



TITLE: Deirdre of the Sorrows

ARTIST: Deirdre Abbotts

AUTHOR: Deirdre Abbotts' Adaptation of an Ancient Celtic Legend. Also includes Deirdre's Lament from the 11th Century

TECHNIQUES: Hand-painted portrait and fabric, thread painting and free-motion machine quilting

DIMENSIONS: 34" wide x 39" high

Deirdre Abbotts

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One of the most well-known tragic Irish legends is the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows.

Deirdre of the Sorrows...

On the day of Deirdre's birth the High King of Ulster, Conchobar mac Nessa was at a feast. During the meal a scream was heard, it was so loud that all of the knights rose to their feet with weapons ready. The source of the sound was the Unborn Child.

Cathbad the druid, stood with arms raised to interpret the omen. He walked into the night and observed the clouds, moon and stars, his vision became clear and he rejoined the others in the Great Hall. Cathbad in a trance said, "This child is like no other. She shall have golden hair and green eyes and be the most beautiful woman ever born." Immediately the guest began to raise their voices in excited cheers.

Cathbad continued, never leaving his trance, "Her name will be Deirdre. But from her great beauty will rise a sword strong enough to split apart the Tree of Ulster."

Cheers were replaced with cries for the death of this unborn child. Shouts of, "Kill the child" were repeated until the king raised his voice with his decree.

Conchobar said, "This unborn child, is the child of my harper and friend, Feidlimid and his wife Elva. It is not right for me to bring pain upon the lives of any of my people, especially a true friend like Feidlimid. I believe the prophecies of Cathbad are true, but I will never sacrifice this innocent child. I will take Deirdre as my ward and raise her in a secluded estate, when she is of age I will marry her and make her my wife. She can cause no rivalry among the people of Ulster so the prophecy will be defeated. This is my word."

As he finished speaking, a cry came from the women's quarters letting everyone know that the beautiful child was born to Elva. The rest of the evening was spent in celebration.

Before Deirdre was a year and a day old she was brought to a small house on a hilltop. Three people would live here with her, foster parents and Levorcham who was a trusted member of the King's court. Levorcham was a storyteller and healer; and she and Deirdre were like mother and daughter.

As Deirdre grew she was free to wander in the meadows and hillsides inside the walled confinement. Deirdre's skills with herbs and flowers grew, as did her beauty. Another skill Deirdre possessed was the gift of premonition.

The summer of her 15th year was to be when she would wed King Conchobar. When Deirdre heard this she was melancholy and filled with hopelessness. She stopped enjoying the change of seasons. During the winter before her wedding she suddenly stopped short in her tracks and stared at the white snow, stained red with blood and colored black with feathers from a fallen Raven. She went into a trance with visions of a young man with white skin, black hair and blood red lips. Deirdre told her nurse that a man fitting this description would be the man she married. Levorcham said, "This description is used to describe a young champion, whose name is Naoise. He and his 2 brothers are knights of the king, and they will be your protectors when you marry the king."

Deirdre replied, "I will not marry the King - Naoise is the man I love!" She continued to implore her friend, "If you love me you will bring Naoise here to take me away. Tell them to come here to hunt and I will find a way to join my true love." Levorcham was torn between her love of the girl and her loyalty to the King. Love won and she arranged a secret meeting. When Deirdre saw them approaching - she rushed to hug her friend goodbye and ran off with the 3 young men.

The 3 brothers and Deirdre fled to Scotland and found themselves filled with joy and happiness, this continued for 7 years.

King Conchobar hosted a great feast - he sent a message to Naoise and his brothers telling them that all was forgiven and that they should return to Ireland. Deirdre dreamt of the king's plot to trick her husband and brothers into returning, so he could kill them. She begged them not to accept his offer but they were proud men and sincerely wanted to once again be members of the Kings Court. They sailed home under a blood red cloud, another premonition of their doom.

Through a series of events filled with treachery, Naoise and his brothers were murdered by Eoghan the warrior who killed the 3 brothers. (See Note)

One year after their death, during which time Conchobar could not make Deirdre love him, Conchobar said to her, "Who do you hate most?" She answered, "I hate you and Eoghan the most."

The king responded that for one year she would live with Eoghan and then for the next she would live with him. Deirdre was distraught and sang her lament while she was put onto a chariot to be taken to Eoghan. Not able to endure life without Naoise, Deirdre leaned from the chariot and smashed her head into the rocks.

Her body was placed in a grave near where the 3 brothers were buried. From both graves grew a yew tree whose branches and limbs intertwined for eternity. Conchobar was warned by the Druid to leave the trees and the dead alone or great misfortune would befall him.

Thus ends the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows, a classic Irish folktale.

(Note: there is an alternate ending where Deirdre overcome with grief leaps into their grave and immediately dies in the arms of her lover.)

Deirdre's Lament for the Sons of Usnagh

Author unknown from 11th century

The lions of the hill are gone,
And I am left alone - alone
Dig the grave both wide and deep
For I am sick, and fain would sleep!

The falcons of the wood are flown,
And I am left alone - alone -
Dig the grave both deep and wide,
And let us slumber side by side.

The dragons of the rock are sleeping,
Sleep that wakes not for our weeping:
Dig the grave, and make it ready;
Lay me on my true-love's body.

Lay their spears and bucklers bright
By the warrior 's sides aright;
Many a day the three before me
On their linked bucklers bore me.

Lay upon the low grave floor,
'Neath each head, the blue claymore ;
Many a time the noble three
Reddened these blue blades for me.

Lay the collars, as is meet,
Of their greyhounds at their feet;
Many a time for me have they
Brought the tall red deer to bay.

In the falcon's jesses throw
Hook and arrow, line and bow;
Never again by stream or plain
Shall the gentle woodsmen go.

Sweet companions ye were ever
Harsh to me, your sister, never;
Woods and wilds and misty valleys
Were, with you, as good's a palace.

Oh! to hear my true love singing,
Sweet as sound of trumpets ringing:
Like the sway of ocean swelling
Rolled his deep voice round our dwelling

Oh! to hear the echoes pealing
Round our green and fairy sheeling,
When the three, with soaring chorus,
Passed the silent skylark o'er us.

Echo, now sleep, morn and even
Lark, alone enchant the heaven!
Arden 's lips are scant of breath,
Neesa's tongue is cold in death.

Stag, exult on glen and mountain
Salmon, leap from loch to fountain
Heron, in the free air warm ye
Usnagh's sons no more will harm ye!

Rulers of the ridge of war;
Never more 'twill be your fate
To keep the beam of battle straight.

Woe is me! by fraud and wrong -
Traitors false and tyrants strong -
Fell Clan Usnagh, bought and sold,
For Barach's feast and Conor's gold!

Woe to Eman, roof and wall!
Woe to Red Branch, hearth and hall!
Tenfold woe and black dishonor
To the foul and false Clan Conor!

Dig the grave both wide and deep,
Sick I am, and fain would sleep!
Dig the grave and make it ready,
Lay me on my true love's body!



Erin's stay no more you are,