

THE FORTUNES OF MAURICE O'DONNELL.

(By CONAL NOIR in the Dublin Freeman.)

CHAPTER XX.

"FOLLOW me, men! For the Russian guns!" he called aloud, as giving his horse free rein, and a quick spur; and freeing his sword arm, he swept suddenly forward.

Harold, prompted much by the same motives, spurred swiftly after to keep up with him; whilst a score or more of the Inniskillings maddened by the manner in which they were torn and decimated, without being able to pay back a blow, broke away from the ranks, and with sword hilts burying themselves in their bleeding hands rode with equal speed after him.

With heads bent down, much as men do when they face a fierce shower of hail on a summer's day, Maurice and his gallant band of followers flew forward.

Nearer and nearer came the wreathing clouds of smoke; redder and redder, and brighter and brighter grew the flash from the guns; more distinctly grew the forms of the men working at them; until all of a sudden their white faces and their long rammers became plainly visible; and in a second more Maurice was leaping over the guns and tumbrils, followed by his men, sabring the Russian gunners at their posts as they thundered past.

Some of the latter abandoned the guns in face of this determined onslaught, and sheltered themselves under the ammunition waggons, or retreated closely pursued by the Inniskillings, on the great mass of the Russian infantry behind.

Wheeling around when he had cut his way to the rear of the men, Maurice rode back to them. He looked for Harold but he was nowhere to be seen. A great many men and horses were lying entangled between the smoking guns, for in the few minutes the fight had lasted the Inniskillings had lost heavily, not alone from the bayonets of the gunners, but from the incessant rifle fire of the masses behind.

At that moment a regiment of Cossacks with their long lances rode forward to attack the handful of men that had ridden over and beyond the guns, whilst in front a division of Russian dragoons and infantry were swiftly deploying from the hills to intercept their return.

The moment was critical. This mad and purposeless charge had been gallantly accomplished. There was not a moment to be lost if they were not to be surrounded and taken prisoners. Even already were the encircling columns of Russians barricading their retreat.

Through the roll of musketry, the clash of arms, the vengeful cry of the English soldiers as their swords clove through the helmets of the Russians, the savage yells of the Cossacks as they ran full tilt against the little scattered bands of the Inniskillings, came the bugle-call for retreat.

At once the horsemen turned from their foes; and once more leaping over the guns on his return, Maurice, sword in hand, faced backwards towards the foes that were gathering to bar his retreat. Side by side with and behind him came those that were still able to keep their seats and hold their swords firmly.

The Russians from the hills on either side had nearly joined hands across the valley—but not quite.

To the space thus vacant Maurice turned his horse's head. A troop of dragoons, with their colonel at their head, rode forward to intercept them.

Maurice faced for the colonel. There was nothing else for it; and though the Russian was a powerful man and powerfully mounted Maurice, confident in his skill, and moved with the desperation of the moment, rode straight at him.

Before he had time to exchange a blow, a passing Cossack riding at full speed tilted at him with his lance, hurling him from the saddle with a heavy fall to the ground. A rush of the Inniskillings passed over him as he lay half-stunned, dashing wrathfully at the obstructing Russians. The conflict was of short duration. The superior skill and élan of the Inniskillings and the desperation with which their position nerved them, clove for them a pathway.

As Maurice lifted himself to his feet a Russian trooper aimed a sabre blow at him. A cry arose from behind which startled Maurice and he looked upwards only to perceive his danger. His sword had fallen from his grasp, and instinctively he raised his bare arm to protect himself.

The Russian's sword wavered in the air with the swiftness of a wave of light above his head, like a flash of lightning, searing his brain and heart. Maurice felt his hour was come.

But a shot rang out at his ear, the flash of light blazed at his eyelid; and before he knew what had happened, Maurice saw the sabre drop, point downwards, from the foreign officer's grasp and its owner reel in the saddle. A bullet had passed through his heart.

"Mount, Maurice O'Donnell! You have not a minute to lose. You'll never see Craighome again if you wait a heart's beat or time. Mount!"

Without waiting to see who spoke to him, Maurice grasped at the reins of one of the riderless horses that were rushing back; seized his sword from the ground where it lay; leaped with one swift bound into the saddle; and flew forward through the opening his retreating horsemen had made.

His horse, flying at great speed, stumbled over the dead body of a charger that had fallen, and he was flung heavily on the ground before yet he had gotten beyond the circle of his enemies.

An immediate rush was made for him, and several Cossacks passed swiftly across from the main body with the points of their lances downwards.

But just as his riderless horse, after recovering himself dashed past after the others, and before the advancing Russians had time to arrive and put their intention into execution, he felt, in his half-stunned state, a firm hand grasp in his collar, and he found himself dragged along the trampled surface of the ground with great rapidity.

At the same moment the ground shook with the charge of the brigade of heavy cavalry, as they rode forward to cover the retreat of the remnant of the shattered brigade that had ridden forth in all their bravery and magnificence a short half-hour before. The Russian guns, abandoned by their captors, opened a terrific fire on friends and foes where they were intermingled in the narrow valley. The hoarse cries of thirty thousand French soldiers who had watched with wonder and amazement the magnificence and daring of the charge—in enthusiastic admiration of its dauntless bravery, and wonder at its very madness and purposelessness—burst forth in applauding cheers for the survivors; and in the midst of this whirlwind of war, uproar, and confusion, and while a dull sense of being much hurt and shaken pervaded his senses, Maurice heard his name called.

"Can you stand, Maurice. Try if you can stand—if you can walk. We're in a very dangerous place here. The bullets are sweeping straight from their guns. Recover yourself! Can you stand?"

With a vague sense that the voice was familiar to him, with a dim consciousness that they were, as the speaker had said, in a position of deadly danger, but still unable to recall his scattered senses sufficiently to resolve on anything, Maurice leant against the pommel of his saddle, the grasp of the friendly horseman still on his collar.

"Who is it?" he feebly asked, the heavy fall rendering it difficult for him to hold up his head.

"Is it you, my man, Maurice? Look at me. You can't, I see that. It was a heavy fall you got. But it's me that's here; it's Briney."

"Briney!" said Maurice, rapidly gathering up his scattered faculties at the name.

"Sorra wan else. But this if no place to be stayin. Come along, Maurice. Do you see who's here?"

Maurice, with difficulty, looked upwards. To his infinite surprise—even in his semi-conscious state—he saw that Briney was dressed in regimentals, which did not at all seem so unsuitable to him as might be supposed from his dwarfish size; and that he bore on the saddle, whilst he himself sat behind, the form of a wounded soldier.

Looking still closer, as his vision and mind grew clearer, he noticed that the wounded soldier was an officer, that the officer was Harold, and that he was seriously wounded and senseless.

"Followed you through the smoke. Was hot foot behind you leavin' his horse over the cannons; an' begorra, a Russian as big as the three of us together gav him a wipe of his sword, an' fair he went down between two of them guns without a breath in him," said Briney in answer to the mute questioning of the other. "An' fair, only I happened to be near at hand, be good luck, the sorra ever he'd have lifted his head out or id, for there were fifty ready to fly their horses over the same path, after him, an' they'd have trampled him to death."

"So it was you that saved me from the Russian?" asked Maurice half-dazedly.

"Av coorse it was. Shure you couldn't expect me to let you be kilt by a devil of a Russian, or wan of these Cossacks, God betune us an' harm. It's bad enough to be killed by a decent Christian, but be one ov' these Tartars—paugh! But, Maurice, honey, here! there is a rein for you!" Briney grasped at and caught the reins of a passing steed, as he spoke. "Jump up an' come along. Look at that! If you don't hurry we'll never get back. Never. See!"

A shell burst at the moment within a few yards of them; and in a moment after, a tremendous salvo of artillery from the heights announced that the French, the first astonishment and surprise over, and the cavalry free from the Russian guns, had opened fire upon the Russian positions, which the latter, in no way disheartened, began steadily to return.

Maurice mounted the saddle with great difficulty and with but little of his former elasticity.

CHAPTER XXI.

As Maurice with Briney in his charge rode past the place where the famous horseman had fallen his body was lying there still.

The time was so short and the period was so full of excitement and suspended interest that there was no time to give attention to the fallen.

Still and rigid he lay, the face, white and fixed, turned to the sky. The bright hopes that had fired his brain, the daydreams that had kindled his heart ever since the day he parted from the blue ranges of Mount Leinster, the ambition to use his high military skill in the service of his native land, were all vanished. He was fated never more to rest his eyes on the purple flowers of the Blackstairs nor on the broad wave of the sunlit Barrow; and his sword was destined never to outflash on Irish hill-side for his country's freedom.

"Poor fellow! poor fellow!" was all Maurice could say as he yet but faintly realised the death of his gallant friend.

But the living needed attention more than the dead, for the present and so himself and Briney rode with the unconscious form of the wounded Harold to the military hospital, whither they had him carefully borne and attended to.

He had received some severe bayonet wounds, as his horse fell, killed by a bullet through the head, in the moment of leaping over the Russians guns, Harold had fallen underneath and been severely crushed.

It was only then that Briney, who, unknown to them, had provided himself with uniform as indeed, he managed to provide himself and them with everything—had seized a picketed charger, and in the excitement of the moment had joined them, lifted him with great bodily strength from under the crushing weight, and bore him in safety from his dangerous position.

(To be continued.)

An interesting ceremony took place at Glencolumbkille,—namely, the blessing of 40,000 trees about to be planted in the district, in pursuance of the reforestation scheme of Dr. Lyons, M.P. Dr. Lyons was present, and the ceremony was performed by the Most Rev. Dr. Logue, Bishop of Raphoe.