

THE BANSHEE'S WARNING: A STORY OF THE IRISH REBELLION OF 1641.

(By JAMES MURPHY, Author of "The Forge of Clobogue," "The Cross of Glencarrig, etc., etc.")

CHAPTER XXX.

Events had been marching rapidly in Ireland whilst Maurice O'Connor lay on his bed of illness, a prisoner in the high watch tower of Tredath. The insurrection had become general all over Ireland, and in many places the strongholds had fallen into the hands of the insurgents. The slaughter of the Puritan force at Julianstown Bridge, within a short distance of the metropolis, had given great life to the cause everywhere. But it had a still more important effect in its influence over the minds of the Catholic lords of the Pale. These gentlemen had been holding neutral during the momentous days of the rising; they feared to take part with their fellow-countrymen, dreading failure and its results; but, aware of the statements concerning the projected extermination of the Irish Catholics made by Borlase, Parsons, and Coote, they kept aloof from Dublin. In the latter they soon saw that they had acted wisely, for one of their number, Mr. King, a gentleman wholly opposed to the rebellion, and relying on his well-known loyalty for his safety, had his magnificent mansion at Clontarf within a few miles of the city, sacked and burnt one night by a marauding party, and himself seized and lodged in Dublin Castle. This gentleman was of immense wealth and owner of vast properties in the north of the county of Dublin. But neither his extensive possessions, his well-known loyalty, nor the confidence he displayed in the Lords Justices by the fact of his remaining at his residence, could protect him.

Similarly it was with Sir Patrick Barnwell, a gentleman, likewise, of great property and allied by marriage with all the high families of the Pale. He had shown his loyalty and confidence by residing, through all the turmoil and trouble, in his city mansion. He was seized and tortured, though an old man, as was also, under similar circumstances, Sir Patrick Read. Even despite the dangers that surrounded them, the Lords Justices and Coote could not prevent this hatred of Catholics from showing forth in these insensate acts of cruelty.

It was time for the timid lords of the Pale, therefore, to make up their minds. They saw that extermination and confiscation menaced them equally with those of the ancient Celtic race. On the other hand, they would be among friends joining the native lords on whose banners the light of victory had already begun to gleam. Wherefore overtures had been made between them; and on the hill of Knock Crofty, by arrangement, representatives from the two parties met. On the one side were the Earl of Fingal, Lord Gormanstown, Lord Netterville, the Lord of Slane, Lord Louth, Lord Dunsany, Lord Trimblestown, with a large body of others of the gentry; on the insurgent side, Roger Leix, Colonel Philip O'Reilly, Colonel Cuillagh, McBryen, McMahon, Colonel Hugh Roy O'Reilly, and Colonel Hugh Phelim O'Byrne, attended by a guard of musketeers armed with weapons taken from the slain forces at Julianstown, the captured colours waving above their beads. An arrangement was entered into by which the vacillating lords came over to the side of the rebels. It was a meeting pregnant with ruin and loss to the Irish cause. And if any of the Irish gentlemen had been gifted with foresight enough to know the consequence within the next year to the cause for which they were striving, they would have slept an uneasy sleep on their beds that night. Fighting for themselves and by themselves they were practically unconquerable; they had now introduced an element of timidity, vacillation, and weakness which was soon to rule paramount in their councils, to the exclusion of themselves.

The approach of Lord Ormonde, who had been appointed Lieutenant-General of the Puritan forces, with three thousand foot and five hundred horse, to the relief of Drogheda, had compelled Sir Phelim O'Neale to assault the town. The attack having failed, there was nothing left for him to do, his ammunition having given out, but to raise the siege and retreat, the various chiefs taking the directions of their own homes to defend their own properties until such time as the promised aid—more especially that of arms and ammunition—arrived from Continental nations.

Freedom was thus given to the garrison of Dublin to move out over the undefended portion of the surrounding districts and slay and destroy, which they did. Grown bold by degrees, they extended their raids, under Coote, until the rich grain districts farther away attested the power of his savage band, and burning baggards, villages and farm-houses through the rich plains of Dublin and Kildare filled the eye with smoke-clouds and startled the winter nights with the cries of women and children.

The freedom of Leix was amongst the first to raise in revolt. Several castles which still held out were besieged by the Irish and sorely pressed. To relieve these Lord Ormonde was now despatched with a large force, including some five hundred cavalry. Sir Charles Coote, who had raided as far as Burr, joined his forces with his, and having destroyed all that country were devastating on their march. Word was sent to the Irish chiefs far and near of the havoc being done, and musters of men were being hastily made and marched to the assistance of the harassed localities.

It was whilst these things were going on that one morning in his castle at Glen-ma-corr Hugh Phelim O'Byrne received by a foot-messenger a letter from Roger Leix. He had been lately employed in drilling his forces, and in making occasional sorties along the boundaries of his own territories—not infrequently carrying his horsemen within sight of Dublin.

"Maurice," he said to his guest, "listen to this. This is a letter from O'Moore. Harken to what he says: 'You have been appointed commander of the confederate Catholics for Leinster. Ormonde and Coote are burning and slaughtering all around. They will probably retreat, crossing the Barrow, by way of Athy. They must be met by the Irish forces and destroyed. Bring all your

available horsemen and march at once across the hills, and ride night and day. The rendezvous will be at the pass of Gaasemoyne. Lord Mountgarret—Oh! Hugh, think what an appointment this is—has been nominated by the Supreme Council to the supreme command. But it is no time to think of this. Hasten—a bold opportunity offers; pray Heaven it be availed of. Make all haste.—Your friend Roger Leix."

"This is calamity indeed," he said, when he had finished. "Mountgarret appointed Commander-in-chief! Heaven save this unfortunate land!"

"Who is Mountgarret, Hugh? I have never heard of him."

"An old Pale lord—uncle to Ormonde."

"Has he military skin?"

"None whatever. And, moreover, he is uncle to this very Ormonde that is now commanding the Puritan army, as vile a man nearly as Coote himself. I warned O'Moore to be careful in his arrangements with these treacherous lords of the Pale. But he was anxious for conciliation and union. Behold the result! It was like a wolf appointed to lead an army of sheep amongst a pack of wolves. Woe for the cause of Ireland!"

"What do you propose doing? Of course you will obey orders."

"At once. Without an hour's delay. Will you ride with me?"

"Most certainly," said Maurice.

"Then get ready."

Maurice had just recovered from a long spell of illness. The wounds still unhealed on the night of his escape from Drogheda had broken afresh in the long ride of the retreat from the marshes, and all the skill of the Wicklow leech was necessary to close them up again. The fair lady which he bore on the saddle before him had been ill too. The distressing incidents of that time had proved too much for her. For a long time she lay wavering in the balance between life and death, but the genial airs of the Irish hills and the nursing kindness of the sisters of the Wicklow prince had by degrees gradually restored her. She was now convalescent, and the olden beauty was beginning to show itself in her face. It had been arranged that as soon as she was strong enough they should be married, and Maurice's long postponed expedition to France carried out.

Now, however, with the news to hand, Maurice rode over to the mansion where she resided, some few miles off, to see her before leaving. It was a distressing parting. It was not made the less so by a strange story which she told him. Maurice had often heard it during his boyhood days in Arranmore, and the nursery stories came back to him now, over the intervening years with their unnumbered incidents, freshly as if they were told but yesterday.

She had been standing at the window looking out over the hills and valleys below in the direction of the sea. The full moon was shining, and the distant water on the horizon glimmered and shone like a vast semicircle of burnished silver. Intervening, moonlit and shadowy valley followed one another in picturesque array, like a vast carpet alternated with silver white and dark veining; while here and there the waving trees threw a sort of flagstone work of light and shade, filling up with smaller detail the larger outlines. It was a scene so purely romantic as painter never yet put on canvas. How could it be otherwise when the land most beautiful and magnificent of all on earth for scenic loveliness lay transfigured in the moonlight?

Looking down through the narrow windows of the grey and square fortalice, she happened to cast her eyes on the great wall that bounded it. Within grew a parallel range of oaks, old—older than the massive keep itself, throwing by their waving branches a chequered light. This latter, cut into grotesque and curious fragments, like an antique mosaic, by the overhanging boughs, looked so strange and quaint that her eye was at once attracted to it. Presently—she could not tell how or when, for it did not seem to be there when she first looked—there grew out of the shadow at the foot of a huge oak tree, immediately beneath the window whereat she stood, the form of a woman—of a young woman—combing her hair, the tresses of which descended to her waist!

For a moment Carrie stood, not wondering at the apparition, but wondering why she had not seen her before. And presently there came to her ear a strain so strange, so full of sadness and sweetness, conveying such feeling of profound, inexpressible sorrow, that the listener stood entranced. Sweet as sounds that might come from Paradise, but mingled with notes of sorrow that sighing angels might utter over those condemned for ever, she stood rapt, entranced, transfixed, as she listened. The sounds, whatever they portended, were in a tongue and language strange to her. How long she might have listened to them in the calm bright moonlight she did not know, but the spell of music was broken by one of the chieftain's sisters coming into the garden and gliding to her side. The latter at once, as her ear heard the song and her eye saw the mysterious singer with her long hair, pointed with outstretched hand at the figure, uttered a cry of terror, and fell into her visitor's arms. And at the moment Carrie looked for a second at the singer, and behold, she was gone! As a shadow might have flitted, she had instantaneously vanished.

The watcher's wondering attention was transferred at once from the vision to the swooning girl clinging to her. She was scarcely able to bear her to a chair, and ring for an attendant. Her sisters came at the sound, but it was long ere she recovered consciousness. Before she did, Carrie from her own weak state of recovering health was perforce fain to retire. But previously she told, in explanation of the circumstances, what she had seen, and noted with curiosity, not unmixed with palpitating fear, the sudden glance of affright the young ladies exchanged. It was a glance that conveyed a world of secret knowledge of an alarming kind, but neither spoke. Whatever they understood by it they kept resolutely dumb, and in attendance upon their sister all reference to the matter dropped or was forgotten.

The sound sleep that waits on returning health was the lot of Carrie Mordaunt for that night, and whoever else within the cincture of the gray old fortalice had uneasy thoughts her resting brain had none. Whoever else started from their pillows with a cry of agony for the keening form that sat combing her long tresses at the foot of the ancient oak, her rest was long and tranquil.