



# *Fin MacCumhail and the Knight of the Full Axe*

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Irish

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*Intermediate  
15 min read*

There was a day when Fin went on an expedition by himself. He walked out to his currochán on the seashore, gave it a kick that sent it out nine leagues from land, then with a spring he jumped into the boat and rowed over the sea.

After he had gone some distance he saw a giant coming towards him, walking through the water, which did not reach his knees. Looking up, Fin could see nothing between the head of the giant and the sky.

With one step the giant was in front of Fin, and it seemed that he and his boat would be lost in a moment between the legs of the terrible monster.

“Poor, little helpless creature! what brings you here in my way?” asked the giant. He was just going to lay hold of the boat and toss it far off to one side, when Fin called out:

“Won’t you give fair play; just let me put foot on solid land, and see what will happen. Don’t attack me here; I’m not afraid to meet you once I have earth for my two feet to stand on.”

“If that is all you want I can take you to land very soon.” And seizing the boat as he would a grass-blade, the

giant drew it to the shore of the sea opposite to that from which Fin started, and in front of his own castle.

“What will you do now?” asked the giant.

“I’ll fight with you,” said Fin.

The giant brought out his battle-axe, which had a blade seven acres in size. Fin was ready with his sword, and now began a most terrible battle.

Fin faced the giant, slashing at him with his sword, and when the giant made an offer of the axe at him, Fin would dart to one side; and when the axe missing him struck the ground, it went into the handle. The giant was a long time striving to know could he draw out the axe; and while at this Fin ran behind and cut steps with his sword into the leg of his enemy; and by the time the giant had the axe out of the ground, Fin was ready for him again and in front of him, striking and vexing him with his sword. It was another long while till a blow came down; and when the axe went into the ground again, Fin ran behind a second time, cut more steps in the leg and body of the giant, so as to reach his neck and cut the head off him.

When the axe was coming to the ground the third time, Fin slipped and fell under one corner of it, and between the feet of the giant, who closed his legs with a clap that was heard to the end of the Western World. He thought to catch Fin; but Fin was too quick for him, and though badly hurt he was able to cut more steps and climb to the neck of the giant. With one blow he swept the head off him,—and a big head it was; by all accounts as broad as the moon.

The battle was fought in front of the giant’s castle. Fin was terribly wounded; the axe had cut that deep that his bowels were to be seen. He dropped at the side of the giant, and lay helpless on the ground. After the fall of the giant twelve women came out of his castle, and when they drew near and saw him dead they laughed from joy; but seeing Fin with his wound they began to mourn.

“Oh, then,” said Fin, “is it making sport of me you are after the evil day that I’ve had?”

“Indeed it is not. We are twelve daughters of kings, stolen from our fathers. We saw the giant fall, and came here to look at him dead; we grieve for you and mourn for the sorrow that is on you, but we are so glad the giant is killed that we cannot help laughing.”

“Well,” said Fin, “if you mourn for me and are glad that I have killed the giant, will you carry me to my currochán, lay me in it, and push it out to sea? The waves may bear me home, and I care for nothing else if only

one day my bones may come to land in Erin.”

The twelve women took him up carefully and put him in the boat, and when the tide came they pushed it out to sea.

Fin lay in the bottom of the boat barely alive. It floated along, and he was borne over the waves. Hither and thither went the boat, till at last one day a blackbird came down on the body of Fin MacCumhail, and began to pick at his entrails. The blackbird said:

“Many a long day have I watched and waited for this chance, and glad am I to have it now.”

That moment the blackbird turned into a little man not more than three feet high. Then he said: “I was under a Druidic spell, to be a blackbird till I should get three bites of fat from the entrails of Fin MacCumhail. I have followed you everywhere; have watched you in battle and hunt, on sea and land, but never have I been able to get the chance till this day. Now I have it, I have also the power to make you well again.”

He put Fin’s entrails into their proper place, rubbed him with an ointment that he had, and Fin was well as ever.

The little man, who said his name was Ridiri na lan tur (Knight of the Full Axe) had a small axe, his only weapon. As they floated along he said to Fin: “I wish to show you some strange things, such as you have never seen in Erin. We are near a country where the king’s daughter is to be married to-night. We will prevent the ceremony.”

“Oh no,” said Fin, “I would rather go to my own home.”

“Never mind,” said the little man, “nothing can harm you in my company; come with me. This is a wonderful king, and he has a wonderful daughter. It’s a strange country, and I want to show you the place. We’ll tell him that you are Fin MacCumhail, monarch of Erin; that we have been shipwrecked, and ask for a night’s shelter.”

Fin consented at last, and with the Knight of the Full Axe landed, drew the boat on shore, and went to the king’s castle. There was noise and tumult; great crowds of people had come to do honor to the king’s daughter. Never before had such preparations been made in that kingdom.

The Knight of the Full Axe knocked at the door, and asked admission for himself and Fin MacCumhail, monarch of Erin, shipwrecked on that shore. (The country was north of Erin, far out in the sea.)

The attendants said: "No strangers may enter here, but there is a great house further on; go there and welcome."

The house to which they were directed was twenty-one miles long, ten miles wide, and about five miles distant from the castle; inhabited by the strangest men in the world, body-guards of the king, fed from the king's house, and a terrible feeding it was,—human flesh. All strangers who came to the king's castle were sent to that house, where the guards tore them to pieces and ate them up.

These guards had to be fed well; if not they would devour the whole country.

With Fin and the Knight of the Full Axe there went a messenger, who was careful not to go near the house; he pointed it out from a distance, and ran home.

Fin and the knight knocked at the door. When it was opened all inside laughed; as they laughed, Fin could see their hearts and livers they were so glad. The Knight of the Full Axe asked, "Why do you laugh in this way?"

"Oh," answered they, "we laugh because you are so small you'll not make a mouthful for one of us."

The guards barred the door and put a prop against it. Now the knight put a second prop against the door; the guards asked, "Why do you do that?"

"I do it so none of you may escape me," answered the knight. Then seizing two of the largest of the guards, one in each hand, he used them as clubs and killed the others with them. He ran the length of the house, striking right and left, till he walloped the life out of all that was in it, but the two. To them he said: "I spare you to clean out the house, and make the place fit for the monarch of Erin to spend the night in. Bring rushes, and make ready to receive Fin MacCumhail."

And from wherever they got them, they brought two baskets of rushes, each basket as big as a mountain, and spread litter on the ground two feet deep through the whole house; and then at the knight's command they brought a pile of turf, and made a grand fire.

Late in the evening the king's attendants brought food, which they left near the house of the guards; these monsters were fed twice a day, morning and evening. To their great surprise the attendants saw the bodies of the dead giants piled up outside the house; they ran off quickly to tell the news.

Now the Knight of the Full Axe sat by the fire. The two guards that he had spared tried to chat and be agreeable; but the knight snapped at them and said: "What company are you for the monarch of Erin?" Then he caught the two, squeezed the life out of them, and threw them on the pile outside.

"Now," said the knight to Fin, "there is no suitable food for you; I must get you something good to eat from the castle."

So off he started, reached the castle quickly, knocked at the door, and demanded the best of food, saying, "'Tis fine treatment you are giving the monarch of Erin to-night!"

They trembled at the voice of the little man, and without words or delay gave him the best they had in the castle. He carried it back and placed it before Fin. "Now," said he, "they have given us no wine; we must have wine, and that of the best."

"Oh, we have no need of wine!" said Fin; but off went the knight.

Again he demanded supplies at the castle. He took a hogshead of the best wine, threw it over his shoulder, and, as he hurried out, he struck a jamb off the door and swept it along with the hogshead.

"Now," said the knight, after they had eaten and drunk, "'tis too bad for the monarch of Erin to sleep on rushes; he should have the best bed in the land."

"Oh, trouble yourself no further," said Fin; "better sleep on rushes than all this noise."

But the knight would listen to nothing; away he went to the castle, and shouted: "Give me the best bed in this place! I want it for Fin MacCumhail, the monarch of Erin."

They gave him the bed in a moment. With hurried steps he was back, and said to Fin: "Rest on this bed. Now I'll stop the wedding of the princess; you may take her to Erin if you like."

"Oh, that would not be right! I am well as I am," said Fin, who was getting in dread of the knight himself.

“No, you’d better have the princess,” and off rushed the knight. He entered the castle. All were in terror; hither and thither they hurried, not knowing what to do. The Knight of the Full Axe seized the princess. “The monarch of Erin is a better man than your bridegroom,” said he; and clapping her under his arm, away he went. Not a man had the courage to stir.

All was confusion and fear in the king’s castle. The princess was gone and no one could save her. All were in terrible dread, knowing what had been done at the long house.

At last an old hag, one of the queen’s waiting-women, said: “I’ll go and see what has become of the princess. I’ll go on the chimney and look down.”

Off ran the hag, and never rested till she was on the top of the chimney, sticking down her head to know what could she see. The chimney was wide, for the king’s guards had cooked all their food below on the fire. The Knight of the Full Axe was looking up at the time and saw the two eyes staring down at him.

“Go on out of that,” cried he, flinging his axe; which stuck in the old woman’s forehead. Off she rushed to the castle. She had seen nothing of the princess; all she knew was that a little man was sitting by the fire warming himself, that he had thrown his axe at her, and it had stuck in her forehead.

At daylight the knight spoke to Fin, who rose at once. “Now,” said he, “I have no strength left; all my strength is in the axe. While I had that I could do anything, now I can do nothing. We are in great danger; but there is such dread of us on the people here that we may mend matters yet. Do you put on the dress of a leech, get herbs and vials, and pretend you have great skill in healing. Go to the castle, and say you can take the axe out of the old hag’s head. No man there can do that without killing her; she will die the minute it is drawn. Get at her, seize the axe, pull it out, and with it you will have the greatest power on earth.”

Fin went to the castle, and said: “I am a great doctor. I can take the axe out of the old woman’s head without trouble.”

They took him to the hag, who was sitting upright in bed; her head was so sore she couldn’t lie down. He felt her head around the axe, sent the people away; when they were gone he took hold of the handle. With one snap he made two halves of the old woman’s head. Fin ran out with the axe, leaving the old hag dead behind him. He never stopped till he came where he had left the knight.

Fin MacCumhail was now the strongest man on earth, and the knight the weakest. "You may keep the axe," said the little man; "I shall not envy you, but will go with you and you will protect me."

"No," said Fin, "it shall never be said that I took the axe from you, though I know its value and feel its power."

The knight was glad to get back his axe, and now the two set out for Erin. Fin kicked the boat three leagues from land, and with a bound they both came down in it, and floated on till they saw the coast of Erin. Then the little man said:

"I must leave you now. Though of your kin, I cannot land in Erin. But if you need me at any time you have only to look over your right shoulder, call my name, and you will see me before you."

Now Fin sprang ashore; he had been absent a year and more, and no man knew where he was while gone. All thought him lost. Great was the gladness when Fin came home, and told the Fenians of Erin of what he had seen and what he had done.

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