

The Boyhood Deeds of Finn

WHEN CONN OF THE HUNDRED BATTLES was king of Ireland he had at his command an army of fighters and hunters called the Fianna, whose leader was Cumhall, son of Trenmor.

The king's chief druid at the time was called Nuada and this man built for himself a beautiful, white-fronted fort in Leinster. The druid's wife, Almu, asked that the fort be named after her and so Almu it was called. When Nuada died, his son Tadg became a druid in his place and lived on the Hill of Allen in the fort that his father had built.

Now Tadg had a daughter called Muirne who was so beautiful that the sons of kings and chiefs came in great numbers to Almu to ask for her hand. Among her suitors was Cumhall, head of Clan Bascna and leader of the Fianna. He asked repeatedly that Muirne become his wife but was always refused. Cumhall was so determined to have Muirne in spite of the refusals that one day he abducted her from the fort of Almu and carried her off. Tadg was outraged when he heard that his daughter had been taken away by Cumhall and went directly to see the king. He complained bitterly that one of the Fianna, all of whom were bound by a solemn oath to respect women, should have abducted his daughter. He reminded Conn that Cumhall was a kinsman of his and demanded that he be forced to restore Muirne to her family.

Immediately Conn dispatched his messengers to Cumhall and ordered him to send Muirne back to her father. Cumhall sent word back to the king that he would give him anything he asked, anything at all, except the woman. When Conn got this reply to his command he gathered together from the east and the west the Leinster and Connacht chiefs and the soldiers of Clan Morna, and enlisted their help to fight Cumhall.

From Munster in the south, bands of men loyal to Cumhall and

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the Clan Bascna marched to Leinster to help him. At Cnuca, called Castleknock today, the armies met and a fierce battle ensued. Cumhall fought bravely leading his small force against Conn's bigger army. In the course of the battle, Luchet, a follower of Cumhall's, struck one of the sons of Morna in the face with his spear and blinded him in one eye. For ever after this man was known as Goll (Blind) Mac Morna. Goll was a ferocious fighter and though he was half blind, he killed Luchet. He stripped him of his valuables and carried off his head. Then the followers of Goll Mac Morna turned on the Clan Bascna and routed them. They killed before and behind them and only a few of Cumhall's men escaped the massacre.

After the battle of Cnuca the king rewarded Goll Mac Morna by putting *him* at the head of the Fianna in place of Cumhall's heir. Because of this, and his part in Cumhall's death, a great feud broke out between Goll's tribe, the Clan Morna, and Cumhall's tribe, the Clan Bascna, which lasted for many years.

When Muirne, Cumhall's wife, heard that her husband had been killed in the battle of Cnuca and his followers scattered, she went back to Almu to seek refuge with her father, but Tadhg was so angry that she had eloped with Cumhall that he turned her from his door. Muirne made her way to the king's fortress at Tara and asked Conn for his protection, not only from Clan Morna, but from her own father who had ordered his men to kill her. Conn sent one of his servants to bring Muirne to a kinsman's house where she would be safe. There she was received warmly by the family and remained in hiding. Not long afterwards she gave birth to the son of Cumhall, and called him Demne.

Years later, when Demne grew up and was given the name Finn because he had fair hair, he went back to Almu to call his grandfather, Tadhg, to account for his part in Cumhall's death. Finn gave the druid a choice: either fight him in single combat or give him the fort at Almu and everything in it to be his for all time. Tadhg, who was an old man by now, knew he could not overcome his grandson in close hand-to-hand fighting so he thought it best to move away from Almu and give it to Finn. This he did and Almu became Finn's

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headquarters. From then on, though Finn and the Fianna roamed the length and breadth of Ireland and made expeditions to Scotland and to the islands, the fort on the Hill of Allen became his principal residence and he always returned happily to the shining white dun that Nuada had built.

While he was a baby, Demne had no home where he could be safe. Goll Mac Morna, having killed Cumhall and been made captain of the Fianna, was determined to kill Cumhall's son as well. He was afraid that one day, when the boy was grown up, he would claim his father's position at the head of the Fianna. Muirne knew that her son was in danger while he was with her and though she was sad to part with her child she handed the boy over to two of her trusted women attendants who had been trained to survive in the wilderness and were skilled trackers. Then she escaped southwards from the territory controlled by Clan Morna and married a king who lived there.

As soon as Muirne's servant women were given the baby they took him away and hid with him in the woods and valleys of Slieve Bloom. There they guarded him closely and reared him and cared for him as if he was their own child.

Six years after she had parted with him, Muirne came secretly to visit Demne in his forest hideout. She wanted to see her son again and make sure he was hidden from his enemies and well cared for by his friends. She moved stealthily from the remote territory where she lived till she came to Slieve Bloom. The hunting bothy her son lived in was made of wattle and mud and was roofed with branches so that it was almost invisible in the depths of the wood, but Muirne found it and went in. The two women recognized her and welcomed her joyfully. They led her into the room where her fair-haired son lay asleep. She lifted him up and, holding him close, hugged him and talked to him. Then rocking him in her arms she sang him a lullaby until he went back to sleep. She thanked the faithful women for the love and protection they were giving her child and told them to look after him till he was able to fend for himself. Then she stole away, slipping from wood to wilderness till she reached the safety of her own territory.

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As Demne grew up his guardians taught him about the changing seasons and life in the woods and hills around him. He was hardy in winter and carefree in summer. He became a skillful tracker and hunter; he could outstrip the hare and bring down a stag on his own without the help of a deerhound and he could make a wild duck drop from the sky with one stone from a sling. He was still a young child when he brought home to his fosterers the first food he had caught. He had seen a flock of wild duck fly low over a lake. As they passed above his head he slung a stone at them and sheared the wing feathers off one of the birds so that it fell to the ground, stunned.

As he became more adventurous Demne went further and further afield in spite of his guardians' warnings. The fair-haired forest boy whom they glimpsed through the trees began to be talked about by the huntsmen of the Fianna. Goll Mac Morna heard these rumours and suspected that the child might be the son of Cumhall. He sent his trackers to Slieve Bloom to find his secret camp and flush him out and kill him. Getting wind of Goll's plans, the women sent Demne away from Slieve Bloom in the care of three wandering smiths, with whom he travelled for a time. But the men kept him half starved and his hair fell out for want of proper food. For a while then he was known as Demne the Bald.

One night as the smiths were asleep a robber came upon them. He killed the three men, robbed them and captured the boy. Then he took him south to work in his own house. But the women trackers who had reared Demne heard about his kidnap and came after their ward and found him a prisoner in the bandit's house. They forced the man to hand over the boy and the three of them made their way back to Slieve Bloom.

Some time later, when Demne was on his wanderings, he came out of the forest on to the green of a large fort. There were boys playing hurley on the green and Demne joined in the game. He was the fastest player among them, so the next day, when he returned, he played alone against a quarter of them and won. Then a third of them measured themselves against him but Demne still beat them. Finally they were all ranged against him, but the

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newcomer took the ball from them all and won the game.

'What is your name?' the boys asked him.

'Demne,' he said and turned away and disappeared into the forest.

The boys told the chieftain who owned the fort about the stranger who had beaten them all single-handed.

'Surely, between the lot of you, you should be able to beat one boy!' the man exclaimed. 'Did he tell you his name?'

'He said his name was Demne.'

'And what does this champion look like?' the chieftain asked.

'He's tall and well built and his hair is very fair.'

'Then we'll give him the nickname Finn, because of that white hair,' said the chief and from that day on Finn, which means fair-haired, became Demne's name.

The chieftain's son incited his companions to turn against Finn so when he appeared the next day to join the game they flung their hurley sticks at him. Finn grabbed a hurley stick from the ground and made a run at the boys, knocking seven of them to the ground and scattering the rest. Then he escaped to the shelter of the forest and back to the bothy where he lived.

About a week after this as he was going for a swim in a mountain lake he heard shouting and yelling from the water. Finn ran to the lough shore and saw the boys from the fort swimming and playing in the water. They challenged Finn to come in and wrestle in the water with them. They wanted to drown him and as soon as he waded in the youths all grabbed him and held him under the water. Finn broke free and held seven of them under the water and then he escaped to Slieve Bloom. The boys hurried back to the fort to tell this latest story about Finn to the household and the story spread like wildfire.

The two women warriors who had guarded Demne so faithfully knew they could keep him safe no longer now that tales of his exploits were on everyone's lips.

'You must leave us now, son. The Mac Morna scouts are on your track, and if they find you they will kill you,' they told him.

Sadly Finn said goodbye to his brave friends and headed south

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out of the dangerous terrain of Slieve Bloom. He made his way carefully, slipping from wood to wood down through the country until he reached Lough Lene in Kerry. He made his way to the stronghold of the king of Bantry and joined his band of fighters and trackers, but he told no one his name or lineage. Before long it was clear to all that the newcomer had no equal as a hunter. The king observed the young man closely for a while and decided to catch him off guard and trick him into betraying his identity.

'I would have sworn that you were the son of Cumhall,' he said, 'because you're so like him, except that I know he left only one son and he is a soldier in Scotland at the moment.'

Finn made no reply but shortly after that he left the service of the king of Bantry and became a soldier with a neighbouring king. This king noticed the youth's skill at chess and challenged him to a game. Finn won seven games in a row, making his own moves and advising the king on the moves *he* should make as well.

'Who *are* you?' the king demanded.

'I am the son of a poor farmer from Tara,' replied Finn.

'No, you are not!' the king said. 'You're the son of Cumhall! You are called Finn Mac Cumhaill, and you were born to Muirne after your father was killed at Cnuca. Goll Mac Morna is out to kill you. Leave my place at once. I can't protect you against Mac Morna's men and I don't want you killed under my roof.'

Now that the news of his parentage was out, Finn became a fugitive once more. He made his way east to another chief who was loyal to Clan Bascna and would shelter and protect him. The blacksmith of this tribe was called Lochan and he had a beautiful daughter. As soon as the girl saw Finn she fell in love with him. Her father was so taken by the young man that he consented to their union even though he knew nothing about the new arrival, neither who he was nor where he came from. He made two sharp spears for Finn as a gift so that he could protect himself from a fierce wild boar that was terrorizing that part of Munster. As luck would have it, one day when Finn was out alone he was passing through a narrow gap in the mountain when the huge beast came crashing down the mountainside and charged at him. Finn took one of his

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newly forged spears and thrust it through the boar's body and killed it. Then he brought the pig's head back to Lochan as a bridal gift for his daughter and to this day that mountain is called Slieve Muc, the Mountain of the Pig.

After he had stayed a while with Lochan and his daughter, Finn set off again, this time to find his uncle, Crimhall, son of Trenmor. Crimhall had fought by Cumhall's side at the battle of Cnuca but had managed to escape the slaughter that followed his brother's death and had fled westward to a wild and desolate part of Connaught. There, with the last remnants of Cumhall's followers, he had taken refuge in a remote wood. The younger men looked after their old leader and hunted for food for him.

As Finn was on his way westwards to find his uncle, he heard loud keening and lamenting. He started off in the direction of the cries and saw a woman wailing and swaying with grief. Her face was smeared with blood and tears of blood streamed from her eyes.

'You are covered in blood! What has turned your tears to blood?' Finn cried out.

'I have good cause to cry tears of blood!' the woman said bitterly. 'My only son was ambushed and killed a short while ago by a tall, terrible warrior.'

Finn went quickly in pursuit of the warrior. He soon overtook him and challenged him to a fight. He overpowered the tall soldier and killed him with his spear. A strange-looking pouch made of delicate hide was lying among the dead warrior's belongings and Finn took it with him and went on into Connacht until he found his uncle.

Crimhall was overjoyed when his nephew arrived at his bothy. Moreover he recognized the strange bag that Finn carried. 'How did you come by this?' he asked in astonishment. 'This was stolen from Cumhall by a cowardly warrior called the Grey of Luachra. We trusted him. He was the treasurer of the Fianna, but at the battle of Cnuca it was the Grey of Luachra who dealt your father the first blow and Goll Mac Morna who finished the work. Then the Grey of Luachra slipped away taking his treasure bag with him. How did you get it back?'

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Finn told his uncle about the wailing woman he had met and how he had killed the tall man who had slain her son.

'That was the Grey of Luachra you killed,' the old man said, 'and this bag which you have recovered for Clan Bascna is the chief treasure of the Fianna.'

Then Crimhall told Finn the story of the magic treasure bag made from the skin of a crane.

'This crane bag belonged to Manannan Mac Lir of the Tuatha De Danaan. A beautiful gentle-eyed girl called Aoife fell in love with Manannan's son, Ilbrach, and he loved her in return. But another woman loved Ilbrach too, and was fiercely jealous of Aoife. One day she lured Aoife into the water and then she changed the gentle girl into a crane and drove her away from Manannan's island to wander from lough to lough for two hundred years. When Aoife died Manannan took her skin and made a treasure bag of it and he put into it some of the magic hoard of the Tuatha De Danaan. He put into it his own knife and magic shirt, the anvil and leather apron that Goibniu the smith had owned, the king of Scotland's shears and the king of Norway's horned helmet, as well as a belt made of a strip of whaleskin. When the sea is at full tide you can see the treasures in the bag. When the tide turns and ebbs away the crane bag seems empty. By strange turns it came into your father's possession and it stayed with the Fianna until the Grey of Luachra stole it away. It is a good omen, Finn, that it has come back to us again. It means that our tribe, Clan Bascna, will become leaders of the Fianna once again.'

Finn stayed with his uncle and listened closely to his stories about Cumhall and the Fianna. He listened proudly as Crimhall told of their bravery in battle, their skill in the hunt and their mastery of the art of poetry. Fired by these tales he determined to overthrow Goll Mac Morna and become the leader of the Fianna as his father had once been. But he knew he would not be safe until he could gather around him a band of men strong enough to challenge Goll for the captaincy. And he knew he would not be considered worthy to take command of the élite band of men until he was as good a poet as he was a warrior and hunter.

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So he left Crimhall and headed eastwards towards Leinster to the place where there lived a poet and teacher called Finnegas. Now Finnegas had spent seven years camping near a pool on the River Boyne. The red-speckled Salmon of Knowledge lived in this pool and it had been prophesied that whoever ate one of these fish would possess understanding of everything in the world, past, present and future. This was because the salmon ate the berries that fell from a magic rowan tree overhanging the pool and acquired the wisdom of the world from them.

When Finn arrived at Finnegas's house, the poet had just caught one of the salmon from the well. The learned man was overjoyed that, at last, all knowledge would be his. He gave the fish to Finn and ordered him to cook it but he warned him that he was utterly forbidden to taste even the smallest morsel. Finn made a fire and cooked the salmon for Finnegas and as he lifted it off the spit the skin of the fish seared his thumb. To ease the pain Finn put his thumb in his mouth. Then he brought the fish to the poet. Finnegas looked at his pupil as he handed him the salmon and noticed a change in him.

'Are you sure you haven't tasted any of the salmon, my lad?' he demanded.

'No,' said Finn, 'but I burnt my thumb on the skin of the fish and put it in my mouth to soothe it.'

The poet let out a groan. 'What is your name?' he asked the boy.

'My name is Demne,' he replied.

'Your name is Finn!' said the poet. 'It was prophesied that a fair-haired man would eat the Salmon of Knowledge, and you are that fair-headed Finn. So the eternal knowledge is *yours* now, not mine. You may as well eat the whole fish, Finn!'

And so Finn did and from then on, at moments of great significance and danger, when he put his thumb in his mouth whatever he needed to know was revealed to him.

Finn stayed with Finnegas on the banks of the Boyne learning the art of poetry. And to prove to his teacher that he had mastered that difficult art he composed his first poem in praise of early summer, the season he loved best of all.