



Black, Brown and Gray

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Irish

Intermediate

14 min read

In a day Fin MacCumhail was near Tara of the Kings, south of Ballyshannon, hunting with seven companies of the Fenians of Erin.

During the day they saw three strange men coming towards them, and Fin said to the Fenians: “Let none of you speak to them, and if they have good manners they’ll not speak to you nor to any man till they come to me.”

When the three men came up, they said nothing till they stood before Fin himself. Then he asked what their names were and what they wanted. They answered:—

“Our names are Dubh, Dun, and Glasán [Black, Brown, and Gray]. We have come to find Fin MacCumhail, chief of the Fenians of Erin, and take service with him.”

Fin was so well pleased with their looks that he brought them home with him that evening and called them his sons. Then he said, “Every man who comes to this castle must watch the first night for me, and since three of you have come together, each will watch one third of the night. You’ll cast lots to see who’ll watch first and second.”

Fin had the trunk of a tree brought, three equal parts made of it, and one given to each of the men.

Then he said, "When each of you begins his watch he will set fire to his own piece of wood, and so long as the wood burns he will watch."

The lot fell to Dubh to go on the first watch. Dubh set fire to his log, then went out around the castle, the dog Bran with him. He wandered on, going further and further from the castle, and Bran after him. At last he saw a bright light and went towards it. When he came to the place where the light was burning, he saw a large house. He entered the house and when inside saw a great company of most strange looking men, drinking out of a single cup.

The chief of the party, who was sitting on a high place, gave the cup to the man nearest him; and when he had drunk his fill out of it, he passed it to his neighbor, and so on to the last.

While the cup was going the round of the company, the chief said, "This is the great cup that was taken from Fin MacCumhail a hundred years ago; and as much as each man wishes to drink he always gets from it, and no matter how many men there may be, or what they wish for, they always have their fill."

Dubh sat near the door on the edge of the crowd, and when the cup came to him he drank a little, then slipped out and hurried away in the dark; when he came to the fountain at the castle of Fin MacCumhail, his log was burned.

As the second lot had fallen on Dun, it was now his turn to watch, so he set fire to his log and went out, in the place of Dubh, with the dog Bran after him.

Dun walked on through the night till he saw a fire. He went towards it, and when he had come near he saw a large house, which he entered; and when inside he saw a crowd of strange looking men, fighting. They were ferocious, wonderful to look at, and fighting wildly.

The chief, who had climbed on the crossbeams of the house to escape the uproar and struggle, called out to the crowd below: "Stop fighting now; for I have a better gift than the one you have lost this night." And putting his hand behind his belt, he drew out a knife and held it before them, saying: "Here is the wonderful knife, the small knife of division, that was stolen from Fin MacCumhail a hundred years ago, and if you cut on a bone with the knife, you'll get the finest meat in the world, and as much of it as ever your hearts can wish for."

Then he passed down the knife and a bare bone to the man next him, and the man began to cut; and off came slices of the sweetest and best meat in the world.

The knife and the bone passed from man to man till they came to Dun, who cut a slice off the bone, slipped out unseen, and made for Fin's castle as fast as his two legs could carry him through the darkness and over the ground.

When he was by the fountain at the castle, his part of the log was burned and his watch at an end.

Now Glasán set fire to his stick of wood and went out on his watch and walked forward till he saw the light and came to the same house that Dubh and Dun had visited. Looking in he saw the place full of dead bodies, and thought, "There must be some great wonder here. If I lie down in the midst of these and put some of them over me to hide myself, I shall be able to see what is going on."

He lay down and pulled some of the bodies over himself. He wasn't there long when he saw an old hag coming into the house. She had but one leg, one arm, and one upper tooth, which was as long as her leg and served her in place of a crutch. When inside the door she took up the first corpse she met and threw it aside; it was lean. As she went on she took two bites out of every fat corpse she met, and threw every lean one aside.

She had her fill of flesh and blood before she came to Glasán; and as soon as she had that, she dropped down on the floor, lay on her back, and went to sleep.

Every breath she drew, Glasán was afraid she'd drag the roof down on top of his head, and every time she let a breath out of her he thought she'd sweep the roof off the house.

Then he rose up, looked at her, and wondered at the bulk of her body. At last he drew his sword, hit her a slash, and if he did, three young giants sprang forth.

Glasán killed the first giant, the dog Bran killed the second, and the third ran away.

Glasán now hurried back, and when he reached the fountain at Fin's castle, his log of wood was burned, and day was dawning.

When all had risen in the morning, and the Fenians of Erin came out, Fin said to Dubh, "Have you anything new or wonderful to tell me after the night's watching?"

"I have," said Dubh; "for I brought back the drinking-cup that you lost a hundred years ago. I was out in the darkness watching. I walked on, and the dog Bran with me till I saw a light. When I came to the light I found a house, and in the house a company feasting. The chief was a very old man, and sat on a high place above the rest. He took out the cup and said: 'This is the cup that was stolen from Fin MacCumhail a hundred years ago, and it is always full of the best drink in the world; and when one of you has drunk from the cup pass it on to the next.'

"They drank and passed the cup till it came to me. I took it and hurried back. When I came here, my log was burned and my watch was finished. Here now is the cup for you," said Dubh to Fin MacCumhail.

Fin praised him greatly for what he had done, and turning to Dun said: "Now tell us what happened in your watch."

"When my turn came I set fire to the log which you gave me, and walked on; the dog Bran following, till I saw a light. When I came to the light, I found a house in which was a crowd of people, all fighting except one very old man on a high place above the rest. He called to them for peace, and told them to be quiet. 'For,' said he, 'I have a better gift for you than the one you lost this night,' and he took out the small knife of division with a bare bone, and said: 'This is the knife that was stolen from Fin MacCumhail, a hundred years ago, and whenever you cut on the bone with the knife, you'll get your fill of the best meat on earth.'

"Then he handed the knife and the bone to the man nearest him, who cut from it all the meat he wanted, and then passed it to his neighbor. The knife went from hand to hand till it came to me, then I took it, slipped out,

and hurried away. When I came to the fountain, my log was burned, and here are the knife and bone for you.”

“You have done a great work, and deserve my best praise,” said Fin. “We are sure of the best eating and drinking as long as we keep the cup and the knife.”

“Now what have you seen in your part of the night?” said Fin to Glasán.

“I went out,” said Glasán, “with the dog Bran, and walked on till I saw a light, and when I came to the light I saw a house, which I entered. Inside were heaps of dead men, killed in fighting, and I wondered greatly when I saw them. At last I lay down in the midst of the corpses, put some of them over me and waited to see what would happen.

“Soon an old hag came in at the door, she had but one arm, one leg, and the one tooth out of her upper jaw, and that tooth as long as her leg, and she used it for a crutch as she hobbled along. She threw aside the first corpse she met and took two bites out of the second,—for she threw every lean corpse away and took two bites out of every fat one. When she had eaten her fill, she lay down on her back in the middle of the floor and went to sleep. I rose up then to look at her, and every time she drew a breath I was in dread she would bring down the roof of the house on the top of my head, and every time she let a breath out of her, I thought she’d sweep the roof from the building, so strong was the breath of the old hag.

“Then I drew my sword and cut her with a blow, but if I did three young giants sprang up before me. I killed the first, Bran killed the second, but the third escaped. I walked away then, and when I was at the fountain outside, daylight had come and my log was burned.”

“Between you and me,” said Fin, “it would have been as well if you had let the old hag alone. I am greatly in dread the third young giant will bring trouble on us all.”

For twenty-one years Fin MacCumhail and the Fenians of Erin hunted for sport alone. They had the best of eating from the small knife of division, and the best of drinking from the cup that was never dry. At the end of twenty-one years Dubh, Dun, and Glasán went away, and one day, as Fin and the Fenians of Erin were hunting on the hills and mountains, they saw a Fear Ruadh (a red haired man) coming toward them.

“There is a bright looking man coming this way,” said Fin, “and don’t you speak to him.”

“Oh, what do we care for him?” asked Conan Maol.

“Don’t be rude to a stranger,” said Fin.

The Fear Ruadh came forward and spoke to no man till he stood before Fin.

“What have you come for?” asked Fin.

“To find a master for twenty-one years.”

“What wages do you ask?” inquired Fin.

“No wages but this,—that if I die before the twenty-one years have passed, I shall be buried on Inis Caol (Light Island).”

“I’ll give you those wages,” said Fin, and he hired the Fear Ruadh for twenty-one years.

He served Fin for twenty years to his satisfaction; but toward the end of the twenty-first year he fell into a decline, became an old man, and died.

When the Fear Ruadh was dead, the Fenians of Erin said that not a step would they go to bury him; but Fin declared that he wouldn’t break his word for any man, and must take the corpse to Inis Caol.

Fin had an old white horse which he had turned out to find a living for himself as he could on the hillsides and in the woods. And now he looked for the horse and found that he had become younger than older in looks since he had put him out. So he took the old white horse and tied a coffin, with the body of the Fear Ruadh in it, on his back. Then they started him on ahead and away he went followed by Fin and twelve men of the Fenians of Erin.

When they came to the temple on Inis Caol there were no signs of the white horse and the coffin; but the temple was open and in went Fin and the twelve.

There were seats for each man inside. They sat down and rested awhile and then Fin tried to rise but couldn’t.

He told the men to rise, but the twelve were fastened to the seats, and the seats to the ground, so that not a man of them could come to his feet.

“Oh,” said Fin, “I’m in dread there is some evil trick played on us.”

At that moment the Fear Ruadh stood before them in all his former strength and youth and said: “Now is the time for me to take satisfaction out of you for my mother and brothers,” Then one of the men said to Fin, “Chew your thumb to know is there any way out of this.”

Fin chewed his thumb to know what should he do. When he knew, he blew the great whistle with his two hands; which was heard by Donogh Kamcosa and Diarmuid O’Duivne.

The Fear Ruadh fell to and killed three of the men; but before he could touch the fourth Donogh and Diarmuid were there, and put an end to him. Now all were free, and Fin with the nine men went back to their castle south of Ballyshannon.

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