

The Sorrowing of Conal Cearnach

(By ETHNA CARBERY.)

The autumn night had set in with a dreary darkness full of the howling of angry winds that swept up from the sea, and flung clouds of salt foam even to the crest of the gray cliffs that stood sentinel over the Northern coast of Uladh. White screaming flocks of seagulls darted inland, flying low, as is their wont when the storm-fiend comes to take his pleasure; and in scanty hedge or stunted fir-tree the little timid land-birds cowered before the blast. The air held the chill of coming winter; the moaning waters seemed to chant a dirge for all the dead whose bones lay far beneath among the weeds and wrecks and tossing shells; and overhead the thick clouds went drifting by without the glimmer of a single star to light the gloom, while, through this maze of storm and darkness, with sorrow in his heart and on his brow, after his many and perilous wanderings over distant countries, Conal Cearnach, the chieftain of Dunseverick, and Champion of the Red Branch Knights of Uladh, came back to his own.

But though the storm might sport and rave in ecstasy as it circled the open coast-line, it seemed to shriek its madness round the towers of the Caiseal, which stood but a short way from the brink of a tall cliff that sheered straight down into the foaming wild water. It hissed and swirled through the broad open chimney of the banqueting hall, scattering the flames in the heart of the glowing logs piled high upon the hearth, and sending showers of light peat ashes almost to the feet of Conal Cearnach himself, who, sitting silent in his carven chair of dark oak, with mournful eyes gazing steadily at the leaping fire, heeded neither the rattle, as each fresh gust hurled itself against the timbers of the walls, nor the chanting of his harper, nor yet the sweet voice of his lady as she strove to win him from the bitter thoughts that held him in that sad and woeful quietude. Many and melodious were the strains by which the harper sought to rouse his master; now soft and silvery as the thrush's warble in the glow of a mellow summer eve; anon bursting into loud and triumphant pealing like the return of a victor army from the field of conflict, and again sinking into melting harmony as when a mother croons at slumber-hour above the baby on her bosom. Clear and tuneful the song rose with the harp-music, telling of Conal Cearnach's wonderful and world-enduring feats; of his manly beauty and his valor; of his loyalty to friend and vengefulness to foe, of all the glorious attributes that had raised him to the Champion's place in the Court of the Red Branch, and won him renown at home and afar as the flower of Uladh's matchless chivalry. Loudly and proudly did the music-maker chant the death of Misgedhra, the great soldier, slain single-handed in a trial of skill by the Chieftain of Dunseverick. Solemnly he related the making of the brain-ball of that valiant fighter, and how the dead had been revenged upon Uladh afterwards, when this ghastly trophy, that belonged to Conal Cearnach by right of prowess, and was lodged for safety in the royal palace of Crovdearg, passed into the hands of the enemy through the hands of a fool, and brought about the gravest sorrow under which Uladh had ever bowed, in the death of her gifted and noble ruler Conor Mac-Nessa. And as he sang the death-lament for Conor, the warriors ranged all down the long hall took up the strain, and mingled their praise and regret for the kingly king with the twanging of the harp until the sob of the wind seemed hushed outside and the hissing of the waters died away. Then in the distant chamber of the Lady of Dunseverick her waiting women and maidens, hearing this weird and mournful chanting, took up the *caoine*, and shrilled the dead man's praises with clapping of palms and rending of hair, until, in sooth, throughout the Caiseal from end to end no sounds but those of grief and dismay echoed on this the return-night of the Chieftain. Once, and once only, was his brooding gaze lifted, and his brows arched, not in anger, but in surprise, as he asked curiously:

"Wherefore this clamor in my halls to-night? There seems but storm without and storm within, and it vexeth me. Hush ye, hush ye, my people."

The harper rose, flushing red because of the reproof, and vouchsafed a reply.

"It was the death-lament for Conor the King we sang,

my honored lord, and inasmuch as he hath died but a short time since, we feared you sorrowed for him in silence. And because our battle-strains or strains of love have been powerless to win you from your grief, in our affection we have fallen in with this mood, and have joined in your regrets. The death he died was a strange one, and unknown in all the annals of the land."

"I, too, have looked on death," said Conal Cearnach, slowly and reverently, still gazing into the burning brightness on the hearth, "but not such a death as a King of Eirinn might die. Nay, 'twas such as only a God could endure and make no moan. A great end and a terrible. Yet the divine pity in His eyes bore naught but forgiveness for those who tortured Him, and their dying glory hath made me His slave for ever."

"My lord, my lord," pleaded his wife, rising and clasping her white arms round his neck, "put these haunting thoughts away, I pray thee, and turn to the feast where thy kin and clan await to give thee welcome home. Tell us how thou didst bear thyself at Rome, and of thy wrestling feats in those far distant cities. Thou were champion swordsman there as well as here, my love and brave knight, were thou not? They indeed had courage who accepted the challenge of Conal Cearnach and strove to match their strength with his. Sad for Ceat was the day when he met thee; he that was ever a champion of renown. Sing, harper, sing the death of Ceat, son of Magach of Connacht, that my lord may remember only his own great fame and forget this grief that holds him enchained."

Once more the harper ran his fingers across the strings, breaking into high, proud chanting. The oft-told tale, ever new because of their joy in it, brought a glint of battle-fury into the eyes of all those listening warriors. Only the Chieftain heeded not, though well he might have gloried in that marvellous recital. How Ceat came out of Connacht to fight the stoutest champions of Uladh, and how he slew three of them, one by one, in single combat. And setting forth with their heads as trophies to show to his own people he was pursued by the Chieftain of Dunseverick and overtaken at Athceitt. Then the bloodiest and most furious combat that had ever been known in Eirinn took place between these two. Shields were pierced and swords were hacked, and many men died that day, but it was left to the two champions to decide the issue of war. And the victory was with Uladh, for after many most wonderful exploits, Ceat of Connacht fell by the hand of Conal Cearnach, who, pierced with wounds, lay well-nigh dead himself upon the field. The song told how Conal was carried into Connacht by Bealchue Breifne and tended until his strength was restored to him, when, for fear of his strong arm and following, his host sought to put the Ultonian to death, repenting that he had saved him. How Conal baffled the treacherous schemers, and made his way back into Uladh, all was chanted, and chorused and cheered. But still the hero was silent, taking no pride, as of yore, in his own exploits, and slowly the voices sank, the harping ended in a few faint silvery echoes, and all grew mournful because of the brooding eyes of their lord.

This was the vision that Conal Cearnach saw in the heart of the fire that night of his return to Dunseverick.

He saw himself at the beginning of this, the most curious adventure that had yet befallen him, setting forth with a strong, well-chosen band, on a foray into Britain, a country lying beyond a narrow sea to the east of the land of Eirinn. Many were the tales that had reached his ears and the ears of other warriors of Uladh concerning the descent of the mighty, world-famed Romans upon this island; how they had exhibited to the people their much-vaunted feats of athletic skill until the report of their daring and courage had penetrated the Court of Emania.

What wonder that the war-like, hot blood of Conal Cearnach pulsed to hear the deeds of the Roman soldiers, that he longed to try his strength with theirs on battle field or in the field or sport. And when he had come amongst them, and they noted his great height, his agile limbs, and the muscles that swelled adown the length of his powerful arms, their admiration and awe of him sur-