

The
Story Of Conn-Eda ;

Or,
The Golden Apples

Of
Loch Erne.

Translated From The Original Irish,

By Nicholas O’Kearney, Esq.

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The Story Of Conn-Eda [1].

The following romantic tale, or *Fionn-sgeal*, is as wild as any told by the Arabian princess, and both curious and interesting, because it solely relates to Ireland. The story is a literal translation of an Irish one frequently told, or rather recited, by a professed story-teller, or *Ursgealaidhe*, named Abraham Mac Coy, during his professional engagements. The story-teller, possibly the last member of his profession known to have flourished in Ireland, was a living encyclopædia, replete with stories of the same nature, some of which have been rescued from oblivion, and may tend to throw light on the manners, customs, and forms of religious belief entertained by the pagan Irish, or, perhaps, help to elucidate some obscurities found dimming many pages of our ancient history. There can be no doubt entertained but that the archæologists of the sister countries—those of Cambria in particular—will feel obliged for having preserved this and similar tales from the general wreck sustained by Irish traditional lore, as they probably may find something analogous in their own legends. Perhaps the lore of one country may materially tend to explain that of another.

It was long before the time the western districts of *Innis Fodhla* [2] had any settled name, but were indiscriminately called after the person who took possession of them, and whose name they retained only as long as his sway lasted, a powerful king reigned over this part of the sacred island. He was a puissant warrior, and no individual was found able to compete with him either on land or sea, or question his right to the conquest he made by strength of his manly right hand, the point of his glittering javelin, and keen edge of his blue sword. The great king of the west held uncontrolled sway from the island of Rathlin to the mouth of the Shannon by sea, and far as the glittering Shannon wound its sinuous length by land. The ancient king of the west, whose name was Conn, was good as well as great, and passionately loved by his people. His queen was a *Breton* (British) princess, and was equally beloved and esteemed, because she was the very counterpart of the king in every respect ; for

whatever good qualification was found wanting in one, the other was certain to indemnify the omission. It was plainly manifest that heaven approved of the career in life of the virtuous couple ; for during their reign the earth produced exuberant crops, the trees fruit ninefold commensurate with their usual bearing, the rivers, lakes, and surrounding sea teemed with abundance of choice fishes, while herds and flocks were unusually prolific, and kine and sheep yielded such abundance of rich milk, that they shed it in torrents upon the pastures ; and furrows and cavities were always filled with the pure lacteal produce of the dairy. All these were blessings heaped by heaven upon the western districts of *Innis Fodhla*, over which the benignant and just Conn swayed his sceptre, in approbation of the course of government he had marked out for his own guidance. It is needless to state that the people who owned the authority of this great and good sovereign were the happiest on the face of the wide expanse of earth. It was during his reign, and that of his son and successor, that Ireland acquired the title of the “ happy isle of the west” among foreign nations. Conn Mór, and his good Queen Eda, reigned in great glory during many years : they were blessed with an only son, whom they named Conn-eda, after both his parents, because the Druids foretold, at his birth, that he would inherit the good qualities of both. According as the young prince grew in years, his amiable and benignant qualities of mind, as well as his great strength of body and manly bearing, became more manifest. He was the idol of his parents, and the proud boast of his people ; he was beloved and respected to that degree that neither prince, lord nor plebeian swore an oath either by the sun, moon, stars, or elements, except by the head of Conn-eda. This career of glory however was doomed to meet a powerful but temporary impediment, for the good Queen Eda took a sudden and severe illness, of which she died in a few days, thus plunging her spouse, her son, and all her people, into a depth of grief and sorrow from which it was found difficult to relieve them.

The good king and his subjects mourned the loss of Queen Eda for a year and a day ; and, at the expiration of that time. Conn Mór reluctantly yielded to the advice of his Druids and counsellors, and took to wife the daughter of his Archdruid. The new queen appeared to walk in the footsteps of the good Eda for several years, and gave great satisfaction to her subjects. But, in course of time, having had several children, and perceiving that Conn-eda was the favourite son of the king, and the darling of the people, she clearly foresaw that he would become successor to the throne after the demise of his father, and that her son would certainly be excluded. This excited the hatred and inflamed the jealousy of the Druid’s daughter against her stepson to such an extent, that she resolved, in her own mind, to leave nothing in her power undone to procure his death, or even exile from the kingdom. She began by circulating evil reports of the prince ; but, as he was above suspicion, the king only laughed at the weakness of the queen ; and the great princes and chieftains, supported by the people in general, gave an unqualified contradiction ; while the prince himself bore all his trials with the utmost patience, and always repaid her bad and malicious acts towards him with good and benevolent ones. The enmity of the queen towards Conn-eda knew no bounds, when she saw that the false reports she circulated could not injure him, because he was a public man whose character was too well known and appreciated to suffer the least injury from the poisoned sting of calumny. As a last resource, to carry out her wicked projects, she determined to consult her *Cailleach-chearc* (hen wife), who was a reputed enchantress.

Pursuant to her resolution, by the early dawn of morning she hied to the cabin of the *Cailleach-chearc*, and divulged to her the cause of her trouble. “ I cannot render you any help,” said the Cailleach, “ until you name the *duais*” (reward). “ What *duais* do you require?” asked the queen impatiently. “ My *duais*,” replied the enchantress, “ is to fill the cavity of my arm with wool, and the hole I shall bore with my distaff with red wheat.” “ Your *duais* is granted, and shall be immediately given you,” said the queen. The enchantress thereupon stood in the door of her hut, and bending her arm into a circle with her side,

directed the royal attendants to thrust the wool into her house through her arm ; and she never permitted them to cease until all the available space within was filled with wool. She then got on the roof of her brother's house, and, having made a hole through it with her distaff, caused red wheat to be spilled through it, until that house was filled up to the roof, so that there was no room for another grain within. " Now," said the queen, " since you have received your *duais*, tell me how I can accomplish my purpose." " Take this chess-board and chess, and invite the prince to play with you ; you shall win the first game. The condition you shall make is, that whoever wins a game shall be at liberty to impose whatever *geasa* (conditions) the winner pleases upon the loser. When you win, you must bind the prince under the penalty either to go into *ionarbadh* (exile), or procure for you, within the space of a year and a day, the three golden apples that grow in the garden, the *each dubh* (black steed), and *coilean con na mhuadh* (hound of super-natural powers), called Samer, which are in the possession of the king of the Firbolg race, who resides in Loch Erne. [3] Those two things are so precious, and so well guarded, that he never can attain them by his own power; and, if he would rashly attempt to seek them, he should lose his life."

The queen was greatly rejoiced at the advice, and lost no time in inviting Conn-eda to play a game at chess, under the conditions she had been instructed to arrange by the enchantress. The queen won the game, as the enchantress had foretold ; but so great was her anxiety to have the prince completely in her power, that she was tempted to challenge him to play a second game, which Conn-eda, to her astonishment, and no less mortification, easily won. " Now," said the prince, " since you have won the first game, it is your duty to impose your *geis* first." " My *geis*" said the queen, " which I impose upon you, is to procure me the *each duhh* (black steed), and *cuilean con na mhuadh* (hound of supernatural powers), which are in the keeping of the king of the Firbolgs, in Loch Erne, within the space of a year and a day ; or, in case you fail, to go into *ionarhadh* (exile), and never return, except you surrender yourself to lose your head and *comhead beatha*" (preservation of life). " Well, then," said the prince, " the *geis* which I bind you by is, to sit upon the pinnacle of yonder tower until my return, and to take neither food nor nourishment of any description, except what red wheat you can pick up with the point of your bodkin ; but, if I do not return, you are at perfect liberty to come down at the expiration of the year and a day."

In consequence of the severe *geis* imposed unexpectedly upon him, Conn-eda was very much troubled in mind ; and, well knowing he had a long journey to make before he would reach his destination, immediately prepared to set out on his way, not, however, before he had the satisfaction of witnessing the ascent of the queen to the place where she was obliged to remain exposed to the scorching sun of summer, and the blasting storms of winter, for the space of one year and a day, at least. Conn-eda being ignorant of what steps he should take to procure the *each duhh* and *cuilean con na rnhuadh*, though he was well aware that human energy would prove unavailing, thought proper to consult the Great Druid, Fionn Badhna, of Sliabh Badhna, who was a friend of his, before he ventured to proceed to Loch Erne. When he arrived at the *bruighean* of the Druid, he was received with cordial friendship, and the *failte* [4] as usual, was poured out before him ; and, when he was seated, warm water was fetched, and his feet bathed, so that the fatigue he felt after his journey was greatly relieved. The Druid, after he had partaken of refreshments, consisting of the newest of food and the oldest of liquors, asked him the reason for paying the visit, and more particularly the cause of his sorrow ; for the prince appeared exceedingly depressed in spirit. Conn-eda told his friend the whole history of the transaction with his step-mother, from the beginning to the end ; which, when the Druid heard it, caused him to compress his lips and nod his head very significantly, but he made no answer. " Can you not assist me?" asked the prince, with down-cast countenance, having observed the motions of the Druid. " I cannot, indeed, assist you at present," replied the Druid, " but I will retire to my *grianan*, at sun-rising on the morrow, and

learn by virtue of my druidism what can be done to assist you.” The Druid, accordingly, as the sun rose on the following morning, retired to his *grianan*, and consulted the god he adored, through the power of his *druidheacht*. When he returned, he called Conn-eda aside on the plain, and addressed him thus : — “ My dear son, I find you have been bound under a severe — an almost impossible — *geis*, intended for your destruction ; no person on earth could have advised the queen to impose it, except the Cailleach of Loch Corrib, who is the greatest Druidess now in Ireland, and sister to the Firbolg king of Loch Erne. It is not, I am sorry to have to inform you, in my power, nor in that of the deity I adore, to interfere in your behalf ; but go directly to Sliabh Mis, and consult *Eán chinn-duine* (the bird with a human head), and if there be any possibility of relieving you, that bird shall do it ; for there is not a bird in the western world so celebrated as that bird, because it knows all things that are past, all things that are present, and exist, and all things that shall hereafter exist. It is difficult to find access to his place of concealment, and more difficult still to obtain an answer from him ; but I will endeavour to regulate that matter for you ; and that is all I can do for you at present.”

The Archdruid then instructed him thus: — “ Take,” said he, “ yonder little shaggy steed, and mount him immediately ; for in those days the bird will make himself visible, and the little shaggy steed will conduct you to his place of abode. But lest the bird should refuse to reply to your queries, take this precious stone (*leag longmhar*), and present it to him ; and then little danger and doubt exists but he will give you a ready answer.” The prince returned heartfelt thanks to the Druid ; and, having saddled and mounted the little shaggy horse without making much delay, received the precious stone from the Druid, and, after having taken his leave of him, set out on his journey. He suffered the reins to fall loose upon the neck of the horse, according as he had been instructed, so that the animal took whatever road he chose.

It would be tedious to relate the numerous adventures he had with the little shaggy horse, which had the extraordinary gift of speech, and was a *draoidheacht* horse, during his journey.

The prince having reached the hiding-place of the strange bird at the appointed time, and having presented him with the *leag longmhar*, according to Fionn Badhna’s instructions, and proposed his questions relative to the manner he could best arrange for the fulfilment of his *geis*, the bird took up the jewel from the stone on which it was placed, in his mouth, and flew to an inaccessible rock at some distance, and, when there perched, he thus addressed the prince: — “ Conn-eda, son of the king of Cruachan,” said he, in a loud croaking human voice, “ remove the stone just under your right foot, and take the ball of iron and the *corná* (cup) you shall find under it ; then mount your horse, cast the ball before you, and, having so done, your horse will tell you all the other things necessary to be done.” The bird, having said this, immediately flew out of sight.

Conn-eda took great care to do everything according to the instructions of the bird. He found the iron ball and *corná* in the place which had been pointed out. He took them up, mounted his horse, and cast the ball before him. The ball rolled on at a regular gait, while the little shaggy horse followed on the way it led, until they reached the margin of Loch Erne. Here the ball rolled into the water, and became invisible. “ Alight now,” said the *draoidheacht* pony, “ and put your hand into mine ear ; take from thence the small bottle of *íce* (all-heal) and the little wicker basket which you will find there, and remount with speed, for just now your great dangers and difficulties commence.” Conn-eda, ever faithful to the kind advice of his *draoidheacht* pony, did what he had been advised. Having taken the basket and bottle of *íce* from the animal’s ear, remounted and proceeded on his journey, while the water of the lake appeared only like an atmosphere above his head. When he entered the lake the

ball again appeared, and rolled along until it came to the margin, across which was a causeway, guarded by three frightful serpents ; the hissings of the monsters were heard at a great distance, while, on a nearer approach, their yawning mouths and formidable fangs were quite sufficient to terrify the stoutest heart. “ Now,” said the horse, “ open the basket, and cast a piece of the meat you find in it into the mouth of each serpent ; when you have done this, secure yourself in your seat in the best manner you can, so that we may make all due arrangements to pass those *draoidheacht peists*. Take the pieces of meat you shall find in the basket, and, with a straight hand and well-directed aim, cast one into the mouth of each peist. If you do so unerringly we shall pass them safely, otherwise, we are lost. Conn-eda flung the pieces of meat into the jaws of the serpents with unerring aim. “ Bear a benison and victory,” said the *draoidheacht* steed, “ for you are a youth that will win and prosper.” And, on saying these words, he sprang aloft, and cleared in his leap the river and ford, guarded by the serpents, seven measures beyond the margin. “ Are you still mounted. Prince Conn-eda?” asked the steed. “ It is only half my exertion to remain so,” replied Conn-eda. “ I find,” said the pony, “ that you are a young prince that deserves to succeed, — one danger is now over, but two others still remain.” They proceeded onwards after the ball until they came in view of a great mountain flaming with fire. “ Hold yourself in readiness for another dangerous leap,” said the horse. The trembling prince had no answer to make, but seated himself as secure as the magnitude of the danger before him would permit. The horse in the next instant sprung from the earth, and flew like an arrow over the burning mountain. “ Are you still alive, Conn-eda, son of Conn-more?” inquired the faithful horse. “ I am just alive, and no more, for I am greatly scorched,” answered the prince. “ Since you are yet alive, I feel assured that you are a young man destined to meet supernatural success and benisons,” said the druidic steed. “ Our greatest dangers are over,” added he, “ and there is hope that we shall be able to overcome the next, and last danger.” After they proceeded a short distance, his faithful steed, addressing Conn-eda, said, “ alight now, and apply a portion of the contents of the little bottle of *íce* to your wounds.” The prince immediately followed the advice of his monitor ; and, as soon as he rubbed the *íce* (all-heal) to his wounds, he became as whole and fresh as ever he had been before. After having done this, Conn-eda remounted, and, following the track of the ball, soon came in sight of a great city surrounded by high walls. The only gate which was visible was not defended by armed men, but by two great towers, which emitted flames that could be seen at a great distance. “ Alight on this plain,” said the steed, “ and take a small knife from my other ear; with this knife you shall kill and flay me. When you have done this, envelope yourself in my hide, and you can pass the gate unscathed and unmolested. When you get inside you can come out at pleasure ; because, when once you enter, there is no danger, and you can pass and repass whenever you wish ; and let me tell you that all I have to ask of you, in return for any little service I may have rendered you, is that you, when once you get inside of the gates, will immediately return, and drive away any birds of prey that may be fluttering around to feed on my carcass, and more, that you will pour any little drop of that powerful *íce*, if such still remain in the bottle, upon my flesh, to preserve it from corruption. When you do this in memory of me, if it be not too troublesome, dig a pit and cast my remains into it.”

“ Well,” said Conn-eda, “ my noblest steed, because you have been so faithful to me hitherto, and because I had the pleasure, as well as the happiness, to meet with you, and you still would have rendered me further service, I consider such a proposal insulting to my feelings as a man, and totally at variance with the spirit which can feel the value of gratitude, not to speak of my feelings as a prince. You, that propose to sacrifice your life for my welfare and benefit, — what a horrid revolting proposal your good nature prompts you to make, — a proposal which shall never be sanctioned by me, much less its details be carried into execution. Ah, you, who have been my dearest companion, faithful friend and infallible counsellor, to demand such a sacrifice at my hands ! But as a prince I am able to say ‘ come what may, —

come death itself in its most hideous forms and terrors, — I never will sacrifice private friendship to personal interest, no matter, what the urgencies or provocations may be.’ Hence I am, I swear by my arms of valour, prepared to meet the worst, — even death itself, — sooner than violate the principles of humanity, honour and friendship ! My life, in corroboration of what I state as a prince and a hero, shall be sacrificed before I will lay a single finger upon my noble steed and counsellor, to injure his life. Come, death, come in your most hideous forms, and you will find what an Irish prince, filled with grateful feelings, can endure, with not only patience, but cheerfulness ! Well, let me say, your death would lead me to victory. But what would that victory be but a triumph over a weak woman ? What a sacrifice you propose !” “ Pshaw, man ! heed not that : do what I advise you, and prosper.” “ Never! never!” exclaimed the prince. “ Well, then, son of the great western monarch,” said the horse, with a tone of sorrow, “ if you do not follow my advice on this occasion, I can tell you that both you and I shall perish, and shall never meet again ; but, if you act as I have instructed you, matters shall assume a happier and more pleasing aspect than you may imagine. I have not misled you heretofore, and if I have not, what need have you to doubt the most important portion of my counsel ? Do exactly as I have directed you, else you will cause a worse fate than death to befall me. And, moreover, I can tell you that, if you persist in your resolution, I have done with you for ever.”

When the prince found that his noble steed could not be dissuaded from his purpose, he took the knife out of his ear with reluctance, and with a faltering mind and trembling hand, essayed experimentally to point the weapon at his throat. Conn-eda’s eyes were bathed in tears ; but no sooner had he pointed the druidic *scian* to the throat of his good steed, than the dagger, as if impelled by some druidic power, stuck in his neck, and in an instant the work of death was done, and the noble animal fell dead at his feet ! When the prince saw his noble steed fall dead by his hand, he cast himself on the ground, and cried aloud until his consciousness was gone. When he recovered, he perceived that the steed was quite dead ; and, as he thought there was no room left for hope of resuscitating him, he considered it the most prudent course he could adopt, to act according to the advice he had given him. After many misgivings of mind, and abundant showers of tears, he essayed the task of flaying him, which was that of only a few minutes. When he found he had the hide separated from the carrion, he, in the derangement of the moment, enveloped himself with it, and proceeding towards the magnificent city in rather a demented state of mind, entered it without any molestation or opposition. It was a surprizingly populous city, and an extremely wealthy place ; but its beauty, magnificence, and wealth had no charm for Conn-eda, because the thoughts of the loss he sustained in his dear steed were paramount to those of all other earthly considerations.

He had scarcely proceeded more than fifty paces from the gate, until the last request of his beloved *draoidheacht* steed forced itself upon his mind, and compelled him to return to perform the last solemn injunction imposed upon him. When he came to the spot upon which the remains of his beloved *draoidheacht* steed lay, an appalling sight presented itself : ravens and other carnivorous birds of prey were tearing and devouring the flesh of his dear steed. It was but short work to put them to flight ; and, having uncorked his little jar of *ice*, he deemed it a labour of love to embalm the now mangled carrion with the precious ointment. The potent *ice* had scarcely touched the inanimate flesh, when, to the surprize of Conn-eda, it commenced to undergo some strange change, and in a few minutes, to his unspeakable astonishment and inexpressible joy, it assumed the form of one of the handsomest and noblest young men imaginable, and, in the twinkling of an eye, the prince was locked in his embrace, smothering him with kisses, and drowning him with tears of joy. When one recovered from his ecstasy of joy, and the other from his surprize, the strange youth thus addressed the prince : — “ Most noble and puissant prince, you are the best sight I ever saw with my eyes, and I the most fortunate being in existence for having met you I Behold in my person, changed to the natural

shape, your little shaggy *draoidheacht* steed ! I am brother of the king of this city ; and it was the wicked Druid, Fionn Badhna, who kept me so long in bondage ; but he was forced to give me up when you came to *consult him*, as my *geis* was then broken ; yet I could not recover my pristine shape and appearance, unless you had acted as you have kindly done. It was my own sister that urged the queen, your stepmother, to send you in quest of the steed and powerful puppy hound, which my brother has long had in keeping. My sister, rest assured, had no thought of doing you the least injury, but much good, as you shall find hereafter ; because, if she were maliciously inclined towards you, she could have accomplished her end without any trouble. In short, she only wanted to free you from all future danger and disaster, and recover me from my relentless enemies, through your instrumentality. Come with me, my friend and deliverer, and the steed, and the puppy hound of extraordinary powers, and the golden apples, shall be thine, and a cordial welcome shall greet you in my brother's abode ; for you deserve all this, and much more."

The exciting joy felt on the occasion was mutual, and they lost no time in idle congratulations, but proceeded on to the royal residence of the king of Loch Erne. Here they were both received with demonstrations of joy by the king and his chieftains ; and, when the purport of Conn-eda's visit became known to the king, he gave a free consent to bestow on Conn-eda the black steed, the *coilean con na mbuadh*, called Samer, and the three golden apples of health that were growing in his garden, under the special condition, however, that he would consent to remain as his guest until he would set out on his journey, in proper time to fulfil his *geis*. Conn-eda, at the earnest solicitation of his friends, consented, and remained in the royal residence of the Firbolg king of Loch Erne, in the enjoyment of the most delicious and fascinating pleasures during that period.

When the time of his departure came, the three golden apples were plucked from the crystal tree in the midst of the pleasure garden, and deposited in his bosom ; the puppy hound, Samer, was leashed, and the leash put into his hand ; and the black steed, richly harnessed, was got in readiness for him to mount. The king himself helped him on horseback, and both he and his brother assured him that he might not fear burning mountains or hissing serpents, because none would impede him, as his steed was a passport to and from his subaqueous kingdom at every time. And both he and his brother extorted a promise from Conn-eda, that he would visit them once every year, at least.

Conn-eda took his leave of his dear friend, and the king, his brother ; the parting was a tender one, soured by regret on both sides. He proceeded on his way, without meeting anything to obstruct him, and, in due time, came in sight of the dun of his father, where the queen had been placed on the pinnacle of the tower, in the full hope that, as it was the last day of her imprisonment there, the prince would fail to make his appearance, and thereby forfeit all pretensions and right to the crown of his father for ever. But her hopes were doomed to meet a disappointment ; for when it had been announced to her by her couriers, who had been posted to watch the arrival of the prince, that he approached, she was incredulous ; but when she saw him mounted upon a foaming black steed, richly harnessed, and leading a strange kind of animal of the dog kind by a silver chain, she at once knew he was returning in triumph, and that her schemes laid for his destruction were frustrated. In the excess of grief at her disappointment, she cast herself from the top of the tower, and was instantly dashed in pieces. Conn-eda met a welcome reception from his father, who mourned for him as lost to him for ever, during his absence ; and when the base conduct of the queen became known, the king and his chieftains ordered her remains to be consumed to ashes, for her perfidy and wickedness.

Conn-eda planted the three golden apples in his garden, and instantly a great tree, bearing similar fruit, sprung up. This tree caused all the district to produce an exuberance of crops and fruits, so that it became as fertile and plentiful as the dominions of the Firbolgs, in consequence of the extraordinary powers possessed by the golden fruit. The hound, Samer, and the steed, were of the utmost utility to him ; and his reign was long and prosperous, and celebrated among the old people for the great abundance of corn, fruit, milk, fowl and fish that prevailed during this happy reign. It was after the name of Conn-eda the province of Connacht, or *Conn-eda*, *Connacht*, was so called.

[1] Some years ago, two rude statues were found in Neale Park, County Mayo, the seat of Lord Kilmaine. One represented an unicorn, probably the goat, from whence the cornucopia was taken for Jupiter, the other a lion, or some such animal. The inscription found on those monuments of antiquity, as is stated, says that these were the “*Díé na feile*” gods of plenty, and were the gods adored by Conn and Eda. Hence the place has been called *Neale*, from the Irish words “*an fheile*” (pronounced *a neile*); and because the Irish article *an*, the, has been attached to the substantive, *the Neale* is the name by which the place has been known. The traditions of the people exactly correspond with this account. The statues, it is said, are still preserved in the park of Lord Kilmaine ; but, never having been in that part of the island, I have not seen them.

[2] *Innis Fodhla*, Island of Fate, as some think, an old name of Ireland.

[3] The Firbolgs believed their elysium to be under water ; and the Irish still fancy that many of our lakes are peopled.

[4] *Failte* means welcome, but it means much more in original MSS.; even the Irish contraction of the word (*t*) means *fail*, a circle, and *t*, or *te*, the individual surrounded by friends.

The story of Conn-Eda : or, The golden apples of Loch Erne (1855)

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