

THE FORTUNES OF MAURICE O'DONNELL.

(By CONAL NOIR in the Dublin Freeman.)

CHAPTER VIII.

"Perhaps you would hold all three, whilst these gentlemen go in to see their friend."

"To be sure I will, Miss Grace."

"He is inside—is he not?"

"He is."

The three descended from their horses, and Grace walked lightly up to where Manus, on whose dull hearing the unaccustomed tread of the horses' feet had fallen, had risen from his seat of grassy turf bank.

A bright look of pleasure and intelligence seemed to kindle over the withered and sightless cheeks, from which the orbits themselves had long disappeared, and the parchment face seemed to glow alight with recognition as Grace laid her white hand on his.

"Manus."

"Grace."

"I came over to see you this morning."

"You were always a good child, Grace. It makes my heart light to know you are near."

"You are so kind, Manus. I know it does. I heard you playing."

"Ah, 'twas an old air. I don't know what brought it into my head that morning."

"It was very sad, Manus."

"Ah, 'twas a sad story."

"What was it about, Manus? It seemed to be very distressing and sad."

"It was about a traitor O'Donnell, Grace."

The old man always called her by the name she was called when she was a child, and Grace looked up to him with all the more affection therefor.

"About a traitor O'Donnell, who in old times sold his name, an' his creed, an' his native hills for Saxon gold. It's a very old tune, and the sorrow is the keening for its treachery; and the high notes are the bursts of anger and vengeance to follow him."

"I thought it was very striking."

"Aye," said the old man, turning his face up to the warmth of the sun, whose brightness had been hidden from his dim brain for scores of years, "it's a great many years since it came into my head afore, not since your Uncle Rickard was hung from the walls of Derry."

"I am sorry you thought of it to-day," said Grace, with an uncomfortable feeling over her.

"I can't help them, child. These old tunes come in spite of me. They come of themselves. I cannot make them come; I cannot prevent them."

"I am going in to see this young gentleman that has been hurt, Manus. And when we are going I shall ask you to play for me—for me, Manus, the march of the O'Donnells."

"Ah, if I can. My heart is heavy to-day for some reason. I can't play the tunes with life an' power an' battle in them. It's only the keen and the wail that come into my fingers this morning."

"It oughn't to be so, Manus. It is a bright day."

"I know it is. I feel it on my face; but my heart is sad. I don't know why. Who is with you, child?"

"Two gentlemen friends of mine," said Grace, fearing for some unknown dread to mention her brother's name—a fear partly begotten of the old harper's sorrowful memories and of her brother's caution.

"But take your seat, Manus, and rest yourself. Don't walk with me; you are not strong enough. Rest yourself. We shall be out shortly."

And gently pressing the old man back to his turf seat, and placing the harp, which he had laid to rest against a bush, once more in his hands, Grace tripped down with a heart many degrees less light than it was going up to the door of the dwellinghouse, and entered.

She had a strange curiosity to see the other visitor her brother had brought, and during the morning had not unfrequently employed her imagination in drawing a fancy picture of him. But the reality was very unlike—as is the case with all fancy pictures—the reality though not unpleasantly or disagreeably so.

For reclining on a bed of heath that sent a perfume as of flowers through the apartment, Grace saw a young man, somewhat about her brother's age, whose pleasant face and fine eyes, even though contracted occasionally with the pain of his broken arm, indicated a cheerful spirit and high courage. There was something in the stamp of his face of good nature, insouciance, carelessness, and fearlessness, that showed even to Grace's first glance high blood and gentle breeding. His eyes, as they fell on the young girl's face when Maurice introduced her, lit up with the electric light of admiration and astonishment; but he speedily checked himself. Not indeed, however, till Harold's quick eye had noticed with a jealous pang the glance of admiration. And, as before, despite of his better nature and of his high notions of honour, a secret wish shot through his heart that Frank had not been found, or that, being found, he might be tempted to return home to England, or anywhere out of Donegal.

Frank's story was soon told. Seeing his friends standing out against the moonlight on the cliff, and seeing them further move away from it out of his sight, he had hurried to overtake them, which hurry caused him to take less certain steps; his foot slipped, and he fell backwards—how far or how often he could not say. He could only remember the bright surface of the sky, with its silver moon and studding stars rushing past him, as he swiftly fell. He could remember that they seemed drowned out, as if a flood of darkness had suddenly quenched them. Further than that, he knew of himself nothing.

But he had learned since that he had been stayed in his head-long descent after his heavy fall by the strong roots of a bush on the

steep hill side, and that he had been found and carried home. By whom?

"Of all people in the world," said Frank with a droll twinkle of his eye, "by whom?"

"We know," said Maurice with an answering smile. "The geni."

"The geni. Yes. Better known as"—

"Briney," interrupted Maurice.

"Yes, that's the name."

Briney, Frank told them, astonished at seeing three strangers ascending such a dangerous pathway, and not knowing what they were about, had despite of his recent fright and his wounds rushed to follow and watch them; and, seeing the unaccustomed traveller slip and fall from the perilous height, had climbed down after him; reached him where the bush-roots caught and held his senseless form; and bore him in safety homewards with as much ease as he would a trapped hare.

All this and much more, Frank told in a droll round-about way, in which references to the geni were made in a languid, humorous way; but through which clear indications of his gratefulness were shown. And always, when he could, without being rude letting his eyes wander from his two friends, and rest on the wondrous face of beauty that was presented to him, and that was in silence listening gracefully to his story.

And as his wandering eye rested on her face, and the light that indicated his admiration and surprise kindled for a second anew in them, Harold's eyes followed them with a bitterness and dislike and soreness of heart, which he could not utter for, even to himself.

"Grace!" said Maurice in a whisper.

"Yes, Maurice."

"How shall we get him to Craighome. We can't leave him here you know?"

"Certainly not," said Grace.

"How shall we remove him?"

"Leave that to Allan and Briney. They will know what to do. Would he like to come? Is he strong enough?"

"Yes, he would," Maurice put the question to him. "Yes he would like to come; and would certainly be strong enough after another day." With such a beautiful young lady as that at Craighome, Frank thought, he would have himself removed there, even though his head had been taken off. And as he smiled to himself over the oddity of this notion, the visitors rose to take their leave; and to send him from Craighome such delicacies as he needed.

They found blind Manus, standing in the sunlight of the threshold when they came out.

"Manus," said Grace.

"Yes, child."

"I want one of these gentlemen to hear you play the 'March of the O'Donnells.' Will you play it?"

"I can't, Grace. I can't get a stirring note from my harp this morning. Who is that with you?"

"Friends, Manus."

"Who are they?" asked Manus persistently.

"An English gentleman."

"Who else?"

"My brother, Maurice," said Grace with reluctance.

"I knew, I knew!" said the old man, whilst an expression of anger and dislike seemed to creep over his face.

"What do you know?" asked Grace uneasily.

"He's wan ov the O'Donnell's. He's wan of the praskeen O'Donnells. He's wan ov the traitor O'Donnells. 'Twas ov him the prophecy was said. 'Twas ov him the prophecy was said!"

"Manus, Manus!" almost shrieked the young girl in affrighted expostulation. "Do you know of whom you are speaking?"

"I do well," said he, clutching the harp under one arm. He felt his way along the clay wall with the other to the doorway. "I do well."

"Maurice, my brother Maurice. Maurice O'Donnell?"

"Aye, I know him well—know him since first my blinded eyes grew dark. He's Maurice, the traitor. 'Twas of him the prophecy was said. He was——"

"Oh, Manus, Manus, stop!" cried Grace. "Don't say such dreadful things."

But the old man, interrupted, had slid into the doorway and was lost.

"Come away, Grace! come away. This is simply fooling," said Maurice, angrily.

But the tears of disappointment and undeserved reproof and affright had welled up into the gentle girl's eyes, and had filled them.

Seeing this, and with unusual anger in his heart, more for their effect on Grace's feelings than for any care he had himself for the old man's words or prophecies, Maurice gently linked her by the arm down to where the horses were standing, and assisted her to remount.

Their ride home was a good deal in silence; for Grace's heart was overwhelmed with unknown fear, begotten of the unusual and unaccountable unkindness of the old harper—her kinsman by name if not by blood—and his singular dislike to Maurice.

And the application of that prophecy—how well Grace knew it! How often she had heard of it! How often she rejoiced to think it could never be verified in any of her family. For there now remained of them all but herself and Maurice.

It was with a heart very different from the bounding one she carried in her breast, when she cantered up the avenue in the freshness of the morning, that now in the evening throbbed within her, laden with feelings of hidden fear and danger, as she threw the reins over her horse's neck to Allen; and hurried up to her room looking out on the distant graveyard, where her kindred lay buried, and burying her face in her hands, cried bitterly.

"Maurice. Poor Maurice. What an unkindness. What a way to greet him after his absence. What could they mean?"

(To be Continued.)