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UNA BAN: AN IRISH SONG AND STORY

By JAMES O'BEIRNE

MR. GEORGE HERZOG of Columbia University, some time ago recorded several songs in Gaelic from the singing of Gerard M. Degidon of New York. Mr. Degidon has specialized in songs arranged by the late Carl Hardebeck of Dublin, and Hardebeck's arrangements, despite many faults, are generally acknowledged as the most faithful to traditional music. The setting of this particular song, "Una Ban,"¹ has been criticized by native singers as departing from the original in details of word and vowel emphasis (an Irish singer would never say "O Una," for example, but would elide the sounds to a long "Una," stressing the *n*, not the vowels), but in general structure it conveys some of the beauty of a folk rendition. At any rate, the music does not concern us here. Several versions are available in print; Hardebeck's is in his *Gems of Melody, Part Two* (Dublin: Pigott, n.d.). It is still known from tradition by Irish people in New York City, and the printed versions are very popular with Irish-American concert singers.

The story behind the song is one of the folk tales of Ireland, the following version of it being what I recall from childhood in County Wicklow. It tells a tragedy of misunderstanding and love, the story of a man's pride and stubbornness and a maid's loyalty and longing. It dates from the time of the Cromwellian confiscations and, as I heard it, was localized in Connaught. The belief is that both words and music were composed by Tomas Costello, the son

of a family dispossessed of land by Cromwell.²

Tomas Costello is known in the Connaught folk tales as Tomas Laidir (Tomas the Strong), because of his great strength and prowess. He was, among other things, a poet and bard. He fell in love with Una, the daughter of MacDermott, a proud and ambitious man. Una loved Tomas in return, and their courtship progressed until MacDermott realized that Una was set upon marrying the penniless Tomas. Having other plans for her, he forbade her to see him. Then he set about arranging a marriage for Una with a rich and powerful neighbor.

In his foolishness he thought he had everything his own way, so he set out a great feast at which he intended to announce the match. The whole countryside was invited, including of course Tomas Laidir. Food, drink, and merriment galore — the house rang with laughter. Then MacDermott called upon Una to present a toast to the man she liked best in the company. This was Una's cue to drink to the wealthy suitor, but she was not her father's daughter for nothing. She stood up and presented the toast to the love of her heart, Tomas Laidir. The father struck her in rage. Silence filled the hall. Una tried to cover up the tears that were filling her eyes from the hurt of the blow, by taking a pinch of strong snuff and pretending that was what had caused her to weep. Tomas, bound by the rules of hospitality, could do nothing. He left the place.

MacDermott confined Una to the house and would allow no communication between Tomas and herself. This had its effect on Una — she fell into a decline and began to waste away. A great weakness possessed her, and she took to her bed. At this, remorse came on her father, and in an attempt to make amends he sent for Tomas to visit her. Tomas delayed not in his coming but went straight to Una's bedside. He took her little hand in his and began to tell her of his great love for her. Una was so overjoyed at seeing him that she could not say a word but fainted with the very joy of the meeting. Soon she was in a deep and peaceful sleep, the first in

many a long day, while Tomas stood beside her holding her hand. He continued to speak to her, but she did not answer. Finally he became silent and waited for her to say something or even to open her eyes, but she remained still in a deep sleep. Tomas thought that perhaps she did not wish to speak to him, so he released her hand and went from the room.

On his way through the house he met no servant or any person, and thinking that he had been made a fool of, he called to a companion who had accompanied him to bring the horses. They rode slowly away, Tomas casting many a glance behind in the hope that someone would call him. His companion began to make fun of his slowness and suggested that perhaps he had been led into a trap. This influenced Tomas, and he resolved that if no call came for him before he crossed the ford of Donogue, he would never again return to the MacDermott house. Slowly and slowly the road crawled back behind him, and nearer and nearer the ford approached. At last he was there and went to cross it, but midway he paused as if yet to turn back. His companion chided him with his tardiness and lack of resolution, and with a final glance back Tomas crossed the ford.

When Una awakened from her sleep, she found Tomas gone. She called for him, but he was nowhere in the house. Realizing what had happened, she sent a servant to overtake him and bring him back, but she had slept a long time and Tomas had travelled far. In all haste the servant set out, and came upon Tomas and his companion shortly after they had crossed the ford of Donogue. The servant delivered his message. Sorrow and rage came upon Tomas. He reproached himself for the vow he had made and reproached his companion for having hurried him. Words passed between him and his companion until Tomas struck him and killed him with a blow. Then without a backward glance, he rode his lonely way, refusing to return.

When the messenger returned without Tomas Laidir, great

woe came on Una. She did not remain long to suffer it. Death claimed her, and grief was on the countryside at her passing. Her body was taken out to an island in Lough Kay and she was buried there. Tomas did not attend her wake, and true to his foolish vow did not go near the MacDermott home. But on the night of the day on which she was buried, he came to the margin of the lake and swam across to the island. He spent the night in anguish and lamentation beside her grave, asking the silent clay for forgiveness and for one sign of her love from the world beyond. As the dawn came he felt the earth lifting under him. A hand slapped his cheek, and a voice said to him, "Come here no more!" Tomas arose and left the place. He never again went there but carried his sorrow with him to his grave. And though his deeds after Una's death are as great as those that went before, he is remembered through his love and sorrow in the song to Una which he composed.³

O Una Waun, thou blossom so wondrous fair,
 Why didst't thou heed the evil counsel?
 See, beloved, I wait at the ford of Donogue,
 Come forth, O Una, and be thou mine forever.

O Una Waun, thou rose in garden rare,
 O thou fair flow'r, the queen of all maidens thou.
 O glory of music, thou soul of poesy and song divine,
 'Tis my sorrow that no longer thy voice I may hear.

O Una Waun, 'tis thou my ruin hast wrought,
 O Una, 'tis thou me nigh thy soul's deep despair hast brought.
 O Una, my undoing till death, thou hast me enthralled,
 O forever my heart shall love thee.

Farewell, Una Waun.

¹ *Ban* is pronounced "wan." It may be translated as "white," "pale," "fair," "wasted," or "beloved."

² An analysis of the facts behind the story of Una is to be found in Marcus Mac Eneary, "Una Bahn," *Eigse: A Journal of Irish Studies*, IV, Part II (1943), 133-146. He concludes that the story actually took place in County Roscommon, despite the Connaught tradition; that Una was the daughter of a Cromwellian soldier and only remotely connected with the MacDermotts; that her sisters opposed her marriage; that she died of tuberculosis and was not buried on an island in Loch Kay.

³ The oldest known version of the song has 44 quatrains (in the MS of Brian O'Ferraghail, circa 1772-1778, in the Royal Irish Academy collection). #