

Farrell's Fascination.

An Irish Soldier's Love Affair.

By W. J. CROSBIE.

THE day was hot, and Private Farrell, tramping along the dusty country road, was smitten with a mighty thirst.

Suddenly—turning a corner, he came in sight of a farmhouse, some fifty yards distant, and considerably nearer, a vision of beauty. Instantly his thirst was forgotten, and halting, he stared before him, surprise and admiration holding him spellbound. Scarce two yards away, stood a dark-eyed enchantress—one hand resting lightly on her hip, the other supporting (as though it were but a feather weight), a water-can filled almost to overflowing.

Her eyes, black, almond shaped, alluring, her hair gracefully looped up above her snowy neck, her supple waist, her white rounded arm, all these charms, Pat Farrell noticed at a glance, and in his mind was quite convinced that no woman ever lived, so beautiful as she. Suddenly he found his voice.

"Beg pardon, miss," said he, saluting, military fashion, "but I'm powerful dhray an'—"

"You shall have a drink of the best water in the parish," said the girl graciously, and stepping forward, she held the can to his lips. As he stooped to drink, their eyes met. She smiled and Pat's subjugation was complete.

"My faith," he said, as he wiped his lips, "that's the best drink I've iver had, and it's thankful to you miss, I am for the same; and now ye'll let me carry it for you, won't ye?"

She shook her head. "No, it would never do, my uncle with whom I live, would be very angry to see me talk to you. No, indeed, you must stay here till I am quite out of sight, but perhaps—another day—if you're passing here and you're thirsty, perhaps, I'll be here to give you another drink."

As you may suppose, Pat Farrell was not slow in availing himself of this thinly veiled invitation, and every evening he haunted the little lane, until once again, he met her face to face. Then his heart beat high, for she came to meet him with a smile; and presently, he found himself sauntering with her through the meadows.

Her name was Elvira Moran, and her mother, so she said, had been a Spanish countess.

On hearing this, Pat felt a momentary but powerful impulse to kneel and kiss the hem of her skirts, not because he was a title-worshipper, but because this beautiful creature had condescended to walk with him, and be so gracious.

Often as the weeks went by they talked together, their trysting place being close to a sturdy yew, whose berries dropped down into an ancient quarry.

Here on a summer evening they were standing, when suddenly, after a brief silence, she said demurely, her eyes on the ground, "Pat—you may kiss me."

A quiver of delight ran through Pat's burly frame, and clasping her in his arms he pressed a passionate kiss upon her red lips.

"Then you'll marry me, aenishla?" She raised her head. "Yes, Pat," and her voice suddenly became matter-of-fact, "a soldier's pay isn't very much, is it?"

"Faith, no. But some day I may be a sergeant—if I'm lucky."

"Even then we wouldn't be able to indulge in many luxuries. Never mind," she added cheerfully, "we won't bother about the future. We can afford to wait, can't we, dear?"

"Ay course we can. Sure, y'are only a ship as a lassie, vit; and so long as y'are true to me, I'll be as happy as a lark."

As they walked slowly down the path towards the river, she turned to him, a gleam of enigma in her dark eyes. "I wonder," said she, "if you think of her now. Do you?"

The question was somewhat disconcerting. "Her! Who? Some girl, d'ye mean?"

"A low laugh broke from her lips. "I'm afraid," Pat, you are not so innocent, after all. I mean your old sweet-

heart—the girl, you know, you left behind you."

Pat's cheeks were crimson now, his eyes upon the ground; while his smart silver-topped cane was in danger of being snapped in two between his brawny fingers.

Bonny Mary Brennan! He had forgotten her. Bonny Mary Brennan, to whom he had pledged his troth but one short year before, under just such another rowan tree at Ballymoyle. In fancy, he could see her as she waved him a last good-bye, the sunlight changing the brightness of her hair into clearest gold. The vision was a momentary one. Turning to the girl beside him, he flung his arm impetuously around her waist. "There was a girl once, but I've forgotten her. There's no one I care for but you—you, me darlin'. I could kiss the very ground—"

"Somebody's coming!" she whispered; whereupon Pat hastily withdrew his arm, and fixing his gaze straight ahead, strove hard to assume an air of unconcern.

Coming leisurely towards them along the narrow path, was a tall, aristocratic-looking man, equipped with a fishing-rod and creel. As he drew nearer, Pat, stepping aside, saluted, an act of which the other was evidently oblivious, his eyes at the moment being riveted upon Pat's companion.

Elvira's mood had changed. Her face was graver than usual, and presently, when Pat attempted to resume his love-making, she thrust him aside with a slight show of resentment.

"Was that one of your officers who passed us just now?" she inquired in careless tones.

"Yis—Captain Ashleigh—an' as fine a gentleman as iver God created. Divil a bit of consate he has; and him—the son av a lord, and twice mentioned in dispatches whin we wor fighting the Pay-thans!"

"The soldiers like him, I suppose?"

"Like him! We'd folla him t' hell (savin' yer presence), ivery mother's son av us. To lak at him ye'd think him as jintle as a lamb; but, och, he's the divil t'fight. He ought t'have had the V.C. for somethin' he did in Fujia, but, nabodish! he'll get it afore the war's over—if they give him a chance."

"The war! What war?"

"The one that's going to be—up on the north-west frontier."

"Are you going? Pat, dear, you'll take care of yourself, won't you?"

"Well," he rejoined with a smile, "if there's goin' to be a fight the Linthorps'll want to be in it; but I'm doubtful if they'll find us out after all."

By this time they had reached the plashing that spanned the stream. Here Elvira came to a standstill.

"Pat," said she, "I think we had better say good-bye, good-bye for ever."

"Arrah! it's jokin' ye are," he said, lightly.

"I am not joking. I really think, Pat you had better try to forget me, to go back to your old sweetheart, if she'll have you. She's a better girl than I, better in every way. I'm not serious enough for marriage; I'm only a butterfly."

"Y'are me own throo colleen, that's fwaht y'are. An' I couldn't let ye go now—sure, 'twould break me heart. Ach, me darlin'!" and his voice quavered with the intensity of his emotion.

The girl's face brightened. "Remember," she said, "I have warned—"

The sentence remained unfinished. For Pat's arms were around her, his kisses upon her lips.

Mars was in the ascendant. The "dogs of war" were about to be loosed; and Private Farrell, like most of his comrades, was straining on the leash. At length, the welcome order; and the Second Battalion of the Leinster Fusiliers departed for Poslavur, in await events in one of our border wars.

It was a day of intense heat. "Hot as Hades!" growled a corporal of the Borderers, as he stood with his comrades awaiting the order to advance.

The scout—wily Gurkhas and silent Englishmen of the line—had located a body of the enemy, and from three

thousand yards away the little mountain battery was vomiting dydite.

Pat, as he watched the luring shells, was in high spirits. "Faith," said he, "if there's any of them yagura up yander they're havin' a purty lively time av it!"

Presently, while the Gurkhas began to work round on either flank, the Leinsters and the Borderers, under cover of the guns, advanced to the attack.

Private Farrell, well in front, sent his gaze up to the hog's-back crest. "Glancy!" he cried, to his nearest comrade, creeping from rock to rock, some half a dozen yards off. "Im thinkin' it's going to be a walk-over!"

Scarcely had the words left his lips, when the dry hillside spurted beneath a slanting rain of bullets. Men began to fall. But there was no wavering. Hot, panting, eager, up they swarmed, the scattered boulders and natural protuberances affording them excellent cover.

"Forward, my lads, forward!" sang out Captain Ashleigh, to a handful of panting struggling Fusiliers, as they neared the spot where he lay, his left arm propped beneath him.

Pat's enthusiasm suddenly vanished. "Ach, wirra, captain dear—" he began, as he sank on one knee beside his wounded officer.

"Go on, Farrell! Never mind me. Forward, my lads! Bravo!"

Twenty minutes later Pat reached the slight fortification on the hill-top. The Pathans had fled, leaving behind them a score or thereabouts of their dead and wounded. Just for a moment he stopped to watch the white-clad enemies dodging from cover to cover across the plateau; then turning, he hurried down the hillside, in search of Captain Ashleigh.

As he went, he suddenly became conscious of a slight dizziness, and of a pain in his right leg.

"Hit, by hokey! An' I niver knew it!" And for a moment or two he stood staring at the blood, as it oozed through the khaki.

As he hastily bandaged the wound, his thoughts returned to his captain. Would he be able to find him. Fear was tugging at his heart strings as, rising to his feet, he staggered onward. Five, ten minutes passed, then, just before the darkness fell, he found the man whom he sought.

Ashleigh, who was apparently in a state of collapse, had been shot through the body; and as Pat, in the fast-fading light, examined the wound, he felt a presentiment that his worst fears would soon be realised.

With some difficulty, he drew off his tunic, then, placing it over the prostrate figure, he rose to his feet with the

intention of seeking assistance. But ere he had gone a couple of yards his growing weakness compelled him to abandon the idea; so limping slowly back he lay down by the side of the captain.

"Who is there?" The words came faintly, almost in a whisper.

"Private Farrell, sir. Is the pain very bad?"

"Not very. We drove them out, didn't we?"

"We did, sir. We ficked them completely."

A brief silence; then the voice of Ashleigh. "What are you doing here? Are you wounded?"

"There's a weehee bit av a scratch on me leg, yer honor."

"Why don't you go and have it dressed?"

"Sure, I would if I could, but I can't, sir. The leg's stiffened a bit, an' it hurts me t' walk on it."

Five minutes passed. It was Ashleigh who again broke the silence.

"Farrell," he said slowly, and with an effort. "I want to say something to you while I'm able. I meant to have spoken about it long ago; but I had so many things on my mind at the time, that I quite forgot."

"Yis, sir."

"It's about a woman called Elvira—the one you were walking with when I met you last August, near Carrickmoyle River. You remember?"

"I do, surv. I'm goin' t' marry her."

"And live to regret it all the days of your life! Don't be a fool, Farrell. The woman is an adventuress—"

"An adventuress—a worthless woman. Four years ago, when I was stationed in Dublin, she tried to trap a brother-officer of mine—a mere boy—into marrying her. Luckily, before it was too late he learnt something of her past history. Farrell, for heaven's sake, man, if you ever loved a good, true, woman, go back to her before it is too late. Before you see Elvira again." Then in a broken whisper: "You—believe—me—Farrell!"

"Aye surr, I do." And below his breath he added, "God help me!"

"And—and you—will promise me to leave her—and go back to the good woman you knew before?"

"I will, surr," answered Pat, with a groan, and again he added softly, "God help me!"

Ten minutes later a man of the R.A.M.C. flashed his lantern upon the two rain-soaked figures.

There—silent, motionless, and apparently lifeless—sat Private Farrell, his back against a boulder, the dead body of his officer clasped in his arms.

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