

But—in the morning—she was quite surprised to see the gloom that pervaded the features of the young ladies of the house. There was an expression of dread and bodement and pain that was very noticeable, all the more that they by no spoken words indicated its presence. But there was a feeling, in the air around them, which the beautiful Sassenach could not help attributing in some way to the singer of the night before. But she spoke not of it to them.

There were others, however, who had heard and seen the vision and who were not so reticent concerning it—some of the numerous servants of the house. For in these times, the mansions of great lords were indeed great establishments, in which the tenantry seemed to have an equal share with the masters, and servants, young and old, immensely outbalancing the actual requirements, lived therein. Very few of the farmers on the estate but at one time or another had some one of their family dwelling at "the Master's." From the information given by some of these in the course of the morning's bustle, for no guarded fortress ever saw the dawn break with such chatter and life as this home of the O'Byrne's, Carrie Mordaunt had learnt later on the meaning of the strange apparition and its song of woe! If she had any doubts of the truth of their story, their frightened and terrified appearances dispelled it.

At once her trembling heart connected the vision with some fateful warning concerning Maurice, although the servants impressed upon her the certainty that the apparition only came when danger menaced the ancient house in which they were; and when he came with the news of his hurried departure, and on such a business, her fear grew intense.

"Don't leave me, Maurice," she cried; "Don't go. I shall go anywhere with you—France, Spain, anywhere. But don't leave me now; my heart is full of dread."

"Carrie, darling, calm your fears. This boding messenger comes not for me. When I return we shall sail for France. I have a mission to discharge there, and we shall wander together through that sunny land, our hearts as bright as its glowing skies."

"Nay, nay; let it be now. Do not go away. I am strong enough to leave now with you any moment."

"It is not possible, Carrie. Dearly as I love you—and no love yet was ever deep and strong as mine—there are things before which even love must give way. A man's pride, a man's courage, a man's honour—all these are things that lie even nearer his heart. But don't fear for me, Carrie, dearest. I've been before, with death round and about, and no harm has come to me; nor shall it now with your protecting prayer to guard me. See! Is not that fine?"

They had been sitting at the window where she stood the previous night, when, mounted on a swift horse, magnificently caparisoned, a young fellow came up at a rapid pace round the corner of the castle. His age was about twenty, his face was fair and bright and, save the dark moustache that began to shadow his upper lips, beardless as a girl's. It might have been counted effeminate did not the quick, bright flashing eye, and the firm set lips, when he closed them, betoken strength of purpose and resolution. His eye fell on the horse ridden by Maurice, as it was led up and down by a little boy, and he reined up his steed sharply, stopping him within a few feet and nearly throwing him on his haunches. The belt he wore was set off with crosses of gold, and the hilt of his sword was yellow and burnished as of the same material.

His quick eye caught the strange steed, and was immediately raised to the window above, and brightened as it fell upon the two sitting there.

Doffing his plumed cap in recognition, he sprang from his saddle, threw the reins to one of the horsemen who, following him at an equally rapid pace, had reined up, when he reined up and raced up the broad oaken stairs to where they were.

"Maurice, I'm so glad to see you. Are you coming? Are you going to Louis?"

"Yes, of course. Who would remain at home with Cootie plundering and murdering at will. Did you see O'Moore's letter?"

"Yes; I saw it. I came here in consequence."

"Well, Miss Mordaunt," said the youth gaily, "you will have to surrender him to us for awhile. Nay, never grow so pale, dear lady; there is no fear for him. The banshee is too true to our race to wail for strangers from Connaught."

Maurice rather started at this laughing allusion to the vision of the night, as told by Carrie Mordaunt, and which had not been without its effect upon him. He could not help admiring the airy fearlessness of the handsome youth for whom, for aught one knew, this threnody might have been sung. Whatever forebodings were in other hearts, clearly fear had not entered his, as he said.

"I shall wait you below, Maurice. Hugh waits us at Ballinacorr. The God of love, my dear lady, must sometimes yield to the God of war."

And so saying, with a warm shake-hands with the "Sassenach lady," as Carrie was called, he descended the stairs in as blithe and merry humour as though he was proceeding to a hunting party on the hills instead of to contend with foes where no quarter should be given or asked, and leaped again into his saddle. Presently, Maurice, after a long and tender farewell, came downwards too, and with a farewell of the uplifted swords in soldierly fashion to the bevy of fair girls who had joined Miss Mordaunt at the window, the troop moved off.

"You are dreaming of England, Maurice," said the young companion after a time as he noticed his absent and pre-occupied air.

He thought of Carrie Mordaunt and heaved a sigh.

His companion looked at him in some wonder and doubt; but at once a bright smile passed across his cherry face.

"I tell you what, Colonel Maurice," he said, "we have been— you have been—treading over the hungry grass."

"I beg your pardon," said Maurice, not understanding him.

"Perhaps I should rather call it in your case the melancholy grass—for it has both attributes. I thought you were growing a shade downcast. Some," said the gay youth as he shifted the shoulder knot of his sword sash, displaying as he did so the diamond ring that sparkled on his finger, "would call it love, Colonel O'Connor; but

we who live and wander in these unfrequented mountain solitudes know better. You have passed over the hungry grass."

"And," said Maurice responding to his bright smile, "what is the hungry grass, and what mysterious properties has it? Will you be good enough to explain, for I am wholly unacquainted with it?"

"Maurice O'Connor, you see these hills?"

"Yes."

"That sleeping lake?"

"Yes."

"That sea white and silver burnished in the distance?"

"Yes."

"Our name and race is as old as these hills, as that lake, as that sea—or nearly so. We were on these 'cliffs, and hills, and gleens' before an elk trod them, before the tall forests fell and formed these bogs, before many great rivers that flow through Ireland now had burst from their sources. Our very name in the antique form of the Irish language means old. Before Firbolg, Danaan, or Milesian trod the land we were here. Race after race came and conquered, exterminated those preceding them, or intermarried and became amalgamated with them; but we—we kept these hills and valleys free from invader from the first. It is our boast, a high one, though we could hardly prove it to the satisfaction of Black Tom," added the youth, laughingly, "that from the very first of the wandering Arian race that landed on yonder coast from their galleys, they loved this smiling land, settled on it, and kept it. But I am wandering from what I had to say, except as an explanation why the story is so old and the legend so hoary."

"Touching the hungry grass?" said Maurice.

"That's what I am coming to. The first of our race—so the story runs—that sailed from the Syrian shores and landed here, bore with him a wife. Among the colony that came with him was a young girl, very fair, very beautiful, and very winsome. Even in these early ages men had been attracted by beauty, and a handsome face stole men's hearts after it, even as is done to-day."

Maurice glanced sharply at the speaker, as if he expected some covert allusion to himself, but there was nothing of the kind evident.

The speaker's face was full of the story he was telling, and his eyes had that look into the remote past that made it evident there was no passing reference to things of present date.

"Go on, Louis," he said, as the young fellow paused.

"Aye, Maurice, even in those early ages men had begun to be led from the ways of honour by sweet faces and witching eyes. It was so in this case, and the Syrian leader, abandoning the princess that had left her father's halls to follow him, and forswearing her love for that of her younger rival, sent her back again across the wide sea to her Eastern home, and selected the latter to rule with him over that island home on the verge of the world to which the breath of fate had wafted their galleys. A storm came, however, and the galley bearing the abandoned princess was driven back and wrecked on the Wicklow coast. The wife, prompted by feelings of love, slighted though they were, sought out her husband among these hills, and, it is said, wandered over those we are now crossing. Her way was long and weary, her path strewn with thorns and brambles, and her heart failed her. But the gods who ruled in that land from which she came were beside her, and, in vengeance for her sufferings and for her unrequited love, decreed that wherever a tear fell there should grow the hungry grass which poisons every animal that touches it, and which causes man himself, when passing over it, to feel a strange weakness which, unless food is quickly at hand, kills him. The agonies which it begets in the human system are untold, and the sufferer dies in great pangs. At other times it creates a feeling of melancholy in him who steps on it for which there is no assuagement. Things of life lose all their attraction, the earth its happiness, the sky its brightness, until the victim, by sheer illness or by his own hand, is ushered into another world where such things are not."

"That's rather an odd story, Louis," remarked Maurice, when he had finished. "If any, the punishment came worse on the descendants than they deserved, considering it was entirely his own fault, not theirs. What became of the princess; does the legend say?"

"Failing to find her faithless husband among these trackless hills she drowned herself in that lake, one result of which is that from that day to this, all along the slow descent of the rolling centuries no trout, save one, has ever been known to live therein. A trout is seen there at rare intervals, but only one; but the tortures of the hungry grass exist to the present day."

"Well, I think we had better ride on," said Maurice. "I do not care to linger over these treacherously green spots. But look yonder!"

"Whose spears are those glancing in the sunlight, above the heath?"

"These are my brother Hugh's—he is coming to meet us," said Louis, putting spurs to his horse and galloping rapidly forward, in which Maurice and his troop followed him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

There was but little time for delay. Every moment was precious if the raiding Puritan general was to be stopped. Fresh messengers had come from O'Moore urging the greatest haste, and accordingly the shadows of evening saw the long lines of swordsmen and spearmen winding over the hills that shut out the Wicklow valleys from the plains of Kildare and the fertile lands of Carlow. Without stop or stay they rode through the night, nothing but the startled flight of the grouse or the wild shriek of the curlew to break the silence of the heathy hills. As the dawn smote the summits, wearing a crown of pale gold from the heather flowers, they rode from the last of the sheep-paths and entered Kildare. Without delay they continued their march—going at a much quicker rate now that the more improved roads permitted of it.

The morning hours pass swiftly; and soon the workers began to appear in the fields, and the blue smoke to curl up from the farm-houses. Most of the former appeared to be women, indicating that the men were away elsewhere.