

# DESMOND O'CONNOR\*

A ROMANCE OF THE IRISH BRIGADE

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XXI

THEY gazed wide-eyed at each other, these two who had loved so fondly, who were severed so completely. Margaret was the first to recover herself. The consciousness that she had been slighted stimulated her pride, and her pride rallied her faculties.

O'Connor stood stupefied, distrusting the evidence of his senses. For a moment he thought he was dreaming.

"Margaret!" he stammered. Then, rousing himself: "For God's sake, *madame*, what do you here?"

She was mistress of herself before he had finished speaking.

"Surely, sir, my presence in my own house need not surprise you," she answered very calmly, standing with the port of a queen amid her poor surroundings.

O'Connor was bewildered. He looked round at the one bare room which had constituted the forester's home—its scanty furniture, its rough, unadorned walls, its one naked, staring window. Then his eyes traveled back to the face of the Countess of Anhalt, pale, composed, scornful.

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the sound of saw and ax as the soldiers loopholed the walls.

"Your own house!" he repeated, wondering.

"It has been in the occupation of my forester," said Margaret coldly, "but he is absent at present. Nevertheless, it is my house, my property, and I must request you to withdraw with your soldiers."

"My God, *madame*," cried O'Connor vehemently, "you do not know what you are risking here! The French army is in retreat. You are under the very feet of the advancing allies. Try to realize your imminent peril!"

"I have no fear of the allies and no de-

sire for French protection. I have met with little consideration and less happiness under the flag of France. I repeat that I am in my own house, and again request you to withdraw."

She took a high tone, supported by the consciousness of what she believed to be her rights, and as ignorant of the masterful ways of belligerents as a babe might have been. O'Connor realized this, and his heart bled for her. His eyes fell before her haughty regard. She misinterpreted his wandering glance.

"You need not look round," she said coldly. "I am quite alone. Your friend Anne Van Rhyn is no longer in my service. You will not find her here."

Desmond flushed.

"Poor girl!" he said. "She is suffering for a fault that was not her own. She was only—"

"We will not discuss her, *monsieur*," Margaret interrupted haughtily. "Will you be good enough to favor me by withdrawing your men?"

"I grieve to disoblige you, *madame*," he replied, stung by her manner. "My orders are to hold this place."

"Against whom?" she demanded.

"Against such pursuit as may develop. We form a portion of the rear guard, and it is our duty to delay the enemy as much as possible."

She threw a scornful glance at the little garrison.

"With half a dozen men?" she asked in a tone that roused the Irishman's pride.

"With such force as I can dispose of," he answered firmly. "These half dozen—to be accurate, we are eleven—are all that are left of five swords and over a hundred bayonets that went into action this morning. You see the wreck of my own company, *madame*."

"Well, sir," she insisted, and her mien

\* This story began in MUNSEY'S MAGAZINE for August, 1908

was as haughty as ever, though there was womanly pity in the eye that glanced over the scanty remnant, "it is a foolish action you contemplate, and I will not permit it. Take your men elsewhere."

"I have told you that my orders are to hold this house," repeated O'Connor.

"And I have told you that this house is mine. I now demand that you leave it, and at once."

"In the stress of war," he explained, "private rights lapse. I am here under orders, and I cannot quit my post."

"You mean that you will not!" she cried angrily.

He bowed profoundly.

"And I will not."

"Then I shall go myself," retorted the countess furiously. "Your presence is an insult!"

"Oh, *madame*," cried Desmond, deeply pained, "believe me, I shall trouble you as little as may be. I cannot suffer you to go forth alone. You do not know what you may encounter."

He paused and ran his eye over the room. It offered no shelter, no concealment. A little door, facing the entrance, arrested his attention, and he pulled it open. It admitted to a tiny closet—scarce more than a hutch, built as a lean-to against the house, and evidently used to store the forester's winter stock of firing. It was piled to its slanting roof with close-packed rows of fagots, only a little passage, a mere niche, having been left clear in the center for convenience of access.

"You would be safer there," he said.

"Those fagots might render it bullet-proof. Will it please you to take shelter? I shall not intrude on you."

"I shall not remain here," said Margaret firmly, and even as she spoke half a dozen shots rang out sharply from the wood. Then, after a brief interval, came a single report, and silence.

"They are upon us," cried O'Connor, springing to the door. "Pick up your muskets and come within," he called to the men at work on the clearing. "I saw a bugle with one of you," he continued. "Sound the recall for the scouts. When the enemy hear it, they may fancy we are in force. And stand ready to close the door in case of a rush, no matter who is left outside. They must be close upon us!"

The shots were not repeated. The stillness of the summer evening settled down on glade and forest, pierced only by the clear, shrill notes of the bugle. The men engaged in cutting at the wall worked feverishly, the countess looking on, but not comprehending their purpose. The reports had startled

her. She addressed Desmond as he turned back from the door.

"What was the meaning of that firing?"

"I cannot quite understand," he replied.

"It must have come from a detachment either of Austrians or of English, but at what they loosed their pieces I cannot tell. Heaven send my sergeant is safe!"

Margaret inwardly echoed the wish, but did not give it utterance.

"Why are the men making those holes in the walls?" she asked, speaking from mere curiosity; but Desmond misunderstood her purpose.

"They are loopholing the walls so that we can fire in any direction," he replied. "I regret that I am forced to damage your property in this way, but war recognizes only its own necessities."

This hurt her, and she turned away, but came back almost instantly.

"Surely this is a foolhardy venture," she said. "It cannot succeed. How can your little band hope to check the advance of an army?"

"We do not hope to check it," he answered, "but we may delay it. We have eleven lives here, and if each costs the enemy but five minutes—and with luck it may, fighting thus from cover—we shall have done what we are here to do."

"But that means—" the countess began, breaking off aghast as the man's purpose dawned on her.

"It means success." O'Connor supplied his own word.

"No, annihilation!" she gasped, gazing at him with horror in her eyes.

"It is our trade, *madame*," O'Connor went on, as if explaining something to a child. "We fight while we can, and die when our time comes. But you—I know not what to do with you when the attack develops."

"Do not concern yourself for me, *monsieur*," she answered. "We women have a kind of courage of our own. We suffer while we must, and die when our time comes."

She turned away, leaving him stricken to the heart by the hopeless misery in her voice and in her eyes. A cry from one of the men on guard roused him.

"Look at here, yer honor! What d'ye make o' this?"

Desmond sprang to the door. Four figures were emerging from the cover, carrying among them one apparently wounded. O'Connor was on the point of ordering the door to be closed when he recognized Sergeant Quirk and the three other scouts. But who was the fifth?

The little group raced across the clearing,

and as they ran a dropping fire pursued them from the wood. Some of the balls gashed the log walls with white scars; but the fugitives reached the house seemingly unhurt.

"Stand by the door!" shouted O'Connor. "Admit them, and bar it instantly!"

Two of the men carried their inanimate burden within and laid it on the bed, as directed. Rourke followed, and Quirk came last, sauntering in his cool, light-hearted way, as if a score of unseen muskets were not making him their target.

"They're middlin' bad shots, anyway, an' that's all to the good," he remarked. Then, lifting the skirt of his coat and examining a ragged hole newly made in it, he went on: "It's a good job me coat is so long. If this was a jacket, it's shot through the back I'd have been."

"What has happened, sergeant?" O'Connor asked, after seeing the massive bar fixed across the doorway.

"It's the Austrians," replied Quirk. "They're close on our heels, divil a doubt of it; but I don't think they're in any great force yet."

"Infantry, I suppose?" questioned Desmond.

"Well, sir," replied the sergeant, pointing to the hole in his coat, "it wasn't cavalry done that. Nor that," he added, indicating by a jerk of the head the senseless figure on the bed.

"Who is he, and where did you pick him up?"

"It's a staff officer, an' we seen him fall. He was ridin' fit to split, an' shots comin' behind him. I thought he had got away. He was just on the edge of the clearin', when a chance bullet took him and rowled him off his horse for all the world like a sack of flour. It was just then I met Rourke comin' in to the bugle, so we picked the poor fellow up an' carried him in. He's the same officer that brought the order that sent the brigade into that tight place there beyant."

"The Vicomte de Louville!" cried Desmond surprised. "Now what brought him here? I thought he was half-way to Ghent by this time."

"He was sent back to carry fresh orders to the brigade. Leastways, that's what I med out from what he said afore he fainted."

"Fresh orders to the brigade!" repeated Desmond. "He'd have been seeking long to find it. There had need be a fresh brigade to carry the orders to!"

No further words were exchanged. They wrought hard to complete the loopholes, and all was silent in the room save for the sound

of their labor and the difficult breathing of the wounded man. The countess crept over toward the bed, shrinking back at every step, yet slowly advancing, as if drawn by a power she could not resist. She bent over the form that lay there so still, peering into the man's face; then she started back with an exclamation.

"Heavens, it is M. de Louville!"

O'Connor heard what Margaret said, and turned his head.

"So the sergeant tells me. Is he badly hurt?"

"I cannot tell," she answered. "He is breathing, at least. Come, see! He has opened his eyes."

"There wasn't much life left in him when we picked him up, if I'm any judge," remarked Con.

The sergeant had been amazed beyond measure when he saw Margaret in the cottage. He had not ventured to ask for an explanation of her presence, but in due time one occurred to him which he accepted without question.

"I niver seen the like of Masther Desmond for puttin' the comether on the girls!" he muttered. "May I niver ate another bit if they wouldn't follow him into purgatory itself!"

He turned again to his work, but chose a position from which he could steal an occasional glance at his officer and the lady. They approached the bed, and O'Connor bent over it.

"You're right; it is the viscount," he said. Then, in gentle tones, speaking close to the wounded man's ear: "Are you badly hurt, *monsieur*?"

De Louville stirred and made a feeble effort to rise.

"The Irish Brigade," he said faintly. "They are to abandon the wood and hold the bridge."

He fell back with a moan, and O'Connor took his hand.

"Very good," he replied. "The orders shall be carried out;" and the viscount pressed his hand feebly. "Let me see to your wound," Desmond continued. "It may be but a trifle, and we are all surgeons here, more or less."

"For pity's sake let me be," gasped the wounded man. "I am hurt to death—I know it too well. You would only torture me."

O'Connor saw plainly that the man was dying, and did not insist.

"Margaret," De Louville uttered very faintly. "I thought I saw Margaret."

"I am here," she answered, coming closer. "Can I do anything?"

"Ah, countess," he said, speaking slowly

and with difficulty, "the king's will fails for once. It cannot reach beyond—"

His voice failed him, and he lay still.

O'Connor looked at the countess. Her eyes were fixed on the dying man, and he could not catch their expression; but he drew back, ashamed of the exultation in his own.

"It is true," he muttered. "If this poor fellow is mortally wounded, Margaret is free. The king's will cannot reach beyond the grave!"

The countess did not notice him. She was smoothing M. de Louville's pillow.

"Are you so badly hurt, viscount?" she murmured.

"I am dying," he gasped. "It is just as well. Only—"

His voice failed him. Margaret bent lower.

"Go on," she said. "I am listening."

The dying man roused himself.

"Are you Margaret? Why are you here? I don't understand."

"Never mind why," she answered gently.

"I am here; I am Margaret. You were saying—?"

The viscount made a visible effort to rally his fleeting senses.

"It is Marie," he murmured. "I left her for your sake—by the king's orders. She was a faithful soul. Poor child! And when I die—where will she find bread—to eat?"

He spoke in broken gasps, with manifest exertion, but Margaret caught his words. She looked down at him with tear-dimmed eyes as he lay, his lids closed, his fingers picking aimlessly at the coverlet.

"Be at ease," she said softly. "She shall never want while I live."

He understood her. His eyes opened and thanked her with a silent look; then the expression faded out of them, and he lay very still. And so passed the Vicomte de Louville.

"God rest him!" Margaret murmured, turning from the bed, "and pity the poor girl who loved him!"

A shout ringing through the room startled her and recalled her to herself. For the moment she had forgotten where she was.

"On guard all!" yelled Sergeant Quirk, stepping back from the window from which he had been peeping. "Here they come!"

At the same moment a bugle without sounded the advance.

"Now, lads, good aim for your lives!" cried O'Connor. "Make every shot tell!"

A volley crashed against the house, but without damage, except to the window, which gave back a tinkling echo of broken glass. The range was too long.

O'Connor flung open the door of the little fagot-room, and stepped to Margaret's side.

"Come, *madame*," he urged. "I must insist."

He led her to the hutch, hat in hand, as he might have led her from a ballroom. Bowing low, he held the door open for her to pass, but ere he relinquished her hand he bent over it.

"One instant, *madame*," he said. "I may never have another opportunity. Try to forget that hour of my madness—forget and forgive."

He closed the door as she passed through, and turned to face his responsibilities.

"Now, sergeant!" he shouted. "Have a man at every loophole, and keep loaded muskets at hand. They'll try to rush us in another minute!"

## XXII

THE position of the little garrison was, in Desmond's view, critical. To most people it would have appeared desperate. A considerable force threatened the house from the west. How soon a further attack might develop from the south none could tell; but the young major was quite cool and serene, and proceeded with his arrangements for offering the best resistance in his power. He had no expectation of preserving his life, or that of any of his little force. His sole object was to delay the enemy as much as possible.

Seven loopholes had been finished. Three faced west, as the window faced. Two looked south, one on either side of the door, and there was one in each of the remaining walls. The bare, unshuttered window was an obvious point of danger, and caught O'Connor's eye at once. Bullets were whistling through it, and a couple of men had been wounded already.

"Here, Quirk," he called, "we must contrive some way of masking that window, or we won't last ten minutes. They can see inside."

He looked around. The men on either side of him were firing steadily. There was room for only three to use their weapons, but their comrades stood behind them, handing them loaded muskets and recharging those they had emptied, so that the fire was well sustained.

"Don't all group together!" Desmond shouted. "Farrell, Connolly, here—one of you to each of those other loopholes, and keep a good lookout on all sides, or they'll be working round on us. Now, Con, give us a hand."

He crossed over to the bed, followed by the sergeant, and removed the patchwork coverlet which had been thrown over De

Louville. This movement brought them in front of the window, and a fresh volley from without splintered the rafters above them.

"Jouk down, yer honor," cried Quirk, "or we'll never get there!"

O'Connor gathered the coarse quilt in his arms.

"He doesn't need it, poor fellow," he remarked. "The rest of us won't be an hour behind him."

Cautiously, and bending low, the two regained the window. Then, crouching beneath the sill, one on either side, they managed to fasten the coverlet to the splintered window-frame, where it hung loose, completely masking the opening.

Before they had completed their task, Desmond saw the sergeant wince and heard him draw breath with a sharp intake.

"Hit, Con?" he asked as they moved away.

"Just touched, sir. They're poor sportsmen," the other replied, holding up a bleeding hand which showed two fingers manifestly broken. "Lucky it's me left, or they'd have spoiled me shooting!"

"They're a long time showing themselves," O'Connor remarked, as he bound up the other's injured hand. "I suppose they're surrounding us."

"Surrounding is grand tactics entirely when you want to make a force surrender," remarked Con philosophically; "but it's not worth the insides of an empty bottle when we're only fighting for time."

"They seem very careful of their own skins," O'Connor observed, with a laugh. "I hope they'll decide that it's safest to starve us out."

"They're beginning to show themselves, sir!" shouted Rourke from his loophole. "I think they're getting ready to rush us!"

Major and sergeant sprang at once to different points of observation, Quirk peering through a loophole, and Desmond cautiously lifting a corner of the improvised curtain that hid the window.

The Austrians were gathering on the edge of the wood, but it was obvious that they did not care to face the stretch of open ground that separated them from the cottage. An officer could be seen here and there trying to urge them forward. O'Connor seized one of the spare muskets, and, kneeling, rested it on the window-sill.

"Take good aim, boys!" he cried. "Don't let them get too close; but, above all, don't hurry!"

An officer sprang out of the cover with drawn sword. He waved it and pointed toward the house. A volley crashed from the wood, and Connolly fell at his loophole,

shot through the brain. Sergeant Quirk picked up his musket and stepped into his place.

Then the charge came. About twoscore men, headed by the officer—he was a colonel by his uniform—raced across the glade, making for the most vulnerable point of the stoutly built log hut, its entrance.

"Bayonets to the door, quick!" yelled O'Connor.

Singly but rapidly the aimed muskets spoke from the house, and every shot told. The room was a reek of smoke, but the men at the loopholes kept up their persistent fire, handing their empty pieces back to their comrades. A dozen or more had fallen in the Austrian ranks, but they had crossed half the distance and still came on determinedly, the officer three or four paces in advance.

O'Connor sighted carefully on this conspicuous figure. It was not without compunction that he pulled the trigger, the man's action was so like what his own might have been; but his hand never quivered, and the Austrian colonel fell.

Confused by the loss of their leader, the assailants wavered. Two men bent to raise the officer, and others stopped with them. The rush had spent itself. The steady musketry of the Irish told. Men were falling fast in the open. Dogged and reluctant, some running, some limping, the Austrians regained cover.

The sum of the garrison's casualties was one man killed and five slightly wounded.

"Come, this will do!" cried O'Connor exultantly, when the result was made known. "Only six men hit, and nearly half an hour gone! At this rate we should do it, sergeant."

Con Quirk shook his head.

"That was only a flash in the pan, yer honor. The colonel's falling sickened them—not but what the boys shot well, too, an' I'm proud of them, but it was yer own bullet that stopped that rush. They'll be at it again mighty soon."

"No doubt," replied Desmond, "and when they come again they'll get the same answer. While you've nothing else to do, boys, you might amuse yourselves cutting another hole or two to command the approach to that door. It's there the tug of war will come."

"What about the window, yer honor?" asked Rourke. "D'ye think they'll try that?"

"It's too small to be of much use to them, except to shoot through," the major answered. "They could only climb in one at a time, and as long as we've a man left he could stop that with an ax. When we're

all down," he added in a lower tone to the sergeant, "they can come in wherever they please."

"So they can, sir, an' the devil thank the begrudgers! I wonder where little Trudchen is," Quirk added in an altered tone. "I wouldn't say no to a kiss from her purty little lips this minute!"

"See if the lady is all safe inside," ordered Desmond.

Con peeped into the fagot-room.

"She's within, on her knees, very quiet—praying, I think."

"Not hurt?" inquired Desmond.

"No; there's nothin' to touch her. She's in a nest of fagots. What'll they do with her, Masther Desmond, when they do break in?"

"Treat her with every courtesy, I should hope," Desmond replied, "and send her to Ghent or wherever she wishes to go. We sha'n't be here to see."

"Hark!" cried Quirk, raising his hand. "They're at it again."

"That volley was against the front of the house—from the south," said Desmond. "Can it be that the English have got here at last?"

"No, them's our ould friends have worked round that side to get a fairer offer at the dure," the sergeant replied. "That was a bad schame of approach they tried, an' they've found it out."

The firing from the wood was close and continuous, and those within the house could hear the bullets pattering on the logs. There was no reply, for the enemy did not show themselves.

"Whoop, keep it up, ye darlints!" laughed Con. "Powdther must be cheap where yez come from!" Then, as one of the men reeled from a loophole and fell with a convulsive movement, the sergeant added, in graver tones: "By the powers, they've nicked poor Thady O'Byrne—a dacent man. I've had many a glass with him in me time. He's one of the ould lot that was at Cremona."

"See if he's much hurt, Quirk," said O'Connor, as another man stepped to the vacant loophole.

"Nothin'll iver hurt him agen," replied Con, bending over the fallen soldier. "Clane through the head! To be sure, what can ye expect when his head's the only part of him they could see?"

The rain of bullets never ceased. It spent itself in vain on the heavy logs, but now and then a ball, chance-directed, found a loophole. Two more men were struck almost simultaneously.

"This will never do," ejaculated O'Connor. "Keep your heads down, boys."

"Then we can't see them comin'," a voice made answer from out of the smoke.

"Try and hear them, then. I can't have you all shot down like rabbits. I haven't enough of you."

The men crouched down as ordered, and O'Connor went around the room, satisfying himself that the clearing was still unoccupied.

"Ye ought to be careful yerself, sir," remonstrated Quirk. "The ball that would hit a private wouldn't blush to make a hole in a field-officer."

Desmond laughed.

"I have to take my chance," he said. "Some one must see what they're up to."

"It's my opinion they'll wait till dark. That'll give them full as good cover as the trees beyant," observed Rourke.

"I'll be very much obliged to them if they do," rejoined Desmond. "By that time the colonel will have finished with the bridge, and will be half-way to Ghent."

"I don't think they will, then," said Quirk. "They'll just make a cockshy of us for a while, and then they'll make another offer to cross that bit o' ground. One thing is, when they get close up them rapparees in the wood'll have to quit shootin'."

"On guard, boys!" O'Connor shouted. "They're coming!"

The Austrians advanced with a determined rush. They did not hang in cover, as before, but made straight for the door, supported for almost half the distance by volley-firing from the wood. Desmond felt that the death-grapple was at hand. He glanced round at his sadly diminished garrison. All that were left stood at the southern wall now, save one who watched the window.

His men aimed coolly, and no shot was thrown away; but they were barely enough to man the loopholes, and their fire was slower. There were no men behind them to reload. Still, they checked the rush in a measure, if they could not stay it. The Austrians came on to the very walls, and attempted to shoot the defenders through the embrasures; but the house was built on a little knoll, and they could not reach high enough. They fell back, leaving a trickle of wounded men to follow as best they could, and a few prone figures that could not follow.

This momentary success had been dearly purchased. The place was a shambles, and only a couple of men remained on their feet. Desmond marveled to find himself still untouched.

Sergeant Quirk was close behind him. He was lying, propped against the body of a fallen comrade, the blood gushing from a

ragged wound in his neck. Nevertheless, he seemed cheerful as ever. He was busily engaged in loading a musket, and he nodded reassuringly to his officer.

"We give it them good that time," he said, but his voice was faint. "Keep yer eye on them, Masther Desmond. Me legs is no good to me, but I can load for ye yet a while."

He primed the musket he held and handed it to O'Connor, receiving the latter's empty piece.

"You gallant soul!" cried Desmond, as he took the weapon and turned again to the embrasure. His thought was: "There goes the last of my old friends!"

### XXIII

O'CONNOR'S eyes were fixed on the enemy, and he did not see the door of the fogot-room slowly open and Margaret peer out. She had endured a lifetime of terror and suspense in every moment she had been shut up there, hearing everything, seeing nothing. When the crash of the last attack subsided and comparative silence succeeded, she could bear it no longer, and crept forth.

The condition of the room startled her horribly. For a moment she thought she was alone in a house of the dead. Then her eyes lighted on Desmond; and cautiously she stole toward him, threading her way among the corpses, sometimes lifting her dress with an involuntary shudder to avoid a pool of blood. She reached the embrasure and stood within a hand's reach of him. He did not see her. Even as she paused his musket spoke.

Without turning his head, O'Connor once more reached back his hand with the empty gun.

"Are you loaded, Con?" he whispered.

The sergeant was lying back against the dead soldier who supported him. He was too far gone to be roused even by the voice he loved best in the world. His musket lay across his knees.

Margaret understood. She took the empty weapon from Desmond's hand, and exchanged it for the one that Quirk had loaded. Desmond took the musket from her hand without a word. His eyes were fixed on the embrasure, and he had noticed nothing. Using the powder and ball that lay at the sergeant's side, Margaret proceeded to recharge the weapon she had received.

"Load, Con, for your life!" cried O'Connor. "I've got one of the officers down, and here goes for another!"

He pulled trigger, but no report followed. Quirk had fainted before, he could see to the priming.

"No priming, Con!" Desmond uttered reproachfully. "And it was you taught me to load a gun!"

He turned as he spoke, and saw Margaret. She might have been a ghost, such amazement and horror were in his eyes as he stared at her.

"Go back, *madame*, go back!" he almost shrieked in his surprise. "You are in deadly peril here."

Margaret's fingers were busy.

"I thought it was ready," she said. "Now it is. Never mind me. You have your work to do."

"God bless you, you are a brave woman," he said, and turned again to front the foe. "Is my poor sergeant dead?" he asked, speaking without looking back.

"No, he has fainted, I think. But you are wounded yourself," she replied.

"It is very slight," he answered. "Go on loading—that is, if you will not go back to safety."

She did not answer, but busied herself with the musket he had discharged. O'Connor stood at the center loophole—the one nearest the door. Right and left were two other men, one wounded. They were the last of the garrison. As he looked out, he saw the Austrians dragging a great tree-trunk into the open. It took more than a dozen men to lift it. Evidently their plan was to dash in the door as his men had done, but with a battering-ram of far greater weight.

He delayed them for a moment, his bullet striking down one of the bearers; but another speedily took the vacant place. The end was very near.

Desmond handed his empty musket to the countess, receiving from her the one she had loaded. He glanced down at her as she knelt.

"Since you are so kind and gracious," he said, "may I hope I am forgiven?"

"Oh, how could you hurt me so?" she cried in a passionate outburst. "What had I done to deserve it?"

"Nothing," he answered brokenly.

"Say it was the wine misled you."

"It was madness," he wailed. "Yet all I did, I did hoping to serve you—to save you!"

"To serve me!" She was puzzled. "I cannot understand."

"Here they come!" he shouted, turning suddenly away from her.

The heavy trunk, borne by a dozen men on each side, was advancing across the open like a great centipede, gathering pace as it came. O'Connor fired. The foremost of the bearers pitched forward, shot dead in his tracks. As he fell, the next man

stumbled over his prostrate body. The mass of timber came to the ground. The rush was checked.

Like an echo to Desmond's shot, a volley rattled out from the wood. The musket fell from his hands, and he staggered back from the loophole, falling at Margaret's feet.

"Oh, my God, he is dead!" she cried. She knelt beside him and raised his head. "Speak to me, one word—oh, my knight! Desmond, can you hear me? I believe you, I trust you, I love you! Won't you speak to me—one word?"

O'Connor's eyes opened. He smiled up in her face. She saw his lips move, and bent down to catch his utterance.

"What time is it?" he asked, speaking very faintly.

Margaret drew back bewildered. Was his mind wandering? She glanced at her watch.

"Half past six."

"More than the hour! Thank God," he murmured, and fainted.

She took his head in her lap and laid her hand above his heart. It was beating, though feebly.

"Why ask me the time?" she murmured, and fell to wiping away the streaks of blood that trickled down his face.

With a mighty crash the door was driven down, and the Austrian soldiers streamed in. They paused a moment at the sight of the havoc they had made. Not a man was on his feet to oppose them. The volley that had stricken down O'Connor had also laid his last comrades low.

An officer who headed the rush turned and struck up the bayonets of the leading files. He cast a wondering eye over the place. The floor was littered with corpses. Here and there a convulsive movement showed that life still lingered in some bullet-torn frame. A dead man was stretched on the bed, and close beside the door, where the fallen lay thickest, a woman crouched, bending a pale face above a head which lay, scarce paler, in her lap.

"Halt there!" cried the Austrian leader. "Here are only one woman and a few dead men. Is this all the force?"

It was a superfluous question. The door of the fagot-room swung open, disclosing the tiny interior beyond; otherwise there was not a spot where a rat could have sheltered unseen.

Very tenderly Margaret lowered Desmond's head to the ground. She glanced down at it, pitifully yet proudly. His strange conduct was still an enigma to her, but she knew that what he had done had been done for her sake. He was still her knight!

Then she faced the captain and replied to

his query, a pride she did not try to dissemble shining in her eyes.

"As you see, *monsieur*—these were all."

The Austrians were staring round the little chamber. Bullet-gashed, blood-stained, cumbered with the dead, it told of a heroic resistance. Two full battalions had taken part in the attack, and they knew what their losses had been.

"*Himmel!*" gasped the captain. "Is this all we have won? They have made us pay dearly for it!"

He lifted his hat, as much out of respect to the gallant dead as in courtesy to the lady, whose rank and breeding he could not mistake.

"And what makes you here, *madame*?" he asked. "Here, among the rear guard of a fleeing army?"

"I am ~~the~~ Countess of Anhalt," Margaret replied. "I am here on my own estates. I chanced to be in my forester's cottage, and could not leave when it was occupied for purposes of defense by these poor fellows."

"You are fortunate to have escaped uninjured, *madame*."

"Perhaps," she said, and the officer was puzzled at the reply. "This gentleman"—she pointed to Desmond—"is still breathing, though sorely wounded. Will you have him attended to?"

"Our surgeons are busy with our own men," replied the Austrian. "Your friends here have furnished them with full employment. But we will do what we can, nevertheless. This was the officer in command, I presume?"

"Major O'Connor, of the Irish Brigade," said Margaret, as if performing the ceremony of introduction, and the captain raised his hat once again to the senseless figure on the floor.

"The Irish Brigade," he said. "I have met these gentlemen before. Hard hitters all!" He turned to a lieutenant who stood in the doorway. Margaret noticed that these were the only two officers with the storming-party. "Carry the dead without, Von Bussman, and see if you can find a surgeon to look at the others."

While a fatigue-party, directed by the lieutenant, addressed itself to this task, the captain turned again to Margaret.

"And you, *madame*, what are we to do with you?"

"I demand that I may be received into the Austrian lines and sent to Vienna at the first opportunity."

"You wish to go to Austria, then?"

"That is my desire," replied Margaret. "These," she added—but her eyes were fixed on Desmond alone as she spoke—

"these, if they live, will be sent thither as prisoners of war, I presume?"

"That, of course, *madame*," replied the officer, "and the dead will be buried with all due honor. They have made a gallant fight!"

## XXIV

GASTON DE BRISSAC, hastening northward with the defeated army, had little leisure for plotting, but he did not forget his purpose. As soon as the confusion which reigned in Ghent had somewhat subsided, he prosecuted a diligent inquiry as to the fate of the Countess of Anhalt. It did not take him long to learn that the castle had been abandoned, all the inmates having been safely taken to Ghent, according to orders issued by the Duc de Vendôme as soon as it became evident that the French would be forced to retire.

Gaston met many of these refugees. He even found opportunity for conversation with Anne Van Rhyn, but he could learn nothing from her. All she knew was that her mistress had quitted her apartment on the morning of the battle, and that no one had seen her since.

All Gaston's researches led him to the same blank negation. No one knew what had become of the countess. He was certain she was not in the town. Ghent was not a large city, and it seemed impossible that a lady of Margaret's consideration could remain in it unknown to him. In little more than a week he had tracked down all the other fugitives from Anhalt, but of Margaret there was not a trace. He began to nourish the hope that the chances of war or accident had befriended him at last, and that the countess had perished. Could he but secure actual proof of her death, he might take up the inheritance with clean hands.

The whole town was ringing with the fame of the Irish Brigade. Colonel O'Brien had seized and mined the bridge. The Austrians had surprised him at the work, but after a spirited action he succeeded in holding them off till the structure had been destroyed. The pursuit from this direction was checked, and the army was saved. Unfortunately, the gallant old soldier did not live to reap the reward of his success. He fell with a score of his brave comrades on the banks of the canal he had defended so well. The news was carried to Ghent by the few stragglers who survived the wreck of the Irish Brigade.

Major O'Connor, whose gallant defense of the hut in the woods had sufficed, and only just sufficed, to afford Colonel O'Brien the time he needed, was also acclaimed as a

hero. The brigade itself received special mention in an order of the day, signed by the dukes of Burgundy and Vendôme, which also expressed the regret of the army that not a single officer of the devoted corps had survived to accept the honors which all alike had so bravely earned.

The credit of the brigade stood higher than ever in the service, and its ranks filled rapidly as the Wild Geese arrived in Flanders. Indeed, more young Irishmen applied to join than could be received on the establishment. To complete the roster of commissions was more difficult, the men refusing, as the terms of their enlistment entitled them to do, to serve under officers other than those of their own nation.

Not until long afterward was it learned that two or three of the defenders of the log house had fallen into the hands of the Austrians, alive, though sorely wounded. Meanwhile it was assumed that O'Connor had perished with his men.

Every day that passed confirmed Gaston de Brissac in his assurance of his cousin's death, and, indeed, it was currently reported and believed in Paris as well as in Ghent. It only remained for him to secure such proof as would satisfy the law.

The Vicomte de Louville, too, was missing, and as time went by without tidings received, he, too, was given up as dead.

So far as active operations were concerned, the campaign was over. The Duc de Vendôme resigned the command, which was assumed by the Marshal de Villars, but little of importance in a military sense occurred till the two armies went into winter quarters. Then Gaston, with ample time at his disposal, set himself to work in earnest at the task of unraveling the mystery of Margaret's fate.

First he inquired for Anne Van Rhyn. He had long since ascertained where she lodged, and he sought her there without misgiving; but she had gone. It cost him some trouble to ascertain that she had started for Vienna a month before. Thus his first clue snapped in his hand.

Why to Vienna? With what motive could the girl have undertaken so long and perilous a journey? He could imagine but one—that she had received news of her mistress and had gone to join her. This thought was so unwelcome to Gaston that he refused to entertain it. If his kinswoman were alive, surely he must have heard of her in all these months; or, if not he, then another. But, inquire where he would, he could meet with none who had tidings of the countess.

He could not conceal from himself that Margaret had abundant reason for keeping

sect:ded, especially if she were ignorant of M. de Louville's death—that is, if he actually were dead.

Here was another cause for misgiving. If both the viscount and his cousin were still in the land of the living, O'Connor having perished, Gaston could conceive of no reason strong enough to induce either of them to continue to defy the king's will. He cursed his ill luck, but consoled himself by the reflection that he had as yet no certain clue to Anne's motives or movements, and that a thousand things might have led to her departure from Ghent. But why to Vienna?

When assured tidings of Margaret came to him at last, it was from an unexpected quarter.

A soldier was brought before him—he chanced to be officer of the day—for some trivial breach of camp regulations. The name struck De Brissac, and he glanced up from the defaulters' sheet to study the man's face. He was an ordinary young fellow enough—evidently from Paris.

"Your name is Jean Corbeau?"

"Yes, my captain."

"You are down here as having been drunk last night, and creating a disturbance in the camp. The sergeant tells me you are drunk often."

"It is hard if a man may not have a little recreation after all this fighting," whined the soldier.

"That is not the point. How do you manage to get drunk without money?"

The pay of the army was largely in arrear, as Gaston well knew.

"I have a little money, my captain. My sister sends me some from time to time."

"What is your sister?"

"She is a washerwoman in Paris, *monsieur*."

De Brissac's eyes glistened. She could be none other than the Vicomte de Louville's mistress.

"Her name?" he demanded.

"Corbeau, *monsieur*, the same as my own—Marie Corbeau."

"Washing must be a fine trade if she can afford to keep a worthless soldier in drink," remarked De Brissac, expecting the reply with confidence; but when it came it startled him.

"It is not from her trade, *monsieur*. A great lady is very good to her, and sees that she wants for nothing."

"A great lady?" repeated Gaston, knitting his brows. "A great gentleman, you mean!"

"No, *monsieur*, it is as I say—a great lady."

"Liar!" thundered the captain. "It is

the Vicomte de Louville who supplies her, I know well!"

"Alas, no, *monsieur*," replied Corbeau, terrified by his officer's threatening manner. "M. de Louville is dead. I will not conceal from *monsieur* that formerly he was very kind to Marie, but after his death she fell into great poverty till this charitable lady relieved her."

"The lady's name?" demanded the captain.

"The Countess of Anhalt," the soldier replied unhesitatingly.

So Margaret was alive and well—some-where! It remained for her cousin to discover where. He assumed a bullying tone.

"I do not believe you. I know the lady you mention. How came she to take any interest in your sister?"

"I cannot tell, my captain," replied the man.

"Does she know your sister?"

"I believe not, *monsieur*. My sister has never seen her, nor have I."

"Fellow, you are inventing all this tale," retorted De Brissac. "I shall deal severely with you for attempting to deceive your officer."

"As God hears me, *monsieur*," Corbeau broke in eagerly, "I have told you nothing but the truth. As to why the lady interests herself in my sister—you know her; ask her. It may be that, as she was affianced to the Vicomte de Louville, she pitied my sister, since poor Marie had to relinquish him."

"I can easily test your story," said De Brissac. "Whence did the Countess of Anhalt send these supplies?"

"From some place in Austria, my captain."

"Be more precise. Whence?"

"I do not know, *monsieur*," replied the man. Then, seeing his officer's brow darken, he hastened to add, "I can easily ascertain, *monsieur*. I will ask my sister."

"Do so," answered Gaston sternly. "Write to your sister, and give me the letter. I will see that it goes to Paris by the first express. And be sure the information she sends you is full, for by that I will test you. Get the name of the town, the name of the street, the name of the house where the lady lodges. I shall know thus if you are trying to fool me with a trumped-up tale. At present, I confess it looks like it, and if you deceive me I shall know how to deal with you. Now you may go."

Corbeau withdrew, thanking his lucky stars, and, having money in his pocket, sought the solace to be found in a wine-shop. Before drinking away his senses, however, he found a comrade skilled with the pen, and bribed him with a bottle of

wine to write a letter to Marie, wherein he explained that the safety of his neck depended on his securing full information as to the Countess of Anhalt's whereabouts. This letter he handed to an orderly, to be passed on to Captain de Brissac, who was prompt to forward it to its destination.

Gaston had come to count on those great estates as his own, and now they seemed farther from his grasp than ever. While O'Connor lived, he had not despaired; but now it seemed as if all his work must be done over again. Corbeau's story he never doubted for a moment. It had rung true, and it fitted in well with Anne's departure for Vienna. But one thing puzzled him. How had Margaret come to know of Marie's whereabouts, and why had she interested herself in M. de Louville's cast-off mistress? It almost seemed as if the viscount and his cousin had come to some understanding on the subject.

But this was an unprofitable speculation, and Gaston dismissed it with a shrug. After all, since Margaret assumed the care of Marie Corbeau, it would seem that the

viscount must be dead. De Louville removed from his path, was not De Brissac free, as he had been before the king had intervened, to woo and win his cousin? Thus the estates would come to him by marriage instead of inheritance—perhaps a pleasanter way, if the fates willed it so, and certainly less troublesome.

He waited with impatience for the reply to Corbeau's letter, for it took many days for a message to travel from Ghent to Paris and back. Sometimes he tormented himself by thinking what he could do if Marie refused to furnish her brother with the information he sought. But this thought only troubled him in his moments of despondency. He had frightened Corbeau thoroughly, and if the sister loved her brother sufficiently to supply him with pocket-money on a campaign, surely she loved him enough to send him information which, while it cost her nothing, would save him from the strappado.

At last Marie's letter arrived. The Countess of Anhalt lodged at the Three Stars in the Hofstrasse, Bregenz.

*(To be continued)*

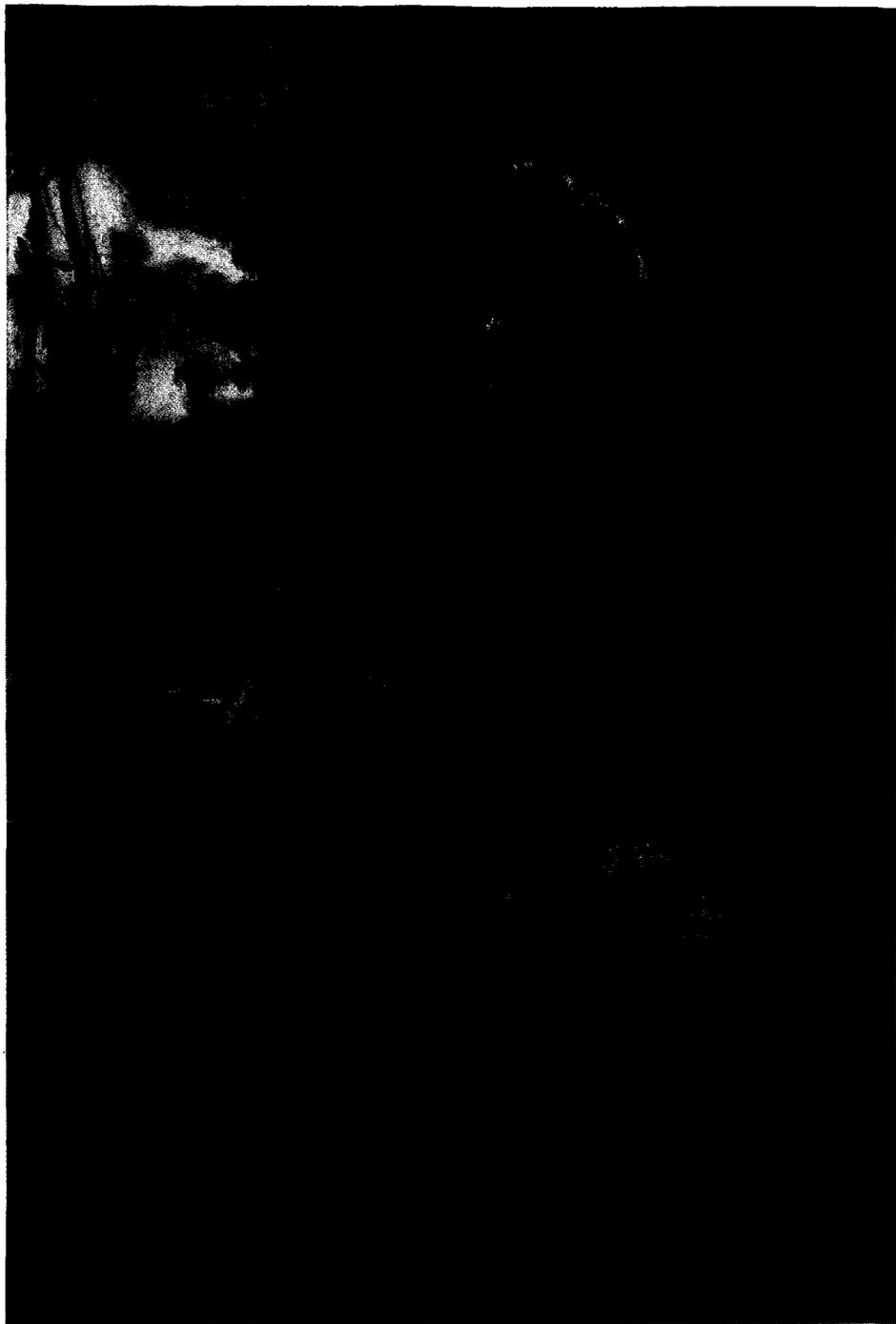
#### BEYOND THE CITY

TAKE me far beyond the city,  
Where the men speak straight an' plain;  
Where the women folks is gritty,  
An' where life ain't all in vain;  
Where the wind whines down the cañons  
With the drenchin', driftin' rain,  
Kinder makin' of companions  
Out o' man and beast again.

Westward, ever westward goin',  
Up the narrow, windin' trail,  
With the rain an' sleet a blowin'  
Down the rushin', roarin' gale;  
Hastenin' while the daylight lingers,  
Weary, dreary mile on mile;  
Freezin' feet and numbin' fingers—  
Take me there a little while!

With the lonesome twilight dyin',  
And the night a creepin' near,  
And the pines and firs a sighin'—  
Lullin' music to the ear;  
With the storm-wind in the cañons  
Like a starved wolf's sobbin' cry,  
And the wild things for companions—  
Take me back before I die!

*Percy M. Cushing*



## NATURE'S MUSIC

**H**ARKEN! How sweetly from dull inaction  
Sudden are born alluring harmonies!  
It is the wind, that gipsying musician,  
Playing upon the woodland's stops and keys!

*Clinton Scollard*