

Birth of Fin MacCumhail. [1]

Myths and folk-lore of Ireland

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CUMHAL MACART was a great champion in the west of Erin, and it was prophesied of him that if ever he married he would meet death in the next battle he fought.

For this reason he had no wife, and knew no woman for a long time ; till one day he saw the king's daughter, who was so beautiful that he forgot all fear and married her in secret.

Next day after the marriage, news came that a battle had to be fought.

Now a Druid had told the king that his daughter's son would take the kingdom from him ; so he made up his mind to look after the daughter, and not let any man come near her.

Before he went to the battle, Cumhal told his mother everything,—told her of his relations with the king's daughter.

He said, " I shall be killed in battle to-day, according to the prophecy of the Druid, and I'm afraid if his daughter has a son the king will kill the child, for the prophecy is that he will lose the kingdom by the son of his own daughter. Now, if the king's daughter has a son do you hide and rear him, if you can ; you will be his only hope and stay." Cumhal was killed in the battle, and within that year the king's daughter had a son.

By command of his grandfather, the boy was thrown out of the castle window into a loch, to be drowned, on the day of his birth.

The boy sank from sight ; but after remaining a while under the water, he rose again to the surface, and came to land holding a live salmon in his hand.

The grandmother of the boy, Cumhal's mother, stood watching on the shore, and said to herself as she saw this : " He is my grandson, the true son of my own child," and seizing the boy, she rushed away with him, and vanished, before the king's people could stop her.

When the king heard that the old woman had escaped with his daughter's son, he fell into a terrible rage, and ordered all the male children born that day in the kingdom to be put to death, hoping in this way to kill his own grandson, and save the crown for himself.

After she had disappeared from the bank of the loch, the old woman, Cumhal's mother, made her way to a thick forest, where she spent that night as best she could. Next day she came to a great oak tree. Then she hired a man to cut out a chamber in the tree.

When all was finished, and there was a nice room in the oak for herself and her grandson, and a whelp of the same age as the boy, and which she had brought with her from the castle, she said to the man : " Give me the axe which you have in your hand, there is something here that I want to fix."

The man gave the axe into her hand, and that minute she swept the head off him, saying : " You'll never tell any man about this place now."

One day the whelp ate some of the fine chippings (*bran*) left cut by the carpenter from the inside of the tree. The old woman said : “ You’ll be called Bran from this out.”

All three lived in the tree together, and the old woman did not take her grandson out till the end of five years ; and then he couldn’t walk, he had been sitting so long inside.

When the old grandmother had taught the boy to walk, she brought him one day to the brow of a hill from which there was a long slope. She took a switch and said : “ Now, run down this place. I will follow and strike you with this switch, and coming up I will run ahead, and you strike me as often as you can.”

The first time they ran down, his grandmother struck him many times. In coming up the first time, he did not strike her at all. Every time they ran down she struck him less, and every time they ran up he struck her more.

They ran up and down for three days ; and at the end of that time she could not strike him once, and he struck her at every step she took. He had now become a great runner.

When he was fifteen years of age, the old woman went with him to a hurling match between the forces of his grandfather and those of a neighboring king. Both sides were equal in skill ; and neither was able to win, till the youth opposed his grand-father’s people. Then, he won every game. When the ball was thrown in the air, he struck it coming down, and so again and again,—never letting the ball touch the ground till he had driven it through the barrier.

The old king, who was very angry, and greatly mortified, at the defeat of his people, exclaimed, as he saw the youth, who was very fair and had white hair : “ Who is that *fin cumhil* [2] [white cap] ?”

“ Ah, that is it ; Fin will be his name, and Fin MacCumhail he is,” said the old woman.

The king ordered his people to seize and put the young man to death, on the spot. The old woman hurried to the side of her grandson. They slipped from the crowd and away they went, a hill at a leap, a glen at a step, and thirty-two miles at a running-leap. They ran a long distance, till Fin grew tired ; then the old grandmother took him on her back, putting his feet into two pockets which were in her dress, one on each side, and ran on with the same swiftness as before, a hill at a leap, a glen at a step, and thirty-two miles at a running-leap.

After a time, the old woman felt the approach of pursuit, and said to Fin : “ Look behind, and tell me what you see.”

“ I see,” said he, “ a white horse with a champion on his back.”

“ Oh, no fear,” said she ; “ a white horse has no endurance ; he can never catch us, we are safe from him.” And on they sped. A second time she felt the approach of pursuit, and again she said : “ Look back, and see who is coming.”

Fin looked back, and said : “ I see a warrior riding on a brown horse.”

“ Never fear,” said the old woman ; “ there is never a brown horse but is giddy, he cannot overtake us.” She rushed on as before. A third time she said : “ Look around, and see who is coming now.”

Fin looked, and said : “ I see a black warrior on a black horse, following fast.”

“ There is no horse so tough as a black horse,” said the grandmother. “ There is no escape from this one. My grandson, one or both of us must die. I am old, my time has nearly come. I will die, and you and Bran save yourselves. (Bran had been with them all the time.) Right here ahead is a deep bog ; you jump off my back, and escape as best you can. I’ll jump into the bog up to my neck ; and when the king’s men come, I’ll say that you are in the bog before me, sunk out of sight, and I’m trying to find you. As my hair and yours are the same color, they will think my head good enough to carry back. They will cut it off, and take it in place of yours, and show it to the king ; that will satisfy his anger.”

Fin slipped down, took farewell of his grand-mother, and hurried on with Bran. The old woman came to the bog, jumped in, and sank to her neck. The king’s men were soon at the edge of the bog, and the black rider called out to the old woman : “ Where is Fin ?”

“ He is here in the bog before me, and I’m trying can I find him.”

As the horsemen could not find Fin, and thought the old woman’s head would do to carry back, they cut it off, and took it with them, saying : “ This will satisfy the king.”

Fin and Bran went on till they came to a great cave, in which they found a herd of goats. At the further end of the cave was a smouldering fire. The two lay down to rest.

A couple of hours later, in came a giant with a salmon in his hand. This giant was of awful height, he had but one eye, and that in the middle of his forehead, as large as the sun in heaven.

When he saw Fin, he called out : “ Here, take this salmon and roast it ; but be careful, for if you raise a single blister on it I’ll cut the head off you. I’ve followed this salmon for three days and three nights without stopping, and I never let it out of my sight, for it is the most wonderful salmon in the world.”

The giant lay down to sleep in the middle of the cave. Fin spitted the salmon, and held it over the fire.

The minute the giant closed the one eye in his head, he began to snore. Every time he drew breath into his body, he dragged Fin, the spit, the salmon, Bran, and all the goats to his mouth ; and every time he drove a breath out of himself, he threw them back to the places they were in before. Fin was drawn time after time to the mouth of the giant with such force, that he was in dread of going down his throat.

When partly cooked, a blister rose on the salmon. Fin pressed the place with his thumb, to know could he break the blister, and hide from the giant the harm that was done. But he burned his thumb, and, to ease the pain, put it between his teeth, and gnawed the skin to the flesh, the flesh to the bone, the bone to the marrow ; and when he had tasted the marrow, he received the knowledge of all things. Next moment, he was drawn by the breath of the giant right up to his face, and, knowing from his thumb what to do, he plunged the Hot spit into the sleeping eye of the giant and destroyed it.

That instant the giant with a single bound was at the low entrance of the cave, and, standing with his back to the wall and a foot on each side of the opening, roared out : “ You’ll not leave this place alive.”

Now Fin killed the largest goat, skinned him as quickly as he could, then putting the skin on himself he drove the herd to where the giant stood ; the goats passed out one by one be-

tween his legs. When the great goat came the giant took him by the horns. Fin slipped from the skin, and ran out.

“ Oh, you’ve escaped,” said the giant, “ but before we part let me make you a present.”

“ I’m afraid to go near you,” said Fin ; “ if you wish to give me a present, put it out this way, and then go back.”

The giant placed a ring on the ground, then went back. Fin took up the ring and put it on the end of his little finger above the first joint. It clung so firmly that no man in the world could have taken it off.

The giant then called out, “ Where are you ?”

“ On Fin’s finger,” cried the ring. That instant the giant sprang at Fin and almost came down on his head, thinking in this way to crush him to bits. Fin sprang to a distance. Again the giant asked, “ Where are you ?”

“ On Fin’s finger,” answered the ring.

Again the giant made a leap, coming down just in front of Fin. Many times he called and many times almost caught Fin, who could not escape with the ring on his finger. While in this terrible struggle, not knowing how to escape, Bran ran up and asked :

“ Why don’t you chew your thumb ?”

Fin bit his thumb to the marrow, and then knew what to do. He took the knife with which he had skinned the goat, cut off his finger at the first joint, and threw it, with the ring still on, into a deep bog near by.

Again the giant called out, “ Where are you ?” and the ring answered, “ On Fin’s finger.”

Straightway the giant sprang towards the voice, sank to his shoulders in the bog, and stayed there.

Fin with Bran now went on his way, and travelled till he reached a deep and thick wood, where a thousand horses were drawing timber, and men felling and preparing it.

“ What is this ?” asked Fin of the overseer of the workmen.

“ Oh, we are building a dun (a castle) for the king ; we build one everyday, and every night it is burned to the ground. Our king has an only daughter ; he will give her to any man who will save the dun, and he’ll leave him the kingdom at his death. If any man undertakes to save the dun and fails, his life must pay for it ; the king will cut his head off. The best champions in Erin have tried and failed ; they are now in the king’s dungeons, a whole army of them, waiting the king’s pleasure. He’s going to cut the heads off them all in one day.”

“ Why don’t you chew your thumb ?” asked Bran.

Fin chewed his thumb to the marrow, and then knew that on the eastern side of the world there lived an old hag with her three sons, and every evening at nightfall she sent the youngest of these to burn the king’s dun.

“ I will save the king’s dun,” said Fin.

“ Well,” said the overseer, “ better men than you have tried and lost their lives.”

“ Oh,” said Fin, “ I’m not afraid ; I’ll try for the sake of the king’s daughter.”

Now Fin, followed by Bran, went with the overseer to the king. “ I hear you will give your daughter to the man who saves your dun,” said Fin.

“ I will,” said the king ; “ but if he fails I must have his head.”

“ Well,” said Fin, “ I’ll risk my head for the sake of your daughter. If I fail I’m satisfied.” The king gave Fin food and drink ; he supped, and after supper went to the dun.

“ Why don’t you chew your thumb ?” said Bran ; “ then you’ll know what to do.” He did. Then Bran took her place on the roof, waiting for the old woman’s son. Now the old woman in the east told her youngest son to hurry on with his torches, burn the dun, and come back without delay ; for the stirabout was boiling and he must not be too late for supper.

He took the torches, and shot off through the air with a wonderful speed. Soon he was in sight of the king’s dun, threw the torches upon the thatched roof to set it on fire as usual.

That moment Bran gave the torches such a push with her shoulders, that they fell into the stream which ran around the dun, and were put out. “ Who is this,” cried the youngest son of the old hag, “ who has dared to put out my lights, and interfere with my hereditary right ?”

“ I,” said Fin, who stood in front of him. Then began a terrible battle between Fin and the old woman’s son. Bran came down from the dun to help Fin ; she bit and tore his enemy’s back, stripping the skin and flesh from his head to his heels.

After a terrible struggle such as had not been in the world before that night, Fin cut the head off his enemy. But for Bran, Fin could never have conquered.

The time for the return of her son had passed ; supper was ready. The old woman, impatient and angry, said to the second son : “ You take torches and hurry on, see why your brother loiters. I’ll pay him for this when he comes home ! But be careful and don’t do like him, or you’ll have your pay too. Hurry back, for the stirabout is boiling and ready for supper.”

He started off, was met and killed exactly as his brother, except that he was stronger and the battle fiercer. But for Bran, Fin would have lost his life that night.

The old woman was raging at the delay, and said to her eldest son, who had not been out of the house for years : (It was only in case of the greatest need that she sent him. He had a cat’s head, and was called Pus an Chuine, “ Puss of the Corner ;” he was the eldest and strongest of all the brothers.) “ Now take torches, go and see what delays your brothers ; I’ll pay them for this when they come home.”

The eldest brother shot off through the air, came to the king’s dun, and threw his torches upon the roof. They had just singed the straw a little, when Bran pushed them off with such force that they fell into the stream and were quenched.

“ Who is this,” screamed Cat-head, “ who dares to interfere with my ancestral right ?”

“ I,” shouted Fin. Then the struggle began fiercer than with the second brother. Bran helped from behind, tearing the flesh from his head to his heels ; but at length Cat-head

fastened his teeth into Fin's breast, biting and gnawing till Fin cut the head off. The body fell to the ground, but the head lived, gnawing as terribly as before. Do what they could it was impossible to kill it. Fin hacked and cut, but could neither kill nor pull it off. When nearly exhausted, Bran said :

“ Why don't you chew your thumb ?”

Fin chewed his thumb, and reaching the marrow knew that the old woman in the east was ready to start with torches to find her sons, and burn the dun herself, and that she had a vial of liquid with which she could bring the sons to life ; and that nothing could free him from Cat-head but the old woman's blood.

After midnight the old hag, enraged at the delay of her sons, started and shot through the air like lightning, more swiftly than her sons. She threw her torches from afar upon the roof of the dun ; but Bran as before hurled them into the stream.

Now the old woman circled around in the air looking for her sons. Fin was getting very weak from pain and loss of blood, for Cat-head was biting at his breast all the time.

Bran called out : “ Rouse yourself, oh, Fin ; use all your power or we are lost ! If the old hag gets a drop from the vial upon the bodies of her sons, they will come to life, and then we're done for.”

Thus roused, Fin with one spring reached the old woman in the air, and swept the bottle from her grasp ; which falling upon the ground was emptied.

The old hag gave a scream which was heard all over the world, came to the ground and closed with Fin. Then followed a battle greater than the world had ever known before that night, or has ever seen since. Water sprang out of gray rocks, cows cast their calves even when they had none, and hard rushes grew soft in the remotest corner of Erin, so desperate was the fighting and so awful, between Fin and the old hag. Fin would have died that night but for Bran.

Just as daylight was coming Fin swept the head off the old woman, caught some of her blood, and rubbed it around Cat-head, who fell off dead.

He rubbed his own wounds with the blood and was cured ; then rubbed some on Bran, who had been singed with the torches, and she was as well as ever. Fin, exhausted with fighting, dropped down and fell asleep.

While he was sleeping the chief steward of the king came to the dun, found it standing safe and sound, and seeing Fin lying there asleep knew that he had saved it. Bran tried to waken Fin, pulled and tugged, but could not rouse him.

The steward went to the king, and said : “ I have saved the dun, and I claim the reward.”

“ It shall be given you,” answered the king; and straightway the steward was recognized as the king's son-in-law, and orders were given to make ready for the wedding.

Bran had listened to what was going on, and when her master woke, exactly at midday, she told him of all that was taking place in the castle of the king.

Fin went to the king, and said : “ I have saved your dun, and I claim the reward.”

“ Oh,” said the king, “ my steward claimed the reward, and it has been given to him.”

“ He had nothing to do with saving the dun ; I saved it,” said Fin.

“ Well,” answered the king, “ he is the first man who told me of its safety and claimed the reward.”

“ Bring him here : let me look at him,” said Fin.

He was sent for, and came. “ Did you save the king’s dun ?” asked Fin. “ I did,” said the steward.

“ You did not, and take that for your lies,” said Fin ; and striking him with the edge of his open hand he swept the head off his body, dashing it against the other side of the room, flattening it like paste on the wall.

“ You are the man,” said the king to Fin, “ who saved the dun ; yours is the reward. All the champions, and there is many a man of them, who have failed to save it are in the dungeons of my fortress ; their heads must be cut off before the wedding takes place.”

“ Will you let me see them ?” asked Fin.

“ I will,” said the king.

Fin went down to the men, and found the first champions of Erin in the dungeons. “ Will you obey me in all things if I save you from death ?” said Fin. “ We will,” said they. Then he went back to the king and asked :

“ Will you give me the lives of these champions of Erin, in place of your daughter’s hand ?”

“ I will,” said the king.

All the champions were liberated, and left the king’s castle that day. Ever after they followed the orders of Fin, and these were the beginning of his forces and the first of the Fenians of Erin.

[1] Cumhail, genitive of Cumhal, after Mac = son ; pronounced Cool.

[2] Cumhal, the name of Fin’s father. Denotes also a cap or head-covering, fin = white. The punning resemblance suggested to the old woman the full name, Fin MacCumhail.

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