

## A Song and a Tale

By Nora Hopper

### I—Lament of the Last Leprechaun

FOR the red shoon of the Shee,  
For the falling o' the leaf,  
For the wind among the reeds,  
My grief!

For the sorrow of the sea,  
For the song's unquickened seeds,  
For the sleeping of the Shee,  
My grief!

For dishonoured whitethorn-tree,  
For the runes that no man reads,  
Where the grey stones face the sea,  
My grief!

Lissakeole, that used to be  
Filled with music night and noon,  
For their ancient revelry,  
My grief!

For

For the empty fairy shoon,  
 Hollow rath and yellow leaf ;  
 Hands un-kissed to sun or moon :  
     My grief—my grief !

## II—Aonan-na-Righ

AONAN-NA-RIGH they called him in Tir Ailella\*—"Darling of the King"—but it was in idle sport, for Cathal the Red hated the son of his old age as men now have forgotten to hate ; and once Aonan had sprung from his sleep with a sharp skene thrust through his arm, that had meant to drink his life-blood ; and once again he had found himself alone in the heart of the battle, and he had scarcely won out of the press with his life—and with the standard of the Danish enemy. Thus it was seen that neither did the Danish spears love the "King's Darling" ; and the sennachies made a song of this, and it was chanted before the King for the first time when he sat robed and crowned for the Beltane feast, and Aonan stood at his left hand, pouring out honey-wine into his father's cup. And before he drank, Cathal the King stared hard at the cup-bearer, and the red light that burned in his eyes was darkened because of the likeness in Aonan's face to his mother Acaill (dead and buried long since), whom Cathal had loved better than his first wife Eiver, who was a king's daughter, and better than the Danish slave Astrild, who bore him five sons, elder and better-loved than Aonan, for all the base blood in their veins. And of these, two were dead in the battle that had spared Aonan, and there were left to Cathal the

\* Now Tirerrill, Co. Sligo.

King only the Druid Coloman, and Toran the boaster, and Guthbinn of the sweet voice, who as yet was too young to fight.

“Drink, Aonan-na-Righ,” shrilled Astrild from her seat at the King’s left hand. “Drink : lest there be death in the cup.”

Aonan took up the golden cup, and gave her back smile for smile. “I drink,” he said, “to my mother, Acaill of Orgiall.”

But the King snatched the cup from his fingers, and dashed it down on the board, so that the yellow mead spilled and stained Astrild’s cloak ; but she did not dare complain, for there was the red light in Cathal’s eyes that was wont to make the boldest afraid.

“Bring me another cup,” he said to one that stood near. “And now, will none of ye do honour to the toast of Aonan-na-Righ ? Bring ye also a cup for the prince ; and, Guthbinn, put your harp aside.”

So in silence they drank to the memory of Acaill of Orgiall, and afterwards they sought to spin together the threads of their broken mirth, but not easily, for Astrild, who was wont to be gayest, sat pale, with her hand on the knife hidden in her breast ; and the King sat dumb and frowning, thinking, as Astrild knew, of dead Acaill : how he had loved and hated her, and, having slain her father and brothers, and brought her to Dunna Scaith a Golden Hostage wearing a golden chain, he had wedded her for her beauty’s sake ; and how until her child was born she had never so much as smiled or frowned for him ; and how, when her babe lay in her arms, she sent for her husband, and said : “I thank thee, Cathal, who hast set me free by means of this babe. I bless thee for this last gift of thine, who for all thine other gifts have cursed thee.” And Cathal remembered how he had held babe and mother to his heart, and said : “Good to hear soft words from thy mouth at last, O Acaill ! Speak again to me, and softly. But she

she had not answered, for her first soft words to him were her last. And Astrild, watching him, saw his face grow black and angry, and she smiled softly to herself, and aloud she said :

“Oh, Guthbinn, sing again, and sing of thy brothers who fell to-day—sing of Oscar, the swift in battle, and Uaithne, of the dark eyes. And will my lord give leave that I, their mother, go to weep for them in my own poor house where they were born ?”

“No,” said Cathal. “I bought you and your tears, girl, with gold rings, from Ocaill of Connaught. Sing to me now, and keep thy tears for to-morrow.” So Astrild drove back her sorrow, and began to sing, while her son Guthbinn plucked slow music from his harpstrings.

“Earrach, Samhradh, Foghmhar, and Geimhridh,  
 Are over all and done :  
 And now the web forgets the weaver,  
 And earth forgets the sun.  
 I sowed no seed, and pulled no blossom,  
 Ate not of the green corn :  
 With empty hands and empty bosom,  
 Behold, I stand forlorn.  
 Windflower I sang, and Flower o’ Sorrow,  
 Half-Summer, World’s Delight :  
 I took no thought o’ the coming morrow,  
 No care for the coming night.”

Guthbinn’s hand faltered on the harpstrings, and the singer stopped swiftly : but King Cathal stayed the tears in her heart with an angry word. “Have I had not always had my will ? And it is not my will now for you to weep.” So Astrild sat still, and she looked at her sons : but Toran was busy boasting of the white neck and blue eyes of the new slave-girl he had won, and Coloman

was dreaming, as he sat with his eyes on the stars that showed through the open door: and only Guthbinn met her eyes and answered them, though he seemed to be busy with his harp. And presently Cathal rose up, bidding all keep their seats and finish out the feast, but Astrild and Aonan he bade follow him. And so they went into the farthest chamber of the House of Shields, which looked upon a deep ditch. Now the end of the chamber was a wall of wattles, and here there was cut a door that led out on a high bank which overlooked the ditch. And the King went out upon the bank, where there was a chair placed ready for him, and Astrild sat at his knee, and Aonan-na-Righ stood a little way off. And Cathal sat still for a time, holding Astrild's hand in his, and presently he said: "Who put the death in the cup to-night, Astrild, thou or Guthbinn?" And Astrild tried to draw her hand away and to rise, but he held her in her place, and asked again, "Guthbinn, or thou?" until she answered him sullenly as she knelt, "King, it was I."

"Belike, Guthbinn's hand did thy bidding," he said, in laughing fashion. "Was the death for me or for Aonan yonder, thou Red-Hair?"

And Astrild laughed as she answered, "For Aonan-na-Righ, my lord." And then she shrieked and sought to rise, for she saw death in the king's face as it bent over her.

"If thou hadst sought to slay thy master, Red-Hair, I might have forgiven thee," Cathal said; "but what had my son to do with thee, my light-o'-love?"

"Give me a day," Astrild said desperately, "and I will kill father and son, and set the light-o'-love's children on your throne, Cathal."

"I doubt it not, my wild-cat, but I will not give ye the day:" Cathal laughed. "Good courage, girl—and call thy Danish gods to aid, for there is none other to help thee, now."

"What

“What will my lord do?” Aonan said quickly, as the Dane turned a white face and flaming eyes to him. “Wouldst kill her?”

“Ay,” said Cathal the King. “But first she shall leave her beauty behind her, lest she meet thy mother in the Land of Youth, and Acaill be jealous.”

“Leave her beauty and breath, lord,” Aonan said, drawing nearer. “If my mother Acaill lived she would not have her slain. My king, she pleased thee once; put her from thee if she vexes thee now; but leave her life, since something thou owest her.”

“She would have slain thee to-day, Aonan, and if I have dealt ill by thee, I let no other deal thus. Yet if thou prayest me for thy life, girl, for love of Acaill I will give it thee.”

And Cathal laughed, for he knew the Dane would not plead in that name. Astrild laughed too. “Spare thy breath, son of Acaill,” she said scornfully. “To-morrow the cord may be round thy neck, and thou be in need of breath; now lord, the cord for mine——”

Cathal smiled grimly.

“Blackheart,” he said, “thou hast no lack of courage. Now up,” and he loosened her hands, “and fly if thou wilt—swim the ditch, and get thee to Drumcoll-choille—and Guthbinn shall die in thy stead. What! Thou wouldst liefer die? Back then to yonder chamber, where my men will deal with thee as I have ordered, and be as patient as in thee lies. A kiss first, Red-Hair; and hearken from yonder chamber if thou wilt, while Aonan sings a dirge for thee.”

She went; and presently there rang from within the chamber the shrill scream of a woman’s agony, and Cathal laughed to see Aonan’s face turn white. “She is not as patient as thou,” he said,

said, "but she will learn. Keep thou my word to her, Aonan ; sing a dirge for her beauty a-dying."

"I cannot sing," Aonan-na-Righ said, shivering as there rose another shriek. "Let them slay her, my lord, and have done."

"My will runs otherwise," said Cathal, smiling. "Sing, if thou lovest thy life."

"My lord knows that I do not," Aonan answered ; and Cathal smiled again.

"Belike not ; but sing and lessen the Dane's punishment. When the song is finished she shall be released, and even tended well."

So Aonan sang the song of the Dane-land over the water, and the Danes that died in the Valley of Keening—which is now called Waterford ; of the white skin and red hair of Astrild ; of her grace and daring ; of the sons that lay dead on the battle-place ; of Coloman the dreamer that read the stars ; and of the beautiful boy whose breast was a nest of nightingales. And then he sang—more softly—of the Isle of the Noble where Acaill dwelt, and how she would have shadowed Astrild with her pity if she had lived ; and then he stopped singing and knelt before the King, dumb for a moment with the passion of his pity, for from the open door they could hear a woman moaning still.

"Lord," he said, "make an end. My life for hers—if a life the King must have ; or my pain for hers—if the King must needs feed his ears with cries."

"Graciously spoken, and like Acaill's son," King Cathal said. "And Astrild shall be set free. You within the chamber take the Dane to her son the lord Coloman's keeping ; and thou, my son Aonan, tarry here till I return. I may have a fancy to send thee with a message to thy mother before dawn. Nay, but come with me, and we will go see Coloman, and ask how his mother does.

does. Give me thine arm to lean on ; I am tired, Aonan, I am old, and an end has come to my pleasure in slaying . . . Coloman !”

They were in Coloman's chamber now, and the Druid turned from star-gazing to greet the King, with a new dark look in his gentle face. “Coloman, how does thy mother do now ? She had grown too bold in her pride, but we did not slay her because of Aonan here. How works our medicine that we designed to temper her beauty ?”

“Well, lord. No man will kiss my mother's beauty more.”

“Good : now she will turn her feet into ways of gentleness, perhaps. Thou holdest me a grudge for this medicine o' mine, my son Coloman ?”

“Lord, she is my mother,” the Druid said, looking down.

“The scars will heal,” Cathal said ; “but—Aonan here has only seen her beautiful. Coloman, wouldst thou have him see her scarred and foul to see ?”

“No, lord,” the Druid said fiercely. Cathal laughed.

“Have a gift of me, then, O Coloman,” he said. “Spare him from sight of a marred beauty, in what way thou canst. I give thee his eyes for thy mother's scars.”

The two young men looked at each other steadily : then Aonan spoke. “Take the payment that the King offers thee, Coloman, without fear : a debt is a debt.”

“And the debt is heavy.”

Coloman said hoarsely : “Lord, wilt thou go and leave Aonan-na-Righ to me ? And wilt thou send to me thy cunning men, Flathartach and Fadhar ? I must have help.”

“Aonan-na-Righ will not hinder thee, Coloman,” said the King, mockingly. “He desires greatly to meet with his mother : and do thou commend me also to the Lady Eivir, whom I wedded first, and who loved me well.”



“Call me also to thy mother’s memory,” Toran the boaster cried presently, when all was made ready, and Coloman bade draw the irons from the brazier—“if thou goest so far, Darling of the King.”

“I will remember,” Aonan said : and then fire and flesh met.

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At the next Beltane feast Cathal the Red slept beside Acaill in the burial-place of the kings at Brugh, and Guthbinn sat in the high seat, Toran the boaster at his right hand. But Coloman the Druid stood on the tower-top, reading the faces of the stars ; and along the road that wound its dusty way to the country of the Golden Hostages there toiled two dark figures : a woman and a man. Now the woman was hooded and masked, but under the grey hood the moonlight found a gleam of ruddy hair ; and the man she led by the hand and watched over as a mother watches her son. Yet the woman was Danish Astrild, and the blind man was Aonan-na-Righ.