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ACT I

Scene: A room in the King's house at Burren. Large window at back with deep window seat. Doors right and left. A small table and some chairs.

Dall Glic: (Coming in with tray, which he puts on table. Goes back to door.) You can come in, King. There is no one here.

King: (Coming in.) That's very good. I was in dread the Queen might be in it.

Dall Glic: It is a good thought I had bringing it in here, and she gone to give learning to the Princess. She is not likely to come this side. It would be a great pity to annoy her.

King: (*Hastily swallowing a mouthful.*) Look out now the door and keep a good watch. The time she will draw upon me is when I am eating my little bite.

Dall Glic: I'll do that. What I wouldn't see with my one eye, there's no other would see with three.

King: A month to-day since I wed with her, and well pleased I am to be back in my own place. I give you word my teeth are rusting with the want of meat. On the journey I got no fair play. She wouldn't be willing to see me nourish myself, unless maybe with the marrow bone of a wren.

Dall Glic: Sure she lays down she is but thinking of the good of your health.

King: Maybe so. She is apt to be paying too much attention to what will be for mine and for the world's good. I kept my health fair enough, and the first wife not begrudging me my enough. I don't know what in the world led me not to stop as I was.

Dall Glic: It is what you were saying, it was for the good of the Princess Nuala, and of yourself.

King: That is what herself laid down. It would be a great ease to my mind, she was saying, to have in the house with the young girl, a far-off cousin of the King of Alban, and that had been conversation woman in his Court.

Dall Glic: So it might be too. She is a great manager of people.

King: She is that ...I think I hear her coming.... Throw a cloth over the plates.

Queen: (*Coming in.*) I was in search of you.

King: I thought you were in Nuala's sunny parlour, learning her to play music and to go through books.

Queen: That is what I thought to do. But I hadn't hardly started to teach her the principles of conversation and the branches of relationships and kindred of the big people of the earth, when she plucked off the coverings I had put over the cages, and set open their doors, till the fiery birds of Sabes and the canaries of the eastern world were screeching around my head, giving out every class of cry and call.

King: So they would too.

Queen: The royal eagles stirred up till I must quit the place with their squawking, and the enchanted swans raising up their heads and pecking at the beadwork on my gown.

King: Ah, she has a wish for the birds of the air, that are by nature light and airy the same as herself.

Queen: It is time for her to turn her mind to good sense. What's that? (*Whipping cloth from tray.*) Is it that you are eating again, and it is but one half-hour since your breakfast?

King: Ah, that wasn't a breakfast you'd call a breakfast.

Queen: Very healthy food, oaten meal flummery with whey, and a griddle-cake; dandelion tea and sorrel from the field.

King: My old fathers ate their enough of wild herbs and the like in the early time of the world. I'm thinking that it is in my nature to require a

good share of nourishment as if to make up for the hardships they went through.

Queen: What now have you within that pastry wall?

King: It is but a little leveret pie.

Queen: (*Poking with fork.*) Leveret! What's this in it? The thickness of a blanket of beef; calves' sweetbreads; cocks' combs; balls mixed with livers and with spice. You to so much as taste of it, you'll be crippled and crappled with the gout, and roaring out in your pain.

King: I tell you my generations have enough done of fasting and for making little of the juicy meats of the world.

Queen: And the waste of it! Goose eggs and jellies.... That much would furnish out a dinner for the whole of the King of Alban's Court.

King: Ah, I wouldn't wish to be using anything at all, only for to gather strength for to steer the business of the whole of the kingdom!

Queen: Have you enough ate now, my dear? Are you satisfied?

King: I am not. I would wish for a little taste of that saffron cake having in it raisins of the sun.

Queen: Saffron! Are you raving? You to have within you any of the four-and-twenty sicknesses of the race, it would throw it out in red blisters on your skin.

King: Let me just taste one little slab of that venison ham.

Queen: (*Poking with a fork.*) It would take seven chewings! Sudden death it would be! Leave it alone now and rise up. To keep in health every man should quit the table before he is satisfied

— there are some would walk to the door and back with every bite.

King: Is it that I am to eat my meal standing, the same as a crane in a shallow, or moving from tuft to thistle like you'd see a jennet on the high road?

Queen: Well, at the least, let you drink down a share of this tansy juice. I was telling you it would be answerable to your health.

King: You are doing entirely too much for me.

Queen: Sure I am here to be comfortable to you. This house before I came into it was but a ship without a rudder! Here now, take the spoon in your hand.

Dall Glic: Leave it there, Queen, and I'll engage he'll swallow it down bye-and-bye.

Queen: Is it that *you* are meddling, Dall Glic? It is time some person took you in hand. I wonder now could that dark eye of yours be cured?

Dall Glic: It is given in that it can not, by doctors and by druids.

Queen: That is a pity now, it gives you a sort of a one-sided look. It might not be so hard a thing to put out the sight of the other.

Dall Glic: I'd sooner leave them the way they are.

Queen: I'll put a knot on my handkerchief till such time as I can give my mind to it.... Now, my dear (*to King*), make no more delay. It is right to drink it down after your meal. The stomach to be bare empty, the medicine might prey upon the body till it would be wore away and consumed.

King: Time enough. Let it settle now for a minute.

Queen: Here, now, I'll hold your nose the way you will not get the taste of it.

(She holds spoon to his mouth. A ball flies in at window; he starts and medicine is spilled.)

Princess: (Coming in with Nurse.) Is it true what they are telling me?

Queen: Do you see that you near hit the King with your ball, and, what is worse again, you have his medicine spilled from the spoon.

Princess: (Patting him.) Poor old King.

Queen: Have you your lessons learned?

Princess: (Throwing books in the air.) Neither line nor letter of them! Poem book! Brehon Laws! I have done with books! I am seventeen years old to-day!

Queen: There is no one would think it and you so flighty as you are.

Princess: (To King.) Is it true that the cook is gone away?

King: (Aghast.) What's that you're saying?

Queen: Don't be annoying the King's mind with such things. He should be hidden from every trouble and care.

Princess: Was it you sent him away?

Queen: Not at all. If he went it was through foolishness and pride.

Princess: It is said in the house that you annoyed him.

Queen: I never annoyed any person in my life, unless it might be for their own good. But it fails some to recognise their best friend. Just teaching him I was to pickle onion thinnings as it was done at the King of Alban's Court.

Princess: Didn't he know that before?

Queen: Whether or no, he gave me very little thanks, but turned around and asked his wages. Hurrying him and harrying him he said I was, and away with him, himself and his four-and-twenty apprentices.

King: That is bad news, and pitiful news.

Queen: Do not be troubling yourself at all. It will be easy find another.

King: It might not be easy to find so good a one. A great pity! A dinner or a supper not to be rightly dressed is apt to give no pleasure in the eating or in the bye-and-bye.

Queen: I have taken it in hand. I have a good headpiece. I put out a call with running lads and with the army captains through the whole of the five provinces; and along with that, I have it put up on tablets at the post office.

Princess: I am sorry the old one to be gone. To remember him is nearly the farthest spot in my memory.

Queen: (*Sharply.*) If you want the house to be under your hand only, it is best for you to settle into one of your own.

Princess: Give me the little rush cabin by the stream and I'll be content.

Queen: If you mind yourself and profit by my instruction it is maybe not a cabin you will be moving to but a palace.

Princess: I'm tired of palaces. There are too many people in them.

Queen: That is talking folly. When you settle yourself it must be in the station where you were born.

Princess: I have no mind to settle myself yet awhile.

Nurse: Ah, you will not be saying that the time Mr. Right will come down the chimney, and will give you the marks and tokens of a king.

Queen: There might have some come looking for her before this, if it was not for you petting and pampering her the way you do, and encouraging her flightiness and follies. It is likely she will get no offers till such time as I will have taught her the manners and the right customs of courts.

Nurse: Sure I am acquainted with courts myself. Wasn't it I fostered comely Manus that is presently King of Sorcha, since his father went out of the world? And as to lovers coming to look for her! They do be coming up to this as plenty as the eye could hold them, and she refusing them, and they laying the blame upon the King!

King: That is so, they laying the blame upon myself. There was the uncle of the King of Leinster; he never sent me another car-load of asparagus from the time you banished him away.

Princess: He was a widower man.

King: As to the heir of Orkney, since the time you sent him to the right about, I never got so much as a conger eel from his hand.

Princess: As dull as a fish he was. He had a fish's eyes.

King: That wasn't so with the champion of the merings of Ulster.

Princess: A freckled man. He had hair the colour of a fox.

King: I wish he didn't stop sending me his tribute of heather beer.

Queen: It is a poor daughter that will not wish to be helpful to her father.

Princess: If I am to wed for the furnishing of my father's table, it's as good for you to wrap me in a speckled fawnskin and roast me!

(Runs out, tossing her ball.)

Queen: She is no way fit for marriage unless with a herd to the birds of the air, till she has a couple of years schooling.

King: It would be hard to put her back to that.

Queen: I must take it in hand. She is getting entirely too much of her own way.

Nurse: Leave her alone, and in the end it will be a good way.

Queen: To keep rules and hours she must learn, and to give in to order and good sense. *(To King.)* There is a pigeon messenger I brought from Alban I am about to let loose on this day with news of myself and of yourself. I will send with it a message to a friend I have, bidding her to make ready for Nuala a place in her garden of learning and her school.

King: That is going too fast. There is no hurry.

Queen: She is seventeen years. There is no day to be lost. I will go write the letter.

Nurse: Oh, you wouldn't send away the poor child!

Dall Glic: It would be a great hardship to send her so far. Our poor little Princess Nu!

Queen: (*Sharply.*) What are saying? (*Dall Glic is silent.*)

King: I would not wish her to be sent out of this.

Queen: There is no other way to set her mind to sense and learning. It will be for her own good.

Nurse: Where's the use troubling her with lessons and with books that maybe she will never be in need of at all. Speak up for her, King.

King: Let her stop for this year as she is.

Queen: You are all too soft and too easy. She will turn on you and will blame you for it, and another year or two years slipped by.

Nurse: That she may!

Dall Glic: Who knows what might take place within the twelvemonth that is coming?

King: Ah, don't be talking about it. Maybe it never might come to pass.

Dall Glic: It will come to pass, if there is truth in the clouds of sky.

King: It will not be for a year, anyway. There'll be many an ebbing and flowing of the tide within a year.

Queen: What at all are you talking about?

King: Ah, where's the use of talking too much.

Queen: Making riddles you are, and striving to keep the meaning from your comrade, that is myself.

King: It's best not be thinking about the thing you would not wish, and maybe it might never come around at all. To strive to forget a threat yourself, it might maybe be forgotten by the universe.

Queen: Is it true something was threatened?

King: How would I know is anything true, and the world so full of lies as it is?

Nurse: That is so. He might have been wrong in his foretelling. What is he in the finish but an old prophecy?

Dall Glic: Is it of Fintan you are saying that?

Queen: And who, will you tell me, is Fintan?

Dall Glic: Anyone that never heard tell of Fintan never heard anything at all.

Queen: His name was not up on the tablets of big men at the King of Alban's Court, or of Britain.

Nurse: Ah, sure in those countries they are without religion or belief.

Queen: Is it that there was a prophecy?

King: Don't mind it. What are prophecies? Don't we hear them every day of the week? And if one comes true there may be seven blind and come to nothing.

Queen: (To *Dall Glic.*) I must get to the root of this, and the handle. Who, now, is Fintan?

Dall Glic: He is an astrologer, and understanding the nature of the stars.

Nurse: He wore out in his lifetime three eagles and three palm trees and three earthen dykes. It is down in a cleft of the rocks beyond he has his dwelling presently, the way he can be watching the stars through the daytime.

Dall Glic: He prophesied in a prophecy, and it is written in clean letters in the King's yew-tree box.

King: It is best to keep it out of sight. It being to be, it will be; and, if not, where's the use troubling our mind?

Queen: Sound it out to me.

Dall Glic: (*Looking from window and drawing curtain.*) There is no story in the world is worse to me or more pitiful; I wouldn't wish any person to hear.

Nurse: Oh, take care it would come to the ears of my darling Nu!

Dall Glic: It is said by himself and the heavens that in a year from this day the King's daughter will be brought away and devoured by a scaly Green Dragon that will come from the North of the World.

Queen: A Dragon! I thought you were talking of some danger. I wouldn't give in to dragons. I never saw one. I'm not in dread of beasts unless it might be a mouse in the night-time!

King: Put it out of mind. It is likely anyway that the world will soon be ended the way it is.

Queen: I will send and search out this astrologer and will question him.

Dall Glic: You have not far to search. He is outside at the kitchen door at this minute, and

as if questioning after something, and it a half-score and seven years since I knew him to come out of his cave.

King: Do not! He might waken up the Dragon and put him in mind of the girl, for to make his own foretelling come true.

Nurse: Ah, such a thing cannot be! The poor innocent child! (*Weeps.*)

Queen: Where's the use of crying and roaring? The thing must be stopped and put an end to. I don't say I give in to your story, but that would be an unnatural death. I would be scandalised being stepmother to a girl that would be swallowed by a sea-serpent!

Nurse: O chone! Don't be talking of it at all!

Queen: At the King of Alban's Court, one of the royal family to die over, it will be naturally on a pillow, and the dead-bells ringing, and a burying with white candles, and crape on the knocker of the door, and a flagstone put over the grave. What way could we put a stone or so much as a rose-bush over Nuala and she in the inside of a water-worm might be ploughing its way down to the north of the world?

Nurse: Och! that is what is killing me entirely! O save her, save her.

King: I tell you, it being to be, it will be.

Queen: You may be right, so, when you would not go to the expense of paying her charges at the Royal school. But wait, now, there is a plan coming into my mind.

Nurse: There must surely be some way!

Queen: It is likely a king's daughter the beast – if there is a beast – will come questioning after, and not after a king's wife.

Dall Glic: That is according to custom.

Queen: That's what I am saying. What we have to do is to join Nuala with a man of a husband, and she will be safe from the danger ahead of her. In all the inventions made by poets, for to put terror on children or to knock laughter out of fools, did any of you ever hear of a Dragon swallowing the wedding ring?

All: We never did.

Queen: It's easy enough so. There must be no delay till Nuala will be married and wed with someone that will bring her away out of this, and let the Dragon go hungry home!

Nurse: That she may! Isn't it a pity now she being so hard to please!

Queen: Young people are apt to be selfish and to have no thought but for themselves. She must not be hard to please when it will be to save and to serve her family and to keep up respect for their name. Here she is coming.

Nurse: Ah, you would not tell her! You would not put the dear child under the shadow of such a terror and such a threat!

King: She must not be told. I never could bear up against it.

(Nuala comes in.)

Queen: Look now at your father the way he is.

Princess: (Touching his hand.) What is fretting you?