



## CHAPTER ONE

The moon shone fitfully through the clouds. It was piercingly cold. The waters of the Boyne carried slabs of ice towards the sea. The heights outside the walls, beyond the Mill Mount, were covered with a white hoar frost, so that they seemed to be part of the fortifications.

The men moved cautiously through the orchard, putting each canvas-covered foot carefully on the frozen ground, their weapons gripped tightly in their hands, almost five hundred little white clouds rising from their mouths each time they breathed. The path through the orchard wasn't large enough for their numbers as more of them came in through the small blind door. There they scattered out, merging with the gaunt, leafless, black, distorted fruit trees.

The iron gate of the orchard was open too.

They poured through that now, more quickly. They all found it hard to believe that they were walking in the town itself; that by all the rights of war they had the whole place at their mercy.

They stood in an unorganized bunch outside the wall of the orchard looking at the buildings all around them silhouetted against the night sky. They didn't like the buildings.

Murdoc didn't like them. He was used to the wide sky, trees and open plains, or the deep woods. Hundreds of buildings one on top of another appalled him. Now, he thought, we should turn to the left and, taking the garrison of the ports guarding the St James's Gate in the back, wipe them out, and let the besiegers come flooding in.

He moved in that direction. He could see the gleam of an arch that led into the street of St James in front of the towers guarding the gate. But he was on his own. The mass of men had moved to the right towards the quays and the salt workings near the river. He shrugged his huge shoulders and followed after them. They will make for the bridge, he thought, and get into the north town. But then what about the soldiers behind us? They can take us in



the rear. It is more important to get a gate open first. That was the trouble: nobody had believed in this foray, nobody had believed that there would be a little orchard door between the main gate and the river left open at a certain hour. It was only a chance. It might have been a trap. So about five hundred curious adventurers had taken the bait. And now they were in, and there was nobody to lead them. This was the place for the Great Chieftain himself to be, Murdoc thought with a sneer, instead of preening himself miles from the walls.

He hurried after the bulk of the men.

There was plenty of room for them at the south quays. They all stood there like *cabógs* gazing at the water of the Boyne pushing past below, ferrying blocks of ice like white fairy boats. Then they looked across the river where the town rose behind the ramparts of the built-up walls and the Maiden Tower. She was a queer maiden, Murdoc thought. They could see the wooden steeple of St Peter's gleaming dully in the moonlight, and the houses climbing the steep hills on the far side looked like weary, burthened, back-bent men.

And then a terrible thing happened.

From the throats of the men gathered at the quays there arose a great shout. It was a primitive shout of joy, of victory, just a good shout from being in an advantageous position. It's the reason we never win wars, damn them to hell, Murdoc thought savagely. Like boys playing at soldiers. What kind of a people are we at all?

He shouted. He had a powerful voice.

'To the bridge, you fools!' he roared. 'To the bridge!'

There was a silence for a moment after his cry, as if the town was holding its breath, and then there came the sounds of a trumpet call, and clang of steel, a musket shot, and the tolling of a steeple bell.

Murdoc turned and ran right, through the narrow street that backed on the ramparts of the river, and the rest of them followed him, shouting, shouting, damn them, in case people didn't know they were there now.

They came into the wide market-place in front of the bridge, swivelled on their running legs there like horses, and then

charged across the open maw of the bridge towards the tall tower on the opposite side. Too late, too late, because a thick body of pikemen, half-dressed, sleepy-eyed, but startled into quick awaking, were plunging towards them from under the arch. The two unorganized bodies of men met in the centre of the bridge and soon the sound of cold steel could be heard entering into warm bodies. There were shouts and groans.

Murdoc, hitting aside the pikes aimed at his body and trying unavailingly to sink the head of his own into the chest of the man opposing him, was cursing the Great Chieftain. Where is the powder and ball, Great Chieftain? Where are decent long handles for our pikes, dear Chieftain? The pike handles were too short. They had cut them themselves in the woods from ash and birch and willow, but they were too short, and as the long pikes of their opponents felt for their chests and their eyes and their brains, they started to fall back across the bridge. Then Murdoc hurled his pike as if it was a spear at the man who was harassing him. It went souging into his chest, and as he fell Murdoc caught his long pike, reversed it and shouting, shouting, started to beat around him with it.

The men behind him rallied, and pikes flew through the air like arrows.

The men before them fell, but as they did so they disclosed behind them the kneeling musketeers. There was just time to see them before the heavy volley sounded, and the smoke-cloud arose, and all around him Murdoc heard the men falling, and screaming as they fell. A ball plucked the heavy cap from his own head. As they wavered another line of musketeers came through and knelt, and behind them Murdoc could see the white-shirted man on the black horse, waving a sword. He threw himself flat as the next volley sounded, then he rose and ran back and he ran fast and now he had a sword in his hand. The bridge was littered with the bodies of men, groaning or silent. There wasn't much time. The garrison was now facing them on the other side too. Murdoc cleaved his way through them with the sword. Behind them again the muskets sounded. You could hear the balls ploughing their way into men's backs, and then they stopped since some of their own had fallen. Murdoc cleaved his way, got past the mouth of



the bridge and then, being blocked by the mass of shouting men there, turned right and ran down a narrow lane. Some of the others, the main bulk of them, had turned left, running and fighting their way back towards the orchard.

He was grinding his teeth. Like rats, he thought, like rats, and not through their being good, but we being bad. Useless. By now they could have been raping this town. We had it like a rotten apple.

He kept going left and ran into what must be St John's Street. There were four armed men running up it. Murdoc ran towards them, a tall towering figure, his teeth white in the middle of a black beard. He was roaring like the devil out of hell, they said. He nearly decapitated one man, backswiped with the sword at another, and then was through them. The first archway on his right he went into, hoping it wasn't a close. It wasn't. It led into a rabbit warren of lanes; all small stone houses or mudwalled ones with thatch. He had an idea. The poorer the quarter the surer you were that they were Irish. He paused to listen.

There was great uproar over to the right of him. That would be the men getting back through the orchard door. Some of them would never get through the door. They would be like himself; cornered inevitably and just having to fight until he died.

He cut through another narrow lane. It was dark in these lanes. Not a light shone anywhere. How would a man know where he might find a friend? If only he could run to a copse. If only it was in the open air. These places smelled to his nostrils of foetid things, discarded sewage, and rotten fish. He closed his lungs on them, got into another laneway, and as he ran past a stone house that must be backing on the river, he saw a gleam of light through a wooden shutter.

He stopped. He went back. He felt the door. It was a heavy oak door, low, soundly built, studded, iron-clad. Was it too good to be Irish?

He knocked at it with the hilt of his sword.

He spoke urgently, penetratingly, in Irish. 'If you are an O or a Mac, for the love of Our Lady, open the door!'

He listened, his ear close to the wood. He thought he heard a whisper of movement.

He spoke again.

'If you are an O or a Mac, for the love of St. Patrick open the door!'

He heard the iron bolts inside being drawn. The test was true then.

The door opened. It was black inside, the light he had seen was doused. He stumbled on the step as a hand reached out and pulled him in and then the door closed behind him. He could hear the bolts being shot home. He stood there helplessly in impenetrable blackness, feeling like shouting. Listening closely. Maybe he would get a knife in the back.

He straightened his back at the thought, gripped his sword very tightly. He heard a rumbling as if of some heavy thing being moved, and then something being opened. Then he felt a hand on his arm and heard a soft voice at his ear. 'Come,' said the voice in Irish. 'Watch your feet. Climb down steps when I put your feet on them. Eight until you get below. Stay there. Don't make any sound.'

He was led, like a blind man, a few paces. Then he felt the hand leaving his arm and holding his foot, shifting it. He felt a step under it and stood on that, then felt for one below, found that and started to walk down. It was really black. He bent in a futile effort to see and cracked his forehead. He didn't shout or groan. 'Best of men,' said the voice above him, and then Murdoc's feet felt rock and he stood there. Above him he heard the flap closing and then the sound of a heavy thing moving over it. Murdoc sat on the ground. Stone flags they were. He welcomed them. They felt cool to his hot body.

He sat there, the sword gripped between his knees, and then he heard the hammering, muffled but unmistakable, on the door above.

That's the way to die, he thought, squealing in a sewer. It brought him to his feet. He could smell strange things all around him, spices and leather. He felt around with his hand until he discovered the steps. He mounted them softly, until his head was stopped. He put pressure on the flap. It was immovable. He listened.

He could hear the bolts going back. The floor above his head

thundered as heavy boots walked on it. An authoritative voice was speaking in English. 'Vermin. Introduced by a traitor. Is this the way we are repaid for our kindness? We will find the one who opened the door and send him to hell without a limb whole on him.'

That soft voice again. 'And you would be right too, Mister Ledwick.'

'This fellow was seen coming this way. Two corpses behind him in the street. We will scour and flush the whole Irish quarter until we find him, and we will hang the people protecting him, without mercy.'

'You would be right too, Mister Ledwick. We were sleeping. We heard the shouting and the shooting. There is just the place up the steps. My wife and little girl are there, that's all.'

'Go and look,' said the other voice. The heavy feet moved on the floor above.

'Don't wake the child if you can,' said the soft voice. Funny the authority of that soft voice. It quietened the military tramping a little.

'You have a good name,' the other said. 'You have kept it clean in the town, and your lady was a Bolton. Which man among the Irish would do a thing like this? You know them. Which of them would do a thing like this?'

'Any of them, with enough courage,' said the soft voice.

'Does it require courage to be a traitor?' the other one shouted rhetorically. 'You want to take care!'

'Irish or English, they are all one to me,' the soft voice insisted. 'Whatever a man is, he has to eat, smoke, and be shod. Beyond that I have only a scientific interest in them.'

'You read too many books,' the other shouted. 'As a citizen of the town it is your duty to expose treachery.'

'I'm not a citizen,' said the other. 'I'm a servitor.'

'You don't talk like one,' said the other with heavy humour. 'Find the man who opened the door and you will be a freeman the next morning.'

'A freeman with a severed throat,' said the voice. 'That would be pleasant. It could be written on my gravestone.'

Oddly enough, Murdoc thought, the other fellow laughed. He

shouldn't be laughing, Murdoc thought, he should be looking for a cellar. The other feet tramped across the floor again. He heard the door closing and the heavy bolts being shot. There was peace then. He didn't hear the soft-voiced one's feet on the floor. He must be walking like a cat or else he wore no shoes. He was consumed with curiosity. What kind of a fellow was this to remain so calm in the midst of such bloody events? He must be an old grey-beard, to have lived so long with an attitude like this. Suddenly he shivered. He went down the steps again. He felt icy cold. The sweat had frozen on his skin. His fingers were almost stuck to the hilt of the sword. He freed them and stretched them.

Then he heard the rumbling over his head, the cover of the cellar was thrown back and he was looking into a rectangle of candlelight.

'Come up, mighty warrior of Eireann,' said the voice in Irish then, 'until we have a look at you.'

Murdoc, inclined to anger, started to mount the steps.