

"AND FAIR, FIERCE WOMEN"

One day a woman that I know came face to face with heroic beauty, that highest beauty which Blake says changes least from youth to age, a beauty which has been fading out of the arts, since that decadence we call progress, set voluptuous beauty in its place. She was standing at the window, looking over to Knocknarea where Queen Maive is thought to be buried, when she saw, as she has told me, "the finest woman you ever saw travelling right across from the mountain and straight to her." The woman had a sword by her side and a dagger lifted up in her hand, and was dressed in white, with bare arms and feet. She looked "very strong, but not wicked," that is, not cruel. The old woman had seen the Irish giant, and "though he was a fine man," he was nothing to this woman, "for he was round, and could not have stepped out so soldierly"; "she was like Mrs.——" a stately lady of the neighbourhood, "but she had no stomach on her, and was slight and broad in the shoulders, and was handsomer than any one you ever saw; she looked about thirty." The old woman covered her eyes with her hands, and when she uncovered them the apparition had vanished. The neighbours were "wild with her," she told me, because she did not wait to find out if there was a message, for they were sure it was Queen Maive, who often shows herself to the pilots. I asked the old woman if she had seen others like Queen Maive, and she said, "Some of them have their hair down, but they look quite different, like the sleepy-looking ladies one sees in the papers. Those with their hair up are like this one. The others have long white dresses, but those with their hair up have short dresses, so that you can see their legs right up to the calf." After some careful questioning I found that they wore what might very well be a kind of buskin; she went on, "They are fine and dashing looking, like the men one sees riding their horses in twos and threes on the slopes of the mountains with their swords swinging." She repeated over and over, "There is no such race living now, none so finely proportioned," or the like, and then said, "The present Queen¹ is a nice, pleasant-looking woman, but she is not like her. What makes me think so little of the ladies is that I see none as they be," meaning as the spirits. "When I think of her and of the ladies now, they are like little children running about without knowing how to put their clothes on right. Is it the ladies? Why, I would not call them women at all." The other day a friend of mine questioned an old woman in a Galway workhouse about Queen Maive, and was told that "Queen Maive was handsome, and overcame all her enemies with a bawl stick, for the hazel is blessed, and the best weapon that can be got. You might walk the world with it," but she grew "very disagreeable in the end—oh very disagreeable. Best not to be talking about it. Best leave it between the book and the hearer." My friend thought the old woman had got some scandal about Fergus son of Roy and Maive in her head.

And I myself met once with a young man in the Burren Hills who remembered an old poet who made his poems in Irish and had met when he was young, the young man said, one who called herself Maive, and said she was a queen "among them," and asked him if he would have money or pleasure. He said he would have pleasure, and she gave him her love for a time, and then went from him, and ever after he was very mournful. The young man had often heard him sing the poem of lamentation that he made, but could only remember that it was "very mournful," and that he called her "beauty of all beauties."

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1. Queen Victoria.