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ANCIENT IRISH TALES

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THE VOYAGE OF BRAN SON OF FEBAL

We have already seen the visit to the Happy Otherworld appearing incidentally in "The Wooing of Etain" (p. 82), "The Sick-Bed of Cu Chulainn" (p. 176), and other romances. Here it constitutes the main purpose of the story. Of the chief traditional characters in Irish literature, the only ones referred to in "The Voyage of Bran" are Manannan mac Lir and Mongan (p. 546). Its literary importance lies in the fact that it is representative of a class of Irish stories called *imrama*, "voyages," that seem to have been rather widely known in other parts of Europe. The voyage literature is also noteworthy in that it frequently appears in ecclesiastical guise; in fact, some authorities are inclined to place the ecclesiastical form earlier than the secular. "The Voyage of Bran" belongs to the early period of Irish literature, being ascribed usually to the eighth century. Though reminding us of the "Odyssey," the Irish narrative is probably based in large part on fantastic stories brought back by sailors who had ventured far out into the Atlantic Ocean long before the discovery of America.

'Twas fifty quatrains the woman from unknown lands sang on the floor of the house to Bran son of Febal, when the royal house was full of kings, who knew not whence the woman had come, since the ramparts were closed.

This is the beginning of the story. One day, in the neighborhood of his stronghold, Bran went about alone, when he heard music behind him. As often as he looked back, 'twas still behind him the music was. At last he fell asleep at the music, such was its sweetness. When he awoke from his sleep, he saw close by him a branch of silver with white blossoms, nor was it easy to distinguish its bloom from the branch. Then Bran took the branch in his hand to his royal house. When the hosts were in the royal house, they saw a woman in strange raiment therein. 'Twas then she sang the fifty quatrains to Bran, while the host heard her, and all beheld the woman.

And she said:

A branch of the apple-tree from Emne
I bring, like those one knows;
Twigs of white silver are on it,
Crystal brows with blossoms.

There is a distant isle,
 Around which sea-horses glisten:
 A fair course against the white-swelling surge,—
 Four pillars uphold it.

A delight of the eyes, a glorious range,
 Is the plain on which the hosts hold games:
 Coracle contends against chariot
 In the southern Plain of White Silver.

Pillars of white bronze under it
 Glittering through beautiful ages.
 Lovely land throughout the world's age,
 On which the many blossoms drop.

An ancient tree there is with blossoms,
 On which birds call the canonical Hours.
 'Tis in harmony it is their wont
 To call together every Hour.

Splendors of every color glisten
 Throughout the gentle-voiced plains.
 Joy is known, ranked around music,
 In southern White-Silver Plain.

Unknown is wailing or treachery
 In the familiar cultivated land,
 There is nothing rough or harsh,
 But sweet music striking on the ear.

Without grief, without sorrow, without death,
 Without any sickness, without debility,
 That is the sign of Emne—
 Uncommon is an equal marvel.

A beauty of a wondrous land,
 Whose aspects are lovely,
 Whose view is a fair country,
 Incomparable is its haze.

Then if Silvery Land is seen,
 On which dragon-stones and crystals drop,
 The sea washes the wave against the land,
 Hair of crystal drops from its mane.

Wealth, treasures of every hue,
 Are in Ciuin, a beauty of freshness,
 Listening to sweet music,
 Drinking the best of wine.

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Golden chariots in Mag Rein,
Rising with the tide to the sun,
Chariots of silver in Mag Mon,
And of bronze without blemish.

Yellow golden steeds are on the sward there,
Other steeds with crimson hue,
Others with wool upon their backs
Of the hue of heaven all-blue.

At sunrise there will come
A fair man illumining level lands;
He rides upon the fair sea-washed plain,
He stirs the ocean till it is blood.

A host will come across the clear sea,
To the land they show their rowing;
Then they row to the conspicuous stone,
From which arise a hundred strains.

It sings a strain unto the host
Through long ages, it is not sad,
Its music swells with choruses of hundreds—
They look for neither decay nor death.

Many-shaped Emne by the sea,
Whether it be near, whether it be far,
In which are many thousands of variegated women,
Which the clear sea encircles.

If he has heard the voice of the music,
The chorus of the little birds from Imchiuin,
A small band of women will come from a height
To the plain of sport in which he is.

There will come happiness with health
To the land against which laughter peals,
Into Imchiuin at every season
Will come everlasting joy.

It is a day of lasting weather
That showers silver on the lands,
A pure-white cliff on the range of the sea,
Which from the sun receives its heat.

The host race along Mag Mon,
A beautiful game, not feeble,
In the variegated land over a mass of beauty.
They look for neither decay nor death.

Listening to music at night,
 And going into Ildathach,
 A variegated land, splendor on a diadem of beauty,
 Whence the white cloud glistens.

There are thrice fifty distant isles
 In the ocean to the west of us;
 Larger than Erin twice
 Is each of them, or thrice.

A great birth will come after ages,
 That will not be in a lofty place,
 The son of a woman whose mate will not be known,
 He will seize the rule of the many thousands.

A rule without beginning, without end,
 He has created the world so that it is perfect,
 Whose are earth and sea,
 Woe to him that shall be under His unwill!

'Tis He that made the heavens,
 Happy he that has a white heart,
 He will purify hosts under pure water,
 'Tis He that will heal your sicknesses.

Not to all of you is my speech,
 Though its great marvel has been made known:
 Let Bran hear from the crowd of the world
 What of wisdom has been told to him.

Do not fall on a bed of sloth,
 Let not thy intoxication overcome thee;
 Begin a voyage across the clear sea,
 If perchance thou mayst reach the land of women.

Thereupon the woman went from them, while they knew not
 whither she went. And she took her branch with her. The branch
 sprang from Bran's hand into the hand of the woman, nor was there
 strength in Bran's hand to hold the branch.

Then on the morrow Bran went upon the sea. The number of
 his men was three companies of nine. One of his foster-brothers and
 mates was set over each of the three companies of nine. When he
 had been at sea two days and two nights, he saw a man in a chariot
 coming towards him over the sea. That man also sang thirty other
 quatrains to him, and made himself known to him, and said that he
 was Manannan son of Lir, and said that it was upon him to go
 to Ireland after long ages, and that a son would be born to him, Mon-
 gan son of Fiachna—that was the name which would be upon him.

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So Manannan sang these thirty quatrains to Bran:

Bran deems it a marvellous beauty
In his coracle across the clear sea:
While to me in my chariot from afar
It is a flowery plain on which he rows about.

That which is a clear sea
For the prowed skiff in which Bran is,
That is a happy plain with profusion of flowers
To me from the chariot of two wheels.

Bran sees
The number of waves beating across the clear sea:
I myself see in Mag Mon
Rosy-colored flowers without fault.

Sea-horses glisten in summer
As far as Bran has stretched his glance:
Rivers pour forth a stream of honey
In the land of Manannan son of Lir.

The sheen of the main, on which thou art,
The white hue of the sea, on which thou rowest,
Yellow and azure are spread out,
It is land, and is not rough.

Speckled salmon leap from the womb
Of the white sea, on which thou lookest:
They are calves, they are colored lambs
With friendliness, without mutual slaughter.

Though but one chariot-rider is seen
In Mag Mell of many flowers,
There are many steeds on its surface,
Though them thou seest not.

The size of the plain, the number of the host,
Colors glisten with pure glory,
A fair stream of silver, cloths of gold,
Afford a welcome with all abundance.

A beautiful game, most delightful,
They play sitting at the luxurious wine,
Men and gentle women under a bush,
Without sin, without crime.

Along the top of a wood has swum
Thy coracle across ridges,
There is a wood of beautiful fruit
Under the prow of thy little boat.

A wood with blossom and fruit,
On which is the vine's veritable fragrance,
A wood without decay, without defect,
On which are leaves of golden hue.

We are from the beginning of creation
Without old age, without consummation of earth,
Hence we expect not that there should be frailty;
Sin has not come to us.

An evil day when the Serpent went
To the father to his city!
She has perverted the times in this world,
So that there came decay which was not original.

By greed and lust he has slain us,
Through which he has ruined his noble race:
The withered body has gone to the fold of torment,
And everlasting abode of torture.

It is a law of pride in this world
To believe in the creatures, to forget God,
Overthrow by diseases, and old age,
Destruction of the soul through deception.

A noble salvation will come
From the King who has created us,
A white law will come over seas;
Besides being God, He will be man.

This shape, he on whom thou lookest,
Will come to thy parts;
'Tis mine to journey to her house,
To the woman in Moylinny.¹

For it is Manannan son of Lir,
From the chariot in the shape of a man;
Of his progeny will be a very short while
A fair man in a body of white clay.

Manannan the descendant of Lir will be
A vigorous bed-fellow to Caintigern:
He shall be called to his son in the beautiful world,
Fiachna will acknowledge him as his son.

He will delight the company of every fairy-mound,
He will be the darling of every goodly land,
He will make known secrets—a course of wisdom—
In the world, without being feared.

¹ Page 546.

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He will be in the shape of every beast,
Both on the azure sea and on land,
He will be a dragon before hosts at the onset,
He will be a wolf in every great forest.

He will be a stag with horns of silver
In the land where chariots are driven,
He will be a speckled salmon in a full pool,
He will be a seal, he will be a fair-white swan.

He will be throughout long ages
A hundred years in fair kingship,
He will cut down battalions,—a lasting grave—
He will redden fields, a wheel around the track.

It will be about kings with a champion
That he will be known as a valiant hero,
Into the strongholds of a land on a height
I shall send an appointed end from Islay.

High shall I place him with princes,
He will be overcome by a son of error;
Manannan the son of Lir
Will be his father, his tutor.

He will be—his time will be short—
Fifty years in this world:
A dragon-stone from the sea will kill him
In the fight at Senlabor.

He will ask a drink from Loch Lo,
While he looks at the stream of blood;
The white host will take him under a wheel of clouds
To the gathering where there is no sorrow.

Steadily then let Bran row,
Not far to the Land of Women,
Emne with many hues of hospitality
Thou wilt reach before the setting of the sun.

Thereupon Bran went from Manannan mac Lir. And he saw an island. He rowed round about it, and a large host was gaping and laughing. They were all looking at Bran and his people, but would not stay to converse with them. They continued to give forth gusts of laughter at them. Bran sent one of his people on the island. He ranged himself with the others, and was gaping at them like the other men of the island. Bran kept rowing round about the island. Whenever his man came past Bran, his comrades would

address him. But he would not converse with them, but would only look at them and gape at them. The name of this island is the Island of Joy. Thereupon they left him there.

It was not long thereafter when they reached the Land of Women. They saw the leader of the women at the port. Said the chief of the women: "Come hither on land, O Bran son of Febal! Welcome is thy coming!" Bran did not venture to go on shore. The woman threw a ball of thread to Bran straight over his face. Bran put his hand on the ball, which adhered to his palm. The thread of the ball was in the woman's hand, and she pulled the coracle towards the port. Thereupon they went into a large house, in which was a bed for every couple, even thrice nine beds. The food that was put on every dish vanished not from them. It seemed a year to them that they were there,—it chanced to be many years. No savor was wanting to them.

Home-sickness seized one of them, even Nechtan son of Collbran. Bran's kindred kept praying him that he should go to Erin with them. The woman said to them their going would make them rue. However, they went, and the woman said that none of them should touch the land, and that they should visit and take with them the man whom they had left in the Island of Joy.

Then they went until they arrived at a gathering at Srub Brain on the coast of Erin. The men asked of them who it was came over the sea. Said Bran: "I am Bran the son of Febal." One of the men said: "We do not know such a one, though the 'Voyage of Bran' is in our ancient stories."

One of Bran's men sprang from them out of the coracle. As soon as he touched the earth of Ireland, forthwith he was a heap of ashes, as though he had been in the earth for many hundred years. 'Twas then that Bran sang this quatrain:

For Collbran's son great was the folly
To lift his hand against age,
Without any one casting a wave of pure water
Over Nechtan, Collbran's son.

Thereupon, to the people of the gathering Bran told all his wanderings from the beginning until that time. And he wrote these quatrains in ogam, and then bade them farewell. And from that hour his wanderings are not known.