

# The Storyteller.

FOR FAITH AND COUNTRY.

(Conclusion.)

## CHAPTER III.

Not long after the departure of Father Donogh, Humphrey Bedingfield had an unexpected visitor. This was Captain Edward Piers, who had received a grant of the lands of Dunboyne in Meath from the Commissioners of the Revenue in Dublin on the terms of maintaining at Dublin and Dunboyne wolf-dogs and a pack of hounds for the purpose of hunting the wolves with which the country had become infested. This terrible increase in numbers of the savage animal was solely due to the wars and the wholesale massacres that had taken place by Cromwell's orders, and as the dead were permitted to lie in heaps unburied the wolves had, in consequence, fine feasting. Captain Piers, on his way to the hunt one blustery November day, thought it would be neighborly to pay his devoirs to the new steward of Castle Carra, whose relationship with Sir William Kendrick he was aware of.

Accordingly he halted his party before the tower and dismounting proceeded to knock with his whip-handle on the massive oaken door. Unfortunately none of the maids were within call, so Una, hearing the uproar as she passed down the stairs undid the bolts and opened to the impatient stranger.

Now this was a thing which Humphrey had expressly forbidden her to do, but knowing that he was not within, and that Dame Honora was confined to her room with a feverish cold, she, forgetting his admonitions, hurried to attend to the summons.

Her surprise at the sight of the intruder, surrounded by the yelping dogs, was equalled by his surprise at the vision of loveliness which confronted him in the gloom of the dark hall. For a moment he did not speak, then as the girl gazed at him with a gathering fear in her eyes he remembered what politeness demanded.

'Your pardon, fair mistress. I came to have speech with Master Humphrey Bedingfield, whose neighbor I am by reason of my residence at Dunboyne. Is he within?'

'Nay, sir,' Una answered with a shy blush under the bold admiration of his look, 'but he is not far distant. If you will enter I shall inform him.'

Nothing loth, Captain Piers followed her through the hall and into the sitting-room, where, despite his efforts to engage her in conversation, she left him to seek for Humphrey. When she found the latter and acquainted him with the name of the visitor, he gravely reproved her for her indiscretion in admitting the wolf-hunting adventurer.

'Captain Piers is a dangerous man, child, and an enemy of my cousin, Sir William. It has been told me since our coming here that he had hoped to obtain a grant of these lands for himself, and was in a fury because he was forestalled. His visit can bode us no good. But do not fret, child. Go upstairs to Dame Honora, and remember, should Piers or any of his men make inquiries as to your position in the household, that you are my daughter. It would be well to warn the maids also.'

Meanwhile Captain Piers sat impatiently waiting Una's return. When the door opened and he saw a stern-faced man enter instead, his eyes showed evident disappointment, but only for an instant. Before Humphrey could speak he was on his feet and smiling blandly into the unsmiling countenance of the other.

'Piers is my name, Captain Edward Piers of Dunboyne, at your service,' he said glibly. 'And is it my pleasure to address Master Humphrey Bedingfield?'

'The same, good sir,' answered Humphrey, coldly. 'I made bold to call, Master Bedingfield, it being but a neighborly to invite you on our wolf-hunt to day. There is a very reason to expect good sport, and, knowing that you have lately come into these parts, it occurred to me that you might wish to join the chase. I am under terms with the Commissioners, as doubtless you are aware, to keep the lands of Meath free of these pests, and would gladly hail your company such times as it might be agreeable to you to honor us.'

He was a very handsome man, this Captain Piers, of middle size, strongly built, and of an ingenuous, pleasant appearance. His eyes were a frank blue, and his good-humored mouth, even when he spoke, did not lose its smile. His age might have been 35, though his florid complexion and fair hair gave him a certain youthfulness. This was not the style of man Humphrey had expected to see, and for an instant he doubted that he had quite caught the name aright.

'Captain Edward Piers, I think you said, good sir.'

'Even so,' smiled the worthy captain. Humphrey bowed stately. 'I am duly grateful for the honor of your visit, Captain Piers; but it chanches that I cannot be one of your party on this occasion. My wife, being in ill-health, is doubly timorous these unsettled times, and I dare not leave her even for a day.'

'I had the privilege of meeting another lady of your household on my entrance,' and the captain looked interrogatively at his host. 'A pretty wench, I' faith, a very pretty wench.'

'My daughter, sir,' said Humphrey, curtly. 'I thought as much. Well, Master Bedingfield, I envy you such a daughter. A charming maid, and I have no doubt, an obedient one. I hope to have the pleasure of paying my duty to her before long.'

He smirked complacently, while Humphrey only registered a vow that his neighbor of Dunboyne should not see Una again if he could help it.

But he reckoned without understanding the character of the man. Piers began to haunt Carra Castle, coming at all unexpected times on trivial excuses, so that it was impossible for Una to avoid him.

Besides, his cheerful air of considering himself quite at home made it difficult to show him that his frequent appearance was an intrusion. His frank admiration for Una was a serious embarrassment to her, but Humphrey counselled her to refrain from exhibiting any displeasure, as he suspected there might be some secret motive underlying the captain's apparent friendship. He thought it might be a menace to Sir William Kendrick, but Una held a different opinion.

'He is a wolf-hunter, guardian,' she said, 'and the folk whisper that he is a priest-hunter as well. I like not that perpetual smile of his, nor the way he comes here by stealth as it were. His visits are duly timed, else why should he come so early and so late? It is our good Father Donogh he is seeking, perchance.'

Dame Honora, slowly recovering from her sickness, lay and listened to the discussion between the other two. She was filled with a vague unrest, which aggravated her complaint, and made her convalescence more tedious than it should have been. She could only pray that her dear ones might be saved from the deadly wiles of this man, whose name was one of terror far and near.

At length Captain Piers proved to the amazed and indignant Una that he was no laggard in love. One noon he came boldly into her presence where she sat at her embroidery, and without any preliminaries abruptly offered her his hand and fortune. The girl shrank back as from a blow, while the smiling eyes of the wooer noted her discomfiture and seemed in no way displeased.

'I cannot,' at last she murmured faintly. 'Take leisure to think, fair mistress,' enjoined the captain. 'My time is yours.'

'Tis too great an honor, Captain Piers, for a penniless maid,' said Una, bravely striving to meet his amorous glances.

'An' it be an honor, sweet Una, it is an honor I am quite willing to bestow.'

'But, sir, I do not love you.'

'That will come.'

'I fear not.'

'How so, mistress? Have I a rival? Gad'—and the captain stamped his thigh in un-Puritan-like enjoyment—'then the sport will be something worth while. I did not think it was in you, sweet, to add such zest to my wooing. Who is it now—this rival? Some gay dog of a soldier from the camp below, or a wild Tory from the mountains over yonder?'

The girl grew white to the lips. 'Speak, mistress, speak. I am keen to strive with him for the prize. Speak,' and he thrust his finger under her chin, lifting her face so that he could look into her downcast eyes. She drew back from the contact.

'Oh, sir, leave me,' she breathed piteously, endeavoring to rise. 'Leave you, fairest? Why, I mean to stay with you always. Tell me now, who is it has dared to love you? Not Sir William Kendrick surely?'

A black frown gathered on his brow.

'No, no,' cried Una.

He threw his arms around her, drawing her closer. She gave a wild scream and sprang to her feet. Just then the door opened and Humphrey entered.

'What means this?' he demanded sternly, looking from one to the other.

'Oh, father!' sobbed Una as she clung to him. 'Oh, father!'

He put his arm about her tenderly.

'I repeat, sir, what does this mean?'

'Nothing, Master Bedingfield, but that I have asked the maid here to be my wife, and she has but taken to the wilful ways of women under such circumstances.'

'You have abused my hospitality in presuming so,' replied Humphrey. 'My daughter is not for such as you. And let me tell you plainly that though I have not refused you the courtesy of an open door when you have forced yourself upon my home, I am not blind to your character. This innocent child is as far above you as the heavens above the earth.'

'Have a care, Master Bedingfield, have a care, for it may be that I know more concerning her than you dream.'

'Your threats cannot alarm me, sir. Go, and never enter this house again.'

Piers stood silent for a second, then he turned and lifted his hat from the table.

'I had thought to argue the matter with you,' he said, 'so as to give you a chance. But now I shall defer the argument until I come again. Like death and judgment I shall enter when you least expect me.'

He kissed his hand gaily to the shrinking girl as he went out. Dame Honora's motherly bosom pillowed Una's tear-wet face as she sobbed out her story.

'He means to work evil on us,' she said when the tale was ended. 'He suspects you are not our daughter, and God grant he does not guess you are the child of O'More. I must cast aside my weakness now and be ready to guard my treasure as a mother should. Better death—aye, a thousand times over—than that you should fall into the power of such a man.'

'If only Con were here, sobbed Una, 'if only Con were here.'

## CHAPTER IV.

In the priest's room of Carra Castle a little group was assembled on the Eve of Christmas. Humphrey and Dame Honora were there, and Una, too, kneeling beside a stalwart youth whose dark head was bowed in prayer. Standing before the improvised altar was Father Donogh Heggerty—no longer a miserable mendicant—but the venerable minister of God, clad in his sacred vestments,

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