

# Finn and his companions

Standish O'Grady

1921

## PREFACE

You have, I am sure, often heard how the Roman Empire was broken up and destroyed by the barbarians of Northern Europe, the Goths, the Vandals, the Huns, the Picts, and Scots, etc., etc. You know too, why God permitted this to be done. It was because the civilised Romans, and the nations whom they made like themselves, lost the great simple virtues of truth, courage, generosity, and the readiness to sacrifice their lives and possessions for the sake of noble objects. We read that Romans at this time would even cut off their thumbs in order to avoid becoming soldiers ; for, of course, a young man who had no thumb to his hand could not be expected to hold a spear strongly, or wield a sword well. In those days the rich Roman became not only very rich, but also selfish and ease-loving, and the poor Roman very poor, so that he cared about nothing but how he might get food in order that he might live; and generally the Roman character changed greatly from what it was in ancient times, for wealth, commerce, civilisation, and peace, however good in themselves, have this tendency, viz. they enfeeble and corrupt men's minds, and make them selfish, lazy, and hard-hearted. Then, as God long ago sent the flood to drown a world which had grown too wicked, so he sent the brave though rude barbarians of northern Europe to destroy the Romans and break their great Empire to pieces.

Woe to the lands, the minstrel sang,  
That hear the northern warriors' clang.

You have also read in the English histories how at this time the Romanised Britons were perpetually invaded and plundered by the Picts and Scots, and then by the Saxons, until they were quite ruined. The Picts and Scots and the Saxons could not have done this in the time of Caractacus and Boadicea.

Now it becomes an interesting question what kind of men these northern barbarians were who did such a great work, and one would like to know how they lived, what they loved and honoured, and what they hated and despised. Of the other northern nations other writers will tell you something. I am going to tell you something about the nation which in histories of England are called the Scots. Now the Scots, who, in alliance with the Picts made such havoc among the degenerate Britons, were in fact the Irish, who at some very early period, overflowing out of Ireland, occupied the western counties of Scotland. The Highlanders and the Irish of Ireland were one race of people whom the old historians called Scoti or Scots. They spoke the same language, and had the same manners and customs, and the same traditions, the same music and the same songs. A great many of their songs and stories lingered a long time in the Highlands, and were believed to have been made by a poet called Ossian. In Ireland a still greater number remained in the minds of the people. These songs and stories, too, were attributed to Ossian or to friends of Ossian, and have been from time to time written down on paper or on parchment. In these stories we learn a great deal about Ossian, his

friends and acquaintances, what sort of men they were, and how they lived. I do not say that everything related about them is true, but when we compare these stories with what is known historically about the conquerors of the Roman Empire, we can see that the people amongst whom Ossian lived must have been very like the people of the Ossianic stories, and that Finn, who was the father of Ossian, Oscar his son, Diarmid his chivalrous cousin, Caelta, Mac-Lewy, and the rest were very brave, upright, true-hearted, and affectionate men, who in their forests and their rude simple homes preserved certain virtues which the Romans and the Romanised Britons had lost in spite of all their wealth. These stories will, I hope, amuse and entertain you, and will also enable you to read some meaning in a word which you have often seen in your histories, but which has had hitherto for you no meaning at all, or perhaps a bad one. The Scots, who with the Picts gave the poor degenerate Britons so many beatings in battle and plundered them far and wide, were essentially somewhat like the men whose characters and manner of living you will find described in these stories. Most of our stories relating to this period are supposed to have been told by Ossian to St. Patrick. Those which I relate are, for the most part, stories told to St. Patrick by Caelta, a cousin of Ossian, and are not so well known. Most of them are, I think, quite new. If all our Irish Ossianic stories and poems were published, I daresay they would fill a hundred volumes like the present. I have, however, tried to tell these few stories in such a way as to give you a good general idea of the literature as a whole.

Finn and his friends are believed to have flourished in the second and third centuries, that is about two hundred years before the Irish began to break out and attack the Roman Empire in this part of Europe.

The great influence exercised by Finn over the Irish mind was not destroyed, but rather purified and elevated, by the introduction of Christianity. It is distinctly traceable down to the seventeenth century, and though now unrecognised, perhaps still survives, warring strongly, if silently, against the vices which are always connected with civilisation.

#### SAINT AND HERO

*Long, long ago, beyond the misty space  
Of twice a thousand years.  
In Erin old theta Lived a mighty race.  
Taller than Roman spears.*

#### ST. PATRICK AND HIS STRANGE GUESTS.

St. Patrick and his fellow-missionaries were building a little church made of straight trees interlaced with osiers on the plains of Meath at a place near the river Boyne, westward from Tara. The sun was declining, and the pious Britons worked industriously, making the most of what day-light still remained. A young clerk who was laying the timbers of the roof cried out, "Look, brothers ! What great men are these who come towards us with large strides ? Sad yet noble are their faces. Truly, I have not seen such in this land at any time." So he stood looking, with a plank in one hand and a hammer in the other.

St. Patrick looked towards Tara and saw ten men coming towards him and now very near. The tallest of the tonsured Gaels and Britons who were with Patrick would not reach their shoulder-blades, and hardly to the waist of the man who walked before the others and seemed

to be their captain. They wore shields and swords, and in their hands carried spears proportioned to their size and strength. Each man's mantle, blue, green, or scarlet, was folded round his shoulders and fastened on the breast by brooches the rings of which were like wheels of gold or silver. Their knees were bare, and their hair, escaped from the brazen helmets, fell in dense curling masses on their shoulders. Their port was majestic, and the meanest of them carried himself like a king. Nevertheless, as the young clerk had said, their countenances were sad, as of men who lacked their comrades, or had recently lost their dear lord.

St. Patrick in his white garments, and bearing his bent staff in his hand, went to meet them, and gave them a respectful and affectionate greeting and bade them a welcome to his small monastery. He conducted them himself to the guest-house. His people brought lavers and washed their feet and hands. They were struck with great awe as they observed the nobleness of the men, their mighty limbs, their tranquillity, and their silence. Food fit for kings was set before them, and old ale in handsome vessels. There, sitting on couches, they ate and drank a little and said nothing, and St. Patrick ministered to them with his own hands, and the more he looked upon them the more he loved them. When all had been served, St. Patrick himself sat down upon a couch over against their captain, and as he did so the men stood up and made him a reverence and again sat down. Though the young men of the monastery frequently made the circuit of the chamber to pour out ale, they soon found that the men's cups continued full. At a sign from St. Patrick they withdrew ; nevertheless the silence was not broken.

The Pagan then raised his eyes and contemplated the Christian for a long time. He knew well the faces of druids, but such a druid as this he had never seen before, and he marvelled at the goodness, refinement, and purity which shone in every feature. St. Patrick on the other hand contemplated the Pagan, his large, bright, peerless eyes and the simplicity and majesty of his aspect, and the more he looked the more he marvelled.

#### ST. PATRICK CONVERSES WITH THE GREAT MEN.

Then the Saint became aware that the expression of his guest's countenance altered to one of sharp inquiry, and, as if answering his thoughts, he said,

" What wouldst thou, warrior?"

" Tidings of my dear foster-brother Ossian, holy druid on whose head has come the razor."

Ere the Saint could reply a young and very handsome clerk who sat near him started up, smote his hands together, and, signing the air with the symbol of the cross, cried aloud in the Latin tongue, " God and His holy angels protect us. My father, this is a dead man. Occisus est in frcelio Gahrn" (he was slain in the battle of Gabhra) ' ' in the reign of Cairbre of the Liffey, son of Cormac mac Art. These men are apparitions, or they are the Sidhe (the Shee)."

The youth was Benignus. He was a Gael, and learned in his country's history. What he called " the Shee" were the gods of the Pagan Irish. At the name of " Gabhra" the men bowed their heads, and their captain put his great hands over his face and wept silently. After a while Patrick said ?

" Of thy dear foster-brother Ossian I have no tidings. But who art thou, O noble man, and who are these with thee ? I ask that I may be the better able to serve thee."

A torrent of loving-kindness and compassion poured from the saint's heart towards him as he spoke. Also he endeavoured to calm the agitation of his young friend and disciple Benignus, who said they were dead men or gods.

" I am Caelta the son of Eonan," answered the large man. " We are all that remain in the whole world of Finn's heroes, unless, mayhap, magnanimous Ossian, his incomparable son, be still alive in some isle of the sea beyond the setting of the sun. Thy druidic community, I perceive, are strangers in Erin. Is the King of Erin kind to thee, who art thyself kind to strangers ? Say he is not, O Talkend, and verily he shall be compelled."

( Talkend means ' razored head,' an allusion to the saint's tonsure.)

" Nay," answered Patrick, " Laeghaire, son of Nial, hath been very kind to us."

" Who is that man?" said Caelta, more sternly. " Are thy spells upon us, druid, for that man is not in Ireland?"

His voice in its rising wrath was terrible to hear and shook the guest-house.

" I am no druid," answered Patrick mildly, " and have no understanding of spells, charms, and incantations. Truly, Laeghaire, son of Nial of the Nine Hostages, is now King of Ireland, whoever was King in thy time. Benignus, tell these noble men the pedigree of the King, and how he stands related in descent or otherwise with him who reigned when the battle of Gabhra was fought.\*"

Benignus thereupon spoke out very clearly and fluently, for sweet was his voice, and eloquent was the young man. It was he who used to chant hymns and canticles for Patrick, and revive his spirits when they drooped.

" Noble strangers," he said, " the King of Ireland now is indeed Laeghaire, son of Nial of the Nine Hostages, who was the son of Eocha Movmodhon, who was the son of Murdach, who was the son of Fiacha, who was the son of Cairbre of the Liffey. And in the reign of Cairbre of the Liffey was fought the great battle of Gabhra, where were exterminated the giant race of the Fians, falling by each other's hands in fratricidal warfare, so that only nine men went alive out of the battle around Caelta son of Ronan, and from that day to this they have not been seen. Also there survived Ossian the son of Finn, but he was not in the battle, for he went out of Ireland before that, and there are no tidings of him since he followed the Danann maiden beyond the setting of the sun." The men looked at each other in great amaze-ment.

Where have you been since the battle ?" asked Patrick.

" We went out of the battle," said Caelta, " after having raised the tombs of our dead, and after having mourned long, weeping passionately, over the grave of Oscur, to the house of the prophetess and wisest of all w^omen, Kama, who had cared for and watched over Finn since he was a boy. And she asked tidings of the Fians and why we came to her so few, so sad, and so torn with many wounds, and when we told her she raised up her voice and wept aloud. Then we all wept together, lamenting as it were the end of the world, on account of the great destruction that had come upon the Fians. After that she washed our wounds and bound them up, applying salves and ointments and incantations of power, and gave us the newest of food and the oldest of drink, and sweetly we slept that night in her enchanted house, and our great sorrow departed ; and ever delicious fairy music resounded under the hollow dome, so that it was sweeter to be awake there than to sleep. Nevertheless she would not suffer us to go

beyond her doors, nor were we ourselves inclined to do so on account of the lassitude and weakness which had come upon us after the battle ; yet we felt no pain or grief, and that indeed surprised us, for it is not usual with good men whose dear friends have been slain to feel such peace of mind as we experienced in the house of the prophetess. Four days and nights we were with her, and on the morning of the fifth I said to my men, ' It is time for us to go. Why should we be burthensome to kind hosts ? Let us go elsewhere if there are yet in Erin those who will be kind to us on account of our kindness to them in the day of our power.'

When we came to bid the woman fare-well, she wept anew a long time, and she said that we would not meet again any more till the day of the final harmonising of all the world's discordant things. And she directed us to come first to this place, where holy druids would be kind to us and instruct us. Verily, Talkend, our parting from the woman was like the parting of body and soul, and when we put our feet outside her fairy threshold and saw the green grass and the resplendent sun, full remembrance came upon us again, and great sorrow and weeping, so that with one accord we drew back our feet. But when we thought to recross the threshold, the house which we had left was not seen, nor the woman. There was nothing there save the green hillside and a murmuring stream. Then having wept again, we did as the woman directed, and came to this place. Truly we were under spells in that palace, and our days there were the generations of men."

#### ANGELS INSTRUCT ST. PATRICK AS TO FINN.

Patrick rejoiced greatly when he heard these words, for he perceived that the men had been miraculously preserved by the power of the Almighty, that he, Patrick, might teach them the true faith, and that they might be baptized by his hands, and he shed tears of joy for that reason, and on account of his ardent affection for the men. Then he arose and kissed the ten men one after another and blessed them, beginning with Caelta, and again sat down, and drew his white raiment over his face and wept. Then all wept together, the Saint for pure joy and the heroes for pure sorrow on account of the strange things and men amongst whom they had drifted in the tide of time.

After that Patrick asked Caelta many questions concerning Finn and the Fians and concerning their thoughts and manner of life, and Caelta answered all well, for he was rarely intelligent, and moreover he possessed the gift of eloquence, and Patrick rejoiced listening to him. When their conversation had lasted a good while, Patrick said ?

" How came you, the Fians, to have such power, when the knowledge of the true God was denied to you ?"

And Caelta answered ?

" Talkend, it was because we had truth in our hearts, strength in our hands, and discretion in our tongues."

Patrick called a young man who was his scribe to take his tablets and write down that speech of the Fian's.

He also asked him what manner of man was Finn.

And Caelta said : " There has not come upon the earth a man like him since the beginning of the world nor will till the end of time. That, Talkend, is, in a little, what I have to say con-

cerning Finn. But if I were to pronounce his complete eulogy, the morning with its full light would not find me near the end."

And of Ossian he said, not that he was a famous poet, but that he was a famous warrior, and renowned above all the rest for magnanimity and liberality. "Ossian," he said, "' never asked anything from any man, and never refused any man anything. For himself he was willing to keep only the head with which he ate and the feet with which he walked."

"That is a great character," said St. Patrick, and he bade Bricna, the scribe, write it down. "It is not greater than the man to whom I attribute it," said Caelta.

Next day St. Patrick arose while it was still dark, and walked meditating along the banks of the slow-moving royal Boyne, between the trees and the river, revolving many things. As at other times, angels of God met him, and he asked them whether it was displeasing to God that he should feel so much delight in the profane conversation of the great Pagans. And the angels said that it was not, but pleasing, and that Finn, though a Gentile, was nevertheless a prophet without full knowledge, and had prepared the minds of the Gael for the preaching of Christ's gospel, and they also bade him write in a book such things as Caelta might tell him, for the instruction of future generations. "For truly," they said, "the Holy Trinity have been in this place before thee."

After that the angels left him and St. Patrick returned to the monastery with great joy. The men were still asleep. They slept two days and three nights before the Saint conversed with them again.

Patrick baptized them, and after they had been baptized Caelta put his hand into the hollow of his mighty shield and took out a bar of gold and gave it to Patrick as his baptismal fee. It was as thick as a man's arm and reached from the elbow of the Saint to the first joint of his forefinger.

"It came from a good man," said Caelta, "and it goes to another. This was the last payment that I had from my dear lord and friend, Finn the son of Cool, the son of Trenmor, high captain of the Fianna of Erin."

From that bar Patrick made gilding for all his bells and books, and rejoiced to think that his sacred things had their gold from such a source, for the conversation of Caelta and the communications of the angels caused him to perceive that Finn was a seer and a prophet who in his own way, not knowing it, wrought out the will of God amongst the Gael. Also he was careful to record all that Caelta related to him concerning Finn and the Fians.

#### THE HISTORIAN HAS A WELCOME VISITOR.

At the end of a day's hunting Finn and Bering found themselves alone with their two dogs. When Finn wound his horn there was no answering horn. They then went forward, looking around on every side for some sign of human habitation. At last they saw a light and went towards it. The light came from a large shining lamp set in the gate-tower of a handsome dwelling-place. There was a moat, and inside the moat a wall, and within the wall a good-sized house with trees around it. The drawbridge which spanned the moat was drawn up, but on the side of the moat on which the two men stood was an iron gong, and beneath it a stout club. Bering seized the club and beat upon the gong.

The people of this fort had already retired to rest, but the master was awake. He was sitting beside his fire, arranging a number of beechen tablets on which many

(d 436) p

things seemed to have been written in strange letters. In fact the man was reading, for in those days books were made of timber. The beechen tablet which he held in his hand contained the history of Finn and his men. He had written this history himself, and was getting the tablets into better order, and lamenting that there were so many things in Finn's history with which he was not acquainted. At the other side of the fire was a boy very sleepy and nodding.

Said the man, " Oh, that Finn might lose his way some night when he is hunting, and come here for rest and refreshment. He would tell me the things I want to know. Then I could fill up these empty tablets. Boy," he said, " have not the Fianna been hunting all day in the next forest?"

" Truly, master," said the boy; " I myself ran from height to height watching them, but the chase passed away south-westward."

The man groaned. Just then both man and boy started from their seats, for they heard the thunderous roar of the great iron gong struck by the hand of Finn's man.

" Run, boy," said the man of the house; " see who is at the gate and bring me word."

The boy ran, climbed into the gate tower, and swiftly returned.

" My lord," he said, " there are without two men of great stature. The elder and taller of the two is the most beautiful being that these eyes ever saw. His hair is pure white and rolls in masses over the scarlet mantle that surrounds his mighty shoulders; his complexion is fresh and ruddy, and his eyes are blue. There is beside him a hound which he leads by a chain of silver attached to a collar of gold. That hound is a wonder. She has a small head, eyes as terrible as a dragon, and a white spot on her black breast. The man's companion is brown-haired, and he leads by a bronze chain a spotted leopard."

" Put wings to thy feet, lad," cried the old man in great excitement; " raise the portcullis and let fall the bridge, for the men are Finn and his man Dering, and thy leopard is only Bran's spotted sister. Haste I haste !"

Meantime Dering would have once more thundered upon the gong, but Finn restrained him.

The old man joyfully received these welcome guests. As all his people had been awakened by the thunder which Bering had roused from the gong, an excellent supper was soon got ready for the two Fians. Bran and the Leopard had their supper that night served to them in a silver dish, a vessel of great price, for it was the proudest and happiest night in that old man's long life, and well he knew that not Finn only, but those two dogs, would be famous while night and day endure. When they had had their supper Bran and the Leopard came and lay down upon the hearth before the fire, and the old man scanned them closely with great awe and reverence. Bran's ears were red, her legs yellow, the rest of her body was black, save for a round white spot on her breast, and a starry shower of white over her loins. The Leopard was spotted yellow throughout on a ground of black, the spots growing smaller and more frequent towards the neck, and very small upon the head and ears. Of the two, the Leopard

seemed to be the more powerful, and Bran the swifter and more spirited. Both dogs were sleek and glossy. There was no beast in the world which they would not overtake and pull down. The Leopard's real name was Sgeolan.

#### FINN'S HUMBLE RELATIONS.

" I Like thee well, old man, for many-things," said Finn, who had now ended his supper. " Thou hast entertained us nobly and like a king, without officiousness or too hospitable zeal, and hast suffered us to eat our supper in peace, which hungry men like best. I perceive, too, that thou art a lover of dogs like myself, and that there flows from thee a strong torrent of affection and admiration for my two matchless hounds; and if a man loves my dogs, he shall ever be dear to me. I perceive, also, that thou art a historian, and historians are very dear to me."

The old man answered, " captain of the Fianna, thy dogs are famous over the whole world, and will be famous to the world's end; nor am I surprised at their glory when I look upon them, and this is the first time I have seen them near at hand. Often have I inquired concerning their birth and breeding, but no man could relate it. The wisest of them said it is unknown."

" It is unknown," said Finn.

" I would give much to learn," said the old man.

" Many have expressed the same wish, ' answered Finn.

The old man set drinking vessels on a small table near the fire, also a great measure of ale, and when the two guests had washed their hands in ewers of water, and dried them in napkins, they drew nigh to the fire. Finn blessed the man and his house, and took a deep draught, draining the last drop from the huge tankard, while the old man wondered.

Finn looked earnestly at him and said ? " Bid the servants go to bed, and I will tell thee. I will tell thee other things, too, and thou shalt fill thy empty prepared staves."

The old man obeyed joyfully, and when he had shut and bolted the doors of the chamber, he returned. He thought his heart would break with excess of joy. Then he sat down at the one side of the fire, and, for the first time, looked at Finn towering on the other, his mighty limbs and huge knotted knees, and his countenance like the sun.

" Long ago," said Finn, " for no man who now lives remembers these things, when first my passion for hounds came upon me, I was in my booth on the slopes of the Slieve Bloom Mountains. It was night, and I in my bed. Without a storm raged, and the roar of the forest surrounded me, with thunder and lightning and the rushing of rain. I lay awake rejoicing in the uproar ; but while I listened I heard amid the noise a very small and delicate sound, like the tinkling of some exquisitely modulated tympan, exceeding sweet. I must tell thee, too, that ere this my mother's sister was lost and could nowhere be found, and it was supposed that she had been spirited away by the Fomorian enchanters, and was Been subsequently in the form of a beautiful hound. I heard a knocking at the door of the booth, and when I opened it, I was at first dazzled with the flood of light which came in through the door. I thought it was very near lightning. Then I perceived a woman standing there, tall, and wondrous beautiful, with a closed basket in her hand.

She gave me the basket, and said ? ' I have brought these to thee, O Finn, for I have always heard that cousins should be cousinly.' I sav^ no more of the woman, and when I drew back into the booth and had stirred up the embers and made a blaze, I opened the basket and discovered there two blind puppies of exactly the same colour as those which lie before thee on the hearth. They have been w4th me eversince," said Finn, " and they are with me now. These hounds, then, matchless for beauty, speed, courage, strength, and intelligence, are my own cousins," said Finn.

#### FINN TELLS ABOUT HIS CHILDHOOD.

" Win victories and blessings for ever, O captain of the Fians of Fail," answered the old man. That, indeed, is a strange and memorable story, nor am I surprised at it when I contemplate their beautiful proportions, and think of their rare intelligence and sagacity, of which I have heard many things. And now, Finn, if it would not be irksome to thee, I would gladly learn somewhat of thy boyish life. As long as I can remember thou hast been famous and powerful, ruling in the midst of thy unconquerable warriors and indefatigable hunters. But men tell vaguely of a time, long ago, when thou wert solitary and surrounded with peril of many kinds. They also say that the sons of Morna searched the world for thee, to slay thee, when thou wert a young child. But of these things they speak vaguely. If it would not weary thee, I would gladly learn these things with more exactness from thy own eloquent and correctly-speaking lips."

" I will tell thee somewhat," said Finn. "' It will not weary me, for I am by nature eloquent, and speech flows from me without effort. I was a babe in the cradle when that great battle was fought in which my father was slain. The conquerors, viz. the sons of Morna, forthwith spread themselves over Ireland with the object of exterminating all my father's sons and grandsons, and, in fact, our whole race. A fierce company came straight from the battle to my mother's house to kill me. No news of the battle had yet reached my mother, when two strange women entered the. house, snatched me from the cradle before her eyes, and fled. They were leaving the palace by one door when my enemies were entering by the other. The latter gave chase, but they might as well have chased the wind as chased those women. The women brought me to the depths of the forests which clothe the Slieve Bloom Mountains. There I was weaned, and dwelt as a child with the two women in the forest, cowering low before the wrath of the sons of Morna, whose trackers and searchers continued seeking for me. That was how I survived the slaughter of all my father's house."

#### FINN'S FIRST QUARRY.

" I would know now, Finn," said the old man, " what game, bird or beast, first fell by thy hand. Now indeed thou art a mighty hunter, thy forests are everywhere, and thy game laws embrace all Erin. Few are the houses in which a hound- whelp is not being reared for thee, and, truly, the great game and the small which fall before thee in any one year, who could number? But of all fame there is a beginning, as the mightiest river has a small source."

" That is true," said Finn, " and I will tell thee. Afterwards my protectors fled with me out of the Slieve Bloom Mountains, for the sons of Morna discovered my retreat, and they put a ring of men and dogs round the mountains, and were closing inwards. Nevertheless, the heroines bore me safely through them all, and fled with me into the extreme west of Munster, beyond

the beautiful glen which is called Glengariffe, to a place on the haven of Bera, which is known as Dunboy. There they built a hut on the edge of a wood close to a small lake. I used to play on the shore of the lake, and send smooth finger stones skimming along the surface, and soon began to shoot very straight and far. One day a wild duck came sailing past with her brood of twelve ducklings. I took a good aim at her with a care fully- selected stone. She saw the missile approaching, leaping from point to point on the smooth water, and with her wdngs began to beat the water inthe act of raising herself for flight. Yet the stone struck her and cut off her two wings. The bird, accompanied by her orphaned brood, drifted towards the shore, and when I could reach her, I seized her joyfully, and also took and put in my bosom the twelve ducklings, and so hastened to the house, where the heroines praised me much for my skill and success. The plucking, the roasting, basting, and carving of that duck gave these persons and myself as much pleasure as was ever got out of any similar adventure. That, " said Finn, " was my first exploit as a hunter."

#### FINN AND THE POETS.

" It is reported," said the old man, " that no one understands or loves poetry better than thyself, and I know that no youth can be enrolled amongst thy Fians unless he can make a good poem."

" I myself made that law," said Finn, for many good reasons, and chiefly for this, that youths who love poetry are more readily inflamed to the performance of great deeds, are more obedient to their captains, and hold their banner and their battalion in greater esteem. One rude bone-hewer may indeed conquer a youth of the kind I love, but set against each other two armies, one of warlike boors and the other such as are my Fians, and they are not to be compared.

" My own poetic nature I inherit from my mother. It was she who composed that lullaby which begins, " Sleep, my child, in soft slumber sleep." She came secretly to the place where the heroines guarded me, and took me in her arms and to her bosom and sang that lullaby and departed.

" After the first hunting exploit which I have described, I hunted perpetually, and got food for my protectors. Then the passion of poetry grew upon me. There were six poets who lived together in a dell in the Galtee Mountains I abandoned my protectors and went to live w4th them, and they taught me. I lived with these sons of wisdom and beauty till one day when a robber and plunderer out of Leinster came and slew them all and took me away captive, and compelled me to live with him in his den, which, like a stork's nest, was in the midst of a cold, bleak, desolate marsh, a wide watery expanse of sorrow,

" Afterwards, when I was a young man, J came to the beautiful Boyne, hearing that the wisest men were there, I became servant to a man who called himself Finn ; my own name then was Demna. It chanced that the day I entered his service he had taken a salmon in the pool of the Boyne which is called Linn F6c. He bade me bake the salmon and serve it. When I set the salmon before him, he asked me whether I had tasted the fish. I said, ' no,' but that I had touched it with my thumb to know if it were sufficiently baked, and afterwards put my burned thumb into my mouth, ' Alas,' he said, ' the prophecy is fulfilled. This fish is not for me, but for thee. It is the Salmon of Knowledge, and thou art the true Finn, about whom the prophets have been prophesying from ancient days. Sit in my place and eat the fish,' So I sat in his place and ate the Salmon of Knowledge. That is the reason why, when I put my thumb under my divining tooth, the knowledge of things past and to come is revealed to me.

" I remained on the banks of the Boyne with the wise men there till I had mastered all the mysteries of poetry and all the knowledge which it contained in that art. On the day that I was initiated and admitted a member of their learned company, I composed a poem in proof of my poetic skill."

" Prithee repeat it for me," said the old man.

Finn repeated it.

" May-day ! delightful time ! how beautiful the  
colour,  
The blackbirds sing their full lay.  
Oh that Laeg were here.  
The cuckoos sing in constant strains.  
How welcome the noble  
Brilliance of the season ever. On the margin of  
the branchy woods  
The summer swallows skim the streams.  
The horses seek the pool.  
The heath spreads out its long hair.  
The weak white bog-down grows.  
Sudden consternation attacks the signs. The planets  
in their course running exert an influence.  
The sea is lulled to rest, flowers cover the earth."

Finn repeated the poem slowly in order that the old man might remember it. The metre was complicated and intricate, and the poem throughout riveted with many-shining alliterations, so that it might be the more easily remembered, and defy the assaults of time.

#### FINN REVEALS HIMSELF FURTHER.

" It is on account of my poetic nature and my close intimacy with many excellent poets that I have pleasures which are not usually enjoyed by warriors and hunters. Dear to me is the cry of sea-gulls and the thunder of the great billows of the Atlantic against the cliffs of Erris, the washing of water against the sides of ships, and the sound, foam, and motion behind them as they cleave the fluid sea, for not dearer to me is the firm earth than the never-resting ocean. I love to hear the clear flute of the blackbird in the morning, and the thrush's song as he sits by himself and sings when the sun goes down. The beautiful changes of the varying year are sweet to me, and truly there are not many sights and sounds that I do not love, or from which I do not derive pleasure, so that solitude is no more irksome to me than company, and yet I am the most sociable of men; so that I do not surround myself with guards and royal state, but live simply in the midst of my people, like one of themselves, for I love them well, and well they love me."

The old man, still thirsting for knowledge, said, "O Finn, tell me who is the best man, and who is the worst among the Fians."

Finn answered, " I myself am the best man, and Dara-duff from the Black Mountain is the worst. There is a great deal of life in me," said Finn; "and a great deal of life goes out of me. There is death in him, and a great deal of death goes out of him. Yet he never had less power

than he has now. Even if I could destroy him, I am not permitted to do so, for his roots spring mysteriously out of the roots of the world. He has been in the world always, and will be in it till the end of time."

"Dismiss me now to my rest and my slumber, O amiable and much-inquiring historian!" said Finn; "for I arose early this morning, and that was an early rising when a man could not see the sky between his outspread fingers, or distinguish the leaves of the oak from those of the beech."

While this conversation lasted Dering had shown no signs of sleep or drowsiness; he sat erect, listening with bright eyes.

In the morning Finn asked the historian many questions concerning his manner of work, and commended him, and gave him good counsel, as, for example, "that he should not, in making his histories, concern himself exclusively with wars and things horrible, but should tell also of the common daily life of men and women; let women and children," he said, "be frequent in your stories, for they are the light of life, nor let the sun be long absent from your tale, seeing that he himself is never long absent from us. Also," he said, "I perceive there is some domestic sorrow in thy mind. What is it?"

The old man said that he had a very dear grandson who was sick of a decline.

"Bring him to me," said Finn.

Finn looked upon the lad and asked whether there was a well of pure water in the neighbourhood, and when they answered him "Yes," he bade them lead him to it.

There he scooped up the sparkling water in the hollow of his right hand, and when he had spoken some poetry in a strange tongue, he gave to the young man to drink. From that day the youth steadily recovered.

Finn caused the whole household to come before him. He spake kind words to them all, and he blessed the old man and his people, and went away with Bering and the dogs, and they saw him no more.

Finn and his companions / by Standish O'Grady ([1921])

Author : O'Grady, Standish, 1846-1928

Subject : Finn MacCumhaill, 3rd cent

Publisher : Dublin : Talbot Press ; London : T.F. Unwin

Language : English

Digitizing sponsor : MSN

Book contributor : University of California Libraries

Collection : americana; cdl

Source : Internet Archive

<http://www.archive.org/details/finnhiscompanion00ogra>

Edited and uploaded to [www.augty.org](http://www.augty.org) March 29 2010