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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KING'S THRESHOLD; AND ON BAILE'S STRAND ***

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

THE SECRET ROSE.

THE CELTIC TWILIGHT.

POEMS.

THE WIND AMONG THE REEDS.

THE SHADOWY WATERS.

IDEAS OF GOOD AND EVIL.

PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE
VOLUME III.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD:
AND ON BAILE'S STRAND:

BEING VOLUME THREE
OF PLAYS FOR AN IRISH THEATRE:

BY
W. B. YEATS

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NOTE

Both these plays have been written for Mr. Fay's "Irish National Theatre." "The King's Threshold" was played in October, 1903, and "On Baile's Strand" will be played in February or March, 1904. Both are founded on Old Irish Prose Romances, but I have borrowed some ideas for the arrangement of my subject in "The King's Threshold" from "Sancan the Bard," a play published by Mr. Edwin Ellis some ten years ago.

W. B. Y.

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THE KING'S THRESHOLD

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A Soldier.

A Monk.

THE MAYOR OF KINVARA.

A Cripple.

Another Cripple.

AILEEN, }
ESSA, } Ladies of the Court.

PRINCESS BUAN.

PRINCESS FINNHUA, her Sister.

FEDELM, Seanchan's Sweetheart.

CIAN, }
BRIAN, } Servants of Seanchan.

SENIAS, }
ARIAS, } Pupils of Seanchan.

SEANCHAN (pronounced Shanahan), Chief Poet of Ireland.

Pupils, Courtiers.

A PROLOGUE.^[1]

An Old Man with a red dressing-gown, red slippers and red nightcap, holding a brass candlestick with a guttering candle in it, comes on from side of stage and goes in front of the dull green curtain.

Old Man.

I've got to speak the prologue. [*He shuffles on a few steps.*] My nephew, who is one of the play actors, came to me, and I in my bed, and my prayers said, and the candle put out, and he told me there were so many characters in this new play, that all the company were in it, whether they had been long or short at the business, and that there wasn't one left to speak the prologue. Wait a bit, there's a draught here. [*He pulls the curtain closer together.*] That's better. And that's why I'm here, and maybe I'm a fool for my pains.

And my nephew said, there are a good many plays to be played for you, some to-night and some on other nights through the winter, and the most of them are simple enough, and tell out their story to the end. But as to the big play you are to see to-night, my nephew taught me to say what the poet had taught him to say about it. [*Puts down candlestick and puts right finger on left thumb.*] First, he who told the story of Seanchan on King Guaire's threshold long ago in the old books told it wrongly, for he was a friend of the king, or maybe afraid of the king, and so he put the king in the right. But he that tells the story now, being a poet, has put the poet in the right.

And then [*touches other finger*] I am to say: Some think it would be a finer tale if Seanchan had died at the end of it, and the king had the guilt at his door, for that might have served the poet's cause better in the end. But that is not true, for if he that is in the story but a shadow and an image of poetry had not risen up from the death that threatened him, the ending would not have been true and joyful enough to be put into the voices of players and proclaimed in the mouths of trumpets, and poetry would have been badly served.

[He takes up the candlestick again.

And as to what happened Seanchan after, my nephew told me he didn't know, and the poet didn't know, and it's likely there's nobody that knows. But my nephew thinks he never sat down at the king's table again, after the way he had been treated, but that he went to some quiet green place in the hills with Fedelm, his sweetheart, where the poor people made much of him because he was wise, and where he made songs and poems, and it's likely enough he made some of the old songs and the old poems the poor people on the hillsides are saying and singing to-day.

[A trumpet-blast.

Well, it's time for me to be going. That trumpet means that the curtain is going to rise, and after a while the stage there will be filled up with great ladies and great gentlemen, and poets, and a king with a crown on him, and all of them as high up in themselves with the pride of their youth and their strength and their fine clothes as if there was no such thing in the world as cold in the shoulders, and speckled shins, and the pains in the bones and the stiffness in the joints that make an old man that has the whole load of the world on him ready for his bed.

[He begins to shuffle away, and then stops.

And it would be better for me, that nephew of mine to be thinking less of his play-acting, and to have remembered to boil down the knap-weed with a bit of three-penny sugar, for me to be wetting my throat with now and again through the night, and drinking a sup to ease the pains in my bones.

[He goes out at side of stage.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD.

SCENE: *Steps before the Palace of KING GUAIRE at Gort. A table in front of steps to right with food on it. SEANCHAN lying on steps to left. Pupils before steps. King on top of steps at centre.*

King.

I welcome you that have the mastery
Of the two kinds of music; the one kind
Being like a woman, the other like a man;
Both you that understand stringed instruments,
And how to mingle words and notes together
So artfully, that all the art is but speech
Delighted with its own music; and you that carry
The long twisted horn and understand
The heady notes that being without words
Can hurry beyond time and fate and change;
For the high angels that drive the horse of time,
The golden one by day, by night the silver,
Are not more welcome to one that loves the world
For some fair woman's sake.

I have called you hither
To save the life of your great master, Seanchan,
For all day long it has flamed up or flickered
To the fast-cooling hearth.

Senias.

When did he sicken?
Is it a fever that is wasting him?

King.

He did not sicken, but three days ago
He said he would not eat, and lay down there
And has not eaten since. Till yesterday
I thought that hunger and weakness had been enough,
But finding them too trifling and too light
To hold his mouth from biting at the grave
I called you hither, and have called others yet.
The girl he is to wed at harvest-time,
That should be of all living the most dear,
Is coming from the South, and had I known
Of any other neighbours or good friends
That might persuade him, I had brought them hither,
Even though I'd to ransack the world for them.

Senias.

What was it put him to this work, High King?

King.

You will call it no great matter. Three days ago
I yielded to the outcry of my courtiers,
Bishops, soldiers, and makers of the law,
Who long had thought it against their dignity
For a mere man of words to sit among them
At my own table; and when the meal was spread
I ordered Seanchan to good company,
But to a lower table; and when he pleaded
The poet's right, established when the world
Was first established, I said that I was King
And made and unmade rights at my own pleasure.
And that it was the men who ruled the world,
And not the men who sang to it, who should sit
Where there was the most honour. My courtiers,
Bishops, soldiers, and makers of the law
Shouted approval, and amid that noise
Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this,
Although there is good food and drink beside him,
Has eaten nothing. If a man is wronged,
Or thinks that he is wronged, and will lie down
Upon another's threshold until he dies,
The common people for all time to come
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
Even though it is the King's. He lies there now
Perishing; he is calling against my majesty,

That old custom that has no meaning in it,
And as he perishes, my name in the world
Is perishing also. I cannot give way
Because I am King, because if I give way
My nobles would call me a weakling, and it may be
The very throne be shaken; but should you
That are his friends speak to him and persuade him
To turn his mouth from the ill-savouring grave
And eat good food, he shall not lack my favour;
For I will give plough-land and grazing-land,
Or all but anything he has set his heart on.
It is not all because of my good name
I'd have him live, for I have found him a man
That might well hit the fancy of a king
Banished out of his country, or a woman's,
Or any other's that can judge a man
For what he is. But I that sit a throne,
And take my measure from the needs of the state,
Call his wild thought that over-runs the measure,
Making words more than deeds, and his proud will
That would unsettle all, most mischievous,
And he himself a most mischievous man.

Senias.

King, whether you did right or wrong in this
Let the King say, for all that I need say
Is that there's nothing that cries out for death
In the withholding of that ancient right,
And that I will persuade him. Your own words
Had been enough persuasion were it not
That he is lost in dreams that hunger makes,
And therefore heedless, or lost in heedless sleep.

King.

I leave him to your love, that it may promise
Plough-lands and grass-lands, jewels and silken wear,
Or anything but that old right of the poets.

[He goes out. The Pupils, who have been standing perfectly quiet, all turn towards SEANCHAN, and move a step nearer.]

Senias.

The King did wrong to abrogate our right,
But Seanchan, who talks of dying for it,
Talks foolishly. Look at us, Seanchan,
Waken out of your dream and look at us,
Who have ridden under the moon and all the day,
Until the moon has all but come again,
That we might be beside you.

[SEANCHAN turns half round leaning on his elbow, and speaks as if in a dream.]

Seanchan.

I was but now
At Almhuin, in a great high-raftered house,
With Finn and Osgar. Odours of roast flesh
Rose round me and I saw the roasting spits,
And then the dream was broken, and I saw
Grania dividing salmon by a pool,
And then I was awakened by your voice.

Senias.

It is your hunger that makes you dream of flesh
Roasting, and for your hunger I could weep;
And yet the hunger of the crane that starves
Because the moonlight glittering on the pool
And flinging a pale shadow has made it shy,
Seems to me little more fantastical
Than this that's blown into so great a trouble.

Seanchan.

[Who has turned away again.]
There is much truth in that, for all things change
At times, as if the moonlight altered them,
And my mind alters as if it were the crane's;

For when the heavy body has grown weak
There's nothing that can tether the wild mind
That being moonstruck and fantastical
Goes where it fancies. I had even thought
I knew your voice and face, but now the words
Are so unlikely that I needs must ask
Who is it that bids me put my hunger by?

Senias.

I am your oldest pupil, Seanchan;
The one that has been with you many years,
So many that you said at Candlemas
That I had almost done with school, and knew
All but all that poets understand.

Seanchan.

My oldest pupil. No, that cannot be;
For it is someone of the courtly crowds
That have been round about me from sunrise
And I am tricked by dreams, but I'll refute them.
I asked the pupil that I loved the best,
At Candlemas, why poetry is honoured,
Wishing to know how he'd defend our craft
In distant lands among strange churlish Kings.
And he'd an answer.

Senias.

I said the poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden
About the childbed of the world, that it,
Looking upon those images, might bear
Triumphant children; but why must I stand here
Repeating an old lesson while you starve?

Seanchan.

Tell on, for I begin to know the voice;
What evil thing will come upon the world
If the arts perish?

Senias.

If the arts should perish
The world that lacked them would be like a woman
That looking on the cloven lips of a hare
Brings forth a hare-lipped child.

Seanchan.

But that's not all.
For when I asked you how a man should guard
Those images you had an answer also,
If you're the man that you have claimed to be,
Comparing them to venerable things
God gave to men before he gave them wheat.

Senias.

I answered, and the word was half your own,
That he should guard them, as the men of Dea
Guard their four treasures, as the Grail King guards
His holy cup, or the pale righteous horse
The jewel that is underneath his horn,
Pouring out life for it, as one pours out
Sweet heady wine—but now I understand
You would refute me out of my own mouth;
And yet a place at table near the King
Is nothing of great moment, Seanchan.
How does so light a thing touch poetry?

[SEANCHAN *is now sitting up. He still looks dreamily in front of him.*

Seanchan.

At Candlemas you called this poetry
One of the fragile mighty things of God
That die at an insult.

Senias.

[*To other Pupils.*] Give me some true answer.
For on that day we spoke about the court
And said that all that was insulted there
The world insulted, for the courtly life,

Being the first comely child of the world,
Is the world's model. How shall I answer him?
Can you not give me some true argument?
I will not tempt him with a lying one.

Arias.

[*Throwing himself at SEANCHAN's feet.*]
Why did you take me from my father's fields?
If you would leave me now, what shall I love?
Where shall I go, what shall I set my hand to?
And why have you put music in my ears
If you would send me to the clattering houses?
I will throw down the trumpet and the harp,
For how could I sing verses or make music
With none to praise me and a broken heart?

Seanchan.

What was it that the poets promised you
If it was not their sorrow? Do not speak.
Have I not opened school on these bare steps,
And are not you the youngest of my scholars?
And I would have all know that when all falls
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
The victim's joy among the holy flame,
God's laughter at the shattering of the world,
And now that joy laughs out and weeps and burns
On these bare steps.

Arias.

O Master, do not die.

[*Three men come in. CIAN and BRIAN, old men carrying
basket with food, and MAYOR OF KINVARA. They stand at
the side listening.*]

Senias.

Trouble him with no useless argument.
Be silent; there is nothing we can do
Except find out the King and kneel to him
And beg our ancient right. These three have come
To say whatever we could say and more,
And fare as badly. Come, boy, that's no use;

[*He lifts the Boy up.*]

If it seem well that we beseech the King,
Lay down your harps and trumpets on the stones
In silence and come with me silently.
Come with slow footfalls and bow all your heads,
For a bowed head becomes a mourner best.

[*They lay the harps and trumpets down one by one and
then go out very solemnly and slowly, following one
another.*]

Cian.

Let's show the food that's in the basket.

Mayor.

[*Who carries an Ogham stick.*] No,
I must get through my speech or I'll forget it;
Besides, there is no reason why he'd eat
Till he has heard my reasons.

Cian.

It were better

To show what we have brought him in the basket,
For we have nothing that he has not liked
From boyhood.

Brian.

For we have not brought kings' food
That's cooked for everybody and nobody.

Mayor.

You are not showing right respect to me,
Or to the people of Kinvara, when you wish
That something else should come before my message.

Seanchan.

What brings you here? I never sent for you.

Cian.

He must be famishing, he looks so pale.
We had better get the food out first. I tell you,
That we have brought the things he likes the best.

Mayor.

No, no; I lost a word at every cross road
And maybe if I do not speak it now
I'll have forgot it.

Cian.

Well, out with it quickly.

Seanchan.

Why, what's this foolery?

Mayor.

No foolery;
A message from the richest, best born townsman
Of your own town, and from your aged father.

Cian.

Run through it while I am getting out the food.

Mayor.

How was I to begin? What was the word
That was to keep it in my memory?
Wait, I have notched it on this Ogham stick.
"Chief poet," "Ireland," "Townsmen"; that is it.
Chief poet of Ireland, when we heard that trouble
Had come between you and the King of Ireland
It plunged us in deep sorrow, part for you,
Our honoured townsman, part for our good town.
The King was said to be most friendly to us,
And we had reasons, as you'll recollect,
For thinking that he was about to give
Those grazing lands inland we so much need,
Being pinched between the water and the rocks.
But now his friendliness being ill repaid
Will be turned from us and our town get nothing.
But there was something else—I'll find the word
That was to keep it in my memory.
"Pride"—that's the word,—we would not have you think,
Weighty as these considerations are,
That they have been as weighty in our minds
As our desire that one we take much pride in,
A man who has been an honour to our town,
Should live and prosper, therefore we beseech you
To give way in a matter of no moment,
A matter of mere sentiment, a trifle,
That we may always keep our pride in you.

Seanchan.

Their pride, their pride, what do they know of pride?
My pupils do not know it, for they beg
From the King's favour what is theirs by right,
And how can men, that God has made so weak
They need a rich man's favour every day,
Know anything of pride?

Cian.

[To MAYOR.] You have spoken it wrongly.
You have forgotten something out of it about the cattle dying.

Mayor.

Maybe you do not know, being much away,
How many of our cattle died last winter
From lacking grass, and that there was much sickness
Because the poor had nothing but salt fish
To live upon. The people all came out
And stood about the doors as I went by.

Seanchan.

What would you have of me?
For there are men that shall be born at last
And find sweet nurture that they may have voices
Even in anger like the strings of harps.
Yet how could they be born to majesty
If I had never made the golden cradle?

Mayor.

What is it? "Father"—"Mother"; that is it;
Your father sends this message.

Cian.

He is listening.

Mayor.

He says that he is old and that he needs you,
And that the people will be pointing at him
And he not able to lift up his head
If you should turn the King's favour away.
And he adds to it, that he cared you well,
And you in your young age, and that it's right
That you should care him now.

Cian.

And when he spoke
He cried because the stiffness of his bones
Prevented him from coming.

Mayor.

But your mother
Has sent no message, for when they had told her
The way it is between you and the King
She said, "No message can do any good,
He will not send the answer that you want;
We cannot change him," and she went indoors,
Lay down upon her bed and turned her face
Out of the light. And thereupon your father
Said, "Tell him how she is, and that she sends
No message." I have nothing more to say.
Cian and Brian, you can set out the food.

[*He sits down on steps. SEANCHAN is silent.*]

Mayor.

I have a horse waiting outside the town
To bring me home, and all the neighbours wait
Your answer. What answer am I to bring?

Seanchan.

Give them my answer—no, I have no answer:
My mother knew it.

Mayor.

Maybe you have forgotten
That all our fields are so heaped up with stones
That the goats famish, and the mowers mow
With knives, and that the King half promised us——

Seanchan.

Thrust that old cloak of yours into your mouth
Till it's done gabbling.

Mayor.

But——

Cian.

You have said enough;
I knew that you would never speak it right.

Seanchan.

Our mothers know us, they know us to the bone,
They knew us before birth, and that is why
They know us even better than the sweethearts
Upon whose breasts we have lain.

Brian.

We have brought your honour
The food that you have always liked the best,
Young pigeons from Kinvara, and watercress
Out of the stream that's by the blessed well,
And dulse from Duras. Here is the dulse, your honour,
It is wholesome, and has the good taste of the sea.

Seanchan.

O Brian, you would spread the table for me
As you would spread it when I was in my childhood;
But all that's finished.

Mayor.

I knew he would not care

For country things now that he's grown accustomed
To the King's dishes. I told Brian too
He'd have his pains for nothing. But he's old.

And what dishes! Venison from Slieve Echtge
Fattened with poor men's crops; flesh of wild pig;
Not fat nor lean, but streaky and right well cured;
Bread that's the whitest that I've ever seen.

Cian.

You're in the right, you're in the right, he will not eat.

Mayor.

Bring him some wine, it will give him strength to eat.

No wonder if the King is proud and merry,
And keeps all day in the saddle, when even I
Am well-nigh drunken with the odour of it,
And if I dared—I dare not.

Cian.

Drink it, sir.

Brian.

Drink a few drops.

Seanchan.

Drink it yourself, old man,
For you have come a journey, and I daresay
You did not eat or drink upon the road.

Cian.

How can I drink it when your honour's thirsty?

Chamberlain.

Well, have you it in imagination still
To overthrow the dignity of the King,
Or is the game finished?

How many days

Will you keep up this quarrel with the King,
With the King's nobles and myself and all
Who'd gladly be your friends if you would let them?

Soldier.

[*Who has been speaking to MAYOR and Servants.*]

Was it you that sent his servants and the Mayor
Of his own town to wheedle him into life?

Chamberlain.

It was the King himself.

Soldier.

Was it worth our while

To have got rid of him from the King's table
If he is to be humoured and made much of?

Chamberlain.

It seems that he has not eaten yet, although
He's had another dozen hours of hunger.

Soldier.

If he's so proud and obstinate a neck
I'd let him starve.

Monk.

Persuade him to eat, my lord.

His death would make a scandal, and stir up
The common people.

Chamberlain.

And I have a fancy

That if it brought misfortune on the King,
Or the King's house, we'd be as little thought of

[*Goes over to table at right. While he is speaking CIAN and BRIAN are in vain offering SEANCHAN food.*]

[*Pouring wine into cup.*]

[*BRIAN brings wine over towards SEANCHAN.*]

[*He offers cup again. The King's Household comes in. CHAMBERLAIN with long staff, a Soldier, a Monk, two Ladies, followed by Cripples who beg from the ladies, who keep close together at right, talking to each other at intervals. Soldier goes over to MAYOR, and talks to him.*]

[*A pause.*]

As summer linen when the winter's come.

Aileen.

[*To CIAN.*] You've had no luck, old man.

Cian.

We have not, lady.

Aileen.

Maybe he's out of humour with your ways,
Having grown used to sprightlier service.

Cian.

Maybe.

But the King's messengers have gone for one
That will persuade him. [*To BRIAN.*] Come, let us go;
For she might lose her way in this fine place.
Come, we have been too long upon the tree,

[*Plucking sleeve of* MAYOR.

And there are little golden pippins here.

Soldier.

Give me the dish, I'll hand it him myself.

Aileen.

I wonder if she is pretty.

[MAYOR *and* Servants *have gone out.*

Soldier.

Eat this, old hedgehog.

Sniff up the savour and unroll yourself.
But if I were the King I'd make you do it
With wisps of lighted straw.

Seanchan.

You have rightly named me,

I lie rolled up under the ragged thorns
That are upon the edge of those great waters
Where all things vanish away, and I have heard
Murmurs that are the ending of all sound.
I am out of life, I am rolled up, and yet,
Hedgehog although I am, I'll not unroll
For you, King's dog. Go to the King, your master,
Crouch down and wag your tail, for it may be
He has nothing now against you, and I think
The stripes of your last beating are all healed.

Chamberlain.

Don't answer, you were never to his mind.
And now you have angered him to no good purpose.
But put the dish down and I will speak to him.

Seanchan.

You must needs keep your patience yet awhile,
For I have some few mouthfuls of sweet air
To swallow before I have grown to be as civil
As any other dust.

Chamberlain.

You wrong us, Seanchan,
There is none here but holds you in respect,
And if you would only eat out of this dish
The King would show how much he honours you.

Aileen.

[*Giving Cripple money.*]

You are always discontented. Look at this cripple,
He has had to cover up his eyes with rags
Because they are too weak to look at the sun,
And has a crooked body, and yet he is cheerful.
Stand there where he can see you.

[*Cripple goes over and stands in front of* SEANCHAN, *bowing and smiling.*

Chamberlain.

We have come to you

Because we wish you a long, prosperous life;
Who could imagine you'd so take to heart
Being put from the high table.

Seanchan.

It was not I

That you have driven away from the high table,
But the images of them that weave a dance,
By the four rivers in the mountain garden.

Monk.

He means we have driven poetry away.

Chamberlain.

It is the men who are learned in the laws,
Or have led the King's armies that should sit
At the King's table. Nor has poetry
Been altogether driven away, for I,
As you should know, have written poetry,
And often when the table has been cleared
And candles lighted, the King calls for me
And I repeat it him. My poetry
Is not to be compared with yours, but still
Where I am honoured, poetry is honoured
In some measure.

Seanchan.

If you are a poet,
Cry out that the King's money would not buy,
Nor the high circle consecrate his head,
If poets had never christened gold, and even
The moon's poor daughter, that most whey-faced metal,
Precious; and cry out that none alive
Would ride among the arrows with high heart
Or scatter with an open hand, had not
Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues.
And when that story's finished, shake your coat
Where the little jewels gleam on it, and say
A herdsman sitting where the pigs had trampled
Made up a song about enchanted kings,
Who were so finely dressed one fancied them
All fiery, and women by the churn
And children by the hearth caught up the song
And murmured it until the tailors heard it.

Monk.

How proud these poets are! It was full time
To break their pride.

Seanchan.

And I would have you say
That when we are driven out we come again
Like a great wind that runs out of the waste
To blow the tables flat.

Chamberlain.

If you'd eat something
You'd find you have these thoughts because you are hungry.

Seanchan.

And when you have told them all these things, lie down
On this bare threshold and starve until the King
Restore to us the ancient right of the poets.

Aileen.

Let's come away. There's no use talking to him,
For he's resolved to die, and that's no loss:
We will go watch the hurley.

Monk.

You should obey
The King's commandment and not question it,
For it is God himself who has made him king.

Essa.

Let's hear his answer to the monk.

Seanchan.

Stoop down,
For there is something I would say to you.
Has that wild God of yours that was so wild
When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,
Grown any tamer? He gave you all much trouble
Being so unruly and inconsiderate.

Aileen.

What does he mean?

Monk.

Let go my habit, Seanchan.

Seanchan.

Or it may be you have persuaded him
To chirp between two dishes when the King
Sits down to table.

Monk.

Let go my habit, sir.

What do I care about your insolent dreams.

Seanchan.

And maybe he has learnt to sing quite softly
Because loud singing would disturb the King
Who is sitting drowsily among his friends
After the table has been cleared—

Monk.

Let go.

[SEANCHAN *has been dragged some feet, clinging to the*
MONK'S *habit.*

Seanchan.

Not yet; you did not think that hungry hands
Could be so strong. They are not civil yet—
I'd know if you have taught him to eat bread
From the King's hand, and perch upon his finger.
I think he perches on the King's strong hand,
But it may be that he is still too wild.
You must not weary in your work; a King
Is often weary and he needs a God
To be a comfort to him.

[*The MONK plucks his habit away. SEANCHAN holds up his*
hand as if a bird perched upon it. He pretends to stroke
the bird.

A little god,

With soft well-coloured feathers, and bright eyes.

Aileen.

We have listened long enough.

Essa.

Let us away,

Where we can watch the young men at the hurley.

Seanchan.

Yes, yes, go to the hurley, go to the hurley,
Go to the hurley, gather up your skirts,
Run quickly. You can remember many love songs;
I know it by the light that's in your eyes,
But you'll forget them. You're fair to look on,
Your feet delight in dancing, and your mouths
In the slow smiling that awakens love.
The mothers that have borne you mated rightly,
For they had little ears as thirsty as are yours
For many love-songs. Go to the young men:
Are not the ruddy flesh and the thin flanks
And the broad shoulders worthy of desire?
Go from me. Here is nothing for your eyes,
But it is I that am singing you away,
Singing you to the young men.

[*The two young PRINCESSES BUAN and FINNHUA come in.*
While he has been speaking AILEEN and ESSA have
shrunk back holding each others hands.

Aileen.

Be quiet;

Look who it is that has come out of the house.

Princesses, we are for the hurling field.

Will you come too?

Princess Buan.

We will go with you, Aileen,

But we must have some words with Seanchan,

For we have come to make him eat and drink.

Chamberlain.

I will hold out the dish and cup for him

While you are speaking to him of his folly,
If you desire it, Princess.

[*He has taken up dish and cup.*

Princess Buan.

Give me the cup.
My sister there will carry the dish of meat:
We'll offer them ourselves.

Aileen.

They are so gracious,
The dear little princesses are so gracious.

[*PRINCESS BUAN holds out her hand for SEANCHAN to kiss it; he does not move.*

Although she is holding out her hand to him
He will not kiss it.

Princess Buan.

My father bids us say
That though he cannot have you at his table,
You may ask any other thing you like
And he will give it you. We carry you
A dish and a cup of wine, with our own hands,
To show in what great honour you are held.
Will you not drink a little? Does he not show
Every befitting honour to the poets?

Aileen.

O look, he has taken it, he has taken it!
The dear princesses, I have always said
That nobody could refuse them anything.

[*SEANCHAN takes the cup in one hand, in the other he holds for a moment the hand of the PRINCESS.*

Seanchan.

O long soft fingers and pale finger-tips
Well worthy to be laid in a king's hand;
O you have fair white hands, for it is certain
There is uncommon whiteness in these hands.
But there is something comes into my mind,
Princess. A little while before your birth
I saw your mother sitting by the road
In a high chair, and when a leper passed
She pointed him the way into the town,
And he lifted his hand and blessed her hand;
I saw it with my own eyes. Hold out your hands,
I will find out if they are contaminated;
For it has come into my thoughts that may be
The King has sent me food and drink by hands
That are contaminated. I would see all your hands,
You've eyes of dancers, but hold out your hands,
For it may be there are none sound among you—

[*The PRINCESSES have shrunk back in terror.*

Princess Buan.

He has called us lepers.

Chamberlain.

He's out of his mind,
And does not know the meaning of what he said.

Seanchan.

[*Standing up.*] There are no sound hands among you. No sound hands.
Away with you, away with all of you,
You are all lepers. There is leprosy
Among the plates and dishes that you have brought me.
I would know why you have brought me leper's wine?

[*He flings the wine in their faces.*

There, there, I have given it to you again, and now
Begone or I will give my curse to you.
You have the leper's blessing, but you think
Maybe the bread will something lack in savour
Unless you mix my curse into the dough.

[*They go out to L., all except the Cripples. SEANCHAN is staggering in the middle of the stage.*

Seanchan.

Where did I say the leprosy came from?

I said it came out of a leper's hand
And that he walked the highway; but that's folly,
For he was walking up there in the sky
And there he is even now with his white hand
Thrust out of the blue air and blessing them
With leprosy.

A Cripple.

He's pointing at the moon
That's coming out up yonder, and he calls it
Leprous, because the daylight whitens it.

Seanchan.

He's holding up his hand above them all
King, Noblemen, Princesses, blessing all.
Who could imagine he'd have so much patience.

First Cripple.

Come out of this.

[*Clutching other Cripple.*

Second Cripple.

If you don't need it, sir,
May we not carry some of it away?

[*He points to food.*

Seanchan.

Who's speaking? Who are you?

First Cripple.

Come out of this.

Second Cripple.

Have pity on us, that must beg our bread
From table to table throughout the entire world
And yet be hungry.

Seanchan.

But why were you born crooked?
What bad poet did your mothers listen to
That you were born so crooked?

First Cripple.

Come away.

Maybe he's cursed the food and it might kill us.

Second Cripple.

Yes, better come away.

[*They go out.*

Seanchan.

[*Staggering and speaking wearily.*]

He has great strength
And great patience to hold his right hand there
Uplifted and not wavering about;
He is much stronger than I am, much stronger.

[*He sinks down on steps.*

Enter from R. FEDELM, CIAN and BRIAN.

Brian.

There he is lying. Go over to him now
And bid him eat.

Fedelm.

I'll get him out of this
Before I have said a word of food and drink;
For while he is on this threshold and can hear,
It may be, the voices that made mock of him,
He would not listen.

Brian.

That is a good plan.

But there is little time, for he is weakening.

Fedelm.

[*Crying.*] I cannot think of any other plan
Although it breaks my heart.

Cian.

Let's leave them now,

For she will press the honey from her bag
When we are gone.

Brian.

It will be hard to move him
If hunger and thirst have got into his bones.

Fedelm.

Seanchan! Seanchan!

Can you not see me, Seanchan?
It is myself.

Seanchan.

Is this your hand, Fedelm?
I have been looking at another hand
That is up yonder.

Fedelm.

I have come for you.

Seanchan.

Fedelm, I did not know that you were here.

Fedelm.

And can you not remember that I promised
That I would come and take you home with me
When I'd the harvest in? and now I've come,
And you must come away, and come on the instant.

Seanchan.

Yes, I will come; but is the harvest in?
This air has got a summer taste in it.

Fedelm.

But is not the wild middle of the summer
A better time to marry? Come with me now.

Seanchan.

[*Seizing her by both wrists.*]
Who taught you that, for it's a certainty,
Although I never knew it till last night,
That marriage, because it is the height of life,
Can only be accomplished to the full
In the high days of the year. I lay awake,
There had come a frenzy into the light of the stars
And they were coming nearer and I knew
All in a minute they were about to marry
Clods out upon the plough-lands, to beget
A mightier race than any that has been;
But some that are within there made a noise
And frightened them away.

Fedelm.

Come with me now;
We have far to go, and daylight's running out.

Seanchan.

The stars had come so near me that I caught
Their singing; it was praise of that great race
That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-bodied
With a high head, and open hand, and how
Laughing, it would take the mastery of the world.

Fedelm.

But you will tell me all about their songs
When we're at home. You have need of rest and care,
And I can give them you when we're at home,
And therefore let us hurry and get us home.

Seanchan.

That's true; and there's some trouble here, although
I cannot now remember what it is,
And I would get away from it. Give me your help.
But why are not my pupils here to help me?
Go, call my pupils, for I need their help.

Fedelm.

Come with me now, and I will send for them,
For I have a great room that's full of beds

[*They go out leaving FEDELM and SEANCHAN alone. FEDELM runs over to SEANCHAN and kneels down before him.*

[*He remains looking into the sky.*

[*SEANCHAN looks at her dreamily at first, then takes her hand.*

I can make ready, and there is a smooth lawn
Where they can play at hurley and sing poems
Under an apple-tree.

Seanchan.

I know that place,
An apple tree and a smooth level lawn,
Where the young men can sway their hurley sticks.

Sings.

The four rivers that run there,
Through well-mown level ground,
Have come out of a blessed well
That is all bound and wound
By the great roots of an apple,
And all fowls of the air
Have gathered in the wide branches
And keep singing there.

[FEDELM, *troubled, has covered her eyes with her hands.*

Fedelm.

No, there are not four rivers, and those rhymes
Praise Adam's Paradise.

Seanchan.

I can remember now.
It's out of a poem I made long ago
About the garden in the east of the world,
And how spirits in the images of birds
Crowd in the branches of old Adam's crab-tree;
They come before me now and dig in the fruit
With so much gluttony, and are so drunk
With that harsh, wholesome savour that their feathers
Are clinging one to another with the juice.
But you would take me to some friendly place,
And I would go there quickly.

Fedelm.

Come with me.

[*She helps him to rise. He walks slowly, supported by her till he comes to the table at R.*

Seanchan.

But why am I so weak? Have I been ill?
Sweetheart, why is it that I am so weak?

[*He sinks on to the seat.*

Fedelm.

I'll dip this piece of bread into the wine,
For that will make you stronger for the journey.

Seanchan.

Yes, give me bread and wine, that's what I want,
For it is hunger that is gnawing me.

[*He takes bread from FEDELM, hesitates, and then thrusts it back into her hand.*

But no, I must not eat it.

Fedelm.

Eat, Seanchan,
For if you do not eat it you will die.

Seanchan.

Why did you give me food?
Why did you come?
For had I not enough to fight against
Without your coming?

Fedelm.

Eat this little crust,
Seanchan, if you have any love for me.

Seanchan.

I must not eat it: but that's beyond your wit;
Child, child, I must not eat it though I die.

Fedelm.

You do not know what love is, for if you loved
You would put every other thought away
But you have never loved me.

Seanchan.

[*Seizing her by the wrist.*] You, a child,
Who have but seen a man out of the window,
Tell me that I know nothing about love,
And that I do not love you. Did I not say
There was a frenzy in the light of the stars
All through the livelong night, and that the night
Was full of marriages? But that fight's over.
And all that's done with, and I have to die.

Fedelm.

[*Throwing her arms about him.*]
I will not be put from you, although I think
I had not grudged it you if some great lady,
If the King's daughter, had set out your bed.
I will not give you up to death; no, no,
And are not these white arms and this soft neck
Better than the brown earth?

Seanchan.

I swear an oath
Upon the holy tree that I'll not eat
Until the King restore the right of the poets.
O Sun and Moon, and all things that have strength,
Become my strength that I may put a curse
On all things that would have me break this oath.

[*FEDELM has sunk down on the ground while he says this,
and crouches at his feet.*]

Fedelm.

Seanchan, do not curse me; from this out
I will obey like any married wife.
Let me but lie before your feet.

Seanchan.

Come nearer.

[*He kisses her.*]

If I had eaten when you bid me, sweetheart,
The kiss of multitudes in times to come
Had been the poorer.

King.

[*Entering from house.*] Has he eaten yet?

Fedelm.

No, King, and will not till you have restored
The right of the poets.

King.

[*Coming down and standing before SEANCHAN.*]
Seanchan, you have refused
Everybody that I have sent, and now
I come to you myself, and I have come
To bid you put your pride as far away
As I have put my pride. I had your love
Not a great while ago, and now you have planned
To put a voice by every cottage fire
And in the night when no one sees who cries
To cry against me till my throne has crumbled.
And yet if I give way I must offend
My courtiers and nobles till they too
Strike at the crown. What would you have of me?

Seanchan.

When did the poets promise safety, King?

King.

Seanchan, I bring you bread in my own hands,
And bid you eat it because of all these reasons,
And for this further reason that I love you.

[*SEANCHAN pushes bread away with FEDELM's hand.*]

You have refused it, Seanchan.

Seanchan.

We have refused it.

King.

I have been patient though I am a king,
And have the means to force you—but that's ended,
And I am but a king and you a subject.

Nobles and courtiers, bring the poets hither
For you can have your way: I that was man
With a man's heart am now all king again,
Remembering that the seed I come of, although
A hundred kings have sown it and re-sown it,
Has neither trembled nor shrunk backward yet
Because of the hard business of a king.

Speak to your master, beg your life of him,
Show him the halters that are round your necks;
If his heart's set upon it he may die,
But you shall all die with him; beg your lives;
Begin, for you have little time to lose;
Begin it you that are the oldest pupil.

Senias.

[*Going up to SEANCHAN.*]

Die, Seanchan, and proclaim the right of the poets.

King.

Silence, you are as crazy as your master.
But that young boy that seems the youngest of you,
I'd have him speak. Kneel down before him, boy,
Hold up your hands to him that he may pluck
That milky coloured neck out of the noose.

Arias.

Die, Seanchan, and proclaim the right of the poets.

Senias.

Gather the halters up into your hands
And lead us where you will, for in all things
But in our art we are obedient.

King.

[*Kneeling down before SEANCHAN.*]

Kneel down, kneel down, he has the greater power.
I give my crown to you.

Seanchan.

O crown, O crown,
It is but right if hands that made the crown
In the old time should give it when they will.
O silver trumpets be you lifted up

And cry to the great race that is to come.
Long-throated swans among the waves of time
Sing loudly, for beyond the wall of the world
It waits and it may hear and come to us.

[*He goes up steps.*]

[*Princesses, Ladies, and Courtiers have come in with
Pupils, who have halters round their necks.*]

[*All the Pupils turn towards the KING, holding out the ends
of their halters.*]

[*The KING comes slowly down the steps.*]

[*All kneel except SEANCHAN, FEDELM and Pupils. SEANCHAN
rises slowly, supported by one of the Pupils and by
FEDELM.*]

[*He lays the crown on the KING's head.*]

[*Some of the Pupils blow a blast upon their horns.*]

CURTAIN.

[1] Written for the first production of "The King's Threshold" in Dublin, but not used, as, owing to the smallness of the company, nobody could be spared to speak it.

ON BAILE'S STRAND.

CUCHULLAIN, the King of
Muirthemne.
CONCOBAR, the High King of Ullad.
DAIRE, a King.
FINTAIN, a blind man.
BARACH, a fool.
A Young Man.
Young Kings and Old Kings.

SCENE: *A great hall by the sea close to Dundalغان. There are two great chairs on either side of the hall, each raised a little from the ground, and on the back of the one chair is carved and painted a woman with a fish's tail, and on the back of the other a hound. There are smaller chairs and benches raised in tiers round the walls. There is a great ale vat at one side near a small door, and a large door at the back through which one can see the sea.* BARACH, a tall thin man with long ragged hair, dressed in skins, comes in at the side door. He is leading FINTAIN, a fat blind man, who is somewhat older.

Barach.

I will shut the door, for this wind out of the sea gets into my bones, and if I leave but an inch for the wind there is one like a flake of sea-frost that might come into the house.

Fintain.

What is his name, fool?

Barach.

It's a woman from among the Riders of the Sidhe. It's Boann herself from the river. She has left the Dagda's bed, and gone through the salt of the sea and up here to the strand of Baile, and all for love of me. Let her keep her husband's bed, for she'll have none of me. Nobody knows how lecherous these goddesses are. I see her in every kind of shape but oftener than not she's in the wind and cries "give a kiss and put your arms about me." But no, she'll have no more of me. Yesterday when I put out my lips to kiss her, there was nothing there but the wind. She's bad, Fintain. O, she's bad. I had better shut the big door too.

[*He is going towards the big door but turns hearing FINTAIN'S voice.*]

Fintain.

[*Who has been feeling about with his stick.*] What's this and this?

Barach.

They are chairs.

Fintain.

And this?

Barach.

Why, that's a bench.

Fintain.

And this?

Barach.

A big chair.

Fintain.

[*Feeling the back of the chair.*] There is a sea-woman carved upon it.

Barach.

And there is another big chair on the other side of the hall.

Fintain.

Lead me to it. [*He mutters while the fool is leading him.*] That is what the High King Concoabar has on his shield. The High King will be coming. They have brought out his chair. [*He begins feeling the back of the other chair.*] And there is a dog's head on this. They have brought out our master's chair. Now I know what the horse-boys were talking about. We must not stay here. The Kings are going to meet here. Now that Concoabar and our master, that is his chief man, have put down all the enemies of Ullad, they are going to build up Emain again. They are going to talk over their plans for building it. Were you ever in Concoabar's town before it was burnt? O, he is a great King, for though Emain was burnt down, every war had made him richer. He has gold and silver dishes, and chessboards and candlesticks made of precious stones. Fool, have they taken the top from the ale vat?

Barach.

They have.

Fintain.

Then bring me a horn of ale quickly, for the Kings will be here in a minute. Now I can listen. Tell me what you saw this morning?

Barach.

About the young man and the fighting?

Fintain.

Yes.

Barach.

And after that we can go and eat the fowl, for I am hungry.

Fintain.

Time enough, time enough. You're in as great a hurry as when you brought me to Aine's Seat, where the mad dogs gather when the moon's at the full. Go on with your story.

Barach.

I was creeping under a ditch, with the fowl in my leather bag, keeping to the shore where the farmer could not see me, when I came upon a ship drawn up upon the sands, a great red ship with a woman's head upon it.

Fintain.

A ship out of Aoife's country. They have all a woman's head on the bow.

Barach.

There was a young man with a pale face and red hair standing beside it. Some of our people came up whose turn it was to guard the shore. I heard them ask the young man his name. He said he was under bonds not to tell it. Then words came between them, and they fought, and the young man killed half of them, and the others ran away.

Fintain.

It matters nothing to us, but he has come at last.

Barach.

Who has come?

Fintain.

I know who that young man is. There is not another like him in the world. I saw him when I had my eyesight.

Barach.

You saw him?

Fintain.

I used to be in Aoife's country when I had my eyesight.

Barach.

That was before you went on shipboard and were blinded for putting a curse on the wind?

Fintain.

Queen Aoife had a son that was red haired and pale faced like herself, and everyone said that he would kill Cuchullain some day, but I would not have that spoken of.

Barach.

Nobody could do that. Who was his father?

Fintain.

Nobody but Aoife knew that, not even he himself.

Barach.

Not even he himself! Was Aoife a goddess and lecherous?

Fintain.

I overheard her telling that she never had but one lover, and that he was the only man who overcame her in battle. There were some who thought him one of the Riders of the Sidhe, because the child was great of limb and strong beyond others. The child was begotten over the mountains; but come nearer and I will tell you something.

Barach.

You have thought something?

Fintain.

When I hear the young girls talking about the colour of Cuchullain's eyes, and how they have seven colours, I have thought about it. That young man has Aoife's face and hair, but he has Cuchullain's eyes.

Barach.

How can he have Cuchullain's eyes?

Fintain.

He is Cuchullain's son.

Barach.

And his mother has sent him hither to fight his father.

Fintain.

It is all quite plain. Cuchullain went into Aoife's country when he was a young man that he might learn skill in arms, and there he became Aoife's lover.

Barach.

And now she hates him because he went away, and has sent the son to kill the father. I knew she was a goddess.

Fintain.

And she never told him who his father was, that he might do it. I have thought it all out, fool. I know a great many things because I listen when nobody is noticing and I keep my wits awake. What ails you now?

Barach.

I have remembered that I am hungry.

Fintain.

Well, forget it again, and I will tell you about Aoife's country. It is full of wonders. There are a great many Queens there who can change themselves into wolves and into swine and into white hares, and when they are in their own shapes they are stronger than almost any man; and there are young men there who have cat's eyes and if a bird chirrup or a mouse squeak they cannot keep them shut, even though it is bedtime and they sleepy; and listen, for this is a great wonder, a very great wonder: there is a long narrow bridge, and when anybody goes to cross it, that the Queens do not like, it flies up as this bench would if you were to sit on the end of it. Everybody who goes there to learn skill in arms has to cross it. It was in that country too that Cuchullain got his spear made out of dragon bones. There were two dragons fighting in the foam of the sea, and their grandam was the moon, and nine Queens came along the shore.

Barach.

I won't listen to your story.

Fintain.

It is a very wonderful story. Wait till you hear what the nine Queens did. Their right hands were all made of silver.

Barach.

No, I will have my dinner first. You have eaten the fowl I left in front of the fire. The last time you sent me to steal something you made me forget all about it till you had eaten it up.

Fintain.

No, there is plenty for us both.

Barach.

Come with me where it is.

Fintain.

[*Who is being led towards the door at the back by BARACH.*] O, it is all right, it is in a safe place.

Barach.

It is a fine fowl. It was the biggest in the yard.

Fintain.

It had a good smell, but I hope that the wild dogs have not smelt it. [*Voices are heard outside the door at the side.*] Here is our master. Let us stay and talk with him. Perhaps Cuchullain will give you a new cap with a feather. He told me that he would give you a new cap with a feather, a feather with an eye that looks at you, a peacock's feather.

Barach.

No, no.

[*He begins pulling FINTAIN towards the door.*]

Fintain.

If you do not get it now, you may never get it, for the young man may kill him.

Barach.

No, no, I am hungry. What a head you have, blind man! Who but you would have remembered that the hen-wife slept for a little at noon every day!

Fintain.

[*Who is being led along very slowly and unwillingly.*] Yes, I have a good head. The fowl should be done just right, but one never knows when a wild dog may come out of the woods.

[*They go out through the big door at the back. As they go out CUCHULLAIN and certain YOUNG KINGS come in at the side door. CUCHULLAIN, though still young, is a good deal older than the others. They are all very gaily dressed, and have their hair fastened with balls of gold. The young men crowd about CUCHULLAIN with wondering attention.*]

First Young King.

You have hurled that stone beyond our utmost mark
Time after time, but yet you are not weary.

Second Young King.

He has slept on the bare ground of Fuad's Hill
This week past, waiting for the bulls and the deer.

Cuchullain.

Well, why should I be weary?

First Young King.

It is certain

His father was the god who wheels the sun,
And not King Sualtam.

Third Young King.

[*To a YOUNG KING who is beside him.*] He came in the dawn,
And folded Delectara in a sudden fire.

Fourth Young King.

And yet the mother's half might well grow weary,
And it new come from labours over sea.

Third Young King.

He has been on islands walled about with silver,
And fought with giants.

[*They gather about the ale vat and begin to drink.*

Cuchullain.

Who was it that went out?

Third Young King.

As we came in?

Cuchullain.

Yes.

Third Young King.

Barach and blind Fintain.

Cuchullain.

They always flock together; the blind man
Has need of the fool's eyesight and strong body,
While the poor fool has need of the other's wit,
And night and day is up to his ears in mischief
That the blind man imagines. There's no hen-yard
But clucks and cackles when he passes by
As if he'd been a fox. If I'd that ball
That's in your hair and the big stone again,
I'd keep them tossing, though the one is heavy
And the other light in the hand. A trick I learnt
When I was learning arms in Aoife's country.

First Young King.

What kind of woman was that Aoife?

Cuchullain.

Comely.

First Young King.

But I have heard that she was never married,
And yet that's natural, for I have never known
A fighting woman, but made her favours cheap,
Or mocked at love till she grew sandy dry.

Cuchullain.

What manner of woman do you like the best?
A gentle or a fierce?

First Young King.

A gentle, surely.

Cuchullain.

I think that a fierce woman's better, a woman
That breaks away when you have thought her won,
For I'd be fed and hungry at one time.
I think that all deep passion is but a kiss
In the mid battle, and a difficult peace
'Twixt oil and water, candles and dark night,
Hill-side and hollow, the hot-footed sun,
And the cold sliding slippery-footed moon,
A brief forgiveness between opposites
That have been hatreds for three times the age
Of this long 'stablished ground. Here's Concoibar;
So I'll be done, but keep beside me still,
For while he talks of hammered bronze and asks
What wood is best for building, we can talk
Of a fierce woman.

[CONCOBAR, a man much older than CUCHULLAIN, has come in
through the great door at the back. He has many Kings
about him. One of these Kings, DAIRE, a stout old man,
is somewhat drunk.

Concoibar.

[*To one of those about him.*] Has the ship gone yet?
We have need of more bronze workers, and that ship
I sent to Africa for gold is late.

Cuchullain.

I knew their talk.

Concoibar.

[*Seeing CUCHULLAIN.*] You are before us, King.

Cuchullain.

So much the better, for I welcome you
Into my Muirthemne.

Concobar.

But who are these?

The odour from their garments when they stir
Is like a wind out of an apple garden.

Cuchullain.

My swordsmen and harp players and fine dancers,
My bosom friends.

Concobar.

I should have thought, Cuchullain,
My graver company would better match
Your greatness and your years; but I waste breath
In harping on that tale.

Cuchullain.

You do, great King.

Because their youth is the kind wandering wave
That carries me about the world; and if it sank,
My sword would lose its lightness.

Concobar.

Yet, Cuchullain,

Emain should be the foremost town of the world.

Cuchullain.

It is the foremost town.

Concobar.

No, no, it's not.

Nothing but men can make towns great, and he,
The one over-topping man that's in the world,
Keeps far away.

Daire.

He will not hear you, King,

And we old men had best keep company
With one another. I'll fill the horn for you.

Concobar.

I will not drink, old fool. You have drunk a horn
At every door we came to.

Daire.

You'd better drink,

For old men light upon their youth again
In the brown ale. When I have drunk enough,
I am like Cuchullain as one pea another,
And live like a bird's flight from tree to tree.

Concobar.

We'll to our chairs for we have much to talk of,
And we have Ullad and Muirthemne, and here
Is Conall Muirthemne in the nick of time.

[He goes to the back of stage to welcome a company of Kings who come in through the great door. The other Kings gradually get into their places. CUCHULLAIN sits in his great chair with certain of the young men standing around him. Others of the young men, however, remain with DAIRE at the ale vat. DAIRE holds out the horn of ale to one or two of the older Kings as they pass him going to their places. They pass him by, most of them silently refusing.]

Daire.

Will you not drink?

An Old King.

Not till the council's over.

A Young King.

But I'll drink, Daire.

Another Young King.

Fill me a horn too, Daire.

Another Young King.

If I'd drunk half that you have drunk to-day,
I'd be upon all fours.

Daire.

That would be natural

When Mother Earth had given you this good milk

From her great breasts.

Cuchullain.

[*To one of the YOUNG KINGS beside him.*]

One is content awhile

With a soft warm woman who folds up our lives
In silky network. Then, one knows not why,
But one's away after a flinty heart.

The Young King.

How long can the net keep us?

Cuchullain.

All our lives

If there are children, and a dozen moons
If there are none, because a growing child
Has so much need of watching it can make
A passion that's as changeable as the sea
Change till it holds the wide earth to its heart.
At least I have heard a father say it, but I
Being childless do not know it. Come nearer yet;
Though he is ringing that old silver rod
We'll have our own talk out. They cannot hear us.

[*CONCOBAR who is now seated in his great chair, opposite CUCHULLAIN, beats upon the pillar of the house that is nearest to him with a rod of silver, till the Kings have become silent. CUCHULLAIN alone continues to talk in a low voice to those about him, but not so loud as to disturb the silence. CONCOBAR rises and speaks standing.*]

Concobar.

I have called you hither, Kings of Ullad, and Kings
Of Muirthemne and Connall Muirthemne,
And tributary Kings, for now there is peace—
It's time to build up Emain that was burned
At the outset of these wars; for we,
Being the foremost men, should have high chairs
And be much stared at and wondered at, and speak
Out of more laughing overflowing hearts
Than common men. It is the art of kings
To make what's noble nobler in men's eyes
By wide uplifted roofs, where beaten gold,
That's ruddy with desire, marries pale silver
Among the shadowing beams; and many a time
I would have called you hither to this work,
But always, when I'd all but summoned you,
Some war or some rebellion would break out.

Daire.

Where's Maine Morgor and old Usnach's children,
And that high-headed even-walking Queen,
And many near as great that got their death
Because you hated peace? I can remember
The people crying out when Deirdre passed
And Maine Morgor had a cold gray eye.
Well, well, I'll throw this heel-tap on the ground,
For it may be they are thirsty.

A King.

Be silent, fool.

Another King.

Be silent, Daire.

Concobar.

Let him speak his mind.

I have no need to be afraid of ghosts,
For I have made but necessary wars.
I warred to strengthen Emain, or because
When wars are out they marry and beget
And have their generations like mankind
And there's no help for it; but I'm well content
That they have ended and left the town so great,
That its mere name shall be in times to come
Like a great ale vat where the men of the world
Shall drink no common ale but the hard will,
The unquenchable hope, the friendliness of the sword.

[He takes thin boards on which plans have been carved by those about him.]

Give me the building plans, and have you written
That we—Cuchullain is looking in his shield;
It may be the pale riders of the wind
Throw pictures on it, or that Mananan,
His father's friend and sometime fosterer,
Foreknower of all things, has cast a vision,
Out of the cold dark of the rich sea,
Foretelling Emain's greatness.

Cuchullain.

No, great King,
I looked on this out of mere idleness,
Imagining a far-off country and one
That held it with a sword, although a woman.

Concobar.

A woman needs but laugh, or a friend sigh,
And you're afar off sounding through the world,
While I plan Emain's greatness.

Open the doors!

I hear a herald's trumpet, and await,
It may be, the heavy fleeces of the sea
And golden and silver apples or ancient crowns
Long hidden in the well at the World's End,
Or glittering garments of the salmon, tributes
From the Great Plain, or the high people of Sorcha,
Or the walled garden in the east of the world.

[The sound of a trumpet without.]

What is your message?

Young Man.

I am of Aoife's army.

First King.

Queen Aoife and her army have fallen upon us.

Second King.

Out swords! Out swords!

Third King.

They are about the house.

Fourth King.

Rush out! Rush out! Before they have fired the thatch.

Young Man.

Aoife is far away. I am alone.
I have come alone in the midst of you
To weigh this sword against Cuchullain's sword.

[The great door at the back is flung open; a Young Man, who is fully armed and carries a shield with a woman's head painted on it, stands upon the threshold. Behind him are trumpeters. He walks into the centre of the hall, the trumpeting ceases.]

[There is a murmur amongst the Kings.]

Concobar.

And are you noble? for if of common seed
You cannot weigh your sword against his sword
But in mixed battle.

Young Man.

I am under bonds
To tell my name to no man, but it's noble.

Concobar.

But I would know your name and not your bonds.
You cannot speak in the Assembly House
If you are not noble.

A King.

Answer the High King.

Young Man.

[Drawing his sword.] I will give no other proof than the hawk gives
That it's no sparrow.

[He is silent a moment, then speaks to all.]

Yet look upon me, Kings;
I too am of that ancient seed and carry

The signs about this body and in these bones.

Cuchullain.

To have shown the hawk's gray feather is enough,
And you speak highly too.

Give me that helmet!

I'd thought they had grown weary sending champions.
That leathern coat will do. The High King there
Being old in wisdom can think of times to come,
But the hawk's sleepy till its well-beloved
Cries out amid the acorns, or it has seen
Its enemy like a speck upon the sun.
What's Emain to the hawk when that clear eye
Is burning nearer up in the high air?
That buckle should be tighter. Give me your shield.
There is good level ground at Baile's Yew-tree,
Some dozen yards from here, and it's but truth
That I am sad to-day and this fight welcome.

Hither into the light.

The very tint

Of her that I was speaking of but now:
Not a pin's difference.

You are from the North,

Where there are many that have that tint of hair,
Red-brown, the light red-brown. Come nearer, boy!
For I would have another look at you.
There's more likeness, a pale, a stone pale cheek.
What brought you, boy? Have you no fear of death?

Young Man.

Whether I live or die is in the Gods' hands.

Cuchullain.

That is all words, all words, a young man's talk;
I am their plough, their harrow, their very strength,
For he that's in the sun begot this body
Upon a mortal woman, and I have heard tell
It seemed as if he had outrun the moon,
That he must always follow through waste heaven,
He loved so happily. He'll be but slow
To break a tree that was so sweetly planted.
Let's see that arm; I'll see it if I like.
That arm had a good father and a good mother,
But it is not like this.

Young Man.

You are mocking me.

You think I am not worthy to be fought,
But I'll not wrangle but with this talkative knife.

Cuchullain.

Put up your sword, I am not mocking you.
I'd have you for my friend, but if it's not
Because you have a hot heart and a cold eye
I cannot tell the reason. You've got her fierceness,
And nobody is as fierce as those pale women.

We'll keep him here in Muirthemne awhile.

A Young King.

You are the leader of our pack and therefore
May cry what you will.

Cuchullain.

You'll stop with us

And we will hunt the deer and the wild bulls,
And, when we have grown weary, light our fires
In sandy places where the wool-white foam

[CUCHULLAIN comes down from his great chair. He remains standing on the steps of the chair. The Young Kings gather about him and begin to arm him.]

[He looks hard at the Young Man, and then steps down on the floor of the Assembly House. He grasps the Young Man by the shoulder.]

[Turning to one of the Young Kings.]

[To the Young Man.]

[To the Young Kings.]

Is murmuring and breaking, and it may be
That long-haired women will come out of the dunes
To dance in the yellow fire-light. You hang your head,
Young man, as if it was not a good life;
And yet what's better than to hurl the spear,
And hear the long-remembering harp, and dance?
Friendship grows quicker in the murmuring dark;
But I can see there's no more need for words
And that you'll be my friend now.

First Old King.

Concobar,
Forbid their friendship, for it will get twisted
To a reproach against us.

Concobar.

Until now
I'd never need to cry Cuchullain on
And would not now.

First Old King.

They'll say his manhood's quenched.

Cuchullain.

I'll give you gifts, but I'll have something too,
An arm-ring or the like, and if you will
We'll fight it out when you are older, boy.

An Old King.

Aoife will make some story out of this.

Cuchullain.

Well, well, what matter, I'll have that arm-ring, boy.

Young Man.

There is no man I'd sooner have my friend
Than you whose name has gone about the world
As if it had been the wind, but Aoife'd say
I had turned coward.

Cuchullain.

I'll give you gifts
That Aoife'll know and all her people know
To have been my gifts. Mananan, son of the sea,
Gave me this heavy embroidered cloak. Nine Queens
Of the Land-under-Wave had woven it
Out of the fleeces of the sea. O! tell her
I was afraid, or tell her what you will.
No! tell her that I heard a raven croak
On the north side of the house and was afraid.

An Old King.

Some witch of the air has troubled Cuchullain's mind.

Cuchullain.

No witchcraft, his head is like a woman's head
I had a fancy for.

Second Old King.

A witch of the air
Can make a leaf confound us with memories.
They have gone to school to learn the trick of it.

Cuchullain.

But there's no trick in this. That arm-ring, boy.

Third Old King.

He shall not go unfought, I'll fight with him.

Fourth Old King.

No! I will fight with him.

First Old King.

I claim the fight,
For when we sent an army to her land---

Second Old King.

I claim the fight, for one of Aoife's galleys
Stole my great cauldron and a herd of pigs.

Third Old King.

No, no, I claim it, for at Lammas' time---

Cuchullain.

Back! Back! Put up your swords! Put up your swords!
There's none alive that shall accept a challenge

I have refused. Laegaire, put up your sword.

Young Man.

No, let them come, let any three together.
If they've a mind to, I'll try it out with four.

Cuchullain.

That's spoken as I'd spoken it at your age,
But you are in my house. Whatever man
Would fight with you shall fight it out with me.
They're dumb. They're dumb. How many of you would meet

[Drawing his sword.]

This mutterer, this old whistler, this sandpiper,
This edge that's grayer than the tide, this mouse
That's gnawing at the timbers of the world,
This, this—Boy, I would meet them all in arms
If I'd a son like you. He would avenge me
When I have withstood for the last time the men
Whose fathers, brothers, sons, and friends I have killed
Upholding Ullad; when the four provinces
Have gathered with the ravens over them.
But I'd need no avenger. You and I
Would scatter them like water from a dish.

Young Man.

We'll stand by one another from this out.
Here is the ring.

Cuchullain.

No, turn and turn about,
But my turn is first, because I am the older.
Cliodna embroidered these bird wings, but Fand
Made all these little golden eyes with the hairs
That she had stolen out of Aengus' beard,
And therefore none that has this cloak about him
Is crossed in love. The heavy inlaid brooch
That Buan hammered has a merit too.

[He begins spreading the cloak out on a bench, showing it to the Young Man. Suddenly CONCOBAR beats with his silver rod on a pillar beside his chair. All turn towards him.]

Concobar.

[In a loud voice.] No more of that, I will not have this friendship.
Cuchullain is my man and I forbid it;
He shall not go unfought for I myself—

Cuchullain.

[Seizing CONCOBAR.] You shall not stir, High King, I'll hold you there.

Concobar.

Witchcraft has maddened you.

The Kings.

[Shouting.] Yes, witchcraft, witchcraft.

A King.

You saw another's head upon his shoulders
All of a sudden, a woman's head, Cuchullain.
Then raised your hand against the King of Ullad.

Cuchullain.

[Letting CONCOBAR go, and looking wildly about him.]
Yes, yes, all of a sudden, all of a sudden.

Daire.

Why, there's no witchcraft in it, I myself
Have made a hundred of these sudden friendships
And fought it out next day. But that was folly,
For now that I am old I know it is best
To live in comfort.

A King.

Pull the fool away!

Daire.

I'll throw a heel-tap to the one that dies.

Concobar.

Some witch is floating in the air above us.

Cuchullain.

Yes, witchcraft, witchcraft and the power of witchcraft.

[To the Young Man.

Why did you do it? was it Calatin's daughters?
Out, out, I say, for now it's sword on sword.

Young Man.

But, but, I did not.

Cuchullain.

Out, I say, out, out!
Sword upon sword.

That hair my hands were drowned in!

A King.

I saw him fight with Ferdiad.

Second King.

We'll be too late,
They're such a long time getting through the door.

Third King.

Run quicker, quicker.

Daire.

I was at the Smith's
When he that was the boy Setanta then—

Third King.

He will have killed him.
They have begun the fight!

[He goes towards the door at back, followed by Young Man. He turns on the threshold and cries out, looking at the Young Man.

[He goes out, followed by Young Man. The other Kings begin to follow them out.

[Sound, of fighting outside.

[They all go out, leaving the house silent and empty. There is a pause during which one hears the clashing of the swords. BARACH and FINTAIN come in from side door. BARACH is dragging FINTAIN.

Barach.

You have eaten it, you have eaten it, you have left me nothing but the bones.

Fintain.

O, that I should have to endure such a plague. O, I ache all over. O, I am pulled in pieces. This is the way you pay me for all the good I have done you!

Barach.

You have eaten it, you have told me lies about a wild dog. Nobody has seen a wild dog about the place this twelve month. Lie there till the Kings come. O, I will tell Concoabar and Cuchullain and all the Kings about you!

Fintain.

What would have happened to you but for me, and you without your wits? If I did not take care of you what would you do for food and warmth?

Barach.

You take care of me? You stay safe and send me into every kind of danger. You sent me down the cliff for gull's eggs while you warmed your blind eyes in the sun. And then you ate all that were good for food. You left me the eggs that were neither egg nor bird. [The blind man tries to rise. BARACH makes him lie down again.] Keep quiet now till I shut the door. There is some noise outside. There are swords crossing; a high vexing noise so that I can't be listening to myself. [He goes to the big door at the back and shuts it.] Why can't they be quiet, why can't they be quiet! Ah, you would get away, would you? [He follows the blind man who has been crawling along the wall and makes him lie down close to the KING's chair.] Lie there, lie there. No, you won't get away. Lie there till the Kings come, I'll tell them all about you. I shall tell it all. How you sit warming yourself, when you have made me light a fire of sticks, while I sit blowing it with my mouth. Do you not always make me take the windy side of the bush when it blows and the rainy side when it rains?

Fintain.

O good fool, listen to me. Think of the care I have taken of you. I have brought you to many a warm hearth, where there was a good welcome for you, but you would not stay there, you were always wandering about.

Barach.

The last time you brought me in, it was not I who wandered away, but you that got put out because you took the crubeen out of the pot, when you thought nobody was looking. Keep quiet now, keep quiet till I shut the door. Here is Cuchullain, now you will be beaten. I am going to tell him everything.

Cuchullain.

[Comes in and says to the fool.] Give me that horn.

[The fool gives him a horn which CUCHULLAIN fills with ale and drinks.

Fintain.

Do not listen to him, listen to me.

Cuchullain.

What are you wrangling over?

Barach.

He is fat and good for nothing. He has left me the bones and the feathers.

Cuchullain.

What feathers?

Barach.

I left him turning a fowl at the fire. He ate it all. He left me nothing but the bones and feathers.

Fintain.

Do not believe him. You do not know how vain this fool is. I gave him the feathers, because I thought he would like nothing so well.

[BARACH *is sitting on a bench playing with a heap of feathers, which he has taken out of the breast of his coat.*

Barach.

[*Singing.*] When you were an acorn on the tree top——

Fintain.

Where would he be but for me? I must be always thinking, thinking to get food for the two of us, and when we've got it, if the moon's at the full or the tide on the turn, he'll leave the rabbit in its snare till it is full of maggots, or let the trout slip through his hands back into the water.

Barach.

[*Singing.*] When you were an acorn on the tree top,
Then was I an eagle cock;
Now that you are a withered old block,
Still am I an eagle cock!

Fintain.

Listen to him now! That's the sort of talk I have to put up with, day out day in.

[*The fool is putting the feathers into his hair. CUCHULLAIN takes a handful of feathers out of the heap and out of the fool's hair, and begins to wipe the blood from his sword with them.*

Barach.

He has taken my feathers to wipe his sword. It is blood that he is wiping from his sword!

Fintain.

Whose blood? Whose blood?

Cuchullain.

That young champion's.

Fintain.

He that came out of Aoife's country?

Cuchullain.

The Kings are standing round his body.

Fintain.

Did he fight long?

Cuchullain.

He thought to have saved himself with witchcraft.

Barach.

That blind man there said he would kill you. He came from Aoife's country to kill you. That blind man said they had taught him every kind of weapon that he might do it. But I always knew that you would kill him.

Cuchullain.

[*To the blind man.*] You knew him, then?

Fintain.

I saw him when I had my eyes, in Aoife's country.

Cuchullain.

You were in Aoife's country?

Fintain.

I knew him and his mother there.

Cuchullain.

He was about to speak of her when he died.

Fintain.

He was a Queen's son.

Cuchullain.

What Queen, what Queen? [*He seizes the blind man.*] Was it Scathach? There were many Queens. All the rulers were

Queens.

Fintain.

No, not Scathach.

Cuchullain.

It was Uathach, then. Speak, speak!

Fintain.

I cannot speak, you are clutching me too tightly. [CUCHULLAIN *lets him go.*] I cannot remember who it was. I am not certain. It was some Queen.

Barach.

He said a while ago that the young man was Aoife's son.

Cuchullain.

She? No, no, she had no son when I was there.

Barach.

That blind man there said that she owned him for her son.

Cuchullain.

I had rather he had been some other woman's son. What father had he? A soldier out of Alba? She was an amorous woman, a proud, pale amorous woman.

Fintain.

None knew whose son he was.

Cuchullain.

None knew? Did you know, old listener at doors?

Fintain.

No, no, I knew nothing.

Barach.

He said a while ago that he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had overcome her in battle.

[*A pause.*]

Fintain.

Somebody is trembling. Why are you trembling, fool? the bench is shaking, why are you trembling? Is Cuchullain going to hurt us? It was not I who told you, Cuchullain.

Barach.

It is Cuchullain who is trembling. He is shaking the bench with his knees.

Cuchullain.

He was my son, and I have killed my son.

[*A pause.*]

'Twas they that did it, the pale windy people,
Where, where, where? My sword against the thunder.
But no, for they have always been my friends;
And though they love to blow a smoking coal
Till it's all flame, the wars they blow aflame
Are full of glory, and heart uplifting pride,
And not like this; the wars they love awaken
Old fingers and the sleepy strings of harps.
Who did it then? Are you afraid; speak out,
For I have put you under my protection
And will reward you well. Dubthach the Chafer.
He had an old grudge. No, for he is with Maeve.
Laegaire did it. Why do you not speak?
What is this house? [*A pause.*] Now I remember all.

Fintain.

He will kill us. O, I am afraid!

Cuchullain.

[*Who is before CONCOBAR'S chair.*]

'Twas you who did it, you who sat up there
With that old branch of silver, like a magpie
Nursing a stolen spoon. Magpie, magpie,
A maggot that is eating up the earth!

[*Begins hacking at the chair with his sword.*]

No, but a magpie, for he's flown away.
Where did he fly to?

Fintain.

He is outside the door.

Cuchullain.

Outside the door?

Fintain.

He is under Baile's yew-tree.

Cuchullain.

Concobar, Concobar, the sword into your heart.

[He goes out. A pause. The fool goes to the great door at back and looks out after him.]

Barach.

He is going up to King Concobar; they are all under the tree. No, no, he is standing still. There is a great wave going to break and he is looking at it. Ah! now he is running down to the sea, but he is holding up his sword as if he were going into a fight. *[A pause.]* Well struck, well struck!

Fintain.

What is he doing now?

Barach.

Oh! he is fighting the waves.

Fintain.

He sees King Concobar's crown on every one of them.

Barach.

There, he has struck at a big one. He has struck the crown off it, he has made the foam fly. There again another big one.

[Shouting without.]

Fintain.

Where are the Kings? What are the Kings doing?

Barach.

They are shouting and running down to the shore, and the people are running out of the houses, they are all running.

Fintain.

You say they are running out of the houses, there will be nobody left in the houses. Listen, fool.

Barach.

There, he is down! He is up again! He is going out into the deep water.

Fintain.

Come here, fool; come here, I say.

Barach.

[Coming towards him but looking backward towards the door.] What is it?

Fintain.

There will be nobody in the houses. Come this way, come quickly; the ovens will be full; we will put our hands into the ovens.

[They go out.]



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Transcriber's Note:

Punctuation has been standardised. Spelling and hyphenation have been preserved as printed.

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*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE KING'S THRESHOLD; AND ON BAILE'S STRAND ***

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