

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

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

CHAPTER XXX.

The horsemen shook themselves into motion, rode lightly round to the rear of the pass, and, couching their long spears, went straight at the cavalry, who, having failed to follow their fellows to the hill, were busy clearing the way by cutting to pieces stray broken bands who still defended positions of vantage.

The shock was great. Men and horses were quickly overthrown, and the glensmen in the victorious burst went through them, driving them to the mouth of the pass, where a furious fight ensued. For a moment the column of troopers reeled unsteadily, and the sudden affright that precedes a panic set in. It needed but a second more to see them break and flee.

"Soldiers!" cried an officer riding down the hill from where the more adventurous and daring troopers were at work, "Soldiers! Will you allow a handful of savages to affright you? Rally near me, and show that English bravery is not an empty word!"

As if a trumpet had sounded victory in their ears, the hesitating soldiers cheered him—all sense of fear or intention of retreat vanished, as Mordaunt, flushed with victory, waved his sword above his head.

Maurice had joined his friends when the enemy had come near, and charged with them. He had gained the mouth of the pass, and commanded a fair view of the gallant stand the pikemen were making on the plain and behind the hedges. The hill-sides were covered with powder-smoke, and the fate of the battle there was unknown. But he saw at once that if his horsemen could get into the opening, the fate of the English infantry there was sealed. One brave effort and the day was won!

"Wicklow to me! A moi?" cried he, using in the excitement of the moment the French rallying cry. "Into the open, men; into the open!"

"You here, too, traitor!" cried Mordaunt, as leaping his horse across a low earthen dyke he spurred towards him. "You here—still treacherous and still disloyal!"

As he aimed a blow at his head, Maurice caught the blow on his sword, but before he had time to do more a portion of the column fleeing before the Wicklow men came rushing abreast, and in the collision his horse went down, and he himself was flung in the dyke. Stunned and bruised, he raised himself to his feet, but only to find that a similar event had befallen his foe, who, gathering himself together more deftly, advanced to meet him on foot.

It was a curious scene and a strange one—in the pass the opposing horsemen contested fiercely hand to hand for mastery, without order, without organisation, almost without leaders, a sort of military faction fight, in which lives were quenched every second, and no quarter was given or asked. On the hill-sides the cloud of musketry arose thicker and thicker, shutting out all view, and here in the grassy dyke, separated from the combatants only by a thin row of trees, the two foemen, perfectly unheeding the storm of war around, closed on one another. It was no hurried action, there was no haste, but coolly as it were a set and ordered duel, they confronted one another. Each felt that it was to be a fight to the death, each knew that his opponent was one of dangerous metal, and that a fatal thrust or feint or second's unsteadiness of hand brought death with it. It behoved each, for dear life's sake, and for triumph and revenge, to be cool and guarded, and therefore with eyes malignantly bent on each other, with foot advanced, and with swords on the level, they stood for a brief second, each hesitating to commence, and give the other the advantage.

Some thought of the sweet fair face among the Wicklow hills occurred to Maurice, for he said, without stirring his hand or taking his eye off the other—

"Must we, then, slay and kill one another, Mordaunt?"

If he meant the question as an attempt at reconciliation it failed in its effect.

"Traitor!—double-dyed traitor!—false to king and friend!" said Raymond, whilst the light leaped cold and malignant from his eyes, as he made a sudden thrust at his foe. The point of his sword passed through Maurice's uniform, grazing his side—had he not warded it off with a slight touch it would have passed through his heart. He felt the blood trickling from the wound. It taught him the danger in which he was more than anything else could, and, abandoning the attempt at reconciliation, grew wary, watchful, and cautious. Several passes were made, several times their steel crossed or along one another, evoking sparks, but neither gained the advantage. Both had grown careful, as behoved men face to face with a deadly enemy, and in whom the turn of a hair's breadth might mean death. A rapid play of sword blades, a successive series of steel-sparks, and Mordaunt's sword pierced his opponent's shoulder. At the same moment his foot slipped and he fell on one knee, but, as he did he threw away the sword, and snatched at the pistol in his belt—perhaps unthought of until now—and levelled it at his foe. Maurice stunned for a moment, leaped forward, the bullet passed him unharmed, and he lifted his sword to cleave his unrelenting enemy to the dust. He felt his strength going from him, and knew that if the duel continued much longer he should fall and be at the mercy of his antagonist. Life is sweet, and in the hour of utmost peril all other considerations vanish into nothing before its preservation! Once for all, now!

But he had mistaken the strength and activity of his foe, who suddenly leaped up and bounded in on him, throwing him off his guard. Maurice leaped quickly aside to avoid him, and with swift motion, almost instantaneous in its swiftness, brought his sword to the descent. As a wild wolf or a savage lion, the implacable foe must die. One or other must die; and, if possible, not he!

Raymond Mordaunt, missing his foe, stumbled and fell prostrate on his face. And as he did the uplifted sword descending to smite

him broke across in its descent; and, half-blinded with loss of blood and dust and perspiration, Maurice saw that it was shivered on an oak staff interposed between him and the object of his vengeance and that the staff was carried by a well-known form. A well-known face shone from amidst the midst of powder-smoke that had surrounded them, and a well-known voice spoke.

"This is not battle; this is murder!" said the interposer sternly.

"Friar Tully!" cried Maurice, in anger and surprise. "Friar, stand aside! You have no business here," as he turned with a broken sword to meet his fallen foe struggling to arise.

"Don't lift your hand—I command you!" said the Friar, facing him. "This is personal feud, therefore murder! Slay no man in hate! And look! Further bloodshed is useless, even if it was just. Look yonder! The day is lost. Fly, man, fly while there is time. Ireland's cause is in the dust, and will be for many a day. Fly; save yourself while there is yet time."

Appalled by the manner of his address as well as by his words, Maurice looked in the direction indicated. The hill-sides were bereft of smoke, and bare and open to the view. And a woeful sight met his eyes. The regiments of English cavalry had made sad havoc of the untrained Irish infantry. The slopes were covered with dead and wounded, and the Irish army—now a disorganised multitude—were flying in all directions, mostly in the direction of the spreading marshes and bogs behind! The fortunes of the day had unaccountably changed, and the battle was hopelessly lost.

Maurice stood thunderstruck.

"Fly, and save yourself," urged the Friar. "Loss and shame enough have come on our cause to-day. Fly while there is yet time. My place is here among the dying. Do you go?"

Thus urged, and scarcely knowing what he was doing, but conscious that some great and strange calamity had fallen, Maurice leaped into the saddle from which a dying soldier had just reeled and fallen, and seizing the reins put spurs to his horse and dashed forward to the entrance to the pass. Here, having gained the open, he could see that the defeat was complete. The English infantry at the bayonet point were driving the Irish musketeers before them on the swords of the cavalry above.

"One charge to save the poor fellows, Maurice," said a voice beside him. "And then for the hills. The day is lost beyond hope. Follow me then, and sweep the field of those fellows."

It was Hugh O'Byrne that spoke. And presently the heavy canter of horsemen behind told that the remnant of the glensmen were beside. In a moment they were riding down on the English bayonet men who, fighting in scattered array, were unable to coalesce and to save themselves from the horseman, and ran for shelter everywhere. This gave the broken ranks of the Irish pikemen time—not to reform, that was perfectly hopeless—but to seek retreat and safety in the swamps and quagmires of the bog where the English cavalry could not follow them.

The result secured, O'Byrne called out:

"Take the road to the right, men—make for the Wicklow hills."

A large body of cavalry was descending from the slopes to the aid of their fellows, and there was no time to be lost, if retreat was not cut off. The road—a narrow one—lay through the spreading bog, and along this the remnant of the horsemen flew. A steed came madly tearing along over the field, the reins trailing over his neck, the rider with head stooped, bending over his saddle. The reins had fallen from his nerveless hand.

Maurice, in the emergency of the moment, thought he recognised the wounded form, and spurring his horse came up with the maddened charger, caught the reins, and, whilst the scattered infantry were gathering towards the approach to the road to bar his way, swept by them, and rode with all his speed after the retreating glensmen—the hoofs of his horse raising sparks out of the stony surface of the road. The latter was considerably elevated above the surface of the surrounding bog—either because it had been so originally or that the latter had been much cut away and lowered, and so prevented the retreating horsemen being taken in flank.

"The enemy are pursuing us, Maurice," said O'Byrne as the former came up with him, "look yonder."

Looking, Maurice saw that in the distance a crowd of horsemen seemed coming.

"We had better turn and face them here," said the Wicklowman.

"It is a narrow road, and half a dozen are as good as a thousand.—We can give our wearied and wounded horsemen time to retreat by barring the enemy's way for a while."

"Precisely what I was thinking, said Maurice, as, galloping forward a little, he entrusted the charge of his wounded companion to one of the glensmen, and then returned.

"They must be hardy fellows if they dare to force men at bay on this narrow causeway," remarked Maurice, as, with faces set towards the late battlefield, they awaited the coming of the troopers.

"They seem coming at any rate," said Colonel O'Byrne. "I hope they may. It will be a fairer chance, and an even match than we had this day."

"By heavens! they are returning—they have thought better of it—see, they are riding back."

"The worse luck!" said the Wicklowman, disappointedly. "But stay—who are these two coming towards us?"

"Fugitives like ourselves, I fancy," said Maurice. "Our staying has frightened their pursuers. Let us see who they be."

"Why, Oney Na Coppul, I declare," cried O'Byrne in surprise as they drew rein and trotted easily up, "and—and—Roger Leix."

"Myself, faix, sure enough," said the former, in easy good-humour, "in a day like this wan does not mind the kind of a road he travels. An' it's a time when a poor fellow is glad of company."

"Ob, Roger," said Hugh, unheeding Oney's careless badinage which fell unpleasantly on his ears, "this has been an evil day for the cause."

"It has been a woeful day, no doubt," replied O'Moore, slowly, "but there are ups and downs in warfare, and another day may restore us what we lost."