

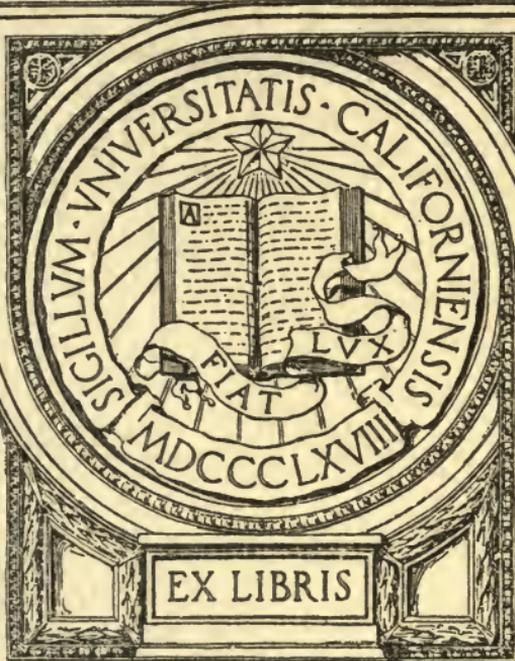
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THE HILLS



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CHILDREN OF
THE HILLS
TALES AND SKETCHES
OF WESTERN IRELAND IN THE
OLD TIME AND THE PRESENT DAY
BY DERMOT O'BYRNE

THE
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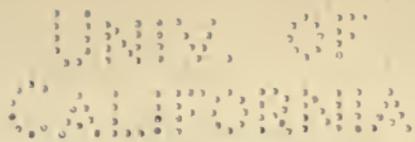
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ELSITA

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OF these stories Nos. I and III have appeared in *The Irish Review*, and Nos. II, V, and VII in the art periodical *Orpheus*. The author wishes to make the usual acknowledgments to the editors of these publications. The other two tales are now printed for the first time.

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CHILDREN OF THE HILLS

I

HUNGER

I

A MAN woefully out of breath, with eyes dilated by fear burning in his hollow grey face, hammered with a ragged thorn stick on the gate of the Glengariff School of Poetry. He was clad in soiled skins, and his gaunt ribs heaved through the rents of his wretched attire. His brogues were made of untanned cowhide, soaked, rotted, and malodorous with the clauber of a day's hasty travel. His long black hair was tangled and matted with sweat, and his right heel bled incessantly from a deep wound inflicted by a flint some hours back. Altogether, his condition was very pitiable, yet less so were they known than his tidings. He listened, gasping. There was no sound in the house. He drew back a little from the gate and scanned the wall. It presented a blank face, for the house was entirely windowless. Then he began to beat unintermittently and with petulance upon the door, the whiles cursing the inmates for dolts and laggards. From this he fell to kicks, but the pampooties were softened with much bog-water and his sore toes did not take kindly to the hard oak of the door nor

to the nails that studded it. He butted at it with thin knees like twisted roots, while the thorn stick played like the hail of a mid-winter night.

“Blisterings and running sores on ye for a brood of oinseachs and omadauns,” he panted, his breath rasping, “the cold flags of hell for your beds,” and the monotonous dull blows of the stick on the door throbbed and rang in his own skull, for by this he was getting weak. Even when the creaking of bolts and rattling of chains showed that his outcry had been heard, his arm still swung on mechanically; and when the door was suddenly dragged sharply open he tottered forward with it and fell on the flags, his knees clattering.

The door-keeper, clad in a brown frock and hood which gave him the appearance of a Franciscan friar, regarded with severity the miserable-looking man before him, while his eye wandered to the thin stream of blood traced upon the threshold by the stranger’s wounded heel. The thought of the additional scouring that the stone would demand from him in the morning added heightened asperity to his tone as he demanded :

“What kind of a drunken shuler are you, my lad, to be raising the seven shows of Cork at this hour of the evening ? ”

“News ! news ! ” panted the other with difficulty. “News for the Ard-File O’Sullivan ! ”

The door-keeper’s lip curled contemptuously. “This is the Ard-File’s working hour,” said he, “and ’tis a flogging to any who would do so much as sprinkle feathers outside his door. Let you mind that, my lad. Rumour tells that he is after composing a panegyric on the Geraldines, and that in the Rannuigheacht Mor ; and sure all but un-

lettered breallans the like of yourself know it to be the most beautiful and at the same time the most difficult of measures."

The messenger, who during this speech had been gasping inarticulate words and groping blindly with his hands, now seized the other's skirt, plucking at it feverishly, while he stammered: "For the love of God, and His Mother, let you bring me to the Ard-File; my story presses, my friend. It concerns the lives of you all, and my strength fails."

The door-keeper seemed impressed by this. He turned pale, and looked curiously at the gaunt figure before him. Then he said:

"Wait here, this shall be sifted. I will inquire, though like enough my four bones will groan for it."

He returned almost immediately, and said gruffly: "Let you follow me now, fellow."

But the stranger, who had sunk down against the wall when deprived of the support of the door-keeper's frock, remained motionless, his head drooping on his breast and his arms hanging loose and limp.

The other shook him impatiently by the shoulder, but the man only moaned. The door-keeper cursed under his breath, and then turned and shouted up the whitewashed corridor. Two under-servants came running to the call.

"Take this man before the Ard-File," said the door-keeper shortly.

II

At the end of the great windowless hall of the college the Ard-File, Art O'Sullivan, sat in an oaken chair, the back and arms of which were carven into complex devices in which dog-heads and sinuous folds of serpents were distinguishable. This personage was a man of rather above middle age, strongly built, and with large knotted hands that seemed well fitted to strike as good a music from the sword-hilt as from the clairséach. Nevertheless, this somewhat coarsely-fashioned and altogether incongruous figure was that of a harper and poet, rightly accounted the most notable in Munster.

His lower limbs were attired in the kilt of his clan; there were richly-wrought silver buckles upon his brogues, a robe of green silk covered his shoulders, whilst about his muscular neck was hung a golden chain, the gift of a member of the famous and ill-fated family whose bounty he lauded in his present poem. His grey hair and beard were long and rough, and his steady eyes, very widely and deeply set, burned hotly for an instant upon the intruders. Altogether, one with whom it were ill to trifle.

"What is this? What is the meaning of this interruption?" he grunted, dropping his eyes again to the parchment before him, whilst he fell to wrestling again with an "uaithne" in an elusive line, his brow supported in his enormous freckled hand and his foot tapping a rhythm on the flagged floor.

The half-conscious messenger murmured vague words, whilst his eyes rolled to the roof; then he

fell silent, his neck limp. Art O'Sullivan continued to mutter to himself with a sound as of distant thunder.

Two minutes passed.

"Speak, dog," boomed the poet suddenly, and thereupon muttered the harder.

Another two minutes dragged slowly by, and then one of the servants, becoming weary of the increasing weight of the exhausted messenger, glanced at his companion. The other nodded back.

The first man shuffled and coughed slightly. "The man has fallen weak," he ventured timidly.

"Eh?" grunted Art abstractedly, and then suddenly thrust aside the parchment and dropping his arms forward upon the desk, looked keenly at the group before him.

His eyes blazed. "God!" he shouted, rising from his chair. "A black noose of death to the necks of these fellows. Do I rule churls in this house?" he stamped. "Murrough," he cried to a steward who entered immediately, "bring wine."

Murrough hesitated.

"My lord," he stammered, "there is but a flagon and a half remaining, and no more to be had, as thou knowest. The famine crawls to our very gates, and no dower of provision has been brought since a fortnight. It is a pity——"

"Bring the wine, pig," snapped the Ard-File, and it seemed his beard bristled. "Your long tongue and its share of talk would turn a mill!"

The wine was brought without further delay in a silver cup, surmounted with the device of the Fitzgeralds, who had once been the patrons of the College. The man drank the liquor with difficulty, for his gullet was so dry that the breath

rattled through it, and his tongue was dark and swollen.

When he had swallowed the contents of the goblet he blinked, sat up, stared about him in perplexity, caught his head for a moment between his hands, and then, remembering all, leapt to his feet.

"My lord," he cried hurriedly, the words coming from his shaking lips in a broken torrent, "I have travelled far—far—more than six leagues, and I running the most of the way like a hare of the hill. Och, och, it's a poor thing, I'm saying, to be travelling half-naked through the dirty bogs with the ghosts clinging to your skirts and death flapping his lean arms from behind every rock the like of a scald-crow. Listen! listen! The red day of Ireland has fallen upon Munster. We are dead! we are dead! all of us, save those who live yet and breathe more fearful breath than the blast of death may be. The country is destroyed at the Sassenach devil whom they call An Caorach (Carew). My children—my wife"—his voice broke, and, lifting his head, the face contorted horribly, he raised his clenched fists above him. After a moment his arms drooped, slow, stiff, and quivering, to his sides, and wiping a froth of foam from his lips with the back of his hand, he continued hoarsely:

"He comes like a withering wind. The country is black and smoking where his feet have passed. In a day he will be at these gates, and because my son is under this roof, and he the only one left to me, I have run like the wind of March to warn you, my lord, that you may flee to the hills and caves and maybe escape destruction for this time."

A contemptuous exclamation was the Ard-File's answer to this.

“What is your son’s name?” he said severely.

“Maelmhuire Ua Deasmhumhan, my lord.”

“A very poor rhymer,” commented Art absently, and fell to worrying his moustache. There was a moment’s silence whilst he appeared to consider deeply some matter.

“Summon all the students,” called Art loudly at last, and seated himself brooding in the chair, whilst two servants hurried to carry out his order.

In accordance with the regulations of the bardic schools the sons of learning were at this time lying upon their beds in their windowless cells, composing the exercises in prosody which later in the evening were to be written down and submitted to the Ard-File for his judgment. Obedient to the summons of their master they crowded into the hall in confusion and alarm, treading upon one another’s heels, for such a divergence from the quiet routine of their life filled them with excitement and apprehension.

When they were all within the hall and the door closed, Art O’Sullivan rose from his feet and held up his hand to command silence.

“My children,” he began mildly, looking down with a quiet and masterful eye upon the host of upturned startled faces, “I am no theologian nor a dealer in fine argument, but this I know, that the appearances of God are many, that He can be at one time a hanging bough of ripe fruit and at another a scourge, and yet, at the same time, a just and merciful Judge and Lord. So do we learn from the sayings and writings of holy men of old, and especially of St. Barr, our patron and strong defence.

“At the present time He is pleased of His wisdom

and for the stiffening of our spirits to loose the devil upon our land, who prowleth like a lean wolf, seeking whom he may devour. The whole of this, the fattest province of Erin, he has destroyed, and even now he is at our gates.

“ It is known to you all that a treasure of learning, a fruitful and admirable vine of poesy and story-telling, hath been entrusted to our keeping. This glorious harvest of the ripe and golden past, known to learned ones as the Great Skin-book of Bere, is written in a style so divinely and nobly obscure that its contents have been the feeble gleam of jewels in clouded water to many of the learned and more of the unlearned in old years. And of this I judge from the glosses in the margins of the first ten leaves.

“ I myself have spent ten years of my life in the elucidation of the great mysteries contained therein, and have at least accomplished the task, as I believe, of dispelling the clouds raised by the incompetency and ill-judgment of other commentators. Now it is my purpose—with God’s will—to ensure that this shrine of poetry shall escape the destruction which shall undoubtedly fall upon this roof and those beneath it, and therefore I shall now choose three from among you to convey it by stealth to the school of Corkaguiney, situated, as I believe, convenient to the town of Dingle, in the west of the Kingdom of Kerry. But of this you must make yourselves assured.” Thus with a flying tempest of metaphor spoke Art.

He paused for an instant, and then raising his voice and scrutinising ^{the} with added severity the bewildered faces beneath him, continued :

“ I have examined the compositions you have of

late submitted to me, and I find them very ill-conceived and lacking in every grace and delicacy of art. The penmanship is cramped, the images scantily considered, moving with very stiff limbs in an attire for the most part exceedingly tawdry ; for your assonances are commonly ill-disposed and more frequently false than not. By the Rood and Him that died thereon, I can only hope that there are certain amongst you hardier with spear and stave than they are with the pen."

He thundered at them, the veins in his neck standing forth thick and knotted, whilst his eyes scorched. In a moment he was calm, and proceeded :

" Nevertheless, three of these poems I found to be something less contemptible than their fellows and indeed not wanting in certain natural merits, and to the authors of these I entrust this charge. Connall O'Leary, Art MacMurrough, and Dermot O'Brien, let you come forward."

The three students named came forward and stood before Art O'Sullivan.

" I myself, and those of you that are left," he concluded, turning to the body of the hall, " will remain in this place to do battle and to die for the clan of O'Sullivan Mor. And after due time may our souls rise to God's glory. Now get back to your beds, and let you find wings to your brains for this while, for, by my hand, it is unlikely that one of you will live to compose another poem in any measure."

He ceased, and looked down upon them from his great height with a kind of grim humour. In the moment the high-hearted among his auditors adored him inwardly, whilst the timid rolled wide

eyes, slanting, and cursed through chattering teeth.

When the hall was emptied again, Art brought the Great Skin-book of Bere from his own apartment, together with a second manuscript written upon vellum, his own translation into modern Irish of the first half of the book. These he gave into the hands of Connall O'Leary, the eldest of the three young men. This done, and certain more particular instructions given, he embraced the students in turn seriously and almost paternally, and added: "Let you remember, my sons, the worth of the lives of all three of you is as nothing weighed against the precious thing you carry. Make what speed you may, but at the same time be wary and heedful of your steps and your conversation, for your path is through desert and desolation, wherein Sassenach wolves and vultures will be your only companions. Farewell! Without doubt in a day or two at most myself and this school will be dust on the wind, though, by my hand, I swear a dust of a dirtier hue will be mingled with it, or my sword tells not truth. Now let you go, and God and St. Barr be your guides."

The young men crossed themselves, weeping, and with bowed heads murmured in a low chant:

"In the name of the all-victorious Father,
And of Mary, the seven times tormented,
May the Three be with us before and behind us on our
journey,
And may we come in the end of all to the company of the
saints
And the gardens of the Lord Christ. Amen."

Meanwhile Art O'Sullivan had already seated

himself at the table, and was lost in the intricacies of his poem, frowning at the parchment before him and chewing the feather of his quill, whilst he muttered in his beard, breathing heavily the while through his nose.

As noiselessly as possible the three students left the hall. Only Connall O'Leary turned at the door for a last glance at his beloved master. He saw through tear-dimmed eyes that they and their affair were already forgotten. The enormous head was bent low. In the dim light of the rush-candle the powerful shoulders loomed like twin boulders against a wan moon, all the incongruous strength of that strange figure in subjection to the niceties of scholarship, and the almost insuperable difficulties of a prosody the most severe and complex that the mind of poet has conceived.

III

At the end of an hour the three young men were already on their way. They had but a single ass among them, for almost all the live stock of the College had already been slain for food. On this account they decided to take turns in riding as long as the animal might still be serviceable, and indeed the poor creature was so wasted from underfeeding that it was clear to the travellers that they would soon be deprived even of the poor aid it could afford to them.

The Skin-book and the Ard-File's manuscript were sewn into a leather wallet, which Connall O'Leary wore beneath his clothing and next his skin. On leaving the school, each of the three had been given a small metal amulet, figured with the

effigy of St. Barr, the patron of the College, and these they wore for solace against their breasts.

The country was very little known to any of them, for the students were not permitted to wander far from the school during the six-month term, and since the visitation of the English this regulation had been enforced with even greater severity than usual.

After stumbling northward for some three hours through the trackless bog, the night becoming colder and darker every moment, they decided that it was useless to continue further before daylight, and peered about in the deepening gloom for some place of shelter.

Even in the dim light they could perceive that the ground was scorched and charred in patches as though sparks blown by the wind from some greater conflagration had partially lighted the heather. The air was tainted and sour with the heavy odour of burning, and as the moments passed the pilgrims became more and more uneasy. "The trail of the wolf," said Dermod, sniffing; "one scents him on the wind." At last, almost despairing of finding what they sought, they detected a faint gleam in the throbbing purple hollow of a hill some half-mile from them. Encouraging one another with heartening words, they directed their steps towards it, slipping every moment into bog-holes half-concealed by the rank heather, and bruising their shins against sharp edges of rock.

At the end of half an hour they reached the cabin whence the light glimmered. All about the wretched building the black ground smouldered. The byre at the back was a charred ruin, the walls

crumbling to the touch, and within it lay hideously in a litter of grey ashes the smoking remains of two pigs, giving forth an intolerable stench. The house itself was untouched, but to the minds of the travellers this immunity was itself a sinister and disquieting portent. For a moment they hesitated on the threshold, and then Connall O'Leary, murmuring a prayer beneath his breath, stepped forward into the house. Within the door he uttered a sharp exclamation and remained staring before him, his jaw dropping. The others, peering over his shoulder, beheld that which had given him pause. On the floor lay in her own blood the bruised body of a young girl, completely naked, with a sgian driven up to the haft in her left breast. Close to the wall a rush-candle oozing burning grease lay upon the floor, and above it, his heels dangling over the flame, an old man hanged by his thumbs, his face to the wall. He also was naked, and the feet and lower part of his legs were already charred and blackened by the wandering flame.

For a few moments the young men stared in speechless horror at the pitiful sight, and then Art, removing his hat, crossed himself with a sob. Dermot's features twitched; he looked wildly around the room, and then covered his face with his hands, pressing his fingers against the eyeballs. At the same moment, with a gesture of decision, Connall O'Leary stepped forward, and, breathing hard and short through his nose, released the poor body from the wall as tenderly as might be and laid it upon the floor beside that of the girl—his granddaughter, as they judged. "In the name of the Three," he whispered. Each of the three students approached in turn, and made the sign of the cross

thrice over the breasts and ashy foreheads of the dead. Then they looked doubtfully at one another. The same query leapt to the lips of each, but trembled there unuttered. Then Connall sighed.

“Adversity makes strange bedfellows,” he said quietly. “So be it,” said the other two. Dermod trod out the sputtering flame of the rush-candle, and without breaking their fast they lay down on the cold flags, the living beside the dead.

Connall, arising with the sun, awakened his companions. While the golden pale light of dawn spread slowly like the breath of God over desolated mountain and glen, they buried their bedfellows of the night in a little knoll at the back of the house, and then kneeling at the rude grave, each repeated aloud as much of the Office for the Dead as he could remember. “Brothers,” said Connall humbly, as he rose from this devout exercise, “let us go forward now in the light of this good deed, and may the prayers of the Mother of God be our breastplate.”

For five days they struggled forward, suffering severely from privation and sores on the feet. On the second evening the ass died and was left by the wayside. Henceforward they could find no alleviation of the hardships and fatigue of their rough road, and day by day their small store of provisions diminished. Every hour they encountered new demonstrations of the work of Elizabeth’s murderers—indeed the further north they proceeded the more hideous were the footprints of massacre and famine upon the desolated land. They came upon solitary wretches, male and female, often naked to the bitter cold, wallowing upon the frosty ground spitting forth curses and blasphemies from

lips green with dock and grasses. The mountains echoed to one another the cry of a whole tortured province—"There is no God. Anti-Christ has slain Him." Once they found three children, with eyes like those of famished wolf-cubs, drowsily devouring the flesh of their dead mother. When in a blind frenzy Art had cuffed them off, one of the wretched little creatures fell into a convulsion and died in a few moments, whilst the others crawled back to their horrid feast with hoarse and inhuman cries. In a remote place they found a woman in the final throes of death bound to an oak sapling. Her arms had been broken, and strangled in her long hair hung a month-old child which must have been dead for upwards of two days.

Sick in mind and fevered in body from scanty food and exposure to the bitterness of nights spent in draughty hovels or even in the open ditches, they at last reached a hill from which they could see Tralee, a place which they hoped had not yet felt the scourge of the English and would be sufficiently provisioned to yield some addition to their almost emptied wallets.

They found the town in flames. With numbed minds they tottered down the hill-slope towards it, hardly conscious of their direction, and not daring to look one another in the face. As they approached the broken gate of the town they could already see all the details of the dreadful work in those tragic streets and by-ways, and once they caught a glimpse of a cold, implacable figure on horseback—Carew or Coote himself, as they judged—sowing the seed of loot and massacre and incendiarism, the harvest of which his savage followers were only too accomplished gleaners.

They avoided the town by a long and difficult detour, and by evening were again in the mountains. That night they lay beneath a great boulder, huddling together for warmth, having eaten nothing since daybreak. Fever-dreams and the gnawing teeth of famine made the darkness hideous. They stumbled on all through the following day, whilst demons chattered and hunger grinned and howled.

That evening it began to snow out of a copper sky glooming slowly into a dense blackness, and then, as the fall thickened, becoming dissolved into a whirling dimness of grey. At each breath that the three travellers drew in the sword-like atmosphere it seemed to them that the whole world groaned in pain. By good chance, as night fell, they happened upon a small cave in the recesses of one of the mountains above Gleann-na-Galt. Into this they crawled upon hands and knees, and with great difficulty lighted a fire, for their numbed fingers were scarcely able to handle the flint. Senseless with hunger and cold, their bodies heaving and moaning, they lay down upon the damp earth. The cold seemed to have penetrated through bone and marrow into their very brains, freezing the faculty of prayer. All the night they lay silent side by side, dozing fitfully now and again, and waking with a start to behold deliriously the gaunt and hollow faces of their companions lighted with horrid fantasy and, as it seemed, with sinister playfulness by the dying flicker of the fire.

As the cold light of dawn dragged languidly into the mouth of their shelter Connall O'Leary opened his eyes. There was something about the chill, white light that he could not understand. He lay musing upon this for half an hour, and then

with a great effort raised his head. The opening was almost entirely blocked up with snow. He regarded it drowsily and without emotion, and yet dimly he was amazed that he felt no surprise. His eyelids seemed weighted with lead and pained him horribly. He blinked at his sleeping companions. Their bodies seemed to leap and flicker where they lay. It was useless to waken them. Death itself was surely more merciful than the pain of this white light against the eyeballs.

Later in the day they made a short and despairing attempt to clear away the snow at the mouth of the cave sufficiently to allow them to escape from their prison. Sweating and fainting with weakness and exertion, they tore at the frozen mass with their hands until their fingers bled beneath the nails, only to find at last that the drift was impenetrable, for great masses of snow were slipping every half-hour from a projecting crag immediately above the entrance. After struggling for two hours, utter weariness overcame them, and they lay down sobbing with despair. All day they crouched thus, a pale shaft of daylight falling forlornly upon them from a narrow chink high up in the opening of the cave which the snow had left uncovered.

In the early evening of the following day delusions came to Dermot. At times he imagined that he was a wolf, tossing up his head, baring his teeth, and making hoarse barking sounds in his throat. At another time it was clear that he supposed himself to be the spirit of the famine itself, and would crouch in a corner laughing slyly, wagging his head, his tongue lolling, while he pointed a lean triumphing forefinger at his companions.

After enduring this for some hours, Connall went

over to the place where Art sat, his head on his knees, his famished brain lost in some heedless and listless contemplation. He touched him on the shoulder, and, after several helpless attempts to articulate, nodded his head at the red-eyed gibbering figure.

Lifting his head abstractedly, Art gazed at him, a calm smile like that of a shy child in his eyes, with no indication that he understood the situation. Connall nodded again, but Art only laughed shortly, and sank back into his hidden dreary dreams.

Opening his eyes at dawn, Connall found Art on hands and knees leaning over him and groping in his breast. Connall stared at him fascinated. "The Skin-book," gasped Art hoarsely. "Give me the Skin-book." I am hungry—the hunger of a damned soul is upon me, do you hear? That madman there—ugh, he stabbed himself just now in the dark. I heard it, I'm saying; the Skin-book, Connall." He shook him violently, till his teeth rattled. "By God, we will be chewing that since there is nothing else."

Connall lay still. The horrible and sacrilegious thought drew him like a sweet melody. Art continued to fumble in his clothing, scratching his breast sometimes with his long nails. Suddenly the figure of the Ard-File, Art O'Sullivan, seemed to surge up in the dimness. The terrible contemptuous eyes glared upon them like ice. Connall gathered his faculties with a supreme effort, the sweat breaking out all over his body.

"Leave me, you mad amadán," he gasped. "Let you lie quiet or I will kill you." The words came burning from between Art's teeth, and with a jerk he snatched the sgian from his girdle, his

hot breath pouring upon Connall's face. With a violent motion the latter heaved up his body. He was the heavier and stronger of the two, and Art rolled over, striking wildly upwards with his knife as he did so. The blade grazed Connall's shoulder as he fell uppermost, facing the mouth of the cave.

A nervous frenzy seized him. The snow-crowded opening wheeled dizzily before his eyes in a blaze of red like an enormous and hilarious sun. Dragging out his own sgian he plunged it up to the haft in Art's throat. The latter's head fell back. He heaved his body once, there was a splutter and a choke in his gullet, and then he lay still.

An hour later a distracted sun-ray crawling feebly over the snow into the cave found the solitary figure still shuddering over his dead.

Several years had passed, and stagnant and apathetic peace had spread like a blight over the province. A day came when some turf-cutters, sheltering in a mountain cave from a sharp shower of hail, found three human skeletons lying on the damp mould. The bony hand of one of these still clutched a mass of dried pulp which, on being examined, was found to bear the imprint of human teeth. In a crevice of the rocks in the interior of the cave, perhaps blown there by some wandering wind, the startled visitors discovered a tattered fragment of vellum, upon which traces of ancient Irish characters were still decipherable.

II

THROUGH THE RAIN

It is for you in the first place, my friend, that I recall this strange experience, for you who know a delight as keen and searching as is present with myself when walking out in thoroughly bad weather, in surrendering the body and spirit—aye, the will itself—to the violent caprices of unchainable rains and winds and seas. How often have we striven together against stinging south-westerly gales as they lashed the streaming and slippery quays of that old grey town of the west in which for one whole winter we had occasion to share lodgings. You will remember as well as I those dishevelled twilights when pools of water stood in the cracks of flags and paving-stones, when slimy pins and ring-bolts gleamed sullenly under the struggling light of the last broken tawny glare in the west, when even in the harbour the black waves slapped with angry haste against the green and barnacled walls of the slips and spars creaked and rattled and ropes strained before the hissing gusts of wind and rain. Standing there with the rain scourging our faces and the wind whistling as it seemed between our ears and our caps, our legs pinned by the whipping folds of our coats, we have read half-blinded the names of the sombre and beautiful craft, sentient creatures we fancied,

and dumb only with surprise of the storm. Some of them were Celtic names of owners in the Southern ports or of those on the Clyde, whilst others were foreign enough, names full of rich, soft vowels that set the wander-blood that is the heritage of youth leaping in all our veins, vague gleams of multi-coloured romance flashing for a moment against the souging blackness before our eyes, and lovely and mournful melodies, half-sensed, stirring the heart with the sweet pain of that "Over the hills and far-away" that is found in every language and is the oldest lilt in the world.

Together we have felt that sense of inexpressible lightness, almost of disembodiment, which comes at such an hour, as though the force of the storm had snapped the chains of Space and Time, and set our spirits free to wander unchecked in all centuries and all climes.

Yes, we both know the heartening ecstasy of these moments, but it is of another and a more mystical mood that I would write now, and although we have never spoken together of such things I feel sure that these half beautiful, half terrible, states of vision are not unknown to you.

Do you recollect certain lonely moments, noisy with outward storm, and yet tremulous with an inward quiet, intense and suspended—moments when the grey veil of torn mist upon which your eyes dream becomes a whirling mirror blown clear and dusked again by the demon of the wind, a bewitched crystal in which instead of the familiar black bog and curtained mountain and frothing lake-water past things may become appallingly apparent? Do you know such moments, I say? I think you do, for I am sure that in fleeting instants

I have seen the wonder and terror of this wisdom in your eyes.

It was the memory of such an experience that came to me with a sudden startling vividness a while back, just when a more than usually mastering gust blustered against the corner of the house, flinging a hissing scatter of hail down the chimney upon the fire and driving a stinging reek of turf-smoke into my eyes. Before I had rubbed them clear I saw again for a brief moment what I beheld through the rain of that day.

It is some years now since the desolate October evening on which this vision of which I speak came to me. I was in Donegal at the time, a temporary inhabitant of that village which has become dearer to me than any place under the stars, a secret shrine of dreams and spiritual desire. All the morning it had rained—rained as perhaps it only can in the Northern hills. The wind was from the south-west and the clouds trailed low on the earth, dragging before the wind over the boggy and rocky soil of the glen and followed immediately by others, an endless whispering grey host, hurrying into the mountains at the back with their sad and tender message from that west that is the illusive Heart's Desire of the Celtic imagination.

In the afternoon the rain still continued, but I had grown tired of work and of the unevenly papered walls of my room, whose only decorations were two cheap oleographs of the present Pope and his predecessor and a coloured supplement from the Christmas number of some magazine of twenty years ago. Allowing my book to slip from my knees to the ground I rose from my chair with a sigh and went over to the window.

For a few moments I gazed pensively at the heaped-up pearly mists pouring resistlessly up the glen, and then the ceaseless soft motion seemed suddenly to communicate itself to my own heart together with a strong inclination to mingle myself with those quiet-footed hosts and accompany them for a while on their road. I felt—obscurely still and yet with a certain persuasiveness that would not be put aside—the fancy inattentively and lightly conjured up in the morning that they were upon some secret quest, either the messengers or the seekers of some melancholy spiritual mystery. I could stay indoors no longer. Going downstairs I took my coat and hat from their peg in the white-washed passage and went out into the chill wet dimness of the evening. There was no one in the little village street as I passed through it. The whitewashed walls of the cabins on either side were streaked with brown stains where the dirt had oozed down from the roofs, and the straw itself was sodden to every tone of stained yellow and tawny brown. Bristling grass growing among the soiled thatches and lank wisps loosened from beneath the ropes and stones which bound them flapped desolately in the wind. The ill-kept road had become a morass and in the soft deep ruts small rivulets gleamed dimly in the feeble light. Among the grass at the side of the road two or three ducks, complacently wallowing among the remnants of broken crockery and rusty and battered tin cans, shook the water from their tail-feathers and expressed their content with low chuckling quacks. This was the only token of life in the place. I followed the road up the glen between its borders of dripping grey thorn-bushes, passing a few more cabins, almost all with

the tops of their half-doors fastened up against the weather. Behind one of these someone was practising a reel on a crack-toned fiddle, and as I passed another I heard a sour voice scolding in Gaelic at some children.

Soon I had left all trace of human life behind me and was companioned on every side by the drifting mists. As I moved moodily forward through the intense loneliness and stillness I was surprised to remark a narrow bohireen which suddenly appeared to my right. I could not remember to have seen it before nor was I able to make out its direction, for the grey mantle of cloud was heaped so heavily over it that my eyes could only follow its course for a few yards. The unremembered and obscure footpath seemed to hold some secret lure for my melancholy mood and unconsciously I resolved to follow it until I would at least find out where it led.

Leaving the road I plunged into the dense mist. The bohireen—or rather bridle-path, for it was little more—had clearly fallen into disuse for many years, for over its borders the tufted heather—its tops now heavy and palely gleaming with silver and web-like veils of rain—had grown so closely that its direction was hardly discernible.

The wind, though not very strong, now and again made short rushes over the waste of black bogland, sighing sharply—as it seemed with a kind of impotent viciousness like some mortally wounded animal—and fainting away again immediately. No cry of heron, curlew, or plover broke the stillness. There was something trance-like in this melancholy groping through the dead and dripping heather with the walls of mist heavy and impenetrable

about one on all sides, a silence and desolation unforeseen and disturbing. For an instant it seemed that the life of the spirit was shadowed forth in this uncertain progress through a dim and hovering company of shadows—a friendless, foeless land. I shook off this uncomfortable fancy hurriedly, and even as I did so the track suddenly came to an end. I looked about in all directions, stirring the heather with my foot, thinking that possibly in the course of time the path had become overgrown for a few yards, but without success. I stumbled irresolutely this way and that, uncertain whether to turn back at once or to venture a few perilous steps further in the soaking and trackless bog, and then suddenly an exclamation of astonishment and alarm escaped me. My right foot was sinking rapidly in a welter of soft rich mud that bubbled oozing and gurgling in a cloud of froth as far as my shin before I could realise that I was no longer on firm soil. With an effort I succeeded in keeping my balance and dragged my foot up sharply. The bubbles sank down again in the depths of a heaving and throbbing vortex of mud and with a gasp of relief I drew back carefully until I felt the unyielding rock beneath the soles of my feet. It was then that I discovered I was on the brink of a marsh or lake—I could not tell which, for the hurrying blind ones of the rain thronged the water impenetrably at a short distance from its margin.

There was nothing outwardly remarkable about the place, but even at the first glance I was filled with an unaccountable disquietude. Coarse and colourless reeds flapped and rustled before the wind at the edge of the water, and though slightly disturbed by the rain the latter was so clear that

I could dimly see the weeds and fungi stirring languidly in the depths. At that moment the wind dropped momentarily, the rain lightened, and the surface of the water became almost glassy-clear.

I leaned forward involuntarily. For an instant something seemed to glimmer redly in the oozy depths. I stared into the marsh and a strange confusion clouded my brain.

I groped feverishly among a heaped wastage of memories, searching for something that the gloomy glitter in the bottom of the marsh had fallen upon for one fleeting moment—some fragment of a tale heard in childhood, or perhaps dreamed—possibly even——

I started. There was something stirring in the mist on the other side of the water, something was approaching, forceful and pervading.

I listened with every nerve strained. Out of the mist came a strange mingling of sounds, a rhythmical ring and clatter as of multitudes of arms and bucklers and a great sighing like the hurried breathing of a vast host on the march.

I speak of sound, but even at the time I knew that it was not sound, but as it were the shadow of sound, for it did not strike my ears, but rather some inner sense. Even as I listened a spear-head broke the mist, and then a second, and then many an one like stars bursting through a storm.

A great army began to defile transversely through the teeming hosts of the rain. This was no latter-day battle-array but a ragged horde of the gallow glasses and kernes of the old time. They moved like shadows in a dream, mighty and shaggy shapes, some clothed in untanned skins, others in a kind

of rough armour with cross-garterings about their legs, but the majority were half-naked. Their long dark hair, curiously plaited, was matted with the rain and hung about their scarred brows. Their weapons were of a most diverse nature, some carrying immense ashwood spears with heavy heads of iron or bronze, whilst others were merely armed with sickles or even small reaping hooks. One or two of them bore great curved battle trumpets of the kind that was then called a "stoc" and among their number were many harpers. I knew they were hastening to battle, for all marched forward with heads erect, their eyes staring before them and a kind of blind defiance and ferocity in their gaze. In some faces the "mircath" or battle-frenzy was already burning.

At their head and a few paces in advance of the remainder of the army a tall solitary figure marched. The upper part of his body was attired in a beautifully wrought suit of chain armour, while a kilt tossed about his knees. Across his shoulders was a purple cloak embroidered about the borders in serpent convolutions, a golden torque circled his bare throat and thin bracelets of the same metal glittered upon his brown arms. His head, which was bent in some melancholy reflection, was crowned with a golden circlet adorned with rays.

I stared at this figure, fascinated. There was something strangely familiar about his appearance, something arresting and intimate, though to my knowledge I had never seen any living man attired as he was. As I have said his head was sunk upon his breast and I could not see his features. Reaching the edge of the marsh he paused as though struck with a sudden thought, but even when he motioned

with his hand to the hosts behind him, commanding them to halt, he did not raise his eyes. The great army trailing back into the misty obscurity checked its march abruptly and each man became instantly motionless, though a low hoarse murmur passed through the ranks for a moment as though of complaint at the delay. For a moment, I say, for immediately I realised vaguely that it was but the tearing sigh of the wind as it fled through the tops of the heather.

The king gazed steadily into the oozy depths of the marsh. I cannot explain the state of consciousness I was in at the time, but all of a sudden my vision seemed to become one with that of the brooding king, in that I saw that which took place with his eyes rather than with my own. Again that dull red-gold glitter glared obscurely in the depths of the water. And then the dimness cleared and I saw the reason. The weedy bed of the marsh was full of golden crowns like that worn by the staring king, and circled by these crowns were the brows of human skulls. The empty sockets where the eyes had been gazed up blankly through the water. The bodies of most of these mighty ones of old were engulfed in the bubbling mud, but some few had become loosened and rolled heavily to the swaying motion of the reeds with which they were entangled. For a moment I stared at the sight in an entranced horror and then I was again on the other side of the water, which was now once more clouded and disturbed by the densely falling shafts of the rain. I saw that the king had raised his head. It was my own face into which I gazed, my own eyes sombre with a dark foreknowledge that I encountered.

My heart leaped and for a moment seemed to cease beating. I gasped and then paused in wonder. The rain still beat in my face, but all trace of the marsh had disappeared. Surely I was stumbling down the street of my own village. Yes, here to my right was Owenin Beg's forge and a few paces further on the whitewashed walls of the chapel loomed out of the dripping dusk. I reached my own door shaken with a great bewilderment.

At first I supposed that, drugged by the monotonous blank greyness of the mist, I must have returned home almost unconsciously while my brain was busy with a kind of waking-dream in which I beheld the strange scene I have related. But I have become persuaded since that while my body retraced its steps my spirit had lingered awhile by the side of that lost water that I have so often tried in vain to rediscover and had gained for a second time the foreknowledge of that death which was to overtake me and the fleeting power and glory that was mine so many centuries ago.

III

THE CALL OF THE ROAD

I

It was past midnight. From the edge of a driving storm-cloud the light of the December moon fell like a spear, a cold challenging loveliness dropped to earth from the hand of a petulant spirit. For the last half-hour the strife had been hard. Softening welters of pearl and amber and bronze had shown at intervals that the hosts of the rain were thinning before the strengthening gleam. The hail ceased suddenly, and now the moon's face was luminous with a bleak triumph almost as wild as the previous tearing darkness. White arrows of light seemed to fill the air, whilst on earth a strange and secret beauty awoke. All the bare glen was covered with a silver veil flickered and rippled constantly by the north wind blowing shrilly in violent gusts, that hissed in the blackberry bushes and the bare branches of the sparse sycamores and rowans and shook down a shower of liquid gems into the throbbing webs and mists below. Tiny points of light of unimagined colour and delicacy trembled on every thorn and twig as though the mist were pierced with innumerable fairy shafts assembling for some phantasmal warfare. The half-melted hail was blown across the roads by the gusts and

lay massed in the ditches like snow. And among the shafts and the snow the phantom flowers of Irish hills bloomed, grey and blue, the evanescent but unfading blossoming of the Donegal wilderness.

But to Mickey Rourke, tinker, who, supported on either side by two fellow-revellers, was making a devious and uncertain progress down the glittering road, these aspects of his native country made no appeal. Mr. Rourke was burningly if vaguely alive with a desire to be rid of his companions, and to be allowed to assume a recumbent attitude in the streaming shough at the side of the way—in respect of which side his intention wavered—whilst his two friends were equally persistent in their endeavours to induce him to abandon his project and to come on out o' that. They reasoned with him with simple eloquence, they exhausted their resources of argument, entreaty and blasphemy.

Mr. Rourke was adamant, and with maudlin bitterness lamented to the stars his unequalled misfortune in being afflicted with companions of such depravity and inebriety as Tommy Cunnea and Pat-Vickey Gillespie. They were three miles from the shebeen in Meenadruim, through the door of which the two country lads had dragged Mr. Rourke by his tattered coat-tails. To the local mind the townland was greatly blessed in a situation six miles removed from the nearest police-barrack, and if for that reason alone had become since the completion of the last haystack a favourite nocturnal meeting-place for the more energetic and adventurous lads of the country-side. During the summer months smoke was often to be seen issuing from a hole in the rocks upwards of a hundred yards

from the nearest cabin, and pint bottles of Meenadruim poitin of a highly inflammatory virtue and glue-like consistency had swelled the roomy breast-pockets of many a man of the lower glen returning home in the dawn. The country knew well that this beatific state of things could not continue, for already priest and peeler had shown unmistakable signs of bestirring themselves. The matter had been referred to from the altar with admirably sustained passion by Father Dara, the curate-in-charge, though there were those in the congregation who had reason to know that six bottles of the same poitin were locked in the dining-room cupboard of the parochial house at that moment.

From time to time Mr. Rourke was moved to song. For his supporters the phrase may be said to have had a painfully literal significance, for the singer found it necessary to emphasise each assonance and alliteration with a violent lurch of uncertain direction, and since there appeared to be little or no scheme in Mr. Rourke's rhythmical ecstasies it was impossible to tell whither the party would be propelled from moment to moment.

“ bhí an bhó bhuinne chúmhra ag géimnidh
As na h'éanlaith go meidhreach le cheól ”

proclaimed the melodious tinker in dragging quarter-tones that a fanciful ear might have imagined echoed in faithful imitation by the wild cats in neighbouring Cnochnamban.

“ Arú, let you quit your roaring and come on out o' that, Mickey, ye damn fool you,” gasped Pat-Vickey, his small slightly-built frame strained painfully to cope with one of Mr. Rourke's ponderous lurches. “ God, I'm bet out entirely, I tell ye,

Tommy. We'll not see Faucha before the skreek of dawn ; no, nor Bráid itself."

"We'll not, then," shouted Cunnea above the din.

"Damn, but there's the full tide of sweat over every inch of me, and it teeming with hail too. There now, quit that, me buck, and let yez step out mannerly, or we'll be leaving you to rot in the shough of the road, if you be my first cousin itself."

" 's ar bhruach an tsruthain ar leath-thaoibh dhíom
bhí an cailín deas cumhdach na mbó "*"

howled Mr. Rourke, rolling his eyes languidly on the moon. Then obeying, as it seemed, some sentimental suggestion, he laughed weakly, and flinging his arms suddenly round Pat Gillespie's neck, hung there limply like a dead hare over a sportsman's shoulder.

"It's yourself should be l-lilting yon song—mo—mo—c-ch-chroidhe," he hiccoughed affectionately. "Sure, it's you has the lass can be minding the cows rightly."

"Leave me go," gasped the choking Pat Gillespie, "leave me go, you b——y streeler, I'm saying. You'll have me strangled. Damn, but I'll make you, then"; and he hit Mr. Rourke a smart blow between the eyes.

The tinker's arms fell apart immediately, and he staggered heavily to one side, righted himself by a singular gymnastic contortion, and slipping on a patch of melting hail, lurched again, rolling helplessly like a foundering ship.

* The Donegal form of the refrain of this well-known song.

Pat-Vickey leapt to one side, and Mr. Rourke fell with a heavy thud and splash into the streaming ditch. Once on his back he lay like a log, while the icy water rushed and gurgled about him, soaking the new pair of trousers for which Mr. Rourke had paid the Glen tailor that very morning, a transaction conducted with much guile and a ferocity and bitterness on both sides obviously wanting in sincerity, but regarded as in the nature of such things.

“ Well, you be to have done it now, Pat,” said Cunnea grimly ; “ he’ld not be rising out o’ that if the Pope itself ’d be standing over him calling red damnation on his soul.”

“ I’ve done it, is it ? ” exclaimed Pat, with heat. “ Well, who wouldn’t then ? Tell me that ! Sure my four bones are cracked in me with the batter-action they’re after getting from yon play-boy. Let you come on now out of this. We’ld have a right to be leaving him here till the sun will dry him stiff.”

“ Arú,” said Tommy, “ he’ld be dying on us, there’s that power of devilment in him ” ; and he laid hold of Mr. Rourke’s heels with the intention of dragging him into the open road.

“ Whisht now,” cried Pat Gillespie, suddenly, “ there’s some person coming this way.” They remained motionless listening, while the water oozed down Mr. Rourke’s neck and his clothes enveloped him in a chill and clammy embrace. The steps came nearer, until the figure of the approaching man was distinguishable in the moonlight.

“ It’s Brian Cormac of Meenaduff,” said Pat-Vickey.

“ Who are ye drowning, boys ? ” inquired Brian with indifference, as he came up to them and paused, his hands deep in his pockets.

“ Drowning be damned,” grunted Cunnea. “ Here, lay a holt like a good ’un.”

“ He’s a stout lump of a streeler, whatever,” said Brian, complying. “ Who is he at all ? One of the Bráid ones, I’m thinking.”

“ He’s not, then, but a tinker. One of the Rourkes—Mickey they do be calling him. Conn McConnell and Bidy Rourke—that’s the sister to that one—do be lodging in Faucha below. Here now, up with you, me boy-o.”

They pushed, thumped, and kicked the tinker into an upright position.

“ Cailín deas cumdhach na mbó,” mumbled Mr. Rourke to the night at large, and sat down gently upon vacancy, supported by his devoted companions.

“ You’ll not get that one to Faucha before dawn ; no, nor half the way,” remarked Brian, with relish.

“ Musha, that’s the truth I’m thinking,” agreed Pat dejectedly. “ Sure we’re destroyed at him. I’d sooner be carrying a heifer intil the fair of Glenties than to be contending another half-hour with this streeler here.”

“ What light will that be back west yonder ? ” suddenly inquired Tommy, who had been peering about eagerly.

“ What, under the brae is it ? That’s Niell Carr’s.”

“ Niell Mor, is it ? ”

“ Aye, Niell Mor. He has some kind of a big night within on the head of his eldest daughter

coming back from America. I was in it myself a piece back."

"Is it throng within?" asked Tommy.

"It is, then—middling throng. There's another Yankee in it, too—a fella' from beyond the mountain—Johnny McGinley they call him—it's be he's courting Sara Carr—that's Niell's youngest lass, ye mind. They're to be married in the New Year, 'tis said."

"Aye, I mind her right well," said Tommy, with a secret smile. "She's the bold article, is that one."

"Well, I must be shortening the way," said Brian, and moved on. "God bless the work!" he added jeeringly from up the road, and went on his way whistling.

"Pat," said Tommy dramatically across the rolling head of Mr. Rourke, "listen here," and, laughing wickedly, he caught his companion by the shoulder and whispered in his ear with stifled mirth. He was obliged to repeat his plan before its full humour and iniquity dawned upon the scandalised Pat.

"God! Tommy," he gasped, "it be to be scheming you are. Sure it'd be a sin to do the like of thon!"

"Ach 'gorra! That's fun! What harm is there? And if there was itself, haven't we our 'nough penance put in and we destroyed and crippled entirely the way we'll not be fit to put a stir out of us, hand or foot, good nor bad, to-morrow with the *tarlach* is in them?"

"But look, Tommy, he might be hurted or kilt itself, and he full up with all them schooners of drink, and what will be hindering his ghost from following us up any dark night and we walking the

roads, and taking a red sweat out of us with its crying out of the high beds in hell laid up against our coming."

Tommy spread out his hands towards the throbbing sky. "The Lord forgive him. There's talk," he retorted shrilly, stammering in his excitement. "Is he my cousin or yours, that same lad, and wouldn't I be knowing better nor you what class of crockery is in his ugly head? Well, there ye are! Let you come on now, Pat, my boy-o. Take you a holt of his two feet, and I'll be catching his oxters."

Pat was understood to mutter something about Petty Sessions and Lifford Jail, but he said no more in objection to an enterprise which on several grounds made a strong appeal to him.

Together they bundled Mr. Rourke without ceremony over the stone wall, bringing down a great part of it and leaving an instalment of the unconscious tinker's new garments clinging to the remainder. From this point they literally carried their burden over the spongy and hummocky surface of upland bog which lay between them and Niell Mor's cabin. The ground was unknown to either of the conspirators, and Tommy, who was in the rear with Mr. Rourke's lolling head pressed against the pit of his stomach, soon stumbled heavily in a deep hole, losing his grip under the tinker's armpits. There was a thud and a sloppy splash of water, followed by a stifled curse from Pat-Vickey. Tommy, grumbling and sighing, again raised his end of the burden, and then suddenly burst into choking laughter.

"Whisht now," whispered Pat sharply, and then fell to laughing himself, as he too caught sight of

Mr. Rourke's face lifted to the moon. The effect of patches of rich mud and an oozing stream of black bog-water were now added to the natural attractions of the tinker's countenance.

"It's hard to say, but he'd take a start out of any lassie would be meeting him in the road now," spluttered Tommy Cunnea hoarsely.

"Will you whisht now," answered Pat, controlling himself sternly, "and let us be done with him. God, then, but he's a sore enough looking case, this same buck!"

At last they reached the trickling bothirín leading to the cabin door, from behind which sounds of merriment already fell upon their ears. They approached at right angles to the house in order that the light streaming through the two small windows might not by ill chance reveal them to any person within.

"Now," said Tommy, as they crept in under the thatch. With infinite care they arranged the now completely unconscious Mr. Rourke in an upright position against the house-door, his back tilted very slightly towards it, and stood away regarding their work with critical eyes.

"Is he right now, do ye think?" whispered Tommy cautiously.

"He'll do," replied Pat in the same tone, and after a moment's anxious pause nodded to the other. Tommy Cunnea stepped on tip-toe up to the door and rapped sharply upon it. There was an instant lull within. "Come on now," whispered Tommy hurriedly, and the two conspirators made off into the shadows, painfully choking a fit of nervous laughter.

"Tar isteach!" ("Come in!") said a hearty

voice from behind the door. There was a pause, and someone flattened a nose against the minute window-pane. Followed a low-toned and anxious argument, while outside the severe and dispassionate rays of the moon fell upon the lamentable and mottled features of Mr. Rourke and the form of their owner lolling grotesquely against the door. And always the lovely gleams glanced and trembled on thatch and heather, on tree-top and thorn, and mountain hollows palpitated in ecstasy of the pearly glories that, heedless of the dismal comedy of man's degradation, they brimmed towards the stars.

II

As Briany Cormac had said, it was "middling throng" in Niell Carr's cabin, and the heat was intense.

After an absence of six years in America, Maggie, the gigantic farmer's eldest daughter, had arrived at the Glen post office early that evening in the mail-car from Gorteen. From thence she had completed her journey in more homely sort and an extremely dusty cart with bright-blue shafts and red-rimmed wheels. She had been escorted during this latter stage by her father and brother, both of them in a condition of intense and tearful enthusiasm slightly enhanced by artificial means. The popular lady was now enthroned next the fire on a plain kitchen chair, and was receiving the exuberant attentions of her old neighbours with cheerful composure. She was well and simply dressed, in person still young and tolerably good-looking, though the appearance of her naturally fine hair was impaired

by the dull sheen of much cheap bear's grease and the insertion of the pad—now, alas! so greatly affected by girls in the West of Ireland.

Though she spoke English with great fluency and a liberal use of such phrases as "I presoom" and "I guess," once considered as hall-marks of gentility, she preferred, in common with most returned Americans of the last few years, to speak in Gaelic.

The natural expression of her face was good-natured, though a little foolish.

The youngest girl, Sara, hovered between the back of Maggie's chair and the door. She was tall and strong, and luxuriously formed, with a high, rather over-developed bosom and wide hips. Her untidy black hair was parted carelessly in the middle and drawn back in heavy waves above her ears, over the edges of which loose wisps escaped and fluttered as she moved. Her skin was brown almost to sallowness, though a hot red glowed in her cheeks. She possessed a rather square nose, tilted slightly at the tip, and a sensitive and petulant mouth, large but well-formed. But her eyes dominated all else in her personal appearance. These were deep and black as pools of bog-water, and burning with a restless fire that seemed a witness to a wilful and volcanically disturbed spirit within. There was that about the lithe movements of her body and the nervous clenching and unclenching of her hands that suggested the motions of the limbs and claws of a wild animal.

Seated near Maggie and following Sara about the room with rather scared and puzzled eyes, was John McGinley, who had returned from America in the same boat with the elder girl. A match

was in process of settlement for himself and Sara, and it had been agreed that after the marriage the pair would take over the control of some large farm in the neighbourhood.

Besides Niell Carr and his son, the only other adult person in the room directly related to the house was the farmer's second daughter, Mary, a healthy pleasant-faced young woman, who was expecting her third confinement in a few weeks. The remainder of the company consisted of neighbours from surrounding townlands.

Conviviality had attained its height at the moment of the unexpected knock at the door, and when Niell Mor's hearty invitation to the stranger met with no response, speculation and anxiety became rife. "Well, open the door till you see who's in it," cried Sara, impatiently tapping the floor with one bare foot.

"Do not then, Niell," said a voice in the background, "who's to say what thing might be in it, and it all hours of the night?"

"The Lord save us, that's true for you," put in another in a low, fearful tone, "myself felt a kind of crawling and creeping in the heather the time I was coming up the brae."

"It might be a faery or a ghost itself," said a woman near the fire, wrapping her shawl more closely around her.

"Arú," cried Sara, in high scorn, "will ye whisht. Ye have me heart-scalded altogether with your plubbering of faeries. Let yez stand clear now till I open the door myself, since ye've not that much spunk in yez." And striding across the floor she unfastened the two latches simultaneously, and wrenched the door open with a vicious jerk.

Screams and squeals from the women and a hoarse roar from the men accompanied the entrance of a heavy body, that hurtled backwards past the astonished Sara, and after executing a complicated figure across the length of the floor, in which it would seem at least half a dozen hob-nailed boots were employed, fetched up with a crash against the dresser, and from thence slid thudding to the ground. Turmoil ensued. Crockery rattled and jingled, two dogs scrambled from beneath the table barking shrilly, a cat streaked across the floor and out into the night, screaming men and women clutched one another convulsively, whilst incoherent voices apostrophising God and the blessed saints in Irish and English mingled in the confusion. The enceinte woman turned faint, and, catching at her sides with both hands, was hurried somehow into the back room.

"It's the old lad itself," said a quavering voice in an unexpectedly loud tone which terrified its owner, a pronouncement followed by a renewed outburst of wailing from the women. Immediately there was a confused rush towards the door, struggling men and women crushing one another in their eagerness to escape the proximity of the agent of damnation. A scornful figure with flashing eyes and hands upon hips confronted them.

"It's Mickey Rourke, the tinker, and he drunk," said Sara, with slow distinctness, and laughing shortly and savagely, she pointed a bare derisive arm at the gaping crowd.

"Here, get out of my sight, the whole snivelling kit of yez," she cried turbulently, "and let you quit that foolishness now," she continued sharply, administering a thump to the bristly head of a

young man who was on his knees distractedly repeating disconnected fragments of the shorter catechism.

Sara went over to Mr. Rourke's side.

"Give me the tea-pot and a cup now, and let you hurry," she snapped at the pale-faced Maggie, who was standing up unsteadily by the fire, her hand to her heart. Meantime the majority of the neighbours, doubtful whether to be resentful, prayerful, or merely ashamed of themselves, crept back cautiously into the centre of the room, where they huddled together, peering over one another's shoulders. Sara poured out a cup of scalding and inky tea, and kneeling down by Mr. Rourke's side, shook that gentleman roughly and even punched him with severity about the arms and ribs, while she admonished him to rise up out o' that and not lie there like an old sheep would be lambing, the scorn of all the weans in the barony. Under this treatment, Mr. Rourke opened his eyes for a scarcely appreciable instant, and muttered thickly. Seizing the occasion, Sara forced the edge of the cup between his broken and discoloured teeth, tilting it slightly, and at the same time dashing back the hair from her eyes with a petulant gesture of her disengaged hand.

"Drink that, darling," she said with surprising softness. Mr. Rourke did so, and reopening his bloodshot eyes, showed instant signs of returning consciousness. "You'll do now, my playboy," remarked his ministrant grimly, when the contents of the cup had disappeared; "but it's no lie to say you're a sore-looking case at this moment," though she gazed at Mr. Rourke without disfavour.

The tinker sat up, smiling feebly and with modesty,

as though this tribute to his personal appearance were in the nature of flattery.

"Damn, but you're a decent class of a woman," he remarked with indistinct cordiality, and then, overcome by a wave of sentiment, began to weep, thereby causing the mud upon his pale face to form astonishing and streaky designs.

"O Dhia," he moaned, "if I do be a middling ordinary kind of a show itself, what call would I have to be washing my face every week or patching my clothes. Och, mo leun, isn't it the hard way of life for a poor man the like of myself to be travelling the dirty roads my lone all weathers? God knows it's a long path betwixt this backwards mountainy place and the clouds of the grave, and the mist rolling down the hill to the east and rolling down the hill to the west, and the wind crying always, and myself only an odd time maybe looking on a woman the like of yourself would set a fellow dreaming on your eyes, and he on the bare flag of hell."

"Musha, there's talking," chuckled an old woman sardonically, "and he a naked loungee the young girls would be fleeing from in the noon of the day itself."

"Ah! it's them tinkers are not slow to be putting 'grádh-mo-chroidhe' on the women, once they take the notion," answered a merry-faced girl from the shadows in the back of the room.

John McGinley started uneasily.

"Come now, Sorcha," he called with a good-humour which lightly covered his embarrassment. "I guess he'll do well enough now. Sit down here by my side till we fix what day we'll be getting spliced."

"Spliced, is it?" retorted Sara, turning for a

moment and flashing her eyes at him. "It seems you're mighty sure of me, then?"

There was a roar of laughter at this, and the young American turned away sulkily, looking a little foolish.

"Only hear that now!" said the old woman who had spoken before.

Niell Carr laughed shortly and nervously. He knew his daughter better than others, in that he was aware that she was incomprehensible.

"Ach, it's only scheming she is. She had that way with the boys, ever and always."

"Quit your blathering now," cried Sara sharply. "You're too free with your share of chat entirely, the lot of yez." She turned again to Mr. Rourke and tugged at his sleeve. "Here, rise up now out o' that. You should be able enough to stand on your feet any more."

With many groans, and rudely assisted by Sara, Mr. Rourke arose. Having accomplished this feat, he planted his boots with exactitude upon a selected spot in the flagged floor and stood swaying heavily, with one hand tenderly feeling the back of his head, whilst with the other he held on to a chair, suggesting the appearance of a ship precariously moored in a stormy anchorage.

"God!" he said vaguely, "I'd be thinking there's a great bell clattering in my skull, I'm that mazed! I'll be taking a seat, man o' the house, if there's no offence."

"Here, get out o' that," said Niell, cuffing a small barefooted boy with innocent grey eyes, who had thoughtlessly appropriated the whole of a chair to his own use.

Mr. Rourke drew the chair up to the fire, regard-

less of the protruding feet and legs of neighbours, and sitting down with a sigh, smeared his damp sleeve comprehensively across his face so that its more central portions were restored to a semblance of their natural hue, leaving the remainder rimmed with a thick fringe of mud. He spat ostentatiously into the fire, yawned, and gazed round lamentably with blinking and bloodshot eyes, whilst his wet clothes steamed and reeked to the rafters, until the dried fish suspended from the roof were almost obliterated. A dull gleam shone in his pupils as one by one he appraised the comforts of the room.

"Isn't it well for you ones," he observed with resentful malignance, his eye resting upon Sara, "and you sitting here snug and fat, eating your four meat meals a day, and only doing an odd turn of work when you've the mind for it? It's hard enough for poor fellows the like of me."

Niell Carr, who possessed a share of his youngest daughter's hot temper, controlled himself with difficulty as he replied:

"It's a great call you have to be talking and giving bad chat, the like of yon, Mickey Rourke. Wouldn't yourself have done better in the latter end to have put by the money you made by your trade, in place of drinking yourself blind and silly every day of the year, and coming to be a poor graceless, slobbering scare-crow would fix the devil itself with fright before you?"

"Well, where'll be the good in that?" returned the tinker with gloomy defiance.

"The Lord help you," went on Niell Mor, warming to his subject. "What'll be to hinder you from buying a passage til America and coming back in two years, or maybe three, till you marry a hand-

some lassie, the way John here will be wedding our Sara in the New Year, and settling down on a fine farm of land and rearing up a half-score of weans to be the comfort of your two selves and you in the end of your days."

Mr. Rourke was about to make some reply, when Sara, who was standing near the tinker's chair, laughed harshly and continued, imitating her father's tone :

"Aye, and getting dull and heavy-like and old before your time, and you breaking your heart turning up rotten spuds and minding a lot of stinking beasts, and hearing the blather of the priests o' Sundays, and the one old clack always from dribbling old bodachs you'll hate to be looking at. Aye, it's a fine life, Mickey, to be seeing always the same dirty hill to the east and the same foggy heap of rocks to the west, and staring down at a thatched byre in the bog below you night and morning till you be to be light in the head.

"The Lord forgive you, Mickey Rourke, you're better off the way you are, and it's what I'm thinking I'll be taking to the road myself, and I hearing always the call of distant places till I'm bothered with them."

"God save us, she's raving surely!" murmured a voice in an awestruck tone.

Mr. Rourke stared at the girl strangely, and then leaned forward.

"Is that a true thing you're after saying, mistress?" he inquired in a low eager voice, his haggard face close to Sara's.

"It is then, surely," answered Sara, glancing round boldly and defiantly at the scandalised and speechless company. "God knows I wouldn't

care a hait who I'd be taking up with, so I'd be quit of this place ever and always."

John McGinley leapt to his feet.

"What the hell are you saying?" he shouted hoarsely. "I calculate it's some joke you're playing on me. You were always the one to be scheming. Sure you can't be leaving me like this. Come now, Sorcha," and he laughed uncomfortably.

Mr. Rourke became irritated. To his mind a simple proposition was being visited with a too elaborate criticism.

"Arú, be damned to the whole pack of yez," he cried peevishly, hiding his discoloured face in his hands for a moment, and then suddenly stood up unsteadily, rolling up his ragged sleeves as he did so. "Come on now, mister," he roared at John in uncontrollable fury, "let you come on till I bash your fat, smooth face! I'll let her know which of us is the better man!"

A bustle of excitement stirred all the company. The women huddled together holding their breath, while the men craned their necks forward eagerly, nudging one another. With an imprecation Niell Mor snatched up a thick stick from a corner of the room and rushed towards the gesticulating tinker.

"Out of my house with ye now," he shouted hoarsely, "I'm sick and sore with your dirty blather. Out of my house, I'm saying, and may the devil find you out beyond and leave you rotten with worms before the skreek of day!"

"All right, mister. I'm going," said Mr. Rourke, suddenly abandoning his warlike guise, and becoming rather flustered.

"And I'm going along with him," said Sara, appearing from the inner room with a small bundle

wrapped in a soiled cloth. "I'm going too, do you hear, and no thanks to you. Sure, haven't I been looking long for this chance, and himself and others of the tramps along with him, between young men and old, making sheep's eyes at me every time they did be passing down the glen? And if this young fella' is but a poor unmannerly drunken show of a stocach itself, I'm thinking I'd do better along with him, travelling the broad roads of the north, and sniffing the sweet smells that do be rising from the damp earth in the dawn, and feeling the wind and the sun and the rain on my nape always than to be ever in the one smoky hovel all times, bearing sickly skinny weans to Johnny McGinley or his like, a fella' would be starting from a shadow or a dry leaf itself like an old ailing gearran once the fall of dusk is in it. And now let you come on out o' this, Mickey Rourke, and we'll be getting quare gaming and great sleep some place beyond these dirty hills."

"Come away, then," said Mr. Rourke, in a dazed voice.

Niell Mor, feeling the collective eyes of the awe-struck and scandalised company upon him, made one step forward, and then paused, dropping the stick on the earthen floor.

"Arú, let her go," he said recklessly. "De'il a hair I care what comes to her. She was ever and always a graceless bitch, and 'tis all she's fit for, I'm thinking."

He turned away, whilst Mr. Rourke, goaded forward by Sara, staggered out into the night.

III

I have seen them several times myself since. They come into our glen at intervals of three or four months, always solitary—in distinction from others of their kind who are in the habit of wandering in clans. The distant glare of a rim of red flannel overflowing the edges of their ass-cart is usually the first indication of the slow and apparently fretful approach of the cortège. Then by leisurely degrees they reach the cross-roads where they are accustomed to camp, and the sacking containing an assortment of saucepans, tin cans, trays, and even spoons and watches acquired by simple means of varying illegality, is emptied upon the triangular patch of grass at the roadside. Mr. Rourke slings his budget from his shoulders and prepares for work. A few peevish words are exchanged, and the plan of action is decided. The barefooted Mrs. Rourke arranges her brown and storm-stained countenance into an expression of crafty good-nature, her strong mouth capable of revealing at any moment two rows of perfect teeth as white as the rock marble of the glen, and proceeds up the road to open the campaign upon the public-house. At her heels trots an exceedingly dirty and beautiful child of six or seven years, whose tattered and ill-fitting rags hang loosely about her, the rents frequently showing glimpses of scratched knees and the gleam of shapely little shoulders. Mrs. Rourke enters the shop-door with discretion and dignity, waits patiently until other customers have been served, and then tossing her head proudly and settling her dirty shawl with a gesture of wonderful grace, proceeds in sugared accents, acquired in

the course of predatory excursions over the borders of Connacht, to engage the woman of the house in general conversation. Thus by easy stages the subject of refreshment is approached, hinted at, and at last definitely bróached. The first half-un's are paid for in solid coin, a portion is set aside for "himself," and a liberal share given to the child, the horrified remonstrances of the women of the house being met with the unanswerable argument that "the giorseach must be getting used to it at sometime whatever, God help her, and sure there be's no hour like the one that's in it."

Mrs. Rourke then wipes her mouth with the edge of her shawl, produces after much fumbling a tattered lump of black twist tobacco, bites off a piece with her strong white teeth, spits through the open door, and after filling a broken and filthy duidin, proceeds to smoke with a defiant and more than Oriental languor, holding the pipe in her mouth so that the bowl is toward the ground.

Mr. Rourke now enters. He is no master of phrase, a fact of which he is perfectly well aware, and accounts for the previous despatch of his ambassadress. His methods are direct even to bluntness. He tosses off his glass, and then proclaims to the shop in general that he has no more money and that his thirst is great. The woman of the house smiles incredulously and with conscious integrity, but being of liberal mind gives him another glass without a word. Mr. Rourke drains it at a gulp, and makes tentative inquiries as to the prospects of his trade in the neighbourhood and more particularly in respect of the inn's supply of tins and cans. The answer is unsatisfactory, and Mr. and Mrs. Rourke begin a whining duet on the leit-

motif of their extreme poverty and the discomforts of the nomad's life. The child stares for a moment with heavy eyes that are rapidly becoming clouded with drink, and then, possessed of a wisdom beyond her years and foreseeing the probable course of events, slips noiselessly and unsteadily into the street. The duet becomes impassioned; one or two good-natured customers in the shop stand treats. Mrs. Rourke's gestures become more impressive, the shawl slips away, her black hair falls over her eyes, which blaze through its cloud like stars through a flying storm. The atmosphere becomes electric with fevered argument. The woman of the house refuses any further liberality. Mrs. Rourke waves her arms like a warrior woman of the old time and dashing the duidin to the ground, where it smashes into fragments, threatens to break the windows of the shop and of every house in the glen. She curses the woman of the house and her relatives to the tenth degree. Attracted by the din, men crowd in from the street, and in high enjoyment encourage the frenzied amazon to higher flights of vituperation and violence. The climax arrives. Mrs. Rourke, to emphasise some point, raises one bare arm high above her head, loses her balance, lurches backwards, and falls unexpectedly upon the breast of a young fisherman, who receives her with a self-conscious snigger. There is a roar of laughter, and the woman of the house is heard to murmur, "God save us, isn't that one the devil?" At the word Mr. Rourke starts forward, a primitive fury raging in his eyes, seizes his wife by the arm and flings her across the shop, accusing her of amorous intent towards the innocent fisherman, and inquiring if he wasn't the amadán mi-chéillidhe

to have taken up with a striapach salach the like of yon.

Sara Rourke turns, her finger-nails seem to bristle, her hair to blaze with the flame of her eyes. The men nudge one another, grinning silently. She flies at Mr. Rourke like a wild cat.

The party is somehow bundled into the street, where high war rages for a while. The result is indefinite, and suddenly the combatants draw apart and gasp a few secret sentences to one another, in which appear words neither Irish nor English, and having no meaning for the onlookers. Probably they are remnants of the ancient holy language of Celtic druids and metal-workers, fragments of which have descended to a base usage among these outcasts of our population. The child reappears from nowhere in particular, receives a cuff from her mother, and the party, bleeding, sniffing, and completely sober, move on up the street with a scornful glance at the somewhat sheepish-looking spectators, the man slouching heavily and the woman with head erect and the carriage of a queen. Thus they proceed to the next public-house, where a similar scene is enacted. On more than one occasion I have seen the pair of them alternatively drunk and sober three times in the course of a single day.

There is no explaining this call of the road, this relentless gipsy fever that flaunts in the veins and harries the dreams of one man or woman here and there in the community, and often in the circle of the quietest hearth in the country-side. It is the voice of the distance. Mrs. Rourke is often asked why she prefers her present way of life to the certain and tolerably comfortable if monotonous circum-

stances that might have been hers. Her only reply is that she is better so. And it is true.

“Hills are green far-away” and “Cows overseas have long horns.” These are Gaelic proverbs, perhaps the yet tingling echoes of that trumpet-call of far-away that led the first Celts to leave their Asiatic plains and to wander westward into the desert emptiness with the phantasies of the sunset in their eyes.

IV

“SEANOIDÍN”

I

THE summer day was but an hour old when the Traveller, a slim, middle-aged gentleman of nervous and retiring demeanour, left the door of the house in which he was lodging and set off up the street. On the previous evening he had arranged with Danny-boy Gara to meet him at Carraignaphouca at half-past four in the morning in order that they might proceed together in Dannyboy's cart to the fair of Deerish. The morning was dull, and in the cheerless grey atmosphere there was a slight harshness presaging rain before nightfall. A half-starved dog slinking along the gutter, in which fragments of dirty paper and straws stirred in the light wind, eyed him wildly with a slanting and furtive eye and then made off down a side street. Otherwise the town exhibited no sign of life, and the Traveller rightly judged that he alone among the transient and permanent inmates of Dungloe thought the attractions of a remote country fair and sixteen miles' drive worthy the curtailment at cock-crow of a disturbed sleep. For Deerish Fair is in these latter days a faded glory, the hollow enchantment of a mere name.

“In the old days,” a rheumy-eyed ancient had

with animation informed the Traveller in answer to an inquiry on the previous evening, "there did be the sport of the world in Deerish." He took several gasping and wheezy pulls at a hopelessly stuffed duidin whose scratched brown stem was broken off within an inch of the bowl. "Man dear, them times of a fair day they'd be dancing and tearing away till they'd have the thatches kicked from the houses itself, and begob, the drinking and fighting and batteractions'd be in it! Sure a man would think little of coming from the south or east of Ireland or from the city of Cork itself for love to be looking on at them, the way he'd be left in the latter end with the skin cracked on his four bones with the scairts of laughter they'd take out of him. Arú, boy, you wouldn't ask pleasure but to be stepping about the street under the clouds of night them days, and you lepping ever and always over young and old strectched out with the drink, and they cursing away till you'd think the stars of God'd be to fall from the shining firmament, and thumping and welting one another all times and they not fit to rise, mind you! Still an' all, the women was worse again nor the men, and they ripping the clothes off each other until a decent body'd be shamed and in dread for his soul looking on at them."

A round of laughter from the bystanders manifested appreciation of the vivacity of this description. "Arú, don't be talking," continued the old man, expectorating with an immense air of worldly wisdom and in high good humour, "them were the days you'd see the comely women were the ripe wonders of the universe. But, sure, they're all away now like the mist at the skreek of yesterday's

dawn,” and the old fellow blinked regretfully at the fire, and then in a sudden access of impotent spite against the passing years, those remorseless hunters of youth, “Musha, dear save us, a person wouldn’t be bothered to travel a mile to it now with the peelers chasing up and down the street and the priests as thick as flies of an evening, and that’s the truth for yez now !”

After a few minutes the Traveller came out above the town and faced the desolate road to Carraignaphouca. The whole of the horizon was ringed with ragged hills, hard and dark blue in the chill dawn. Above them in every direction hung threateningly the folded curtains of black rain clouds, edged in the east where the blue of the mountains was deepest with a faint coppery glare. This Rosses country has at all times some witch-like quality, dark-eyed, subtle, and sombrely beautiful, vital with an elusive allurements of tragic recklessness and half weeping defiance, something at the same time soft and vicious like the suddenly gleaming eyes of a slim and tawny-skinned hoyden. Always in the rain-heavy wind that harries the heather from year’s end to year’s end are echoes fading and mingling, flying wracks of harsh goblin laughter and the tender dripping of tears shed for some forgotten sorrow. Here across this beautiful desolation and almost the only relief to the dark complexion of the world the sandy and strangely red roads tangle and pierce one another with a fierce distinctness that is almost painful, attracting the eye involuntarily to follow one of their rosy streams to an horizon whereover the spirit of a dusky eternity ever seems to brood.

The Traveller, who was acutely sensitive to the

moods of his country, was vaguely conscious of impressions such as these as he skirted the oozing manure heap before the first house of Carraignaphouca. Dannyboy was already dragging a dusty cart from the roughly thatched pent-house by the roadside and whistling incoherently over his labour the while.

He hailed the Traveller cheerily.

"Damn, but you're brave an' early," he ejaculated, gasping heavily as he wrenched the cart into the road. "This is a middling morning."

"It's not too bad," assented the Traveller phlegmatically. He started slightly but recovered himself at once. "Well, Dannyboy," he said, with a half-laugh, "I'll take my oath, you'll be the smartest man at the fair to-day."

"Aye, it's a fly kind of a rig. I'll do, I'm thinking," agreed his friend complacently, glancing down at a new suit of clothes made of rough cloth figured with the flamboyant colours of a Scotch tartan of very dubious authenticity, and tan boots which paled the redness of the roads.

"Come up, will yez?" said Dannyboy viciously to the mare, addressing a thump to her glossy and twitching flank. At last she was between the shafts and the traces fastened.

"Sit up now, you," said Dannyboy laconically.

The Traveller, who was lost in semi-humorous reflection upon the attention the other's striking attire would be likely to attract in the main street of Deerish, started again and scrambled with some difficulty into the cart, curling up his long body in as comfortable a position as the hard boards powdered with dust and grain would allow.

"Will herself be afoot as early as we, do you

think ? ” inquired the Traveller, as they started upon their clattering journey.

“ She will then, ” answered Dannyboy from the front without turning his head, and flicking the whip against the wind with as it seemed a certain proud elation. There was too a tenderness and quiet confidence in the short reply that was not lost upon his companion.

He was interested in Dannyboy and had been ever since his first meeting with him, for the young peasant had little by little revealed a curiously imaginative outlook upon the humble environment in which he moved, a gift of vision unfortunately not apparent, however, in his notion of tasteful attire. But in the peasant world of Ireland to-day the niceties of applied art find no place in the careless and dreamy horizons of the mind.

Moreover, Dannyboy presented many conflicting elements to the sympathetic misunderstanding of his friend. The lad’s delicate features, the long, narrow grey eyes clear as only eyes in the Rosses can be that from childhood scan the clear rain-swept distances, the straight, slightly freckled nose with finely cut nostrils, and the sensitive almost girlish mouth tallied very insufficiently with a swaggering curtness and studied profanity of speech affected by the male youth of Donegal when using the English tongue. Carrainaphouca, too, most sordid of Ulster townlands, with its sodden and stained cabins (more than half of them licensed premises) about which trailed dismally the grasses sprouting through the filthy and neglected thatches, its slimy midge-haunted pools of fetid manure and colony of wolf-like and verminous dogs, seemed an unlikely nurse for the love-passion which had made

a country tale of Dannyboy's name for miles round. For this inconsistent young man had recently fallen deeply in love with Mary Cunnigan, a beautiful girl who lived with her mother on the outskirts of Deerish, and this love, which was returned in the same degree if rumour could be credited, was of the nature that maddens the simple soul to conditions of pure and transcendental ecstasy and evokes imperishable poetry from behind the half-door of the mud-cabin. And Dannyboy was a poet. Passionate love matches are looked upon with suspicion in the West of Ireland. "It's not natural the like of thon. Them ones never come to any good. Sure we all know that," mumbled the old women, protruding bird-like features from the shadows of smoky shawls. Yet Dannyboy and Mary cared little for the croakings of all the hooded cailleachs between Inishowen and Glencolmcille and continued to love in their own way in desperation and wonder, and it was principally for the sake of seeing this girl that the Traveller had undertaken this uncomfortable expedition.

He admitted to himself that he did not understand Dannyboy. Having spent the greater part of his days in the office of a ship-owner in Belfast, though of mobile mind he was new to these aspects of life. Otherwise perhaps he would have more readily recognised the possibility of their strange harmony.

Day advanced sullenly and reluctantly, the blue of the hills faded and the distinct colours of the nearer landscape became gradually apparent, here the vivid purple of a patch of bell-heather, or again the rich red-brown of the reeds stirring feebly in some small loch by the roadside. Conversation

was difficult on account of the din of the atrociously rattling cart. Whenever either of the pair attempted a remark the words were jerked from between his teeth like shots from a repeating rifle. At last all effort at talk was abandoned and the Traveller devoted himself miserably to the task of coping with the inclination of a sharp ridge in the side-board of the cart to buffet him startlingly in the spine every time some slight irregularity of the road's surface interrupted the swift flow of the wheels along its red stream.

Dannyboy fell to whistling again—this time an air which his companion after a time recognised as an extremely syncopated version of “The Coolin.” At times the interminable tune would be punctuated with a gruff “Get on out o’ that” addressed to the mare. Otherwise the silence of all else was only accentuated by the pandemonium of the cart's progress.

After an hour or so they began to overtake more and more frequently scattered groups of country people in leisurely motion in the direction of Deerish; a late drover or two endeavouring to instil the sense of commercial enterprise and business-like haste into some recalcitrant beast; groups of staid elderly women with frieze skirts of incredible amplitude, most of their number taken to the fair in the capacity of domestic police with the unspoken intention of rescuing their men-folk from the siren voices of those who are prepared to stand treat on the tacit mutual understanding of reimbursement in the same kind; flocks of young girls, their hair bundled up high in hair-net and bag and their “cools” tied with enormous bows, hurrying along secretly, whispering without cessation, and some-

times breaking into little half-stifled screams of merriment.

Occasionally, too, the clattering cart would pass a young woman of more fashionable habit, hatted and veiled possibly for the first time in this world, and sauntering along languidly and self-consciously, the delicately lifted skirt revealing pointed boots a size or two over-small for country feet that a few years before were running naked and scratched over flints and whins.

Most of the men of the district were already participating in the turmoil of the day's business in Deerish, but with the few that the Traveller and Dannyboy passed the latter exchanged humorous and mordant sallies in Irish, the wit of the rejoinder being usually snatched away and lost on the shrewd bogland wind.

When the cart was within a mile or two of Deerish the bruised Traveller began to notice that an unaccountable consternation, even mingled with a certain curious awe, was apparent in the faces of many of the wayfarers at the sight of his companion. With an uncomfortable sensation of responsibility he imagined at first that possibly the astonishing attire of his young friend was the subject of remark, yet instead of the open mirth which he looked to discover as soon as Dannyboy's back was turned the impression conveyed to his mind by the shy yet evident horror on every face caused him a rising uneasiness. Dannyboy, however, seemed quite unconscious of the disquietude that his appearance created, and setting his cap at a still jauntier angle, flicked the whip in his hand with an even more elaborate swagger.

At last the cart pulled up with a jerk before a

small public-house at the head of the main street of the village. A group of men lounging on the threshold stared gravely and in complete silence at Dannyboy as he descended from his seat, still whistling the inexhaustible “Coolin.” The Traveller noticed that one or two turned away with a muttered exclamation and slunk into the open door of the inn almost with the air of men caught in some forbidden act by the parish priest.

“Grand day, boys,” said Dannyboy airily, preparing to take the mare from the shafts. No one replied. One of the men stirred uneasily, making an awkward movement with his left arm, and opening his lips as though about to speak. Suddenly he closed them again with a snap.

“What the hell’s come to yez?” said Dannyboy with some acerbity. “A person would think yez were all in chapel, you’re so civil.”

There was a constrained pause broken only by the flicking of straps and traces. Then a voice at the back said:

“You did not hear then?”

Dannyboy dropped the trace in his hand and looked up quickly.

“Hear what thing?” he snapped in irritation.

“About Mary Cunnigan,” and, “May God help you, boy,” came in a murmur from the other men. Some of the bystanders crossed themselves.

Dannyboy turned a chalky white and began to tremble all over.

“What about Mary?” he faltered in a voice faint as though echoed from afar over weeping moors, and then in a startling outburst of dangerous fury, shouted:

“ Why can't yez speak out, you pack of b——y fools ? ”

There was another momentary silence, and then the man nearest to him removed the cap from his head.

“ She's dead, God rest her,” he said quietly.

For a few moments Dannyboy stared at him stupidly, his pale face working strangely, whilst he made short feeble gestures before him with his hands. Then his eyes blazed and in an instant he had leapt at the man and struck him on the chin with his clenched fist.

“ Ye damned liar ! ” he yelled, and the foam frothed on his mouth.

“ Steady now, lad,” shouted the other men, and Dannyboy's arms were seized from behind by powerful hands. “ It's true enough, Danny lad, she was found this two hours back among the rocks below the Scraig Mór and she with the neck broken on her. Her mother was out all night after her. They do be saying it was after sheep she was last night and she be to have fallen over the banks in the mist.”

The poor boy's eyes rolled wildly for a moment, then he seemed to collapse. He made several attempts to speak, the words choking in his throat with a strange rattling sound. “ Leave me go,” he whispered at last. The group separated and Dannyboy staggered off down the street with swift uncertain steps, stumbling against every obstacle in his path, his sunken head lolling a little towards his left shoulder.

“ Some person'ld have a right to be going along wi' him,” said a voice in an excited undertone, “ sure he's gone light in the head, the poor

fella'. Who's to know what thing might come on him? ”

“ I think he's better left to himself for a while,” observed the Traveller sorrowfully.

“ Maybe you're right, sir,” agreed the man. “ Come now, boys, we'd best be putting the cart in.”

II

All the long summer day the Traveller wandered among the mazes of the fair, finding little to turn his mind from its gloomy brooding over the sudden and tragic night that had fallen upon the sunlit romance once so attractive to him. To his pre-occupied mood there seemed to lurk some malign and grisly masonry in the resounding hand-clasp ringing now and again over the lowing of beasts and babel of laughter and shouting whenever a bargain was successfully accomplished, as though the participators therein were in some obscure league with malicious destiny over this shocking handselling of death. A dismal and hateful mockery rang hollowly in the harshly alluring shouts of the trick-o'-the-loop man; the insinuations of the negotiator of the three-card trick, shunned as “ a coining lad ” and “ a bad pigeon ” even by the most innocent; the hoarse challenges of the dark-skinned, drink-sodden and neckerchiefed ruffians presiding over the shooting galleries and bagatelle board; the cries of the strident yet untiringly patient vendors of apples, crubeens, medals and sacred pictures; even the foolish and childish laughter of the young girls. It was as though all these discordant but commonplace sounds only subconsciously apparent were echoes of the jangled

derision of demons exulting over human wretchedness. Although his friend was nowhere to be seen—perhaps all the more for this very reason—the Traveller was all the day acutely conscious of Danny-boy's misery. The despair of that simple soul seemed to hover like a black wing over this scene of gross and senseless festivity, to exhale a suffocating blight into the mean street of the little town, rendering even the light of day unreal and phantasmal.

He felt an inclination that as the hours passed became almost overwhelming to leave the place, to return at once, on foot if need be, to Dungloe, to pack up his belongings and to hurry from the district. Yet although he felt totally unqualified to cope with a tragedy of a nature he had previously only dimly apprehended, he was conscious of a certain weight of responsibility as though circumstances had appointed him for this evening at least the natural protector of his unhappy young friend.

His many inquiries during the course of the day failed to elicit any reliable addition to his knowledge of the affair. Mary Cunnigan had been sent out by her mother on the previous evening to gather together the sheep belonging to them which grazed upon the slopes of the Scraig Mór, a hill of about three hundred feet—precipitous on one side—situated some two miles distant near the road that he and his companion had covered in the morning. She had gone alone and nothing further had been seen or heard of her until at day-break two of the country-boys had found her body with the neck broken at the foot of the Scraig. It was supposed that misled by the driving mist she

must have lost her footing on the slippery edge and so fallen to her death.

As night drew on the Traveller became harassed by an increasing apprehension. No one whom he addressed had seen Dannyboy since the fatal moment of the revelation of Mary's fate, so the Traveller not knowing any better course to pursue returned to the door of the inn where the horse and cart were stabled, there to wait for the coming of his friend.

He did not know what to hope for or dread. The business of the fair had started very early in the morning and by this time the greater number of the country-folk were already on their way home. Those who remained in the street were for the most part noisily intoxicated or rapidly approaching that condition. One or two deplorably drunken men lurched up to him where he stood and endeavoured to engage him in absurd and incoherent dispute, but finding little response to their monotonously reiterated abuse and hoarsely breathed insinuations soon moved off jeering sleepily over their shoulders as they went. At last for want of any other employment the Traveller called to a comparatively sober individual occupied in leaning against the streaky and oozing wall of the inn and spitting far into the street, and with the latter's languid assistance brought out the cart into the street and put in the mare.

Just as this was accomplished in the smoky twilight he distinguished Dannyboy coming heavily up the street supported by two countrymen.

It was almost with a sensation of relief that he observed that the poor lad had obviously drunk himself into a condition in which he was hardly

capable of standing unaided. The group approached, Dannyboy drooping limply forward, half carried in the arms of his companions, his head rolling feebly from side to side. His feet dragged helplessly, the heavy boots rattling on the hard dry road. "Lift him up," said the Traveller shortly. "We'll be getting home as soon as may be," and he began to light the head-lamps of the cart. "Where did you find him?" he asked, as the men groaning with the exertion heaved their scarcely conscious burden into the cart, where he collapsed with a thud, churning up a cloud of dust which was dissipated slowly in the still grey dusk.

The men wiped the sweat from their faces with their sleeves.

"It was about a half-mile beyond the town we came on him," said one of them, "and we making off home" ("Drimin's our place, do you see," put in the other man). "The lad was stretched out in the right middle of the road the like of a dead sheep and he not putting a stir out of him, good nor bad. It's hard to say but he thought he'll be getting some easement yon way from the sharp weight of grief is on him. Sure his heart be to be rasped, the poor man."

"We were leaving yourself would be taking him home, sir, since we saw you driving in with him the day," added the other man.

"I will surely and here's something for your trouble," said the stranger.

"Ah, no," they protested, stepping back shyly, "sure we couldn't do less for the poor fellow."

They moved off, shuffling into the misty twilight, leaving behind them a sense of isolation and responsibility that weighed distressingly upon the

Traveller's nervous mood. For a moment he stared in vague philosophical reflection at Danny-boy's motionless form. Then he moved convulsively. "Come up," he said sharply to the mare, and determining to seek relief in immediate action, scrambled on to the board occupied by Dannyboy in the morning and drove off.

The cart rattled and jolted more insufferably than ever. It had evidently been thrust into the inn yard carelessly and one of the wheels must have been jammed hard against some projection, for it was obviously looser than in the morning, occasioning a kind of swinging roll to the motion of the cart, which besides being very uncomfortable caused the driver to apprehend the possibility of the wheel snapping from the axle-pole.

Dannyboy's limp body swayed and flopped to the bucking jerks of the vehicle and the Traveller was not a little anxious as to his safety, for the back-board had been lost some days previously and had not yet been replaced, so that there was some danger lest a pitch into a deep rut or over a stone might fling the helpless passenger into the road. Once, indeed, in taking a corner too quickly Danny-boy's head was tilted suddenly backwards and brought into sharp contact with the plank behind it, but the grief-laden and drink-heavy purple eyelids only opened for a moment, the discoloured drooping mouth stammered something incomprehensible, laughing weakly, and then the head lolled forward again swaying between the huddled knees.

Darkness was falling rapidly. A chill white mist stole up from the bogs and mingled with whirling rain-drifts eddying down in the draughts from

between the hills. Beneath the mare's hoofs and discernible for a few feet before them the road streamed past almost blood-red in the dim light. The fog thickened and the silence and desolation began to adumbrate the Traveller's already sufficiently miserable mood with sinister forebodings. He heartily wished this journey were behind him. To his fancy, which became gloomier with the fading of day, it seemed that Nature was in league with Destiny against Dannyboy and himself. The grimly-hued road appeared to be combating him like the adverse current of some river dyed with ancient carnage. The regular stream of the soft streaky sand past him irritated his nerves, and though they could not have yet traversed more than a couple of miles already he was not very sure of his direction. Cross-roads in the Rosses are innumerable and sign-posts rarer than bishops. Dimly recalling their devious route in the morning he had already turned aside twice, retracing his steps on the first occasion in the certainty that he had been misled by the mist. Now he was not so sure.

The light wind moaning far away seemed full of strange laughter that was also hoarse with unshed tears. It was now almost completely dark and the head-lights of the cart, thrown forward into the mist, made in the tossing and wreathing pallor phantom-like flares in which every individual drop of the thin and powdery rain could be clearly detected, golden in the heart of the light and fading to a dim grey at the edge before it suddenly vanished in the darkness.

Dannyboy, from whose brain the drink-stupor was apparently clearing a little, raised his head and began moaning softly to himself. The Traveller

sunk in numbed brooding started suddenly, pulled up the mare, and intently listened. Somewhere on the road ahead of him he heard voices and the steady tramping of nailed boots, seemingly moving in the same direction as himself for the sounds did not grow any more distinct while he paused. He drove on again with renewed energy and soon caught up two middle-aged farmers who turned at the cart's approach and surveyed the travellers curiously from beneath their shabby dark-blue wide-awake hats.

“Soft night, sir,” said one of them respectfully.

“It is,” said the Traveller hurriedly. “Will I get to Dungloe by this road?”

“Dungloe, is it? God save you, you're astray entirely. You can make it this road, but it's longsome and a wee thing hard to come on in the mist.”

“Where am I now?” asked the Traveller.

“You're below the Scraig Mór, but you're to the west, and it's the other side you should be, d'ye see?”

“The Scraig Mór,” repeated the Traveller and he shivered slightly, glancing over his shoulder at Dannyboy who was blinking miserably at the mist.

“Lord have mercy,” said the farmer, “is yon the lad was great with——”

“Hist,” said the Traveller quickly. “Well, will I go on now or turn back, do you think?”

“Sure, you'll as well keep on now you're this far,” answered the farmer, staring curiously at Dannyboy. And he gave the Traveller minute and confusing particulars as to the roads he should pursue.

“This is our way,” he concluded, indicating yet another cross-road disappearing into the fog.

“I don’t know really which I had better do,” said the Traveller sorely perplexed.

III

In this moment of hesitation there came a sudden flash of colour and from beyond a flat boulder at the roadside behind which it must have been crouching a figure appeared, leaping so suddenly into the sphere of the lamp-light that it almost seemed like some emanation of the earth’s crust.

“Myself’ll put the duine-uasal on the road,” said a joyous clear voice in Irish.

The Traveller stared at this quaint creature in rising astonishment. He saw before him a girl, seemingly quite young—not more than twenty-two years of age as he judged. Her outer attire consisted of a single garment extending as far as her knees and of a red so vivid in the hard flare of light from the cart that as the ragged folds tossed about her brown legs she seemed to be enveloped fantastically in flames. This attire, which was cut or rather torn away at the shoulders, leaving her long slender arms bare, was bound at the waist with a girdle of plaited reeds and through the rents in this strange covering the white skin of her shoulders, breast, and sides gleamed dazzlingly in many places. Her features—all that were visible of them—revealed a curious kind of elfin refinement, the chin sharp and very white, and through a cloud of loose black hair falling forward about her cheeks the wide-set slanting eyes flashed,

laughingly radiant with a hot unnatural vitality which created a strong sense of uneasiness in the bewildered mind of the Traveller. The creature was obviously mad.

“ Lord God,” exclaimed the farmer, “ you were near to killing me, Seanoidín, with the start you took out of me. A person’d have a right to be scarred before you, and you lepping out on him yon way like a pooka of the bog.”

“ Arú, you and your Lord Gods and your pookas !” cried the girl, and she laughed shrilly and harshly, capering from one naked leg to the other.

She tip-toed up to the man, dancing delicately on the points of her shapely brown feet, and catching his head in one hand dragged it roughly towards her and whispered hoarsely and silyly in his ear :

“ What trade was Seanoidín at last evening ? ”

“ Arú, how would I be knowing, you wee scuddy !” said the farmer good-humouredly.

She paused a moment, an expression of indescribable cunning on her face, and then screamed in his ear so suddenly that he jumped back a couple of feet :

“ Riding the pooka over the brae of the Scraig Mór. There’s pookas for ye, now ! ”

“ Arú, come on out o’ that, Donnall,” called impatiently the other man who had moved off down the road.

“ Well, sir,” said the farmer, turning to the Traveller. “ Now you’re all right, and you with your choice thing of a sign-post. There’s not under the shining sun a better guide for yez than yon lassie. Sure the roads be all one to her.” He lowered his voice and continued hastily :

“ She’s not all in it, as you can see, but there’s

devil a hait harm in the poor creature if she's no religion itself—nothing but a reel of old tales would leave you sick and sore and she plubbering away at them all times. Sure, all the neighbours know her. She does be living her lone in a cave yonder in-under the Scraig, and she as happy as the flowers of May. The neighbours do be giving her a wee lump of fish or a drop of milk or maybe an old skirt itself an odd time. The peelers be after her this week on the head of her not being decent-like in yon rig, but, begorra', she's too contriving a schemer for them lads and she's away from them all times, and does be pleasuring herself and she pitching down skites of turf on them from above. Seanoidín-na-nGáiridhe they call her in these parts, and that for the reason that she does be laughing ever and always."

"For God's sake," wailed his companion from the mist, "let you put a stir out of you, Donnall, and not be putting the night to loss on me."

"Well, good night to you, sir, and safe home," said the farmer, and slouched off after his muttering fellow.

"Come on now, mister! Let you come on, Mister Honey-boy," sang Seanoidín-na-nGáiridhe in a quaint and softly melodious chant like the cooing of a pigeon. The Traveller returned slowly to the cart and looked for a moment with repulsion at the flaming figure already seated above him on the board sucking at a straw and swinging her brown legs jauntily. Then yielding himself to the inevitable he clambered up by her side.

Dannyboy was sitting up now, holding his head clasped between his fists, his arms resting on his knees. Now and again he muttered miserably to

himself or lifted his dull bloodshot eyes, raising the lids as it seemed with an immense effort as though weights were attached to them. They drove on again, Seanoidín pointing the way with little sharp cries and sudden cat-like movements, while she continually hummed some lively tune beneath her breath and laughed softly from time to time.

Neither of the Traveller's two uncanny companions seemed to notice the presence of the other.

The rain increased and the wind began to whine more loudly and peevishly over the shadow-strewn bog. It even seemed to achieve the personal emotion of a sentient being. The Traveller could hear it afar off wandering vaguely among distant rocks and whimpering like a lost and wounded thing, and then all at once it would seem to have found its way and scurried sobbing over the intervening desert of shrouded lake and drenched heather, passing by like a panic-stricken and disintegrating phantom. The shrewd mist drove about the occupants of the cart, clinging to their hair and eyebrows and filling their eyes and mouths until they were breathless and half-blind.

“Seanoidín's cold,” said the girl and crowded up to the Traveller's side, languidly leaning her black head a gleam with the rain upon his shoulder. He shivered at the contact, for this bizarre creature filled him with a nameless horror, the more disquieting since he could not rightly understand its nature. More than ever she seemed like an emanation of the earth, almost as though the sum of his fancies concerning the Rosses country had become embodied in the form of this reckless and instinctive being.

The chill rain appeared to revive Dannyboy still

further, and with a wild glance into the mist he cried suddenly and loudly in Gaelic :

“ Is this the road to Hell ? ”

The girl turned at his voice and answered excitedly with a kind of breaking laughter in her voice :

“ It is not, a chroidhe 'stigh, but the path til the world's end and the plains of Tir-na-mBeo (The Land of the Ever-living). Let you lie still, a-laogh. Seanoidín will be singing to yez,” and immediately she began :

“ An bhfaca tú an Cúlfhionn's i ag síubhal ar na bóithre
Maidín geal drúchta's gan smúit ar a bróga ?
Is iomdha óganách súl-glas ag cnúth le n'-a posadh,
Acht ní bhfágaidh siad mo rún-sa ar an gcúntas is dóigh leó.”

“ Hist,” broke in the Traveller sharply, frowning down on the singer whose white tense throat throbbing with the passion of the music shone bright in the glare reflected back from the mist, but the clear voice rang on over the wind with a kind of savage exultation. The Traveller, knowing the associations this song possessed for Dannyboy, glanced apprehensively over his shoulder and felt rather than saw that the boy's face was working in pain and fury.

“ Let you quit that now, you b——y striapuigh,” the latter shouted, half-rising from the floor of the cart.

But the wild-eyed girl paid no heed and continued :

“ An bhfaca tú mo stóirín lá bréagh 's í léithi féin
A cúl dualach drisleanach go slinnean síos léithe ?
Mil ar an óig-bhean. . . .”

With a hoarse shout Dannyboy leapt up, swaying perilously, and before the Traveller could interfere

struck the singer over the shoulder with all the weight of his arm. With a horrified exclamation the Traveller pushed him back roughly into the cart where he fell inert and sobbing feebly.

Seanoidín, whom the Traveller had expected to see fall between the mare's hoofs, hardly flinched beneath the blow, but catching him lightly by the sleeve settled herself easily in her seat and broke into peal after peal of joyous laughter.

“Och, the poor lad,” she cried, “the poor wean without sense. Sure himself'll be liting yon song again before the skreek of dawn, and he with the white birds of Aengus about his head,” and she fell to singing again wildly and harshly now, though she had exchanged the melody for another love-song.

The Traveller could make nothing of her last words. “The Lord help us all!” he sighed fervently under his breath.

After a time the mare began to flag and the Traveller, impatient with their slow progress, flicked her sharply with the whip. This innocent action produced a surprising effect upon the enigmatical creature at his side. She drew away from him convulsively and her singing ceased, breaking off abruptly in a kind of whimpering wail. The startled Traveller turned and observed that her pupils were contracted to glittering points and that her thin hands were stretched out threateningly, the fingers stiff and crooked like claws.

“Arú, a chladaire gránna,” she screamed piercingly. “You cursed tinker to be welting a poor weak beast the like of thon.”

For a moment he expected to feel the sharp nails in his throat, but in the next instant she had leapt

from her seat and running to the mare's head pulled up the cart and began to fondle the sleek sweating nose and twitching ears, whispering soft, Irish words to the tired animal in an agony of tenderness and compassion, her green slanting eyes brimmed with tears that glistened on the long black lashes.

After a few moments she returned to her place on the cart. "There now, myself will drive," she cried contemptuously, roughly snatching the reins from him.

They crawled on wearisomely. Hour after hour passed as it seemed, mile succeeded vaporous and drenched mile. The rain penetrated the Traveller's overcoat, soaked his collar, and oozed gradually down his back. His feet and hands were almost completely numbed. As time passed he became somewhat more accustomed to the near presence of his strange companion, his mood of alarm gradually giving place to a listless and vaguely dreary torpor. Even had his faculties been fully alert he could have formed no idea of their whereabouts. He paid no heed to their direction, for all the roads were strange to him and all seemed exactly alike. Dannyboy slept heavily, curled in an awkward position in a corner of the cart, and the Traveller was content to allow absolute control over the journey to the irresponsible being at his side. The girl, whose red garment was swept tightly about her form imparting to her the exaggerated appearance of some theatrical demon, had now recovered her whimsical and sinister gaiety, and pulling up the cart with a jerk every now and again would shout into the wind as though in response to some voice she could hear crying through

the streaming darkness. On one occasion she dragged up the mare so suddenly that the startled Traveller was almost flung from his seat, and then leaping to her feet on the board and balancing herself precariously on the narrow foothold, she railed in whirling Irish at some imaginary antagonist with such a passion of mocking laughter that all the Traveller's obscure terrors returned tenfold.

It was just as the latter was peering with leaden eyes at the east and drowsily praying for the first glimpse of dawn that Seanoidín said suddenly :

“ We can be shortening the way up yonder, but we must travel it on our feet. It does be as steep as the glass hill in the tale ! ” She bounded on to the road, the Traveller dismounting also. He brought the cart round in the direction she indicated and descried a rough bothirín which lifted an almost incredible declivity into the fog. He saw the girl go round to the back of the cart and take Danny-boy's cold hands gently into her own, calling to him like a mother rousing her child from sleep.

Dannyboy sat up and stared vacantly about him. “ Mary — Mary — astóirin,” he mumbled vaguely, and then shuddered convulsively in sudden realisation while his whole stiff body was shaken with a gasping sob.

“ Come, gossur, you must be travelling on your two feet a wee while,” cooed Seanoidín in a quiet and startlingly natural tone and Dannyboy, his enfeebled will offering no resistance, scrambled obediently from the cart and stood by the girl's side seemingly ready to follow any suggestion she might make.

“ Let you be leading the mare now,” called Seanoidín carelessly to the Traveller, and started

off swiftly up the bothirín holding Dannyboy by the hand.

The path was very stony, streaming with rain-water, and as it seemed to the stumbling Traveller almost precipitous. He had the greatest difficulty in bringing the mare to face it. The worn-out animal plunged and staggered, splashing up the mud and stones everywhere, whilst the man leading her tugged and strained at the reins until the sweat broke out all over his body and his wet palms and fingers seemed almost bitten through by the harsh edge of the frayed leather.

For some ten minutes he struggled on. Ahead in the mist he could hear Seanoidín whispering soothingly to Dannyboy, but the wailing of the wind and clattering of the mare's hoofs rendered the words inaudible. It struck him that she appeared to be hurrying her companion along with a certain feverish haste, for already they were out of sight. The Traveller reflected wonderingly upon this for an instant and then, like grisly and obscene birds hosting out of the wind, a cloud of terrors eddied formlessly, and then gathering together and taking shape faced the Traveller in the obscurity with the distinct presence of a personal antagonist. He listened, every nerve in his body tense and quivering. Then suddenly it was as though a knife were plunged into his brain, for he heard Seanoidín shriek excitedly:

“ This way! this way! lep now, a chuid an tsaoghail ! ”

An icy sweat poured out on the Traveller's body.

“ Here now, what are you doing ? ” he shouted brokenly. “ Dannyboy, stand still, don't move.

for God’s sake! Do you hear me, Dannyboy?” He listened again, the breath tearing through his lungs painfully with a saw-like sound. He heard a dull clattering. Then silence fell, broken immediately by a laughing scream of delight.

IV

He stumbled forward desperately and in the next moment the lamp-light searching the mist discovered a grotesque red shape capering wildly on a pinnacle of rock, flame-like, phantasmal, the black hair whirled out on the wind like a cloud of smoke. “Och, they are happy, they be to be happy any more,” chanted the dancing Seanoidín, laughing and crying at the same moment, “and they singing together like two birds on the one branch. Seanoidín is happy too. Whisht now, listen! The wind be’s dancing. The stars are lepping in the sky!” Her green eyes were like marsh-lights in the mist.

“Where is he? What have you done to him?” stammered the Traveller incoherently.

“Only hear him! Where is he? says he,” shrieked Seanoidín in fantastic glee. “Sure, man, I’ll be telling you! He be’s ravelled up now in the webs of the four winds—himself and herself together, the white fragrant blossoms, the shapely swans of my heart.” She clasped her hands in delight, and laughed shrilly like a child. “O, my soul, Seanoidín can hear the laughter of them and their golden kisses, and they hearing the waves of Tir-na-mBeo and the singing of the coloured birds in the apple boughs!”

“What is this place?” murmured the Traveller involuntarily, hearing the words faintly as though spoken by someone else at a great distance.

“Arú, the Scraig Mór,” laughed the girl.

“The Scraig Mór!” The Traveller tottered backwards, falling against the muddy rim of the wheel. He felt physically sick.

“Round and round the world’s ridge, Liath Macha,”* cried the delirious girl, leaping from the rock and dropping instantaneously upon her haunches in front of the mare. “Round the four coasts of Eire and back again we have travelled together the night! Old mare, old mare, ye rotten old devil ye, there should be pride and joy galore on ye surely, for ’tis you that carried my white hero to the brink of the pleasant Plain.”

The mist, golden in the flare of the lamp, drove thinly about her where she sat on the drenched ground, her slender feet side by side like the paws of a kitten. Lightly veiled by their flimsy covering, her small breasts heaved tumultuously like red roses tossed in the wind. As she sat she swayed backwards and forwards from toe to heel, her eyes glittering with childish excitement and rapture. Even in that moment her half-fainting companion was dimly aware of her horrible beauty. A new and hideous suspicion dawned on him, causing the lights to spin giddily and the girl’s form to become scattered like flames blown from a fire.

“And you killed her too?” he breathed with difficulty.

“Surely, surely, ye poor fool,” she cried with careless scorn, still rocking to and fro.

An overwhelming sensation of nausea seized the

* The name of Cuchullin’s famous war steed.

Traveller. He turned from her and his arms cast out before him and his body drooping helplessly over the filthy and dripping rim of the wheel, he retched violently.

For a few moments he felt as if his reason were forsaking him. The ground heaved beneath his feet like a turbulent sea, the pillars of his brain, the foundations of all his moral and philosophical values seemed to be slipping from him. “ O Lord God, save me from this night of horror ! ” he cried in his agony, and seemed to gather strength with the mention of that august Name. At last he turned a white drawn face to the girl.

“ Why ? ” he articulated faintly.

“ Because I loved him, since you’re that hot on knowing. Sure, I would be meeting him often on the road, and he’ll be speaking mannerly to me and not shying skites the like of the Deerish lads. And herself too ! Och—och, that one was the flower of the western world, the way a hundred boys would be killing one another for love to get a sight of her. A decent body she was too. Didn’t she give Seanoidín a frieze skirt one time, and a soda-cake on Hallow-E’en ? I could have kissed her two feet for that.”

“ But why did you want to kill them ? They were happy, God knows ! ” pursued the Traveller, and then started aghast at his momentary forgetfulness of the crime and his unnatural interest in discovering the logic actuating this maniac mind.

“ Happy, is it ? ” she cried, almost with ferocity. “ Ah, it’s young they were, himself and herself. Sure, that’s the reason they were happy. And Seanoidín is young ! ” she added breathlessly.

She waved her bare arms and gave a little whoop

of excitement. Then she surveyed him carefully, a hard glitter in her eyes, and said harshly and contemptuously :

“ But you now—you be to be middling old, I’m thinking. And let you tell me this now. Do you be so quare and jolly, Mr. Catholic-boy, with your sore bones, and your hackit face, and your dread for your poor wee soul, is but a dry wisp of a thing I doubt, and you quaking in your bed of a night in dread of the reels and raiméis the bishops and priests do be spouting at yez? And who’ld love yourself, a dried-up, withered old lad the young girls’ld leave choking and coughing and teeming with sweat after one turn in a reel? ”

The Traveller, disconcerted by this direct appeal, stared blankly at the bright derisive eyes before him.

“ Listen here now,” said Seanoidín authoritatively, “ let you sit down forenenst me-self if you’re not in dread you’ll be catching cold in yon four merry bones of yours. Sure, you need not frighten before me. I’ll not harm you. There’s no love at me for your like, and you old and ancient and a fella’ too does be welting the poor beasts.”

Under the spell of some horrible and incalculable fascination he sat down on the dripping heather as she commanded and stared helplessly at the entranced young face, now rapt and earnest as only the faces of the insane can be.

“ Look at here now, Mr. Spoilt-Priest, there’s a tale my grandmother was telling the night before she died, and I a wee giorseach creeping on the flags. In them old days the seanachies do be telling of there were two in Ireland were great with one another the like of Dannyboy Gara and Mary-Pat-

Nora. And some lad of the Daoine Maithe—him they used to be calling Aengus of the Boyne—got word of it somehow, and he in his shining brugh—(a king he was, I’m thinking). And says he, ‘Sure, wouldn’t it be a poor thing for them ones are more comely than the lords of the Sidhe to be married on earth, and they starving themselves of their last spud maybe to pay some greedy priest for splicing them?’

“‘Begorra,’ says he, ‘it would be a great wonder, I’m thinking,’ he says, ‘her to be soiling her bright feet paddling in the ooze of the dung heap and the clauber of the byre, and getting middling careless of herself maybe, and himself that be’s so straight and supple to be breaking his bones digging spuds and forking rotten hay year in and out, and the pair of them likely in the latter end failing away to greasy crooked old bodachs and they that contrary they’ld be scolding at each other till they’ld make sport for all the tinkers of the county!’ So he rigs himself out like an old breallan of a tramp and he happit in rags with the old boots split on him and the hat gnawed at the moths, and he goes to Báile (that was the name was on the young fella’) and, ‘Báile,’ he says, ‘the lassie Aillin that’s your share of the world died the day.’ And at that word, begorra, Báile’s heart broke in him with grief and he fell out of his standing, dead. Then me old smigadán goes to Aillin the very same way and he says, ‘My girl,’ says he, ‘yon poor gossur Báile that was your secret love died the day,’ he says, and sure enough she fell on the grass in the place she was walking with her companions and she died. And Aengus of the Boyne took the two of them then and put them out on the

plains of the Land of Life, the place where there be's no delay finding your 'nough of food and drink, the place where ever and always the bloom of the foxglove be's on the cheek, where there be's dancing and singing in it from dawn till night, and leave at the bright boys and lasses to be sleeping together on beds of the fine down of birds."

She delivered this recital with so great a vivacity and breathless excitement that the Traveller's mind was borne along on the flood of her words as though in the stream of some hectic dream. Then she leapt up suddenly and stood over the Traveller, the lines of her lithe young body, clearly apparent through the drenched garment swept back about her figure by the wind, suggesting some Hellenic semblance of victory or joyful force.

"Sure you's the way myself was thinking always about them two till Aengus come to me one night, and I sleeping, and told me to bring them ones to himself."

She stretched out her arms above him swaying lightly on the points of her feet, and screamed down at him with vicious mockery. "Let you look at Seanoidín, ye poor old man is crawling down the steep path of the grave. Let you be looking at herself, I'm saying. She is youth that you'll never be seeing again."

Then with an elfin malignity she added :

"Arú, I'm sick and sore now contending with yez. It's dull ye are, old man, a fella' without wit or sense at all, I'm thinking. I leave the curse of the grass on the scythe at you, the curse of the young on the old at you, and the black curse of the merry heart on the head is wrinkled and bald as a rock by the roadside. And now let you be getting home the

best way you can. Wee Seanoidín’s away now to dance with sleep on the hills ! ” and before he was aware of her last words she had fled away laughing into the darkness.

V

An hour after dawn the Traveller staggered half-fainting into Deerish and for several weeks was confined to his bed in the hotel with a nervous fever. Acting upon information that he supplied the police obtained a certificate for Seanoidín’s arrest as a homicidal maniac, and after great difficulty she was captured and taken to the Letterkenny Asylum, where in the course of two months she pined away and died from the effect of inactivity and confinement.

THE LIFTING OF THE VEIL

I THINK that in the lives of all men there must be fleeting moments invested by the imagination from some intangible cause with a vast and awe-inspiring significance out of all proportion to the actual event. Some simple gesture of the friend with whom we are conversing, the lifting of a hand or drooping of the eyelids, seems for one dusky-vestured and winged instant of higher import than the beacon-flares of the trafficking world and the roar of nations rushing to change or ruin. For in such an instant the veil of enchantment that was woven about our memories in the cave of birth is lifted, only to fall again, alas ! before our vision has time to become accustomed to the light that broods upon eternal things. We feel how delicate is the adjustment of external conditions at such a point in time, conscious that another almost exactly similar circumstance would have been empty of any hidden meaning ; that because the curled flame of the fire-light flickered in just such intensity, hue, and direction, and because that shoulder was turned at precisely that angle and no other, we have become aware of a mystery that would else have slumbered for ever in the mist-hung hollows of that land where time is not. We feel too a certain

irritation, mingled with sadness, that such occasions of insight necessarily take us all unready, apprehending that were only a moment of warning and preparation granted to us we should be able easily to wrest the meaning from the lovely or tragic wonder that for a hand's turn hovers in pale radiance on the threshold of the mind.

On very rare occasions it happens, perchance, to some men to be able to seize for a fraction of a second the hem of the departing dream, and between the clouds of its twilight hair to catch a half-glimpse of those fateful eyes before they fade again into the folded shadows of the ages.

I have to tell of an experience that occurred to myself a few months ago, an incident of beauty and fear that I shall not forget as long as I live. One autumn day I wandered with my gun among the hills that surround my Donegal home. All the previous night it had rained and a savage sou'-wester had sacked the rocky bastions of the bare glens and plundered fruitlessly among the withered roots of heather and bracken. In the early morning the rain and wind had ceased, leaving a dull lifeless sky and a sodden earth, veiled in silver and tremulous webs of moisture.

Where I wandered high up in the hills the aspect of the world on that sullen dusky day possessed that strange quality of numbness and stagnation peculiar to certain November mornings in remote places. This atmosphere of unreality lasted all day, heightened later by a light fog that steamed up from the dank earth rendering the fantastic features of inanimate nature, that from hour to hour were almost my only companions, still more illusive. The silence was near to becoming terrify-

ing. All the day scarcely a bird rose and of these I was able to account for very few, for I am a poor shot at the best of times and the shifting blight of which I have spoken rendered the conditions for successful sport very precarious.

In the early evening I began to be oppressed by the sterile desolation and the closeness of the air. Not a feathered thing nor even a rabbit had I sighted for more than an hour and I decided that for this day at least I had had enough of it, and though I was not very certain of my exact whereabouts I set off, as I supposed, in the direction of home.

After plunging downhill through the heavy heather for half an hour or so, sometimes stumbling with a jarring shock into miniature fissures of rock treacherously concealed by the overgrowth of rotting ferns, I became very hot and thirsty, my clothes irritated my skin maddeningly, and I experienced quite painful pricking sensations in my brow and temples. Yet in spite of my urgent need of water this particular hill-side, notwithstanding the wet weather, was entirely lacking in any streams or rills.

It was becoming rapidly darker and not knowing my direction very clearly I could not afford to rest. The mist was denser now and filled with a thin dust-like rain, so fine that it seemed scarcely to possess the quality of moisture. To my melancholy mood the pale wall of vapour, ever constant yet ever dissolving above the brown heather immediately before my feet, became invested with a suggestion of sorrowful eternity, and suddenly my imagination became a prey to that strange panic that sometimes comes to young people waking alone in the

stillness of night, when the silence echoes nothing to the soul's cry of desire but the beatings of the heart that mark the ebbing of our days. And in the darkness and the loneliness the pulsations of that little time-piece seem so fluttering and feeble and the hours and years that they count so monotonous and grey—a ceaseless pitiful rain of ashes and dust compared with the fiery fantasies we have dreamed, so that within us the desire becomes an agony to live for a single hour with all the might of the imagination, to drown our beings in the proud sunlit tumult of one instant of utter realisation even though it consume us utterly.

At last, just as complete darkness was falling and I was beginning to be seriously alarmed at the prospect of spending the night on the dripping earth without overcoat or covering of any kind, I came upon a solitary cabin, its light breaking through the obscurity startlingly like the eye of some wild animal. I hastened towards it and, picking my way through the evil-smelling morass that surrounded it, knocked at the half-door. Hearing a soft reply that sounded like an invitation to come in, I unhooked the latch and entered the house. It was full of smoke penetrated with the hard glare of a newly-lighted and malodorous lamp. Becoming accustomed to the atmosphere I saw that there were but two occupants of the room. An old woman was crouching forward over the fire, sitting rather precariously upon a rickety kitchen chair and vaguely stretching out her thin speckled and purple-veined hands to the blaze. Her profile was toward me lit dimly by the fire-light and I could see that she was very old, the teeth fallen away and the blinking and probably nearly blind

eyes embedded in folds of loose skin seamed with a network of wrinkles picked out sharply in the drifted turf-dust of years. The other was a young girl, perhaps the old woman's granddaughter, who was standing in the middle of the uneven mud floor as I entered. The lamp-light streamed from immediately behind her, and the only thing about her that I could distinguish clearly was the loose cloud of dark hair which fluttered out from her head and netted the light fantastically. The heavy blue wreaths of smoke swathed her almost tangibly, giving her slight figure a strangely unreal appearance.

"How far am I from Glen?" I inquired, speaking towards the vague shape of the younger woman.

"Four Irish miles," she replied, as a renewed burst of smoke from the chimney enfolded her in even denser obscurity.

"Is this Meenaveen?" I asked.

"No, but Cúléinean," said the lips that I could not see, though they were no more than a couple of yards distant from me.

"Can I have a cup of milk?" I said. "I'm perished with thirst."

"You can surely. Let you sit up to the fire and rest yourself a wee while."

She turned towards the dresser, disturbing the sea of smoke in which she seemed to float into a storm that curled up in fantastic tongues and eddies behind her, and then, sucked into the draught between chimney and door, circled for an instant and flowed out in a thin stream into the night.

I laid my gun and bag on the table by the window and sat upon the edge myself, glancing at the old

woman whose red-rimmed eyes still blinked over the belching fire-place. She made no motion and indeed seemed wholly unconscious of the presence of a stranger. I addressed some remark to her, but still she did not stir. From the dresser I heard the welcome sound of the milk bubbling into the cup.

"That one's doting," said the girl, shortly. "She be's 'deef,' too. She wouldn't heed not if the hill itself would fall in. Here's the milk for yez now."

She came across to me, approaching from the further end of the table so that the light of the lamp fell directly upon her, her slender form causing a new tumult in the blue billows of smoke.

Then with a sudden catch at my heart I saw that this girl was beautiful, with the proud, sorrowful, maddening loveliness that one associates with dreams of Deirdre or Blanaid or "the star woman" that haunted the "*aisling*" of many a half-starved Munster poet of a century or two ago. My hand trembled a little as I took the cup from her so that a few drops spilled on the muddy floor, startling a hen that scuttled from under the table to the opposite corner of the kitchen.

"Sláinte mháith agat," said the girl unconcernedly, and then suddenly became strangely serious, staring at me with a curious expression of dawning anxiety and embarrassment. I drank the milk at one gulp, looking over the rim of the cup into her eyes, which never left mine though the lids fluttered. Her lips were parted a little and her breathing seemed rather short. She appeared to be afraid of something. I felt her nervous mood intensely.

“What is the matter?” I said, and found that I had not my voice under complete control.

“Arú, nothing,” she murmured, still staring as though hypnotised. “Sure I don’t know. It’s quare, so it is——” She dropped her eyes with a visible effort.

“Will you be taking some more milk?” she added hurriedly and gasping slightly.

I shook my head and handed the cup back to her. I could nowise understand the fancy that gripped me irresistibly—the presentiment that something very frail was being strained to breaking-point, that this desolate day of dimness and mist was about to culminate in a blaze of such light as never was on land or sea.

She put out her right arm, the sleeve of which was turned back above the elbow, and suddenly my whole consciousness—not sight alone, but as it seemed every faculty of my being—became feverishly centred upon that movement. I suppose her gesture was quite rapid in reality, but an instant came when the feeble light of the lamp gleamed along the white curve of her fore-arm as she stretched it toward me to take the cup. I saw the silky texture of her skin and even the soft down at the sides, and in that flashing moment my thought became a whirling confusion and I seemed to hear a voice within me say with extraordinary distinctness, “This has happened before!” “When? How? Where?” my memory cried back in a kind of agony.

Then all at once I remembered that evening two thousand years ago when I, almost the only survivor of our little army, having fled all through the autumn day from the place where my king had

been slain in that terrible and splendid fight in the gap, groped my way half-fainting into our own liss.

I was bleeding from two wounds, one from the blow of an axe in the thigh, which was not very severe, for the black Connaught pig who dealt it had slipped in some blood as he struck at me and there was little weight behind his arm. (Ho ro! I remember the gulp he gave, like a drunken laugh, when I drove the *miodog* between his thick shoulder-blades.) My other hurt was a fearful spear-thrust above the right eye. Also in the midst of the battle the sharp edges of the golden torque, which King Forgael had given me because I had made a great chant in his praise, had been hammered into the hollow above my breast-bone and one of the rays had broken off against the bone so that a fragment remained embedded in the flesh which had swollen up and closed over it. Och! the misery of that fevered wandering through bog and heather, with the blood and sweat oozing into my eyes and the fires that seemed to blaze in my throat and breast and to roar and spit upwards into my brain, and the sick throbbing and ache whenever I turned my head! Towards the end of the day, too, I fancied in my delirium that the heavy war-harp strapped round my shoulders was the moon, with which the gods had burdened me until the end of time. I remembered then how I found myself at last in the grianan of Forgael's daughter, Etain, who was my secret love, and how she had brought me a cup of milk just as she did a moment ago, and how even in my fever my heart had sung and I seeing the light of the smoky rushes gleam golden along the smooth skin of her beautiful fore-arm. But

then—that time—she had thrown the cup among the reeds that littered the floor and had caught me in her arms and had caressed my cheeks and eyelids with their marble coolness, and I remembered how the touch of her flesh against my burning face seemed to my bewildered imagination like the sound of the bell-branch shaken in the turmoil of dispute. Afterwards she had kissed me over and over with little soft moaning cries until I swooned away, stifled with the weight of her black hair that fell all about my face and mouth.

Then suddenly there returned to me the remembrance of how in the evening, having arrayed me in my green singing-robe and placed the great war-harp in my hands, they had slain me in order that my king might not go comfortless without music and singing in the land of shadows.

“Etain,” I heard my lips whisper in that memory of tragic death, as though the word were pronounced by another person at an immeasurable distance, and suddenly I felt her hand touch mine as she grasped the cup to take it from me.

We must both have started at the contact, for the cup slipped between our fingers and smashed to atoms on the ground. In its fall the veil of enchantment seemed to be dragged down again, for instantly I discovered that the girl’s eyes had left mine and were fixed rather vacantly upon the scattered fragments of crockery on the floor. The exigencies of the present situation called to me, time reasserted itself again, and I suddenly became aware of our social distinctions.

“I am so sorry,” I said. “It was clumsy of me. You must let me pay for that cup.”

The girl looked up at the sound of my voice.

Her eyes were distended and she was very pale, and then I realised that until that moment she had been quite unconscious of the trivial accident which had just occurred.

"You will not then," she answered with a certain haughtiness, though her voice shook. "Sure, it was my own fault. I'm all thumbs to-night. Something come on my two eyes. It's quare, I'm thinking."

She laughed, nervously clasping her hands together. Then she raised her lashes for a moment, but at once dropped them again in confusion.

"What is quare?" said I cruelly, but I could not help myself.

"I don't know, I tell you. I thought a while back—I thought——"

She plucked at her apron for a moment and it seemed to me that I detected the glisten of tears on her dark lashes.

"Arú, it's all foolishness," she said sharply and impatiently, though there was a break in the last word as if it caught in her throat. She glanced up at me and her cheek flushed with sudden anger and bitterness. "Sure, I've no learning to be telling a high-up fella' the like of yez. Maybe you're thinking you're getting quare gaming, and you tormenting a poor lonely girl." She turned away as if ashamed at her loss of control, and continued in a softened tone and carefully avoiding my gaze, "You'll have a right to be stepping out from this now, sir, if you've a mind to be in the Glen before night."

There was almost a sound of entreaty in her words. She stared at me again helplessly, and her eyes pleaded with me, the mute voices of a soul

tormented with nervous excitement and bewildered, utterly uncomprehending emotion. She appeared to be trembling from head to foot and it was evident that I distressed her miserably. Yet her tragic beauty called to me out of the wrecks and sundowns of ancient years.

If only I had some clue as to how much of the truth she had divined and whether she had any clear vision through the whirlwind of the centuries of that sombre and beautiful past that she and I had shared together. But I was inclined to think that it was her very lack of certain knowledge that tortured her, that she was in agonising dread of the immensity of the burning and haunted darkness that she felt enveloped her soul in that hour, something that had nothing to do with either the heaven or hell of her religious faith.

Pity overwhelmed me and I felt that it would be impossible to trouble her further.

"I will go now," I said as soothingly as I could, "but will you tell me your name first?"

She was on the point of answering me when something stirred in the smoky obscurity behind her.

"Mary," croaked the hoarse and peevish voice of the old woman. "Come here, will you? Who's yon fella' you're plubbering with? I tell you, you have me bothered entirely with your chat, ever and always, with this one and that. Och! musha! musha! Amn't I the pity of the world, and I left to die for want of a cup of tay?"

The girl gave vent to a gasping sigh of obvious relief. "Arú, I'm coming," she shouted over her shoulder with a kind of cheerful savagery, and then turning to me, a red spot burning in either cheek:

“ Mary Cunnigan’s my name,” she said swiftly. “ The road’s just below now, down the bothirín yonder. Let you keep on over the old bridge at Stradearg cross-roads. Safe home now. You’d best be moving or it’ll fáil you to make Glen before the clouds of night are on ye.”

She turned to the old woman, and gathering up my things abstractedly I stumbled out into the dripping darkness.

I never saw her again, for, as I heard later, her grandmother died a few days after my visit and the girl emigrated the following week to America.

VI

ANCIENT DOMINIONS

“ And there was darkness in
Eire in those days,
The people adored Faerie.”

Hymn of St. Fiacc.

“ ON Thursday the 15th inst.,” so I read languidly in the *Tirconnail Champion*, “ the consecration ceremony in connection with the opening for divine worship of St. Finnan’s Cathedral, Letterard, took place. A crowded assemblage filled every available space in the imposing edifice, and included the ecclesiastical representatives of almost every parish in the county. Amongst the officiating clergy were His Grace the Archbishop and the bishops of the diocese, Monsignor Cullen of Ballygowan, the most reverend Dr. O’Gorman of Maynooth, and other notable figures in the Roman Catholic Church.”

My eyes trailed down a waste of three columns.

“ During the peroration of his eloquent discourse,” concluded the journalist, and I fancied I could hear him smacking his greedy lips over the telling phrase to come, “ His Grace observed that he thought the whole diocese—nay, the dear Motherland herself—would be at one with him when he ventured to affirm that the noble building which he was proud to assist in consecrating to-day would in after years be looked upon as a work of glory to Almighty God and a credit and honour to

Ireland. In short, he would even assert that this day would be remembered as a landmark in the ecclesiastical history of our native land."

I flung down the paper in disgust. A few days previously during an enforced detainment in Letterard attributable to the caprices of the railway time-table, I had yielded to a mood of idle curiosity and had paid a visit to the "credit and honour to Ireland," the price of which I was well aware would be slowly drained for some ten years to come from pitiful little hoards secreted in the beds of the poor at home and tapped from abundant springs of cheap sentimentality in America. Many things had impressed me, but the alleged beauty of the cathedral had left me cold. The structure was of nondescript design, planned by a second-rate English provincial architect ("that rising young man who had built the new Catholic Hall in Liverpool"), and erected by contract with a second-rate firm of builders imported for the purpose from London. The united dreams of these artists had decreed that the church should be adorned externally with meaningless flying buttresses, apparently added as a happy afterthought and completely destroying any accidental grace or symmetry inherent in the original design. Also every practicable niche and corner were filled with deplorable images of the Blessed Virgin and the saints of an æsthetic value neither greater nor less than the gaudy plaster effigies to be found on the bedroom mantelpieces in many western inns. The dreary marble columns in the nave had been sent from the New World "by natives of Letterard and diocese now resident in Washington," and the flamboyant stained glass—to the irreverent mind

so inevitably suggestive of a patch-work quilt—was of German manufacture.

Wherein this cosmopolitan edifice redounded to the credit of Ireland except in a pecuniary sense at present unrealised and perhaps unrealisable I could not discover.

A profound depression fell upon me. All the long day I had been drunk with beauty, bathing my sense and spirit in the stream of the spring in the Northern hills, down which May guides her flower-laden boat, not flaunting the green of the plains but clothed in mysterious veiled allurements of blue and pearl and amethyst. All day wind and sea and sky had been radiant with the childlike freshness of sunny mountain places that impels one to draw soft breath and tread delicately lest one humble blossom should be crushed and the fragile harmony of the world destroyed.

I rose from my chair with a sigh and kicked the crumpled offender from the trafficking world into a corner of the grate. For some minutes I paced absently up and down the room, endeavouring to recover my previous mental tranquillity. This however I found to be an impossibility. The two abstractions—Ireland and the Irishman—regarded one another irreconcilably across a gulf in my thought—the one a serene and delicate loveliness, inviolate and holy, her ancient wounds purged and healed and forgotten on such days of clear wind and sun as this, a lovely and darling dream of God, the other baffling and baffled, tossing in a feverish trance between an aged and benumbed national consciousness and the glamour of a tawdry and alien civilisation only half understood and never to be assimilated.

Even the room in this cottage in which I was staying filled me with weariness and pity, the respectable and characterless furniture, the gim-cracks on the mantel-shelf, the smug tastelessness of the pseudo-genteel frieze figuring a succession of faded blue flowers of unknown species tied expansively with pink ribbons, the photographs of relatives in America, and especially that of the second son Michael, a tram-conductor in Chicago. He was represented standing behind a basket-chair with one thick and shapeless hand resting on the back, and his whole figure stiff and self-conscious in the pride of American citizenship and of a new and many-buttoned uniform. Only the deep-set eyes were still simple and tender with the fading light of the hills that had borne him. In short, the whole appearance of the room was almost identical with that of the most bovine farmer's best parlour in the South of England. And yet I knew that before my landlady Mrs. Sweeny had spoken more than a few sentences she would have made use of some vivid and tender turn of phrase which would have brought the heavy grin of good-natured contempt to the dull English face and set the two souls asunder for ever.

All these amiable absurdities afflicted me with a sense of unutterable sadness, almost of tragedy. I felt spiritually stifled.

Tired as I was it was necessary to escape from this room; I knew that I could not sleep until I felt once more the heart of the earth-mother beating close to my own heart.

Leaving word that I would come in for my supper later on in the evening, I stepped out into the soft May night. The moon had just risen over the low

hill at the back of the glen and the first object that met my eye as I walked slowly down the deserted road in the direction of the sea was the hideous gable of John-Ann McGinley's licensed premises, its gaunt and angular contour bitten out uncompromisingly against the tingling depth of a sky already becoming suffused with the pale fire and phantasy of the moonlight. As I crossed the flagrant gulf of light flowing from the window and open door I caught a glimpse of the proprietor lolling behind the counter, the sugared amiability of subtly directed and increasingly effective gombeenism irradiating his slightly puffy cheeks and watery blue eyes with a smile of rather nauseous sweetness. About him like flies in a spider's web clustered some half-dozen of the young fishermen of the glen, the innocent eyes of one or two among their number already dull and hot-looking under the sway of Mr. McGinley's commodities. Hurrying swiftly from this malign scene I followed the grey road towards the sea, still dully oppressed with the thought of the cathedral and Mr. McGinley and all that they implied. The moonlight that night was quite extraordinary, so uncannily brilliant as to be almost disquieting. It was like the sweet false sheen of some new goblin sun under an eternal semi-eclipse, the nurse of death rather than of wholesome vitality. Objects unnoticed by day stood forth in disproportionate relief. Fragments of snow-white rock marble among the loose stones forming the low walls at the roadside glared suddenly out at me with a violent and disconcerting brilliance. The blackberry bushes among the rocks seemed new and sinister like gigantic growths of grey lichen. The dark shape of a byre a short

distance away assumed a secret and menacing significance.

As with bent head I wandered moodily on half my consciousness was vaguely and unrestfully occupied with these things whilst the other part of my mind strayed back to a certain evening in Dublin in the previous winter. I recalled the picture of several of us young poets and artists sitting about the red glow of a studio fire whilst we discussed the relative importance of the several arts as an expression of national temperament and aspiration. And I remembered how one among us had maintained that architecture, though not the greatest of the arts, but simply because it was as present with all men as the physical contours of the land itself, possibly possessed a subtler control than any of the others. I recollected, too, how he had shown that the typical architecture of every land ancient and modern reflected with devilish exactitude the natural trend of a people's imagination and even its inherent religious faith.

Tracing the history of the art through the ages he had demonstrated to us that the mechanical civilisations of modern Germany and America had their temples in the formality and imposing dullness of a Berlin street vista and the sky-scrapers of New York and Chicago, and how even the confused national consciousness of an England stifling beneath the agglomerating weight of the British Empire was symbolised in the restlessness and irregularity of the line of the house-tops in Oxford Street. And then he had proceeded in words of excellent eloquence to figure forth for us a dream of the ideal city to be built in future ages by the hands of man, and the fashioning of those streets

down which men and women might pass hand-in-hand with the immortal gods.

But on that night one land had been left unnamed and now under the bleak incandescence of the moon that obscured the stars of the May night my thought finished the broken catalogue and my heart sighed the name of her whose noblest architectural manifestation is the cabin of the western peasant, of which at least the mean roof is obviously fashioned of the grasses of the field and the sodden walls of the broken rock of tide-worn Eire. For the rest we have made for her the plastered rigidity of Mr. McGinley's "hotel," whilst the cathedral of Letterard stands to her credit and honour. And, beyond this: Ruins! the wreck of a storm-harried and defeated dawn that sank again into the ocean of darkness long and long ago.

I was near the muddy and stone-strewed bothirín that leads to the strand, and seating myself on a flat boulder at the roadside I began to conjure up an obscure vision of the ideal Irish architecture, of the temples that might fittingly house the lovely and mysterious deities of mountain and river and wood. Here in the west too, I said to myself, the sea would have its part and its own symbolism, and with the birth of this thought I became suddenly and startlingly aware that the stillness of the dreaming land was intensified by a great sound so monotonous and pulseless that hitherto it had seemed a part of the silence. This sound was the tremendous dull thundering of the tide. On other nights breathless as this I had remarked the strange roaring of the bar at Doonalt, but never before this evening had it seemed so pregnant with significance and arcane power.

I turned my head westward. At the edge of the sea the drowsy waves broke in a long thin crest of foam, rising and subsiding rhythmically with the beat of the tide, and a little beyond this the weltering turmoil of the bar glared under the moon. The white gleam of it was so sharp that it seemed at any moment about to burst into some intenser expression than was possible to light alone, as if it must break into some trumpet tone shrilling above the heavy crashing of the surf. Further out the Atlantic dreamed impenetrably, an enormous grey allurements, tender and terrible.

Suddenly the full strangeness of this night's mood came upon me almost with the directness of a physical sensation. The sea, the moon, the pallid jewelled glimmer of the sleeping hills and the phantasmal appearances of homely and commonplace objects near at hand all seemed to shadow forth some mystery soon to be revealed either to my bodily eyes or supersensual perception.

I turned landward again and noticed that a man was approaching, not by the road, but clambering hurriedly among the rocks and bushes as though even at this late hour of the night fearing discovery. He was very tall and ran swiftly in a crouching attitude whenever the rocks were not of sufficient size to conceal his upright figure.

I was sitting so still upon my stone that he evidently was not yet aware of my proximity, and I judged that his curiously stealthy methods arose from fear of possible detection by anyone who might be standing at the door of one of the few cabins forming the rocky townland above the road. For the Dooley folk were in the habit of wastefully burning their lights until a very late hour.

I watched the man's strange performance with an interest that suddenly developed into acute astonishment when I recognised him as Michael Condy McGuire—commonly known as Mickey-the-Bridge because he lived by the old bridge over the little Glen river. He was a weaver by trade, but he spent much of his time at sea during the herring season. I knew him well as a very quiet sober man, a good neighbour and a regular attendant at Sunday Mass. What this extraordinary behaviour could mean was more than I could imagine.

At the same instant he obviously detected me, for all at once he started as though he had received a blow and paused motionless, crouching convulsively into the shadow of a rock. I could see the pale outline of his face staring at me. For a few moments his whole attitude was eloquent of irresolution. Then seeming to come to a decision, he rose quietly and coming down on to the road with no further attempt at concealment walked rapidly towards me.

I waited motionless until he was close to me.

"Fine night, Mickey," I observed carelessly.

"Well it is then, just a fine night," he answered, glancing at me for an instant. I was watching him keenly of course, curious to discover any clue to his previous behaviour. The moonlight fell sheer upon his momentarily raised face, and I read on his usually rather dull and immobile features an extraordinary exultation such as I had never seen there before. This exultant quality seemed to tremble also in the syllables of the commonplace words with which he had answered me. For a moment I wondered if he were drunk, but dismissed the thought at once.

He tried to hurry past.

“Where are you going, Mickey?” I said.

“Hey?” he inquired absently, pretending not to have heard my question.

“I said, where are you going? Are you fishing to-night?”

“Arú, not at all,” he answered, his hands in his pockets and his foot tracing designs in the sand on the road. “Sure the scadan’ll not be in it for a couple of weeks,” he added with some petulance as it seemed. He was strangely excited I thought.

“Maybe you’re going courting then?” I suggested conventionally.

He laughed shortly.

“O! now!” he said, and then added with a constrained lightness, “Maybe I might then.”

I noticed that his flippancy seemed strangely mechanical, and even at that very moment a most curious fancy flashed through my mind that this man’s form was surrounded by a faint green glow.

This impression, which I at once recognised as ridiculous, passed as quickly as it had come, yet his state of mind was certainly very unusual. I did not believe his last words and he knew it. A silence fell between us whilst he lounged heavily before me in deep embarrassment. I felt unable to question him further, for after all his movements were none of my business.

“Well,” I repeated at last, “it’s a brave moon whatever the trade on hand,” for I could find nothing better to say.

He dug one heel into the road, scraping up the dust and stones. Then he raised his head and looking me full in the eyes with what seemed to me

a kind of challenge, quite irrelevant to the situation.

“Aye, it’s a *great* night, surely,” he said in a deep voice and moved off hurriedly down the road. I stared after him strangely stirred.

Why had this banal and uneasy conversation seemed so pregnant with hidden meanings? Why had he used the rather curious word “*great*,” and why had his voice quivered and thrilled in so peculiar a way as he said it? What did his unusual exaltation betoken, and why had I the unlooked-for impression of a fervour that had seemed to emanate from that simple soul like shafts of green fire? Were these things fancies? If so then all these imaginings must nevertheless be correlated in some way.

I watched his form lessening down the road, and suddenly the unnatural din of the calm sea thundered again in my ears. It seemed to seize a strayed echo of the fisherman’s last sentence, to churn it rapturously in a wilderness of frenzied foam. “A great night surely” it crashed and roared in a triumphant confusion, and then over the white path along the ridge of the lazy tide voices ran piping softly “Follow, follow!”

In the dead white moonlight I looked after Michael, I saw him sneak over the low wall—this is the only phrase I can think of to describe his peculiar furtiveness—and move hurriedly, running as it seemed, down the bothirín connecting the road with the strand. I could just see the crown of his head over the top of the wall, then he disappeared. “Follow, follow!” cried the white lips of the surf, and a sudden light breath of wind shook

a shower of dew-drops rustling from the berry bushes, creating a strange impression of disturbance and excitement.

I scrambled over the low wall, bringing down part of it in my clumsy haste and ran as fast as I could down the slight slope, wading through a tangle of thistles, coarse grasses, and occasional flints. Below this was the black and ugly patch of Andy Gillespie's potato-field over which I plunged heedlessly, stumbling and wallowing in the ridges. A great waste of dunes lay before me, known as the "warren," spiky grass and patches of "muirealach" sprouting through a desert of sand and broken shells. By traversing this I hoped I should be able to come out above the strand at the further end at about the same moment as Mickey travelling by the sea's edge. I hurried on, dragging my feet through the soft heavy sand and over little hills tunnelled with rabbit-holes that in the half-light had the semblance of yawning caverns, their summits tufted with spiky grass that shone grey under the moon. All about me the shadowy forms of multitudinous rabbits scuttled, reminding me of the phantom animal appearances, harbingers of good and evil in Gaelic faery-lore. In some welcome places where the sand had become harder and denser the glittering shells crackled and split crisply beneath my feet. I dared not approach the sea's edge too nearly lest some unexpected break in the sand-hills might reveal me to my quarry as he sped along the strand.

At last I reached the end of the warren and came out all at once into dangerous conspicuousness in full view of anyone who chanced to be crossing the strand, which at this point turned almost at right

angles, broadening to form a watercourse for the glen river in its passage to the sea. On the other side of the little stream lay the rocky and roadless townland of Garbhros.

I threw myself on my face in the sand with such precipitancy that the coarse spiky grass pricked me through my clothing. Mickey was wading across the river and had almost reached the rocks on the opposite side. Fortunately his back was at this moment towards me, but I was not an instant too soon, for as he plunged his way to the shore I saw the white gleam of his face as he turned to peer anxiously into the pale dimness behind him. For at least a minute he remained motionless. At last he appeared to be satisfied and sitting upon the sand struggled hastily into his boots. This accomplished, he began to scramble up the rocks. I waited until he had disappeared over the top and then ran in pursuit, splashing into the river without troubling to take off my boots and socks. Although the water soaked through my clothes almost to my middle I did not heed it, but hurried up the rocks at the best speed that my clinging garments would permit, fearing that if I lost sight of him among the stony entanglements of Garbhros he might be gone from me beyond recovery.

At the summit I paused. There was not a trace of him. The townland was immediately before me, a trackless confusion of muddy yards, leaky byres, and cabins built without design upon any comparatively smooth patch of mud and rock. I listened carefully. The windows of the houses were all darkened. If my man had sought admission from any of the inmates some sound would still be audible, were it only the barking of a dog. The

village was like a place of the dead. I decided that he must have skirted the houses at the back in order the better to evade possible detection.

In that case, I reasoned, his business must be leading him to some place on the side or even at the summit of Glen Head, the great precipice which walled in the valley to the north.

Without further delay I followed the course that I considered he would most probably have taken were he making for the foot of the cliff whose southern flank fell towards the lowland in a steep slope of grass and heather. My path undulated through a wilderness of bog-cuttings and rock in such a way that the vista never extended beyond a short distance, and I had little hope of glimpsing him again until I came out below the almost coverless flank of the gigantic headland. To my relief on reaching this place I detected him at once, a tiny shadow crawling slowly up the side of the hill, apparently in no great haste now that he supposed himself safe from human observation. Continuing my pursuit, I began the ascent, keeping as much as possible under the protection of the numerous great boulders and masses of glittering marble that littered the lower part of the slope. At last he passed from sight over the sky-line, and after some twenty minutes of breathless scrambling I too reached the old watch-tower that marked the highest point of the cliff. The unworldly loveliness of the spring night in that holy and desert place is impossible of description, for I looked upon a world less than half material, an enchanted land, a bewitched sea. Northward I could dimly make out the pale shape of Aranmore and the lowlands of the Rosses, a dove-coloured glimmer like a lake

of moonlight, inhuman lands fragile, immensely withdrawn, silver and grey illusions like the phantasmal faery islands of some ancient "iomrama" or boat-tale. Behind these and fainter yet, I descried a mere luminous pulsation, the image it seemed of some dim other-world hill, that I knew to be Errigal.

I peered round in every direction. Michael was nowhere to be seen. The ground at this point was a black waste of turf-cuttings intersected by channels of inky water almost level for nearly half a mile, and it was impossible that he could have covered this distance in the short space of time since he had passed out of my sight. At the place where I now stood the cliff dropped in a sheer and horrible magnificence of more than seven hundred feet. Could he have fallen over the edge? I dismissed this idea at once as an absurd improbability. Irritation seized me at the thought that I had pursued this man through the night for more than an hour, only to find at last that he had vanished like smoke. I decided to make a thorough search and for some time wandered aimlessly about the empty expanse, examining turf-stacks and staring into the depths of gloomy and stagnant bog-water, though what message of him I expected to gather from these things it would have been hard for me to say, for I knew every inch of the ground and was inwardly convinced of the futility of my quest.

I was on the point of abandoning my foolish enterprise when the idea occurred to me to follow the whole edge of the cliff once from end to end. There was a rough and often slippery sheep-track half-buried in heather-roots, skirting the extreme

brink of the precipice, and this I followed. From the depths arose the narcotic whispering of the tide, to some souls the most moving music that ever awakened the nostalgia for beauty unrevealed or lost on the wind. At such a height the distinct sound of the ebb and flow is imperceptible. In the soft husky murmur there is a gentle pulsation, answering between eternity and eternity, the tireless beating of the desires of the soul symbolised by the moody waters of the old sea.

And down there along the base of the terrible cliffs in the phosphorescent flicker of the foam the capricious and delicate voice seemed to cry still, climbing up to me through an abyss tingling in a jewelled enchantment, "Follow! follow!"

At one point just at the edge of the cliff was a very remarkable boulder presenting to anyone approaching by the sheep-track the semblance of an enormous toad sitting back on its haunches and gazing out to sea northwards. Expecting to recognise its usual grotesque shape I paused suddenly in bewilderment when I realised that it was not there, or to speak more accurately, the rock was in its place but its contour was altered. I walked slowly up to it, stunned with a sense of enchantment. The huge boulder had been pushed on to its side and where it had lain there was a gaping chasm about four feet square. Kneeling down on the damp heather I struck a match and held it at the mouth of the pit. The faint light illumined the beginning of a rough flight of steps cut into the face of the rock.

It also revealed a number of ordinary wax candles hidden in a niche to one side just below the surface. The sense of bewitchment clouded me,

descending softly over mind and will as mist covers a hill. Unreasoning I lowered myself on to the first step, lit one of the candles, and began to descend very carefully, feeling my way with my feet with the utmost caution. The steps were very steep and narrow—so narrow indeed that on many of them I was obliged to tread sideways. Also I had to assume a very cramped position, my body always painfully bent, for I found it necessary to hold the candle very low to enable its light to discover the next step.

It was a most uncomfortable progress.

The silence was appalling and only broken by the occasional dull drip of the tallow upon the rock. The stillness of external nature at night is ardently alive, tingling with unworldly singing, wise whisperings unheard in the light of common hours, but the hush of that strange place was like the touch of death. I had the sensation of being asphyxiated—scarcely physically, for the air was fairly clear and I could breathe without discomfort. Rather it was as though my spirit were being stifled and crushed by some stupendous domination the nature of which I was unable to determine. Indeed, remembering this strange adventure, except for the aching of my back during the earlier part of my descent I cannot recall any bodily sensation at all, any consciousness of heat or cold, of physical exultation or depression. The whole affair seems to have taken place in the hidden house of the soul, though perceptions were for the most part conveyed thither in the usual way through the doors of the senses.

I kept steadily but very slowly downwards. The path appeared to wander considerably as though

following a single devious vein of rock, for at times there were corridors and passages level, or nearly so, one of them extending for nearly fifty yards. Once or twice even the surface of these passages rose slightly. These interváls during which I was able to stand upright afforded an immense relief to my cramped and painfully aching limbs and back.

After about twenty minutes, chancing to raise the candle towards the roof, I noticed that another dripping was mingled with the guttering of the wax, and that the rock above my head was now furrowed with crawling streams of black water and becoming covered in patches with a kind of grey lichen or fungus. Placing one finger on the damp rock and thence to my lips, I found that the taste was acrid and salt. At the same moment I became aware of a dull murmur which seemed to come from the heart of the world leagues beneath my feet. This husky whisper in that stagnant silence was profoundly impressive and masterful. It touched my soul intimately, seeming to claim me. I knew it was the sound of the sea. On I went, always downward now, while the chill drippings from the roof fell on my face and hair. There were no more corridors or level stretches, but from this point the steps became wider and more easily negotiable, and it was seldom that I was obliged to twist my feet sideways in gaining a foothold. The great sound below gradually swelled, began to pulsate and reverberate, and finally the thundering swish and swing of the tide became audible, and sometimes thudding shocks and crashes, followed by a fierce hissing, subsiding and mingling in the gathering turmoil of the next wave. Now and again the

sharp stinging odour of sea-wrack drifted to my nostrils.

The turmoil awoke the dull atmosphere into wild life. It was a moment of unforgettable ecstasy, my soul felt absolutely alone with that great noise. It smashed all my barriers, invaded me, and my being leapt laughing into the dance of its violent and exulting music. A cold clear wind smote me in the face and the flame of the candle was blown backwards, so that its light was greatly dimmed. I saw that below me a deep green glow was beginning to suffuse the darkness. I stared at it with a momentary catch at my heart, but curiosity and a growing and unaccountable delight drove me forward. The rocky stairs became still broader and more regular, the chill wind stronger and more sharply impregnated with the scent of the gardens of the sea. Suddenly I started. A keener draught had blown out my candle. But in the pale opalescent light that was like the invasion of an elfin spring the steps were perfectly clear. Then to my amazement I noticed that the walls on either side were covered with elaborate carvings. Amongst a wilderness of intricate convolutions similar to those in which the gold-artificers of ancient Ireland delighted, I recognised several obscure symbols that I knew to be connected with water. My heart beat painfully and an extraordinary emotion overwhelmed me. I felt assured that I was on the brink of some great mystery.

And then with startling suddenness the rock on my right broke away, revealing a sight so astonishing that my head swam and my limbs seemed about to collapse. I tottered helplessly, only saving myself

from falling to certain death by clinging mechanically to a projecting pinnacle of rock, the barnacles that covered it cutting my fingers, though of this I was not conscious at the time. The candle slipped from my hand and leapt clattering softly down the stairs.

Through the opening as through a window I gazed dizzily down upon the most wonderful thing that I had ever seen or shall ever see again in life.

I was near the roof of an immense sea-temple, the aperture through which I stared corresponding in some measure to a window in the clere-storey of a Gothic cathedral. From the spot where I stood the steps still fell away mistily into the smother of the tide, but somewhat higher than the present limit of the incoming flood there seemed to be a great doorway, probably the principal approach to the floor of the temple.

Any description by human pen however skilled of the beauty of that place must of necessity fall far short of the impression that its exquisite symmetry and nobility made upon the soul. Such a fabric might the inspired vision of an ancient Celtic seer conjure up, meditating upon the perished glories of Gorias and Falias, those mystical cities entombed in churning sea-slime and the corals of unnumbered ages. The arching roof, fashioned in the forms of breaking waves clashing together in the shock of storm, was supported by colossal pillars of jade and amethyst. One of these towered from the granite floor close to where I stood and I could see the green jade delicately veined with snowy white melting into the green as foam mingles in the opal heart of a climbing wave. Each pillar

too was carved intricately with symbols of water similar to those I had noticed on the rock as I descended the stairs. The floor, which consisted of three platforms or terraces of rock each raised slightly above the next, was inlaid with gold and silver and mother-of-pearl. The place was lit with lanterns carved from enormous green shells, the uniform pallid light touching every other hue with its own soft magic, as moonlight harmonises the conflicting colours of day. The upper terrace was filled with men and women kneeling, their heads bent in an attitude of adoration. They were all clothed in flowing robes of the hue of a breaking wave. There were girdles of sea-weed and shells about their middles and on their heads were coronals of shells. The men's bodies were entirely covered, but the women appeared to be naked above the waist and their bright shoulders and the white curve of their bent backs gleaming here and there in the green confusion caused a beautiful impression of flecks of foam scattered broadcast on a disturbed sea.

On the lowest platform at the extreme edge of the tide, whose foam occasionally frothed over his naked feet, a tall figure stood erect. He too was attired in a green robe, similar to those worn by the rest of the company, but between the shoulder-blades a thick golden bar was embroidered, intersected by what I at first thought was a conventional decorative design, and there was also a girdle of gold about his waist. His back was towards me and he stood facing the tide, perfectly motionless. The sea crashed and thudded against the slimy edge of the terrace on which he stood with a sound that swayed the whole assembly as though it were

the beating of a mighty heart with whose undying life that of each individual were intimately related.

Sometimes the figure of this man was drenched and clouded in a glitter of spray, in the mist of which he stood imperturbable and moveless as though carven of enduring rock. At last as one of these foam-clouds cleared he raised his two arms above his head, and I saw that his right hand grasped an immense sword whilst his left held some kind of bowl or goblet. For a moment he held out the cup towards the sea and then, after whirling the great blade thrice round his head very slowly in the direction of the sun, smote the goblet so that it split in two pieces, allowing the liquid with which it had been filled to fall into the foam.

A great sigh rose from the multitude as this strange ritual was accomplished. Then the priest, as I judged him to be, lifting the sword again above him, turned slowly upon his toes until he faced the people on the third terrace, the gleam of the sword's edge and the iridescence of the foam-drops seeming to spray a torrent of gems about him. As he did so I stared, passed my hand across my incredulous eyes and stared again until I felt that my eyes were starting from their sockets.

The face of the tall man was that of Michael McGuire!

Once again he stretched his arm pointing the sword over the heads of the crowd. At the same moment every back straightened, every face was raised to the mystic blade. I recognised several among them at once, a man from Dooley, another from Garbhros, and then others from different parts of the glen. A girl's too white brow and straight nose and deep, gentle eyes I remarked at once as

the features of Mary Cunnea, famous through the length of three parishes for her comeliness and the many lads who had sickened for love of her.

Another countenance, dark and rugged, with thick, matted red hair and hot furious eyes, I knew too. The man belonged to Meen-a-sillagh, a remote sea-board townland more than twenty-five miles distant. He was very poor and must have travelled the whole road on his feet during the previous evening.

Michael advanced slowly to the second platform, the sword still extended above him. All rose and the green human tide spread on noiseless naked feet over the ledge separating the third platform from the second, as the sea streams over a low-lying rock. When the third terrace was at last emptied I saw that it was inlaid transversely with a thick bar of amethyst, intersected irregularly with lines of gold, some above the bar and others below it. There was something about this bar and the disposition of the gold lines that I seemed to have seen before. And then I suddenly realised that this was an immense Ogham inscription. I had made some study of the Ogham characters and after a little thought the meaning of the writing and of the whole scene flashed into me, like the forked flare of lightning cleaving the darkness of night.

“Manannan” was the word carven on the floor and embroidered upon the robe of the arch-druid of this ancient and secret worship. It may seem strange that the realisation of this thing caused me no particular astonishment that a number of uneducated peasants, regular attendants at Mass and undoubtedly in dread of the priests of their lawful and professed religion, should assemble at

midnight, many of them from a wearisome distance, to worship a form of deity supposed to have been disproved and banished from honour nearly two thousand years. But those who are intimate with the soul of the Gaelic péasant know that the God of the Christian is only one amongst a Pantheon of hidden dominations lovely and terrible, though the priest at the altar may thunder anathemas from a fettered intelligence and a material age may visit with clever derision mysteries too bright for its understanding. I remembered how in the middle of the nineteenth century the people of an island off the Mayo coast had worshipped the figure-head of a ship stranded on their rocks in a winter storm, and how the western Isles of Scotland still pay libation and tribute to a vague sea-being whom they name Shanny. And now I recognised the sword that swayed the mystical ecstasy of these poor worshippers below me as an emblem of the Druid sword of Manannan, the same that had been the instrument of fate in so many tragic and lovely destinies in the unforgotten dream-world of ancient Ireland.

Now on the second platform began an infinitely strange and unworldly dance, full of slow-flowing motions, one figure especially recurring again and again. In this figure, the men and women separated to opposite walls of the temple, and then whilst the men remained motionless the women glided swiftly over the rocky floor with the movement of a sea-bird preparing to take flight. The left arm was outstretched palm uppermost whilst the right arm held a green veil above the head and concealing the body. Then as each of the women reached the man opposite her she rose upon the points of her

feet and swept her left arm over, turning the hand so that it fell across the man's shoulder, and as he clasped her waist, allowed her arms and body to droop gently backwards, dropping the veil so that her throat and breasts were exposed in sudden gleaming whiteness. I felt certain that this ritual was intended to symbolise the breaking of green waves and the backwash of the surf.

The alternating flicker of the diaphanous green garments and the soft sheen of the women's bodies exercised a curious drugging influence on my brain. I began to float in a dream in which the great sound, churning and frothing, of the ebb and flow seemed caused by the human tides of the dance, as though the bodily elements of the participants were becoming mingled and dissolved into the green surges and the welter of foam. Also it seemed to me at moments as though the whole lovely temple were alive with flights of winged green flames.

At last the full tide of the dance swept over the edge of the second terrace and surged down to the sea's border with the very flood and gush of water itself. There the frenzied dancers swayed panting with heaving breasts above the welter and scum of the tumultuous inflowing tide of the sea which swept over their naked feet with each oncoming wave, and even drenched the fringes of their garments, swinging them about their legs.

"Manannan" they sighed three times, the name echoing up the sculptured columns and clanging high in the carven dimness of the roof. Following immediately upon the last cry the voice of the Druid broke into a loud Gaelic chant, the climbing rhythms swelling through the turmoil of the sea and then lapsing lost in the hissing ebb, whilst at

regular intervals the people murmured in reply with a sonorous sound, like the deep boom of a wave caught in some hidden skelp in the intricacies of the cavern.

By this time my sense of external actuality was so completely subdued that not only was I entirely unconscious of the rock against which I leaned and of the jewelled walls of the temple, but even the human beings below me no longer existed, nothing lived but the sea, a tumultuous battle-field of the hidden desires and obscure longings of the soul of the world. I too was a part of that green delirium and ecstasy. I too was commingled with the soul of wave and rock and those chosen human souls that had become one in that hour.

And then suddenly over this threshold of vision a presence passed. For an instant I saw again the wave-crowded mouth of the cavern and the green light in which it was bathed invaded by something vast and dominating, whether breath or light or shadow I could not tell, but I knew that all those men and women below me were again kneeling with veiled heads, their brows almost to the ground, that all were shaken by some obscure ecstasy of terror and joy. Then over myself it swept like a sun-smitten storm and my soul seemed pierced through with shafts of blinding green light and to vibrate and rock in an awful and delirious rapture as though cradled within the soul of the sea.

This state of trance lasted for an indefinable period, whether a few seconds or for hours I cannot say, but at last I seemed to hear a soft tearing sound as if a veil were being rent and at the same moment it was as though a covering were drawn from my eyes and I knew that the sound I had

heard was the wakening sigh of the people below me in the hall of the temple. I saw them rise slowly, their soaked raiment clinging about their knees. Many of them seemed dazed yet by the mystery that had taken place, and stared dully about them blinking like men suddenly roused from deep sleep.

And then all at once the bewitchment fell from me completely, and I noticed that the sea had already engulfed the lowest platform and was hastily splashing the edges of the second, each oncoming surge jetting the spray higher. I saw too that the people below were fully conscious of this also.

Up to this point I had not considered the probable consequences of my own discovery, but now with disquieting suddenness the suspicion dawned on me that it was likely my life depended on my reaching the upper air again before I was overtaken or detected by any of the peasants. Already one of the younger men was scrambling with the activity of a mountain-goat along the slippery ledges in the wall and quenching each of the shell-lanterns as he passed them. At the same time the rest of the people began to light the candles with which to guide themselves to the top of the cliff. Even now in the rapidly fading light I could see that several of them were splashing their way through the surf to the base of the stairs, and I knew that if I stayed another instant I must inevitably fall into their hands. Suddenly with a sharp pang that was like a physical blow I remembered that I had lost my candle. I peered down the dim stairs but could see no sign of it. I could not tell whether it had fallen at once into the sea or whether by chance it had

been arrested in its downward course by a projecting edge of rock. For a moment or two I deliberated whether I would risk descending a part of the stairs in search of it, but quickly decided that the venture would be too dangerous. The light was now extremely dim, for nearly all the shell-lanterns were extinguished and most of the feeble glow that still remained came from the pale phosphorescence of the sea.

I turned and hurried up the steps. Soon the path diverged sharply and complete darkness closed me in. I felt my way carefully up a few more stairs, but from this point they began to be steeper and more narrow. I struck a match and toiled on as long as the light lasted and then paused to ignite another. For some ten minutes I laboured on slowly and painfully in this way, only able to accomplish some four or five steps by the light of each match. And then glancing down I noticed a pallor in the obscurity beneath me and with despair at my heart heard, mingled with the dull booming of the sea, the first sounds of the approaching voices of the peasants. I was certain that my position was hopeless, but I struggled on almost mechanically. My pursuers did not appear to be hurrying, yet they gained on me with a torturing slowness and surety.

Once I slipped dangerously and expected to fall headlong, but fortunately succeeded in checking myself on a step which chanced to be broader than most. Shaken and half-stunned by the fall I stumbled on again and now I began to notice the increasing yellow glow beneath me and fully to realise the hopelessness of my situation.

The peasants were silent now, perhaps becoming

breathless from the exertion of the steep climb, and the soundless and stealthy approach of that pale light was cruel beyond anything I ever experienced. In a few minutes I knew they must be upon me ; already I could hear the sigh of their gasping breath. By this time I was becoming very much exhausted, and my heart throbbed most painfully. The sweat poured from me. I could hear the pulses throbbing in my temples and at whiles the light of the matches swam in circles, yellow and red and green, before my eyes.

It was then that I came upon the transverse passage that I had remarked during my descent. I dared not hide there, for my only chance of escape, as I well knew, was to reach the mouth of the shaft before the peasants would reach it and by replacing the great boulder over the entrance entomb me for ever in the heart of the cliff.

I staggered on, slipping from exhaustion at almost every step. There were but a few matches now remaining to me, and I had only succeeded in gaining another half-dozen stairs when dizziness again overwhelmed me, the flame of the match began to stream round like a ribbon of fire waving crazily in a whirlwind and I felt the heavy aching in the arms and shoulders and the chill creeping sensation under the skin which precedes a fainting fit. I tried to surmount this weakness, but uselessly, and collapsed heavily against the rocky wall. Fortunately I had the instinct to drag myself behind a projecting boulder before I lost consciousness. This state, however, must have lasted but a few seconds, for all at once I was aware that the abyss beneath me was filled with a golden glow. The peasants had overtaken me ! I could hear their

heavy breathing, the rustling of their garments and the padded shuffling of their bare feet.

Although I knew that for the moment I was hidden from them I experienced an almost irresistible desire to leap up from my hiding-place and to reveal myself by laughing insanely or screaming abuse at them. Indeed I believe I was only saved from doing so by reason of my physical weakness. Each moment was an eternity, an eternity which every instant I expected to be snapped by a hoarse roar, a sudden rush, and a savage and lonely death at the hands of panic-stricken fanatics. Yet nothing happened, the light remained steady, the vague sound of pattering feet continued, and then to my astonishment instead of approaching became thinner and the individual sounds more distinct, whilst the yellow glow grew fainter and fainter. At last I heard the padding of a single pair of feet and a gigantesque shadow leapt grotesquely through a flickering glare across the wall, followed by complete darkness. What could have happened to them? I peered cautiously round the edge of the rock. I could see nothing whatever and the silence was absolute. For a moment I wondered if my presence had been discovered, if this were some subtle snare to enmesh me in a still more cruel noose of death. But on reflection I realised that if the darkness were indeed filled with crouching human forms, their breathing must be audible to me after the heavy effort of the climb.

Then all at once the explanation came. I remembered that the figures I had seen splashing through the surf to the stairs were still attired in the green vestments of their ancient ritual and understood in a flash of joy and thankfulness that

these transverse passages must contain natural chambers used by the participants in that antique worship as hiding-places for these rare and wonderful garments. Now they were doubtless exchanging them for their ordinary insignificant attire.

I crept out cautiously from my hiding-place, and feeling safe from immediate pursuit, began to grope my way slowly up the stairs in the dense darkness, for I considered it prudent to husband my few remaining matches until I reached a particularly difficult part of the way that I remembered had given me great trouble during the descent. But the disturbing surprises of that night were not yet over, for after I had crawled up some score of steps I suddenly noticed that the darkness was not so intense, and a moment afterwards the dripping rock at my side became faintly visible.

After a moment of bewilderment I glanced downwards and to my horror saw again the yellow glow that for the last half-hour had been for me the symbol of death. The light came from some point a little below the transverse corridor, and I had no doubt that its bearer must be one of the peasants delayed for a space on the way by some trivial accident and relying upon overtaking the others in the changing-rooms.

I glanced upwards. In the dimness I beheld the stairs ascending perfectly straight and undeviating and noticed too that the wall in this place was completely smooth without a single projection to afford me concealment until this new danger would be past.

Neither was there time in which to regain my late hiding-place. My discovery was inevitable.

Crouching down and pressing my contracted

body as close to the wall as possible, I watched the growing light in helpless and horrible fascination. Almost immediately its bearer came into sight, and with a strange thrill I recognised Mary Cunnea, the beautiful girl whom I had noticed on the floor of the temple. The green veil was folded loosely over her bare shoulders and bosom and her graceful black head was bent towards the difficult steps.

The sweat of agony and suspense broke out again on my forehead. It seemed an exaggeration of cruelty that Death should meet me clothed in such loveliness. Yet a faint hope was mingled with my pain. Mary and I were good friends, and she had reason to be grateful to me, for I had once delivered her from the ruffianly and dangerous attentions of a drunken tinker on the roadside in the previous summer.

If only I could prevent her from screaming at the sudden sight of me I believed that she would take pity on my disastrous situation and refrain from telling her fellow-worshippers of this encounter. I knew that I must present a terrifying appearance. My hands were covered with blood, dried upon the scratches inflicted by the barnacles to which I had unwittingly clung earlier in the evening, and my pallid and sweating face was bleeding from a cut over the eye sustained during one of my falls. I knew too that she was a very nervous and highly-strung girl.

Meanwhile she had reached the platform from which the corridor branched left and right, and as with a sigh of relief she raised her head her eyes rested immediately upon my shrinking form. She saw me at once, I well knew, yet at the first moment I could tell that she did not realise that she was

gazing at anything unusual. Then she stared harder, started violently, turned terribly pale and tottered for a moment, the candle shaking vaguely in her hand. A little sobbing sigh forced itself from her throat, "The Lord save us," she gasped. Even at the time I was momentarily struck by the quaint incongruity of these words, following upon the scene in which she had so recently taken part. She seemed at the first shock too terrified to cry out.

"Hush, Mary," I whispered hoarsely, "don't scream, for God's sake," and I began to descend towards her in a manner which I intended to be reassuring. Suddenly I was conscious that I was grinning with a kind of ghastly amiability that would probably produce a directly opposite effect to that which I intended.

She cowered against the wall, holding out her beautiful bare arms piteously, as though to ward off an attack, whilst the candle in her right hand waved aslant, shaking out jets of grease on to the rocks.

I saw her open her lips to scream.

"No—no, on your soul, do not, Mary; you know me surely," I whispered in Irish, scarcely recognising my own voice, and I told her my name. To my relief her lips closed slowly, but she still cowered back staring wildly at me like a hunted animal, and I was obliged to repeat my words several times before she could realise my identity. Then she let her arms fall and drooped against the wall, her head back and her eyes closed whilst her bosom heaved convulsively.

"The Lord save us!" she murmured faintly, "you—you were in it too. You saw, is it? All—all?"

I nodded. "But if I did I understood it all, Mary, as well as any of you," I said, and I am sure my voice shook with entreaty. "I swear that I'll tell no one of this night if you let me go out of this place."

"They'll have my life. They'll destroy me surely," she said feebly, her eyes wandering restlessly about the roof of the cave.

"But they need never know. How can they tell that you saw me?" I urged feverishly.

"They'll have my life," she muttered again, her breath fluttering through her lips. "They'll have my life. O God! O Mother Mary, have mercy. I'm frightened, I'm frightened." She seemed quite helpless, incapable of coming to any kind of decision, while the precious moments hurried by. I dared not leave her thus, fearing that only my actual proximity to her kept the tension of her nerves from snapping into the shriek that would betray me to my doom.

Yet strangely enough at that moment a wave of quite impersonal pity swept over me, pity for the weakness and mental instability that is so often the birthright of beauty. I stared in brooding perplexity at that pale beautiful shape of my destiny, the sombre black hair falling about her milky cheeks, her deep grey eyes mad with unreasoning terror, and her lips whispering in nervous incoherence. Beneath the thin veil covering them I could see the curve of her young breasts and the slender shape of her fatal body that has been praised in pain and passion by more than one country singer, even as Mary Hynes was praised with the name of "An Posadh Glégeal" three generations ago.

My own will must have been getting weak now from the effects of bodily hunger and exhaustion, for I found considerable difficulty in rousing myself to action from the trance of these vain reflections.

I started violently and caught her by the arm.

"Listen for the love of God," I cried with effort, for I had suddenly become horribly drowsy. "Listen, Mary," and then paused for an instant, for I noticed with a ray of hope that she was trembling less and that her eyes had more of reason in them. "Listen now! Do you understand what I am saying? Do you mind that day last summer—Tom Joyce the tinker?"

She shuddered convulsively and made a gesture with one hand as though to silence me. Then with a suddenness that made me start she roused herself, stood upright, and began speaking with feverish haste.

"Aye, I mind, I mind surely. I'd be to be a shamed girl yon time, maybe, only for yourself, and indeed, sir, I've put up a prayer every night since for you. There now," she gasped, breathing with difficulty. "Let you hurry. Quick now, O, O, be quick. Take you the candle. I'll be telling them I dropped it. But hurry, O! hurry." She thrust the candle into my hand and began pushing me towards the steps.

"God bless you, Mary," I whispered, "I'll never forget it," and instinctively I caught her hand and kissed it as though she were a queen. She gave a little sob.

"Arú, what are you doing?" she cried, and her voice broke hysterically. Immediately afterwards she had fled down the corridor and I was alone.

I reached the top of the cliff without much

difficulty just as the day was breaking, and hiding myself in the rocks at a safe distance saw the peasants stream up over the edge of the pit almost directly after me. It was not until they had replaced the great boulder in its usual position and had dispersed stealthily down the hill-side that I dared to venture from my place of concealment.

As I staggered down the hill-side in the splendid and burning dawn, sick and dizzy with fatigue and hunger, my eyes pricking and smarting from want of sleep, a strange delight sang within me, for though I might never behold its like again I had for once looked on a house truly fashioned to the glory of Ireland's gods.

VII

THE DEATH OF MACHA GOLD-HAIR

I

THE harper Airbreach sat at Queen Macha's feet. He loved her and had been loved by her, but during this night of the great Beltaine feast his spirit was heavy within him. Occasionally he writhed impatiently on the low dragon-carved stool upon which he sat, and glanced up angrily and passionately into the lovely and mask-like face of the queen. Yet never once had she even looked at him. Perfectly motionless she sat on the great high-seat, whose cunning and beautiful fashioning was almost entirely hidden by the quantity of wolf- and deer-skins heaped about it that the fair body of the queen might recline in comfort during the feast.

Following a custom first ordained by herself, the harpers were ranged before the high-seat in the form of a half moon, for Macha liked to be girdled with music at all times. The ancient Muirteach, who crouched on his stool figured with grotesque fish and dragon-shapes immediately before the queen, had composed a rann :

“ As the foamy swift-footed milk-crested wave of the south
Calls to the pleasant shores of smooth-sanded Eire
The desirous sweet-lipped surf of our singing
Is raining about the star-woman, the queen Macha of
gracious words.”

This tribute had so greatly pleased the queen, that as a mark of her special favour she had bestowed upon the old bard a magnificent golden torque that was wont to circle her throat, and with her own hands had fastened it still glowing with the warmth of her sweet flesh about the neck of the aged minstrel. All the other bards had become inflamed with jealousy, and not content with criticising with rancour the technical merits of the rann, had made several attempts secretly to poison its author, though as yet without success.

From where Macha was seated she could see with ease every corner of the great dun. Though it was fashioned externally of clay and wattles rudely enough, the interior was, after the fashion of the time, not wanting in beauty and even splendour. New rushes had been strewn upon the floor and the damp walls were overhung with sumptuous skins and even in places with tapestries, many of which were already rotted and mildewed with the sticky ooze of the soaked clay beneath them.

The dun was lit with blazing rushes twisted tightly into a kind of plait, dipped in the fat of animals, and mounted in fantastically carven metal braziers. They burned badly, giving forth a very evil smell, and as they were continually going out with much hissing and sputtering several attendants had been set apart for the sole purpose of trimming and relighting them. The hour was late and the feasting was over long since, but still the flagons of mead passed precariously from hand to hand. Most of the "ceanns" and nobles and many of the women were drunk and the floor was strewn with the inert bodies of warriors, ollavs, genealogists, amazons and maidens mingled almost indistinguish-

ably, some rolling feebly alone among the soiled rushes, whilst others lay dully folded in one another's embraces, their heavy listless arms tightly interlaced, often as it seemed almost unconsciously.

The captain of the guard lay on his back in the middle of the floor, his glazed eyes staring without expression at the damp and oozing roof, and his right arm vaguely waving above him his drinking-cup, skilfully hammered out of the bleached skull of one of his foes. He mumbled quarrelsome of his own exploits, whilst the paint and sweat dripped off his face into the rushes of the floor.

But the bards circled about the feet of the queen were sober to a man, not from inclination, but because they knew well that a false chord or a forgotten word meant instant death. All through the night they had sung almost unceasingly, but the queen was in very ill humour, and they were disheartened and ill-at-ease. Airbreach, close to Queen Macha's impatiently-tapping sandalled foot, glanced up again into her staring unfathomable face. The air in the dun was stifling, filled with the heavy odour of human bodies and the fumes of mead and wine.

Airbreach felt very dizzy, and he was not sure what thing might happen in the next moment. He drew a deep breath, and with that inhalation seemed to suck into his being a wandering flame that instantly set light to some primitive fury smouldering in the depths of his spirit. He shuddered slightly, and making a convulsive movement with his whole body leapt to his feet. His face was very pale, yet a red spot burned in the centre of each cheek. Tossing the long black hair out of his eyes, he smote several loud sour chords from his harp, and un-

heeding the fact that two of the strings had snapped beneath his fierce fingers sang :

- “ Woe to the sweet-tongued bard
 And the hero skilled in combat,
 He to be putting faith in the smiles of women,
 And the honey talk of a high queen ;
- “ His soul to be trapped in the snare of desire,
 In foolish and profitless things,
 The poisonous net of her hair
 And the pale mists of her flesh.
- “ If I saw the hawks of the machair,
 The fierce broad-winged eagles of western Sliabh Sneachta,
 And I after gazing at the haughty queen,
 My heart tormented in the bitter heat of the night,
 I would say that those were gentle things.
- “ I cry to the gersfalcons of the Red Gap,
 The grey-backed very swift swallows of Dooish of the
 winds,
 That they traverse the six roads of green Fodhla
 And circle the winds with their strong flight,
 My words scorching their tongues
 Till they shower them over the world.
- “ The wounds in my middle cry to you,
 O wild birds, and this my message,
 Macha, the comely queen
 Of the glens of western Uladh,
 The white-shouldered woman of Tír Conaill,
 Is without gentleness, without honour,
 Without warmth, without affection,
 Without love of poet's words
 And the roaring of the harps,
 An empty flagon, a hollow reed,
 A blasted birch-tree, a false string,
 Blown foam on the shifting sands,
 A whirl of dust on the dry roads of the world,
 Vain as all vain things,
 Vain with the vanity of women.”

Throwing the harp to the floor, Airbreach burst into a roar of bitter mocking laughter and stood before the queen, his breast heaving and his body swaying as though he were drunk.

When she had first understood the meaning of the the harper's song, Macha's face had flushed violently, but now she was very pale. She bit her lip, and her eyes seemed to search some icy distance. Then she smiled slightly. There were those in the dun who trembled seeing that smile.

"Cut out his tongue," said Macha simply, and she smiled again, and then sat very still, though her bosom rose and fell like a stormy sea.

The kernes rushed upon the harper, and after binding him, seized his long dark hair and wrenched back his head. Then they battered on his mouth with the butt-end of a short spear until the teeth were driven in, and one of them drawing forth his sgian hacked out the tongue.

Macha sighed. "Bring it to me," she said. They laid the tongue on a silver dish and placed it before the queen. She looked at it curiously for a moment, and then a wave of fury appeared to flood her whole body. She trembled violently and her cheeks became more red than the wine-stains upon the rushes of the floor. Drawing a golden pin from her hair, many times with its delicate point she stabbed the tongue, about which the blood was already beginning to congeal. Then she rose to her feet, her chin thrust out, and her face lime-white even to the lips. She swept over the floor, the rushes hissing beneath her long scarlet robe, to the edges of which some of them clung. Laughing low and derisively, she stood before the harper.

"Airbreach, Airbreach," she said softly, "where

now will you be finding any white woman to kiss those lips that a thousand windless nights among the dewy hills have lied so sweetly that the stars and the lake-waters have listened to thee even as thy love has listened? Between what fragrant breasts shall thy mouth that was beloved of queens whisper its music now in the secret corners of the house when lights are overturned? "

And she pointed her white forefinger, the nail dyed with a costly red spice, at the battered swollen bleeding thing that had once been the mouth of a great poet.

"Sing to me, Airbreach, my poet of the golden voice," she went on with false tenderness, "Sing to me one of thy songs that are more sweet than the music of the nightingales of Coillsheogue, and more heady than the red mead the rivers pour among the flowers of Magh Mell, the pleasant plain. Sing to me 'The Waving of the Corn,' with which men say the hearts of the proudest women are melted, as the snows of Errigal are melted in a single night by the warm honey-breath of golden-eyed Bel." The eyes of the harper rolled expressionlessly in his blood-stained and contorted face. Even in his agony the queen seemed to hold him fascinated, as some lovely and evil she-snake fascinates her prey.

"Sing! sing! sing!" cooed Macha, relentlessly, "I thirst for thy songs as a hero thirsts for battle, as the weary for sleep, as the night for the dawn." She leaned forward, her eyes close to his staring and strained eyes, and suddenly she stamped her foot in simulated wrath.

"Thou wilt not sing," she screamed savagely, and her eyes blazed. "Cowherd! Mule! Clod! Ha, ha, ha! thou hast made very sweet music in thy day

upon yonder harp, now shall thy harp make music upon thee ! ”

She made a sign to the chief of the kernes, pointing at the harp which lay among the tossed and trampled rushes, most of its strings already hanging tattered over the edges of the frame. But before any of them could make a movement an exulting cry rang out and from the listless and stupefied throng a woman leapt with the activity of a wild cat, trampling heedlessly on bare faces and arms in the fury of her wild rush. She was of abnormal height and clad in a single skin garment. Her muscular tanned legs were bare, and her thick black hair hung in matted dishevelled clusters over her eyes. Between her left eye and the corner of her mouth a long livid scar stretched, and the slipping aside of her loosely folded garment revealed the fact that her right breast had been burnt off according to the usual custom of warrior women, a practice which allowed the spear-arm greater freedom of action. Thrusting aside the blear-eyed staggering warriors, she snatched up the heavy clairseach with a sweeping movement of the arm as she ran.

The pain-clouded eyes of the doomed harper regarded her with a kind of dull surprise. For a moment she stood looking through her tangled hair into those eyes. Then she shook herself like some wild animal, and with a scream swung the clairseach above her like a battle-axe. As it fell one of the drunken women lying upon the floor cried out in terror and began to whimper, but the blows still continued to rain down. With the heavy embossed frame of the harp the amazon battered Airbreach's head until the bones of the skull were crushed and the blood spurted out upon the rushes. She laughed,

feeling the hot dark drops dripping from the harp upon her hands and bare arms. And she chanted this rann :

“ Aïa, Aïa, O—ro !
 Long shall the day be remembered
 In the dun of Cliath-na-Righ,
 In the goodly wide-spreading feast-house
 Of Macha of haughty eyebrows.
 Long shall this day be remembered,
 The night of the Bleeding of the Harp,
 The harp of Airbreach Honey-mouth
 Whose singing was a sword-edge,
 A moonlit drift of blossom,
 A wave on the shores of the heart.
 Long shall the day be remembered
 In the grianans of western Tír-Conaill,
 The day when the strings that were wont
 To stream with songs of passion
 Sweated with blood and death.”

When she had finished this chanting she dropped the harp and fell swooning as it seemed across the dead body of the poet, her face pressed into his breast.

Macha had regarded the scene with startled eyes that for the moment under the sway of astonishment appeared almost innocent and childlike, but the sudden silence which followed the amazon's chant broke the spell. The queen turned her head away contemptuously with a short laugh that seemed wrung from her throat almost involuntarily. There was a moment of silence, and then a strange sadness passed over the queen's face as a cloud floats across the hard blue midday sky. She stared abstractedly at the aged Muirteach's head, bent in some grievous reflection, his long silver hair falling forward among the strings of the *cruit* that rested

on his knees. "The waving of the corn!" she murmured slowly into the depths of her shining hair. She started with a gesture of irritation. "I am weary," she said fretfully, "lead me to the grianan. I will that only women sleep with me to-night. I tire of men and their foolishness."

The women led her down the length of the dun, the proud feet of the queen stepping delicately as those of a hind among the rushes stained with blood and wine. Her beautiful head, poised with marvellous grace on her white shoulders, was motionless, her eyes stared forward without expression. Already she seemed to have forgotten the tumultuous happenings of the evening. As she moved the little golden balls suspended to the ends of the four twisted plaits in which her yellow hair was dressed swayed languidly and rhythmically upon her graceful back, and the amethyst brooch that fastened the scarlet embroidered robe glittered now and again with unearthly and disturbing hues as the flickering gleam of the rush-lights fell momentarily upon it.

II

For a long time a profound silence had reigned in the dun. Then there was a very faint rustling somewhere among the rushes followed by a soft swift pattering sound. A rat ran across the skins on the floor and leaping upon the daïs began to gnaw one of the carven legs of the high-seat. Another half-hour passed, and then a pale shaft of moonlight stole through the single small opening that served the great dun as door and window. It moved slowly to the right, revealing for a moment

perhaps the flushed face and swollen eyes of some sleeping reveller. It seemed to be searching for something, timidly, tenderly, as some fragile woman searches a star-lit battle-field for the body of her love. It swayed forward slowly and obliquely, every moment becoming more and more narrow, until finally, slender as the shaft of a spear, it fell upon the body of the dead Airbreach, on the blood, stiff, dark, and clotted about the wrecked milk-white face, on the obscure living shape stretched upon that lifeless shape, and the heavy hair spread about the pale breast like a thundercloud. The moonlight seemed to cling to those two for a moment and then stole softly away, leaving the dun in unfathomable darkness.

III

Towards morning Macha the queen awoke with a start, the grianan was strangely hot and she felt an unusual and painful sensation at her throat, as though wires were being twisted about it and were gradually biting into her flesh. She became furiously angry. With one hand she groped for the knife that was always her bedfellow in the darkness, whilst with the other she clutched her soft neck, but under her trembling fingers she felt nothing but the smooth firm flesh.

She opened her eyes, closed them again in terror, opened them once more. A heavy red glare smote upon them, and something smelling acrid and sour wreathed about her, flooding the glare in dense swelling clouds. Fire and smoke! She tried to scream, but those wires about her throat strangled the sound. She lifted herself upon her elbow with a supreme effort, for her body seemed turned to stone.

She attempted to draw a full breath but was unable to do so. Something seemed to be straining and tearing her breasts, strange lights and darkneses swam before her eyes, there was a buzzing sound in her ears as though some bee had strayed into her brain and was striving to escape.

Through the smoke and the glare she could see the forms of her women lying as if in sleep, most of them quite still. Near to her one of them writhed languidly, heaving up her body for a moment and then falling back, as it seemed to the queen with a certain dreadful luxuriousness. She did not move again.

Macha was afraid of death, and the heat was becoming every moment more intense. It seemed that spears were piercing her eyes outward from behind and that they must fall from her head in the next instant. She tried to rise, but some force pinned her down to the bed. With a fearful struggle that seemed to tear the heart from her breast she gained her feet and stood reeling, the red glare wrapping like a lover her beautiful naked body, over which as it seemed to her a thousand envenomed tongues were sliding. She tottered this way and that, hiding her mouth in her hair, and seeking for some door of escape.

Suddenly she heard a sound of singing as it seemed at an immense distance. The queen's brain became confused. At times the singing melted into the flames, at others it seemed the flames sang, and again she thought that in those red-tongued darting things she was actually looking upon the very forms of those bitter passion-wrung sounds. It was indeed a bitter singing that night for Queen Macha Gold-hair.

" Hei-a ! Hei-a ! Hei-a-aha !
 A red night for Cliath-na-Righ,
 For the shining grianan of Macha Oir-cinn.
 Sweet the song of the flames to the stars,
 A music passing that of stately harps,
 Masterful the red red lips
 Kissing the breasts of the queen,
 The tossing burning arms
 That are wreathed in her tressy hair,
 Hei-a ! Hei-a !—Aro ! Aree !
 The four winds of green-pastured Eire,
 The lean hungry winds
 Furiously follow the fire,
 The brown wind of the west, the moon in his hair,
 The red wind of the east, his feet stained with the sun-
 blood,
 The grey wind of the south, the rain in his eyes,
 The black wind of the north, the storm froth on his mouth,
 Ochone, ochone, aree !
 The pale lips of the dawn
 Will be crying after Macha the queen,
 The blown sands in the dry sea-grasses
 Shall answer with voices weak, faint, very thin.
 The smooth very gracious body of her
 That was as flowers that fall through foam,
 The breasts that were apples on a sunny bough,
 The hair that was ripe corn in the summer wind,
 The mouth that was as the berry of the rowan,
 All these are dust, a very little dust,
 And it lying between the fingers of the four winds
 In the sundered mists of the western world,
 That cling to the four great mountains
 Of surgy foam-worn Eire.
 My grief for him that is the beloved
 Of two pitiless fierce-eyed women !
 Evil shall come to him from the sun,
 And misfortune among the rains of the moon,
 Neither shall he find peace in the hollow hills.
 Aio, hei-a, aha ! O Macha of the scornful brow,
 My laughter leaps in the flames,
 Sure I am after drowning you in the great fires of my
 mirth ! "

The queen's head fell back, she clutched her breast with both hands. Dimly she heard a great crashing and splitting as the sides of the grianan fell in roaring. Through the glares and blacknesses circling giddily in her eyes she saw indistinctly the figure of a woman that leapt over the breach and was instantly lost in a wilderness of flame.

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