

Aine at Saint Patrick's
A Short Story in the Chronicles of Philip Williams

By

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It was hard to concentrate. The acrid smell of spent gunpowder wafted everywhere inside the city walls of Armagh. The scent tickled the back of her throat and made her head ache. Aine couldn't imagine what the smell was like outside.

"Aine, are you finished yet?"

"Almost mother." The title was courtesy, not familial. But Mother Kathleen was the closest thing to a mother she had ever known.

"Let me see." The plump woman lumbered over to Aine's bench and took some torn fabric out of the girl's hands that she was mending. Mother Kathleen eyed it carefully. "Your straight stitches are getting better, but your speed is abysmal." The older woman returned the cloth. Of course the good fabric was tucked away in a locked chest. The fighting outside the city

was fierce and clouds of spent gunpowder descended on Armagh like fog. It would forever ruin any good fabric, so Aine and Mother Kathleen practiced with the scraps.

A clap of thunder shook the room and startled both women. Aine squeaked in terror.

“Relax child,” Mother Kathleen began. “It’s only cannon fire.” She placed her hand on Aine’s head and stroked her hair. “You’ll get used to it, as much as any of us can.” Mother Kathleen furrowed her brow and looked out the window.

Aine’s heart raced. She tried to go back to her sewing, to practice her stitches, but her hands trembled. It was only that morning the Queen’s Royal Irish Army left the city to march to Dungannon, a town on the other end of the valley. But almost immediately the army came under fire from the rebels in Ulster. Many of the other camp followers told Aine not to worry. That the shooting would wane as the army marched farther from Armagh. But that didn’t happen. Musket and cannon fire echoed into Armagh all day long.

“Would an errand take your mind off the fighting?” Mother Kathleen asked.

Aine smiled and nodded.

“Go to the butcher, tell him you’ve come for Mother Kathleen’s portion. He’ll give you some beef. Thank him and hurry back.” Mother Kathleen kissed Aine on the forehead. “Go now, my child.”

Aine left Mother Kathleen’s immediately. The streets were mostly deserted. As she walked Armagh’s ancient cobblestones people shuttered their windows and bolted their doors. The battle was going poorly. The previous evening, as the gammers sat and drank Spanish wine

she overheard them talk about previous battles and previous wars. “They should make it to the Blackwater fort by noon-day,” one grey-haired matron said.

“That’s if things go well. You know the O’Neil will have a surprise or two waiting for those boys, he will,” offered another.

“They’ll make it,” Mother Kathleen said right before she took a pull from her cup of wine.

“Kathleen, Sir Henry’s rabble won’t stay the course.” A wrinkled, toothless crone shook her bony finger.

Mother Kathleen took another sip of wine. “Rabble or not, I have never seen so many muskets and cannon come north. How can Ulster survive it?”

The other women groaned and dismissed Mother Kathleen’s questions as they drained their cups. Aine sat at their feet and listened until the gammers speech slurred and they stumbled off to bed.

Noon is what Mother Kathleen had said. And it was well after noon now and still the air rumbled with the sound of cannons and smelled of burning powder. When the other camp followers stopped by, Aine could see the worry on their face as she climbed into the camp wagon sat at Mother Kathleen’s feet.

“What will we do?” asked a women.

“It will be—”

Young women screamed as another round of cannons made the town shudder. For once the confidence in Mother Kathleen’s face faded into worry.

“They’re back,” shouted a boy from the street. “The army has come back!”

Aine stood and jumped down.

“Aine! Aine! Come back!” Mother Kathleen struggled to get up. “Someone, help me up.”

Aine ran to the wide cobblestone street where the townspeople gathered. The crowd was already five deep when the gates swung open. Three weary drummers, wounded and battered, accompanied a piper at the front of the vanguard. Behind them were two flag bearers, each no older than 14, carrying the banners of St. George and St. Patrick. Both looked wide-eyed and scared.

Aine remembered that morning when the Royal Irish Army left Armagh. They marched in neat rows and stern faces. That army did not return. What did return were tired, worn men, covered in sweat, dirt, and blood. The dust of the road choked their throats and blinded them. These men used their pikes as crutches and had their wounds wrapped in haste. Men groaned in agony in the back of wagons while weary skirmishers fired rounds at the O’Neil’s men, hoping to keep them at bay. The thing that scared Aine the most were their faces. Regardless of their condition, their eyes could not conceal their shame.

But where was Captain Williams?

Cannons bellowed in the distance as horses screamed and bucked their riders. The townspeople spoke of what would happen next. Would the O’Neil sack his own city? Would he show mercy? “Best to bolt the door of your own house and pray,” Aine heard a man say. “Oh God, my daughters!” Cried a woman.

Aine did not care. Where was Captain Williams?

More men poured into the town. Wounded men carried on stretchers and wagons filled the ranks.

“Aine. Aine, child. Come here.” It was Mother Kathleen. She grabbed Aine by the elbow. “Go back to the wagon and grab some things.”

Aine pulled her elbow away. “No.”

“What did you say, child?”

Aine’s face warmed as she stammered. “I must know. Where is Captain Williams?”

Mother Kathleen’s face softened. “I know you care for him. But there are more pressing things that need your attention.” Mother Kathleen pointed to the great cathedral on the hill. “That place is the safest in the town. The army will barricade themselves in there, I am sure of it.”

“What of it? I don’t care,” Aine shot back.

“Listen fool, do you know what a sack is? Men loot and take what they want. There is no law, no order during a sack.” Mother Kathleen grabbed Aine’s shoulders and drew the girl to her face. “You don’t want to be on the streets during a sack. It is a grave matter, to be sure. Now, do as I say, grab your things and meet me back here. There is work to do.”

“But what about Captain Williams?”

Mother Kathleen face reddened. “Do not vex me child. If he has fallen there is nothing we can do. Get your things and meet me back here. If he lives, then there will be plenty of time to find him in St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Every moment you dawdle lives are imperiled, child. GO!”

She was right, of course. But Aine didn't want to admit it. She nodded and moved away from the dissipating crowd and back to the wagon that had been her home the entire march north. As she walked Aine thought of Captain Williams and hoped he was alright.

When she returned to St. Patrick's the train of men writhed like a snake. About fifty men brandished pikes and muskets at the crowd. Several wagons filled with wounded men came to a stop at the base of the steps. It was there she saw Mother Kathleen giving orders to the other camp followers. "Bring all the food you can find. Barrels of beer and ale, grog too, if it can be found." Women scurried away to do the gammers bidding. "Sergeant, sergeant," she called.

"Aye, Mother?"

"These wounded cannot make the walk up those steps alone. Bring stretchers and blankets to carry them," Mother Kathleen barked. The sergeant wiped sweat from his brow and nodded before giving orders of his own.

Aine approached Mother Kathleen but froze when she saw another captain. It was Thomas Maria Wingfield. Wasn't he one of Captain William's friends?

Mother Kathleen nodded in deference, but would not curtsy or bow; times were too grave for such courtesy. "Captain, how can I be of service?"

"Captain," Aine blurted out without thinking. "Have you seen Captain Williams?"

Mother Kathleen glared at the girl

Captain Wingfield turned to Aine and removed his cap. “The last time I saw him, I gave him the defense of the road. His men were to stall the O’Neil and buy us time so we could return to Armagh.”

“He’s still out there?” Aine felt her cheeks burn as she spoke.

“Go inside child and vex the captain no more,” Mother Kathleen barked.

Suddenly Cannons thundered near the city gate. “The rebels are close now,” Captain Wingfield said. A panic took over the soldiers, camp followers and residents of Armagh. Tempers and voices flared. Those carrying the wounded doubled their pace. A chaotic rhythm driven by terror rushed more and more men through the enormous oak doors of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. It all scared Aine terribly.

“Aine,” Mother Kathleen called. “Quickly, take your things and find the other women inside. You will be safe with them.” Mother Kathleen nodded towards the cathedral doors.

“What about you?” Aine asked.

“Worry not. We’re almost done here,” Mother Kathleen said as she struggled up the steps to the church. “Go child. Make haste.”

They could all hear musket fire coming from down the hill. Aine ran to the cathedral door and turned around. Would she see her Captain Williams? She turned to look down the hill, into the city proper and beyond the gates. The valley floor lay thick with a fog of spent gunpowder that smelled of sulfur and ash. Flashes lit up the acrid haze now and then as more muskets fired.

“Aine? Aine, come inside,” a woman’s voice called. Aine turned and saw a haggard woman whose face was covered in grime and sweat. Eva was her name. “There is not much time. The wounded are nearly inside. The doors will be closed soon. Come.”

“But Captain Williams? He’s not here. He’s not safe,” Aine said.

Eva’s face filled with confusion, then softened. “You care deeply for him, don’t you?” She reached out and touched Aine’s cheek. “No one has seen him, have they?”

“Captain Winfield said he lead a remnant against the Ulster rebels to give the army time. But he should be back by now.” Aine’s voice cracked.

“Captain Williams is a resourceful man. He is smart and cunning.” More cannon fire bellowed into the town. “He would not want you here, fretting about him. He would have you do your duty.”

Aine tried to fight back tears. “My duty?”

“To the men who are here. To the living.” As they spoke a crowd grew at the base of the cathedral’s steps and angrily demanded in. “It’s time Aine. Come inside, now.” Eva took the woman-child by the hand and brought her inside the cathedral. They walked briskly to the alter where Mother Kate directed several women.

“In this place,” Mother Kathleen began, “are men gravely wounded. No medicinal arts, no cunning, no succor, will keep some of these men from meeting their maker.” She crossed herself, absentmindedly. “Our role is to comfort them. Soothe their brows, slack their thirst, hold their hands as they die. Some men will become delirious. They will call you good wife, sweet sister, even mother. Give them their comfort.”

The women, some six of them, eyed Mother Kathleen, then each other. In the short time Aine had been in the army, she came to know these women. Women who forsook their place in courteous society to wait table and serve rough men. Women who had survived in spite of the baser instincts of mankind. And while none of them had ever wielded a sword or fired a musket (That Aine knew of,) these women had all known war intimately.

“What do we do now, mother?” asked one of the women.

“Until we find another source, the water in these buckets and jugs and that baptismal font is the only water we have. We must be cautious,” Mother Kathleen said.

“But the water in the baptismal font is blessed—holy,” blurted out one of them.

Mother Kathleen clenched her jaw. “Then it should do for thirst.”

The heat of the cathedral grew as the day waned into evening. Men groaned and cried. Others collapsed on the cold stone and slept where they lay. One of the chapels became the stables for the few horses that survived that day. Aine overheard one soldier say they would eat them if it came to it.

“Aine, come here girl.”

Aine turned and went to Mother Kathleen. “Aye, mother?”

Mother Kathleen shoved a small wooden bowl and a wet rag into Aine’s hands. She pointed. “You see that boy over there? The one restless on the floor? His wounds are grave. There is not much water, so twist the rag and drop the water in his mouth.”

Aine's heart pounded in her chest. She trembled. "I-I don't want to."

"You must."

Aine saw the man, really a boy, breathe shallow breaths while lying still on the floor. She turned to Mother Kathleen one last time, eyes pleading, but it was a futile gesture. What was it that Eva said? I must do my duty. She thought of Captain Williams, lost outside of Armagh. She feared the worst for him. Dying alone in the afternoon sun. Her eyes welled with tears at the thought of it.

Her mind quickly turned to a fantasy of hope. A poor widow woman, or perhaps a shepherd and his wife, rescuing her Captain Williams, nursing him to health out of Christian charity. She looked at the boy resting against the wall of the cathedral and said a prayer for symmetry as she took the bowl and rag.

He was not alone. Men littered the cathedral floor. Aine moved deftly around the writhing bodies towards her target. Some men wept, others groaned or convulsed in pain. Some men lay motionless as Aine walked over or around them, fearing the worst.

The boy was Irish. He wore the long liene underneath a shirt of chainmail. Blood pooled on his abdomen. Aine trembled as the boy moved fitfully and moaned in his sleep. She had not been with the army long, only a few weeks since her uncle's death, but she knew a musket ball to the stomach was not only fatal, but horribly painful—the worst way to die.

Suddenly the boy convulsed and coughed blood. His eyes opened, only for a moment, as he cried out, "Ma!" No. This was too much. Her uncle's death, the battle, and Captain Williams, too? Aine trembled and dropped the bowl. Her heart felt like it would burst from her chest while

she fought back tears. She looked right and saw a man still and grey, eyes wide to the ceiling. A priest prayed over him.

Aine moved deftly between the wounded and the dying. The stench of death and horse urine, combined with the thick warmth of the air made her cough. She dizzied in horror. Men lit candles as the sun went down.

THERE. On the other side of the church a flicker of light inside a doorway caught her eye. Aine bolted for it, dancing between soldiers and priests, camp followers and the dying.

“Aine? Aine? Where do you go?” She could not make out the voice and didn’t care to, either.

She made it to the far room with the flickering light inside. She burst inside, hoping the room would be empty. The sacristy was filled with cabinets and closets, chairs and statues of saints. The room was much cooler than the fetid church. Aine could breathe hear. She took one deep breath, then another, before she began to cry. She trembled in the dancing shadows weeping softly. But she was not alone.

“Hello. Who’s there?”

Somewhere in the shadows someone replied with sniffles.

Aine’s heart pounded. There was always danger in a dark room—and she was tired of it. Suddenly she found her courage and moved towards the candle. She swung it around the room looking for the source of the tears. In a far corner she saw movement on the floor.

“Please, goodwoman,” the voice called.

“What do you want?” Aine barked.

“Just a place to rest. Nothing more.” His voice trembled. The candles light illuminated a grown man—English by his clothes and speech—balled up on the floor. He looked at her, hands trembling. For a moment their eyes met and darted away. He looked at his hands with shame and hid them.

The camp followers would talk of such things. The broken men. Soldiers for whom the cannon and muskets were too much. In hush whispers, late at night, the women spoke of men who screamed in their sleep and trembled during the day. Men who had lost their courage. “It’s alright,” she said.

He sniffled again and wiped his cheeks with his sleeve. He tried a smile but wept again. He forced a laugh. “My brother. He was the crier in the family. Always weeping at church or at a song in a tavern.” He wiped his nose on his sleeve. “Not me,” he said forcing a chuckle again. “I didn’t cry when our mother passed. Now?” The man’s face reddened and he began to rock. What was this poor creature doing here? How had he come to this place? He cowered in a dark corner not out of fear for his life, but out of shame.

For the first time since she had joined the army, Aine didn’t think about her own plight. All she could do was pity this man before her. Her heart broke for this stranger. She moved towards him.

“What are you doing?” He asked between sobs.

She sat next to the man, placing the candle to her right and opposite of the soldier. She took his hands in hers and held them tight as he placed his head on her shoulders. Slowly, over the course of an hour, the trembling man’s head moved from her shoulder, to her breast, to her lap. He moved an arm around her waist. She stroked his hair while he cried himself to sleep.

At one point she drifted off. She dreamed of her father who would hold her close and tickle her in his lap when she was small. She dreamed of strawberries and cream they would eat on a late spring day and her heart ached with longing for him.

She awoke with her own tears now. The man snored softly in her lap and the candle had gone out. Aine tried to move, gently scooching herself away from the soldier's grasp. Finally she was free of him as she gently placed his head on the marble floor and stood.

Once back into the church proper the stench of a thousand men flooded her nostrils. But the cool of the evening had lessened the thickness of the air. Aine could breathe now. She turned back around into the sacristy and grabbed a folded linen square that was for the altar's use. She soaked it in water from the baptismal font that had not been drunk and worked her way back to the dying Irish boy. She hoped she was not too late.

Aine moved deftly between the sleeping soldiers. There, against the church's wall, lay the Irish soldier. No. No. No. No. Please don't be dead. Please!

She rushed to his side, bent over and touched his chest. Aine sighed as she felt the boy's heartbeat. She sat on her knees and began to clean the dried blood from his lips. He was cold and clammy. When she was done cleaning his mouth she wiped the caked dirt and dried sweat from his face. Finally, she took a comb she kept in a pouch and brushed the boy's hair. His eyes fluttered opened.

At first there was confusion and fear in his eyes. "Where am I?"

"You are in Armagh, in St. Patrick's Cathedral. Rest now."

"What happened?"

“I’m not sure. All I know is that the march to Dungannon failed and a remnant of the Royal Army returned. Your commander barricaded the army in the cathedral,” Aine said.

“Sir Henry Bagenal, did he order this?”

Aine shook her head. “The rumors say he died moments after the battle began. Captain Wingfield commands now.”

The Irish boy groaned in pain and tried to move.

“Stay STILL,” Aine commanded. “Your wounds have stopped bleeding. If you move they will start again.”

The boy’s eyes widened in fear then rolled into the back of his head before he passed out again.

It was mid-morning when Aine woke up again. She had fallen asleep at the boy’s knees. Her stomach ached and her mouth was dry. She sat up and saw an officer with other men inspecting the wounded. Soon the small party of men were near Aine. A weary man in very fine clothes and an apron splattered with blood bent over and roughly prodded the Irish boy’s wound.

“Argh!” Cried out the boy.

“Well, Barber-surgeon?” asked one of the attendants.

The barber-surgeon looked at his companion with pursed lips and shook his head no.

“What?” The Irish boy cried out.

The Barber-surgeon knelt close to the boys head. “I’m sorry, son. Your wound is grave. I’m surprised you didn’t bleed out in the night. I’ll fetch the priest to hear your confession.” The barber-surgeon stood and walked away.

The boy agitated and took shallow breaths. “I’m going to die,” he said over and over again as tears poured down.

Aine grabbed his hand. He looked at her with sad eyes. “I don’t want to die.”

“I know,” she said.

The boy’s eyes wandered to the cathedral’s ceiling. “There was so much I wanted,” he said between sobs. “And now I’m going to die. Far from home and alone.” He closed his eyes.

Aine leaned over him and caressed his cheek. She whispered in his ear. “You won’t die alone. I will be here with you to the end.” She took his hand firmly.

The Irish boy opened his eyes again in wonder. His eyes reddened and welled with tears. “Thank you.” He wept for some time, then he composed himself and found his courage and his dignity. He nodded in reply. “My name is Brian.”

They sat together, Aine the camp follower and Brian the Irish boy, for a day. Brian spoke of living in the countryside. He spoke of catching salmon and roasting it on an open fire. Aine spoke of her dear father and strawberries and cream. Aine tried to keep the conversation light, but this was Ireland. Eventually they spoke of their struggles. They had no food and no water. What they had, in that short time, was each other.

By the evening, Brian was delirious. He passed in and out of consciousness. Aine could barely keep her eyes open either, so she lay next to him and closed her eyes. “Good night, Brian.” She kissed his cheek.

She awoke suddenly to a thunderous creaking moan. It was followed by the most beautiful cool breeze. Then the murmurs started as weary men became agitated with speech. She heard a shout, then cheers. Some men wept.

“What is happening?” She asked an English soldier.

The man turned to Aine with his face alight. “The O’Neil has granted us reprieve. We may leave. It’s over.” He ran off to tell others.

Aine could not hide her tears. She wept and laughed. “Brian, did you hear that? We can go home!” She nudged Brian on his shoulder. He didn’t move. She touched his face and knew. “Brian, we can go home,” she said as she caressed his cold cheeks. “We can go home.” Aine lay down with her Irish boy one last time, holding his cold, dead hand and nuzzling his cold cheek. “We can go home,” she whispered in between tears.