



Fin MacCumhail, the Seven Brothers, and the King of France

Jeremiah Curtin

Irish

Intermediate
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When Fin MacCumhail with seven companies of the Fenians of Erin was living at Tara of the Kings, he went hunting one day with the seven companies; and while out on the mountains seven young men came towards him and when they came up and stood before him he asked their names of them.

Each gave his name in turn, beginning with the eldest, and their names were Strong, son of Strength; Wise, son of Wisdom; Builder, son of Builder; Whistler, son of Whistler; Guide, son of Guide; Climber, son of Climber; Thief, son of Thief.

The seven young men pleased Fin; they were looking for service, so he hired them for a year and a day.

When Fin and the Fenians of Erin went home that night from the hunt there was a message at the castle before them from the king of France to Fin MacCumhail and the Fenians of Erin, asking them to come over to him on a most important affair.

Fin held a council straightway and said, "France is a thousand miles from this and the sea between it and Erin; how can we go to the king of France?"

Then Strong, son of Strength, spoke up and said: "What is the use of hiring us if we can't do this work and the like of it? If you'll make a ship here, or in any place, I'll pull it in the sea."

"And I," said Builder, "will make a ship fit for you or any king on earth with one blow of this axe in my hand."

"That's what I want," said Fin, "and now do you make that ship for me."

"I will," said Builder.

"Well," said Strong, "I'll put your ship in the sea."

Builder made the ship there at Tara of the Kings and then Strong brought it to the seashore and put it in the water. Fin and the Fenians of Erin went on board, and Guide took the ship from Erin to France.

When Fin and his men went to the king of France he was glad to see them and said:

"I'll tell you the reason now I asked you here, and the business I have with you. This time three years ago my wife had a son, two years ago a second, one year ago a third, and the neighbors' wives are thinking she'll have another child soon. Immediately they were born the three were taken away, and I want you to save the fourth; for we all think it will be taken from us like the other three. When each one of the others was sleeping, a hand came down the chimney to the cradle and took the child away with it up the chimney. There is meat and drink in plenty in that room for you and the Fenians of Erin. My only request is that you'll watch the child."

"We'll do that," said Fin, and he went into the chamber with men enough to watch and the seven brothers with him. Then the seven said: "Do you and the men go to sleep for yourselves, and we'll do the watching." So Fin and the men went to sleep. The child was born early in the evening and put in the cradle. At the dead of night Wise said to Strong: "Now is your time; the hand is near; keep your eye on it."

Soon he saw the hand coming lower and lower and moving towards the child; and when it was going into the cradle, Strong caught the hand and it drew him up nearly to the top of the chimney. Then he pulled it down to the ashes; again it drew him up.

They were that way all night,—the hand drawing Strong almost to the top of the chimney and out of the house

and Strong dragging the hand down to the hearth. They were up and down the chimney till break of day; and every stone in the castle of the king of France was trembling in its place from the struggle.

But at break of day Strong tore from its shoulder the arm with the hand, and there was peace. Now all rose up at the castle. The king came and was glad when he saw the child.

Then Fin spoke up and said: "We have done no good thing yet till we bring back the other three to you."

Wise spoke up and said: "I know very well where the other three are, and I'll show you the place."

So all set out and they followed him to the castle of Mal MacMulcan and there they saw the three sons of the King of France carrying water to MacMulcan to cool the shoulder from which the arm had been torn by Strong.

Then Wise said to Climber: "Now is your time to take the children away; for we can do it without being seen; but if Mal MacMulcan were to see the children going from him, he'd destroy the whole world. But as it is when he finds the children are gone, he has a sister there near himself, and he'll break her head against the wall of the castle."

Then Climber took a clew from his pocket and threw it over the walls of the castle, and the walls were so high that no bird of the air could fly over them. Then they fixed a rope ladder on the castle. Wise, Guide, and Climber went up the ladder and at break of day they brought away the three children and gave them to the king of France that morning. And the king of France was so glad when he saw his three sons that he said to Fin: "I will give you your ship full of the most precious stuffs in my kingdom."

"I will take nothing for myself," said Fin; "but do you give what you like to my seven young men who have done the work;" and the seven said they wouldn't take anything while they were serving with him. So Fin took the present from the king of France and set sail for Erin with the Fenians and the seven young men.

While they were on the way to Erin they saw the sea raging after them. Wise, son of Wisdom, said: "That is Mal MacMulcan coming to get satisfaction out of us."

Then MacMulcan caught hold of the ship by the stern and pulled it down till the masts touched the sea. Strong caught him by the left remaining hand, and the two began to fight, and at last Strong pulled him on to the deck of the ship.

"Our ship will be sunk," said Wise, "and Fin with the Fenians of Erin and the seven of us will be drowned unless

you make a flail out of MacMulcan and thrash the head off his body on the deck of the ship.”

Strong made a flail out of MacMulcan and killed him, and the sea was filled with blood in a minute of time. Then the ship moved on without harm till they came to the same spot in Erin from which they had sailed.

When Fin came to the place where he had hired the seven young men the year and a day were over. He paid them their hire and they left him. Then he came to his own castle at Tara of the Kings.

One day Fin went out walking alone, and he met an old hag by the way. She spoke up to him and asked: “Would you play a game of cards with me?”

“I would,” said Fin, “if I had the means of playing.”

The old hag pulled out a pack of cards and said: “Here you have the means of playing as many games as you like.”

They sat down and played; Fin got the first game on the old woman. Then she said, “Put the sentence on me now.”

“I will not,” said Fin; “I’ll do nothing till we play another game.”

They played again and she won the second game. Then she said to Fin, “You will have to go and bring here for me the head of Curucha na Gras and the sword that guards his castle; and I won’t give you leave to take away any of your men with you but one, and he is the worst of them all,—’Iron back without action,’ and the time for your journey is a year and a day. Now what is your sentence on me?” said the old hag.

“You’ll put one foot,” said Fin, “on the top of my castle in Tara of the Kings, and the other on a hill in Mayo, and you’ll stand with your back to the wind and your face to the storm, a sheaf of wheat on the ground before the gate will be all you’ll have to eat, and any grain that will be blown out of it, if you catch that you’ll have it, and you’ll be that way till I come back.”

So Fin went away with himself and “Iron back without action.” And when they had gone as far as a large wood that was by the roadside, a thick fog came on them, and rain, and they sat down at the edge of the wood and waited. Soon they saw a red-haired boy with a bow and arrows shooting birds, and whenever he hit a bird he used to put the arrow through its two eyes and not put a drop of blood on its feathers.

And when the red boy came near Fin, he drew his bow, sent an arrow through "Iron back without action," and put the life out of him.

When he did that Fin said, "You have left me without any man, though this was the worst of all I have."

"You'd better hire me," said the red boy; "you've lost nothing, for you were without a man when you had that fellow the same as you are now."

So Fin hired the red boy and asked him his name. "I won't tell you that," said he, "but do you put the name on me that'll please yourself."

"Well," said Fin, "since I met you in the rain and the mist I'll call you Misty."

"That'll be my name while I'm with you," said the red boy, "and now we'll cast lots to see which of us will carry the other;" and the lot fell upon Misty. He raised Fin on his back to carry him, and the first leap he took was six miles, and every step a mile, and he went on without stopping till he was in the Western World. When they came to the castle of Curucha na Gras, Fin and Misty put up a tent for themselves and they were hungry enough after the long road, and Misty said, "I will go and ask Curucha for something to eat." He went to the castle and put a fighting blow on the door. Curucha came out and Misty asked him for bread.

"I wouldn't give you the leavings of my pigs," said Curucha.

Misty turned and left him, but on the way he met the bakers bringing bread from the bake house and he caught all their loaves from them and ran home to Fin. "We have plenty to eat now," said Misty, "but nothing at all to drink. I must go to Curucha to know will he give us something to drink."

He went a second time to the castle, put a fighting blow on the door, and out came Curucha.

"What do you want this time?" asked he.

"I want drink for myself and my master, Fin MacCumhail."

"You'll get no drink from me. I wouldn't give you the dirty ditch-water that's outside my castle."

Misty turned to go home, but on the way he met twelve boys each carrying the full of his arms of bottles of wine. He took every bottle from them, and it wasn't long till he was in the tent.

"Now we can eat and drink our fill."

"We can indeed," said Fin. Next morning Misty put another fighting blow on the door of the castle. Out flew Curucha with his guardian sword in his hand, and he made at Misty. With the first blow he gave him, he took an ear off his head.

Misty sprang back, drew his bow, and sent an arrow into Curucha's breast. It flew out through his head and he fell lifeless on the ground. Then Misty drew his knife, cut off the head, and carried the head and the sword to Fin MacCumhail, and Fin was glad to get them both.

"Take the head," said Misty, "and put it on top of the holly bush that's out here above us." Fin put the head on the holly bush, and the minute he put it there the head burnt the bush to the earth, and the earth to the clay.

Then they took the best horse that could be found about Curucha's castle. Fin sat on the horse, with the sword and head in front of him; and Misty followed behind.

They went their way and never stopped till they came to the place where Misty sent the arrow through "Iron back without action" and killed him. When they came to that spot, Misty asked Fin would he tell him a story, and Fin answered, "I have no story to tell except that we are in the place now where you killed my man."

"Oh, then," said Misty, "I'm glad you put that in my mind for I'll give him back to you now." So they went and took "Iron back without action" out of the ground; then Misty struck him with a rod of enchantment which he had, and brought life into him again.

Then Misty turned to Fin and said: “I am a brother of the seven boys who went with you to save the children of the king of France. I was too young for action at that time, but my mother sent me here now as a gift to help you and tell you what to do. When you go to the hag she’ll ask you for the sword, but you’ll not give it, you’ll only show it to her. And when she has seen the sword she’ll ask for the head. And you’ll not give the head to her either, you’ll only show it; and when she sees the head, she’ll open her mouth with joy at seeing the head of her brother; and when you see her open her mouth be sure to strike her on the breast with the head; and if you don’t do that, the whole world wouldn’t be able to kill her.”

Then Fin left Misty where he met him and with “Iron back without action” he made for Tara of the Kings.

When he came in front of the old hag she asked him had he the gifts. Fin said he had. She asked for the sword but she didn’t get it, Fin only showed it to her. Then she asked for the head, and when she saw the head, she opened her mouth with delight at seeing the head of her brother.

While she stood there with open mouth gazing, Fin picked out the mark and struck her on the breast with the head. She fell to the ground; they left her there dead and went into the castle.

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