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THE BRIDEGROOM OF BARNA.

CHAPTER II.

When peace was established, it was found that the number of wounded happily bore slight proportion to the combatants; and that, with the exception of Tim Carroll, who was severely hurt by the left-handier he had received, no serious results were to be apprehended to those engaged in the affray.

Hugh Lawlor having now been permitted by his fair fiancée to join her father, took the opportunity of severely reprimanding Bush, who, thanks to the thickness of his pericranium, was fast regaining his faculties for the wanton enormity of which he had been guilty, in committing the assault that had led to so inauspicious an interruption of their harmony. He ordered him at once to depart, and not make his appearance at Barna, adding, that a strict watch should be kept upon him in case the life of Carroll should be endangered.

Far from exhibiting any symptoms of contrition, the fellow replied in a tone of mingled sullenness and defiance, muttering, in an undergrowl, some taunting words, to the effect that it would be well if some people felt the same dislike to bloody hands that they did to broken heads.

Whatever might be implied by these words, they seemed to exasperate the bridegroom to frenzy—he wrenched the fatal cudgel from the grasp of his owner, and dragging him to the gateway, beat him from its threshold like a dog.

Slowly, and with hell fire glaring in his eyes, Tom Bush, still facing his ejector, withdrew. When he had got some distance from the gate, he pointed significantly to the branch of a mighty elm that projected over the avenue, shook his hand fiercely at young Lawlor, and plunged into the darkness of the gathering night, with which peals of distant thunder, announcing an approaching storm, now began to mingle.

There were very few spectators of this occurrence. The moment, therefore, the short-lived battle of the factions had subsided, the revellers returned with a tenfold zest to the conviviality of their respective circles.

The tables, which had been so plentifully bestowed, and so rapidly relieved of their goodly viands, were in the meanwhile removed, the apartments were gaily lighted up, and preparations for dancing commenced.

Hugh Lawlor had by this time rejoined us, quite unruined by the incident that had just occurred, save that his face, I thought, looked paler than when he had left us; but he was at the side of Ellen in a moment more, and every other thought was lost in the looks of eagerness and delight with which he drank in her beauty.

The cheerful glass, with its accompanying toast and joyous laugh, now circulated merrily; the old related their choicest stories; the young gentlemen, who happened to be unpaired, told each other of their hardest rides over the stiffest countries; while those who had a pretty partner at their side (and they were the majority) whispered those tales that sound sweetest in the ears of a single auditor.

I perceived that Father O'Hea was absent for the last quarter of an hour, and now a little sleek-headed man entered the room, and, looking up towards the head of the table at old Dary Nugent, made a low bow; whereupon Ellen Nugent turned very pale, and then red, and then still paler; young Lawlor sprang up, and catching her hand, gently withdrew it within his arm; and then all the gentlemen rose, and each seized a lady, and Dary Nugent led out, with a jaunty air, Mrs. Mackesy. And so we went to the small parlor, or, as they would call it in a fine house, the drawing-room.

And there was Father O'Hea in his alb and surplice, looking quite venerable, his breviary before him on a little table, and near him the sleek-headed herald before mentioned—the clerk of the chapel—a useful attendant upon the occasion.—And then there was a crowding and pressing forward; and I, being a thin man, and easily slipped over in a throng, found myself very much in the rear. But I could see the top of Hugh Lawlor's stately head, and could imagine him whispering some words of encouragement to Ellen, perhaps bidding her remember his long and arduous, and once hopeless suit, and blessing this hour that so brightly repaid him for all.

After some low-voiced conversation for a few minutes, Father O'Hea opened his breviary, and every one knelt down; a few words were said; a prayer uttered, and an amen pronounced; and Ellen Nugent rose up for life and in death the wife of Hugh Lawlor.

Then the rushing was greater than ever; but Lawlor was before them all; he had folded his Ellen to his bosom, and laughing, as he disappointed those who sought to anticipate him, bestowed upon her pure lips a most emphatic kiss; whereupon I could not close my ears to the conviction, that a mighty rustling and smacking resounded through the apartment, even as if every woman in the room was being kissed—not excepting Mrs. Mackesy herself, who, however, gave old Dary Nugent a reproachful punch on

the head, as she was wiping her mouth, which set his wig marvellously awry.

The sudden burst of bagpipes, reinforced by a strong detachment of fiddlers, that now resounded from every corner of the abode, announced the impatience of the humbler guests for the presence of the fair bride and her partner.

Leaning on the arm of her husband, Ellen led the way to the apartments assigned for dancing, and taking their place at the head of some forty or fifty couple, the happy pair led off the country-dance to the appropriate measure 'Haste to the wedding.'

The reign of innocent and frolic mirth was now fully established; and it was early dawn that saw the conclusion of the nuptials of Barna. As I had to travel some miles in an opposite direction to that which I had come for the purpose of paying a long-promised visit to a friend, I took my leave early in the night.

While all was light and gaiety within the bridal mansion of Barna, one of those tempests which, during the equinox, visit the islands of the Atlantic with such extraordinary violence, was raging far and near without.

The winds swept the hills with the roar and fury of a hurricane, and seemed to pause only in its career, when out-bellowed by the thunder, which burst forth in tremendous and long-continued peals through the advancing night. The rain descended in torrents, drifting in sheets along the country, and swelling the mountain streams until they rose above their channels, and rushed down to aid in the conflict of the devastating elements.

Amid the tumultuous din of merriment and music at the abode of Dary Nugent, such a storm, if heard at all, was little heeded; but in the quieter abodes of the surrounding country, its terrors were impressively felt and were long remembered.

Amongst those who sat listening to its effects, crowded round a cheerful and happy hearth, that contrasted strongly with the desolation outside, was the family of Major Walker, a gentleman of independent fortune, and a magistrate for the county, who resided about four miles distant from the scene of our narrative; but still higher up the county, where, after sinking into moor and morass, and assuming the wild features of mountain districts, the land rises and unites with the principal chain of hills that intersects Tipperary. The house which was a spacious one, was well adapted for its position—it was strongly by as well as handsomely built.

The place had been built but a few years. It was occupied by Major Walker, who had planted extensively around it; but the plantations were not grown, the shrubberies were stunted, and in the midst stood the house, wrapped in a fearful naught of weather-slatine, and imparting to the whole, what it only borrowed itself, a look of solitary bleakness.

Far different, however, was the aspect of the mansion within. The bright drawing-room fire, around which the family were this night seated, blazed upon a cheerful group, surrounded by all the comforts of social existence, that are met with nowhere in greater profusion than in the abodes of the Irish gentry.

Wax lights were glancing upon tables strewn with portfolios and books, one of the latter turned down upon its open pages, an idle work-stand, and a piano with expanded music—appeared to have been just abandoned, as if unable to amuse or interest amid the howling of such a tempest. Upon another table was the tea-equipage, with its still summing urn; while by the fire, in fauteuils and easy chairs, were seated the owner of the mansion, a tall, grave, gentlemanly man of about fifty—his lady, some few years younger—their daughter, a fine, florid, bright-cheeked girl of seventeen—and two sons, a couple of years, perhaps, the juniors of their sister. A lady and gentleman, Mr. and Mrs. Craven, visitors from a distant part of Ireland, completed the circle, which had gradually narrowed as the violence of the storm increased.

'William, my boy,' asked Major Walker, 'have you seen to the fastenings of doors and windows to-night?'

'I have indeed, sir—John Bryan and I went through the house at six, as usual. You are not apprehensive, I hope, that doors and windows, proof against bullets and Captain Rock, can be affected by the storm?'

'I am not—but it is wise to take precautions against both.'

'Of the two,' observed Mr. Craven, 'the tempest would be far the more merciful intruder.'

'I fear so,' Major Walker replied; 'for tho' I have reason to think I am unpopular, the very fact of my being in the commission of the peace marks me out for odium—it is certainly a dreadful state of things.'

'Well, cried Charles Walker, 'if Captain Rock should come to pay us a visit, he will meet a warm reception—there are eight of us men, including servants, with three blunderbusses, two guns, three cases—'

'How can you go on so, Charley?' said his sister; 'good gracious!' she exclaimed, 'how it does blow—one is at a loss to say which is safer, the outside or inside of the house. What a bad night for Ellen Nugent's wedding, poor thing!—I understand half the country were invited to it.'

'I don't think,' said her brother William, 'we had such a storm as this since the night Garryvoe bridge was carried away, when Fogarty the post-boy was drowned at Templebeg ford.'

'He couldn't have better luck,' said Charles; 'he was connected, they say, with all the bad boys about the country; and it was strongly suspected he knew something of poor Milo Byrne's murder.'

'That was a frightful affair, if I recollect rightly,' observed Mr. Craven, 'the newspapers were full of it for days—but I do not exactly remember why it excited so much horror?'

'From its unparalleled atrocity,' replied his host. 'Poor Byrne was a man of easy fortune, an old neighbor of mine before I left Upper Ormond for this part of the country—he lived about seven miles away, at a fine old place that his family—a Catholic one—had for a number of years. They were not exactly gentry, but gentlemen farmers, and Milo was a worthy representative of a respectable stock. He was a fellow of the most inoffensive disposition, universally beloved for his hospitality and kindness of heart—an excellent landlord, and an indulgent master; and so well known through the greater part of Tipperary for the benevolence and charity, that, as a convincing proof of his popularity, it is believed (however extraordinary such a thing may appear in Tipperary, where we live with the knife almost at our throats) that at Currarheen—the name of his place—they never took the precaution of placing more than an ordinary latch upon the doors at night. He used to say he never injured any one—never drove for rent—never ejected a tenant—never turned a beggar away empty—and that, therefore, there could be no temptation for people to come at night to seek the spoil or redress they were not welcome to by day.'

'And yet he met with such an untimely end.'

'Untimely indeed! It was a fine moonlight night in October—about eight o'clock, Byrne was seated with his family, I believe, reading the newspaper aloud to them—when—'

'Papa, do you hear nothing?' exclaimed Miss Walker, starting suddenly up, as a fresh burst of the hurricane shook the house to its foundations.

'There is no cause for alarm, my love. As I was saying, poor Byrne, it appears, was reading aloud, when the front door of his dwelling was opened, and a number of men, all armed, their faces covered with crape, walked into the room. In other cases of atrocity, insult is generally added to outrage; but, according to the testimony of the old man's family, the intruders used no words of menace or reproach. They entered with the usual salutation—which, it was observed, they expressed in Irish, a language little spoken in this county—and, addressing Byrne in a respectful manner, said they wanted to speak with him outside. He rose and followed them, two of the party being left in the room to repress any alarm his inmates might attempt to make. In a few minutes more his wife, with the ear of anxiety, caught the voice of her husband in earnest expostulation in front of the house, apparently requesting to be allowed to speak to her. In a short time one shot was fired—a dreadful pause—the sentinels were called off; and, when his terrified family rushed out, Byrne lay stone-dead at his own threshold.'

'And the cause of all this?' inquired Mr. Craven.

'Was the most revolting and incredible in the annals of crime. The murderers, on leaving the scene, met some of the farm-servants; and, with a kind of inconsistent justice, frequent in this passionate and distracted people, desired them to proclaim that the men who killed Milo Byrne were actuated by no ill-will towards him—on the contrary, that they respected and esteemed his character—but his life was the last surviving one in White Will Redmond's lease; a man that ruined, they said, their families and themselves; and, by cutting off Byrne in the prime of life, they deprived their oppressor so many years the earlier of an income of about four hundred a year—a deadly and more lasting revenge, they added than taking away his life.'

'Horrible! Were the murderers brought to justice?'

'Not one of them,' replied Major Walker.—'It is now more than two years since the transaction, and nothing has transpired to throw light upon the matter. The interest it excited is gradually dying away amongst more recent occurrences; but its barbarous wantonness will never let it wholly be forgotten.'

'Well, I always feel confident,' interposed Mrs. Walker, 'that the perpetrators of that evil deed will yet be discovered. The murderers of so blameless a man will not die unpunished—'

Even, if all living agency fails, the very deed will rise.'

As she spoke, a peal of thunder broke above the storm with a crash, as if the very mountains had rent asunder, and were topping on the dwelling; and, while the awe-struck circle awaited the cessation of its stunning roar, a loud knocking at the hall door reverberated sharply and distinctly through the house, as though the fiend of the tempest was demanding entrance.

The little party instantly sprang up—the already excited females clinging in dismay to their protectors. Major Walker, as calm as usual, rang the bell, while his eldest son advanced to the door of the apartment, and impressed upon the servant the needless caution that upon no pretence was the nocturnal visitant to be admitted.

Again the thunder rattled round the hills; and the knocking, which had ceased for a moment, was more violently renewed than before. The voice of the servant was now heard in parley with some person, who, it appeared, eagerly sought admission; and, after the lapse of a few minutes, the domestic descended to the drawing-room.

'The old boy himself, I do verily believe, Major, is outside. Sure such another night no Christian would venture out in! I 'ont take it on me to swear whether 'tis man or beast is there; but whichever it is, he keeps cursing and bellowing that he wants to see you, and that he won't go till he does.'

'Did you tell him, Bryan, that no stranger is allowed into my house after nightfall upon any account?'

'I did, over and over, Major; and 'twas little use for me; 'didn't you tell me your master is at home; 'ses he; 'shure 'twouldn't be out sich a night as this he'd be,' 'ses I, 'nor any one else that's about anything that's good; 'ses I; 'well, go up and tell him that I'm come a long journey on weighty business,' 'ses he, 'and if I go without seeing him, the sin of it be on his own sowl; 'ses he (then were his very words, saving your favor, Major); 'whisper your message through the key-hole, can't you; 'ses I, 'an' I'll take it safe and sound for you; (by the same token I could hardly hear my own ears with the wind and thundher; with that, my dear life, he bot the door such a stroke, I thought 'twas drivn in in my face; and then such an oath as he swore. 'I'll have you yet,' 'ses he, 'where there'll be no oak betune us; 'wisha I cross; 'ses I 'and in the name of God be off out of that, whoever you are, and come again in the morning.'

'I can't come in the daylight at all,' 'ses he, 'soft as if he put his mouth down to the key-hole; 'I can't come in the daylight, Bryan; (how well he knows my name, God help us!) 'I must give my message before twelve to-night, or not at all; and if he does not take it, the sin of it be on his own sowl, and go up and tell him so; and so I came up to let you know what he ses.'

'Go down, then, again,' said Major Walker, without hesitation, 'and say, what I suppose this person is well aware of, that no gentleman, in the present state of the country, allows his doors to be opened to let in a stranger at such an hour as this. If his errand is on magisterial business, tell him he can go to the police-barrack at Caparue, only two miles off, and they will attend to him instantly.'

'Thru' for you, sir; shure 'tisn't out of our senses we'd be to open the dure, when maybe 'tis Captain Rock, or some one far worse, is there; and Bryan descended with the message.

The little party listened in breathless attention to hear the effect of this second denial. While the servant was engaged in the foregoing recital, the knocker continued to be plied violently at intervals, showing that the visitant by no means relinquished the expectation of being admitted. They could now hear Bryan's voice again announcing his master's inflexible resolution; they heard no more; nothing but inarticulate sounds outside, blown away by the tempest, and again John Bryan appeared before them.

'You never heard how he swore, your honor, when I gev him your message; I could hear him muttering to himself when I put my ear to the keyhole; at last I thought he had gone away entirely, when by this and by that up he comes again, and the door gets another peal. 'Are you there,' 'ses he; 'what do you think of yourself?' 'ses I. 'Well, up again with you; 'ses he, 'and tell your master I'm come for some money he owes me this long time, and here's the receipt.' With that I sees this ween bit of paper thrust through the keyhole, and raising his hand, Bryan extended a scrap of dirty paper to his master.

Major Walker glanced at it, and started; alter a pause of some minutes he said—'I must see this person.'

'Is it now, your honor?'

'Instantly; tell them to place lights below in the study,' he said, turning to his daughter; and do you, Charles and William, get Hartnett to the next room, over the hall door, and keep a

good look-out to see that this is no stratagem of Rockites to get in upon us. If there is but one person outside, make no noise while the door is opened; should any more make their appearance or offer for the house, clear away with the blunderbuss—it will be check enough until the door is fast again.'

So saying, Major Walker descended, followed by the trusty Bryan, having first supplied themselves with pistols from the armory closet on the landing place.

To those of our readers who are only accustomed to the order and tranquility that prevails in countries where the law are feared at least, if not respected, and where every man's house is literally his castle, the precautions just mentioned may appear the exaggerations of some imaginative story-teller; but they whose birth and business has bound them to the distracted country in which our narrative is laid, will, very probably, perceive that the sketch is more remarkable for feebleness of outline than for depth of color. To such the marvel would be, not that a country gentleman should place a little garrison under arms when his house-door was to be opened after dark, but that, under any pretence, he should permit it to be opened at all.

On reaching the hall, Bryan was directed to undo the fastenings of the door while his master stood at the entrance opening to the study, and watched with some anxiety a process which, any where but in Munster, would not be an important one. As the last bar was heaved away, and the bolt undrawn, a terrific gust of wind, mingled with the groan of thunder, fiercely blew the door wide open, and the nocturnal visitant sprang in as if winged with the red lightning that at the moment went hissing through the sky.

John Bryan, who had been flung to some distance by the unexpected blast, instantly closed and fastened the door, and the stranger stood alone before his master.

'Humph!' said Major Walker, after closely eyeing the intruder; 'I think I have seen you before now?'

'Glory be to God; if it isn't Tom Bush after all, the villain; but more like the old—'

'Jack Bryan—none of your jaw—or it'll be worse for you!' interrupted the fellow, pulling from the breast of his coat a large clasp-knife, with the blade unclosed, and looking with his flashing eyes—his savage face ghastly with passion, strongly contrasting with the fiery red cap by which his wild and haggard looks were surmounted, more like

'Angry demon sent, Red from his penal element,' than an inhabitant of the living world.

'I wish to speak with you, Major, if you please, about that bit of paper I sent you just now.'

'Come this way,' said Major Walker, leading the way into the study; 'and do you, Bryan wait in the hall until I call.'

They entered the study, and Bush immediately closed the door, seeking, in rain, to adjust the bolt by which persons inside were saved from intrusion.

'There is no occasion—we shall not be interrupted; come forward and let me hear what you have to say.' And the magistrate seated himself within reach of the bell pull, placing the reading-lamp, the only light that had been supplied, on the table, so as to diffuse its rays as equally as possible through the room.

But Bush did not choose to advance more than a few paces from the door: he kept aloof from the circle of light emitted by the lamp, and stood within the flickering shade that enveloped the greater part of the apartment; his form half bent, his chin resting on his hand, and his eye glistening like a rattlesnake's about to spring upon his prey.

'I have here,' said Major Walker, 'the piece of paper you sent in. It is the advertisement proclaiming the reward of four hundred pounds offered by Government two years back for the discovery of the murderers of Milo Byrne of Currarheen—are you able to give any information on the subject?'

'If I worn't able, 'tisn't here I'd be now,' said the fellow, after a pause. 'Where's the pen and ink, Major?'

'I am quite ready to take a memorandum of anything you wish to say, previous to your deposition being made out, which can be done to-morrow,' said Major Walker, at the same time drawing to him writing materials, and taking up the pen.

'To-morrow! Major! I'll scald the heart in him, and spile his pleasure—if I swung for it!—Promise me, by all the books in the house, that if I put my hand upon the man that killed Milo Byrne, you'll get him taken that miut? Promise me that, or if I ever open a lip up the matter if you have me torn between wild horses.'

'Go on, then,' said Walker, anxiously; 'I promise you.'

'Put down—first and foremost—last Michaelmas-night two years.'