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Author(s): Miriam Alexander

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SCIATH NA RITH

By MIRIAM ALEXANDER

I.

THE cabin in which Morty and his kinsfolk lived lay low under a brown fold of bog within sound of the sea. But for the blue drift of turf-smoke from its open door a new-comer might have taken it to be a natural mound, for the heather that roofed it met the growing heather behind, and the walls were like the chocolate-coloured slabs of mould in a bog-drain.

Morty, when he went in or out, had to stoop, and even inside could not stand upright. He was a tall, black-haired, grey-eyed man, young in years, but old with the curious oldness of the people of that coast, a race probably more ancient than any other in Europe. Lineal ancestors of his—lean, lithe and dark as he was—had marched behind Medb's chariot, had followed King Dathi over seas, had gone out in the same type of curragh he used to meet the galleys of the Phœnician traders. For three thousand years his people had lived upon the bog in the sound of the Atlantic, looking ever on the two wide seas—the one restless, relentless, uncertain as life itself; the other far flung to a faint violet horizon, brown and silent and unchanging. For three thousand years they had wrung the bare necessities of life from the two seas and paid their bitter toll, until they were more part of that storm-swept coast than the very rocks on it.

The traditional thriftlessness of the Irish race did not exist in that small community. Indeed, the wonder in most cases was that human beings should sustain life at all with so little encouragement, and Morty was no exception to the general rule. Upon him devolved the whole task of supporting a paralysed brother and a mother prematurely crippled by rheumatism; a task performed under conditions which would have tried the hardihood of a mountain goat.

He was always more or less hungry, always more or less wet, always in conflict with the elements that strove unceasingly to unroof his cabin or wreck his curragh or blight his potatoes.

To-day the goat, a lady of sour nature and contrary habits, had added her quota to the day's burden by removing herself three miles from the cottage to an island known as Inisbeg, which at low tide might be reached dry-shod across a narrow channel of sand. Morty could well have dispensed with that extra six miles. He had been carrying creels of turf all the afternoon, and each creel represented a forty minutes' walk, but the instinct of rebellion was not

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in him. He did not even curse the goat when he at last saw her cold, malignant yellow eyes peering at him over the summit of the moat that crowned Inisbeg.

A ray of sunlight had come out—the first for days—and he sat down in it to rest, with his back against the moat's topmost ridge. Away before him lay a scene which tourists would have travelled miles to see—a wide bay of tumbling waters, a distant shore jewelled with lights of amethyst and emerald; a range of peaks, darkly purple as a ripe damson, and veiled in white wisps of mist. Sunbeams travelled across them like things alive, showing out vivid patches of "scragh," silver threads of water, ravines that gleamed green and brown under the torn rainbow fringes of cloud. Morty looked at it all indifferently, with eyes as grey and sad as the Atlantic horizon. Not that he felt sad; he felt nothing except a vague gratification at the unusual warmth.

He was scraping absently in the loose soil, much as an idler seated by the seashore scrapes the sand, when his fingers chanced on something smooth and round, and glancing down he saw through the little rift in the moss made by his hand, a glint of yellow.

Ten minutes later he knelt upon a ridge of uprooted sod, looking with awed eyes at a great shield—a shield almost as tall as he was himself, and made with a skill beyond modern comprehension. Findrinny, that curious white bronze, dear to the ancient Irish, formed the groundwork, but the broad rim was of wonderfully wrought gold, and a lattice-work tracery of gold gleamed upon the paler metal. Seven in number were its bosses, and all pure pale gold; each one a marvel of craftsmanship, each one holding in its heart a polished stone. The September sun shining full on them, as the shield lay on the short turf of Inisbeg, awoke a mysterious glory like to the glory of those long past days when it had gone into battle upon an Adrith's arm.

For fully five minutes Morty knelt, wrapt in perplexity and gratification, gazing at the shield as a child might for the first time gaze upon a large diamond. Here was a thing of beauty—a thing of mystery—a thing such as he had never seen before in all his twenty-two years of life. He asked no more for a time than to look.

Then very slowly, very vaguely a thought stole into his mind. He had seen the shield before, he had held it in his hands, he had loved it once long, very long, ago. He hardly understood the feeling at first. It was so subtle, so intricate that a highly educated man might have been puzzled by it, and Morty was almost entirely uneducated except in the lesson of how to keep body and soul together. He did not either assist or combat the idea. In point

of fact he knew too little to do either. He submitted to it as he would have submitted to a heavy shower had one swept across the island, but his conviction in the matter was as clear as his conviction upon the wetting qualities of rain—and as purely instinctive.

After a time he touched the shining surface reverently. There was a green stone set in one of the golden bosses which he particularly remembered—a clear olive-green stone the colour of deep water under the shadow of cliffs. There had been a red stone, too—as red as a drop of blood . . . but he had preferred the green stone. He had chosen to put the green stone in that particular boss. It was all coming back to him now, vaguely, dimly. Even yet he hardly realised that this marvel had been the work of his own hands, the child of his own brain; but he knew that the choice of stones had been his, and that for some reason, which doubtless he would remember presently, he had preferred the green.

The remembrance when it came brought with it a host of other memories. He who had never seen a wood saw one now in retrospect: a wood of rowans, silver-leaved and bright with scarlet berries, perched high on the steep side of a glen. Somewhere far below lay the sea, a blue gleam seen only between slender stems or when the wood stirred the branches, and down to the sea, past the place where he worked, plunged a stream. The stream recurred to Morty with extraordinary vividness. He remembered the long sheer channel of fawn-coloured granite, down which it slid like a crystal rope into a pool, whose heart was translucent emerald that melted, through a hundred quivering gleams of green light, to the pure, pale colour of young corn.

The pool had been responsible for his choice of the green stone. A ray of sunlight shimmering in its depths, as he sat hesitating, had aroused in him the true artist's desire to make all his art a tribute to Nature. The setting of that gem was, he now remembered, the finishing touch, his last piece of work upon the shield. Some faint breath of his intense pride of craftsmanship, his joy at having fashioned so beautiful a thing, came back to him across the mists of three thousand years. As long as his soul endured, the pure exquisite bliss of that moment would remain to it whatever its habitation.

It did not occur to Morty that there was anything in this knowledge that clashed with the very strong faith of which Father Pat and Father Pat's little church down by the shore were the outward tokens. Indeed he would have repudiated the knowledge with horror if such an idea had as much as entered his head. But it did not. He was sufficiently primitive of heart, sufficiently near the

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core of things to stand clear of doubt, and to accept without question obvious truths, even though one should appear to contradict the other.

What was it they had called the shield? Sciath-na-rith—and something else—the “thunder-voiced.” He could not quite recall the reason for this last name, but it would come back to him—later. He was vaguely aware that there were many things which would come back to him later. He would hide the shield again; would tell no living soul of his find; would come and look at it every day—every day.

II.

Morty was walking home from Inisbeg filled with the strange elation that half-an-hour's worship of Sciath-na-rith always evoked in his heart. At every glance a little more of that long-past life came back to him. The king for whom he had made the shield and the king's house and the king's men in their green bratts were clear now as the rocks of the island. Clear, too, was the fact that people had respected him then, more, had been afraid of him. Spells lay in his power and enchantments. He was a very different person from the perpetually soaked Morty, whose days were equally divided between fear of displeasing God and fear of seeing his old mother and his helpless brother “destroyed” for lack of life's barest necessities.

He had told no single soul of his find. Some day “his reverence” would have to know, but for the present he felt that even the consciousness of an unconfessed secret was more endurable than to mention Sciath-na-rith. That extraordinary reticence, which is one of the most curious of the Irish Celt's many curious attributes, held him in its grip.

He was walking along in a reverie when the sound of voices came to him. Down in a heather-filled hollow on his right were two girls—tourists obviously—one of whom was reading aloud out of a small willow-green book.

Morty stood still, vaguely fascinated by the swing of the blank verse, and almost the first word he heard was the name of the shield:

“ But in the House of Arms bode his long thrusting spear,
‘ Spoil Winner ’; there too bode, far-famed in bardic song
‘ The Bellowing,’ his great shield, seven-bossed, whose pealing voice,
Loud o’er the battle’s roar, would call its vassal waves,
The wave of Toth, the wave of Rury, and the wave

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Of Cleana, the three waves to thunder on their shores,
Ireland's three magic waves, at danger of her king."

"His great shield, seven-bossed, whose pealing voice,
Loud o'er the battle's roar, would call its vassal waves——"

Was it true, then, that this work of his hands had once held *the sea* in thrall—had had power over *the sea*?

Like every dweller on that coast he had grown up in abject fear of the Atlantic. To him it was not an element, but a sentient thing—a terrible overlord, unapproachable and sinister, claiming the life of any man who should try to rob it of its chosen victims. His own father and his two elder brothers were among its prey. His mother went every Hallows' Eve to the Holy Well, though the pilgrimage meant torture, acute and prolonged, to pray that he himself might be spared during the ensuing year.

Yet the shield that he had made had had power over the waves. It was an incredible and an intoxicating thought. It swept him away over the border of the Fairy Kingdom which every day claimed a little more of him.

He came back at last to the fact that the little green book was closed, and the reader had turned instead to a newspaper which she held in her other hand. The reporter's phrases sound woefully cold and dull after the story of the Sons of Usna, but they had, nevertheless, a keen interest for him, for they described a find of three gold torcs somewhere in Leinster, which had, it seemed, been taken to a mysterious place quite unknown to Morty—the Museum in Kildare Street.

He waited, listening eagerly, and when the two ladies presently rose and walked away, leaving the newspaper, he made haste to capture the fluttering sheet. Though, or perhaps because, he could not read, he had that reverence for printed matter and the "scholars" who create printed matter, which rarely survives an extended knowledge on the subject.

There were illustrations of the torcs, and another of the glass case in which they had been deposited in the Museum. Morty, gazing solemnly, reflected on what he had heard of the matter—namely, that "Antiquarians"—whatever these might be—"were very much interested in the discovery," and also that "the workmen who came upon the ornaments in the course of digging operations" had been "suitably rewarded."

He looked long at the photograph of the torc's new home. If he told anyone about Sciath na rith, the unknown people with the

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strange name, who doubtless belonged to the same awe-inspiring species as a Local Government Board Inspector, might come and take the shield and put it for ever in a glass case, out of sound of the sea and out of sight of his eyes. That he would be "suitably rewarded" counted for nothing. The desires of the body burn feebly in descendants of a half-starved race who, during long centuries, have lived very close to nature. Morty could imagine no outcome of a "suitable reward"—not even escape to America—which would compensate him for the knowledge that Sciath na rith was shut away in a glass case, unable to hear should one of the vassal waves call.

He did not tell himself so in words, any more than he told himself that no joy life held would ever equal that of looking upon his handiwork and dreaming of that other existence, because to analyse his own feelings was entirely beyond his capabilities; but he knew it, nevertheless.

One thing was entirely clear in his mind as he rose to go home. No one must ever know of Sciath-na-rith. The shield belonged to the sea. It was indissolubly one with that Spirit which had claimed so very many of his kin: the Spirit that slept in the sunshine and awoke to fury at the first breath of the north wind.

III.

The potatoes failed that year. Not entirely, but enough to entail considerable misery on people who lived upon potatoes and slók and an occasional herring. There was fever of a low intermittent type in more than one barony, and District Nurse and Dispensary Doctor alike had a strenuous time of it.

The latter was inclined to be angry when he came into Morty's cabin one wet October evening and found the young man preparing to go out for "a few sods of turf."

"Didn't I tell you if you crossed the threshold inside of a week you'd kill yourself?" he asked, for him, irritably.

Morty made no response. It was true that he was ill, but then so were the other two, and someone must do things.

He watched with shamed eyes while the doctor himself fetched an armful of sods from the little stack in the thatched angle of two banks. Such senses as the fever had left him were shocked that "his honour" should be put to this necessity.

"Now, mind, you're to stay indoors. An hour's work or a good soaking would be the end of you," said the Doctor when he had finished stoking the fire. "I'll be round again to-morrow morning.

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Oh, and if a couple of gentlemen come here from Inisbeg looking for me, tell 'em I've gone on to Glendanure."

Morty glanced up with quick anxiety.

"It's hardly there'd be quality in Inisbeg the likes of this weather, sir?" he said tentatively.

"There are then—antiquarians," answered the Doctor in an absent-minded fashion. "Looking for fossils. Don't forget my directions, unless you want to be a dead man."

He departed forthwith, and after he had gone Morty sat thinking, stirred out of apathy by the awful idea of antiquarians on Inisbeg. They would find Sciath-na-rith. They would take it away and put it in a glass case. Somehow or other he must get to the island. The Doctor had said that to go out would possibly mean death; but that, like the reward, seemed a minor matter compared with the thought of Conchobar's shield.

He got up, and stiffly and weakly dragged himself to the door. Rain was driving out of the west in a grey sheet across the greyer country. Promise of a wet night lay in the ice-cold, moaning wind and in the leaden horizon. Morty, holding to the door-post, shivered. But he never for a single moment thought of abandoning his project.

There was a cliff on the further side of Inisbeg, where the waters on a summer's day showed unfathomable depths of dark clear green. Sciath-na-rith should go down into those depths, should lie at the bottom in perpetual sound of the ocean, ready to answer if the vassal waves ever again called to Erin.

He planned it all in his mind as he set out with wavering steps along the rain-drenched goat-track through the heather.

IV.

It was about eight o'clock on the following morning when the Doctor, coming down to the cabin through white sheets of rain, chanced on Morty lying at the corner of the potato patch. Water from the flooded furrows made a grey pool in that particular place, and one side of his body was more than half-submerged.

The Doctor swore aloud. Here was another defeat—a thing he was still young enough to resent. But after he had satisfied himself that nothing could be done, he stood for nearly five minutes in the pitiless rain looking down perplexedly at Morty's body.

He did not share that astounding ignorance of every thought, idea and ideal, of his poorer compatriots, which distinguishes too many upper-class Irishmen. On the contrary, he had studied his

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countrymen with care, had found in them a problem as interesting as it was inscrutable. Hopes cherished in secret from generation to generation; beliefs older, deeper, more unfathomable than the sea itself; motives hardly admitted by the very men who acted on them; where was there a race exactly like this, so full of interest, so lovable, so entirely baffling?

The Doctor, who liked Morty, would have given a good deal to know the young man's reason for going out to what was practically certain death. It might, of course, have been the delirium of fever; but he did not think so, nay, he felt almost certain it was not so.

He pondered the matter as he walked on up to the cabin. But if he had known the truth; if he had seen Morty crawling painfully over Inisbeg; lying on the edge of the cliff in the wet, wind-swept darkness, with Conchobar's shield clutched between his hands in passionate, inarticulate, entirely uncomprehended farewell, he would have been still more mystified. And Morty himself was the last person who could have elucidated the riddle.