

It was O'Byrne's intention, as he said, to get into the Wicklow glens before them, and muster the glensmen to surround them, and so out of their retreat.

Towards mid-day they rested on the hills, for they were fatigued with their long and devious ride, and partook of some of the brandy Oney carried, mixed with the clear water from the mountain springs, and lit their cigars, whilst their horses, picketed by their bridles, were allowed to graze around.

During this luxurious period of repose O'Byrne suddenly pointed to the East.

"See, Maurice, look yonder!"

Maurice looked, but could only see a dreamy haze arising far in the lowlands—little spots of blue dotting the landscape not unpleasantly here and there, but growing more frequent. They were now too distant to see the line of horsemen.

"Do you know what that is? Do you know what that means?"

"No."

"They are burning the country as they pass. These are the houses and haggarts of the farmers. They are desolating the land on their line of march, and murdering the people too, you may depend. Heaven help them!"

"I cannot see the troops," said Maurice, gazing intently. "I can only see the blue spots."

"No; because they have scattered, and are burning far inland and off their line of march. See how numerous the blue dots grow now!"

"But Coote is our own countryman, O'Byrne. Surely he will not suffer this!"

"An Irishman! So much the worse, Maurice. Don't you remember the old saying: if an Irishman were roasting you would get another to turn the spit. See how the dots grow!"

They were indeed growing numerous, dotting valleys widely asunder.

"Maurice, I'll tell you what we shall do," said O'Byrne, after a painful pause. "We shall resume our march, and when we come to the parting of the ways you and Oney—he will be a safe guide—shall ride into Wicklow while I go and summon the clansmen. The castle there is still defended. Encourage them to hold out and delay Coote and his people until I can come to your relief. They will return home with another story, I fancy."

"Be it so," said Maurice, in ready acquiescence.

When they had reached the place indicated, Maurice and his companion turned their horses' heads towards the distant town, and by many devious ways and winding paths moved in that direction, cantering rapidly where the road admitted of it, walking slowly where the ways were dangerous and rough; while O'Byrne pursued his solitary way across the mountains.

The two travellers rode in under the castle walls and gained admittance before the military had more than come in sight. But from the summit of the battlements they could see, when the dusk began to fall, the glare of burning homes, and the dull thud of shots told where some hapless victim had fallen a prey to the savage barbarity of Coote and the soldiery.

There were not more than some three dozen defending the castle, armed with muskets and a culverin or two—these latter of little use. There was, however, abundance of ammunition, and if they could but hold out for a day or two, the Wicklow leader would be back with sufficient forces from the glensmen. Maurice looked about the place to see that all points of defence were made sufficiently strong, and then waited the entrance of the enemy.

With a grand fanfare of trumpets they crossed the narrow bridge entering the town, and advanced up hill into the streets. They had waited so long, burning and shooting on the line of march, that it was long after nightfall before the tall shakos of the soldiers and the glittering lines of bayonets became visible to the astonished eyes of the townspeople.

The castle was some distance away from the town on the seaside, the town itself being hidden away by the curvature of the hill, but little of it could be seen from the battlements. It was bad strategy in whoever built it, but, probably, in ancient times it was more for the purpose of over-awing the turbulent townspeople than of defending them. But, looking and listening from the battlements, its defenders soon found that it was not so much the intention of the raiding column to attack them as to wreak vengeance on the defenceless townspeople. The sky soon reflected the blazing homes, whilst the cries and shrieks of women rose loud and shrill on the night air.

There were pale faces and anxious hearts on the battlements as these proceedings went on. Fighting in their own defence would have the stimulating effects of excitement and ardour, but listening in cold blood, to the cries of their kinswomen, was helplessly agonising.

After a time Maurice could stand it no longer.

"This is not warfare these scoundrels are carrying on—it is murder," he said in a burst of passion. "I shall not remain here and witness it. Who will volunteer to come with me, and try and stop this murderous work?"

A number of men, equally brave and resolute as he, volunteered at once. Selecting some four, of whom his previous guide, Oney, was one, whom he ascertained to be good marksmen, they opened the barred door of the fortalice and crept through the fields until they came to a spot in a laneway where they could look on the square, where the soldiers after their march were encamped. They had little difficulty in reconnoitring, for the glare of the burning houses shed a light, bright as noon day, on the place, whilst the shadows it threw placed themselves in a gloom.

The narrow-way in which they were crouched led upwards from the place, and they had thus the advantage of the position.

Maurice, his gun on his knees, was transfixed with surprise as his eyes rested on the scene before him. A rough platform had been erected on which several forms were suspended. Other forms, apparently dead from gun-shots, were strewn under it. Soldiers were here and there seated in groups around barrels of drink, which they had

taken from the houses, whilst at large fires, made of the furniture of the pillaged dwellings, sheep were roasting whole.

"What are those fellows doing yonder?" Maurice asked of Oney, as straight in front of them was a large mansion, evidently the residence of people well-to-do and of independent means, into which a number of soldiers were passing in and out, carrying bundles with suspicious eagerness. "What do they mean by this hurrying in and out?"

"They are going to make it their quarters for the night," replied the other in a whisper. "See, there are officers outside." As indeed there were, as Maurice saw when he had time to take closer and more particular vision.

"I hardly think it is that," said he; but his attention was presently attracted by another sight. It was that of a young woman, of superior and prepossessing appearance, who was being driven up by some soldiers with the buttends of their guns, as if it were an animal they were driving into the glare of the burning houses. There was a look of wild agony on her face, of speechless terror, that made Maurice's heart throb. She carried a child in her arms, to which she clung, and to which she in a wild, dazed way bent her head as if entreating it for protection—so it seemed to the watcher, as half-wild himself with what he saw, he nervously looked on and waited.

A soldier, amid the laughter of his comrades, deftly threw a noose over her neck from behind and drew it tight. In an instant the young woman lifted her head, but as the rope tightened under her chin she only bent the more fondly and appealingly to the little one she carried in her arms. And then her face reddened under the influence of a new glare thrown upon it by a sudden and greater blaze that had burst forth. It was the fine mansion in their immediate front, into the first floor of which soldiers had been piling all the inflammable materials they could find, to which they had now set fire and which blazed forth with destructive fury.

As the fire leaped out through the under windows and shot up above them in the second and third storeys, a piercing cry rang through the night, overlapping in its shrill accents of terror the bustle, riot, and confusion below. It came as plainly on the watcher's astounded ears, as if there were no other sound or noise there. The form of a lady, young or old, gentle or simple, Maurice could not distinguish in the wreathing flames, appeared at the window, but it was barred with iron, and it was impossible she could get through. In her terror or anguish to save its life at any rate from the terrible death which menaced herself, or perhaps by sheer accident, a child fell from her hands into the street. A soldier standing at guard underneath, some distance from the curling flames, promptly ran up his musket, and on the point of his bayonet caught the little child. A burst of laughter at this amusing incident came from the group of officers adjoining. Encouraged by this approbation, the soldier tossed the little form upwards, and again deftly caught it on his bayonet.

Maurice felt as if his heart was leaping through his mouth.

"He dies! By the eternal justice of God! he dies," came from lips and throat, parched almost to suffocation; and, kneeling on one knee, he carried the musket on his shoulder, held it with sinews of steel; for a second his eyes glanced along it and a shrill report startled the echoes of the night!

He could hardly see, through the lifting wreaths of smoke, the reeling form of the soldier, the startled attitudes of the others, when from beside him a volley flashed, the light and the flame from the musket barrels nearly blinding him; and then he became conscious as one in a drunken frenzy might—dimly and vaguely conscious—that there were many forms behind him, that the greater part of the little garrison had recklessly stolen after to see what devilry was going on among their kinsmen. The momentary gleam of consciousness vanished, and, without knowing how it came to pass, or how he had come there, Maurice next found himself in the centre of the lighted square in the midst of a deadly struggle, where with axes and short pikes and long knives he and his comrades fought against overwhelming odds not for life—no, not for life—but for a bloody death—death to all whom they could reach and slay.

Blazing houses shooting their cones of flame to the sky and their hot glare around; malignant faces in crowds before, himself and his friend the little centre of the maddened struggle; blood stained steel shining with crimson red and blue gleam as they changed and shifted in the struggle, in which no quarter was given or asked, formed a tableau which for a second flashed on his mind, in a lucid moment as if he had got a passing vision in his sleep into the region of the damned, and forgot what preceded or followed. The raging, maddened passion of hate and vengeance and sense of cruel wrong was upon him; the fire had transferred itself from breast to brain, and but for that passing spell—that fleeting instant of consciousness and sanity—he was no more capable of human feeling than the tiger engaged in fight to the death.

Suddenly, power of action, of motion, went from him, and the glare of the burning houses gave way to blind and sightless night.

CHAPTER XVII.

When Maurice awoke he found it difficult to remember where he was. All the incidents of the previous time had vanished from his mind. He only knew that something strange and untoward had happened, but of what nature the confused jumble of thoughts could give him no definite remembrance. A heavy, dull pain was pressing upon his attention, arising from some hurt at the back of his head. He made an effort to lift his hand to it, and then found that he could not—that his hands were securely fastened together. This was his first discovery, and immediately after he became aware that he was firmly bound to one of the supports of the rough platform which he had seen the night before. And with this second discovery complete recollection flashed upon him and he remembered all—the ride over the mountains, the reconnoitring movement, the burning house, the bayoneted child, the infuriated swoop of the little garrison—all. The results of the maddened attack were perceptible enough before him. The forms of the attackers were strewn about on the square, lying where they had fallen. It was a daring and a foolish sacrifice of life, for they were but as one to twenty, and