

COSTELLO THE PROUD, OONA MACDERMOTT, AND THE BITTER TONGUE



COSTELLO had come up from the fields, and lay upon the ground before the door of his square tower, supporting his head upon his hands, looking at the sunset, and considering the chances of the weather. Though the customs of Elizabeth and James, now going out of fashion in England, had begun to prevail among the gentry, he still wore the great cloak of the native Irishry; and the sensitive outlines of his face and the greatness of his indolent body showed a commingling of pride and strength which belonged to a simpler age. His eyes strayed in a little from the sunset to where the long white road lost itself over the south-western horizon, and then falling, lit upon a horseman who toiled slowly up the hill. A few more minutes and the horseman was near enough for his little and shapeless body, his long Irish cloak and the dilapidated bagpipes hanging from his shoulders, and the rough-haired garron under him, to stand out distinctly in the gathering greyness. So soon as he had come within earshot he began crying in Gaelic,

‘Is it sleeping you are, Tumaus Costello, while better folk break their hearts on the great white roads? Listen to me, Tumaus Costello the Proud, for I come out of Coolavin, and bring a message from Oona MacDermott, and it is the good pay I must have, for the saddle was bitter under me.’

He was close to the door by now, and began slowly dismounting, cursing the while by God, and Bridget and the devil; for riding in all weathers from wake to wedding and wedding to wake had made him rheumatic. Costello had risen to his feet, and was fumbling at the mouth of the leather bag, in which he carried his money, but it was some time before it would open, for the hand that had thrown so many in wrestling shook with excitement.

‘Here is all the money in my bag,’ he said, at last dropping a stream of French and Spanish silver into the hand of the piper. ‘I got it for a heifer down at Ballysumaghan last week!’ The other bit a shilling between his teeth, and went on,

‘And it is the good protection I must have, for if the MacDermotts lay their hands upon me in any boreen after sundown, or in Coolavin
by

by broad day, I will be flung among the nettles in a ditch, or hanged upon the sycamore, where they hanged the horse thieves out by Leitram last Great Beltan four years !' And while he spoke he tied the reins of his garron to a bar of rusty iron that was mortared into the wall.

'I will make you my piper and my body servant,' said Costello, 'and no man dare lay hands upon the man or the goat, or the horse or the dog protected by Tumaus Costello.'

'And I will only tell my message,' said the other flinging the saddle on the ground, 'in the corner of the chimney with a noggin of Spanish ale in my hand, and a jug of Spanish ale beside me, for though I am ragged and empty my forbears were well clothed and full until their house was burnt, and their cattle harried in the time of Cathal of the Red Hand by the Dillons, whom I shall yet see on the hob of hell, and they screeching,' and while he spoke the little eyes gleamed and the thin hands clenched.

Costello brought him into the great rush-strewn hall where were none of the comforts which had begun to grow common among the gentry, but a feudal gauntness and bareness, and led him to the bench in the great chimney ; and when he had sat down, filled up a horn noggin, and set it on the bench beside him, and set a great black-jack of leather beside the noggin, and lit a torch that slanted out from a ring in the wall, his hands trembling the while ; and then turned towards him and said,

'Will Oona MacDermott come to me, Dualloch O'Daly of the Pipes?'

'Oona MacDermott will not come to you, for her father, Teig MacDermott of the Sheep, has set women to watch her, but she bid me tell you that this day sennight will be the eve of St. John and the night of her betrothal to Macnamara of the Lake, and she would have you there, that, when they bid her drink to him she loves best, as the way is, she may drink to you, oh Tumaus Costello, and let all know where her heart is and how little of gladness is in her marrying : and I myself bid you go with good men about you, for I saw the horse thieves with my own eyes, and they dancing the blue pigeon in the air.' And then he held the now empty noggin towards Costello, his hand closing round it like the claw of a bird, and cried,

'Fill my noggin again, for I would the day had come when all the water in the world is to shrink into a periwinkle shell, that I might drink nothing but the poteen.' Finding that Costello made no reply, but sat in a dream, he burst out,

'Fill my noggin, I tell you, for no Costello is so great in the world
that

that he should not wait upon an O'Daly, even though the O'Daly travel the road with his pipes and the Costello have a bare hill, an empty house, a horse, a herd of goats and a handful of cows.'

'Praise the O'Dalys if you will,' said Costello as he filled the noggin, 'for you have brought me a kind word from my love.'

For the next few days Duallach went hither and thither, trying to raise a body guard; and every man he met had some story of Costello, how he killed the wrestler, when but a boy, by so straining at the belt, that went about them both, that he broke the back of his opponent; how, when somewhat older, he dragged the fierce horses of the Dunns of Shancough through a ford in the Unchion for a wager; how, when he came to maturity, he broke the steel horse shoe in Mayo; how he drove many men before him through Drumlease and Cloonbougher and Drumahair, because of a malevolent song they had about his poverty; and of many another deed of his strength and pride; but he could find none who would trust themselves with any so passionate and poor in a quarrel with careful and wealthy persons, like MacDermott of the Sheep, and Macnamara of the Lake.

Then Costello went out himself, and, after listening to many excuses and in many places, brought in a big half-witted fellow who followed him like a dog, a farm labourer who worshipped him for his strength, a fat farmer whose forefathers had served his family, and a couple of lads who looked after his goats and cows, and marshalled them before the fire in the empty hall. They had brought with them their stout alpeens, and Costello gave them an old pistol a-piece, and kept them all night drinking Spanish ale, and shooting at a white turnip which he pinned against the wall with a skewer. O'Daly sat on the bench in the chimney playing 'The Green Bunch of Rushes,' 'The Unchion Stream,' and 'The Princes of Beffeny' on his old pipes, and railing now at the appearance of the shooters, now at their clumsy shooting, and now at Costello because he had no better servants. The labourer, the half-witted fellow, the farmer and the lads were all well accustomed to O'Daly's unquenchable railing, for it was as inseparable from wake or wedding as the squealing of his pipes, but they wondered at the forbearance of Costello, who seldom came either to wake or wedding, and, if he had, would scarce have been patient with a scolding piper.

On the next evening they set out for Coolavin, Costello riding a tolerable horse and carrying a sword, the others upon rough haired garrons,

garrons, and with their stout alpeens under their arms. As they rode over the bogs, and in the boreens among the hills, they could see fire answering fire from hill to hill, from horizon to horizon, and everywhere groups who danced in the ruddy light of the turf, celebrating the bridal of life and fire. When they came to MacDermott's house they saw before the door an unusually large group of the very poor, dancing about a fire, in the midst of which was a blazing cartwheel, that circular dance which is so ancient that the gods, long dwindled to be but fairies, dance no other in their secret places. From the door, and through the long loop-holes on either side, came the pale light of candles, and the sound of many feet dancing a dance of Elizabeth and James.

They tied their horses to bushes, for the number so tied already showed that the stables were full, and shoved their way through a crowd of peasants who stood about the door, and went into the great hall where the dance was. The labourer, the half-witted fellow, the farmer, and the two lads mixed with a group of servants, who were looking on from an alcove, and Duallach sat with the pipers on their bench; but Costello made his way through the dancers to where MacDermott of the Sheep stood with Macnamara of the Lake, pouring poteen out of a porcelain jug into horn noggins with silver rims.

'Tumaus Costello,' said the old man, 'you have done a good deed to forget what has been, and to fling away enmity and come to the betrothal of my daughter to Macnamara of the Lake.'

'I come,' answered Costello, 'because, when in the time of Eoha of the Heavy Sighs my forbears overcame your forbears, and afterwards made peace, a compact was made that a Costello might go with his body servants and his piper to every feast given by a MacDermott for ever, and a MacDermott with his body servants and his piper to every feast given by a Costello for ever.'

'If you come with evil thoughts and armed men,' said MacDermott flushing, 'no matter how strong your hands to wrestle and to swing the sword, it shall go badly with you, for some of my wife's clan have come out of Mayo, and my three brothers and their servants have come down from the Mountains of the Ox,' and while he spoke he kept his hand inside his coat as though upon the handle of a weapon.

'No,' answered Costello, 'I but come to dance a farewell dance with your daughter.'

MacDermott drew his hand out of his coat and went over to a tall
pale

pale girl who had been standing a little way off for the last few moments, with her mild eyes fixed upon the ground.

‘Costello has come to dance a farewell dance, for he knows that you will never see one another again.’

The girl lifted her eyes and gazed at Costello, and in her gaze was that trust of the humble in the proud, the gentle in the violent, which has been the tragedy of woman from the beginning. Costello led her among the dancers, and they were soon absorbed in the rhythm of the Pavane, that stately dance which, with the Saraband, the Gallead, and the Morrice dances, had driven out, among all but the most Irish of the gentry, the quicker rhythms of the verse-interwoven, pantomimic dances of earlier days ; and while they danced came over them the unutterable melancholy, the weariness with the world, the poignant and bitter pity, the vague anger against common hopes and fears, which is the exultation of love. And when a dance ended and the pipers laid down their pipes and lifted their horn noggins, they stood a little from the others, waiting pensively and silently for the dance to begin again and the fire in their hearts to leap up and to wrap them anew ; and so they danced and danced through Pavane and Saraband and Gallead the night through, and many stood still to watch them, and the peasants came about the door and peered in, as though they understood that they would gather their children’s children about them long hence, and tell how they had seen Costello dance with Oona MacDermott, and become, by the telling, themselves a portion of ancient romance ; but through all the dancing and piping Macnamara of the Lake went hither and thither talking loudly and making foolish jokes, that all might seem well with him, and old MacDermott of the Sheep grew redder and redder, and looked oftener and oftener at the doorway to see if the candles there grew yellow in the dawn.

At last he saw that the moment to end had come, and, in a pause after a dance, cried out from where the horn noggins stood, that his daughter would now drink the cup of betrothal ; then Oona came over to where he was, and the guests stood round in a half circle, Costello close to the wall to the right, and the labourer, the farmer, the half-witted man, and the two farm lads close behind. The old man took out of a niche in the wall the silver cup, from which her mother and her mother’s mother had drunk the toasts of their betrothals, and poured into it a little of the poteen out of a porcelain jug, and handed it to his daughter with the customary words, ‘Drink to him whom you love the best.’

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She held the cup to her lips for a moment, and then said in a clear, soft voice,

‘I drink to my true love, Tumaus Costello.’

And then the cup rolled over and over on the ground, ringing like a bell, for the old man had struck her in the face, and it had fallen in her confusion ; and there was a deep silence. There were many of Macnamara’s people among the servants, now come out of the alcove, and one of them, a story teller and poet, a last remnant of the bardic order, who had a chair and a platter in Macnamara’s kitchen, drew a French knife out of his girdle, and made as though he would strike at Costello, but in a moment a blow had hurled him on the ground, his shoulder sending the cup rolling and ringing again. The click of steel had followed quickly had not there come a muttering and shouting from the peasants about the door, and from those crowding up behind them ; and all knew that these were no children of Queen’s Irish or friendly Macnamaras and MacDermotts, but wild Lavells and Quinns and Dunns from about Lough Garra, who rowed their skin coracles, and had masses of hair over their eyes, and left the right arms of their children unchristened, that they might give the stouter blows, and swore only by St. Atty and sun and moon, and worshipped beauty and strength more than St. Atty or sun and moon.

Costello’s hand had rested upon the handle of his sword, and his knuckles had grown white, but now he drew it away, and, followed by those who were with him, strode towards the door, the dancers giving before him, the most angrily and slowly and with glances at the muttering and shouting peasants, but some gladly and quickly because the glory of his fame was over him ; and passed through the fierce and friendly peasant faces, and came where his good horse and the rough-haired garrons were tied to bushes ; and mounted and bade his ungainly body-guard mount also, and rode into the narrow borreen. When they had gone a little way, Duallach, who rode last, turned towards the house where a little group of MacDermotts and Macnamaras stood next to a far more numerous group of peasants, and cried,

‘Well do you deserve, Teig MacDermott, to be as you are this hour, a lantern without a candle, a purse without a penny, a sheep without wool, for your hand was ever niggardly to piper and fiddler and story teller and to poor travelling folk.’ He had not done before the three old MacDermotts from the Mountains of the Ox had run towards their horses, and old MacDermott himself had caught the bridle of a garron

garron of the Macnamaras, and was calling to others to follow him ; and many blows and many deaths had been, had not the Lavells and Dunns and Quinns caught up still glowing brands from the ashes of the fire, and hurled them among the horses with loud cries, making all plunge and rear, and some break from their owners with the whites of their eyes gleaming in the dawn.

For the next few weeks Costello had no lack of news of Oona, for now a woman selling eggs or fowls, and now a man or a woman on pilgrimage to the holy well of Tubbernalty, would tell him how his love had fallen ill the day after St. John's Eve, and how she was a little better or a little worse, as it might be ; and though he looked to his horses and his cows and goats as usual, the common and uncomely things, the dust upon the roads, the songs of men returning from fairs and wakes, men playing cards in the corners of fields on Sundays and Saints' Days, the rumours of battles and changes in the great world, the deliberate purposes of those about him, troubled him with an inexplicable trouble ; but the peasants still remember how when night had fallen he would bid Duallach O'Daly recite, to the chirping of the crickets, 'The Son of Apple,' 'The Beauty of the World,' 'The Feast of Bricriu,' or some other of those traditional tales, which were as much a piper's business as 'The Green Bunch of Rushes,' 'The Unchion Stream,' or 'The Chiefs of Breffany' ; and, while the boundless and phantasmal world of the legends was a-building, would abandon himself to the dreams of his sorrow.

Duallach would often pause to tell how the Lavells or Dunns or Quinns or O'Dalys, or other tribe near his heart, had come from some Lu, god of the leaping lightning, or incomparable King of the Blue Belt or Warrior of the Ozier Wattle, or to tell with many railings how all the strangers and most of the Queen's Irish were the seed of some misshapen and horned Fomoroh or servile and creeping Firbolg ; but Costello cared only for the love sorrows, and no matter whither the stories wandered, whether to the Isle of the Red Loch where the blessed are, or to the malign country of the Hag of the East, Oona alone endured their shadowy hardships ; for it was she, and no King's daughter of old, who was hidden in the steel tower under the water with the folds of the Worm of Nine Eyes round and about her prison ; and it was she who won, by seven years of service, the right to deliver from hell all she could carry, and carried away multitudes clinging with worn fingers to the hem of her dress ; and it was she who endured dumbness for a year
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because of the little thorn of enchantment the fairies had thrust into her tongue ; and it was a lock of her hair, coiled in a little carved box, which gave so great a light that men threshed by it from sundown to sunrise, and awoke so great a wonder that kings spent years in wandering, or fell before unknown armies in seeking, to discover her hiding place ; for there was no beauty in the world but hers, no tragedy in the world but hers : and when at last the voice of the piper, grown gentle with the wisdom or old romance, was silent, and his rheumatic steps had toiled upstairs and to bed, and Costello had dipped his fingers into the little delf font of holy water, and begun to pray to Maurya of the Seven Sorrows, the blue eyes and star-covered dress of the painting in the chapel faded from his imagination, and the brown eyes and homespun dress of Oona MacDermott came in their stead ; for there was no tenderness in the world but hers. He was of those ascetics of passion who keep their hearts pure for love or for hatred, as other men for God, for Mary and for the saints, and who, when the hour of their visitation arrives, come to the Divine Essence by the bitter tumult, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the desolate rood, ordained for immortal passions in mortal hearts.

One day a serving man rode up to Costello, who was helping his two lads to reap a meadow, gave him a letter and rode away without a word ; and the letter contained these words in English : ‘Tumaus Costello, my daughter is very ill. The wise woman from Knock-na-shee has seen her, and says she will die unless you come to her. I therefore bid you to her, whose peace you stole by treachery—Teig MacDermott.’

Costello threw down his scythe, sent one of the lads for Duallach, who had become associated in his mind with Oona, and himself saddled his great horse and Duallach’s garron.

When they came to MacDermott’s house it was late afternoon, and Lough Garra lay down below them, blue, mirrorlike, and deserted ; and though they had seen, when at a distance, dark figures moving about the door, the house appeared not less deserted than the lake. The door stood half-open, and Costello rapped upon it again and again, making a number of lake gulls fly up out of the grass, and circle screaming over his head, but there was no answer.

‘There is no one here,’ said Duallach, ‘for MacDermott of the Sheep is too proud to welcome Costello the Proud,’ and, flinging the door open, showed a ragged, dirty, and very ancient woman, who sat upon the floor leaning against the wall. Costello recognised Bridget Delaney, a deaf

and dumb beggar ; and she, when she saw him, stood up, made a sign to him to follow, and led him and his companion up a stair and down a long corridor to a closed door. She pushed the door open, and went a little way off and sat down as before. Duallach sat upon the ground also, but close to the door, and Costello went and gazed upon Oona MacDermott asleep upon a bed. He sat upon a chair beside her and waited, and a long time passed, and still she slept on, and then Duallach motioned to him through the door to wake her, but he hushed his very breath that she might sleep on, for his heart was full of that ungovernable pity which makes the fading heart of the lover a shadow of the divine heart. Presently he returned to Duallach and said,

‘It is not right that I stay here where there are none of her kindred, for the common people are ever ready to blame the beautiful.’ And then they went down and stood at the door of the house and waited, but the evening wore on and no one came.

‘It was a foolish man that called you Costello the Proud,’ Duallach cried at last ; ‘had he seen you waiting and waiting where they left none but a beggar to welcome you, it is Costello the Humble he would have called you.’

Then Costello mounted and Duallach mounted, but when they had ridden a little way, Costello tightened the reins and made his horse stand still. Many minutes passed, and then Duallach cried,

‘It is no wonder that you fear to offend Teig MacDermott of the Sheep, for he has many brothers and friends, and though he is old he is a strong man, and ready with his hands.’

And Costello answered, flushing and looking towards the house :

‘I swear by Maurya of the Seven Sorrows that I will never return there again if they do not send after me before I pass the ford in the Donogue,’ and he rode on, but so very slowly, that the sun went down and the bats began to fly over the bogs. When he came to the river he lingered a while upon the bank among the purple flag-flowers, but presently rode out into the middle, and stopped his horse in a foaming shallow. Duallach, however, crossed over and waited on the further bank above a deeper place. After a good while, Duallach cried out again, and this time very bitterly :

‘It was a fool who begot you and a fool who bore you, and they are fools of all fools who say you come of an old and noble stock, for you come of whey-faced beggars, who travelled from door to door, bowing to gentles and to serving men.’

With bent head Costello rode through the river and stood beside him,

him, and would have spoken had not hoofs clattered on the further bank and a horseman splashed towards them. It was a serving man of Teig MacDermott's, and he said, speaking breathlessly like one who had ridden hard,

'Tumaus Costello, I come to bid you again to Teig MacDermott's. When you had gone, Oona MacDermott awoke and called your name, for you had been in her dreams. Bridget Delaney, the dummy, saw her lips move and the trouble upon her, and came where we were hiding in the wood above the house, and took Teig MacDermott by the coat and brought him to his daughter. He saw the trouble upon her, and bid me ride his own horse to bring you the quicker.'

Then Costello turned towards the piper Duallach O'Daly, and, taking him about the waist, lifted him out of the saddle, and hurled him against a grey rock that rose up out of the river, so that he fell lifeless into the deep place, and the waters swept over the tongue which God had made bitter that there might be a story in men's ears in after time; and plunging his spurs into the horse, he rode away furiously towards the north-west, along the edge of the river, and did not pause until he came to another and smoother ford and saw the rising moon mirrored in the water. He paused for a moment irresolute, and then rode into the ford and on over the Mountains of the Ox, and down towards the sea, his eyes almost continually resting upon the moon, which glimmered in the dimness like a great white rose hung on the lattice of some boundless and phantasmal world. But now his horse, long dank with sweat and breathing hard, for he kept spurring it to utmost speed, fell heavily, hurling him into the grass at the road side. He tried to make it stand up, and, failing this, went on alone towards the moonlight; and came to the sea, and saw a schooner lying there at anchor. Now that he could go no further because of the sea, he found that he was very tired and the night very cold, and went into a shebeen close to the shore, and threw himself down upon a bench. The room was full of Spanish and Irish sailors, who had just smuggled a cargo of wine and ale, and were waiting a favourable wind to set out again. A Spaniard offered him a drink in bad Gaelic. He drank it greedily, and began talking wildly and rapidly.

For some three weeks the wind blew still inshore or with too great violence, and the sailors stayed, drinking and talking and playing cards, and Costello stayed with them, sleeping upon a bench in the shebeen, and drinking and talking and playing more than any. He soon lost what little money he had, and then his horse, which some one had brought
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from the mountain boreen, to a Spaniard, who sold it to a farmer from the mountains for a score of silver crowns, and then his long cloak and his spurs and his boots of soft leather. At last a gentle wind blew towards Spain, and the crew rowed out to their schooner singing Gaelic and Spanish songs, and lifted the anchor, and in a little the white sails had dropped under the horizon. Then Costello turned homeward, his empty life gaping before him, and walked all day, coming in the early evening to the road that went from near Lough Garra to the southern edge of Lough Cay. Here he overtook a great crowd of peasants and farmers, who were walking very slowly after two priests, and a group of well dressed persons who were carrying a coffin. He stopped an old man and asked whose burying it was and whose people they were, and the old man answered,

‘It is the burying of Oona MacDermott, and we are the Macnamaras and the MacDermotts and their following, and you are Tumaus Costello who murdered her.’

Costello went on towards the head of the procession, passing men who looked at him with fierce eyes, and only vaguely understanding what he had heard, for, now that he had lost the quick apprehension of perfect health, it seemed impossible that a gentleness and a beauty which had been so long the world’s heart could pass away. Presently he stopped and asked again whose burying it was, and a man answered,

‘We are carrying Oona MacDermott, whom you murdered, to be buried in the island of the Holy Trinity,’ and the man stooped and picked up a stone and cast it at Costello, striking him on the cheek, and making the blood flow out over his face. Costello went on scarcely feeling the blow, and, coming to those about the coffin, shouldered his way into the midst of them, and, laying his hand upon the coffin, asked in a loud voice,

‘Who is in this coffin?’

The three old MacDermotts from the Mountains of the Ox caught up stones and bid those about them do the same; and he was driven from the road covered with wounds, and but for the priests would surely have been killed.

When the procession had passed on Costello began to follow again, and saw from a distance the coffin laid upon a large boat and those about it get into other boats and the boats move slowly over the water to Insula Trinitatis; and after a time he saw the boats return and their passengers mingle with the crowd upon the bank and all disperse by
many

many roads and boreens. It seemed to him that Oona was somewhere on the island smiling gently as of old, and, when all had gone, he swam in the way the boats had been rowed and found the new-made grave beside the ruined Abbey of the Trinity, and threw himself upon it, calling to Oona to come to him. Above him the three-cornered leaves of the ivy trembled, and all about him white moths moved over white flowers and sweet odours drifted through the dim air.

He lay there all that night and through the day after, from time to time calling her to come to him, but when the third night came he had forgotten, worn out with hunger and sorrow, that her body lay in the earth beneath; and only knew she was somewhere near and would not come to him.

Just before dawn, the hour when the peasants hear his ghostly voice crying out, his pride awoke and he called loudly,

'Oona MacDermott, if you do not come to me I will go and never return to the island of the Holy Trinity;' and, before his voice had died away, a cold and whirling wind had swept over the island, and he saw many figures rushing past, women of the Shee with crowns of silver and dim floating drapery; and then Oona MacDermott, but no longer smiling gently, for she passed him swiftly and angrily, and as she passed struck him upon the face crying,

'Then go and never return.'

He would have followed and was calling out her name, when the whole glimmering company rose up into the air, and, rushing together into the shape of a great silvery rose, faded into the ashen dawn.

Costello got up from the grave, understanding nothing but that he had made his beloved angry, and that she wished him to go, and, wading out into the lake, began to swim. He swam on and on, but his limbs were too weary to keep him long afloat, and her anger was heavy about him, and, when he had gone a little way, he sank without a struggle like a man passing into sleep and dreams.

The next day a poor fisherman found him among the reeds upon the lake shore, lying upon the white lake sand with his arms flung out as though he lay upon a rood, and carried him to his own house. And the very poor lamented over him and sang the keen, and, when the time had come, laid him in the Abbey on Insula Trinitatis with only the ruined altar between him and Oona MacDermott, and planted above them two ash trees that in after days wove their branches together and mingled their trembling leaves.

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