



### DERMOT'S SPRING

**T**HE young king of Tir-Cullen, bright in his feasting apparel, sat upon his throne, welcomed his many guests with a joyous air and the clapping of hands, and bade the bondsmen serve supper. He was twenty-two years of age lacking a month, and his wedding-day was fixed and drawing nigh. He was said to be the handsomest youth of his own nation, and the most expert in all manly exercises. He was brown-haired and rich-complexioned, with eyes bright and black, and keen of sight as an eagle's. There was peace in all his country, and he was deemed by many to be the happiest and most prosperous of territorial kings. There was no high king over Leinster at this time; he was servant only to the King of Ireland, and under his protection. It happened to be the 25th day of November in the year of our Lord 1133. Murchard O'Byrne was the young king's name.

All day, in a high wind, he had been making trial of his racing steeds, against the next great Fair at Loch Garman and the steed-contests of the I-Drona to be held there. Afterwards he had bathed and changed his clothes, and now sat his high seat in the great hall of his Dûn, and would entertain, like a king, his dependants and friends. His hostages were ungyved for the feast, but armed men stood behind them where

they sat. The wind rose as night fell, roaring mightily in the forest, and shook the strong-built Dún. Within, a great fire blazed and many candles illuminated the hall, the pillars and side-walls with their racked or pendent weapons, and the instruments or trophies of the chase, and showed the many feasters, their gay attire and happy faces. The young king's face beamed as he contemplated the scene, and his eyes glistened: they were black and bright under a white forehead. O my sorrow, that this tale should be for me to tell!

An ancient man sat in the ingleside dispreparing his hands to the blaze while he looked sideways with sightless eyes towards the company. One took him by the hand and led him to the king's table, and sat beside him and ministered to his wants. The man was not born blind, but made so by men's hands. They said that he too was once a king, but that his dominion had been of short endurance, troubles having arisen out of which he did not come forth with victory. But these things happened long ago. It was the first feast celebrated by the young king since his inauguration feast.

When all had eaten to their satisfaction, they betook themselves to drinking, and conversation, and merrymaking, while ever and anon Murchard would pledge one of his guests or chief men, calling him by his name with a clear voice. Seeing that all had been served to their liking, and the din of cheerful conversation sound around him, the king turned to an ancient lord who was of his council, and who sat beside him upon the right.

'How do thy timid counsels appear to thee now, Art, son of Bran? Are not my people obedient and loving in all the borders of Tir-Cullen? Nay, in all Leinster doth even a dog bark against that settlement of the Province which was made by the high King of all Ireland and his great council, who advanced myself, before that a plain lord, to be king of Tir-Cullen, as my ancestors have been before me, and thou alone of my council wast unwilling?'

'Mingle not business with pleasure,' said the lord so addressed.

'I have known kings who were grave at feastings and merry in the council-chamber. Do not resemble them.'

'Thy censure,' replied the king, 'is the one bitter drop in my cup. Yet the Clan-Regnant of Leinster is depressed past any recall. Men speak of the rule of the MacMurroughs as they do of ancient things. And this Dermot is the satisfied king of a small realm, like myself, and is obedient to the King of Ireland, keeping his peace and following his war and rising-out to all his occasions. He consorts with ecclesiastics and learned men. He doth not rejoice in the chase or in the ale-feast, and is not said to be skilful of his hands or to show any of the signs which mark out young men for future pre-eminence—a morose, unprofitable youth, according to the report of all. Moreover, I myself and all the kings of Leinster are under the protection of the King of Ireland, high and mighty.'

'Royal houses are not done away with and abolished on such terms,' replied the other; 'and not for an instant, by day or by night, is it forgotten by that youth that the sovereignty of Leinster is his. I saw him once in his hall at Ferns, and, though he smiled, I perceived the fell purpose—watchful, wary, biding its time. Beware the spring, O Murchard! And as thou wilt force me to speak, I like not thy manner of living, thy travellings slenderly attended, and thy Dùn at night with the bridge undrawn, and thy hospitable beacon-fire for all way-farers. And the King of Ireland is far away on the other side of the Shannon, and this dour-faced and silent youth is not far off. Beware the spring, I say again, O Murchard!'

'Thou art a sour counsellor,' answered the king. 'I like not such. Should Dermot try conclusions with the King of Ireland, he would be no more than a sparrow in a hawk's claw.'

'I give faithful counsel according to my lights,' said the other; 'and there have been kings of Leinster who have beaten the army of Ireland, and youth is the season of hope and daring, and in the ear of that young king—believe it, dear son—ancestral voices for ever call.'

The storm was so loud now that conversation in general ceased.

Men looked to see the great Dûn unroofed or overthrown. The sightless, ancient man had been led to his place in the ingle-side by that other who waited upon him. His tankard of mulled ale was placed so that he might easily lay his hand upon it whenever he had a desire to drink. 'There was a storm then too,' he murmured as he bowed his fading head, while visions and memories of his glorious youth trooped thronging past before the inner eye.

'I love thee, and I like thee not,' replied the king to that counsellor.

Then he said to another—

'Iarbanel, thou art a wizard and prophet. Secret things of the Druids have come down to thee. Doth this storm portend aught?'

'There is danger coming nigh to this Dûn,' answered the prophet; 'and its nature is not shown to me, but I feel its coming as of a host of men with malignant minds.'

'Raise the drawbridge!' cried the king.

From without that self-same moment sounded a clamour, and one voice there that rang like a trumpet, and the clash of steel, and the stamping of mailed feet on the bridge.

A young man stood in the wide door of the Dûn, bright against the darkness. He was tall and great-bodied, and his aspect high and menacing. His battle-cap was of polished steel, scarlet his mantle, and for brooch he wore a pin of gold with a plain ring to it. Beneath his mantle he wore a battle-dress of steel rings. Armed men succeeded him. They swiftly surrounded the risen feasters and intercluded them from the walls of the chamber and their weapons hanging there. Soon the whole Dûn was filled with armed men. They stood steady and silent with fierce-glittering eyes under fixed brows.

The young man with the scarlet mantle strode up the hall alone. There was a battle-axe in his right hand. Like a Fate he came and stood before the young king.

'Who art thou?' said the king. 'And is it peace or war?'

The other looked terribly upon him.

'There was a friendly message and warning sent to thee,' he said, 'on the eve of thy inauguration and of thy swearing thyself man to the King of Ireland.

The other answered, 'Yea.'

'Then thy punishment be on thy own head, for never more shalt thou be king, duke, or lord in Leinster, and from this night forward thy lot and part in the high strife of captains and great men hath an end, and the Lord Christ shall be thy sole hope, for never again shalt thou see the sun or be eligible as a ruler in thy nation. I say it—I—Dermot, son of Murchard, son of Dermot Mac Mael-na-m-bo, high king of all Leinster and of the Danes.'

When he heard that word, Murchard, King of Tir-Cullen, ran forward to clasp the high king's knees.

'Slay me rather,' he cried, 'O king most merciful!'

But ere he could accomplish his purpose they seized and bound him, and by main force dragged him out of the hall, shrieking. After that there was a great silence. The high king stood where he had spoken, motionless, like a statue; but his lips moved, and thrice he invoked the name of Christ and thrice that of God Most High.

When Murchard was led back into the hall there was no word from his mouth, or cry. The high king flashed a candle close to his eyes and he did not wince. Then they led him by the hand to the ingleside, and caused him to sit down beside that other, the ancient one. He said one word only, and that was 'Christ.'

After that Dermot and his men went away swiftly into the country of the I-Murethi.

On that day and night, Dermot, or his officers, slew or blinded seventeen of the principal nobility of the Province which brought Leinster far under his hand. Also he seized the Abbess of Kildare, the comarb of Bridget, and caused her to be defiled, and he set another in her place.

STANDISH O'GRADY.