

O'Grady, Standish
The departure of Dermot

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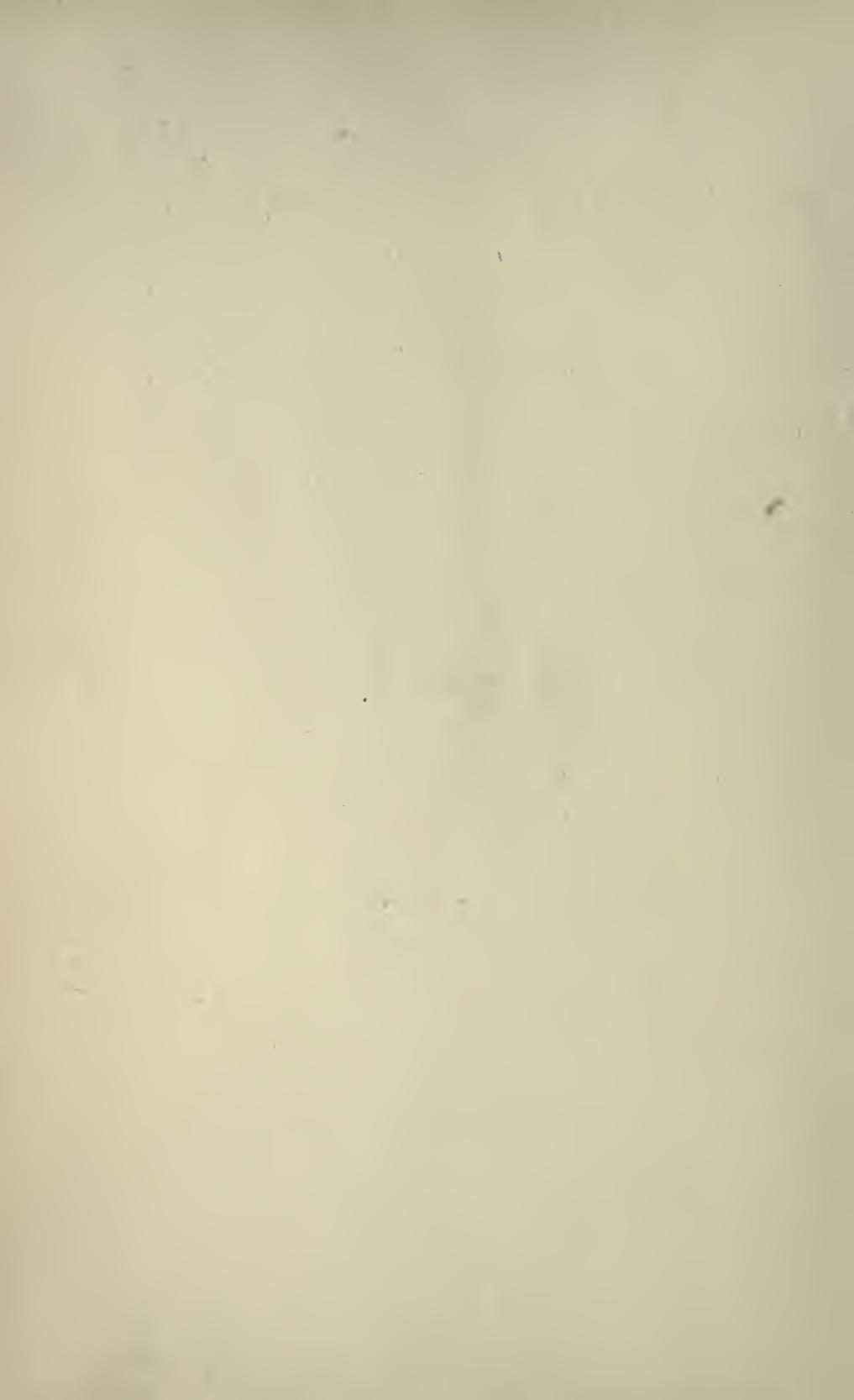
THE DEPARTURE OF DERMOT

BY
STANDISH O'GRADY

DUBLIN
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1917
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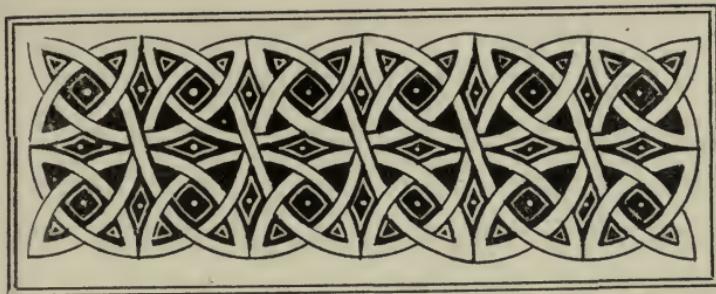


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THE DEPARTURE OF DERMOT

“FAREWELL, friends, kinsmen, and you, my mercenaries most valiant and most faithful,” cried the departing king. “Farewell! but for a while only. In early summer, ere the flowering of the whitethorn, I shall return. So assist me and mine, O Son of God. With the first swallow, then, look to see me, not alone, but leading a host. And many mouths wide now with laughter shall gape wider borne on the ends of spears; and many eyes lit now with the light of triumph shall roll sightless balls to the sun. For I shall die as I have lived—M‘Murrrough, Captain of I-Kinsella and High King of all Leinster and of the Danes.”

He stood on the sea's verge in the light of the rising sun and harangued, for the last time, the bloody remnant of his host—the old, white-bearded king; broad-browed, strong-featured, huge of stature, almost gigantic. Faint ripples of the ebbing tide licked his sandalled feet, for he stood where land and water met, with his broad back to the sea. His warrior voice, long since broken by overmuch pleading in the Court of Battle-axes, hoarse-quavering at its best, was hoarser now from passion. A low, fierce moan was the sole response of his auditory. They gripped their weapons tighter as they leaned forward, while they seemed to devour him with their silent, bright, feverish eyes; bent and leaned to hear the last words of their Captain.

The army stood crescent-wise, its horns in the tide, and half enclosed the orator.

“With the first swallow, then O Dermot, light of our eyes,” murmured a soldier. The half-whispered word was taken up

and repeated by the host, a low murmur of sound swelling and subsiding like the noise of the wind in the leaves on a still night. “With the first swallow, then O Dermot, light of our eyes.”

The king was clad in a battle-dress of ring-mail, part burnished, part rusted, over which he wore a torn linen tunic, belted at the waist. In his right hand he bore a long battle-axe, dull in the blade. A straight short-sword, in a sheath of red yew, hung by his side. From the front of his brazen helmet projected a single bar, the face-guard. His moustache and beard were white as snow, and white the straggling locks which, escaping from the helmet, fell upon his broad shoulders; but his black eyes, unsubdued by time, glowed and flashed, and his huge and stalwart frame suggested a strength and energy which his white hairs would seem to belie. Passions such as afflicted the souls of our antique fighting kings, in whose ears the war-storm,

now loud, now low, never once ceased to sound, swept across his face. Yet no one could fail to read in that countenance indomitable purpose and unconquerable will.

Behind him, sagging in the shallow tide, lay a long and beautifully-shaped barge. Her stern, richly caparisoned with scarlet, was towards the shore. A little timber gang-way, which stood higher and higher out of the water as the tide receded, ran from the king's feet to the barge. The crew sat negligently on the thwarts, in easy attitudes, holding the oar-grips in their hands. They were fair-haired men, well-nourished, sound, and strong; with full ruddy faces, round or square, dressed in clean fresh tunics, and contrasted strangely with the lean forms and hollow countenances, long and dour, of King Dermot's wild auditory, all rags and eyes and discoloured bronze, and whom those fair-haired boatmen surveyed with looks of

mild wonder, hardly of curiosity. They were Saxons, slaves of Robert Fitzharding, Reeve of Bristol; but slaves who seemed to have thriven upon their slavery.

Further out lay moored a ship, or rather galley, for her starboard, which faced the shore, showed a double row of jet-black oar-holes. From her one mast a gay pennant rippled eastward, the ship's beak looking to the west whence the wind blew. The deck was crowded with people. Women in bright attire, some holding infants in their arms, stood on the quarter deck or poop, that rose like a tower. The Queen of Leinster sat there. Beside her, on the right, stood a fair and slender girl, the Princess Eva. The forecastle, which was high, too, terminated at the bows in a dragon's neck and head sublime, which gave a formidable and menacing emphasis to the whole. Just above the surface of the sea a great spike, or ram, projected from the cut-water. This ship was no merchant-

man, but a long ship, war-galley, or man-of-war. Fitzharding and the West-English Saxons of Bristol had sent their best, their fleetest and strongest to bear away safe their unsuccessful ally. For King Dermot was an old-time friend, war-like and commercial, of the commercial and war-like Bristolmen. He was also a near kinsman of Robert Fitzharding. The Fitzhardings and McMurroughs had intermarried, and more than once. That shining galley is to bring Dermot to Bristol, where, it is believed by some, he will take the cowl and end his days in St. Austin's monastery; for cowl and beads in these pious times are regarded as the natural and harmonious conclusion of his career for an aged king.

The place is Corkeran; not so much a harbour as a broad bight or indentation of the coast line of Munster; and the time, the “Kalends of August” (Aug. 1), in the year 1166, A.D.; a memorable date, for it marks the departure for England, of the

Irish difficulty. Long coming, it has at last come; has taken form in that huge mailed figure and is about to sail for Saxonland. God, or the Devil, or both, or blind Destiny, is accomplishing here, and to-day, a great work—a work with world-wide issues and developments whose end no man can even now see.

Further inland, but at a safe distance, on the slope of a drum, or rising ground, in relief against a dark forest, stood another army, horse and foot, quite as considerable as that which Dermot addressed upon the sands. From this assembly arose ceaselessly cries suggestive of insult and contumely, altogether unregarded by Dermot and his rapt auditory. It was the van of the army of Ireland, a slight visible indication of the storm which is sweeping Dermot out of his Kingdom across the salt sea. They would have killed him—if they could! They tried to do so yesterday, but were not able; and scorn any further acquaintance with Dermot's ragged warriors.

Autumn was beginning to redder the forest which rose behind them. Further inland distant hills showed purple, for the heather was beginning to bloom. The sun stood not a foot above the quivering line of the horizon—his disc of glowing fire. A million dancing wavelets sprang and laughed in the broad sunpath; strong, briny odors from the wet sand and soaking seaweed scented the pure air. Not so far away little flocks of red-legged, noisy birds piped and chattered as they ran to and fro over the strand. Seagulls wheeled and hovered, or dropped flutteringly, seeking their food. Curlews flew crying across the bay. Dermot's men neither saw them nor heard, but we to whom the centuries are glass, mysteriously present and assisting may witness both the tragedy and Nature's sublime tranquillity and indifference. Their eyes were riveted on the face of their dear captain; their souls rapt in his rude oratory. That voice, once clear as a trumpet, heard

so often on the pale edge of battle, was now strong only—unmelodious, hoarse-quavering; hoarser to-day with grief and wrath, and choking shame, but charged with a wild sincerity, and the hot words, as they came straight from the heart of the speaker, went straight to the hearts of his hearers.

It was ebb-tide too with these men. They had fought so much, suffered so much, and fought and suffered, as it seemed, in vain. Many faces were seamed with ancient scars, many showed signs of recent rude surgery. Many necks and foreheads were bound with cloths; many arms rested in slings. Some, too feeble or too severely wounded to stand, were upheld by their comrades. One, whose right arm was a stump, murmured in response to some word of the orator, “I have another hand for thee yet, O Dermot.” For this King, though an object of the deadliest hatred to many, was also passionately loved by not a few. Ere yon rising sun sinks in the

Atlantic an unknown hand will write words which may still be read as the letters flowed from the pen of the mournful scribe :

“ O God, it is a great thing that has been done to-day; Dermot to be banished over seas by the men of Ireland ! Alas ! alas ! What shall I do ?”

The words are inscribed in the most famous of our manuscripts, the great Book of Leinster.

These men had done all that men could for their King. Their shields were bent and battered, showing many a hole and rent. The edges of their dull battle-axes were gapped. Their raiment, if that could be called raiment which was rags, was stained with mud and blood and dulled with sweat. Their faces were drawn and hollow; their eyes bright with famine and hardship, bright, too, with that which gold can never buy. They were the bloody and war-wasted remnant of a once proud host, which in battle after battle has been

worsted, not so much by superior force in front as by treachery behind. Back from the banks of the Boyne, from the banks of the Shannon; back from the gates of Danish Dublin, in spite of all their valour, all their self-forgetting loyalty, they have been pushed, beaten, or driven, fresh foes starting up around them and behind ! Through all Leinster they had been chased by famine or by the sword, till at last they fought, not for victory, but only to bring their Captain and King to the seaboard—to the seaboard anywhere, and save him from the innumerable and deadly foes who had everywhere and so suddenly risen for his destruction. But Dublin, Arklow, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford, having gates and walls, had warned them off. All the ports of Leinster were either in rebellion or had been seized by the enemy. Then they broke out southwestward across the mearings of the Province and, fighting their way into Munster, fighting night and day, for

hungry hunters were on their traces, and the country rose against them as they went, few, and spent with war, famine, and marching, they at last reached the remote haven of Corkeran, where yonder English ship, long signalling, and signalled to, has put in. God willing, she shall convey their dear lord and master to England, beyond the reach of his foes. Bitterly he had now expiated his unlawful love for Dervorgilla, wife of Tiernan, King of Breffney. Gaunt, one-eyed Tiernan, the injured husband, never forgave him. Though year had followed year since the famous elopement, till their tale exceeded fourteen, and that matter seemed now to most men like ancient history, Tiernan did not forget; the long-memoried Celt. Though he and Dermot had been war-allies since then, the one-eyed man was still implacable, retaining all in his deep mind. He never forgot that stealing of his wife, or how he had been made a spectacle and a laughing-stock for all

Ireland. Then at last, fourteen full years after the injury, an opportunity, for the first time, presented itself. Tiernan found himself in a position to direct the action of the King of Ireland, and, through him, of all the minor Kings; so that the whole of Ireland, as if set in motion by a single impulse and one common purpose, precipitated itself on Dermot. Simultaneously, Dermot's own false vassals arose against him, and the once proud and powerful King of Leinster, “after many battles, in which he was always defeated,” was overthrown and cast out.

All save Dermot, himself, and a few who kept hoping, believed that this was the end. Dermot, about to sail for England, unhurt in body, unbroken in spirit, his soul filled with dire purposes, for the last time addresses his faithful followers, and bids them be of good cheer, for that he will surely return.

Near him, in complete steel, too, stood

a tall and very handsome youth, Donald Kavanagh, which means “the handsome,” his eldest son, who is to remain behind, and make such terms as he can for himself and friends, with the victorious foe. For the old King had no thought at all of taking to cowl and beads in St. Austin’s while there were friends to be rewarded and enemies to be destroyed. “With the first swallow he will return—leader of a host.” Then, woe to his extern enemies and his own traitor dukes. “King of Leinster and the Leinstermen I shall die,” he cried, “after having punished my enemies and rewarded my friends as a King should. I have loved God too well to be forsaken by Him in my age, though He may try me. I have cherished the sons of life; I have exterminated the sons of death; I have adorned Leinster with many churches, and endowed them with much land, and Almighty God, powerful and righteous, will not see me want, or those who love me

go unhonored and unrewarded. This I know for a verity. Would you learn how? Come nearer :

“At the foot of Mount Leinster there is a little lake, with a few sad reeds on one side, but the other side is stony. There are twelve teal in the lake, fed once there by the hand of Holy Colman. On the edge of the lake there is an oratory, all stone, very ancient; and in the oratory an altar, a grey flag unchiselled, and candles burn there always in honor of Colman. When the Kings of Ireland conspired against me and the greater part of my dukes rebelled, declaring that they would henceforth be Kings, and freed of my control, and when the Battle of Ferns was broken upon me, I was greatly afflicted. I fasted, and, fasting, spent one night in the oratory, and there was none with me; prone before the altar, where Colman looks for his resurrection. And I prayed to Almighty God, Maker of all worlds, and to Holy Colman. Early in the

morning, when the lights were dim, a man stood before me. I lowered my eyes, for I did not dare to look upon him. The man spoke to me, and what he said was this : ' Fight bravely, O Dermot, while any will stand beside thee; fight to the end though it will not avail thee. Thy enemies will cast thee out of Ireland, for a season, for it is the will of God to punish thee on account of thy many sins. But as thou hast served Him faithfully, building many churches, and cherishing always His children, He will bring thee back again after a short time. Thou shalt return, O Dermot, with great power. Gloriously and victoriously thou shalt chase thy enemies and take vengeance on thy traitors, in especial upon Murrough, Duke of Tir-Cullen; upon him before all others; and reward all thy friends like a rich King—and through thee great deeds shall be done in the land of Fail.' Then the voice ceased, and when, after a long time, I looked, there was no man there.

Therefore, without fear or grief, I cross the sea, now, going into the land of strangers, and I tell you these things that they may strengthen your minds and harden your hearts while I am far away from you. Till I return obey my son Donald Kavanagh as you would obey me, and let all of you, the constable, and marshal, the dukes, barons, and sergeants, put your right hands into his in my presence."

When he saw that done, it was said by those who witnessed it, that he was well pleased. After that they said that he took an affectionate farewell of the whole company, calling them each man by his name; that is to say, all the men who carried battle-axes and the leaders of the light foot, but the rest in general. They were in all, five hundred men, lacking seventeen. Then he kissed all the captains upon the right cheek, and his sons upon the mouth; but Donald Kavanagh he embraced with both his arms. Yet the best of his sons, namely

Enda, was not here, for he had been taken prisoner and blinded by the Ossorians.

After that he raised his eyes and looked around, and he took no note at all of that army which he had defeated, but his eyes settled westward, where was a small house whiter than snow, and a slender, white, very graceful tower beside it, and around it, trees, and men, and oxen, labouring there in the fields, for it was harvest. And he asked, “ Whose house is that yonder ? ” And one answered that it appertained to the familia of Ailbhe, of Emly, and that the said Ailbhe had not come into Ireland with Patrick, or after him, but before him, and that there was a relic of the holy Ailbhe preserved there. “ Donald, my son,” said the King, “ lay ten ounces of gold on the altar, and let it be told to the comarb of holy Ailbhe that, after I shall have returned and taken again the kingdom, I will double that gift and new-shrine that relic, in gold, finely carved, and furnished with eyes of

crystal." These were King Dermot's last words.

Afterwards he went into the boat, and Donald Kavanagh and the Duke of Idrone propelled her till her stern was cleared from the sand and mud, and she floated free. All the company kept silence, while that was being done, save one man only, who raised his voice and wept aloud; whom the Constable struck down. The rest watched the departure of the King with eyes harder than iron. The King reached the ship and ascended to the poop. The crew followed, and the boat was raised up by ropes and set in her place in the ship. Then King Dermot looked toward the shore with a cheerful countenance, and raised high above his head, clear seen against the southern sky, his mailed arm and gauntleted hand. His people silent, all stooped, and bent forward, had been watching him, the while they shaded their eyes with their hands. Then, seeing his gesture, they stood erect,

and raised their right hands. It was as if the King had cried, "Remember," and that they on their side had replied, "Yea, O Dermot, we remember." But the gesture was more eloquent than speech.

Then the anchor of the galley was drawn up to a sea chaunt; a trumpet was sounded, and, all at once, the long oars ran out through the vents with a dull roar like distant thunder, and swung forward, and were still. Again, the trumpet sounded and they dropped at once, suddenly. Strongly the good oars gripped while they bent and struggled with the surprised and reluctant, yet yielding sea; strongly broke through and lashed the green water to foam, yet hardly communicated motion to the great galley. Again, again, again the long, white oars gripped and struggled through the green water, at each stroke more victoriously, till, anon, the galley seemed to know what she was required by them to do, and at each fresh impulse lifted

herself and sprang forwards mightily. Her course first was due west, as she lay; then, more gracefully than a sea bird on the wing, she curved southward and eastwards with a long, slow, gradual sweep, till the dragon's eyes looked steadily to the rising sun. The sailors hoisted the one sail and the breeze filled out the bright sail taut, and the ship's speed was doubled, for a gentle and prosperous wind blew steady out of the west. The unseen oarsmen felt the presence of their good ally and rejoiced. The stiffness of inaction, too, began to leave their limbs; they bent to their work with more power and encouraged each other to row. Well they knew for what task they had been chosen, and whom they were bearing over the deep. So, propelled alike by wind and oar, the snoring galley sped eastward, dividing the unfurrowed sea. Swifter and ever swifter the long, white oars bounded forward, constant-going, steady, unhesitating; and behind the great ship as she sped, there

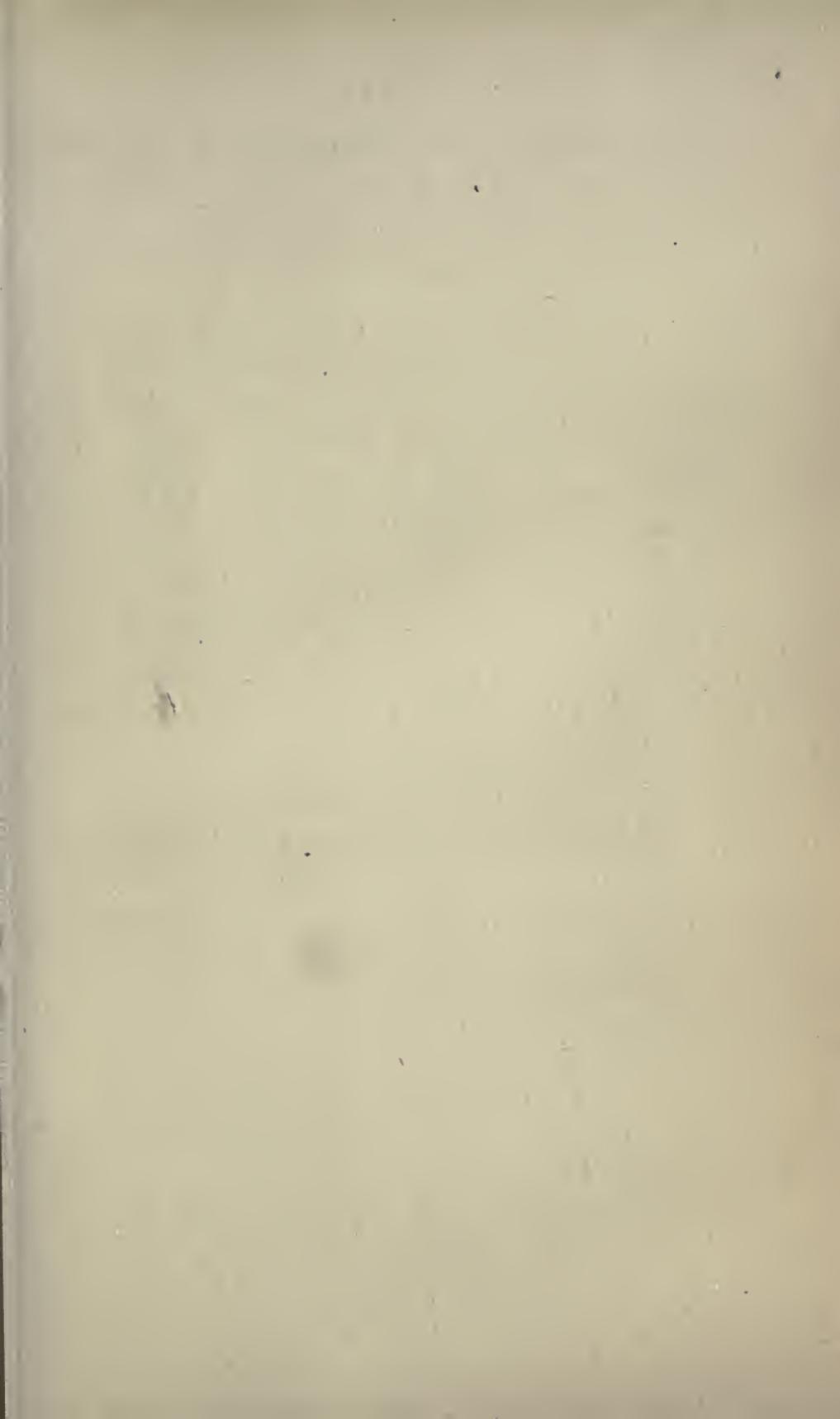
arose a tumult, a roar of displaced and sounding waters; and, on both sides, where the oars lashed the surface, there shone as it were roads of white foam. At the mast-head a long pennon, showing the arms of the Fitzhardings, white on a red ground, bordered with narrow gold, floated and rippled, pointed eastward to Saxonland.

Ere the galley left Corkeran horsemen were seen galloping eastward, along the road that led to Waterford. Soon they entered a cut in the hills, and were lost to view. King Dermot and his people knew well with what purpose those horsemen rode so fast. They were messengers despatched to the men of Waterford, with the news that King Dermot had put to sea at Corkeran and had sailed eastward, and that they, the Vedra's Fiord sailors, should man their galleys and intercept him. The master accordingly steered out further and further from the shore, so that ere long the hills only were to be seen. When the

galley passed Carnsore Point many galleys were seen far away, but near land. They were the Northmen waiting, who thought that Dermot's galley would hug the shore. They gave chase, indeed, but soon fell away; and after that King Dermot commanded that the oarmen should slack their rowing. He was silent most part of the day, and evermore watched the receding shores of Erin, and then the mountains. As it drew towards evening he bade Maurice Regan, his secretary, to read for him out of a book. He did not eat or drink till sunset. At supper he was cheerful, and called for the master and bade him give the brave Saxon rowing-men the best supper which the ship could afford; for, he said, "It is to these men I owe it, that I have the use of my eyes this night. Had the Northmen taken me, surely they would have blinded me." Ever since his troubles had commenced it was not death that he feared, but the loss of eyesight—imprisonment till death in black

night. Also, he charged his treasurer to give a good largesse to all the ship's company, for he was ever generous.

On the third day, early in the morning, the ship rowed up the Severn, and in the forenoon reached Bristol, where the King was joyfully and affectionately received by the whole city, and especially by Robert Fitzharding and his own people. Fitzharding and the men of Bristol gave him lodging in the Carfex, hard by St. Austin's, and ever treated him with great respect and affection. Yet he did not remain long there, such was his desire to come into the presence of Henry, son of the Empress, who was surnamed Curthose, and secure his assistance for the recovery of his kingdom.





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