

## CHAPTER V THE STORY OF FINGAL

‘CATHULLIN sat by TURA’S wall, by the tree of the rustling sound. His spear leaned against a rock. His shield lay on grass, by his side. And as he thus sat deep in thought a scout came running in all haste and cried, “Arise! Cathullin, arise! I see the ships of the north. Many, chief of men, are the foe! Many the heroes of the sea-born Swaran!”

‘Then to the scout the blue-eyed chief replied, “Thou ever tremblest. Thy fears have increased the foe. It is Fingal King of deserts who comes with aid to green Erin of streams.”

“Nay, I beheld their chief,” replied the scout, “tall as a glittering rock. His spear is a blasted pine. His shield the rising moon. He bade me say to thee, “Let dark Cathullin yield.””

“No,” replied the blue-eyed chief, “I never yield to mortal man. Dark Cathullin shall be great or dead.”

Then Cathullin bade the scout summon his warriors to council. And when they were gathered there was much talk, for some would give battle at once and some delay until Fingal, the King of Morven, should come to aid them. But Cathullin himself was eager to fight, so forward they marched to meet the foe. And the sound of their going was ‘as the rushing of a stream of foam when the thunder is travelling above, and dark-brown night sits on half the hill.’ To the camp of Swaran was the sound carried, so that he sent a messenger to view the foe.

‘He went. He trembling, swift returned. His eyes rolled wildly round. His heart beat high against his side. His words were faltering, broken, slow. “Arise, son of ocean! arise, chief of the dark brown shields! I see the dark, the mountain stream of battle. Fly, King of ocean! Fly!”

“When did I fly?” replied the King. “When fled Swaran from the battle of spears? When did I shrink from danger, chief of the little soul? Shall Swaran fly from a hero? Were Fingal himself before me my soul should not darken in fear. Arise, to battle my thousands! pour round me like the echoing main. Gather round the bright steel of your King; strong as the rocks of my land, that meet the storm with joy, and stretch their dark pines to the wind.”

‘Like autumn’s dark storms, pouring from two echoing hills, towards each other approached the heroes. Like two deep streams from high rocks meeting, mixing, roaring on the plain; loud, rough and dark in battle meet Lochlin and Innis-fail. Chief mixes his strokes with chief, and man with man; steel clanging sounds on steel. Helmets are cleft on high. Blood bursts and smokes around. Strings murmur on the polished yews. Darts rush along the sky, spears fall like the circles of light which gild the face of night. As the noise of the troubled ocean when roll the waves on high, as the last peal of thunder in heaven, such is the din of war. Though Cormac’s hundred bards were there to give the fight to song, feeble was the voice of a hundred bards to send the deaths to future times. For many were the deaths of heroes; wide poured the blood of the brave.’

Then above the clang and clamour of dreadful battle we hear the mournful dirge of minstrels wailing o’er the dead.

‘Mourn, ye sons of song, mourn! Weep on the rocks of roaring winds, O maid of Inistore! Bend thy fair head over the waves, thou lovelier than the ghost of the hills, when it moves, in a sunbeam at noon, over the silence of Morven. He is fallen! thy youth is low! pale beneath the sword of Cathullin. No more shall valour raise thy love to match the blood of kings. His grey dogs are howling at home, they see his passing ghost. His bow is in the hall unstrung. No sound is on the hill of his hinds.’

Then once again, the louder for the mourning pause, we hear the din of battle.

‘As roll a thousand waves to the rocks, so Swaran’s host came on. As meets a rock a thousand waves, so Erin met Swaran of spears. Death raises all his voices around, and mixes with the sounds of shields. Each hero is a pillar of darkness; the sword a beam of fire in his hand. The field echoes from wing to wing, as a hundred hammers that rise by turn, on the red son of the furnace.’

But now the day is waning. To the noise and horror of battle the mystery of darkness is added. Friend and foe are wrapped in the dimness of twilight.

But the fight was not ended, for neither Cathullin nor Swaran had gained the victory, and ere grey morning broke the battle was renewed.

And in this second day’s fight Swaran was the victor, but while the battle still raged white-sailed ships appeared upon the sea. It was Fingal who came, and Swaran had to fight a second foe.

‘Now from the grey mists of the ocean, the white-sailed ships of Fingal appear. High is the grove of their masts, as they nod by turns on the rolling wave.’

Swaran saw them from the hill on which he fought, and turning from the pursuit of the men of Erin, he marched to meet Fingal. But Cathullin, beaten and ashamed, fled to hide himself: ‘bending, weeping, sad and slow, Cathullin sank in Cromla’s wood, and mourned his fallen friends. He feared the face of Fingal, who was wont to greet him from the fields of renown.’

But although Cathullin fled, between Fingal and Swaran battle was renewed till darkness fell. A second day dawned, and again and again the hosts closed in deadly combat until at length Fingal and Swaran met face to face.

‘There was a clang of arms! Their every blow like the hundred hammers of the furnace. Terrible is the battle of the kings; dreadful the look of their eyes. Their dark brown shields are cleft in twain. Their steel flies, broken from their helms.

‘They fling their weapons down. Each rushes to his hero’s grasp. Their sinewy arms bend round each other they turn from side to side, and strain and stretch their large spreading limbs below. But when the pride of their strength arose they shook the hills with their heels. Rocks tumble from their places on high; the green-headed bushes are overturned. At length the strength of Swaran fell; the king of the groves is bound.’

The warriors of Swaran fled then, pursued by the sons of Fingal, till the hero bade the fighting cease, and darkness once more fell over the dreadful field.

‘The clouds of night come rolling down. Darkness rests on the steeps of Cromla. The stars of the north arise over the rolling of Erin’s waves: they shew their heads of fire, through the flying mist of heaven. A distant wind roars in the wood. Silent and dark is the plain of death.’

Then through the darkness is heard the sad song of minstrels mourning for the dead. But soon the scene changes and mourning is forgotten.

The heroes gathered to the feast. A thousand aged oaks are burning to the wind. The souls of warriors brighten with joy. But the king of Lochlin (Swaran) is silent. Sorrow reddens in his eyes of pride. He remembers that he fell.

‘Fingal leaned on the shield of his fathers. His grey locks slowly waved on the wind of night. He saw the grief of Swaran and spoke to the first of bards.

“Raise, Ullin, raise the song of peace. O soothe my soul from war. Let mine ear forget in the sound the dismal noise of arms. Let a hundred harps be near to gladden the king of Lochlin. He must depart from us with joy. None ever went sad from Fingal. The lightening of my sword is against the strong in fight. Peaceful it lies by my side when warriors yield in war.”

So at the bidding of Fingal the minstrel sang, and soothed the grief of Swaran. And when the music ceased Fingal spoke once more:

“King of Lochlin, let thy face brighten with gladness and thine ear delight in the harp. Dreadful as the storm of thine ocean thou hast poured thy valour forth; thy voice has been like the voice of thousands when they engage in war.

“Raise, to-morrow, raise thy white sails to the wind. Or dost thou choose the fight? That thou mayest depart renowned like the sun setting in the west.”

Then Swaran chose to depart in peace. He had no more will to fight against Fingal, so the two heroes swore friendship together. Then once again Fingal called for the song of minstrels.

‘A hundred voices at once arose, a hundred harps were strung. They sang of other times; the mighty chiefs of other years.’ And so the night passed till ‘morning trembles with the beam of the east; it glimmers on Cromla’s side. Over Lena is heard the horn of Swaran. The sons of the ocean gather around. Silent and sad they rise on the wave. The blast of Erin is behind their sails. White as the mist of Morven they float along the sea.’

Thus Swaran and his warriors departed, and Fingal, calling his men together, set forth to hunt. And as he hunted far in the woods he met Cathullin, still hiding, sad and ashamed. But Fingal comforted the beaten hero, reminding him of past victories. Together they returned to Fingal’s camp, and there the heroes sang and feasted until ‘the soul of Cathullin rose. The strength of his arm returned. Gladness brightened along his face. Thus the night passed away in song. We brought back the morning with joy.

‘Fingal arose on the heath and shook his glittering spear. He moved first towards the plain of Lena. We followed in all our arms.

“Spread the sail,” said the King, “seize the winds as they pour from Lena.”

‘We rose on the wave with songs. We rushed with joy through the foam of the deep.’

Thus the hero returned to his own land.