

Sir Arthur Chichester



As he looked at Sir Arthur Chichester, Con grew up. No longer was he just a young rascal riding out for an adventure; he was Con O'Neill, the son of the Earl of Tyrone. All summer Father had been talking about this man, Chichester, and how he had been hounded by him. Now, suddenly, here was the very man, riding out through the Pale with what seemed to Con to be a whole army. Where could he be going? Uncle de Cashel's castle? And if so, why? To Con it was quite obvious: *He's going there to catch Father!* His mind raced. *What can I do?* Here he was, jammed up against a wall. *I must warn Father – but how?*

He slid off his pony; he was far too obvious up there. *Dandelion indeed!* Head down, he led Macha towards the gate. The crowd had closed across the road with the passing of the horsemen, like water in the wake of a ship. People seemed much larger to him down at ground level. Con kept his head down and thrust into them. If they objected to being pushed aside by a small boy, they

had to argue with the dogged pony that followed him faithfully, breathing down his neck. He could see the gates ahead; the last of the horsemen were just passing through. *Oh no!* The gates were closing, but Con wasn't the only one wanting to get out. There was a murmur among the crowd, early risers who had finished their business and wanted to get home.

'Stand back from the gates there,' shouted the guards, as they pushed the people back with the poles of their pikes.

'But we have to get out!'

'Nobody leaves here for one hour from now,' the guards shouted. Con, only feet away from the gate now, heard one of them explain to the other, 'He don't want nobody gettin' ahead and givin' de Cashel a warning.' The man dropped his voice. 'They've got O'Neill cornered at last.'

'Sir, sir,' Con called in English. He grabbed one of their pike poles and held on. 'I have to get out.'

'They all say that, son.'

'But ... but I have important information for Milord Chichester.'

'Le'go o' me pike, boy; he don't want to hear from the likes of you.'

'Lieutenant!' Con shouted through the narrowing gap between the gates. 'Let me come out. I have information for His Lordship!'

The lieutenant turned and saw him. 'Well, if it isn't Milord's dandelion. Suddenly found our tongue, have we? And speaking English of a sort too!' He wheeled his horse clumsily, dragging its

head around as if it was cart-horse, and came back to the gate. 'Well, bwat, what have you to tell me?'

Con's mind was whirring. What information could he pretend to have? 'Sir, I have secret information for the general, sir.'

'Well, what is it?'

Con rolled his eyes towards the crowd behind him. 'I can't talk here, everyone will hear!' Indeed, he *was* afraid that some English patriot in the crowd would recognise him and put a knife in his back. Or an Irish one, if they heard what he had to say.

The lieutenant pouted. 'Tsch, I s'pose you're wight,' and then said to the gateman, 'Let him thwough. I'll see he doesn't escape.' The guards raised their pikes and Con and his pony were allowed through. 'Lead that cweature, boy, and come with me.'

Creature! Con was furious. *We'll show him, won't we, Macha!* For a wild moment he thought he'd make a break for it, but, truly, a pony is no match for a horse, and he would soon be ridden down. The soldiers were being formed into marching order under the watchful eye of the general while Con was being led forward. He'd have to say something now, but what? The general turned, caught sight of Con's yellow shirt, and a look of thunder crossed his face.

'Lieutenant Bonmann, what the devil are you doing with that boy?'

So that was the lieutenant's name; Con was sure he'd heard it somewhere before.

'He says he has important information for you, sir.'

The general growled. 'All right, bring him here, and if he's a

nuisance, you can have the pleasure of shooting him, dandelion or no.’ He glowered at Con. ‘Come here, boy! Lieutenant, you can wait there.’ Con walked forward, his knees feeling like jelly. ‘D’you speak English?’ the general demanded, leaning forward in his saddle.

‘Yes, sir,’

‘Well? What’s your message?’

Con stood tongue-tied. Then, like a whisper, it came to him. ‘Sir – Milord – I have secret information ...’ He looked about him as if nervous that someone might hear, and dropped his voice. ‘The Lord of Tyrone, sir, he’s lodging at de Cashel’s castle, sir!’ *He knows it already, so it won’t make any difference. He’ll think I am on his side and let me go.* Con watched the man’s expression. *Am I betraying my own father? Is this news to him?* There was surprise on the general’s face, but it seemed mostly surprise that this new spy was a mere seven-year-old.

‘Well, well, well. So how do you have this information, pray?’

‘My sister works in the castle, sir,’ improvised Con quickly.

‘And does she speak English like you? That would be unusual for a serving girl.’

‘She was in service in Dundalk, sir,’ said Con, naming the only English-speaking town he knew. Still those cold eyes bored into him, but now there were sounds that the column was ready to move.

The general looked up. ‘Bonmann!’ he yelled. ‘Take this lad. Let him ride, but hold his reins and guard him with your life. Put

an archer on him. He may be telling the truth, or he may be useable in some way or other.' He raised his arm, the drums began to beat and the column was on its way.



Con had no alternative but to hand his reins to the lieutenant, who took them as if they were twin snakes. He hooked them onto his saddle-horn.

'So, I'm stuck with you for the journey, then. What stowies did you tell his lordship?'

'I can't say, sir. It's a secret.'

'Oh, be like that!' Bonmann said petulantly. 'Archer!' he called. An archer stepped out from the ranks. 'One move from this bwat and you skewer him, all wight?'

The archer, who looked to have the brains of an ox, took an arrow from his quiver, notched it to his bow and fell in behind the two riders.

If only my English was better I might get some information from this Englishman, thought Con. He'd learned English from one of Mother's ladies-in-waiting, but this man had a funny way of speaking that made him feel uncertain. As they moved forward, Con measured the distance to the forest edge wondering if he would be able to make a run for it, but it was too far. He'd never make it to the forest before a horseman caught up with him, and then there was the archer; the thought of an arrow between his shoulder blades made him squirm. He turned in his saddle and

tried the archer with a grin, but all he got was a threatening lift of the man's bow; no help there.

The drum-beat and the tramp of the men's feet on the road were like a slow pulse. As the miles passed, Con's chances of getting away, and ahead of the army to warn Father, were getting fewer and fewer. With every step, time was running out. He looked about him. He counted the men in the column and then looked at the pattern of their march. The general rode in front with two mounted lieutenants, and then came the pike-men, their pikes raised. Behind them followed the musketeers and then the archers. There were also a half-dozen cavalry, gentlemen all, who were probably supposed to march on the flanks of the column, but spent most of their time chatting and laughing to the rear. The only one who seemed in any way alert was General Chichester himself, who was constantly looking ahead and slowing the column as if he felt in danger of an ambush. Con imagined himself as the commander of an Irish force lying in wait for the column, and in no time he was chasing the whole English column into the sea.

He was suddenly brought back to reality. The column had stopped; but Con's reins were hooked over the lieutenant's saddle, so his pony was brought up with a painful jolt. In panic, Macha wheeled and backed away, pulling hard against his reins.

'Dwat!' shouted Lieutenant Bonmann, as his saddle, loose because he hadn't tightened the girth properly, slipped sideways on his horse's back.

But why had they stopped? As Con calmed his pony, he looked ahead. He could see a sharp bend in the road. Here, for the first time, the forest crowded close to the road. It was the perfect place for an ambush – but wasn't it also the perfect place for Con to escape? He could see Chichester at the corner, his hand still up to halt the column. He leaned forward. 'Come on, Macha, we'll go for it!' he whispered, and he grabbed his pony's reins from where they hung slack under his chin and heaved. Lieutenant Bonmann's saddle now tipped over, and he fell in a flounder of arms and legs. Con's reins slipped off the pommel of the saddle – and he was free. But the archer! Out of the corner of his eye, Con could see the man readying his bow.

'My Lord Chichester!' he shouted. 'Beware, there is an ambush!' His voice carried high and clear. The archer looked around as if for orders, but Lieutenant Bonmann was hopping around trying to get his foot out of his stirrup. There was only one safe direction for Con to go. *Ride for the general*, he thought, *the archer will never risk a shot in his direction*. Clapping his heels to his pony's sides, he rode straight towards Sir Chichester.

However, he had reckoned without Lieutenant Bonmann. 'Shoot him, you wretch!'

Con heard the command and flattened himself over the saddle as an accurately aimed arrow hissed above his back. He could see the arrow speed beyond him and for one heart-stopping moment he thought it would hit the general. Instead it fell short, causing the general's horse to rear on its hind legs.

'General!' shouted Con again. He didn't like the way Chichester was reaching for his sword. 'There is an ambush waiting!' He pointed at the corner. He saw a moment's puzzlement on the general's face. He was safe from the archer, who wouldn't risk two shots at the general, but Chichester had drawn his sword now. Confusion was Con's only weapon.

'Come on, lads,' he roared. 'It's Con! To the attack!' He changed direction and galloped for all he was worth towards the sheltering corner of the forest. Again he flattened himself along the pony's back.



Con galloped until he reckoned he was well beyond bow-shot and then turned. There was no sign of a chase. Not even Chichester peering around the corner. He gave a yip of triumph and waved his fist in the air. He patted Macha, whose sides were heaving from the gallop. The road was a temptation, but he knew only too well that he would be galloped down in minutes by the cavalry once they tumbled to it that his talk of an ambush was a hoax. He hadn't escaped from the army just to be run down by Bonmann wobbling on horseback. He must be careful. He must take to the forest now.

The trees on his left climbed to a long, low ridge. His eye ran along its spine. Trees, more trees, featureless trees – until there, rising above the leafy canopy, was a clump of Scots pines, straight, proud trees with bristle-brush tops. Were they familiar? They were! Con's heart gave a surge. *Of course! Those are the ones I saw*

from the de Cashel castle. Now I know where I am. The castle must be just over the ridge. Easy! I'll be over there and giving my warning in half an hour. He turned and began to skirt the forest edge, looking for a path. There had to be one, it was such an obvious short-cut to the castle. He began to hum, making up a song about 'Bonmann the Bwave'.

He came on what he was looking for sooner than he expected. An old pack-horse road, if ever there was one. He turned into it, still humming, urging his pony forward. *Oh no!* There was a fallen tree across it. Perhaps the path had not been used for a while. He struck off into the trees to by-pass the fallen trunk, but immediately found his way blocked again. He'd never seen a forest like this. The young trees were bent over, twisted and plaited together like a basket. He dismounted and started pushing at the tangle, but this wasn't ordinary forest – it seemed to fight him, catching at his clothes. When he tried to back out, it seemed as if the branches had come alive, grabbing him at every twist and turn. *Oh, how can I get out?* His pony's anxious whicker showed him the way. Macha stood with his head on Con's shoulder and the boy stroked his pony for comfort. Then he remembered the watchman on the castle tower. 'The wood is plashed,' he had said, 'a sparrow couldn't fly through it!' Con could believe that now, but hadn't he added: 'not unless it knew the way'? *Oh yes!* Con thought, *but who's going to show me the way?* The only thing he could do was to retreat. When he emerged out of the forest he was dazzled by the sunlight – and the shouts from behind him told him that he had

been seen. He shaded his eyes. The army had turned the corner – two horsemen were even now detaching themselves from the column and heading straight towards him.

For a moment he was tempted to give up. In another ten minutes they would have him, anyway, but then he remembered Father shouting, ‘That man is hounding me!’ and a flash of white-hot rage shot through him. He gathered his pony’s trailing reins, scrambled into the saddle, and turned towards his pursuers with a yell of defiance: ‘Come on, Sir Chichester, hound *me* instead!’ Then he spun about and fled headlong along the forest edge.

He had no plan; he would never be able to find a path at this speed. He’d wait until they were close, then plunge into the forest, abandon Macha and perhaps wriggle through the plashing, though on foot he’d never get to the castle in time for Father to get away. He spotted an oddly shaped hump of hay ahead. *I’ll ride that far*, he thought, *I’ll make up my mind then*. And he rode like fury.

He was only yards from it when, without warning, the hump rose up out of the ground, and Con found himself holding onto his pony’s neck as Macha reared in terror. A bear, was his first thought, escaped from some wandering performer, but no, it was the man in the shaggy cloak, the one who’d warned him about his dagger. Without any explanation, the man calmly reached out, took Macha’s bridle before he could bolt, and led him and a very startled Con straight towards the forest edge. Con had his hand on his dagger, ready to slash and run if he needed to, but the clatter of hooves behind was getting louder. Every second counted now,

and here he was, being led straight towards what looked to be an impenetrable hedge of hawthorn and bramble. Without hesitation, the lumbering figure – his guide or his captor? – parted a screen of elder that had sprung up in front of a fallen oak and led Con, still on his pony, into a green cavern behind the massive trunk. Con slid from the saddle. His new friend held a finger to his lips. The clatter of hooves on stone changed to the thud of hooves on grass as the horses behind turned in off the road. *Did they see us?* Con raised a questioning eyebrow. The man stepped forward and reached up to fondle Macha's ears. Hooves pounded on the soft turf just yards away.

A voice called out, 'I'm sure this is where he went.' Con started; they were so close. 'A sparrow wouldn't get through that bush, let alone a boy. You try the forest there.' Con looked anxiously at his silent companion as the nearby bushes began to shake. There was some lusty swearing. 'Here, Jake, come and look at this. Someone has twisted the branches together like a wattle wall.' There were more crashes. Then Jake's voice said: 'We'll never get through this. Let's listen; if he's anywhere around we'll hear him.'

Con had never heard silence like this before. He could hear his own breathing, his heart beating. His new companion seemed, miraculously, to have found some oats in his pocket and was feeding them to the pony. The crunch-crunch of chewing seemed loud enough to bring the whole of Chichester's army on them. Then one of the searcher's horses whinnied; Macha raised his head as if to answer, but in one deft movement the man enveloped it in

his cloak. The pony didn't whinny, but he shifted his feet.

'Did you hear that?' But by now the tramp of marching feet, the clink of harness and clatter of hooves was loud enough to drown anything but an outright whinny.

'Let's forget it. The little blighter won't be able to get through here any more than we can. Anyway, he unseated Bonmann, and nearly got an arrow stuck in the general – I reckon we owe him one.'

The sound of their horses faded and Con and his new friend were left looking at each other.

'Thank you,' said Con. Then, in wonder: 'Who are you? I've been wondering ever since you warned me about my dagger. I'm sorry I was rude. Just now I thought you were a haystack!'

The man laughed. 'That'll do, I'm better without a name. A name can save a man and a name can hang a man. But here's a hint for you. I know you: Con, son of Hugh, son of Matthew, son of Con Bacach. I could go on ... That's my trade. But I think you should be on your way.'

'And I thought you were a vagabond, but you are a poet!'

'The guard at the gate thought I was a vagabond too, and that's my disguise. But it worked out well because it meant I was outside the gate when Chichester came through.'

Con had seen poets before, but always as revered figures at feasts, telling tales of times past, playing their instruments, or singing songs. To be rescued by one was like Cuchulainn himself coming striding through the woods to his aid. The man, who had

thrown off his cloak, was now standing straight, the stoop, apparently, part of his disguise. He was tall, dressed in simple clothes, but of the best cloth. His combed hair reached his shoulders. His trimmed beard jutted out to give his face a determined look. As he guided Macha through the plashing, he told Con which path to follow to get to the Scots pines, and, from there, the way to the castle. 'Are you listening, boy?' Con, who had been staring at his companion, nodded earnestly. 'Remember what I've told you, it's not as easy as it looks. If you don't get lost you will be there at least an hour before Chichester, but go carefully.'

'Thank you, thank you, sir. I could never have found my way through on my own.' A mischievous grin flicked across Con's face, 'Thank you, Mr Haystacks, sir!'

It wasn't long before he began to regret that he hadn't listened more carefully to the poet's instructions.