



RED HUGH OF IRELAND

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THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY



Prologue

LATE AFTERNOON of a mild August day—and in the grim stone building on Dublin's high street, in a room with barred windows looking seaward—Sir John Perrot, Queen Elizabeth's Lord Deputy to Ireland, slouched over the huge oak desk and propped his head in his hands. His order, given two hours ago, had been that no one disturb him; he must think. Yet after such prolonged seclusion, he was ready to admit little progress had been made in solving the grievous problem which beset him.

But how on earth could a man think here! Sir John struck the desk with a clenched fist. How could a man concentrate amidst the many diverting sounds: the blackbird's shrill whistle in the thorn tree, the rattling of soldiers drilling in the court, cart wheels clattering on the cobbles, the clomp-clomp of horses' hoofs, the voices of townsfolk? To each of these noises, and a hundred others as irritating, though less distinguishable, Sir John was acutely sensitive. He blamed them for his inability to find the answer he sought, and he smote the desk so fiercely that ink pots shivered, quill pens rolled to the floor, and papers slid away from their shelving. And all the while, in his heart, the Lord Deputy knew his vexation to have deeper sources.

Three years he had spent in Ireland, toiling in his Queen's service. Three long years—and what results had he achieved? He enumerated them. English troops patrolled Dublin now; English homesteaders farmed the confiscated lands of the Irish; the Pale, that line more real than imaginary which separated the wholly

conquered Irish from those still rebellious, had been established; far and wide Sir John proclaimed the pomp and pride of Britain and wrote cheery, hopeful reports that he dispatched monthly to London—yet he had not truly succeeded with his mission. He was beginning to think he never would.

He got up from his chair and stretched muscular arms and legs. A fine figure of a man, Sir John. He had laid off his stiff military jacket, his sword, gun belt, and spurs. Even so, with his gray hair disheveled, his shirt open at the throat, and vest and leggings wrinkled, there was distinction in his carriage.

He sauntered to the window where, in an elaborate metal cage, a green and red parrot sidled and dipped.

“Pretty Poll.”

Sir John edged his fingers through the slats of the cage.

“Speak, Poll. What must I do with these obdurate Irish?” As the bird quirked its neck and flapped bright wings, he urged, “Tell me. Advise me, please.”

Poll, accomplished enough in the tricks of laughing, crying, and humming tunes, had only three speeches: “Ship ahoy!” “Blood on your head!” and “Hail, the sweet Queen!” But to Sir John, it seemed the phrases were offered with discrimination that bordered on downright wisdom. He often felt that his pet understood him and his perplexities, and he enjoyed asking questions to which one of the three exclamations made a proper answer.

The Lord Deputy and Poll had been associates for a long time. Years ago, the bird had been given to him by a crude and rather humorous old sea-captain who roamed the Spanish Main. “Because,” the sailor had announced, “it’s right ye should own a parrot, being one yourself—though not the same sort, God bless ye.”

Sir John believed Poll to be a native of Africa, and sometimes he speculated as to the name of the queen whom it had learned to hail so ardently—surely not England’s Elizabeth! He liked to picture in his mind Poll’s early life, what alien scenes it had looked on and whether or not it fancied its present existence, swung in the window of the Dublin dwelling, fronting the Irish sea.

“Do you want out, Poll?”

He unlatched the wicket. The parrot stepped forth and, lurching to the sill, marched drolly to and fro, drawing its feet high, tilting its head from side to side.

“Hail, the sweet Queen!” Poll squawked, then emitted a hoarse chuckle.

Sir John laughed, too. The bird always amused him. He patted the shining green head. But at a knock on the door, he straightened, instantly alert.

“Well?” He listened for the reply of the sentry posted in the corridor just outside. “Well?”

“A man to see you, my lord.”

“Is it Dragos?”

“Sir, it is Dragos.”

Sir John pushed Poll into the cage and strode to his desk as if to entrench himself behind it.

“Let Dragos enter.”

That was a noiseless entrance. The door opened upon a rectangle of thick dusk. In the twinkling of an eye, the door had closed again, and Sir John could have sworn he neither heard nor saw his visitor glide in. Yet he was there, bowing, smiling in a fawning manner, rubbing clawlike hands together.

To appear in this way, as though he materialized magically from air, was a habit of Dragos'. Sometimes Sir John reflected that probably the feat might be performed if the door remained bolted. For surely the man, Dragos, possessed more than ordinary powers.

Now he was speaking: “You sent for me, my lord?”

Sir John inclined his head. “I did.”

“I am so flattered! A great man like yourself, a peer of the realm, sending for me—”

With a brusque gesture, Sir John interrupted. “Sit down.” He needed Dragos. In certain emergencies, he depended on him. But he never felt quite comfortable in his company.

“Ah, thank you, my lord.” Dragos had not left off bowing. “Most kind and gracious of you, sir.” Only when the Lord Deputy was seated did he drop into a chair.

Briefly and in silence, Sir John scanned this caller of his, the face which was narrow and wax-white, with little, brilliant eyes and a terrible scar, startlingly red against the skin's pallor, reaching from brow to chin. What tale of violence and strife, Sir John wondered, lay behind that scar?

"I must talk to you, Dragos," he said at length. "Once more I am in difficulties."

"Ah, I am so sorry." Dragos rubbed his hands. "And once more I am to have the honor of—of helping you?"

"Perhaps." Sir John scowled. "I have been dealing recently with Tyrconnell."

"Tyrconnell? I know it very well, my lord. Every nook and cranny of it. A vast tract of land in the northwest, owned and governed by the O'Donnell family. MacManus O'Donnell is the hereditary chieftain. His castle is at Ballyshannon, on the coast, where the Erne River flows into the sea. A rich man, a powerful man—"

"A stubborn man!" hotly pronounced Sir John. "A rebel! Another like him is Earl O'Neill."

"Of Tyrone. Yes," Dragos said. "He and The O'Donnell are a combination to cause you many a sleepless night, I'll warrant. They are of equal rank, almost of equal age, both being in the early fifties, but O'Neill is the son-in-law to MacManus O'Donnell."

"So I am told. He married The O'Donnell's daughter. Thus the two houses are allied—and I must crush them both." Sir John paused. "Well, I have a plan—"

"You call your plan 'The Composition of Connaught,' my lord?"

"Yes. Rather detailed it is, too, worked out with thought and effort and heartily approved by the Queen—"

"God save the lovely Elizabeth!" Dragos cried fervently.

"By the Queen," Sir John resumed with some annoyance. "According to my plan, I have divided Tyrconnell into shires and placed over each shire a sheriff who will do my bidding. These sheriffs are English—or, in a few instances, Irishmen who are sympathetic with England. I have selected them with caution, for I realize what stern, implacable folk Tyrconnell breeds. They will not



Chapter I

THE BOY CAME OUT into the rock-flagged courtyard, crossed to the parapet which here was breast-high, and leaned elbows on it. He cupped his chin in his fingers. He blinked his eyes, for the clean sparkle of the outdoor world seemed dazzling after the shadows of the great hall where he had eaten breakfast.

Perhaps an April morning never had been so fine and bright as this. Like a flood of melted gold, the sunlight poured over Ballyshannon and patched the castle's old gray walls with squares of vivid yellow. A breeze, little but mischievous, crept in from the bay, along the blue river, bringing the good, fresh smell of the open sea, spinning the windmills in the village, tilting the new green of oak and yew and hawthorn tree. Below the bridge which linked castle and village, where small cascades frothed like snow, were many moving figures, diminished by distance but clearly discernible: men busy with the salmon-trapping; women kneeling on flat rocks to the task of laundering; soldiers in aimless, wandering groups; children romping and playing.

The boy at the parapet breathed deeply and smiled. He had plans for the day—splendid plans! But, for the moment, he was content with idleness, with gazing.

This scene upon which his eyes feasted was familiar to him—so familiar, each detail of it: the castle’s massive bulk, walled, turreted, ivy-strung, patterned by arched windows and doors, by round towers where sentries kept a ceaseless vigil; the town with its winding street and thatched cottages; the low hills running to the sea; the steep-grooved valleys of grazing cattle. Lake and field, wood, bog, and pebbly lane, these were Tyrconnell, “land of the O’Donnells,” his own, real as the palm of his hand, dear as the beat of his heart. He belonged to Tyrconnell, would always belong to it, and it to him. He loved it.

He heard a step behind him then and turned. Felim stood there, his brown wool robe long and shabby, his hair and beard long and whiter than hoar-frost.

“It is the hour for lessons, Master Hugh.”

Immediately, at first glimpse of the old man and the book in his thin fingers, the boy had pulled a cap from a jacket pocket and donned it.

“Is it, now?” he asked, as if surprised. “And I’m just leaving. I shall have to miss them. Too bad!”

“Your brother Rory is already at his desk, Master Hugh, and your gentle little sisters. We waited in the schoolroom. You did not come.” Felim’s voice was like sad and mellow music. He folded his arms, the loose sleeves of his robe hanging almost to his feet. “It is one thing that you should disappoint *me*, for I am so old that no one cares for me. I am poor and robbed by the infamous English Queen of my rightful work—which, my young lord, is *not* the teaching of reluctant children but the noble art of making songs! I have no riches or station, and except for the generosity of your father, O’Donnell’s chieftain, would soon become an outcast, a beggar. It matters not, I repeat, about unhappy Felim; you may treat him as you choose. But I cannot believe you to be unmindful of the wishes of your lady mother.”

Hugh had listened with bowed head to the lengthy speech.

“You’re in a black mood again, my friend.”

The old man sighed. “Yes, it is true.”

“The fact is,” Hugh said, his eyes twinkling, “you don’t give two pins whether I study today or not—and mark you, I will not! Such a morning must not be wasted on history and Latin grammar.” He strode forward and clapped Felim heartily on the shoulder. “What you’re really after is a word of cheer and comfort. Well, you shall have it! You’re not old—at least, not *very*; not poor, at all; nor homeless. Nor is my father generous where you’re concerned; he’s selfish.”

“Selfish?” Felim quavered.

“That’s it. He’ll not let you go away from Ballyshannon because he needs you. Without you here, we never could get along.” He was watching the old man and settling his cap more firmly on his thick red locks, his smile wide and warm and bright. “Let Elizabeth decree there shall be no family bards in Ireland. The O’Donnells will prove the worth of her impudent rulings! While Felim lives, the O’Donnells will have poetry, songs, and tales of heroes!”

“You mean it, Master Hugh?” the old man queried breathlessly. He had, actually, no thought of parting from these folk whom he had served faithfully all his life, but the pledge of friendship was sweet in his ears at a time when the whole world seemed torn with conflict. “You mean it?”

“As surely as there’s a saint in heaven!”

“And—and could you not get along without me?”

“Never a day! And now,” Hugh said, “I’m off to the village and Justin’s house. We’ve absorbing business, Justin and I.”

“But your lessons?” Felim cried, remembering.

“They’ll be here when I return, won’t they? All the tiresome, musty books?” Hugh nimbly leaped the parapet and from the other side grinned back at Felim. “They’ll not scamper away, alas.”

“Your mother expects—”

“My mother is the loveliest woman on the Isle—the most reasonable, also. She cannot expect me to spend a day like this indoors. But,” he said as Felim wagged his beard, “if you wish, go and ask my mother. Put the case before her and wait upon her answer.”



Chapter II

JUSTIN LIVED WITH Dame Judith Shea, his grandmother, in a thatched cottage at the very end of the street. A white picket fence engirdled the house. There was a small, well-tended grass plot in front and a quite large yard in the rear, where the good dame raised her many speckled chickens.

Though no richer than any other of the town's inhabitants, the Sheas were people of considerable importance. Judith, in her youth, had been the prettiest girl for miles around, the gayest and most light of heart and foot. There were, even yet, men and women in Ballyshannon who could recall the sight of Judith dancing at parties and festivals, flowers twined in her black hair and her little buckled shoes tapping as fast as the rattle of rain. Of course, she never danced now, for she was past sixty, withered and dry, her hair turned gray and hidden under a cap. But still she was spry, and nothing could dim the brightness of her brown eyes.

She had had her share of trouble, surely. Her young husband had been a soldier, killed in the clan fighting of O'Donnell and O'Neill,

and her only child, a son, had become a soldier also and met an early death. But, as Judith often said, everyone must take the bitter with the sweet, and she had had much happiness, too. She had enjoyed the protection of the O'Donnell family all her life and had been provided with sufficient food and clothing, and now that her grandson was in her charge, she had the cozy cottage and the pleasure of caring for him.

For several years, she had served as the nurse to the chieftain's children, and it was through this connection at the castle that Justin and Hugh were such staunch friends. As a baby, Justin had been carried by Judith into the O'Donnell nursery—"One more spalpeen won't do any harm!" she exclaimed. "And how else, in the saints' name, could I look out for the poor, orphaned darling?"—and the basket which held him set alongside the beribboned cribs of the infant O'Donnells.

Justin was Hugh's age. They had been toddlers together, and then sturdy little boys, and presently, as time rolled so swiftly, striplings in jerkins and hose, playing at hurley and other noisy games in the courtyard, climbing trees, wading in the river, stealing off for long, secret excursions in the woods and along the rocky coast of Donegal Bay.

Now they were fifteen—young men, almost!—and comrades, with Hugh training for the day when he should succeed to the leadership of the clan and his father's title of "The O'Donnell," and Justin was welcomed like a member of the family at the castle. He was a slender, wiry, dark-haired youth, mild-mannered and so studious that there was talk between the chieftain and his wife of sending Justin away next year to a university, where he might make the most of his taste for books. Even the thought of such a thing brought tears of joy to old Judith's eyes!

As for herself, Judith had won the respect and admiration of every soul in the village and was called upon for advice and help with all noteworthy happenings—births, christenings, weddings, illnesses, and deaths.

This morning, Dame Shea was out in the fowl yard, industriously sweeping the path with a besom, a broom fashioned of heather



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The year is 1587. Fair Ireland and her proud people are being crushed by the iron fist of English rule under the unyielding Queen Elizabeth. Sir John, the Queen's Lord Deputy to Ireland, and his conniving henchman, Dragos, are determined to quash the last of the resistance by any means necessary.

Young Hugh O'Donnell is everything his family could wish him to be—clever, handsome, generous, and fiercely loyal to Ireland and the O'Donnell clan. So when he and Art O'Neill, the son of a rival clan, are kidnapped by the evil Dragos and held hostage in Dublin Castle on condition of their families' surrender, all hope seems lost. However, Hugh and Art have friends outside their prison walls, waiting to help the boys and their country to freedom.



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