

The Huntman's Son

Edmund Leamy

Irish

Advanced
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A long, long time ago there lived in a little hut, on the borders of a great forest, a huntsman and his wife and son. From his earliest years the boy, whose name was Fergus, used to hunt with his father in the forest, and he grew up strong and active, sure and swift-footed as a deer, and as free and fearless as the wind. He was tall and handsome; as supple as a mountain ash, his lips were as red as its berries; his eyes were as blue as the skies in spring; and his hair fell down over his shoulders like a shower of gold. His heart was as light as a bird's, and no bird was fonder of green woods and waving branches.

He had lived since his birth in the hut in the forest, and had never wished to leave it, until one winter night a wandering minstrel sought shelter there, and paid for his night's lodging with songs of love and battle. Ever since that night Fergus pined for another life. He no longer found joy in the music of the hounds or in the cries of the huntsmen in forest glades. He yearned for the chance of battle, and the clang of shields, and the fierce shouts of fighting warriors, and he spent all his spare hours practising on the harp and learning the use of arms, for in those days the bravest warriors were also bards.

In this way the spring and summer and autumn passed; and when the winter came again it chanced that on a stormy night, when thunder was rattling through the forest, smiting the huge oaks and hurling them crashing to the earth, Fergus lay awake thinking of his present lot, and wondering what the future might have in store for him. The lightning was playing around the hut, and every now and then a flash brightened up the interior.

After a peal, louder than any which had preceded it, Fergus heard three loud knocks at the door. He called out to his parents that some one was knocking.

“If that is so,” said his father, “open at once; this is no night to keep a poor wanderer outside our door.”

Fergus did as he was bidden, and as he opened the door a flash of lightning showed him, standing at the threshold, a little wizened old man with a small harp under his arm.

“Come in, and welcome,” said Fergus, and the little man stepped into the room.

“It is a wild night, neighbours,” said he.

“It is, indeed, a wild night,” said the huntsman and his wife, who had got up and dressed themselves; “and sorry we are we have no better shelter or better fare to offer you, but we give you the best we have.”

“A king cannot do more than his best,” said the little man.

The huntsman’s wife lit the fire, and soon the pine logs flashed up into a blaze, and made the hut bright and warm. She then brought forth a peggin of milk and a cake of barley-bread.

“You must be hungry, sir,” she said.

“Hungry I am,” said he; “but I wouldn’t ask for better fare than this if I were in the king’s palace.”

“Thank you kindly, sir,” said she, “and I hope you will eat enough, and that it will do you good.”

“And while you are eating your supper,” said the huntsman, “I’ll make you a bed of fresh rushes.”

“Don’t put yourself to that trouble,” said the little man. “When I have done my supper I’ll lie down here by the fire, if it is pleasing to you, and I’ll sleep like a top until morning. And now go back to your beds and leave me to myself, and maybe some time when you won’t be expecting it I’ll do a good turn for your kindness to the poor wayfarer.”

“Oh, it’s no kindness at all,” said the huntsman’s wife. “It would be a queer thing if an Irish cabin would not give shelter and welcome in a wild night like this. So good night, now, and we hope you will sleep well.”

“Good night,” said the little man, “and may you and yours never sup sorrow until your dying day.”

The huntsman and his wife and Fergus then went back to their beds, and the little man, having finished his supper, curled himself up by the fire, and was soon fast asleep.

About an hour after a loud clap of thunder awakened Fergus, and before it had died away he heard three knocks at the door. He aroused his parents and told them.

“Get up at once,” said his mother, “this is no night to keep a stranger outside our door.”

Fergus rose and opened the door, and a flash of lightning showed him a little old woman, with a shuttle in her hand, standing outside.

“Come in, and welcome,” said he, and the little old woman stepped into the room.

“Blessings be on them who give welcome to a wanderer on a wild night like this,” said the old woman.

“And who wouldn’t give welcome on a night like this?” said the huntsman’s wife, coming forward with a peggin of milk and a barley cake in her hand, “and sorry we are we have not better fare to offer you.”

“Enough is as good as a feast,” said the little woman, “and now go back to your beds and leave me to myself.”

“Not till I shake down a bed of rushes for you,” said the huntsman’s wife.

“Don’t mind the rushes,” said the little woman; “go back to your beds. I’ll sleep here by the fire.”

The huntsman’s wife went to bed, and the little old woman, having eaten her supper, lay down by the fire, and was soon fast asleep.

About an hour later another clap of thunder startled Fergus. Again he heard three knocks at the door. He roused his parents, but he did not wait for orders from them. He opened the door, and a flash of lightning showed him outside the threshold a low-sized, shaggy, wild-looking horse. And Fergus knew it was the Pooka, the wild horse of the mountains. Bold as Fergus was, his heart beat quickly as he saw fire issuing from the Pooka’s nostrils. But, banishing fear, he cried out:

“Come in, and welcome.”

“Welcome you are,” said the huntsman, “and sorry we are that we have not better shelter or fare to offer you.”

“I couldn’t wish a better welcome,” said the Pooka, as he came over near the fire and sat down on his haunches.

“Maybe you would like a little bit of this, Master Pooka,” said the huntsman’s wife, as she offered him a barley cake.

“I never tasted anything sweeter in my life,” said the Pooka, crunching it between his teeth, “and now if you can give me a sup of milk, I’ll want for nothing.”

The huntsman’s wife brought him a peggin of milk. When he had drunk it, “Now,” says the Pooka, “go back to your beds, and I’ll curl myself up by the fire and sleep like a top till morning.”

And soon everybody in the hut was fast asleep.

When the morning came the storm had gone, and the sun was shining through the windows of the hut. At the song of the lark Fergus got up, and no one in the world was ever more surprised than he when he saw no sign of the little old man, or the little old woman, or the wild horse of the mountains. His parents were also surprised, and they all thought that they must have been dreaming until they saw the empty peggins around the fire and some pieces of broken bread; and they did not know what to think of it all.

From that day forward the desire grew stronger in the heart of Fergus for a change of life; and one day he told his parents that he was resolved to seek his fortune. He said he wished to be a soldier, and that he would set out for the king’s palace, and try to join the ranks of the Fenian.

About a week afterwards he took leave of his parents, and having received their blessing he struck out for the road that led to the palace of the High King of Erin. He arrived there just at the time when the great captain of the Fenian host was recruiting his battalions, which had been thinned in recent battle.

The manly figure of Fergus, his gallant bearing, and handsome face, all told in his favour. But before he could be received into the Fenian ranks he had to prove that he could play the harp like a bard, that he could contend with staff and shield against nine Fenian warriors, that he could run with plaited hair through the tangled forest without loosening a single hair, and that in his course he could jump over trees as high as his head, and stoop under trees as low as his knee, and that he could run so lightly that the rotten twigs should not break under his feet. Fergus proved equal to all the tests, thanks to the wandering minstrel who taught him the use of

the harp, to his own brave heart, and to his forest training. He was enrolled in the second battalion of the Feni, and before long he was its bravest and ablest champion.

At that very time it happened that the niece of the High King of Erin was staying with the king and queen in their palace at Tara. The princess was the loveliest lady in all the land. She was as proud as she was beautiful. The princes and chieftains of Erin in vain sought her hand in marriage. From Alba and Spain, and the far-off isles of Greece, kings came to woo her. From the northern lands came vikings in stately galleys with brazen prows, whose oarsmen tore the white foam from the emerald seas as they swept towards the Irish coasts. But the lady had vowed she would wed with no one except a battle champion who could excel in music the chief bard of the High King of Erin; who could outstrip on his steed in the great race of Tara the white steed of the plains; and who could give her as a wedding robe a garment of all the colours of the rainbow, so finely spun that when folded up it would fit in the palm of her small white hand. To fulfil these three conditions was impossible for all her suitors, and it seemed as if the loveliest lady of the land should go unmarried to her grave.

It chanced that once, on a day when the Fenian battalions were engaged in a hurling-match, Fergus beheld the lady watching the match from her sunny bower. He no sooner saw her than he fell over head and ears in love with her, and he thought of her by night, and he thought of her by day, and believing that his love was hopeless, he often wished he had never left his forest-home.

The great fair of Tara was coming on, and all the Feni were busy from morning till night practising feats of arms and games, in order to take part in the contests to be held during the fair. And Fergus, knowing that the princess would be present, determined to do his best to win the prizes which were to be contended for before the ladies' eyes.

The fair began on the 1st of August, but for a whole week before the five great roads of Erin were thronged with people of all sorts. Princes and warriors on their steeds, battle champions in their chariots, harpers in hundreds, smiths with gleaming spears and shields and harness for battle steeds and chariots; troops of men and boys leading racehorses; jewellers with gold drinking-horns, and brooches, and pins, and ear-rings, and costly gems of all kinds, and chess-boards of silver and gold, and golden and silver chessmen in bags of woven brass; dyers with their many-coloured fabrics; bands of jugglers; drovers goading on herds of cattle; shepherds driving their sheep; huntsmen with spoils of the chase; dwellers in the lakes or by the fish-abounding rivers with salmon and speckled trout; and countless numbers of peasants on horseback and on foot, all wending their way to the great meeting-place by the mound, which a thousand years before had been raised over the

grave of the great queen. For there the fair was to be held.

On the opening day the High King, attended by the four kings of Erin, set out from the palace, and with them went the queen and the ladies of the court in sparkling chariots. The princess rode in the chariot with the high queen, under an awning made of the wings of birds, to protect them from the rays of the sun. Following the queen were the court ladies in other chariots, under awnings of purple or of yellow silk. Then came the brehons, the great judges of the land, and the chief bards of the high court of Tara, and the Druids, crowned with oak leaves, and carrying wands of divination in their hands.

When the royal party reached the ground it took its place in enclosures right up against the monumental mound. The High King sat with the four kings of Erin, all wearing their golden helmets, for they wore their diadems in battle only. In an enclosure next the king's sat the queen and the princess and all the ladies of the court. At either side of the royal pavilions were others for the dames and ladies and nobles and chiefs of different degrees, forming part of a circle on the plain, and the stands and benches for the people were so arranged as to complete the circle, and in the round green space within it, so that all might hear and see, the contests were to take place.

At a signal from the king, who was greeted with a thunderous cheer, the heralds rode round the circle, and having struck their sounding shields three times with their swords, they made a solemn proclamation of peace. Then was sung by all the assembled bards, to the accompaniment of their harps, the chant in honour of the mighty dead. When this was ended, again the heralds struck their shields, and the contests began. The first contest was the contest of spear-throwing between the champions of the seven battalions of the Feni. When the seven champions took their places in front of the royal enclosure, everyone, even the proud princess, was struck by the manly beauty and noble bearing of Fergus.

The champions poised their spears, and at a stroke from the heralds upon their shields the seven spears sped flashing through the air. They all struck the ground, shafts up, and it was seen that two were standing side by side in advance of the rest, one belonged to Fergus, the other to the great chief, Oscar. The contest for the prize then lay between Oscar and Fergus, and when they stood in front of the king, holding their spears aloft, every heart was throbbing with excitement. Once more the heralds struck their shields, and, swifter than the lightning's flash, forth went the spears, and when Fergus's spear was seen shivering in the ground a full length ahead of the great chief Oscar's, the air was shaken by a wild cheer that was heard far beyond the plains of Tara. And as Fergus approached the high king to receive the prize the cheers were renewed. But Fergus

thought more of the winsome glance of the princess than he did of the prize or the sounding cheers. And Princess Maureen was almost sorry for her vow, for her heart was touched by the beauty of the Fenian champion.

Other contests followed, and the day passed, and the night fell, and while the Fenian warriors were revelling in their camps the heart of Fergus, victor as he was, was sad and low. He escaped from his companions, and stole away to his native forest, for--

“When the heart is sick and sorest,
There is balsam in the forest--
There is balsam in the forest
For its pain.”

And as he lay under the spreading branches, watching the stars glancing through the leaves, and listening to the slumb'rous murmur of the waters, a strange peace came over him.

But in the camp which he had left, and in the vast multitude on the plains of Tara, there was stir and revelry, and babbling speculation as to the contest of to-morrow--the contest which was to decide whether the chief bard of Erin was to hold his own against all comers, or yield the palm. For rumour said that a great Skald had come from the northern lands to compete with the Irish bard.

At last, over the Fenian camp, and over the great plain and the multitude that thronged it, sleep fell, clothing them with a silence as deep as that which dwelt in the forest, where, dreaming of the princess, Fergus lay. He awoke at the first notes of the birds, but though he felt he ought to go back to his companions and be witness of the contest which might determine whether the princess was to be another's bride, his great love and his utter despair of winning her so oppressed him that he lay as motionless as a broken reed. He scarcely heard the music of the birds, and paid no heed to the murmur of the brook rushing by his feet. The crackling of branches near him barely disturbed him, but when a shadow fell across his eyes he looked up gloomily, and saw, or thought he saw, someone standing before him. He started up, and who should he see but the little wizened old man who found shelter in his father's hut on the stormy night.

“This is a nice place for a battle champion to be. This is a nice place for you to be on the day which is to decide who will be the successful suitor of the princess.”

“What is it to me,” said Fergus, “who is to win her since I cannot.”

“I told you,” said the little man, “the night you opened the door for me, that the time might come when I might be able to do a good turn for you and yours. The time has come. Take this harp, and my luck go with you, and in the contest of the bards to-day you’ll reap the reward of the kindness you did when you opened your door to the poor old wayfarer in the midnight storm.”

The little man handed his harp to Fergus and disappeared as swiftly as the wind that passes through the leaves.

Fergus, concealing the harp under his silken cloak, reached the camp before his comrades had aroused themselves from sleep.

At length the hour arrived when the great contest was to take place.

The king gave the signal, and as the chief bard of Erin was seen ascending the mound in front of the royal enclosures he was greeted with a roar of cheers, but at the first note of his harp silence like that of night fell on the mighty gathering.

As he moved his fingers softly over the strings every heart was hushed, filled with a sense of balmy rest. The lark soaring and singing above his head paused mute and motionless in the still air, and no sound was heard over the spacious plain save the dreamy music. Then the bard struck another key, and a gentle sorrow possessed the hearts of his hearers, and unbidden tears gathered to their eyes. Then, with bolder hand, he swept his fingers across his lyre, and all hearts were moved to joy and pleasant laughter, and eyes that had been dimmed by tears sparkled as brightly as running waters dancing in the sun. When the last notes had died away a cheer arose, loud as the voice of the storm in the glen when the live thunder is revelling on the mountain tops. As soon as the bard had descended the mound the Skald from the northern lands took his place, greeted by cries of welcome from a hundred thousand throats. He touched his harp, and in the perfect silence was heard the strains of the mermaid’s song, and through it the pleasant ripple of summer waters on the pebbly beach. Then the theme was changed, and on the air was borne the measured sweep of countless oars and the swish of waters around the prows of contending galleys, and the breezy voices of the sailors and the sea-bird’s cry. Then his theme was changed to the mirth and laughter of the banquet-hall, the clang of meeting drinking-horns, and songs of battle. When the last strain ended, from the mighty host a great shout went up, loud as the roar of winter billows breaking in the hollows of the shore; and men knew not whom to declare the victor, the chief

bard of Erin or the Skald of the northern lands.

In the height of the debate the cry arose that another competitor had ascended the mound, and there standing in view of all was Fergus, the huntsman's son. All eyes were fastened upon him, but no one looked so eagerly as the princess.

He touched his harp with gentle fingers, and a sound low and soft as a faint summer breeze passing through forest trees stole out, and then was heard the rustle of birds through the branches, and the dreamy murmur of waters lost in deepest woods, and all the fairy echoes whispering when the leaves are motionless in the noonday heat; then followed notes cool and soft as the drip of summer showers on the parched grass, and then the song of the blackbird, sounding as clearly as it sounds in long silent spaces of the evening, and then in one sweet jocund burst the multitudinous voices that hail the breaking of the morn. And the lark, singing and soaring above the minstrel, sank mute and motionless upon his shoulder, and from all the leafy woods the birds came thronging out and formed a fluttering canopy above his head.

When the bard ceased playing no shout arose from the mighty multitude, for the strains of his harp, long after its chords were stilled, held their hearts spell-bound.

And when he had passed away from the mound of contest all knew there was no need to declare the victor. And all were glad the comely Fenian champion had maintained the supremacy of the bards of Erin. But there was one heart sad, the heart of the princess; and now she wished more than ever that she had never made her hateful vow.

Other contests went on, but Fergus took no interest in them; and once more he stole away to the forest glade. His heart was sorrowful, for he thought of the great race of the morning, and he knew that he could not hope to compete with the rider of the white steed of the plains. And as he lay beneath the spreading branches during the whole night long his thoughts were not of the victory he had won, but of the princess, who was as far away from him as ever. He passed the night without sleep, and when the morning came he rose and walked aimlessly through the woods.

A deer starting from a thicket reminded him of the happy days of his boyhood, and once more the wish came back to him that he had never left his forest home. As his eyes followed the deer wistfully, suddenly he started in amazement. The deer vanished from view, and in his stead was the wild horse of the mountains.

“I told you I’d do you a good turn,” said the Pooka, “for the kindness you and yours did me on that wild winter’s night. The day is passing. You have no time to lose. The white steed of the plains is coming to the starting-post. Jump on my back, and remember, ‘Faint heart never won fair lady.’”

In half a second Fergus was bestride the Pooka, whose coat of shaggy hair became at once as glossy as silk, and just at the very moment when the king was about to declare there was no steed to compete with the white steed of the plains, the Pooka with Fergus upon his back, galloped up in front of the royal enclosure. When the people saw the champion a thunderous shout rose up that startled the birds in the skies, and sent them flying to the groves.

And in the ladies’ enclosure was a rustle of many-coloured scarves waving in the air. At the striking of the shields the contending steeds rushed from the post with the swiftness of a swallow’s flight. But before the white steed of the plains had gone half-way round, Fergus and the wild horse of the mountains had passed the winning post, greeted by such cheers as had never before been heard on the plains of Tara.

Fergus heard the cheers, but scarcely heeded them, for his heart went out through his eyes that were fastened on the princess, and a wild hope stirred him that his glance was not ungrateful to the loveliest lady of the land.

And the princess was sad and sorry for her vow, for she believed that it was beyond the power of Fergus to bring her a robe of all the colours of the rainbow, so subtly woven as to fit in the palm of her soft, white hand.

That night also Fergus went to the forest, not too sad, because there was a vague hope in his heart that had never been there before. He lay down under the branches, with his feet towards the rustling waters, and the smiles of the princess gilded his slumbers, as the rays of the rising sun gild the glades of the forest; and when the morning came he was scarcely surprised when before him appeared the little old woman with the shuttle he had welcomed on the winter’s night.

“You think you have won her already,” said the little woman. “And so you have, too; her heart is all your own, and I’m half inclined to think that my trouble will be thrown away, for if you had never a wedding robe to give her, she’d rather have you this minute than all the kings of Erin, or than all the other princes and kings and chieftains in the whole world. But you and your father and mother were kind to me on a wild winter’s night, and I’d never see your mother’s son without a wedding robe fit for the greatest princess that ever set nations to battle for her beauty. So go and pluck me a handful of wild forest flowers, and I’ll weave out of them a wedding

robe with all the colours of the rainbow, and one that will be as sweet and as fragrant as the ripe, red lips of the princess herself.”

Fergus, with joyous heart, culled the flowers, and brought them to the little old woman.

In the twinkling of an eye she wove with her little shuttle a wedding robe, with all the colours of the rainbow, as light as the fairy dew, as soft as the hand of the princess, as fragrant as her little red mouth, and so small that it would pass through the eye of a needle.

“Go now, Fergus,” said she, “and may luck go with you; but, in the days of your greatness and of the glory which will come to you when you are wedded to the princess, be as kind, and have as open a heart and as open a door for the poor as you had when you were only a poor huntsman’s son.”

Fergus took the robe and went towards Tara. It was the last day of the fair, and all the contests were over, and the bards were about to chant the farewell strains to the memory of the great queen. But before the chief bard could ascend the mound, Fergus, attended by a troop of Fenian warriors on their steeds, galloped into the enclosure, and rode up in front of the queen’s pavilion. Holding up the glancing and many-coloured robe, he said:

“O Queen and King of Erin! I claim the princess for my bride. You, O king, have decided that I have won the prize in the contest of the bards; that I have won the prize in the race against the white steed of the plains; it is for the princess to say if the robe which I give her will fit in the hollow of her small white hand.”

“Yes,” said the king. “You are victor in the contests; let the princess declare if you have fulfilled the last condition.”

The princess took the robe from Fergus, closed her fingers over it, so that no vestige of it was seen.

“Yes, O king!” said she, “he has fulfilled the last condition; but before ever he had fulfilled a single one of them, my heart went out to the comely champion of the Feni. I was willing then, I am ready now, to become the bride of the huntsman’s son.”

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