

The Green Magician

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Synopsis

FLEEING FINLAND, Harold Shea, his wife Belphebe (late of FAERIE QUEEN) and the indomitable Pete Brodsky find themselves in Celtic Ireland instead of Ohio, arriving in a downpour.

It is Pete's knowledge of Ireland that saves them; a lifetime of being around Irish cops, and trying to be one of the boys, makes Brodsky invaluable.

Upon arrival, they are mistaken for Fomorians by the 'Hound of Ulster', the legendary Cuchulainn himself. However, they are set upon by Lagenians, and Cuchulainn rescues them, being upset with them

for ganging up.

Falling in with Cucuc, as they came to find he was called, they set out for his camp. As usual, they claim to be magicians, and ask to see the leading druid in Ireland .

To resist the amorous advances of Cucuc, Belphebe strips naked in public, thereby violating a taboo, and driving Cucuc from her. To explain her behavior, Pete improvises the tale that she has a horrible geas laid on her that makes any man that comes near her violently ill. This mollifies Cucuc, but prompts the druid to attempt the lifting of the bogus geas. In so doing, he inflicts a real one, and Shea is even more bereft.

All his magic has failed dismally in Ireland ; the return spell attempt nearly fried them when it attracted lightning, his water-to-wine spell nearly inundated the party at which he tried it. He has impressed Cathbadh, the druid of Cucuc's faction, by removing a werewolf-like curse from a man with some elementary hypnosis. When Cathbadh inadvertently puts the bogus geas on Belphebe, he admits defeat, and tells Shea that there is one other in Ireland that might be able to help — Ollgaeth, chief druid to the Connachta, hereditary enemies of Ulster.

Brodsky, with his knowledge of Celtic lore, has tried to warn Cucuc that the Connachta will still try to do him mischief. Cucuc is undismayed, and so the trio set out to meet Ollgaeth to try once more to return to Ohio . . .

I

IN THAT suspended moment when the gray mists began to whirl around them, Harold Shea realized that, although the pattern was perfectly clear, the details often didn't work out right.

It was all very well to realize that, as Doc Chalmers once said, "The world we live in is composed of impressions received through the senses, and if the senses can be attuned to receive a different series of impressions, we should infallibly find ourselves living in another of the infinite number of possible worlds." It was a scientific and personal triumph to have proved that, by the use of the sorites of symbolic logic, the gap to one of those possible worlds could be bridged.

The trouble was what happened after you got there. It amounted to living by one's wits; for, once the jump across space-time had been made, and you were in the new environment, the conditions of the surroundings had to be accepted completely. It was no good trying to fire a revolver or scratch a match or light a flashlight in the world of Norse myth; these things did not form part of the surrounding mental pattern, and remained obstinately inert masses of useless material. On the other hand, magic . . .

The mist thickened and whirled. Shea felt the pull of Belphebe's hand, clutching his desperately as though something were trying to pull her in the other direction.

Another jerk at Shea's hand reminded him that they might not even wind up in the same place, given that their various mental backgrounds would spread the influence of the generalized spells across different space-time patterns. "Hold on!" he cried, and clutched Belphebe's hand tighter still.

Shea felt earth under his feet and something hitting him on the head. He realized that he was standing in pouring rain, coming down vertically and with such intensity that he could not see more than a few yards in any direction. His first glance was toward Belphebe; she swung herself into his arms and they kissed damply.

"At least," she said, disengaging herself a little, "you are with me, my most dear lord, and so there's

nought to fear.”

They looked around, water running off their noses and chins. Shea’s heavy woolen shirt was already so soaked that it stuck to his skin, and Belphebe’s neat hair was taking on a drowned-rat appearance.

She pointed and cried, “There’s one!”

Shea peered toward a lumpish dark mass that had a shape vaguely resembling Pete Brodsky.

“Shea?” came a call, and without waiting for a reply the lump started toward them. As it did so, the downpour lessened and the light brightened.

“Curse it, Shea!” said Brodsky, as he approached. “What kind of a box is this? If I couldn’t work my own racket better, I’d turn myself in for moper. Where the hell are we?”

“Ohio, I hope,” said Shea. “And look, shamus, we’re better off than we were, ain’t we? I’m sorry about this rain, but I didn’t order it.”

“All I got to say is you better be right,” said Brodsky gloomily. “You can get it all for putting the snatch on an officer, and I ain’t sure I can square the rap even now. Where’s the other guy?”

Shea looked around. “Walter may be here, but it looks as though he didn’t come through to the same place. And if you ask me, the question is not where we are but when we are. It wouldn’t do us much good to be back in Ohio in 700 A.D., which is about the time we left. If this rain would only let up . . .”

With surprising abruptness the rain did, walking away in a wall of small but intense downpours. Spots and bars of sky appeared among the clouds wafted along by a brisk steady current of air that penetrated Shea’s wet shirt chillingly, and the sun shot an occasional beam through the clouds to touch up the landscape.

It was a good landscape. Shea and his companions were standing in deep grass, on one of the higher spots of an extent of rolling ground. This stretch in turn appeared to be the top of a plateau, falling away to the right. Mossy boulders shouldered up through the grass, which here and there gave way to patches of purple-flowered heather, while daisies nodded in the steady breeze. Here and there was a single tree, but down in the valley beyond their plateau the low land was covered with what appeared at this distance to be birch and oak. In the distance, as they turned to contemplate the scene, rose the heads of farblue mountains .

The cloud-cover thinned rapidly and broke some more. The air had cleared enough so they could now see two other little storms sweeping across the middle distance, trailing their veils of rain. As the patches of sunlight whisked past, the landscape blazed with a singularly vivid green, quite unlike that of Ohio .

Brodsky was the first to speak. “If this is Ohio, I’m a peterman,” he said. “Listen, Shea, do I got to tell you again you ain’t got much time? If those yaps from the D.A.’s office get started on this, you might just as well hit yourself on the head and save them the trouble. He’s coming up for election this fall and needs a nice fat case. And there’s the F.B.I. Rover boys — they just love snatch cases, and you can’t put no fix in with them that will stick. So you better get me back before people start asking questions.”

Shea said, rather desperately, “Pete, I’m doing all I can. Honest. I haven’t the least idea where we are, or in what period. Until I do, I don’t dare try sending us anywhere else. We’ve already picked up a rather high charge of magical static coming here, and any spell I used without knowing what kind of

magic they use around here is apt to make us simply disappear or end up in Hell — you know, real red hell with flames all around, like in a fundamentalist church.”

“Okay,” said Brodsky. “You got the office. Me, I don’t think you got more than a week to get us back at the outside.”

Belphebe pointed, “Marry, are those not sheep?”

Shea shaded his eyes. “Right you are, darling,” he said. The objects looked like a collection of lice on a piece of green baize, but he trusted his wife’s phenomenal eyesight.

“Sheep,” said Brodsky. One could almost hear the gears grind in his brain as he looked around. “Sheep.” A beatific expression spread over his face. “Shea, you mustof done it! Three, two, and out we’re in Ireland — and if it is, you can hit me on the head if I ever want to go back.”

Shea followed his eyes. “It does rather look like it,” he said. “But when . . .”

Something went past with a rush of displaced air. It struck a nearby boulder with a terrific crash and burst into fragments that whizzed about like pieces of an artillery shell.

“Duck!” shouted Shea, throwing himself flat and dragging Belphebe down with him.

Brodsky went into a crouch, lips drawn tight over his teeth, looking around with quick, jerky motions for the source of the missile. Nothing more happened. After a minute, Shea and Belphebe got up and went over to examine a twenty-pound hunk of sandy conglomerate.

Shea said, “Somebody is chucking hundred pound boulders around. This may be Ireland, but I hope it isn’t the time of Finn McCool or Strongbow.”

“Cripes,” said Brodsky, “and me without my heater. And you a shiv man with no shiv.”

It occurred to Shea that at whatever period they had hit this place, he was in a singularly weaponless state. He climbed on the boulder against which the missile had destroyed itself and looked in all directions. There was no sign of life except the distant, tiny sheep — not even a shepherd or a sheep-dog.

He slid down and sat on a ledge of the boulder and considered, the stone feeling hard against his wet back. “Sweetheart,” he said, addressing Belphebe, “it seems to me that whenever we are, the first thing we have to do is find people and get oriented. You’re the guide. Which direction’s the most likely?”

The girl shrugged. “My woodcraft is nought without trees,” she said, “but if you put it so, I’d seek a valley, for people ever live by watercourses.”

“Good idea,” said Shea. “Let’s . . .”

Whizz!

Another boulder flew through the air, but not in their direction. It struck the turf a hundred yards away, bounced clumsily, and rolled out of sight over the hill. Still — no one was visible.

Brodsky emitted a growl, but Belphebe laughed.

“We are encouraged to begone,” she said. “Come, my lord, let us do no less.”

At that moment another sound made itself audible. It was that of a team of horses and a vehicle whose wheels were in violent need of lubrication. With a drumming of hooves, a jingle of harness, and a squealing of wheels, a chariot rattled up the slope and into view. It was drawn by two huge horses, one gray and one black. The chariot itself was built more on the lines of a sulky than those of the open-backed Graeco-Roman chariot, with a seat big enough for two or three persons across the back, and the sides cut low in front to allow for entrance. The vehicle was ornamented with nail-heads and other trim in gold, and a pair of scythe-blades jutted from the hubs.

The driver was a tall, thin freckled man, with red hair trailing from under his golden fillet down over his shoulders. He wore a green kilt and over that a deerskin cloak with arm-holes at elbow length.

The chariot sped straight toward Shea and his companions, who dodged away from the scythes round the edge of the boulder. At the last minute the charioteer reined to a walk and shouted, “Be off with you if you would keep the heads on your shoulders!”

“Why?” asked Shea.

“Because himself has a rage on. It is tearing up trees and casting boulders he is, and a bad hour it will be for anyone who meets him the day.”

“Who is himself?” said Shea, almost at the same time as Brodsky said, “Who the hell are you?”

The charioteer pulled up with an expression of astonishment on his face. “I am Laeg mac Riagabra, and who would himself be but Ulster’s hound, the glory of Ireland, Cuchulainn the mighty? He is after killing his only son and has worked himself into a rage. *Ara!* It is ruing the countryside he is, and the sight of you Fomorians would make him the wilder.”

The charioteer cracked his whip, and the horses raced off over the hill, the flying clods dappling the sky. In the direction from which he had come, a good-sized sapling with dangling roots rose against the horizon and fell back.

“Come on!” said Shea, grabbing Belphebe’s hand and starting down the slope after the chariot.

“Hey!” said Brodsky, tagging after them. “Come on back and pal up with this ghee. He’s the number one hero of Ireland.”

Another rock bounced on the sward and from the distance a kind of howling was audible.

“I’ve heard of him,” said Shea, “and if you want to, we can drop in on him later, but I think that right now is a poor time for calls. He isn’t in a pally mood.”

Belphebe said, “You name him hero, and yet you say he has slain his own son. How can this be?”

Brodsky said, “It was a bum rap. This Cuchulainn got his girlfriend Aoife pregnant way back when and then gave her the air, see? So she’s sore at him, see? So when the kid grows up, she sends him to Cuchulainn under a geas . . .”

“A moment,” said Belphebe. “What would this geas be?”

“A taboo,” said Shea.

Brodsky said, “It’s a hell of a lot more than that. You got one these geasa on you and you can’t do the thing it’s against even if it was to save you from the hot seat. So like I was saying this young ghee, his name is Conla, but he has this geas on him not to tell his name or that of his father to anyone. So when Aoife sends him to Cuchulainn, the big shot challenges the kid and then knocks him off. It ain’t good.”

“A tale to mourn, indeed,” said Belphebe. “How are you so wise in these matters, Master Pete? Are you of this race?”

“I only wisht I was,” said Brodsky fervently. “It would do me a lot of good on the force. But I ain’t, so I dope it this way, see? I’ll study this Irish stuff till I know more about it than anybody. And then I got innarested, see?”

They were well down the slope now, the grass dragging at their feet, approaching the impassive sheep.

Belphebe said, “I trust we shall come soon to where there are people. My bones protest I have not dined.”

“Listen,” said Brodsky, “This is Ireland, the best country in the world. If you want to feed your face, just knock off one of them sheep. It’s on the house. They run the pitch that way.”

“We have neither knife nor fire,” said Belphebe.

“I think we can make out on the fire deal with the metal we have on us and a piece of flint,” said Shea. “And if we have a sheep killed and a fire going, I’ll bet it won’t be long before somebody shows up with a knife to share our supper. Anyway, it’s worth a try.”

He walked over to a big tree and picked up a length of dead branch that lay near the base. By standing on it and heaving, he broke it somewhat raggedly in half, handing one end to Brodsky. The resulting cudgels did not look especially efficient, but they could be made to do.

“Now,” said Shea, “if we hide behind that boulder, Belphebe can circle around and drive the flock toward us.”

“Would you be stealing our sheep now, darlings?” said a deep male voice.

Shea look around. Out of nowhere, a group of men had appeared, standing on the slope above them. There were five of them, in kilts or trews, with mantles of deerskin or wolfhide fastened around their necks. One of them carried a brassbound club, one a clumsy-looking sword, and the other three, spears.

Before Shea could say anything, the one with the club said, “The heads of the men will look fine in the hall, now. But I will have the woman first.”

“Run!” cried Shea, and took his own advice. The five ran after them.

Belphebe, being unencumbered, soon took the lead. Shea clung to his club, hating to have nothing to hit back with if he were run down. A glance backward showed that Brodsky had either dropped his or thrown it at the pursuers without effect.

“Shea!” yelled the detective. “Go on — they got me!”

They had not, as a matter of fact, but it was clear they soon would. Shea paused, turned, snatched up a stone about the size of a baseball, and threw it past Brodsky’s head at the pursuers. The spearman-target ducked, and they came on, spreading out in a crescent to surround their prey.

“I — can’t — run no more,” panted Brodsky.

“Go on.”

“Like hell,” said Shea. “We can’t go back without you. Let’s both take the guy with the club.”

The stones arched through the air simultaneously. The clubman ducked, but not far enough; one missile caught his leather cap and sent him sprawling to the grass.

The others whooped and closed in with the evident intention of skewering and carving, when a terrific racket made everyone pause on tiptoe. Down the slope came the chariot that had passed Shea and his group before. The tall, red-haired charioteer was standing in the front, yelling something like “Ulluullu” while balancing in the back was a smaller, rather dark man.

The chariot bounded and slewed toward them. Before Shea could take in the whole action, one of the hub-head scythes caught a spearman, shearing off both legs neatly, just below the knee. The man fell, shrieking, and at the same instant the small man drew back his arm and threw a javelin right through the body of another.

“It is himself!” cried one of them, and the survivors turned to run.

The small dark fellow spoke to the charioteer, who pulled up his horses. Cuchulainn leaped down from the vehicle, took a sling from his belt and whirled it around his head. The stone struck one of the men in the back of the neck, and down he went. As the man fell, Cuchulainn wound up a second time. Shea thought this one would miss for sure, as the man was now a hundred yards away and going farther fast. But the missile hit him in the head, and he pitched on his face.

“Get out the head bag and fetch me the trophies, dear,” said Cuchulainn.

II

LAEG RUMMAGED in the rear of the chariot and produced a large bag and a heavy sword, with which he went calmly to work. Belphebe had turned back, as the rescuer came toward the three. Shea saw a smallish man with curly black hair, not older than himself, heavy black eyebrows and only a faint fuzz on his cheeks to compare with the heavy beards of the defunct five. He was not only an extremely handsome man; there was also a powerful play of musculature under his loose outer garment. The hero’s face bore an expression of settled and brooding melancholy, and he was dressed in a long-sleeved white cloak embroidered with gold thread, over a red tunic.

“Thanks a lot,” said Shea. “You just saved our lives, in case you wondered. How did you happen along?”

“’Twas Laeg came to me with a tale of three strangers, who might be Fomorians by the look to them, and they were like to be set on by the Lagenians.

Now I will be fighting any man in Ireland that gives me the time, but unless you are a hero it is not good to fight at five to two, and it is time that these pigs of Lagenians learned their manners. So now it is time for you to be telling me who you are and where you come from and whither bound. If you are indeed Fomorians, the better for you — King Conchobar is friends with them this year, or I might be making you by the head shorter.”

Shea searched his mind for details of the culture pattern of the men of Cuchulainn’s Ireland. A slip at the beginning might result in their heads being added to the collection bumping each other in Laeg’s bag like so many cantaloupes. Brodsky beat him to the punch.

“Jeepers!” he said, in a tone which carried its own message. “Imagine holding heavy with a zinger like you! I’m Pete Brodsky — give a toss to my friends here, Harold Shea and his wife Belphebe.”

He stuck out his hand.

“We do not come from Fomoria, but from America, an island beyond their land,” said Shea.

Cuchulainn acknowledged the introduction to Shea with a stately nod of courtesy. His eyes swept over Brodsky, and he ignored the outthrust hand. He addressed Shea. “Why do you travel in company with such a mountain of ugliness, dear?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Shea could see the cop’s wattles swell dangerously. He said hastily; “He may be no beauty, but he’s useful. He’s our slave and bodyguard, a good fighting man. Shut up, Pete!”

Brodsky had sense enough to do so. Cuchulainn accepted the explanation with the same sad courtesy and gestured toward the chariot. “You will be mounting up in the back of my car, and I will drive you to my camp, where there will be an eating before you set out on your journey again.”

He climbed to the front of the chariot himself, while the three wanderers clambered wordlessly to the back seat and held on. Laeg, having disposed of the head bag, touched the horses with a golden goad. Off they went. Shea found the ride a monstrously rough one, for the vehicle had no springs and the road was distinguished by its absence, but Cuchulainn lounged in the seat, apparently at ease.

Presently there loomed ahead a small patch of woods at the bottom of a valley. Smoke rose from a fire. The sun had decided to resolve the question of what time of day it was by setting, so that the hollow lay in shadow. A score or more of men, rough and wild-looking, got to their feet and cheered as the chariot swept into the camp. At the center of it a huge iron pot bubbled over the fire, and in the background a shelter of poles, slabs of bark and branches had been erected. Laeg pulled up the chariot and lifted the head bag with its lumpish trophies, and there was more cheering.

Cuchulainn sprang down lightly, acknowledged the greeting with a casual wave, then swung to Shea. “Mac Shea, I am thinking that you are of quality, and as you are not altogether the ugliest couple in the world, you will be eating with me.” He waved an arm. “Bring the food, darlings.”

Cuchulainn’s henchmen busied themselves, with a vast amount of shouting, and running about in patterns that would have made good cat’s cradles. One picked up a stool and carried it across the clearing; a second immediately picked it up again and took it back to where it had been.

“Do you think they’ll ever get around to feeding us?” said Belphebe in a low tone. But Cuchulainn merely looked on with a slight smile, seeming to regard the performance as somehow a compliment to himself.

After an interminable amount of coming and going, the stool was finally established in front of the lean-to. Cuchulainn sat down on it and with a wave of his hand, indicated that the Sheas were to sit on the ground in front of him. The charioteer Laeg joined them on the ground, which was still decidedly damp after the rain. But, as their clothes had not dried, it didn't seem to matter.

A man brought a large wooden platter on which were heaped the champion's victuals, consisting of a huge cut of boiled pork, a mass of bread, and a whole salmon. Cuchulainn laid it on his knees and set to work on it with fingers and his dagger, saying with a ghost of a smile, "Now according to the custom of Ireland, Mac Shea, you may challenge the champion for his portion. A man of your inches should be a blithe swordsman, and I have never fought with an American."

"Thanks," said Shea, "but I don't think I could eat that much, anyway, and there's a — what do you call it? — a geas against my fighting anyone who has done something for me, so I couldn't after the way you saved us." He addressed himself to the slab of bread on which had been placed a pork chop and a piece of salmon, then glanced at Belphebe and added, "Would it be too much trouble to ask for the loan of a pair of knives? We left in rather a hurry and without our tools."

A shadow flitted across the face of Cuchulainn. "It is not well for a man of his hands to be without his weapons. Are you sure, now, that they were not taken away from you?"

Belphebe said, "We came here on a magical spell, and as you doubtless know, there are some that cannot be spelled in the presence of cold iron."

"And what could be truer?" agreed Cuchulainn. He clapped his hands and called, "Bring two knives, darlings. The iron knives, not the bronze." He chewed, looking at Belphebe. "And where would you be journeying to, darlings?"

Shea said, "Back to America, I suppose. We sort of — dropped in to see the greatest hero in Ireland."

Cuchulainn appeared to take the compliment as a matter of course. "You come at a poor time. The expedition is over, and now I am going home to sit quietly with my wife Emer, so there will be no fighting."

Laeg looked up with his mouth full and said, "You will be quiet if Meddling Maev and Ailill will let you, Cucuc. Some devilment they will be getting up, or it is not the son of Riangaobra I am."

"When my time comes to be killed by the Connachta, then I will be killed by the men of Connacht," said Cuchulainn, composedly. He was still looking at Belphebe.

Belphebe asked, "Who stands at the head of the magical art here?"

Cuchulainn said, "It is true that you said you have a taste for magic. None is greater, nor will be, than Ulster's Cathbadh, adviser to King Conchobar. And now you will come with me to Muirthemne in the morning, rest and fit yourselves, and we will go to Emain Macha to see him together."

He laid aside his platter and took another look at Belphebe. The little man was as good with a trencher as he was with a sling; there was practically nothing left, and he had had twice as much as Shea.

"That's extremely kind of you," said Shea. "Very kind indeed." It was so very kind that he felt a twinge of suspicion.

“It is not,” said Cuchulainn. “For those with the gift of beauty, it is no more than their due that they should receive all courtesy.”

He was still looking at Belphebe, who glanced up at the darkening sky. “My lord,” she said, “I am somewhat foredone. Would it not be well to seek our rest?”

Shea said, “It’s an idea. Where do we sleep?”

Cuchulainn waved a hand toward the grove. “Where you will, darlings. No one will disturb you in the camp of Cuchulainn.” He clapped his hands. “Gather moss for the bed of my friends.”

When they were alone, Belphebe said in a low voice: “I like not the manner of his approach, though he has done us great good. Cannot you use your art to transport us back to Ohio?”

Shea said, “I’ll take a chance on trying to work out the sorites in the morning. Remember, it won’t do us any good to get back alone. We’ve got to take Pete, or we’ll be up on a charge of kidnapping or murdering him, and I don’t want to go prowling through this place at night looking for him. Besides, we need light to make the passes.”

Early as they rose, the camp was already astir about them and a fire lighted. As Shea and Belphebe wandered through the camp, looking for Brodsky, they noted it was strangely silent, the elaborate confusion of the previous evening being carried on in whispers or dump show. Shea grabbed the arm of a bewhiskered desperado hurrying past with a bag of something to inquire the reason. The man bent close and said in a fierce whisper, “Sure, ‘tis that himself is in his sad mood, and keeping his booth. If you would lose your head, it would be just as well to make a noise.”

“There’s Pete,” said Belphebe.

The detective waved a hand and came toward them from under the trees. He had somehow acquired one of the deerskin cloaks, which was held under his chin with a brass brooch, and he looked unexpectedly cheerful.

“What’s the office?” he asked in the same stage whisper the others were using, as he approached them.

“Come with us,” said Shea. “We’re going to try to get back to Ohio. Where’d you get the new clothes?”

“Aw, one of these muzzlers thought he could wrestle, so I slipped him a little jujitsu and won it. Listen, Shea, I changed my mind. I ain’t going back. This is the real McCoy.”

“But we want to go back,” said Belphebe, “and you told us just yesterday that if we showed up without you, our fate would be less than pleasant.”

“Listen, give it a rest. I’m on the legit here, and with that magical stuff of yours, you could be, too. At least I want to stay for the big blow.”

“Come this way,” said Shea, leading away from the center of the camp to where there was less danger of their voices causing trouble. “What do you mean by the big blow?”

“From what I got,” said Pete, “I figured out when we landed. This Maev and Ailill are rustling out the

mob and heeling them up to give Cuchulainn a bang on the head. They got all the cousins of people he's bumped off in on the caper, and they're going to put a geas on him that will make him go up against them all at once, and then boom. I want to stay for the payoff."

"Look here," said Shea, "you said only yesterday that we had to get you back within a week. Remember? It was something about your probably being seen going into our house and not coming out."

"Sure, sure. And if we go back, I'll alibi you. But what for? I'm teaching these guys to wrestle, and what with your magic, maybe you could even take the geas off the big shot and he wouldn't get shoved over."

"Perhaps I could at that," said Shea. "It seems to amount to a kind of psychological compulsion by magical means, and between psychology and magic, I ought to make it. But no — it's too risky. I daren't take the chance with him making eyes at Belphebe."

They had emerged from the clump of trees and were at the edge of the slope, with the early sun just touching the tops of the branches above them. Shea went on, "I'm sorry, Pete, but Belphebe and I don't want to spend the rest of our lives here, and if we're going, we've got to go now. As you said. Now, you two hold hands. Give me your other hand, Belphebe."

Brodsky obeyed with a somewhat sullen expression.

Shea closed his eyes, and began: "If either A or (B or C) is true, and C or D is false . . ." motioning with his free hand to the end of the sorites.

He opened his eyes again. They were still at the edge of a clump of trees, on a hill in Ireland, watching the smoke from the fire as it rose above the trees to catch the sunshine.

Belphebe asked, "What's amiss?"

"I don't know," said Shea desperately. "If I only had something to write with, so I could check over the steps . . . No, wait a minute. Making this work depends on a radical alteration of sense impressions in accordance with the rules of symbolic logic and magic. Now we know that magic works here, so that can't be the trouble. But for symbolic logic to be effective, you have to submit to its effects — that is, be willing. Pete, you're the villain of the piece. You don't want to go back."

"Don't put the squeeze on me," said Brodsky.

"I'll play ball."

"All right. Now I want you to remember that you're going back to Ohio, and that you have a good job there and like it. Besides, you were sent out to find us, and you did. Okay?"

They joined hands again and Shea, constricting his brow with effort, ran through the sorites again, this time altering one or two of the terms to give greater energy. As he reached the end, time seemed to stand still for a second; then *crash!* and a flash of vivid blue lightning struck the tree nearest them, splitting it from top to bottom.

Belphebe gave a little squeal, and a chorus of excited voices rose from the camp.

Shea gazed at the fragments of the splintered tree and said soberly, "I think that shot was meant for us, and that that just about tears it, darling. Pete, you get your wish. We're going to have to stay here at least

until I know more about the laws controlling magic in this continuum.”

Two or three of Cuchulainn’s men burst excitedly through the trees and came toward them, spears ready. “Is it all right that you are?” one of them called.

“Just practicing a little magic,” said Shea, easily. “Come on, let’s go back and join the others.”

In the clearing voices were no longer quenched, and the confusion had become worse than ever. Cuchulainn stood watching the loading of the chariot, with a lofty and detached air. As the three travelers approached he said, “Now it is to you I am grateful, Mac Shea, with your magical spell for reminding me that things are better done at home than abroad. It is leaving at once we are.”

“Hey!” said Brodsky. “I ain’t hadno breakfast.”

The hero regarded him with distaste. “You will be telling me that I should postpone the journey for the condition of a slave’s belly?” he said, and turning to Shea and Belphebe, “We can eat as we go.”

The ride was smoother than the one of the previous day only because the horses went at a walk so as not to outdistance the column of retainers on foot. Conversation over the squeaking of the wheels began by being sparse and rather boring, with Cuchulainn keeping his chin well down on his chest. But he apparently liked Belphebe’s comments on the beauty of the landscape. As it came on to noon he began to chatter, addressing her with an exclusiveness that Shea found disturbing, though he had to admit that the little man talked well, and always with the most perfect courtesy.

The country around them got lower and flatter and flatter and lower, until from the tops of the few rises Shea glimpsed a sharp line of gray-blue across the horizon; the sea. A shower came down and temporarily soaked the column, but nobody paid it much attention, and in the clear sunlit air that followed everyone was soon dry. Cultivation became more common, though there was still less of it than pasturage. Occasionally a lumpish-looking serf, clad in a length of ragged sacking-like cloth wrapped around his middle and a thick veneer of dirt, left off his labors to stare at the band and wave a languid greeting.

At last, over the manes of the horses, Shea saw that they were approaching a stronghold. This consisted of a stockade of logs with a huge double gate.

Belphebe surveyed it critically and whispered behind her hand to Shea, “It could be taken with firearrows.”

“I don’t think they have many archers or very good ones,” he whispered back. “Maybe you can show them something.”

The gate was pushed open creakingly by more bearded warriors, who shouted: “Good-day to you, Cucuc! Good luck toUlster ’s hound!”

The gate was wide enough to admit the chariot, scythe-blades and all. As the vehicle rumbled through the opening, Shea glimpsed houses of various shapes and sizes, some of them evidently stables and barns. The biggest of all was the hall in the middle, whose heavily thatched roof came down almost to the ground at the sides.

Laeg pulled up. Cuchulainn jumped down, waved his hand, and cried, “Muirthemne welcomes you, Americans!” All the others applauded as though he had said something particularly brilliant. He turned to

speak to a fat man, rather better dressed than the rest, when another man came out of the main hall and walked rapidly toward them. The newcomer was a thin man of medium height, elderly but vigorous, slightly bent and carrying a stick, on which he leaned now and again. He had a long white beard, and a purple robe covered him from neck to ankle.

“The best of the day to you, Cathbadh,” said Cuchulainn. “This is surely a happy hour that brings you here, but where is my darling Emer?”

“Emer has gone to Emain Macha,” said Cathbadh. “Conchobar summoned her . . .”

“Ara!” shouted Cuchulainn. “Is it a serf that I am, that the King can send for my wife every time he takes it into the head of him? He is . . .”

“It is not that at all, at all,” said Cathbadh. “He summons you, too, and for that he sent me instead of Levarcham, for he knows you might not heed her word if you took it into that willful head of yours to disobey, whereas it is myself can put a geas on you to go.”

“And why does himself want us at Emain Macha?”

“Would I be knowing all the secretes in the heart of a King?”

Shea asked, “Are you the court druid?”

Cathbadh became aware of him for the first time, and Cuchulainn made introductions. Shea explained, “It seems to me that the King might want you at the court for your own protection, so the druids can keep Maev’s sorcerers from putting a spell on you. That’s what she’s going to do.”

“How do you know of this?” asked Cathbadh.

“Through Pete here. He sometimes knows about things that are going to happen before they actually take place. In our country we call it second sight.”

Cuchulainn wrinkled his nose. “That ugly slave?”

“Yeh, me,” said Brodsky, who had approached the group. “And you better watch your step, handsome, because somebody’s going to hang you up to dry unless you do something about it.”

“If it is destined none can alter it,” said Cuchulainn.

“Fergus! Have the bath water heated.” He turned to Shea. “Once you are properly washed and garbed you will look well enough for the board in my beautiful house. I will lend you some proper garments, for I cannot bear the sight of those Formorian-like rags.”

III

ALONG THE side of the main hall was an alcove made of screens of wattle, set at an angle that provided privacy for those within. In the alcove stood Cuchulainn’s bathtub, a large and elaborate affair of bronze. A procession of the women of the manor were now coming in from the well with jugs of water, which they emptied into the tub. Meanwhile the men were poking up the fire at the end of the hall and adding a number of stones of about five to ten pounds’ weight.

Brodsky sidled up to Shea, as they stood in the half-light, orienting themselves. "Listen, I don't want to blow the whistle on a bump rap, but you better watch it. The racket they have here, this guy can make a pass at Belphebe in his own house, and it's legit. You ain't got no beef coming."

"I was afraid of that," said Shea, unhappily.

"Look there."

"There" was a row of wooden spikes projecting from one of the horizontal strings along the wall, and most of these spikes were occupied by human heads. As they watched Laeg brought in the head bag and added the latest trophies to the collection, pressing them down firmly. Some of those already in place were quite fresh, while others had been there so long that there was little left of them but a skull with a little hair adhering to the scalp.

"Jeepers!" said Brodsky, "and if you start beefing, he'll put you there, too. Give me time — I'll try to think of some way to rumble his line."

"Make way!" shouted a huge bewhiskered retainer. The three dodged as the man ran past them, carrying a large stone, smoking from the fire, in a pair of tongs. The man dashed into the alcove. There was a splash and a loud hiss. Another retainer followed with a second stone while the first was on his return trip. In a few minutes all the stones had been transferred to the bathtub. Shea looked around the screen and saw that the water was steaming gently.

Cuchulainn sauntered past into the bathroom and tested the water with an inquisitive finger. "That will do, dears."

The retainers picked the stones out of the water with their tongs and piled them in the corner, then went around from behind the screen. Cuchulainn reached up to pull off his tunic, then saw Shea. "I am going to undress for the bath," he said. "Surely, you would not be wanting to remain here, now."

Shea turned back into the main room just in time to see Brodsky smack one fist into the other palm.

"Got it!"

"Got what?" said Shea.

"How to needle his hot tomato." He looked around, then pulled Shea and Belphebe closer. "Listen, the big shot putting the scam on you now just reminded me. The minute he makes a serious pass at you, Belle, you gotta go into a strip-tease act. In public, where everybody can get a gander at it."

Belphebe gasped. Shea asked, "Are you out of your head? That sounds to me like trying to put a fire out with gasoline."

"I tell you he can't take it!" Brodsky's voice was low but urgent. "They can't none of them. One time when this guy was going to put the slug on everyone at the court, the King sent out a bunch of babes with bare knockers, and they nearly had to pick him up in a basket."

"I like this not," said Belphebe, but Shea said, "A nudity taboo! That could be part of a culture pattern, all right. Do they all have it?"

"Yeh, and but good," said Brodsky. "They even croak of it. What gave me the tip was him putting the

chill on you before he started to undress — he was doing you a favor.”

Cuchulainn stepped out of the alcove, buckling a belt around a fresh tunic, emerald-green with embroidery of golden thread. He scrubbed his long hair with a towel and ran a comb through it, while Laeg took his place behind the screen.

Belphebe said, “Is there to be but one water for all?”

Cuchulainn said, “There is plenty of soapwort. Cleanliness is good for beauty.” He glanced at Brodsky. “The slave can bathe in the trough outside.”

“Listen . . .” began Brodsky, but Shea put a hand on his arm, and to cover up, asked, “Do your druids use spells of transportation — from one place to another?”

“There is little a good druid cannot do — but I would advise you not to use the spells of Cathbadh unless you are a hero as well as a maker of magic, for they are very mighty.”

He turned to watch the preparations for dinner with a sombre satisfaction. Laeg presently appeared, his toilet made, and from another direction one of the women brought garments which she took into the bathroom for Shea and Belphebe. Shea started to follow his wife, but remembered what Brodsky had said about the taboo, and decided not to take a chance on shocking his hosts. She came out soon enough in a floor-length gown that clung to her all over, and he noted with displeasure that it was the same green and embroidered pattern as Cuchulainn’s tunic.

After Shea had dealt with water almost cold and a towel already damp, his own costume turned out to be a saffron tunic and tight knitted scarlet treads which he imagined as looking quite effective.

Belphebe was watching the women around the fire. Over in the shadows under the eaves sat Pete Brodsky, cleaning his fingernails with a bronze knife, a chunky, middle-aged man — a good hand in a fight, with his knowledge of jujitsu and his quick reflexes, and not a bad companion. Things would be a lot easier, though, if he hadn’t fouled up the spell by wanting to stay where he was, or had that been responsible?

Old Cathbadh came stumping up with his stick. “Mac Shea,” he said, “the Little Hound is after telling me that you also are a druid, who came here by magical arts from a distant place, and can summon lightning from the skies.”

“It’s true enough,” said Shea. “Doubtless you know those spells.”

“Doubtless I do,” said Cathbadh, looking sly. “We must hold converse on matters of our craft. We will be teaching each other some new spells, I am thinking.”

Shea frowned. The only spell he was really interested in was one that would take Belphebe and himself — and Pete — back to Garaden, Ohio, and Cathbadh probably didn’t know that one. It would be a question of getting at the basic assumptions, and more or less working out his own method of putting them to use.

Aloud he said, “I think we can be quite useful to each other. In America, where I come from, we have worked out some of the general principles of magic, so that it is only necessary to learn the procedures in various places.”

Cathbadh shook his head. “You do be telling me — and it is the word of a druid, so I must believe you — but ‘tis hard to credit that a druid could travel among the Scythians of Greece or the Scots of Egypt, with all the strange gods they do be having, and still be protected by his spells as well as at home.”

Shea got a picture of violently confused geography. But then, he reflected, the correspondence between this world and his own would only be rough, anyway. There might be Scots in Egypt here.

Just then Cuchulainn came out of his private room and sat down without ceremony at the head of the table. The others gathered round. Laeg took the place at one side of the hero and Cathbadh at the other. Shea and Belphebe were nodded to the next places, opposite each other. A good-looking serf woman with hair bound back from her forehead filled a large golden goblet at Cuchulainn’s place with wine from a golden ewer, then smaller silver cups at the places of Laeg and Cathbadh, and copper mugs for Shea and Belphebe. Down the table the rest of the company had leather jacks and barley beer.

Cuchulainn said to Cathbadh, “Will you make the sacrifice, dear?”

The druid stood up, spilled a few drops on the floor and chanted to the gods Bile, Danu, and Ler. Shea decided that it was only imagination that he was hearing the sound of beating wings, and only the approach of the meal that gave him a powerful sense of internal comfort, but there was no doubt that Cathbadh knew his stuff.

He knew it, too. “Was that not fine, now?” he said, as he sat down next to Shea. “Can you show me anything in your outland magic ever so good?”

Shea thought. It wouldn’t do any harm to give the old codger a small piece of sympathetic magic, and might help his own reputation. He said, “Move your wine-cup over next to mine, and watch it carefully.”

There would have to be a spell to link the two if he were going to make Cathbadh’s wine disappear as he drank his own, and the only one he could think of at the moment was the “Double, double” from “Macbeth.” He murmured that under his breath, making the hand passes he had learned in Faerie.

Then he said, “Now, watch,” picked up his mug and set it to his lips.

Whoosh!

Out of Cathbadh’s cup a geyser of wine leaped as though driven by a pressure hose, nearly reaching the ceiling before it broke up to descend in a rain of glittering drops, while the guests at the head of the table leaped to their feet to draw back from the phenomenon.

Cathbadh was a fast worker; he lifted his stick and struck the hurrying stream of liquid, crying something unintelligible in a high voice. Abruptly the gusher was quenched and there was only the table, swimming with wine, and serf women rushing to mop up the mess.

Cuchulainn said, “This is a very beautiful piece of magic, Mac Shea, and it is a pleasure to have so notable a druid among us. But you would not be making fun of us, would you?” He looked dangerous.

“Not me,” said Shea. “I only. . .”

Whatever he intended to say was cut off by a sudden burst of unearthly howling from somewhere outside. Shea glanced around rather wildly, feeling that things were getting out of hand. Cuchulainn said, “You need not be minding that at all, now. It will only be Uath, and because the moon has reached her

term.”

“I don’t understand,” said Shea.

“The women of Ulster were not good enough for Uath, so he must be going to Connacht and courting the daughter of Ollgaeth the druid. This Ollgaeth is no very polite man; he said no Ultonian should have his daughter, and when Uath persisted, he put a geas on Uath that when the moon fills he must howl the night out, and a geas on his own daughter that she cannot abide the sound of howling. I am thinking that Ollgaeth’s head is due for a place of honor.” He looked significantly at his collection.

Shea said, “But I still don’t understand. If you can put a geas on someone, can’t it be taken off again?”

Cuchulainn looked mournful, Cathbadh embarrassed, and Laeg laughed. “Now you will be making Cathbadh sad, and our dear Cucuc is too polite to tell you, but the fact is no other than that Ollgaeth is so good a druid that no one can lift the spells he lays, nor lay one he cannot lift.”

Outside, Uath’s mournful howl rose again.

Cuchulainn said to Belphebe, “Does he trouble you, dear? I can have him removed, or the upper part of him.”

As the meal progressed, Shea noticed that Cuchulainn was putting away an astonishing quantity of the wine, talking almost exclusively with Belphebe, although the drink did not seem to have much effect on the hero but to intensify his sombre courtesy. But, when the table was cleared, he lifted his goblet to drain it, looked at Belphebe from across the table, and nodded significantly.

Shea got up and ran around the table to place a hand on her shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Pete Brodsky getting up, too. Cuchulainn’s face bore the faintest of smiles. “It is sorry to discommode you I am,” he said, “but this is by the rules and not even a challenging matter. So now, Belphebe, darling, you will just come to my room.”

He got up and started toward Belphebe, who got up, too, backing away. Shea tried to keep between them and racked his brain hopelessly for some kind of spell that might stop this business. Everyone else was standing up and pushing to watch the little drama.

Cuchulainn said, “Now you would not be getting in my way, would you, Mac Shea, darling?” His voice was gentle, but there was something incredibly ferocious in the way he uttered the words, and Shea suddenly realized he was facing a man who had a sword. Outside, Uath howled mournfully.

Beside him, Belphebe herself suddenly leaped for one of the weapons hanging on the wall and tugged, but in vain. It had been so securely fastened with staples that it would have taken a pry bar to get it loose. Cuchulainn laughed.

Behind and to the left of Shea, Brodsky’s voice rose, “Belle, you stiff, do like I told you!”

She turned back as Cuchulainn drew nearer and with set face crossed her arms and whipped the green gown off over her head. She stood in her underwear.

There was a simultaneous gasp and groan of horror from the audience. Cuchulainn stopped, his mouth coming open.

“Go on!” yelled Brodsky in the background.

“Give it the business!”

Belphebe reached behind her to unhook her brassiere. Cuchulainn staggered as though he had been struck. He threw one arm across his eyes, reached the table and brought his face down on it, pounding the wood with the other fist.

“Ara!” he shouted. “Take her away! Is it killing me you will be and in my own hall, and me your host that has saved your life?”

“Will you let her alone?” asked Shea.

“I will that for the night.”

“Mac Shea, take his offer,” advised Laeg from the head of the table. He looked rather greenish himself. “If his rage comes on him, none of us will be safe.”

“Okay. Honest,” said Shea and held Belphebe’s dress for her.

There was a universal sigh of relief from the background. Cuchulainn staggered to his feet. “It is not feeling well that I am, darlings,” he said and, picking up the golden ewer of wine, made for his room.

IV

THERE WAS a good deal of excited gabble among the retainers as Belphebe walked back to her place without looking to right or left, but they made room for Shea and Brodsky to join her. The druid looked shrewdly at the closed door and said, “If the Little Hound drinks too much by himself, he may be brooding on the wrong you are after doing him, and a sad day that would be. If he comes out with the hero-light playing round his head, run for your lives.”

Belphebe said, “But where would we go.”

“Back to your own place. Where else?”

Shea frowned. “I’m not sure. . .” he began, when Brodsky cut in suddenly, “Say,” he said, “your boss ain’t really got no right to get bugged up. We had to play it that way?”

Cathbadh swung to him. “And why, serf?”

“Don’t call me serf. She’s got a fierce geas on her. Any guy that touches her gets a bellyache and dies of it. Her husband only stands it because he’s a magician. It’s lucky we put the brakes on before the boss got her in that room, or he’d be ready for the lilies right now.”

Cathbadh’s eyebrows shot up like a seagull taking off. “Himself should know of this,” he said. “There would be less blood shed in Ireland if more people opened their mouths to explain things before they put their feet in them.”

He got up, went to the bedroom door and knocked. There was a growl from within, Cathbadh entered, and a few minutes later came out with Cuchulainn. The later’s step was visibly unsteady, and his melancholy seemed to have deepened. He walked to the head of the table and sat down in the chair

again.

“Sure, and this is the saddest tale in the world I’m hearing about your wife having such a bad geas on her. The evening is spoilt and all . . . I hope the black fit does not come on me, for then it will be blood and death I need to restore me.”

There were a couple of gasps audible and Laeg looked alarmed, but Cathbadh said hastily, “The evening is not so spoilt as you think Cucuc. This Mac Shea is evidently a very notable druid and spell maker, but I think I am a better. Did you notice how quickly I put down his wine fountain? Would it not lift your heart, now, to see the two of us engage in a contest of magic?”

Cuchulainn clapped his hands. “Never was truer word spoken. You will just do that, darlings.”

Shea said, “I’m afraid I can’t guarantee . . .” but Belphebe plucked his sleeve and with her head close to his, whispered, “Do it. There is a danger here.”

“It isn’t working right,” Shea whispered back. Outside rose the mournful sound of Uath’s howling. “Can you not use your psychology on him out there?” the girl asked. “It will be magic to them.”

“A real psychoanalysis would take days,” said Shea. “Wait a minute, though — we seem to be in a world where the hysteric type is the norm. That means a high suggestibility, and we might get something out of post-hypnotic suggestion.”

Cuchulainn from the head of the table said, “It is not all night we have to wait.”

Shea turned round and said aloud, “How would it be if I took the geas off that character out there training to be a bar-room tenor? I understand that’s something Cathbadh hasn’t been able to do.”

Cathbadh said, “If you can do this, it will be a thing worth seeing, but I will not acknowledge you can do it until I have seen it.”

“All right,” said Shea. “Bring him in.”

“Laeg, dear, go get us Uath,” said Cuchulainn.

He took a drink, looked at Belphebe and his expression became morose again.

Shea said, “Let’s see. I want a small bright object. May I borrow one of your rings, Cuchulainn? That one with the big stone would do nicely.”

Cuchulainn slid the ring down the table as Laeg returned, firmly gripping the arm of a stocky young man, who seemed to be opposing some resistance to the process. Just as they got in the door Uath flung back his head and emitted a blood-curdling howl. Laeg dragged him forward, howling away. Shea turned to the others. “Now if this magic is going to work, I’ll need a little room. Don’t come too near us while I’m spinning the spell, or you’ll be apt to get caught in it, too.” He arranged a pair of seats well back from the table and attached a thread to the ring.

Laeg pushed Uath into one of the seats. “That’s a bad geas you have there, Uath,” said Shea, “and I want you to cooperate with me in getting rid of it. You’ll do everything I tell you, won’t you?”

The man nodded. Shea lifted the ring, said, “Watch this,” and began twirling the thread back and forth

between thumb and forefinger, so that the ring rotated first one way and then the other, sending out a flickering gleam of reflection from the rushlights. Meanwhile Shea talked to Uath in a low voice, saying “sleep” now and then in the process. Behind him he could hear an occasionally caught breath and could almost feel the atmosphere of suspense.

Uath went rigid.

Shea asked in a low voice, “Can you hear me, Uath?”

“That I can.”

“You will do what I say.”

“That I will.”

“When you wake up, you won’t suffer from this howling geas any more.”

“That I will not.”

“To prove that you mean it, the first thing you do on waking will be to clap Laeg on the shoulder.”

“That I will.”

Shea repeated his directions several times, varying the words, and making Uath repeat them after him. There was no use taking a chance on slipups. At last he brought him out of the hypnotic trance with a snap of the fingers and a sharp “Wake up!”

Uath stared about him with an air of bewilderment. Then he got up, walked over to the table and clapped Laeg on the shoulder. There was an appreciative murmur from the audience.

Shea asked, “How do you feel, Uath?”

“It is just fine that I am feeling. I do not want to be howling at the moon at all now, and I’m thinking the geas is gone for good. I thank your honor.” He came down the table, seized Shea’s hand and kissed it and joined the other retainers at the lower part of the table.

Cathbadh said, “That is a very good magic, indeed, and not the least of it was the small geas you put on him to lay his hand on Laeg’s shoulder at the same time. And true it is that I have been unable to lift this geas. But as one man can run faster, so can another one climb faster, and I will demonstrate by taking the geas off your wife, which you have evidently not been able to deal with.”

“I’m not sure. . .” began Shea, doubtfully.

“Let not yourself be worried,” said Cuchulainn.

“It will not harm her at all, and in the future she can be more courteous in the high houses she visits.”

The druid rose and pointed a long, bony finger at Belphebe. He chanted some sort of rhythmic affair which began in a gibberish of unknown language, but became more and more intelligible, ending with: “. . . and by oak, ash and yew, by the beauty of Aengus and the strength of Ler and by authority as high druid of Ulstr, let this geas be lifted from you, Belphebe! Let it pass! Out with it! It is erased, cancelled

and no more to be heard of!” He tossed up his arms and then sat down. “How do you feel, darling?”

“In good sooth, not much different than before,” said Belphebe. “Should I?”

Cuchulainn said, “But how can we know now that the spell has worked? Aha! I have it! Come with me.” He rose and came round the table, and in response to Shea’s exclamation of fury and Belphebe’s of dismay, added, “Only as far as the door. Have I not given you my word?”

He bent over Belphebe, put one arm around her and reached for her hand, then reeled back, clutching his stomach with both hands and gasping for breath. Cathbadh and Laeg were on their feet. So was Shea.

Cuchulainn staggered against Laeg’s arm, wiped a sleeve cross his eyes and said, “Now the American is the winner, since your removal spell has failed, and it was like to be the death of me that the touch of her was. Do you be trying it yourself, Cathbadh, dear.”

The druid reached out and laid a cautious finger on Belphebe’s arm. Nothing happened.

Laeg said, “Did not the serf say that a magician was proof against this geas?”

Cathbadh said, “You may have the right of it there, although, but I am thinking myself there is another reason. Cucuc wished to take her to his bed, while I was not thinking of that at all, at all.”

Cuchulainn sat down again and addressed Shea. “A good thing it is, indeed, that I was protected from the work of this geas. Has it not proved obstinate even to the druids of your own country?”

“Very,” said Shea. “I wish I could find someone who could deal with it. He had been more surprised than Cuchulainn by the latter’s attack of cramps, but in the interval he had figured it out. Belphebe hadn’t had any geas on her in the first

place. Therefore, when Cathbadh threw at her a spell designed to lift a geas, it took the opposite effect of laying on her a very good geas indeed. That was elementary magicology, and under the conditions he was rather grateful to Cathbadh.

Cathbadh said, “In America there may be none to deal with such a matter, but in Ireland there is a man both bold and clever enough to lift the spell.”

“Who’s he?” asked Shea.

“That will be Ollgaeth of Cruachan, at the Court of Ailill and Maev, who put the geas on Uath.”

Brodsky, from beside Shea spoke up. “He’s the guy that’s going to put one on Cuchulainn before the big mob takes him.”

“Wurra!” said Cathbadh to Shea. “Your slave must have a second mind to go with his second sight. The last time he spoke, it would only be a spell that Ollgaeth would be putting on the Little Hound.”

“Listen, punk,” said Brodsky in a tone of exasperation, “get the stones out of your head. This is the pitch: this Maev and Ailill are mobbing up everybody that owes Cuchulainn here a score, and when they get them all together, they’re going to put a geas on him that will make him fight them all at once, and it’s too bad.”

Cathbadh combed his beard with his fingers. "If this be true. . ." he began.

"It's the McCoy. Think I'm on the con?"

"I was going to say that if it be true, it is high tidings from a low source. Nor do I see precisely how it may be dealt with. If it were a matter of spells only . . ."

Cuchulainn said with mournful and slightly alcoholic gravity, "I would fight them all without the geas, but if I am fated to fall, then that is an end of me."

Cathbadh turned to Shea. "You see the trouble we have with himself. Does your second sight reach farther, slave?"

Brodsky said, "Okay, lug, you asked for it. After Cuchulainn gets rubbed out, there'll be a war and practically everybody in the act gets knocked off, including you and Ailill and Maev. How do you like it?"

"As little as I like the look of your face," said Cathbadh. He addressed Shea. "Can this foretelling be trusted?"

"I've never known him to be wrong."

Cathbadh glanced from one to the other till one could almost hear his brains rumbling. Then he said, "I am thinking, Mac Shea, that you will be having business at Ailill's court."

"What gives you such an idea?"

"You will be wanting to see Ollgaeth in this matter of your wife's geas, of course. A wife with a geas like that is like one with a bad eye, and you can never be happy until it is removed entirely. You will take your man with you, and he will tell his tale and let Maev know that we know of her schemings, and they will be no more use than trying to feed a boar on bracelets."

Brodsky snapped his fingers and said, "Take him up," in a heavy whisper, but Shea said, "Look here, I'm not at all sure that I want to go to Ailill's court. Why should I? And if this Maev is as determined as she seems to be, I don't think you'll stop her by telling her you know what she's up to."

"On the first point," said the druid, "there is the matter that Cucuc saved your life and all, and you would be grateful to him, not to mention the geas. And for the second, it is not so much Maev that I would be letting know we see through her planning as Ollgaeth. For he will know as well as yourself, that if we learn of the geas before he lays it, all the druids at Conchobar's court will chant against him, and he will have no more chance of making it bite than a dog does of eating an apple."

"Mmm," said Shea. "Your point about gratitude is a good one, even if I can't quite see the validity of the other. What we want mostly is to get to our own home, though." He stifled a yawn. "We can take a night to sleep on it and decide in the morning. Where do we sleep?"

"Finn will show you to a chamber," said Cuchulainn.

"Myself and Cathbadh will be staying up the while to discuss on this matter of Maev." He smiled his charming and melancholy smile.

Finn guided the couple to a guest-room at the back of the building, handed Shea a rush-light and closed the door, as Belphebe put up her arms to be kissed.

The next second Shea was doubled up and knocked flat to the floor by a super-edition of the cramps.

Belphebe bent over him. "Are you hurt, Harold?" she asked.

He pulled himself to a sitting posture with his back against the wall. "Not — seriously," he gasped. "It's that geas. It doesn't take any time out for husbands."

The girl considered. "Could you not relieve me of it as you did the one who howled?"

Shea said, "I can try, but I can pretty well tell in advance that it won't work. Your personality is too tightly integrated — just the opposite of these hysterics around here. That is, I wouldn't stand a chance of hypnotizing you."

"You might do it by magic."

Shea scrambled the rest of the way to his feet.

"Not till I know more. Haven't you noticed I've been getting an over-charge — first that stroke of lightning and then the wine fountain? There's something in this continuum that seems to reverse my kind of magic."

She laughed a little. "If that's the law, why there's an end. You have but to summon Pete and make a magic that would call for us to stay here, then hey, presto! we are returned."

"I don't dare take the chance, darling. It might work and it might not — and even if it did, you'd be apt to wind up in Ohio with that geas still on you, and we really would be in trouble. We do take our characteristics along with us when we make the jump. And anyway, I don't know how to get back to Ohio yet."

"What's to be done, then?" the girl said. "For surely you have a plan, as always."

"I think the only thing we can do is take up Cathbadh's scheme and go see this Ollgaeth. At least, he ought to be able to get rid of that geas."

All the same, Shea had to sleep on the floor.

V

HAROLD SHEA, Belphebe, and Pete Brodsky rode steadily at a walk across the central plain of Ireland, the Sheas on horses, Brodsky on a mule which he sat with some discomfort, leading a second mule carrying the provisions and equipment that Cuchulainn had pressed on them. Their accouterments included serviceable broadswords at the hips of Shea and Brodsky and a neat dagger at Belphebe's belt. Her request for a bow had brought forth only miserable sticks that pulled no farther than the breast and were quite useless beyond a range of fifty yards, and these she had refused.

All the first day they climbed slowly into the uplands of Monaghan. They followed the winding course of the Erne for some miles and splashed across it at a ford, then struck the boglands of western Cavan.

Sometimes there was a road of sorts, sometimes they plodded across grassy moors, following the vague and verbose directions of peasants.

As they skirted patches of forest, deer started and ran before them, and once a tongue-lolling wolf trotted parallel to their track for a while before abandoning the game.

By nightfall they had covered at least half their journey. Brodsky, who had begun by feeling sorry for himself, began to recover somewhat under the ministrations of Belphebe's excellent camp cookery, and announced that he had seen quite enough of ancient Ireland and was ready to go back.

"I don't get it," he said. "Why don't you just mooch off the way you came here?"

"Because I'm unskilled labor now," explained Shea. "You saw Cathbadh make that spell — he started chanting in the archaic language and brought it down to date. I get the picture, but I'd have to learn the archaic. Unless I can get someone else to send us back. And I'm worried about that. As you said, we've got to work fast. What are you going to tell them if they've started looking for you when we get back?"

"Ah, nuts," said Brodsky. "I'll level with them. The force is so loused up with harps that are always cutting up touches about how hot Ireland is that they'll give it a play whether they believe me or not."

Belphebe said in a small voice, "But I would be at home."

"I know, kid," said Shea. "So would I. If I only knew how."

Morning showed mountains on the right, with a round peak in the midst of them. The journey went more slowly than on the previous day, principally because all three had not developed riding callouses. They pulled up that evening at the hut of a peasant rather more prosperous than the rest, and Brodsky more than paid for their food and lodging with tales out of Celtic lore. The pseudo-Irishman certainly had his uses.

The next day woke in rain, and though the peasant assured them that Rath Cruachan was no more than a couple hours' ride distant, the group became involved in fog and drizzle, so that it was not till afternoon that they skirted Loch Key and came to Magh Ai, the Plain of Livers. The cloaks with which Cuchulainn had furnished them were of fine wool, but all three were soaked and silent by time a group of houses came into sight through air slightly clearing.

There were about as many of the buildings as would constitute an incorporated village in their own universe, surrounded by the usual stockade and wide gate — unmistakably Cruachan of the Poets, the capital of Connacht.

As they approached along an avenue of trees and shrubbery, a boy of about thirteen, in shawl and kilt and carrying a miniature spear, popped out of the bushes and cried: "Stand there! Who is it you are and where are you going?"

It might be important not to smile at this diminutive warrior. Shea identified himself gravely and asked in turn, "And who are you, sir?"

"I am Goistan mac Idha, of the boy troop of Cruachan, and it is better not to interfere with me."

Shea said, "We have come from a far country to see your King and Queen and the druid Ollgaeth."

He turned and waved his spear toward where a building like that at Muirthemne, but more ornate, loomed over the stockade, then marched ahead of them down the road.

At the gate of the stockade was a pair of hairy soldiers, but their spears were leaning against the posts and they were too engrossed in a game of knuckle-bones even to look up as the party rode through. The clearing weather seemed to have brought activity to the town. A number of people were moving about, most of whom paused to stare at Brodsky, who had flatly refused to discard the pants of his brown business-suit and was evidently not dressed for the occasion.

The big house was built of heavy oak beams and had wooden shingles instead of the usual thatch. Shea stared with interest at windows with real glass in them, even though the panes were little diamond-shaped pieces half the size of a hand and far too irregular to see through.

There was a doorkeeper with a beard badly in need of trimming and lopsided to the right. Shea got off his horse and advanced to him, saying, "I am Mac Shea, a traveler from beyond the island of the Fomorians, with my wife and bodyguard. May we have an audience with their majesties, and their great druid, Ollgaeth?"

The doorkeeper inspected the party with care and then grinned. "I am thinking," he said, "that your honor will please the Queen with your looks, and your lady will please himself, so you had best go along in. But this ugly lump of a bodyguard will please neither, and as they are very sensitive and this is judgment day, he will no doubt be made a headshorter for the coming, so he had best stay with your mounts."

Shea glanced round in time to see Brodsky replace his expression of fury with the carefully cultivated blank that policemen use, and helped Belphebe off her horse.

Inside, the main hall stretched away with the usual swords and spears in the usual place on the wall, and a rack of heads, not as large as Cuchulainn's. In the middle of the hall, surrounded at a respectful distance by retainers and armed soldiers, stood an oaken dais, ornamented with strips of bronze and silver. It held two big carven armchairs, in which lounged, rather than sat, the famous sovereigns of Connacht.

Maev might have been in her early forties, still strikingly beautiful, with a long, pale, unlined face, pale blue eyes and yellow hair, hanging in long braids. For a blonde without the aid of cosmetics, she had remarkably red lips.

King Ailill was a less impressive figure than his consort, some inches shorter, fat and paunchy, with small close-set eyes constantly moving and a straggly pepper-and-salt beard. He seemed unable to keep his fingers still. An ulcer type, thought Shea; would be a chain smoker if tobacco existed in this part of the space-time continuum.

A young man in a blue kilt, wearing a silver-hilted shortsword over a tunic embroidered with gold thread, seemed to be acting as usher to make sure that nobody got to the royal couple out of turn. He spotted the newcomers at once, and worked his way toward them.

"Will you be seeking an audience, or have you come merely to look at the greatest King in Ireland?" he asked. His eyes ran appreciatively over Belphebe's contours.

Shea identified himself, adding, "We have come to pay our respects to the King and Queen . . . ah . . ."

"Mainemac Aililla. Mainemo Epert," said the young man.

This would be one of the numerous sons of Ailill and Maev, who had all been given the same name. But he stood in their path without moving.

“Can we speak to them?” Shea said.

Mainemo Epert put back his head and looked down an aristocratic nose. “Since you are foreigners, you are evidently not knowing that it is the custom in Connacht to have a present for the man who brings you before a King. But I will be forgiving your ignorance.” He smiled a charming smile.

Shea glanced at Belphebe and she looked back in dismay. Their total possessions consisted of what they stood in. “But we have to see them,” he said. “It may be as important to them as to us.”

Mainemo Epert smiled again.

Shea said, “How about a nice broadsword?” and pushed forward his hilt.

“I have a better one,” said Maine mo Epert, exasperatingly, and pushed forward his. “If it were a jewel, now . . .”

“How about seeing Ollgaeth the druid?”

“It is a rule that he will see none but those the Queen sends him.”

Shea felt like whipping out the broadsword and taking a crack at him, but that would probably not be considered polite. Suddenly Belphebe beside him said: “Jewels have we none, sirrah, but from your glances, there is something you would prize more. I am sure that in accordance with your custom, my husband would be glad to lend me to you for the night.”

Shea gasped, and then remembered. That geas she had acquired could be handy as well as troublesome. But it had better not be taken off till morning. Maine mo Epert’s smile turned into a grin that made Shea want more than ever to swat him, but he clapped his hands and began to push people aside. Shea had just time to whisper, “Nice work, kid,” when the usher pushed a couple of people from the end of a bench and sat them down in the front row, facing the royal pair. At the moment a couple of spearmen were holding a serf and giving evidence that he had stolen a pork chop.

Maev looked at Ailill, who said, “Ahem — since the lout was starving, perhaps we ought to exercise mercy and let him off with the loss of a hand.”

“Do not be a fool,” said Maev, “when it is not necessary at all. What! A man in Connacht of the heroes who is so weak-witted that he must starve? Hang him or burn him, would be my decision if I were king.”

“Very well, darling,” said Ailill. “Let the man be hung.”

Two little groups stepped forward next, glaring at each other. Maine mo Epert began to introduce them, but before he got halfway through, Maev said, “I know of this case and it promises to be a long one. Before we hear it I would willingly learn something of the business of the handsome pair of strangers you have brought in.”

Mainemo Epert said, “This is a pair from a distant island called America. The Mac Shea and his wife, Belphebe. They wish to pay their respects.”

“Let him speak,” said Maev.

Shea wondered whether he ought to make an obeisance, but as no one else seemed to be doing it, he merely stepped forward and said, “Queen, you have become so famous that even in America we have heard of you, and we could not restrain the desire to see you. Also, I would like to see your famous druid, Ollgaeth, since my wife is suffering from a most unpleasant geas, and I am told he is an expert at removing them. Also, I have a message for you and the King, but that had better be private.”

Maev rested her chin on her hand and surveyed him. “Handsome man,” she said, “it is easy to see that you are not much used to deceiving people. Your embroidery is in the style of Ulster, and now you will be telling me at once what this message is and from whom it comes there.”

“It doesn’t come from there,” said Shea. “It’s true I have been in Ulster, in fact at Cuchulainn’s house of Muirthemne. And the message is that your plan against him will bring disaster.”

King Ailill’s fingers stopped their restless twitching and his mouth came open, while Maev’s eyebrows formed a straight line. She said in a high voice, “And who told you of the plans of the King of Connacht?”

Look out, said Shea to himself, *this is thin ice*. Aloud he said, “Why, it’s just that in my own country, I’m something of a magician, and I learned of it through spells.”

The tension appeared to relax. “Magic,” said Maev. “Handsome man, you have said a true word that this message should be private. We will hear more on it later. You will be at our table tonight, and there you will meet Ollgaeth. For the now, our son, Maine Mingor, will show you to a place.”

She waved her hand, and Maine Mingor, a somewhat younger edition of Maine mo Epert, stepped out of the group and beckoned them to follow him.

At the door Belphebe giggled and said, “Handsome man.”

Shea said, “Listen . . .”

“That I did,” said Belphebe, “and heard her say that the message should be private. You’re going to need a geas as much as I do tonight.”

The rain had stopped, and the setting sun was shooting beams of gold and crimson through the low clouds. The horses had been tied to rings in the wall of the building, and Pete was waiting, with an expression of boredom. As Shea turned to follow Maine Mingor, he bumped into a tall, dark man, who was apparently waiting around for just that purpose.

“Is it a friend of Cuchulainn of Muirthemne you are now?” asked this individual, ominously.

“I’ve met him, but we’re not intimates,” said Shea. “Have you any special reason for asking?”

“I have that. He killed my father in his own house, he did. And I am thinking it is time he had one friend the less.” His hand went to his hilt.

Maine Mingor said, “You will be leaving off with that, Lughaid. These people are messengers and under the protection of the Queen, my mother, so that if you touch them it will be both gods and men you must deal with.”

“We will talk of this later, Mac Shea dear,” said Lughaid, and turned back to the palace.

Belphebe said, “I like that not.”

Shea said, “Darling, I still know how to fence, and they don’t.”

VI

DINNER FOLLOWED a pattern only slightly different from that at Muirthemne, with Maev and Ailill sitting on a dais facing each other across a small table. Shea and Belphebe were not given places so lofty as they had been at Cuchulainn’s board, but this was partly compensated for by the presence of Ollgaeth the druid just across the board.

Only partly, however; it became quite clear that Ollgaeth — a big, stoutish man with a mass of white hair and beard — was one of those people who pretend to ask questions only in order to trigger themselves off on remarks of their own. He inquired about Shea’s previous magical experience, and let him just barely touch on the illusions he had encountered in the Finnish Kalevala before taking off.

“Ah, now you would be thinking that was a great rare thing to see, would you not?” he said, and gulped at barley beer. “Now let me tell you, handsome man, that of all the places in the world, Connacht produces the greatest illusions and the most beautiful. I remember, I do, the time when I was making a spell for Laerdach, for a better yield from his dun cow, and while I was in the middle of it, who should come past but his daughter, and she so beautiful that I stopped my chanting to look at her. Would you believe it now? The milk began to flow in a stream that would have drowned a man on horseback, and I had barely time to reverse the spell before it changed from illusion to reality and ravaged half a county.”

Shea said, “Oh, I see. The chanting . . .”

Ollgaeth hurried on, “And there is a hill behind the rath of Maev this very moment. It looks no different from any other, but it is a hill of great magic, being one of the hills of the Sidhe and a gateway to their kingdom.”

“Who . . .” began Shea, but the druid only raised his voice a trifle: “Mostly now, they would be keeping the gateways closed. But on a night like tonight, a good druid, or even an ordinary one might open the way.”

“Why tonight?” asked Belphebe from beside Shea.

“What other night would it be but the Lughnasadh? Was it not for that you would be coming here? No, I forget. Forgive an old man.” He smote his brow to emphasize the extent of his fault. “Mainemo Epert was after telling me that it was myself you came to see, and you could have done no better. Come midnight when the moon is high, and I will be showing you the powers of Ollgaeth the druid.”

Shea said, “As a matter of fact . . .” but Ollgaeth rushed past him with: “I call to mind there was a man — what was his name? — had a geas on him that he would be seeing everything double. Now that was an illusion, and it was me he came to in his trouble. I . . .”

Shea was spared the revelation of what Ollgaeth had done in the case of the double vision by King Ailill’s rapping on his table with the hilt of his knife and saying in his high voice, “We will now be hearing from Ferchertne the bard, since this is the day of Lugh, and a festival.”

Serfs were whisking away the last of the food and benches were being moved to enlarge the space around Ferchertne. This was a youngish man with long hair and a lugubrious expression; he sat down on a stool with his harp, plucked a few melancholy twangs from the strings, and in a bumpish baritone launched into the epic of the "Fate of the Children of Tuirenn."

It wasn't very interesting, and the voice was definitely bad. Shea glanced around and saw Brodsky fidgeting every time the harpist missed a quantity or struck a false note. Everyone else seemed to be affected almost to the point of tears, however, even Ollgaeth. Finally Ferchertne's voice went up in an atrocious discord, and there was a violent snort.

The harp gave a twang and halted abruptly. Shea followed every eye in the room to the detective, who stared back belligerently.

"You would not beliking the music now, dear?" asked Maev, in a glacial voice.

"No, I wouldn't," said Brodsky. "If I couldn't do better than that, I'd turn myself in."

"Better than that you shall do," said Maev. "Come forward, ugly man. Eiradh, you are to stand by this man with your sword, and if I signal you that he is less than the best, you are to bring me his head at once."

"Hey!" cried Shea, and Brodsky: "But I don't know the words."

Protest was useless. He was grabbed by half a dozen pairs of hands and pushed forward beside the bard's seat. Eiradh, a tall, bearded man, pulled out his sword and stood behind the pair, a smile of pleasant anticipation on his face.

Brodsky looked around and then turned to the bard. "Give a guy a break, will you?" he said, "and go back over that last part till I catch the tune."

Ferchertne strummed obediently, while Brodsky leaned close, humming until he got the rather simple air that carried the words of the ballad. Then he straightened up, gesturing with one hand toward the harpist, who struck a chord and began to sing:

"Take these heads unto they breast, O Brian . . ."

Pete Brodsky's voice soared over his, strong and confident, with no definite syllables, but carrying the tune for Ferchertne's words as the harp itself never had. Shea, watching Queen Maev, saw her stiffen, and then, as the melancholy ballad rolled on, two big tears came out on her cheek. Ailill was crying, too, and some of the audience were openly sobbing. It was like a collective soap-opera binge.

The epic came to an end, Pete holding the high note after the harp had stopped. King Ailill lifted an arm and dried his streaming eyes on his sleeve, while Maev dried hers on her handkerchief. She said, "You have done more than you promised, American serf. I have not enjoyed the 'Fate of the Children' more in my memory. Give him a new tunic and a gold ring." She stood up. "And now, handsome man, we will be hearing your message. You will attend us while the others dance."

As a pair of bagpipers stepped forward and gave a few preliminary howls on their instruments, Maev led the way through a door at the back, down the hall to a bedroom sumptuous by the standards that obtained here. There were rushlights against the wall, and a soldier on guard at the door.

Maev said, "Indech! Poke up the fire, for it is cool the air is after the rain."

The soldier jabbed the fire with a poker, leaned his spear against the door, and went out. Maev seemed in no hurry to come to business. She moved about the room restlessly.

"This," she said, "is the skull that belonged to Feradach macConchobar, that I killed in payment for the taking of my dear Maine Morgor. See, I have had the eye-holes gilded."

Her dress, which had been a bright red in the stronger illumination of the hall, was quite a deep crimson here, and clung closely to a figure that, while full, was unquestionably well shaped. She turned her head and one of the jewels in her coronet threw a red flash of light into Shea's eyes.

"Would you be having a drop of Spanish wine, now?"

Shea felt a little trickle of perspiration gather on his chest and run down, and wished he were back with Ollgaeth. The druid was verbose and hopelessly vain, but he had furnished the tipoff on the chanting. It was some kind of quantity control for the spells that went with it. "Thanks," he said.

Maev poured wine into a golden cup for him, more for herself, and sat down on a stool. "Draw close beside me," she said, "for it is not right that we should be too much overheard. There. Now what is this of planning and disasters?"

Shea said, "In my own country I am something of a magician, or druid as you call it. Through this I have learned that you're going to get all Cuchulainn's enemies together, then put a geas on him to make him fight them all at once."

She looked at him from narrowed eyes. "You know too much, handsome man," she said, and there was a note of menace in her voice. "And what is this of disasters?"

"Only that you better not. You will succeed against Cuchulainn, but it will end up in a war, in which you and your husband and most of your sons will be killed."

She sipped, then stood up suddenly and began to pace the floor, moving like a crimson tide. Shea thought etiquette probably required him to get up, too, and he did so.

Not looking at him, Maev said, "And you have been at Muirthemne . . . Which is to say you have told the Hound of what we hold in store for him . . . Which is to say that Cathbadh knows of it also . . . Ha!" She whirled with sudden panther-like grace and faced Shea. "Tell me, handsomeman, is it not true that Cathbadh sent you here to turn us from our purpose? Is not that tale of wars and disasters something he made up and put into your mouth?"

Shea said, "No, it isn't. Honest. I did talk to Cathbadh, and he'd like to stop this chain reaction, but I came here for something quite different."

She stamped. "Do not be lying to me. I see it all. Cathbadh can no more protect Cuchulainn against the geas of Ollgaeth than a pig can climb trees, so he would be sending you here with your talk of magic."

This was getting dangerous. Shea said, "Cathbadh did admit that Ollgaeth was the better druid."

"I thank him for the sending." She turned and stepped across the room, opened a big jewel case, from

which she took a gold bracelet. "Come hither."

Shea stepped over to her. She rolled up his sleeve and snapped the bracelet on his arm.

"Thanks," said Shea, "But I don't think I ought to accept . . ."

"And who are you to be saying what you will accept from Queen Maev? It is a thing decided, and I will never come to terms with Cuchulainn, no matter if it costs me my life and all. Come, now."

She filled the wine cups again, took his hand, guided him to the stools and sat down close beside him. "Since life will be so short we may as well have what we can out of it," she said, drank off the cup and leaned back against him.

The thought leaped across his mind that if he moved aside and let this imperious and rather beautiful woman slip to the floor, she would probably have his head taken off. He put his arm around her in self-defense. She caught the hand and guided it to her bosom, then reached for the other hand and led it to her belt. "The fastening is there," she said.

The door opened and Maine mo Epert came in, followed by Belphebe.

"Mother and Queen . . ." began the young man, and stopped.

To give Maev due credit, she got to her feet with dignity and without apparent embarrassment. "Will you be forever behaving as though you were just hatched from the shell, now?" she demanded.

"But I have a case against this woman. She made a promise to me, she did, and she has a geas on her that makes a man as ill as though bathed in venom."

"You will be having Ollgaeth take it off, then," said Maev.

"'Tis the night of Lugh. Ollgaeth is not to be found."

"Then you must even bed by yourself, then," said Maev. She looked at Belphebe and her expression was rather sour.

"I think we had better be going along, too, Harold," said Belphebe, sweetly.

VII

WHEN THEY were outside, Belphebe said, "Tell me not. I know. She looked so fine in that red robe that you wished to help her take it off."

Shea said, "Honest, Belphebe, I . . ."

"Oh, spare me your complaints. I'm not the first wife to have a husband made of glass and breakable, nor will be the last. What is that you have on your arm?"

"Listen, Belphebe, if you'll only let me tell you . . ."

A form stepped out of the shadows into moonlight which revealed it as Ollgaeth. "The hour is met if you would see the Hill of the Sidhe, Mac Shea," he said.

“Want to come along, kid?” said Shea. “This might be useful for both of us.”

“Not I,” said Belphebe. “I’m for bed — geas and all.” She lifted a hand to stifle an imaginary yawn.

Shea said, “May I . . .” and stopped. He hated to leave Belphebe alone in her present mood, no matter how really unjustified it was. But it occurred to him that if he wanted to get any cooperation out of the vain druid, he would have to play along and butter him up. And it was distinctly important to learn about the system of magic here.

“All right,” he said. “See you later, dear.”

He turned to follow Ollgaeth through the dark streets. The guards at the gate were awake, a tribute to Maev’s management, but they passed the druid and his companion through readily enough. Ollgaeth, stumbling along the track, said, “The Sidhe, now, they have the four great treasures of Ireland — Dagda’s cauldron that will never let a man go foodless, the stone of Fal that strikes every man it is aimed at, Lugh’s spear and Nuada’s great manslaying sword that is death to all before it but protection to the bearer.”

“Indeed,” said Shea. “At the table you were saying. . .”

“Will you never let a man finish his tale?” said Ollgaeth. “The way of it is this: The Sidhethemselves may not use the treasures — there is a geas on them that they can be handled only by a man of Milesian blood. Nor will they give them up, for fear the treasures may be used against them. And all who come into their land, they use hardly.”

“I should think . . .” began Shea.

“I do call to mind there was a man named Goll tried it,” said Ollgaeth. “But the Sidhe cut off both his ears and fed them to the pigs, and he was never the same man after. Ah, it’s a queer race they are, and a good man one must be to sit at table with them”

The Hill of the Sidhe loomed in front of them.

“If you will look there carefully, handsome man,” said Ollgaeth, “to the left of that little tree, you will see a darkish patch in the rocks. Let us move a little closer now.” They climbed the base of the hill. “Now if you will be standing about here, watch the reflection of the moon on the spot there.”

Shea looked, moving his head from side to side, and made out a kind of reflection on the surface of the rock, notso definite and clear as it might be, more like that on a pond, wavering slightly with ripples. Clearly an area of high magical tension.

Ollgaeth said, “It is not to everyone I would be showing this or even telling it, but you will be going back to your America, and it is as well for you to know that because of the spells the Sidhe themselves place on these gates, they may be opened without the use of the ancient tongue. Watch how.”

He raised his arms and began to chant:

“The chiefs of the voyage over the sea

By which the sons of Mil came. . .

It was not very long, ending

“Who opens the gateway to Tir na n-Og?”

Who but I, Ollgaeth the druid?”

He clapped his hands together sharply. The wavering reflection faded out and Shea saw nothing but blackness, as if he were looking into a tunnel in the side of the hill.

“Approach, approach,” said Ollgaeth, “It is not like that the Sidhe will be dangerous against a druid as powerful as myself.”

Shea went nearer. Sure enough, he was looking down a tunnel that stretched some distance into blackness, with a faint light beyond. He put out a hand; it went into the hole where solid rock had been without resistance, except for a slight tingly feeling.

Shea asked, “How long will it stay open?”

“Long enough for whatever passes to reach the other side.”

“Do you suppose I could open it, too?”

“Are you not a qualified magician, now? To be sure you could, if you will learn the spell. But you will give me something in exchange.”

“Certainly,” said Shea. He thought; there was the one he had used in Faerie. “How about a spell to change water into wine? I can teach it to you first thing in the morning.” If he did it himself, the result would probably be rum of an uncommonly potent brew, but qualitative control was this guy’s own business.

Ollgaeth’s eyes almost glittered in the moonlight. “That would be a thing to see, now. Raise your arms.”

He followed Ollgaeth through the spell a couple of times, then repeated it alone. The wavelike shimmering disappeared, and the tunnel came open.

“I am thinking,” said Ollgaeth, as they made their way back to the town, “that it would be as well not to come here again the night. The Sidhe will be noticing their gate clap open and shut and setting a guard over it, and though they are poor in arms, it’s a bad-tempered lot they are.”

“I’ll be careful,” said Shea.

Within, he tapped at the door of the guesthouse.

“Who’s there?” asked Belphebe’s voice.

“It’s me — Harold.”

The bolt slammed back, and the door opened to show her still fully dressed, a little line of worry in her forehead.

“My lord,” she said, “I do pray your pardon for my angers. I do see now ‘twas no more your fault than it was mine at Muirthemne. But we must be quick.”

“What do you mean?”

She was collecting their small amount of gear.

“Pete was here but now. We are in deadly danger, but more especially yourself. The Queen has given permission to this Lughaid who accosted you to take your head if he will.”

Shea put his hand on his sword. “I’d like to see him try it.”

“Foolish man! He is not coming alone, but with a band — six, half a score. Come.” She pulled him toward the door.

“But where’s Pete? We can’t go back without him.”

“Nor can we go back at all if we do not live out the night,” she said, leading out into the dark, silent street. “Pete is doing what he can to gain us time — his singing’s wholly caught them. Hurry!”

“I don’t see what good merely running away tonight will do us,” said Shea. “Wait a minute, though. I can get in touch with Ollgaeth. You’re right.”

There was only one guard at the gate, but he held his spear crosswise and said, “I cannot be letting you out again the night. The Queen has sent word.”

Belphebe gave a little cry. Shea half-turned to see sparks of light dancing, back among the houses. Torches. He swung round again, bringing his sword out with a wheep, and without warning, drove a thrust at the guard’s neck. The soldier jerked up his buckler just in time to catch Shea’s point in the edge of the bronze decorations. Then he lowered his spear and drew it back for a jab.

Shea recovered, knocking the spear aside, but was unable to get around the shield for a return lunge.

He thrust twice, feinting with the intention of driving home into an opening, but each time a slight movement of the buckler showed it would be futile.

The soldier balanced, drew back for another thrust, and then swore as Belphebe, who had slipped past him, caught the butt end of the weapon.

He shouted, “Ho! An alarm!”

They would have to work fast. Shea aimed a cut at the man’s head, but he ducked, simultaneously releasing the spear into Belphebe’s hands, who went tumbling backward as the man did a quick side-step

and whipped out his sword.

Shea made a lightning estimate; the guard's face and neck were too small a target and too well protected by the shield, and the torso was doubly protected by shield and mail. Down.

He made a quick upward sweep that brought the buckler aloft, then drove the blade into the man's thigh, just above the knee and below the edge of the kilt. He felt the blade cleave meat; the man's leg buckled, spilling him to the ground in a clang of metal with a great groaning shout.

Behind them in the rath there were answering cries and the torchlight points turned. "Come on!" cried Belphebe, and began to run. She still clutched the big spear, but was so light on her feet that it did not appear to matter. Shea, trying to keep up with his wife, heard more shouts behind him. "The hill," he gasped, and as he ran, was suddenly glad that the Irish of this period were not much with bows.

There were only occasional trees, but the moonlight was tricky and dubious. A glance backward showed the torchbearers had reached the gate and were beginning to spread. There ought to be just barely time if he could remember the spell correctly. Whatever dangers the country of the Sidhe held, they were less than those to be encountered by staying.

He was getting short of breath, though Belphebe beside him was running as lightly as ever. The hill loomed over them, dark now by reason of the movement of the moon. "This way," gasped Shea, and led up the uneven slope. There was the black rock, still shining queerly mirrorlike. Shea lifted his arms over his head and began to chant, panting for breath:

"The chiefs of the voyage — over the sea — By which — the sons of Mil came. . ."

Behind one of the pursuers set up a view-halloo. Out of the corner of his eye, Shea saw Belphebe whirl and balance the spear as though for throwing; he didn't have time to stop and tell her that such a weapon couldn't be used that way.

"Who but I, Harold mac Shea?" he finished, resoundingly.

"Come on."

He dragged Belphebe toward the dimly seen black opening and then through it. As he entered the darkness he felt a tingling all over, as of a mild electric shock.

Then, abruptly, sunlight replaced moonlight. He and Belphebe were standing on the downward slope of another hill, like the one they had just entered. He had time to take in the fact that the landscape was similar to the one they had quitted, before something crashed down on the back of his head and knocked him unconscious.

VIII

BRIUN MAC SMETRA, King of the Sidhe of Connacht, leaned forward in his carven chair and looked at the prisoners. Harold Shea looked back at him as calmly as he could, although his hands were bound behind his back and his head was splitting. Briun was a tall, slender person with pale blond hair and blue eyes that seemed too big for his face. The rest of them were a delicate-looking people, clad with Hellenic simplicity in wrap-around tunics. Their furnishings seemed a point more primitive than those in the Ireland from which they had come — the building they were in had a central hearth with a smoke-hole instead of the fireplaces and chimneys he had seen there.

“It will do you no good at all to be going on like this,” said the King. “So now it is nothing at all you must lose but your heads, for the black-hearted Connachta that you are.”

“But we’re not Connachta!” Said Shea. “As I told you . . .”

A husky man with black hair said, “They look like Gaels, they speak like Gaels, and they are dressed like Gaels.”

“And who should know better than Nera the champion, who was a Gael himself before he became one of us?” said the King.

“Now look here, King,” said Shea. “We can prove we’re not Gaels by teaching you things no Gael ever knew.”

“Can you now?” said Briun. “And what sort of things would those be?”

Shea said, “I think I can show your druids some new things about magic.”

Beside him Belphebe’s clear voice seconded him. “I can show you how to make a bow that will shoot — two hundred yards.”

Briun said, “Now it is to be seen that you are full of foolish lies. It is well known that we already have the best druids in the world, and no bow will shoot that far. This now is just an excuse to have us feed you for a time until it is proved you are lying, which is something we can see without any proof being needed. You are to lose your heads.”

He made a gesture of dismissal and started to rise.

The black-thatched Nera said, “Let me . . .”

“Wait a minute!” cried Shea, desperately. “This guy is a champion, isn’t he? All right, how about it if I challenge him?”

The King sat down again and considered. “Since you are to lose your head anyway,” he said, “we may as well have some enjoyment out of it. But you are without armor.”

“Never use the stuff,” said Shea. “Besides, if neither one of us has any, things will move faster.”

He heard Belphebe gasp beside him, but did not turn his head.

“Ha, ha,” said Nera. “Let him loose and I will be making him into pieces of fringe for your robe.”

Somebody released Shea and he stretched his arms and flexed his muscles to restore circulation. He was pushed rather roughly toward the door, where the Tuatha De Danaan were forming a ring, and a sword was thrust into his hand. It was one of the usual Irish blades, almost pointless and suitable mainly for cutting.

“Hey!” he said. “I want my own sword, the one I had with me.”

Briun stared at him a moment out of pale, suspicious eyes. “Bring the sword,” he said, and then called:

“Miach!”

The broadsword that Shea had ground down to as fine a point as possible was produced. A tall old man with white hair and beard that made him look like a nineteenth-century poet stepped forward.

“You are to be telling me if there is a geas on this blade,” said the King.

The druid took the blade and, holding it flat on both palms, ran his nose along it, sniffing. He looked up. “I do not find any smell of geas or magic about it,” he said, then lifted his nose like a hound toward Shea. “But about this one there is certainly something that touches my profession.”

“It will not save him,” said Nera. “Come and be killed, Gael.” He swung up his sword.

Shea just barely parried the downstroke. The man was strong as a horse, and had a good deal of skill in the use of his clumsy weapon. For several panting minutes the weapons clanged; Shea had to step back, and back again, and there were appreciative murmurs from the audience.

Finally, Nera, showing a certain shortness of breath and visibly growing restive, shouted, “You juggling Greek!” took a step backward and wound up for a two-handed overhead cut, intended to beat down his opponent’s blade by sheer power. Instantly Shea executed the maneuver known as an advance-thrust — dangerous against a fencer, but hardly a barbarian like this. He hopped forward, right foot first, and shot his arm out straight. The point went right into Nera’s chest.

Shea’s intention was to jerk the blade loose with a twist to one side to avoid the downcoming slash. But the point stuck between his enemy’s ribs, and, in the instant it failed to yield, Nera’s blade, weakened and wavering, came down on Shea’s left shoulder. He felt the sting of steel and in the same moment the sword came loose as Nera folded up wordlessly.

“You’re hurt!” cried Belphebe. “Let me loose!”

“Just a flesh wound,” said Shea. “Do I win, King Briun?”

“Loose the woman,” said the fairy King, and tugged at his beard. “Indeed, and you do. A great liar you may be, but you are also a hero and champion, and it is our rule that you take his place. You will be wanting his head for the pillars of the house you will have.”

“Listen, King,” said Shea. “I don’t want to be a champion, and I’m not a liar. I can prove it. And I’ve got obligations. I really come from a land as far from the land of the Gaels as it is from Tir na n-Og and, if I don’t get back there soon, I’m going to be in trouble.”

“Miach!” called the King. “Is it the truth he is telling?”

The druid stepped forward, said, “Fetch me a bowl of water,” and when it was brought, instructed Shea to dip a finger in it. Then he made a few finger-passes, murmuring to himself, and looked up. “It’s of the opinion I am,” he said, “that this Mac Shea has obligations elsewhere, and if he fails to fulfill them, a most unfavorable geas would come upon him.”

“We may as well be comfortable over a mug of beer in deciding these questions,” said the King. “We command you to follow us.”

Belphebe had been dabbing at Shea’s shoulder. Now she caught his hand and they went in together.

The big sword was awkward, and they had taken his scabbard as well, but he clung to it anyway. When they were inside, and King Briun had seated himself again, he said, "This is a hard case, and requires thinking, but before we give judgment, we must know what there is to know. Now, what is this of a new magic?"

"It's called sympathetic magic," said Shea. "I can show Miach how to do it, but I don't know the old tongue, so he'll have to help me. You see — I've been trying to get back to my own place, and I can't do it because of that." He went on to explain about the court of Maev and Ailill, and the necessity of rescuing Pete and getting back with him.

"Now," he said, "if someone will give me a little clay or wax, I'll show you how sympathetic magic is done."

Miach came forward and leaned over with interest, as someone brought a handful of damp clay to Shea, who placed it on a piece of wood and formed it into a rather crude and shapeless likeness of the seated King. "I'm going to do a spell to make him rise," said Shea, "and I'm afraid the effect will be too heavy if you don't chant. So when I start moving with my hands, you sing."

"It shall be done," said Miach.

A verse or two of Shelley ought to make a good rising spell. Shea went over it in his head, then bent down and took hold of the piece of wood with one hand, while he murmured the words and with the other began to make the passes. He lifted the piece of wood. Miach's chant rose.

So did a shriek from the audience. Simultaneously an intolerable weight developed on Shea's arm, a crack zigzagged across the floor, and he half-turned his head in time to see that the royal palace and all its contents were going up like an elevator, already past the lower branches of the trees, with one of the spectators clinging desperately to the doorsill by his finger-tips.

Shea stopped his passes and hastily began repeating the last line backward, lowering his piece of wood. The palace came down with a jar that sent things tumbling from the walls and piled the audience in a yelling heap. Miach looked dazed.

"I'm sorry," began Shea. "I . . ."

Patting his crown back into position, King Briun said, "Is it ruining us entirely you would be?"

Miach said, "O King, it is my opinion that this Mac Shea has done no more than was asked, and that this is a very beautiful and powerful magic."

"And you could remove the geas on this woman and return the pair to their own place?"

"On the wings of the wild swan."

"Then hear our judgment." King Briun stretched forth a hand. "It is the command of the gods on all of us to help others fulfill their obligations, and this we will do. Yet it is equally true that a doing should be met with a doing in return, and this we cannot escape. Now, Mac Shea has killed our champion, and does not wish to take his place. There must be a balance against this, and we set it that it shall be this wonder-working bow of his wife's, which if it is as good as his magic, will surely shoot holes through the walls of the mountains."

He paused and Shea nodded. The man could be quite reasonable after all.

“Secondly,” Briun went on, “there is the matter of removing his wife’s geas. Against this we will place the teaching of this new magic to our druid. Now respecting the transfer of these two to their own country, there is no counterweight, and it is our judgement that it should be paid for by having Mac Shea undertake to rid us of the sinech, since it is so troublesome a monster and he is so great a champion and magician.”

“Just a minute,” said Shea. “That doesn’t help us find Pete or get him back, and we’ll be in trouble if we don’t. And we really ought to do something for Cuchulainn. Maev is going through with her plan against him.”

“We would most willingly help you in this matter, but you have no other prices to pay.”

Miach said, “Yet there is a way to accomplish all they ask, save the matter of the man Pete, in the finding of whom I have no power.”

Briun said, “You will be telling us about it, then.”

“Touching the geas,” said Miach. “Since it is one that was imposed, and not a thing natural, it can be lifted at the place and in the presence of the druid who laid it, and it will be needful for me to accompany these two to the place where it was put on.

Touching the sinech, it is so dreadful a monster that even Mac Shea will be hard put against it by his own strength. Therefore let us lend him the great invincible sword of Nuada, which is forbidden to us by its geas, but which he will be able to handle without trouble, at all. Then he can lend it to this hero Cuchulainn, who will make a mighty slaughter of the Connachta we detest, and as I will be with the sword and Mac Shea, I can see that it is returned.”

The King leaned his chin on one hand and frowned for a minute. Then he said, “It is our command that this be done as you advise.”

IX

MIACH WAS an apt pupil. At the third try he succeeded in making a man he did not like break out in a series of beautiful yellow splotches, and he was so delighted with the result that he promised Shea for the hunting of the sinech not only the sword of Nuada, but the enchanted shoes of Iubdan, that would enable him to walk on water. He explained that the reason for the overcharge in Shea’s magic was that the spells were in the wrong tongue; but, as the magic wouldn’t work at all without a spell of some kind and Shea didn’t have time to learn another language, this was not much help.

About the sinech itself he was more encouraging. He did a series of divinations with bowls of water and blackthorn twigs. Although Shea himself did not know enough of the magic of this continuum to make out anything but a confused and cloudy movement below the clear surface of the bowl, Miach assured him that in coming to this world of legendary Ireland, he had himself acquired a geas that would not allow his release until he had accomplished something that would alter the pattern of the continuum itself.

“Now tell me, Mac Shea,” he said, “was it not so in the other lands you visted?For I see by my divinations that you have visited many.”

Shea, thinking of how he had helped break up the chapter of magicians in Faerie and rescued his wife

from the Saracens of the *Orlando Furioso*, was forced to agree.

“It is just as I am telling you, for sure,” said Miach. “And I am thinking that this geas has been with you since the day you were born without your ever knowing it. We all of us have them, we do, just as I have one that keeps me from eating pig’s liver, and a good man it is that does not have trouble with his geasa.”

Belphebe looked up from the arrow she was shaping. Her bow was a success, but finding seasoned material from which to build shafts was a problem. “Still, master druid,” she said, “it is no less than a problem to us that we may return to our own place late, and without our friend Pete. For this would place us deeply in trouble.”

“Now I would not be worrying about that at all, at all,” said Miach. “For the nature of a geas is that once it is accomplished, it gives you no more trouble at all. And the time you are spending in the country of the Sidhe will be no more than a minute in the time of your own land, so that you need not be troubling until you are back among the Gaels.”

“That’s a break,” said Shea. “Only I wish I could do something about Pete.”

“Unless I can see him, my divination will not work on him at all,” said Miach. “And now I am thinking it is time for you to try the shoes. King Fergus of Rury waseat up by this same sinech because he did not know how to use them, or another pair like them.”

He accompanied Shea to one of the smaller lakes, not haunted by sinechs, and the latter stepped out cautiously from the shore. The shoes sank a little, forming a meniscus around them, but they seemed to give the lake-water beneath a jellylike consistency just strong enough to support him. A regular walking motion failed to yield good results. He found he had to skate along, and he knew that, if he tripped over a wave, the result would be unfortunate. The shoes would not keep the rest of him from breaking through the surface and, once submerged, would keep his head down. But he found he could work up quite good speed and practiced making hairpin turns until night put an end to the operation.

Next morning they went out in a procession to Loch Gara, the haunt of the monster, with King Briun, Belphebe, and the assorted warriors of the Tuatha De Danaan. The latter had spears, but they did not look as though they would be much help. Two or three of them fell out and sat under trees to compose poems, and the rest were a dreamy-eyed lot.

Miach murmured a druid spell, unwrapped the sword of Nuada, and handed it to Shea. It was better balanced than his own broadsword, coming down to a beautiful laurel-leaf point. As Shea swung it appreciatively, the blade began to ripple with light, as though there were some source of it within the steel itself.

He looked around. “Look, King,” he said, “I’m going to try to do this smart. If you’ll cut down that small tree there, then hitch a rope to the top of that other tree beside it. We’ll bend down the second tree . . .”

Under his direction the Tuatha did away with one tree and bent the other down by a rope running to the stump of the first. This rope continued on, Shea holding the rest of it in a coil. “Ready?” he called.

“We are that,” said King Briun. Belphebe took up her shooting stance, with a row of arrows in the ground beside her.

Shea skated well out in the lake, paying out the rope, which dragged in the water behind him. The

monster seemed in no hurry to put in an appearance.

“Hey!” called Shea. “Where are you, sinech? Come on out, Loch Ness!”

As if in answer, the still surface of the lake broke like a shattered mirror some fifty yards away. Through the surface there appeared something black and rubbery, which vanished and appeared again, much closer. The sinech was moving toward him at a speed which did credit to its muscles.

Shea gripped the rope with both hands and shouted, “Let her go!”

The little figures on shore moved around, and there was a tremendous tug on the rope. The men had untied the tackle, so that the bent tree sprang upright. The pull on the rope sent Shea skidding shoreward as though he were water-skiing behind a motorboat. An arrow went past him and then another. Shea began to slow down, then picked up again as a squad of King Briun’s soldiers took hold of the rope and ran inland with it as fast as they could. His theory was that the sinech would ground, and in that condition could be dispatched by a combination of himself, the soldiers with spears, and Belphebe’s arrows.

But the soldiers on the rope did not yank hard enough to take up all the slack before Shea slowed down almost to a stop. Still twenty yards from shore, he could see the sandy bottom below him, looking a mere yard down.

Behind him he heard the water boiling and swishing under the urge of the sinech’s progress. Shea risked a glance over his shoulder to catch a glimpse of a creature somewhat like a mosasaur, with flippers along its sides. Just behind the pointed, lizard-like head that reared from the water, a pair of arrows projected. Another had driven into its cheekbone, evidently aimed for the eye.

The instant of looking back brought Shea’s foot into contact with a boulder that lay with perhaps an inch projecting from the surface. Over it and down he went, head first into the water of the marge. The sinech’s jaws snapped like a closing bank-vault door on empty air, while Shea’s head drove down until his face plowed into the sand of the bottom. His eyes open under the water, he could see nothing but clouds of sand stirred up by the animal’s passage. The water swished around him as the sinech came in contact with solid ground and threshed frantically in its efforts to make progress.

The shoes of Iubdan kept pulling Shea’s feet up, but at last he bumped into the boulder he had stumbled over. His arms clawed its sides and his head came out of water with his legs scrambling after.

The sinech was still grounded, but not hopelessly so. It was making distinct progress toward Belphebe, who valiantly stood her ground, shooting arrow after arrow into the creature. The same glance told him that the spearmen of the Tuatha De Danaan had taken to their heels.

The monster, engrossed in Belphebe as its remaining opponent, threw back its head for a locomotive hiss. Shea, skating toward it, saw her bend suddenly and seize up one of the abandoned spears to distract it from him. Tugging out the sword of Nuada, he aimed for the sinech’s neck, just behind the head, where it lay half in and half out of water, the stiff mane standing up above Shea’s head. As he drove toward the creature, the near eye picked him up and the head started to swivel back.

In his rush, he drove the sword in up to the hilt, hoping for the big artery.

The sinech writhed, throwing Shea back and ejecting the sword. There was a gush of blood so dark it looked black, the animal threw back its head and emitted a kind of mournful whistling roar of agony. Shea skated forward on his magical shoes for another shot, almost stumbling over the neck, but reaching

down to grasp a bunch of mane in his left hand, and climbing aboard, cutting and stabbing.

The sinech threw back its head violently, it seemed to a height of thirty feet. Shea's grip on the mane was broken, and he was thrown through the air. All he could think of was that he must hang on to the sword. He had hardly formulated this thought before his behind struck the water with a terrific splash.

When he got his head out against the resistance of the shoes at the other end of his anatomy, the sinech was creaming the water with aimless writhings, its long head low on the bank, and its eyes already glassed. The sword of Nuada had lived up to its reputation for giving mortal wounds, all right. Shea had to develop a kind of side-winding dog paddle to carry him into shallow water past the throes of the subsiding monster.

Belphebe waded out to help Shea to his feet, regardless of the wet. She put both arms around him and gave him a quick, ardent kiss, which instantly doubled him over with cramps. Behind her the Sidhe were trickling out of the wood, headed by King Briun, looking dignified, and Miach, looking both amazed and pleased.

Shea said, "There's your job. Do you think that lets me out from under that gas you say I've got?"

Miach shook his head. "I am thinking it will not. A rare fine change you have made in the land of the Sidhe, but it is to the land of men you belong, and there you must do what is to be done. So we will just be going along to see if you can avert the fate that hangs over this Cuchulainn."

X

SHEA AND Belphebe were bouncing along in a chariot on the route from the section of Tir na n-Og corresponding to Connacht to the other-world equivalent of Muirthemne in Ulster. They had agreed with Miach, who was coming in another chariot, that this would be better than to re-enter as they had come and possibly have to fight their way through hostile Connacht, even though he was wearing the invincible sword of Nuada.

The country around seemed very similar to that from which they had come, though the buildings were generally poorer, and there were fewer of them. Indeed, none at all were in sight when they stopped at a furze-covered hill with a rocky outcrop near its base. Miach signalled his charioteer to draw up and said, "Here stands another of the portals. You are to draw off a little while I cast my spell, as this is not one of the holy days and a magic of great power is required."

From the chariot, Shea could see him tossing his arms aloft and catch an occasional word of the chant, which was in the old language. A blackness, which seemed to suck up all the light of the day, appeared around the outcrop, considerably larger than the tunnel Shea himself had opened. The charioteers got down to lead the horses, and they found themselves on the reverse slope, with Cuchulainn's stronghold of Muirthemne in the middle distance, smoke coming from its chimneys.

Shea said, "That's queer. I thought Cuchulainn was at Emain Macha with the King, but it looks as though he came back."

"By my thinking," said Belphebe, "he is most strangely set on having his own will and no other, so that not even the prophecy of death can drive him back."

"I wouldn't . . ." began Shea, but was interrupted as a horseman suddenly burst from a clump of trees to the right, and went galloping across the rolling ground toward Cuchulainn's stronghold.

Miach called from the other chariot, "That will be a warden, now. I am thinking the fine man there is expecting company and is more than a little ready to receive it."

They went down a slope into a depression where the fold of the ground and a screen of young trees on the opposite side hid the view of Muirthemne. As they climbed the slope, the charioteers reined in. Glancing ahead, Shea saw that the saplings and bushes on the crest had all been pulled down and woven into a tangle. At the same time a line of men jumped out of cover, with spears and shields ready.

One of them advanced on the travelers. "Who might you be?" he demanded truculently, "and for why are you here?"

Miach said, "I am a druid of the Sidhe, and I am travelling with my friends to Muirthemne to remove a geas that lies on one of them."

"You will not be doing that the day," said the man. "It is an order that no druids are to come nearer to Muirthemne than this line until himself has settled his differences with the Connachta."

"Woe's me!" said Miach, then turned toward Shea. "You will be seeing how your geas still rules. I am prevented from helping you at the one place where my help would be of avail."

"Be off with you, now!" the man said and waved his spear.

Behind her hand, Belphebe said to Shea, "Is this not very unlike them?"

Shea said, "By George, you're right, kid! That isn't Cuchulainn's psychology at all." He leaned toward the guard. "Hey, you, who gave the order and why? Cuchulainn?"

The man said, "I do not know by what right you are questioning me, but I will be telling you it was the Shamus."

An inspiration struck Shea. "You mean Pete, the American?"

"Who else?"

"We're the other Americans that were here before. Get him for us, will you? We can straighten this out. Tell him that Shea is here."

The man looked at him suspiciously, then at Miach even more suspiciously. He pulled a little aside and consulted with one of his companions, who stuck his spear in the ground, laid the shield beside it, and trotted off toward Muirthemne.

Shea asked, "How comes Pete to be giving orders around here?"

"Because it's the Shamus he is."

Shea said, "I recognize the title all right, but what I can't figure out is how Pete got away from Cruachain and got here to acquire it."

He was saved from further speculation by the creaking of a rapidly driven chariot, which drew up on the other side of the hedge. From it descended a Pete Brodsky metamorphosed into something like the

Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's court. His disreputable trousers projected from beneath a brilliantly red tunic embroidered in gold; he had a kind of leather fillet around his head and a considerable growth of beard; and at his belt swung not one, but two obviously home-made blackjacks.

"Jeepers!" he said, "am I glad to see you! It's all right, gang — let these guys through. They're part of my mob."

Shea made room for him to climb in their chariot, and the spearmen fell back respectfully as Pete directed the driver through the winding gaps in the entanglement. When they had cleared it Shea asked, "How did you get here, anyway?"

Pete said, "It was a pushover. They had me singing until I almost busted a gut. I tried to get this Ollgaeth to send me back to Ohio, but he nixed it and said I'd have to throw in with their mob when they came over here to rub out Cuchulainn. Well, hell, I know what's going to happen to the guys in that racket. They're going to end up with their heads looking for the rest of them, and anyway I figure that if you go any here after you do your fadeout, it will be here. So one day when this Ollgaeth has me in the King's ice house showing me some of the flash, I figure it's a good chance to take along some presents. I let him have one on the conk, snatched everything I could and make a getaway."

"You mean you stole Ailill's crown jewels?" asked Shea.

"Sure. I don't owe him nothing, do I? Well, when I get here, they roll out the carpet and send for, Cuchulainn. Well, I give him a line about how this Maev mob is coming to hit him on the head, like I told him before, but I add that they're gonna put a geas on all his gang so they'll go to sleep and can't do any fighting. That was different, see? They all want to get into the act, but they can't figure what to do about it. I been watching this Ollgaeth, see, and the line I got is that if he can't get close enough, he can't make this geas business stick."

"That's good magicology," said Shea. "Couldn't Cathbadh send you home?"

"Home? What do you mean, home? They told me to go to it, so I stashed the combination around the place like we done in the army. Then they made me head shamus of the force. Do you think I want to go back to Ohio and pound a beat?"

"Now, look here . . ." began Shea, but just then the gate of Muirthemne loomed over them, with Cuchulainn and Cathbadh beside it, accompanied by a tall, beautiful woman who must be Emer.

The hero said, "It is glad to see you that I am, darlings. Your man is less beautiful than ever, but you will be handselling him to me, for I think that with his help I may escape the doom that has been predicted."

Shea climbed down and helped Belphebe out of the chariot. "Listen," he said. "Pete's already done all he can for you, and we don't dare go back to our own country without him."

Pete said, "Look, I'll write you a letter or something to put you in the clear. Leave a guy run his own racket, will you? This is my spot."

"Nothing doing," said Shea. "Go ahead, Miach."

The druid lifted his arms, mumbled one or two words, and lowered his arms again. "The geas is still upon you, Mac Shea," he said. "I cannot."

“Oh, I forgot,” said Shea, and pulled the sword from his belt. “Here, Cuchulainn, this is the sword of Nuada. I borrowed it from the Sidhe for you, and it will have to go back to them after you’re through, with the Connachta, who ought to be here any minute. But it will protect you better than Pete could. Does that leave us square?”

“It does that,” said Cuchulainn, holding the great sword up admiringly. Light rippled and flowed along the blade.

“Now, Miach,” said Shea.

Miach lifted his arms. “Hey, I don’t want . . .” began Pete, as the chant rose.

Whoosh!

Shea, Belphebe, and Brodsky arrived with a rush of displaced air in the living room at Garaden, Ohio, and almost in a heap. Behind them, the door of Shea’s study stood open. As the trio landed, a couple of heavy-set men with large feet turned startled faces, their hands full of Shea’s papers.

“It’s them!” said one.

The other said, “And by gawd — Pete Brodsky, the synthetic harp, in a monkey suit!” They both began to laugh.

“Hell with that, you punks,” said Pete. “I’ve had enough Ireland to last me. From now on it’s *snazdorowie Polska!* See?”

Shea paid little attention. He was too busy kissing Belphebe.

The End