

The Dream of the Emperor Maxen



MAXEN WLEDIG* was emperor of Rome, and he was the fairest man, and the wisest, and the best suited to be emperor of all his predecessors. One day he was at a council of kings; and he said to his companions, 'I want to go hunting tomorrow', he said.

Early the next day he set out with his retinue, and they came to the valley of the river that flows down to Rome. He hunted the valley until it was noon. Moreover, with him that day were thirty crowned kings, vassals of his. It was not so much for the pleasure of hunting that the emperor hunted for that length of time, but because he had been made a man of such high rank that he was lord over all those kings. The sun was high in the sky above his head, and the heat was great, and Maxen fell asleep. His chamberlains* protected him from the sun by raising shields on spear-shafts around him. They placed a gold-chased shield under his head; and so the emperor slept.

And then he had a dream. This was his dream, that he was travelling along the river valley to its source until he came to the highest mountain he had ever seen, and he was sure that the mountain was as high as the sky. As he came over the mountain he could see that he was travelling along level plains, the fairest that anyone had ever seen, on the other side of the mountain. And he could see great, wide rivers flowing from the mountain to the sea, and he was travelling to the sea-fords and the rivers. After travelling in this way for a long time, he came to the mouth of a great river, the widest that anyone had seen, and he could see a great city at the mouth of the river, and a great wall around the city with many great towers of different colours. At the mouth of the river he saw a fleet, and that was the largest fleet he had ever seen. Among the fleet he saw a ship which was much larger and fairer than any of the others: of as much of it that he could see above the water, one plank was of gold and the next was of silver. He saw a bridge of whalebone from the ship to the

shore, and imagined he was walking along the bridge into the ship. A sail was hoisted on the ship, and she steered over sea and ocean. He saw himself coming to the fairest island in the world, and having crossed the island from one sea to the other he could see, at the far end of the island, steep mountains and lofty crags, and rough, rugged terrain the like of which he had never seen before. From there he saw an island in the sea, facing that rugged terrain, and between him and the island he saw a land whose plain was the length of its sea, whose forest was the length of its mountain. From that mountain he saw a river crossing the land, making for the sea, and at the mouth of the river he saw a great castle, the fairest that anyone had ever seen, and he saw the castle gate was open, and he came into the castle. He saw a hall in the castle. He thought that the roof-tiles of the hall were all of gold. The side of the hall he thought to be of valuable, sparkling stones. The floors of the hall he imagined to be of pure gold, with golden couches and silver tables. On a couch facing him he saw two young, auburn-haired lads playing *gwyddbwyll*.* He saw that the board for the *gwyddbwyll* was silver, and its pieces were of red gold. The lads' garments were of pure black brocaded silk, and frontlets of red gold on their heads holding their hair in place, with precious, sparkling stones in them, rubies and white gems alternating with imperial stones. On their feet were boots of new Cordovan leather, with bands of red gold fastening them. And at the foot of the hall-pillar he saw a grey-haired man in a chair of elephant ivory with the images of two eagles in red gold on it. There were gold bracelets on his arms, and many gold rings on his fingers; and a gold torque around his neck, and a gold frontlet holding his hair; and a noble quality about him. There was a *gwyddbwyll* board in front of him, and a bar of gold in his hand, and with steel files he was carving *gwyddbwyll* pieces from the bar.

He saw a maiden sitting before him, in a chair of red gold. Because of her beauty it was no easier to gaze upon her than it would be upon the sun when it is at its brightest and most beautiful. The maiden wore shifts of white silk with clasps of red gold at her breast, and a surcoat of gold brocaded silk with a mantle to match, and a brooch of red gold holding the mantle about her; and a frontlet of red gold on her head, with rubies and white gems in the frontlet, and pearls alternating with imperial stones; and a girdle of red gold about her; and she was the most beautiful sight to behold. The maiden got up

to meet him from the golden chair, and he embraced her, and they sat down together in the golden chair. And the chair was no narrower for them both than for the maiden alone. And as he had his arms around the maiden, and his cheek against her cheek, what with the dogs straining at their leashes, and the corners of the shields touching one another, and the spear-shafts striking together, and the stamping of the horses, the emperor woke up. And when he awoke he could no longer live or breathe or exist because of the maiden he had seen in his sleep. Not a bone-joint of his, not the root of a fingernail, let alone anything larger, was not full of love for the maiden.

Then his retinue said to him, 'Lord,' they said, 'it is gone time for you to eat.'

Then the emperor mounted his palfrey, the saddest man that anyone had ever seen, and he made his way to Rome. Whatever messages he was given, no answer was received because of his sadness and moroseness. And then he arrived in the city of Rome, and he was thus the whole week long. Whenever his retinue went to drink from golden vessels and to take their pleasure, he would not accompany any one of them. Whenever they went to listen to songs and entertainment, he would not accompany them. He did nothing but sleep, for as often as he slept, he would see in his sleep the woman he loved best; when he was not sleeping, because of her he cared for nothing, for he did not know where in the world she was.

One day a chamberlain said to him (and although he was a chamberlain of his, he was also a king in Romani),* 'Lord,' he said, 'all your men are criticizing you.'

'Why are they criticizing me?' said the emperor.

The servant replied, 'Because neither your men nor anyone else has received from you either a message or an answer such as men expect to get from their lord. And that is why you are being criticized.'

'Lad,' said the emperor, 'bring the wise men of Rome to me, and I will tell them why I am sad.'

Then the wise men of Rome were brought around the emperor. He said, 'You see, men,' he said, 'I had a dream. And in the dream I saw a maiden. I can no longer live or breathe or exist because of her.'

'Lord,' they replied, 'because you have asked us for advice, we will advise you. And this is our advice to you. Send messengers for three years to the three regions of the world* to look for your dream. And