

CHAPTER 29

THE GREYABBEY INSURGENTS

*"But stars oft gleam brightly when night's gloom is drearest,
To brighten the pilgrim upon his lone way,
So deeds of past heroes, whose fame we hold dearest,
Still flash through dark chaos a hallowing ray." - Corry.*

ON the county road leading from Donaghadee to Greyabbey, and distant about one mile from the latter town, stands till this day the house in which the first branch of the United Irishmen's Society was organised in County Down. Grove Cottage, the name by which it is known, is a charming little house, picturesquely situated, and kept in excellent order.

In the troublous times Grove Cottage was in the possession of Mrs. Sarah Byers, an aged widow, and her two sons, Alick and William.

On the night of Thursday, 7th June, 1798, there was a meeting in Grove Cottage of some half dozen of the Greyabbey insurgents. Mrs. Byers was present at the consultation which was being held, and the occasion was to her a trying one. Both her sons had resolved upon taking up arms, and a position of importance had been assigned to each. Their commissions had just been handed to them by David Bryson, Colonel Bryson's son.

"My father has been placed under arrest," said young Bryson, "but be assured he will not be long a prisoner. We have laid our plans for his rescue, and he will march with us to the field of battle."

Then, turning to Widow Byers, he said -

"Next time we meet, Mrs. Byers, there will be stirring stories to relate, and your sorts will be crowned with glory."

Mrs. Byers shook her head sadly and was silent.

"You are not despondent, surely?" said Bryson.

"I am," she answered, "I fear no good will come of this, and it is hard, indeed, to part from my two sons, neither of whom I may ever see again."

"Never fear, mother," said William Byers, "we will both come back to you hale and hearty. Cheer up!"

"I cannot be cheerful," said the widow; "with one of you I would willingly part when your country calls, but to take both and leave me without a friend or protector - oh, it is too bad!"

"It is, mother," said Alick; "one of us must remain."

The mother's face brightened.

"Which will it be?" she asked.

The two brothers looked at each other in silence.

"Will you draw cuts?" enquired young Bryson.

Both nodded assent.

Bryson went outside, and returned a minute afterwards, holding in his closed hand two straws of unequal length. One end of each was visible.

"Now", he said, "the man who draws the longer straw remains at home."

The brothers drew simultaneously, and held the straws aloft. William had drawn the longer!

"So be it, mother," he said, "I'll stay with you."

Thus it fell to the lot of Alick Byers to lead the Ballyboley contingent. So prevalent were informers in those days that almost every movement of the Insurgents was communicated to the authorities. The appointment of Alick Byers was that very night made known to Colonel Stapleton. William Byers, when in Newtownards on the following day, learned from a private source that his brother was about to be arrested. By a trusty friend he sent this information to Grove Cottage, and urged his brother to flight. Alick received the message and told his mother not to be alarmed at anything which might happen. At the same time he resolved to await William's return before deciding how he should act. In the dusk of the evening he was standing upon the road just opposite Grove Cottage, watching for his brother's return. Suddenly a party of soldiers came in sight. They were too near to afford an opportunity of escape. The leader of the party shouted to Byers to stand, and this he did until the party was within a few yards of him, when he turned and ran into the house. The soldiers dashed after him. Some of them went into the kitchen and others into the parlour but their man had disappeared. Suddenly the crash of breaking glass was heard, and, guided by the noise, the pursuers rushed into the bedroom. The window had been knocked out of its frame, and the soldiers, concluding that he of whom they were in quest had made his escape in that direction, bolted after him, and scoured the country. But Byers had not escaped in the manner supposed. With remarkable presence of mind he had sent a chair flying through the window, while he himself crept under the bed, where he lay until the soldiers were out of hearing.*

On the morning of Saturday, 9th of June, the Cottown and Granshaw men, armed with pikes, guns and other weapons, marched for Newtownards, determined to effect the rescue of Colonel Bryson.

David Bryson, the Colonel's son, had gone into Newtownards during the night for the purpose of ascertaining the exact position of affairs. He spent several hours with a friend who resided in Francis Street. While here he learned that at an early hour on Saturday, Colonel Stapleton, with nearly the entire force under his command, would march for Saintfield, where a large number of Insurgents had assembled.

This was cheering news for young Bryson, who knew well that the chances of a rescue were small in the face of the troops quartered at Newtownards and ready at any moment to respond to a call to arms.

Mounting his horse, he rode to Grove Cottage, where he found his trusty friend, Alick Byers, and informed him of how matters stood. It was arranged that during the night the men of Ballyboley, Greyabbey, and neighbourhood should arm themselves and march for Newtownards, where, next morning, they, with the contingents from Cottown and Granshaw, should attack the Market-house and rescue Colonel Bryson. Having rested for a brief period, young Bryson returned to Newtownards, without interference, and spent the remainder of the night there.

The morning dawned, and during its early hours the inhabitants of Newtownards witnessed a stirring scene. A detachment of the York Fencible Regiment, accompanied by the Newtownards and Comber Yeomanry Cavalry and Infantry, numbering altogether close upon a thousand men, were marshalled in the Market Square. Their bayonets and shining musket barrels gleamed in the light of the summer sun and the men were as gay as though bent upon a holiday march. Colonel Stapleton, mounted upon a spirited horse, surveyed his men with a look of pride.

Amongst the officers were Captain Chetwynd, Lieutenant Unit, and Ensign Sparks. The Newtownards and Comber Yeomen were led by Captains Houghton and Cleland. The Rev. Mr. Mortimer, rector of Comber, accompanied the Yeomen of that town.

The departure of the troops was witnessed by crowds, but ere the military had proceeded many hundred yards along the route of march, the streets were almost deserted, the people retiring to their houses for safety, or to make preparation for joining in the approaching conflict.

A small armed force had been left in charge of the town, and the men composing it were posted in the Market-house.

No sooner had Colonel Stapleton and his army marched from Newtownards than David Bryson mounted his horse and galloped off to join his friends from Granshaw and Cottown. He met them about a mile from the town, and a halt was made for consultation.

The Insurgents were led by George Gray and Willie Boal, who it was well known, were to have assigned to them positions of importance on reaching Ballynahinch. The two young men were dressed in green jackets turned up with yellow, white vests, buckskin breeches, and half boots, while their hats were ornamented with green cockades. The uniform suited them to perfection.

Eliza Bryson, seated on a fine horse, rode in front. She was dressed in green silk and wore a white feather in her hat. Betsy Gray had remained behind. Her brother George had peremptorily forbidden her to join them; her entreaties and tears were of no avail with him, and at last she consented to stop at home. But in her heart she resolved not to be far behind, and to join her friends at Ednavady ere the first shot would be fired upon an advancing foe.

The consultation held by David Bryson with his friends, George Gray and Willie Boal, did not occupy many minutes, and at its close George briefly addressed his followers, telling them of the work that lay before them, and how it was to be accomplished. The object in view was simply the rescue of Colonel Bryson and any other prisoners who might be with him. Bloodshed was to be avoided if possible, and no man was to use arms unless to defend his life.

At this juncture a man was seen running rapidly towards them from the direction of Newtownards. As he ran he waved a green handkerchief.

He was soon recognised as a scout from Greyabbey, and his news was cheering. Alick Byers and his men were awaiting them close to Greenwell Street.

With a wild "hurrah" the march was resumed. Half an hour later they met their brother patriots at George's Street, and hearty greetings were exchanged. The united forces were addressed by George Gray, who briefly disclosed his plans. Strict silence was enjoined and strictly observed. The march down Frances Street was at a quick and steady pace. From almost every window the pale faces of terror-stricken watchers could be seen. Soon the rear of the Market-house was reached, and the men filed round the corner into the square. As they did so the single sentry on guard stood for a moment

paralysed, then uttered a shout and fired off his musket in the air. In an instant the upper windows of the building were thrown open, and a perfect babble of confused voices, mingled with the clash of arms, was heard.

"Right Mat!" cried young Bryson, "bring your sledge hammer with you and break in the doors!"

"Keep close, my men!" shouted Gray, making a dash for the door, followed by his supporters. Entrance was gained in less than a minute, and the men poured in. At this instant a volley of musketry was discharged by the soldiers from the windows, but their aim, whether wilfully or through nervousness, was faulty. Several were wounded, and one man was killed. The next moment the Insurgents came rushing from the building accompanied by Col. Bryson and several other prisoners, who, having heard the alarm and guessed rightly its meaning, boldly attempted an escape, and actually fell into the arms of their rescuers.

The voice of George Gray was heard above the din shouting his orders, and, in less time than is required to relate the circumstances, the whole force had regained Frances Street and re-formed into marching order.

The military made no attempt to follow.

A halt was made near the head of Frances Street, and a supply of liquor having been procured, it was distributed among the men, who, with hearty cheers, drank the health of Colonel Bryson and success to their cause. They then struck out upon the Greyabbey road and resumed their march.

The Londonderry family had sailed for Liverpool on the previous night. The Granshaw men learned this fact from the Greyabbey and Ballyboley men, and it was determined to pay a visit to Mountstewart House and grounds. A few men servants, who had been left in charge, fled on the approach of the Insurgents, who gambolled about the grounds like a pack of merry schoolboys. No attempt was made to injure the house or premises, but a visit was made to the well-stocked dairy, from which Eliza Bryson freely distributed milk and cream to the thirsty men.

A good deal of chaff was indulged in as to who should be the ultimate proprietor of the handsome house and grounds, but the fun was interrupted by the sound of drums. The look-out reported the approach of further contingents of the Insurgent army, and George Gray, Willie Boal, Colonel Bryson and Alick Byers hastened away their men to join the others.

Down was in arms by the morning of Sunday, the 10th of June

The men who had been appointed to communicate the signal in the various towns, villages and districts, and who were called "warners", did their duty promptly and well, so that the rising was general and all but simultaneous

There were many scenes and instances of a remarkable character. Thousands of persons, too timid to take up arms on either side, fled to Belfast for refuge, leaving behind them nearly all their worldly goods.

In numerous places efforts were made to induce loyally disposed persons to join in the rising, but these efforts met with little success. One remarkable instance is worthy of mention. Stewart Bell, of Ballywooley, Crawfordsburn, was a lieutenant in the Bangor Yeomanry, and a man of unswerving loyalty. Publicly and privately he had frequently remonstrated with the people against joining in the rebellion, and on this account his life and property were threatened with destruction. On the

morning of Sunday, the 10th June, at about five o'clock, several men galloped up to the house on horseback, aroused the inmates, and called upon Bell at the peril of his life to join the Insurgents. As soon as they had left, Bell went to Crawford and consulted him. He was advised by this gentleman to get a pass and cross to Greenock. On his way back he fell in with bands of the Insurgents going towards Bangor, and in consequence of their threats he was compelled to accompany them thither. At Bangor he found a large body of men awaiting the arrival of Hugh McCullough, who was to lead them to Newtownards.

In vain Bell sought for an opportunity to escape from his unpleasant position. He was compelled to go with the people to Conlig, where, after a halt, a start was made for Comber. When about half way to Comber news was received that Colonel Nugent, with a large force, was marching from Belfast to meet them. Alarmed by these tidings, the Insurgents crossed by the fields to Scrabo mountain, and planted their standards there. At this point Bell managed to get free from his company. He was however, afterwards arrested and thrown into Downpatrick jail. When his trial came on, he owed his life to the evidence of one of his servants. Similar cases could be cited, but I must hasten to describe the terrible events which transpired from the 9th to the 13th of June.

*Alick Byers led his men to the battle of Ballynahinch, and fell in the fight. His decomposed body was afterwards identified by his linen upon which his name was embroidered. Singularly to relate, a splendid grey horse, upon which he had ridden to the battle, was found grazing in a meadow close to Ednavady many weeks after the fight, and was taken back to the old homestead. Some time after the battle of Ballynahinch, William Byers was arrested and marched from Grove Cottage to Newtownards in charge of a military escort. Nothing could be proved against him, however, and he was released. Suspicion was strong against him, and orders were given to burn Grove Cottage to the ground. Montgomery, of Rosemount interfered, and upon his representation the cruel order was cancelled.
