

'And Fergus, there's a—Oh, a chroidhe 'stigh, there's mother calling me. She's going to spin, and I'll have to card the wool for her. But I'll tell you the whole plan to-morrow night, and, please God, on Christmas Eve we'll show the pig-headed priest-hunters what an Irish boy and girl can do for the sagart they love. Beannacht leat.'

She was gone before Fergus could answer, and as he watched her lithe figure fitting away into the darkness he murmured, half unconsciously:

'Mo ghradh thu, a Una! Mo ghradh thu.'

II.

'Tis Christmas Eve; and as beautiful a night as ever shed a lustre of glory over the heathery mountains and smiling valleys of Ireland. A mist hangs upon the hills like a fleecy robe of grey. A soft crooning breeze sighs adown the glens like the swelling of fairy music. Sparkling, glittering frost lies over all the earth, resplendent in the bright moonlight, while the stars twinkle joyfully overhead. Oh, sorrow of sorrows! that a land so beautiful should be cursed by tyrant laws, and that its children should be forbidden by these laws even to offer praise to Him Who was born to suffer and die for their redemption! Nowhere does the beauty of the night show to greater advantage than in the noble wood of Killarra, where two men are busily engaged in tying their horses to the gnarled roots of a huge elm that stands in an open space like a mighty monarch of the forest.

The men thus occupied seem to be watching for someone, for now and then they glance hurriedly around and scan with eager gaze the sparkling woodland path that winds through myriad trees like a snake among the tall grasses of some Western prairie.

Suddenly a light sound on the frozen earth causes them to turn quickly around, each one's right hand involuntarily seizing the pistol in his breast. One glance at the cloaked figure standing in the centre of the path, however, seems to reassure them, for they instantly allow their hands to fall once more to their sides.

The drooping head is slowly raised, yet with a kind of business-like gesture, and reveals the witching face of Una Farrell, shaded now with a look of earnestness, whether real or apparent.

'You aren't a moment too soon,' she whispers, hurriedly. 'He's hiding in the old chapel beyond the wood—a good mile away. Mass will commence at midnight, and we must be there before the people begin to gather. It's ten o'clock now. So come along after me and make no noise.'

With a grunt of satisfaction, and after bestowing a parting look on the horses, the two men follow Una, as with quick, light step she plunges into the forest, ignoring the path altogether, and advancing in an easterly direction.

In single file they go quickly on through the wood, then out among hedgerows covered with dew and fields glittering with frosty stars. Una goes silently and quickly, and the same rule is followed by her companions, who are too busy with their thoughts of success to give heed to anything else. Now the old chapel looms up in front: they are beside it, and the leader treads more cautiously, by a shake of her finger entreating silence on the part of her attendants. Suddenly she gives a start, stops abruptly, and gazes eagerly towards the far side of the chapel. Then she says in a passionate whisper:

'They've seen us! they've seen us! There's the priest running down the far breen. They think we don't see them, and none of the boys are going with him, in case they'd attract our attention, and they think he'll reach the hiding-place all right. I know where he's going, and if you keep close to me, one on each side—that way—we'll run him down in fifteen minutes.'

She turns suddenly, with wild, eager eyes fixed on a stooped black figure that has started out from the chapel and is making all speed to gain the wood just at the point where she had emerged from it, leading the priest-hunters.

The latter keep close to Una, according to directions, and follow her light form as she bounds over

ditches and gaps and stiles in pursuit of the black figure which seems to drag itself along with much difficulty.

Into the wood the figure goes, scarcely three hundred yards in front, and visibly failing, while the others gain with every step.

On, on through briar and swamp and heather they go, pursued and pursuers, in the race for life and liberty on the one side, and greed of gold on the other. He is scarce two hundred yards ahead now, and is struggling along like a man about to fall.

Past the big elm and the affrighted horses they dash, the doomed victim heading for a belt of sedge grass about a dozen yards long, with a tree at each end like a silent sentinel, while a little nodding sapling in the centre of the shimmering grass seems to bend its head in approval of the whole thing.

Right by the little sapling he dashes—out beyond he struggles bravely on for a few paces—then, with a wild, despairing cry, falls heavily to the earth and lies, a black dot, on the glorious landscape.

'Hurrah! we have him!' cries Una, in exulting tones. She can hear the half-suppressed gloating of her companions as they race along, one at each side.

Up to the belt of sedge they dash, puffing, gloating, almost breathless after the exciting chase, and—

Splash!

Splash!

Una is out beyond the sedge now. She has left the sapling stretched at full length on the grass with the impetuous swing of her little foot.

She hears a splash; a murky spatter has fallen to either side of her on the frozen earth, and then she looks around.

There, panting, struggling, cursing in a seeming network of white grass, over which a black murky substance is quickly oozing, are her late companions of the chase, glaring at her like caged lions.

'Why don't you come on,' she says mockingly, when laughter allows her to speak: 'sure we have him safe and sound!'

A cry for mercy is the only reply to her exhortation.

'You won't come? Well, I suppose we'll have to coax you. Come here with the ropes, Fergus boy, and don't be lying there on the frozen ground famishing the life out of yourself.'

The black figure moves, then springs to its feet with a bound, and reveals the stalwart form and laughing face of Fergus O'Hara, while two other robust friends of his jump up from behind a ditch. From beneath his coat Fergus draws a pair of stout hempen cords, and he and his companions approach the spot where Una stands enjoying the discomfiture of her dupes.

A running noose is placed upon each cord and these are then thrown over the head and shoulders of the priest-hunters, securing their arms tight to their bodies. Then, after a good 'plunging,' enlivened with the scorching satire of Una, they are drawn to earth and the ropes wound tightly around their bodies.

'You see,' says Una, and the mischievous eyes of her are brighter than the stars: 'you see, somehow or other the grass grew over that pit last night, and the board grew across it. If you followed after me you were all right; but it was just a bit of bad luck. You didn't run in the right place.'

They are lifted on to the horses, the bridle-reins are taken out, and with these their legs are bound securely to the saddle.

'And now,' Una says, when the horses have been led out upon the high road, and Fergus has turned their heads towards K——, 'I hope this little adventure will teach you better than to make bargains ever again with "softies" of country girls; and you may tell every black-hearted son of your tribe that's how they'll get their blood-money when they come to look for it in the woods of Killarra!'

'Let the poor fellows go home, Fergus.'

And Father Maurice said Midnight Mass that Christmas Eve in Killarra wood, and the two happiest hearts there, it need not be said, were those of Una and Fergus, the betrothed lovers.—*Catholic Columbian*.