

Proud Costello, MacDermot's Daughter, And the Bitter Tongue

By W. B. Yeats

Costello had come up from the fields and lay upon the ground before the door of his square tower, resting his head upon his hands and looking at the sunset, and considering the dances of the weather. Though the customs of Elizabeth and James, now going out of fashion in England, had begun to prevail among the gentry, he still wore the great cloak of the native Irish; and the sensitive outlines of his face and the greatness of his indolent body had a commingling of pride and strength which belonged to a simpler age. His eyes wandered from the sunset to where the long white road lost itself over the south-western horizon and to a horseman who toiled slowly up the hill. A few more minutes and the horseman was near enough for his little and shapeless body, his long Irish cloak, and the dilapidated bagpipes hanging from his shoulders, and the rough-haired garron under him, to be seen distinctly in the grey dusk. So soon as he had come within earshot, he began crying: 'Is it sleeping you are, Tumaus Costello, when better men break their hearts on the great white roads? Get up out of that, proud Tumaus, for I have news! Get up out of that, you great omadhaun! Shake yourself out of the earth, you great weed of a man!'

Costello had risen to his feet, and as the piper came up to him seized him by the neck of his jacket, and lifting him out of his saddle threw him on to the ground.

'Let me alone, let me alone,' said the other, but Costello still shook him.

'I have news from MacDermot's daughter, Winny,' The great fingers were loosened, and the piper rose gasping.

'Why did you not tell me,' said Costello, that you came from her? You might have railed your fill.'

'I have come from her, but I will not speak unless I am paid for my shaking.'

Costello fumbled at the bag in which he carried his money, and it was some time before it would open, for the hand that had overcome many men shook with fear and hope. 'Here is all the money in my bag,' he said, dropping a stream of French and Spanish money into the hand of the piper, who bit the coins before he would answer.

'That is right, that is a fair price, but I will not speak till I have good protection, for if the MacDermots lay their hands upon me in any boreen after sundown, or in Cool-a-vin by day, I will be left to rot among the nettles of a ditch, or hung on the great sycamore, where they hung the horse-thieves last Beltaine four years.' And while he spoke he tied the reins of his garron to a bar of rusty iron that was mortared into the wall.

'I will make you my piper and my body-servant,' said Costello, 'and no man dare lay hands upon the man, or the goat, or the horse, or the dog that is Tumaus Costello's.'

'And I will only tell my message,' said the other, flinging the saddle on the ground, 'in the corner of the chimney with a noggin in my hand, and a jug of the Brew of the Little Pot beside me, for though I am ragged and empty, my forbears were well clothed and full until their house was burnt and their cattle harried seven centuries ago by the Dillons, whom I shall yet see on the hob of hell, and they screeching'; and while he spoke the little eyes gleamed and the thin hands clenched.

Costello led him into the great rush-strewn hall, where were none of the comforts which had begun to grow common among the gentry, but a feudal gauntness and bareness, and pointed to the bench in the great chimney; and when he had sat down, filled up a horn noggin and set it on the bench beside him, and set a great black jack of leather beside the noggin, and lit a torch that slanted out from a ring in the wall, his hands trembling the while; and then turned towards him and said: 'Will MacDermot's daughter come to me, Duallach, son of Daly?'

'MacDermot's daughter will not come to you, for her father has set women to watch her, but she bid me tell you that this day week will be the eve of St. John and the night of her betrothal to MacNamara of the Lake, and she would have you there that, when they bid her drink to him she loves best, as the way is, she may drink to you, Tumaus Costello, and let all know where her heart is, and how little of gladness is in her marriage; and I myself bid you go with good men about you, for I saw the horse-thieves with my own eyes, and they dancing the "Blue Pigeon" in the air.' And then he held the now empty noggin towards Costello, his hand closing round it like the claw of a bird, and cried: 'Fill my noggin again, for I would the day had come when all the water in the world is to shrink into a periwinkle-shell, that I might drink nothing but Poteen.'

Finding that Costello made no reply, but sat in a dream, he burst out: 'Fill my noggin, I tell you, for no Costello is so great in the world that he should not wait upon a Daly, even though the Daly travel the road with his pipes and the Costello have a bare hill, an empty house, a horse, a herd of goats, and a handful of cows.' 'Praise the Dalys if you will,' said Costello as he filled the noggin, 'for you have brought me a kind word from my love.'

For the next few days Duallach went hither and thither trying to raise a bodyguard, and every man he met had some story of Costello, how he killed the wrestler when but a boy by so straining at the belt that went about them both that he broke the big wrestler's back; how when somewhat older he dragged fierce horses through a ford in the Unchion for a wager; how when he came to manhood he broke the steel horseshoe in Mayo; how he drove many men before him through Rushy Meadow at Drum-an-air because of a malevolent song they had about his poverty; and of many another deed of his strength and pride; but he could find none who would trust themselves with any so passionate and poor in a quarrel with careful and wealthy persons like MacDermot of the Sheep and MacNamara of the Lake.

Then Costello went out himself, and after listening to many excuses and in many places, brought in a big half-witted fellow, who followed him like a dog, a farm-labourer who worshipped him for his strength, a fat farmer whose forefathers had served his family, and a couple of lads who looked after his goats and cows; and marshalled them before the fire in the empty hall. They had brought with them their stout cudgels, and Costello gave them an old pistol apiece, and kept them all night drinking Spanish ale and shooting at a white turnip which he pinned against the wall with a skewer. Duallach of the pipes sat on the bench in the chimney playing 'The Green Bunch of Rushes', 'The Unchion Stream,' and 'The Princes of Breffeny' on his old pipes, and railing now at the appearance of the shooters, now at their clumsy shooting, and now at Costello because he had no better servants. The labourer, the half-witted fellow, the farmer and the lads were all well accustomed to Duallach's railing, for it was as inseparable from wake or wedding as the squealing of his pipes, but they wondered at the forbearance of Costello, who seldom came either to wake or wedding, and if he had would scarce have been patient with a scolding piper.

On the next evening they set out for Cool-a-vin, Costello riding a tolerable horse and carrying a sword, the others upon rough-haired garrons, and with their stout cudgels under their arms. As they rode over the bogs and in the boreens among the hills they could see fire answering fire

from hill to hill, from horizon to horizon, and everywhere groups who danced in the red light on the turf, celebrating the bridal of life and fire. When they came to MacDermot's house they saw before the door an unusually large group of the very poor, dancing about a fire, in the midst of which was a blazing cartwheel, that circular dance which is so ancient that the gods, long dwindled to be but fairies, dance no other in their secret places. From the door and through the long loop-holes on either side came the pale light of candles and the sound of many feet dancing a dance of Elizabeth and James.

They tied their horses to bushes, for the number so tied already showed that the stables were full, and shoved their way through a crowd of peasants who stood about the door, and went into the great hall where the dance was. The labourer, the half-witted fellow, the farmer and the two lads mixed with a group of servants who were looking on from an alcove, and Duallach sat with the pipers on their bench, but Costello made his way through the dancers to where MacDermot of the Sheep stood with MacNamara of the Lake pouring Poteen out of a porcelain jug into horn noggins with silver rims.

'Tumaus Costello,' said the old man, 'you have done a good deed to forget what has been, and to fling away enmity and come to the betrothal of my daughter to MacNamara of the Lake.'

'I come,' answered Costello, 'because when in the time of Costello De Angalo my forbears overcame your forbears and afterwards made peace, a compact was made that a Costello might go with his body-servants and his piper to every feast given by a MacDermot for ever, and a MacDermot with his body-servants and his piper to every feast given by a Costello for ever.'

'If you come with evil thoughts and armed men,' said the son of MacDermot flushing, 'no matter how strong your hands to wrestle and to swing the sword, it shall go badly with you, for some of my wife's clan have come out of Mayo, and my three brothers and their servants have come down from the Ox Mountains'; and while he spoke he kept his hand inside his coat as though upon the handle of a weapon.

'No,' answered Costello, 'I but come to dance a farewell dance with your daughter.'

MacDermot drew his hand out of his coat and went over to a tall pale girl who was now standing but a little way off with her mild eyes fixed upon the ground.

'Costello has come to dance a farewell dance, for he knows that you will never see one another again.'

The girl lifted her eyes and gazed at Costello, and in her gaze was that trust of the humble in the proud, the gentle in the violent, which has been the tragedy of woman from the beginning. Costello led her among the dancers, and they were soon drawn into the rhythm of the Pavane, that stately dance which, with the Saraband, the Gallead, and the Morrice dances, had driven out, among all but the most Irish of the gentry, the quicker rhythms of the verse-interwoven, pantomimic dances of earlier days; and while they danced there came over them the unutterable melancholy, the weariness with the world, the poignant and bitter pity for one another, the vague anger against common hopes and fears, which is the exultation of love. And when a dance ended and the pipers laid down their pipes and lifted their horn noggins, they stood a little from the others waiting pensively and silently for the dance to begin again and the fire in their hearts to leap up and to wrap them anew; and so they danced and danced Pavane and Saraband and Gallead and Morrice through the night long, and many stood still to watch them, and the peasants came about the door and peered in, as though they understood that they would gather their children's children about them long hence, and tell how they had seen Costello dance with MacDermot's daughter Una, and become by the telling themselves a portion of ancient romance; but through all the dancing and piping MacNamara of the Lake went hither and thither talking

loudly and making foolish jokes that all might seem well with him, and old MacDermot of the Sheep grew redder and redder, and looked oftener and oftener at the doorway to see if the candles there grew yellow in the dawn.

At last he saw that the moment to end had come, and, in a pause after a dance, cried out from where the horn noggins stood that his daughter would now drink the cup of betrothal; then Una came over to where he was, and the guests stood round in a half-circle, Costello close to the wall to the right, and the piper, the labourer, the farmer, the half-witted man and the two farm lads close behind him. The old man took out of a niche in the wall the silver cup from which her mother and her mother's mother had drunk the toasts of their betrothals, and poured Poteen out of a porcelain jug and handed the cup to his daughter with the customary words, 'Drink to him whom you love the best.'

She held the cup to her lips for a moment, and then said in a clear soft voice: 'I drink to my true love, Tumaus Costello.'

And then the cup rolled over and over on the ground, ringing like a bell, for the old man had struck her in the face and the cup had fallen, and there was a deep silence.

There were many of MacNamara's people among the servants now come out of the alcove, and one of them, a story-teller and poet, a last remnant of the bardic order, who had a chair and a platter in MacNamara's kitchen, drew a French knife out of his girdle and made as though he would strike at Costello, but in a moment a blow had hurled him to the ground, his shoulder sending the cup rolling and ringing again. The click of steel had followed quickly, had not there come a muttering and shouting from the peasants about the door and from those crowding up behind them; and all knew that these were no children of Queen's Irish or friendly MacNamaras and MacDermots, but of the wild Irish about Lough Gara and Lough Cara, who rowed their skin coracles, and had masses of hair over their eyes, and left the right arms of their children unchristened that they might give the stouter blows, and swore only by St. Atty and sun and moon, and worshipped beauty and strength more than St. Atty or sun and moon.

Costello's hand had rested upon the handle of his sword and his knuckles had grown white, but now he drew it away, and, followed by those who were with him, strode towards the door, the dancers giving way before him, the most angrily and slowly, and with glances at the muttering and shouting peasants, but some gladly and quickly, because the glory of his fame was over him. He passed through the fierce and friendly peasant faces, and came where his good horse and the rough-haired garrons were tied to bushes; and mounted and bade his ungainly bodyguard mount also and ride into the narrow breen. When they had gone a little way, Duallach, who rode last, turned towards the house where a little group of MacDermots and MacNamaras stood next to a more numerous group of countrymen, and cried: 'MacDermot, you deserve to be as you are this hour, a lantern without a candle, a purse without a penny, a sheep without wool, for your hand was ever niggardly to piper and fiddler and story-teller and to poor travelling people.' He had not done before the three old MacDermots from the Ox Mountains had run towards their horses, and old MacDermot himself had caught the bridle of a garron of the MacNamaras and was calling to the others to follow him; and many blows and many deaths had been had not the countrymen caught up still glowing sticks from the ashes of the fires and hurled them among the horses with loud cries, making all plunge and rear, and some break from those who held them, the whites of their eyes gleaming in the dawn.

For the next few weeks Costello had no lack of news of Una, for now a woman selling eggs or fowls, and now a man or a woman on pilgrimage to the Well of the Rocks, would tell him how his love had fallen ill the day after St. John's Eve, and how she was a little better or a little

worse, as it might be; and though he looked to his horses and his cows and goats as usual, the common and uncomely, the dust upon the roads, the songs of men returning from fairs and wakes, men playing cards in the corners of fields on Sundays and Saints' Days, the rumours of battles and changes in the great world, the deliberate purposes of those about him, troubled him with an inexplicable trouble; and the country people still remember how when night had fallen he would bid Duallach of the Pipes tell, to the chirping of the crickets, 'The Son of Apple,' 'The Beauty of the World,' 'The King of Ireland's Son,' or some other of those traditional tales which were as much a piper's business as 'The Green Bunch of Rushes,' 'The Unchion Stream,' or 'The Chiefs of Breffeny'; and while the boundless and phantasmal world of the legends was a building, would abandon himself to the dreams of his sorrow.

Duallach would often pause to tell how some clan of the wild Irish had descended from an incomparable King of the Blue Belt, or Warrior of the Ozier Wattle, or to tell with many curses how all the strangers and most of the Queen's Irish were the seed of the misshapen and horned People from Under the Sea or of the servile and creeping Ferbolg; but Costello cared only for the love sorrows, and no matter whither the stories wandered, whether to the Isle of the Red Lough, where the blessed are, or to the malign country of the Hag of the East, Una alone endured their shadowy hardships; for it was she and no king's daughter of old who was hidden in the steel tower under the water with the folds of the Worm of Nine Eyes round and about her prison; and it was she who won by seven years of service the right to deliver from hell all she could carry, and carried away multitudes clinging with worn fingers to the hem of her dress; and it was she who endured dumbness for a year because of the little thorn of enchantment the fairies had thrust into her tongue; and it was a lock of her hair, coiled in a little carved box, which gave so great a light that men threshed by it from sundown to sunrise, and awoke so great a wonder that kings spent years in wandering or fell before unknown armies in seeking to discover her hiding-place; for there was no beauty in the world but hers, no tragedy in the world but hers: and when at last the voice of the piper, grown gentle with the wisdom of old romance, was silent, and his rheumatic steps had toiled upstairs and to bed, and Costello had dipped his fingers into the little delf font of holy water and begun to pray to Mary of the Seven Sorrows, the blue eyes and star-covered dress of the painting in the chapel faded from his imagination, and the brown eyes and homespun dress of MacDermot's daughter Winny came in their stead; for there was no tenderness in the passion who keep their hearts pure for love or for hatred as other men for God, for Mary and for the Saints, and who, when the hour of their visitation arrives, come to the Divine Essence by the bitter tumult, the Garden of Gethsemane, and the desolate Rood ordained for immortal passions in mortal hearts.

At last a serving-man rode up to Costello, who was helping his two lads to reap a meadow, and gave him a letter, and rode away; and the letter contained these words in English: 'Tumaus Costello, my daughter is very ill. She will die unless you come to her. I therefore command you come to her whose peace you stole by treachery.'

Costello threw down his scythe, and sent one of the lads for Duallach, who had become woven into his mind with Una, and himself saddled his great horse and Duallach's garron.

When they came to MacDermot's house it was late afternoon, and Lough Gabhra lay down below them, blue, and deserted; and though they had seen, when at a distance, dark figures moving about the door, the house appeared not less deserted than the Lough. The door stood half open, and Costello knocked upon it again and again, so that a number of lake gulls flew up out of the grass and circled screaming over his head, but there was no answer.

‘There is no one here,’ said Duallach, ‘for MacDermot is too proud to welcome Proud Costello,’ and he threw the door open, and they saw a ragged, dirty, very old woman, who sat upon the floor leaning against the wall. Costello knew that it was Bridget Delaney, a deaf and dumb beggar; and she, when she saw him, stood up and made a sign to him to follow, and led him and his companion up a stair and down a long corridor to a closed door. She pushed the door open and went a little way off and sat down as before; Duallach sat upon the ground also, but close to the door, and Costello went and gazed upon Winny sleeping upon a bed. He sat upon a chair beside her and waited, and a long time passed and still she slept on, and then Duallach motioned to him through the door to wake her, but he hushed his very breath, that she might sleep on, for his heart was full of that ungovernable pity which makes the fading heart of the lover a shadow of the divine heart. Presently he turned to Duallach and said: ‘It is not right that I stay here where there are none of her kindred, for the common people are always ready to blame the beautiful.’ And then they went down and stood at the door of the house and waited, but the evening wore on and no one came.

‘It was a foolish man that called you Proud Costello,’ Duallach cried at last; ‘had he seen you waiting and waiting where they left none but a beggar to welcome you, it is Humble Costello he would have called you.’

Then Costello mounted and Duallach mounted, but when they had ridden a little way Costello tightened the reins and made his horse stand still. Many minutes passed, and then Duallach cried: ‘It is no wonder that you fear to offend MacDermot of the Sheep, for he has many brothers and friends, and though he is old, he is a strong man and ready with his hands, and he is of the Queen’s Irish, and the enemies of the Gael are upon his side.’

And Costello answered, flushing and looking towards the house: ‘I swear by the Mother of God that I will never return there again if they do not send after me before I pass the ford in the Brown River,’ and he rode on, but so very slowly that the sun went down and the bats began to fly over the bogs. When he came to the river he lingered awhile upon the bank among the flowers of the flag, but presently rode out into the middle and stopped his horse in a foaming shallow. Duallach, however, crossed over and waited on a further bank above a deeper place. After a good while Duallach cried out again, and this time very bitterly: ‘It was a fool who begot you and a fool who bore you, and they are fools of all fools who say you come of an old and noble stock, for you come of whey-faced beggars who travelled from door to door, bowing to gentles and to serving-men.

With bent head, Costello rode through the river and stood beside him, and would have spoken had not hoofs clattered on the further bank and a horseman splashed towards them. It was a serving-man of MacDermot’s, and he said, speaking breathlessly like one who had ridden hard: ‘Tumaus Costello, I come to bid you again to MacDermot’s house. When you had gone, his daughter Winny awoke and called your name, for you had been in her dreams. Bridget Delaney the Dummy saw her lips move and the trouble upon her, and came where we were hiding in the wood above the house and took MacDermot of the Sheep by the coat and brought him to his daughter. He saw the trouble upon her, and bid me ride his own horse to bring you the quicker.’

Then Costello turned towards the piper Duallach Daly, and taking him about the waist lifted him out of the saddle and hurled him against a grey rock that rose up out of the river, so that he fell lifeless into the deep place, and the waters swept over the tongue which God had made bitter, that there might be a story in men’s ears in after time. Then plunging his spurs into the horse, he rode away furiously toward the north-west, along the edge of the river, and did not pause until he came to another and smoother ford, and saw the rising moon mirrored in the water. He paused

for a moment irresolute, and then rode into the ford and on over the Ox Mountains, and down towards the sea; his eyes almost continually resting upon the moon which glimmered in the dimness like a great white rose hung on the lattice of some boundless and phantasmal world. But now his horse, long dark with sweat and breathing hard, for he kept spurring it to an extreme speed, fell heavily, hurling him into the grass at the roadside. He tried to make it stand up, and failing in this, went on alone towards the moonlight; and came to the sea and saw a schooner lying there at anchor. Now that he could go no further because of the sea, he found that he was very tired and the night very cold, and went into a shebeen close to the shore and threw himself down upon a bench. The room was full of Spanish and Irish sailors who had just smuggled a cargo of wine and ale, and were waiting a favourable wind to set out again. A Spaniard offered him a drink in bad Gaelic. He drank it greedily and began talking wildly and rapidly.

For some three weeks the wind blew inshore or with too great violence, and the sailors stayed drinking and talking and playing cards, and Costello stayed with them, sleeping upon a bench in the shebeen, and drinking and talking and playing more than any. He soon lost what little money he had, and then his horse, which some one had brought from the mountain breen, to a Spaniard, who sold it to a farmer from the mountains, and then his long cloak and his spurs and his boots of soft leather. At last a gentle wind blew towards Spain, and the crew rowed out to their schooner, singing Gaelic and Spanish songs, and lifted the anchor, and in a little while the white sails had dropped under the horizon. Then Costello turned homeward, his life gaping before him, and walked all day, coming in the early evening to the road that went from near Lough Gara to the southern edge of Lough Cay. Here he overtook a great crowd of peasants and farmers, who were walking very slowly after two priests and a group of well-dressed persons, certain of whom were carrying a coffin. He stopped an old man and asked whose burying it was and whose people they were, and the old man answered: 'It is the burying of Una, MacDermot's daughter, and we are the MacNamaras and the MacDermots and their following, and you are Tumaus Costello who murdered her.'

Costello went on towards the head of the procession, passing men who looked at him with fierce eyes and only vaguely understanding what he had heard, for now that he had lost the understanding that belongs to good health, it seemed impossible that a gentleness and a beauty which had been so long the world's heart could pass away. Presently he stopped and asked again whose burying it was, and a man answered: 'We are carrying MacDermot's daughter Winny whom you murdered, to be buried in the island of the Holy Trinity,' and the man stooped and picked up a stone and cast it at Costello, striking him on the cheek and making the blood flow out over his face. Costello went on scarcely feeling the blow, and coming to those about the coffin, shouldered his way into the midst of them, and laying his hand upon the coffin, asked in a loud voice: 'Who is in this coffin?'

The three Old MacDermots from the Ox Mountains caught up stones and bid those about them do the same; and he was driven from the road, covered with wounds, and but for the priests would surely have been killed.

When the procession had passed on, Costello began to follow again, and saw from a distance the coffin laid upon a large boat, and those about it get into other boats, and the boats move slowly over the water to Insula Trinitatis; and after a time he saw the boats return and their passengers mingle with the crowd upon the bank, and all disperse by many roads and breens. It seemed to him that Winny was somewhere on the island smiling gently as of old, and when all had gone he swam in the way the boats had been rowed and found the new-made grave beside the ruined Abbey of the Holy Trinity, and threw himself upon it, calling to Una to come to him.

Above him the square ivy leaves trembled, and all about him white moths moved over white flowers, and sweet odours drifted through the dim air.

He lay there all that night and through the day after, from time to time calling her to come to him, but when the third night came he had forgotten, worn out with hunger and sorrow, that her body lay in the earth beneath; but only knew she was somewhere near and would not come to him.

Just before dawn, the hour when the peasants hear his ghostly voice crying out, his pride awoke and he called loudly: 'Winny, daughter of MacDermot of the Sheep, if you do not come to me I will go and never return to the island of the Holy Trinity,' and before his voice had died away a cold and whirling wind had swept over the island and he saw many figures rushing past, women of the Sidhe with crowns of silver and dim floating drapery; and then Una, but no longer smiling gently, for she passed him swiftly and angrily, and as she passed struck him upon the face crying: 'Then go and never return.'

He would have followed, and was calling out her name, when the whole glimmering company rose up into the air, and, rushing together in the shape of a great silvery rose, faded into the ashen dawn.

Costello got up from the grave, understanding nothing but that he had made his beloved angry and that she wished him to go, and wading out into the lake, began to swim. He swam on and on, but his limbs were too weary to keep him afloat, and her anger was heavy about him, and when he had gone a little way he sank without a struggle, like a man passing into sleep and dreams.

The next day a poor fisherman found him among the reeds upon the lake shore, lying upon the white lake sand with his arms flung out as though he lay upon a rood, and carried him to his own house. And the very poor lamented over him and sang the keen, and when the time had come, laid him in the Abbey on Insula Trinitatis with only the ruined altar between him and MacDermot's daughter, and planted above them two ash-trees that in after days wove their branches together and mingled their leaves.