

Yeats William Butler

**The Collected Works in Verse
and Prose of William Butler
Yeats. Volume 2 of 8**



William Yeats

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William Butler Yeats

The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats, Vol. 2

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

THE KING'S THRESHOLD

To Frank Fay

**BECAUSE OF HIS BEAUTIFUL SPEAKING
INTHE CHARACTER OF SEANCHAN**

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

King Guaire
Seanchan (*pronounced* Shanahan)
His Pupils
The Mayor of Kinvara
Two Cripples
Brian (*an old servant*)
The Lord High Chamberlain
A Soldier
A Monk
Court Ladies
Two Princesses
Fedelm

THE KING'S THRESHOLD

Steps before the Palace of KING GUAIRE at Gort. A table in front of steps at one side, with food on it, and a bench by table. Seanchan lying on steps. PUPILS before steps. KING on the upper step before a curtained door.

KING

I welcome you that have the mastery
Of the two kinds of Music: the one kind
Being like a woman, the other like a man.
Both you that understand stringed instruments,
And how to mingle words and notes together
So artfully, that all the Art's but Speech
Delighted with its own music; and you that carry
The long twisted horn, and understand
The heady notes that, being without words,
Can hurry beyond Time and Fate and Change.
For the high angels that drive the horse of Time —
The golden one by day, by night the silver —
Are not more welcome to one that loves the world
For some fair woman's sake.
I have called you hither
To save the life of your great master, Seanchan,
For all day long it has flamed up or flickered
To the fast cooling hearth.

OLDEST PUPIL

When did he sicken?
Is it a fever that is wasting him?

KING

No fever or sickness. He has chosen death:
Refusing to eat or drink, that he may bring
Disgrace upon me; for there is a custom,
An old and foolish custom, that if a man
Be wronged, or think that he is wronged, and starve
Upon another's threshold till he die,
The common people, for all time to come,

Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,
Even though it be the King's.

OLDEST PUPIL

My head whirls round;
I do not know what I am to think or say.
I owe you all obedience, and yet
How can I give it, when the man I have loved
More than all others, thinks that he is wronged
So bitterly, that he will starve and die
Rather than bear it? Is there any man
Will throw his life away for a light issue?

KING

It is but fitting that you take his side
Until you understand how light an issue
Has put us by the ears. Three days ago
I yielded to the outcry of my courtiers —
Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law —
Who long had thought it against their dignity
For a mere man of words to sit amongst them
At my own table. When the meal was spread,
I ordered Seanchan to a lower table;
And when he pleaded for the poets' right,
Established at the establishment of the world,
I said that I was King, and that all rights
Had their original fountain in some king,
And that it was the men who ruled the world,
And not the men who sang to it, who should sit
Where there was the most honour. My courtiers —
Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law —
Shouted approval; and amid that noise
Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this,
Although there is good food and drink beside him,
Has eaten nothing.

OLDEST PUPIL

I can breathe again.
You have taken a great burden from my mind,

For that old custom's not worth dying for.

KING

Persuade him to eat or drink. Till yesterday
I thought that hunger and weakness had been enough;
But finding them too trifling and too light
To hold his mouth from biting at the grave,
I called you hither, and all my hope's in you,
And certain of his neighbours and good friends
That I have sent for. While he is lying there
Perishing, my good name in the world
Is perishing also. I cannot give way,
Because I am King. Because if I gave way,
My Nobles would call me a weakling, and it may be
The very throne be shaken.

OLDEST PUPIL

I will persuade him.
Your words had been enough persuasion, King;
But being lost in sleep or reverie,
He cannot hear them.

KING

Make him eat or drink.
Nor is it all because of my good name
I'd have him do it, for he is a man
That might well hit the fancy of a king,
Banished out of his country, or a woman's,
Or any other's that can judge a man
For what he is. But I that sit a throne,
And take my measure from the needs of the State,
Call his wild thought that overruns the measure,
Making words more than deeds, and his proud will
That would unsettle all, most mischievous,
And he himself a most mischievous man.

[He turns to go, and then returns again.]

Promise a house with grass and tillage land,

An annual payment, jewels and silken ware,
Or anything but that old right of the poets.

[He goes into palace.]

OLDEST PUPIL

The King did wrong to abrogate our right;
But Seanchan, who talks of dying for it,
Talks foolishly. Look at us, Seanchan;
Waken out of your dream and look at us,
Who have ridden under the moon and all the day,
Until the moon has all but come again,
That we might be beside you.

SEANCHAN

[Half turning round, leaning on his elbow, and speaking as if in a dream.]

I was but now
In Almhuin, in a great high-raftered house,
With Finn and Osgar. Odours of roast flesh
Rose round me, and I saw the roasting-spits;
And then the dream was broken, and I saw
Grania dividing salmon by a stream.

OLDEST PUPIL

Hunger has made you dream of roasting flesh;
And though I all but weep to think of it,
The hunger of the crane, that starves himself
At the full moon because he is afraid
Of his own shadow and the glittering water,
Seems to me little more fantastical
Than this of yours.

SEANCHAN

Why, that's the very truth.
It is as though the moon changed everything —

Myself and all that I can hear and see;
For when the heavy body has grown weak,
There's nothing that can tether the wild mind
That, being moonstruck and fantastical,
Goes where it fancies. I had even thought
I knew your voice and face, but now the words
Are so unlikely that I needs must ask
Who is it that bids me put my hunger by.

OLDEST PUPIL

I am your oldest pupil, Seanchan;
The one that has been with you many years —
So many, that you said at Candlemas
That I had almost done with school, and knew
All but all that poets understand.

SEANCHAN

My oldest pupil? No, that cannot be,
For it is some one of the courtly crowds
That have been round about me from sunrise,
And I am tricked by dreams; but I'll refute them.
At Candlemas I bid that pupil tell me
Why poetry is honoured, wishing to know
If he had any weighty argument
For distant countries and strange, churlish kings.
What did he answer?

OLDEST PUPIL

I said the poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden
About the child-bed of the world, that it,
Looking upon those images, might bear
Triumphant children. But why must I stand here,
Repeating an old lesson, while you starve?

SEANCHAN

Tell on, for I begin to know the voice.
What evil thing will come upon the world
If the Arts perish?

OLDEST PUPIL

If the Arts should perish,
The world that lacked them would be like a woman,
That looking on the cloven lips of a hare,
Brings forth a hare-lipped child.

SEANCHAN

But that's not all:
For when I asked you how a man should guard
Those images, you had an answer also,
If you're the man that you have claimed to be,
Comparing them to venerable things
God gave to men before he gave them wheat.

OLDEST PUPIL

I answered – and the word was half your own —
That he should guard them as the Men of Dea
Guard their four treasures, as the Grail King guards
His holy cup, or the pale, righteous horse
The jewel that is underneath his horn,
Pouring out life for it as one pours out
Sweet heady wine... But now I understand;
You would refute me out of my own mouth;
And yet a place at table, near the King,
Is nothing of great moment, Seanchan.
How does so light a thing touch poetry?

[Seanchan is now sitting up. He still looks dreamily in front of him

SEANCHAN

At Candlemas you called this poetry

One of the fragile, mighty things of God,
That die at an insult.

OLDEST PUPIL

[*To other PUPILS.*]

Give me some true answer,
For on that day we spoke about the Court,
And said that all that was insulted there
The world insulted, for the Courtly life,
Being the first comely child of the world,
Is the world's model. How shall I answer him?
Can you not give me some true argument?
I will not tempt him with a lying one.

YOUNGEST PUPIL

O, tell him that the lovers of his music
Have need of him.

SEANCHAN

But I am labouring
For some that shall be born in the nick o' time,
And find sweet nurture, that they may have voices,
Even in anger, like the strings of harps;
And how could they be born to majesty
If I had never made the golden cradle?

YOUNGEST PUPIL

[*Throwing himself at SEANCHAN'S feet.*]

Why did you take me from my father's fields?
If you would leave me now, what shall I love?
Where shall I go? What shall I set my hand to?

And why have you put music in my ears,
If you would send me to the clattering houses?
I will throw down the trumpet and the harp,
For how could I sing verses or make music
With none to praise me, and a broken heart?

SEANCHAN

What was it that the poets promised you,
If it was not their sorrow? Do not speak.
Have I not opened school on these bare steps,
And are not you the youngest of my scholars?
And I would have all know that when all falls
In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,
Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
The victim's joy among the holy flame,
God's laughter at the shattering of the world.
And now that joy laughs out, and weeps and burns
On these bare steps.

YOUNGEST PUPIL

O master, do not die!

OLDEST PUPIL

Trouble him with no useless argument.
Be silent! There is nothing we can do
Except find out the King and kneel to him,
And beg our ancient right.
For here are some
To say whatever we could say and more,
And fare as badly. Come, boy, that is no use.

[Raises YOUNGEST PUPIL.]

If it seem well that we beseech the King,
Lay down your harps and trumpets on the stones
In silence, and come with me silently.
Come with slow footfalls, and bow all your heads,
For a bowed head becomes a mourner best.

[They lay harps and trumpets down one by one, and then go out very solemnly and slowly, following one another. Enter MAYOR, TWO CRIPPLES, and BRIAN, an old servant. The mayor, who has been heard, before he came upon the stage, muttering 'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' etc., crosses in front of SEANCHAN to the other side of the steps. BRIAN takes food out of basket. The CRIPPLES are watching the basket. The MAYOR has an Ogham stick in his hand

MAYOR

[As he crosses.]

'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,' 'Grazing land,'
Those are the words I have to keep in mind —
'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,' 'Grazing land.'
I have the words. They are all upon the Ogham.
'Chief Poet,' 'Ireland,' 'Townsmen,' 'Grazing land.'
But what's their order?

[He keeps muttering over his speech during what follows]

FIRST CRIPPLE

The King were rightly served
If Seanchan drove his good luck away.
What's there about a king, that's in the world
From birth to burial like another man,
That he should change old customs, that were in it
As long as ever the world has been a world?

SECOND CRIPPLE

If I were king I would not meddle with him,
For there is something queer about a poet.
I knew of one that would be making rhyme
Under a thorn at crossing of three roads.
He was as ragged as ourselves, and yet
He was no sooner dead than every thorn tree

From Inchy to Kiltartan withered away.

FIRST CRIPPLE

The King is but a fool!

MAYOR

I am getting ready.

FIRST CRIPPLE

A poet has power from beyond the world,
That he may set our thoughts upon old times,
And lucky queens and little holy fish
That rise up every seventh year —

MAYOR

Hush! hush!

FIRST CRIPPLE

To cure the crippled.

MAYOR

I am half ready now.

BRIAN

There's not a mischief I'd begrudge the King
If it were any other —

MAYOR

Hush! I am ready.

BRIAN

That died to get it. I have brought out the food,
And if my master will not eat of it,
I'll home and get provision for his wake,
For that's no great way off. Well, have your say,
But don't be long about it.

MAYOR

[Goes close to SEANCHAN.]

Chief Poet of Ireland,
I am the Mayor of your own town Kinvara,
And I am come to tell you that the news
Of this great trouble with the King of Gort
Has plunged us in deep sorrow – part for you,
Our honoured townsman, part for our good town.

[Begins to hesitate; scratching his head.]

But what comes now? Something about the King.

BRIAN

Get on! get on! The food is all set out.

MAYOR

Don't hurry me.

FIRST CRIPPLE

Give us a taste of it.
He'll not begrudge it.

SECOND CRIPPLE

Let them that have their limbs
Starve if they will. We have to keep in mind
The stomach God has left us.

MAYOR

Hush! I have it!
The King was said to be most friendly to us,
And we have reason, as you'll recollect,
For thinking that he was about to give
Those grazing lands inland we so much need,
Being pinched between the water and the stones.
Our mowers mow with knives between the stones;
The sea washes the meadows. You know well
We have asked nothing but what's reasonable.

SEANCHAN

Reason in plenty. Yellowy white hair,
A hollow face, and not too many teeth.
How comes it he has been so long in the world
And not found Reason out?

[While saying this he has turned half round. He hardly looks at the MAYOR

BRIAN

[Trying to pull MAYOR away.]

What good is there
In telling him what he has heard all day!
I will set food before him.

MAYOR

[Shoving BRIAN away.]

Don't hurry me!
It's small respect you're showing to the town!
Get farther off! [*To SEANCHAN.*] We would not have you think,
Weighty as these considerations are,
That they have been as weighty in our minds
As our desire that one we take much pride in,
A man that's been an honour to our town,
Should live and prosper; therefore we beseech you
To give way in a matter of no moment,
A matter of mere sentiment – a trifle —
That we may always keep our pride in you.

[He finishes this speech with a pompous air, motions to BRIAN to bring the food to SEANCHAN, and sits on seat

BRIAN

Master, master, eat this! It's not king's food,
That's cooked for everybody and nobody.
Here's barley-bread out of your father's oven,
And dulse from Duras. Here is the dulse, your honour;
It's wholesome, and has the good taste of the sea.

***[Takes dulse in one hand and bread in other and
presses them into SEANCHAN'S hands. SEANCHAN
shows by his movement his different feeling to BRIAN***

FIRST CRIPPLE

He has taken it, and there'll be nothing left!

SECOND CRIPPLE

Nothing at all; he wanted his own sort.
What's honey to a cat, corn to a dog,
Or a green apple to a ghost in a churchyard?

SEANCHAN

[Pressing food back into BRIAN'S hands.]

Eat it yourself, for you have come a journey,
And it may be eat nothing on the way.

BRIAN

How could I eat it, and your honour starving!
It is your father sends it, and he cried
Because the stiffness that is in his bones
Prevented him from coming, and bid me tell you
That he is old, that he has need of you,
And that the people will be pointing at him,
And he not able to lift up his head,
If you should turn the King's favour away;
And he adds to it, that he cared you well,
And you in your young age, and that it's right
That you should care him now.

SEANCHAN

[Who is now interested.]

And is that all?
What did my mother say?

BRIAN

She gave no message;
For when they told her you had it in mind to starve,
Or get again the ancient right of the poets,
She said: 'No message can do any good.
He will not send the answer that you want.
We cannot change him.' And she went indoors,
Lay down upon the bed, and turned her face
Out of the light. And thereupon your father
Said: 'Tell him that his mother sends no message,
Albeit broken down and miserable.' [*A pause.*
Here's a pigeon's egg from Duras, and these others
Were laid by your own hens.

SEANCHAN

She has sent no message.
Our mothers know us; they know us to the bone.
They knew us before birth, and that is why
They know us even better than the sweethearts
Upon whose breasts we have lain.
Go quickly! Go
And tell them that my mother was in the right.
There is no answer. Go and tell them that.
Go tell them that she knew me.

MAYOR

What is he saying?
I never understood a poet's talk
More than the baa of a sheep!

[Comes over from seat. SEANCHAN turns away]

You have not heard,
It may be, having been so much away,
How many of the cattle died last winter
From lacking grass, and that there was much sickness
Because the poor have nothing but salt fish
To live on through the winter?

BRIAN

Get away,
And leave the place to me! It's my turn now,
For your sack's empty!

MAYOR

Is it 'get away'!
Is that the way I'm to be spoken to!
Am I not Mayor? Amn't I authority?
Amn't I in the King's place? Answer me that!

BRIAN

Then show the people what a king is like:
Pull down old merings and root custom up,
Whitewash the dunghills, fatten hogs and geese,
Hang your gold chain about an ass's neck,
And burn the blessed thorn trees out of the fields,
And drive what's comely away!

MAYOR

Holy Saint Coleman!

FIRST CRIPPLE

Fine talk! fine talk! What else does the King do?
He fattens hogs and drives the poet away!

SECOND CRIPPLE

He starves the song-maker!

FIRST CRIPPLE

He fattens geese!

MAYOR

How dare you take his name into your mouth!
How dare you lift your voice against the King!
What would we be without him?

BRIAN

Why do you praise him?
I will have nobody speak well of him,
Or any other king that robs my master.

MAYOR

And had he not the right to? and the right
To strike your master's head off, being the King,
Or yours or mine? I say, 'Long live the King!
Because he does not take our heads from us.'
Call out, 'Long life to him!'

BRIAN

Call out for him!

[Speaking at same time with MAYOR.]

There's nobody'll call out for him,
But smiths will turn their anvils,
The millers turn their wheels,
The farmers turn their churns,
The witches turn their thumbs,
'Till he be broken and splintered into pieces.

MAYOR

[At same time with Brian.]

He might, if he'd a mind to it,
Be digging out our tongues,
Or dragging out our hair,
Or bleaching us like calves,
Or weaning us like lambs,
But for the kindness and the softness that is in him.

[They gasp for breath.]

FIRST CRIPPLE

I'll curse him till I drop!

***[Speaking at same time as SECOND CRIPPLE
and MAYOR and BRIAN, who have begun again]***

The curse of the poor be upon him,
The curse of the widows upon him,
The curse of the children upon him,
The curse of the bishops upon him,
Until he be as rotten as an old mushroom!

SECOND CRIPPLE

[Speaking at same time as FIRST CRIPPLE and MAYOR and BRIAN]

The curse of wrinkles be upon him!
Wrinkles where his eyes are,
Wrinkles where his nose is,
Wrinkles where his mouth is,
And a little old devil looking out of every wrinkle!

BRIAN

[Speaking at same time with MAYOR and CRIPPLES.]

And nobody will sing for him,
And nobody will hunt for him,
And nobody will fish for him,
And nobody will pray for him,
But ever and always curse him and abuse him.

MAYOR

[Speaking at same time with CRIPPLES and BRIAN.]

What good is in a poet?
Has he money in a stocking,
Or cider in the cellar,
Or flitches in the chimney,
Or anything anywhere but his own idleness?

[BRIAN seizes MAYOR.]

MAYOR

Help! help! Am I not in authority?

BRIAN

That's how I'll shout for the King!

MAYOR

Help! help! Am I not in the King's place?

BRIAN

I'll teach him to be kind to the poor!

MAYOR

Help! help! Wait till we are in Kinvara!

FIRST CRIPPLE

[Beating MAYOR on the legs with crutch.]

I'll shake the royalty out of his legs!

SECOND CRIPPLE

[Burying his nails in MAYOR'S face.]

I'll scramble the ermine out of his skin!

**[The CHAMBERLAIN comes down steps
shouting, 'Silence! silence! silence!']**

CHAMBERLAIN

How dare you make this uproar at the doors,
Deafening the very greatest in the land,
As if the farmyards and the rookeries
Had all been emptied!

FIRST CRIPPLE

It is the Chamberlain.

[CRIPPLES go out.]

CHAMBERLAIN

Pick up the litter there, and get you gone!
Be quick about it! Have you no respect
For this worn stair, this all but sacred door,
Where suppliants and tributary kings
Have passed, and the world's glory knelt in silence?
Have you no reverence for what all other men
Hold honourable?

BRIAN

If I might speak my mind,
I'd say the King would have his luck again
If he would let my master have his rights.

CHAMBERLAIN

Pick up your litter! Take your noise away!
Make haste, and get the clapper from the bell!

BRIAN

[Putting last of food into basket.]

What do the great and powerful care for rights
That have no armies!

[CHAMBERLAIN *begins shoving them out with his staff*

MAYOR

My lord, I am not to blame.
I'm the King's man, and they attacked me for it.

BRIAN

We have our prayers, our curses and our prayers,
And we can give a great name or a bad one.

[MAYOR *is shoving BRIAN out before him with one hand. He keeps his face to CHAMBERLAIN, and keeps bowing. The CHAMBERLAIN shoves him with his staff*

MAYOR

We could not make the poet eat, my lord.

[CHAMBERLAIN shoves him with staff.]

Much honoured [*is shoved again*] – honoured to speak with you, my lord;
But I'll go find the girl that he's to marry.
She's coming, but I'll hurry her, my lord.
Between ourselves, my lord [*is shoved again*], she is a great coxer.
Much honoured, my lord. O, she's the girl to do it;
For when the intellect is out, my lord,

Nobody but a woman's any good.

[Is shoved again.]

Much honoured, my lord [*is shoved again*], much honoured, much honoured!

[Is shoved out, shoving BRIAN out before him]

[All through this scene, from the outset of the quarrel, SEANCHAN has kept his face turned away, or hidden in his cloak. While the CHAMBERLAIN has been speaking, the SOLDIER and the MONK have come out of the palace. The MONK stands on top of steps at one side, SOLDIER a little down steps at the other side. COURT LADIES are seen at opening in the palace curtain behind SOLDIER. CHAMBERLAIN is in the centre]

CHAMBERLAIN

[To SEANCHAN.]

Well, you must be contented, for your work
Has roused the common sort against the King,
And stolen his authority. The State
Is like some orderly and reverend house,
Wherein the master, being dead of a sudden,
The servants quarrel where they have a mind to,
And pilfer here and there.

[Pause, finding that SEANCHAN does not answer.]

How many days
Will you keep up this quarrel with the King,
And the King's nobles, and myself, and all,
Who'd gladly be your friends, if you would let them?

[Going near to MONK.]

If you would try, you might persuade him, father.
I cannot make him answer me, and yet
If fitting hands would offer him the food,
He might accept it.

MONK

Certainly I will not.
I've made too many homilies, wherein
The wanton imagination of the poets
Has been condemned, to be his flatterer.
If pride and disobedience are unpunished
Who will obey?

CHAMBERLAIN

[*Going to other side towards* SOLDIER.]

If you would speak to him,
You might not find persuasion difficult,
With all the devils of hunger helping you.

SOLDIER

I will not interfere, and if he starve
For being obstinate and stiff in the neck,
'Tis but good riddance.

CHAMBERLAIN

One of us must do it.
It might be, if you'd reason with him, ladies,
He would eat something, for I have a notion
That if he brought misfortune on the King,
Or the King's house, we'd be as little thought of
As summer linen when the winter's come.

FIRST GIRL

But it would be the greater compliment

If Peter'd do it.

SECOND GIRL

Reason with him, Peter.
Persuade him to eat; he's such a bag of bones!

SOLDIER

I'll never trust a woman's word again!
There's nobody that was so loud against him
When he was at the table; now the wind's changed,
And you that could not bear his speech or his silence,
Would have him there in his old place again;
I do believe you would, but I won't help you.

SECOND GIRL

Why will you be so hard upon us, Peter?
You know we have turned the common sort against us,
And he looks miserable.

FIRST GIRL

We cannot dance,
Because no harper will pluck a string for us.

SECOND GIRL

I cannot sleep with thinking of his face.

FIRST GIRL

And I love dancing more than anything.

SECOND GIRL

Do not be hard on us; but yesterday
A woman in the road threw stones at me.
You would not have me stoned?

FIRST GIRL

May I not dance?

SOLDIER

I will do nothing. You have put him out,
And now that he is out – well, leave him out.

FIRST GIRL

Do it for my sake, Peter.

SECOND GIRL

And for mine.

[Each girl as she speaks takes PETER'S hand with her right hand, stroking down his arm with her left. While SECOND GIRL is stroking his arm, FIRST GIRL leaves go and gives him the dish

SOLDIER

Well, well; but not your way. [*To SEANCHAN.*] Here's meat for you.
It has been carried from too good a table
For men like you, and I am offering it
Because these women have made a fool of me.

[A pause.

You mean to starve? You will have none of it?
I'll leave it there, where you can sniff the savour.
Snuff it, old hedgehog, and unroll yourself!
But if I were the King, I'd make you do it
With wisps of lighted straw.

SEANCHAN

You have rightly named me.
I lie rolled up under the ragged thorns
That are upon the edge of those great waters
Where all things vanish away, and I have heard
Murmurs that are the ending of all sound.
I am out of life; I am rolled up, and yet,
Hedgehog although I am, I'll not unroll
For you, King's dog! Go to the King, your master.
Crouch down and wag your tail, for it may be
He has nothing now against you, and I think
The stripes of your last beating are all healed.

[The SOLDIER has drawn his sword.

CHAMBERLAIN

[Striking up sword.]

Put up your sword, sir; put it up, I say!
The common sort would tear you into pieces
If you but touched him.

SOLDIER

If he's to be flattered,
Petted, cajoled, and dandled into humour,
We might as well have left him at the table.

[Goes to one side sheathing sword.

SEANCHAN

You must need keep your patience yet awhile,
For I have some few mouthfuls of sweet air
To swallow before I have grown to be as civil
As any other dust.

CHAMBERLAIN

You wrong us, Seanchan.
There is none here but holds you in respect;
And if you'd only eat out of this dish,
The King would show how much he honours you.

[Bowing and smiling.]

Who could imagine you'd so take to heart
Being put from the high table? I am certain
That you, if you will only think it over,
Will understand that it is men of law,
Leaders of the King's armies, and the like,
That should sit there.

SEANCHAN

Somebody has deceived you,
Or maybe it was your own eyes that lied,
In making it appear that I was driven
From the King's table. You have driven away
The images of them that weave a dance
By the four rivers in the mountain garden.

CHAMBERLAIN

You mean we have driven poetry away.
But that's not altogether true, for I,
As you should know, have written poetry.
And often when the table has been cleared,
And candles lighted, the King calls for me,
And I repeat it him. My poetry

Is not to be compared with yours; but still,
Where I am honoured, poetry is honoured —
In some measure.

SEANCHAN

If you are a poet,
Cry out that the King's money would not buy,
Nor the high circle consecrate his head,
If poets had never christened gold, and even
The moon's poor daughter, that most whey-faced metal,
Precious; and cry out that none alive
Would ride among the arrows with high heart,
Or scatter with an open hand, had not
Our heady craft commended wasteful virtues.
And when that story's finished, shake your coat
Where little jewels gleam on it, and say,
A herdsman, sitting where the pigs had trampled,
Made up a song about enchanted kings,
Who were so finely dressed, one fancied them
All fiery, and women by the churn
And children by the hearth caught up the song
And murmured it, until the tailors heard it.

CHAMBERLAIN

If you would but eat something you'd find out
That you have had these thoughts from lack of food,
For hunger makes us feverish.

SEANCHAN

Cry aloud,
That when we are driven out we come again
Like a great wind that runs out of the waste
To blow the tables flat; and thereupon
Lie down upon the threshold till the King
Restore to us the ancient right of the poets.

MONK

You cannot shake him. I will to the King,
And offer him consolation in his trouble,
For that man there has set his teeth to die.
And being one that hates obedience,
Discipline, and orderliness of life,
I cannot mourn him.

FIRST GIRL

'Twas you that stirred it up.
You stirred it up that you might spoil our dancing.
Why shouldn't we have dancing? We're not in Lent.
Yet nobody will pipe or play to us;
And they will never do it if he die.
And that is why you are going.

MONK

What folly's this?

FIRST GIRL

Well, if you did not do it, speak to him —
Use your authority; make him obey you.
What harm is there in dancing?

MONK

Hush! begone!
Go to the fields and watch the hurley players,
Or any other place you have a mind to.
This is not woman's work.

FIRST GIRL

Come! let's away!
We can do nothing here.

MONK

The pride of the poets!
Dancing, hurling, the country full of noise,
And King and Church neglected. Seanchan,
I'll take my leave, for you are perishing
Like all that let the wanton imagination
Carry them where it will, and it's not likely
I'll look upon your living face again.

SEANCHAN

Come nearer, nearer!

MONK

Have you some last wish?

SEANCHAN

Stoop down, for I would whisper it in your ear.
Has that wild God of yours, that was so wild
When you'd but lately taken the King's pay,
Grown any tamer? He gave you all much trouble.

MONK

Let go my habit!

SEANCHAN

Have you persuaded him
To chirp between two dishes when the King
Sits down to table?

MONK

Let go my habit, sir!

[Crosses to centre of stage.]

SEANCHAN

And maybe he has learnt to sing quite softly
Because loud singing would disturb the King,
Who is sitting drowsily among his friends
After the table has been cleared. Not yet!

[SEANCHAN has been dragged some feet clinging to the MONK'S habit

You did not think that hands so full of hunger
Could hold you tightly. They are not civil yet.
I'd know if you have taught him to eat bread
From the King's hand, and perch upon his finger.
I think he perches on the King's strong hand.
But it may be that he is still too wild.
You must not weary in your work; a king
Is often weary, and he needs a God
To be a comfort to him.

[The MONK plucks his habit away and goes into palace. SEANCHAN holds up his hand as if a bird perched upon it. He pretends to stroke the bird

A little God,
With comfortable feathers, and bright eyes.

FIRST GIRL

There will be no more dancing in our time,
For nobody will play the harp or the fiddle.
Let us away, for we cannot amend it,
And watch the hurley.

SECOND GIRL

Hush! he is looking at us.

SEANCHAN

Yes, yes, go to the hurley, go to the hurley,
Go to the hurley! Gather up your skirts —
Run quickly! You can remember many love songs;
I know it by the light that's in your eyes —
But you'll forget them. You're fair to look upon.
Your feet delight in dancing, and your mouths
In the slow smiling that awakens love.
The mothers that have borne you mated rightly.
They'd little ears as thirsty as your ears
For many love songs. Go to the young men.
Are not the ruddy flesh and the thin flanks
And the broad shoulders worthy of desire?
Go from me! Here is nothing for your eyes.
But it is I that am singing you away —
Singing you to the young men.

[The TWO YOUNG PRINCESSES come out of palace. While he has been speaking the GIRLS have shrunk back holding each other's hands]

FIRST GIRL

Be quiet!
Look who it is has come out of the house.
Princesses, we are for the hurling field.
Will you go there?

FIRST PRINCESS

We will go with you, Aileen.
But we must have some words with Seanchan,
For we have come to make him eat and drink.

CHAMBERLAIN

I will hold out the dish and cup for him
While you are speaking to him of his folly,
If you desire it, Princess.

[He has taken dish and cup.]

FIRST PRINCESS

No, Finula
Will carry him the dish and I the cup.
We'll offer them ourselves.

[They take cup and dish.]

FIRST GIRL

They are so gracious;
The dear little Princesses are so gracious.

**[PRINCESS holds out her hand for
SEANCHAN to kiss it. He does not move**

Although she is holding out her hand to him,
He will not kiss it.

FIRST PRINCESS

My father bids us say
That, though he cannot have you at his table,

You may ask any other thing you like
And he will give it you. We carry you
With our own hands a dish and cup of wine.

FIRST GIRL

O, look! he has taken it! He has taken it!
The dear Princesses! I have always said
That nobody could refuse them anything.

**[SEANCHAN takes the cup in one hand. In the other
he holds for a moment the hand of the PRINCESS]**

SEANCHAN

O long, soft fingers and pale finger-tips,
Well worthy to be laid in a king's hand!
O, you have fair white hands, for it is certain
There is uncommon whiteness in these hands.
But there is something comes into my mind,
Princess. A little while before your birth,
I saw your mother sitting by the road
In a high chair; and when a leper passed,
She pointed him the way into the town.
He lifted up his hand and blessed her hand —
I saw it with my own eyes. Hold out your hands;
I will find out if they are contaminated,
For it has come into my thoughts that maybe
The King has sent me food and drink by hands
That are contaminated. I would see all your hands.
You've eyes of dancers; but hold out your hands,
For it may be there are none sound among you.

[The PRINCESSES have shrunk back in terror.]

FIRST PRINCESS

He has called us lepers.

[SOLDIER draws sword.]

CHAMBERLAIN

He's out of his mind,
And does not know the meaning of what he said.

SEANCHAN

[Standing up.]

There's no sound hand among you – no sound hand.
Away with you! away with all of you!
You are all lepers! There is leprosy
Among the plates and dishes that you have carried.
And wherefore have you brought me leper's wine?

[He flings the contents of the cup in their faces.]

There, there! I have given it to you again. And now
Begone, or I will give my curse to you.
You have the leper's blessing, but you think
Maybe the bread will something lack in savour
Unless you mix my curse into the dough.

***[They go out hurriedly in all directions. SEANCHAN
is staggering in the middle of the stage]***

Where did I say the leprosy had come from?
I said it came out of a leper's hand,

Enter CRIPPLES.

And that he walked the highway. But that's folly,
For he was walking up there in the sky.
And there he is even now, with his white hand
Thrust out of the blue air, and blessing them
With leprosy.

FIRST CRIPPLE

He's pointing at the moon
That's coming out up yonder, and he calls it
Leprous, because the daylight whitens it.

SEANCHAN

He's holding up his hand above them all —
King, noblemen, princesses – blessing all.
Who could imagine he'd have so much patience?

FIRST CRIPPLE

[Clutching the other CRIPPLE.]

Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE

[Pointing to food.]

If you don't need it, sir,
May we not carry some of it away?

[They cross towards food and pass in front of SEANCHAN

SEANCHAN

Who's speaking? Who are you?

FIRST CRIPPLE

Come out of this!

SECOND CRIPPLE

Have pity on us, that must beg our bread
From table to table throughout the entire world,
And yet be hungry.

SEANCHAN

But why were you born crooked?
What bad poet did your mothers listen to
That you were born so crooked?

CRIPPLE

Come away!
Maybe he's cursed the food, and it might kill us.

OTHER CRIPPLE

Yes, better come away.

[They go out.]

SEANCHAN

[Staggering, and speaking wearily.]

He has great strength
And great patience to hold his right hand there,
Uplifted, and not wavering about.
He is much stronger than I am, much stronger.

[Sinks down on steps. Enter MAYOR and FEDELM

FEDELM

[Her finger on her lips.]

Say nothing! I will get him out of this
Before I have said a word of food and drink;
For while he is on this threshold and can hear,
It may be, the voices that made mock of him,
He would not listen. I'd be alone with him.

[MAYOR goes out. FEDELM goes to SEANCHAN and kneels before him

Seanchan! Seanchan!

[He remains looking into the sky.]

Can you not hear me, Seanchan?
It is myself.

[He looks at her, dreamily at first, then takes her hand

SEANCHAN

Is this your hand, Fedelm?
I have been looking at another hand
That is up yonder.

FEDELM

I have come for you.

SEANCHAN

Fedelm, I did not know that you were here.

FEDELM

And can you not remember that I promised
That I would come and take you home with me
When I'd the harvest in? And now I've come,
And you must come away, and come on the instant.

SEANCHAN

Yes, I will come. But is the harvest in?
This air has got a summer taste in it.

FEDELM

But is not the wild middle of the summer
A better time to marry? Come with me now!

SEANCHAN

[Seizing her by both wrists.]

Who taught you that? For it's a certainty,
Although I never knew it till last night,
That marriage, because it is the height of life,
Can only be accomplished to the full
In the high days of the year. I lay awake:
There had come a frenzy into the light of the stars,
And they were coming nearer, and I knew
All in a minute they were about to marry
Clods out upon the ploughlands, to beget
A mightier race than any that has been.
But some that are within there made a noise,

And frightened them away.

FEDELM

Come with me now!
We have far to go, and daylight's running out.

SEANCHAN

The stars had come so near me that I caught
Their singing. It was praise of that great race
That would be haughty, mirthful, and white-bodied,
With a high head, and open hand, and how,
Laughing, it would take the mastery of the world.

FEDELM

But you will tell me all about their songs
When we're at home. You have need of rest and care,
And I can give them you when we're at home.
And therefore let us hurry, and get us home.

SEANCHAN

It's certain that there is some trouble here,
Although it's gone out of my memory.
And I would get away from it. Give me your help. [*Trying to rise.*]
But why are not my pupils here to help me?
Go, call my pupils, for I need their help.

FEDELM

Come with me now, and I will send for them,
For I have a great room that's full of beds
I can make ready; and there is a smooth lawn
Where they can play at hurley and sing poems
Under an apple-tree.

SEANCHAN

I know that place:
An apple-tree, and a smooth level lawn
Where the young men can sway their hurley sticks.

[Sings.]

The four rivers that run there,
Through well-mown level ground,
Have come out of a blessed well
That is all bound and wound
By the great roots of an apple,
And all the fowl of the air
Have gathered in the wide branches
And keep singing there.

[FEDELM, *troubled, has covered her eyes with her hands*

FEDELM

No, there are not four rivers, and those rhymes
Praise Adam's paradise.

SEANCHAN

I can remember now,
It's out of a poem I made long ago
About the Garden in the East of the World,
And how spirits in the images of birds
Crowd in the branches of old Adam's crabtree.
They come before me now, and dig in the fruit
With so much gluttony, and are so drunk
With that harsh wholesome savour, that their feathers
Are clinging one to another with the juice.
But you would lead me to some friendly place,
And I would go there quickly.

FEDELM

[Helping him to rise.]

Come with me.

He walks slowly, supported by her, till he comes to table

SEANCHAN

But why am I so weak? Have I been ill?
Sweetheart, why is it that I am so weak?

[Sinks on to seat.]

FEDELM

[Goes to table.]

I'll dip this piece of bread into the wine,
For that will make you stronger for the journey.

SEANCHAN

Yes, give me bread and wine; that's what I want,
For it is hunger that is gnawing me.

***[He takes bread from FEDELM, hesitates,
and then thrusts it back into her hand]***

But, no; I must not eat it.

FEDELM

Eat, Seanchan.
For if you do not eat it you will die.

SEANCHAN

Why did you give me food? Why did you come?
For had I not enough to fight against
Without your coming?

FEDELM

Eat this little crust,
Seanchan, if you have any love for me.

SEANCHAN

I must not eat it – but that's beyond your wit.
Child! child! I must not eat it, though I die.

FEDELM

[Passionately.]

You do not know what love is; for if you loved,
You would put every other thought away.
But you have never loved me.

SEANCHAN

[Seizing her by wrist.]

You, a child,
Who have but seen a man out of the window,
Tell me that I know nothing about love,
And that I do not love you! Did I not say
There was a frenzy in the light of the stars
All through the livelong night, and that the night
Was full of marriages? But that fight's over,
And all that's done with, and I have to die.

FEDELM

[Throwing her arms about him.]

I will not be put from you, although I think
I had not grudged it you if some great lady,
If the King's daughter, had set out your bed.
I will not give you up to death; no, no!
And are not these white arms and this soft neck
Better than the brown earth?

SEANCHAN

[Struggling to disengage himself.]

Begone from me!
There's treachery in those arms and in that voice.
They're all against me. Why do you linger there?
How long must I endure the sight of you?

FEDELM

O, Seanchan! Seanchan!

SEANCHAN

[Rising.]

Go where you will,
So it be out of sight and out of mind.
I cast you from me like an old torn cap,
A broken shoe, a glove without a finger,
A crooked penny; whatever is most worthless.

FEDELM

[Bursts into tears.]

O, do not drive me from you!

SEANCHAN

[Takes her in his arms.]

What did I say,
My dove of the woods? I was about to curse you.
It was a frenzy. I'll unsay it all.
But you must go away.

FEDELM

Let me be near you.
I will obey like any married wife.
Let me but lie before your feet.

SEANCHAN

Come nearer.

[Kisses her.

If I had eaten when you bid me, sweetheart,
The kiss of multitudes in times to come
Had been the poorer.

[Enter KING from palace, followed by the two PRINCESSES

KING

[To FEDELM.]

Has he eaten yet?

FEDELM

No, King, and will not till you have restored
The right of the poets.

KING

[Coming down and standing before SEANCHAN.]

Seanchan, you have refused
Everybody that I have sent, and now
I come to you myself; and I have come
To bid you put your pride as far away
As I have put my pride. I had your love
Not a great while ago, and now you have planned
To put a voice by every cottage fire,
And in the night when no one sees who cries,
To cry against me till my throne has crumbled.
And yet if I give way I must offend
My courtiers and nobles till they, too,
Strike at the crown. What would you have of me?

SEANCHAN

When did the poets promise safety, King?

KING

Seanchan, I bring you bread in my own hands,
And bid you eat because of all these reasons,
And for this further reason, that I love you.

[Seanchan *pushes bread away, with FEDELM'S hand*

You have refused it, Seanchan?

SEANCHAN

We have refused it.

KING

I have been patient, though I am a king,
And have the means to force you. But that's ended,
And I am but a king, and you a subject.
Nobles and courtiers, bring the poets hither;

**[Enter COURT LADIES, MONK, SOLDIER, CHAMBERLAIN, and
COURTIERS with PUPILS, who have halters round their necks**

For you can have your way. I that was man,
With a man's heart, am now all king again,
Remembering that the seed I come of, though
A hundred kings have sown it and resown it,
Has neither trembled nor shrunk backward yet
Because of the hard business of a king.
Speak to your master; beg your life of him;

Show him the halter that is round your necks.
If his heart's set upon it, he may die;
But you shall all die with him. [Goes up steps.
Beg your lives!
Begin, for you have little time to lose.
Begin it, you that are the oldest pupil.

OLDEST PUPIL

Die, Seanchan, and proclaim the right of the poets.

KING

Silence! you are as crazy as your master.
But that young boy, that seems the youngest of you,
I'd have him speak. Kneel down before him, boy;
Hold up your hands to him, that you may pluck
That milky-coloured neck out of the noose.

YOUNGEST PUPIL

Die, Seanchan, and proclaim the right of the poets.

OLDEST PUPIL

Gather the halters up into your hands
And drive us where you will, for in all things,
But in our Art, we are obedient.

***[They hold the ends of the halter towards the
KING. The KING comes slowly down steps***

KING

Kneel down, kneel down; he has the greater power.
There is no power but has its root in his —

I understand it now. There is no power
But his that can withhold the crown or give it,
Or make it reverend in the eyes of men,
And therefore I have laid it in his hands,
And I will do his will.

[He has put the crown into SEANCHAN'S hands

SEANCHAN

[Who has been assisted to rise by his pupils.]

O crown! O crown!
It is but right the hands that made the crown
In the old time should give it where they please.

[He places the crown on the KING'S head

O silver trumpets! Be you lifted up,
And cry to the great race that is to come.
Long-throated swans, amid the waves of Time,
Sing loudly, for beyond the wall of the world
It waits, and it may hear and come to us.

[The PUPILS blow a trumpet blast.

ON BAILE'S STRAND

To William Fay

**BECAUSE OF THE BEAUTIFUL PHANTASY OF
HISPLAYING IN THE CHARACTER OF THE FOOL**

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

A Fool

A Blind Man

Cuchulain, *King of Muirthemne*

Conchubar, *High King of Ulad*

A Young Man, *Son of Cuchulain*

Kings and Singing Women

ON BAILE'S STRAND

A great hall at Dundevalgan, not 'Cuchulain's great ancient house' but an assembly house nearer to the sea. A big door at the back, and through the door misty light as of sea mist. There are many chairs and one long bench. One of these chairs, which is towards the front of the stage, is bigger than the others. Somewhere at the back there is a table with flagons of ale upon it and drinking-horns. There is a small door at one side of the hall. A FOOL and BLIND MAN, both ragged, come in through the door at the back. The BLIND MAN leans upon a staff.

FOOL

What a clever man you are though you are blind! There's nobody with two eyes in his head that is as clever as you are. Who but you could have thought that the henwife sleeps every day a little at noon? I would never be able to steal anything if you didn't tell me where to look for it. And what a good cook you are! You take the fowl out of my hands after I have stolen it and plucked it, and you put it into the big pot at the fire there, and I can go out and run races with the witches at the edge of the waves and get an appetite, and when I've got it, there's the hen waiting inside for me, done to the turn.

BLIND MAN

[Who is feeling about with his stick.]

Done to the turn.

FOOL

[Putting his arm round Blind Man's neck.]

Come now, I'll have a leg and you'll have a leg, and we'll draw lots for the wish-bone. I'll be praising you, I'll be praising you, while we're eating it, for your good plans and for your good cooking. There's nobody in the world like you, Blind Man. Come, come. Wait a minute. I shouldn't have closed the door. There are some that look for me, and I wouldn't like them not to find me. Don't tell it to anybody, Blind Man. There are some that follow me. Boann herself out of the river and Fand out of the deep sea. Witches they are, and they come by in the wind, and they cry, 'Give a kiss, Fool, give a kiss,' that's what they cry. That's wide enough. All the witches can come in now. I wouldn't have them beat at the door and say: 'Where is the Fool? Why has he put a lock on the door?' Maybe they'll hear the bubbling of the pot and come in and sit on the ground. But we won't give them any of the fowl. Let them go back to the sea, let them go back to the sea.

BLIND MAN

[Feeling legs of big chair with his hands.]

Ah! [*Then, in a louder voice as he feels the back of it.*] Ah – ah —

FOOL

Why do you say ‘Ah-ah’?

BLIND MAN

I know the big chair. It is to-day the High King Conchubar is coming. They have brought out his chair. He is going to be Cuchulain’s master in earnest from this day out. It is that he’s coming for.

FOOL

He must be a great man to be Cuchulain’s master.

BLIND MAN

So he is. He is a great man. He is over all the rest of the kings of Ireland.

FOOL

Cuchulain’s master! I thought Cuchulain could do anything he liked.

BLIND MAN

So he did, so he did. But he ran too wild, and Conchubar is coming to-day to put an oath upon him that will stop his rambling and make him as biddable as a house-dog and keep him always at his hand. He will sit in this chair and put the oath upon him.

FOOL

How will he do that?

BLIND MAN

You have no wits to understand such things. [*The BLIND MAN has got into the chair.*] He will sit up in this chair and he’ll say: ‘Take the oath, Cuchulain. I bid you take the oath. Do as I tell you. What are your wits compared with mine, and what are your riches compared with mine? And what sons have you to pay your debts and to put a stone over you when you die? Take the oath, I tell you. Take a strong oath.’

FOOL

[Crumpling himself up and whining.]

I will not. I'll take no oath. I want my dinner.

BLIND MAN

Hush, hush! It is not done yet.

FOOL

You said it was done to a turn.

BLIND MAN

Did I, now? Well, it might be done, and not done. The wings might be white, but the legs might be red. The flesh might stick hard to the bones and not come away in the teeth. But, believe me, Fool, it will be well done before you put your teeth in it.

FOOL

My teeth are growing long with the hunger.

BLIND MAN

I'll tell you a story – the kings have story-tellers while they are waiting for their dinner – I will tell you a story with a fight in it, a story with a champion in it, and a ship and a queen's son that has his mind set on killing somebody that you and I know.

FOOL

Who is that? Who is he coming to kill?

BLIND MAN

Wait, now, till you hear. When you were stealing the fowl, I was lying in a hole in the sand, and I heard three men coming with a shuffling sort of noise. They were wounded and groaning.

FOOL

Go on. Tell me about the fight.

BLIND MAN

There had been a fight, a great fight, a tremendous great fight. A young man had landed on the shore, the guardians of the shore had asked his name, and he had refused to tell it, and he had killed one, and others had run away.

FOOL

That's enough. Come on now to the fowl. I wish it was bigger. I wish it was as big as a goose.

BLIND MAN

Hush! I haven't told you all. I know who that young man is. I heard the men who were running away say he had red hair, that he had come from Aoife's country, that he was coming to kill Cuchulain.

FOOL

Nobody can do that.

[To a tune.]

Cuchulain has killed kings,
Kings and sons of kings,
Dragons out of the water,
And witches out of the air,
Banachas and Bonachas and people of the woods.

BLIND MAN

Hush! hush!

FOOL

[Still singing.]

Witches that steal the milk,
Fomor that steal the children,
Hags that have heads like hares,
Hares that have claws like witches,
All riding a-cockhorse

[Spoken.]

Out of the very bottom of the bitter black north.

BLIND MAN

Hush, I say!

FOOL

Does Cuchulain know that he is coming to kill him?

BLIND MAN

How would he know that with his head in the clouds? He doesn't care for common fighting. Why would he put himself out, and nobody in it but that young man? Now, if it were a white fawn that might turn into a queen before morning —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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