

THE  
GREY GOD  
PASSES

Robert E. Howard

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# **The Grey God Passes**

ROBERT E. HOWARD

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The Grey God Passes

A voice echoed among the bleak reaches of the mountains that reared up gauntly on either hand. At the mouth of the defile that opened on a colossal crag, Conn the thrall wheeled, snarling like a wolf at bay. He was tall and massively, yet rangily, built, the fierceness of the wild dominant in his broad, sloping shoulders, his huge hairy chest and long, heavily muscled arms. His features were in keeping with his bodily aspect—a strong, stubborn jaw, low slanting forehead topped by a shock of tousled tawny hair which added to the wildness of his appearance no more than did his cold blue eyes. His only garment was a scanty loin-cloth. His own wolfish ruggedness was protection enough against the elements—for he was a slave in an age when even the masters lived lives as hard as the iron environments which bred them.

Now Conn half crouched, sword ready, a bestial snarl of menace humming in his bull-throat, and from the defile there came a tall man, wrapped in a cloak beneath which the thrall glimpsed a sheen of mail. The stranger wore a slouch hat pulled so low that from his shadowed features only one eye gleamed, cold and grim as the grey sea.

"Well, Conn, thrall of Wolfgar Snorri's son," said the stranger in a deep, powerful voice, "whither do you flee, with your master's blood on your hands?"

"I know you not," growled Conn, "nor how you know me. If you would take me, whistle up your dogs and make an end. Some of them will taste steel ere I die."

"Fool!" There was deep scorn in the reverberant tone. "I am no hunter of runaway serfs. There are wilder matters abroad. What do you smell in the sea-wind?"

Conn turned toward the sea, lapping greyly at the cliffs far below. He expanded his mighty chest, his nostrils flaring as he breathed deeply.

"I smell the tang of the salt-spume," he answered.

The stranger's voice was like the rasp of swords. "The scent of blood is on the wind—the musk of slaughter and the shouts of the slaying."

Conn shook his head, bewildered. "It is only the wind among the crags."

"There is war in your homeland," said the stranger sombrely. "The spears of the South have risen against the swords of the North and the death-fires are lighting the land like the mid-day sun."

"How can you know this?" asked the thrall uneasily. "No ship has put in to Torka for weeks. Who are you? Whence come you? How know you these things?"

"Can you not hear the skirl of the pipes, the clashing of the axes?" replied the tall stranger. "Can you not smell the war-reek the wind brings?"

"Not I," answered Conn. "It is many a long league from Torka to Erin, and I hear only the wind among the crags and the gulls screeching over the headlands. Yet if there is war, I

should be among the weapon-men of my clan, though my life is forfeit to Melaglin because I slew a man of his in a quarrel."

The stranger gave no heed, standing like a statue as he gazed far out across the reaches of hazy barren mountains and misty waves.

"It is the death-grip," he said, like one who speaks to himself. "Now comes the reaping of kings, the garnering of chiefs like a harvest. Gigantic shadows stalk red-handed across the world, and night is falling on Asgaard. I hear the cries of long-dead heroes whistling in the void, and the shouts of forgotten gods. To each being there is an appointed time, and even the gods must die..."

He stiffened suddenly with a great shout, flinging his arms seaward. Tall, rolling clouds, sailing gigantically before the gale, veiled the sea. Out of the mist came a great wind and out of the wind a whirling mass of clouds. And Conn cried out. From out the flying clouds, shadowy and horrific, swept twelve shapes. He saw, as in a nightmare, the twelve winged horses and their riders, women in flaming silver mail and winged helmets, whose golden hair floated out on the wind behind them, and whose cold eyes were fixed on some awesome goal beyond his ken.

"The Choosers of the Slain!" thundered the stranger, flinging his arms wide in a terrible gesture. "They ride in the twilight of the North! The winged hooves spurn the rolling clouds, the web of Fate is spun, the Loom and Spindle

broken! Doom roars upon the gods and night falls on Asgaard! Night and the trumpets of Ragnarok!"

The cloak was blown wide in the wind, revealing the mighty, mail-clad figure; the slouch hat fell aside; the wild elf-locks blew free. And Conn shrank before the blaze of the stranger's eye. And he saw that where the other eye should have been, was but an empty socket. Thereat panic seized him, so that he turned and ran down the defile as a man flees demons. And a fearsome backward glance showed him the stranger etched against the cloud-torn sky, cloak blowing in the wind, arms flung high, and it seemed to the thrall that the man had grown monstrously in stature, that he loomed colossal among the clouds, dwarfing the mountains and the sea, and that he was suddenly grey, as with vast age.

## CHAPTER TWO

Oh Masters of the North, we come with  
tally of remembered dead,  
Of broken hearth and blazing home, and  
rafters crashing overhead.  
A single cast of dice we throw to balance,  
by the leaden sea,  
A hundred years of wrong and woe with  
one red hour of butchery.

The spring gale had blown itself out. The sky smiled blue overhead and the sea lay placid as a pool, with only a few scattered bits of driftwood along the beaches to give mute evidence of her treachery. Along the strand rode a lone horseman, his saffron cloak whipping out behind him, his yellow hair blowing about his face in the breeze.

Suddenly he reined up so short that his spirited steed reared and snorted. From among the sand dunes had risen a man, tall and powerful, of wild, shock-headed aspect, and naked but for a loincloth.

"Who are you," demanded the horseman, "who bear the sword of a chief, yet have the appearance of a masterless man, and wear the collar of a serf withal?"

"I am Conn, young master," answered the wanderer, "once an outlaw, once a thrall,—always a man of King

Brian's, whether he will or no. And I know you. You are Dunlang O'Hartigan, friend of Murrogh, son of Brian, prince of Dal Cais. Tell me, good sir, is there war in the land?"

"Sooth to say," answered the young chief, "even now King Brian and King Malchi lie encamped at Kilmainham, before Dublin. I have but ridden from the camp this morning. From all the lands of the Vikings King Sitric of Dublin has summoned the slayers, and Gaels and Danes are ready to join battle—and such a battle as Erin has never seen before."

Conn's eyes clouded. "By Crom!" he muttered, half to himself, "It is even as the Grey Man said—yet how could he have known? Surely it was all a dream."

"How come you here?" asked Dunlang.

"From Torka in the Orkneys in an open boat, flung down as a chip is thrown upon the tide. Of yore I slew a man of Meath, kern of Melaghlin, and King Brian's heart was hot against me because of the broken truce; so I fled. Well, the life of an outlaw is hard. Thorwald Raven, Jarl of the Hebrides, took me when I was weak from hunger and wounds, and put this collar on my neck." The kern touched the heavy copper ring encircling his bull-neck. "Then he sold me to Wolfgar Snorri's son on Torka. He was a hard master. I did the work of three men, and stood at his back and mowed down carles like wheat when he brawled with his neighbors. In return he gave me crusts from his board, a bare earth floor to sleep on, and deep scars on my back. Finally I could bear it no more, and I leaped upon him in his own skalli and crushed his skull with a log of firewood. Then I took his

sword and fled to the mountains, preferring to freeze or starve there rather than die under the lash.

"There in the mountains,"—again Conn's eyes clouded with doubt—"I think I dreamed," he said, "I saw a tall grey man who spoke of war in Erin, and in my dream I saw Valkyries riding southward on the clouds..."

"Better to die at sea on a good venture than to starve in the Orkney mountains," he continued with more assurance, his feet on firm ground. "By chance I found a fisherman's boat, with a store of food and water, and I put to sea. By Crom! I wonder to find myself still alive! The gale took me in her fangs last night, and I know only that I fought the sea in the boat until the boat sank under my feet, and then fought her in her naked waves until my senses went from me. None could have been more surprised than I when I came to myself this dawn lying like a piece of driftwood on the beach. I have lain in the sun since, trying to warm the cold tang of the sea out of my bones."

"By the saints, Conn," said Dunlang, "I like your spirit."

"I hope King Brian likes it as well," grunted the kern.

"Attach yourself to my train," answered Dunlang. "I'll speak for you. King Brian has weightier matters on his mind than a single blood-feud. This very day the opposing hosts lie drawn up for the death-grip."

"Will the spear-shattering fall on the morrow?" asked Conn.

"Not by King Brian's will," answered Dunlang. "He is loath to shed blood on Good Friday. But who knows when the heathen will come down upon us?"

Conn laid a hand on Dunlang's stirrup-leather and strode beside him as the steed moved leisurely along.

"There is a notable gathering of weapon-men?"

"More than twenty thousand warriors on each side; the bay of Dublin is dark with the dragon-ships. From the Orkneys comes Jarl Sigurd with his raven banner. From Man comes the Viking Brodir with twenty longships. From the Danelagh in England comes Prince Amlaff, son of the King of Norway, with two thousand men. From all lands the hosts have gathered—from the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Hebrides—from Scotland, England, Germany, and the lands of Scandinavia.

"Our spies say Sigurd and Brodir have a thousand men armed in steel mail from crown to heel, who fight in a solid wedge. The Dalcassians may be hard put to break that iron wall. Yet, God willing, we shall prevail. Then among the other chiefs and warriors there are Anrad the Berserk, Hrafn the Red, Platt of Danemark, Thorstein and his comrade-in-arms Asmund, Thorleif Hordi, the Strong, Athelstane the Saxon, and Thorwald Raven, Jarl of the Hebrides."

At that name Conn grinned savagely and fingered his copper collar. "It is a great gathering if both Sigurd and Brodir come."

"That was the doing of Gormlaith," responded Dunlang.

"Word had come to the Orkneys that Brian had divorced Kormlada," said Conn, unconsciously giving the queen her Norse name.

"Aye—and her heart is black with hate against him. Strange it is that a woman so fair of form and countenance should have the soul of a demon."

"God's truth, my lord. And what of her brother, Prince Mailmora?"

"Who but he is the instigator of the whole war?" cried Dunlang angrily. "The hate between him and Murrogh, so long smoldering, has at last burst into flame, firing both kingdoms. Both were in the wrong—Murrogh perhaps more than Mailmora. Gormlaith goaded her brother on. I did not believe King Brian acted wisely when he gave honors to those against whom he had warred. It was not well he married Gormlaith and gave his daughter to Gormlaith's son, Sitric of Dublin. With Gormlaith he took the seeds of strife and hatred into his palace. She is a wanton; once she was the wife of Amlaff Cauran, the Dane; then she was wife to King Malachi of Meath, and he put her aside because of her wickedness."

"What of Melaghlin?" asked Conn.

"He seems to have forgotten the struggle in which Brian wrested Erin's crown from him. Together the two kings move against the Danes and Mailmora."

As they conversed, they passed along the bare shore until they came into a rough broken stretch of cliffs and boulders;

and there they halted suddenly. On a boulder sat a girl, clad in a shimmering green garment whose pattern was so much like scales that for a bewildered instant Conn thought himself gazing on a mermaid come out of the deeps.

"Eevin!" Dunlang swung down from his horse, tossing the reins to Conn, and advanced to take her slender hands in his. "You sent for me and I have come—you've been weeping!"

Conn, holding the steed, felt an impulse to retire, prompted by superstitious qualms. Eevin, with her slender form, her wealth of shimmering golden hair, and her deep mysterious eyes, was not like any other girl he had ever seen. Her entire aspect was different from the women of the Norse-folk and of the Gaels alike, and Conn knew her to be a member of that fading mystic race which had occupied the land before the coming of his ancestors, some of whom still dwelt in caverns along the sea and deep in unfrequented forests—the De Danaans, sorcerers, the Irish said, and kin to the faeries.

"Dunlang!" The girl caught her lover in a convulsive embrace. "You must not go into battle—the weird of far-sight is on me, and I know if you go to the war, you will die! Come away with me—I'll hide you—I'll show you dim purple caverns like the castles of deep-sea kings, and shadowy forests where none save my people has set foot. Come with me and forget wars and hates and prides and ambitions, which are but shadows without reality or substance. Come and learn the dreamy splendors of far

places, where fear and hate are naught, and the years seem as hours, drifting forever."

"Eevin, my love!" cried Dunlang, troubled, "You ask that which is beyond my power. When my clan moves into battle, I must be at Murrogh's side, though sure death be my portion. I love you beyond all life, but by the honor of my clan, this is an impossible thing."

"I feared as much," she answered, resigned. "You of the Tall Folk are but children—foolish, cruel, violent—slaying one another in childish quarrels. This is punishment visited on me who, alone of all my people, have loved a man of the Tall Folk. Your rough hands have bruised my soft flesh unwittingly, and your rough spirit as unwittingly bruises my heart."

"I would not hurt you, Eevin," began Dunlang, pained.

"I know," she replied, "the hands of men are not made to handle the delicate body and heart of a woman of the Dark People. It is my fate. I love and I have lost. My sight is a far-sight which sees through the veil and the mists of life, behind the past and beyond the future. You will go into battle and the harps will keen for you; and Eevin of Craglea will weep until she melts in tears and the salt tears mingle with the cold salt sea."

Dunlang bowed his head, unspeaking, for her young voice vibrated with the ancient sorrow of womankind; and even the rough kern shuffled his feet uneasily.

"I have brought a gift against the time of battle," she went on, bending lithely to lift something which caught the sun's sheen. "It may not save you, the ghosts in my soul whisper—but I hope without hope in my heart."

Dunlang stared uncertainly at what she spread before him. Conn, edging closer and craning his neck, saw a hauberk of strange workmanship and a helmet such as he had never seen before,—a heavy affair made to slip over the entire head and rest on the neckpieces of the hauberk. There was no movable vizor, merely a slit cut in the front through which to see, and the workmanship was of an earlier, more civilized age, which no man living could duplicate.

Dunlang looked at it askance, with the characteristic Celtic antipathy toward armor. The Britons who faced Caesar's legionnaires fought naked, judging a man cowardly who cased himself in metal, and in later ages the Irish clans entertained the same conviction regarding Strongbow's mail-clad knights.

"Eevin," said Dunlang, "my brothers will laugh at me if I enclose myself in iron, like a Dane. How can a man have full freedom of limb, weighted by such a garment? Of all the Gaels, only Turlogh Dubh wears full mail."

"And is any man of the Gael less brave than he?" she cried passionately. "Oh, you of the Tall Folk are foolish! For ages the iron-clad Danes have trampled you, when you might have swept them out of the land long ago, but for your foolish pride."

"Not altogether pride, Eevin," argued Dunlang. "Of what avail is mail of plated armor against the Dalcassian ax which cuts through iron like cloth?"

"Mail would turn the swords of the Danes," she answered, "and not even an ax of the O'Briens would rend this armor. Long it has lain in the deep-sea caverns of my people, carefully protected from rust. He who wore it was a warrior of Rome in the long ago, before the legions were withdrawn from Britain. In an ancient war on the border of Wales, it fell into the hands of my people, and because its wearer was a great prince, my people treasured it. Now I beg you to wear it, if you love me."

Dunlang took it hesitantly, nor could he know that it was the armor worn by a gladiator in the days of the later Roman empire, nor wonder by what chance it had been worn by an officer in the British legion. Little of that knew Dunlang who, like most of his brother chiefs, could neither read nor write; knowledge and education were for monks and priests; a fighting man was kept too busy to cultivate the arts and sciences. He took the armor, and because he loved the strange girl, agreed to wear it—"if it will fit me."

"It will fit," she answered. "But I will see you no more alive."

She held out her white arms and he gathered her hungrily to him, while Conn looked away. Then Dunlang gently unlocked her clinging arms from about his neck, kissed her, and tore himself free.

Without a backward glance he mounted his steed and rode away, with Conn trotting easily alongside. Looking back in the gathering dusk, the kern saw Eevin standing there still, a poignant picture of despair.

## CHAPTER THREE

The campfires sent up showers of sparks and illumined the land like day. In the distance loomed the grim walls of Dublin, dark and ominously silent; before the walls flickered other fires where the warriors of Leinster, under King Mailmora, whetted their axes for the coming battle. Out in the bay, the starlight glinted on myriad sails, shield-rails and arching serpent-prows. Between the city and the fires of the Irish host stretched the plain of Clontarf, bordered by Tomar's Wood, dark and rustling in the night, and the Liffey's dark, star-flecked waters.

Before his tent, the firelight playing on his white beard and glinting from his undimmed eagle eyes, sat the great King Brian Boru, among his chiefs. The king was old—seventy-three winters had passed over his lion-like head—long years crammed with fierce wars and bloody intrigues. Yet his back was straight, his arm unwithered, his voice deep and resonant. His chiefs stood about him, tall warriors with war-hardened hands and eyes whetted by the sun and the winds and the high places; tigerish princes in their rich tunics, green girdles, leathern sandals and saffron mantles caught with great golden brooches.

They were an array of war-eagles—Murrogh, Brian's eldest son, the pride of all Erin, tall and mighty, with wide blue eyes that were never placid, but danced with mirth, dulled with sadness, or blazed with fury; Murrogh's young son, Turlogh, a supple lad of fifteen with golden locks and an

eager face—tense with anticipation of trying his hand for the first time in the great game of war. And there was that other Turlogh, his cousin—Turlogh Dubh, who was only a few years older but who already had full stature and was famed throughout all Erin for his berserk rages and the cunning of his deadly ax-play. And there were Meathla O'Faelan, prince of Desmond or South Munster, and his kin—the Great Stewards of Scotland—Lennox, and Donald of Mar, who had crossed the Irish Channel with their wild Highlanders—tall men, sombre and gaunt and silent. And there were Dunlang O'Hartigan and O'Hyne, and prince of Hy Many, was in the tent of his uncle, King Malachi O'Neill, which was pitched in the camp of the Meathmen, apart from the Dalcassians, and King Brian was brooding on the matter. For since the setting of the sun, O'Kelly had been closeted with the King of Meath, and no man knew what passed between them.

Nor was Donagh, son of Brian, among the chiefs before the royal pavilion, for he was afield with a band ravaging the holdings of Mailmora of Leinster.

Now Dunlang approached the king, leading with him Conn, the kern.

"My Lord," quoth Dunlang, "here is a man who was outlawed aforetime, who has spent vile durance among the Gall, and who risked his life by storm and sea to return and fight under your banner. From the Orkneys in an open boat he came, naked and alone, and the sea cast him all but lifeless on the sand."

Brian stiffened; even in small things his memory was sharp as a whetted stone. "Thou!" he cried. "Aye, I remember him. Well, Conn, you have come back—and with your red hands!"

"Aye, King Brian," answered Conn stolidly, "my hands are red, it is true, and so I took to washing off the stain in Danish blood."

"You dare stand before me, to whom your life is forfeit!"

"This alone I know, King Brian," said Conn boldly, "my father was with you at Sulcoit and the sack of Limerick, and before that followed you in your days of wandering and was one of the fifteen warriors who remained to you when King Mahon, your brother, came seeking you in the forest. And my grandsire followed Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks, and my people have fought the Danes since the days of Thorgils. You need men who can strike strong blows, and it is my right to die in battle against my ancient enemies, rather than shamefully at the end of a rope."

King Brian nodded. "Well spoken. Take your life. Your days of outlawry are at an end. King Malachi would perhaps think otherwise, since it was a man of his you slew, but—" He paused; an old doubt ate at his soul at the thought of the King of Meath. "Let it be," he went on, "let it rest until after the battle—mayhap that will be world's end for us all."

Dunlang stepped toward Conn and laid hand on the copper collar. "Let us cut this away; you are a free man now."

But Conn shook his head. "Not until I have slain Thorwald Raven who put it there. I'll wear it into battle as a sign of no quarter."

"That is a noble sword you wear, kern," said Murrogh suddenly.

"Aye, my Lord. Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks wielded this blade until Blacair the Dane slew him at Ardee, and it remained in the possession of the Gall until I took it from the body of Wolfgar Snorri's son."

"It is not fitting that a kern should wear the sword of a king," said Murrogh brusquely. "Let one of the chiefs take it and give him an ax instead."

Conn's fingers locked about the hilt. "He would take the sword from me had best give me the ax first," he said grimly, "and that suddenly."

Murrogh's hot temper blazed. With an oath, he strode toward Conn, who met him eye to eye and gave back not a step.

"Be at ease, my son," ordered King Brian. "Let the kern keep the blade."

Murrogh shrugged. His mood changed. "Aye, keep it and follow me into battle. We shall see if a king's sword in a kern's hand can hew as wide a path as a prince's blade."

"My lords," said Conn, "it may be God's will that I fall in the first onset—but the scars of slavery burn deep in my back

this night, and I will not be backward when the spears are splintering."

## CHAPTER FOUR

"Therefore your doom is on you,  
Is on you and your kings...."

Chesterton

While King Brian communed with his chiefs on the plains above Clontarf, a grisly ritual was being enacted within the gloomy castle that was at once the fortress and palace of Dublin's king. With good reason did Christians fear and hate those grim walls; Dublin was a pagan city, ruled by savage heathen kings, and dark were the deeds committed therein.

In an inner chamber in the castle stood the Viking Brodir, sombrely watching a ghastly sacrifice on a grim black altar. On that monstrous stone writhed a naked, frothing thing that had been a comely youth; brutally bound and gagged, he could only twist convulsively beneath the dripping, inexorable dagger in the hands of the white-bearded wild-eyed priest of Odin.

The blade hacked through flesh and thew and bone; blood gushed, to be caught in a broad, copper bowl, which the priest, with his red-dappled beard, held high, invoking Odin in a frenzied chant. His thin, bony fingers tore the yet pulsing heart from the butchered breast, and his wild half-man eyes scanned it with avid intensity.

"What of your divinations?" demanded Brodir impatiently.

Shadows flickered in the priest's cold eyes, and his flesh crawled with a mysterious horror. "Fifty years I have served Odin," he said, "fifty years divined by the bleeding heart, but never such portents as these. Hark, Brodir! If ye fight not on Good Friday, as the Christians call it, your host will be utterly routed and all your chiefs slain; if ye fight on Good Friday, King Brian will die—but he will win the day."

Brodir cursed with cold venom.

The priest shook his ancient head. "I cannot fathom the portent—and I am the last of the priests of the Flaming Circle, who learned mysteries at the feet of Thorgils. I see battle and slaughter—and yet more—shapes gigantic and terrible that stalk monstrously through the mists..."

"Enough of such mummery," snarled Brodir. "If I fall I would take Brian to Helheim with me. We go against the Gaels on the morrow, fall fair, fall foul!" He turned and strode from the room.

Brodir traversed a winding corridor and entered another, more spacious chamber, adorned, like all the Dublin king's palace, with the loot of all the world—gold-chased weapons, rare tapestries, rich rugs, divans from Byzantium and the East—plunder taken from all peoples by the roving Norsemen; for Dublin was the center of the Vikings' wide-flung world, the headquarters whence they fared forth to loot the kings of the earth.

A queenly form rose to greet him. Kormlada, whom the Gaels called Gormlaith, was indeed fair, but there was cruelty in her face and in her hard, scintillant eyes. She was of mixed Irish and Danish blood, and looked the part of a barbaric queen, with her pendant earrings, her golden armlets and anklets, and her silver breastplates set with jewels. But for these breastplates, her only garments were a short silken skirt which came half way to her knees and was held in place by a wide girdle about her lithe waist, and sandals of soft red leather. Her hair was red-gold, her eyes light grey and glittering. Queen she had been, of Dublin, of Meath, and of Thomond. And queen she was still, for she held her son Sitric and her brother Mailmora in the palm of her slim white hand. Carried off in a raid in her childhood by Amlaff Cauran, King of Dublin, she had early discovered her power over men. As the child-wife of the rough Dane, she had swayed his kingdom at will, and her ambitions increased with her power.

Now she faced Brodir with her alluring, mysterious smile, but secret uneasiness ate at her. In all the world there was but one woman she feared, and but one man. And the man was Brodir. With him she was never entirely certain of her course; she duped him as she duped all men, but it was with many misgivings, for she sensed in him an elemental savagery which, once loosed, she might not be able to control.

"What of the priest's words, Brodir?" she asked.

"If we avoid battle on the morrow we lose," the Viking answered moodily. "If we fight, Brian wins, but falls. We

fight—the more because my spies tell me Donagh is away from camp with a strong band, ravaging Mailmora's lands. We have sent spies to Malachi, who has an old grudge against Brian, urging him to desert the king—or at least to stand aside and aid neither of us. We have offered him rich rewards and Brian's lands to rule. Ha! Let him step into our trap! Not gold, but a bloody sword we will give him. With Brian crushed we will turn on Malachi and tread him into the dust! But first—Brian."

She clenched her white hands in savage exultation. "Bring me his head! I'll hang it above our bridal bed."

"I have heard strange tales," said Brodir soberly. "Sigurd has boasted in his cups."

Kormlada started and scanned the inscrutable countenance. Again she felt a quiver of fear as she gazed at the sombre Viking with his tall, strong stature, his dark, menacing face, and his heavy black locks which he wore braided and caught in his sword-belt.

"What has Sigurd said?" she asked, striving to make her voice casual.

"When Sitric came to me in my skalli on the Isle of Man," said Brodir, red glints beginning to smoulder in his dark eyes, "it was his oath that if I came to his aid, I should sit on the throne of Ireland with you as my queen. Now that fool of an Orkneyman, Sigurd, boasts in his ale that he was promised the same reward."

She forced a laugh. "He was drunk."

Brodir burst into wild cursing as the violence of the untamed Viking surged up in him. "You lie, you wanton!" he shouted, seizing her white wrist in an iron grip. "You were born to lure men to their doom! But you will not play fast and loose with Brodir of Man!"

"You are mad!" she cried, twisting vainly in his grasp. "Release me, or I'll call my guards!"

"Call them!" he snarled, "and I'll slash the heads from their bodies. Cross me now and blood will run ankle-deep in Dublin's streets. By Thor! there will be no city left for Brian to burn! Mailmora, Sitric, Sigurd, Amlaff—I'll cut all their throats and drag you naked to my ship by your yellow hair. Dare to call out!"

She dared not. He forced her to her knees, twisting her white arm so brutally that she bit her lip to keep from screaming.

"You promised Sigurd the same thing you promised me," he went on in ill-controlled fury, "knowing neither of us would throw away his life for less!"

"No! No!" she shrieked. "I swear by the ring of Thor!" Then, as the agony grew unbearable, she dropped pretense. "Yes—yes, I promised him—oh, let me go!"

"So!" The Viking tossed her contemptuously on to a pile of silken cushions, where she lay whimpering and disheveled. "You promised me and you promised Sigurd," he said, looming menacingly above her, "but your promise to me you'll keep—else you had better never been born. The

throne of Ireland is a small thing beside my desire for you—if I cannot have you, no one shall."

"But what of Sigurd?"

"He'll fall in battle—or afterward," he answered grimly.

"Good enough!" Dire indeed was the extremity in which Kormlada had not her wits about her. "It's you I love, Brodir; I promised him only because he would not aid us otherwise."

"Love!" The Viking laughed savagely. "You love Kormlada—none other. But you'll keep your vow to me or you'll rue it." And, turning on his heel, he left her chamber.

Kormlada rose, rubbing her arm where the blue marks of his fingers marred her skin. "May he fall in the first charge!" she ground between her teeth. "If either survive, may it be that tall fool, Sigurd—methinks he would be a husband easier to manage than that black-haired savage. I will perforce marry him if he survives the battle, but by Thor! he shall not long press the throne of Ireland—I'll send him to join Brian."

"You speak as though King Brian were already dead." A tranquil voice behind Kormlada brought her about to face the other person in the world she feared besides Brodir. Her eyes widened as they fell upon a slender girl clad in shimmering green, a girl whose golden hair glimmered with unearthly light in the glow of the candles. The queen recoiled, hands outstretched as if to fend her away.

"Eevin! Stand back, witch! Cast no spell on me! How came you into my palace?"

"How came the breeze through the trees?" answered the Danaan girl. "What was Brodir saying to you before I entered?"

"If you are a sorceress, you know," suddenly answered the queen.

Eevin nodded. "Aye, I know. In your own mind I read it. He had consulted the oracle of the sea-people—the blood and the torn heart,"—her dainty lips curled with disgust—"and he told you he would attack tomorrow."

The queen blanched and made no reply, fearing to meet Eevin's magnetic eyes. She felt naked before the mysterious girl who could uncannily sift the contents of her mind and empty it of its secrets.

Eevin stood with bent head for a moment, then raised her head suddenly. Kormlada started, for something akin to fear shone in the were-girl's eyes.

"Who is in this castle?" she cried.

"You know as well as I," muttered Kormlada. "Sitric, Sigurd, Brodir."

"There is another!" exclaimed Eevin, paling and shuddering. "Ah, I know him of old—I feel him—he bears the cold of the North with him, the shivering tang of icy seas..."

She turned and slipped swiftly through the velvet hangings that masked a hidden doorway Kormlada had thought known only to herself and her women, leaving the queen bewildered and uneasy.

In the sacrificial chamber, the ancient priest still mumbled over the gory altar upon which lay the mutilated victim of his rite. "Fifty years I have served Odin," he maundered, "and never such portents have I read. Odin laid his mark upon me long ago in a night of horror. The years fall like withered leaves, and my age draws to a close. One by one I have seen the altars of Odin crumble. If the Christians win this battle, Odin's day is done. It comes upon me that I have offered up my last sacrifice..."

A deep, powerful voice spoke behind him. "And what more fitting than that you should accompany the soul of that last sacrifice to the realm of him you served?"

The priest wheeled, the sacrificial dagger falling from his hand. Before him stood a tall man, wrapped in a cloak beneath which shone the gleam of armor. A slouch hat was pulled low over his forehead, and when he pushed it back, a single eye, glittering and grim as the grey sea, met his horrified gaze.

Warriors who rushed into the chamber at the strangled scream that burst hideously forth, found the old priest dead beside his corpse-laden altar, unwounded, but with face and body shrivelled as by some intolerable exposure, and a soul-

shaking horror in his glassy eyes. Yet, save for the corpses, the chamber was empty, and none had been seen to enter it since Brodir had gone forth.

Alone in his tent with the heavily-armed gallaghlachs ranged outside, King Brian was dreaming a strange dream. In his dream a tall grey giant loomed terribly above him, and cried in a voice that was like thunder among the clouds, "Beware, champion of the white Christ! Though you smite my children with the sword and drive me into the dark voids of Jotunheim, yet shall I work you rue! As you smite my children with the sword, so shall I smite the son of your body, and as I go into the dark, so shall you go, likewise, when the Choosers of the Slain ride the clouds above the battlefield!"

The thunder of the giant's voice and the awesome glitter of his single eye froze the blood of the king who had never known fear, and with a strangled cry, he woke, starting up. "The thick torches which burned outside illumined the interior of his tent sufficiently well for him to make out a slender form.

"Eevin!" he cried. "By my soul! it is well for kings that your people take no part in the intrigues of mortals, when you can steal under the very noses of the guards into our tents. Do you seek Dunlang?"

The girl shook her head sadly. "I see him no more alive, great king. Were I to go to him now, my own black sorrow

might unman him. I will come to him among the dead tomorrow."

King Brian shivered.

"But it is not of my woes that I came to speak, My Lord," she continued wearily. "It is not the way of the Dark People to take part in the quarrels of the Tall Folk—but I love one of them. This night I talked with Gormlaith."

Brian winced at the name of his divorced queen. "And your news?" he asked.

"Brodir strikes on the morrow."

The king shook his head heavily. "It vexes my soul to spill blood on the Holy Day. But if God wills it, we will not await their onslaught—we will march at dawn to meet them. I will send a swift runner to bring back Donagh..."

Eevin shook her head once more. "Nay, great king. Let Donagh live. After the battle the Dalcassians will need strong arms to brace the sceptre."

Brian gazed fixedly at her. "I read my doom in those words. Have you cast my fate?"

Eevin spread her hands helplessly. "My Lord, not even the Dark People can rend the Veil at will. Not by the casting of fates, or the sorcery of divination, not in smoke or in blood have I read it, but a weird is upon me and I see through flame and the dim clash of battle."

"And I shall fall?"

She bowed her face in her hands.

"Well, let it fall as God wills," said King Brian tranquilly. "I have lived long and deeply. Weep not—through the darkest mists of gloom and night, dawn yet rises on the world. My clan will revere you in the long days to come. Now go, for the night wanes toward morn, and I would make my peace with God."

And Eevin of Craglea went like a shadow from the king's tent.

# CHAPTER FIVE

The war was like a dream; I cannot tell  
How many heathen souls I sent to Hell.  
I only know, above the fallen ones  
I heard dark Odin shouting to his sons,  
And felt amid the battle's roar and shock  
The strife of gods that crashed in Ragnarok.

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## Conn's Saga

Through the mist of the whitening dawn men moved like ghosts and weapons clanked eerily. Conn stretched his muscular arms, yawned cavernously, and loosened his great blade in its sheath. "This is the day the ravens drink blood, My Lord," he said, and Dunlang O'Hartigan nodded absently.

"Come hither and aid me to don this cursed cage," said the young chief. "For Eevin's sake I'll wear it; but by the saints! I had rather battle stark naked!"

The Gaels were on the move, marching from Kilmainham in the same formation in which they intended to enter battle. First came the Dalcassians, big rangy men in their saffron tunics, with a round buckler of steel-braced yew wood on the left arm, and the right hand gripping the dreaded Dalcassian ax. This ax differed greatly from the heavy weapon of the Danes; the Irish wielded it with one hand, the thumb stretched along the haft to guide the blow, and they

had attained a skill at ax-fighting never before or since equalled. Hauberks they had none, neither the gallaghlachs nor the kerns, though some of their chiefs, like Murrogh, wore light steel caps. But the tunics of warriors and chiefs alike had been woven with such skill and steeped in vinegar until their remarkable toughness afforded some protection against sword and arrow.

At the head of the Dalcassians strode Prince Murrogh, his fierce eyes alight, smiling as though he went to a feast instead of a slaughtering. On one side went Dunlang in his Roman corselet, closely followed by Conn, bearing the helmet, and on the other the two Turloghs—the son of Murrogh, and Turlogh Dubh, who alone of all the Dalcassians always went into battle fully armored. He looked grim enough, despite his youth, with his dark face and smoldering blue eyes, clad as he was in a full shirt of black mail, mail leggings and a steel helmet with a mail drop, and bearing a spiked buckler. Unlike the rest of the chiefs, who preferred their swords in battle, Black Turlogh fought with an ax of his own forging, and his skill with the weapon was almost uncanny.

Close behind the Dalcassians were the two companies of the Scottish, with their chiefs, the Great Stewards of Scotland, who, veterans of long wars with the Saxons, wore helmets with horsehair crests and coats of mail. With them came the men of South Munster commanded by Prince Meathla O'Faellan.

The third division consisted of the warriors of Connacht, wild men of the west, shock-headed and naked but for their

wolf-skins, with their chiefs O'Kelly and O'Hyne. O'Kelly marched as a man whose soul is heavy, for the shadow of his meeting with Malachi the night before fell gauntly across him.

Somewhat apart from the three main divisions marched the tall gallagachs and kerns of Meath, their king riding slowly before them.

And before all the host rode King Brian Boru on a white steed, his white locks blown about his ancient face and his eyes strange and fey, so that the wild kerns gazed on him with superstitious awe.

So the Gaels came before Dublin, where they saw the hosts of Leinster and Lochlann drawn up in battle array, stretching in a wide crescent from Dubhgall's Bridge to the narrow river Tolka which cuts the plain of Clontarf. Three main divisions there were—the foreign Northmen, the Vikings, with Sigurd and the grim Brodir; flanking them on the one side, the fierce Danes of Dublin, under their chief, a sombre wanderer whose name no man knew, but who was called Dubhgall, the Dark Stranger; and on the other flank the Irish of Leinster, with their king, Mailmora. The Danish fortress on the hill beyond the Liffey River bristled with armed men where King Sitric guarded the city.

There was but one way into the city from the north, the direction from which the Gaels were advancing, for in those days Dublin lay wholly south of the Liffey; that was the bridge called Dubhgall's Bridge. The Danes stood with one horn of their line guarding this entrance, their ranks curving

out toward the Tolka, their backs to the sea. The Gaels advanced along the level plain which stretched between Tomar's Wood and the shore.

With little more than a bow-shot separating the hosts, the Gaels halted, and King Brian rode in front of them, holding aloft a crucifix. "Sons of Goidhel!" his voice rang like a trumpet call. "It is not given me to lead you into the fray, as I led you in days of old. But I have pitched my tent behind your lines, where you must trample me if you flee. You will not flee! Remember a hundred years of outrage and infamy! Remember your burned homes, your slaughtered kin, your ravaged women, your babes enslaved! Before you stand your oppressors! On this day our good Lord died for you! There stand the heathen hordes which revile His Name and slay His people! I have but one command to give you—conquer or die!"

The wild hordes yelled like wolves and a forest of axes brandished on high. King Brian bowed his head and his face was grey.

"Let them lead me back to my tent," he whispered to Murrogh. "Age has withered me from the play of the axes and my doom is hard upon me. Go forth, and may God stiffen your arms to the slaying!"

Now as the king rode slowly back to his tent among his guardsmen, there was a taking up of girdles, a drawing of blades, a dressing of shields. Conn placed the Roman helmet on Dunlang's head and grinned at the result, for the young

chief looked like some mythical iron monster out of Norse legendry. The hosts moved inexorably toward each other.

The Vikings had assumed their favorite wedge-shaped formation with Sigurd and Brodir at the tip. The Northmen offered a strong contrast to the loose lines of the half-naked Gaels. They moved in compact ranks, armored with horned helmets, heavy scale-mail coats reaching to their knees, and leggings of seasoned wolf-hide braced with iron plates; and they bore great kite-shaped shields of linden wood with iron rims, and long spears. The thousand warriors in the forefront wore long leggings and gauntlets of mail as well, so that from crown to heel they were steel-clad. These marched in a solid shield-wall, bucklers overlapping, and over their iron ranks floated the grim raven banner which had always brought victory to Jarl Sigurd—even if it brought death to the bearer. Now it was borne by old Rane Asgrimm's son, who felt that the hour of his death was at hand.

At the tip of the wedge, like the point of a spear, were the champions of Lochlann—Brodir in his dully glittering blue mail, which no blade had even dented; Jarl Sigurd, tall, blond-bearded, gleaming in his golden-scaled hauberk; Hrafn the Red, in whose soul lurked a mocking devil that moved him to gargantuan laughter even in the madness of battle; the tall comrades, Thorstein and Asmund; Prince Amlaff, roving son of the King of Norway; Platt of Danemark; Athelstane the Saxon; Jarl Thorwald Raven of the Hebrides; Anrad the Berserk.

Toward this formidable array the Irish advanced at quick pace in more or less open formation and with scant attempt at

any orderly ranks. But Malachi and his warriors wheeled suddenly and drew off to the extreme left, taking up their position on the high ground by Cabra. And when Murrogh saw this, he cursed under his breath, and Black Turlogh growled, "Who said an O'Neill forgets an old grudge? By Crom! Murrogh, we may have to guard our backs as well as our breasts before this fight be won!"

Now suddenly from the Viking ranks strode Platt of Danemark, his red hair like a crimson veil about his bare head, his silver mail gleaming. The hosts watched eagerly, for in those days few battles began without preliminary single combats.

"Donald!" shouted Platt, flinging up his naked sword so that the rising sun caught it in a sheen of silver. "Where is Donald of Mar? Are you there, Donald, as you were at Rhu Stoir, or do you skulk from the fray?"

"I am here, rogue!" answered the Scottish chief as he strode, tall and gaunt, from among his men, flinging away his scabbard.

Highlander and Dane met in the middle space between the hosts, Donald cautious as a hunting wolf, Platt leaping in reckless and headlong, eyes alight and dancing with a laughing madness. Yet it was the wary Steward's foot which slipped suddenly on a rolling pebble, and before he could regain his balance, Platt's sword lunged into him so fiercely that the keen point tore through his corselet-scales and sank deep beneath his heart. Platt's mad yell of exultation broke in a gasp. Even as he crumpled, Donald of Mar lashed out a

dying stroke that split the Dane's head, and the two fell together.

Thereat a deep-toned roar went up to the heavens, and the two great hosts rolled together like a tidal wave. Then were struck the first blows of the battle. There were no maneuvers of strategy, no cavalry charges, no flights of arrows. Forty thousand men fought on foot, hand to hand, man to man, slaying and dying in red chaos. The battle broke in howling waves about the spears and axes of the warriors. The first to shock were the Dalcassians and the Vikings, and as they met, both lines rocked at the impact. The deep roar of the Norsemen mingled with the yells of the Gaels and the Northern spears splintered among the Western axes. Foremost in the fray, Murrogh's great body heaved and strained as he roared and smote right and left with a heavy sword in either hand, mowing down men like corn. Neither shield nor helmet stood beneath his terrible blows, and behind him came his warriors slashing and howling like devils. Against the compact lines of the Dublin Danes thundered the wild tribesmen of Connacht, and the men of South Munster and their Scottish allies fell vengefully upon the Irish of Leinster.

The iron lines writhed and interwove across the plain. Conn, following Dunlang, grinned savagely as he smote home with dripping blade, and his fierce eyes sought for Thorwald Raven among the spears. But in that mad sea of battle where wild faces came and went like waves, it was difficult to pick out any one man.

At first both lines held without giving an inch; feet braced, straining breast to breast, they snarled and hacked, shield jammed hard against shield. All up and down the line of battle blades shimmered and flashed like sea-spray in the sun, and the roar of battle shook the ravens that wheeled like Valkyries overhead. Then, when human flesh and blood could stand no more, the serried lines began to roll forward or back. The Leinstermen flinched before the fierce onslaught of the Munster clans and their Scottish allies, giving way slowly, foot by foot, cursed by their king, who fought on foot with a sword in the forefront of the fray.

But on the other flanks, the Danes of Dublin under the redoubtable Dubhgall had held against the first blasting charge of the Western tribes, though their ranks reeled at the shock, and now the wild men in their wolf-skins were falling like garnered grain before the Danish axes.

In the center, the battle raged most fiercely; the wedged-shaped shield-wall of the Vikings held, and against its iron ranks the Dalcassians hurled their half-naked bodies in vain. A ghastly heap ringed that rim wall as Brodir and Sigurd began a slow, steady advance, the inexorable outstride of the Vikings, hacking deeper and deeper into the loose formation of the Gaels.

On the walls of Dublin Castle, King Sitric, watching the fight with Kormlada and his wife, exclaimed, "Well do the sea-kings reap the field!"

Kormlada's beautiful eyes blazed with wild exultation. "Fall, Brian!" she cried fiercely. "Fall, Murrogh! And fall too,

Brodir! Let the keen ravens feed!" Her voice faltered as her eyes fell upon a tall cloaked figure standing on the battlements, apart from the people—a sombre grey giant, brooding over the battle. A cold fear stole over her and froze the words on her lips. She plucked at Sitric's cloak. "Who is he?" she whispered, pointing.

Sitric looked and shuddered. "I know not. Pay him no heed. Go not near him. When I but approached him, he spoke not or looked at me, but a cold wind blew over me and my heart shrivelled. Let us rather watch the battle. The Gaels give way."

But at the foremost point of the Gaelic advance, the line held. There, like the convex center of a curving ax-blade, fought Murrogh and his chiefs. The great prince was already streaming blood from gashes on his limbs, but his heavy swords flamed in double strokes that dealt death like a harvest, and the chiefs at his side mowed down the corn of battle. Fiercely Murrogh sought to reach Sigurd through the press. He saw the tall Jarl looming across the waves of spears and heads, striking blows like thunder-strokes, and the sight drove the Gaelic prince to madness. But he could not reach the Viking.

"The warriors are forced back," gasped Dunlang, seeking to shake the sweat from his eyes. The young chief was untouched; spears and axes alike splintered on the Roman helmet or glanced from the ancient cuirass, but, unused to armor, he felt like a chained wolf.

Murrogh spared a single swift glance; on either side of the clump of chiefs, the gallaghlachs were falling back, slowly, savagely, selling each foot of ground with blood, unable to halt the irresistible advance of the mailed Northmen. These were falling, too, all along the battle-line, but they closed ranks and forced their way forward, legs braced hard, bodies strained, spears driving without cease or pause; they plowed on through a red surf of dead and dying.

"Turlogh!" gasped Murrogh, dashing the blood from his eyes. "Haste from the fray for Malachi! Bid him charge, in God's name!"

But the frenzy of slaughter was on Black Turlogh; froth flecked his lips and his eyes were those of a madman. "The Devil take Malachi!" he shouted, splitting a Dane's skull with a stroke like the slash of a tiger's paw.

"Conn!" called Murrogh, and as he spoke he gripped the big kern's shoulder and dragged him back. "Haste to Malachi—we need his support."

Conn drew reluctantly away from the melee, clearing his path with thunderous strokes. Across the reeling sea of blades and rocking helmets he saw the towering form of Jarl Sigurd and his lords—the billowing folds of the raven banner floated above them as their whistling swords hewed down men like wheat before the reaper.

Free of the press, the kern ran swiftly along the battle-line until he came to the higher ground of Cabra where the Meathmen thronged, tense and trembling like hunting

hounds as they gripped their weapons and looked eagerly at their king. Malachi stood apart, watching the fray with moody eyes, his lion's head bowed, his fingers twined in his golden beard.

"King Melaghlin," said Conn bluntly, "Prince Murrogh urges you to charge home, for the press is great and the men of the Gael are hard beset."

The great O'Neill lifted his head and stared absently at the kern. Conn little guessed the chaotic struggle which was taking place in Malachi's soul—the red visions which thronged his brain—riches, power, the rule of all Erin, balanced against the black shame of treachery. He gazed out across the field where the banner of his nephew O'Kelly heaved among the spears. And Malachi shuddered, but shook his head.

"Nay," he said, "it is not time. I will charge—when the time comes."

For an instant king and kern looked into each others' eyes. Malachi's eyes dropped. Conn turned without a word and sped down the slope. As he went, he saw that the advance of Lennox and the men of Desmond had been checked. Mailmora, raging like a wild man, had cut down Prince Meathla O'Faellan with his own hand, a chance spear-thrust had wounded the Great Steward, and now the Leinstermen held fast against the onset of the Munster and Scottish clans. But where the Dalcassians fought, the battle was locked; the Prince of Thomond broke the onrush of the Norsemen like a jutting cliff that breaks the sea.

Conn reached Murrogh in the upheaval of slaughter. "Melaghlin says he will charge when the time comes."

"Hell to his soul!" cried Black Turlogh. "We are betrayed!"

Murrogh's blue eyes flamed. "Then in the name of God!" he roared, "Let us charge and die!"

The struggling men were stirred at his shout. The blind passion of the Gael surged up, bred of desperation; the lines stiffened, and a great shout shook the field that made King Sitric on his castle wall whiten and grip the parapet. He had heard such shouting before.

Now, as Murrogh leaped forward, the Gaels awoke to red fury as in men who have no hope. The nearness of doom woke frenzy in them, and, like inspired madmen, they hurled their last charge and smote the wall of shields, which reeled at the blow. No human power could stay the onslaught. Murrogh and his chiefs no longer hoped to win, or even to live, but only to glut their fury as they died, and in their despair they fought like wounded tigers—severing limbs, splitting skulls, cleaving breasts and shoulder-bones. Close at Murrogh's heels, flamed the ax of Black Turlogh and the swords of Dunlang and the chiefs; under that torrent of steel the iron line crumpled and gave, and through the breach the frenzied Gaels poured. The shield formation melted away.

At the same moment the wild men of Connacht again hurled a desperate charge against the Dublin Danes. O'Hyne and Dubhgall fell together and the Dublin men were battered

backward, disputing every foot. The whole field melted into a mingled mass of slashing battlers without rank or formation. Among a heap of torn Dalcassian dead, Murrogh came at last upon Jarl Sigurd. Behind the Jarl stood grim old Rane Asgrimm's son, holding the raven banner. Murrogh slew him with a single stroke. Sigurd turned, and his sword rent Murrogh's tunic and gashed his chest, but the Irish prince smote so fiercely on the Norseman's shield that Jarl Sigurd reeled backward.

Thorleif Hordi had picked up the banner, but scarce had he lifted it when Black Turlogh, his eyes glaring, broke through and split his skull to the teeth. Sigurd, seeing his banner fallen once more, struck Murrogh with such desperate fury that his sword bit through the prince's morion and gashed his scalp. Blood jetted down Murrogh's face, and he reeled, but before Sigurd could strike again, Black Turlogh's ax licked out like a flicker of lightning. The Jarl's warding shield fell shattered from his arm, and Sigurd gave back for an instant, daunted by the play of that deathly ax. Then a rush of warriors swept the ranging chiefs apart.

"Thorstein!" shouted Sigurd. "Take up the banner!"

"Touch it not!" cried Asmund. "Who bears it, dies!" Even as he spoke, Dunlang's sword crushed his skull.

"Hrafn!" called Sigurd desperately. "Bear the banner!"

"Bear your own curse!" answered Hrafn. "This is the end of us all."

"Cowards!" roared the Jarl, snatching up the banner himself and striving to gather it under his cloak as Murrogh, face bloodied and eyes blazing, broke through to him. Sigurd flung up his sword—too late. The weapon in Murrogh's right hand splintered on his helmet, bursting the straps that held it and ripping it from his head, and Murrogh's left-hand sword, whistling in behind the first blow, shattered the Jarl's skull and felled him dead in the bloody folds of the great banner that wrapped about him as he went down.

Now a great roar went up, and the Gaels redoubled their strokes. With the formation of shields torn apart, the mail of the Vikings could not save them; for the Dalcassian axes, flashing in the sun, hewed through chainmesh and iron plates alike, rending linden shield and horned helmet. Yet the Danes did not break.

On the high ramparts, King Sitric had turned pale, his hands trembling where he gripped the parapet. He knew that these wild men could not be beaten now, for they spilled their lives like water, hurling their naked bodies again and again into the fangs of spear and ax. Kormlada was silent, but Sitric's wife, King Brian's daughter, cried out in joy, for her heart was with her own people.

Murrogh was striving now to reach Brodir, but the black Viking had seen Sigurd die. Brodir's world was crumbling; even his vaunted mail was failing him, for though it had thus far saved his skin, it was tattered now. Never before had the Manx Viking faced the dreaded Dalcassian ax. He drew back from Murrogh's onset. In the crush, an ax shattered on Murrogh's helmet, knocking him to his knees and blinding

him momentarily with its impact. Dunlang's sword wove a wheel of death above the fallen prince, and Murrogh reeled up.

The press slackened as Black Turlogh, Conn and young Turlogh drove in, hacking and stabbing, and Dunlang, frenzied by the heat of battle, tore off his helmet and flung it aside, ripping off his cuirass.

"The Devil eat such cages!" he shouted, catching at the reeling prince to support him, and even at that instant Thorstein the Dane ran in and drove his spear into Dunlang's side. The young Dalcassian staggered and fell at Murrogh's feet, and Conn leaped forward to strike Thorstein's head from his shoulders so that it whirled grinning still through the air in a shower of crimson.

Murrogh shook the darkness from his eyes. "Dunlang!" he cried in a fearful voice, falling to his knees at his friend's side and raising his head.

But Dunlang's eyes were already glazing. "Murrogh! Eevin!" Then blood gushed from his lips and he went limp in Murrogh's arms.

Murrogh leaped up with a shout of demoniac fury. He rushed into the thick of the Vikings, and his men swept in behind him.

On the hill of Cabra, Malachi cried out, flinging doubts and plots to the wind. As Brodir had plotted, so had he. He had but to stand aside until both hosts were cut to pieces, then seize Erin, tricking the Danes as they had planned to

betray him. But his blood cried out against him and would not be stilled. He gripped the golden collar of Tomar about his neck, the collar he had taken so many years before from the Danish king his sword had broken, and the old fire leaped up.

"Charge and die!" he shouted, drawing his sword, and at his back the men of Meath gave tongue like a hunting back and swarmed down into the field.

Under the shock of the Meathmen's assault, the weakened Danes staggered and broke. They tore away singly and in desperate slashing groups, seeking to gain the bay where their ships were anchored. But the Meathmen had cut off their retreat, and the ships lay far out, for the tide was at flood. All day that terrific battle had ranged, yet to Conn, snatching a startled glance at the setting sun, it seemed that scarce an hour had passed since the first lines had crashed together.

The fleeing Northmen made for the river, and the Gaels plunged in after them to drag them down. Among the fugitives and the groups of Norsemen who here and there made determined stands, the Irish chiefs were divided. The boy Turlogh was separated from Murrogh's side and vanished in the Tolka, struggling with a Dane. The clans of Leinster did not break until Black Turlogh rushed like a maddened beast into the thick of them and struck Mailmora dead in the midst of his warriors.

Murrogh, still blood-mad, but staggering from fatigue and weakened by loss of blood, came upon a band of Vikings

who, back to back, resisted the conquerors. Their leader was Anrad the Berserk, who, when he saw Murrogh, rushed furiously upon him. Murrogh, too weary to parry the Dane's stroke, dropped his own sword and closed with Anrad, bearing him to the ground. The sword was wrenched from the Dane's hand as they fell. Both snatched at it, but Murrogh caught the hilt and Anrad the blade. The Gaelic prince tore it away, dragging the keen edge through the Viking's hand, severing nerve and thence; and, setting a knee on Anrad's chest, Murrogh drove the sword thrice through his body. Anrad, dying, drew a dagger, but his strength ebbed so swiftly that his arm sank. And then a mighty hand gripped his wrist and drove home the stroke he had sought to strike, so that the keen blade sank beneath Murrogh's heart. Murrogh fell back dying, and his last glance showed him a tall grey giant looming above, his cloak billowing in the wind, his one glittering eye cold and terrible. But the mazed eyes of the surrounding warriors saw only death and the dealing of death.

The Danes were all in flight now, and on the high wall King Sitric sat watching his high ambitions fade away, while Kormlada gazed wild-eyed into ruin, defeat and shame.

Conn ran among the dying and the fleeing, seeking Thorwald Raven. The kern's buckler was gone, shattered among the axes. His broad breast was gashed in half a dozen places; a sword-edge had bitten into his scalp when only his shock of tangled hair had saved him. A spear had girded into his thigh. Yet now in his heat and fury he scarcely felt these wounds.

A weakening hand caught at Conn's knee as he stumbled among dead men in wolf-skins and mailed corpses. He bent and saw O'Kelly, Malachi's nephew, and chief of the Hy Many. The chiefs eyes were glazing in death. Conn lifted his head, and a smile curled the blue lips.

"I hear the war-cry of the O'Neill," he whispered. "Malachi could not betray us. He could not stand from the fray. The Red Hand-to-Victory!"

Conn rose as O'Kelly died, and caught sight of a familiar figure. Thorwald Raven had broken from the press and now fled alone and swiftly, not toward the sea or the river, where his comrades died beneath the Gaelic axes, but toward Tomar's Wood. Conn followed, spurred by his hate.

Thorwald saw him, and turned, snarling. So the thrall met his former master. As Conn rushed into close quarters, the Norseman gripped his spear-shaft with both hands and lunged fiercely, but the point glanced from the great copper collar about the kern's neck. Conn, bending low, lunged upward with all his power, so that the great blade ripped through Jarl Thorwald's tattered mail and spilled his entrails on the ground.

Turning, Conn saw that the chase had brought him almost to the king's tent, pitched behind the battle-lines. He saw King Brian Boru standing in front of the tent, his white locks flowing in the wind, and but one man attending him. Conn ran forward.

"Kern, what are your tidings?" asked the king.

"The foreigners flee," answered Conn. "But Murrogh has fallen."

"You bring evil tidings," said Brian. "Erin shall never again look on a champion like him." And age like a cold cloud closed upon him.

"Where are your guards, My Lord?" asked Conn.

"They have joined in the pursuit."

"Let me then take you to a safer place," said Conn. "The Gall fly all about us here."

King Brian shook his head. "Nay, I know I leave not this place alive, for Eevin of Craglea told me last night I should fall this day. And what avails me to survive Murrogh and the champions of the Gael? Let me lie at Armagh, in the peace of God."

Now the attendant cried out, "My king, we are undone! Men blue and naked are upon us."

"The armored Danes," cried Conn, wheeling.

King Brian drew his heavy sword.

A group of blood-stained Vikings were approaching, led by Brodir and Prince Amlaff. Their vaunted mail hung in shreds; their swords were notched and dripping. Brodir had marked the king's tent from afar, and was bent on murder, for his soul raged with shame and fury and he was beset by visions in which Brian, Sigurd, and Kormlada spun in a

hellish dance. He had lost the battle, Ireland, Kormlada—now he was ready to give up his life in a dying stroke of vengeance.

Brodir rushed upon the king, Prince Amlaff at his heels. Conn sprang to bar their way. But Brodir swerved aside and left the kern to Amlaff, as he fell upon the king. Conn took Amlaff's blade in his left arm and smote a single terrible blow that rent the prince's hauberk like paper and shattered his spine. Then the kern sprang back to guard King Brian.

Then even as he turned, Conn saw Brodir parry Brian's stroke and drive his sword through the ancient king's breast. Brian went down, but even as he fell he caught himself on one knee and thrust his keen blade through flesh and bone, cutting both Brodir's legs from under him. The Viking's scream of triumph broke in a ghastly groan as he toppled in a widening pool of crimson. There he struggled convulsively and lay still.

Conn stood looking dazedly around him. Brodir's company of men had fled, and the Gaels were converging on Brian's tent. The sound of the keening for the heroes already rose to mingle with the screams and shouts that still came from the struggling hordes along the river. They were bringing Murrough's body to the king's tent, walking slowly—wearing, bloody, men with bowed heads. Behind the litter that bore the prince's body came others—laden with the bodies of Turlogh, Murrough's son; of Donald, Steward of Mar; of O'Kelly and O'Hyne, the western chiefs; of Prince Meatha O'Faellan; of Dunlang O'Hartigan, beside whose litter walked Eevin of Craglea, her golden head sunk on her breast.

The warriors set down the litters and gathered silently and wearily about the corpse of King Brian Boru. They gazed unspeaking, their minds dulled from the agony of strife. Eevin lay motionless beside the body of her lover, as if she herself were dead; no tears stood in her eyes, no cry or moan escaped her pallid lips.

The clamor of battle was dying as the setting sun bathed the trampled field in its roseate light. The fugitives, tattered and slashed, were limping into the gates of Dublin, and the warriors of King Sitric were preparing to stand siege. But the Irish were in no condition to besiege the city. Four thousand warriors and chieftains had fallen, and nearly all the champions of the Gael were dead. But more than seven thousand Danes and Leinstermen lay stretched on the blood-soaked earth, and the power of the Vikings was broken. On Clontarf their iron reign was ended.

Conn walked toward the river, feeling now the ache of his stiffening wounds. He met Turlogh Dubh. The madness of battle was gone from Black Turlogh, and his dark face was inscrutable. From head to foot he was splattered with crimson.

"My Lord," said Conn, fingering the great copper ring about his neck, "I have slain the man who put this thrall-mark on me. I would be free of it."

Black Turlogh took his red-stained ax-head in his hands and, pressing it against the ring, drove the keen edge through the softer metal. The ax gashed Conn's shoulder, but neither heeded.

"Now I am truly free," said Conn, flexing his mighty arms. "My heart is heavy for the chiefs who have fallen, but my mind is mazed with wonder and glory. When will ever such a battle be fought again? Truly, it was a feast of the ravens, a sea of slaughter..."

His voice trailed off, and he stood like a statue, head flung back, eyes staring into the clouded heavens. The sun was sinking in a dark-ocean of scarlet. Great clouds rolled and tumbled, piled mountainously against the smoldering red of the sunset. A wind blew out of them, biting, cold, and, borne on the wind, etched shadowy against the clouds, a vague, gigantic form went flying, beard and wild locks streaming in the gale, cloak billowing out like great wings—speeding into the mysterious blue mists that pulsed and shimmered in the brooding North.

"Look up there—in the sky!" cried Conn. "The Grey Man! It is he! The Grey Man with the single terrible eye. I saw him in the mountains of Torka. I glimpsed him brooding on the walls of Dublin while the battle raged. I saw him looming above Prince Murrough as he died. Look! He rides the wind and races among the tall clouds. He swindles. He fades into the void! He vanishes!"

"It is Odin, god of the sea-people," said Turlogh sombrely. "His children are broken, his altars crumble, and his worshippers fallen before the swords of the South. He flees the new gods and their children, and returns to the blue gulfs of the North which gave him birth. No more will helpless victims howl beneath the daggers of his priests—no more will he stalk the black clouds." He shook his head

darkly. "The Grey God passes, and we too are passing, though we have conquered. The days of the twilight come on again, and a strange feeling is upon me as of a waning age. What are we all, too, but ghosts waning into the night?"

And he went on into the dusk, leaving Conn to his freedom—from thralldom and cruelty, as both he and all the Gaels were now free of the shadow of the Grey God and his ruthless worshippers.

[The end of *The Grey God Passes* by Robert E. Howard]