

The Storyteller.

THE RISING OF THE WATERS.

It was the night after Ballyellis.

The men were asleep in the valley, on the grass, under the hedges, wherever they could, enjoying a needed and well-earned rest, for they had proved the manhood that was in them on that memorable day. Only an odd scout on the hills around was awake, keeping watch and ward.

Lights glimmered faintly in the windows of a farmhouse on the verge. Glimmered presently more brightly, as the door opened and a beam of light shot outwards on the bawn. Again grew darkened, as a form appeared thereat, blocking it.

The form appearing at the door whistled, and from the gable-end a man came up.

'I want you to look up Mick Maher and George Malone, and send them to me. Don't be long.'

The door closed, the form re-entered, and the stream of light was shut off. Less than half an hour afterwards the door opened, and two men entered. Were shown into the parlor, where a number of men were sitting around a table.

'George,' said he who sat at the head of the table, to the first who entered, 'I want to send this letter to Dwyer. It is most important it should reach him at once. I select you because you know the Wicklow hills so well. You cannot go Arklow way, because the soldiery are all around there—guarding every road.'

'Very well, Mr. Ryan,' said the young fellow addressed, readily.

'You will go with him Mick, because it is too important to be chanced to one. Anything may happen to one in such times as these. But two will be able to help one another, and if evil mischance comes to one the other can take up the running. You understand?'

They understood.

'Very well. When will you be ready?'

They would be ready in half an hour. And were.

The letter was handed to them, and, with muskets strapped across their shoulders, they got into the saddles and moved across towards the bawn-gate. Other riders had owned these horses and sat in these saddles that morning—men with gleaming helmets and high plumes thereover, with burnished breastplates, steel shoulder-straps, and swords by their sides—but these men were lying somewhere in the valley, too, and would never again mount horse or sit in saddle.

There was a heavy mist, the mist of a summer night, lying over the ground; but the moon would be up presently. And, indeed, as it was, the round silver orb was creeping slowly into view over the sky line of Carraclough.

It was a strange and unaccustomed scene its peaceful rays would stream down on a little later; but the two wayfarers never even thought of that as they turned their horses' heads northwards.

They could not go by the Arklow way, as Edmond Ryan had told them—nor indeed by any of the known roads; for, after the events of this day became known to them—and ill news travels fast—the crowding soldiery would be keeping watch and ward everywhere. They, therefore, crossed the meadow-lands and corn-lands, and towards the Wicklow hills.

The moonlight kept them in company until the grey light came creeping from the east across the broad breast of the Irish Sea, and then the moon and the peeping stars shut up and disappeared. And by this time they had gained the friendly shelter of the hills. Carn Tual, high and mighty, was in front of them, and, like a genial Irish mountain, put on a friendly smile of golden rays on his summit to welcome them what time they drew near.

It was a glorious summer morning. The sun's rays came slantingly across the distant sea, the air was sweet and fresh, the heather around was creeping into redness, and, except an odd lark singing high in the morning air, there was not a thing or a sound about. Whatever noise there was arose from the striking of the horses' hoofs against the stony way. The air in these high latitudes is exhilarating, and the travellers felt its effect. They were enjoying it to the full as they moved on in single file, non-speaking, silent. The sensations were much too pleasant to be interrupted by talk.

Presently, however, the silence is broken, for the one behind says in a low voice and startled—

'Look, George!—look!'

Malone turned round quickly in his saddle and looked at the speaker.

He was about to ask 'What?—Where?' But his eye following the other's gaze, which was fixed in a westerly direction, he did not need to put the query.

He saw it all at a glance.

This is what he saw:—

A troop of lancers, the morning sun shining brightly on their pennons and their red-coats, bringing out the colors with strange vividity. By their sides hung their swords, and in their leather sheathing their carbines. They were going along the ancient military road, so long unused as to have fallen back into its original savagery; but now they halted, and the forms in the saddles turned their faces eastwards.

'My soul to glory! They see us!' exclaimed Malone in the instant in which he took the scene in. It was easy to take it in; for, with the clearness of the air and the fresh brightness of the sun-rays, they did not seem a quarter of a mile away, though they were probably a mile.

'That they do,' said Maher.

'We had better ride for it. They will be on us immediately.'

They were, indeed; for presently the troop went about and were riding in their direction. It did not need much urging to send the two travellers pressing forward. They carried their lives in their hands on a very short lease—and both knew it. So they went forward.

Their horses were not very fresh. They had seen a good deal of exercise the previous day, before their former owners had fallen from the saddles, and, save the rest during the evening and early part of the night, had had little for some time. And they had come a long, troublesome, tiring way already. But they were strong and in good condition, and they were now put to their best.

Over the rocky heather, taking advantage of a sheep track wherever they found it, pounding over the shingle into a depression and urging their horses up the other side, they went on. But the others behind, some ten or twelve, were equally well mounted, and their horses were fresher, so they kept their own with them—if, indeed, they were not gaining. They would have gained more rapidly if some of them, from time to time, when a good occasion arose, did not stay to sight their carbines and fire. But the distance was too great for these old-fashioned firearms, or the aim was unsteady, and they escaped unhurt.

The boulders, as they came to Carn Tual, became more frequent and the way heavier. They had to ride—scramble, rather—around these huge masses of granite, and were sorely delayed. True, their pursuers would have to do the same thing; but these detours, making large curves, were bringing them within easier range of gunshot, and if man or horse got a bullet—then where were they? It was all up with them. And what 'all up' meant they very well knew. The military doings in Wexford and Wicklow left no doubt about that.

'We'll never make Glenmalur, George,' said Maher, one time when bullets came singing around, and they could hear the laughing shouts and hails of their pursuers—laughing, so sure were they of their prey. 'My horse is getting tired.'

'Well, we must do the best we can. God is good!' returned Malone. 'Push on; we're nigh a mile ahead of them still. Push on!'

Malone had not much more hope of a successful ending than the other, but he was of a cheasier nature, and thought, moreover, that the good word was just as useful as the bad one.

They left Carn Tual to their right, and from its high base the ground sloped.

'Now, Mick, we're all right. We're going down the hill. Mind your horse's feet; keep a fast hold on the reins, and we'll make it yet. Good gracious! What's amiss?'

The curving path had left pursuers and pursued not quite a quarter of a mile away, as the crow flies. They were at the ends of a large chord, both—from the circumstances of the ground—exposed, and the former had taken advantage of the position to fire a volley.

'My horse is hit in the shoulder, George. See.'

Maher rubbed his hand along the shoulder, lifted it for view—it was streaming with blood.

'That's a bad job, devil a worse,' said Malone as he reined up. 'Will he be able to carry on, d'ye think?'

But he got no answer, for the horse presently shivered a bit, shook himself, plunged forward on his head and side, and it took all Maher's quickness to get his feet out of the stirrups before he fell, and save himself from being crushed.

The cheers and ribald shouts of their pursuers were plain enough now—plain almost as if beside.

'If I were never to see the setting sun again I'll put a kink in their laughing,' said Malone, as he leaped out of the saddle, and unslinging his gun, got it ready. 'Don't mind that horse, Mick, don't bother yourself about him, he'll never travel a foot again. Get your gun.'

It was fortunate the horse was a trooper's horse and could stand fire, for they both rested their muskets on his back, took steady aim at the yelling pursuers behind, who were in no hurry now knowing their pray was certain, and fired.

They were both good shots. Much firing at hares and wild fowl in these same regions in the more peaceful days had made them so. When the smoke lifted they found that their pursuers had something else to occupy themselves with than yelling forth ribald insults. They were in a state of confusion, and horses were rearing and trembling.

'There! that will delay 'em a time,' Malone said, slinging up his gun again and leaping into the saddle. 'Now, Mick, jump up behind me. Why—eh? What the devil are you doing?'

'Well! Saint Aidan help us! Of all the loonies I ever saw! Jump up, will you—while there's time!'

The words came in a wildly desperate voice—hot with indignation and wrath.

Mick Maher did as he was told.

'We'll never make it, George,' he said. 'We'll never make Glenmalur. This horse is tired, an' two's too much.'

'He wouldn't be much the better for having your saddle on him,' said Malone angrily. 'Anyhow, we can only do the best we can. It's all in the hands of God! How dreadful dark it's growing!'

Two was too much on him, as Mick Maher had said. That was evident from the labored way in which the horse strove to get along. That was quite evident. All the more evident when, going through a narrow cleft, he staggered visibly against the left side rock, scraping the riders' shins.

George Malone felt Maher's fingers, holding on to him, go in through his ribs at this.

'Never mind,' he said, in reply to this unintended remark. 'It's all right. The best horse in the world might do that. Did you bring the cartridges?'

'No,' said Maher with a choke. 'No, they're under the saddle-skirts. I never thought of them. Why did you hurry me?'