

Yeats William Butler

# The King's Threshold; and On Baile's Strand



**William Yeats**  
**The King's Threshold;**  
**and On Baile's Strand**

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*The King's Threshold; and On Baile's Strand:*

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# **William Butler Yeats**

## **The King's Threshold; and On Baile's Strand**

### **NOTE**

Both these plays have been written for Mr. Fay's "Irish National Theatre." "The King's Threshold" was played in October, 1903, and "On Baile's Strand" will be played in February or March, 1904. Both are founded on Old Irish Prose Romances, but I have borrowed some ideas for the arrangement of my subject in "The King's Threshold" from "Sancan the Bard," a play published by Mr. Edwin Ellis some ten years ago.

*W. B. Y.*

# THE KING'S THRESHOLD

## LIST OF CHARACTERS

King Guaire.		
The Chamberlain of King Guaire.		
A Soldier.		
A Monk.		
The Mayor of Kinvara.		
A Cripple.		
Another Cripple.		
Aileen,	}	Ladies of the Court.
Essa,		
Princess Buan.		
Princess Finnua, her Sister.		
Fedelm, Seanchan's Sweetheart.		
Cian,	}	Servants of Seanchan.
Brian,		
Senias,	}	Pupils of Seanchan.
Arias,		
Seanchan (pronounced Shanahan), Chief Poet of Ireland.		
Pupils, Courtiers.		

# A PROLOGUE.<sup>1</sup>

*An Old Man with a red dressing-gown, red slippers and red nightcap, holding a brass candlestick with a guttering candle in it, comes on from side of stage and goes in front of the dull green curtain.*

*Old Man.*

I've got to speak the prologue. [*He shuffles on a few steps.*] My nephew, who is one of the play actors, came to me, and I in my bed, and my prayers said, and the candle put out, and he told me there were so many characters in this new play, that all the company were in it, whether they had been long or short at the business, and that there wasn't one left to speak the prologue. Wait a bit, there's a draught here. [*He pulls the curtain closer together.*] That's better. And that's why I'm here, and maybe I'm a fool for my pains.

And my nephew said, there are a good many plays to be played for you, some to-night and some on other nights through the winter, and the most of them are simple enough, and tell out their story to the end. But as to the big play you are to see to-night, my nephew taught me to say what the poet had taught him to say about it. [*Puts down candlestick and puts right finger on left thumb.*] First, he who told the story of Seanchan on King Guaire's

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<sup>1</sup> Written for the first production of "The King's Threshold" in Dublin, but not used, as, owing to the smallness of the company, nobody could be spared to speak it.

threshold long ago in the old books told it wrongly, for he was a friend of the king, or maybe afraid of the king, and so he put the king in the right. But he that tells the story now, being a poet, has put the poet in the right.

And then [*touches other finger*] I am to say: Some think it would be a finer tale if Seanchan had died at the end of it, and the king had the guilt at his door, for that might have served the poet's cause better in the end. But that is not true, for if he that is in the story but a shadow and an image of poetry had not risen up from the death that threatened him, the ending would not have been true and joyful enough to be put into the voices of players and proclaimed in the mouths of trumpets, and poetry would have been badly served.

[He takes up the candlestick again.

And as to what happened Seanchan after, my nephew told me he didn't know, and the poet didn't know, and it's likely there's nobody that knows. But my nephew thinks he never sat down at the king's table again, after the way he had been treated, but that he went to some quiet green place in the hills with Fedelm, his sweetheart, where the poor people made much of him because he was wise, and where he made songs and poems, and it's likely enough he made some of the old songs and the old poems the poor people on the hillsides are saying and singing to-day.

[A trumpet-blast.

Well, it's time for me to be going. That trumpet means that

the curtain is going to rise, and after a while the stage there will be filled up with great ladies and great gentlemen, and poets, and a king with a crown on him, and all of them as high up in themselves with the pride of their youth and their strength and their fine clothes as if there was no such thing in the world as cold in the shoulders, and speckled shins, and the pains in the bones and the stiffness in the joints that make an old man that has the whole load of the world on him ready for his bed.

[He begins to shuffle away, and then stops.

And it would be better for me, that nephew of mine to be thinking less of his play-acting, and to have remembered to boil down the knap-weed with a bit of three-penny sugar, for me to be wetting my throat with now and again through the night, and drinking a sup to ease the pains in my bones.

[He goes out at side of stage.



# THE KING'S THRESHOLD

*Scene: Steps before the Palace of King Guaire at Gort. A table in front of steps to right with food on it. Seanchan lying on steps to left. Pupils before steps. King on top of steps at centre.*

*King.*

I welcome you that have the mastery  
Of the two kinds of music; the one kind  
Being like a woman, the other like a man;  
Both you that understand stringed instruments,  
And how to mingle words and notes together  
So artfully, that all the art is but speech  
Delighted with its own music; and you that carry  
The long twisted horn and understand  
The heady notes that being without words  
Can hurry beyond time and fate and change;  
For the high angels that drive the horse of time,  
The golden one by day, by night the silver,  
Are not more welcome to one that loves the world  
For some fair woman's sake.

I have called you hither  
To save the life of your great master, Seanchan,  
For all day long it has flamed up or flickered  
To the fast-cooling hearth.

*Senias.*

When did he sicken?

Is it a fever that is wasting him?

*King.*

He did not sicken, but three days ago  
He said he would not eat, and lay down there  
And has not eaten since. Till yesterday  
I thought that hunger and weakness had been enough,  
But finding them too trifling and too light  
To hold his mouth from biting at the grave  
I called you hither, and have called others yet.  
The girl he is to wed at harvest-time,  
That should be of all living the most dear,  
Is coming from the South, and had I known  
Of any other neighbours or good friends  
That might persuade him, I had brought them hither,  
Even though I'd to ransack the world for them.

*Senias.*

What was it put him to this work, High King?

*King.*

You will call it no great matter. Three days ago  
I yielded to the outcry of my courtiers,  
Bishops, soldiers, and makers of the law,  
Who long had thought it against their dignity  
For a mere man of words to sit among them  
At my own table; and when the meal was spread  
I ordered Seanchan to good company,  
But to a lower table; and when he pleaded  
The poet's right, established when the world  
Was first established, I said that I was King  
And made and unmade rights at my own pleasure.

And that it was the men who ruled the world,  
And not the men who sang to it, who should sit  
Where there was the most honour. My courtiers,  
Bishops, soldiers, and makers of the law  
Shouted approval, and amid that noise  
Seanchan went out, and from that hour to this,  
Although there is good food and drink beside him,  
Has eaten nothing. If a man is wronged,  
Or thinks that he is wronged, and will lie down  
Upon another's threshold until he dies,  
The common people for all time to come  
Will raise a heavy cry against that threshold,  
Even though it is the King's. He lies there now  
Perishing; he is calling against my majesty,  
That old custom that has no meaning in it,  
And as he perishes, my name in the world  
Is perishing also. I cannot give way  
Because I am King, because if I give way  
My nobles would call me a weakling, and it may be  
The very throne be shaken; but should you  
That are his friends speak to him and persuade him  
To turn his mouth from the ill-savouring grave  
And eat good food, he shall not lack my favour;  
For I will give plough-land and grazing-land,  
Or all but anything he has set his heart on.  
It is not all because of my good name  
I'd have him live, for I have found him a man  
That might well hit the fancy of a king  
Banished out of his country, or a woman's,

Or any other's that can judge a man  
For what he is. But I that sit a throne,  
And take my measure from the needs of the state,  
Call his wild thought that over-runs the measure,  
Making words more than deeds, and his proud will  
That would unsettle all, most mischievous,  
And he himself a most mischievous man.

*Senias.*

King, whether you did right or wrong in this  
Let the King say, for all that I need say  
Is that there's nothing that cries out for death  
In the withholding of that ancient right,  
And that I will persuade him. Your own words  
Had been enough persuasion were it not  
That he is lost in dreams that hunger makes,  
And therefore heedless, or lost in heedless sleep.

*King.*

I leave him to your love, that it may promise  
Plough-lands and grass-lands, jewels and silken wear,  
Or anything but that old right of the poets.

*[He goes out. The Pupils, who have been standing perfectly quiet, all turn towards Seanchan, and move a step nearer.]*

*Senias.*

The King did wrong to abrogate our right,  
But Seanchan, who talks of dying for it,

Talks foolishly. Look at us, Seanchan,  
Waken out of your dream and look at us,  
Who have ridden under the moon and all the day,  
Until the moon has all but come again,  
That we might be beside you.

*[Seanchan turns half round leaning on his elbow, and speaks as if in a dream.]*

*Seanchan.*

I was but now  
At Almhuin, in a great high-raftered house,  
With Finn and Osgar. Odours of roast flesh  
Rose round me and I saw the roasting spits,  
And then the dream was broken, and I saw  
Grania dividing salmon by a pool,  
And then I was awakened by your voice.

*Senias.*

It is your hunger that makes you dream of flesh  
Roasting, and for your hunger I could weep;  
And yet the hunger of the crane that starves  
Because the moonlight glittering on the pool  
And flinging a pale shadow has made it shy,  
Seems to me little more fantastical  
Than this that's blown into so great a trouble.

*Seanchan.*

*[Who has turned away again.]*

There is much truth in that, for all things change

At times, as if the moonlight altered them,  
And my mind alters as if it were the crane's;  
For when the heavy body has grown weak  
There's nothing that can tether the wild mind  
That being moonstruck and fantastical  
Goes where it fancies. I had even thought  
I knew your voice and face, but now the words  
Are so unlikely that I needs must ask  
Who is it that bids me put my hunger by?

*Senias.*

I am your oldest pupil, Seanchan;  
The one that has been with you many years,  
So many that you said at Candlemas  
That I had almost done with school, and knew  
All but all that poets understand.

*Seanchan.*

My oldest pupil. No, that cannot be;  
For it is someone of the courtly crowds  
That have been round about me from sunrise  
And I am tricked by dreams, but I'll refute them.  
I asked the pupil that I loved the best,  
At Candlemas, why poetry is honoured,  
Wishing to know how he'd defend our craft  
In distant lands among strange churlish Kings.  
And he'd an answer.

*Senias.*

I said the poets hung  
Images of the life that was in Eden  
About the childbed of the world, that it,

Looking upon those images, might bear  
Triumphant children; but why must I stand here  
Repeating an old lesson while you starve?

*Seanchan.*

Tell on, for I begin to know the voice;  
What evil thing will come upon the world  
If the arts perish?

*Senias.*

If the arts should perish  
The world that lacked them would be like a woman  
That looking on the cloven lips of a hare  
Brings forth a hare-lipped child.

*Seanchan.*

But that's not all.  
For when I asked you how a man should guard  
Those images you had an answer also,  
If you're the man that you have claimed to be,  
Comparing them to venerable things  
God gave to men before he gave them wheat.

*Senias.*

I answered, and the word was half your own,  
That he should guard them, as the men of Dea  
Guard their four treasures, as the Grail King guards  
His holy cup, or the pale righteous horse  
The jewel that is underneath his horn,  
Pouring out life for it, as one pours out  
Sweet heady wine – but now I understand  
You would refute me out of my own mouth;  
And yet a place at table near the King

Is nothing of great moment, Seanchan.  
How does so light a thing touch poetry?

*[Seanchan is now sitting up. He still looks dreamily in front of him.]*

*Seanchan.*

At Candlemas you called this poetry  
One of the fragile mighty things of God  
That die at an insult.

*Senias.*

*[To other Pupils.]* Give me some true answer.  
For on that day we spoke about the court  
And said that all that was insulted there  
The world insulted, for the courtly life,  
Being the first comely child of the world,  
Is the world's model. How shall I answer him?  
Can you not give me some true argument?  
I will not tempt him with a lying one.

*Arias.*

*[Throwing himself at Seanchan's feet.]*  
Why did you take me from my father's fields?  
If you would leave me now, what shall I love?  
Where shall I go, what shall I set my hand to?  
And why have you put music in my ears  
If you would send me to the clattering houses?  
I will throw down the trumpet and the harp,  
For how could I sing verses or make music



With none to praise me and a broken heart?

*Seanchan.*

What was it that the poets promised you

If it was not their sorrow? Do not speak.

Have I not opened school on these bare steps,

And are not you the youngest of my scholars?

And I would have all know that when all falls

In ruin, poetry calls out in joy,

Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,

The victim's joy among the holy flame,

God's laughter at the shattering of the world,

And now that joy laughs out and weeps and burns

On these bare steps.

*Arias.*

O Master, do not die.

*[Three men come in. Cian and Brian, old men carrying basket with food, and Mayor of Kinvara. They stand at the side listening.]*

*Senias.*

Trouble him with no useless argument.

Be silent; there is nothing we can do

Except find out the King and kneel to him

And beg our ancient right. These three have come

To say whatever we could say and more,

And fare as badly. Come, boy, that's no use;

*[He lifts the Boy up.]*

If it seem well that we beseech the King,  
Lay down your harps and trumpets on the stones  
In silence and come with me silently.  
Come with slow footfalls and bow all your heads,  
For a bowed head becomes a mourner best.

[They lay the harps and trumpets down one by one and  
then go out very solemnly and slowly, following one another.]

*Cian.*

Let's show the food that's in the basket.

*Mayor.*

*[Who carries an Ogham stick.]* No,  
I must get through my speech or I'll forget it;  
Besides, there is no reason why he'd eat  
Till he has heard my reasons.

*Cian.*

It were better  
To show what we have brought him in the basket,  
For we have nothing that he has not liked  
From boyhood.

*Brian.*

For we have not brought kings' food  
That's cooked for everybody and nobody.

*Mayor.*

You are not showing right respect to me,

Or to the people of Kinvara, when you wish  
That something else should come before my message.  
*Seanchan.*

What brings you here? I never sent for you.  
*Cian.*

He must be famishing, he looks so pale.  
We had better get the food out first. I tell you,  
That we have brought the things he likes the best.  
*Mayor.*

No, no; I lost a word at every cross road  
And maybe if I do not speak it now  
I'll have forgot it.  
*Cian.*

Well, out with it quickly.  
*Seanchan.*

Why, what's this foolery?  
*Mayor.*

No foolery;  
A message from the richest, best born townsman  
Of your own town, and from your aged father.  
*Cian.*

Run through it while I am getting out the food.  
*Mayor.*

How was I to begin? What was the word  
That was to keep it in my memory?  
Wait, I have notched it on this Ogham stick.  
"Chief poet," "Ireland," "Townsmen"; that is it.  
Chief poet of Ireland, when we heard that trouble  
Had come between you and the King of Ireland

It plunged us in deep sorrow, part for you,  
Our honoured townsman, part for our good town.  
The King was said to be most friendly to us,  
And we had reasons, as you'll recollect,  
For thinking that he was about to give  
Those grazing lands inland we so much need,  
Being pinched between the water and the rocks.  
But now his friendliness being ill repaid  
Will be turned from us and our town get nothing.  
But there was something else – I'll find the word  
That was to keep it in my memory.  
“Pride” – that's the word, – we would not have you think,  
Weighty as these considerations are,  
That they have been as weighty in our minds  
As our desire that one we take much pride in,  
A man who has been an honour to our town,  
Should live and prosper, therefore we beseech you  
To give way in a matter of no moment,  
A matter of mere sentiment, a trifle,  
That we may always keep our pride in you.

*Seanchan.*

Their pride, their pride, what do they know of pride?  
My pupils do not know it, for they beg  
From the King's favour what is theirs by right,  
And how can men, that God has made so weak  
They need a rich man's favour every day,  
Know anything of pride?

*Cian.*

[*To Mayor.*] You have spoken it wrongly.

You have forgotten something out of it about the cattle dying.  
*Mayor.*

Maybe you do not know, being much away,  
How many of our cattle died last winter  
From lacking grass, and that there was much sickness  
Because the poor had nothing but salt fish  
To live upon. The people all came out  
And stood about the doors as I went by.

*Seanchan.*

What would you have of me?  
For there are men that shall be born at last  
And find sweet nurture that they may have voices  
Even in anger like the strings of harps.  
Yet how could they be born to majesty  
If I had never made the golden cradle?

*Mayor.*

What is it? “Father” – “Mother”; that is it;  
Your father sends this message.

*Cian.*

He is listening.

*Mayor.*

He says that he is old and that he needs you,  
And that the people will be pointing at him  
And he not able to lift up his head  
If you should turn the King’s favour away.  
And he adds to it, that he cared you well,  
And you in your young age, and that it’s right  
That you should care him now.

*Cian.*

And when he spoke  
He cried because the stiffness of his bones  
Prevented him from coming.

*Mayor.*

But your mother  
Has sent no message, for when they had told her  
The way it is between you and the King  
She said, "No message can do any good,  
He will not send the answer that you want;  
We cannot change him," and she went indoors,  
Lay down upon her bed and turned her face  
Out of the light. And thereupon your father  
Said, "Tell him how she is, and that she sends  
No message." I have nothing more to say.  
Cian and Brian, you can set out the food.

*[He sits down on steps. Seanchan is silent.]*

*Mayor.*

I have a horse waiting outside the town  
To bring me home, and all the neighbours wait  
Your answer. What answer am I to bring?

*Seanchan.*

Give them my answer – no, I have no answer:  
My mother knew it.

*Mayor.*

Maybe you have forgotten  
That all our fields are so heaped up with stones

That the goats famish, and the mowers mow  
With knives, and that the King half promised us —  
*Seanchan.*

Thrust that old cloak of yours into your mouth  
Till it's done gabbling.

*Mayor.*

But —

*Cian.*

You have said enough;

I knew that you would never speak it right.

*Seanchan.*

Our mothers know us, they know us to the bone,  
They knew us before birth, and that is why  
They know us even better than the sweethearts  
Upon whose breasts we have lain.

*Brian.*

We have brought your honour  
The food that you have always liked the best,  
Young pigeons from Kinvara, and watercress  
Out of the stream that's by the blessed well,  
And dulse from Duras. Here is the dulse, your honour,  
It is wholesome, and has the good taste of the sea.

*Seanchan.*

O Brian, you would spread the table for me  
As you would spread it when I was in my childhood;  
But all that's finished.

*Mayor.*

I knew he would not care  
For country things now that he's grown accustomed

To the King's dishes. I told Brian too  
He'd have his pains for nothing. But he's old.

*[Goes over to table at right. While he is speaking Cian and Brian are in vain offering Seanchan food.]*

And what dishes! Venison from Slieve Echtge  
Fattened with poor men's crops; flesh of wild pig;  
Not fat nor lean, but streaky and right well cured;  
Bread that's the whitest that I've ever seen.

*Cian.*

You're in the right, you're in the right, he will not eat.

*[Pouring wine into cup.]*

*Mayor.*

Bring him some wine, it will give him strength to eat.

*[Brian brings wine over towards Seanchan.]*

No wonder if the King is proud and merry,  
And keeps all day in the saddle, when even I



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