

The Harping of Cravetheen

By Fiona Macleod

When Cormac, that was known throughout all Northern Eiré as Cormac Conlingas, Cormac the son of Concobar the son of Nessa, was one of the ten hostages to Conairy Mòr for the lealty of the Ultonians, he was loved by men and women because of his strength, his valor, and his beauty.

He was taller than the tallest of his nine comrades by an inch, and broader by two inches than the broadest; though that fellowship of nine was of the tallest and broadest men among the Ultonians, who were the greatest warriors that green Banba, as Eiré or Erin was called by the bards who loved her, has ever seen.

The *shenackies* sang of him as a proud champion, with eyes full of light and fire, his countenance broad above and narrow below, ruddy-faced, with hair as of the gold of the September moon.

The commonalty spoke of his mighty spear-thrust, of his deft sword-swing, the terror of his wrath, of the fury of his battle-lust, of his laughter and light joy, and the singing that was on his lips when his sword had the silence upon it. No man dared touch "Blue-Green," as Cormac Conlingas called it,—the "Whispering Sword," as it was named among his fellows. "Blue-Green," for in its sweep it gleamed blue-green as the leaping levin, whispered whenever it was athirst, and a red draught it was that would quench that thirst, and no other draught for the drinking; and it whispered when there was a ferment of the red blood among men who hated while they feared the Ultonians; and it whispered whenever a shadow dogged the shadow of Cormac, the son of Concobar the son of Nessa. Therefore it was that of all who desired his death, there was none that did not fear the doom-whisper of the sword that had been forged by Lèn, the Smith, where he sits and works forever amid his mist of rainbows. Women spoke of his strength as though it were their proud beauty. He had the way of the sunlight with him, they said. And of the sunfire, added one ever, below her breath; and that was Eilidh, the daughter of Conn Mac Art and of Dearduill, the daughter of Somhairle, the Prince of the Isles,—Eilidh, the daughter of Dearduill the daughter of Mama, the three queens of beauty in the three generations of the generations.

She was not of the Ultonians, this fair Eilidh; but of the people who were subject to Conairy Mòr. It was when the ten hostages abode with the Red Prince that she grew faint and wan with the love-sickness. Her mother, Dearduill, knew who the man was. She put a mirror of polished steel against the mouth of the girl while she slept, and then it was that she saw the flames of love burning a red heart on which was written in white fire,—“I am the heart of Cormac, the son of Concobar.” The gladness was hers, as well as the fear. Sure, there was no greater hero than Cormac Conlingas; but then he was an Ultonian, and would soon be for going away; and ill-pleased would Conairy Mòr be that the beautiful Eilidh, who was his ward since the death of Conn, should be the wife of one of the men of Concobar Mac Nessa whom in his heart he hated.

There was a warrior there called Art Mac Art Mòr. Conairy Mòr loved him, and had promised him Eilidh. One day this man came to the overlord, and said this thing,—

“Is she, Eilidh, to be hearing the lowing of the kine that are upon my hills?”

“That is so, Art Mac Art.”

“I have spoken to the girl. She is like the wind in the grass.”

"It is the way of women. Quest, and trace, and you shall not find. But say 'Come,' and they will come; and say 'Do,' and they obey."

"I have put the word upon her, and she has laughed at me. I have said 'Come,' and she asked me if the running wave heard the voice of yesterday's wind. I have said 'Do,' and she called to me, 'Do the hills nod when the fox barks?' "

"What is the thing that is behind your lips, Art Mac Art Mòr?"

"This. That you send the man away that is the cause of the mischief that is upon Eilidh."

"Who is the man?"

"He is of the Hostages."

Conairy Mòr brooded awhile. Then he stroked his beard, brown-black as burn-water in shadow; and laughed.

"Why is there laughter upon you, my king?"

"Sure, I laugh to think of the blood of a white maid. They say it is of milk, but I am thinking it must be the milk of the hero-women of old that was red and warm as the stream the White Hound that courses through the night swims in. And that blood that is in Eilidh leads to the blood of heroes. She would have the weight of Cormac, the Yellow-haired, on her breast!"

"His blood or mine."

The king kept silence for a time. Then he smiled, and that boded ill. Then, after a while, he frowned, and that was not so ill.

"Not thine, Art."

"And if not mine, what of Cormac Mac Conobar?"

"He shall go."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

And, sure, it was on the eve of that day that Dearduil went to warn Cormac Conlingas, and to beg him to leave the whiteness of the snow without a red stain.

But when she entered his sleeping-place Eilidh was there, upon the deer-skins.

Dearduil looked for long before she spoke.

"By what is in your eyes, Eilidh my daughter, this is not the first time you have come to Cormac Conlingas?"

The girl laughed low. The white arms of her moved through the gold of her hair like sickles among the corn. She looked at Cormac. The flame that was in her eyes was bright in his. The wife of Conn turned to him.

"No," he said gravely, "it is not the first time."

"Has the seed been sown, O husbandman?"

"The seed has been sown."

"It is death."

"The tide flows, the tide ebbs."

"Cormac, there will be two dead this night if Conairy Mòr hears this thing. And even now his word moves against you. Do you love Eilidh?"

Cormac smiled slightly, but made no answer.

"If you love her, you would not see her slain."

"There is no great evil in being slain, Dear-duil-nic-Somhairle."

"She is a woman, and she has your child below her heart."

"That is a true thing."

"Will you save her?"

"If she will."

"Speak, Eilidh."

Then the terror that was in the girl's heart arose and moved about like a white bewildered bird in the dark. She knew that Dearduil had spoken out of her heart. She knew that Art Mac Art Mòr was in this evil. She knew that death was near for Cormac, and near for her. The limbs that had trembled with love, trembled now with the breath of the fear. Suddenly she drew a long sobbing sigh.

"Speak, Eilidh."

She turned her face to the wall.

"Speak, Eilidh."

"I will speak. Go, Cormac Conlingas."

The chief of the Ultonians started. This doom to life was worse to him than the death-doom. An angry flame burned in his eyes. His lip curled.

"May it not be a man-child you will have, Eilidh of the gold hair," he said scornfully, "for it would be an ill thing for a son of Cormac Mac Concobar to be a coward, as his mother was, and to fear death as she did, though never before her any of her race."

And with that he turned upon his heel, and went out.

Cormac Conlingas had not gone far when he met Art Mac Art Mòr, with the others.

"It is the king's word," said Art, simply.

"I am ready," answered Cormac. "Is it death?"

"Come; the king shall tell you."

But there was to be no blood that night. Only, on the morrow the hostages were nine. The tenth man rode slowly north eastward, against the graying of the dawn.

If, in the heart of Cormac Conlingas, there was sorrow and a bitter pain, because of Eilidh, whom he loved, and from whom he would fain have taken the harshness of his word, there was, in the heart of Eilidh, the sound as of trodden sods.

That day it was worse for her.

Conairy Mòr came to her himself. Art was at his right hand. The king asked her if she would give her troth to the son of Art- Mòr, and, that being given, if she would be his wife.

"That cannot be," she said. The fear that had been in the girl's heart was dead now. The saying of Cormac had killed it. She knew that, like her ancestor, the mother of Somhairle, she could, if need be, have a log of burning wood against her breast and face the torture as though she were no more than holding a dead child there.

"And for why cannot it be?" asked Conairy Mòr.

"For it is not Art's child that I carry in my womb," answered Eilidh, simply.

The king gloomed. Art Mac Art put his right hand to the dagger at his silver-bossed leathern belt.

"Is it a wanton that you are?"

"No: by my mother's truth, and the mother of my mother. I love another man than Art Mac Art Mòr, and that man loves me, and I am his."

"Who is this man?"

"His name is in my heart only."

"I will ask you three things, Eilidh, daughter of Dearduil. Is the man one of your race? is he of noble blood? is he fit to wed the king's ward?"

“He is more fit to wed the king’s ward than any man in Eiré. He is of noble blood, and himself the son of a king. But he is an Ultonian.”

“Thou hast said. It is Cormac Mac Concobar Mac Nessa.”

“It is Cormac Conlingas.”

With a loud laugh Art Mac Art strode forward. He raised his hand and flung it across the face of the girl.

“Art thou his tenth or his hundredth? Well, I would not have you now as a serving-wench.”

Once more the king gloamed. It went ill with him, that sight of a man striking a woman, howsoever lightly.

“Art, I have slain a better man than you, for a thing less worthy than that. Take heed.”

The man frowned, with the red light in his eyes.

“Will you do as you said, O king?”

“No, not now. Eilidh, that blow has saved you. I was going to let Art have his way of you, and then do with you what he willed, servitude or death. But now you are free of him. Only this thing I say; no Ultonian shall ever take you in his arms. You shall wed Cravetheen, the step-brother of Art.”

“Cravetheen the Harper?”

“Even so.”

“He is old, and is neither comely nor gracious.”

“There is no age upon him that a maid need mock at; and he is gracious enough to those who do not cross him; and he has the mouth of honey, he has, and, if not as comely as Cormac Conlingas, is yet fair to see.”

“But—”

“I have said.”

And so it was. Cravetheen took Eilidh to wife. But he left the great Dun of Conairy Mòr and went to live in his own dùn in the forest that clothed the frontiers of the land of the Ultonians.

He took his harp that night when for the first time she lay upon the deerskins in his dùn, and he played a wild air. Eilidh listened. The tears came into her eyes. Then deep shadows darkened them. Then she clenched her hands till the nails drew blood. At last she lay with her face to the wall, trembling.

For Cravetheen was a harper that had been taught by a Green Hunter on the slopes of Sliav-Sheean. He could say that in music that other men could scarce say aright in words.

And when he had ended that night he went up to his wife.

“No, Eilidh, for all you are so white and soft, and for all the sweet ways of you, I shall not be laying my heart upon yours this night, nor for many nights. But a day shall come when I will be playing you a marriage song. But before that day I will play to you twice.” “And beware the third playing” said his old mother, who sat before the smouldering logs, crooning and muttering.

As for the second playing; that was not till months later. It was at the set of the sun that had shone on the birthing of the child of Eilidh and Cormac Conlingas.

All through the soundless labour of the woman, for she had the pride of pride, Cravetheen the Harper played. What he played was that the child might be born dead. Eilidh knew this, and gave it the breath straight from her heart. “My pulse to you,” she whispered between her low sobs. Then Cravetheen played that it might be born blind and deaf and dumb. But Eilidh knew this, and she whispered to the soul that was behind her eyes, *Give it light*; and to the soul that was

listening behind her ears, *Give it hearing:* and to the soul whose silence was beneath her silence, *Give it speech.*

And so the child was born; and it was a man-child, and fair to see.

When the swoon was upon Eilidh, Cravetheen ceased from his harping. He rose, and looked upon the woman. Then he lifted the child, and laid it on a doeskin in the sunlight, on a green place, that was the meeting-place of the moonshine dancers. Then he lifted his harp again, and again played.

At the first playing, the birds ceased from singing: there was silence amid the boughs. At the second, the leaves ceased from rustling: there was silence on the branches. At the third, the hare leapt no more, the fox blinked with sleep, the wolf lay down. At the fourth, and fifth, and sixth, the wind folded its wings like a great bird, the wood-breeze crept beneath the bracken and fell asleep, the earth sighed and was still. There was silence there,—for sure, silence everywhere, as of sleep.

At the seventh playing the quiet people came out upon the green place. They were small and dainty, clad in green with small, white faces; just like lilies-of-the-valley they were.

They laughed low among themselves, and some clapped their hands. One climbed a thistle, and swung round and round till he fell on his back with a thud, like the fall of a dewdrop, and cried pitifully. There was no peace till a *duinshee* took him by a green leg and shoved him down a hole in the grass and stopped it with a dandelion.

Then one among them, with a scarlet robe and a green cap with a thread of thistledown waving from it like a plume, and with his wee, wee eyes aflame, stepped forward, and began to play on a little harp made of a bird-bone with three gossamer-films for strings. And the wild air that he played and the songs that he sang were those *fonnshéen* that few hear now, but that those who do hear know to be sweeter than the sorrow of joy.

Suddenly Cravetheen ceased playing, and then there was silence with the Green Harper also.

All of the hillside-folk stood still. When an eddy of air moved along the grass they wavered to and fro like reeds with the coolness at their feet.

Then the Green Harper threw aside his scarlet cloak and his green cap, and the hair of him was white and flowing as the *canna*. He broke the three threads of gossamer, and flung away the bird-bone harp. Then he drew a wee bit reed from his waist-band that was made of beaten gold, and put it to his lips, and began to play. And what he played was so passing sweet that Cravetheen went into a dream, and played the same wild air, and he not knowing it, nor any man.

It was with that that the soul of the child heard the elfin-music, and came out. Sure, it is a hard thing for the naked spirit to come away from its warm home of the flesh, with the blood coming and going forever like a mother's hand, warm and soft. But to the playing of Cravetheen and the Green Harper there was no denying. The soul came forth, and stood with great frightened eyes.

"*Shrink! Shrink! Shrink!*" cried all the quiet people, and, as they cried, the human spirit shrank so as to be at one with them.

Then, as it seemed, two shining white flowers—for they were bonnie, bonnie—stepped forward and took the human by the hand, and led it away. And as they went, the others followed, all singing a glad song, that fell strange and faint upon the ear of Cravetheen. All passed into the hillside, save the Green Harper, who stopped awhile, playing and playing and playing, till Cravetheen dreamed he was Alldai, the God of Gods, and that the sun was his bride, and the moon his paramour, and the stars his children and the joys that were before him. Then he, too, passed.

With that, Cravetheen came out of his trance, and rubbed his eyes as a man startled from sleep.

He looked at the child. It would be a changeling now, he knew. But when he looked again he saw that it was dead.

So he called to Gealcas, that was his mother, and gave her the body.

“Take that to Eilidh,” he said, “and tell her that this is the second playing; and that I will be playing once again, before it’s breast to breast with us.”

And these were the words that Gealcas said to Eilidh, who in her heart cursed Cravethen, and mocked his cruel patience, and longed for Cormac of the Yellow Hair, and cared not for all the harping that Cravethen could do now.

It was in the Month of the White Flowers that Cormac Conlingas came again.

He was in the Southland when news reached him that his father, Concobar Mac Nessa, was dead. He knew that if he were not speedily in Ulster, the Ultonians might not grant him the Ard-Reeship. He, surely, and no other, should be Ard-Ree after Concobar; yet there was one other who might well become overlord of the Ultonians in his place, were he not swift with word and act.

So swift was he that he mounted and rode away from his fellows without taking with him the famous Spear of Pisarr, which was a tenor in battle. This was that fiery, living spear, wrought by the son of Turenn, and won out of Eiré by the god Lu Lam-fáda. In battle it flew hither and thither, a live thing.

He rode from noon to within an hour of the setting of the sun. Then he saw a long, green hill rise like a pine-cone out of the wood, bossed with still-standing stones of an ancient ruined dún. Against it a blue column of smoke trailed. Cormac knew now where he was. Word had come to him recently from Eilidh herself.

He drew rein, and stared awhile. Then he smiled; then once more he gloomed, and his eyes were heavy with the shadow of that gloom.

It was then that he drew “Blue-Green” from its sheath, and listened. There was a faint murmur along the blade, as of gnats above a pool; but there was no whispering.

Once more he smiled.

“It will be for the happening,” he murmured. Then, leaning back, he sang this Rune to Eilidh.

Oimé, Oimé, Woman of the white breasts, Eilidh;
Woman of the golden hair, and lips of the red, red rowan!
Oimé, O-rì, Oimé!

Where is the swan that is whiter, with breast more soft,
Or the wave on the sea that moves as thou movest Eilidh—
Oimé, a-rò; Oimé, a- rò!

It is the marrow in my bones that is aching, aching, Eilidh;
It is the blood in my body that is a bitter, wild tide Oimé!
O-rì, O-hion, O-rì, aròne!

Is it the heart of thee calling that I am hearing, Eilidh,
Or the wind in the wood, or the beating of the sea, Eilidh,
Or the beating of the seal

Shule, shule agràh, shule agràh, shule agràh, Shule!
Heart of me, move to me! move to me! heart of me, Eilidh, Eilidh,
Move to me!

Ah, let the wild hawk take it, the name of me, Cormac Conlingas,
Take it and tear at thy heart with it, heart that of old was so hot with it,
Eilidh, Eilidh, o-rì, Eilidh, Eilidh!

And the last words of that song were so loud and clear—loud and clear as the voice of the war-horn—that Eilidh heard. The heart of her leapt, the breast of her heaved, the pulses danced in the surge of the blood. Once more it was with her as though she were with child by Cormac Conlingas. She bade the old mother of Cravetheen and all who abode in the dun to remain within, and not one to put the gaze upon the *grìanan*, her own place there, or upon whom she should lead to it. Then she went forth to meet Cormac, glad to think of Cravetheen far thence on the hunting, and not to be back again till the third day.

It was a meeting of two waves, that. Each was lost in the other. Then, after long looking in the eyes, and with the words aswoon on the lips, they moved hand in hand towards the dùn.

And as they moved, the Whispering of the Sword made a sound like the going of wind through grass.

“What is that?” said Eilidh, her eyes large.

“It is the wind in the grass,” Cormac answered. And as they entered the dun the Whispering of the Sword made a confused murmur as of the wind among swaying pines.

“What is that?” Eilidh asked, fear in her eyes.

“It is the wind in the forest,” said Cormac. But when, after he had eaten and drunken, they went up to the Grianan, and lay down upon the deer-skins, the Whispering of the Sword was so loud that it was as the surf of the sea in a wild wind.

“What is that?” cried Eilidh, with a sob in her throat

“It is the wind on the sea,” Cormac said, his voice hoarse and low.

“There is no sea within three days’ march,” whispered Eilidh, as she clasped her hands.

But Cormac said nothing. And, now, the Sword was silent also.

It was that night that Cravetheen returned. He was playing one of the *fonnshean* he knew, as he came through the wood in the moonlight; for in the hunting of a stag he had made a great circle and was now near Dunchraig again, Dunchraig that was his dùn. But he had left his horse with his kindred in the valley, and had come afoot through the wood.

He stopped as he was nigh upon the rocks against which the dun was built. He saw the blackness of the shadow of a living thing.

“Who is that?” he cried.

“It is I, Murtagh Là-m-Rossa,”—and with that a man out of the dun came forward slowly and hesitatingly. He was a man who hated Eilidh, because she had put him to shame.

Cravetheen looked at him.

“I am waiting,” he said.

Still the man hesitated.

“I am waiting, Murtagh Là-m-Rossa.”

“This is a bitter thing I have to say. I was on my way for the telling.”

“It is of Eilidh that is my wife?”

"You have said it."

"Speak."

"She does not sleep alone in the Grianan, and there is no one of the dùn who is there with her."

"Who is there?"

"A man."

Cravetheen drew a long breath. His hand went to the dagger at his belt.

"What man?"

"Cormac mac Concobar, that is called Cormac Conlingas."

Again Cravetheen drew a deep breath, and the blood was on his lip.

"You are knowing this thing for sure?"

"I am knowing it."

"That is what no other man shall do," and with that Cravetheen flashed the dagger in the moonshine, and thrust it with a surging sound into the heart of Murtagh Làmh-Rossa.

With a groan the man sank. His white hands wandered among the fibrous dust of the pine-needles. His face was as a livid wave with the foam of death on it.

Cravetheen looked at the froth on his lips; it was like that of the sped deer. He looked at the bubbles about the hilt of the knife; they were as the yeast of cranberries.

"That is the sure way of silence," he said; and he moved on, and thought no more of the man.

When he came nigh the dun he stood a long while in thought. He could not reach the Grianan, he knew. Swords and spears for Eilidh, before then, mayhap; and, if not, there was Cormac Conlingas,—and not Cormac only, but the Sword "Blue-Green," and the Spear "Pisarr."

But a thought drove into his mind as a wind into a corrie. He put back his sword, and took his harp again. "It is the third playing," he muttered with a grim smile. Then once more he stood on the green rath of the quiet people, and played the *fionnshean* till they heard. And when the old elfin harper was come, Cravetheen played the Tune of the Asking.

"What will you be wanting, Cravetheena Mac Rory," asked the Green Harper.

"The Tune of the Trancing Sleep, green prince of the hill."

"Sure, you shall have it:" and with that the Green Harper gave the magic melody, so that not a leaf stirred, not a bird moved, and even the dew ceased to fall.

Then Cravetheen took his harp and played.

The dogs in the dùn rose, but none howled. Then all lay down nosing their outstretched paws. Thrice the stallions in the rear of the dùn put back their ears, but no neighing was on their curled lips. The mares whimpered, and then stood with heads low, asleep. The armed men did not awake, but slumbered deep. The women dreamed into the darkness where no dream is. The old mother of Cravetheen stirred, crooned wearily, bowed her gray head and was in Tir-nan-og again, walking with Rosy mac Rory that loved her, him that was slain with a spear and a sword long, long ago.

Only Eilidh and Cormac Conlingas were waking. Sweet was that wild harping against their ears.

"It will be the Green Harper himself," whispered Cormac, drowsy with the sleep that was upon him.

"It will be the harping of Cravetheen I am thinking," said Eilidh, with a low sigh, yet as though that thing were nothing to her. But Cormac did not hear, for he was asleep.

"I see nine shadows leaping upon the wall," murmured Eilidh, while her heart beat and her limbs lay in chains.

“ ‘ . . . *Move to me, heart me, Eilidh, Eilidh, Move to me,* ’ ”

sang Cormac, in a slow, chanting whisper.

“I see nine hounds leaping into the dûn,” Eilidh cried, though none heard.

Cormac smiled in his sleep.

“Ah, ah, I see nine red phantoms leaping into the room!” screamed Eilidh; but none heard.

Cormac smiled in his sleep.

And then it was that the nine red flames grew ninefold, and the whole dûn was wrapt in flame.

For this was the doing of Cravetheen the Harper. All there died in the flame. That was the end of Eilidh, that was so fair. She laughed the pain away, and died. And Cormac smiled, and as the flame leapt on his breast he muttered, “*Ah, hot heart of Eilidh!—heart to me—move to me!*” And he died.

There was no dûn, and there were no folk, and no stallions and mares, and no baying hounds, when Cravetheen ceased from the playing,—but only ashes.

He looked at them till dawn. Then he rose, and he broke his harp. Northward he went, to tell the Ultonians that thing, and to die the death.

And this was the end of Cormac the Hero, Cormac the son of Concobar the son of Nessa, that was called Cormac Conlingas.