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The Wild Geese

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THE WILD GEESE



BY

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CHAPTER

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 swaggared, 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 kedge 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 Castlemaigne," 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 Morrystown."

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 drugged 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