

Weyman Stanley John

The Wild Geese



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CHAPTER I

ON BOARD THE "CORMORANT" SLOOP

Midway in that period of Ireland's history during which, according to historians, the distressful country had none – to be more precise, on a spring morning early in the eighteenth century, and the reign of George the First, a sloop of about seventy tons burthen was beating up Dingle Bay, in the teeth of a stiff easterly breeze. The sun was two hours high, and the grey expanse of the bay was flecked with white horses hurrying seaward in haste to leap upon the Blasquets, or to disport themselves in the field of ocean. From the heaving deck of the vessel the mountains that shall not be removed were visible – on the northerly tack Brandon, on the southerly Carntual; the former sunlit, with patches of moss gleaming like emeralds on its breast, the latter dark and melancholy, clothed in the midst of tradition and fancy that in those days garbed so much of Ireland's bog and hill.

The sloop had missed the tide, and, close hauled to the wind, rode deep in the ebb, making little way with each tack. The breeze hummed through the rigging. The man at the helm humped a shoulder to the sting of the spray, and the rest of the crew, seven or eight in number – tarry, pigtailed, outlandish sailor men – crouched under the windward rail. The skipper sat with a companion on a coil of rope on the dry side of the skylight, and at the moment at which our story opens was oblivious alike of the weather and his difficulties. He sat with his eyes fixed on his neighbour, and in those eyes a wondering, fatuous admiration. So might a mortal look if some strange hap brought him face to face with a centaur.

"Never?" he murmured respectfully.

"Never," his companion answered.

"My faith!" Captain Augustin rejoined. He was a cross between a Frenchman and an Irishman. For twenty years he had carried wine to Ireland, and returned laden with wool to Bordeaux or Cadiz. He knew every inlet between Achill Sound and the Head of Kinsale, and was so far a Jacobite that he scorned to pay duty to King George. "Never? My faith!" he repeated, staring, if possible, harder than ever.

"No," said the Colonel. "Under no provocation, thank God!"

"But it's *drôle*," Captain Augustin rejoined. "It would bother me sorely to know what you do."

"What we all should do," his passenger answered gently. "Our duty, Captain Augustin. Our duty! Doing which we are men indeed. Doing which, we have no more to do, no more to fear, no more to question." And Colonel John Sullivan threw out both his hands, as if to illustrate the freedom from care which followed. "See! it is done!"

"But west of Shannon, where there is no law?" Augustin answered. "Eh, Colonel? And in Kerry, where we'll be, the saints helping, before noon – which is all one with Connaught? No, in Kerry, what with Sullivans, and Mahonies, and O'Beirnes, that wear coats only for a gentleman to tread upon, and would sooner shoot a friend before breakfast than spend the day idle, *par ma foi*, I'm not seeing what you'll be doing there, Colonel."

"A man may protect himself from violence," the Colonel answered soberly, "and yet do his duty. What he may not do – is this. He may not go out to kill another in cold blood, for a point of honour, or for revenge, or to sustain what he has already done amiss! No, nor for vanity, or for the

hundred trifles for which men risk their lives and seek the lives of others. I hope I make myself clear, Captain Augustin?" he added courteously.

He asked because the skipper's face of wonderment was not to be misread. And the skipper answered, "Quite clear!" meaning the reverse. Clear, indeed? Yonder were the hills and bogs of Kerry – lawless, impenetrable, abominable – a realm of Tories and rapparees. On the sloop itself was scarce a man whose hands were free from blood. He, Augustin, mild-mannered as any smuggler on the coast, had spent his life between fleeing and fighting, with his four carronades ever crammed to the muzzle, and his cargo ready to be jettisoned at sight of a cruiser. And this man talked as if he were in church! Talked – talked – the skipper fairly gasped. "Oh, quite clear!" he mumbled. "Quite clear!" he replied. "But it's an odd creed."

"Not a creed, my friend," Colonel Sullivan replied precisely. "But the result of a creed. The result, thank God, of more creeds than one."

Captain Augustin cast a wild eye at the straining, shrieking rigging; the sloop was lurching heavily. But whether he would or no, his eye fluttered back and rested, fascinated, on the Colonel's face. Indeed, from the hour, ten days earlier, which had seen him mount the side in the Bordeaux river, Colonel John Sullivan had been a subject of growing astonishment to the skipper. Captain Augustin knew his world tolerably. In his time he had conveyed many a strange passenger from strand to strand: haggard men who ground their shoulders against the bulkhead, and saw things in corners; dark, down-looking adventurers, whose hands flew to hilts if a gentleman addressed them suddenly; gay young sparks bound on foreign service and with the point of honour on their lips, or their like, returning old and broken to beg or cut throats on the highway – these, and men who carried their lives in their hands, and men who went, cloaked, on mysterious missions, and men who wept as the Irish coast faded behind them, and men, more numerous, who wept when they saw it again – he knew them all! All, he had carried them, talked with them, learned their secrets, and more often their hopes.

But such a man as this he had never carried. A man who indeed wore outlandish fur-trimmed clothes, and had seen, if his servant's sparse words went for aught, outlandish service; but who neither swore, nor drank above measure, nor swaggered, nor threatened. Who would not dice, nor game – save for trifles. Who, on the contrary, talked of duty, and had a peaceful word for all, and openly condemned the duello, and was mild as milk and as gentle as an owl. Such a one seemed, indeed, the fabled "phaynix," or a bat with six wings, or any other prodigy which the fancy, Irish or foreign, could conceive.

Then, to double the marvel, the Colonel had a servant, a close-tongued fellow, William Bale by name, and reputed an Englishman, who, if he was not like his master, was as unlike other folk. He was as quiet-spoken as the Colonel, and as precise, and as peaceable. He had even been heard to talk of his duty. But while the Colonel was tall and spare, with a gentle eye and a long, kindly face, and was altogether of a pensive cast, Bale was short and stout, of a black pallor, and very forbidding. His mouth, when he opened it – which was seldom – dropped honey. But his brow scowled, his lip sneered, and his silence invited no confidence.

Such being the skipper's passenger, and such his man, the wonder was that Captain Augustin's astonishment had not long ago melted into contempt. But it had not. For one thing, a seaman had been hurt, and the Colonel had exhibited a skill in the treatment of wounds which would not have disgraced an experienced surgeon. Then in the Bay the sloop had met with half a gale, and the passenger, in circumstances which the skipper knew to be more trying to landsmen than to himself, had maintained a serenity beyond applause. He had even, clinging to the same ring-bolt with the skipper, while the south-wester tore overhead and the gallant little vessel lay over wellnigh to her beam-ends, praised with a queer condescension the conduct of the crew.

"This is the finest thing in the world," he had shouted, amid the roar of things, "to see men doing their duty! I would not have missed this for a hundred crowns!"

"I'd give as much to be safe in Cherbourg," had been the skipper's grim reply as he watched his mast.

But Augustin had not forgotten the Colonel's coolness. A landsman, for whom the trough of the wave had no terrors, and the leeward breakers, falling mountain high on Ushant, no message, was not a man to be despised.

Indeed, from that time the skipper had begun to find a charm in the Colonel's gentleness and courtesy. He had fought against the feeling, but it had grown upon him. Something that was almost affection began to mingle with and augment his wonder. Hence the patience with which, with Kerry on the beam, he listened while the Colonel sang his siren song.

"He will be one of the people called Quakers," the skipper thought, after a while. "I've heard of them, but never seen one. Yes, he will be a Quaker."

Unfortunately, as he arrived at this conclusion a cry from the steersman roused him. He sprang to his feet. Alas! the sloop had run too far on the northerly tack, and simultaneously the wind had shifted a point to the southward. In the open water this had advantaged her; but she had been allowed to run into a bight of the north shore and a line of foam cut her off to the eastward, leaving small room to tack. She might still clear the westerly rocks and run out to sea, but the skipper saw – with an oath – that this was doubtful, and with a seaman's quickness he made up his mind.

"Keep her on! – keep her on!" he roared, "you son of a *maudite mère*! Child of the accursed! We must run into Skull haven! And if the men of Skull take so much as an iron bolt from us, and I misdoubt them, I'll keel-haul you, son of the *Diable*! I'll not leave an inch of skin upon you!"

The man, cowering over the wheel, obeyed, and the little vessel ran up the narrowing water – in which she had become involved – on an even keel. The crew were already on their feet, they had loosened the sheet, and squared the boom; they stood by to lower the yard. All – the skipper with a grim face – stood looking forward, as the inlet narrowed, the green banks closed in, the rocks that fringed them approached. Silently and gracefully the sloop glided on, more smoothly with every moment, until a turn in the passage opened a small land-locked haven. At the head of the haven, barely a hundred yards above high-water mark, stood a ruined tower – the Tower of Skull – and below this a long house of stone with a thatched roof.

It was clear that the sloop's movements had been watched from the shore, for although the melancholy waste of moor and mountain disclosed no other habitation, a score of half-naked barefoot figures were gathered on the jetty; while others could be seen hurrying down the hillside. These cried to one another in an unknown tongue, and with shrill eldritch voices, which vied with the screams of the gulls swinging overhead.

"Stand by to let go the kedge," Augustin cried, eyeing them gloomily. "We are too far in now! Let go! – let go!"

But the order and the ensuing action at once redoubled the clamour on shore. A dozen of the foremost natives flung themselves into crazy boats, that seemed as if they could not float long enough to reach the vessel. But the men handled them with consummate skill and with equal daring. In a twinkling they were within hail, and a man, wearing a long frieze coat, a fisherman's red cap, and little besides, stood up in the bow of the nearest.

"You will be coming to the jetty, Captain?" he cried in imperfect English.

The skipper scowled at him, but did not answer.

"You will come to the jetty, Captain," the man repeated in his high, sing-song voice. "Sure, and you've come convenient, for there's no one here barring yourselves."

"And you're wanting brandy!" Augustin muttered bitterly under his breath. He glanced at his men, as if he meditated resistance.

But, "Kerry law! Kerry law!" the man cried. "You know it well, Captain! It's not I'll be answerable if you don't come to the jetty."

The skipper, who had fallen ill at Skull once before, and got away with some loss, hoping that he might never see the place again, knew that he was in the men's power. True, a single discharge of his carronades would blow the boats to pieces; but he could not in a moment warp his ship out through the narrow passage. And if he could, he knew that the act would be bloodily avenged if he ever landed again in that part of Ireland. He swore under his breath, and the steersman who had wrought the harm by holding on too long wilted under his eye. The crew looked other ways.

At length he yielded, and sulkily gave the order, the windlass was manned, and the kedg drawn up. Fenders were lowered, and the sloop slid gently to the jetty side.

In a twinkling a score of natives swarmed aboard. The man in the frieze coat followed more leisurely, and with such dignity as became the owner of a stone-walled house. He sauntered up to the skipper, a leer in his eye. "You will have lost something the last time you were here, Captain?" he said. "It is not I that will be responsible this time unless the stuff is landed."

Augustin laughed scornfully. "The cargo is for Crosby of Castlemaine," he said. And he added various things which he hoped would happen to himself if he landed so much as a single tub.

"It's little we know of Crosby here," the other replied; and he spat on the deck. "And less we'll be caring, my dear. I say it shall be landed. Here, you, Darby Sullivan, off with the hatch!"

Augustin stepped forward impulsively, as if he had a mind to throw the gentleman in the frieze coat into the sea. But he had not armed himself before he came on deck, the men of Skull outnumbered his crew two to one, and, savage and half-naked as they were, were furnished to a man with long sharp skenes and the skill to use them. If resistance had been possible at any time, he had let the moment pass. The nearest Justice lived twelve Irish miles away, and had he been on the spot he would, since he was of necessity a Protestant, have been as helpless – unless he brought the garrison of Tralee at his back – as a churchwarden in a Synod of Cardinals. The skipper hesitated, and while he hesitated the hatches were off, and the Sullivans swarmed down like monkeys. Before the sloop could be made fast, the smaller kegs were being tossed up, and passed over the side, a line was formed on land, and the cargo, which had last seen the sun on the banks of the Garonne, was swiftly vanishing in the maw of the stone house on the shore.

The skipper's rage was great, but he could only swear, and O'Sullivan Og, the man in the frieze coat, who bore him an old grudge, grinned in mockery. "For better custody, Captain!" he said. "For better custody! Under my roof, *bien*! And when you will to go again there will be the dues to be paid, the little dues over which we quarrelled last time! And all will be rendered to a stave!"

"You villain!" the Captain muttered under his breath. "I understand!" Turning – for the sight was more than he could bear – he found his passenger at his elbow.

The Colonel, if his face went for anything, liked the proceedings almost as little as the skipper. His lips were tightly closed, and he frowned.

"Ay," Augustin cried bitterly – for the first instinct of the man who is hurt is to hurt another – "now you see what it is you've come back to! It's rob, or be robbed, this side of Tralee, and as far as the devil could kick you beyond it! I wish you well out of it! But I suppose it would take more than this to make you draw that long hanger of yours?"

The Colonel cast a troubled eye on him. "Beyond doubt," he said, "it is the duty of a man to assist in defending the house of his host. And in a sense and measure, the goods of his host" – with an uneasy look at the fast-vanishing cargo, which was leaping from hand to hand so swiftly that the progress of a tub from the hold to the house was as the flight of a swallow – "are the house of his host. I do not deny that," he continued precisely, "but –"

"But in this instance," the sea-captain struck in with a sneer, contempt for the first time mastering wonder, "in this instance?"

"In this instance," the Colonel repeated with an unmistakable blush, "I am not very free to act. The truth is, Captain Augustin, these folk are of my kin. I was born not many miles from here" – his eye measured the lonely landscape as if he compared it with more recent scenes – "and, wrong or

right, blood is thicker than wine. So that frankly, I am not clear that for the sake of your Bordeaux, I'm tied to shed blood that might be my forbears'!"

"Or your grandmother's," Augustin cried, with an open sneer.

"Or my grandmother's. Very true. But if a word to them in season – "

"Oh, d – n your words," the skipper retorted disdainfully.

He would have said more, but at that moment it became clear that something was happening on shore. On the green brow beside the tower a girl mounted on horseback had appeared; at a cry from her the men had stopped work. The next moment her horse came cantering down the slope, and with uplifted whip she rode in among the men. The whip fell twice, and down went all the tubs within reach. Her voice, speaking, now Erse, now Kerry English, could be heard upbraiding the nearest, commanding, threatening, denouncing. Then on the brow behind her appeared in turn a man – a man who looked gigantic against the sky, and who sat a horse to match. He descended more slowly, and reached the girl's side as O'Sullivan Og, in his frieze coat, came to the front in support of his men.

For a full minute the girl vented her anger on Og, while he stood sulky but patient, waiting for an opening to defend himself. When he obtained this, he seemed to the two on the deck of the sloop to appeal to the big man, who said a word or two, but was cut short by the girl. Her voice, passionate and indignant, reached the deck; but not her words.

"That should be Flavia McMurrough!" the Colonel murmured thoughtfully, "And Uncle Ulick. He's little changed, whoever's changed! She has a will, it seems, and good impulses!"

The big man had begun by frowning on O'Sullivan Og. But presently he smiled at something the latter said, then he laughed; at last he made a joke himself. At that the girl turned on him; but he argued with her. A man held up a tub for inspection, and though she struck it pettishly with her whip, it was plain that she was shaken. O'Sullivan Og pointed to the sloop, pointed to his house, grinned. The listeners on the deck caught the word "Dues!" and the peal of laughter that followed.

Captain Augustin understood naught of what was going forward. But the man beside him, who did, touched his sleeve. "It were well to speak to her," he said.

"Who is she?" the skipper asked impatiently. "What has she to do with it?"

"They are her people," the Colonel answered simply – "or they should be. If she says yea, it is yea; and if she says nay, it is nay. Or, so it should be – as far as a league beyond Morristown."

Augustin waited for no more. He was still in a fog, but he saw a ray of hope; this was the Chatelaine, it seemed. He bundled over the side.

Alas! he ventured too late. As his feet touched the slippery stones of the jetty, the girl wheeled her horse about with an angry exclamation, shook her whip at O'Sullivan Og – who winked the moment her back was turned – and cantered away up the hill. On the instant the men picked up the kegs they had dropped, a shrill cry passed down the line, and the work was resumed.

But the big man remained; and the skipper, with the Colonel at his elbow, made for him through the half-naked kernes. He saw them coming, however, guessed their errand, and, with the plain intention of avoiding them, he turned his horse's head.

But the skipper, springing forward, was in time to seize his stirrup. "Sir," he cried, "this is robbery! *Nom de Dieu*, it is thievery!"

The big man looked down at him with temper. "Oh, by G – d, you must pay your dues!" he said. "Oh yes, you must pay your dues!"

"But this is robbery."

"Sure it's not that you must be saying!"

The Colonel put the skipper on one side. "By your leave," he cried, "one word! You don't know, sir, who I am, but – "

"I know you must pay your dues!" Uncle Ulick answered, parrot-like. "Oh yes, you must pay your dues!" He was clearly ashamed of his *rôle*, however; for as he spoke he shook off the

Colonel's hold with a pettish gesture, struck his horse with his stick, and cantered away over the hill. In a twinkling he was lost to sight.

"*Vaurien!*" cried Captain Augustin, shaking his fist after him. But he might as well have sworn at the moon.

CHAPTER II

MORRISTOWN

It was not until the Colonel had passed over the shoulder above the stone-walled house that he escaped from the jabber of the crowd and the jeers of the younger members of this savage tribe, who, noting something abnormal in the fashion of the stranger's clothes, followed him a space. On descending the farther slope, however, he found himself alone in the silence of the waste. Choosing without hesitation one of two tracks, ill-trodden, but such as in that district and at that period passed for roads, he took his way along it at a good pace.

A wide brown basin, bog for the most part, but rising here and there into low mounds of sward or clumps of thorn-trees, stretched away to the foot of the hills. He gazed upon it with eyes which had been strained for years across the vast unbroken plains of Central Europe, the sandy steppes of Poland, the frozen marshes of Lithuania; and beside the majesty of their boundless distances this view shrank to littleness. But it spoke to more than his eyes; it spoke to the heart, to feelings and memories which time had not blunted, nor could blunt. The tower on the shoulder behind him had been raised by his wild forefathers in the days when the Spaniard lay at Smerwick; and, mean and crumbling, still gave rise to emotions which the stern battlements of Stralsund or of Rostock had failed to evoke. Soil and sky, the lark which sang overhead, the dark peat-water which rose under foot, the scent of the moist air, the cry of the curlew, all spoke of home – the home which he had left in the gaiety of youth, to return to it a grave man, older than his years, and with grey hairs flecking the black. No wonder that he stood more than once, and, absorbed in thought, gazed on this or that, on crag and moss, on the things which time and experience had so strangely diminished.

The track, after zig-zagging across a segment of the basin that has been described, entered a narrow valley, drained by a tolerable stream. After ascending this for a couple of miles, it disclosed a view of a wider vale, enclosed by gentle hills of no great height. In the lap of this nestled a lake, on the upper end of which some beauty was conferred by a few masses of rock partly clothed by birch-trees, through which a stream fell sharply from the upland. Not far from these rocks a long, low house stood on the shore.

The stranger paused to take in the prospect; nor was it until after the lapse of some minutes, spent in the deepest reverie, that he pursued his way along the left-hand bank of the lake. By-and-by he was able to discern, amid the masses of rock at the head of the lake, a grey tower, the twin of that Tower of Skull which he had left behind him; and a hundred paces farther he came upon a near view of the house.

"Two-and-twenty years!" he murmured. "There is not even a dog to bid me welcome!"

The house was of two stories, with a thatched roof. Its back was to the slopes that rose by marshy terraces to the hills. Its face was turned to the lake, and between it and the water lay a walled forecourt, the angle on each side of the entrance protected by a tower of an older date than the house. The entrance was somewhat pretentious, and might – for each of the pillars supported a heraldic beast – have seemed to an English eye out of character with the thatched roof. But, as if to correct this, one of the beasts was headless, and one of the gates had fallen from its hinges. In like manner the dignity of a tolerably spacious garden, laid out beside the house, was marred by the proximity of the fold-yard, which had also trespassed, in the shape of sundry offices and hovels, on the forecourt.

On the lower side of the road opposite the gates half a dozen stone steps, that like the heraldic pillars might have graced a more stately mansion, led down to the water. They formed a resting-place for as many beggars, engaged in drawing at empty pipes; while twice as many old women sat against the wall of the forecourt and, with their drugget cloaks about them, kept up a continual

whine. Among these, turning herself now to one, now to another, moved the girl whom the Colonel had seen at the landing-place. She held her riding-skirt uplifted in one hand, her whip in the other, and she was bare-headed. At her elbow, whistling idly, and tapping his boots with a switch, lounged the big man of the morning.

As the Colonel approached, taking these things in with his eyes, and making, Heaven knows what comparisons in his mind, the man and the maid turned and looked at him. The two exchanged some sentences, and the man came forward to meet him.

"Sir," he said, not without a touch of rough courtesy, "if it is for hospitality you have come, you will be welcome at Morristown. But if it is to start a cry about this morning's business, you've travelled on your ten toes to no purpose, and so I warn you."

The Colonel looked at him. "Cousin Ulick," he said, "I take your welcome as it is meant, and I thank you for it."

The big man's mouth opened wide. "By the Holy Cross!" he said, "if I'm not thinking it is John Sullivan!"

"It is," the Colonel answered, smiling. And he held out his hand.

Uncle Ulick grasped it impulsively. "And it's I'm the one that's glad to see you," he said. "By Heaven, I am! Though I didn't expect you, no more than I expected myself! And, faith," he continued, grinning as if he began to see something humorous as well as surprising in the arrival, "I'm not sure that you will be as welcome to all, John Sullivan, as you are to me."

"You were always easy, Ulick," the other answered with a smile, "when you were big and I was little."

"Ay? Well, in size we're much as we were. But – Flavia!"

The girl, scenting something strange, was already at his elbow. "What is it?" she asked, her breath coming a little quickly. "Who is it?" fixing her eyes on the new-comer's face.

Uncle Ulick chuckled. "It's your guardian, my jewel," he said. "No less! And what he'll say to what's going on I'll not be foretelling!"

"My guardian?" she repeated, the blood rising abruptly to her cheek.

"Just that," Ulick Sullivan answered humorously. "Just that, my darling. It's John Sullivan come back from Sweden. And, as I've told him, I'm not sure that all at Morristown will be as glad to see him as I am." At which Uncle Ulick went off into a peal of Titanic laughter.

But that which amused him did not appear to amuse his niece, She stood staring at Colonel Sullivan as if she were far more surprised than pleased. At length, and with a childish dignity, she held out her hand.

"If you are Colonel John Sullivan," she said, in a thin voice, "you are welcome at Morristown."

He might have laughed at the distance of her tone. But he merely bowed, and with the utmost gravity. "I thank you," he answered. And then, addressing Ulick Sullivan, "I need not say that I had your communication," he continued, "with the news of Sir Michael's death and of the dispositions made by his will. I could not come at once, but when I could I did, and I am here. Having said so much," he went on, turning to the girl and looking at her with serious kindness, "may I add that I think it will be well if we leave matters of business on one side until we know one another?"

"Well, faith, I think we'd better," Ulick Sullivan replied. And he chuckled. "I do think so, bedad!"

The girl said nothing, and when he had chuckled his fill restraint fell upon the three. They turned from one another and looked across the lake, which the wind, brisk at sea, barely ruffled. Colonel Sullivan remarked that they had a little more land under tillage than he remembered, and Ulick Sullivan assented. And then again there was silence, until the girl struck her habit with her whip and cried flippantly, "Well, to dinner, if we are to have dinner! To dinner!" She turned, and led the way to the gate of the forecourt.

The man who followed was clever enough to read defiance in the pose of her head and resentment in her shoulders. When a beggar-woman, more importunate than the rest, caught hold of her skirt, and Flavia flicked her with the whip as she would have flicked a dog, he understood. And when the dogs in the court fell upon her in a troop and were kicked to right and left, and when a babe, that, clothed in a single shift, was crawling on hands and knees upon the threshold, was removed in the same manner – but more gently – still he understood.

There were other dogs in the stone-paved hall; a hen too, finding its food on the floor and strutting here and there as if it had never known another home. On the left of the door, an oak table stood laid for the mid-day meal; on the right, before a carved stone chimney-piece, under which a huge log smouldered on the andirons, two or three men were seated. These rose on the entrance of the young mistress—they were dependants of the better class, for whom open house was kept at Morristown when business brought them thither. And, so far, all was well. Yet it may be that on the instant eyes which had been blind to defects were opened by the presence of this stranger from the outer world. For Flavia's voice was hard as she asked old Darby, the butler, if The McMurrrough was in the house.

"Faith, I believe not," said he. "His honour, nor the other quality, have not returned from the fishing."

"Well, let him know when he comes in," she rejoined, "that Colonel John Sullivan has arrived from Sweden, and," she added with a faint sneer, "it were well if you put on your uniform coat, Darby."

The old butler did not hear the last words. He was looking at the new-comer. "Glory be to God, Colonel," he said; "it's in a field of peas I'd have known you! True for you, you're as like the father that bred you as the two covers of a book! It's he was the grand gentleman! I was beyond the Mahoney's great gravestone when he shot Squire Crosby in the old church-yard of Tralee for an appetite to his breakfast! More by token, he went out with the garrison officer after his second bottle that same day that ever was – and the creature shot him in the knee – bad luck to him for a foreigner and a Protestant – and he limped to his dying day!"

The girl laughed unkindly. "You're opening your mouth and putting your foot in it, Darby," she said. "If the Colonel is not a foreigner –"

"And sure he couldn't be that, and his own father's son!" cried the quick-witted Irishman. "And if, bad luck, he's a Protestant, I'll never believe he's one of them through-and-through d – d black Protestants that you and I mean! Glory be to God, it's not in the Sullivans to be one of them!"

The Colonel laughed as he shook the old servant's hand; and Uncle Ulick joined in the laugh. "You're a clever rogue, Darby," he said. "Your neck'll never be in a rope, but your fingers will untie the knot! And now, where'll you put him?"

Flavia tapped her foot on the floor; foreseeing, perhaps, what was coming.

"Put his honour?" Darby repeated, rubbing his bald head. "Ay, sure, where'll we put him? May it be long before the heavens is his bed! There's the old master's room, a grand chamber fit for a lord, but there's a small matter of the floor that is sunk and lets in the rats – bad cess to the dogs for an idle, useless pack. And there's the Count's room would do finely, but the vagabonds have never mended the thatch that was burned the last drinking, and though 'twas no more than the width of a flea's leap, the devil of a big bowl of water has it let in! The young master's friends are in the South, but the small room beyond that has the camp truckle that Sir Michael brought from the ould wars: that's dry and snug! And for the one window that's airy, sure, 'tis no drawback at this sayson."

"It will do very well for me, Darby," the Colonel said, smiling.

"Well," Darby answered, rubbing his head, "the Cross be between us and harm, I'm not so sure where's another. The young masther –"

"That will do, Darby!" the girl cried impatiently. And then, "I am sorry, Colonel Sullivan," she continued stiffly, "that you should be so poorly lodged – who are the master of all. But doubtless,"

with an irrepressible resentment in her voice, "you will be able presently to put matters on a better footing."

With a formal curtsy she left them then, and retreated up the stairs, which at the rear of the hall ascended to a gallery that ran right and left to the rooms on the first floor.

Colonel Sullivan turned with Uncle Ulick to the nearest window and looked out on the untidy forecourt. "You know, I suppose," he said, in a tone which the men beside the fire, who were regarding him curiously, could not hear, "the gist of Sir Michael's letters to me?"

Uncle Ulick drummed with his fingers on the window-sill. "Faith, the most of it," he said.

"Was he right in believing that her brother intended to turn Protestant for the reasons he told me?"

"It's like enough, I'm thinking."

"Does she know? The girl?"

"Not a breath! And I would not be the one to tell her," Uncle Ulick added, with some grimness.

"Yet it may be necessary?"

Uncle Ulick shook his fist at a particularly importunate beggar who had ventured across the forecourt. "It's a gift the little people never gave me to tell unpleasant things," he said. "And if you'll be told by me, Colonel, you'll travel easy. The girl has a spirit, and you'll not persuade her to stand in her brother's light, at all, at all! She has it fast that her grandfather wronged him – and old Sir Michael was queer-tempered at times, God forbid I should say the other! The gift to her will go for nothing, you'll see!"

"She must be a very noble girl."

"Devil a better has He made!"

"But if her grandfather was right in thinking so ill of his grandson?"

"I'm not saying he wasn't," Uncle Ulick muttered.

"Then we must not let her set the will aside."

Ulick Sullivan shrugged his shoulders. "Let?" he said. "Faith! it's but little it'll be a question of that! James is for taking, and she's for giving! He's her white swan, and to her mind, sleeping or waking, as Darby says, he'd tread on eggs and sorra a chick the less! Let? Who's to hinder?"

"You."

"It's easiness has been my ruin, and faith! it's too late to change."

"Then I?"

Uncle Ulick smiled. "To be sure," he said slyly, "there's you, Colonel."

"The whole estate is mine, you see, in law."

"Ay, but there's no law west of Tralee," Uncle Ulick retorted. "That's where old Sir Michael made his mistake. Anywhere through the length and breadth of old Ireland, if 'twas in the Four Courts themselves, and all the garrison round you, you'd be on honour, Colonel, to take no advantage. But here it would not be the cold shoulder and a little unpleasantness, and a meeting or two on the ground, that's neither here nor there – that you'd be like to taste. I'd not be knowing what would happen if it went about that you were ousting them that had the right, and you a Protestant. He's not the great favourite, James McMurrough, and whether he or the girl took most 'd be a mighty small matter. But if you think to twist it, so as to play cuckoo – though with the height of fair meaning and not spying a silver penny of profit for yourself, Colonel – I take leave to tell you, he's a most unpopular bird."

"But, Sir Michael," the Colonel, who had listened with a thoughtful face, answered, "left all to me to that very end – that it might be secured to the girl."

"Sorrow one of me says no!" Ulick rejoined. "But –"

"But what?" the Colonel replied politely. "The more plainly you speak the more you will oblige me."

But all that Ulick Sullivan could be brought to say at that moment – perhaps he knew that curious eyes were on their conference – was that Kerry was "a mighty queer country," and the thief of the world wouldn't know what would pass there by times. And besides, there were things afoot – faith, and there were, that he'd talk about at another time.

Then he changed the subject abruptly, asking the Colonel if he had seen a big ship in the bay. "What colours?" the Colonel asked – the question men ask who have been at sea.

"Spanish, maybe," Uncle Ulick answered. "Did you sight such a one?"

But the Colonel had seen no big ship.

CHAPTER III

A SCION OF KINGS

The family at Morristown had been half an hour at table, and in the interval a man of more hasty judgment than Colonel Sullivan might have made up his mind on many points. Whether the young McMurrough was offensive of set purpose, and because an unwelcome guest was present, or whether he merely showed himself as he was – an unlicked cub – such a man might have determined. But the Colonel held his judgment in suspense, though he leaned to the latter view of the case. He knew that even in England a lad brought up among women was apt to develop a quarrelsome uncouthness, a bearishness, intolerable among men of the world. How much more likely, he reflected, was this to be the case when the youth belonged to a proscribed race, and lived, a little chieftain among his peasants, in a district wild and remote, where for a league each way his will was law. The Colonel made allowances, and, where need was, he checked his indignation. If he blamed any one, he let his censure rest on the easy temper of Uncle Ulick. The giant could have shaken the young man, who was not over robust, with a single finger; and at any time in the last ten years might have taught him a lifelong lesson.

At their first sitting down the young man had shown his churlishness. Beginning by viewing the Colonel in sulky silence, he had answered his kinsman's overtures only by a rude stare or a boorish word. His companions, two squireens of his own age, and much of his own kidney, nudged him from time to time, and then the three would laugh in such a way as to make it plain that the stranger was the butt of the jest. Presently, overcoming the reluctant impression which Colonel John's manners made upon him, the young man found his tongue, and, glancing at his companions to bring them into the joke, "Much to have where you come from, Colonel?" he asked.

"As in most places," the Colonel replied mildly, "by working for it, or earning it after one fashion or another. Indeed, my friend, country and country are more alike, except on the outside, than is thought by those who stay at home."

"You've seen a wealth of countries, I'm thinking?" the youth asked with a sneer.

"I have crossed Europe more than once."

"And stayed in none?"

"If you mean –"

"Faith, I mean you've come back!" the young man exclaimed with a loud laugh, in which his companions joined. "You'll mind the song" – and with a wink he trolled out,

"In such contempt in short I fell,
Which was a very hard thing,
They devilish badly used me there,
For nothing but a farthing.

"You're better than that, Colonel, for the worst we can say of you is, you's come back a penny!"

"If you mean a bad one, come home," the Colonel rejoined, taking the lad good-humouredly – he was not blind to the flush of indignation which dyed Flavia's cheeks – "I'll take the wit for welcome. To be sure, to die in Ireland is an Irishman's hope, all the world over."

"True for you, Colonel!" Uncle Ulick said. And "For shame, James," he continued, speaking with more sternness than was natural to him. "Faith, and if you talked abroad as you talk at home, you'd be for having a pistol-ball in your gizzard in the time it takes you to say your prayers – if you ever say them, my lad!"

"What are my prayers to you, I'd like to know?" James retorted offensively.

"Easy, lad, easy!"

The young man glared at him. "What is it to you," he cried still more rudely, "whether I pray or no?"

"James! James!" Flavia pleaded under her breath.

"Do you be keeping your feet to yourself!" he cried, betraying her kindly manoeuvre. "And let my shins be! I want none of your guiding! More by token, miss, don't you be making a sight of yourself as you did this morning, or you'll smart for it. What is it to you if O'Sullivan Og takes our dues for us – and a trifle over? And, sorra one of you doubt it, if Mounseer comes jawing here, it's in the peat-hole he'll find himself! Or the devil the value of a cork he gets out of me; that's flat! Eh, Phelim?"

"True for you, McMurrough!" the youth who sat beside him answered, winking. "We'll soak him for you."

"So do you be taking a lesson, Miss Flavvy," the young Hector continued, "and don't you go threatening honest folk with your whip, or it'll be about your own shoulders it'll fall! I know what's going on, and when I want your help, I'll ask it."

The girl's lip trembled. "But it's robbery, James," she murmured.

"To the devil with your robbery!" he retorted, casting a defiant eye round the table. "They'll pay our dues, and what they get back will be their own!"

"And it's rich they'll be with it!" Phelim chuckled.

"Ay, faith, it's the proud men they'll be that day!" laughed Morty, his brother. "Sure, when it comes!" with a wink.

"Fine words, my lad," Uncle Ulick replied quietly; "but it's my opinion you'll fall on trouble, and more than'll please you, with Crosby of Castlemaine. And why, I'd like to know? 'Tis a grand trade, and has served us well since I can remember! Why can't you take what's fair out of it, and let the poor devil of a sea-captain that's supplied many an honest man's table have his own, and go his way? Take my word for it, it's ruing it you'll be, when all's done."

"It's not from Crosby of Castlemaine I'll rue it!" James McMurrough answered arrogantly. "I'll shoot him like a bog-snipe if he's sorra a word to say to it! That for him, the black sneak of a Protestant!" And he snapped his fingers. "But his day will soon be past, and we'll be dealing with him. The toast is warming for him now!"

Phelim slapped his thigh. "True for you, McMurrough! That's the talk!"

"That's the talk!" chorussed Morty.

The Colonel opened his mouth to speak, but he caught Flavia's look of distress, and he refrained. And "For my part," Morty continued jovially, "I'd not wait – for you know what! The gentleman's way's the better; early or late, Clare or Kerry, 'tis all one! A drink of the tea, a peppered devil, and a pair of the beauties, is an Irishman's morning!"

"And many's the poor soul has to mourn it – long and bitterly," the Colonel said. His tender corn being trod upon, he could be silent no longer. "For shame, sir, for shame!" he added warmly.

Morty stared. "Begorra, and why?" he cried, in a tone which proved that he asked the question in perfect innocence.

"Why?" Colonel John repeated. And for a moment, in face of prejudices so strong, and of prepossessions so deeply rooted, he paused. Then, "Why?" he repeated. "Can you ask me when you know how many a life as young as yours – and I take you to be scarcely, sir, in your twenties – has been forfeit for a thoughtless word, an unwitting touch, a look; when you know how many a bride has been widowed as soon as wedded, how many a babe orphaned as soon as born? And for what? For what, sir?"

"For the point of honour!" The McMurrough cried. Morty, for his part, was dumb with astonishment. What talk was this!

"The point of honour?" the Colonel repeated, more slowly, "what is it? In nine cases out of ten the fear of seeming to be afraid. In the tenth – the desire to wipe out a stain that blood leaves as deep as before!"

"Faith, and you surprise me!" Phelim cried with a genuine *naïveté* that at another time would have provoked a smile. "You do indeed!"

"And Kerry'll more than surprise you," quoth The McMurrough rudely, "if it's that way you'll be acting! Would you let Crosby of Castlemaine call you thief?"

"I would not thief!" the Colonel replied.

There was a stricken silence for a moment. Then The McMurrough sprang to his feet, his querulous face flushed with rage, his arm raised. But Ulick's huge hand dragged him down. "Easy, lad, easy," he cried, restraining the young man. "He's your guest! He's your guest; remember that!"

"And he spoke in haste," the Colonel said. "I withdraw my words," he continued, rising and frankly holding out his hand. "I recognise that I was wrong! I see that the act bears in your eyes a different aspect, and I beg your pardon, sir."

The McMurrough took the hand, though he took it sullenly; and the Colonel sat down again. His action, to say nothing of his words, left Phelim and Morty in a state of amazement so profound that the two sat staring as if carved out of the same block of wood.

If Colonel John noticed their surprise he seemed in no way put out by it. "Perhaps," he said gently, "it is wrong to thrust opinions on others unasked. I think that is so! It should be enough to act upon them one's self, and refrain from judging others."

No one answered. But one thing was certain: whether he judged them or not, they were all judging him, with such of their faculties as remained to them. True, Flavia, save by a single frightened glance when a quarrel seemed imminent, had not betrayed what she thought – nor now betrayed what she was thinking. Her eyes were glued to her plate. But the impression made on the others, not excepting the dependent buckeens who sat at the board a little apart and took no part in the talk, was so apparent that an onlooker must have laughed at their bewilderment. Even Uncle Ulick, whom a steady good humour had steered clear of many a brawl – so that a single meeting on Aghrim racecourse made up the tale of his exploits – stared vacantly at his kinsman. Never before had he heard any one question the right of an Irish gentleman to fight at pleasure; and for the others whose blood was hotter and younger, for the three Kerry Cocks, the Conclave had not been more surprised if a Cardinal had risen and denounced the Papacy, nor an assembly of half-pay captains been more astonished if one of their number had denounced the pension system. The Colonel was a Sullivan and an Irishman, and it was supposed that he had followed the wars. Whence, then, these strange words, these unheard-of opinions? Morty felt his cheek flush with the shame which Colonel John should have felt; and Phelim grieved for the family. The gentleman might be mad; it was charitable to think he was. But, mad or sane, he was like, they feared, to be the cause of sad misunderstanding in the country round.

The McMurrough, of a harder and less generous nature than his companions, felt more contempt than wonder. The man had insulted him grossly, and had apologised as abjectly; that was his view of the incident. And he was the first to break the silence. "Sure, it's very well for the gentleman it's in the family," he said dryly. "Tail up, tail down, 's all one among friends. But if he'll be so quick with his tongue in Tralee Market, he'll chance on one here and there that he'll not blarney so easily! Eh, Morty?"

"I'm fearing so, too," said Phelim pensively. Morty did not answer. "'Tis a queer world," Phelim added.

"And all sorts in it," The McMurrough cried, his tone more arrogant than before.

Flavia glanced at him, frowning. "Let us have peace now," she said.

"Peace? Sorrow a bit of war there's like to be in the present company!" the victor cried. And he began to whistle, amid an awkward silence. The air he chose was one well known at that day,

and when he had whistled a few bars, one of the buckeens at the lower end of the table began to sing the words softly.

It was a' for our rightful king
We left fair Ireland's strand!
It was a' for our rightful king
We e'er saw foreign land, my dear,
We e'er saw foreign land!

"My dear, or no, you'll be doing well to be careful!" The McMurrough said, in a jeering tone, with his eye on the Colonel.

"Pho!" the man replied. "And I that have heard the young mistress sing it a score of times!"

"Ay, but not in this company!" The McMurrough rejoined.

Colonel John looked round the table. "If you mean," he said quietly, "that I am a loyal subject of King George, I am that. But what is said at my host's table, no matter who he is, is safe for me. Moreover, I've lived long enough to know, gentlemen, that most said is least meant, and that the theme of a lady's song is more often – sunset than sunrise!" And he bowed in the direction of the girl.

The McMurrough's lip curled. "Fair words," he sneered. "And easy to speak them, when you and your d – d Protestant Whigs are on top!"

"We won't talk of Protestants, d – d or otherwise!" Colonel John replied. And for the first time his glance, keen as the flicker of steel, crossed The McMurrough's. The younger man's eyes fell. A flush of something that might have been shame tinged his brow: and though no one at table save Uncle Ulick understood the allusion, his conscience silenced him. "I hope," the Colonel continued more soberly, "that a good Protestant may still be a good Irishman."

"It's not I that have seen one, then!" The McMurrough muttered churlishly.

"Just as a bad Protestant makes a bad Irishman," the Colonel returned, with another of those glances which seemed to prove that the old man was not quite put off.

The McMurrough was silenced. But the cudgels were taken up in an unexpected quarter. "I know nothing of bad or good," Flavia said, in a voice vibrating with eagerness, "but only, to our sorrow, of those who through centuries have robbed us! Who, not content, shame on them! with shutting us up in a corner of the land that was ours from sea to sea, deny us even here the protection of their law! Law? Can you call it law – "

"Heaven be between us and it!" old Darby groaned.

"Can you call it law," she continued with passion, "which denies us all natural rights, all honourable employments; which drives us abroad, divides son from father, and brother from brother; which bans our priests, and forbids our worship, and, if it had its will, would leave no Catholic from Cape Clear to Killaloe?"

The Colonel looked sorrowfully at her, but made no answer; for to much of what she said no answer could be made. On the other hand, a murmur passed round the board; and more than one looked at the stranger with compressed lips. "If you had your will," the girl continued, with growing emotion; "if your law were carried out – as, thank God! it is not, no man's heart being hard enough – to possess a pistol were to be pilloried; to possess a fowling-piece were to be whipped; to own a horse, above the value of a miserable garron, were to be robbed by the first rascal who passed! We must not be soldiers, nor sailors," she continued; "nay" – with bitter irony – "we may not be constables nor gamekeepers! The courts, the bar, the bench of our fatherland, are shut to us! We may have neither school nor college; the lands that were our fathers' must be held for us by Protestants, and it's I must have a Protestant guardian! We are outlaws in the dear land that is ours; we dwell on sufferance where our fathers ruled! And men like you, abandoning their country, abandoning their creed – "

"God forbid!" the Colonel exclaimed, much moved himself.

"Men like you uphold these things!"

"God forbid!" he repeated.

"But let Him forbid, or not forbid," she retorted, rising from her seat with eyes that flashed anger through tears, "we exist, and shall exist! And the time is coming, and comes soon – ay, comes perhaps to-day! – when we who now suffer for the true faith and the rightful King will raise our heads, and the Faithful Land shall cease to mourn and honest men to pine! And, ah" – with upraised face and clasped hands – "I pray for that day! I pray for that day! I – "

She broke off amid cries of applause, fierce as the barking of wolves. She struggled for a moment with her overmastering emotion, then, unable to continue or to calm herself, she turned from the table and fled weeping up the stairs.

Colonel John had risen. He watched her go with deep feeling; he turned to his seat again with a sigh. He was a shade paler than before, and the eyes which he bent on the board were dark with thought. He was unconscious of all that passed round him, and, if aware, he was heedless of the strength of the passions which she had unbridled – until a hand fell on his arm.

He glanced up then and saw that all the men had risen, and were looking at him – even Ulick Sullivan – with dark faces. A passion of anger clouded their gaze. Without a word spoken, they were of one mind. The hand that touched him trembled, the voice that broke the silence shook under the weight of the speaker's feelings.

"You'll be leaving here this day," the man muttered.

"I?" the Colonel said, taken by surprise. "Not at all."

"We wish you no harm, but to see your back. But you'll be leaving here."

The Colonel, his first wonder subdued, looked from one to another. "I am sure you wish me no harm," he said.

"None, but to see your back," the man repeated, while his companions looked down at the Colonel with a strange fixedness. The Celtic nature, prone to sudden rage, stirred in them. The stranger who an hour before had been indifferent to them now wore the face of an enemy. The lake and the bog – ay, the secret grave yearned for him: the winding-sheet was high upon his breast. "Stay, and it's but once in your life you'll be sorry," the man growled, "and faith, that'll be always!"

"But I cannot go," the Colonel answered, as gently as before.

"And why?" the man returned. The McMurrough was not of the speakers, but stood behind them, glowering at him with a dark face.

"Because," the Colonel answered, "I am in my duty here, my friends. And the man who is in his duty can suffer nothing."

"He can die," the man replied, breathing hard. The men who were on the Colonel's side of the table leant more closely about him.

But he seemed unmoved. "That," he replied cheerfully, "is nothing. To die is but an accident. Who dies in his duty suffers no harm. And were that not enough – and it is all," he continued slowly, "what harm should happen to me, a Sullivan among Sullivans? Because I have fared far and seen much, am I so changed that, coming back, I shall find no welcome on the hearth of my race, and no shelter where my fathers lie?"

"And are not our hearths cold over many a league? And the graves – "

"Whisht!" a voice broke in sternly, as Uncle Ulick thrust his way through the group. "The man says well!" he continued. "He's a Sullivan – "

"He's a Protestant!"

"He is a Sullivan, I say!" Uncle Ulick retorted, "were he the blackest heretic on the sod! And you, would you do the foul deed for a woman's wet eye? Are the hearts of Kerry turned as hard as its rocks? Make an end of this prating and foolishness! And you, James McMurrough, these are your men and this is your house? Will you be telling them at once that you will be standing

between him and harm, be he a heretic ten times over? For shame, man! Is it for raising the corp of old Sir Michael from his grave ye are?"

The McMurrough looked sombrely at the big man. "On you be the risk," he said sullenly. "You know what you know."

"I know that the seal in the cave and the seal on the wave are one!" Ulick answered vehemently. "Whisht, man, whisht, and make an end! And do you, John Sullivan, give no thought to these omadhauns, but come with me and I'll show you to your chamber. A woman's tear is ever near her smile. With her the good thought treads ever on the heel of the bad word!"

"I have little knowledge of them," Colonel John answered quietly.

But when he was above with Uncle Ulick, he spoke. "I hope that this is but wild talk," he said. "You cannot remember, nor can I, the bad days. But the little that is left, it were madness and worse than madness to risk! If you've thought of a rising, in God's name put it from you. Think of your maids and your children! I have seen the fires rise from too many roofs, I have heard the wail of the homeless too often, I have seen too many frozen corpses stand for milestones by the road, I have wakened to the creak of too many gibbets – to face these things in my own land!"

Uncle Ulick was looking from the little casement. He turned and showed a face working with agitation. "And you, if you wore no sword, nor dared wear one? If you walked in Tralee a clown among gentlefolk, if you lived a pariah in a corner of pariahs, if your land were the handmaid of nations, and the vampire crouched upon her breast, what – what would you do, then?"

"Wait," Colonel John answered gravely, "until the time came."

Uncle Ulick gripped his arm. "And if it came not in your time?"

"Still wait," Colonel John answered with solemnity. "For believe me, Ulick Sullivan, there is no deed that has not its reward! Not does one thatch go up in smoke that is not paid for a hundredfold."

"Ay, but when? When?"

"When the time is ripe."

CHAPTER IV

"STOP THIEF!"

A candid Englishman must own, and deplore the fact, that Flavia McMurrough's tears were due to the wrongs of her country. Broken by three great wars waged by three successive generations, defeated in the last of three desperate struggles for liberty, Ireland at this period lay like a woman swooning at the feet of her captors. Nor were these minded that she should rise again quickly, or in her natural force. The mastery which they had won by the sword the English were resolved to keep by the law.

They were determined that the Irishman of the old faith should cease to exist; or if he endured, should be *nemo*, no one. Confined to hell or Connaught, he must not even in the latter possess the ordinary rights. He must not will his own lands or buy new lands. If his son, more sensible than he, "*went over*," the father sank into a mere life-tenant, bound to furnish a handsome allowance, and to leave all to the Protestant heir. He might not marry a Protestant, he might not keep a school, nor follow the liberal professions. The priest who confessed him was banished if known, and hanged if he returned. In a country of sportsmen he might not own a fowling-piece, nor a horse worth more than five pounds; and in days when every gentleman carried a sword at his side, he must not wear one. Finally, his country grew but one article of great value – wool: and that he must not make into cloth, but he must sell it to England at England's price – which was one-fifth of the continental price. Was it wonderful that, such being Ireland's status, every Roman Catholic of spirit sought fortune abroad; that the wild geese, as they were called, went and came unchecked; or that every inlet in Galway, Clare, and Kerry swarmed with smugglers, who ran in under the green flag with brandy and claret, and, running out again with wool, laughed to scorn England's boast that she ruled the waves?

Nor was it surprising that, spent and helpless as the land lay, some sanguine spirits still clung to visions of a change and of revenge. A few men, living in the vague remotenesses beyond the bridling Shannon and its long string of lakes, or on the western shore where the long rollers broke in spume and the French and Spanish tongues were spoken more freely than English, still hoped for the impossible. Passing their lives far from the Castle and the Four Courts, far even from the provincial capitals, they shut their eyes to facts and dreamed of triumph. The Sullivans of Morristown and Skull were of these; as were some of their neighbours. And Flavia was especially of these. As she looked from her window a day or two after the Colonel's arrival, as she sniffed the peat reek and plumbed the soft distances beyond the lake, she was lost in such a dream; until her eyes fell on a man seated cross-legged under a tree between herself and the shore. And she frowned. The man sorted ill with her dream.

It was Bale, Colonel John's servant. He was mending some article taken from his master's wardrobe. His elbow went busily to and fro as he plied the needle, while sprawling on the sod about him half a dozen gossoons watched him inquisitively.

Perhaps it was the suggestive contrast between his diligence and their idleness which irritated Flavia; but she set down her annoyance to another cause. The man was an Englishman, and therefore an enemy: and what did he there? Had the Colonel left him on guard?

Flavia's heart swelled at the thought. Here, at least, she and hers were masters. Here, three hours west of Tralee – and God help the horse on that road that was not a "lepper" – they brooked no rival. Colonel John had awakened mixed feelings in her. At times she admired him. But, admirable or not, he should rue his insolence, if he had it in his mind to push his authority, or interfere with her plans.

In the meantime she stood watching William Bale, and a desire to know more of the man, and through him of the master, rose within her. The house was quiet. The McMurrough and his following had gone to a cocking-match and race-meeting at Joyce's Corner. She went down the stairs, took her hood, and crossed the courtyard. Bale did not look up at her approach, but he saw her out of the corner of his eye, and when she paused before him he laid down his work and made as if he would rise.

She looked at him with a superciliousness not natural to her. "Are all the men tailors where you come from?" she asked. "There, you need not rise."

"Where I came from last," he replied, "we were all trades, my lady."

"Where was that?"

"In the camp," he answered.

"In Sweden?"

"God knows," he replied. "They raise no landmarks there, between country and country, or it might be all their work to move them."

For a moment she was silent. Then, "Have you been a soldier long?" she asked, feeling herself rebuffed.

"Twenty-one years, my lady."

"And now you have done with it."

"It is as his honour pleases."

She frowned. He had a way of speaking that sounded uncivil to ears attuned to the soft Irish accent and the wheedling tone. Yet the man interested her, and after a moment's silence she fixed her eyes more intently on his work. "Did you lose your fingers in battle?" she asked. His right hand was maimed.

"No," he answered – grudgingly, as he seemed to answer all her questions – "in prison."

"In prison?" she repeated; "where?"

He cast an upward look at his questioner. "In the Grand Turk's land," he said. "Nearer than that, I can't say. I'm no scholar, my lady."

"But why?" she asked, puzzled. "I don't understand."

"Cut off," he said, stooping over his work.

Flavia turned a shade paler. "Why?" she repeated.

"'One God, and Mahomet His prophet' – couldn't swallow it. One finger!" the man answered jerkily. "Next week – same. Third week – "

"Third week?" she murmured, shuddering.

"Exchanged."

She lifted her eyes with an effort from his maimed hand. "How many were you?" she inquired.

"Thirty-four." He laughed drily. "We know one another when we meet," he said. He drew his waxed thread between his finger and thumb, held it up to the light, then looked askance at the gossoons about him, to whom what he said was gibberish. They knew only Erse.

The day was still, the mist lay on the lake, and under it the water gleamed, a smooth pale mirror. Flavia had seen it so a hundred times, and thought naught of it. But to-day, moved by what she had heard, the prospect spoke of a remoteness from the moving world which depressed her. Hitherto the quick pulse and the energy of youth had left her no time for melancholy, and not much for thought. If at rare intervals she had felt herself lonely, if she had been tempted to think that the brother in whom were centred her hopes, her affections, and her family pride was hard and selfish, rude and overbearing, she had told herself that all men were so; that all men rode rough-shod over their women. And that being so, who had a better right to hector it than the last of the McMurroughs, heir of the Wicklow kings, who in days far past had dealt on equal terms with Richard Plantagenet, and to whom, by virtue of that never-forgotten kingship, the Sullivans and Mahonies, some of the McCarthys, and all the O'Beirnes, paid rude homage? With such feelings

Sir Michael's strange whim of disinheriting the heir of his race had but drawn her closer to her brother. To her loyalty the act was abhorrent, was unnatural, was one that could only have sprung, she was certain, from second childhood, the dotage of a man close on ninety, whose early years had been steeped in trouble, and who loved her so much that he was ready to do wrong for her sake.

Often she differed from her brother. But he was a man, she told herself; and he must be right – a man's life could not be ruled by the laws which a woman observed. For the rest, for herself, if her life seemed solitary she had the free air and the mountains; she had her dear land; above all, she had her dreams. Perhaps when these were realised – and the time seemed very near now – and a new Ireland was created, to her too a brighter world would open.

She had forgotten Bale's presence, and was only recalled to every-day life by the sound of voices. Four men were approaching the house. Uncle Ulick, Colonel John, and the French skipper were three of these; at the sight of the fourth Flavia's face fell. Luke Asgill of Batterstown was the nearest Justice, and of necessity he was a Protestant. But it was not this fact, nor the certainty that Augustin was pouring his wrongs into his ears, that affected Flavia. Asgill was distasteful to her, because her brother affected him. For why should her brother have relations with a Protestant? Why should he, a man of the oldest blood, stoop to intimacy with the son of a "middleman," the son of one of those who, taking a long lease of a great estate and under-letting at rack rents, made at this period huge fortunes? Finally, if he must have relations with him, why did he not keep him at a distance from his home – and his sister?

It was too late, or she would have slipped away. Not that Asgill – he was a stout, dark, civil-spoken man of thirty-three or four – wore a threatening face. On the contrary, he listened to the Frenchman's complaint with a droll air; and if he had not known of the matter before, his smile betrayed him. He greeted Flavia with an excess of politeness which she could have spared; and while Uncle Ulick and Colonel John looked perturbed and ill at ease, he jested on the matter.

"The whole cargo?" he said, with one eye on the Frenchman and one on his companions. "You're not for stating that, sir?"

"All the tubs," Augustin answered in a passion of earnestness. "What you call, every tub! Every tub!"

"The saints be between us and harm!" Asgill responded. "Are you hearing this, Miss Flavia? It's no less than felony that you're accused of, and I'm thinking, by rights, I must arrest you and carry you to Batterstown."

"I do not understand," she answered stiffly. "And The McMurrough is not at home."

"Gone out of the way, eh?" Asgill replied with a deprecatory grin. "And the whole cargo was it, Captain?"

"All the tubs, perfectly!"

"You'd paid your dues, of course?"

"Dues, *mon Dieu*! But they take the goods!"

"Had you paid your dues?"

"Not already, because – "

"That's unfortunate," Asgill answered in a tone of mock condolence. "Mighty unfortunate!" He winked at Uncle Ulick. "Port dues, you know, Captain, must be paid before the ship slips her moorings."

"But – "

"Mighty unfortunate!"

"But what are the dues?" poor Augustin cried, dimly aware that he was being baited.

"Ah, you're talking now," the magistrate answered glibly. "Unluckily, that's not in my province. I'm made aware that the goods are held under lien for dues, and I can do nothing. However, upon payment, of course – "

"But how much? Eh, sir? How much? How much?"

Luke Asgill, who had two faces, and for once was minded to let both be seen, enjoyed the Frenchman's perplexity. He wished to stand well with Flavia, and here was a rare opportunity of exhibiting at once his friendliness and his powers of drollery. He was surprised, therefore, and taken aback, when a grave voice cut short his enjoyment.

"Still, if Captain Augustin," the voice interposed, "is willing to pay a reasonable sum on account of dues?"

The magistrate turned about abruptly. "Eh?" he said. "Oh, Colonel Sullivan, is it?"

"Then, doubtless, the goods will be released, so that he may perform his duty to his customer."

Asgill had only known the Colonel a few minutes, and, aware that he was one of the family, he did not see how to take it. It was as if treason lifted its head in the camp. He coughed.

"I'd not be denying it," he said. "But until The McMurrrough returns –"

"Such a matter is doubtless within Mr. Sullivan's authority," the Colonel said, turning from him to Uncle Ulick.

Uncle Ulick showed his embarrassment. "Faith, I don't know that it is," he said.

"If Captain Augustin paid, say, twenty per cent. on his bills of lading –"

"*Ma foi*, twenty per cent.!" the Captain exclaimed in astonishment. "Twenty – but yes, I will pay it. I will pay even that. Of what use to throw the handle after the hatchet?"

Luke Asgill thought the Colonel either a fool or very simple. "Well, I've nothing to say to this, at all!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It's not within my province."

Colonel John looked at the girl in a way in which he had not looked at her before; and she found herself speaking before she knew it. "Yes," she cried impulsively; "let that be done, and the goods be given up!"

"But The McMurrrough?" Asgill began.

"I will answer for him," she said impulsively. "Uncle Ulick, go, I beg, and see it done."

"I will go with you," Colonel Sullivan said. "And doubtless Mr. Asgill will accompany us, and lend the weight of his authority in the event of any difficulty arising."

Asgill's countenance fell, and he looked the uncertainty he felt. He was between two stools, for he had no mind to displease Flavia or thwart her brother. At length, "No," he said, "I'll not be doing anything in The McMurrrough's absence – no, I don't see that I can do that!"

Colonel John looked in the same strange fashion at Flavia. "I have legal power to act, sir," he said, "as I can prove to you in private. And that being so, I must certainly ask you to lend me the weight of your authority."

"And I will be d – d if I do!" Asgill cried. There was a change in his tone, and the reason was not far to seek. "Here's The McMurrrough," he continued, "and he'll say!"

They all turned and looked along the road which ran by the edge of the lake. With James McMurrrough, who was still a furlong away, were the two O'Beirnes. They came slowly, and something in their bearing, even at that distance, awoke anxiety.

"They're early from the cocking," Uncle Ulick muttered doubtfully, "and sober as pigs! What's the meaning of that? There's something amiss, I'm fearing."

A cry from Flavia proved the keenness of her eyes. "Where is Giralda?" she exclaimed. "Where is the mare?"

"Ay, what have they done with the mare?" Uncle Ulick said in a tone of consternation. "Have they lamed her, I'm wondering? The garron Morty's riding is none of ours."

"I begged him not to take her!" Flavia cried, anger contending with her grief. Giralda, her grey mare, ascribed in sanguine moments to the strain of the Darley Arabian, and as gentle as she was spirited, was the girl's dearest possession. "I begged him not to take her!" she repeated, almost in tears. "I knew there was danger."

"James was wrong to take her up country," Uncle Ulick said sternly.

"They've claimed her!" Flavia wailed. "I know they have! And I shall never recover her! I shall never see her again! Oh, I'd rather – I'd far rather she were dead!"

Uncle Ulick lifted up his powerful voice. "Where's the mare?" he shouted.

James McMurrough shrugged his shoulders, and a moment later the riders came up and the tale was told. The three young men had halted at the hedge tavern at Brocktown, where their road ran out of the road to Tralee. There were four men drinking in the house, who seemed to take no notice of them. But when The McMurrough and his companions went to the shed beside the house to draw out their horses, the men followed, challenged them for Papists, threw down five pounds in gold, and seized the mare. The four were armed, and resistance was useless.

The story was received with a volley of oaths and curses. "But by the Holy," Uncle Ulick flamed up, "I'd have hung on their heels and raised the country! By G – d, I would!"

"Ay, ay! The thieves of the world!"

"They took the big road by Tralee," James McMurrough explained sulkily. "What was the use?"

"Were there no men working in the bogs?"

"There were none near by, to be sure," Morty said. "But I'd a notion if we followed them we might light on one friend or another – 'twas in Kerry, after all!"

"'Twas not more than nine miles English from here!" Uncle Ulick cried.

"That was just what I thought," Morty continued with some hesitation. "Just that, but – " And his eye transferred the burden to The McMurrough.

James answered with an oath. "A nice time this to be bringing the soldiers upon us," he cried, "when, bedad, if the time ever was, we want no trouble with the Englishry! What's the use of crying over spilt milk? I'll give you another mare."

"But it'll not be Giralda!" Flavia wailed.

"Sure it's the black shame, it is!" Uncle Ulick cried, his face dark. "It's enough to raise the country! Ay, I say it, though you're listening, Asgill. It's more than blood can stand!"

"No one is more sorry than myself," Asgill replied, with a look of concern. "I don't make the laws, or they'd be other than they are!"

"True for you," Uncle Ulick answered. "I'm allowing that. And it is true, too, that to make a stir too early would ruin all. I'm afraid you must be making the best of it, Flavvy! I'd go after them myself, but the time's not convenient, as you know, and by this they're in Tralee, bad cess to it, where there's naught to be done. They'll be for selling her to one of the garrison officers, I'm thinking; and may the little gentleman in black velvet break his neck for him! Or they'll take her farther up country, maybe to Dublin."

Flavia's last hopes died with this verdict. She could not control her tears, and she turned and went away in grief to the house.

Meantime the hangers-on and the beggars pressed upon the gentry, anxious to hear. The McMurrough, not sorry to find some one on whom to vent his temper, turned upon them and drove them away with blows of his whip. The movement brought him face to face with Captain Augustin. The fiery little Frenchman disdained to give way, in a trice angry words passed, and – partly out of mischief, for the moment was certainly not propitious – Asgill repeated the proposal which Colonel John had just made. The Colonel had stood in the background during the debate about the mare, but thus challenged he stood forward.

"It's a fair compromise," he argued. "And if Captain Augustin is prepared to pay twenty per cent – ."

"He'll not have his cargo, nor yet a cask!" The McMurrough replied with a curt, angry laugh. "Loss and enough we've had to-day."

"But – "

"Get me back the mare," the young man cried, cutting the Colonel short with savage ridicule. "Get me back the mare, and I'll talk. That's all I have to say."

"It seems to me," Colonel John replied quietly, "that those who lose should find. Still – still," checking the young man's anger by the very calmness of his tone, "for Captain Augustin's sake, who can ill bear the loss, and for your sister's sake, I will see what I can do."

The McMurrough stared. "You?" he cried. "You?"

"Yes, I."

"Heaven help us, and the pigs!" the young man exclaimed. And he laughed aloud in his scorn.

But Colonel John seemed no way moved. "Yes," he replied. "Only let us understand one another" – with a look at Uncle Ulick which made him party to the bargain – "if I return to-morrow evening or on the following day – or week – with your sister's mare –"

"Mounseer shall have his stuff again to the last pennyworth," young McMurrough returned with an ironical laugh, "and without payment at all! Or stay! Perhaps you'll buy the mare?"

"No, I shall not buy her," Colonel John answered, "except at the price the man gave you."

"Then you'll not get her. That's certain! But it's your concern."

The Colonel nodded, and, turning on his heels, went away towards the house, calling William Bale to him as he passed.

The McMurrough looked at the Frenchman. He had a taste for tormenting some one. "Well, monsieur," he jeered, "how do you like your bargain?"

"I do not understand," the Frenchman answered. "But he is a man of his word, *ma foi!* And they are not – of the common."

CHAPTER V

THE MESS-ROOM AT TRALEE

If England had made of Ireland a desert and called it peace, she had not marred its beauty. That was the thought in Colonel Sullivan's mind as he rode eastward under Slieve Mish, with the sun rising above the lower spurs of the mountain, and the lark saluting the new-born radiance with a song attuned to the freshness of the morning. Where his road ascended he viewed the sparkling inlet spread far to the southward; and where the track dipped, the smooth slopes on either side ran up to grey crags that, high above, took strange shapes, now of monstrous heads, now of fantastic towers. As his sure-footed nag forded the brown bog-stream, long-shanked birds rose silently from the pools, and he marked with emotion the spots his boyhood had known: the shallow where the dog-wolf – so big that it had become a fable – died biting, and the cliff whence the sea-eagle's nest had long bidden him defiance.

Bale rode behind him, taciturn, comparing, perhaps, the folds of his native Suffolk hills with these greener vales. They reached the hedge tavern, where the mare had been seized, and they stayed to bait their horses, but got no news. About eight they rode on; and five long Irish miles nearer Tralee, though still in a wild and lonely country, they viewed from the crest of a hill a piece of road stretched ribbon-like before them, and on it a man walking from them at a great pace. He had for companion a boy, who trotted beside him.

Neither man nor boy looked back, and it did not seem to be from fear of the two riders that they moved so quickly. The man wore a loose drugget coat and an old jockey-cap, and walked with a stout six-foot staff. Thus armed and dressed he should have stood in small fear of robbers. Yet when Colonel John's horse, the tread of its hoofs deadened by the sod road, showed its head at his shoulder, and he sprang aside, he turned a face of more vivid alarm than seemed necessary. And he crossed himself.

Colonel John touched his hat. "I give you good morning, good man," he said.

The walker raised his hand to his cap as if to return the salute, but lowered it without doing so. He muttered something.

"You will be in haste?" Colonel John continued. He saw that the sweat stood in beads on the man's brow, and the lad's face was tear-stained.

"I've far to go," the man muttered. He spoke with a slight foreign accent, but in the west of Ireland this was common. "The top of the morning to you."

Plainly he wished the two riders to pass on, but he did not slacken his speed for a moment. So for a space they went abreast, the man, with every twenty paces, glancing up suspiciously. And now and again, the boy, as he ran or walked, vented a sob.

The Colonel looked about him. The solitude of the valley was unbroken. No cabin smoked, no man worked within sight, so that the haste of these two, their sweating faces, their straining steps, seemed portentous. "Shall I take up the lad?" Colonel John asked.

Plainly the man hesitated. Then, "You will be doing a kindness," he panted. And, seizing the lad in two powerful arms, he swung him to the Colonel's stirrup, who, in taking him, knocked off the other's jockey-cap.

The man snatched it up and put it on with a single movement. But Colonel John had seen what he expected.

"You walk on a matter of life and death?" he said.

"It is all that," the man answered; and this time his look was defiant.

"You are taking the offices, father?"

The man did not reply.

"To one who is near his end, I suspect?"

The priest – for such he was – glanced at the weapon Colonel John wore. "You can do what you will," he said sullenly. "I am on my duty."

"And a fine thing, that!" Colonel John answered heartily. He drew rein, and, before the other knew what he would be at, he was off his horse. "Mount, father," he said, "and ride, and God be with you!"

For a moment the priest stared dumbfounded. "Sir," he said, "you wear a sword! And no son of the Church goes armed in these parts."

"If I am not one of your Church I am a Christian," Colonel John answered. "Mount, father, and ride in God's name, and when you are there send the lad back with the beast."

"The Mother of God reward you!" the priest cried fervently, "and turn your heart in the right way!" He scrambled to the saddle. "The blessing of all – "

The rest was lost in the thud of hoofs as the horse started briskly, leaving Colonel John standing alone upon the road beside Bale's stirrup. The servant looked after the retreating pair, but said nothing.

"It's something if a man serves where he's listed," Colonel John remarked.

Bale smiled. "And don't betray his own side," he said. He slipped from his saddle.

"You think it's the devil's work we've done?" Colonel John asked.

But Bale declined to say more, and the two walked on, one on either side of the horse, master or man punching it when it showed a desire to sample the herbage. A stranger, seeing them, might have thought that they were wont to walk thus, so unmoved were their faces.

They had trudged the better part of two miles when they came upon the horse tethered by the reins to one of two gate-pillars, which stood gateless beside the road. Colonel John got to his saddle, and they trotted on. Notwithstanding which it was late in the afternoon when they approached the town of Tralee.

In those days it was a town much ruined. The grim castle of the Desmonds, scene of the midnight murder which had brought so many woes on Ireland, still elbowed the grey Templars Cloister, and looked down, as it frowned across the bay, on the crumbling aisles and squalid graves of the Abbey. To Bale, as he scanned the dark pile, it was but a keep – a mere nothing beside Marienburg or Stettin – rising above the hovels of an Irish town. But to the Irishman it stood for many a bitter memory and many a crime, besides that murder of a guest which will never be forgotten. The Colonel sighed as he gazed.

Presently his eyes dropped to the mean houses which flanked the entrance to the town; and he recognised that if all the saints had not vouchsafed their company, the delay caused by the meeting with the priest had done somewhat. For at that precise moment a man was riding into the town before them, and the horse under the man was Flavia McMurrough's lost mare.

Colonel John's eye lightened as he recognised its points. With a sign to Bale he fell in behind the man and followed him through two or three ill-paved and squalid streets. Presently the rider passed through a loop-holed gateway, before which a soldier was doing sentry-go. The two followed. Thence the quarry crossed an open space surrounded by dreary buildings which no military eye could take for aught but a barrack yard. The two still followed – the sentry staring after them. On the far side of the yard the mare and its rider vanished through a second archway, which appeared to lead to an inner court. The Colonel, nothing intimidated, went after them. Fortune, he thought, had favoured him.

But as he emerged from the tunnel-like passage he raised his head in astonishment. A din of voices, an outbreak of laughter and revelry, burst in a flood of sound upon his ears. He turned his face in the direction whence the sounds came, and saw three open windows, and at each window three or four flushed countenances. His sudden emergence from the tunnel, perhaps his look of surprise, wrought an instant's silence, which was followed by a ruder outburst.

"Cock! cock! cock!" shrieked a tipsy voice, and an orange, hurled at random, missed the Colonel's astonished face by a yard. The mare which had led him so far had disappeared, and instinctively he drew bridle. He stared at the window.

"Mark one!" cried a second roisterer, and a cork, better aimed than the orange, struck the Colonel sharply on the chin. A shout of laughter greeted the hit.

He raised his hat. "Gentlemen," he remonstrated, "gentlemen – "

He could proceed no further. A flight of corks, a renewed cry of "Cock! cock! cock!" a chorus of "Fetch him, Ponto! Dead, good dog! Find him, Ponto!" drowned his remonstrances. Perhaps in the scowling face at his elbow – for William Bale had followed him and was looking very fierce indeed – the wits of the – th found more amusement than in the master's mild astonishment.

"Who the devil is he?" cried one of the seniors, raising his voice above the uproar. "English or Irish?"

"Irish for a dozen!" a voice answered. "Here, Paddy, where's your papers?"

"Ay, be jabbers!" in an exaggerated brogue; "it's the broth of a boy he is, and never a face as long as his in ould Ireland!"

"Gentlemen," the Colonel said, getting in a word at last. "Gentlemen, I have been in many companies before this, and – "

"And by G – d, you shall be in ours!" one of the revellers retorted. And "Have him in! Fetch him in!" roared a dozen voices, amid much laughter. In a twinkling half as many young fellows had leapt from the windows, and surrounded him. "Who-whoop!" cried one, "Who-whoop!"

"Steady, gentlemen, steady!" the Colonel said, a note of sternness in his voice. "I've no objection to joining you, or to a little timely frolic, but – "

"Join us you will, whether or no!" replied one, more drunken or more turbulent than the rest. He made as if he would lay hands on the Colonel, and, to avoid violence, the latter suffered himself to be helped from his saddle. In a twinkling he was urged through the doorway, leaving his reins in Bale's hand, whose face, for sheer wrath and vindictiveness, was a picture.

Boisterous cries of "Hallo, sobersides!" and "Cock, cock, cock!" greeted the Colonel, as, partly of his own accord and partly urged by unceremonious hands, he crossed the threshold, and shot forward into the room.

The scene presented by the apartment matched the flushed faces and the wandering eyes which the windows had framed. The long table was strewn with flasks and glasses and half-peeled fruit, the floor with empty bottles. A corner of the table had been cleared for a main at hazard; but to make up for this the sideboard was a wilderness of broken meats and piled-up dishes, and an overturned card-table beside one of the windows had strewn the floor with cards. Here, there, everywhere on chairs, on hooks, were cast sword-belts, neckcloths, neglected wigs.

A peaceful citizen of that day had as soon found himself in a bear-pit; and even the Colonel's face grew a trifle longer as hands, not too gentle, conducted him towards the end of the table. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," he began, "I have been in many companies, as I said before, and – "

"A speech! Old Gravity's speech!" roared a middle-aged, bold-eyed man, who had suggested the sally from the windows, and from the first had set the younger spirits an example of recklessness. "Hear to him!" He filled a glass of wine and waved it perilously near the Colonel's nose. "Old Gravity's speech! Give it tongue!" he cried. "The flure's your own, and we're listening."

Colonel John eyed him with a slight contraction of the features. But the announcement, if ill-meant, availed to procure silence. The more sober had resumed their seats. He raised his head and spoke.

"Gentlemen," he said – and it was strange to note the effect of his look as his eyes fell first on one and then on another, fraught with a dignity which insensibly wrought on them. "Gentlemen, I have been in many companies, and I have found it true, all the world over, that what a man brings he finds. I have the honour to speak to you as a soldier to soldiers – "

"English or Irish?" asked a tall sallow man – sharply, but in a new tone.

"Irish!"

"Oh, be jabbers!" from the man with the wineglass.

But the Colonel's eye and manner had had their effect, and "Let him speak!" the sallow man said. "And you, Payton, have done with your fooling, will you?"

"Well, hear to him!"

"I have been in many camps and many companies, gentlemen," the Colonel resumed, "and those of many nations. But wherever I have been I have found that if a man brought courtesy with him, he met with courtesy at the hands of others. And if he brought no offence, he received none. I am a stranger here, for I have been out of my own country for a score of years. On my return you welcome me," he smiled, "a little boisterously perhaps, but I am sure, gentlemen, with a good intent. And as I have fared elsewhere I am sure I shall fare at your hands."

"Well, sure," from the background, "and haven't we made you welcome?"

"Almost too freely," the Colonel replied, smiling good-humouredly. "A peaceable man who had not lived as long as I have might have found himself at a loss in face of so strenuous a welcome. Corks, perhaps, are more in place in bottles – "

"And a dale more in place out of them!" from the background.

"But if you will permit me to explain my errand, I will say no more of that. My name, gentlemen, is Sullivan, Colonel John Sullivan of Skull, formerly of the Swedish service, and much at your service. I shall be still more obliged if any of you will be kind enough to inform me who is the purchaser – "

Payton interrupted him rudely. "Oh, d – n! We have had enough of this!" he cried. "Sink all purchasers, I say!" And with a drunken crow he thrust his neighbour against the speaker, causing both to reel. How it happened no one saw – whether Payton himself staggered in the act, or flung the wine wantonly; but somehow the contents of his glass flew over the Colonel's face and neckcloth.

Half a dozen men rose from their seats. "Shame!" an indignant voice cried.

Among those who had risen was the sallow man. "Payton," he said sharply, "what did you do that for?"

"Because I chose, if you like!" the stout man answered. "What is it to you? I am ready to give him satisfaction when he likes, and where he likes, and no heel-taps! And what more can he want? Do you hear, sir?" he continued in a bullying tone. "Sword or pistols, before breakfast or after dinner, drunk or sober, Jack Payton's your man. D – n me, it shall never be said in my time that the – th suffered a crop-eared Irishman to preach to them in their own mess-room! You can send your friend to me when you please. He'll find me!"

The Colonel was wiping the wine from his chin and neckcloth. He had turned strangely pale at the moment of the insult. More than one of those who watched him curiously – and of such were all in the room, Payton excepted – and who noted the slow preciseness of his movements and the care with which he cleansed himself, albeit his hand shook, expected some extraordinary action.

But no one looked for anything so abnormal or so astonishing as the course he took when he spoke. Nothing in his bearing had prepared them for it; nor anything in his conduct which, so far, had been that of a man of the world not too much at a loss even in the unfavourable circumstances in which he was placed – circumstances which would have unnerved many a one.

"I do not fight," he said. "Your challenge is cheap, sir, as your insult."

Payton stared. He had never been more astonished in his life. "Good L – d!" he cried. "You do not fight? Heaven and earth! and you a soldier!"

"I do not fight."

"After that, man! Not – after – " He did not finish the sentence, but laughed with uplifted chin, as at some great joke.

"No," Colonel John said between his teeth.

And then no one spoke. A something in Colonel John's tone and manner, a something in the repression of his voice, sobered the spectators, and turned that which might have seemed an ignominy, a surrender, into a tragedy. And a tragedy in which they all had their share. For the insult had been so wanton, so gross, so brutal, that there was not one of the witnesses who had not felt shame, not one whose sympathy had not been for a moment with the victim, and who did not experience a pang on his account as he stood, mild and passive, before them.

Payton alone was moved only by contempt. "Lord above us, man!" he cried, finding his voice again. Are you a Quaker? If so, why the devil do you call yourself a soldier?"

"I am no Quaker," Colonel John answered, "but I do not fight duels."

"Why?"

"If I killed you," the Colonel replied, eyeing him steadily, "would it dry my neckcloth or clean my face?"

"No!" Payton retorted with a sneer, "but it would clean your honour!" He had felt the reprehension in the air, he had been conscious for a few seconds that he had not the room with him; but the perception made him only the more arrogant now that he felt his feet again. "It would prove, man, that, unlike the beasts that perish, you valued something more than your life!"

"I do."

"What?" Payton asked with careless disdain.

"Among other things, my duty." Payton laughed brutally. "Why, by the powers, you *are* a preacher!" he retorted. "Hang your duty, sir, and you for a craven! Give me acts, not words! It's a man's duty to defend his honour, and you talk of your neckcloth! There's for a new neckcloth!" He pulled out a half-crown and flung it, with an insulting gesture, upon the table. "Show us your back, and for the future give gentlemen of honour – a wide berth! You are no mate for them!"

The act and the words were too strong for the stomachs of the more generous among his hearers. A murmur, an undoubted murmur rose – for if Payton was feared he was not loved; and the sallow-faced man, whose name was Marsh, spoke out. "Easy, Payton," he said. "The gentleman –"

"The gentleman, eh?"

"Did not come here of his own accord, and you've said enough, and done enough! For my part –"

"I didn't ask for your interference!" the other cried insolently.

"Well, anyway –"

"And I don't want it! And I won't have it; do you hear, Marsh?" Payton repeated menacingly. "You know me, and I know you."

"I know that you are a better fencer and a better shot than I am," Marsh replied, shrugging his shoulders, "and I daresay than any of us. We are apt to believe it, anyway. But –"

"I would advise you to let that be enough," Payton sneered.

It was then that the Colonel, who had stood silent during the altercation of which he was the subject, spoke – and in a tone somewhat altered. "I am much obliged to you, sir," he said, addressing the sallow-faced man, "but I will cause no further trouble. I crave leave to say one word only, which may come home to some among you. We are all, at times, at the mercy of mean persons. Yes, sir, of mean persons," the Colonel repeated, raising his voice and speaking in a tone so determined – he seemed another man – that Payton, in the act of seizing a decanter to hurl at him, hesitated. "For any but a mean person," Colonel John continued, drawing himself up to his full height, "finding that he had insulted one who could not meet him on even terms – one who could not resent the insult in the manner intended – would have deemed it all one as if he had insulted a one-armed man, or a blind man, and would have set himself right by an apology."

At that word Payton found his voice. "Hang your apology!" he cried furiously.

"By an apology," the Colonel repeated, fixing him with eyes of unmeasured contempt, "which would have lowered him no more than an apology to a woman or a child. Not doing so, his act

dishonours himself only, and those who sit with him. And one day, unless I mistake not, his own blood, and the blood of others, will rest upon his head."

With that word the speaker turned slowly, walked with an even pace to the door, and opened it, none gainsaying him. On the threshold he paused and looked back. Something, possibly some chord of superstition in his breast which his adversary's last words had touched, held Payton silent: and silent the Colonel's raised finger found him.

"I believe," Colonel John said, gazing solemnly at him, "that we shall meet again." And he went out.

Payton turned to the table, and, with an unsteady hand, filled a glass. He read disapprobation in the eyes about him, but he had shaken the momentary chill from his own spirits, and he stared them down. "Sink the old Square-Toes!" he cried. "He got what he deserved! Who'll throw a main with me?"

"Thirty guineas against your new mare, if you like?"

"No, confound you," Payton retorted angrily. "Didn't I say she wasn't for sale?"

CHAPTER VI THE MAÎTRE D'ARMES

Beyond doubt Colonel John had got himself off the scene with a certain amount of dignity. But with all that he had done and suffered in the lands beyond the Baltic and the Vistula, he had not yet become so perfect a philosopher as to be indifferent to the opinion held of him by others. He was, indeed, as he retired, as unhappy as a more ordinary man might have been in the same case. He knew that he was no craven, that he had given his proofs a score of times. But old deeds and a foreign reputation availed nothing here. And it was with a deep sense of vexation and shame that he rode out of the barrack-yard. Why, oh why! had he been so unlucky as to enter it? He was a man, after all, and the laughter of the mess-room, the taunts of the bully, burned his ears.

Nor were his spirits low on his account only. The cruelty of man to man, the abuse of strength by those who had it, and the pains of those who had it not, the crookedness of the world in which the weak go to the wall – thoughts of these things weighed him down. But more, and more to the purpose, he saw that after what had happened, his chances of success in the enterprise which had brought him to town, and which was itself but a means to an end, were lessened. It might not be possible to pursue that enterprise any farther. This was a mortifying thought, and accounted for the melancholy face with which he sought the inn, and supped; now wishing that he had not done this or that, now pondering how he might turn the flank of a misfortune which threatened to shatter all his plans.

For if he was anxious to recover the mare, his anxiety did not rest there. Her recovery was but a step to other things; to that influence at Morristown which would make him potent for good; to that consideration which would enable him to expel foolish councils, and silence that simmering talk of treason which might at any moment boil up into action and ruin a countryside. But he knew that he could only get the mare from those who held her by imposing himself upon them; and to do this after what had happened seemed impossible. The story would be told, must be told: it would be carried far and wide. Such things were never hid; and he had come off so ill, as the world viewed things, he had cut so poor a figure, that after this he could hope for nothing from his personal influence here or at Morristown. Nothing, unless he could see himself right at Tralee.

He brooded long over the matter, and at length – but not until after his meal – he hit on a plan, promising, though distasteful. He called Bale, and made inquiries through that taciturn man; and next morning he sat late at his breakfast. He had learned that the garrison used the inn much, many of the officers calling there for their "morning"; and the information proved correct. About ten he heard heavy steps in the stone-paved passage, spurs rang out an arrogant challenge, voices called for Patsy and Molly, and demanded this or that. By-and-by two officers, almost lads, sauntered into the room in which he sat, and, finding him there, moved with a wink and a grin to the window. They leant out, and he heard them laugh; he knew that they were discussing him before they turned to the daily fare – the neat ankles of a passing "colleen," the glancing eyes of the French milliner over the way, or the dog-fight at the corner. The two remained thus, half eclipsed as far as the Colonel was concerned, until presently the sallow-faced man sauntered idly into the room.

He did not see the Colonel at once, but the latter rose and bowed, and Marsh, a little added colour in his face, returned the salute – with an indifferent grace. It was clear that, though he had behaved better than his fellows on the previous day, he had no desire to push the acquaintance farther.

Colonel John, however, gave him no chance. Still standing, and with a grave, courteous face, "May I, as a stranger," he said, "trouble you with a question, sir?"

The two lady-killers at the window heard the words and nudged one another, with a stifled chuckle at their comrade's predicament. Captain Marsh, with one eye on them, assented stiffly.

"Is there any one," the Colonel asked, "in Tralee – I fear the chance is small – who gives fencing lessons? – or who is qualified to do so?"

The Captain's look of surprise yielded to one of pitying comprehension. He smiled – he could not help it; while the young men drew in their heads to hear the better.

"Yes," he answered, "there is."

"In the regiment, I presume?"

"He is attached to it temporarily. If you will inquire at the Armoury for Lemoine, the Maître d'Armes, he will oblige you, I have no doubt. But –"

"If you please?" the Colonel said politely, seeing that Marsh hesitated.

"If you are not a skilled swordsman, I fear that it is not one lesson, or two, or a dozen, will enable you to meet Captain Payton, if you have such a thing in your mind, sir. He is but little weaker than Lemoine, and Lemoine is a fair match with a small-sword for any man out of London. Brady in Dublin, possibly, and perhaps half a dozen in England are his betters, but –" he stopped abruptly, his ear catching a snigger at the window. "I need not trouble you with that," he concluded lamely.

"Still," the Colonel answered simply, "a long reach goes for much, I have heard, and I am tall."

Captain Marsh looked at him in pity, and he might have put his compassion into words, but for the young bloods at the window, who, he knew, would repeat the conversation. He contented himself, therefore, with saying rather curtly, "I believe it goes some way." And he turned stiffly to go out.

But the Colonel had a last question to put to him. "At what hour," he asked, "should I be most likely to find this – Lemoine, at leisure?"

"Lemoine?"

"If you please."

Marsh opened his mouth to answer, but found himself anticipated by one of the youngsters. "Three in the afternoon is the best time," the lad said bluntly, speaking over his shoulder. He popped out his head again, that his face, swollen by his perception of the jest, might not betray it.

But the Colonel seemed to see nothing. "I thank you," he said, bowing courteously.

And re-seating himself, as Marsh went out, he finished his breakfast. The two at the window, after exploding once or twice in an attempt to stifle their laughter, drew in their heads, and, still red in the face, marched solemnly past the Colonel, and out of the room. His seat, now the window was clear, commanded a view of the street, and presently he saw the two young bloods go by in the company of four or five of their like. They were gesticulating, nor was there much doubt, from the laughter with which their tale was received, that they were retailing a joke of signal humour.

That did not surprise the Colonel. But when the door opened a moment later, and Marsh came hastily into the room, and with averted face began to peer about for something, he was surprised.

"Where the devil's that snuff-box!" the sallow-faced man exclaimed. "Left it somewhere!" Then, looking about him to make sure that the door was closed. "See, here sir," he said awkwardly, "it's no business of mine, but for a man who has served as you say you have, you're a d – d simple fellow. Take my advice and don't go to Lemoine's at three, if you go at all."

"No?" the Colonel echoed.

"Can't you see they'll all be there to guy you?" Marsh retorted impatiently. He could not help liking the man, and yet the man seemed a fool! The next moment, with a hasty nod, he was gone. He had found the box in his pocket.

Colonel Sullivan smiled, and, after carefully brushing the crumbs from his breeches, rose from the table. "A good man," he muttered. "Pity he has not more courage." The next moment he came to attention, for slowly past the window moved Captain Payton himself, riding Flavia's mare, and talking with one of the young bloods who walked at his stirrup.

The man and the horse! The Colonel began to understand that something more than wantonness had inspired Payton's conduct the previous night. Either he had been privy from the first to the plot to waylay the horse; or he had bought it cheaply knowing how it had been acquired; or – a third alternative – it had been placed in his hands, to the end that his reputation as a fire-eater might protect it. In any event, he had had an interest in nipping inquiry in the bud; and, learning who the Colonel was, had acted on the instant, and with considerable presence of mind.

The Colonel looked thoughtful; and though the day was fine for Ireland – that is, no more than a small rain was falling – he remained within doors until five minutes before three o'clock. Bale had employed the interval in brushing the stains of travel from his master's clothes, and combing his horseman's wig with particular care; so that it was a neat and spruce gentleman who at five minutes before three walked through Tralee, and, attending to the directions he had received, approached a particular door, a little within the barrack gate.

Had he glanced up at the windows he would have seen faces at them; moreover, a suspicious ear might have caught, as he paused on the threshold, a scurrying of feet, mingled with stifled laughter. But he did not look up. He did not seem to expect to see more than he found, when he entered – a great bare room with its floor strewn with sawdust and its walls adorned here and there by a gaunt trophy of arms. In the middle of the floor, engaged apparently in weighing one foil against another, was a stout, dark-complexioned man, whose light and nimble step, as he advanced to meet his visitor, gave the lie to his weight.

Certainly there came from a half-opened door at the end of the room a stealthy sound as of rats taking cover. But Colonel John did not look that way. His whole attention was bent upon the Maître d'Armes, who bowed low to him. Clicking his heels together, and extending his palms in the French fashion, "Good-morning, sare," he said, his southern accent unmistakable. "I make you welcome."

The Colonel returned his salute less elaborately. "The Maître d'Armes Lemoine?" he said.

"Yes, sare, that is me. At your service!"

"I am a stranger in Tralee, and I have been recommended to apply to you. You are, I am told, accustomed to give lessons."

"With the small-sword?" the Frenchman answered, with the same gesture of the open hands. "It is my profession."

"I am desirous of brushing up my knowledge – such as it is."

"A vare good notion," the fencing-master replied, his black beady eyes twinkling. "Vare good for me. Vare good also for you. Always ready, is the gentleman's motto; and to make himself ready, his high recreation. But, doubtless, sare," with a faint smile, "you are proficient, and I teach you nothing. You come but to sweat a little." An observant person would have noticed that as he said this he raised his voice above his usual tone.

"At one time," Colonel John replied with simplicity, "I was fairly proficient. Then – this happened!" He held out his right hand. "You see?"

"Ah!" the Frenchman said in a low tone, and he raised his hands. "That is ogly! That is vare ogly! Can you hold with that?" he added, inspecting the hand with interest. He was a different man.

"So, so," the Colonel answered cheerfully.

"Not strongly, eh? It is not possible."

"Not very strongly," the Colonel assented. His hand, like Bale's, lacked two fingers.

Lemoine muttered something under his breath, and looked at the Colonel with a wrinkled brow. "Tut – tut!" he said, "and how long are you like that, sare?"

"Seven years."

"Pity! pity!" Lemoine exclaimed. Again he looked at his visitor with perplexed eyes. After which, "Dam!" he said suddenly.

The Colonel stared.

"It is not right!" the Frenchman continued, frowning. "I – no! Pardon me, sare, I do not fence with *les estropiés*. That is downright! That is certain, sare. I do not do it."

If the Colonel had been listening he might have caught the sound of a warning cough, with a stir, and a subdued murmur of voices – all proceeding from the direction of the inner room. But he had his back to the half-opened door and he seemed to be taken up with the fencing-master's change of tone. "But if," he objected, "I am willing to pay for an hour's practice?"

"Another day, sare. Another day, if you will."

"But I shall not be here another day. I have but to-day. By-and-by," he continued with a smile as kindly as it was humorous, "I shall begin to think that you are afraid to pit yourself against a *manchot*!"

"Oh, la! la!" The Frenchman dismissed the idea with a contemptuous gesture.

"Do me the favour, then," Colonel John retorted. "If you please?"

Against one of the walls were three chairs arranged in a row. Before each stood a boot-jack, and beside it a pair of boot-hooks; over it, fixed in the wall, were two or three pegs for the occupant's wig, cravat, and cane. The Colonel, without waiting for a further answer, took his seat on one of the chairs, removed his boots, and then his coat, vest, and wig, which he hung on the pegs above him.

"And now," he said gaily, as he stood up, "the mask!"

He did not see the change – for he seemed to have no suspicion – but as he rose, the door of the room behind him became fringed with grinning faces. Payton, the two youths who had leant from the window of the inn and who had carried his words, a couple of older officers, half a dozen subalterns, all were there – and one or two civilians. The more grave could hardly keep the more hilarious in order. The curtain was ready to go up on what they promised themselves would be the most absurd scene. The stranger who fought no duels, yet thought that a lesson or two would make him a match for a dead-hand like Payton – was ever such a promising joke conceived? The good feeling, even the respect which the Colonel had succeeded in awakening for a short time the evening before, were forgotten in the prospect of such a jest.

The Frenchman made no further demur. He had said what he could, and it was not his business to quarrel with his best clients. He took his mask, and proffered a choice of foils to his antagonist, whose figure, freed from the heavy coat and vest of the day, and the overshadowing wig, seemed younger and more supple than the Frenchman had expected. "A pity, a pity!" the latter said to himself. "To have lost, if he ever was professor, the joy of life!"

"Are you ready?" Colonel John asked.

"At your service, sare," the Maître d'Armes replied – but not with much heartiness. The two advanced each a foot, they touched swords, then saluted with that graceful and courteous engagement which to an ignorant observer is one of the charms of the foil. As they did so, and steel grated on steel, the eavesdroppers in the inner room ventured softly from ambush – like rats issuing forth; soon they were all standing behind the Colonel, the sawdust, and the fencers' stamping feet as they lunged or gave back, covering the sound of their movements.

They were on the broad grin when they came out. But it took them less than a minute to discover that the entertainment was not likely to be so extravagantly funny as they had hoped. The Colonel was not, strictly speaking, a tyro; moreover, he had, as he said, a long reach. He was no match indeed for Lemoine, who touched him twice in the first bout and might have touched him thrice had he put forth his strength. But he did nothing absurd. When he dropped his point, therefore, at the end of the rally, and, turning to take breath came face to face with the gallery of onlookers, the best-natured of these felt rather foolish. But Colonel John seemed to find nothing surprising in their presence. He saluted them courteously with his weapon. "I am afraid I cannot show you much sport, gentlemen," he said.

One or two muttered something – a good day, or the like. The rest grinned unmeaningly. Payton said nothing, but, folding his arms with a superior air, leant, frowning haughtily, against the wall.

"*Parbleu*," said Lemoine, as they rested. "It is a pity. The wrist is excellent, sare. But the pointing finger is not – is not!"

"I do my best," the Colonel answered, with cheerful resignation. "Shall we engage again?"

"At your pleasure."

The Frenchman's eye no longer twinkled; his gallantry was on its mettle. He was grave and severe, fixing his gaze on the Colonel's attack, and remaining blind to the nods and shrugs and smiles of amusement of his patrons in the background. Again he touched the Colonel, and, alas! again; with an ease which, good-natured as he was, he could not mask.

Colonel John, a little breathed, and perhaps a little chagrined also, dropped his point. Some one coughed, and another tittered.

"I think he will need another lesson or two," Payton remarked, speaking ostensibly to one of his companions, but loudly enough for all to hear.

The man whom he addressed made an inaudible answer. The Colonel turned towards them.

"And – a new hand," Payton added in the same tone.

Even for his henchman the remark was almost too much. But the Colonel, strange to say – perhaps he really was very simple – seemed to find nothing offensive in it. On the contrary, he replied to it.

"That was precisely," he said, "what I thought when this" – he indicated his maimed hand – "happened to me. And I did my best to procure one."

"Did you succeed?" Payton retorted in an insolent tone.

"To some extent," the Colonel replied, in the most matter-of-fact manner. And he transferred the foil to his left hand.

"Give you four to one," Payton rejoined, "Lemoine hits you twice before you hit him once."

Colonel John had anticipated some of the things that had happened. But he had not foreseen this. He was quick to see the use to which he might put it, and it was only for an instant that he hesitated. Then "Four to one?" he repeated.

"Five, if you like!" Payton sneered.

"If you will wager," the Colonel said slowly, "if you will wager the grey mare you were riding this morning, sir –"

Payton uttered an angry oath. "What do you mean?" he said.

"Against ten guineas," Colonel John continued carelessly, bending the foil against the floor and letting it spring to its length again, "I will make that wager."

Payton scowled at him. He was aware of the other's interest in the mare, and suspected, at least, that he had come to town to recover her. And caution would have had him refuse the snare. But his toadies were about him, he had long ruled the roast, to retreat went against the grain; while to suppose that the man had the least chance against Lemoine was absurd. Yet he hesitated. "What do you know about the mare?" he said coarsely.

"I have seen her. But of course, if you are afraid to wager her, sir –"

Payton answered to the spur. "Bah! Afraid?" he cried contemptuously. "Done, with you!"

"That is settled," the Colonel replied. "I am at your service," he continued, turning to the Maître d'Armes. "I trust," indicating that he was going to fence with his left hand, "that this will not embarrass you?"

"No! But it is interesting, by G – d, it is vare interesting," the Frenchman replied. "I have encountered *les gauchers* before, and –"

He did not finish the sentence, but saluting, he assumed an attitude a little more wary than usual. He bent his knees a trifle lower, and held his left shoulder somewhat more advanced, as

compared with his right. The foils felt one another, and "Oh, va, va!" he muttered. "I understand, the droll!"

For half a minute or so the faces of the onlookers reflected only a mild surprise, mingled with curiosity. But the fencers had done little more than feel one another's blades, they had certainly not exchanged more than half a dozen serious passes, before this was changed, before one face grew longer and another more intent. A man who was no fencer, and therefore no judge, spoke. A fierce oath silenced him. Another murmured an exclamation under his breath. A third stooped low with his hands on his hips that he might not lose a lunge or a parry. For Payton, his face became slowly a dull red. At length, "Ha!" cried one, drawing in his breath. And he was right. The Maître d'Armes' button, sliding under the Colonel's blade, had touched his opponent. At once, Lemoine sprang back out of danger, the two points dropped, the two fencers stood back to take breath.

For a few seconds the Colonel's chagrin was plain. He looked, and was, disappointed. Then he conquered the feeling, and he smiled. "I fear you are too strong for me," he said.

"Not at all," the Frenchman made answer. "Not at all! It was fortune, sare. I know not what you were with your right hand, but you are with the left vare strong, of the first force. It is certain."

Payton, an expert, had been among the earliest to discern, with as much astonishment as mortification, the Colonel's skill. With a sudden sinking of the heart, he had foreseen the figure he would cut if Lemoine were worsted; he had endured a moment of great fear. But at this success he choked down his apprehensions, and, a sanguine man, he breathed again. One more hit, one more success on Lemoine's part, and he had won the wager! But with all he could do he could no longer bear himself carelessly. Pallid and troubled, he watched, biting his lip; and though he longed to say something cutting, he could think of nothing. Nay, if it came to that, he could not trust his voice, and while he still faltered, seeking for a gibe and finding none, the two combatants had crossed their foils again. Their tense features, plain through the masks, as well as their wary movements, made it clear that they played for a victory of which neither was confident.

By this time the rank and file of the spectators had been reinforced by the arrival of Marsh; who, discovering a scene so unexpected, and quickly perceiving that Lemoine was doing his utmost, wondered what Payton's thoughts were. Apart from the wager, it was clear that if Lemoine had not met his match, the Captain had; and in the future would have to mend his manners in respect to one person present. Doubtless many of those in the room, on whose toes Payton had often trodden, had the same idea, and felt secret joy, pleased that the bully of the regiment was like to meet with a reverse and a master.

Whatever their thoughts, a quick rally diverted them, and riveted all eyes on the fencers. For a moment thrust and parry followed one another so rapidly that the untrained gaze could not distinguish them or trace the play. The spectators held their breath, expecting a hit with each second. But the rally died away again, neither of the players had got through the other's guard; and now they fell to it more slowly, the Colonel, a little winded, giving ground, and Lemoine pressing him.

Then, no one saw precisely how it happened, whiff-whaff, Lemoine's weapon flew from his hand and struck the wall with a whirr and a jangle. The fencing-master wrung his wrist. "*Sacre!*" he cried, between his teeth, unable in the moment of surprise to control his chagrin.

The Colonel touched him with his button for form's sake, then stepped rapidly to the wall, picked up the foil by the blade, and courteously returned it to him. Two or three cried "Bravo," but faintly, as barely comprehending what had happened. The greater part stood silent in sheer astonishment. For Payton, he remained dumb with mortification and disgust; and if he had the grace to be thankful for anything, he was thankful that for the moment attention was diverted from him.

Lemoine, indeed, the person more immediately concerned, had only eyes for his opponent, whom he regarded with a queer mixture of approval and vexation. "You have been at Angelo's school in Paris, sare?" he said, in the tone of one who stated a fact rather than asked a question.

"It is true," the Colonel answered, smiling. "You have guessed it."

"And learned that trick from him?"

"I did. It is of little use except to a left-handed man."

"Yet in play with one not of the first force it succeeds twice out of three times," Lemoine answered. "Twice out of three times, with the right hand. *Ma foi!* I remember it well! I offered the master twenty guineas, Monsieur, if he would teach it me. But because" – he held out his palms pathetically – "I was right-handed, he would not."

"I am fortunate," Colonel John answered, bowing, and regarding his opponent with kind eyes, "in being able to requite your good nature. I shall be pleased to teach it you for nothing, but not now. Gentlemen," he continued, giving up his foil to Lemoine, and removing his mask, "gentlemen, you will bear me witness, I trust, that I have won the wager?"

Some nodded, some murmured an affirmative, others turned towards Payton, who, too deeply chagrined to speak, nodded sullenly. How willingly at that moment would he have laid the Colonel dead at his feet, and Lemoine, and the whole crew, friends and enemies! He gulped something down. "Oh, d – n you!" he said, "I give it you! Take the mare, she's in the stable!"

At that a brother officer touched his arm, and, disregarding his gesture of impatience, drew him aside. The intervener seemed to be reminding him of something; and the Colonel, not inattentive, and indeed suspicious, caught the name "Asgill" twice repeated. But Payton was too angry to care for minor consequences, or to regard anything but how he might most quickly escape from the scene of defeat and the eyes of those who had witnessed his downfall. He shook off his adviser with a rough hand.

"What do I care?" he answered with an oath. "He must shoe his own cattle!" Then, with a poor show of hiding his spite under a cloak of insouciance, he addressed the Colonel. "The mare is yours," he said. "You've won her. Much good may she do you!"

And he turned on his heel and went out of the armoury.

CHAPTER VII BARGAINING

The melancholy which underlies the Celtic temperament finds something congenial in the shadows that at close of day fall about an old ruin. On fine summer evenings, and sometimes when the south-wester was hurling sheets of rain from hill to hill, and the birch-trees were bending low before its blast, Flavia would seek the round tower that stood on the ledge beside the waterfall. It was as much as half a mile from the house, and the track which scaled the broken ground to its foot was rough. But from the narrow terrace before the wall the eye not only commanded the valley in all its length, but embraced above one shoulder a distant view of Brandon Mountain, and above the other a peep of the Atlantic. Thither, ever since she could remember, she had carried her dreams and her troubles; there, with the lake stretched below her, and the house a mere Noah's ark to the eye, she had cooled her hot brow or dried her tears, dwelt on past glories, or bashfully thought upon the mysterious possibilities of that love, of that joint life, of that rosy-hued future, to which the most innocent of maidens must sometimes turn their minds.

It was perhaps because she often sought the tower at sunset, and he had noted the fact, that Luke Asgill's steps bore him thither on an evening three days after the Colonel's departure for Tralee. Asgill had remained at Morristown, though the girl had not hidden her distaste for his presence. But to all her remonstrances The McMurrough had replied, with his usual churlishness, that the man was there on business – did she want to recover her mare, or did she not? And she had found nothing more to say. But the most slavish observance on the guest's part, and some improvement in her brother's conduct – which she might have rightly attributed to Asgill's presence – had not melted her. She, who had scarcely masked her reluctance to receive a Protestant kinsman, was not going to smile on a Protestant of Asgill's past and reputation; on a man whose father had stood hat in hand before her grandfather, and whose wealth had been wrung from the sweat of his fellow peasants.

Be that as it might, Asgill did not find her at the tower. But he was patient; he thought that she might still come, and he waited, sitting low, with his back against the ruined wall, that she might not see him until it was too late for her to retreat. By-and-by he heard footsteps mounting the path; his face reddened, and he made as if he would rise. Remembering himself, however, he sat down again, with such a look in his eyes as comes into a dog's when it expects to be beaten. But the face that rose above the brow was not Flavia's, but her brother's. And Asgill swore.

The McMurrough understood, grinned, and threw himself on the ground beside him. "You'll be wishing me in the devil's bowl, I'm thinking," he said. "Yet, faith, I'm not so sure – if you're not a fool. For it's certain I am, you'll never touch so much as the sole of her foot without me."

"I'm not denying it," the other answered sulkily.

"So it's mighty little use your wishing me away!" The McMurrough continued, stretching himself at his ease. "You can't get her without me; nor at all, at all, but on my terms! It would be a fine thing for you, no doubt, if you could sneak round her behind my back! Don't I know you'd be all for old Sir Michael's will then, and I might die in a gutter, for you! But an egg, and an egg's fair sharing."

"Have I said it was any other?" Asgill asked gloomily.

"The old place is mine, and I'm minded to keep it."

"And if any other marries her," Asgill said quietly, "he will want her rights."

"Well, and do you think," the younger man answered in his ugliest manner, "that if it weren't for that small fact, Mister Asgill –"

"And the small fact," Asgill struck in, "that before your grandfather died I lent you a clear five hundred, and I'm to take that, that's my own already, in quittance of all!"

"Well, and wasn't it that same I'm saying?" The McMurrrough retorted. "If it weren't for that, and the bargain we've struck, d'you think that I'd be letting my sister and a McMurrrough look at the likes of you? No, not in as many Midsummer Days as are between this and world without end!"

The look Asgill shot at him would have made a wiser man tremble. But The McMurrrough knew the strength of his position.

"And if I were to tell her?" Asgill said slowly.

"What?"

"That we've made a bargain about her."

"It's the last strand of hope you'd be breaking, my man," the younger man answered briskly. "For you'd lose my help, and she'd not believe you – though every priest in Douai backed your word!"

Asgill knew that that was true, and though his face grew dark he changed his tone. "Enough said," he replied pacifically. "Where'll we be if we quarrel? You want the old place that is yours by right. And I want – your sister." He swallowed something as he named her; even his tone was different. "'Tis one and one. That's all."

"And you're the one who wants the most," James replied cunningly. "Asgill, my man, you'd give your soul for her, I'm thinking."

"I would."

"You would, I believe. By G – d," he continued, with a leer, "you're that fond of her I'll have to look to her! Hang me, my friend, if I let her be alone with you after this. Safe bind, safe find. Women and fruit are easily bruised."

Asgill rose slowly to his feet. "You scoundrel!" he said in a low tone. And it was only when The McMurrrough, surprised by his movement, turned to him, that the young man saw that his face was black with passion – saw, indeed, a face so menacing, that he also sprang to his feet. "You scoundrel!" Asgill repeated, choking on the words. "If you say a thing like that again – if you say it again, do you hear? – I'll do you a mischief. Do you hear? Do you hear?"

"What in the saints' names is the matter with you?" The McMurrrough faltered.

"You're not fit to breathe the air she breathes!" Asgill continued, with the same ferocity. "Nor am I! But I know it, thank God! And you don't! Why, man," he continued, still fighting with the passion that possessed him, "I wouldn't dare to touch the hem of her gown without her leave! I wouldn't dare to look in her face if she bade me not! She's as safe with me as if she were an angel in heaven! And you say – you; but you don't understand!"

"Faith and I don't," The McMurrrough answered, his tone much lowered. "That's true for you!" When it came to a collision of wills the other was his master.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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