

## THE BINDING OF THE HAIR

THE men-at-arms of the young queen Dectira, and of the old and foolish king Lua, had lighted a line of fires from Bulben to the sea and set watchmen by every fire; and built a long house with skin-covered wattles for the assembly, and smaller houses to sleep in, and dug round them a deep ditch, close to the place where the Lis of the Blindman was built in later times; and now they sat in the long house waiting the attack of the clans coming down from the plain of Ith, and listened to the bard Aodh, who recited a battle-tale of the wars of Heber and Heremon. The tale was written upon thin slips of wood, which the bard held before him like a fan, grasping them above the brazen pivot, and only laid down when he would take up the five-stringed cruit from the ground at his feet and chaunt hastily, and with vehement gesture, one of the many lyrics woven into the more massive measure of the tale. Though the bard was famous, the old and foolish king did not listen, but leaned his head upon the central pillar and snored fitfully in a wine-heavy sleep; but the young queen sat among her women, straight and still like a white candle, and listened as though there was no tale in the world but this one, for the enchantment of his dreamy voice was in her ears; the enchantment of his changing history in her memory: how he would live now in the Rath of kings, now alone in the great forest; how rumour held him of the race of the bard for whom the tribes of Heber and Heremon cast lots at the making of the world; how, despite the grey hairs mingling before their time with the dark of his beard, he was blown hither and thither by love and anger; how, according to his mood, he would fly now from one man and with blanched face, and now prove himself of a preternatural bravery alone against many; and, above all, how he had sat continually by her great chair telling of forays and battles to hearten her war-beaten men-at-arms, or chaunting histories and songs laden with gentler destinies for her ears alone, or, more often still, listening in silence to the rustling of her dress.

He sang now of anger and not of love, for it was needful to fill the hearts of her men-at-arms with thirst of battle that her days might have peace; yet over all the tale hovered a mournful beauty not of battle, and from time to time he would compare the gleam of a sword to the brightness of her eyes; or the dawn breaking on a morning of victory to the glimmering of her breast. As the tale, and its lyrics, which were like the foam upon a wave, flowed on, it wrapped the men-at-arms as in a tide of fire, and its vehement passages made them clash their swords upon their shields and shout an ever-more clamorous approval. At last it died out in a chant of triumph over battle-cars full of saffron robes and ornaments of gold and silver, and over long lines of youths and maidens with brazen chains about their ankles; and the men shouted and clashed their swords upon their shields for a long time. The queen sat motionless for a while, and then leaned back in her chair so that its carved back made one dark tress fall over her cheek. Sighing a long, inexplicable sigh, she bound the tress about her head and fastened it with a golden pin. Aodh gazed at her, the fierce light fading in his eyes, and began to murmur something over to himself, and presently taking the five-stringed cruit from the ground, half knelt before her, and softly touched the strings. The shouters fell silent, for they saw that he would praise the queen, as his way was when the tales were at an end; and in the silence he struck three notes, as soft and sad as though they were the cooing of doves over the Gates of Death.

Before he could begin his song, the door which led from the long room into the open air burst open and a man rushed in, his face red with running, and cried out:

“The races with ignoble bodies and ragged beards, from beyond the Red Cataract, have driven us from the fires and have killed many!”

The words were scarcely from his mouth before another man struck against him, making him reel from the door, only to be thrust aside by another and another and another, until all that remained of the watchmen stood in the centre of the hall, muddy and breathless, some pouring wine into horns from the great stone flagon that stood there, and some unhooking their bronze helmets and shields and swords from the pillars. The men about the

queen had already taken their helmets and shields and swords from pillars and walls, and were now armed; but the queen sat on straight and still, and Aodh half knelt before her, with bowed head, and touched the five-stringed cruit slowly and dreamily.

At last he rose with a sigh, and was about to mix among the men-at-arms when the queen leaned forward, and, taking him by the hand, said, in a low voice:

“O Aodh, promise me to sing the song before the morning, whether we be victors or weary fugitives!”

He turned, with a pale face, and answered:

“There are two little verses in my heart, two little drops in my flagon, and I swear by the Red Swineherd that I will pour them out before the morning for the Rose of my Desire, the Lily of my Peace, whether I have living lips or fade among the imponderable multitudes!”

Then he took down his wicker shield covered with hide, and his helmet and sword, from a pillar, and mixed among the crowd that poured, shouting, through the great door.

Nobody remained in the long room except the queen and her women and the foolish king, who slept on, with his head against a pillar.

After a little, they heard a far-off ringing of bronze upon bronze, and the dull thud of bronze upon hide, and the cries of men, and these continued for a long time, and then sank into the silence. When all was still, the queen took the five-stringed cruit upon her knees and began touching the strings fitfully and murmuring stray lines and phrases out of the love songs of Aodh; and so sat until about two hours before dawn, when the tramp of feet told the return of the men-at-arms. They came in slowly and wearily, and threw themselves down, clotted with blood as they were, some on the floor, some on the benches.

“We have slain the most, and the rest fled beyond the mountains,” said the leader; “but there is no part of the way where there was not fighting, and we have left many behind us.”

“Where is Aodh?” said one of the women.

“I saw his head taken off with a sword,” said the man.

The queen rose and passed silently out of the room, and, half crossing the space within the ditch, came where her horses were tethered, and bade the old man, who had charge of their harness and chariot, tell none, but come with her and seek for a dead man. They drove along the narrow track in the forest that had been trod by marauders, or by those sent to give them battle, for centuries; and saw the starlight glimmer upon the helmets and swords of dead men troubling a darkness which seemed heavy with a sleep older than the world. At last they came out upon the treeless place where the servile tribes had fought their last desperate battle before they broke. The old man tied the reins to a tree and lit a torch, and the two began to search among the dead. The crows, which had been tearing the bodies, rushed up into the air before them with loud cawing, and here and there the starlight glimmered on helmet or sword, or in pools of blood, or in the eyes of the dead.

Of a sudden, a sweet, tremulous song came from a bush near them. They hurried towards the spot, and saw a head hanging from the bush by its dark hair; and the head was singing, and this was the song it sung—

“Fasten your hair with a golden pin,  
 And bind up every wandering tress;  
 I bade my heart build these poor rhymes:  
 It worked at them day out, day in,  
 Building a sorrowful loveliness  
 Out of the battles of old times.

“You need but lift a pearl-pale hand,  
 And bind up your long hair and sigh;  
 And all men’s hearts must burn and beat;  
 And candle-like foam on the dim sand,  
 And stars climbing the dew-dropping sky,  
 Live but to light your passing feet.”

And then a troop of crows, heavy like fragments of that sleep older than the world, swept out of the darkness, and, as they passed, smote those ecstatic lips with the points of their wings, and the head fell from the bush and rolled over at the feet of the queen.

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