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books

JOHN HENRY CLAY

The Lion and
the Lamb



HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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FOUR YEARS LATER

One Year Before the
Great Barbarian Conspiracy



I

*Our yearning anticipates landfall,
throws hope as an anchor towards the shore.*

St Augustine of Hippo

She was free.

Eachna clambered over the bramble hedge of the farmstead, tumbled into the ditch beyond and clawed her way up the opposite slope. She paused for a heartbeat to glance back at the compound. Her master was still down on his knees in the dirt, both hands clutching his bleeding face. The dogs were running wildly around him, savage and frantic, almost drowning out his roar. Other shouts began to arise from across the enclosure, from the vegetable field, from the spinning huts.

Eachna saw this all in a moment that seemed to hang outside time. She felt it burn itself into her memory like the image of a flickering fire snatched in a blink, and it stayed before her eyes even as she turned and ran across the scrubland towards the forest.

She was free.

She fled down curling valleys smothered by forest and laced with mumbling rivers. She scrambled over rocks; she squeezed between the trunks of trees, the image of her master and his fury always behind her, beneath arches thrown overhead by their limbs as they grappled and wrestled, into a darkness of scuffles and howls that she did not believe would ever end. She sniffed the air and through the fractured crown of the forest, whose blooming oak branches hung heavy and dark over her head, she watched the sky for traces of smoke.

She could not hear anyone following her, but that meant nothing. Her master was small, wiry, and could slip through the forest like a ghost, and even though her rock had struck home and surely left him half blind he had spent enough nights roaming the forest to hardly need his eyes. Several times she saw a shape in the shadows that took his form – those high shoulders, the head held low like a boar's – but it was only his spirit, if it was him at all.

Let him stumble upon me, she thought. I will tear out his throat with my teeth.

For days she continued, not knowing how far or how long she had travelled or what lay ahead. One night she dreamed that he crashed through the branches upon her and began tearing at her eyes. She awoke with a jump to find the fingers of a tree scratching her face. She panicked and struck at the skeletal hand, gripped the branch, twisted and tore it from the trunk and with a scream hurled the broken limb into the undergrowth. The trees had grown around her overnight and tried to smother her in her sleep. This time they had failed, but they were becoming more treacherous the deeper she sank into the woods, the further she went from the taming prayers and offerings of men.

She needed to escape the trees, which imprisoned her now as the barbed hedge of the farmstead had imprisoned her for four years. She forced her way upwards, climbing towards the breeze and the promising sky of early summer. By late afternoon, weary with the pain of hunger and fatigue, she had reached the crest of a hill with an open view. Looking to the west, she could see a long, narrow lake. Beyond the lake rose more forested hills, but to the south the hills sank towards the coast and the fine blue line of the sea.

She had not seen the sea since the day the pirates had taken her across it, the day her master had bought her and dragged her into the mountains with her wrists bound to the dirt-stiff tail of a mule. Beyond that sea was her home. She remembered, many years before, walking from the shore with an apron full of mussels, gleaming black with foam; sipping warm broth while

wrapped in a sheepskin rug; the dog that whined as it slept by the hearth – what was its name?

She smothered the memories as she always did. For all she knew, this was a different sea, facing the other end of the world. She told herself that the place she had known as a child, from which she had been wrenched and thrown across the ocean, was as distant and dreamlike now as the Otherworld.

When the pirates had taken her she had been on the brink of womanhood. She had had her first bleeding in captivity, alone, unwatched and uncared for. She had not been washed in the holy stream by her mother and grandmother as was required; she had not had the prayers and offerings that brought every child through the second birth into adulthood. She was left a child's soul in a woman's body, an aberration, an obscenity.

She had not been strong enough to resist her master the first time he heaved himself onto her, though she had tried, and in the pain and desecration of that moment she had lost something that could never be replaced. Even if, by some magic of the gods, she were to be carried on the clouds to her family, she would inspire only shame and revulsion. Her father would no more offer her to a neighbour in marriage than he would offer his guest a lump of meat that had been dropped in the midden and chewed on by the dogs.

She looked down at her bare feet, filth and dried blood plastered on white skin, at her numb soles, deeply cut and scratched, callused lumps of unfeeling flesh carrying her to an empty death. One day soon her body would stumble from hunger, too weak to go on, and she would die in the belly of these woods, known only to the wild animals who would pick apart her corpse, and the spirits who would watch her passing without concern.

Sorrow and bitterness tugged a burning feeling up her throat. The great open sky looked down on her with scorn. She felt its weight press her back into the arms of the forest, into the snagging, spiny embrace where she belonged.

Her knees buckled. She closed her eyes so tightly that the blackness behind her eyelids was soon flooded with pain. She

began to run down the hill. She fell almost immediately, rolled over trunks and leaves, climbed to her feet and continued, her eyes still closed. She did not want to see the world and its sights. She threw herself blindly into the forest and kept running. She let its punishments flood over her, a struck shin, the sole of her foot stabbed on a splintered log, her hand shredded on rocks, and a final fall into an ocean of barbs and nettles. She writhed and cried, absorbed by pain until she could feel nothing else, until her entire body was alive with fire.

She turned on her stomach, buried her face in her arms and wept, and did not move from the place until night had fallen and she passed finally into an oblivious sleep.

Eachna woke with the smell of cooked fish tickling her nostrils. The sun was newly risen, and she heard voices nearby. She was no longer surrounded by brambles. Twisting where she lay, she looked across a small grassy clearing to where a group of four men was cooking a breakfast of roasted salmon. They were kneeling around a small fire, each holding his arms before him, palms upward, chanting in a language she had not heard before. Her instinct was to scurry back into the bushes, but she realised that someone had lain a woollen blanket over her. Of course they already knew she was here.

The men finished chanting and sat down, and one of them saw her. Like the others, he was wearing a long tunic, tied with a thick cord at the waist. He held out a piece of fish. 'Hungry?' he said. When she did not reply, he continued, 'We tried to rouse you, but you were sleeping like the dead.' By now the other men were looking at her. 'What's your name?' another asked.

The dialect was strange to Eachna, but she understood them. 'Eachna,' she said.

'Ah,' said the third man. 'Irish, yes? Who are your people?'
'Delbhna.'

Now the fourth man spoke, tasting her name on a foreign tongue: 'Ak-na?' He did not look like the others. His skin was dark, his hair and eyes jet black. He was a little older than his

companions, perhaps forty, and where their heads and faces were thick with hair he was almost bald and wore only a thin beard. They seemed to respect him as their leader, for at his voice they had fallen silent. Then he looked at Eachna and said to her directly: 'You are a slave.'

The suddenness of his words frightened Eachna, and she could not muster a reply.

'Don't fear us,' he said. 'We don't want to hurt you.' He held out another piece of fish, and Eachna's stomach yawned. Saliva moistened her dry mouth. Cautiously she rose, keeping the blanket wrapped tightly around herself to cover her left arm, which ended in a stump at the wrist, and edged forwards. She took the fish from his outstretched hand, returned to a safe distance, crouched and stuffed the fish into her mouth.

'Where are you travelling to?' asked one of the other men.

Eachna waved vaguely to the south. This was a nameless country to her.

'To the coast, perhaps?'

She nodded.

'We're going to Luguvalium,' he said. 'Perhaps we can travel together. A girl shouldn't be alone in the hills.'

'Shouldn't be alone,' agreed another. 'We thought you were dead when we saw you.'

'No,' said Eachna. 'I need to go quickly.'

'Well, our feet move lightly enough over this ground. The people around here know us. We won't be troubled, and we can escort you home.'

'No.'

'It's better to travel with company, little sister. Where is your home? Among Herne's people?'

'I need to move on,' said Eachna, chewing the last of the fish. She licked her fingers and stood, letting the blanket fall away.

'We're travelling to the coast, and east by boat to Luguvalium,' said the man closest to her, rising. 'We could carry you as far as you need, if you're going that way.' Eachna shook her head. As she started to walk away the man grabbed her arm. 'Where's

your master, girl?' he snarled. 'Where have you come from?' He tugged her closer, so their bodies were touching. Eachna struggled, but she did not have a shred of strength against his. 'Tell us, or we'll punish you for him!'

The dark man, who had been watching the exchange in silence, now jumped to his feet. '*Nol' illae obstare!*' he shouted, and his companion released Eachna's arm. '*In nomine Dei—*' continued the foreigner, and went on to berate the other in a tongue Eachna had never before heard. His broad, round face was flushed as though about to burst. Eachna did not wait, but slipped away, following the stream to lower ground, into the forest.

She had not gone far when a voice came after her. 'Girl! Wait!' It was the dark man, panting as he raced to catch up with her. 'If you go on alone, you will die!'

Eachna paid him no heed. He overtook her and tried to block her path, his short legs moving clumsily through the bracken. 'We shall protect you,' he said. 'My companion – he has much to learn. He is sorry for his act. Please stop; I want to speak with you for a moment, that is all.'

She halted, seeing that he would pester her for a good while yet before giving in. 'I need to keep moving,' she said. 'I can't stay with people. I have to return home to my father—'

'You're afraid,' he said, seeing through her lies as though she had not spoken them. 'You do not know why you are here. You don't know this country, or where you should go. Your name was Eachna, yes? My name is Ludo.' He paused, giving her the chance to reply. When she did not, he went on, 'I feel I know, Eachna, why you are here. Of course you do not have faith in me. But if you come with us – I can save you.'

Eachna pushed past him. He could save her? She had escaped by herself; she had survived so far by herself; she needed nobody, least of all a foreigner. The only foreigners she had ever known had been robbers and slavers, greedy and cruel to their fingertips: the arrogant men who used to take their food for tribute when she was a child, the pirates who had stolen her, the farmer who had dragged her into the hills.

‘If you continue, you shall die,’ Ludo said, relentless. ‘The lands south of here are full of people. Perhaps you’ll last a few more days as a walking corpse. If you even live out the summer, you’ll freeze in the winter, and if you don’t starve first, you’ll be slain like a wild dog by anyone who sees you. There’s little pity to be found in this country.’

Those words brought her to a stop. She turned to face him. ‘Pity is for sick children and cripples.’

‘You are a cripple,’ said Ludo, nodding at her handleless left arm. ‘And you seem to me to be just a child. But I don’t mean the pity you think of – there is a greater sort, which brings neither shame nor dishonour.’ He stepped closer. ‘Do not take my pity, then, since you don’t understand it. But take my food, and my companionship. Come with us to the city of Luguvalium. I can promise you freedom. By the holy waters of baptism you can be reborn. Our Lord Christ can wash away the cruelty and ignorance of this world, and show you the light that is offered to every tribe in every land. He will embrace each of us, Eachna, if only we listen to his call.’

Ludo held out his hand. Eachna looked at it. She glanced down the stream, and in the tangled depths of the trees saw cold and nameless death awaiting her, a shadowy place where she would wander in eternal grief, never able to reach the Otherworld. This man’s accent was strange, but his voice, gentle as it was, carried the tone of one accustomed to being obeyed. Eachna had never before heard anyone talk like this. He had promised rebirth through water, and this spoke to her; and in the stranger’s lined face, beseeching, tireless, kind, she saw, if only for a moment, an answer to the unreasoned wretchedness of the world.

The moment passed, but Ludo’s hand remained.

Eachna travelled on with Ludo and his companions, the men carrying their own light shoulder sacks, walking south to the coast along forest paths before breaking out beneath an overcast sky. In a gesture she did not quite understand, Ludo had given Eachna his own cloak and shoes, seeming content to go barefoot. She

was glad for the rare comfort. The party did not talk to her, but for much of the time sang songs in that same alien tongue that Ludo had used earlier in anger. This time it lilted and danced lightly in the air, sounding so different from the mournful ballads of British and the guttural grate of Pictish. Eachna listened carefully, trying to pick through the inflections and stresses, and thought she heard some mentions of Ludo's Lord Christ, but she understood nothing more.

By dusk the party had reached a fishing village at the mouth of an estuary. The four men, Ludo in particular, seemed to be well known and liked here, for they were warmly welcomed by the locals. Ludo introduced Eachna as a lost northern girl whom they were taking to Luguvalium, and she too was suddenly surrounded by a gaggle of smiling women, almost tearful with joy, who raised their voices and hands into the air in praise of Christ. Eachna, exhausted and weak, straining to see clearly in the fading light, felt as though she had slipped into a dream, lost among so many faces that shifted through the red glow of torches, chattering, singing.

The next day brought a sky of broken clouds and a fine wind to the east. After breakfast, Ludo and his group boarded a light fishing vessel with a local man to act as pilot, and set sail along the coast. Eachna sat at the prow of the little boat as it rolled through the water. She watched the masses of seagulls circling overhead, filling the air with a harsh chorus. Warm limbs and a full stomach, those most unfamiliar sensations, brought a smile of elation and defiance to her lips, and she decided that she would not be afraid of the fair-haired goddess Clíona, queen of the Land of Promise, the protector who had turned betrayer and let her fall into slavery. Clíona's realm broke upon the shores of distant Ériu, not here. Even as the boat churned its way to the east, Eachna felt the grip of the goddess weakening.

'I am from a place called Massilia,' came a voice, shouting to be heard above the wind and waves, the creaking of the boat and the flapping of its sail. Ludo sat himself at the prow next to her. 'The ocean is blue there,' he said. 'And clear, like the sky. I never

thought the ocean could be so grey.' He pointed at the sky, and the sea. 'Grey above, grey below. Cold, wind, mist.' He shook his head and shivered. 'And is your country different from this?'

Eachna did not know the names of the gods who lived in what men called the empire of Rome, apart from the lord called Christ, who she assumed was Ludo's father-god. Without knowing them, it was difficult to understand the moods and turns of the weather. Hers was a country where the voices of other gods rushed across the sky. 'Some days,' she said, 'the Dagda comes from the south, bringing walls of rain from the endless ocean. The next day Morrígu, his raven-queen, will come from the north, pushing mountains of cloud before her. She is kindest in the summer. They bring glorious rainbows.'

'We are both foreigners here. A strange country is a difficult skin to wear. And when one is alone . . . it can be a great trial.' He smiled, showing his fine, even teeth. 'But when one has faith, and hope, no trial is too great. Do you not agree, Eachna?'

'Yes,' she said, though this was a new idea to her. She wondered about this man's kin, and why he claimed to be alone. Perhaps he was an exile.

'I am a messenger,' he said. 'The Lord sent me here, across mountains and oceans, to the very edge of the empire, with a gift for all men of every nation, every clan. It is not a gift of gold or power or things of this world, for the Lord is not a lord of this world. It is the gift of eternal life, unending joy. He will offer this, and asks for nothing in return but your faith.'

'Your lord,' said Eachna cautiously, 'he is a child of the goddess Danu?'

'No, no!' Ludo shook his head. 'The gods you know are not gods at all, but demons. They lie and trick you into offering them sacrifices without worth. Eachna, they have fooled your people into believing in their power.'

Eachna looked away in puzzled silence. How could Dagda father-god, who ruled the seasons on the strings of his harp, have no power? Without Lugh, how could the breasts of girls, the bellies of mothers-to-be, the ripening fields of summer, swell to