

The Storyteller.

FOR FAITH AND COUNTRY.

CHAPTER I.

CARRA CASTLE stood on the south side of the Boyne, where it flows by the fertile lands of Meath. There is but a single tower remaining of what was once a great and stately pile—a square tower with ivy clinging in thick festoons to the walls and swaying like green banners from the battlemented roof. When Cromwell laid siege to Drogheda and swept the valley of the Boyne with fire and sword, the little garrison of Carra had resisted his assault valiantly until superior forces overwhelmed them. Then Felim O'More, the hereditary lord, came forth with his few surviving men and made the last target for the Puritan bullets. He had fought like a lion throughout the conflict, and fell—shrilling with his dying breath the war-cry of his clan—among the ruins of his ancient home.

Thus it happened that Sir William Kendrick, captain of Cromwell's body-guard of horse, noting the rich lands that sloped to the river, and being in high favor with the Lord Protector, petitioned that this district should be granted him for his services. Cromwell, anxious to gratify his favorite, accordingly made over Carra to him by private treaty. But Sir William, knowing that it would be impossible for himself to undertake the personal supervision of his new property, sought for a trustworthy person who would hold the tower and territory securely for him in his name. He remembered his cousin, Humphrey Bedingfield, who had settled in Dublin some 20 years before, marrying an Irish wife and adopting the Catholic faith. Humphrey, he recollected, had been a grave and wary man, cool of judgment and scant of speech. In only one instance had he shown instability of character, and that was when he took the Irish girl to wife and followed her to the Mass House.

'But then,' mused Sir William, 'these Irish wenches are undoubtedly handsome, and beauty will ever turn a man's head, even turning it from the religion of his fathers towards the contemplation of idols.'

So he finally determined to send to Dublin for Humphrey and find if he would undertake the responsibility.

When Humphrey Bedingfield, silk mercer of the Coombe, received the sealed letter from his cousin he perused it attentively without any show of surprise. But he sat staring straight before him, with a wrinkle of perplexity between his brows, which his wife, Mistress Honora, well knew meant an affair of importance. She did not dare to break the silence until it was his pleasure to speak.

'Dame,' he said finally, 'come hither until I tell you of this matter. It concerns us both deeply and also one who is dearer to us than our own lives.'

And he read the letter slowly while tears gathered in the soft blue eyes that followed his along the page.

'Tis surely the will of God,' said Dame Honora, when the reading was over.

'Surely it is, sweetheart, and perchance it meaneth that our darling may yet come into her own. For of course, all being well, I shall accept this offer of my cousin, Sir William, and become his faithful steward in trust for one dearer than he.'

'But, Humphrey,' and a sudden fear gathered in the soft eyes gazing at him. 'But, Humphrey, should he demand more than stewardship from you; should he ask you to disown our Faith, how will it be then? Better, dear husband, to dwell in our happy obscurity here than run such a direful risk,' and she stroked his hand tenderly.

A loving smile transfigured his stern face.

'Fond heart,' he said, 'have I ever failed you that you need fear for me now? Have I worshipped you all these years to find you doubting my sincerity at last? Ah no, sweet wife, no. 'Tis true that it was you I sought in those far days, not your Faith; but even then it was precious to me for your sake.'

Dame Honora sighed.

'Yet I would, Humphrey, that you valued our holy religion for its own sake, not mine. If I were gone—I often think of this when I lie awake at night—could you be firm without my help and my prayers? These are evil times, and evil powers walk abroad. The monasteries and churches are the prey of the invader; the priests are being hunted to death, with the same price upon their heads as is on the head of a wolf. Here we are safe, but there—within reach of the fanatical soldiery Cromwell keeps to guard Drogheda, men who go about with God's name on their lips and the devil in their hearts—temptations may come to assail you, and you may grow lax, and fall.'

'Oh, my timorous dame,' he cried playfully, to reassure her. 'this business may come to naught, though I am wishful it should be arranged satisfactorily. And to comfort you I shall speak a word to Sir William concerning our Faith, that we may not be molested. If he is still the same generous soul he will not hesitate to befriend his old schoolmate in this. But,' he added hastily, 'we are thinking only of ourselves. Had we not better convey the news to our dear child?'

'She was at her prayers,' replied Dame Honora 'when I left her. You know she has many sad thoughts these days. Her heart is heavy for young O'Hanlon, lest he should be seized and transported, perchance to the Barbadoes, with the other unfortunates. And she sorrows bitterly for her father's death, although she is proud that his end was what he would have chosen. She has a brave heart, Humphrey, for all her wistful, clinging ways, and would have wished to have been near him at the last.'

'And fallen a victim to the lust of the besiegers, God forbid, wife.'

'She says she would have died with him.'

'Death might have mercifully spared her. But now, since this proposal comes so timely, or untimely, that we should go into possession of her heritage, we must hear what she has to say. Bring her hither, wife.'

Dame Honora left the room returning quickly followed by a young girl. This was Una O'More, the only child of Felim of Carra. She had happily escaped her father's fate, being at the time on a visit to Dublin to his foster-sister, the wife of Humphrey Bedingfield. The news of his tragic end had reached her through the medium of an old priest, Father Donogh Heggerty, who, since the enforcement of the laws against the Catholic clergy, had adopted the disguise of a beggar-man in his journeyings. Father Donogh had many a time abode in the western tower of Carra where was a secret room—the tower which had been spared—and when in Dublin he invariably made his home in Bedingfield's house in the Coombe, where his comings and goings did not excite any particular comment. He was accounted a poor friend of the family, and, Mistress Honora's charity being well known, it was agreed that his frequent appearance was in the character of an alms-seeker.

As for Una O'More, her visit to the house of the worthy silk mercer had been religiously kept from the knowledge of the inquisitive neighbors, as both Humphrey and his wife feared to run the risk of letting her beauty come under the eyes of the Cromwellian troopers who infested the locality. Hence she went out only after nightfall to take the air, securely cloaked and hooded, leaning on the arm of the taciturn Humphrey, who gave but curt answers to the greeting of any passer-by. Her guardian was well aware of the danger of these late strolls, still he could not bear to see the roses fade from the young girl's cheeks, which would inevitably be the outcome of prolonged seclusion in the musty old house.

Now, as she entered the room with his wife, he could plainly perceive the change those months of anxiety and retirement had wrought upon her. There were dark circles round the gray eyes, and her features had grown sharper. She was very beautiful in spite of this. Her little face was a perfect oval of creamy paleness, with broad brows round which the nut-brown hair curled in rebellious tangles. Of middle height, slender and straight, she carried herself, for all her youth, with a graceful dignity which added to her charm. Her gown of plain blue woolen stuff, high at the neck, fell in soft folds from a girdle of silver filigree.

It was in direct contrast to the attire of Dame Bedingfield, who wore the costume of an English lady of the period—a dress in which she was wont to say she ever felt ill at ease. But, out of deference to her husband's wish, she had adopted it a short time previously for safety's sake on her goings and comings. Humphrey gazed at them with fond admiration in his eyes as they approached.

'It is a matter of great importance, that which I have to unfold to you, dear child,' he said, leading her to a chair, 'and it will be necessary for us to consider it gravely. But to explain properly, I shall first read to you this letter of my cousin, the worshipful knight, Sir William Kendrick.'

Una listened with her head on the ample shoulder of Dame Honora. Now and then a sob stirred her, but otherwise she was silent.

'Those,' said Humphrey, at the conclusion of the epistle, 'are my cousin's written words. It will be a task of considerable peril to make our way to Drogheda, and we can only do so unmolested under passport from Cromwell himself. It is to try and save your father's lands for you that I would go, dear child.'

'I well know that, my kind guardian,' Una answered, 'and though I would give more than I can say to dwell in the old home again, where every stone is dear and familiar, where my sweet mother died and my father fought his last fight, still it grieves me that your peaceful life should be disturbed through love of me. It would be cruel to bring Dame Honora into that lonely and ruined quarter, where, as Father Donogh tells me, none of our Faith is safe.'

'Fear not for me, my treasure,' said Dame Honora, 'wherever you are happy so shall I be and Humphrey too'—she added with a smile.

'Tis but the truth, wife,' assented Bedingfield.

'And besides,' Dame Honora went on, 'there is someone else who ought to come into our calculations. Young Con O'Hanlon is perchance haunting that dangerous place for a sight of my darling,'—here she bent to kiss the blushing cheek—'and for his safeguard it would be better to take our journey there and warn him that the woods of the Fews make a better hiding place from the Round-heads than the open plains of Meath.'

'The most conclusive argument of all,' cried Humphrey, as he saw how favorably the suggestion had impressed Una. 'Make a few preparations, wife, and I shall leave for Drogheda in the morning, returning swiftly, God granting, whether my tidings be of good import or the reverse.'

CHAPTER II.

Humphrey Bedingfield made his way safely to the camp at Drogheda and there found his cousin, the worshipful captain, awaiting him. There were mutual expressions of wonder that the years had wrought such changes in each. Of the two, however, Bedingfield showed less sign of wear and tear. He still preserved his hardy, spare figure, but the soldier looked heavier than such a seasoned campaigner had a right to be. There was no appearance, though, of the Puritan about Sir William—the twinkle in his eye came and went too often, and the self-indulgent lips and chin spoke volumes for his tastes. It could easily be seen that here was a man who accepted the rigid tenets of the Ironsides merely because it suited his purpose, not because he had any especial love for psalm singing and a cropped head.

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