

m a g a z i n e o f  
**HORROR**

**The Bizarre and The Unusual**

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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# Dermod's Bane

by Robert E. Howard

(author of *Skulls in the Stars*, *The Vale of Lost Women*, etc.)

ROBERT E. HOWARD left a large mass of unpublished and incomplete mss. behind when he died in 1936, as well as a number of mss. either accepted or to be accepted by WEIRD TALES. When Farnsworth Wright ran the short science-fiction type novel, *Almúric*, in 1939 (May, June-July, August issues), it looked as if this was all there was. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. It was learned that the late Oscar J. Friend, onetime editor of THRILLING WONDER STORIES, then authors' agent, had a large box of Howard mss.; this was the buried treasure into which L. Sprague de Camp and others dipped to bring forth new or revised or "collaborated" Howard stories in the late 40s and the 50s. Again, it seemed as if all had been discovered, but there were many who felt that there was still more Howard material. Finally GLENN LORD uncovered a large box full of mss., and it was from this file that we located the long-missing mss. *Valley of the Lost*, which we ran in the Summer issue of STARTLING MYSTERY STORIES under the title, *The Secret of Lost Valley*. (An explanation of why the title had to be changed, and a reproduction of a letter to Howard from Harry Bates, along with page one of the mss., appears in this issue; no need to repeat it here.) As a result, a new surge of Howard material is beginning to appear, some of it retyped without alteration from REH's original mss., some of it revised, some of it "completed". The present story, like *The Vale of Lost Women*, is a Howard original. Why it was not accepted during his lifetime, we do not know — in fact, we do not know if it was submitted at all; we can suspect, though, that if Wright rejected it, that was because he felt that its tone was not that which WT readers wanted from Howard — and the Conan stories were most heavily demanded, even if a few readers expressed growing boredom with a steady diet of them. There were few non-Conan tales under the Howard byline in WT between the issues of December 1932 (*The Phoenix on the Sword*) and October 1936 (part three, conclusion, of *Red Nails*, appearing just after WT's obituary notice, which ran in the August-September issue).

**IF YOUR HEART** is sick in your breast and a blind black curtain of sorrow is between your brain and your eyes so that the very sunlight is pale and leprous — go to the city of Galway, in the county of the same name, in the province of Connaught, in the country of Ireland.

In the gray old City of Tribes as they call it, there is a dreamy soothing spell that is like enchantment, and if you are of Galway blood, no matter how far away, your grief will pass slowly from you like a dream, leaving only a sad sweet memory, like the scent of a dying rose. There is a mist of antiquity hovering over the old city which mingles with sorrow and makes one forget. Or you can go out into the blue Connaught hills and feel the salt sharp tang of the wind off the Atlantic, and life seems faint and far away, with all its sharp joys and bitter sorrows, and no more real than the shadows of the clouds which pass.

I came to Galway as a wounded beast crawls back to his lair in the hills. The city of my people broke upon my gaze for the first time, but it did not seem strange or foreign. It seemed like a homecoming to me, and with each day passing the land of my birth seemed farther and farther away and the land of my ancestor closer.

I came to Galway with an

aching heart. My twin sister, whom I loved as never I had loved anyone else, died; her going was swift and unexpected. It seemed to my mazed agony that one moment she was laughing beside me with her cheery smile and bright gray Irish eyes, and the next, the cold bitter grass was growing above her. Oh, my soul to God, not your Son alone endured crucifixion.

A black cloud like a shroud locked about me and in the dim borderland of madness I sat alone, tearless and speechless. My grandmother came to me at last, a great grim old woman, with hard haunted eyes that held all the woes of the Irish race.

"Let you go to Galway, lad. Let you go to the ould land. Maybe the sorrow of you will be drowned in the cold salt sea. Maybe the folk of Connaught can heal the wound that is on you . . ."

I went to Galway.

Well, the people were kind there — all those great old families, the Martins, the Lynches, the Deanes, the Dorseys, the Blakes, the Kirowans — families of the fourteen great families who rule Galway.

Out on the hills and in the valleys I roved and talked with the kindly, quaint country folk, many of whom still spoke the good old Erse language which I could speak haltingly.

There, on a hill one night be-

fore a shepherd's fire I heard again the old legend of Dermot O'Connor. As the shepherd unfolded the terrible tale in his rich brogue, interlaced with many Gaelic phrases, I remembered that my grandmother had told me the tale when I was a child, but I had forgotten the most of it.

BRIEFLY THE story is this: there was a chief of the Clan na O'Connor and his name was Dermot, but people called him the Wolf. The O'Connors were kings in the old days, ruling Connaught with a hand of steel. They divided the rule of Ireland with the O'Briens in the South — Munster — and the O'Neills in the North — Ulster. With the O'Rourkes they fought the MacMurraughs of Leinster and it was Dermot MacMurrough, driven out of Ireland by the O'Connors, who brought in Strongbow and his Norman adventurers. When Earl Pembroke (whom men called Strongbow) landed in Ireland, Roderick O'Connor was king of Ireland in name and claim at least. And the clan O'Connor, fierce Celtic warriors that they were, kept up their struggle for freedom until at last their power was broken by a terrible Norman invasion. All honor to the O'Connors. In the old times my people fought under their banners—but each tree has a rotten root. Each great house has its black sheep.

Dermot O'Connor was the black sheep of his clan and a blacker one never lived.

His hand was against all men, even his own house. He was no chieftain, fighting to regain the crown of Erin or to free his people; he was a red-handed reaver and he preyed alike on Norman and Celt; he raided into The Pale and he carried torch and steel into Munster and Leinster. The O'Briens and the O'Carrolls had cause to curse him, and the O'Neills hunted him like a wolf.

He left a trail of blood and devastation wherever he rode and at last, his band dwindling from desertions and constant fighting, he alone remained, hiding in caves and hills, butchering lone travelers for the sheer lust of blood that was on him, and descending on lonely farmer's houses or shepherd's huts to commit atrocities on their womenfolk. He was a giant of a man and the legends make of him something inhuman and monstrous. It must be truth that he was strange and terrible in appearance.

But his end came at last. He murdered a youth of the Kirowan clan and the Kirowans rode out of the city of Galway with vengeance in their hearts. Sir Michael Kirowan met the marauder alone in the hills — Sir Michael, a direct ancestor of mine, whose very name I bear. Alone they fought with only the shuddering hills to witness that

terrible battle, till the clash of steel reached the ears of the rest of the clan who were riding hard and scouring the countryside.

They found Sir Michael badly wounded and Dermod O'Connor dying with a cleft shoulder bone and a ghastly wound in his breast. But such was their fury and hatred, that they flung a noose about the dying robber's neck and hanged him to a great tree on the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea.

"And," said my friend, the shepherd, stirring the fire, "the peasant folk still point out the tree and call it Dermod's Bane, after the Danish manner, and men have seen the great outlaw o' nights, and him gnashing his great tusches and spouting blood from shoulder and breast and swearin' all manner o' ill on the Kirowans and their blood for all time to come.

"And so, sir, let you not walk in the cliffs over the sea by night for you are of the blood he hates and the same name of the man who felled him is on you. For let you laugh if so be you will, but the ghost of Dermod O'Connor the Wolf is abroad o' dark night and the moon out of the sky, and him with his great black beard and ghastly eyes and boar tusches."

They pointed me out the tree, Dermod's Bane, and strangely like a gallows it looked, standing there as it had stood for

how many hundred years I do not know for men live long in Ireland and trees live longer. There were no other trees near and the cliff rose sheer from the sea for four hundred feet. Below was only the deep sinister blue of the waves, deep and dark, breaking on the cruel rocks.

I WALKED MUCH in the hills at night for when the silence of the darkness was on the world and no speech or noises of men to hold my thoughts, my sorrow was dark on my heart again and I walked on the hills where the stars seemed close and warm. And often my mazed brain wondered which star she was on, or if she had turned to a star.

One night the old, sharp agony returned unbearably. I rose from my bed — for I was staying at the time in a little mountain inn — and dressed and went into the hills. My temples throbbed and there was an unbearable weight about my heart. My dumb frozen soul shrieked up to God but I could not weep. I felt I must weep or go mad, for never a tear had passed my eyelids since . . .

Well, I walked on and on, how long or how far I do not know. The stars were hot and red and angry and gave me no comfort that night. At first I wanted to scream and howl and throw myself on the ground and tear the grass with my teeth.

Then that passed and I wandered as in a trance. There was no moon and in the dim starlight the hills and their trees loomed dark and strange. Over the summits I could see the great Atlantic lying like a dusky silver monster and I heard her faint roaring.

Something flitted in front of me and I thought it was a wolf; but there have been no wolves in Ireland for many and many a year. Again I saw the thing, a long low shadowy shape. I followed it mechanically. Now in front of me I saw a cliff overlooking the sea. On the cliff's edge was a single great tree that loomed up like a gibbet. I approached this.

Then in front of me, as I neared the tree, a vague mist hovered. A strange fear spread over me as I watched stupidly. A form became evident. Dim and silky, like a shred of moon-mist, but with an undoubted human shape. A face — I cried out!

A vague, sweet face floated before me, indistinct, mist-like—yet I made out the shimmering mass of dark hair, the high pure forehead, the red curving lips—the serious soft gray eyes.

"Moiral!" I cried in agony and rushed forward, my aching arms spread wide, my heart bursting in my bosom.

She floated away from me like a mist blown by a breeze; now she seemed to waver in space—

I felt myself staggering wildly on the very edge of the cliff, whither my blind rush had led me. As a man wakes from a dream I saw in one flashing instant the cruel rocks four hundred feet below, I heard the hungry lapping of the waves — as I felt myself falling forward I saw the vision, but now it was changed hideously. Great tusk-like teeth gleamed ghoulishly through a matted black beard. Terrible eyes blazed under pent-house brows; blood flowed from a wound in the shoulder and a ghastly gash in the broad breast

"Dermod O'Connor!" I screamed, my hair bristling, "Avaunt, fiend out of hell . . ."

I SWAYED OUT for the fall I could not check, with death waiting four hundred feet below. Then a soft small hand closed on my wrist and I was drawn irresistably back. I fell, but back on the soft green grass at the lip of the cliff, not to the keen edged rocks and waiting sea below. Oh, I knew—I could not be wrong. The small hand was gone from my wrist, the hideous face gone from the cliff edge — but that grasp on my wrist that drew me back from my doom — how could I fail to recognize it? A thousand times had I felt the dear touch of that soft hand on my arm or in my own hand. Oh Moira, Moira, pulse of my heart, in life and in

death you were ever at my side.

And now for the first time I wept and lying on my stomach with my face in my hands, I poured my racked heart out in scalding, blinding and soul easing tears, until the sun came up over the blue Galway hills and limned the branches of Dermod's Bane with a strange new radiance.

Now, did I dream or was I mad? Did in truth, the ghost of that long dead outlaw lead me across the hills to the cliff under the death-tree, and there assume the shape of my dead sister to lure me to my doom? And did

in truth the real hand of that dead sister, brought suddenly to my side by my peril, hold me back from death?

Believe or disbelieve as you will; to me it is a fact. I saw Dermod O'Connor that night and he led me over the cliff, and the soft hand of Moira Kirowan dragged me back and its touch loosened the frozen channels of my heart and brought me peace. For the wall that bars the living from the dead is but a thin veil, I know now, and so sure as a dead woman's love conquered a dead man's hate, so sure shall I some day in the world beyond, hold my sister in my arms again.

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