

Stories of Exile

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The Swans of Lir.

Gerald Griffin.

AFTER the battle of Tailtlean, the Tuatha Danaans assembled together from the remotest corners of the five provinces of Ireland, in order to make arrangements for the future government of the isle. All agreed that it was better the whole country should be united under one monarch, chosen by common consent, than to continue subject to the interminable dissensions and oppressive imposts, arising from the rivalry of a number of petty sovereigns. Six candidates aspired to this supreme power, namely, Bogh Dearg, or Red Bow, of the tribe of the Deasies ; Ibbreac, or the Many Colored, from the Red Stream ; Lir ; Fiuvar the Royal ; Mioyar of the Great Burthen, so surnamed from his prodigious strength ; and Aongusa Og, or young Oneas. All the rest of the Tuatha Danaans, except the six candidates, then went into council, and the determination was, to give the kingdom to Bogh Dearg, for three reasons. The first reason was, that his father had been a good man in his time ; the second, that he was a good man himself ; and the third, that he came of the best blood in the nation.

When Lir heard that the crown was to be given to Bogh Dearg, indignant at the choice, he returned to his own home, without waiting to see the new king inaugurated, or letting any of the assembly know that he was going, for he was convinced that the choice of the people would have fallen upon himself. Bogh Dearg, however, was proclaimed in due form, by the unanimous consent of the assembly, none of the five rejected candidates opposing his election, except Lir alone.

The ceremonies being concluded, the assembled tribes called on the new monarch to lead them in pursuit of Lir.

“ Let us burn and spoil his territory,” said they. “ Why dares he, who never had a king in his family, presume to slight the sovereign we have chosen ?”

“ We will follow no such counsel,” replied Bogh Dearg. “ His ancestors and himself have always kept the province in which he lives in peace, and it will take nothing from my sovereignty over the Tuatha Danaans, to allow him still to hold his own possessions there.”

The assembly, not fully satisfied with this reply, debated much on the course they had best take ; but after much discussion, the question was allowed to rest for a time. Meanwhile an incident occurred which pressed heavily on the mind of Lir. His wife, whom he tenderly loved, fell ill and died in three nights. The report of her death, which was looked upon as a grievous loss in her own country, soon spread all over Ireland. It reached at length the ears of Bogh Dearg, and of the princes and nobles who were at his palace.

“ Now,” said the monarch, “ if Lir were willing to accede to it, I could propose a mode of redoubling the present friendship which I entertain for Lir. You all know that I have three daughters, the fairest in the kingdom, and I would praise them further, but that I am their father. I mean Aov, Aoife, and Alve, of whom Lir might choose which he pleased, to supply the place of his dead wife.”

The speech of the king circulated amongst the Tuatha Danaans, and all agreed that a messenger ought to be sent to Lir in order to propose the connection, with a suitable dowry for the bride. When the ambassador arrived at the palace of Lir, he found the latter willing to accept the proposal, and, accordingly, both returned together to the royal residence of Bogh Dearg, on the shores of Lough Derg, where they were received on the part of the Tuatha Danaans with all the acclamations that even a more popular prince could expect. All parties seemed to take an interest in promoting the union.

The three daughters were sitting on chairs richly ornamented, in a hall of their father's palace. Near them sat the queen, wife of Bogh Dearg. When Lir and the monarch entered, the latter directed his attention to the three princesses, and bade him choose which he would.

"I do not know which of the three to choose," said Lir, "but the eldest is the most royal, and besides it is just that she should have precedence of the rest."

"Then," said the monarch, "that is Aov."

"Aov, then, I choose," replied Lir.

The marriage was celebrated with the magnificence becoming the rank of the parties. They remained a fortnight in the palace of the monarch, after which they went to the residence of Lir, who gave a splendid banquet on his arrival. In the progress of time Aov had twins, a son and a daughter, who were named, the one Fingula, and the other Aodh, or Eugene. In her next confinement, she gave birth to two sons, to whom were given the names of Fiacra and Cornu, but died herself, in a few days after. Lir was exceedingly grieved at her death, and, only for the love he bore his children, would almost have wished to die along with her. The tidings reached the monarch, who, together with all his household, made great lamentations for his eldest daughter, grieving more especially for the affliction which it caused to Lir.

"Nevertheless," said the monarch, "what has occurred need not dissolve the connection between Lir and us, for he can, if he please, take my second daughter, Aoife, to supply her place."

This speech, as was intended, soon found its way to Lir, who set out immediately for the palace of Bogh Dearg. The marriage was celebrated with the same splendor as on the former occasion, and Lir, after spending some time at the monarch's palace, returned to his house with Aoife, where he received her with all the love and honor which she could expect. For some time Aoife returned the same to him and to his children; and indeed any person who once saw those children could not avoid giving them all the love which any creature could receive. Frequently the old monarch came to see them to Lir's house, and often took them to his own, where he would gladly keep them, but that their father could not bear to have them out of his sight. It was the custom of the Tuatha Danaans to entertain each other in succession. When they assembled at the house of Lir, the four children were the whole subject of discourse, and the chief ornament of the day, they were so fair and so winning both in their appearances and their dispositions; and even as they dispersed to their several homes, the guests were heard to speak of nothing else. Lir himself would rise every morning at daybreak, and going to the apartment in which his children lay, would lie down among them for a while. The black poison of jealousy began at length to insinuate itself into the mind of Aoife. As if the love of Lir were not wide enough to comprehend them and herself, she conceived a mortal hatred against her sister's children. She feigned illness, and remained nearly a year in that condition, totally occupied in devising in her mind some means of ruining the children.

One morning she ordered her chariot, to the great surprise of Lir, who, however, was well pleased at this sign of returning health. Aoife next desired that the four children of Lir should be placed in the chariot with her, and drove away in the direction of Bogh Dearg's house. It was much against her will that Fingula, the daughter, went into the carriage, for she had long observed the increasing coolness in the mind of her step-mother, and guessed that she had no kindly purpose in her thoughts at present. She could not, however, avoid the destiny that was prepared for her, nor escape the suffering which she was doomed to undergo.

Aoife continued her journey until she arrived at Fiondach, where dwelt some of her father's people whom she knew to be deeply skilled in the art of the Druids. Having arrived at their residence, she went into the place where they were, and endeavored to prevail on them to kill the children, telling them that their father through his affection for them had slighted her, and promising to bestow on them all the riches which they could require.

“ Ah,” replied the Druids, “ we would not kill the children of Lir for the whole world. You took an evil thought into your mind, and left your shame behind you, when you came with such a request to us.”

“ Then if you will not,” cried Aoife, seizing a sword which lay near, “ I will avenge myself, for I am resolved they shall not live.”

Saying these words, she rushed out with the drawn sword, but through her womanhood she lost her courage when she was about to strike at the children. She then returned the sword to the Druids, and said she could not kill them.

Aoife resumed her journey, and they all drove on until they reached the shores of Lough Dairvrec, on the Lake of the Speckled Oak. Here she unharnessed the horses, and desired the children to descend and bathe in the lake. They did as she bade, but when all were in the water, she took a magic wand and struck them with it one after another. One after another the forms of the beautiful children disappeared, and four white swans were seen upon the water in their stead, when she addressed them in the following words :

AOIFE.

Away, you children of the king ! I have separated your lives
from joy.
Your people will grieve to hear these tidings, but you shall continue birds.
What I have done, I have done through hatred of you, and
malice to your father.

THE CHILDREN.

We, left here on the waters, must be tossed from wave to wave.

In the mean time Lir, returning to his palace, missed his children, and finding Aoife not yet come home, immediately guessed that she had destroyed them, for he likewise had observed her jealousy. In the morning he ordered his chariot to be prepared, and, following the track of his wife, travelled along until he came to the Lake of the Speckled Oak, when the children saw the chariot approaching, and Fingula spoke as follows:

By yon old Oak, whose branches hoar
Wave o'er Lough Dairvrec's lonely shore,
Bright in the morn, a dazzling line
Of helms and silver targets shine ;
Speed, brethren dear, speed towards the shelving strand,
'T is royal Lir himself who leads the shining band.

Lir came to the brink of the water, and when he heard the birds conversing, as they drew nigh, in human language, he asked them how they became endowed with that surprising gift.

“ Know, Lir,” replied Fingula, “ that we are your four children, who, through the frantic jealousy of our step-mother, and our own mother's sister, have been, reduced to this unhappy condition.”

“ Are there any means,” asked the wretched father, “ by which you can ever be restored to your own forms again ?”

“ None,” replied Fingula ; “ there is no man in existence able to effect that change, nor can it ever take place until a woman from the south, named Deocha, daughter of Ingri, the son of Black Hugh, and a man from the north, named Larigneau, the son of Colman, shall occasion our deliverance in the time of THE TAILGEAN, [1] when the Christian faith and charity shall come into Ireland.”

When Lir and his attendants heard these words, they tittered three doleful cries.

“ Are you satisfied,” said Lir, “ since you retain your speech and reason, to come and remain with us ?”

“ It is not in our power to do so,” replied Fingula, “ nor are we at liberty to commit ourselves to the hands of man, until what I have told you shall have come to pass. But in the mean time we possess our speech and our mental faculties as fully as ever, and are moreover endowed with one additional quality, which is that we can sing the most melodious airs that the world has ever heard, and there is no mortal that would not feel a pleasure in listening to our voices. Remain with us for this night, and you shall hear our music.”

When Lir had heard these words, he ordered his followers to unharness their steeds, and they remained during the whole night on the strand, listening to the music of the birds, until all were lulled to sleep by the enchanting melody, excepting Lir alone. In the morning Lir arose from the bank on which he lay, and addressed his children in the following words :

In vain I stretch my aching limbs
And close my weeping eyes,
In vain my children’s moonlight hymns
For me alone arise.
'T is morn again, on wave and strand,
My children, we must part ;
A word that like a burning brand
Falls on your father’s heart.

O had I seen this fatal hour,
When Lir’s malignant queen
First sought his old paternal tower,
This hour had never been !
As thus between the shore and you
The widening waters grow,
So spreads my darkening spirits through
The sense of cureless woe.

Lir departed from the lake, and, still following the track of Aoife, came to the palace of the Ard-Righ, or Chief King, as Bogh Dearg was entitled. The monarch welcomed him, but complained of his not having brought his children as usual.

“ Alas, poor that I am !” said Lir, “ it is not I who would keep my children from your sight, but Aoife yonder, once your darling, and the sister of their mother, who has had them transformed into four swans, and abandoned them on the Lake of the Speckled Oak. They have been seen in that place by a great multitude of our people, who have heard the story from themselves, for they retain their speech and reason as before.”

The monarch started at these words, and, looking on Aoife, immediately became convinced that Lir had spoken the truth. He began to upbraid his daughter in a rough and angry tone.

“ Malicious as you were,” said he, “ you will suffer more by this cruel deed than the children of Lir, for they in the progress of time will be released from their sufferings, and their souls will be made happy in the end.”

He then asked her into what shape of all living creatures she would least like to be transformed.

“ Speak,” said he, “ for it is not in your power to avoid telling the truth.”

Aoife, thus constrained, replied with a horrible look and tone, that there was no form which she more abhorred than that of a Deamhain Eidhir, or Demon of the Air.

“ That form, then,” said the monarch, “ shall soon be yours” ; and while he said so, he took a magic collar and laid it on her. Immediately losing her own shape, she flew away, shrieking, in that of a foul Spirit of the Air, in which she continues to this day, and will to the end of time, according to her deserts.

Soon afterwards, the monarch and the Tuatha Danaans went to the Lake of the Speckled Oak and encamped upon its shores, listening to the music of the birds. The Sons of Mile, likewise, came thither from every part of Ireland, and formed an encampment in the same place, for there never was music comparable to that of those swans. Sometimes they related their mournful story, sometimes they would answer the questions proposed to them by the people on shore, and talk familiarly with their relatives and friends, and at others they sung, both by day and night, the most delightful music that was ever heard by human ear ; so that the listeners on shore, notwithstanding the grief and uneasiness in which they continued, enjoyed as sweet sleep, and arose as fresh and vigorous, as if they had been resting in their accustomed beds at home. The two multitudes of the Sons of Mile, and of the Tuatha Danaans, thus remained in their respective encampments during the space of thirty years. At the end of that time, Fingula addressed her brethren as follows :

“ Are you ignorant, my brothers, that but one night is left of the time which you were to spend upon the lake ?”

On hearing this, the three brethren grew very sorrowful, and uttered many plaintive cries and sounds of grief ; for they were almost as happy on that lake, enjoying the company of their friends and relatives, talking with them and answering their questions, as they would have been in their own home ; more especially, when compared to the grief they felt on leaving it for the wild and stormy sea that lies to the north of Ireland. Early in the morning they came as close to the brink of the lake as they could, and spoke to their father and their friends, to all of whom they bade a mournful farewell, repeating those pitiful lines that follow:

Receive, royal sage, our last farewell,
Thou of the potent spell !
And thou, Lir, deep skilled in mystic lore—
We meet — we meet no more !
The sum complete of our appointed hours,
We leave your happy bowers.
Farewell, dear friends, till time itself is o'er
We meet, we meet no more !
Forever now to human converse lost,
On Moyle's wild waters tost,
Our doom till day, and night, and seasons fail,
To weave a mournful tale.
Three lingering ages on the northern main
To waste in various pain.
Three lingering ages in the stormy west
To heave on ocean's breast.
Sad is our doom, dear friends, on wintry seas
Through many a year to freeze, —
Harsh brine and rocks, with horrid sea-weed brown
For Lir's soft beds of down !
No more the joy of Lir's paternal breast,
Early we part unblest !
A power unseen commands that we forsake
Lone Dairvrec's peaceful lake.
Rise from the wave, companions of my fear,
Rise, brethren dear !

Bright wave and pebbly beach and echoing dell,
Farewell, a last farewell !
And you, dear friends, who throng the leafy shore,
We meet — we meet no more !

Having ended those verses, the swans took wing and, wising lightly on the air, continued their flight until they reached the Sruih na Maoile, or the Sea of Moyle, as those waters were called which flowed between Ireland and Scotland. Their departure occasioned deep sorrow to all who witnessed it, and they had a law proclaimed throughout the kingdom, that any one, from the king to the peasant, who should kill a swan, let his power be as great as it might, should meet with certain death. In the mean time, the children of Lir found that they had made an unhappy change of place. When they saw the broad wild ocean around them, they grew cold and hungry, and began to fall into despair, thinking that all they ever suffered was nothing until they were sent to these seas. They remained on the waters until one night it began to freeze very hard.

“ My loving brothers,” said Fingula, “ we make very unwise provision against the coming night if we do not keep close together; and lest by any mischance we should lose sight of each other, let us appoint a place where we may meet again as soon as it may be in our power.”

“ In that case, dear sister,” said the three brothers, “ let us meet at the Carrig na Roin (or the Rock of the Seals), for that is a place with which we are all acquainted.”

They continued thus until about the middle of the night. The wind then increased to a storm, the waters arose, and the mountains of brine as they rolled and broke around them sparkled in the gloom as if they had taken fire. So great was the tempest that the children of Lir were separated by the waves. All were scattered far and wide, nor could one tell whither any of the three others had been driven. At length it abated a little of its violence, the deep became more settled, and Fingula found herself alone. Not being able to see her brethren anywhere around, she felt the deepest anxiety of mind, and at length broke forth into the following words : —

Heart-broken o'er these seas I glide,
My frozen wings together clinging :
No more along the stormy tide
I hear my brethren singing.

Three lingering ages, marked by woes,
Since first we left Lone Dairvreac's water
Break, break, my heart, and give repose
To Lir's unhappy daughter.

Beloved alike, loved so well,
That made your sister's breast your pillow.
Tell me, my wandering brethren, tell,
Where roam you o'er the billow ?

Hid by what rocks or secret caves,
That wont beneath my wings to slumber,
I fear the dead will leave their graves,
Ere time restore our number.

Tossed by the surge and sleety storm
At random o'er this briny water ;
Woe, woe to all who share the form
Of Lir's unhappy daughter.

Fingula remained that night on the Rock of the Seals. At sunrise the next morning, looking out in every direction along the water, she saw Cornu coming towards her with head drooping, and feathers

drenched with spray, so cold and feeble that he could not answer her questions. Fingula received him lovingly under her wings, and said : —

“ If Eugene were with us now, our condition would be tolerable.”

Not long after she saw Eugene coming towards her, with a drooping head, and wings hanging to the ground, and she welcomed him, and put him under the feathers of her breast. Immediately after she saw Fiacra approaching, and she then removed Cornu from beneath her right wing and placed him under her left, and put Fiacra beneath her right wing, where Cornu had been before. She then settled her feathers about them, and said:

“ Severe, my dear brothers, as you have found the last night, you must yet see many more as bad.”

The children of Lir continued for a long time in the same condition on the Sruih na Maoile, until one night they suffered so much from the cold and wind and snow, that nothing they had hitherto felt was comparable to it ; which made Fingula utter the following words :

Hard is our life and sharp with ill,
My brethren dear ;
The snow so thick, the wind so chill,
The night so drear.
We strive to keep
Sad concert in our songs of pain,
But the wild deep,
Relentless, mars the rising strain.
Vainly we soothe our aching hearts
With converse sweet,
Wave after wave, high heaving, parts
Our union meet.
Ah, doom severe !
Harsh was our mother's vengeful will,
Ah, brethren dear,
Hard is our life, and sharp with ill.

They remained for a year on the Sea of Moyle, when one night, as they were on the Rock of the Seals, the waters congealed around them with the cold ; and as they lay on the rock, their feet and wings were frozen to it, so that they could not move a limb. When at length, after using what strength remained in their bodies, they succeeded in getting free, the skin of their feet, and the innermost down of their breasts, and the quills of their wings, remained clinging to the icy crag.

“ Woe to the children of Lir !” said Fingula, “ mournful is our fate to-night, for when the salt water pierces into our wounds, we shall be pained to death” ; and she sung these lines : —

Sad is our hap this mournful night,
With mangled feet and plumage bleeding ;
Our wings no more sustain our flight,
Woe comes to linked woe succeeding.
Ah, cruel was our step-dame's mind,
When hard to nature's sweet emotion,
She sent us here 'mid wave and wind,
To freeze on Moyle's relentless ocean.

The wild sea-foam that strews the shore,
The weeds those briny waves engender,
For past delights are all our store,
Though, fostered once in regal splendor.
Rise, sister of three brethren dear,

Let custom dull the edge of anguish,
In hollow rock or cavern drear,
By doom unrighteous, bound to languish.

Leaving the Rock of the Seals, they alighted again on the waters of Moyle, where the sharp brine pierced them keenly, although they strove to keep their feet under their wings as closely as they could. They continued to suffer thus, until their feathers grew, and the wounds of their feet were healed. They used frequently to go as near the shore as they could, on that part of the Irish coast which looks towards Scotland, and every night they came together to Moyle, which was their constant place of rest. One day as they drew nigh the shore of Bama, to the north, they saw a number of chariots and horsemen, splendidly arrayed, with horses richly caparisoned, approaching from the west.

“ Do you observe that brilliant company, you sons of Lir ?” said Fingula.

“ We know not who they are,” replied her brethren, “ but they seem to be Irish ; whether of the Sons of Mile, or the Tuatha Danaans, it is impossible for us to conjecture.”

They drew close to the shore, in order to observe more accurately. When the horsemen saw them coming, they hastened towards them, until they came within speaking distance. The persons of note who were amongst them were Aodh Aithiosatch, or Merry Hugh, and Feargus Fithcall (of the Complete Armor), the two sons of Bogh Dearg the Monarch, and the third part of his body, guard. The children of Lir inquired how the Tuatha Danaans were, and especially Lir and Bogh Dearg, with their friends and dependants.

“ They are all well in their respective homes,” replied the horsemen. “ At present, it is true, they are in your father’s palace, partaking of a splendid banquet, in health and joy, knowing no other want than that of your absence, and their ignorance of your place of abode, since you left the Lake of the Speckled Oak.”

“ Evil has been our life since then,” said Fingula, “ for neither we nor any other creature, that we have heard of, ever suffered so much as we have done, since we came to the waters of Moyle” ; and she uttered the following words : —

We four are well,
Though in keen want and sombre grief we dwell.
Happy are they
Who sit in Lir’s bright hall, and share his banquet gay.
Rich food and wine
For them in sparkling gold and silver shine ;
While far away
His children shiver in the hungry spray !
We, who of yore
On dainties fared, and silken garments wore,
Now all our fare,
Cold sand, and bitter brine, for wax and honey rare ;
Our softest bed,
The crag that o’er those surges lifts its head ;
Oft have we laid
Our limbs on beds of tenderest down arrayed.
Now must we lie,
On Moyle’s rough wave, with plumage seldom dry ;
A pageant rare
Oft bore us to our grandsire’s palace fair.
Ah, mournful change !
Now with faint wings these dreary shores I range.
O’er Moyle’s dark tide,
Plume touching plume, we wander side by side ;
Sharing no more

The joys that cheered our happy hearts of yore ;
The welcome mild,
That on our grandsire's kingly features smiled ;
Lir's counsel meet,
And fond paternal kiss, that made the morning sweet.

The horsemen returned soon after to the house of Lir, and told the principal men of the Tuatha Danaans where they had seen the birds, and the dialogue they had held together.

“ We cannot assist them,” they replied, “ but we are well pleased to hear that they live, for they will be restored to their former shape, after a long tune has elapsed.”

The children of Lir, meantime, returned northwards to the Sea of Moyle, where they remained until their time in that place had expired. Then Fingula spoke to her brothers, and said :

“ It is time for us to depart from hence, for the period appointed for us to remain here is at an end” ; and she added these verses : —

At length we leave this cheerless shore,
Unblest by summer's sunshine splendid ;
Its storm for us shall howl no more,
Our time on gloomy Moyle is ended.
Three hundred sunless summers past,
We leave at length this loveless billow ;
Where oft we felt the icy blast,
And made the shelving crag our pillow.

Still on our lingering night of pain,
Far distant beams the dawn of gladness ;
Light ease beside the western main
Awaits our long accustomed sadness.
Long must we haunt that billowy shore,
Ere breaks for us the daybeam splendid,
But here our numbered years are o'er,
Our time on gloomy Moyle is ended.

After that time the children of Lir left the Sea of Moyle, and flew until they came to the most westerly part of the ocean. They were there for a long time, suffering all kinds of hardship, until they happened to see a man, a tiller of the ground, who used often to watch them when they came near the shore, and took great pleasure in listening to their music. He told the people on the coast of what he had seen, and spread the tidings of the prodigy far and near. However, the same tale remains to be repeated, for the children of Lir never suffered so much before or after as they did on that very night, after the husbandman had seen them; the frost was so keen, and the snow coming so thick upon the wind. The waters all congealed into ice, so that the woods and the sea were of one color. Their feet stuck to the ground, leaving them unable to move, and they began to utter the most lamentable cries, while Fingula comforted, and strove to persuade them not to grieve, but in vain; and she repeated these lines : —

Sad are my suffering brethren's piercing cries,
This dreary night !
Sharp drives the snow shower, o'er the moonless skies,
With ceaseless flight !
Where'er they search the frost-bound ocean o'er,
On solid ice their thirsty beaks are ringing,
Nor on the wintry shore
Fresh water laves their plumes, nor bubbling fount is springing.

O thou dread Monarch, who to sea and coast
Their being gave,
And led'st, as shadowy rumor tells, a host,
Through the deep wave !
Behold these wretched birds with pitying eyes,
Their lingering years in joyless slavery spending,
In thy great might arise,
And bid our souls be free, their bonds of anguish rending.

“ Brothers,” said Fingula, “ confide in Him who made heaven, and the elements, the earth with all its fruit, and the sea with all its wonders, and you will find comfort and relief.”

“ We do confide in him,” they answered.

“ And I confide with you,” said Fingula, “ in the only being who is full of knowledge and of pity.” They remained on the Oraas Domhnan (Deep Seas) until their time was fulfilled, when Fingula said :

“ It is time for us to go to Fioncha, where Lir and his people dwell, and our people also.”

“ We are well content to do so,” replied they ; and all proceeded together somewhat joyfully, until they came to Fioncha. They found the place where their father's palace had stood, and all around it, without either house or inhabitants, but everything looking dreary and dull. They saw smoke at a distance, and the four came towards it, and uttered three mournful cries, and Fingula repeated these words : —

A mournful wonder is this place to me,
Which once I knew so well !
Not even the trace of that loved home I see,
Where Lir was wont to dwell.
Nor hound, nor steed, nor lord nor lady bright,
Nor welcome spoken !
Since I have lived to see this mournful sight,
My heart is broken.

This was not in our father's time of old,
A loveless, lightless waste,
Without a cup the sparkling wine to hold,
Or princely guest to taste.
The home where oft we hailed each joyous morn
Is bleak and lonely !
And nothing left to us, its heirs forlorn,
Save memory only.

Now do I know the deep devouring grave
Holds all who once were dear !
Sad was our life on Moyle's tempestuous wave,
But keener grief is here.
Low rustling grass, and winds that sadly blow
Through dry leaves creeping !
And he who should his cherished darlings know,
Forever sleeping !

The children of Lir remained in the place where their father and their ancestors had lived, and where they had themselves been nursed and educated, and late at night they began to sing most melodious music. In the morning they took wing and flew until they came to Inis Gluair Breanain, and they began to sing there ; so that all the birds of the country that could swim came to that place, which was called Lochan na Heanlaithe (or the Lake of the Birds). They continued in that condition

for a long time, until the Christian doctrine was preached in those countries, when St. Patrick came to Ireland, and St. Macaomh Og came to Inis Gluair Breanain. The first night he came there the children of Lir heard the sound of the bell ringing near them, and were greatly rejoiced. They hastened towards the place from whence they heard the bells, and the three sons of Lir made such speed that they left Fingula by herself.

“What is the matter with you, dear brethren?” said Fingula.

“We cannot tell,” they replied, “we know not how to account for the heavenly music we have heard.”

“I will explain it to you,” said she; “that is the bell of Macaomh Og, and it is by him you shall be released from your pain and trouble, and you shall be comforted”; and she said these lines:—

List, list to the sound of the anchoret’s bell,
Rise, children of Lir, from the wave where ye dwell,
Uplift your glad wings and exult as ye hear,
And give thanks, for the hour of your freedom is near.
He merits our duty, the Mighty to save
From the rock and the surge, from the storm and the wave.
Who clings to his doctrine with constant endeavor,
His grief shall be turned into glory forever.
Past moments of anguish, forever farewell!
List, children of Lir, to the sound of the bell.

The children of Lir were listening to the music of the bell until the saint had finished his prayers.

“Let us now,” said Fingula, “sing our own music to the great Ruler of the heavens and the earth”; and they sung the most melodious strains of praise and adoration. Macaomh Og was listening, and in the morning early he came to the Lake of the Birds. Coming close to the shore, he asked them, were they the children of Lir?

“We are, indeed,” they answered.

“I am most thankful to hear it,” said he, “for it was to relieve you that I was sent to this island, rather than to any other part of Ireland.”

On hearing these words the children of Lir came to the shore, and depended on his word. He took them down to his residence, where they remained listening to his instructions and joining in his devotions day after day. Macaomh Og sent for a craftsman and desired him to make two silver chains, which he accordingly did. One of them he put between Eugene and Fingula, and the other between Cornu and Fiacra.

The king who governed Conact at that time was named Lairgnean, the son of Colman (the same of whom Fingula had spoken to her father on the Lake of the Speckled Oak), and his queen’s name was Deocha, the daughter of Ingri, son of Black Hugh. Deocha came to hear of the wonderful birds, and, being seized with a violent desire of possessing them, requested the king to procure them for her. He replied that he could never persuade himself to ask Macaomh Og to give them up. Deocha, enraged at his refusal, declared that she never again would spend a night within the palace of Glairgnea, as the king’s residence was called, unless she got the swans; and, leaving the palace, she travelled to Kill da Luadh (now called Killaloe) and took up her abode at her own home. When Lairgnean found her so resolute, he sent a messenger three several times for the birds, but could not obtain them. Then he came himself to Macaomh Og, and asked him if it were true he had refused his messengers.

“It is true,” answered Macaomh Og.

“ Then,” said the king, “ it is true, likewise, that I will take them with me whether you are willing or otherwise.”

As he said this he rushed toward the altar near which they stood, and seized the two chains which coupled them together. No sooner had he done so, than the swans lost their plumage, their beautiful feathers disappeared, and the three sons of Lir appeared three withered old men, with their bones seeming to project through their skin ; while Fingula, instead of the graceful swan that sung such enchanting strains, became an old shrivelled hag, fleshless and bloodless. The King let fall the chains, and returned home, while Macaomh Og uttered many lamentations after the birds, and pronounced a malediction on Lairgnean. Fingula then said : —

“ Come hither, holy father, and give us baptism, for we are as much concerned at parting with you as you in parting with us. You are to bury us together in this manner. Place Cornu and Fiacra at my back, and place Eugene before me” ; and she again said, “ Baptize us, holy father, and make us happy.”

After that they departed this life, and the children of Lir were buried by Macaomh Og as Fingula had desired. He raised the earth in the form of a tomb, and placed a stone over them, on which he carved their names in the Ogham character, and wept bitterly above their grave. It is thought that their souls went to heaven. For Lairgnean, who was the immediate cause of their death, Macaomh Og predicted his fate in the following lines : —

Ill shoot of Colman’s royal line,
The malison of heaven is thine,
The grief which thou hast caused to mine,
Thine own cold heart shall feel,
Thou whose unholy zeal
Hath left me on this isle forlorn,
My cherished darlings’ loss to mourn.
And she whose soul, in evil strong,
Hath prompted this unfeeling wrong,
To early dust consigned, shall long
Her fruitless rapine wail,
A shivering spectre pale !
The malison of heaven is thine,
Ill shoot of Colman’s royal line !

Not long after, Lairgnean and his wife died a sudden death, according to the prediction of Macaomh Og, which concludes the history of the Swans of Lir.

[1] Tailgean, or the Holy Offspring, a name supposed to have been applied by the Druids to St. Patrick, previous to his arrival in Ireland. *O’Brien’s Irish Dictionary*.

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