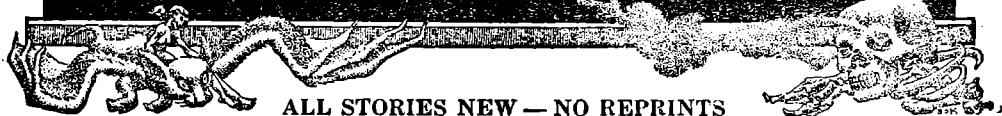


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1950

Cover by Matt Fox

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... and a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.



Dark Rosaleen

BY SEABURY QUINN

Marcia

MARCIA hummed a snatch of tune as she let the long, swirl-skirted dinner dress slip down her sleek hips to form a circle on the floor about her feet. The old song had been ringing in her

head all afternoon since they had picked it up on the radio as they left Maplewood, fitting its rhythm to the rhythm of the tires as the car sped like the shuttle of a loom across the Jersey highways, over Pennsylvania's brick roads, and up and down the rolling contours of the Maryland turnpikes:

In thine arms enfold me, my beloved . . .
For thy loss a world could not atone . . .

SHE stood for a moment before the long mirror, looking at the slim perfection of herself reflected in the glass. "I *am* pretty!" she whispered, as if she had just discovered what she'd known for at least twenty of her twenty-three years.

The pleased exclamation was no overstatement. In her wisp of nylon garment and her gold-kid sandals she was as bewitching as a dryad; azure-eyed, with short hair yellow as new honey, pink-cheeked, slim of hands and feet and ankles, lissome, beautifully shaped, radiating health and happiness and eagerness.

She turned from her reflection, took the filmy *robe de nuit* from her new pigskin bag and slipped into it, paused to study herself for another moment in the glass, then snapped the light off and crept into the big four-poster bed with its percale sheets and lace-trimmed pillows and the "wedding ring" design patchwork quilt. "Rex!" she called softly, and in the darkness she could feel the not entirely unpleasant warmth of a blush on her cheeks and brow and throat. "Rex!"

They had been married just at noon in Saint Justin's, and afterwards there was the ordeal by reception at the Blenheim Towers, then the frantic dash for escape in the new convertible that was her father's wedding present, shaking off pursuit somewhere between Coytsville and Bordentown, followed by the long drive to the cottage at Catoctin which Aunt Martha had lent them for their honeymoon.

The little house, less than a rifle's reach from the locale of George A. Townsend's novel, was ideally suited to their purpose as if it had been built for them. Stone walls a foot thick held the July heat at a respectful distance, the floors were odd-width planks of polished oak held to their joists with wooden pegs, in all directions there were vistas of the Blue Ridge as entrancing as a picture, the brick-walled garden was a fenced-in bit of paradise, with phlox and zinnias in riotous bloom and roses climbing over an old arbor.

They had dinner in the open air with Aunt Martha's maid Susannah in attend-

ance, stepping softly as a cat for all her wrestler's bulk, and with a tender hand for food and china. Only in Maryland—and not often there—are such dinners to be had: Potomac bass fried saddle-brown in country butter, crackling-hot fried chicken breasts with creamy white gravy, served with stewed celery tops and quince-mint jelly, potatoes whipped in milk, tossed salad, beaten biscuit, and for dessert a deep-dish apple pie. Too, with the meal there was the true "wine of the country"—dandelion wine as white and well-nigh tart as Chablis with the fish, elderberry wine as red and fine as any vintage out of Burgundy with the chicken, and apple brandy of amazing potency with dessert.

They had dined late and lingered long after coffee, content to be alone at last, and, as children might deliberately prolong the ecstasy of anticipation by delaying to eat a sweet, putting off the time of going in until long after the midnight express thundered through the valley on its way to Washington. Now, as Marcia snuggled down between the cool, clove-scented sheets, there came the distant hooting of a diesel locomotive as it dragged a train westward, and the distant, eerie baying of a dog that found an echo somewhere farther off in the hills, then thinned out to a long drawn, wavering howl that echoed mournfully as the lament of a lost and wind-vexed ghost.

"Rex!" she called a little louder, just a little frightened by the grieving ululation. "Rex, dear!"

She knew the room reserved for him lay just beyond the bath. She had helped him unpack, hanging his tweeds in the closet and laying out his fishing gear for the next morning. "Get ready to eat fish till you grow scales!" he had warned her. "You're married to old Izaak W. Walton himself, young lady!" As she undressed she had heard him come upstairs and heard the latch of his door click. "Rex, dear!"

From his room came a sound, the sort of sound that had no business in a bridegroom's chamber; a low-pitched, controlled laugh that held a note of triumph, a woman's laugh that bore a freight of victory; of jubilant, exultant conquest. Then Rex's pleading, panic-stricken "No! No!" and that slow, soft, vaunting laugh once more.

"Rex!"

There was no answer.

The pitter-pat of her feet on the cool boards of the floor was panic made audible. "Rex!"

The door of his room swung a little open, and a single lamp upon the bedside shed a meager, honey-pale light. By the dim illumination she saw him sitting on the bed, stripped to his underwear, one shoe and sock removed. He leaned slightly forward, as if listening, but when she called he gave no answer. Then she saw his face, and her scream rose like the sudden flaring of a flame. It mounted in a thin, sharp spiral, piercing, poignant, shriller and more shrill until it seemed no human throat could stand the strain of it. When it was over it began again, or, rather, it never quite finished, but grew lower by gradations of agonized modulations, prolonging itself in a rhythm of monotonous despair.

The mask—it could not properly be called a face—into which she looked was lifeless as a plaque of molded clay. His features sagged as if they had been formed of wax and had slipped in the mold, or softened with the heat. His cheeks hung pendulously and his mouth was slack, his chin had dropped, and on the rim of his teeth his tongue lolled, almost as if he made a grimace. But it was his eyes that appalled her. Glaucomous, expressionless, yet somehow deep as fathomless twin openings into hell they were; the eyes of one who lived without a soul or spirit or intelligence—the eyes of a breathing dead man, a zombie.

She made no effort to arouse, to waken him; she knew intuitively the soul of him was gone, that here was nothing but a physical residuum, as hopelessly devoid of life and future as a body lying in its casket.

So she stood there till Susannah, wakened by her screams, came to her with soft words of meaningless comfort: honey-chil'; po' lamb; Susannah's po' li'l baby-gal.

Rex

A JOURNEY of a thousand miles begins with a single step, the Manchu proverb says. Rex Moynahan's descent into Avernus began when his plane was forced down on its way from St. John's to Croydon. Officials

of the Irish government were courteous, the airline's officers did everything for his comfort, but there could not be another flight that evening; he would have to spend the night in Limerick, or Luimneach, as they insisted on calling it.

He dined excellently at the airline's expense, mutton cutlet, potatoes, green salad and an apple tart that was the last word in perfection of the baker's art, with perhaps just a mug or two too many Guinnesses and possibly too many samples of John Jameson's product, but he was far from drunk—just comfortably fuddled—when he set out to explore the town.

The sweet, long Irish twilight lent an air of unreality to everything as he strolled through the streets, the cut of his clothes proclaiming him American and his air of tolerant sophistication tabulating him as a New Yorker.

He did not note the street's name, or even notice if it bore a sign, but as he turned from a wide thoroughfare he found himself in a small semilunar byway where trees seemed gossiping leafily, where red-brick houses stood side by side like guardsmen on parade. Here and there among the residences with their window boxes bright with nodding geraniums was a little shop with bow-front windows of small panes set in neat wooden frames; a fruiterer's, a green grocer's, a chemist's, finally an art store. Its window held but one exhibit, an unframed oil painting some eighteen inches wide by twenty-four in height, but as he looked at it he felt a dazed, almost enraptured sensation; his heart beat faster and there was an ache in his throat. The subject was a woman, young, perhaps; perhaps mature; he could not say, he knew only that she was like a sudden close-up view of something he had known vaguely in dreams, the concrete realization of a hazy ideal he had cherished almost since infancy.

SHE stood in an arched doorway, the ruined entrance to some long-dilapidated castle or abbey, perhaps, and the background shaded by gradations from the green, green grass of Erin at her feet to the young, tender, yellow-green of early leaf-age behind her. Her costume was the simplest, just a gown of white stuff flowing

from her throat to insteps, belted at the waist with a black sash. One hand was raised to rest against the stone jamb of the archway, and where the long sleeve fell away it showed a wrist and arm as white as milk and moulded with a perfection that would have sent Praxiteles into mute rapture. All black and white she was: black, misty hair drawn back from a high, snowy brow and gathered in a loose knot at the nape of her neck, black, brooding eyes between long, curving lashes, eyes that somehow seemed to express sensuousness and humility at once; white cheeks, white throat, white hands, white feet—even the nails of her long, tapering fingers and delicately shaped toes were vivid black, as if enameled with jet lacquer. Her lips, too, seemed black at first glance, but as he looked again he saw their black was underlaid with red, like garnets smeared with soot, or rubies dipped in ink.

The fascination of his wonder grew as he looked at the picture. Who was she? Flesh and blood? An artist's concrete conception of something vague and abstract, tenuous and allegorical?

The gallery's proprietor came from an inner room and greeted him with a smile. "Yis, sir?" His Irish accent was no brogue, but just the merest differentiation from the speech a cultured Londoner or New Yorker would use. He was a small man, rather old, Rex judged, for his hair, what there was of it, was as gray as pewter and his small, neat beard and mustache were almost white, while about his bright black eyes and on his brow and cheeks was a network of small wrinkles. "Yis, sir?"

"I—" somehow Rex found it embarrassing to state the question—"I'd like to know about that picture—the one in your window, you know."

The little man looked at him under lowered lids. "And what is it you'd like to know?"

"Why—er—what's it represent? Is it supposed to be a portrait, one of those neo-classic things like the French did in the Directoire and First Empire periods, or—"

The shopkeeper's small eyes burned with sudden intensity, perhaps with anger, possibly with ardor. "It's supposed to be an allegory, sir. Shawn Kennedy did it just

before he went mad. He called it *Róisín Dubh*, and but for one thing it's a damnable libel."

"A libel—?"

"Yis, sir. *Róisín Dubh*, Dark Rosaleen, the Anglo-Irish call it, means the Little Black Rose, and symbolizes Ireland. She ought to be presented as a cold, chaste being, as lovely as an angel, and as sexless. He made her Circe o' the Isles, a seductress, a vampire-woman."

"Oh?" Rex sparred for an opening. How the devil could he come right out and ask about the artist's model? "You say the artist went mad?"

"Mad as a hatter, sir. He was one of our most promising young painters, exhibited in Dublin, London, Paris, New York—on his way to real fame when he came up with that picture." Abruptly, irrelevantly, it seemed to Rex, he asked, "D'ye know Mangan's poem, *Dark Rosaleen*?"

Rex shook his head.

"You wouldn't. Few foreigners do. Young Kennedy claimed he took his inspiration from that song, but I'm after thinkin' it came from a darker source. She who posed for that picture was no mortal woman, I'll be bound."

"How do you mean?"

THE dealer shook his head. "It's hard to put it into words, sir, and practically impossible to make a foreigner believe, especially an Englishman or American. Shawn Kennedy did that picture two-three years ago, and raised as much tumult with it as the Devil amongst the tailors. Next we heard it was a thing that he was marryin' Lady Frances Holahan O'Toole, an' married they were in the Cathedral, with the Archbishop's self celebratin' the nuptial Mass. *A mbuire!* on his weddin' night, afore he'd let his bride's hair down or loosed her girdle, he was stricken. In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, his brain went soft like mush and he became a helpless, hopeless imbecile, just a livin', breathin' *thing*, without a mind or soul or spirit in him.

"So that's the end o' Mister Shawn Kennedy, one o' Ireland's foremost young painters, livin' out the wretched remnant of his life in a nursin' home, with her that was

the Lady Frances Holahan O'Toole bewailin' her virginity like Jephtha's daughter, for it's a maid-wife she is, held to him by the bonds o' holy matrimony, and held from him by his hopeless idiocy. He might 'a' known as much afore he set his brush to canvas for that picture!"

Rex had an eerie feeling, as if small red ants were racing up and down his spine. "I don't think I quite understand. What connection—"

"Musha, man," the art dealer leaned toward him confidentially, "I'm after tellin' you it was no mortal woman sat for that picture! 'Twas the very Leanhaun Shee herself."

"The Leanhaun Shee—"

"Precisely. The Leanhaun Shee's a fairy wife who comes out from the Sliábh-namban, the Hill o' Women, that is, to seek the love o' mortal men, and if they give in to her blandishments she binds 'em to her till the end o' time, when she and they and all the fairy folk and their changelings will vanish in the brightness of God's face like dewdrops in the risin' sun. 'Tis said that in the old days she was Princess Edáin, daughter o' the High King, who was stolen on her weddin' night and taken to Tir-nan-Og, the Country o' the Young where age and death are unknown and there are neither tears nor loud laughter. I wouldn't know about that, sir; but this I know: It is an evil thing to see the Leanhaun Shee and hear the softness of her voice and feel the softness of her arms, for he who can resist her is a better man nor Saint Anthony, and he who succumbs to her is doomed to lose his soul—"

Rex could not hold his laugh back. "Well, all I've got to say," he chuckled, "is that it would be worth it. To be accepted as a lover by the Lean—whatever you call her—would be worth the price of 'most any man's soul, certainly I'd gladly give mine—"

"Ochone!" The little man stared at him aghast. "Out o' my shop! Out, I say!" He crossed himself and came from behind the counter. "Off with ye, an' quick! Sayin' things like that beneath this roof! It is an evil thing ye've done, so 'tis. The Leanhaun Shee's but waitin' to hear mortals talk like that—"

Still laughing, Rex went out into the soft, sweet twilight of the Irish evening.

Dark Rosaleen

THE tower clock of Saint Bridget's had sounded midnight, then a quarter past, finally one o'clock, but still Rex fought for sleep. Since his return to the hotel he'd had a feeling of malaise, not quite amounting to the jitters, but not far from it. The flight was scheduled for five-thirty in the morning, and he'd be a complete wreck if he did not get some sleep—confound this Irish hospitality! He knew he should have eaten less at dinner, and that Guinness, and the whiskey! He'd be glad to get back to New York where the martinis made you comfortably drowsy instead of tauting your nerves like fiddle strings.

Before he went up to his room he'd found a book of Irish poems in the hotel library, and read James Clarence Mangan's *Dark Rosaleen* for the first time. Now its cadences ran through his mind with an insistence not to be denied:

"Red lightning lightened through my
blood,
My Dark Rosaleen!"

"I'd give my life and soul anew,
A second life and soul anew,
My Dark Rosaleen!"

The four-barred chime that told the hour trembled on the air. It hung and clung and vibrated till he did not know if he still heard it or only imagined it, and would go on hearing it in his imagination till the end of time.

The sound stopped as abruptly as a cymbal's tintinnabulations cease when a hand is laid upon the quivering brass, and with the sudden, almost deafening, silence she came.

He'd locked the door of his room, and the key lay on the dresser, but the latch snapped back with a sharp click, the door swung open, and she entered, softly, soundlessly as a zephyr. The long silken gown that flowed back against her figure was white, dead white, and so were her slim throat and face and brow. Her hair, her

eyes, were black as rain clouds, and the nails of her slim hands and narrow, high-arched feet shone with the blackness of cut jet. Beneath the slumberous, brooding eyes, set in their ambuscades of curving lashes, her lips showed blackly, with an underlie of red, and back of the black lips was the white line of little, milk-white teeth. "*Ocuiste*—O pulse of my heart!" she whispered, and held out slim white hands to him. He rose to meet her, drawn as to a magnet.

Her warm, soft arms twined round him like the tendrils of a vine—the ivy vine that strangles the oak—and her lips were on his, soft and tender, mercilessly, avidly hungry. Heady perfume, laden with the scent of clover blossoms and spring roses, was in his nostrils like a drug, and he felt himself go weak to sickness with desire as the blackly-red lips moved against his own. . . .

AFTER a time came satiety, a feeling such as he'd known when coming out of anesthesia after an appendectomy; a subdued feeling, strangely calm, as if he were at rest after an ordeal. An immense weariness was on him, marrow-deep, exhausting, paralyzing.

She laughed softly as she rose and drew the black sash tight about her waist. Softly and triumphantly. "Thou art mine, Rex *omuirnin*—Rex my love—" she told him as she held her white feet out for him to lace the tiny black sandals on them. "Mine alone."

"Thine alone!" he answered in a voice more sob than whisper. "Thine alone, *Edáin mo muirnin!*"

"Another night I'll come for thee and take thee with me to Tir-na-n-Og, the land where no one grows old, where worldly wisdom has no place, nor prayer nor preaching; where bitter words and tears are unknown."

"Come soon, O pulse of my heart, breath of my life!"

"It may be sooner than thou thinkest, Rex *omuirnin*."

"Boy, what a dream you had last night!" he had told himself next morning as

he shaved. "You're getting out of Ireland none too soon, young feller. If you stayed here you'd be takin' dope to keep asleep and dreamin' twenty-four hours a day."

HE WAS tireder than he'd realized. The drive down from New York had taken more out of him than he'd bargained for. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he took his tweeds off, reached for the crisp, new pajamas he'd bought just two days ago, dropped down on the bed and began unlacing his shoes. Marcia was in her room; Marcia, his bride—

"*Omuirnin!*" The whisper came as softly as the echo of an echo, laden with a load of longing not to be gainsaid. "*Rex omuirnin!*"

Like the shadow of a wind-blown cloud she came toward him, slim, white hands outstretched, blackly-red lips smiling. "I've come to take thee, lover, pulse of my heart. The time is come for us to go to Tir-na-n-Og."

The perfume of her wafted toward him like an anesthetic, a paralyzing drug that stole his strength away, and in a moment he felt soft hands on his cheeks, soft lips on his lips.

"No! No!" he gasped. "Not now, not yet, Edáin! I've just been married—"

A slow laugh crept from between her black lips. "Since the days when the Five Kings ruled Ireland no mortal woman has stood between me and my desire, *ocuisle*. Dost thou not remember what was said when first we met? 'Thou'rt mine!' I told thee, and, 'Thine alone!' thou answered. 'Twas then we made our compact, Rex my love, a compact that cannot be broken. Come." Her lips were on his lips, her arms were round him, tenderly, resistly. Her warm, perfume-laden breath was in his mouth.

For just a moment he fought, futilely as a man fallen in deep water fights drowning. Remembered words rang in his brain, "—afore he'd let his bride's hair down or loosed her girdle . . ."

"Rex!" he heard Marcia's frantic cry. "Rex!"

And then he heard no more.