

THE GREEN SHEAF SUPPLEMENT TO No. 7.

DEIRDRE

A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS

By A. E.

All Dramatic Rights held by the Irish National Theatre Society.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

CONCOBAR	....	....	Ardrie of Ulla.
NAISI			
AINLE	} ....	....	Brothers of Naisi.
ARDAN			
FERGUS			
BUINNE	} ....	....	Sons of Fergus.
ILANN			
CATHVAH	....	....	A Druid.
DEIRDRE			
LAVARCAM	....	....	A Druidess.
			Herdsman, Messenger.

DEIRDRE:

A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS.

ACT I.

SCENE.—*The dun of Deirdre's captivity. Lavarcam, a Druidess, sits before the door in the open air. Deirdre comes out of the dun.*

DEIRDRE. Dear fostermother, how the spring is beginning! The music of the Father's harp is awakening the flowers. Now the winter's sleep is over, and the spring flows from the lips of the harp. Do you not feel the thrill in the wind—a joy answering the trembling strings? Dear fostermother, the spring and the music are in my heart!

LAVARCAM. The harp has but three notes; and, after sleep and laughter, the last sound is of weeping.

DEIRDRE. Why should there be any sorrow while I am with you? I am happy here. Last night in a dream I saw the blessed Shee upon the mountains, and they looked on me with eyes of love. *(An old herdsman enters who bows before Lavarcam.)*

HERDSMAN. Lady, the High King of Ulla is coming through the woods.

LAVARCAM. Deirdre, go to the grianan for a little. You shall tell me your dream again, my child.

DEIRDRE. Why am I always hidden from the King's sight?

LAVARCAM. It is the King's will you should see no one except these aged servants.

DEIRDRE. Am I indeed fearful to look upon, fostermother? I do not think so, or you would not love me.

LAVARCAM. It is the King's will.

DEIRDRE. Yet why must it be so, fostermother? Why must I hide away? Why must I never leave the valley?

LAVARCAM. It is the King's will. *(While she is speaking Concobar enters. He stands still and looks on Deirdre. Deirdre gazes on the King for a moment, and then covering her face with her hands, she flies into the dun. The herdsman goes out. Lavarcam sees and bows before the King.)*

CONCOBAR. Lady, is all well with you and your charge?

LAVARCAM. All is well.

CONCOBAR. Is there peace in Deirdre's heart?

LAVARCAM. She is happy, not knowing a greater happiness than to roam the woods or her dreams of the immortal ones can bring her.

CONCOBAR. Fate has not found her yet hidden in this valley.

LAVARCAM. Her happiness is to be here. But she asks why must she never leave the glen. Her heart quickens within her. Like a bird she listens to the spring, and soon the valley will be narrow as a cage.

CONCOBAR. I cannot open the cage. Less ominous the Red Swineherd at a feast than this beautiful child in Ulla. You know the word of the Druids at her birth.

LAVARCAM. Aye, through her would come the destruction of the Red Branch. But sad is my heart, thinking of her lonely youth.

CONCOBAR. The gods did not guide us how the ruin might be averted. The druids would have slain her, but I set myself against the wise ones, thinking in my heart that the chivalry of the Red Branch would be already gone if this child were slain. If we are to perish, it shall be nobly, and without any departure from the laws of our order. So I have hidden her away from men, hoping to stay the coming of fate.

LAVARCAM. King, your mercy will return to you, and if any of the Red Branch fall, you will not fall.

CONCOBAR. If her thoughts turned only to the Shee, her heart would grow cold to the light love that warriors give. The Birds of Angus cannot breathe or sing their maddening song in the chill air that enfolds the wise. For this, Druidess, I made thee her fosterer. Has she learned to know the beauty of the ever-living ones, after which the earth fades, and no voice can call us back?

LAVARCAM. The immortals have appeared to her in vision, and looked on her with eyes of love.

CONCOBAR. Her beauty is so great it would madden whole hosts, and turn them from remembrance of their duty. We must guard well the safety of the Red Branch. Druidess, you have seen with subtle eyes the shining life beyond this. But through the ancient traditions of Eri, which the bards have kept and woven into song, I have seen the shining law enter men's minds, and subdue the lawless into love of justice. A great tradition is shaping a heroic race; and the gods who fought at Moytura are descending and dwelling in the hearts of the Red Branch; and deeds will be done in our time as mighty as those wrought by the giants who battled at the dawn; and through the memory of our days and deeds, the gods will build themselves an eternal empire in the mind of the Gael. Wise woman, guard well this beauty which fills my heart with terror. I go now, and will doubly warn the spearmen at the passes, but will come hither again, and speak with thee of these things; and with Deirdre I would also speak.

LAVARCAM. King of Ulla, be at peace. It is not I who will break through the design of the gods. *(Concobar goes through the woods, after looking for a time at the door of the dun.)* But Deirdre is also one of the immortals. What the gods desire will utter itself through her heart. I will seek counsel from the gods. *(Deirdre comes slowly through the door.)*

DEIRDRE. Is he gone? I fear this stony king with his implacable eyes.

LAVARCAM. He is implacable only in his desire for justice.

DEIRDRE. No! No! There is a hunger in his eyes for I know not what.

LAVARCAM. He is the wisest king who ever sat on the chair of Macha.

DEIRDRE. He has placed a burden on my heart. Oh! fostermother, the harp of life is already trembling into sorrow!

LAVARCAM. Do not think of him. Tell me your dream, my child. (*Deirdre comes from the door of the dun and sits on a deerskin at Lavarcam's feet.*)

DEIRDRE. Tell me, do happy dreams bring happiness, and do our dreams of the Shee ever grow real to us as you are real to me? Do their eyes draw nigh to ours, and can the heart we dream of ever be a refuge for our hearts?

LAVARCAM. Tell me your dream.

DEIRDRE. Nay; but answer me, first of all, dear fostermother—you who are wise, and who have talked with the Shee.

LAVARCAM. Would it make you happy to have your dream real, my darling?

DEIRDRE. Oh, it would make me happy! (*She hides her face on Lavarcam's knees.*)

LAVARCAM. If I can make your dream real, I will, my beautiful fawn.

DEIRDRE. Dear fostermother, I think my dream is coming near to me. It is coming to me now.

LAVARCAM. Deirdre, tell me what hope has entered your heart?

DEIRDRE. In the night I saw in a dream the top of the mountain yonder, beyond the woods, and three hunters stood there in the dawn. The sun sent its breath upon their faces, but there was a light about them never kindled at the sun. They were surely hunters from some heavenly field, or the three gods whom Lu condemned to wander in mortal form, and they are come again to the world to seek some greater treasure.

LAVARCAM. Describe to me these immortal hunters. In Eire we know no gods who take such shape appearing unto men.

DEIRDRE. I cannot now make clear to thee my remembrance of two of the hunters; but the tallest of the three—oh, he stood like a flame against the flameless sky, and the whole sapphire of the heavens seemed to live in his fearless eyes! His hair was darker than the raven's wing; his face dazzling in its fairness. He pointed with his great flame-bright spear to the valley. His companions seemed in doubt, and pointed east and west. Then in my dream I came nigh him, and whispered in his ear, and pointed the way through the valley to our dun. I looked into his eyes, and he started like one who sees a vision; and I know, dear fostermother, he will come here; and he will love me. Oh, I would die if he did not love me!

LAVARCAM. Make haste, my child, and tell me, was there aught else memorable about this hero, and his companions?

DEIRDRE. Yes, I remember each had the likeness of a torch shedding rays of gold embroidered on the breast.

LAVARCAM. Deirdre, Deirdre, these are no phantoms, but living heroes! O wise King, the eyes of the

spirit thou wouldst open have seen further than the eyes of the body thou wouldst blind! The druid vision has only revealed to this child her destiny.

DEIRDRE. Why do you talk so strangely, fostermother?

LAVARCAM. Concohar, I will not fight against the will of the immortals. I am not thy servant, but theirs. Let the Red Branch fall! If the gods scatter it, they have chosen to guide the people of Ulla in another path.

DEIRDRE. What has disturbed your mind, dear fostermother? What have I to do with the Red Branch? And why should the people of Ulla fall because of me?

LAVARCAM. O Deirdre! there were no warriors created could overcome the Red Branch. The gods have but smiled on this proud chivalry through thine eyes, and they are already melted. The waving of thy hand is more powerful to subdue than the silver rod of the king to sustain. Thy golden hair shall be the flame to burn up Ulla.

DEIRDRE. Oh, what do you mean by these fateful prophecies? You fill me with terror. Why should a dream so gentle and sweet portend sorrow?

LAVARCAM. Dear golden head, cast sorrow aside for a time. The Father has not yet struck the last chords on the harp of life. The chords of joy have but begun for thee.

DEIRDRE. You confuse my mind, dear fostermother, with your speech of joy and sorrow. It is not your wont. Indeed, I think my dream portends joy.

LAVARCAM. It is love, Deirdre, which is coming to thee. Love, which thou hast never known.

DEIRDRE. But I love thee, dearest and kindest of guardians.

LAVARCAM. Oh, in this love heaven and earth will be forgotten, and your own self unremembered, or dim and far off, as a home the spirit lives in no longer.

DEIRDRE. Tell me, will the hunter from the hills come to us? I think I could forget all for him.

LAVARCAM. He is not one of the Shee, but the proudest and bravest of the Red Branch, Naisi, son of Usna. Three lights of valour among the Ultonians are Naisi and his brothers.

DEIRDRE. Will he love me, fostermother, as you love me, and will he live with us here?

LAVARCAM. Nay, where he goes you must go, and he must fly afar to live with you. But I will leave you now for a little, child; I would divine the future. (*Lavarcam kisses Deirdre and goes within the dun. Deirdre walks to and fro before the door. Naisi enters. He sees Deirdre, who turns and looks at him, pressing her hands to her breast. Naisi bows before Deirdre.*)

NAISI. Goddess, or enchantress, thy face shone on me at dawn on the mountain. Thy lips called me hither, and I have come.

DEIRDRE. I called thee, dear Naisi.

NAISI. Oh, knowing my name, never before having spoken to me, thou must know my heart also.

DEIRDRE. Nay, I know not. Tell me what is in thy heart.

NAISI. O enchantress! thou art there. The image of thine eyes is there, and thy smiling lips; and the beating of my heart is muffled in a cloud of thy golden tresses.

DEIRDRE. Say on, dear Naisi.

NAISI. I have told thee all. Thou only art in my heart.

DEIRDRE. But I have never ere this spoken to any man. Tell me more.

NAISI. If thou hast never before spoken to any man, then indeed art thou one of the immortals, and my hope is vain. Hast thou only called me to thy world to extinguish my life hereafter in memories of thee?

DEIRDRE. What wouldst thou with me, dear Naisi?

NAISI. I would carry thee to my dun by the sea of Moyle, O beautiful woman, and set thee there on an ivory throne. The winter would not chill thee there, nor the summer burn thee, for I would enfold thee with my love, enchantress, if thou camest to my world. Many warriors are there of the clan Usna, and two brothers I have who are strong above any hosts, and they would all die with me for thy sake.

DEIRDRE (*taking the hands of Naisi*). I will go with thee where thou goest. (*Leaning her head on Naisi's shoulder.*) Oh, fostermother, too truly hast thou spoken! I know myself not. My spirit has gone from me to this other heart for ever.

NAISI. Dost thou forego thy shining world for me?

LAVARCAM (*coming out of the dun*). Naisi, this is the Deirdre of the prophecies.

NAISI. Deirdre!—Deirdre!—I remember in some old tale of my childhood that name. (*Fiercely.*) It was a lying prophecy. What has this golden head to do with the downfall of Ulla?

LAVARCAM. Thou art the light of the Ultonians, Naisi, but thou art not the star of knowledge. The druids spake truly. Through her, but not through her sin, will come the destruction of the Red Branch.

NAISI. I have counted death as nothing battling for the Red Branch; and I would not, even for Deirdre, war upon my comrades. But Deirdre I will not leave nor forget for a thousand prophecies made by druids in their dotage. If the Red Branch must fall, it will fall through treachery; but Deirdre I will love, and in my love is no dishonour, nor any broken pledge.

LAVARCAM. Remember, Naisi, the law of the king. It is death to thee to be here. Concoibar is even now in the woods, and will come hither again.

DEIRDRE. Is it death to thee to love me, Naisi? Oh, fly quickly, and forget me. But first, before thou goest, bend down thy head—low—rest it on my bosom. Listen to the beating of my heart. That passionate tumult is for thee! There—I have kissed thee. I have sweet memories for everlasting. Go now, my beloved, quickly. I fear—I fear for thee this stony king.

NAISI. I do not fear the king, nor will I fly hence. It is due also to the chief of the Red Branch that I should stay and face him, having set my will against his.

LAVARCAM. You cannot remain now.

NAISI. It is due to the king.

LAVARCAM. You must go; both must go. Oh, do not cloud your heart with dreams of a false honour. It is not your death only, but Deirdre's, which will follow. Do you think the Red Branch would spare her, after your death, to extinguish another light of valour, and another who may wander here?

NAISI. I will go with Deirdre to Alba.

DEIRDRE. Through life, or to death, I will go with thee, Naisi.

(*Voices of Ainle and Ardan are heard in the wood.*)

ARDAN. I think Naisi went this way.

AINLE. He has been wrapt in a dream since the dawn. See! this is his footstep in the clay.

ARDAN. I heard voices.

AINLE (*entering with Ardan*). Here is our dream-led brother—

NAISI. Ainle and Ardan, this is Deirdre, your sister. I have broken through the command of the king, and fly with her to Alba, to avoid warfare with the Red Branch.

ARDAN. Our love to thee, beautiful sister.

AINLE. Dear maiden, thou art already in my heart with Naisi.

LAVARCAM. You cannot linger here. With Concoibar the deed follows swiftly the counsel; to-night his spearmen will be on your track.

NAISI. Listen, Ainle and Ardan. Go you to Emain Macha. It may be, the Red Branch will make peace between the king and myself. You are guiltless in this flight.

AINLE. Having seen Deirdre, my heart is with you, brother, and I also am guilty.

ARDAN. I think, being here, we, too, have broken the command of the king. We will go with thee to Alba, dear brother and sister.

LAVARCAM. Oh, tarry not: tarry not! Make haste while there is yet time. The thoughts of the king are circling around Deirdre as wolves around the fold. Try not the passes of the valley—but over the hills. The passes are all filled with the spearmen of the king.

NAISI. We will carry thee over the mountain, Deirdre, and to-morrow will see us nigh to the isles of Alba.

DEIRDRE. Farewell, dear fostermother. I have passed the faery sea since dawn, and have found the Island of Joy. Oh, see! what bright birds are around us, with dazzling wings! Can you not hear their singing? Oh, bright birds, make music for ever around my love and me!

LAVARCAM. They are the Birds of Angus. Their singing brings love—and death.

DEIRDRE. Nay, death has come before love, dear fostermother, and all I was has vanished like a dewdrop in the sun. Oh, beloved, let us go. We are leaving death behind us in the valley. (*Deirdre and the brothers go through the wood. Lavarcam watches, and, when they are out of sight, sits by the door of the dun with her head bowed to her knees. After a little Concoibar enters.*)

CONCOBAR. Where is Deirdre?

LAVARCAM (*not lifting her head*). Deirdre has left death behind her, and has entered into the kingdom of her youth.

CONCOBAR. Do not speak to me in portents. Lift up your head, Druidess. Where is Deirdre?

LAVARCAM (*looking up*). Deirdre is gone!

CONCOBAR. By the high gods, tell me whither; and who has dared to take her hence?

LAVARCAM. She has fled with Naisi, son of Usna, and is beyond your vengeance, king.

CONCOBAR. Woman, I swear by Balor, Tethra, and all the brood of demons, I will have such a vengeance a thousand years hereafter shall be frightened at the tale. If the Red Branch is to fall, it will sink at least in seas of the blood of the clan Usna.

LAVARCAM. O king, the doom of the Red Branch had already gone forth, when you suffered love for Deirdre to enter your heart.

(*Scene closes.*)

ACT II.

SCENE.—*In the dun by Loch Etive. Through the open door can be seen the lakes and wooded islands in a silver twilight. Deirdre stands at the door looking over the lake. Naisi is within binding a spear-head to the shaft.*

DEIRDRE. How still is the twilight! It is the sunset, not of one, but of many days—so still, so still, so living! The enchantment of Dana is upon the lakes and islands and woods, and the Great Father looks down through the deepening heavens.

NAISI. Thou art half of their world, beautiful woman, and it seems fair to me, gazing on thine eyes. But when thou art not beside me, the flashing of spears is more to be admired than a whole heavenful of stars.

DEIRDRE. O Naisi! still dost thou long for the Red Branch, and the peril of battles and death.

NAISI. Not for the Red Branch, nor the peril of battles, nor death, do I long. But—

DEIRDRE. But what, Naisi? What memory of Eri hast thou hoarded in thy heart?

NAISI (*bending over his spear*). It is nothing, Deirdre.

DEIRDRE. It is a night of many days, Naisi. See, all the bright day had hidden is revealed! Look, there! A star! and another star! They could not see each other through the day, for the hot mists of the sun were about them. Three years of the sun have we passed in Alba, Naisi; and now, O star of my heart, truly do I see you, this night of many days.

NAISI. Though my breast lay clear as a crystal before thee, thou couldst see no change in my heart.

DEIRDRE. There is no change, beloved; but I see there one memory warring on thy peace.

NAISI. What is it then, wise woman?

DEIRDRE. O Naisi, I have looked within thy heart, and thou hast there imagined a king with scornful eyes thinking of thy flight.

NAISI. By the gods, but it is true! I would give this kingdom I have won in Alba to tell the proud monarch I fear him not.

DEIRDRE. O Naisi, that thought will draw thee back to Eri, and to I know not what peril and death beyond the seas.

NAISI. I will not war on the Red Branch. They were ever faithful comrades. Be at peace, Deirdre.

DEIRDRE. Oh, how vain it is to say to the heart, "Be at peace," when the heart will not rest! Sorrow is on me, beloved, and I know not wherefore. It has taken the strong and fast place of my heart, and sighs there hidden in my love for thee.

NAISI. Dear one, the songs of Ainle and the pleasant tales of Ardan will drive away thy sorrow.

DEIRDRE. Ainle and Ardan! Where are they? They linger long.

NAISI. They were watching a sail that set hitherward from the south.

DEIRDRE. A sail!

NAISI. A sail! What is there to startle thee in that? Have not a thousand galleys lain in Loch Etive since I built this dun by the sea?

DEIRDRE. I do not know, but my spirit died down in my heart as you spake. I think the wind that brings it blows from Eri, and it is it has brought sorrow to me.

NAISI. My beautiful one, it is but a fancy. It is some merchant comes hither to barter Tyrian cloths for the cunning work of our smiths. But glad would I be if he came from Eri, and I would feast him here for a night, and sit round a fire of turves, and hear of the deeds of the Red Branch.

DEIRDRE. Your heart for ever goes out to the Red Branch, Naisi. Were there any like unto thee, or Ainle, or Ardan?

NAISI. We were accounted most skilful, but no one was held to be braver than another. If there were one, it was great Fergus, who laid aside the silver rod which he held as Ardrie of Ulla; but he is in himself greater than any king.

DEIRDRE. And does one hero draw your heart back to Eri?

NAISI. A river of love, indeed, flows from my heart unto Fergus, for there is no one more noble. But there were many others, Conal, and the boy we called Cuculain, a dark, sad child, who was the darling of the Red Branch, and truly he seemed like one who would be a world-famous warrior. There were many held him to be a god in exile.

DEIRDRE. I think we, too, are in exile in this world. But tell me, who else among the Red Branch do you think of with love?

NAISI. There was the Ardrie, ConcoBAR, whom no man knows, indeed, for he is unfathomable. But he is a wise king, though moody and passionate at times, for he was cursed in his youth for a sin against one of the Shee.

DEIRDRE. Oh, do not speak of him! My heart falls at the thought of him as into a grave; and I know I will die when we meet.