

## THE FORTUNES OF MAURICE O'DONNELL.

(By CONAL NOIR in the Dublin Freeman.)

## CHAPTER XX.

"There goes the bugles, at any rate," said Maurice, in hearty approval. "We shall soon know whether our horses' heads point."

"It is for our captured guns," said Harold cheerily. "We shall soon have them out of their clutches again. What impudence in the oil-drinking Tartars to think of capturing and holding English guns."

"How far are they away, think you?"

"I should say two miles or thereabouts."

"We had better go easy up that slope else our horses will be blown long before we reach these fellows."

"We shall have the Inniskilling sabres about their ears in twenty minutes," said Harold confidently.

"If it is for them we are bent," said Maurice doubtfully.

The bugles once more rang out "Forward!"

"The two long lines of horsemen, with drawn swords, trotted lightly forward, the officers in front. Seven hundred horsemen comprised the glittering lines, and as they moved in perfect order over the slightly undulating plain, Maurice's eye brightened at the brilliant sight.

The bugles again sounded "Halt!"

Again the Generals conversed together doubtfully, as if not quite sure of the business which they had before them.

"What the devil is the meaning of this?" asked Harold angrily.

"Just what I said before. The Generals don't know what they are about."

"Upon my honour I think you are right, Maurice. As if the blind fools had not eyes to see where our captured guns are being taken off. Confound them!"

"A few seconds will reveal all," said Maurice with great seriousness and gravity. "There goes the bugle again. Hear it. 'Forward!' There seems at last to be a decision in their councils. Now at last for the captured guns!"

As the cavalry moved forward, with that indecision which characterises the actions and movements of men who are not quite certain of what they are called upon to do, Maurice's eye had time to take in the surroundings.

Before him at the distance of more than a mile and a half, at the further end of the valley, the guns of the Russians lay in a long line, their black mouths pointing in their direction. Behind these guns were massed heavy columns of Russian infantry, silent, motionless, and impassible as a granite rock.

Right and left, for half a mile in advance of the guns the Cossacks with their long lances, and the Russian Hussars, held the low hills that bordered the valley on either side. Some of the troops were busily engaged in removing the English cannon from the forts which the Turks had hastily abandoned.

To Maurice's right was the brigade of heavy cavalry to which the staff-officer had so hurriedly ridden; whilst to the left nodding plumes, burnished helmets, and flash of drawn swords in far-extended array, showed where the divisions of the French were rapidly forming up.

The ceaseless piping and the gay calls of the bugles, as the white caps of the Spanish intermixed with the sparkling sheen of the helmets of the dragoons, gave a festive air to the warlike preparation.

But his eye quickly forsook the gay sight—indeed, from the low ground in which he sat in his saddle and from the crest of the hill obscuring it, he could but see the head gear of their cavalry, or the bannerets of the lancers, as regiment after regiment gaily, as if on parade moved lightly into position—and glanced down the valley that lay before him.

"It really does seem as if the Russian guns were our destination," said Maurice, as they trotted slowly forward.

"Our people do foolish things; but they are hardly mad enough to do that," said Harold slowly, as his eye took in the surroundings also.

"It would be pure sacrifice of the men."

"It would be worse—it would be simple murder."

"Not a dozen men will come back."

"Scarcely; and the army is particularly weak in cavalry, even at present."

"Here comes Nolan. By heavens, Harold, it is for the guns yonder we are bent."

"I think so; they might as well send us to charge into the centre of a burning forest, whatever confounded blunder urges the General on."

"No; but whatever confounded madness has hold of them. Not even a madman would send a handful of troops on such a mission."

"To fight the whole Russian army, and to ride down a score of guns. But here comes Nolan. How he sits his horse!"

"One would think he grew from the saddle."

"By heavens, Maurice, look!"

"Maurice was engaged as the officer trotted forward in loosening the silken knot of his sword; but he looked up at this exclamation.

"What is it, Harold?"

"Nolan is going to ride the charge himself."

"Nonsense; he is not mad enough."

"I assure you he is. Look!"

"I don't see him. Where is he?"

"Right in front. In advance of the General."

"Yes; I see him. Good heavens, so he is."

"By the way, Maurice, was it not here we saw him last night?"

"So it was," said Maurice with something of a start as he hurriedly recalled the transaction. "Just where he is at present."

As Maurice looked forward Nolan had ridden obliquely from the column of heavy dragoons at the right, and had placed himself in advance of the cavalry, now getting into a rapid trot.

Waving his sword to his men behind, as if pointing the direction in which their charge should be made, or bidding them follow, he turned once more in his saddle, freed the reins of his horse, grasped his sword more firmly, and, foremost of the advancing horsemen, prepared to ride with them.

A feeling of surprise ran through the ranks of the horsemen as the dancing plumes of the gallant staff-officer appeared before them ready at his own chivalrous notion merely, to ride the charge of death with his comrades—a feeling which rapidly changed into enthusiastic admiration.

His fine form; his easy seat; the manner in which horse and man moved together, as if they formed but one; the handsome uniform of the hussar setting off so finely his muscular figure; all gave him the appearance of the *beau sabreur* of the French army.

"He is fit to rival Murat," said Harold.

"He is a born leader of horsemen. If he were born in the East he would be another Saladin. My God! Look!"

At this moment a Russian shell, thrown with great precision, had fallen in advance of the object of their regards and exploded with great force, bursting into a thousand fragments. A portion of the shell struck the officer in the breast.

Immediately the reins relaxed from his grasp and the sword dropped from his nerveless hand. His horse, feeling the pressure of his masters' hand released from the reins, and perhaps frightened by the explosion of the shell, turned round and galloped back on the advancing horsemen.

The two officers' attention was riveted upon him as they met; the former advancing in a trot that was rapidly becoming a gallop, the latter retreating.

"Harold! he's killed. See! his sword has fallen. He has lost hold of the rein."

"Tut, Maurice. He sits upright. His sword arm is upraised."

A second after they had swept past him, his horse having skirted to the right. As they did they saw in a glance that the form sitting upright, as if to show even in death his skill as a horseman, was lifeless. The eyes wide open, were ghastly and staring; the under jaw had fallen; and the face, even in the brief second of time, bore the strange imprint of death.

But whilst they passed and noticed all this with affright, a cry, a shriek—so strange, so weird, so unearthly that it sent a shudder through all the ranks, and rang even over the tread of the horsemen—burst from the dead officer's lips!

It chilled the blood in Maurice's veins, so weird and appalling it was. It was the cry of a dead man!

This is no fiction. It is now historical. And much discussion in connection with the event has since taken place. That the famous horseman had been killed instantaneously by the bursting shell at the moment when his sword fell from his uplifted arm and the bridle dropped from his grasp, is undoubted. And that the strange unearthly cry that came from his lips, came from those from which life had departed is also undoubted. Many efforts have been made to explain it; but the fact remains unimpeachable.

"Maurice!" said Harold as they rode past, "Did you hear that?"

"It was awful!" said Maurice.

"He is dead."

"Poor fellow—that shell killed him."

"See he has fallen."

As Maurice wheeled around in his saddle to look back, he noticed that the riderless horse had turned again, and was galloping disorderly along with the brigade. Its dead master had fallen from his saddle and lay on the ground.

"It was there we saw him last night, Maurice. It was his wraith we saw—if ever there was such a thing."

"It was strange—passing strange! Poor fellow! Braver heart or truer spirit never died on battle-field before."

"Nor better comrade."

"No; I mourn him for many reasons."

"His high hopes and bright anticipations are over, Maurice."

Maurice did not reply. He had no time for replying—nor for even thinking. The bugle sounded "go faster."

They had come within range of the Russian riflemen lining the hills on either side, who began to open fire on them rapidly. The gunners ranged in front, who had been leisurely throwing an odd shell at them as they first got into movement, now began to open on them briskly; and as the hurtling roundshot tore through their ranks, or the shells exploded above them or before them, they could see where the guns in front were wreathing themselves in a thick mantle of white smoke, as from a score mouths the angry jets of red flame spurted forth.

The Russians had been too much surprised at first by the madness of this singular charge to understand it or know what it was about; but as soon as the movement sufficiently developed to allow them to become certain of its nature, they rapidly opened fire on the horsemen. From the troops crowding the hills on either side as they rode up the narrow valley, and from the long ordered lines of guns in front, the messengers of death were rained upon the devoted band; and in a short time the dying and dead horses and soldiers began to mark their fiery pathway.

"This is murder—pure murder!" said Harold. "Why don't we go faster? We shall never reach these guns in front at this rate."

The men were dropping by scores; saddles were being emptied; and riderless horses were galloping wounded around the valley behind, or disorganising the ranks as they plunged frightened in and out, or again rode with the general body disorderly forward.

One consequence being that long before the charging horsemen got near the enemy, the ranks were completely broken, and they moved forward rather a disorderly mob than in line of charge.

"To me, men! follow me!" exclaimed Maurice, as he took in with hurried glance the perilous surroundings to right and left of him, and as the hail of fire from the hills held by the Russians rained on them, whilst from the front the cannon, worked with ceaseless activity, tore them with shot and shell.

(To be continued.)