

THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

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Frontispiece: "I had one hand over his mouth ere he could shout or cry."

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The King's Curing.

BY SEUMAS MACMANUS.

Author of "A Lad of the O'Friel's," "The Leadin' Road to Demgal," etc.



HERE was a King in Connaught once named Cormac; and, more by the same token, a purty foolish King he was in his early days. For he come to the throne young, and fetched there a long sight less wit than a discreet young man of his age and family should. He was purty weak-minded; and the clan of designin' people, who pitchforked him on the throne, thought they should have all use of him. They were as covetous as Barney Connolly's *moosy* cow, who loved the thistles in the neighbour-fields better nor the clover in her own. The chief of these lads was a chap named Conal, as deep as a tailyer's thimble. He always had the ear of Cormac, and kept Cormac and Connaught for ever at war, north, south, aist, or west; and no matter how the war went, Conal and his clan, who were born moroders (marauders), managed to come out of it nothin' the poorer anyway.

There was a time Cormac was heading his army on one of these moroding expeditions into Leinster, and he whanged the King

of Leinster, marching into his own palace a conqueror. But if he did, the tide of war changed soon and suddent; for the minute Cormac met the King of Leinster's daughter, Criona,* it was himself that was conquered—and he knew it, poor fellow. And this was the salvation of him.

Criona, she was known and noted through the length and brea'th of Ireland, not for her beauty alone—though, in troth, you'd fare far and ford a deal of fords ere you'd meet her bate for that—but far more for her wit and her wisdom. Now, Cormac, to give the devil his dues, was nowise an ill-lookin' man; and he had a good heart and kindly as e'er another in Ireland. Any ill or unkindliness that was in it was there only by rasion his counsellors put it there. Criona she seen his good qualities in short time; and seen, too, that if he hadn't enough mind of his own for a King, he only needed a good adviser at his elbow and he'd be better nor the average King anyway. She give consent to have him, and back with him went to Connaught.

* Pronounced "Creena."



"THE MINUTE CORMAC MET THE KING OF LEINSTER'S DAUGHTER, CRIONA, IT WAS HIMSELF THAT WAS CONQUERED."

This was the first time Cormac ever differed with Conal and his ill counsellors; they riz an uproar when they found he fell in love with Criona; and they threatened all sorts if he wouldn't leave her where he found her and come single again to his own country. For they well knew the wise and strong-minded woman she was; and knew that if they let Cormac get into her clutches, as they put it, small influence they'd ever have over him after. But Cormac, poor fellow, was so desperate in love that for the first time in his life he dared to defy Conal and his clan.

When, in spite of them, he married Criona, it's downcast creatures they were, and mournful, draggle-tailed warriors who trooped back after the weddin'-party to Connaught; and through the length and breadth of that province they spread themselves, croakin' that both Cormac and Connaught were now done for; there'd be no more wars and no more spoils, and the young men would be turned into old women—as the prophecies had foretold. They seen well that Queen Criona looked through them, and witnessed the thoughts in their hearts, and found they'd been influenclin' weak-minded Cormac for lad; and that she'd have small *faillte* (welcome) for them coming about Cormac or his castle any more. So they dispersed themselves every man to his own home—and sucked their thumbs there.

Right enough, there came big changes on Connaught; Criona took Cormac in hands and showed him the beauty of peace and Christian forbearance. He loved her devoutly from the first; and it's deeper and deeper he fell in love with her every day after, so that, if she'd tell him it was for his good (or hers) or for the good of Connaught, he'd put his foot in the fire and hold it there till it burned to the stump. Consequently, for the first time in ages, Connaught ceased goin' to war, and began growin' peaceful and prosperous and happy. The land thrived and flourished as it never done afore in the memory of man; and people sayed that the clever Criona had brought them God's blessing. All quarters and corners of the country envied the kingdom of Connaught, for that it had such a clever woman at the head of it; and the farned, and the wise, and the witty used to resort to the castle of King Cormac from all arts and parts of Ireland, on purpose to make the acquaintance of the wittiest Queen any province ever knew, and the remarkablist all round—for she could outdo at their own games all the scholars, and doctors, and wits of Erin. And, as well

you may suppose, it was Cormac was the proud man of her. He'd never pass a law, or walk a step, without first consulting Criona, and having her advice upon it. So clever was this woman, too, that while managin' to make him do all things she wanted, she contrived in such a way as humoured him, poor fellow, into the belief he was doin' only what he himself wanted. And he believed he was grown a mighty wise King—the wisest in all Ireland. Sartain proof of it was that the wisest woman, whom all the world acknowledged, in all Ireland said, "That's good," to everything he done. Purty soon he began to grow vain of himself. "Criona," he'd say, "all the world must give in that myself and yourself are the wisest King and Queen history ever heard tell of."

"There's sorra doubt of it," Criona, she'd say, without ever a smile showin'.

At long and at last, King Cormac he got so vain of what he now believed to be entirely his own wisdom that Conal and his colleagues, who, though they kept quiet and far from the Coort all this time, still owed Criona a deadly spite, and still longed to get hold of King Cormac again and be back at their thievin', their murderin's and morodi's—Conal and his colleagues they come to the Coort in ones and pairs, making pretence to Criona to have turned wise and peaceful men and great admirers of hers—and insinuated themselves again around Cormac by flattery. For, now they seen his weak spot, they made their most of it. They never tired tellin' him that his like for wisdom, for statesmanship, and for kingcraft was never before known, not in Ireland alone, but in the whole world—and that there would be a good many moons in the sky, and three in the du'ghill, afore his equal would be seen again. Cormac soon got back all his old liking for Conal, who, he now thought, was a fine fellow entirely. And when Conal had him well worked up he said to Cormac there was only one small thing standin' in the way of his fame, as the wisest of Princes, goin' down to all time.

"And what's that?" says King Cormac, says he.

When Conal told that as all great men had enemies, so he had some, too, scattered here and there, who envied him beca'se of his greatness, and who went up and down the country trying to rob him of all credit for his wisdom, "By what manes?" Cormac wanted to know. Conal told that the means they took was givin' it out that all his wisdom was only his wife's; that he didn't know how to



"INNOCENT PEOPLE," SAYS CONAL, "ARE BEGINNIN' TO THINK YOU ARE RAILLY TIED TO YOUR WIFE'S APRON-STRINGS."

tiddle his thumbs unless she showed him, and daren't do it without her consent, even if he knew. "Innocent people," says Conal, says he, "are beginnin' to believe these liars, and to think you are railly tied to your wife's apron-strings. And everybody who knows you, and knows your wonderful wisdom, is heartily sorry that such things is gettin' out; and they're sayin' that it's your due to show up these liars for what they are."

"How am I to do that?" says King Cormac.

And Conal told him the surest way of doing it was to begin scornin' his wife's word once in a way; gradually breakin' both her and the world into the knowledge that it was him was the head of wisdom, and not her. Cormac, he studied on this; and he said to himself it was a wise advice surely; and he'd act on it—for 'twas a pity Criona 'ud be gettin' credit for his greatness.

As good luck would have it, there was to be, just a week after, a great fair at a place twenty mile from the King's castle. All sorts of articles and animals that ever was noted or known were annually brought to this fair for to be throged or sold; and the young men and old of all the country for a hundred miles round used to gather to it; some of

them for business, but more of them just for divilment and diversion. It lasted three days and three nights, and was a great time for carousin' and for contestin' at all kinds of feats and games. Cormac never missed this fair for once in all his life till he got married. In the ten years since then he never stood in it, by reason Criona had advised him it was a proper thing for a married man, and a King, to keep far from it.

Here, now, was the grandest of chances to show his wife and the world that he was a man had a mind of his own, so he made up his mind to enjoy the Fair of Farney.

Always, since he married, he'd never gone a cat's-call from home without asking Criona whether he would or no. Now, on the night afore the day for settin' out for Farney, he took the opportunity, when Conal and his colleagues and all his Court were listenin', to say to his wife in a mighty off-hand way: "Criona, darlin', I'd like you to give me an early call in the mornin'."

"For why?" says Criona, says she. "Is it that you're expecting the arrival of them farn'd scholars that are on their way here from Meath?"

"I'm not," says Cormac, says he, "expectin' the arrival of them farn'd scholars from Meath. And if they come the morrow they'll have to take their time and cool their heels for four days or more, till I get back to discourse them upon their farn'd subjects at my leisure."

"Back from where?" says Criona, says she.

"Back from the Fair of Farney," says Cormac, says he, as cool as a trout in a pool—to the consternation of the Court, who all looked at Criona.

But Criona, wise woman that she was, never showed a shadow on her face; she said, "Cormac, my dear, the Fair of Farney may be all right for reckless youths, but it's not the place I should like to see a King, and the father of a family, and a wise man like you, going to."

"But, Criona," says he, still as cool as ever, "you see, it's not what you like, but what I like, that's got to be done in this kingdom—if I'm King. If I haven't enough sense," says he, "to carry me to the Fair of Farney and back again, without making myself

ridiculous, it's tied to your apron-strings I should be—instead of being, as I am, the wisest, and most knowledgeable, and far-famed King that Ireland has known this many a day." Says he, "I have been so lazy for past ten years back that I neglected entirely the Fair of Farney. For the time to come I intend, with Heaven's help, never to miss it. Conal," says he, "would you order the neatest and smartest small pony in my stable to be saddled for me? Put on it a white bridle—as sign that it's for sale I have it. I went about so little lately, since I got lazy, that there'll be few in the fair 'ill know me as King Cormac. They'll think I'm an old fellow come from the country to dispose of his pony."

The Court was consternated more and more—dumbfounded entirely. Criona, wise woman that she was, saw in a jiffy how the wind sat; for, more by the same token, she was not till now without having her suspicions of the mischief Conal and his colleagues were up to. But she just bowed her head and turned the talk to another subject.

And, in troth, to tell the truth, Cormac was delighted withinside himself that she took it so; for, for all the bold face he put on, he was trimblin' lest she'd put down her foot and say "No!"

There was a faithful fellow at the Court—a Leinsterman who had been servant to her father, and who she'd fetched with her from home. Afore she went to bed that night she had a five minutes' private chat with him; and when she had finished with him she put some good in his fist and warned him to be mum.

When they were retirin' that night Cormac was still trimblin' withinside himself, but he thought it was due from him to Criona to mollify her a bit; so he said, "Criona, darlin', you know I have now come to the time of day to have sense—if I'll ever have any. And it would be too bad for you for to expect that I'm too foolish to be trusted to go by myself, of my own accord, to the Fair of Farney."

"True for you," says Criona, says she, chiming in with him. "You surely have come to the time of day to have sense now. It's what I've just been thinking to myself," says she, "that, for the time to come, you should be guidin' both yourself and me—instead of me pretending, as I have done, to be taking it on myself to guide both of us."

Faith, Cormac was relieved and happy to find how she took it. He told her that she

might trust him from this time on to guide the pair of them, and guide Connaught as well. And he'd begin now, this night, to take no more advice from her.

"Cormac," she said, "I'm proud to see you showing such a fine spirit. From now, begin," says she. "By your own advice, and of your own free will, go to the Fair of Farney the morrow as the first step; and I have no doubt you'll very soon prove to me you have enough wisdom not alone to guide yourself and me and Connaught—but the whole world."

"Thank you, Criona," says he; "from my heart I thank you. And I want you to believe that you'll never have reason to be vexed for puttin' yourself under my guidance from this night on."

Well and good; in the mornin' King Cormac was early astir and had a hearty breakfast; and when he went out into the courtyard Conal was there, holding a beautiful little pony, saddled, and with a white bridle on it, to pretend it was for sale; and, when Cormac put his leg over it, Conal give him a hearty thump on the back, sayin', "Bowld fellow, King Cormac," says he, "it's meself was proud for you last night; you'll very soon now show the worl' who is master at the Court of King Cormac." And King Cormac he smiled very proud, and he rode away out of the gate.

As he was throttin' over the drawbridge forensten of the castle, Queen Criona threw open her window and called to him, and he stopped.

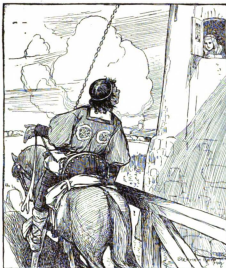
"Cormac," says she, "what in the world tempts you for to make such a fool of yourself as saddle an ass and ride it to Farney?"

Cormac, he looked at the pony and then looked up at Criona, and says he, "Criona, my dear, is it that you have taken laive of your senses? Don't you see that I'm ridin' the finest little pony my stables can show?"

Criona, she laughed hearty at this, and said he was fond of his joke in the mornin'. "Nevertheless," says she, "it's a joke un becomin' a King, for to ride to Farney on an ass; and that you'll soon find if anyone discovers you to be King Cormac."

He got as mad as ten hatters with her, and he said to her something wasn't in his prayers; and he spurred his pony out over the drawbridge and away with him.

Now Cormac wasn't gone three mile of the way, and his anger wasn't simmered down—though it was nearly so—when he overtuk a gay lad steppin' out, with a stick in his hand,



"DON'T YOU SEE THAT I'M RIDIN' THE FINEST LITTLE PONY BY STABLES CAN SHOW?"

and facin' for the fair likewise. "Good morra," says King Cormac, says he, as he trotted past.

"Good morra; and good luck to the pair of ye," says the lad.

"It's a far thramp you'll have afoot," says Cormac, says he, "if you're for the fair."

"It's my own fault that I come afoot," says the lad, says he, "for, like you, I had an ass at home; but, unlike you, I'd be ashamed for to be seen ridin' an ass into Farney."

Cormac, he turned the head of his pony round, and he made a dash at the lad, and a slash at him with his whip; and well it was for the fellow he was light o' foot and fit to clear the ditch like a hare, else Cormac 'uld have massacraid him.

The King faced his pony for Farney again and rode on, and in little sweet humour he was. As he'd rode over the drawbridge he thought he'd left behind him in the castle, in his wife, the one fool the world knew this morning. But here was as great and as provokin' a fool. He put spurs to his pony and he rode terrible hard, tryin' for to ride the madness off himself, and never stopped nor

stayed till he had gone another three mile; and there a big *bodach* of a farmin'-lookin' fellow crossin' the fields, and dressed for the fair too, halloed to him to stop.

King Cormac pulled up, wondering what this *bodach* wanted with him, and "What's the matter with ye?" says he to the *bodach*.

"Old buck," says the *bodach*, says he, "light down till I have a look at that ass you've for sale. How much 'ill ye be after wantin' for him?"

And the King that instant was dumbfoundered, not knowin' what answer to make, or whether it was in his right wits, or out of them, he was. Without replyin' to the *bodach* one word, good, bad, or indifferent, he put spurs to the pony and away with him like the wind, for shame's sake.

"Either all Ireland," says he to himself, "is gone mad entirely this mornin', or else I'm the sorriest fool that flounders on the ridge of the world.

"By this and by that," at last, says he, "the next man I meet I'll let him decide atween me and the animal I'm ridin'. I'll bestow it to him," says he, "if it's makin' a laughin' stock o' myself bestridin' an ass I am—and Heaven help Conal, too."

Faith, he hadn't gone a mile more when he overtak a dandy chap footin' it for the fair. King Cormac he noticed that this chap, like the other two lads, didn't know him for the King. He slowed up when he came into company with this third, and, says he, "It's a brave mornin' this, glory be to Goodness."

"It is, thank Heaven, yes," says the other, says he; "is it for the fair you're pushin'?"

"For the fair, yes," says King Cormac, says he, and he patted his pony. "I'm taking this little horse there to sell it." And he turned the tail of his eye at the same time on the lad he was chatting to, to see how he'd take this. The lad gave a snigger.

"What are ye sniggerin' at?" says King Cormac, says he.

"At me own fun," says the lad, says he, dryly, that way.

"And what's the fun?" says King Cormac.

And the lad turns on the King purty mad, and says he, "For three fardens I'd crack your ribs, ye oul' fool, ye," says he, "with this stick."

"For why?" says King Cormac, astonished.

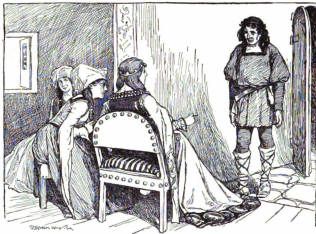
"For hintin' to me," says the lad, says he, "that I never left my mother afore, and wouldn't know an ass from a horse."

King Cormac jumped out of his saddle

"Criona," says he, "I made it a present to a man I met on the way."

"For why, Cormac?" says she—and she tryin' to keep her face straight.

"Because," says he, "the castle of Connaught can only afford to keep one ass—and I thought it better the biggest of the pair should come back."



"'BECAUSE,' SAYS HE, 'THE CASTLE OF CONNAUGHT CAN ONLY AFFORD TO KEEP ONE ASS.'"

that minute. "I humbly beg your ten thousand pardons," says he, "and I didn't mean for to insult you. It was all a mistake, and I want ye to take this ass a present from me for the insult." He pitched the reins on the lad's arm, and, "No Fair of Farney," says he, "for ould fools like me. Good mornin' to you, and good luck." And he was footin' it for home afore you could say "Scat!"

When he reached the castle he first went like a madman after Conal, who, I tell you, didn't wait to chop logic with him, but cleared the walls like a wild deer afore the ragin' tiger that come after him, and never stopped runnin' till he put three parts of Ireland behind him. Then Cormac went stavin' up the stairs, out of one room into another, till he found Criona sittin' sewin' with her maidens.

"Why, my own Cormac!" says Criona, says she. "Surely it isn't back from the fair you are yet? What have you done with the ass?"

"Cormac," says she, "how do you mean?"

"I mane," says Cormac, says he, "that, though the one I parted with was an ass, right enough, he had the sense enough to know it; but I was too big an ass even to know I was one. Criona," says he, "you're the wisest and cleverest woman in all creation, and you've got for a man the stupidest fool that ever walked. Promise me," says he, "that you'll never let me make myself ridiculous in the face of the country, by either liftin' hand or foot, givin' word, order, diraction, or command, ever again, without first havin' your advice on it."

Well, Criona promised him. And, by consequence, King Cormac was a happy man, who listened to his wife's advice and did his wife's will, and ruled with great credit to himself over a peaceful and prosperous kingdom of Connaught from then till the day he died. And he left a great name after him, entirely.