

PETER TREMAYNE

DANCING WITH DEMONS

A Novel of Ancient Ireland



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A Mystery of Ancient Ireland

PETER TREMAYNE



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For those intrepid enthusiasts from ten countries
who gathered in Cashel, 8 – 10 September 2006,
to attend the first *Féile Fidelma: Sister Fidelma's World at Cashel*,
and to the organisers and citizens of Cashel
in appreciation and thanks.

PROLOGUE

Erc the Speckled, the guard at the entrance of Ráth na Riogh, the royal enclosure of the great Palace Tara, knew the man whom he had challenged in the darkness. He knew him and therefore he let him pass inside without any suspicion; pass freely into the fortified sanctuary of the High Kings Éireann. Erc, while an imperturbable warrior in a crisis, was also unimaginative. It did not occur to him that even people who were known to the palace guards should be asked what had brought them hither when they sought to gain entrance to the royal enclosure in the early hours of the morning. That he recognised the man, who presented himself in the light of the burning torches that lit the main portals to the enclosure, was enough for Erc. He allowed him entrance without further thought and without question as to his purpose. After all, this chieftain had often been admitted to the High King's presence during daylight hours. At least, that's what he would eventually tell the examining Brehon, but by then it was too late.

In his defence, one could argue that there was good reason to believe all was secure. It was well known that no enemy could penetrate the large complex that made up the buildings of Tara. It was too large and well-defended, both in the number of guards and in the physical structure, to allow for any serious threat. The hills over which the royal centre spread had been built upon for countless centuries, dominating the luscious valley whose great river was called after the ancient goddess, Bóinn. It was said that the palace complex itself had been called after Téa, the wife of Eremon who, with his brother Eber, had led the children of the Gael into this land and settled it at the dawn of time. But Erc the Speckled was not interested in ancient legends. He knew only that the royal enclosure was impossible for any enemy to attack and he added complacency to the folly of being unimaginative.

The celebrated High King, Cormac Mac Art, three centuries before, had ordered the construction of the interior royal enclosure with its large rectangular house still called *Tech Cormaic*, Cormac's House, in which the High Kings dwelled. It was opposite the *Forradh* or Royal Seat, to its east, from where the High Kings dispensed the duties of governing the five kingdoms. Even the colossal *Tech Miodhchuarta*, the banqueting hall, owed its existence to Cormac. And he had built fortifications to protect this inner sanctum of the kings. High walls and ditches, great oval earth-works, protected the buildings, with guards at all the entrances.

Tara was impregnable and so Erc the Speckled was not one whit concerned when the noble, whom he recognised, came walking to the gate that he guarded, in the darkness before dawn. He merely raised his spear in salute and went down the wooden stairway to the *immdorus*, the small door set in the now closed and bolted great gate of the fortress, released the lock and swung it open. He then motioned the man to the royal enclosure. The man did so with a smile and brief nod to Erc.

Once beyond the gate, and across the bridge over the defensive ditch, in which three tall men could stand on each other's shoulders from its bottom to its top, the man's attitude seemed to tense. He began to hurry with long loping strides, his head bent forward, his shoulders hunched, keeping to the semi-gloom beyond the pathways. He made his way between the great banqueting hall, towering up in the darkness to his right, and the fortified building known as the Ráth of Synods, where the High

Kings summoned their assemblies, to his left. He turned left at the end and moved quickly towards the burial mound, which had been old even before the coming of the children of the Gael to the land. Then he moved past the *Forradh* and turned to face the great building of *Tech Cormaic*, the residence of the High King.

He halted in the shadow of some trees and bushes, designed to give privacy to the building, and stood surveying it for a moment. It was mainly in darkness except for two burning brand torches stuck out in their iron braziers, which protruded on each side of the central dark oak doors, causing faint light and countless dancing shadows to obscure the portal.

A movement caught his eye and he drew back further into the shadows, his hand sliding to the hilt of his sword, eyes narrowing as if the action would help him see more clearly in the darkness.

A warrior with drawn sword, whose blade rested easily against his shoulder, moved with an almost lazy gait around the edge of the building and paused before the oak doors. A moment later, a second warrior joined him.

One spoke in a low voice, but on such a still night as this, the watcher could clearly make out what he said.

‘The night passes slowly, Cuan, my friend.’

‘Too slowly,’ the other replied with a yawn. ‘How long until dawn, Lugna?’

His companion glanced at the sky. It was almost cloudless but the clouds that were fleeting in the high winds were obscuring the pale gibbous moon. The man quickly assessed the position of the stars.

‘A while yet.’

‘Perhaps a small libation will keep the early-morning chill at bay until the sun rises? There is a jug in the kitchens.’

The second man seemed to hesitate. ‘It is wrong to leave the doors unguarded. What if Irél comes to inspect the guard?’

Cuan chuckled. ‘Our good commander has retired to his chamber. He will not come to inspect the guard until it is time to change it at dawn. Come, a drop of *corma* will keep out the night chill.’

The warrior addressed as Lugna made as if to protest. Then, in a tone of resignation, he said: ‘I cannot argue. Lead the way.’

The two guards moved off along the side of the High King’s house into the darkness towards the *ircha*, or kitchen, which was situated at the back of the building and entered by a separate door.

In the shadows, the waiting man smiled in satisfaction, glanced swiftly around and then, assuring himself that there was no one else in the vicinity, crossed quickly to the heavy doors. His hand did not tremble as he turned the iron handle. One of the double doors opened with ease and he passed into the hallway of the large building. With the two guards in the kitchen, he knew that there were no other guards inside the royal house. He eased the door quietly shut behind him. A few spluttering oil lamps caused shadows to dance over the wood-panelled walls of red yew. Thus far, thus good, he thought.

If his information was correct, the High King slept alone that night. His wife had gone, in the company of her daughters, to Finnian's abbey at Cluain Ioraird to offer prayers for the repose of the soul of her mother, who had but recently succumbed to the Yellow Plague. In any case, the intruder also knew that the High King never slept with his wife, the lady Gormflaith, these days. So now, unless the High King had invited someone else to his bed, he would be found alone.

The man knew his way to the High King's bedchamber. With a calm deliberation, he moved up the single flight of broad wooden stairs and into the deserted upper corridor, where he halted, head to one side, listening. All was quiet. Now he just had to hope that the others had played their part. A few seconds passed before he heard the slight creak of a door swinging gently open to his right. He pressed back against the panelled wall, as a shadow appeared. It was the dark figure of a woman. He had been expecting her.

No greeting was exchanged between them. Instead, the woman held out a hand and his own closed on the cold bronze *eochoir* or key.

'The lock is well-oiled,' the woman whispered. 'I saw to that.'

'And he is alone?'

'I am fairly certain of it,' came the soft reply. 'The Old One has been watching the steps leading to the privy door at the back and has seen no one go up since he retired for the night.'

'That is good. Return to your chamber and if I am successful I shall call you. You know what it is you must look for?'

The woman's voice was scornful. 'Of course. Have I not waited a lifetime for this? Are you prepared?'

'I know my part as you do your own. We must be away from here before daylight.'

'The Old One knows the way. She will guide us. We must not be caught. If anything happens, you are aware of what must be done?'

'I am,' he replied grimly.

She disappeared whence she had come without a further word.

He trod noiselessly to the dark oak door at the far end of the corridor. Then he stretched out to insert the key ... and turned it slowly. The lock was indeed well-oiled, and made not the slightest sound. On the turn of the handle, a slight push and the door opened a fraction. The man felt a second of relief. He listened: in the darkness beyond, he could hear nothing. Stepping stealthily into the gloom, he slipped the key into the purse that he wore at his belt and stood for a moment, back against the door, waiting for his eyes to adjust.

The room was lit by moonlight. The clouds seemed to have moved on, leaving the pale glow permeate through the window and spread itself over the bed on which the recumbent figure lay.

The High King appeared to be asleep, stretched on his back.

A look of satisfaction formed on the face of the man. In one quick motion, he drew his knife, i

blade sharp like a razor, and moved rapidly across to the side of the bed. Barely pausing, he plunged the knife down towards the High King's exposed throat. The severed jugular spurted a little blood and he moved the knife across the throat like a butcher slaughtering a lamb. It happened so fast that there was not even a movement of the features of his victim. The assassin doubted whether the sleeper even knew what had happened.

The killer stepped back, still holding the knife in his right hand, a thin smile of triumph on his lips.

He was just about to turn away when a high-pitched shriek of terror echoed through the chamber. His head jerked up. On the far side of the room, a door had opened and the figure of a young girl stood there. She was naked and held her hands to her cheeks in a stance of obvious shock and horror. She screamed again and ran out, slamming the door shut behind her.

For a second the assassin stood aghast. Should he pursue her, or turn for the door by which he had come? Almost immediately, he was aware of shouting and the sound of running feet. Her screams had aroused the servants and the guards. There would be no escape. He knew then what he had to do. There could be no surrender. He felt one moment of regret but there was a greater will than his which compelled him to obey his orders. Raising the hand with the dagger ...

A few moments later, the door flew open and Lugna rushed in, his sword drawn. His companion Cuan, followed, holding a lantern.

It was too late.

The assassin was slumped against the bed of the High King, blood spurting from his chest. He was still alive and but the light was dying in his eyes. Lugna bent down, restraining the urge to finish him off.

'Why?' he demanded sharply of the man.

The murderer stared at him with a dull gaze for a moment. Then the pale lips moved. A word was whispered which Lugna stretched forward to catch. There was a gasp and the assassin toppled sideways onto the floor, staining it with one last outpouring of blood.

Lugna rose to his feet, his face showing his disgust. He took the lantern from his companion and looked beyond the assassin's body to the figure on the bed to assure himself that the victim was beyond help.

Cuan glanced curiously down at the body on the floor. 'What did he say?'

Lugna shrugged. 'Something about blame. I think he meant that he was accepting the blame for the crime.'

His companion laughed shortly. 'That was stating the obvious.'

There was a continued shouting in the corridor and the noise of people running hither and thither and some began crowding in. Lugna turned towards the door, telling them to stay back. As he did so Cuan suddenly noticed a small bracelet by the side of the dead assassin; it was a chain from which silver coins hung. It looked valuable. He picked it up and turned to Lugna, but his comrade had n

noticed for he was trying to prevent people entering. One or two of them held oil lamps in their hands. Someone was shouting for the High King's physician. Cuan's hand closed over the trinket.

'Too late for that. The High King is dead,' Lugna informed those at the door, as he sheathed his sword. 'And the assassin is dead also, but not by my hand.'

Then Irél, the commander of the Fianna, the High King's bodyguard, appeared, pushing through the alarmed servants.

Lugna stiffened as his superior's gaze swept the scene with an aghast expression. The man's eyes alighted on the body of the assassin, slumped on the floor by the bed, and he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

'It is Dubh Duin, chief of the Cinél Cairpre!'

Lugna had not recognised the man but now he turned with curiosity, holding the lantern over the dead features. By its flickering light he saw that the assassin had been correctly identified, and he whistled softly in disbelief.

'He was of the Uí Néill, of the same family as the High King,' Lugna said nervously, turning to Irél. 'Can this have been some family blood feud? Or does it signal insurrection?'

The commander of the Fianna was noncommittal but he was clearly worried by the same thoughts.

'We must send for Abbot Colmán, the chief steward, also the High King's brother, Cenn Faelad. He is heir apparent and will now succeed as lawful King. He must be informed. Meanwhile, I shall order the Fianna to stand to arms until we know what this means.'

Lugna glanced once more at the still form lying on the bed.

Sechnussach, son of Blathmac of Sil nÁedo Sláine, direct descent of the immortal Niall of the Nine Hostages, High King of the five kingdoms of Éireann, was dead. If this were a blood feud, then the five kingdoms would soon be threatened with civil war.

CHAPTER ONE

Ferloga had been an innkeeper most of his adult life and was in the habit of boasting that he had seen all manner of guests – rich and poor, the arrogant and the humble. He had had dealings with kings and chieftains, religious of all descriptions, rich merchants, travelling players, farmers passing on the way to market and even beggars desperate for shelter. Ferloga's proud claim was that no guest had ever tried to cheat him of his fee, for there were few of them that he was unable to judge; after a glance, he could tell what calling in life they followed and whether they were trustworthy or not. But as the elderly innkeeper sat talking with his wife while she finished cleaning the utensils after the morning meal, he freely confessed to confusion. The guest who had arrived not long after nightfall of the previous evening had been an utter mystery to him.

A tall, thin man, almost skeletal, the pale parchment-like skin had stretched tightly over his bony features. That he was elderly was indisputable, but whether sixty or eighty years of age was impossible to discern. He had curious eyes, the left one made sinister by the white film of a cataract. His unkempt white hair seemed to tumble in all directions, thick and curly, ending around his shoulders. His neck reminded Ferloga of a chicken's scrawny folds with a prominent bobbing Adam's apple. A dark grey woollen cloak, which had probably once been white, covered the man from neck to ankles. He carried a long wooden staff with curious carving on it, and a leather satchel was slung from his shoulder.

At first Ferloga had thought that he was a wandering religious, for he certainly looked like one of the hermits that one infrequently encountered on the road, and it was clear that he had arrived on foot. However, once he loosened his cloak, the stranger displayed none of the usual symbols of the New Faith but wore a curious necklet of gold and semi-precious stones which, Ferloga knew, no religious would ever wear.

The conversation had been unexpectedly short. Ferloga was used to some sociability from his guests but this elderly traveller merely demanded a bed. He even declined a traditional mug of *corma* to protect against the chill of the night. When Ferloga asked whither he had come, the man replied: 'A long journey from the north,' and nothing more. Ferloga took the view that the man was exhausted from his travels and, indeed, he noticed that the newcomer was swaying slightly and the dark skin under his eyes was a trifle puffy. So the innkeeper did not press the late arrival further but conducted him to a small room above the stairs, and withdrew.

Now, in the light of dawn, Ferloga was still wondering about his mysterious guest.

His plump wife sniffed in irritation as she gave the cauldron of porridge, still warming over the fire, a stir to stop it sticking.

'Rather than sit there trying to make guesses, why don't you go and rouse the man. It's long past

sun up. All the other guests have risen, broken their fasts and continued on their way. I do not plan to stay here all day making sure the porridge does not burn. I need to go berry picking.’

Ferloga sighed and slowly rose from his comfortable seat by the side of the fire. Lassar, was right of course. The business of the inn could not wait for ever and it was unusual for guests to delay so long in the morning.

Fidelma of Cashel halted her horse on a rise of the road, which ran from Cluain Meala, the Field of Honey, the settlement on the banks of the broad River Siúr, where she had spent the night, north to her brother’s fortress. She had spent a week away from Cashel in attendance at Lios Mhór, the great abbey and settlement south beyond the mountain range of Mhaoldomhnaigh. Although she had slept well the previous night, Fidelma felt exhausted after a week’s hard work. She was a *dálaigh*, or advocate, in the law courts of the five kingdoms of Éireann, proficient to the degree of *anruth*, the second highest qualification in the land. Her rank therefore allowed her not only to plead cases before judges but when nominated, to hear and adjudicate in her own court on a range of applications that did not require the presence of a judge of higher rank. It was a task that Brehon Baithen, the senior judge of the kingdom of Muman, often requested her to perform. It was also a task that she liked least.

She frequently found it tiring to sit in a stifling court and listen to the complaints and arguments of those who appeared before her. Often it was a waste of time and the plaintiffs should have been advised that their claims, more often than not, were born from pettiness and malice and without foundation in law. But it was her task and duty to sit patiently and decide whether there was a case to be answered and whether it should be brought before a more senior Brehon. And, after a week in the law courts at Lios Mhór, she felt drained and irritable and was delighted when she could finally mount her horse and set off across the mountains back towards her brother’s royal fortress at Cashel.

Turning in her saddle, she watched her companion trotting up towards her. The youthful warrior who joined her was Caol, the commander of her brother’s guard. He had been designated to act as her escort on the trip.

Fidelma smiled as he reined in his mount beside her and gestured with an outstretched arm. ‘That’s Ráth na Drínne ahead. I could do with refreshment at Ferloga’s inn before we continue on to Cashel.’

Caol inclined his head briefly. ‘As it pleases you, lady.’ Those who knew Fidelma as sister to Colgú, King of Muman, always used the respectful form of address rather than her ecclesiastical one of Sister. Caol added: ‘We did leave Cluain Meala without breaking our fast and I could do with something to fill the emptiness in my stomach.’

There was a slight note of rebuke in his voice as he reminded Fidelma of her eagerness to be on the road even before daylight that morning. However, Caol knew why Fidelma was anxious to return to Cashel. She had been a week away from her little son, Alchú, and Caol appreciated her anxiety as a mother. He knew that she must be feeling an additional anxiety because her husband Eadulf, the Saxon, had left Cashel over a week before on an embassy to the abbey at Ros Ailithir on behalf of Ségdæ, Abbot of Imleach and chief bishop of Muman. How long he would be away on his embassy, which involved

matters of ecclesiastical importance, was anyone's guess. Perhaps he would be gone several weeks. That being so, Caol had tried not to complain about her general impatience and quickness of temper during this last week.

Fidelma was smiling almost apologetically at him, as if she read his thoughts.

'I know, I know,' she said softly. 'Had I not been in such a hurry to be on the road to Cashel this morning, we could have broken our fasts and had something warming to keep out the chill on the journey. But Ferloga's inn lies ahead of us and we can soon rectify the lack of nourishment caused by my impatience.'

She turned and nudged her horse forward towards the distant rise of Ráth na Drínne.

It was not long before they trotted into the yard before the inn, causing the chickens and geese to start an angry chorus at being disturbed. Before they began to dismount, the door of the inn swung open and Ferloga himself came hurrying out. The first thing that Fidelma noticed was his pale features and concerned expression.

'What ails you, Ferloga?' she asked, frowning down at him.

'Lady ...' The innkeeper's expression seemed to brighten as he recognised her. 'Thank God that you have come.'

Fidelma raised an eyebrow in query as she dismounted and faced the elderly innkeeper.

'You appear distraught, Ferloga. What is the trouble?'

'One of my guests, lady,' replied the man. 'He was late to rise and so I went up to wake him. I have just found him in bed – dead.'

Caol had dismounted and was taking Fidelma's reins from her. 'Dead?' He suddenly looked interested. 'Murdered?'

Ferloga looked shocked. 'Murdered? I hadn't thought ...'

'Put the horses in the stable, Caol,' Fidelma instructed before turning to the shocked innkeeper. 'Come, let us examine this body. Who is this guest, anyway?'

As he turned to lead the way back into the inn, Ferloga contrived to shrug. 'I've no idea, lady. He arrived late last night and told me nothing. He was elderly, that is all I know.'

As they entered the inn, Lassar came forward anxiously. 'Ah, it is good that you are here, lady. That could be bad for us if the kin of the guest claim we have been neglectful in our duties towards him and somehow contributed to his death.'

Fidelma knew exactly why the elderly couple were concerned. The laws for innkeepers in the *Bretha Nemed Toisech* were very precise about their responsibilities. A guest, by virtue of the fact that he was given legal protection, and anyone killed or injured while under that protection was counted as having been a victim of the crime of *díguin*, the violation of such protection. The responsibility was laid down to the *fer tige oíget* or the guest-house owner, whether it was a public hostel or a private inn. If found responsible, Ferloga might lose his inn and be fined a heavy sum.

Fidelma gave the old woman a smile of reassurance. 'Where is the body?' she asked Ferloga.

He turned to ascend the dark wooden stairs that led to the upper floor. 'This way,' he said.

The body lay on its back in the bed. Ferloga had already opened the shutters to allow light to flood into the room. Fidelma wished that Eadulf was with her. Having studied medical matters for a period in Tuam Breacain, the renowned Irish medical college, his knowledge would have been invaluable. She bent down and allowed her eye to traverse the body of the old man who lay there. There were two things she noticed immediately. The facial muscles seemed twisted into a grimace, as if a last moment of pain had been frozen on the features. That death could not have taken place much before dawn was clear because the flesh was not really cold. The second thing she noticed was that the pale lips were blue, unusually so. Disguising her distaste, she drew back the covers and quickly ascertained that there were no marks of physical violence on the body. Replacing the covers, she stood up, turning to face the anxious Ferloga.

At that moment, Caol came hurrying up the stairs into the room and cast a look at the corpse.

'Can I help, lady?' he asked.

Fidelma shook her head. 'Take a closer look and see if you agree with me. I believe the old man suffered a fit.' She used the word *taem* to indicate the condition.

Caol glanced down, nodding. 'Blue and twisted lips and a convulsion of the muscles. I have observed the like before, lady, on the battlefield. Twice now I have seen men work themselves up into such a rage that, suddenly, they clutch at their chests and their faces become contorted and they fall into a paroxysm. Many have died from it.'

Fidelma agreed. 'There seems no barrier to the condition, old age nor youth. I have even heard that some can survive the fit, and have described it as a terrible, debilitating pain here in the centre of the chest. No, have no fear, Ferloga, yours is not the responsibility for this death.'

There was a deep sigh of relief from the doorway. Lassar had followed Caol up the stairs and stood watching them.

'I'll go below and prepare some refreshment for you, lady,' she said.

'If you have fresh bread and honey, it will more than satisfy me,' Caol added quickly as the old woman turned away.

Fidelma was gazing quizzically down at the corpse again. 'Who was he?' she asked.

Ferloga shrugged. 'I had little chance to find out. He arrived after dark, only said that he was from the north, which was not a matter of surprise for I could hear the northern accents in his speech. He answered no questions, asked only one of his own, ate nothing, drank less and demanded to be shown to his bed.'

Fidelma looked keenly at the innkeeper. 'Asked only one question? What was that?'

'He asked what road he should take this morning to find Cnánmchailli.'

Fidelma shook her head thoughtfully. 'The place beyond Ara's well? But there is nothing there'

only an ancient pillar stone.'

'Just what I said,' agreed Ferloga. 'But he wanted to know the road, so I told him.'

'Did you form any opinion of the man? You have a reputation for knowing your guests even when you spend only a few moments with them.'

Ferloga grimaced wryly. 'I was saying only this morning to Lassar that I am perplexed. At first, I thought he was a religious until I examined his clothing and ornaments more closely. Alas, this man puzzles me.'

'And he came here on foot?' asked Caol. When Fidelma shot him a glance of surprise, Caol added by way of explanation: 'When I dealt with our horses just now, I saw no other horse in the stable that would belong to a guest.'

'You are right,' Ferloga said. 'This man arrived on foot with only that strange staff to help him on his travels.'

Fidelma moved to the ornately carved staff that had been propped in a corner of the room. Taking it in her hands she gazed curiously at the dark oak wood which was mounted and tipped with bronze both as a spiked ferrule and as an ornate headed piece. In fact, at the top part of the staff, the piece of bronze was shaped as a head wearing a torse; a male head with a long, flowing moustache and some semi-precious glinting red stones for the eyes. From ear to ear was a crescent-shaped head-dress studded with little triskel-style solar symbols.

'It's quite beautiful,' muttered Caol, gazing over her shoulder.

'It's also quite old,' said Ferloga.

'It's certainly very ancient,' agreed Fidelma. 'I seem to have seen those symbols before, but I cannot quite recall where ...'

'There are curious symbols and animals carved all over the staff,' observed Caol, pointing. 'It must be very valuable.'

'What else did he carry that might identify him?' demanded Fidelma, turning to Ferloga.

The innkeeper gestured at a leather satchel, which the man had been carrying the night before. There was also the richly inscribed gorget, which he had worn around his neck and which was now placed on the table by the side of the bed. The old man had obviously removed it from his neck before reposing himself for sleep.

'Apart from his robe and clothing, there is only the satchel and this ornament.'

The satchel revealed no more than a change of clothing, an extra pair of sandals and a knife, and such toilet items as anyone might carry. However, if the staff had been a fascinating object of art the gorget was even more so. The necklet was made of intricately beaten gold, decorated with a manner of ancient symbols that also seemed disturbingly familiar to Fidelma – but which she could not place at all. She was about to remark on it when Caol gave a grunt of surprise.

She turned to see him removing a small leather bag from under the pillow on which the old man

head lay. He held it up and the bag clinked as if it contained metal. He handed it to Fidelma.

‘I think we’ll find that this strange old man was rich,’ he said.

Fidelma opened the string that tied the leather pouch together. Indeed, it was full of coins, mainly of gold and silver but with a few bronze coins. She glanced at several of them.

‘They are mainly old coins of Gaul and Britain, ones the Britons struck before the coming of the Romans. That’s curious. I can’t see any Roman coins among them either and they are the easiest to come by these days.’

‘That may mean the old man intended to travel in Gaul or Brittany?’ suggested Caol.

Fidelma returned his smile but shook her head. ‘It only means that he was in possession of coins from those countries, but they are centuries old. If someone was going to travel, why would they not be in possession of more modern coins?’

Caol looked a little crestfallen. ‘You are right, lady. But the old man must have been some sort of merchant, to have these foreign coins and so many. Only merchants are so rich.’

‘I doubt that he was a merchant.’ It was Ferloga who uttered the thought.

Fidelma turned to give him a quizzical look. The innkeeper was looking worried.

‘Not everyone has converted to the New Faith, lady. You know that already. Some keep to the old ways.’

She suddenly realised what the innkeeper was implying. Picking up the old man’s gorget, she examined it carefully and let out a slow breath as she agreed with Ferloga’s unspoken thought.

Caol was standing frowning. ‘I don’t understand,’ he said.

‘Ferloga is saying that he thinks this old man might have been a Druid priest,’ Fidelma explained.

Caol’s eyebrows shot up. ‘But the old religion has died out. The Druids are no more.’

‘I have had several encounters with those who cling to the old religion,’ Fidelma said, a little grimly. ‘It was only a short time ago that Eadulf and I were sent to the valley of Gleann Geis where Laisre decided that his people should convert from the old ways to the New Faith.’

‘Gleann Geis is way over to the west,’ Caol dismissed airily. ‘They are always slow to move with the times.’

Fidelma smiled at the young warrior’s arrogance. ‘Or perhaps they move in a different direction,’ she observed quietly. ‘You are wrong, Caol – there are many who still move along the old paths and venerate the old gods and goddesses of this land. Many, even of the New Faith, respect and owe reverence to the Druids or see them as they were – as great teachers. Did not Colmcille, the dove of the Church, write in one of his poems that Christ, the son of the One God, was his Druid?’

Caol shrugged indifferently. ‘So you are saying that the old man,’ he jerked his head towards the corpse, ‘might have been a Druid?’

‘It would fit in with the way I initially mistook him for a religious,’ interrupted Ferloga, ‘and yet he is certainly not of the Christian Faith. Look at the symbols he carries. They are found among the carvings on the stones where I have heard that people gathered to worship in the old days. And there was him asking the way to Cnánmchailli, the place of the ancient pillar stone.’

‘You may well be right, Ferloga,’ Fidelma said. ‘However, there is little we can do now to identify him, unless someone comes in search of him.’

‘I do not know what to do, lady,’ muttered the innkeeper. ‘No one has ever died in my inn.’

Fidelma thought for a moment or two. ‘We will take his belongings with us to Cashel. Brother Conchobhar is very learned in many of these old customs and symbols. He might be able to tell us more about what they signify and perhaps we can trace where this man came from.’

‘But the body?’ Ferloga still looked unhappy. ‘What am I to do with it?’

‘There is a small chapel beyond the next hill,’ Caol pointed out. ‘Two brothers of the Faith look after it and there is a burial ground nearby. Send someone to bring them hither to take away the body and give it a decent burial. Whatever the man’s beliefs, he deserves that much.’

The old innkeeper’s face grew longer but Fidelma, with a smile, reached in her purse and handed a few coins to Ferloga. She knew what he had been thinking.

‘Tell them it is my wish that they give the deceased a proper burial,’ she said. ‘And you will find there is enough there that you will not be wanting for your fee for his night’s repose.’

‘But I can’t accept that,’ protested the innkeeper, half-heartedly.

‘I am taking the old man’s purse,’ Fidelma cut off his protests, ‘because I believe that the coins may be a means of discovering more about him. I would not have you suffering any loss for this misfortune – and if anyone comes by making enquiries for him, tell them to come to Cashel.’

Ferloga’s hand closed over the coins. ‘A blessing on you, lady.’ He hesitated and then added nervously, ‘Do you think anyone *will* come looking for him?’

‘Why so uneasy?’ asked Fidelma.

Ferloga compressed his lower lip with his top one for a moment. ‘If he is a man of the old religion his comrades might also be of that belief and custom. We are good Christians here, lady. My grandfather was baptised in the Siúr by the Blessed Ailbe himself.’

Fidelma smiled. ‘There is nothing to worry about, Ferloga.’

‘But if this man were a pagan and knew the ancient arts, the secret arts, and curses ...’

Fidelma’s expression grew sharp. ‘We do not have a monopoly on all that is good, Ferloga. The New Faith binds us to have charity towards all and not to fear those who follow different paths.’

She glanced at Caol and, reading the meaning of her expression, Caol picked up the gorget, stashed the satchel and the purse of coins, and then followed her to the lower floor, where Lassar had set out a table with their refreshments on it.

Ferloga went to find the boy who usually helped him with the stables and outside work in order to instruct him to go to the chapel and summon the aid of the religious as Fidelma had advised. Meanwhile, Fidelma and Caol sat down to break their fast with freshly baked bread, honey and mead of sweet mead. Fidelma took time to reassure Lassar about the situation and then, when Ferloga returned, she asked if he had any news from Cashel. The inns were the one sure way of hearing news and gossip.

‘There is little of consequence that has happened in the last few days, lady,’ he said. ‘Did anything of significance transpire at Lios Mhór? Were there any matters of importance that came before you?’

‘Nothing at all that is worth the breath of a storyteller,’ she observed. It had been a boring week with only petty crimes to speak of, such as a man failing to support his wife and a woman charging rape against a man who turned out to be innocent. Fidelma’s interrogation had discovered that the woman was inspired by vengeance after the man had rejected her. ‘Have there been no other travellers with news who have stayed at your inn?’

‘Only some religious who passed through a few days ago who were lately returned from the kingdom of Dál Riada beyond the seas,’ Ferloga told her.

Fidelma was at once interested for she had once travelled through Dál Riada and stayed at the tiny island of I, called Iona, where Colmcille had built an abbey. It had been nearly five years ago since she had stayed there when travelling to the Synod at Witebia for the great debate between the Irish clerics and those who supported Roman rule.

‘What news did they bring? Does Iona still send missionaries into the Saxon kingdoms?’

‘They did not say. They spoke of warfare among the Cruithin and among the Saxons. But there was peace in Dál Riada. The King, whom they named as Domangart, son of Diomhnall Brecc, had succeeded in consolidating affairs and bringing peace to the country. They say that everyone speaks well of this King.’

‘So Dál Riada prospers?’

‘Yes, but there is some fear and unrest, due to a Saxon King called Wulphere who rules a kingdom called Mercia, which I understood is situated to the south of Dál Riada. Apparently he is attempting to expand his borders even among the other Saxon kingdoms and beyond. These same travellers brought news that a great abbey of the Britons in Gwynedd has been burned down in one of his raids into the country. Many of the religious have been killed.’

Fidelma sighed sadly. ‘The Saxons always seem to be fighting, and when it is not with their neighbours, then they fight among themselves,’ she observed. Then she thought of Eadulf and flushed guiltily. Yet, she thought, it was a true comment nonetheless.

‘Oh, and they brought word that the abbot of Iona had died.’

Fidelma eyes widened. ‘Cumméne the Fair?’ she queried.

‘That, indeed, was the name they mentioned, lady. You have a great knowledge of such things,’ Ferloga added, showing a little awe.

Fidelma shrugged indifferently. ‘It is when I travelled through that land that I met the old abbot Cumméne was a respected scholar, the seventh abbot of Colmcille’s foundation, who had written a life of the holy founder. ‘Was the cause of his death a natural one?’

‘They said so, lady, for the abbot was apparently very aged and infirm.’

‘Who replaces him? Did they say?’

‘Failbe of the Cenél Conaill.’

It seemed that Iona was following the custom of many of the Irish abbeys where the abbots succeeded in the same family, being elected by the *derbfine*, three generations of the family of the first abbot. Failbe, whom she had also met on that trip, was a nephew of another former abbot, Ségen, who was a cousin to Colmcille, founder of the abbey.

‘Failbe will have much to contend with,’ she observed, thinking aloud. ‘Cumméne will be hard to replace, for he was a great thinker and scholar.’

They chatted on for a while over the meal until Fidelma rose unhurriedly and announced that they must continue on to Cashel.

Caol went out to prepare the horses while Fidelma again reassured the innkeeper and his wife that they had no reason to feel responsible about the death of the stranger at their inn. Soon, she and Caol were back on the road out of Ráth na Drínne and trotting along the highway that wound through the woods towards her brother’s fortress.

CHAPTER TWO

The journey to the fortress of Cashel passed swiftly. As soon as they arrived, Fidelma left Caol to take care of the horses while she made her way to the chambers that she and Eadulf shared. Muirgen, the nurse, had been alerted to her arrival and was already waiting to greet her, holding young Alchú by the hand. Fidelma paused on the threshold, her eyes anxiously on the child. A moment's examination to ensure that he was well and then she crouched down with her arms held out. Muirgen let go of the boy's hand and he came stumbling into his mother's embrace. They clung together, making those strange, inarticulate sounds that only a mother and child can exchange.

Finally, Fidelma glanced up at the old nurse with a smile. 'Has all been well, Muirgen?'

'Yes, lady,' the nurse replied. 'Brother Eadulf returned yesterday and he is in good spirits.'

'He has returned already?' Fidelma was surprised. 'Where is he?'

'He is with Bishop Ségdæ discussing his findings at Ros Ailithir. Now – shall I prepare a bath or would you prefer refreshments first?'

Fidelma stood up and threw off her badger-fur riding cloak. 'We halted at Ferloga's inn to break our fast this morning, so a bath would not come amiss,' she replied, before turning to her son. 'Come, my little hound. We'll sit for a while until Muirgen has prepared my bath. Your mother is dusty after such a long ride this morning.'

As Muirgen headed for the door, it opened suddenly and Eadulf came hurrying in, his face expectant.

'I heard that—' He stopped when he saw Fidelma and made straight for her. Wisely, Muirgen let them together, closing the door quietly behind her.

After a while, Eadulf was anxiously plying Fidelma with questions. Little Alchú had wandered to the corner to play with his toys. Fidelma assured Eadulf that her time at Lios Mhór had been a tedious one with nothing exciting about the charges brought by the plaintiffs. Eadulf told her that his trip to Ros Ailithir had been equally boring, the return journey even more so. Then his eyes fell on the staff that Fidelma had brought with her. He picked it up and examined the curious mountings.

'This is a strange object for you to be presented with.'

'I was not presented with it,' said Fidelma. Briefly, she recounted the events at Ferloga's inn. 'I thought that I would show it to old Brother Conchobhar as he knows much about such things. As soon as I have bathed and rested, I'll go and have a word with him.'

She showed Eadulf the other items that she had brought from Ferloga's inn.

'So there is no indication of the old man's identity among his possessions?' asked Eadulf,

Fidelma shook her head. ‘It would be sad for him to be buried without a name, for he must have been someone of consequence to have such belongings.’

‘And the coins,’ added Eadulf, as he inspected them. ‘These coins are valuable. I wonder what manner of man he was?’

‘It is a waste of time to speculate without facts,’ Fidelma admonished, but with a mischievous smile for it was a saying of which she was particularly fond. ‘We’ll wait to hear what old Conchobhar has to say.’

It was late afternoon before Fidelma made her way down to Brother Conchobhar’s apothecary shop tucked away in the shadow of the chapel within the fortress complex. Eadulf had been summoned back to Bishop Ségdæ for further discussions and so she had gone alone.

As she entered the gloomy interior, the musky smell of the dried herbs and potions caused her to halt momentarily and catch her breath. The odours were not unpleasant but merely heavy. At the far end of the shop, bent over a table with pestle and mortar and various bowls and vessels, beneath a hanging oil lamp, was an old man in worn and stained brown robes.

He glanced up and, seeing her there, he rose from his stool, coming forward with a smile and outstretched hands to greet her. Brother Conchobhar had known Fidelma since childhood for he had served her father, the King Failbe Flann, and, indeed, other kings of Cashel before and since. For many it seemed impossible to imagine the great capital of Muman without the aged figure of Conchobhar the apothecary, physician and astrologer. He had taught his skills to many, including a young Fidelma who had been anxious to be proficient in as many of the arts as possible.

In spite of their long relationship, Brother Conchobhar was always punctilious in addressing her as ‘lady’, although he had nursed her through childhood ailments, had taught her and advised her. She had only once disagreed with his advice and that had been when he had suggested that she was ill-suited to life as a religieuse at the abbey of Cill Dara. In fact, old Conchobhar knew her character so well that he had disagreed with her entering the religious life at all. That she had left Cill Dara soon after entering it was never mentioned. While she was entitled to be called ‘Sister’, he reminded her that she was the daughter of a king, the sister of a king and of the line of the Eóghanacht. ‘Lady’ was the more respectful form of address in old Conchobhar’s eyes.

‘Is all well, lady?’ he asked now. ‘You and yours are not ailing and need my potions?’

Fidelma smiled pleasantly. ‘Thanks be, no, we stand in no need of cures or restoratives, my old friend. But I do stand in need of your knowledge and advice.’

‘How can I be of service, lady?’ He suddenly realised she was holding a staff in her hand and peered at it.

‘Can you identify this?’ she asked, allowing him to take it and move to the better light provided by his lantern.

He stood turning it over, examining it carefully. 'I have not seen anything like this since I was child,' he observed at last. 'It is very old and beautiful. Where did you get it?'

'So you have seen something like it before?' pressed Fidelma. 'Tell me about it first.'

Brother Conchobhar shrugged. 'It is an old staff that symbolised one of the wise teachers of the times before the New Faith was brought to this land.'

'The Druids?'

Brother Conchobhar nodded absently. 'The Druids – and that should be a term of respect, for the word "vid" means "knowledge" and the prefix "dru" means "an immersion". The Druids were considered as people who were immersed in knowledge. There were none wiser nor better informed.'

Fidelma could not hide her impatience. 'I have heard all about them and, indeed, I have met some who still claim to be so. Yet they are people who cling on to the old beliefs and ideas.'

'This symbol speaks of a teacher of some importance. Where did you get it?' he asked again.

Fidelma told him what had happened at Ferloga's inn.

Brother Conchobhar was thoughtful. 'Did he carry anything else with him? Anything other than the staff?'

Fidelma reached into the bag she carried and brought out the gorget, its polished crescent shape sparkling with its curious designs and symbols beaten onto the panel. Brother Conchobhar took it and unexpectedly and uncharacteristically, a soft whistle broke from his lips.

'I did not think that anything like this would have survived the zeal of those who spread the New Faith in this land. I have seen something similar only once before in my life, and it was on the body of a dead man. They said he was a great teacher, a mystic but withal a pagan. The object was taken from him by a warrior and, at the direction of a priest, was cast into the sea with the body of the man, with many prayers and cries to Christ to protect the pious.'

'Superstition and fear is no way forward,' Fidelma said.

'Any faith is spread by a certain degree of fear, lady,' the old man replied philosophically. 'Faith is not logic otherwise it would not be Faith. In those times it came down to those whose magic was the more powerful. That is why the stories of the miracles had to be told so that people would know whose power the early fathers of the Faith had over their pagan enemies. Hence the Blessed Patrick could walk into fires or the Blessed Ailbe could restore to life the son of Mac Dara after he had drowned in the river. Look how it is told that Patrick smashed the skull of the Druid Lochru on a rock, using, as we are told, his magical powers to do so. This was to demonstrate that his magic was more powerful than their magic. In fear, they turned to the Faith that he brought as being more advantageous to their well-being. This fear spreads the Faith.'

Fidelma was slightly disapproving of the argument but she knew the stories well enough. For herself, she did not believe in miracles of any sort.

'So this is a symbol of the old beliefs?' she said quickly as she saw the old man about to extend his

argument.

‘It may well be the only surviving symbol of a great Druid.’ Brother Conchobhar nodded slowly.

‘You think the old man who died in Ferloga’s inn was such an important member of the Old Faith?’

‘It is impossible to say with certainty, but it is rare to come upon such accoutrements. Do you know anything else about him? Was it known where he came from or where he was going?’

‘Apparently, he was from the north. He asked Ferloga the innkeeper, what road he should take for Cnánmhchaili. But there are no dwellings around there. It is an empty and desolate place.’

Brother Conchobhar’s eyes had widened. ‘Except for the ancient pillar stone,’ he pointed out.

‘So Ferloga said,’ Fidelma grimaced. ‘Why go to an old, decaying pillar stone? I have passed it a hundred times. It is of no significance.’

‘To you, perhaps. But if this man were truly one of those who clung to the pagan ways, then it might make sense that he would be going there.’

‘How so?’

Brother Conchobhar leaned forward, confidentially. ‘Have you heard of the legends of Mug Ruith?’

‘The sun god of the pagans?’

‘Yes. He became known as *mac seanfhesa*, the son of ancient wisdom, chief of all the Druids in the five kingdoms. He rode a great chariot, which at night shone as bright as daylight. In the days before the Blessed Ailbe of Imleach brought the teachings of Christ to this corner of the world, it was said that the pillar stone was a fragment of the wheel of Mug Ruith’s great chariot that had become petrified.’

When Fidelma smiled cynically, Brother Conchobhar told her: ‘It is not wise to dismiss other beliefs without understanding them. Among those who cling to the Old Faith it is said that Mug Ruith is their great champion against Christianity and that his Roth Fáil, his wheel of light, will one day be an engine of destruction that will sweep the teachings of Christ out of the five kingdoms; that we will once again encompass the old way. I believe that many of the Old Faith still search in the hope of finding the Roth Fáil.’

‘An old pillar stone is hardly the Roth Fáil.’ Fidelma was dismissive.

‘The Druids spoke in symbols. Who knows what they meant? Tell me, did this man carry anything else with him?’

Fidelma brought forth the bag of coins. ‘He carried these.’

Brother Conchobhar emptied the coins on his table and peered at them. ‘Roman coins?’ he asked.

‘Look closer. They are ancient coins of the type the Britons and Gauls used to cast before the coming of the Romans, centuries before the birth of Christ. I have seen them before in my journey. And here are also some marked with the name of Tasciovanus, who ruled in Britain two generations before the Romans invaded. Do you see the letters CAM on this gold stater? That signified his capital

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