

THE FORTUNES OF MAURICE O'DONNELL.

(By CONAL NOIR in the Dublin Freeman.)

CHAPTER II.

HAROLD was not long in returning with the door, on which they speedily lifted the wounded man, and proceeded to carry it downwards to where the road wound midway round the side of the hill.

"Shall we leave the hare here?" asked Frank, as their patient, apparently recovering himself, glanced round in the direction of the clump of furze.

"No, shoot it, and put it beside him," said Maurice. "He has suffered enough for it, poor fellow."

"Oh, no, thank you," said the other, "no more shooting of hares for me on this mountain. When I shoot at a hare I'll take care that it will be one that won't turn into a man. I don't admire that sort of legerdemain."

"Knock it on the head and bring it along with you, Harold," said Maurice.

Harold did so and they proceeded down the uneven hill side, Frank carrying the two guns and the others the door.

The way down being rugged they had much difficulty in carrying it horizontally.

The hill sloped very steeply from the road to the base, along which a torrent poured its stream. In some places the slope changed into a cliff, and it was at one of these places that Frank preparing to take his place as carrier in place of Maurice, whose arms were tired, asked—

"Have we far to go? Can any one tell me that?"

"I have never been here before," said Harold, "so I don't know."

"Do you know, Maurice?"

"It's several years since I have been here before," said Maurice, "and I forget exactly how this road lies or where it leads to."

"It is a very satisfactory ending to a day's sport—isn't it," said Frank in great disgust. "Tramping along a road in an unknown desert land, and carrying something that may turn out to be a witch or a wher-wolf, for anything anyone knows."

"I tell you what it is, Maurice," said he, as he found that they paid no attention to these remarks, and stopping to straighten his back. "This is altogether too much of a good thing. What I suggest is, let us cant this whole business over the side of the cliff into the stream below. It would be bad no doubt, but not very much worse than the shooting. It might save you. Shall I? It will never be known in the dark."

"What's that he says?" burst out angrily the occupant of the door, lifting himself sharply on his elbow and glaring malevolently at him. "What's that he says?"

The question was not addressed to anyone in particular, but was rather a defiant reply to the suggestion of the carrier.

But it came so unexpectedly, the inanimate form raised itself with such remarkable liveliness, and its tones were couched in such anger and fierceness, in contrast with his own rollicking good-humoured way, that Frank was very much startled, and in the first moment of surprise his hands slipped from their hold, and the end of the door which he carried fell on the road, and the querist rolled over off it into the dust.

"That's a nice way to thrate a man," said he, jumping up with great liveliness on to his feet, to the profound astonishment of all three.

"It's a nice thing to kill a man first by shootin' him an' then to tby to murder him, ain't it?"

The surprise which reigned over the group prevented them replying, or, in fact, doing more than for the moment staring at him.

The speaker, now that he had risen to his feet and stood erect, seemed to be at first just a hunchback. But a second glance showed that it was only a stoop, whether arising from some natural defect or the force of habit. He was of very dwarfish form, not more than about four feet six in height, which the stoop made to appear greater.

In marked contrast with this diminished height was the breadth of his shoulders, which gave him the appearance of being as broad as he was long. And in still more marked contrast with his late inanimate condition was the energy and life displayed in his countenance, as, addressing himself to Frank, he again queried—

"Aint it?"

"It was not this gentleman who did it," said Maurice, who was the first to recover from the surprise. "It was I unfortunately who fired the shot. I am glad you are so much better. Where are you hurt?"

"It was him that said I ought to be thrown down the cliff, wasn't it?" said the dwarf, still addressing himself to the young Englishman, and wholly unheeding the question asked him.

"He was only joking," said Maurice apologetically.

"Aye," said the dwarf, "jokin'. It's nice jokin'. So is the shootin'. That's nice jokin', too."

"Can we help you home?" said Maurice, kindly endeavouring to placate the anger of the other, and to make some amends for his unfortunate shot.

"No, you can't help me home. I'm at home."

"At home. Where?"

"Where? There!" said the dwarf frantically.

Maurice looked around and up the hill side, but in the darkening eve he could see no sign of habitation.

He rested his eyes again on the dwarf, and following the direction indicated by his gaze, was surprised to see a light gleaming in a doorway by the roadside. The roof of the hut corresponded with the slope of the mountain, and but for the chance appearance of the glimmer at the entrance he would have failed to notice it.

"You'd better leave that where you got it or you'll sup sorrow if the mistress hears ov it," said the dwarf, taking the hare under his arm, and limping painfully, disappeared without further remark or observation, into the doorway, which was little more in height than himself.

The three young men looked at one another for a few minutes silently at this unexpected change in the situation.

"It is a land of marvels!" said Frank, in mock heroics, as he watched this lately inanimate form hobble across the road and disappear into the hill.

"That's very odd!" reflected Maurice. "I really thought he was dying."

"I told you, my dear Maurice, if you'll be good enough to remember, that he did not seem to me to be a gentleman whom ordinary bullets or shot could touch," said Frank chaffingly.

"To think the fellow should have humbugged us into carrying him down the hill," said Harold, whose sides and back ached with the stooping.

"It's incomprehensible to me," said Maurice, "for I really believed he was seriously injured."

"For my part I consider it a great honour to have had the dignity of being his bearer," said Frank. "If I had not unfortunately dropped my end of the stretcher we might possibly have had the pleasure of his company still farther. Take my word for it, that's the guardian genius of the Clan O'Donnell, dwelling in the hills. We have had the rare felicity of being permitted to see him."

"What shall we do with this door?" said Harold, touching it with the top of his boot in disgust.

"With all respect to the geni's injunctions," said Frank, lifting the door from the road and tilting it over against the rough stone wall that bordered the cliff, "I shall leave it there and not where we got it. It could not be under better guardianship than his. By the way, who is the Mistress of whose punishment he warned us? Any giants living among the rocks? Any gorgones dwelling in the hills? Because, if so, we had better decamp more rapidly."

"I fancy it's my sister Grace," said Maurice. "These mountains used to be ours. I don't know whether they do now or not. Grace knows. Grace knows all about them."

"A rich and fertile possession, too," Frank was about to add, as he glanced upwards at the frowning mountains, now shrouding their huge boulders and rushy swamps with the night mists, and down into the torrent far below. But he checked himself in time. Fond as he was of joking, and light and airy of character, he would not for a good deal have said a word that would grate on the feelings of his host.

"Miss O'Donnell is the mistress, is she?"

"I think so. I don't know of any other."

"Well, then, most worthy genius," said Frank, giving the old door a parting thrust with his boot to steady it, "I think we leave this venerable bier in your guardianship, and take all the punishments and sufferings that come of it."

"That puts me in mind," said Maurice suddenly, "Grace will be home this evening—may be home even now. She left Paris on Thursday, and should be here this evening. It's too bad that I should be absent."

"As it is," said Harold, "and all the more so that it is so long since you saw one another. How long is this you say?"

"Not since I left Eton," said Maurice. "That's four years ago. But she was only seventeen then. I suppose I shall hardly know her now. She must have grown a great deal since."

"It's hardly good taste in you not to be there to meet her," said Harold. He did not say that he was burning with anxiety himself to see the young lady of whose beauty he had heard so much, and which indeed was the reason why he had come across from his regiment to spend the summer leave among the highlands of Donegal.

"You're right there, Harold. But I thought we should be home earlier. And we would, but for that confounded misfortune that has happened to us."

"I object to its being called a misfortune," said Frank, as he handed Maurice his gun and fixed the other on his own shoulder, as an indication to proceed on their journey, which they did. "I object to its being called a misfortune. We have evoked from his reserve one of the mountain deities. We have brought from his hiding-place the long-forgotten genius of the Clan O'Donnell! What would you have, oh! unbelieving Saxon? What would you have more?"

"I wish the genius had not turned up for this one evening," said Maurice. "I should have much preferred it. I think there's a short cut at the end of this turn," said he as they came, after half an hour's quick walk, to a sharp angle where the huge granite rocks protruded themselves forward, and the road narrowed itself into a footway around the cliffs. "I think I remember this place. This used to be Glen-na-Scobb."

They had turned the angle, and a semi-circular bend, sharp, steep, and declivity, lay before them, around which the path wound in a half-moon circle.

"Yes, this is Glen-na-Scobb," said he. "We shall have to climb upwards here. There is a path here somewhere, if I remember aright. The moon will have risen by the time we reach the top."

"It would have been rather an ugly business if we had to carry our friend the genius around this pathway," said Frank, as he glanced at the shelving path that sloped around the steep sides of the amphitheatre; and glanced upwards where the sharp crest stood in strong relief against the sky.

"Where is the path anyhow?" said Harold, whose impatience to get home again was very strong, for reasons known to himself.

"This is it," said Maurice, "I think. Yes; this is it. I remember it now."

"This," said Frank. "This! Why this is but a winding sheep-path. We could never climb up that to the top."

"It is the best we can offer you; I'm afraid. They are not particular about roads among these highlands."

"That's pretty evident," said the other, striking at the white path before him with the butt-end of the gun, and displacing a quantity of shelving stones that rolled with a great rattle into the darkness below. "Bather unsteady footway that."

"Talking won't make it better," said Maurice. "So here goes now for yonder summit."

Winding along the face of the hillside, that, for its steepness, might almost be called a cliff, the path led zig-zag upwards; and the three young men commenced the ascent, Maurice leading.

(To be continued.)