

# *Fin MacCumhail and the Son of the King of Alba*

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Irish

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*Intermediate*

*17 min read*

On a day Fin went out hunting with his dog Bran, on Knock an Ar; and he killed so much game that he didn't know what to do with it or how to bring it home. As he stood looking and thinking, all at once he saw a man running towards him, with a rope around his waist so long that half his body was covered with it; and the man was of such size that, as he ran, Fin could see the whole world between his legs and nothing between his head and the sky. When he came up, the man saluted Fin, who answered him most kindly. "Where are you going?" asked Fin. "I am out looking for a master." "Well," said Fin, "I am in sore need of a man; what can you do?" "Do you see this rope on my body? Whatever this rope will bind I can carry." "If that is true," said Fin, "you are the man I want. Do you see the game on this hillside?" "I do," said the man. "Well, put that into the rope and carry it to my castle."

The man put all the game into the rope, made a great bundle, and threw it on his back.

"Show me the way to the castle now," said he. Fin started on ahead, and though he ran with all his might, he could not gain one step on the man who followed with the game. The sentry on guard at the castle saw the man running while yet far off. He stepped inside the gate and said: "There is a man coming with a load on his back as big as a mountain." Before he could come out again to his place the man was there and the load off his back.

When the game came to the ground, it shook the castle to its foundations. Next day the man was sent to herd cows for a time, and while he was gone, Conán Maol said to Fin: "If you don't put this cowherd to death, he will destroy all the Fenians of Erin." "How could I put such a good man to death?" asked Fin. "Send him," said Conán, "to sow corn on the brink of a lake in the north of Erin. Now, in that lake lives a serpent that never lets a person pass, but swallows every man that goes that way." Fin agreed to this, and the next morning after breakfast he called the man, gave him seven bullocks, a plough, and a sack of grain, and sent him to the lake in the north of Erin to sow corn. When he came to the lake, the man started to plough, drew one furrow. The lake began to boil up, and as he was coming back, making the second furrow, the serpent was on the field before him and swallowed the seven bullocks and the plough up to the handles. But the man held fast to what he had in his two hands, gave a pull, and dragged the plough and six of the bullocks out of the belly of the serpent. The seventh one remained inside. The serpent went at him and they fought for seven days and nights. At the end of that time the serpent was as tame as a cat, and the man drove him and the six bullocks home before him.

When he was in sight of Fin's castle, the sentry at the gate ran in and cried: "That cowherd is coming with the size of a mountain before him!" "Run out," said Conán Maol, "and tell him to tie the serpent to that oak out there."

They ran out, and the man tied the serpent to the oak-tree, then came in and had a good supper.

Next morning the man went out to herd cows as before. "Well," said Conán Maol to Fin, "if you don't put this man to death, he'll destroy you and me and all the Fenians of Erin."

"How could I put such a man to death?"

"There is," said Conán, "a bullock in the north of Erin, and he drives fog out of himself for seven days and then he draws it in for seven other days. To-morrow is the last day for drawing it in. If any one man comes near, he'll swallow him alive."

When the cowherd came to supper in the evening, Fin said to him: "I am going to have a feast and need fresh beef. Now there is a bullock in that same valley by the lake in the north of Erin where you punished the serpent; and if you go there and bring the bullock to me, you'll have my thanks."

"I'll go," said the man, "the first thing after breakfast in the morning."

So off he went next morning; and when he came near the valley, he found the bullock asleep and drawing in the

last of the fog; and soon he found himself going in with it. So he caught hold of a great oak-tree for safety. The bullock woke up then and saw him, and letting a roar out of himself, faced him, and gave him a pitch with his horn which sent him seven miles over the top of a wood. And when he fell to the ground, the bullock was on him again before he had time to rise, and gave him another pitch which sent him back and broke three ribs in his body.

“This will never do,” said the man, as he rose, and pulling up an oak-tree by the roots for a club, he faced the bullock. And there they were at one another for five days and nights, till the bullock was as tame as a cat and the man drove him home to Fin’s castle. The sentry saw them coming and ran inside the gate with word. “Tell the man to tie the bullock to that oak-tree beyond,” said Conán. “We don’t want him near this place.” The cowherd tied the bullock, and told Fin to send four of the best butchers in Erin to kill him with an axe; and the four of them struck him one after another and any of them couldn’t knock him.

“Give me an axe,” said the man to the butchers. They gave him the axe, and the first stroke he gave, he knocked the bullock. Then they began to skin him; but the man didn’t like the way they were doing the work, so he took his sword and had three quarters of the bullock skinned before they could skin one.

Next morning the cowherd went out with the cows; but he wasn’t long gone when Conán Maol came to Fin and said: “If you don’t put an end to that man, he’ll soon put an end to you and to me and to all of us, so there won’t be a man of the Fenians of Erin left alive.”

“How could I put an end to a man like him?” asked Fin.

“There is in the north of Erin,” said Conán, “a wild sow who has two great pigs of her own; and she and her two pigs have bags of poison in their tails; and when they see any man, they run at him and shake their poison bags; and if the smallest drop of the poison touches him, it is death to him that minute. And, if by any chance he should escape the wild sow and the pigs, there is a fox-man called the Gruagach, who has but one eye and that in the middle of his forehead. The Gruagach carries a club of a ton weight, and if the cowherd gets one welt of that club, he’ll never trouble the Fenians of Erin again.”

Next morning Fin called up the cowherd and said, “I am going to have a feast in this castle, and I would like to have some fresh pork. There is a wild sow in the north of Erin with two pigs, and if you bring her to me before the feast, you’ll have my thanks.”

“I’ll go and bring her to you,” said the cowherd. So after breakfast he took his sword, went to the north of Erin, and stole up to the sow and two pigs, and whipped the tails off the three of them, before they knew he was in it. Then he faced the wild sow and fought with her for four days and five nights, and on the morning of the fifth day he knocked her dead. At the last blow, his sword stuck in her backbone and he couldn’t draw it out. But with one pull he broke the blade, and stood there over her with only the hilt in his hand. Then he put his foot on one of her jaws, took the other in his hands, and splitting her evenly from the nose to the tail, made two halves of her.

He threw one half on his shoulder; and that minute the big Gruagach with one eye in his head came along and made an offer of his club at him to kill him. But the cowherd jumped aside, and catching the Gruagach by one of his legs, threw him up on to the half of the wild sow on his shoulder, and taking the other half of her from the ground, clapped that on the top of the Gruagach, and ran away to Fin’s castle as fast as his legs could carry him.

The sentry at the castle gate ran in and said: “The cowherd is running to the castle, and the size of a mountain on his back.” “Go out now,” said Conán Maol, “and stop him where he is, or he’ll throw down the castle if he comes here with the load that’s on him.” But before the sentry was back at his place, the cowherd was at the gate shaking the load off his back and the castle to its foundations, so that every dish and vessel in it was broken to bits.

The Gruagach jumped from the ground, rubbed his legs and every part of him that was sore from the treatment he got. He was so much in dread of the cowherd that he ran with all the strength that was in him, and never stopped to look back till he was in the north of Erin.

Next morning the cowherd went out with the cows, drove them back in the evening, and while picking the thigh-bone of a bullock for his supper, Oscar, son of Oisín, the strongest man of the Fenians of Erin, came up to him and took hold of the bone to pull it from his hand. The cowherd held one end and Oscar the other, and pulled till they made two halves of the bone. “What did you carry away?” asked the cowherd. “What I have in my hand,” said Oscar. “And I kept what I held in my fist,” said the cowherd. “There is that for you now,” said Oscar, and he hit him a slap.

The cowherd said no word in answer, but next morning he asked his wages of Fin. "Oh, then," said Fin, "I'll pay you and welcome, for you are the best man I have ever had or met with."

Then the cowherd went away to Cahirciveen in Kerry where he had an enchanted castle. But before he went he invited Fin MacCumhail and the Fenians of Erin to have a great feast with him. "For," said he to Fin, "I'm not a cowherd at all, but the son of the king of Alba, and I'll give you good cheer."

When the Fenians came to the place, they found the finest castle that could be seen. There were three fires in each room and seven spits at every fire. When they had gone and sat down in their places, there was but one fire in each room. "Rise up, every man of you," said Fin, "or we are lost; for this is an enchanted place."

They tried to rise, but each man was fastened to his seat, and the seat to the floor; and not one of them could stir. Then the last fire went out and they were in darkness.

"Chew your thumb," said Conán to Fin, "and try is there any way out of here." Fin chewed his thumb and knew what trouble they were in. Then he put his two hands into his mouth and blew the old-time whistle. And this whistle was heard by Pogán and Ceolán, two sons of Fin who were in the North at that time, one fishing and the other hurling.

When they heard the whistle, they said: "Our father and the Fenians of Erin are in trouble." And they faced towards the sound and never stopped till they knocked at the door of the enchanted castle of the son of Alba at Cahirciveen.

"Who is there?" asked Fin.

"Your two sons," said one of them.

"Well," said Fin, "we are in danger of death to-night. That cowherd I had in my service was no cowherd at all, but the son of the king of Alba; and his father has said that he will not eat three meals off one table without having my head. There is an army now on the road to kill us to-night. There is no way in or out of this castle but by one ford, and to that ford the army of the king of Alba is coming."

The two sons of Fin went out at nightfall and stood in the ford before the army. The son of the king of Alba knew them well, and calling each by name, said: "Won't you let us pass?" "We will not," said they; and then the fight began. The two sons of Fin MacCumhail, Pogán and Ceolán, destroyed the whole army and killed every

man except the son of the king of Alba.

After the battle the two went back to their father. "We have destroyed the whole army at the ford," said they.

"There is a greater danger ahead," said Fin. "There is an old hag coming with a little pot. She will dip her finger in the pot, touch the lips of the dead men, and bring the whole army to life. But first of all there will be music at the ford, and if you hear the music, you'll fall asleep. Now go, but if you do not overpower the old hag, we are lost."

"We'll do the best we can," said the two sons of Fin.

They were not long at the ford when one said, "I am falling asleep from that music." "So am I," said the other. "Knock your foot down on mine," said the first. The other kicked his foot and struck him, but no use. Then each took his spear and drove it through the foot of the other, but both fell asleep in spite of the spears.

The old hag went on touching the lips of the dead men, who stood up alive; and she was crossing the ford at the head of the army when she stumbled over the two sleeping brothers and spilt what was in the pot over their bodies.

They sprang up fresh and well, and picking up two stones of a ton weight each that were there in the ford, they made for the champions of Alban and never stopped till they killed the last man of them; and then they killed the old hag herself.

Pogán and Ceolán then knocked at the door of the castle.

"Who's there?" asked Fin.

"Your two sons," said they; "and we have killed all the champions of Alban and the old hag as well." "You have more to do yet," said Fin. "There are three kings in the north of Erin who have three silver goblets. These kings are holding a feast in a fort to-day. You must go and cut the heads off the three, put their blood in the goblets and bring them here. When you come, rub the blood on the keyhole of the door and it will open before you. When you come in, rub the seats and we shall all be free."

The three goblets of blood were brought to Cahirciveen, the door of the castle flew open, and light came into every room. The brothers rubbed blood on the chairs of all the Fenians of Erin and freed them all, except Conán Maol, who had no chair, but sat on the floor with his back to the wall. When they came to him the last drop of

blood was gone.

All the Fenians of Erin were hurrying past, anxious to escape, and paid no heed to Conán, who had never a good word in his mouth for any man. Then Conán turned to Diarmuid, and said: "If a woman were here in place of me, you wouldn't leave her to die this way." Then Diarmuid turned, took him by one hand, and Goll MacMorna by the other, and pulling with all their might, tore him from the wall and the floor. But if they did, he left all the skin of his back from his head to his heels on the floor and the wall behind him. But when they were going home through the hills of Tralee, they found a sheep on the way, killed it, and clapped the skin on Conán. The sheepskin grew to his body; and he was so well and strong that they sheared him every year, and got wool enough from his back to make flannel and frieze for the Fenians of Erin ever after.

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