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RED OWEN

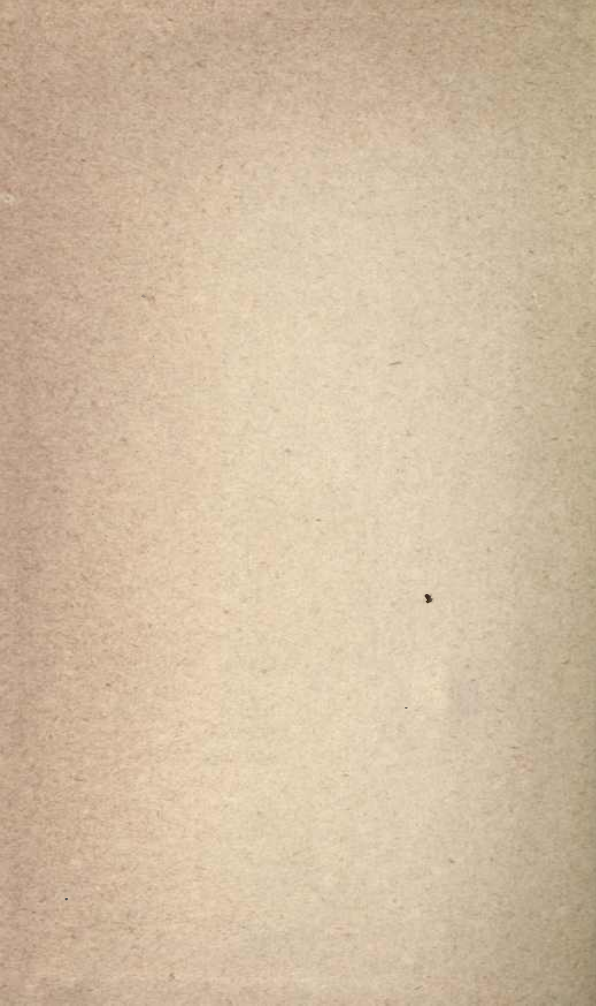
A PLAY IN 3 ACTS

By

Dermot O'Byrne

A decorative rectangular border with a repeating geometric pattern of interlocking lines and small squares, framing the text.

EX LIBRIS
IRENE DWEN ANDREWS



RED OWEN

BY

DERMOT O'BYRNE

Author of

"Wrack," "Children of the Hills," etc.



Dublin:

The Talbot Press, Limited

89 Talbot Street

1919



TO
LENNOX ROBINSON

2057964

CHARACTERS:

RED OWEN HANRAHAN	A Wandering Poet
TADG-SHIELA	A Cobbler and Fiddler
DONNCHADH COSTELLO	A young man (betrothed to MAEVE CURTIN)
DENIS GEARRA	A Blacksmith
THE FAIRY PEDLAR } AN OLD TINKER }	These two characters are the same
THE SHADE OF OISIN	

Several men and lads.

MAEVE CURTIN	A young peasant girl
THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE	Mother to MAEVE

Women and girls.

RED OWEN

ACT I.

THE TWISTING OF THE ROPE

(Interior of a farm-house kitchen in western Connemara. Period: eighteenth century. It is a rainy and blustering winter night, and the storm lashes the window and door and hisses in the chimney. A dance is in progress in the kitchen. The fiddler, TADG-SHIELA, sits on the edge of the table at the left of the room. The older people are grouped about the wall, and five or six are playing cards in a corner. The room is lit with rush-candles, and the floor is of beaten mud and very irregular. The dance ends as curtain rises.)

VOICES: *(Excitedly.)* Again! again now! Tadg-Shiela. Sure that was the finest reel ever you put up.

TADG: *(Half drunk and very quarrelsome.)* Then it's not. Damn a worse! The like of you be's no judge of a fiddle or a pipe. This bass string I had out of the thieving pedlar from Galway (may the pucks ride away with him!) is after scraping on me like a rusty plough.

A YOUNG LAD: 'Gorrah! Tadg would be the quare fiddler if there was a right wee fiddle at him the like of yon one Mickey Beg the tinker had stolen from some kitchen of the Blakes or Frenches the other day, and he travelling the Barony.

ANOTHER LAD: Well, that's the truth. Just one more reel now, Tadg.

TADG: Arú, you'll have me destroyed. I never saw the like of a girla-guairle. Some of you young lads will be kicking an odd star out of the sky before the gray of dawn.

A YOUNG GIRL OF FOURTEEN OR SO: (*A little hysterically*) Hee! Hee! If they do itself they'll be giving them to the girls to be twisting in their hair or the bosoms of their bodices.

VOICES: Arú, quit your blather, Maggie. You'd have the butter churned with your tongue. Put up yon reel again, Tadg, honey. I'll be making you a boxy in the morning, Tadg, a-chuid. The blessed saints wouldn't ask pleasure but to be listening to ye, and that's the truth!

TADG: Och! Och! let you quit your plaimáish. I wouldn't be bothered playing that old reel twice in a night, I'm telling yez. And let me get another wee tint now. My two lips are like the shells of a last year's nut with the dust you're after raising.

A MAN: (*Drawing a bottle from his coat and handing it to TADG.*) It's a quare reel you'll be putting up after that, hey, my buck? (*He thumps the fiddler on the back. TADG drinks.*)

TADG: (*Wiping his mouth on his sleeve and glaring at the speaker.*) Maybe I will, maybe I will not, Con Flaherty—(*elaborately*) Mr. Conn Flaherty of Drimeen—Maybe it'll be a reel I'll be playing, maybe it'll be a step-dance. That's between myself and my own mind. It might be "The Waves of Tory" or it might be "Silvermines," or again I might get a twist for "Moll-Halfpenny." I'll not be ordered by any long lounging streeler the like of you. Begob, let yez step up here, any three of you, till I knock your silly faces together the way it's hard to say but your own mothers 'll be strongly put to it to ravel you out from one another.

MAEVE CURTIN: (*Daughter of the house, aside.*) Musha, Tadg's very cranky someway to-night. Sure it's hateful to be listening to coarse old lads the like of yon would be giving bad chat and he with a drop taken to a holy cardinal of Rome itself.

DONNCHADH COSTELLO: Well that's the truth, and wasn't he terrible the night after the fair at Carnlough when he followed Father Dorian down the street, till he knocked the hat over his eyes?

MAEVE: God save us! It's foolish the young lads are to be vexing him.

VOICES: Be easy now, Tadg. Don't be heeding him a scrape, Tadg honey.

DONNCHADH: (*Aloud.*) Sure Conn must be quare and tight, and he giving that kind of chat to the finest fiddler in the counties of Galway and Mayo.

(*HE winks at CONN FLAHERTY.*)

(TADG *subsides unsteadily on to the table again, tunes the fiddle with great deliberation, blinking fiercely round with his little fiery blue eyes, and then suddenly begins the reel "Silvermines."* A voice is heard lilting the tune outside. The door is rapped smartly, and a wild, unkempt figure enters, a man of immense height and strength, rather over forty years of age. Long red hair hangs on his shoulders, there is a week's growth on his chin, his clothes are ragged, and he is barefooted, but there is about him an impression of force and character and of the subtle fascination of the man of imagination. He carries a harp slung across his shoulders. His eyes burn with a slight fever. His manner tells of over-strung nerves and his speech is at times over-emphatic and even hysterical.)

RED OWEN HANRAHAN: (*On the threshold.*) God's blessing on this house.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: God and Mary be with you, just man.

RED OWEN: (*A little wearily.*) It's a fine dark night for drowning cats, woman of the house, and perishing cold, and I felt music in the night, the way I was thinking there'd likely be little harm to step in a wee while.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: A hundred welcomes before you, just person.

RED OWEN: (*Suddenly animated.*) Is there dancing in it? And girls, hey? If I'd be to hear "Silvermines" or "The Devil among the Tailors" I'd be apt to be lepping and figuring steps in my narrow grave, and I maybe lying a quiet stack of modest bones under the wet sod and cláber a score or more years.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: I'd be thinking you'd be like to be a great dancer, just man, and you tall and supple as a sapling oak in them lowland baronies they be speaking of.

TADG: (*Who has been staring speechlessly at the stranger, suddenly lets out a hoarse shout and waves his fiddle bow round his head, laughing wildly.*) That's the devil, that is! Let yez make confession the whole kit of yez. That's the Lad itself does be slinking under windy bushes in the clouds of night, and he overlooking a decent's body's bonnavs.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: H'st, Tadg, h'st! Lord bless us, isn't that one awful?

RED OWEN: (*Contemptuously.*) Who's yon drunken tinker?

TADG: Drunken tinker, is it? (*Screaming.*) Drunken tinker? (*Shouting very fast.*) Hoo! Sure I know you, Red Owen Hanrahan. I know you, and many another in

this country-side along with me. Let you step over to Ballyclochan beyond the mountain till you ask Grainne Gearra does she mind your flaming hair and your lying silky treacherous tongue did bring the sorrow of women upon her. Will you travel the bridle path over the hill of Cashel till you come to the Liach Mór, till you ask the grey rock can it mind a damp night of harvest under the gold of the moon was in it maybe six years back, and two that were whispering under its shadow till the red of the dawn and the honey-lying was in it beneath the splendour of the stars might change the air of the winds and they passing over you. Let yez go to Galway mad-house till you converse a small while with Michael Lynch used to be mooning over the windy bogs and draughty hills and he crazy, and roaring for Owen Hanrahan to cross his path till he'll powder the rocks with his share of bones: and that on the head of what was done at yon devil's cub on Maire Shiela was my own half-sister. Ach! Ach! my hundred thousand black scalding curses on the whole tribe of poets. They'll have the right to travel the ridge of the world till they come to the doors of hell and until their damned souls be squatting down in the darkness of the devil's house, and their bleeding broken fingers plucking the burning wires of their harps, and their share of bawdy songs choking their throats till the Red Day of the Mountain. Sure there'll be the fine music in it that night, Red Owen Hanrahan, you dirty lying Munster wolf.

VOICES IN THE CROWD: (*Whispering to one another.*)
 God save us, that's the truth he's telling, drunk and all as he is. Sure, I've heard my mother speaking of Grainne Gearra and the dirty old gladiator out of the south as often as there are fingers and toes on me.

A VOICE : (*Aloud.*) Put him out ! Let you not be harbouring the like of yon, Bridget Curtin, or some bad thing'll be coming on you. Mind yourselves now, girls. Let yez move nice and modest the way he'll not be heeding yez at all.

RED OWEN : (*Defiantly, standing in the middle of the floor.*) Well, I'm Owen Hanrahan, and there's little shame on me to say it. And now, faith, I'll be saying it again for fear there's any dummy or deaf body here was not hearing the melodious rhymes of yon blackbird on the table would take a sweat out of the holy angels of God. (*In a loud voice.*) Owen Hanrahan's my name—Red Owen Hanrahan, and it's not every night of the year, mind you, a Munster poet does be breaking his ten toes on the rainy roads of the west. (*Suddenly to a lad near him.*) Would there be any harm to ask a wee drop off you, young fellow ?

THE LAD : No harm in the world, Stranger. (*HE hands OWEN the bottle.*)

A GIRL : (*Whispering.*) They say he's a terrible poet.

SECOND GIRL : Don't yon know he is ? Sure it was himself made "The Sally by the Waters" and "The Banks of the Lee."

FIRST GIRL : God save us, Mary !

THIRD GIRL : He's after looking at yourself now, Nora !

FOURTH GIRL : Your petticoat's loose, Nora !

NORA (*First Girl*) : Whisht now, quit your foolishness, will you !

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE : (*To DONNCHADH.*) I am in doubt yon lad's not fit to be loosed among the girrseachs. Donny, let you be away with Maeve into the west room before that one be's looking on her.

DONNCHADH : 'Gorra, you're right. Come away, Maeve.

MAEVE: Why would I? What harm will come on me at all?

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: Ah! have sense, child. You wouldn't wish trouble to be in it between himself and Donny.

MAEVE: Hold your tongue, mother. Indeed I'll not stir out of this. Donny's not that foolish, are you, boy?

RED OWEN: (*Looking at the girls.*) On my hand, there's sweet flowers surely on the misty hedges of Connaught. (*HE claps his hands together, and leaps in among them.*) Hey now, little girls, the music's pricking my two feet.

THE GIRLS: (*Whispering and giggling nervously.*) The Lord bless us! His two eyes are a holy terror. I'd be scarred to be dancing with that one. Who knows but it's the devil that's in it.

RED OWEN: (*Going up to NORA.*) Come you out of that till you take a turn with me, O young girl with the eyes like cornflowers, and they with the dew of morning in them.

FIRST GIRL: (*Laughing nervously.*) Then, indeed, I will not, Owen Hanrahan, Sir, I'm destroyed dancing.

RED OWEN: (*Indifferently.*) May you dance lonely in the narrow gap of hell. (*The girl screams. HE turns to another, catching her by the hand.*) You'll not be refusing a wee twist with me, O cailin with a tressy-cool like shadows in hollow hills.

THE GIRL: (*Snatching her hand away.*) Arú, leave me go, I'm for home.

DONNCHADH: (*In rising uneasiness.*) Come away, Maeve, I'm saying. (*MAEVE makes an impatient gesture, and continues to regard the struggle with fascinated interest.*)

RED OWEN: (*Viciously, stretching his hands over the girl like claws.*) May your bed be a thorny ditch and the cold mist off the mountain a covering for your naked shoulders and they with the skin creeping on them. (*To another slender girl.*) Let you step out now into the right middle of the floor with me, O star-maiden with the shape of the swan on the wave and the skin of your white shapely throat like the flower of the apple and it drifting beneath the hot staring stars of May.

THE GIRL: (*Trembling with fright.*) May the Saints guard you, Stranger, but my foot's sore this week.

RED OWEN: (*Irritably.*) Och, you're nothing but a salley-rod after all! May the red headless lad come on you at the cross-roads, and he romping! My sore shame on the whole pack of yez for a flock of Tipperary ewes. (*Loudly and rhapsodically.*) I'll be going back now to my own country, and I'll be crying on the high-roads at all the fairs of Desmond and Thomond and Muskerry, and at all the wakes and throng weddings and patterns of Bere and the Dingle Bay, till the depth of my throat is dried up in me, how the women of Connacht are without sprightliness, without fun, without any laughing music lepping in the little tender veins of their feet, without respect for poets, backward, timorous—

MAEVE CURTIN: (*Suddenly with assumed carelessness.*) I'll dance with you, Owen Hanrahan, I'm not scarred before you nor any long-limbed poet out of Munster or any other backward province.

DONNCHADH: (*To MAEVE: furiously.*) What the hell are you saying?

RED OWEN: Begob that I should live to hear the like of yon word put upon the province of Munster. (*HE turns quickly to face MAEVE.*)

THE GIRLS: (*Terrified.*) Maeve, Maeve, God save you! Arú, she's not all in it this night, surely!

DONNCHADH: (*To MAEVE.*) I tell you, you have me heart-scalded, ye headlong piece!

RED OWEN: (*Seeing MAEVE, who is looking at HIM boldly and mischievously.*) Ah—ha-ha!—Ambasa, may my four bones wither within me if it's not the daughter of Lord Mayo itself is in it—or maybe it's a woman out of the faery hills you are?

MAEVE: Indeed then, I am not, but only a poor girl was never hearing the fine heady talk of a poet or learned person until this blessed hour, and she with her two feet itching to be dancing with some swinging, swaggering playboy out of the prancing south.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: Yerrah, hold your tongue, Maeve. You're crazy, surely.

MAEVE: Be quiet, mother. (*To OWEN.*) They're all heavy-going hereabouts, and I'm thinking there'd be apt to be a wild power of music in your two feet, and they so small and shapely. I've heard it said Munstermen are born dancing.

RED OWEN: True for you, my white wonder of the western world, and myself is the best dancer in the counties of Cork and Kerry, or I may say in wide Munster.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: (*To MAEVE.*) Ach, my sore shame on you, you wanton girl.

A GIRL: Musha, Maeve, a-laogh, let you be minding yourself. There do be saying there be's some imp of the devil sitting on the eyelids of every Munsterman will put some nasty thing on you without delay.

SECOND GIRL: Aye, that's the truth, sure. Maybe to-morrow's morn there'll be a hump on you the like of yon came on Peg Moira after she danced with the pedlar out of Limerick at Bartley Tumais' wedding.

MAEVE: (*Scornfully.*) Whisht now, if you'd see a shining archangel off the golden floor of heaven itself and he figuring a reel down the red clouds of evening, you ones would not be putting a stir out of you, good or bad! Put up Silvermines again now, Tadg, will you.

TADG: (*Who has been drinking steadily.*) Indeed I will not. It's not Tadg Connor will be smutching and crippling his fingers playing jigs and reels for the Black Lad. I'm Tadg Connor, I am. (*Uproariously.*) I'm a Christian, that's what I am, do you understand? I'm a Christian cobbler. I was born a Christian cobbler, and I was reared a Christian cobbler, do you understand me? Hey, do you understand. (*HE bangs the fiddle on the table and stands up, but is unable to keep his feet and falls on the floor.*)

MAEVE: (*Impatiently.*) Sure, that's no loss. Let yez give him a drop of butter-milk, mother. Move up, one of you boys, till you put up a reel 'for us. Mickey, you've skill with your fingers.

MICKEY: (*Shyly.*) Indeed it's a poor skill I have, Maeve.

MAEVE: Arú, go along with you! Shift him out of that, some of you. -

(*Some of the lads shove MICKEY up to the table. HE tunes the fiddle bashfully.*)

RED OWEN: Mo cheol thu, gossur, let your fingers find wings till the notes run off the strings faster than crazy bodies to Glen-na-Galt. It's like to be the maddest fling ever you see'd. (*The boy begins to play.*) A step-dance, is it? Come out now, star-child, till we show them.

A GIRL: Holy St. Bride, I'd be afeared I'd see a black goat come lepping down the chimney and it with the horns

flaming till they two'd be away on it riding through the clouds of night, the like of the O'Connor's daughter and the faery smith in the tale.

MAEVE : (*Overhearing.*) Och, the devil fly away with you and your goats. You have me sore with your foolishness.

DONNCHADH : (*Who has been trembling with speechless rage to THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.*) I tell you, I'll not thole the like of this. I'll pull the two lugs of him—that's the thing I'll be doing now.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: Do not, Donny. Let him tear away a while. Sure he can't do much in this place; but God guard us, I never yet see'd a man I'd be so scarred before. I am thinking Maeve's gone light in the head the night, the graceless piece!

(DONNCHADH *stands back irresolutely, glowering watchfully at OWEN and the GIRL.*)

(OWEN and MAEVE *dance a step-dance.*)

RED OWEN: (*Dancing.*) My sharp sorrow that we are not out in the wide dewy splendours of the night and we dancing over the smooth mountains of Eire, till we would leave the wind of March behind us and come up with the wind of Samhain before us. Sure there's not your like in a step-dance between Limerick and Youghal, and it's the Munster lasses have the name.

MAEVE: Ah! then it's the windy coaxing tongue the poets of Ireland do be having would be like to twist a net of destruction about any nice modest girl, I'm thinking.

RED OWEN: (*Airily.*) Ach, the most of the bad things you'll be hearing about the poets is lies and ignorance.

(*At the end of the dance there is subdued whispering among the crowd. They draw away from OWEN and MAEVE and watch them curiously.*)

RED OWEN: (*Irritated by the silence, to a LAD who is staring at him fixedly.*) You'll be like to mind my countenance, young fellow. I could be putting a blistering on you would keep you scratching till the skin hung on your bones like ragged reeds in the cold wind of night. (*The LAD gasps nervously, still staring.*) If I spoke the word I could be changing a poor mangy body the like of yourself into a year-old bonnav and it with one ear only and one blind eye at the end of the tail. (*With a sudden threatening gesture.*) I know a trick would take a start out of you the way you'd be lepping through yon door and running naked over the mountains in the mist and bitterness of tempest a week between Sunday and Sunday, and you screeching and squealing.

A GIRL: Arú come out of that, Padruaig a-chuid. I'm thinking it would be a fearsome thing someway to be a bonnav with one eye only at the end of the tail the like of yon.

ONE OF THE OLDER MEN: Musha, arn't you foolish to be heeding him? Powder away, Mickey, lad. (*Lowering his voice.*) He'll be away without delay if he gets no drink. (*The Dancing continues.*)

RED OWEN: (*To MAEVE.*) Move over to the fire with me, mo cheol, till we talk snug and quiet.

MAEVE: (*Going over to the fire with him.*) What kind of talk will be in it between us, and we only met in this half-hour? (*THEY sit on stools by the fire, close together.*)

RED OWEN: Sure it's no hard matter to say the kind of talk would be in it between a poet of the Gael and a woman would take the palm for beauty over the Lady Helen of Troy and proud scornful queens of the old time.

MAEVE: (*A little mockingly.*) Is it talking of love you will be, perhaps?

RED OWEN: It is, it is, surely. Have not my two eyes been pricking with gazing upon the flaming visage of your eyes, and my heart singing the terriblest songs ever you heard in its right middle since the blessed minute I first looked on you?

MAEVE: I'm thinking it's many a soft coaxing song you should have made about the lasses of Munster and Cork.

RED OWEN: (*Lightly.*) I have, maybe, but if I have itself (*seriously*) it was only the way my tongue would be kept slippy and nimble till I'd be meeting the woman of my choice.

MAEVE: I'd think it would be a nice thing someway to be put in a song would be sung through all the provinces of Ireland the way all the young swaggering shop-boys and wild-poets and big-bellied bailiffs and the like would be asking "Who is Maeve Curtin" or "That one is like to be the blinding wonder of beauty walking the roads of Connacht and the sunny fields of the world and she stirring such a madness of music on a poet's lips."

RED OWEN: I will make songs for you will bring the shining archangels out on to the floors of heaven and they putting their ears to the chinks and crannies for fear they'll be losing one of my flaming words. O shining flower of the women of Eire and O share of the world, let you come with me till we travel together the twisted roads of the west, till we come to wide-pastured Desmond. Sure I'm thinking the rains would dry up before the coming of your white feet and they moving like a cloud on the hill. Come with me to my own land where flowers do be blossoming among the grasses of midwinter, where there is not poison in the wind of the north, nor heaviness nor chill in the mist of the lake at sundown.

MAEVE: (*Flattered, but still mocking.*) Is it that way the people of Munster do be living?

RED OWEN: (*With intensity.*) It is, indeed. You shall get high-heeled shoes with buckles of gold in it, silks and satins and the glittering moony gems of the Eastern world, and gaudy ribbons according to your choice. You shall sleep on a bed of rushes and they changed every evening, the way you shall be shining like a star in a reedy pool and you sleeping. Spanish wine and sweet honey-cakes shall be your portion night and morning, and you will get leave to lie until the sun is risen over the mountain to the height of the giant of the windy gap and he straining on the point of his two feet.

MAEVE: (*Wavering and carried away.*) Arú what way would you do that thing, and you a ragged fellow with the two naked feet split on you with the frost of the night?

RED OWEN: (*Petulantly.*) Ah, I tell you I'm a great lord and prince in my own land. I will wed you without dowry of gold or herds! I will wed you without flax or wool for spinning! I would wed you in a hollow windy gap under the black rains of February! Ah, childeen, I would wed you without any portion at all, but the leave to kiss your flower-like melodious throat and it strained back to my shoulder, and your share of hair falling over the hollows of my two arms like a hill stream between rocks after rain.

MAEVE: (*Moved.*) Ah, Owen Hanrahan, I never was hearing the like of your share of talk, and I doubt it's not right to be listening to you.

(*SHE moves toward HIM till her hair brushes his cheek.*)

RED OWEN: (*Pressing on.*) O star of knowledge and O little candle of the western world, your feet shall make music between the doors of my heart, you will be a light before and

behind me, and I will be singing my share of songs in that light before all the mighty concourses of the earth.

(The dancing ends. MAEVE starts from him and sits upright.)

MAEVE: Whisht now, you'll make a walking shame of me before all the world!

(DONNCHADH COSTELLO tries to force a way through the crowd.)

RED OWEN: It's little I'm heeding the world and its foolishness any time. *(HE throws his arm round MAEVE and lifts her violently to her feet.)*

MAEVE: *(Loudly; trying to push HIM from HER.)* Leave me go now, will you?

RED OWEN: I'll not be leaving you go till we two are after sporting together on the wide moony hills of the south and the warm winds making music of our kisses through the stars of God.

(HE presses HER to him.)

MAEVE: *(Very frightened.)* Leave me go now, I'm saying.

(SHE boxes HIM over the ear. OWEN suddenly seizes HER by the arms and kisses her lips. DONNCHADH COSTELLO rushes forward to attack OWEN. The latter remains motionless gazing in ecstasy at MAEVE who stares at him with blazing eyes and heaving breast; then suddenly controls herself and turns away, laughing shortly and maliciously. The GIRLS giggle nervously, whispering among themselves. THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE seizes DONNCHADH by the sleeve and holds him back forcibly. Exclamations of curiosity and indignation among the company.)

VOICES : God save us ! That's the boy-o for yez ! Why, what's he done ? Arú, what's he done is it, damn you ! Let yez put him out on the road till the rain quenches his flaming bones. Sure the loch over beyond would be putting a brave cooling on him. Holy Saints, that's the grand mannerly courting for yez ! The devil itself's in yon lad, surely. Drunken Tramp ! Shuler ! Munster wolf !

DONNCHADH : (*Struggling with THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE.*) Let me get at him till I knock his two lying green eyes through the back of his fiery skull.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE : (*To DONNCHADH.*) Be easy now ! Don't you know he's as drunk as seven tinkers ? Look at the flamy eyes on him ! Leave yon fellow to me till I put him out, the way he'll be left roaring himself sober and taking sparks out of the stones of the wall with his share of curses will not be putting any bad things on the mice in the rafters once he's out of the house. (*Turning to OWEN.*) Owen Hanrahan, are you anyway skilled to twist a sugán ?

RED OWEN : (*Abstractedly.*) What thing ?

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE : There be's no person in this parish is able to put the right twist on a sugán, my shame on it—

RED OWEN : (*Laughing unpleasantly.*) They'll be to be quare fools in this parish then.

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE : And I was thinking, maybe it would not be putting any great inconvenience on a learned knowledgeable man the like of yourself if you'd be taking an end till you show the boys the way the people of Munster have with that thing. Are you skilled in twisting a rope now ? I've a fine thrassgan back of the house going to loss on me for lack of hands to twist it.

(*The young LADS wink and smile at each other in secret.*)

RED OWEN: I am indeed. None better. But yerrah, Woman of the House, let be with your foolishness. What would I be wanting with an old rope and I with the pipings of all heaven in my two ears and the tormenting splendour of the eyes of the star-woman your daughter blazing before my face in the dark night and putting a clouding on my intellect and the vision of my mind?

THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE: (*Sighing.*) Well, musha, I'm thinking Munster must be the quare backward country, a place where there does be nobody can be twisting a rope for the thatch. I'm thinking it must be a fearful life someway back beyond there, you to be sitting with your bones clattering together like vessels in a tinker's sack on the head of the cold, and no roof over you only the windy heaven and the dirty mist off the mountains. Think of the crayturs, girls, and they with their hay tossed to all the áirts of heaven for lack of a strand of straw to bind their handcocks and tramp-cocks, the Lord help them.

RED OWEN: My soul from the devil, that I should live to hear the like of yon. I tell you, woman, there's many a townland in it under the mountains of the Dingle Bay, or by the fragrant blossoming banks of Loch Lene and Killarney itself, does be shining like the gaudy splendour of the sun at mid-day with the number of roofs in it and they made of hammered glittering gold. But I've travelled many a claubery district of the west and its great knowledge I've gathered between this and that. Let yez give me the full of the crúcan in my two hands till I show you whether or not I can twist your rotten straw.

(*The BOYS fetch some straw from outside.*)

ONE OF THE GIRLS: (*Playing up to the old woman's plan.*)
Arú, you'll see it'll fail him to do that thing for all his high-up
flighty talk.

ANOTHER GIRL: Time's a good story-teller, Nora, but I'm
thinking yon fellow'll be tying himself up in the straw, the
way you'll be thinking he's one of the mummers do be coming
about the country in the New Year.

A MAN: (*In a low voice.*) If it comes with him to make
it at all I wouldn't ask pleasure but to see him hanging to it
over the door-post of the house.

(OWEN takes the crucan impatiently from the old woman
and begins to twist the straw into a rope. The old woman
at the other end letting the straw gradually out of her
hands moves round continually, trying to get OWEN
opposite the door. While HE works he half declaims
and half sings the following:—)

RED OWEN:

My sharp scorn on the counties of Galway and Mayo,
A stony land of mist.

A land without hospitality, without merriment,

A land of fair women without courtliness.

Without respect for learning or the songs of poets,

A land where you might be searching for sweet sounds all
the days

And hear no music but the coughing of ewes on the hills,

And they astray for want of a shepherd.

Arú, keep still, can't you, Woman of the House. What
are you after, and you dancing and lepping round the way a
body would think the devil was stepping on your ten toes?

(*During the second verse THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE
keeps more quiet, but during the third she succeeds in
driving OWEN round to the door.*)

I travelled every road of the West between windy Samhain
 and fiery Beltaine,
 And it was this I saw, every wall with a gap in it and a sore
 wind through it,
 Every thatch with a leak, every coat with a patch in it.
 I was after meditating in my mind after this manner
 Till I came to Gortnalee of the fuschia hedges.
 It was there I saw the shining love of my breast,
 The melodious starry queen of every accomplishment,
 And she like a lamp from the Lord on the broken highways
 of the world ;
 I travelled the four provinces of Ireland, Spain and Greece
 and the Eastern world,
 The grey ridges of the seven seas and back again.
 If I would be seeing white-foot Deirdre and the little pearl of
 Gortnalee,
 It is to my thousand-times loved one I would be giving the
 palm.

(The WOMAN OF THE HOUSE has worked OWEN backwards towards the door, which someone now opens unobserved. OWEN still singing continues to move backwards as he twists the rope until he moves out of the door. THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE throws the bundle of straw after him and several LADS rush at the door and bolt it.)

RED OWEN'S VOICE : *(Outside.)* Well, I'm damned !

(Great laughter and shouting in the kitchen. DONNCHADH presses up to MAEVE.)

DONNCHADH : *(Hard and bitter.)* Maybe you're at liberty to spare an odd word to myself now, woman, and that vile old gladiator put out in his right place.

MAEVE: (*Laughing shortly.*) Let me be, will you? Why would I be conversing with a poor rabbit of a fellow was too timorous and backward to protect the girl of his choice from any ragged unmannerly streeler may be strolling the roads in the clouds of night.

DONNCHADH: (*Making for the door.*) It's that kind of chat you'll be giving me now, is it? By my hand I'll not be back till I have his dirty bones scattered in the windy ditches of four townlands.

MAEVE: (*Seizing him.*) Arú, then, you will not, a poor man the like of thon and he weak and destroyed with fever, and his belt flapping over the deep pit of hunger in his middle.

DONNCHADH: May my throat burst if there's any pleasing your like at all.

RED OWEN: (*Banging furiously on the door.*) Open, Woman of the House! Open you to me, Maeve, my bright share of the world, till we travel distant plains!

(*MAEVE stands for a moment irresolutely, facing the door, then turns half-reluctantly and moodily joins the other girls.*)

END OF ACT I.

ACT II.

THE BARGAINING

(The following dawn : outside the Curtin's house. A ragged twisted tree on the right foreground. It rains thinly.

RED OWEN *still beating on the door in a frenzy of rage. The fever has increased on him, and now and again he shivers.*)

RED OWEN : *(Punctuating each sentence with a bang on the door.)* Open, you deceitful lying cailleach you, a woman without pity or hospitality for poor bodies destroyed with travelling the draughty ditches of your wretched province, a country where the rain blows from all the airts of heaven at one time and it never ceasing between the far gaping ends of eternity. Open, you ugly old striapeach would take a start out of the old lad itself, till he'd be off lepping through the clouds of night with a toothache in his middle if he'd be seeing the greasy gums and the yellow speckled face of you and it wagging above your share of dry bones like a dirty rag on a thorn-bush. Do you hear me, or are the whole rotten kit of yez in shaking dread of one lonesome orphaned Munster lad and he weak and destroyed with the hunger ?

(HE pauses and listens. The sounds of the fiddle is heard in the house.)

Open, let yez open, I'm saying, you poor mean sickly herd of limping bacachs would make a pig out of Desmond or Bere sick to look at yez and your carcasses flung in the trough.

(HE thunders unceasingly at the door.)

Let yez open or I'll be putting such a satire on yez as will crack your leaky walls like you might be splitting a hazel-nut and toss your weedy greasy thatch down among yez the way you'd see bog-cotton blown on a summer storm.

(No answer from the house. RED OWEN sits down on the stump of a fallen tree with a half-humorous gesture of rage.)

Musha, then I'll sit here as long as there's wind and rain in Connemara, and yon door-post'll dance down the road and it singing before Red Owen puts a stir out of him. *(A moment's pause.)* Holy Saints, but this rain's a wonder! It'd be apt to find a body's four bones and they lying a week drowned and snug in the bottom of a loch and the weeds covering them to the depth of ripe corn. Brrr! and there's a sore hunger gnawing my middle likewise.

(HE searches his pockets, but without result.)

Arú, wasn't I the tearing amadan to throw out the mouldy crust the woman at the Maam cross-roads did give me, green and all as it was? Ugh, I could be eating the wind. Am briathar, isn't this Connemara the rag-and-bone of a land? "To Hell or Connaught," said the Scriosadoir; sure that was a hard choice I'm thinking, and one may say the two be's paying rent to the same master. Ugh! Ugh! I'm as empty as an old rusty can by the roadside. My belly be's flapping in the wind with the depth of its emptiness. Maybe a song would contrive to warm me a trifle.

("Casadh an tsúgain.")

Isn't it the sore calamity put me out in this place

And so many fine girls that I left behind me?

I came into the house where was the bright love of my breast

And the cailleach put me out at the twisting of the rope!

(HE sings this verse gloomily and wearily.)

(Passionately.)

If you are mine be mine day and night
 If you are mine be mine before all the world.
 If you are mine be mine every inch of your heart.
 And it is my grief you are not with me this day as wife.

(HE rises and approaches the house.)

(Rhapsodically.)

It was down in Sligo I got knowledge of my love
 And up in Galway I drank my fill with her
 And by my hand unless they let me be
 I'll do a trick will make these women dance.

(During the last verse HE becomes mad with rage. He listens, and as the noise of the dance still continues HE picks up a stone and throws it at the window. The missile rips through the skin. HE runs up to the aperture and cries passionately through it:—)

Come out of that, O woman would take the crown of beauty
 over all the women of the west. The heart in my middle is
 destroyed because of you. I am tormented, bruised, in flames
 because of your beauty has put a wound in my breast it
 would fail any learned doctor or holy well on the high ridge
 of the world to heal.

(There is a confused noise in the house, and suddenly the door is unbarred. OWEN stands tense and expectant and as the door opens makes a rush towards it, only to find himself in the arms of DONNCHADH COSTELLO and DENIS GEARRA, the smith. These are followed by TADG, the fiddler, who capers at a safe distance in drunken and malicious glee, and a good number of people who crowd about the door observing the scene curiously.)

DONNCHADH: It'll be a while now, I'm thinking, before
 you'll be raking along the high-roads of Connaught again and
 you making the winds to rot with your share of raimeish and

bawdy songs, and your blathering to a decent body's woman the way the stones of the road be's sick listening to you. Let you hold him now, Denis the smith, till I get the end of the rope an odd time across his skinny back.

RED OWEN : (*Laughing wildly.*) Isn't that the nice honeyed blessing to be hearing on a morning of wind, and my long limbs stiff with putting in the roaring night on your dirty dung-heap. Let yez come on the three of yez till I knock your poor carcasses through the right middle of yon door.

(*A struggle follows, during which RED OWEN contrives to hit the smith a terrific blow on the mouth.*)

DENIS GEARRA : (*Spluttering.*) Mind yourself now, Donny! damme if he's not as slippy as an eel.

(*THEY continue to struggle, but OWEN holds his own until two of the BOYS in the doorway come to the assistance of DENIS and DONNCHADH, and RED OWEN is overpowered.*)

TADG : (*Yelping with delight.*) Here, boys, let yez bind him to yon old tree the way he'll be the sight for all the bodachs and tinkers of the road and so any old mangy ass or side-langed goat does be straying off the mountain may eat the rags off his long back.

(*THEY hustle OWEN toward the tree and succeed in binding him to it.*)

TADG : (*Squealing.*) Hee! hee! where's Munster now?

DENIS : (*With generosity and admiration.*) The Saints know it's a nasty low thieving scoundrel you are, Owen Hanrahan, but may flies chew me if you haven't the handiest two fists ever I found figuring reels against the right middle of my countenance, and that's the truth whatever.

• RED OWEN: (*Spluttering with rage.*) Let yez get out of that now, or I'll put a curse on you will send a crawling fire between your shirts and your skins or a chill will crumple up your twisted limbs like old salley roots by the grey waters of February.

ONE OF THE LADS: (*Fearfully.*) Maybe we'd have a right to be moving on out of this. They do say there be's a horrid power in the words of a poet and he jerking out destructive flamy curses from the poisonous rage of his heart.

THE OTHER LAD: Aye, surely, let yez come out of that, Donny, now. I'm thinking this is the nasty dangerous deed done at us in this blessed hour, may the saints increase us.

DONNCHADH: (*Sullenly.*) Only for the fright of the bloody curses are maybe hissing on his learned tongue might be putting some stalking terror between myself and Maeve, I'd not leave him, till I'd have him flayed and the skin hanging about his share of bones like old rags on a scaldcrow.

DENIS: (*Regretfully.*) Curses or no, yon's the nimblest old warrior in a scrap ever I seed with my two eyes, and they bunged up at him like rotten nobby spuds in a bad year.

(*THEY move off hurriedly, and the people in the doorway of the house disperse to their homes.*)

RED OWEN: (*Alone, writhing in his bonds.*) Would I were as Cuchullin did put subduing and rout upon thousands and not the way I am, bound with a strand of damp thread to an old tree and it so rotten any strong braggart out of the ancient times would start off down the road with its roots knocking to his heels. Mo leun geur, that I wasted the blossom of my youth courting vain flighty little girls and the headstrong malignant women of the south and west, and making songs of love with the red sweat of my soul and they

not drawing a tear from any living creature only maybe an odd stone of the earth of Ireland on wide distant highways, and that unknown to me! My shame that I was not after putting in my ripe youth with bloody wrestlings and slaughterings the way it would not have failed me to tangle up the bones of yon four streelers like you'd see old roots. Ach, my sore shame on Munster, weak and broken with the hunger and contentions of noisy ages.

(HE pauses, his head fallen forward in his hands. Then HE lifts it again suddenly, his face wearing a cunning expression.)

Praise be to the Saints its not Maeve Kelly or any other soncy straight-backed woman out of Cork or Kerry is looking on me the way I am now. Sure there's an odd breallan does be loafing on the streets of Dingle or Cahirciveen, droning his miserable rhymes without more than a single assonance between them and it false at that, would be giving half his hope of heaven to be seeing Owen Ruadh and he bound to a rotten sycamore in the gray dawn, and the dirty rain of Connacht oozing between his shirt and his skin, the way any old mangy scald-crow of a cailleach can be shying a wormy spud or a sod of turf at him, and any ancient speckled bandy-legged misery whose mother was treading on a grave in her third month can be spitting in his eyes if he has the mind.

(HE become very depressed.)

Ugh! Ugh! the devil take all the clan of women and choke the little white silky throats of them with their own ribbons and female foolishness. My hard dark scorn that any cloud of shining hair did veil the light of the intellect in the poets of the Gael, the way they be's led into all kinds of sinful gaming and nastiness.

If I ever get out of this, by the holy Finbar, I'll be going to some backward rocky island of the western waters, the place I'll never more be scorching my two eyes against the visage of any woman till the ends of time.

(MAEVE CURTIN *creeps round the back of the house. She has a porringer of stirabout and a glass of poitin in her hands. SHE peers about to find if she is unobserved.*)

Holy Saints, it's herself!

MAEVE: (*In a whisper, with signs to OWEN to keep quiet.*) Whisht! Whisht! the most of them's away or asleep, and the rest are lying stretched drunk on the hearth like trussed pigs in a cart. Arú, I'm after thinking the whole world's roaring romping crazy this morning.

RED OWEN: (*In a low intense voice.*) When I am seeing yourself in the dirty dawn and your two arms moving like the swaying branches of the mayblossom in the spring I think I'm looking on a gaudy angel from the doorpost of the Lord's House.

MAEVE: Holy Mother of God, surely you're a wonder, Owen Hanrahan, you to be rhyming away with your share of lovely coaxing talk and that depth of wide emptiness in your belly. It's hard to say but you're destroyed with cold and hunger, man dear.

OWEN: (*Raising his voice.*) If yourself will be travelling the stormy roads of the world by my side and my arm maybe laid across your white nape, it's little hunger or cold I'd be feeling from that out.

MAEVE: (*Excitedly.*) Whisht now, I'm saying. Sure I'd be the living scorn of the barony if there was knowledge at them I was whispering in the foggy dew with a bragging naked stravaguer without modesty or mannerliness at all the

like of yourself. My mother's after sending me over the Bridge yonder for a noggin of butter-milk and it's what I was thinking maybe you'd not be refusing a wee sup of stir-about and a small little half-'n against the cold.

(*SHE goes up to HIM and puts the food and drink into his hands. HE drinks the poitin and hands the cup to HER.*)

RED OWEN : (*Moved : with real gratitude.*) Ah, it's you would take the crown of virtue and open-handedness over the holy Brigid itself.

(*HE begins to feed himself with the spoon, but his hand trembles so violently that much of the food is spilt on the ground.*)

(*Humbly.*) Loose me out of this now, Maeve, a-rúin.

MAEVE : (*Shrinking away.*) I dare not, man dear, they'd kill me.

RED OWEN : (*Stammering with the ague.*) L-loose me out of th-this, I'm s-saying.

MAEVE : (*Drawing nearer and looking at him curiously.*) The quaking of your limbs is a fright surely, Owen Hanrahan, and your two eyes are blazing like dry sods in a wind. I'm thinking it's little but you're destroyed with the fever.

RED OWEN : (*Restlessly.*) If there's a quaking and burning itself on me it's by reason of the great trouble is on my mind because of your soft eyes and your milky brow is like the foam of the wave or the wings of the shining birds of Aengus of the Boyne.

MAEVE : (*Coldly.*) They say there's many a strapping woman in it between this town and the east of the Bens you've had deceived with that kind of chat.

RED OWEN : (*Feverishly.*) 'Gorrah, who wouldn't be deceiving them with the flaming vision of your countenance staring down the roads of time through a cloud of stars.

Loose me out of this now till I fold you round with love like a warm wing. I am wrecked, destroyed because of you. There's nothing on the green floor of the world I would not be getting for you and I blistering my two heels in great fires or feeling my share of bones cracking in me in the frosts of Norway or the black north. If I'd be in ten thousand torments at the King of darkness and the arrowy flames of hell going over me I'd feel you moving on the pleasant moony hills of Ireland like a wandering thought from the heart of the Mother of God. If I'd be in the shining splendour of the Court of heaven and the blessed Peter or some other sainted godly person after asking was there anybody in it could put up an Irish song, there'd be no delay till I'd be up on my two feet and I singing, and before the King of Sunday I swear it is of Maeve Curtin that singing would be.

(Suddenly shouting hoarsely and brutally.) Loose me out of this now, woman.

MAEVE: *(Beginning to be afraid of him.)* I'm minded to loose you out of that, if it's only the way we'll not have your long body wasting and rotting on us and maybe bringing all kinds of ill-luck on the country. But quiet now, will you!

(SHE goes to the back of the tree and begins to untie the knots.)

RED OWEN: *(More quietly.)* Let you hasten now and we'll be getting spliced in the first parish of Munster we come into.

MAEVE: *(Leaving the tree again.)* Spliced, is it? Indeed I will not be wedding with you or the like of you. Faith, I've no mind to be putting in the blossom of my youth, travelling the greasy roads by day, and stretching my body by night in a draughty gap of gorse or in the filth of the beasts

in a leaky byre of some backward barony, and the rain searing my smooth skin like you might be seeing streaks on bacon was reared in barren mountainy townlands. Sure a fireside and a sound thatch and four mud walls are your own against rain and storm and the sorrows of the heavens are better than all the splendours of poets' rhymes between the long ends of time.

RED OWEN: And that's your last word, is it? (MAEVE *shrinking from him makes no answer.*) Ah, ha-ha. Women are all alike through the wide world. There's not so much wildness in their hearts as would keep a mouse kicking. (HE *falls into a fit of coughing and trembling which seems to shake his frame to pieces.*)

MAEVE: (After looking at him doubtfully for a moment.) Will you quit out of this quiet and modest, if I loose you?

RED OWEN: (In a headstrong delirious tone.) If you loose me out of this I swear I'll be squeezing your white body up to me the way I'll have it broken and scattered on the wind like flakes of foam after a night of storm.

MAEVE: (Partly in anger and very much in fear.) You will so, is it? Then the devil loose you in his own time!

(SHE runs away quickly to the right.)

RED OWEN: (Screaming after her.) The curse of fire and water and all the elements on yourself and on every giddy woman on the ridge of the world. May the fire stalk naked in your middle and the waters rot the bright hair from your head and put a cold aching madness in your share of wits.

(A LITTLE BOY comes from the door on his way home, and hearing these words bursts into tears and runs away in panic. OWEN stares before him and then collapses with a long sigh, his head falling back against the tree trunk.)

RED OWEN : (*Utterly dispirited.*) Ach! I am growing old surely! I am near to my death, and I broken on the hard edges of the world.

(*HIS eyes close ; HE becomes for a moment insensible. The rain and wind increase ; mists blow across the scene. The stage is darkened for an instant. A gauze curtain is dropped at the front of the scene or some other contrivance used to create a remote and dream-like mood.*)

RED OWEN'S FEVER-DREAM.

(*The scene becomes visible again immediately, and an OLD PEDLAR is seen to be approaching slowly down the road. HE is very small, bent, and wizened, and on his shoulders he carries an enormous sack bigger than himself. His hair is of a pale straw colour, and he uses a thick thorn stick.*)

RED OWEN : (*Listlessly.*) On my word, yon old lad's a wonder and he with a burden on his wee back would break the knees of a Curragh stallion. Sure yon sack is stuffed with wool without doubt.

THE PEDLAR : (*Peering at him.*) A fine morning, Owen Hanrahan, a grand growing morning. The blessing of the four elements and those behind them be with you.

RED OWEN : Prosperity on you, just man, though the devil bite my two heels if I mind to have seen you before this day and it's queer enough is your share of blessings. But maybe you've travelled the roads of Bere and Desmond and other places where the stars of night are not better known than Owen Ruadh.

THE PEDLAR: (*Mumbling.*) Like enough, like enough Owen Hanrahan. It's many a windy path of earth and air I've travelled in my long share of days. Is there anything lacking from you in my way this morning.

RED OWEN: There's many a thing lacking from me indeed, and one thing lacking you might do for me as well as another. Let you put aside yon sack of wool a moment till you loose this rope does be biting my four bones like the first grey-frost of November.

THE PEDLAR: I'm thinking, Owen Hanrahan, there be's a harder binding on you than yon bit of strand.

RED OWEN: Let you not be talking riddles, old man, but step over here nimble till you loose me out of this.

THE PEDLAR: (*Deliberately.*) Maybe you'd think it a curious thing now, but, by the powers, if I would put this sack off my back, I'd be blown down the wind like summer dust the time you might be blinking your two eyes. And devil a scrap of wool is in this sack. I'm a pedlar, I am, and there's not a road or bohareen in the grey windy west I've not travelled since Mongan and Tuan McCairill and myself were in it together.

RED OWEN: (*Aside.*) It's hard to say but it's some crazy body is in it! (*Aloud.*) What sort of lying tinkers were those two lads? 'Gorra, you're a curious kind of man, and your share of chat's the craziest ever I heard, good nor bad. If it's a pedlar you are you'd have a right to move over west to yon fine gaudy glittering palace you see before you (*nodding at the Curtin's house*) though I doubt if you'll be to make a bargain with your share of goods, unless maybe you've an odd lump of mannerliness or hospitality in yon big sack of yours.

THE PEDLAR: Arú, it's not with the like of them I do be

trafficking on the roadsides of the green earth. It's poets' wares I have in this sack and costly articles you'll not be finding in any fair of the western world.

RED OWEN: Well, musha, I've no use for your share of goods, and if I had itself there's devil a possession to me on the high ridge of the world but hunger and weariness and the old sorrow of the poets of Eire.

THE PEDLAR: (*With great cheerfulness.*) Ambasa, mo choel thu, my buachaillin-O. Sure that's the very coinage is bursting the fat seams of my purse in this moment. I'm thinking there'll be a merry bargain struck between you and me before the rain stops.

RED OWEN: (*Impatiently.*) O without doubt, without doubt, but let you move over here and open that bag till I see what manner of articles are in it.

THE PEDLAR: Whisht! Be easy, lad, be easy. Sure you've the hottest head in a bargain ever I found this side of the west wind. There are articles and powers in this sack, lad, would be harder to put bridle on than a two-year-old gelding was never off grass.

RED OWEN: Musha, old lad, is it yourself says it? Your tongue's the ripest and nimblest with its share of chat ever I found, good nor bad. Maybe then you'll be crying your wares till I hear is there anything will fit my case.

THE PEDLAR: I will surely. (*HE comes close to OWEN and speaks as though reciting some kind of strange litany.*) There's a green wave in it with a golden lip would put a sweeter kiss than ever you had from any white Kerry girl on your lip, and it too weak and faint to pucker up an answer. There's a dream in it would send you out wandering naked among woods and winds and you with such a beauty twisted

hot and jewelled into your two eyes and such a piping in your ears you would not find the time passing from this hour to the day of your death with staring on it and listening to it on all the paths of the western world. There's the ringing of the bell-branch in it did put sleep and the quietness of dream on many a battled-ringed liss and dun in the old time. There's dew in it the like of the dew the Seven Hazel-trees be's shaking with the starlight through the branches into Connla's well. There's the echoes of old battles in it and earth-shaking rattlings of chariots over stony soil. I tell you there's many a shout in this old bag would take the tops off three hills and would throw such a laughing high-hearted fury into your middle it would fail the four waves of Eire to quench it. (*HE lowers his voice.*) There's a parchment in it and a secret written on it in the blood of the very-noble lovers of old time, Deirdre and Naiosi, and Grainne and Diarmuid, and Cuchullin and Fand and a thousand others, a parchment would give you power over the hosts of the hollow hills, and the wavering wills of the folk of the air, and the green unresting limbs of the demons of the sea. There's a—

RED OWEN: (*Who during THE PEDLAR'S speech has become very drowsy, suddenly rouses himself and lifts his open palm to give the hand-clasp customary in concluding a bargain at a fair.*) Arú, pedlar, whoever in Ireland you may be, the bargain's made, and I'll be taking yon parchment off you. I'll not be trafficking with you, and you've leave to name your own price.

THE PEDLAR: Easy again now, my laddie-buck, easy again. There's one little thing I must be asking you first. Do you be attending Mass regular of a Sunday; do you be making confession twice in the year according to the books;

are there blisters and great sores on your two knees with the noise and might of your praying and supplications to the saints at the stony cross-roads of Ireland?

RED OWEN: (*Laughing.*) Damn a mass did I hear, since the crooked squinting priest back south in Dingle did refuse me absolution five years back on the head of my conduct with Evleen Macarthy.

THE PEDLAR: (*Delighted and chuckling.*) Ambasa, isn't yourself the right fellow altogether? It is not always I can make a bargain so quiet and easy as thon. Mind you it's heavy enough going an odd time and I contending with some ragged godly rhymer the like of Tadg Gaedhaleach, maybe, does be shaking like a candle in a draught with dread of the priests and the small little handful of dry dust he calls his immortal soul. And all the while the wind does be pulling me before and whipping me behind till I'd be thinking my one eye be's facing Derry and my other eye Skibbereen with the amount of tearing and batteraction be's in it.

RED OWEN: They'd be to be quare speakers, whatever, the place you was reared, I'm thinking, and you with a reel of rhymes would put dumbness on a Claddagh fish-wife itself. (*Impatiently.*) Let yez give me the full of my two fists of yon parchment without delay.

THE PEDLAR: (*Good humouredly and with maddening deliberation.*) There's time enough, man dear,—time enough between this pleasant morning and the Red Day of the Mountain.

(*HE slings the sack from his shoulder and without putting it down, slowly unties the rope which holds it together. The sack gives out a strange green glow. After fumbling for a while in the interior he extracts a crumpled and ragged sheet of paper and gives it to OWEN.*)

There's to you, my brave boy-o! (*THEY clasp hands vigorously.*)

RED OWEN: (*With a sudden gasping scream.*) Ah! ah, where am I? The rain is gone green! The world is turning to water. I am drowning—Oh! (*HE passes his hands over his face and draws a heavy breath, blinking at THE PEDLAR.*)

THE PEDLAR: Well now it's time for me to be shortening the way. There's an old lad in it back beyond in Clare Island will be content enough to make a market with me. The best singer of the islands he was till he took cold someway the night of some person's hay-stack, and now he be's sitting coughing himself silly before the fire all the day while the share of fine songs he would be singing does be poisoning his heart. It'll be easy enough trafficking with *him*. (*Mumbling, a little breathlessly.*) Wasn't this the easy morning's work now?—the best day for this trade ever I found.

(*HE moves off.*)

RED OWEN: (*Recovering himself and calling after the OLD MAN.*) Hey there, old lad, let you come back till you take your payment. I'm destroyed with the weight of it and it lying across the mouth of my damned soul these many years.

THE PEDLAR: (*Afar, his voice very faint, hardly distinguishable from the wind.*) Time enough, honest man, time enough. My purse be's overfull entirely these days. I'll be seeing you again, never fear, never fear.

(*The mist closes over HIM, and his voice dies away.* OWEN unrolls the paper, and holds it before him, his head bent. Soon HE begins to mutter to himself. The landscape becomes very gloomy and misty.)

(A moment of complete silence and stillness and then the sounds of voices wailing outside are heard, gradually approaching.)

(Ordinary daylight. The gauze curtain is lifted, but the scene is darker than at the beginning of the act.)

A WOMAN'S VOICE: *(Crying without.)* God save us! God save us and bless us! St. Peter and St. Michael and St. Bride be with us! Arone, arone, ochone—ochanoch-aree! Ach, Peggy. Mo leun, mo leun! Maeve Matty's drowned in the river!

ANOTHER WOMAN: *(Also without.)* Ach, ach, God bless us! What are you saying? *(THEY ENTER distractedly: other WOMEN and GIRLS come to meet them from the other side.)*

VOICES: Hey? What thing? What are you saying?

FIRST WOMAN: It's the old bridge was in it yonder by Cormac's.

THIRD WOMAN: The old bridge, is it?

FIRST WOMAN: Aye, aye, and it destroyed at the worms these twenty years the way all the parish was in jeopardy at it.

FOURTH WOMAN: That's the truth, bad luck to the county people!

VOICES: Whisht now, whisht! Well Maggie, what happened her?

FIRST WOMAN: Just she was after stepping on it when it gave one split out of it, and my poor wee pigeon was in the river. There's a flood in it by reason of the soft weather would sweep the chapel.

SECOND WOMAN: Arú to be drowned dead the like of yon without so much as a priest or holy father or reverend person at all to confess you of your share of misdeeds and trespasses against God and His Holy Church!

FIFTH WOMAN : Ach, whisht, you have me lonely listening to you.

VOICES : Be quiet there now. How can we be hearing, and you ones clacking like a pair of old hens.

FIRST WOMAN : (*Gesticulating.*) It's like she was carried on the top of the brown tide the way a strand would be blown from the thatch. Patsy Doorin was saying the face of her was quare and bloody the way you could not be telling it was herself was in it.

AN OLD WOMAN : The craytur !

FIFTH WOMAN : God save us, I'd be scarred to be looking on the like of yon. Is it this way they're coming ?

FIRST WOMAN : It is surely. Where else would they be bringing her. Wirra, wirra, isn't it that one has the sense ! (*SHE laughs scornfully.*)

FIFTH WOMAN : I'd be in dread to look on her the way she is now and she used to be the comeliest wee girl in the three parishes, aye and in the barony itself.

THIRD WOMAN : Look you, they're after bringing her over Paddy Heffigan's field in this blessed moment.

FOURTH WOMAN : Is it a car they have ?

FIRST WOMAN : It is not, but a couple of planks out of Mickey's below there.

SECOND WOMAN : Who are the boys ?

FIRST WOMAN : Bartley Ruadh, and Sheaumais Conn-Mickey, and Cormac Oona, and Johnny Heffigan, and some young mountainy lad from Parknaveen direction.

FIFTH WOMAN : Who'll be telling the Woman of the House ?

SECOND WOMAN : Arú, let one of the lads.

AN ELDERLY WOMAN: (*Quietly.*) Maybe there'll be no call to be telling her. There's many a body has the sight when the cloud of grief be's weighing on the heart. They do be seeing death in a glass or a jug of buttermilk, or an old sheet itself, and it hanging in the shadow back of the fire.

ANOTHER ELDERLY WOMAN: The Lord save us. I'm thinking Mary's apt to be having that power and she with the two eyes in her head like deep wells or hill-hollows after three days' rain.

THIRD WOMAN: Whisht now, it's herself! (*Crossing herself.*) The Son of Mary between your soul and harm, poor woman.

(*The WOMAN OF THE HOUSE comes from the doorway and at the same moment the young men ENTER from the left with the body of MAEVE CURTIN laid on a rude stretcher, the face covered with a shawl. The planks drip water to the ground. ALL bless themselves and the WOMEN keen softly. THE WOMAN OF THE HOUSE makes no sound, merely nodding grimly toward the door, indicating to the MEN that they are to carry her daughter's body into the house. SHE follows them in and shuts the door.*)

A WOMAN: Arú, it's not natural the like of yon. Sure. I'd be screaming myself silly till my two eyes fall from me if my Noirin would be drowned on me, may the mantle of Brighid be over her!

(*A LITTLE BOY runs on out of breath.*)

FIRST WOMAN: Hey now, Dan, what is it?

THE BOY: (*Panting.*) Let yez hearken now, all of yez! It was yon fellow put death on Maeve Matty with his share of pishroques and curses. I heard him with my two ears and I going home a while back. She was after loosing him out of

that and it's what he said, " May the waters rot the hair from her head and put a cold aching madness on her share of wits." It was the fearfullest blackest curse ever I heard, and let yez mind yourselves now, for it's hard to say but she did loose him, the way he can be rising out of that if he takes the notion.

VOICES : (*Confusedly.*) Hang him ! Flay him ! Cut out his tongue ! Let me get a blackthorn in my fist till I crack his skull.

(*The CROWD gather together and are about to make a rush upon OWEN. The latter has remained perfectly motionless during the preceding scene, staring entranced before him. Now HE suddenly rises, the rope falling loose about him. He moves slowly forward like a somnambulist, his outstretched hands groping before him. The CROWD falters and falls back.*)

A WOMAN : (*Whispering.*) The Lord save us ! He's crazy surely. It's the devil is in it.

RED OWEN : (*In a strange dreamy voice.*) Cliodhna ! Cliodhna ! (*A WOMAN screams.*)

THE WOMAN : Ach, the Saints between us and the hosts of the air and the hosts of the sea. It's the faeries are in it ! Let yez flee or your souls will be bound at them in foam and fire with their share of pishrogues, and you in blinding torment till the coming of the Red Day of Ireland !

(*The panic-stricken CROWD scatters in every direction.*)

END OF ACT II.

ACT III.

THE PAYMENT.

(*NIGHT: a desolate strand in Western Connemara. A severe wind is blowing, driving heavy clouds across a fitful moon. The sound of a rough sea is heard, and the edge of the surf gleams occasionally in the moonlight. RED OWEN staggers in from behind the rocks on the LEFT. HE is in a miserable plight and near to fainting.*)

RED OWEN: Cliodhna! Cliodhna! What place are you after bringing me? All the colours of the eight winds are in my eyes. I am like a cloud on the hill, like a straw or a puff of smoke before them, and they sweeping the world. Och, I am lost on the edges of life!

(*HE stumbles over the strand gasping and groaning inarticulately. The moon breaks from a cloud revealing a Titan figure standing motionless with his back to a great rock on the RIGHT. HE leans on a spear. OWEN groping with outstretched hands falls at the feet of the giant.*)

RED OWEN: Let you kill me now, dark fellow, whoever in Ireland you may be. Sure I am astray between two worlds and I not able to find the path back or forward.

(*THE SHADE stands motionless.*)

RED OWEN: Let you slay me now, I'm saying. There's a shining tip of death on yon long spear in your hand.

THE SHADE: (*In a deep slow voice.*) It is not my part to end you, Owen Hanrahan. If this spear was putting a red rout on thousands one time, the gleam you have against your two eyes is not the edge of death.

RED OWEN: What kind of a man are you, old giant was never in rann or rhyme, I am thinking?

THE SHADE: I've not leave to tell you on the sod of Ireland what I am. Yet the time I was living I was a great poet and a leader of men.

RED OWEN: (*With some fearfulness.*) Holy Saints, maybe it's Ovid or the learned Virgil itself I am facing with my long hairy countenance and it sweating and dark with the clauber of days.

THE SHADE: It is not then, but a true poet of the Gael. I am old and blind and in torment at two sounds and they contending in the hollow shell of my mind—two sounds that were after contending like the lasting wars of light and darkness, of Beltaine and Samhain, of life and death—two very greivous sounds I am saying—the bells of the boasting godly clerics, and the music of waters falling between white blossoms in the Land of the Living Heart—and I afar from one as from the other in a withered world, without wind, without sunlight, without the cry of hounds on the speckled hills. Look at me, Owen Hanrahan. I am Oisín, the son of Finn.

RED OWEN: (*Overwhelmed, prostrating himself before the SHADE.*)

OISÍN: (*After a pause: almost chanting.*) But now I am become a wave of the sea, a cry in the heart, a ray on the mountain, the bull of seven battles, the bald eagle of the hill of victory, the sigh between four lips and they clinging in love, the god that is sending the flame roaring in the heads of the poets for ever.

RED OWEN: (*Feebly.*) I am dying now, and I a fellow never did any good thing, unless it might be to make a few

rhymes after the right fashion of the schools of the poets, the time I was a kind of warrant for blaspheming and drinking and deceiving women all my share of days.

OISIN : But your mother you did not deceive.

RED OWEN : My mother, is it ? Did not I go gadding from her in the hour of her death and herself left in a leaky byre back in Letternaclochán of Desmond, and the rain making the one sound on her naked bones and on the field of rotten praties outside ?

OISIN : It is not of the mother of your body I am after speaking now, Owen Ruadh. Were you forgetting your mother Eire any time and you drinking and ganing with outcast women in the shebeens of the south and west ?

RED OWEN : (*Surprised.*) I was not then, surely.

OISIN : Did you not make songs in her praise many a time, and you starving and shivering by the roadside, and were you not singing them on all the roads of the two provinces until the eyes of the young women were like flowers and the eyes of the young men were like the stars of a harvest-night ?

RED OWEN : Indeed then I did, may she remember me and I after dying in her breast.

OISIN : Let you listen now, my son. A day is coming after years when the light of learning and every accomplishment will be quenched in the high places of Eire, and the sons of Heber and Heremon will be scattered over the seven seas of the world. In that day hunger and darkness shall crouch like lean wolves in the fruitful valleys, and swine and cattle will be snuffing and scratching among nettles and docks and dung in the place where the schools of the poets stood. And in that day all that remain of the sons of Miledh shall sleep in

the untilled plains or shall run through the streets of mouldering cities, shouting and blaspheming the holy names of Ireland, screaming their empty vaunts in the tongue of the stranger and bowing before him with the knees of their souls, the time they will be cursing him with their lips. In that day the Gall will be the Lord of Ireland indeed, and all that live of the children of the Gael having the old sweet crying in their hearts shall call into the winds for a single rann the like of those you were putting up out of the depths of your nakedness and ignorance.

RED OWEN: (*Passionately.*) If I would be sitting on a golden stool before the hearth of God and St. Patrick on my right hand and the blessed Finbar to my left and my two ears filled with the shining songs the holy Brigid does be putting up to the Saints of God, by my hand if I'd be seeing the people of Ireland that way, there'd be no delay till I'd be up out of that and travelling to Ireland down the sunny slopes of Heaven and I singing, and though I'd be barefoot and stumbling backwards over the flints and flags of Purgatory I'd not rest till I'd reach Castletown Bere and the shores of Munster.

OISIN: There'll be many a lean ghost surely straying by the lakeside of Eire that time, and he crying tears down through the grey rain. (*A pause.*) But you will not be in it at that keening, Owen Ruadh, for the light of the Ever-Living is shining on your brow this hour the way a star might be lifting over the slope of a hill in the sweet-smelling hour of the dusk.

RED OWEN: (*Desperately.*) Let you quench that light, O master that has all the wisdom of the two worlds. Let you give me back the sorrowful mist on the black dripping bogs

and the moaning of the ewes in it, maybe, and the dirty rain of the night making tracks on my skin, and aches and sores and torments in the veins of my body and the hollows of my mind, so I'll be dying decent at last on the earth of Ireland, and getting leave to be a quaking ghost on the hills and an odd song slipping over my two shadowy lips.

OISIN: Sure I cannot do that thing, Owen Hanrahan. They have you caught in their silver nets; they have you ravelled up in the meshes of their tossing arms. The shadows of them are covering you this hour from the memory of moon and star. (*After a little pause.*) You're better so, maybe. (*OWEN stares before him covering his ears with his hands for a moment: then removes them again.*)

RED OWEN: (*Slowly.*) There's a singing in the wind, the like of the lilts Saeve Breathnach my first love would be raising the time the wind would be stirring in the chimney at dusk.

(The Shade of OISIN wavers and disappears. OWEN crouches down facing the sea. A strange music is heard at first very faintly, though not with the indistinctness that would be occasioned by great distance. Shadows begin to move across the dark strand: at first they are scarcely distinguishable from the dusty gleam of the surf, but gradually they assume a definite human shape, gathering numbers momentarily, and at last are seen to be engaged in a wild yet solemn dance. A dim green light mingles with the moonlight, and over this atmosphere the moving shades flash the innumerable delicate colours of the sea, yet all subdued and vague as though veiled in mist.

The DANCERS whirl faster and faster, tossing their arms and moving in soft undulations like flowing waves. A pause comes in the midst of the wild movement, and

gathering together on the edge of the tide they bend their slender bodies towards the waves as though performing some strange and adoring ritual. RED OWEN crawls forward towards the sea, and with a great effort rises to his feet.)

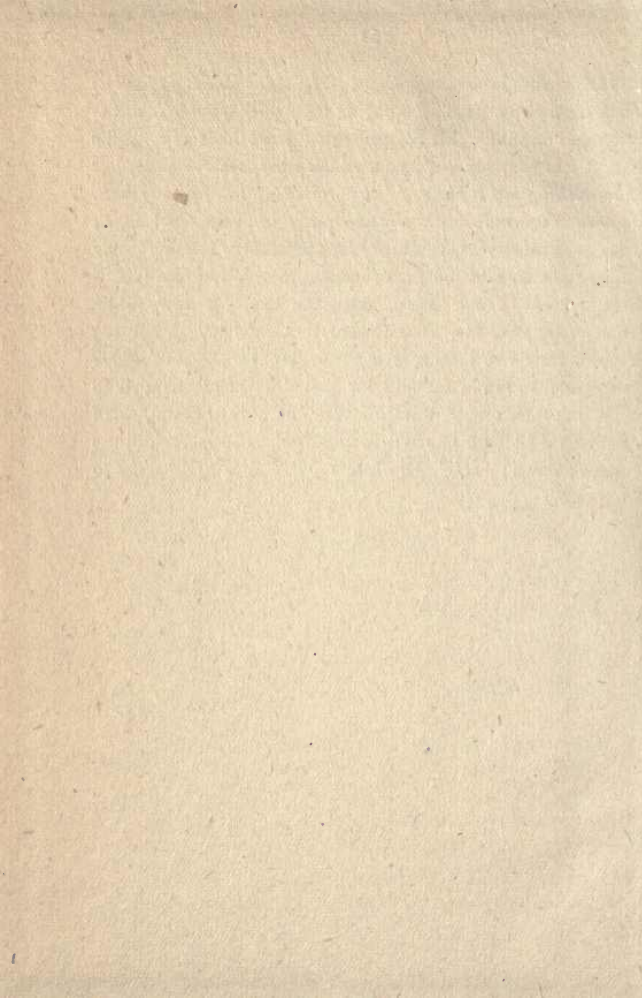
RED OWEN: (*Gasping and swaying to and fro uncontrollably.*) Cliodhna and all you host of the undying, I have heard you. Let you make a dance of the fading life and the living soul of a poet of the Gael!

(Instantly the shadows whirl about him in gradually narrowing rings, closing in upon him. The remote and inhuman music is heard from the sea. The green light becomes more intense. As the sound swells until it seems very near RED OWEN is seen to stumble in the midst of the rushing eddies of the shadows. As he falls dead the light goes out, and for an instant there is complete darkness. The same scene becomes visible again in the feeble gleam of a gloomy and blustering dawn. RED OWEN'S lifeless body lies near the edge of the sea. An old and very disreputable-looking tramp with a budget on his shoulders slinks on furtively from the left. THE TINKER bears a certain resemblance to the pedlar of Act II.—as it might be a harshly grotesque caricature of that character. HE starts on perceiving OWEN'S body and shuffles laboriously up to it.)

THE TINKER: (*After a long and cautious scrutiny pokes at the corpse with his stick then chuckles sardonically.*) A dead man! (*HE bends down groaning and turns over the body.*) Glory be! It's yon raging slaving fellow the boys had tied to a tree in yon backward mountainy place of dirty rocks. Hee-hee! Myself had the sport of the world with you, me buck, and you not knowing what thing under God I was saying—no more than a dummy itself. And now you're

as dead as King James, so you are! (*HE sighs philosophically.*) Well, musha, the dead'll be paying their dues quieter than the living an odd time. I'll be seeing now what kind of a devil's market I have made with you. (*HE ransacks the body, but finds nothing but a piece of paper rolled up into a dirty ball. He stands up and throws the paper away in impatient rage.*) Ugh, be damned if there's any honesty in them ones and they among the clouds of the grave itself. My old rag of a broadsheet and that is all! Well, that's the payment now I'll be lifting from you, Mr. Red Owen, the leave to be spitting between your two staring eyes, you damned poet, and your body stretched brave and still for the birds of all the airts to be picking their choice thing of you, the way the Father of Lies itself'll be hard put to it to know you at the skreek of the morrow's dawn! (*HE spits into Owen's face and begins to shuffle off.*)

(CURTAIN.)



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