

THE FORAY OF QUEEN MEAVE.

(IN TWO PARTS.)

PART II.



WHEN Aubrey de Vere set out to tell his story in verse, he had already to hand a tolerably strong and well-articulated skeleton of legendary lore to dress and adorn. On this point the author, speaking of his poem, assures us in the Preface :

"It is founded, and in substance represents the far-famed *Tain bo Cuailgne*, a tale regarded by many Irish scholars as the great Irish epic of ancient times, by others as a part only of some larger epic of which numerous portions remain, but which unhappily found no Pisistratus to combine them into a whole."

Let us now rapidly glance along the outline of this famous ancient tale, as it appears in its modern form.

In the first book, the poet treats of "The Cause of the Great War." We are here told in glowing language how Meave, the Queen of Connaught, awakening one morning, fell to disputing with her husband, Ailill, "trivial man and quaint, and early old," as to their respective wealth and worth. In fact, they spoke as if wealth and worth meant the same thing. They wrangled about their personal wealth, just as Milton makes Adam and Eve bicker about their respective share of blame, and—whisper it lowly—as their sons and daughters, without the urging of the Puritan poet, have been quarrelling about respective wealth and worth, and almost every other question that permits of debate, ever since. Their lords—I mean the creatures of Meave and Ailill, of course—called upon to arbitrate "'twixt them found in value difference none," and had they decided otherwise they would certainly have proved themselves extremely untactful courtiers.

The description of the royal couple of Connaught, wherewith the poem opens, is vivid :

"In Cruachan, old Connacht's palace pile,
Dwelt Meave the queen, haughtiest of woman-kind,
A warrioress untamed that made her will
The measure of the world. The all-conquering years
Conquered not her: the strength of endless prime
Lived in her royal tread and breast and eye.