

BATTLE OF FONTENOY

by: *Bartholomew Dowling (1823-1863)*

BY our camp-fires rose a murmur
At the dawning of the day,
And the tread of many footsteps
Spoke the advent of the fray;
And as we took our places,
Few and stern were our words,
While some were tightening horse-girths,
And some were girding swords.

The trumpet-blast has sounded
Our footmen to array--
The willing steed has bounded,
Impatient for the fray--
The green flag is unfolded,
While rose the cry of joy--
"Heaven speed dear Ireland's banner
To-day at Fontenoy!"

We looked upon that banner,
And the memory arose
Of our homes and perish'd kindred
Where the Lee or Shannon flows;
We look'd upon that banner,
And we swore to God on high,
To smite to-day the Saxon's might--
To conquer or to die.

Loud swells the charging trumpet--
'Tis a voice from our own land--
God of battles! God of vengeance!
Guide to-day the patriot's brand;
There are stains to wash away,
There are memories to destroy,
In the best blood of the Briton
To-day at Fontenoy.

Plunge deep the fiery rowels
In a thousand reeking flanks--
Down, chivalry of Ireland,
Down on the British ranks!
Now shall their serried columns
Beneath our sabres reel--
Through the ranks, then, with the war-
horse--
Through their bosoms with the steel.

With one shout for good King Louis,
And the fair land of the vine,
Like the wrathful Alpine tempest,
We swept upon their line--
Then rang along the battle-field
Triumphant our hurrah,
And we smote them down, still cheering,
"Erin, shanthagal go bragh."

As prized as is the blessing
From an aged father's lip--
As welcome as the haven
To the tempest-driven ship--
As dear as to the lover
The smile of gentle maid--
Is this day of long-sought vengeance
To the swords of the Brigade.

See their shatter'd forces flying,
A broken, routed line--
See, England, what brave laurels
For your brow to-day we twine.
Oh, thrice bless'd the hour that witness'd
The Briton turn to flee
From the chivalry of Erin
And France's "*fleur de lis*."

As we lay beside our camp-fires,
When the sun had pass'd away,
And thought upon our brethren
Who had perished in the fray,
We prayed to God to grant us,
And then we'd die with joy,
One day upon our own dear land
Like this of Fontenoy.

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FONTENOY is a village of Belgium, and famous as the scene of the battle fought May 11, 1745, between the French under Marshal Saxe and the allied army of English, Dutch, and Austrians, under the Duke of Cumberland. The Campaign was part of what is known as the War of the Austrian Succession, which involved almost all the countries of Europe on one side or the other, and which, although it began over a question as to the succession to the throne of Austria, came to have many other objects. At the time of this battle the French were trying to keep the allied army from marching to relieve the siege of the fortress of Tournai.

The French were posted on a hill behind Fontenoy, and at first appeared to have all the advantage. But soon after the battle began the Duke of Cumberland placed himself at the head of his army and marched a column of fourteen thousand men with fixed bayonets down the ravine between the two forces and up the opposite slope. Legend has it that the advancing English invited the French to fire first, and that the French refused; but the French were surprised by the brave advance and cheered the enemy. The English then opened a devastating fire, and the first French line broke. The allies charged and gained the hill. This was the critical moment of the battle. The French king, Louis XV, and the Dauphin, refused to fly, and Marshal Saxe, although ill, mounted his horse and took command of the French cavalry.

The English stood their ground, although the enemy now commenced attacks on three sides. Finally, the Irish brigade, allies of the French, charged on the English flank, and after desperate fighting broke the solid English square. The English retreated, but prevented a rout by standing again and again against the terrific onslaughts of the French and Irish. The battle, which at first had appeared likely to be a victory for the allies, ended in a decisive triumph for the French.

The poem is spoken by one of that Irish brigade who had joined the French King Louis and fought England because of the harsh treatment that country had shown Ireland after the battle of the Boyne in 1690.

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