

Cucúlin

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Irish

Intermediate

31 min read

There was a king in a land not far from Greece who had two daughters, and the younger was fairer than the elder daughter.

This old king made a match between the king of Greece and his own elder daughter; but he kept the younger one hidden away till after the marriage. Then the younger daughter came forth to view; and when the king of Greece saw her, he wouldn't look at his own wife. Nothing would do him but to get the younger sister and leave the elder at home with her father.

The king wouldn't listen to this, wouldn't agree to the change, so the king of Greece left his wife where she was, went home alone in a terrible rage and collected all his forces to march against the kingdom of his father-in-law.

He soon conquered the king and his army and, so far as he was able, he vexed and tormented him. To do this the more completely, he took from him a rod of Druidic spells, enchantment, and ring of youth which he had, and, striking the elder sister with the rod, he said: "You will be a serpent of the sea and live outside there in the bay by the castle."

Then turning to the younger sister, whose name was Gil an Og, he struck her, and said: "You'll be a cat while inside this castle, and have your own form only when you are outside the walls."

After he had done this, the king of Greece went home to his own country, taking with him the rod of enchantment and the ring of youth. The king died in misery and grief, leaving his two daughters spellbound.

Now there was a Druid in that kingdom, and the younger sister went to consult him, and asked: "Shall I ever be released from the enchantment that's on me now?"

"You will not, unless you find the man to release you; and there is no man in the world to do that but a champion who is now with Fin MacCumhail in Erin."

"Well, how can I find that man?" asked she.

"I will tell you," said the Druid. "Do you make a shirt out of your own hair, take it with you, and never stop till you land in Erin and find Fin and his men; the man that the shirt will fit is the man who will release you."

She began to make the shirt and worked without stopping till it was finished. Then she went on her journey and never rested till she came to Erin in a ship. She went on shore and inquired where Fin and his men were to be found at that time of the year.

"You will find them at Knock an Ar," was the answer she got.

She went to Knock an Ar carrying the shirt with her. The first man she met was Conan Maol, and she said to him: "I have come to find the man this shirt will fit. From the time one man tries it all must try till I see the man it fits."

The shirt went from hand to hand till Cucúlin put it on. "Well," said she, "it fits as your own skin."

Now Gil an Og told Cucúlin all that had happened,—how her father had forced her sister to marry the king of Greece, how this king had made war on her father, enchanted her sister and herself, and carried off the rod of enchantment with the ring of youth, and how the old Druid said the man this shirt would fit was the only man in the world who could release them.

Now Gil an Og and Cucúlin went to the ship and sailed across the seas to her country and went to her castle.

"You'll have no one but a cat for company to-night," said Gil an Og. "I have the form of a cat inside this castle, but outside I have my own appearance. Your dinner is ready, go in."

After the dinner Cucúlin went to another room apart, and lay down to rest after the journey. The cat came to his pillow, sat there and purred till he fell asleep and slept soundly till morning.

When he rose up, a basin of water, and everything he needed was before him, and his breakfast ready. He walked out after breakfast; Gil an Og was on the green outside before him and said:

“If you are not willing to free my sister and myself, I shall not urge you; but if you do free us, I shall be glad and thankful. Many king’s sons and champions before you have gone to recover the ring and the rod; but they have never come back.”

“Well, whether I thrive or not, I’ll venture,” said Cucúlin.

“I will give you,” said Gil an Og, “a present such as I have never given before to any man who ventured out on my behalf; I will give you the speckled boat.”

Cucúlin took leave of Gil an Og and sailed away in the speckled boat to Greece, where he went to the king’s court, and challenged him to combat.

The king of Greece gathered his forces and sent them out to chastise Cucúlin. He killed them all to the last man. Then Cucúlin challenged the king a second time.

“I have no one now to fight but myself,” said the king; “and I don’t think it becomes me to go out and meet the like of you.”

“If you don’t come out to me,” said Cucúlin, “I’ll go in to you and cut the head off you in your own castle.”

“That’s enough of impudence from you, you scoundrel,” said the king of Greece. “I won’t have you come into my castle, but I’ll meet you on the open plain.”

The king went out, and they fought till Cucúlin got the better of him, bound him head and heels, and said: “I’ll cut the head off you now unless you give me the ring of youth and the rod of enchantment that you took from the father of Gil an Og.”

“Well, I did carry them away,” said the king, “but it wouldn’t be easy for me now to give them to you or to her; for there was a man who came and carried them away, who could take them from you and from me, and from as many more of us, if they were here.”

“Who was that man?” asked Cucúlin.

“His name,” said the king, “is Lug Longhand. And if I had known what you wanted, there would have been no difference between us. I’ll tell you how I lost the ring and rod and I’ll go with you and show you where Lug Longhand lives. But do you come to my castle. We’ll have a good time together.”

They set out next day, and never stopped till they came opposite Lug Longhand castle, and Cucúlin challenged his forces to combat.

“I have no forces,” said Lug, “but I’ll fight you myself.” So the combat began, and they spent the whole day at one another, and neither gained the victory.

The king of Greece himself put up a tent on the green in front of the castle, and prepared everything necessary to eat and drink (there was no one else to do it). After breakfast next day, Cucúlin and Lug began fighting again. The king of Greece looked on as the day before.

They fought the whole day till near evening, when Cucúlin got the upper hand of Lug Longhand and bound him head and heels, saying: “I’ll cut the head off you now unless you give me the rod and the ring that you carried away from the king of Greece.”

“Oh, then,” said Lug, “it would be hard for me to give them to you or to him; for forces came and took them from me; and they would have taken them from you and from him, if you had been here.”

“Who in the world took them from you?” asked the king of Greece.

“Release me from this bond, and come to my castle, and I’ll tell you the whole story,” said Lug Longhand.

Cucúlin released him, and they went to the castle. They got good reception and entertainment from Lug that night, and the following morning as well. He said: “The ring and the rod were taken from me by the knight of the island of the Flood. This island is surrounded by a chain, and there is a ring of fire seven miles wide between the chain and the castle. No man can come near the island without breaking the chain, and the

moment the chain is broken the fire stops burning at that place; and the instant the fire goes down the knight rushes out and attacks and slays every man that's before him." The king of Greece, Cucúlin, and Lug Longhand now sailed on in the speckled boat towards the island of the Flood. On the following morning when the speckled boat struck the chain, she was thrown back three days' sail, and was near being sunk, and would have gone to the bottom of the sea but for her own goodness and strength.

As soon as Cucúlin saw what had happened, he took the oars, rowed on again, and drove the vessel forward with such venom that she cut through the chain and went one third of her length on to dry land. That moment the fire was quenched where the vessel struck, and when the knight of the Island saw the fire go out, he rushed to the shore and met Cucúlin, the king of Greece, and Lug Longhand.

When Cucúlin saw him, he threw aside his weapons, caught him, raised him above his head, hurled him down on the flat of his back, bound him head and heels, and said: "I'll cut the head off you unless you give me the ring and the rod that you carried away from Lug Longhand."

"I took them from him, it's true," said the knight; "but it would be hard for me to give them to you now; for a man came and took them from me, who would have taken them from you and all that are with you, and as many more if they had been here before him."

"Who in the world could that man be?" asked Cucúlin.

"The Dark Gruagach of the Northern Island. Release me, and come to my castle. I'll tell you all and entertain you well."

He took them to his castle, gave them good cheer, and told them all about the Gruagach and his island. Next morning all sailed away in Cucúlin's vessel, which they had left at the shore of the island, and never stopped till they came to the Gruagach's castle, and pitched their tents in front of it.

Then Cucúlin challenged the Gruagach. The others followed after to know would he thrive. The Gruagach came out and faced Cucúlin, and they began and spent the whole day at one another and neither of them gained the upper hand. When evening came, they stopped and prepared for supper and the night.

Next day after breakfast Cucúlin challenged the Gruagach again, and they fought till evening; when Cucúlin got the better in the struggle, disarmed the Gruagach, bound him, and said: "Unless you give up the rod of enchantment and the ring of youth that you took from the knight of the island of the Flood, I'll cut the head off

you now.”

“I took them from him, ’tis true; but there was a man named Thin-in-Iron, who took them from me, and he would have taken them from you and from me, and all that are here, if there were twice as many. He is such a man that sword cannot cut him, fire cannot burn him, water cannot drown him, and ’tis no easy thing to get the better of him. But if you’ll free me now and come to my castle, I’ll treat you well and tell you all about him.” Cucúlin agreed to this.

Next morning they would not stop nor be satisfied till they went their way. They found the castle of Thin-in-Iron, and Cucúlin challenged him to combat. They fought; and he was cutting the flesh from Cucúlin, but Cucúlin’s sword cut no flesh from him. They fought till Cucúlin said: “It is time now to stop till to-morrow.”

Cucúlin was scarcely able to reach the tent. They had to support him and put him to bed. Now, who should come to Cucúlin that night but Gil an Og, and she said: “You have gone further than any man before you, and I’ll cure you now, and you need go no further for the rod of enchantment and the ring of youth.”

“Well,” said Cucúlin, “I’ll never give over till I knock another day’s trial out of Thin-in-Iron.”

When it was time for rest, Gil an Og went away, and Cucúlin fell asleep for himself. On the following morning all his comrades were up and facing his tent. They thought to see him dead, but he was in as good health as ever.

They prepared breakfast, and after breakfast Cucúlin went before the door of the castle to challenge his enemy.

Thin-in-Iron thrust his head out and said: “That man I fought yesterday has come again to-day. It would have been a good deed if I had cut the head off him last night. Then he wouldn’t be here to trouble me this morning. I won’t come home this day till I bring his head with me. Then I’ll have peace.”

They met in combat and fought till the night was coming. Then Thin-in-Iron cried out for a cessation, and if he did, Cucúlin was glad to give it; for his sword had no effect upon Thin-in-Iron except to tire and nearly kill him (he was enchanted and no arms could cut him). When Thin-in-Iron went to his castle, he threw up three sups of blood, and said to his housekeeper: “Though his sword could not penetrate me, he has nearly broken my heart.”

Cucúlin had to be carried to his tent. His comrades laid him on his bed and said: “Whoever came and healed

him yesterday, may be the same will be here to-night.” They went away and were not long gone when Gil an Og came and said: “Cucúlin, if you had done my bidding, you wouldn’t be as you are to-night. But if you neglect my words now, you’ll never see my face again. I’ll cure you this time and make you as well as ever;” and whatever virtue she had she healed him so he was as strong as before.

“Oh, then,” said Cucúlin, “whatever comes on me I’ll never turn back till I knock another day’s trial out of Thin-in-Iron.”

“Well,” said she, “you are a stronger man than he, but there is no good in working at him with a sword. Throw your sword aside to-morrow, and you’ll get the better of him and bind him. You’ll not see me again.”

She went away and he fell asleep. His comrades came in the morning and found him sleeping. They got breakfast, and, after eating, Cucúlin went out and called a challenge.

“Oh, ’tis the same man as yesterday,” said Thin-in-Iron, “and if I had cut the head off him then, it wouldn’t be he that would trouble me to-day. If I live for it, I’ll bring his head in my hand to-night, and he’ll never disturb me again.”

When Cucúlin saw Thin-in-Iron coming, he threw his sword aside, and facing him, caught him by the body, raised him up, then dashed him to the ground, and said, “If you don’t give me what I want, I’ll cut the head off you.”

“What do you want of me?” asked Thin-in-Iron.

“I want the rod of enchantment and the ring of youth you carried from the Gruagach.”

“I did indeed carry them from him, but it would be no easy thing for me to give them to you or any other man; for a force came which took them from me.”

“What could take them from you?” asked Cucúlin.

“The queen of the Wilderness, an old hag that has them now. But release me from this bondage and I’ll take you to my castle and entertain you well, and I’ll go with you and the rest of the company to see how will you thrive.”

So he took Cucúlin and his friends to the castle and entertained them joyously, and he said: “The old hag, the queen of the Wilderness, lives in a round tower, which is always turning on wheels. There is but one entrance

to the tower, and that high above the ground, and in the one chamber in which she lives, keeping the ring and the rod, is a chair, and she has but to sit on the chair and wish herself in any part of the world, and that moment she is there. She has six lines of guards protecting her tower, and if you pass all of these, you'll do what no man before you has done to this day. The first guards are two lions that rush out to know which of them will get the first bite out of the throat of any one that tries to pass. The second are seven men with iron hurlies and an iron ball, and with their hurlies they wallop the life out of any man that goes their way. The third is Hung-up-Naked, who hangs on a tree with his toes to the earth, his head cut from his shoulders and lying on the ground, and who kills every man who comes near him. The fourth is the bull of the Mist that darkens the woods for seven miles around, and destroys everything that enters the Mist. The fifth are seven cats with poison tails; and one drop of their poison would kill the strongest man."

Next morning all went with Cucúlin as far as the lions who guarded the queen of the Wilderness, an old hag made young by the ring of youth. The two lions ran at Cucúlin to see which would have the first bite out of him.

Cucúlin wore a red silk scarf around his neck and had a fine head of hair. He cut the hair off his head and wound it around one hand, took his scarf and wrapped it around the other. Then rushing at the lions, he thrust a hand down the throat of each lion (for lions can bite neither silk nor hair). He pulled the livers and lights out of the two and they fell dead before him. His comrades looking on, said: "You'll thrive now since you have done this deed;" and they left him and went home, each to his own country.

Cucúlin went further. The next people he met were the seven men with the iron hurlies (ball clubs), and they said; "'Tis long since any man walked this way to us; we'll have sport now."

The first one said: "Give him a touch of the hurly and let the others do the same; and we'll wallop him till he is dead."

Now Cucúlin drew his sword and cut the head off the first man before he could make an offer of the hurly at him; and then he did the same to the other six.

He went on his way till he came to Hung-up-Naked, who was hanging from a tree, his head on the ground near him. The queen of the Wilderness had fastened him to the tree because he wouldn't marry her; and she said: "If any man comes who will put your head on you, you'll be free." And she laid the injunction on him to kill every man who tried to pass his way without putting the head on him.

Cucúlin went up, looked at him, and saw heaps of bones around the tree. The body said: "You can't go by here. I fight with every man who tries to pass."

"Well, I'm not going to fight with a man unless he has a head on him. Take your head." And Cucúlin, picking up the head, clapped it on the body, and said, "Now I'll fight with you!"

The man said: "I'm all right now. I know where you are going. I'll stay here till you come; if you conquer you'll not forget me. Take the head off me now; put it where you found it; and if you succeed, remember that I shall be here before you on your way home."

Cucúlin went on, but soon met the bull of the Mist that covered seven miles of the wood with thick mist. When the bull saw him, he made at him and stuck a horn in his ribs and threw him three miles into the wood, against a great oak tree and broke three ribs in his side.

"Well," said Cucúlin, when he recovered, "if I get another throw like that, I'll not be good for much exercise." He was barely on his feet when the bull was at him again; but when he came up he caught the bull by both horns and away they went wrestling and struggling. For three days and nights Cucúlin kept the bull in play, till the morning of the fourth day, when he put him on the flat of his back. Then he turned him on the side, and putting a foot on one horn and taking the other in his two hands, he said: "'Tis well I earned you; there is not a stitch on me that isn't torn to rags from wrestling with you." He pulled the bull asunder from his horns to his tail, into two equal parts, and said: "Now that I have you in two, it's in quarters I'll put you." He took his sword, and when he struck the backbone of the bull, the sword remained in the bone and he couldn't pull it out.

He walked away and stood awhile and looked. "'Tis hard to say," said he, "that any good champion would leave his sword behind him." So he went back and made another pull and took the hilt off his sword, leaving the blade in the back of the bull. Then he went away tattered and torn, the hilt in his hand, and he turned up towards the forge of the Strong Smith. One of the Smith's boys was out for coal at the time: he saw Cucúlin coming with the hilt in his hand, and ran in, saying: "There is a man coming up and he looks like a fool; we'll have fun!"

"Hold your tongue!" said the master. "Have you heard any account of the bull of the Mist these three days?"

"We have not," said the boys.

“Perhaps,” said the Strong Smith, “that’s a good champion that’s coming, and do you mind yourselves.”

At that moment Cucúlin walked in to the forge where twelve boys and the master were working. He saluted them and asked, “Can you put a blade in this hilt?”

“We can,” said the master. They put in the blade. Cucúlin raised the sword and took a shake out of it and broke it to bits.

“This is a rotten blade,” said he. “Go at it again.”

They made a second blade. The boys were in dread of him now. He broke the second blade in the same way as the first. They made six blades, one stronger than the other. He did the same to them all. “There is no use in talking,” said the Strong Smith; “we have no stuff that would make a right blade for you. Go down now,” said he to two of the boys, “and bring up an old sword that’s down in the stable full of rust.”

They went and brought up the sword on two hand-spikes between them; it was so heavy that one couldn’t carry it. They gave it to Cucúlin, and with one blow on his heel he knocked the dust from it and went out at the door and took a shake out of it; and if he did, he darkened the whole place with the rust from the blade.

“This is my sword, whoever made it,” said he.

“It is,” said the master; “it’s yours and welcome. I know who you are now, and where you are going. Remember that I’m in bondage here.” The Strong Smith took Cucúlin then to his house, gave him refreshment and clothes for the journey. When he was ready, the Smith said: “I hope you’ll thrive. You have done a deal more than any man that ever walked this way before. There is nothing now to stand in your way till you come to the seven cats outside the turning tower. If they shake their tails and a drop of poison comes on you, it will penetrate to your heart. You must sweep off their tails with your sword. ‘Tis equal to you what their bodies will do after that.”

Cucúlin soon came to them and there wasn’t one of the seven cats he didn’t strip of her tail before she knew he was in it. He cared nothing for the bodies so he had the tails. The cats ran away.

Now he faced the tower turning on wheels. The queen of the Wilderness was in it. He had been told by Thin-in-Iron that he must cut the axle. He found the axle, cut it, and the tower stopped that instant. Cucúlin made a spring and went in through the single passage.

The old hag was preparing to sit on the chair as she saw him coming. He sprang forward, pushed the chair away with one hand, and, catching her by the back of the neck with the other, said: "You are to lose your head now, old woman!"

"Spare me, and what you want you'll get," said she. "I have the ring of youth and the rod of enchantment," and she gave them to him. He put the ring on his finger, and saying, "You'll never do mischief again to man!" he turned her face to the entrance, and gave her a kick. Out she flew through the opening and down to the ground, where she broke her neck and died on the spot.

Cucúlin made the Strong Smith king over all the dominions of the queen of the Wilderness, and proclaimed that any person in the country who refused to obey the new king would be put to death.

Cucúlin turned back at once, and travelled till he came to Hung-up-Naked. He took him down, and putting the head on his body, struck him a blow of the rod and made the finest looking man of him that could be found. The man went back to his own home happy and well.

Cucúlin never stopped till he came to the castle of Gil an Og. She was outside with a fine welcome before him; and why not, to be sure, for he had the rod of enchantment and the ring of youth!

When she entered the castle and took the form of a cat, he struck her a blow of the rod and she gained the same form and face she had before the king of Greece struck her. Then he asked, "Where is your sister?" "In the lake there outside," answered Gil an Og, "in the form of a sea-serpent." She went out with him, and the moment they came to the edge of the lake the sister rose up near them. Then Cucúlin struck her with the rod and she came to land in her own shape and countenance.

Next day they saw a deal of vessels facing the harbor, and what should they be but a fleet of ships, and on the ships were the king of Greece, Lug Longhand, the knight of the island of the Flood, the Dark Guagach of the Northern Island and Thin-in-Iron: and they came each in his own vessel to know was there any account of Cucúlin. There was good welcome for them all, and when they had feasted and rejoiced together Cucúlin married Gil an Og. The king of Greece took Gil an Og's sister, who was his own wife at first, and went home.

Cucúlin went away himself with his wife Gil an Og, never stopping till he came to Erin; and when he came, Fin MacCumhail and his men were at KilConaly, near the river Shannon.

When Cucúlin went from Erin he left a son whose mother was called the Virago of Alba: she was still alive and the son was eighteen years old. When she heard that Cucúlin had brought Gil an Og to Erin, she was enraged with jealousy and madness. She had reared the son, whose name was Conlán, like any king's son, and now giving him his arms of a champion she told him to go to his father.

"I would," said he, "if I knew who my father is."

"His name is Cucúlin, and he is with Fin MacCumhail. I bind you not to yield to any man," said she to her son, "nor tell your name to any man till you fight him out."

Conlán started from Ulster where his mother was, and never stopped till he was facing Fin and his men, who were hunting that day along the cliffs of KilConaly.

When the young man came up Fin said, "There is a single man facing us."

Conan Maol said, "Let some one go against him, ask who he is and what he wants."

"I never give an account of myself to any man," said Conlán, "till I get an account from him."

"There is no man among us," said Conan, "bound in that way but Cucúlin." They called on Cucúlin; he came up and the two fought. Conlán knew by the description his mother had given that Cucúlin was his father, but Cucúlin did not know his son. Every time Conlán aimed his spear he threw it so as to strike the ground in front of Cucúlin's toe, but Cucúlin aimed straight at him.

They were at one another three days and three nights. The son always sparing the father, the father never sparing the son.

Conan Maol came to them the fourth morning. "Cucúlin," said he, "I didn't expect to see any man standing against you three days, and you such a champion."

When Conlán heard Conan Maol urging the father to kill him, he gave a bitter look at Conan, and forgot his guard. Cucúlin's spear went through his head that minute, and he fell. "I die of that blow from my father," said he.

"Are you my son?" said Cucúlin.

“I am,” said Conlán.

Cucúlin took his sword and cut the head off him sooner than leave him in the punishment and pain he was in. Then he faced all the people, and Fin was looking on.

“There’s trouble on Cucúlin,” said Fin. “Chew your thumb,” said Conan Maol, “to know what’s on him.”

Fin chewed his thumb, and said, “Cucúlin is after killing his own son, and if I and all my men were to face him before his passion cools, at the end of seven days, he’d destroy every man of us.”

“Go now,” said Conan, “and bind him to go down to Bale strand and give seven days’ fighting against the waves of the sea, rather than kill us all.”

So Fin bound him to go down. When he went to Bale strand Cucúlin found a great white stone. He grasped his sword in his right hand and cried out: “If I had the head of the woman who sent her son into peril of death at my hand, I’d split it as I split this stone,” and he made four quarters of the stone. Then he strove with the waves seven days and nights till he fell from hunger and weakness, and the waves went over him.

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