



The Battle of the Birds

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Celtic

Intermediate
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I will tell you a story about the wren. There was once a farmer who was seeking a servant, and the wren met him and said: "What are you seeking?"

"I am seeking a servant," said the farmer to the wren.

"Will you take me?" said the wren.

"You, you poor creature, what good would you do?"

"Try me," said the wren.

So he engaged him, and the first work he set him to do was threshing in the barn. The wren threshed (what did he thresh with? Why a flail to be sure), and he knocked off one grain. A mouse came out and she eats that.

"I'll trouble you not to do that again," said the wren.

He struck again, and he struck off two grains. Out came the mouse and she eats them. So they arranged a contest to see who was strongest, and the wren brings his twelve birds, and the mouse her tribe.

"You have your tribe with you," said the wren.

"As well as yourself," said the mouse, and she struck out her leg proudly. But the wren broke it with his flail,

and there was a pitched battle on a set day.

When every creature and bird was gathering to battle, the son of the king of Tethertown said that he would go to see the battle, and that he would bring sure word home to his father the king, who would be king of the creatures this year. The battle was over before he arrived all but one fight, between a great black raven and a snake. The snake was twined about the raven's neck, and the raven held the snake's throat in his beak, and it seemed as if the snake would get the victory over the raven. When the king's son saw this he helped the raven, and with one blow takes the head off the snake. When the raven had taken breath, and saw that the snake was dead, he said, "For thy kindness to me this day, I will give thee a sight. Come up now on the root of my two wings." The king's son put his hands about the raven before his wings, and, before he stopped, he took him over nine Bens, and nine Glens, and nine Mountain Moors.

"Now," said the raven, "see you that house yonder? Go now to it. It is a sister of mine that makes her dwelling in it; and I will go bail that you are welcome. And if she asks you, Were you at the battle of the birds? say you were. And if she asks, 'Did you see any one like me,' say you did, but be sure that you meet me to-morrow morning here, in this place." The king's son got good and right good treatment that night. Meat of each meat, drink of each drink, warm water to his feet, and a soft bed for his limbs.

On the next day the raven gave him the same sight over six Bens, and six Glens, and six Mountain Moors. They saw a bothy far off, but, though far off, they were soon there. He got good treatment this night, as before—plenty of meat and drink, and warm water to his feet, and a soft bed to his limbs—and on the next day it was the same thing, over three Bens and three Glens, and three Mountain Moors.

On the third morning, instead of seeing the raven as at the other times, who should meet him but the handsomest lad he ever saw, with gold rings in his hair, with a bundle in his hand. The king's son asked this lad if he had seen a big black raven.

Said the lad to him, "You will never see the raven again, for I am that raven. I was put under spells by a bad druid; it was meeting you that loosed me, and for that you shall get this bundle. Now," said the lad, "you must turn back on the self-same steps, and lie a night in each house as before; but you must not loose the bundle which I gave ye, till in the place where you would most wish to dwell."

The king's son turned his back to the lad, and his face to his father's house; and he got lodging from the raven's sisters, just as he got it when going forward. When he was nearing his father's house he was going through a

close wood. It seemed to him that the bundle was growing heavy, and he thought he would look what was in it.

When he loosed the bundle he was astonished. In a twinkling he sees the very grandest place he ever saw. A great castle, and an orchard about the castle, in which was every kind of fruit and herb. He stood full of wonder and regret for having loosed the bundle—for it was not in his power to put it back again—and he would have wished this pretty place to be in the pretty little green hollow that was opposite his father's house; but he looked up and saw a great giant coming towards him.

“Bad's the place where you have built the house, king's son,” says the giant.

“Yes, but it is not here I would wish it to be, though it happens to be here by mishap,” says the king's son.

“What's the reward for putting it back in the bundle as it was before?”

“What's the reward you would ask?” says the king's son.

“That you will give me the first son you have when he is seven years of age,” says the giant.

“If I have a son you shall have him,” said the king's son.

In a twinkling the giant put each garden, and orchard, and castle in the bundle as they were before.

“Now,” says the giant, “take your own road, and I will take mine; but mind your promise, and if you forget I will remember.”

The king's son took to the road, and at the end of a few days he reached the place he was fondest of. He loosed the bundle, and the castle was just as it was before. And when he opened the castle door he sees the handsomest maiden he ever cast eye upon.

“Advance, king's son,” said the pretty maid; “everything is in order for you, if you will marry me this very day.”

“It's I that am willing,” said the king's son. And on the same day they married.

But at the end of a day and seven years, who should be seen coming to the castle but the giant. The king's son was reminded of his promise to the giant, and till now he had not told his promise to the queen.

“Leave the matter between me and the giant,” says the queen.

“Turn out your son,” says the giant; “mind your promise.”

“You shall have him,” says the king, “when his mother puts him in order for his journey.”

The queen dressed up the cook’s son, and she gave him to the giant by the hand. The giant went away with him; but he had not gone far when he put a rod in the hand of the little laddie. The giant asked him—

“If thy father had that rod what would he do with it?”

“If my father had that rod he would beat the dogs and the cats, so that they shouldn’t be going near the king’s meat,” said the little laddie.

“Thou’rt the cook’s son,” said the giant. He catches him by the two small ankles and knocks him against the stone that was beside him. The giant turned back to the castle in rage and madness, and he said that if they did not send out the king’s son to him, the highest stone of the castle would be the lowest.

Said the queen to the king, “We’ll try it yet; the butler’s son is of the same age as our son.”

She dressed up the butler’s son, and she gives him to the giant by the hand. The giant had not gone far when he put the rod in his hand.

“If thy father had that rod,” says the giant, “what would he do with it?”

“He would beat the dogs and the cats when they would be coming near the king’s bottles and glasses.”

“Thou art the son of the butler,” says the giant and dashed his brains out too. The giant returned in a very great rage and anger. The earth shook under the sole of his feet, and the castle shook and all that was in it.

“OUT HERE WITH THY SON,” says the giant, “or in a twinkling the stone that is highest in the dwelling will be the lowest.” So they had to give the king’s son to the giant.

When they were gone a little bit from the earth, the giant showed him the rod that was in his hand and said:

“What would thy father do with this rod if he had it?”

The king’s son said: “My father has a braver rod than that.”

And the giant asked him, "Where is thy father when he has that brave rod?"

And the king's son said: "He will be sitting in his kingly chair."

Then the giant understood that he had the right one.

The giant took him to his own house, and he reared him as his own son. On a day of days when the giant was from home, the lad heard the sweetest music he ever heard in a room at the top of the giant's house. At a glance he saw the finest face he had ever seen. She beckoned to him to come a bit nearer to her, and she said her name was Auburn Mary but she told him to go this time, but to be sure to be at the same place about that dead midnight.

And as he promised he did. The giant's daughter was at his side in a twinkling, and she said, "To-morrow you will get the choice of my two sisters to marry; but say that you will not take either, but me. My father wants me to marry the son of the king of the Green City, but I don't like him." On the morrow the giant took out his three daughters, and he said:

"Now, son of the king of Tethertown, thou hast not lost by living with me so long. Thou wilt get to wife one of the two eldest of my daughters, and with her leave to go home with her the day after the wedding."

"If you will give me this pretty little one," says the king's son, "I will take you at your word."

The giant's wrath kindled, and he said: "Before thou gett'st her thou must do the three things that I ask thee to do."

"Say on," says the king's son.

The giant took him to the byre.

"Now," says the giant, "a hundred cattle are stabled here, and it has not been cleansed for seven years. I am going from home to-day, and if this byre is not cleaned before night comes, so clean that a golden apple will run from end to end of it, not only thou shalt not get my daughter, but 'tis only a drink of thy fresh, goodly, beautiful blood that will quench my thirst this night."

He begins cleaning the byre, but he might just as well to keep baling the great ocean. After midday when sweat was blinding him, the giant's youngest daughter came where he was, and she said to him:

"You are being punished, king's son."

"I am that," says the king's son.

"Come over," says Auburn Mary, "and lay down your weariness."

"I will do that," says he, "there is but death awaiting me, at any rate." He sat down near her. He was so tired that he fell asleep beside her. When he awoke, the giant's daughter was not to be seen, but the byre was so well cleaned that a golden apple would run from end to end of it and raise no stain. In comes the giant, and he said:

"Hast thou cleaned the byre, king's son?"

"I have cleaned it," says he.

"Somebody cleaned it," says the giant.

"You did not clean it, at all events," said the king's son.

"Well, well!" says the giant, "since thou wert so active to-day, thou wilt get to this time to-morrow to thatch this byre with birds' down, from birds with no two feathers of one colour."

The king's son was on foot before the sun; he caught up his bow and his quiver of arrows to kill the birds. He took to the moors, but if he did, the birds were not so easy to take. He was running after them till the sweat was blinding him. About mid-day who should come but Auburn Mary.

"You are exhausting yourself, king's son," says she.

"I am," said he.

"There fell but these two blackbirds, and both of one colour."

"Come over and lay down your weariness on this pretty hillock," says the giant's daughter.

"It's I am willing," said he.

He thought she would aid him this time, too, and he sat down near her, and he was not long there till he fell asleep.

When he awoke, Auburn Mary was gone. He thought he would go back to the house, and he sees the byre thatched with feathers. When the giant came home, he said:

“Hast thou thatched the byre, king’s son?”

“I thatched it,” says he.

“Somebody thatched it,” says the giant.

“You did not thatch it,” says the king’s son.

“Yes, yes!” says the giant. “Now,” says the giant, “there is a fir tree beside that loch down there, and there is a magpie’s nest in its top. The eggs thou wilt find in the nest. I must have them for my first meal. Not one must be burst or broken, and there are five in the nest.”

Early in the morning the king’s son went where the tree was, and that tree was not hard to hit upon. Its match was not in the whole wood. From the foot to the first branch was five hundred feet. The king’s son was going all round the tree. She came who was always bringing help to him.

“You are losing the skin of your hands and feet.”

“Ach! I am,” says he. “I am no sooner up than down.”

“This is no time for stopping,” says the giant’s daughter. “Now you must kill me, strip the flesh from my bones, take all those bones apart, and use them as steps for climbing the tree. When you are climbing the tree, they will stick to the glass as if they had grown out of it; but when you are coming down, and have put your foot on each one, they will drop into your hand when you touch them. Be sure and stand on each bone, leave none untouched; if you do, it will stay behind. Put all my flesh into this clean cloth by the side of the spring at the roots of the tree. When you come to the earth, arrange my bones together, put the flesh over them, sprinkle it with water from the spring, and I shall be alive before you. But don’t forget a bone of me on the tree.”

“How could I kill you,” asked the king’s son, “after what you have done for me?”

“If you won’t obey, you and I are done for,” said Auburn Mary. “You must climb the tree, or we are lost; and to climb the tree you must do as I say.” The king’s son obeyed. He killed Auburn Mary, cut the flesh from her body, and unjointed the bones, as she had told him.

As he went up, the king’s son put the bones of Auburn Mary’s body against the side of the tree, using them as steps, till he came under the nest and stood on the last bone.

Then he took the eggs, and coming down, put his foot on every bone, then took it with him, till he came to the last bone, which was so near the ground that he failed to touch it with his foot.

He now placed all the bones of Auburn Mary in order again at the side of the spring, put the flesh on them, sprinkled it with water from the spring. She rose up before him, and said: “Didn’t I tell you not to leave a bone of my body without stepping on it? Now I am lame for life! You left my little finger on the tree without touching it, and I have but nine fingers.”

“Now,” says she, “go home with the eggs quickly, and you will get me to marry to-night if you can know me. I and my two sisters will be arrayed in the same garments, and made like each other, but look at me when my father says, ‘Go to thy wife, king’s son;’ and you will see a hand without a little finger.”

He gave the eggs to the giant.

“Yes, yes!” says the giant, “be making ready for your marriage.”

Then, indeed, there was a wedding, and it was a wedding! Giants and gentlemen, and the son of the king of the Green City was in the midst of them. They were married, and the dancing began, that was a dance! The giant’s house was shaking from top to bottom.

But bed time came, and the giant said, “It is time for thee to go to rest, son of the king of Tethertown; choose thy bride to take with thee from amidst those.”

She put out the hand off which the little finger was, and he caught her by the hand.

“Thou hast aimed well this time too; but there is no knowing but we may meet thee another way,” said the giant.

But to rest they went. “Now,” says she, “sleep not, or else you are a dead man. We must fly quick, quick, or for

certain my father will kill you.”

Out they went, and on the blue grey filly in the stable they mounted. “Stop a while,” says she, “and I will play a trick to the old hero.” She jumped in, and cut an apple into nine shares, and she put two shares at the head of the bed, and two shares at the foot of the bed, and two shares at the door of the kitchen, and two shares at the big door, and one outside the house.

The giant awoke and called, “Are you asleep?”

“Not yet,” said the apple that was at the head of the bed.

At the end of a while he called again.

“Not yet,” said the apple that was at the foot of the bed.

A while after this he called again: “Are your asleep?”

“Not yet,” said the apple at the kitchen door.

The giant called again.

The apple that was at the big door answered.

“You are now going far from me,” says the giant.

“Not yet,” says the apple that was outside the house.

“You are flying,” says the giant. The giant jumped on his feet, and to the bed he went, but it was cold—empty.

“My own daughter’s tricks are trying me,” said the giant. “Here’s after them,” says he.

At the mouth of day, the giant’s daughter said that her father’s breath was burning her back.

“Put your hand, quick,” said she, “in the ear of the grey filly, and whatever you find in it, throw it behind us.”

“There is a twig of sloe tree,” said he.

“Throw it behind us,” said she.

No sooner did he that, than there were twenty miles of blackthorn wood, so thick that scarce a weasel could go

through it.

The giant came headlong, and there he is fleecing his head and neck in the thorns.

“My own daughter’s tricks are here as before,” said the giant; “but if I had my own big axe and wood knife here, I would not be long making a way through this.”

He went home for the big axe and the wood knife, and sure he was not long on his journey, and he was the boy behind the big axe. He was not long making a way through the blackthorn.

“I will leave the axe and the wood knife here till I return,” says he.

“If you leave ’em, leave ’em,” said a hoodie that was in a tree, “we’ll steal ’em, steal ’em.”

“If you will do that,” says the giant, “I must take them home.” He returned home and left them at the house.

At the heat of day the giant’s daughter felt her father’s breath burning her back.

“Put your finger in the filly’s ear, and throw behind whatever you find in it.”

He got a splinter of grey stone, and in a twinkling there were twenty miles, by breadth and height, of great grey rock behind them.

The giant came full pelt, but past the rock he could not go.

“The tricks of my own daughter are the hardest things that ever met me,” says the giant; “but if I had my lever and my mighty mattock, I would not be long in making my way through this rock also.”

There was no help for it, but to turn the chase for them; and he was the boy to split the stones. He was not long in making a road through the rock.

“I will leave the tools here, and I will return no more.”

“If you leave ’em, leave ’em,” says the hoodie, “we will steal ’em, steal ’em.”

“Do that if you will; there is no time to go back.”

At the time of breaking the watch, the giant’s daughter said that she felt her father’s breath burning her back.

“Look in the filly’s ear, king’s son, or else we are lost.”

He did so, and it was a bladder of water that was in her ear this time. He threw it behind him and there was a fresh-water loch, twenty miles in length and breadth, behind them.

The giant came on, but with the speed he had on him, he was in the middle of the loch, and he went under, and he rose no more.

On the next day the young companions were come in sight of his father’s house. “Now,” says she, “my father is drowned, and he won’t trouble us any more; but before we go further,” says she, “go you to your father’s house, and tell that you have the likes of me; but let neither man nor creature kiss you, for if you do, you will not remember that you have ever seen me.”

Every one he met gave him welcome and luck, and he charged his father and mother not to kiss him; but as mishap was to be, an old greyhound was indoors, and she knew him, and jumped up to his mouth, and after that he did not remember the giant’s daughter.

She was sitting at the well’s side as he left her, but the king’s son was not coming. In the mouth of night she climbed up into a tree of oak that was beside the well, and she lay in the fork of that tree all night. A shoemaker had a house near the well, and about mid-day on the morrow, the shoemaker asked his wife to go for a drink for him out of the well. When the shoemaker’s wife reached the well, and when she saw the shadow of her that was in the tree, thinking it was her own shadow—and she never thought till now that she was so handsome—she gave a cast to the dish that was in her hand, and it was broken on the ground, and she took herself to the house without vessel or water.

“Where is the water, wife?” said the shoemaker.

“You shambling, contemptible old carle, without grace, I have stayed too long your water and wood thrall.”

“I think, wife, that you have turned crazy. Go you, daughter, quickly, and fetch a drink for your father.”

His daughter went, and in the same way so it happened to her. She never thought till now that she was so lovable, and she took herself home.

“Up with the drink,” said her father.

“You home-spun shoe carle, do you think I am fit to be your thrall?”

The poor shoemaker thought that they had taken a turn in their understandings, and he went himself to the well. He saw the shadow of the maiden in the well, and he looked up to the tree, and he sees the finest woman he ever saw.

“Your seat is wavering, but your face is fair,” said the shoemaker.

“Come down, for there is need of you for a short while at my house.”

The shoemaker understood that this was the shadow that had driven his people mad. The shoemaker took her to his house, and he said that he had but a poor bothy, but that she should get a share of all that was in it.

One day, the shoemaker had shoes ready, for on that very day the king’s son was to be married. The shoemaker was going to the castle with the shoes of the young people, and the girl said to the shoemaker, “I would like to get a sight of the king’s son before he marries.”

“Come with me,” says the shoemaker, “I am well acquainted with the servants at the castle, and you shall get a sight of the king’s son and all the company.”

And when the gentles saw the pretty woman that was here they took her to the wedding-room, and they filled for her a glass of wine. When she was going to drink what is in it, a flame went up out of the glass, and a golden pigeon and a silver pigeon sprang out of it. They were flying about when three grains of barley fell on the floor. The silver pigeon sprung, and ate that up.

Said the golden pigeon to him, “If you remembered when I cleared the byre, you would not eat that without giving me a share.”

Again there fell three other grains of barley, and the silver pigeon sprung, and ate that up as before.

“If you remembered when I thatched the byre, you would not eat that without giving me my share,” says the golden pigeon.

Three other grains fall, and the silver pigeon sprung, and ate that up.

“If you remembered when I harried the magpie’s nest, you would not eat that without giving me my share,”

says the golden pigeon; “I lost my little finger bringing it down, and I want it still.”

The king’s son minded, and he knew who it was that was before him.

“Well,” said the king’s son to the guests at the feast, “when I was a little younger than I am now, I lost the key of a casket that I had. I had a new key made, but after it was brought to me I found the old one. Now, I’ll leave it to any one here to tell me what I am to do. Which of the keys should I keep?”

“My advice to you,” said one of the guests, “is to keep the old key, for it fits the lock better and you’re more used to it.”

Then the king’s son stood up and said: “I thank you for a wise advice and an honest word. This is my bride the daughter of the giant who saved my life at the risk of her own. I’ll have her and no other woman.”

So the king’s son married Auburn Mary and the wedding lasted long and all were happy. But all I got was butter on a live coal, porridge in a basket, and they sent me for water to the stream, and the paper shoes came to an end.

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