



How Fin Went to the Kingdom of Big Men

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Celtic

Easy
16 min read

Fin and his men were in the Harbour of the Hill of Howth on a hillock, behind the wind and in front of the sun, where they could see every person, and nobody could see them, when they saw a speck coming from the west. They thought at first it was the blackness of a shower; but when it came nearer, they saw it was a boat. It did not lower sail till it entered the harbour. There were three men in it; one for guide in the bow, one for steering in the stern, and one for the tackle in the centre. They came ashore, and drew it up seven times its own length in dry grey grass, where the scholars of the city could not make it stock for derision or ridicule.

They then went up to a lovely green spot, and the first lifted a handful of round pebbles or shingle, and commanded them to become a beautiful house, that no better could be found in Ireland; and this was done. The second one lifted a slab of slate, and commanded it to be slate on the top of the house, that there was not better in Ireland; and this was done. The third one caught a bunch of shavings and commanded them to be pine-wood and timber in the house, that there was not in Ireland better; and this was done.

This caused much wonder to Fin, who went down where the men were, and made inquiries of them, and they answered him. He asked whence they were, or whither they were going. They said, "We are three Heroes

whom the King of the Big Men has sent to ask combat of the Fians.” He then asked, “What was the reason for doing this?” They said they did not know, but they heard that they were strong men, and they came to ask combat of Heroes from them. “Is Fin at Home?” “He is not.” (Great is a man’s leaning towards his own life). Fin then put them under crosses and under enchantments, that they were not to move from the place where they were till they saw him again.

He went away and made ready his coracle, gave its stern to land and prow to sea, hoisted the spotted towering sails against the long, tough, lance-shaped mast, cleaving the billows in the embrace of the wind in whirls, with a soft gentle breeze from the height of the sea-coast, and from the rapid tide of the red rocks, that would take willow from the hill, foliage from the tree, and heather from its stock and roots. Fin was guide in her prow, helm in her stern, and tackle in her middle; and stopping of head or foot he did not make till he reached the Kingdom of the Big Men. He went ashore and drew up his coracle in grey grass. He went up, and a Big Wayfarer met him. Fin asked who he was.

“I am,” he said, “the Red-haired Coward of the King of the Big Men; and,” said he to Fin, “you are the one I am in quest of. Great is my esteem and respect towards you; you are the best maiden I have ever seen; you will yourself make a dwarf for the King, and your dog (this was Bran) a lapdog. It is long since the King has been in want of a dwarf and a lapdog.” He took with him Fin; but another Big Man came, and was going to take Fin from him. The two fought; but when they had torn each other’s clothes, they left it to Fin to judge. He chose the first one. He took Fin with him to the palace of the King, whose worthies and high nobles assembled to see the little man. The king lifted him upon the palm of his hand, and went three times round the town with Fin upon one palm and Bran upon the other. He made a sleeping-place for him at the end of his own bed. Fin was waiting, watching, and observing everything that was going on about the house. He observed that the King, as soon as night came, rose and went out, and returned no more till morning. This caused him much wonder, and at last he asked the King why he went away every night and left the Queen by herself. “Why,” said the King, “do you ask?” “For satisfaction to myself,” said Fin; “for it is causing me much wonder.” Now the King had a great liking for Fin; he never saw anything that gave him more pleasure than he did; and at last he told him. “There is,” he said, “a great Monster who wants my daughter in marriage, and to have half my kingdom to himself; and there is not another man in the kingdom who can meet him but myself; and I must go every night to hold combat with him.” “Is there,” said Fin, “no man to combat with him but yourself?” “There is not,” said the King,

“one who will war with him for a single night.” “It is a pity,” said Fin, “that this should be called the Kingdom of the Big Men. Is he bigger than yourself?” “Never you mind,” said the King. “I will mind,” said Fin; “take your rest and sleep to-night, and I shall go to meet him.” “Is it you?” said the King; “you would not keep half a stroke against him.”

When night came, and all men went to rest, the King was for going away as usual; but Fin at last prevailed upon him to allow himself to go. “I shall combat him,” said he, “or else he knows a trick.” “I think much,” said the King, “of allowing you to go, seeing he gives myself enough to do.” “Sleep you soundly to-night,” said Fin, “and let me go; if he comes too violently upon me, I shall hasten home.”



“At last he saw the sea coming in kilns of fire and as a darting serpent, till it came down below

where he was. A Huge Monster came up and looked towards him, and from him." Illustration by John Batten, published in *More Celtic Fairy Tales* by Joseph Jacobs (1895), G.P. Putnam's Sons

Fin went and reached the place where the combat was to be. He saw no one before him, and he began to pace backwards and forwards. At last he saw the sea coming in kilns of fire and as a darting serpent, till it came down below where he was. A Huge Monster came up and looked towards him, and from him. "What little speck do I see there?" he said. "It is I," said Fin. "What are you doing here?" "I am a messenger from the King of the Big Men; he is under much sorrow and distress; the Queen has just died, and I have come to ask if you will be so good as to go home to-night without giving trouble to the kingdom." "I shall do that," said he; and he went away with the rough humming of a song in his mouth.

Fin went home when the time came, and lay down in his own bed, at the foot of the King's bed. When the King awoke, he cried out in great anxiety, "My kingdom is lost, and my dwarf and my lapdog are killed!" "They are not," said Fin; "I am here yet; and you have got your sleep, a thing you were saying it was rare for you to get." "How," said the King, "did you escape, when you are so little, while he is enough for myself, though I am so big." "Though you," said Fin, "are so big and strong, I am quick and active."

Next night the King was for going; but Fin told him to take his sleep to-night again. "I shall stand myself in your place, or else a better hero than yonder one must come." "He will kill you," said the King. "I shall take my chance," said Fin.

He went, and as happened the night before, he saw no one; and he began to pace backwards and forwards. He saw the sea coming in fiery kilns and as a darting serpent; and that Huge Man came up. "Are you here to-night again?" said he. "I am, and this is my errand: when the Queen was being put in the coffin, and the King heard the coffin being nailed, and the joiner's stroke, he broke his heart with pain and grief; and the Parliament has sent me to ask you to go home to-night till they get the King buried." The Monster went this night also, roughly humming a song; and Fin went home when the time came.

In the morning the King awoke in great anxiety, and called out, "My kingdom is lost, and my dwarf and my lapdog are killed!" and he greatly rejoiced that Fin and Bran were alive, and that he himself got rest, after being so long without sleep.

Fin went the third night, and things happened as before. There was no one before him, and he took to pacing to and fro. He saw the sea coming till it came down below him: the Big Monster came up; he saw the little black speck, and asked who was there, and what he wanted. "I have come to combat you," said Fin.

Fin and Bran began the combat. Fin was going backwards, and the Huge Man was following. Fin called to Bran, "Are you going to let him kill me?" Bran had a venomous shoe; and he leaped and struck the Huge Man with the venomous shoe on the breast-bone, and took the heart and lungs out of him. Fin drew his sword, Mac-a-Luin, cut off his head, put it on a hempen rope, and went with it to the Palace of the King. He took it into the Kitchen, and put it behind the door. In the morning the servant could not turn it, nor open the door. The King went down; he saw the Huge Mass, caught it by the top of the head, and lifted it, and knew it was the head of the Man who was for so long a time asking combat from him, and keeping him from sleep. "How at all," said he, "has this head come here? Surely it is not my dwarf that has done it." "Why," said Fin, "should he not?"

Next night the King wanted to go himself to the place of combat; "because," said he, "a bigger one than the former will come to-night, and the kingdom will be destroyed, and you yourself killed; and I shall lose the pleasure I take in having you with me." But Fin went, and that Big Man came, asking vengeance for his son, and to have the kingdom for himself, or equal combat. He and Fin fought; and Fin was going backwards. He spoke to Bran, "Are you going to allow him to kill me?" Bran whined, and went and sat down on the beach. Fin was ever being driven back, and he called out again to Bran. Then Bran jumped and struck the Big Man with the venomous shoe, and took the heart and the lungs out of him. Fin cut the head off, and took it with him, and left it in front of the house. The King awoke in great terror, and cried out, "My kingdom is lost, and my dwarf and my lapdog are killed!" Fin raised himself up and said, "They are not"; and the King's joy was not small when he went out and saw the head that was in front of the house.

The next night a Big Hag came ashore, and the tooth in the door of her mouth would make a distaff. She sounded a challenge on her shield: "You killed," she said, "my husband and my son." "I did kill them," said Fin. They fought; and it was worse for Fin to guard himself from the tooth than from the hand of the Big Hag.

When she had nearly done for him Bran struck her with the venomous shoe, and killed her as he had done to the rest. Fin took with him the head, and left it in front of the house. The King awoke in great anxiety, and called out, "My kingdom is lost, and my dwarf and my lapdog are killed!" "They are not," said Fin, answering him; and when they went out and saw the head, the King said, "I and my kingdom will have peace ever after this. The mother herself of the brood is killed; but tell me who you are. It was foretold for me that it would be Fin-mac-Coul that would give me relief, and he is only now eighteen years of age. Who are you, then, or what is your name?" "There never stood," said Fin, "on hide of cow or horse, one to whom I would deny my name. I am Fin, the Son of Coul, son of Looach, son of Trein, son of Fin, son of Art, son of the young High King of Erin; and it is time for me now to go home. It has been with much wandering out of my way that I have come to your kingdom; and this is the reason why I have come, that I might find out what injury I have done to you, or the reason why you sent the three heroes to ask combat from me, and bring destruction on my Men." "You never did any injury to me," said the King; "and I ask a thousand pardons. I did not send the heroes to you. It is not the truth they told. They were three men who were courting three fairy women, and these gave them their shirts; and when they have on their shirts, the combat of a hundred men is upon the hand of every one of them. But they must put off the shirts every night, and put them on the backs of chairs; and if the shirts were taken from them they would be next day as weak as other people."

Fin got every honour, and all that the King could give him, and when he went away, the King and the Queen and the people went down to the shore to give him their blessing.

Fin now went away in his coracle, and was sailing close by the side of the shore, when he saw a young man running and calling out to him. Fin came in close to land with his coracle, and asked what he wanted. "I am," said the young man, "a good servant wanting a master." "What work can you do?" said Fin. "I am," said he, "the best soothsayer that there is." "Jump into the boat then." The soothsayer jumped in, and they went forward.

They did not go far when another youth came running. "I am," he said, "a good servant wanting a master." "What work can you do?" said Fin. "I am as good a thief as there is." "Jump into the boat, then"; and Fin took with him this one also. They saw then a third young man running and calling out. They came close to land. "What man are you?" said Fin. "I am," said he, "the best climber that there is. I will take up a hundred pounds on my back in a place where a fly could not stand on a calm summer day." "Jump in"; and this one came in also. "I have my pick of servants now," said Fin; "it cannot be but these will suffice."

They went; and stop of head or foot they did not make till they reached the Harbour of the Hill of Howth. He asked the soothsayer what the three Big Men were doing. "They are," he said, "after their supper, and making ready for going to bed."

He asked a second time. "They are," he said, "after going to bed; and their shirts are spread on the back of chairs."

After a while, Fin asked him again, "What are the Big Men doing now?" "They are," said the soothsayer, "sound asleep." "It would be a good thing if there was now a thief to go and steal the shirts." "I would do that," said the thief, "but the doors are locked, and I cannot get in." "Come," said the climber, "on my back, and I shall put you in." He took him up upon his back to the top of the chimney, and let him down, and he stole the shirts.

Fin went where the Fian band was; and in the morning they came to the house where the three Big Men were. They sounded a challenge upon their shields, and asked them to come out to combat.

They came out. "Many a day," said they, "have we been better for combat than we are to-day," and they confessed to Fin everything as it was. "You were," said Fin, "impertinent, but I will forgive you"; and he made them swear that they would be faithful to himself ever after, and ready in every enterprise he would place before them.

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