

The Storyteller

WOLF OF BENFORD.

Benford was an old grey house, whose thick walls and small paned windows had weathered the storms of many years. My great-grandfather had come northward from the Pale after the overthrow of O'Neill, and purchased this place from an English planter, for although of English blood ourselves, long settlement in the country had rendered us as Irish as any Mac or O' of them all.

The confiscations of Cromwell and of William our little property had fortunately escaped, but the new century saw nought but new persecutions and new oppressions for those of the old faith. Small wonder, then, that the 'wild geese' took flight in flocks to swell the armies of France and Spain. I, too, longed to be away to a land where a career was open to every man of birth and bravery, and where so many of my gallant countrymen had found a home.

Resolving to carry my desire into effect, I determined to speak to my uncle that evening in the quiet hour when we sat over our wine after dinner. He had filled to me the place of the father I had never known, and intended that I should be his heir; therefore, in proportion to his affection for me so I feared his opposition. However, having taken the matter in hand, I resolved to go through with it.

'Why not settle here, my boy,' said my uncle, when I had unfolded my wishes to him. 'I am getting to be an old man now, and a better time will surely come. The Government cannot forever ban our race and faith.'

'I see no signs of it, they have too much at stake, and will never let us have any position whereby we could make them disgorge their ill-gotten gains.'

'Youth is hot-blooded; yet I was by Sarsfield's side when Aughrim field was lost and won, and stood on the walls of Limerick.'

This was just the mood that I wished my uncle to fall into, as when he recalled the stirring times of his own youth, he would be more likely to assent to my wish, so I made answer, 'those were stirring times, uncle, but the days were braver still when the Red Hand floated over Ulster in triumph, as we all hope to see it again, and as you remember your own youth can you wonder at us younger men longing for—'

'The morning's dawn to wing us
Across the sea and bring us
To take our stand and wield a brand
Among the sons of France.'

'Truly I do not wonder at the "wild geese" taking flight, when I see France honoring them with the same and fortune that is denied to them in their own country.'

'You will permit me, then, to mention to Captain Magennis that I think of joining the brigade. You know that he is in these parts seeking for recruits.'

'I suppose if your mind is settled upon it I must give way,' said my uncle, 'but I would have liked to have had you to close my eyes and succeed to what heritage is left to us.'

'You are a hale man yet, uncle, and I may be spared to come back and do all you wish.'

So it was settled that I should see Captain Magennis of the Regiment of Clare, and get enrolled, if possible, in that famous corps, or I might see service in another regiment, such as Burke's, or Dillon's, and exchange in to it when a vacancy occurred. Indeed it was the presence of Captain Magennis in the neighborhood for recruiting purposes, although ostensibly visiting his relations, that had set my pulses beating faster and inflamed my military ardor.

Sometime previous to this an Irish officer retired from the French service had returned to his native land, there to spend his remaining years. He belonged to the princely house of O'Neill, and had settled at Rathowen, about two miles distant from Benford. My uncle had known him slightly in earlier years, but since his return we had come very little in contact with him. We had learned that he had been a captain in Nugent's Horse, and that while in France he had married a Mdlle. de Melancourt, who had died early in their married life, leaving him an only daughter who at that time had reached womanhood.

Thinking that it would be well to have the advice of an experienced soldier like Captain O'Neill, I resolved to call upon him without delay. Accordingly, a few days later I rode over one afternoon to Rathowen, and introduced myself to the returned warrior, stating my reason for wishing to make a closer acquaintance than the distant terms upon which we had stood since his arrival in the country. When riding along the highway skirting the grounds surrounding the captain's residence, my eye caught a glimpse of female garments glancing through the shrubbery, but in my present preoccupied state of mind I paid little heed. A manservant, evidently an old campaigner like his master, took charge of my horse, while the captain received me with all the courtesy of the polished nation in whose armies he had served.

'So you would wear the green cockade under the Fleur-de-lis, my lad?' he said.

'That is my wish, sir.'

'His Most Christian Majesty seldom lacks work for good swords, but Captain Magennis is to be here this evening, and if you will honor us with your company to dinner he can tell you how it goes with the brigade.'

'Your invitation is too kind to be refused, and the circumstances must be my excuse for trespassing on your hospitality.'

'Say no more, my dear sir, a soldier is always ready to share with a comrade, but here comes my daughter. Marie, my love, allow me to introduce to you our neighbor, Mr. Wolf.'

So this was the young lady I saw in the shrubbery, thought I, as I made my acknowledgments to Mdlle. O'Neill. She had inherited her French mother's dark hair and pale face, but her eyes were those of her father, clear, unmistakable Irish blue. The young lady remained but a short time in the apartment and then retired to look after domestic affairs, while her father described to me battles, marches and sieges.

'Yes,' he said, 'it sounds very fine, but there is another side to war as well, and a soldier must be prepared to endure hardships, and still worse, perhaps, see his inferiors promoted over his head, for everything goes by interest, and unless favored by fortune an officer may die an ensign as he started, but I must not damp your ardor, and I think I hear a horse's footsteps.'

'Yes, here comes the captain,' said I, as from where I sat I could see a soldierly figure ride up to the hall door.

'Welcome, captain, we have just been speaking of you, allow me to introduce my neighbor, Mr. Wolf, to you.'

'Captain O'Neill's friends are mine, replied the young officer, with a slightly foreign accent, which same accent my host and his daughter also had.

The dinner being dressed in the French style of cookery was a new experience to me, and when Mdlle. O'Neill rose from the table I could see Captain Magennis's eyes follow her as she retired. We remained chatting over our wine, and our host mentioned the object of my visit.

'Our friend, Mr. Wolf here,' said he, 'has a longing to see some service in some of our Irish regiments, and I asked him to remain to meet you, captain, as the most fitting person to put him in the way of smelling gunpowder.'

'Yes, if Mr. Wolf wishes to serve under the banners of France, he is not likely to be disappointed in that matter; it is seldom that fighting is not going on.'

'It is my wish to see some military service in one or other of the gallant Irish regiments in the service of France, before I finally settle down.'

'Yes,' said Captain O'Neill, 'the Irish regiments are favorites with his Most Christian Majesty, and they well deserve to be, for they have proved faithful on many a hard-fought field, but this is not a very good time for joining. What say you, captain?'

'No, the troops will shortly be going into winter quarters. However, we had heavy losses before Barcelona, and I make no doubt that the spring will find work for every sword we can muster. Indeed, if things go on according to our hopes, we may be striking a blow for the old land once more.'

'Fill up your glasses, gentlemen,' cried our host, 'To the King over the water.'

'To the King,' we cried, 'and work for our swords at home.'

Ere we separated it was arranged that I was to cross to France in the spring, and in the meantime I was to visit Captain O'Neill, who promised to prepare me for the career upon which I was soon to enter. I rode home that night my head filled with the battles and marches of which I had been hearing during the evening—Ramilles, Oudenarde, the Spanish Campaign, with the earlier experiences of Captain O'Neill. Then I thought of the Captain's daughter—I wonder if there is anything between her and Magennis—but my foolish imaginings were brought to a close by my dismounting at my uncle's door.

After this as a matter of course my visits became frequent to Rathowen, to avail myself of Captain O'Neill's military instruction—at least that is what I thought I went for, but ere long I found myself thinking more of the blue eyes of Marie O'Neill than of sword exercise or drill, and of a truth although I tried to be glad to meet Captain Magennis whenever our visits, yet I could not drive out a feeling of jealousy. What chance had a country youth like myself against such a rival, a soldier's daughter would surely prefer a soldier, and she would be the bride of another long ere I had won my epauletts. True, she was always kind and gracious, but that meant nothing, for she was so to everyone, and do what I would I could not muster up courage to tell her of my love. What chance had I then against the dashing officer who was no less her slave than myself.

One afternoon I had ridden over as usual, and the Captain being out, I was chatting with Mademoiselle in the morning room on the first floor, where I found her playing upon the spinet on my arrival. While thus engaged in conversation a stranger came into the room and seated himself on the other side of my companion, who, with the charming grace peculiar to her, said in her pretty foreign fashion—

'Monseigneur, permit me to introduce an admirer,' to which he assented in the urbane manner of the polished French court.

The newcomer was an old man with a strong face, ruddy and somewhat weather-beaten, with white hair, attired in a blue suit, and was rather short and stout in figure. We had not sat long when I saw a man dressed in a drab great-coat advancing up the avenue, whom upon his nearer approach I recognised as Captain Magennis.

The Captain greeted the ecclesiastic as an old friend, making inquiries after friends and affairs in France, then briefly announced that the authorities had received information of the priest being in the neighborhood, and, in