

The Second Return of Oisín.

(Catholic Columbian.)

I climbed Binn Eadair on an evening in the early harvest. The ocean was blue beneath my feet, and on either hand the rocks were resplendent in the sunset. Over against me Sliabh Rua and Sliabh Cualann gradually darkened. I lay down, full of thought in the midst of that solemnity. Aloft on Binn Eadair, Baile Atha Cliath and the everyday things of life seemed strangely remote. The low monotone of the wave which broke on the strand reached me like a voice from the depths. That, and the occasional plaint of a sea-bird, made a music which lulled me into a half slumber. A sound different from either of these struck sharply on my ear. It was the footfall of one toiling toward me up to the height. Presently there topped the healthy knoll in front the bent figure of a man. As he straightened himself to gaze seaward, I beheld a bearded elder, very noble and very mournful in his bearing. He stood outlined against the sky, a heroic shape. As his eye ranged sea and hill it lit with a strange fire, as though he were one returned from far wandering who gazed again on dear familiar things. Yet he sighed as he gazed. His loneliness touched me in a way for which I cannot account. The shadow of a great grief seemed to have fallen on the hillside.

"God save you," I said at length, anxious, yet reluctant to break in on his aloofness. Instinctively I spoke in Irish, as I always do when I am amongst the heather and the seabirds. Besides, to have uttered a word of English in that presence would have seemed to me an irreverence.

He turned quickly, eagerly. "God and Mary to you, child of the Gael, who salutes me as the Tailteann and his disciples were wont to do."

The voice was deep and sonorous, as though it had rung loud above many battles. The Irish was perfectly intelligible, albeit there was something curiously archaic about its sounds and phraseology.

"Who then art thou who knevest the Tailteann?" I asked. "It is long since he dwelt amongst us; his bones have rested for many generations by the Church of the Strangers in Down."

"I am Oisín, the son of Fionn, who was mighty before the Tailteann came with his books and his bells."

This communication interested but did not surprise me. So expectant a mood had fallen on me that I half anticipated it.

"And why does Oisín mourn on Binn Eadair, who long ago found rest?"

"I mourn for the vanished Gael." "Can men then return from the Other Country to weep over the desolation of their earthly homes?"

"It is my doom to return because of yore, through love of a woman of the Sidhe. I went out from my own land and dwelt twice fivescore years in the Country of the Young. I returned and found Almhain desolate."

"I have heard of that lonely home-coming," I said.

"The poets of the Gael have sung of it."

"It was lonely and bitter," wailed the old man, "but its loneliness and bitterness were nought to the loneliness and bitterness of this. I yearned for the familiar places, though I knew them changed. I longed to tread again the sward of Almhain, to wander as of old by the winding shore of Loch Lein, to climb once more the side of Binn Eadair. I have come, and lo! strangers dwell in the shadows of Almhain, strangers roam on the banks of Loch Lein, strangers have built their dunes on the slopes of Binn Eadair."

"How knowest thou them for strangers, O Oisín?"

"By their speech, which is unfamiliar! I have seen stalwart young men at play, and their calls to one another were in a harsh tongue which the Fianna knew not. I have heard clerics preach, and I did not understand them as I understood the Tailteann. On the strand of Binn Eadair I spoke to certain fishers, and they answered me in a speech strange and unlovely. There is an enchantment on the land. O dreaming stranger! This is not Eire! Here are only dead clouds and tongueless stones! Eire no longer lives; all this beauty is but her image!"

After this outburst there fell a silence. Then I spoke:

"Thou errest not, O Oisín, when thou sayest that an enchantment is on the land. We call it the Great Enchantment, and there are those of us who strove to break its spell. Eire is not dead; this is but an enchanted sleep, which is in truth the very image of death, but is not death. Strong voices are calling to Eire, seeking to rouse her out of her sleep, and methinks she hearkens. In yonder city—and I point inland to where Baile Atha Cliath lay under her pall of smoke—"in yonder city young men toil and plot to lessen the might of the Great Enchanter. Throughout the Five Firths they have gallant friends, who rest not either by night or day from their war with the powers of that Evil One. And lo! as I speak they are gathering in Baile Atha Cliath to take counsel together for the weal of the cause. Wouldst thou be convinced, O Oisín, that Eire is not dead? Come with me."

"Whither wouldst thou lead me?" "To an Oireachtas and a hosting of the nobles of the Gael. There shalt thou hear the sound of fingers on harpstrings and the sweet speech of poets; there shalt thou listen to the telling of old tales and to the deep roar of a great host. In old days thy soul loved such music."

"Give me thy hand."

Together we descended the hillside toward the darkening strand. What happened thereafter will in due time be told.

I have told of my strange meeting with Oisín on the brow of Binn Eadair. I have told of his noble grief as he gazed with yearning eyes over an Eire which to him was not Eire, but only a fair semblance—a beautiful corpse from which the spirit had fled. I have related also how, in some measure, I cheered his lonely heart with words of hope, and how together we descended the hillside bent on faring toward Baile Atha Cliath.

Of what fell out immediately thereafter I cannot speak. I have no clear recollection of treading the seaside road toward Baile Atha Cliath. Neither do I recall any considerable lapse of time between the moment when he said to me "Give me thy hand," and the next moment of which I have definite consciousness. Yet the one must have been separated from the other by many hours. It may be that when one walks with an Immortal space and time lose their significance. I have heard of those who, holding converse with the Sidhe, have imagined that to have taken place within the span of a day or an hour which in reality lasted during the flight of months and years. Of such experiences I know nothing. But this I know, that of the days and hours which I must have spent in company with that wanderer from the Other Country only certain brief and supreme moments stand out in my memory. The rest is a dim haze.

I distinctly recall how we picked our dim way down the hillside toward a narrow strip of shore on which broke a white wave. The seabreezes blew on our faces, and a herring gull shrieked near us. My next clear impression is of a thunderous host gathered in a vast apartment. Methought the very roof shook with the clamors of their applause. And in the midst stood one whom they welcomed with all that tumult. Serene he stood, a leader among his people. A fire leaped from his grey eyes, which blazed beneath a white brow crowned with raven locks. A hush fell—a hush deeper than the hush of the mountains, such a hush as is only possible when a great host waits in expectancy for the happening of something. Then he who stood there spoke to that listening Oireachtas: spoke in words now triumphant, now full of quaint and charming humor, now vibrating with scorn or ringing with defiance. And Oisín, who was still close to my side, drank in those words, himself silent and motionless.

"Thou hearest and understandest?" I said to him.

"Yea, and my heart has been comforted. Fionn had not a kindlier presence than that chieftain, nor Fearghus more eloquent lips. But he reminds me most of Goll, for the voice is the voice of a man of Connacht."

"In Connacht he was born and nursed, though he springs from the stock of the stranger."

"How do you call him?"

"We call him the Fair Little Branch—the name which the kindly Connacht folk bestowed on him when a lad, he went amongst them gathering their old songs and singing them new ones. Now that name is known and loved wherever on the round earth a child of the Gael wanders."

"And it shall be known and loved to the end of time; for the names of such as he do not die."

This scene faded away from my consciousness, and I began to be aware that we stood—my companion and I—on a green height overlooking a pleasant strand. It was night, and mists obscured the moonlight; yet I recognized the spot on which we stood as that portion of the strand of Muirbhíthe which nestles, a green nook, in the shelter of the New Town of the Strand rising behind on its dark Rock. Binn Eadair now lay afar, facing us across the bay; its shape we could not see, but only its twinkling lights. On the left hand swept a semi-circle of shining points marking the outline of the coast from Muirbhíthe to Baile Atha Cliath and from Baile Atha Cliath to Cluain Tairbh; and on the right, unseen, was Dun Laoghaire with its spires and sails, and behind the dim hills. To us from the hollow beneath came up the murmurs of a vast multitude, and the sound of martial music. The heights, and rocky paths, and grassy slopes were covered by that dense throng.

"This doubtless is a war hosting of the children of the Gael?" said Oisín in my ear. "I had thought that war hostings were no more in Eire—that her sword had been sheathed."

"There thou didst err, O Oisín, for the sword is not sheathed, nor shall it be sheathed until it sings triumphant through yet another battle. This, indeed, is a war hosting, and these the battalions which fight under that beloved chief whom but now we saw."

"Would it were my lot to charge in that battle with Oscar by my side, and Fionn to cheer us on!"

"We have fighters as bold as Oscar, and counsellors as wise as Fionn; and, O Oisín of the Songs! we have poets too to sing to us of the deeds of our fathers even as thou wast wont to sing to the Fianna on the eve of battle!"

"It is well," said the old man. "It is well; yet I tell thee that I would give up the delights of the Other Country to fight one hour with those battalions. For the battle that is at hand will be, methinks, the greatest battle that has been fought in Eire."

"The greatest and the last," I said.

This scene in its turn lost its sharpness and faded away, and again we found ourselves in the midst of that thunderous host in that lofty apartment. Now a young man dark and slight was singing to the hush of the old songs which one hears on Munster hillsides when the milkmaid gathers the kine about her or round munster hearth-stones at the winter ceilidhe. He ceased, and after a little while there came into presence a company of nobles who were welcomed with deep knells of applause. Amongst them was a tall cleric—"noble-looking as the Tailteann," said Oisín—who spoke with the accent of a Tir Chonnall glenside; and another cleric, whom they hailed as the ambassador and spokesman of the men of Alba; and another, not a cleric, who seemed the most beloved in all that company—a young man, slender and white, with hair and beard like yellow gold. He too spoke, and such speaking I have not often heard; there was no passionate outburst of words; no soaring imagery or dazzling eloquence; only a calm, quiet voice bidding its hearers be of good cheer, and carrying in its evenness and self-possession an assurance of strength, of conviction, of serene and tranquil courage.

"He speaks like a man of Ulster," said Oisín.

"He was cradled in an Antrim glen," I answered, "and it is that man, O Oisín, whose quiet voice has aroused the Gael from an ignoble slumber to all the activity which thou seest."

Next there came before us one small and dark, with the nervous face of an artist. And the harp was brought, and he made wondrous music. Through the room there crept first a murmur as though of a distant coming and then there echoed full in our ears the tramp of marching bands. The face of my listening companion wore a new exultation.

"Methinks," he said, "that I hear the approach of an armed battle—and if I err not, it is the men of Munster who come."

"Thine ear does not deceive thee; that is the Marching Tune of O'Sullivan."

But even as I spoke there had succeeded to the clangor of that march the wailing of one who mourned over the slain—a long drawn sob of exquisite and piercing sweetness. The very soul of the instrument seemed to weep.

"The battle is over," said Oisín, "there is one there who caresses her dead."

If that piteous and tender lament had continued longer, I believe that we too should have wept. But presently there broke upon our ears the trills and shakes and rich mellow notes of a blackbird singing in the greenwood—"tis like the blackbird of Doire Charin," said Oisín, and his aged heart was melted with love. And then there rang out the cheerful beat of a hornpipe, and anon the merry lilt of a reel.

"The harpers of the Fianna harped not more cunningly than this," cried Oisín.

Thereafter a stately and gentle priest spoke to us lofty and beautiful things about the destinies of our race, bidding us to lift up our hearts, to be faithful and true, and, forgetting hates and jealousies, to love one another. I could see that Oisín, who doubtless recalled the old bickerings of the Fianna, when Conacht stood arrayed against Leinster, and Munster plotted against both, found his words wise and good. And presently, turning to me, he said:

"Of old we thought it a noble thing to fight against one another, and behold! the foe came and prevailed against us; now I see that the only worthy fight for the Gael is the fight against the Outland Races. My blessing on that priest for his words of wisdom."

And others came, and sang, or spoke, or played to us; one who sang the song of the Deise with a sweetness and plaintiveness which touched our very hearts and made our eyelashes wet; an old man who recited for us a song which he himself had made about the Oireachtas; and a lad—or so he looked, though they told us he was already a father—a dark and slender lad, with humorous expressive lips, who lifted first of the daughter of a certain Palaitineach, and afterwards of the famous Fair of the Windy Gap; and all laughed, for his songs were merry, and his now laughing face was good to look on. Oisín laughed too, and I laughed with him.

The Round Hall with its thunderous crowd, its harping and its song, was gone. We stood alone on Tara, as the sun was sinking. We looked north and south and east and west, and saw beneath us the Five Fifties of Eire. We gazed on the famous hills—that on which the Tailteann had lit his fire over against Tara, and the others. Afar toward Baile Atha Cliath we saw the rearward of a great host, which had camped all day on the royal hill, and made the silent paths re-echo to the sound of Irish speech and song, and story. I turned to my companion, and the somber eyes now shone even as they had shone on Binn Eadair, but with a more triumphant and glad-some joy.

"Have I kept my bond, O Oisín, and shown thee that Eire indeed lives, and that the final passing of the Gael is not yet at hand?"

"Well hast thou kept thy bond, O son of my heart! The memory of what I have seen and heard will abide with me through the ages in the Other Country."

Again I directed my gaze toward Baile Atha Cliath, and watched until I saw the rearward of the host, wind slowly out of sight. Turning once more to my companion:

"Let us go," I said.

But no voice replied to me, and no companion now stood beside me. That majestic and kindly presence was gone. I heard only the breezes stirring the grass, and singing past the Stone of Destiny. I saw only the bare hillside, with its rude image of the Tailteann and its lonely storied pillar. I recalled that one whose blood runs in my own veins lies buried beneath that pillar in the Grave of the Croppies, sleeping there with his comrades till the awakening. I knelt and prayed. Then, rising, I cast one last look at the silent places where the palaces had stood, and, turning, I descended the hill and followed in the wake of the host.

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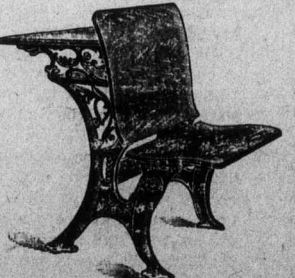
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