward they beat them. Again the mines exploded, shattering and tearing the walls, and once more the French came on. Every man in Arras capable of bearing arms fought in the deadly breach. When night fell the assaulting party, numbering two to one, held the walls, and Arras was doomed.

The last struggle was the most terrible. The Spaniards made a final effort to force the French lines. It ended in such complete disaster that the townspeople laid down their arms and cried out for peace. Yet it was a wonderful day, this day of blood and brave deeds. The Irish brigade showed how they could sweep aside ten times their number at the point of the bayonet, as their fierce battle cries rose above the din.

The citizens, seeing that all was lost, sent messengers to the French commanders begging for terms of surrender. But Owen Roe told them that he held, and would hold, the town for his master, Philip IV., and that it would go hard with any man who dared to play the traitor.

Outside the 100,000 men of Mellieral were swarming closer. Inside 1,500 Spaniards and men from Leinster and Ulster leaned upon their muskets and waited, never fearing, never heeding, the sure death that lay in the throats of those big bronze guns that were being dragged nearer and nearer.

Then came a message from the Cardinal-Infant. He was sick unto death, his power was nigh broken, his army scattered. Resistance could no longer serve the cause of his Majesty away in Madrid. Let Owen make terms as best he could.

The chivalrous Frenchman, who could now dictate his own terms, said with lofty courtesy to Owen Roe—"You surpass us in all things but fortune," and permitted the little garrison to march away with all the honors of war.

So forth from the battered gates came the little band, these 1,800 heroes of Arras with Owen Roe at their head, drums beating a lively march, their flags flying, their backs to the old walls they held so valiantly, and their faces to Douai.

IV.—HOW WORD CAME FROM IRELAND.

On your hillsides the golden corn waves,
Let they yield you but famine-filled graves,
And in valley and town
They are trampling you down,
These tyrants who hold you their slaves.
Your bravest are outlawed and banned
And curst with the felon's foul brand,
But the red ranks shall reel
From the shock of their steel
When our war fires are bright through the land.

Erect and proud this Owen Roe O'Neill. He had done his duty by his Most Catholic Majesty, Philip IV., of Spain. He had fought the good fight, and it was as no craven he turned his face to Douai on that memorable August morning—rather as a Bayard without fear, without reproach.

Somehow the suggestions of the envoys from Ireland again and again sing in his ears as he rode along at the head of that tramping column, swarthy Spanish, hardy Irish, with the tattered flags above their heads, and the drums rattling a march. "Why fight for these scabbish Flemish towns when there is life to lose for Ireland?" pleaded his own kinsmen who had come from Ulster to tell him how the land lay, and what were their hopes of freeing their nation from the thraldom of a hated despotism. With the tread of the pikemen and musketeers, and with the music made by the swinging scabbards and clanking steel went the lilt of that pleading. "Why risk for our scabbish Flemish towns what could claim for her own?"

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League after league this column thered, league after league on the 18th up, rattling dusty road to Douai, 1809 Owen Roe, riding at its head, thought deeper and deeper, and with every mile of the way grew the stern resolution to sheath his blood stained sword, and never draw it again until the voice of the Irish pipes was heard on Irish hills, and the wild cry of the O'Neill clansmen rolled along some valley—"Hurrah! Hurrah! for the Bloody Hand!"

To Douai he came. The gallant band that had fought so well and lost so heavily, the soldiers who slew as did the heroes of Thermopylae, were received by their brothers-in-arms as men who had wrought great deeds and kept the standard unstained.

From Douai to Louvaine, from Louvaine to Brussels, Owen Roe journeyed, here to-day, away to-morrow, then back once more. In every town, in every place he met emissaries from Ireland, trusty messengers who brought him accounts of the number who would bear arms if he would but land upon the shores of Donegal to raise the standard with the blood-red hand. Bearers of despatches from those who were hatching treason against the English monarch; bearers of despatches from the western fastnesses, where the love of Ireland, like the flame of a torch, pointed ever upward, where the song of liberty was sung by the wild seas that broke on the rocky shore, and by the winds that swept down through the gullies and passes in the bleak Curlew mountains. Despatches from Rome, from Luke Wadding, the Franciscan friar, with the brain of a Savonarola and the heart of a Columb Cille. His craving to devote his service to Ireland grew stronger and stronger with every day. Gradually his plans and plots and schemings and great ambition took tangible shape, and became a reality. What was a dream became the practical purpose of his life—a thing to be accomplished, a thing within reach.

It was no new fancy with Owen Roe O'Neill, this yearning to drive back the English stranger beyond the Pale; to make Ireland an Ireland for the Irish, to give freedom of opinion to all men, to recognize liberty of thought and freedom in religious practices as in religious belief, to deal even-handed justice to all men, whether they be the planter or the undertaker, or the poor Irish kerne, with his saffron rags and loyal heart, or the Anglo Normans, who had become more Irish than the Irish themselves, or the latter-day English, who had looked upon this island, this emerald set in a silver sea, as ground for the gallows, partitions and spoliation.

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No new ideas, no sudden conception to draw the sword for Ireland. When in camp, and when the tired soldiery had sank to rest, when nothing was heard but the distant challenge of a sentinel, the story goes that lights would burn in Owen Roe's tent. Some strange friar had come over-night, travel-stained and foot-weary, with eyes that burned brightly with the enthusiasm and a longing that told their tale. Some horseman had galloped from Brussels or ridden all the way from Dunkirk to see Owen Roe. No parchment, no document, nothing to tell their designs if hands were laid upon them on the road; they carried in their hearts, in their brains, what they wished to speak. Owen Roe risked nothing, and when night fell and silence reigned over the encampment were rested the Irish exiles—veterans by bitter experience, half impatient in serving so long under the banner of the Phillips, in keeping the Spanish Netherlands for the king they never saw, but who would gladly redden with their bloodt he plain round Armagh for the holy cause—when these men slept the light would burn in Owen Roe's tent, and sentinels passing to and fro in the soft night would hear the murmur of voices. Perhaps now and then an angry oath, perhaps the quick, hurried accents of pleading. Now it was the patois they spoke in the Low Counties, then it was the gutteral tones of the Celtic tongue. It is told by chroniclers how Owen Roe would open the mouth of his tent, and, with uncovered head, step out and pace up and down. Something had disconcerted him, something had come to him that needed cool thought. The night dews fell upon him, and apace he would re-enter his tent and the voices would murmur again. The bugles sounded in the early morning ere the light went out beside the canvas.

They were plotting, but it was plotting for Ireland.

In the morning a friar, not one with soft Italian eyes or the olive skin of Spain, but with the high cheek bones and blue twinkling eyes of the Celt, would move amongst the rough troops, pause as he went to give them a blessing, and then pass out of their lives for ever. He bore that from Owen Roe to Ireland which would bear good fruit. Haughty messages were they sometimes, orders to those at home in the old country to mend their tactics and abandon their crude plans for conquest—messages telling that doughty battles are planned before hand, and that those who win are those who strive most earnestly.

All along Owen was in touch with the people at home. Every turn and movement in Ulster, aye, at the very gates of Dublin, were brought to him by trusty courier and swift steed.

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When he left Ireland, Ireland was no longer a home for the O'Neills or O'Donnells. The great Hugh O'Neill, his uncle, had bent the knee to an English Lord Deputy at Mellifont, so in sorrow and in despair, Owen Roe, a lad, but a lad with thews of steel, stepped on board the light craft together with many a one of his kinsmen, and sailed away to the Spanish Netherlands, where every Irish gentleman could find employment for his soldier services.

Sad was his going, sad, indeed. He, a prince of a princely house, driven forth from his own country to find service abroad with the stranger, to eat the bitter bread of banishment. As the little craft that bore him away from the shores of his native land rolled and pitched, and as the coast-line of his brave old Ulster grew a dim ridge on the verge of the ocean, he registered that solemn vow before God which he redeemed on the field of Benburb—an oath to be true to his people and his country, an oath to strike at the invader of his land, the despoiler of his house, and the oppressor of his people.

V.—THE MAKING OF THE MAN.

Ah! well he served us in those days
When woe was rife and peace was crime,
When chieftains reared in war's red ways
Made life one ringing battle rhyme.
He fired the coldest breast with zeal,
He dowered with strength the weakest hand,
His voice rang clear as clashing steel,
His glance flashed lightnings o'er the land.

A mere lad he was at the time of his uncle's wars, unable to join in the stand against the perfidy of England or the steel-clad soldiers of Queen Elizabeth. Mere lad though he was, his eyes would glisten when they brought the news that his father, Art M'Baron O'Neill had swept the shores of Lough Neagh and driven these Palesmen before him. How his breath came quick and fast, when they told him the story of Clontibret, that famous battle where his uncle, the great Earl, met the Lord Deputy and all his steel-clad men. Clontibret, the Lawn of the Spring, as it is called in the Irish tongue, but a few miles above Monaghan, a silver stream singing its course through a narrow valley framed around by low hills. There the great Earl met my Lord Deputy, and the boy Owen, with great wondering eyes, would hear veterans boasting the story how, when the Ulster men had well nigh won the day, Seagrave, the Meathian, swept around with his horsemen on the Irish flank and all seemed lost; but Hugh couched his lance and met this Seagrave in full tilt, as if it were in courtly tournament, where kings and queens, and beautiful women and nobles and esquires awaited the rude shock that declared the victor. Full tilt he met this Seagrave and the lances were splintered. On the ground they rolled—the O'Neill wiry, active, hardy as the red deer, heart-whole as a lion, the other strong of limb, enormous, broad-shouldered as an ox. The Irish, seeing their chieftain thus, thought all was lost. There was a flash of steel as the shortened sword of the O'Neill rose in the air, a pause, and the great Earl rose from the ground, looking down upon his fallen foe with the kindness of a great man who has met and conquered.

Then a shout went up from the Irish ranks. Wild shrieks, hoarse with passion and lust of blood, a cry of Lamb dearg abu! The Irish horsemen, poising their spears above their heads like the desert Arabs, or the Saracen soldiers of Saladin, swept down on the dismayed English lines. The Irish pipes sang out no dirge, no sorrow's strain, but a wild chant of battle. The kearnes, the poor caragats remembered the debt of hate they owed these Englishers, and, like a torrent that tears away from the banks trees and boulders, they swept down upon the mighty host, and awful was the slaughter. The challenge of "St. George for Merry England," the same as went up from the lanes that led to Agincourt, died away, and nothing was heard but death cries and piteous prayers for mercy.

When night fell, there upon the field, and for miles beyond it, were the white, upturned faces of the English dead, and in the hands of the Irish lay the banner of St. George, the flag of the Lord Deputy, the emblem of foreign rule in Ireland.

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Owen Roe heard all this. He was but a boy then, but his boy's heart glowed with pride at the deeds of the great Earl, his uncle, and Art O'Neill his father.

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Then came the tidings of the battle of Portmore, where Lord De Burgh went down in all his pride, and to the present day the village is called Drumalch, and Battleford Bridge marks the spot where the best blood of England reddened the Armagh stream.

His uncle's gallow glasses would recount the wonders of English palaces—accounts by those who accompanied the mighty Earl to the Tudor Court, when he went there in the part of tributary chieftain, to Elizabeth. Yet he went there as no silken clad knight, who would bow the head. He went accompanied by his bodyguard of Irish spearsmen, with their tangled locks and wild looks, and strong arms, as if there were treachery—the treachery played so well by the English Henry when the heads of the Fitzgeralds fell upon Tyburn—why, then, O Neill and his gallowglasses would give good account of themselves.

Elizabeth, a keen judge of character, and a woman of impressions—a woman who had weighed Raleigh's theatrical graces, and Essex's passionate foppery, saw in this man of bone and sinew an unalterable purpose, an Antagonism that was eternal. So she smiled and played the woman, whilst her mean little eyes read the resolution on the square forehead and iron chin of this man from the Ulster mountains.

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Owen Roe drank in all this, and became oh, so proud of his people, proud of his house, and yearned to take his stand, and do notable things like the valiant men whose name he bore.

Then came the tidings of the battle of the Yellow Ford, one of the most glorious chapters in the history of our nation. How Owen's heart leaped and thumped against his breast when he heard the wild shout of the mountain men that told of this glorious victory, told how his uncle lured on the English foe on that August morning into the marshes and boglands around the pass that is called Beal-an-atha-Buidhe—the mouth of the Yellow Ford—a short march from Armagh How Bagenal's army, the flower of English chivalry, came right on in splendid array, driving back with their cries of "St. George for Merry England," the Irish skirmishers who lurked in the woods. Flushed with expectant victory they forced their way on. Then the Irish pipes screamed their war cries, and O'Neill and his pikemen hurled themselves on the foe. Ah, the swords and axes of the Irish did bloody work, and like chaff before the north wind the soldiery of Elizabeth were swept away.

To-day the peasantry will show you the laneway leading from this Yellow Ford, called the Bloody Leaning, where the corpses were piled high, and the blood ran in streams.

The tale went that the last to go down before the wild rush was the Queen's O'Reilly, a man of stout heart and long of arm. Irish by name, Irish by birth, he was them typical of all that was English in Ireland. Alas, that it should be! We have men in Ireland to-day just as willing, just as ready to cry out for a foreign sovereign and for a foreign domination. But he had the courage of his race, this O'Reilly. He rallied the panic-stricken English, and when unable to re-form their ranks, like the valorous but mistaken man that he was, he plunged it to the battle fur, and died as behoved him.

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Owen learned all this and his young blood coursed rapidly through his veins. He would talk over these things with his companions, and yearn and hope, and dream.

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Then came the change, the awful, stunning change that cast a pall over Ireland—defeats quick and many upon the Irish arms. The direful story of Kinsale, where the Irish were butchered in cold blood, where O Donnell, the kind-hearted, the generous, glorious type of Irish gentleman and Irish soldier, saw the hopes of his nation sat in a blood-red sea.

Then did this O Donnell sail to Spain to pray the Spanish monarch to equip more ships and men for Ireland. He was received as was befitting a soldier and a gentleman, for the stately Court of Spain, wantever its internal faults may have been, was eager to acknowledge the qualities in such a man.

Right-handed, he was received with all the stateliness and all the dignity of the Royal line that gave monarchs to German empire, whose house ruled half Europe. But his spirit was broken, and before any expedition could be organized, the heart that beat so truly for the Old Cause, was stilled.

To-day in Valladolid, but a few leagues from the walls of the great University at Salamanca, they point out the grave of a goodly Irishman who fought and failed.

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Owen Roe heard this and it cracked his heart. Heard he, too, how his uncle, who had fought the pass of the Yellow Ford and the battle of Portmore, driven step by step by adverse fate, was obliged to bow the knee before an English Lord Deputy at Mellifont.

Then Owen buckled on the sword his father placed upon his thigh many a year before, and sailed from Ireland. He took service, together with many a cadet of other noble houses, in the Spanish service of the Netherlands, and earned great distinction.

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A few years afterwards, when the clouds that lowered darkly o'er the house of O Neill were about to break, when the Ulster Knights, the O Donnells and the O Neills found that England had broken every promise that she had sealed; when a vast murder conspiracy was about to crush out the life of the great Earls, when they found that to stay in Ireland was only to court assassination and betrayal, they resolved to quit their native shores for ever.

Then was written the saddest chapter in Irish history, the flight of the Earls from the shores of Lough Swilly. These men who had done their best for all they held dear, lifted the anchor one bright morning, and set sail for the shores of France. The people, the poor Irish of the Irish, old retainers, faithful servants, men bearing the scars of war, came down to the shores with their wives and children, and bade the Earls an eternal farewell.

Men who had wielded battle-axe and broadsword in deadly contest and never quavered, stood there white and silent, the tears coursing down their faces. Women raised their babies aloft, and bade the little ones take a last look at the truest men Ireland ever bred.

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On the deck of the little ship, whose canvas was now all spread, the O'Neills, and the O'Donnells stood hand-clasped, their faces rigid and drawn, as are the faces of men who feel death. The ship moved steadily onward, the space between the shore and themselves grew greater and greater. They were going to a far country, they were going to Rome, the Eternal City, with all its vast buildings and glorious piles, above them the blue sky of Italy, around them the soft breezes from the Campagna. But to them, dearer still was the land they were leaving—this rough northern coast, Tyrconnell, with its mountains purple and snow-capped, their sides rugged, and carved out by mountain streams and torrents; songs of liberty singing in the voices of the ocean waves that broke upon their rugged coast. Ireland, dear in its wilderness, dear in its poverty, dear in its love for them.

And the Earls saw the hills of Ireland fade and fade until they sank beneath the verge.

From Dunkirk where they landed, they travelled to Flanders. There the great O'Neil broken in health and fortune, told Owen Roe the story of his betrayal; told this young man, his nephew, the chain of his misfortunes, and left with him his blessing and a legacy.

When the cavalcade set out on its way to the Eternal City, the Irish serving with Owen Roe in that foreign land, lined up in camp, and, with quivering lips raised their dinted helments from their brows, and bowed low as it passed long.

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To Rome went the Earls, and there for a few years O'Neill, the great O'Neill, the O'Neill of the Yellow Ford, lived on. And the records have it that when the old man's heart was warm with wine, when old age brought helpless blindness, he would turn his sightless eyeballs towards where Ireland lay in the western sea, and raise a trembling hand, and cry out with a great pain—"There will be a good day in Ireland yet."

And Owen Roe O'Neill heard all this as he fought in Flanders.

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Tale was the Owen Roe O'Neill who, on that August day in 1640, turned his face towards Douai, moving silently at the head of the Exiles, who had fought the fight in Arras. In his heart was the prayer that the time would come quickly to keep his vow, and the day was at hand.

(To be Continued.)

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