



# *Ian, the Soldier's Son*

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Celtic

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*Intermediate*  
*28 min read*

There dwelt a knight in Grianaig of the land of the West, who had three daughters, and for goodness and beauty they had not their like in all the isles. All the people loved them, and loud was the weeping when one day, as the three maidens sat on the rocks on the edge of the sea, dipping their feet in the water, there arose a great beast from under the waves and swept them away beneath the ocean. And none knew whither they had gone, or how to seek them.

Now there lived in a town a few miles off a soldier who had three sons, fine youths and strong, and the best players at shinny in that country. At Christmastide that year, when families met together and great feasts were held, Ian, the youngest of the three brothers, said:

‘Let us have a match at shinny on the lawn of the knight of Grianaig, for his lawn is wider and the grass smoother than ours.’

But the others answered:

‘Nay, for he is in sorrow, and he will think of the games that we have played there when his daughters looked on.’

‘Let him be pleased or angry as he will,’ said Ian; ‘we will drive our ball on his lawn to-day.’

And so it was done, and Ian won three games from his brothers. But the knight looked out of his window, and

was wroth; and bade his men bring the youths before him. When he stood in his hall and beheld them, his heart was softened somewhat; but his face was angry as he asked:

‘Why did you choose to play shinny in front of my castle when you knew full well that the remembrance of my daughters would come back to me? The pain which you have made me suffer you shall suffer also.’

‘Since we have done you wrong,’ answered Ian, the youngest, ‘build us a ship, and we will go and seek your daughters. Let them be to windward, or to leeward, or under the four brown boundaries of the sea, we will find them before a year and a day goes by, and will carry them back to Grianaig.’

In seven days the ship was built, and great store of food and wine placed in her. And the three brothers put her head to the sea and sailed away, and in seven days the ship ran herself on to a beach of white sand, and they all went ashore. They had none of them ever seen that land before, and looked about them. Then they saw that, a short way from them, a number of men were working on a rock, with one man standing over them.

‘What place is this?’ asked the eldest brother. And the man who was standing by made answer:

‘This is the place where dwell the three daughters of the knight of Grianaig, who are to be wedded to-morrow to three giants.’

‘How can we find them?’ asked the young man again. And the overlooker answered:

‘To reach the daughters of the knight of Grianaig you must get into this basket, and be drawn by a rope up the face of this rock.’

‘Oh, that is easily done,’ said the eldest brother, jumping into the basket, which at once began to move—up, and up, and up—till he had gone about half-way, when a fat black raven flew at him and pecked him till he was nearly blind, so that he was forced to go back the way he had come.

After that the second brother got into the creel; but he fared no better, for the raven flew upon him, and he returned as his brother had done.

‘Now it is my turn,’ said Ian. But when he was halfway up the raven set upon him also.

‘Quick! quick!’ cried Ian to the men who held the rope. ‘Quick! quick! or I shall be blinded!’ And the men pulled

with all their might, and in another moment Ian was on top, and the raven behind him.

‘Will you give me a piece of tobacco?’ asked the raven, who was now quite quiet.

‘You rascal! Am I to give you tobacco for trying to peck my eyes out?’ answered Ian.

‘That was part of my duty,’ replied the raven; ‘but give it to me, and I will prove a good friend to you.’ So Ian broke off a piece of tobacco and gave it to him. The raven hid it under his wing, and then went on; ‘Now I will take you to the house of the big giant, where the knight’s daughter sits sewing, sewing, till even her thimble is wet with tears.’ And the raven hopped before him till they reached a large house, the door of which stood open. They entered and passed through one hall after the other, until they found the knight’s daughter, as the bird had said.

‘What brought you here?’ asked she. And Ian made answer:

‘Why may I not go where you can go?’

‘I was brought hither by a giant,’ replied she.

‘I know that,’ said Ian; ‘but tell me where the giant is, that I may find him.’

‘He is on the hunting hill,’ answered she; ‘and nought will bring him home save a shake of the iron chain which hangs outside the gate. But, there, neither to leeward, nor to windward, nor in the four brown boundaries of the sea, is there any man that can hold battle against him, save only Ian, the soldier’s son, and he is now but sixteen years old, and how shall he stand against the giant?’

‘In the land whence I have come there are many men with the strength of Ian,’ answered he. And he went outside and pulled at the chain, but he could not move it, and fell on to his knees. At that he rose swiftly, and gathering up his strength, he seized the chain, and this time he shook it so that the link broke. And the giant heard it on the hunting hill, and lifted his head, thinking—

‘It sounds like the noise of Ian, the soldier’s son,’ said he; ‘but as yet he is only sixteen years old. Still, I had better look to it.’ And home he came.

'Are you Ian, the soldier's son?' he asked, as he entered the castle.

'No, of a surety,' answered the youth, who had no wish that they should know him.

'Then who are you in the leeward, or in the windward, or in the four brown boundaries of the sea, who are able to move my battle-chain?'

'That will be plain to you after wrestling with me as I wrestle with my mother. And one time she got the better of me, and two times she did not.'

So they wrestled, and twisted and strove with each other till the giant forced Ian to his knee.

'You are the stronger,' said Ian; and the giant answered:

'All men know that!' And they took hold of each other once more, and at last Ian threw the giant, and wished that the raven were there to help him. No sooner had he wished his wish than the raven came.

'Put your hand under my right wing and you will find a knife sharp enough to take off his head,' said the raven. And the knife was so sharp that it cut off the giant's head with a blow.

'Now go and tell the daughter of the king of Grianaig; but take heed lest you listen to her words, and promise to go no further, for she will seek to help you. Instead, seek the middle daughter, and when you have found her, you shall give me a piece of tobacco for reward.'

'Well have you earned the half of all I have,' answered Ian. But the raven shook his head.

'You know only what has passed, and nothing of what lies before. If you would not fail, wash yourself in clean water, and take balsam from a vessel on top of the door, and rub it over your body, and to-morrow you will be as strong as many men, and I will lead you to the dwelling of the middle one.'

Ian did as the raven bade him, and in spite of the eldest daughter's entreaties, he set out to seek her next sister. He found her where she was seated sewing, her very thimble wet from the tears which she had shed.

'What brought you here?' asked the second sister.

'Why may I not go where you can go?' answered he; 'and why are you weeping?'

'Because in one day I shall be married to the giant who is on the hunting hill.'

'How can I get him home?' asked Ian.

'Nought will bring him but a shake of that iron chain which hangs outside the gate. But there is neither to leeward, nor to westward, nor in the four brown boundaries of the sea, any man that can hold battle with him, save Ian, the soldier's son, and he is now but sixteen years of age.'

'In the land whence I have come there are many men with the strength of Ian,' said he. And he went outside and pulled at the chain, but he could not move it, and fell on his knees. At that he rose to his feet, and gathering up his strength mightily, he seized the chain, and this time he shook it so that three links broke. And the second giant heard it on the hunting hill, and lifted his head, thinking—

'It sounds like the noise of Ian, the soldier's son,' said he; 'but as yet he is only sixteen years old. Still, I had better look to it.' And home he came.

'Are you Ian, the soldier's son?' he asked, as he entered the castle.

'No, of a surety,' answered the youth, who had no wish that this giant should know him either; 'but I will wrestle with you as if I were he.'

Then they seized each other by the shoulder, and the giant threw him on his two knees. 'You are the stronger,' cried Ian; 'but I am not beaten yet.' And rising to his feet, he threw his arms round the giant.

Backwards and forwards they swayed, and first one was uppermost and then the other; but at length Ian worked his leg round the giant's and threw him to the ground. Then he called to the raven, and the raven came flapping towards him, and said: 'Put your hand under my right wing, and you will find there a knife sharp enough to take off his head.' And sharp indeed it was, for with a single blow, the giant's head rolled from his body.

'Now wash yourself with warm water, and rub yourself over with oil of balsam, and to-morrow you will be as strong as many men. But beware of the words of the knight's daughter, for she is cunning, and will try to keep

you at her side. So farewell; but first give me a piece of tobacco.'

'That I will gladly,' answered Ian breaking off a large bit.

He washed and rubbed himself that night, as the raven had told him, and the next morning he entered the chamber where the knight's daughter was sitting.

'Abide here with me,' she said, 'and be my husband. There is silver and gold in plenty in the castle.' But he took no heed, and went on his way till he reached the castle where the knight's youngest daughter was sewing in the hall. And tears dropped from her eyes on to her thimble.

'What brought you here?' asked she. And Ian made answer:

'Why may I not go where you can go?'

'I was brought hither by a giant.'

'I know full well,' said he.

'Are you Ian, the soldier's son?' asked she again. And again he answered:

'Yes, I am; but tell me, why are you weeping?'

'To-morrow the giant will return from the hunting hill, and I must marry him,' she sobbed. And Ian took no heed, and only said: 'How can I bring him home?'

'Shake the iron chain that hangs outside the gate.'

And Ian went out, and gave such a pull to the chain that he fell down at full length from the force of the shake. But in a moment he was on his feet again, and seized the chain with so much strength that four links came off in his hand. And the giant heard him in the hunting hill, as he was putting the game he had killed into a bag.

'In the leeward, or the windward, or in the four brown boundaries of the sea, there is none who could give my chain a shake save only Ian, the soldier's son. And if he has reached me, then he has left my two brothers dead behind him.' With that he strode back to the castle, the earth trembling under him as he went.

'Are you Ian, the soldier's son?' asked he. And the youth answered:

'No, of a surety.'

'Then who are you in the leeward, or the windward, or in the four brown boundaries of the sea, who are able to shake my battle chain? There is only Ian, the soldier's son, who can do this, and he is but now sixteen years old.

'I will show you who I am when you have wrestled with me,' said Ian. And they threw their arms round each other, and the giant forced Ian on to his knees; but in a moment he was up again, and crooking his leg round the shoulders of the giant, he threw him heavily to the ground. 'Stumpy black raven, come quick!' cried he; and the raven came, and beat the giant about the head with his wings, so that he could not get up. Then he bade Ian take out a sharp knife from under his feathers, which he carried with him for cutting berries, and Ian smote off the giant's head with it. And so sharp was that knife that, with one blow, the giant's head rolled on the ground.

'Rest now this night also,' said the raven, 'and to-morrow you shall take the knight's three daughters to the edge of the rock that leads to the lower world. But take heed to go down first yourself, and let them follow after you. And before I go you shall give me a piece of tobacco.'

'Take it all,' answered Ian, 'for well have you earned it.'

'No; give me but a piece. You know what is behind you, but you have no knowledge of what is before you.' And picking up the tobacco in his beak, the raven flew away.

So the next morning the knight's youngest daughter loaded asses with all the silver and gold to be found in the castle, and she set out with Ian the soldier's son for the house where her second sister was waiting to see what would befall. She also had asses laden with precious things to carry away, and so had the eldest sister, when they reached the castle where she had been kept a prisoner. Together they all rode to the edge of the rock, and then Ian lay down and shouted, and the basket was drawn up, and in it they got one by one, and were let down to the bottom. When the last one was gone, Ian should have gone also, and left the three sisters to come after him; but he had forgotten the raven's warning, and bade them go first, lest some accident should happen. Only, he begged the youngest sister to let him keep the little gold cap which, like the others, she wore on her head; and then he helped them, each in her turn, into the basket.

Long he waited, but wait as he might, the basket never came back, for in their joy at being free the knight's daughters had forgotten all about Ian, and had set sail in the ship that had brought him and his brothers to the land of Grianaig.

At last he began to understand what had happened to him, and while he was taking counsel with himself what had best be done, the raven came to him.

'You did not heed my words,' he said gravely.

'No, I did not, and therefore am I here,' answered Ian, bowing his head.

'The past cannot be undone,' went on the raven. 'He that will not take counsel will take combat. This night, you will sleep in the giant's castle. And now you shall give me a piece of tobacco.'

'I will. But, I pray you, stay in the castle with me.'

'That I may not do, but on the morrow I will come.'

And on the morrow he did, and he bade Ian go to the giant's stable where stood a horse to whom it mattered nothing if she journeyed over land or sea.



‘But be careful,’ he added, ‘how you enter the stable, for the door swings without ceasing to and fro, and if it touches you, it will cause you to cry out. I will go first and show you the way.’

‘Go,’ said Ian. And the raven gave a bob and a hop, and thought he was quite safe, but the door slammed on a feather of his tail, and he screamed loudly.

Then Ian took a run backwards, and a run forwards, and made a spring; but the door caught one of his feet, and he fell fainting on the stable floor. Quickly the raven pounced on him, and picked him up in his beak and claws, and carried him back to the castle, where he laid ointments on his foot till it was as well as ever it was.

‘Now come out to walk,’ said the raven, ‘but take heed that you wonder not at aught you may behold; neither shall you touch anything. And, first, give me a piece of tobacco.’

Many strange things did Ian behold in that island, more than he had thought for. In a glen lay three heroes stretched on their backs, done to death by three spears that still stuck in their breasts. But he kept his counsel and spake nothing, only he pulled out the spears, and the men sat up and said:

‘You are Ian the soldier’s son, and a spell is laid upon you to travel in our company, to the cave of the black fisherman.’

So together they went till they reached the cave, and one of the men entered, to see what should be found there. And he beheld a hag, horrible to look upon, seated on a rock, and before he could speak, she struck him with her club, and changed him into a stone; and in like manner she dealt with the other three. At the last Ian entered.

‘These men are under spells,’ said the witch, ‘and alive they can never be till you have anointed them with the water which you must fetch from the island of Big Women. See that you do not tarry.’ And Ian turned away with a sinking heart, for he would fain have followed the youngest daughter of the knight of Grianaig.

‘You did not obey my counsel,’ said the raven, hopping towards him, ‘and so trouble has come upon you. But sleep now, and to-morrow you shall mount the horse which is in the giant’s stable, that can gallop over sea and land. When you reach the island of Big Women, sixteen boys will come to meet you, and will offer the horse food, and wish to take her saddle and bridle from her. But see that they touch her not, and give her food

yourself, and yourself lead her into the stable, and shut the door. And be sure that for every turn of the lock given by the sixteen stable lads you give one. And now you shall break me off a piece of tobacco.'

The next morning Ian arose, and led the horse from the stable, without the door hurting him, and he rode across the sea to the island of the Big Women, where the sixteen stable lads met him, and each one offered to take his horse, and to feed her, and to put her into the stable. But Ian only answered:

'I myself will put her in and will see to her.' And thus he did. And while he was rubbing her sides the horse said to him:

'Every kind of drink will they offer you, but see you take none, save whey and water only.' And so it fell out; and when the sixteen stable-boys saw that he would drink nothing, they drank it all themselves, and one by one lay stretched around the board.

Then Ian felt pleased in his heart that he had withstood their fair words, and he forgot the counsel that the horse had likewise given him saying:

'Beware lest you fall asleep, and let slip the chance of getting home again'; for while the lads were sleeping sweet music reached his ears, and he slept also.

When this came to pass the steed broke through the stable door, and kicked him and woke him roughly.

'You did not heed my counsel,' said she; 'and who knows if it is not too late to win over the sea? But first take that sword which hangs on the wall, and cut off the heads of the sixteen grooms.'

Filled with shame at being once more proved heedless, Ian arose and did as the horse bade him. Then he ran to the well and poured some of the water into a leather bottle, and jumping on the horse's back rode over the sea to the island where the raven was waiting for him.

'Lead the horse into the stable,' said the raven, 'and lie down yourself to sleep, for to-morrow you must make the heroes to live again, and must slay the hag. And have a care not to be so foolish to-morrow as you were to-day.'

'Stay with me for company,' begged Ian; but the raven shook his head, and flew away.

In the morning Ian awoke, and hastened to the cave where the old hag was sitting, and he struck her dead as she was, before she could cast spells on him. Next he sprinkled the water over the heroes, who came to life again, and together they all journeyed to the other side of the island, and there the raven met them.

'At last you have followed the counsel that was given you,' said the raven; 'and now, having learned wisdom, you may go home again to Grianaig. There you will find that the knight's two eldest daughters are to be wedded this day to your two brothers, and the youngest to the chief of the men at the rock. But her gold cap you shall give to me and, if you want it, you have only to think of me and I will bring it to you. And one more warning I give you. If anyone asks you whence you came, answer that you have come from behind you; and if anyone asks you whither you are going, say that you are going before you.'

So Ian mounted the horse and set her face to the sea and her back to the shore, and she was off, away and away till she reached the church of Grianaig, and there, in a field of grass, beside a well of water, he leaped down from his saddle.

'Now,' the horse said to him, 'draw your sword and cut off my head.' But Ian answered:

'Poor thanks would that be for all the help I have had from you.'

'It is the only way that I can free myself from the spells that were laid by the giants on me and the raven; for I was a girl and he was a youth wooing me! So have no fears, but do as I have said.'

Then Ian drew his sword as she bade him, and cut off her head, and went on his way without looking backwards. As he walked he saw a woman standing at her house door. She asked him whence he had come, and he answered as the raven had told him, that he came from behind. Next she inquired whither he was going, and this time he made reply that he was going on before him, but that he was thirsty and would like a drink.

'You are an impudent fellow,' said the woman; 'but you shall have a drink.' And she gave him some milk, which was all she had till her husband came home.

'Where is your husband?' asked Ian, and the woman answered him:

'He is at the knight's castle trying to fashion gold and silver into a cap for the youngest daughter, like unto the caps that her sisters wear, such as are not to be found in all this land. But, see, he is returning; and now we shall hear how he has sped.'

At that the man entered the gate, and beholding a strange youth, he said to him: 'What is your trade, boy?'

'I am a smith,' replied Ian. And the man answered:

'Good luck has befallen me, then, for you can help me to make a cap for the knight's daughter.'

'You cannot make that cap, and you know it,' said Ian.

'Well, I must try,' replied the man, 'or I shall be hanged on a tree; so it were a good deed to help me.'

'I will help you if I can,' said Ian; 'but keep the gold and silver for yourself, and lock me into the smithy to-night, and I will work my spells.' So the man, wondering to himself, locked him in.

As soon as the key was turned in the lock Ian wished for the raven, and the raven came to him, carrying the cap in his mouth.

'Now take my head off,' said the raven. But Ian answered:

'Poor thanks were that for all the help you have given me.'

'It is the only thanks you can give me,' said the raven, 'for I was a youth like yourself before spells were laid on me.'

Then Ian drew his sword and cut off the head of the raven, and shut his eyes so that he might see nothing. After that he lay down and slept till morning dawned, and the man came and unlocked the door and shook the sleeper.

'Here is the cap,' said Ian drowsily, drawing it from under his pillow. And he fell asleep again directly.

The sun was high in the heavens when he woke again, and this time he beheld a tall, brown-haired youth

standing by him.

'I am the raven,' said the youth, 'and the spells are broken. But now get up and come with me.'

Then they two went together to the place where Ian had left the dead horse; but no horse was there now, only a beautiful maiden.

'I am the horse,' she said, 'and the spells are broken'; and she and the youth went away together.

In the meantime the smith had carried the cap to the castle, and bade a servant belonging to the knight's youngest daughter bear it to her mistress. But when the girl's eyes fell on it, she cried out:

'He speaks false; and if he does not bring me the man who really made the cap I will hang him on the tree beside my window.'

The servant was filled with fear at her words, and hastened and told the smith, who ran as fast as he could to seek for Ian. And when he found him and brought him into the castle, the girl was first struck dumb with joy; then she declared that she would marry nobody else. At this some one fetched to her the knight of Grianaig, and when Ian had told his tale, he vowed that the maiden was right, and that his elder daughters should never wed with men who had not only taken glory to themselves which did not belong to them, but had left the real doer of the deeds to his fate.

And the wedding guests said that the knight had spoken well; and the two elder brothers were fain to leave the country, for no one would converse with them.

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