

The Adventures of Covan the Brown-Haired

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Celtic

*Intermediate
24 min read*

On the shores of the west, where the great hills stand with their feet in the sea, dwelt a goatherd and his wife, together with their three sons and one daughter. All day long the young men fished and hunted, while their sister took out the kids to pasture on the mountain, or stayed at home helping her mother and mending the nets.

For several years they all lived happily together, when one day, as the girl was out on the hill with the kids, the sun grew dark and an air cold as a thick white mist came creeping, creeping up from the sea. She rose with a shiver, and tried to call to her kids, but the voice died away in her throat, and strong arms seemed to hold her.

Loud were the wails in the hut by the sea when the hours passed on and the maiden came not. Many times the father and brothers jumped up, thinking they heard her steps, but in the thick darkness they could scarcely see their own hands, nor could they tell where the river lay, nor where the mountain. One by one the kids came home, and at every bleat someone hurried to open the door, but no sound broke the stillness. Through the night no one slept, and when morning broke and the mist rolled back, they sought the maiden by sea and by land, but never a trace of her could be found anywhere.

Thus a year and a day slipped by, and at the end of it Gorla of the Flocks and his wife seemed suddenly to have

grown old. Their sons too were sadder than before, for they loved their sister well, and had never ceased to mourn for her. At length Ardan the eldest spoke and said:

‘It is now a year and a day since our sister was taken from us, and we have waited in grief and patience for her to return. Surely some evil has befallen her, or she would have sent us a token to put our hearts at rest; and I have vowed to myself that my eyes shall not know sleep till, living or dead, I have found her.’

‘If you have vowed, then must you keep your vow,’ answered Gorla. ‘But better had it been if you had first asked your father’s leave before you made it. Yet, since it is so, your mother will bake you a cake for you to carry with you on your journey. Who can tell how long it may be?’

So the mother arose and baked not one cake but two, a big one and a little one.

‘Choose, my son,’ said she. ‘Will you have the little cake with your mother’s blessing, or the big one without it, in that you have set aside your father and taken on yourself to make a vow?’

‘I will have the large cake,’ answered the youth; ‘for what good would my mother’s blessing do for me if I was dying of hunger?’ And taking the big cake he went his way.

Straight on he strode, letting neither hill nor river hinder him. Swiftly he walked—swiftly as the wind that blew down the mountain. The eagles and the gulls looked on from their nests as he passed, leaving the deer behind him; but at length he stopped, for hunger had seized on him, and he could walk no more. Trembling with fatigue he sat himself on a rock and broke a piece off his cake.

‘Spare me a morsel, Ardan son of Gorla,’ asked a raven, fluttering down towards him.

‘Seek food elsewhere, O bearer of ill-news,’ answered Ardan son of Gorla; ‘it is but little I have for myself.’ And he stretched himself out for a few moments, then rose to his feet again. On and on went he till the little birds flew to their nests, and the brightness died out of the sky, and a darkness fell over the earth. On and on, and on, till at last he saw a beam of light streaming from a house and hastened towards it.

The door was opened and he entered, but paused when he beheld an old man lying on a bench by the fire, while seated opposite him was a maiden combing out the locks of her golden hair with a comb of silver.

'Welcome, fair youth,' said the old man, turning his head. 'Sit down and warm yourself, and tell me how fares the outer world. It is long since I have seen it.'

'All my news is that I am seeking service,' answered Ardan son of Gorla; 'I have come from far since sunrise, and glad was I to see the rays of your lamp stream into the darkness.'

'I need someone to herd my three dun cows, which are hornless,' said the old man. 'If, for the space of a year, you can bring them back to me each evening before the sun sets, I will make you payment that will satisfy your soul.'

But here the girl looked up and answered quickly:

'Ill will come of it if he listens to your offer.'

'Counsel unsought is worth nothing,' replied, rudely, Ardan son of Gorla. 'It would be little indeed that I am fit for if I cannot drive three cows out to pasture and keep them safe from the wolves that may come down from the mountains. Therefore, good father, I will take service with you at daybreak, and ask no payment till the new year dawns.'

Next morning the bell of the deer was not heard amongst the fern before the maiden with the hair of gold had milked the cows, and led them in front of the cottage where the old man and Ardan son of Gorla awaited them.

'Let them wander where they will,' he said to his servant, 'and never seek to turn them from their way, for well they know the fields of good pasture. But take heed to follow always behind them, and suffer nothing that you see, and nought that you hear, to draw you into leaving them. Now go, and may wisdom go with you.'

As he ceased speaking he touched one of the cows on her forehead, and she stepped along the path, with the two others one on each side. As he had been bidden, behind them came Ardan son of Gorla, rejoicing in his heart that work so easy had fallen to his lot. At the year's end, thought he, enough money would lie in his pocket to carry him into far countries where his sister might be, and, in the meanwhile, someone might come past who could give him tidings of her.

Thus he spoke to himself, when his eyes fell on a golden cock and a silver hen running swiftly along the grass in front of him. In a moment the words that the old man had uttered vanished from his mind and he gave chase. They were so near that he could almost seize their tails, yet each time he felt sure he could catch them his

fingers closed on the empty air. At length he could run no more, and stopped to breathe, while the cock and hen went on as before. Then he remembered the cows, and, somewhat frightened, turned back to seek them. Luckily they had not strayed far, and were quietly feeding on the thick green grass.

Ardan son of Gorla was sitting under a tree, when he beheld a staff of gold and a staff of silver doubling themselves in strange ways on the meadow in front of him, and starting up he hastened towards them. He followed them till he was tired, but he could not catch them, though they seemed ever within his reach. When at last he gave up the quest his knees trembled beneath him for very weariness, and glad was he to see a tree growing close by laden with fruits of different sorts, of which he ate greedily.

The sun was by now low in the heavens, and the cows left off feeding, and turned their faces home again, followed by Ardan son of Gorla. At the door of their stable the maiden stood awaiting them, and saying nought to their herd, she sat down and began to milk. But it was not milk that flowed into her pail; instead it was filled with a thin stream of water, and as she rose up from the last cow the old man appeared outside.

‘Faithless one, you have betrayed your trust!’ he said to Ardan son of Gorla. ‘Not even for one day could you keep true! Well, you shall have your reward at once, that others may take warning from you.’ And waving his wand he touched with it the chest of the youth, who became a pillar of stone.

Now Gorla of the Flocks and his wife were full of grief that they had lost a son as well as a daughter, for no tidings had come to them of Ardan their eldest born. At length, when two years and two days had passed since the maiden had led her kids to feed on the mountain and had been seen no more, Ruais, second son of Gorla, rose up one morning, and said:

‘Time is long without my sister and Ardan my brother. So I have vowed to seek them wherever they may be.’

And his father answered:

'Better it had been if you had first asked my consent and that of your mother; but as you have vowed so must you do.' Then he bade his wife make a cake, but instead she made two, and offered Ruais his choice, as she had done to Ardan. Like Ardan, Ruais chose the large, unblessed cake, and set forth on his way, doing always, though he knew it not, that which Ardan had done; so, needless is it to tell what befell him till he too stood, a pillar of stone, on the hill behind the cottage, so that all men might see the fate that awaited those who broke their faith.

Another year and a day passed by, when Covan the Brown-haired, youngest son of Gorla of the Flocks, one morning spake to his parents, saying:

'It is more than three years since my sister left us. My brothers have also gone, no one know whither, and of us four none remains but I. No, therefore, I long to seek them, and I pray you and my mother to place no hindrance in my way.'

And his father answered:

'Go, then, and take our blessing with you.'

So the wife of Gorla of the Flocks baked two cakes, one large and one small; and Covan took the small one, and started on his quest. In the wood he felt hungry, for he had walked far, and he sat down to eat. Suddenly a voice behind him cried:

'A bit for me! a bit for me!' And looking round he beheld the black raven of the wilderness.

'Yes, you shall have a bit,' said Covan the Brown-haired; and breaking off a piece he stretched it upwards to the raven, who ate it greedily. Then Covan arose and went forward, till he saw the light from the cottage streaming before him, and glad was he, for night was at hand.

'Maybe I shall find some work there,' he thought, 'and at least I shall gain money to help me in my search; for who knows how far my sister and my brothers may have wandered?'

The door stood open and he entered, and the old man gave him welcome, and the golden-haired maiden likewise. As happened before, he was offered by the old man to herd his cows; and, as she had done to his brothers, the maiden counselled him to leave such work alone. But, instead of answering rudely, like both Ardan and Ruais, he thanked her, with courtesy, though he had no mind to heed her; and he listened to the

warnings and words of his new master.

Next day he set forth at dawn with the dun cows in front of him, and followed patiently wherever they might lead him. On the way he saw the gold cock and silver hen, which ran even closer to him than they had done to his brothers. Sorely tempted, he longed to give them chase; but, remembering in time that he had been bidden to look neither to the right nor to the left, with a mighty effort he turned his eyes away. Then the gold and silver staffs seemed to spring from the earth before him, but this time also he overcame; and though the fruit from the magic tree almost touched his mouth, he brushed it aside and went steadily on.

That day the cows wandered farther than ever they had done before, and never stopped till they had reached a moor where the heather was burning. The fire was fierce, but the cows took no heed, and walked steadily through it, Covan the Brown-haired following them. Next they plunged into a foaming river, and Covan plunged in after them, though the water came high above his waist. On the other side of the river lay a wide plain, and here the cows lay down, while Covan looked about him. Near him was a house built of yellow stone, and from it came sweet songs, and Covan listened, and his heart grew light within him.

While he was thus waiting there ran up to him a youth, scarcely able to speak so swiftly had he sped; and he cried aloud:

'Hasten, hasten, Covan the Brown-haired, for your cows are in the corn, and you must drive them out!'

'Nay,' said Covan smiling, 'it had been easier for you to have driven them out than to come here to tell me.' And he went on listening to the music.

Very soon the same youth returned and cried with panting breath:

'Out upon you, Covan son of Gorla, that you stand there agape. For our dogs are chasing your cows, and you must drive them off!'

'Nay, then,' answered Covan as before, 'it had been easier for you to call off your dogs than to come here to tell me.' And he stayed where he was till the music ceased.

Then he turned to look for the cows, and found them all lying in the place where he had left them; but when they saw Covan they rose up and walked homewards, taking a different path to that they had trod in the morning. This time they passed over a plain so bare that a pin could not have lain there unnoticed, yet Covan

beheld with surprise a foal and its mother feeding there, both as fat as if they had pastured on the richest grass. Further on they crossed another plain, where the grass was thick and green, but on it were feeding a foal and its mother, so lean that you could have counted their ribs. And further again the path led them by the shores of a lake whereon were floating two boats; one full of gay and happy youths, journeying to the land of the Sun, and another with grim shapes clothed in black, travelling to the land of Night.

‘What can these things mean?’ said Covan to himself, as he followed his cows.

Darkness now fell, the wind howled, and torrents of rain poured upon them. Covan knew not how far they might yet have to go, or indeed if they were on the right road. He could not even see his cows, and his heart sank lest, after all, he should have failed to bring them safely back. What was he to do?

He waited thus, for he could go neither forwards nor backwards, till he felt a great friendly paw laid on his shoulder.

‘My cave is just here,’ said the Dog of Maol-mor, of whom Covan son of Gorla had heard much. ‘Spend the night here, and you shall be fed on the flesh of lamb, and shall lay aside three-thirds of thy weariness.’

And Covan entered, and supped, and slept, and in the morning rose up a new man.

‘Farewell, Covan,’ said the Dog of Maol-mor. ‘May success go with you, for you took what I had to give and did not mock me. So, when danger is your companion, wish for me, and I will not fail you.’

At these words the Dog of Maol-mor disappeared into the forest, and Covan went to seek his cows, which were standing in the hollow where the darkness had come upon them.

At the sight of Covan the Brown-haired they walked onwards, Covan following ever behind them, and looking neither to the right nor to the left. All that day they walked, and when night fell they were in a barren plain, with only rocks for shelter.

‘We must rest here as best we can,’ spoke Covan to the cows. And they bowed their heads and lay down in the place where they stood. Then came the black raven of Corri-nan-creag, whose eyes never closed, and whose wings never tired; and he fluttered before the face of Covan and told him that he knew of a cranny in the rock where there was food in plenty, and soft moss for a bed.

‘Go with me thither,’ he said to Covan, ‘and you shall lay aside three-thirds of your weariness, and depart in the

morning refreshed,' and Covan listened thankfully to his words, and at dawn he rose up to seek his cows.

'Farewell!' cried the black raven. 'You trusted me, and took all I had to offer in return for the food you once gave me. So if in time to come you need a friend, wish for me, and I will not fail you.'

As before, the cows were standing in the spot where he had left them, ready to set out. All that day they walked, on and on, and on, Covan son of Gorla walking behind them, till night fell while they were on the banks of a river.

'We can go no further,' spake Covan to the cows. And they began to eat the grass by the side of the stream, while Covan listened to them and longed for some supper also, for they had travelled far, and his limbs were weak under him. Then there was a swish of water at his feet, and out peeped the head of the famous otter Doran-donn of the stream.

'Trust to me and I will find you warmth and shelter,' said Doran-donn; 'and for food fish in plenty.' And Covan went with him thankfully, and ate and rested, and laid aside three-thirds of his weariness. At sunrise he left his bed of dried sea-weed, which had floated up with the tide, and with a grateful heart bade farewell to Doran-donn.

'Because you trusted me and took what I had to offer, you have made me your friend, Covan,' said Doran-donn. 'And if you should be in danger, and need help from one who can swim a river or dive beneath a wave, call to me and I will come to you.' Then he plunged into the stream, and was seen no more.

The cows were standing ready in the place where Covan had left them, and they journeyed on all that day, till, when night fell, they reached the cottage. Joyful indeed was the old man as the cows went into their stables, and he beheld the rich milk that flowed into the pail of the golden-haired maiden with the silver comb.

'You have done well indeed,' he said to Covan son of Gorla. 'And now, what would you have as a reward?'

'I want nothing for myself,' answered Covan the Brown-haired; 'but I ask you to give me back my brothers and my sister who have been lost to us for three years past. You are wise and know the lore of fairies and of witches; tell me where I can find them, and what I must do to bring them to life again.'

The old man looked grave at the words of Covan.

'Yes, truly I know where they are,' answered he, 'and I say not that they may not be brought to life again. But

the perils are great—too great for you to overcome.’

‘Tell me what they are,’ said Covan again, ‘and I shall know better if I may overcome them.’

‘Listen, then, and judge. In the mountain yonder there dwells a roe, white of foot, with horns that branch like the antlers of a deer. On the lake that leads to the land of the Sun floats a duck whose body is green and whose neck is of gold. In the pool of Corri- Bui swims a salmon with a skin that shines like silver, and whose gills are red—bring them all to me, and then you shall know where dwell your brothers and your sister!’

‘To-morrow at cock-crow I will begone!’ answered Covan.

The way to the mountain lay straight before him, and when he had climbed high he caught sight of the roe with the white feet and the spotted sides, on the peak in front.

Full of hope he set out in pursuit of her, but by the time he had reached that peak she had left it and was to be seen on another. And so it always happened, and Covan’s courage had well-nigh failed him, when the thought of the Dog of Maol-mor darted into his mind.

‘Oh, that he was here!’ he cried. And looking up he saw him.

‘Why did you summon me?’ asked the Dog of Maol-mor. And when Covan had told him of his trouble, and how the roe always led him further and further, the Dog only answered:

‘Fear nothing; I will soon catch her for you.’ And in a short while he laid the roe unhurt at Covan’s feet.

‘What will you wish me to do with her?’ said the Dog. And Covan answered:

‘The old man bade me bring her, and the duck with the golden neck, and the salmon with the silver sides, to his cottage; if I shall catch them, I know not. But carry you the roe to the back of the cottage, and tether her so that she cannot escape.’

‘It shall be done,’ said the Dog of Maol-mor.

Then Covan sped to the lake which led to the land of the Sun, where the duck with the green body and the golden neck was swimming among the water-lilies.

‘Surely I can catch him, good swimmer as I am,’ to himself. But, if he could swim well, the duck could swim

better, and at length his strength failed him, and he was forced to seek the land.

‘Oh that the black raven were here to help me!’ he thought to himself. And in a moment the black raven was perched on his shoulder.

‘How can I help you?’ asked the raven. And Covan answered:

‘Catch me the green duck that floats on the water.’ And the raven flew with his strong wings and picked him up in his strong beak, and in another moment the bird was laid at the feet of Covan.

This time it was easy for the young man to carry his prize, and after giving thanks to the raven for his aid, he went on to the river.

In the deep dark pool of which the old man had spoken the silver-sided salmon was lying under a rock.

‘Surely I, good fisher as I am, can catch him,’ said Covan son of Gorla. And cutting a slender pole from a bush, he fastened a line to the end of it. But cast with what skill he might, it availed nothing, for the salmon would not even look at the bait.

‘I am beaten at last, unless the Doran-donn can deliver me,’ he cried. And as he spoke there was a swish of the water, and the face of the Doran-donn looked up at him.

‘O catch me, I pray you, that salmon under the rock!’ said Covan son of Gorla. And the Doran-donn dived, and laying hold of the salmon by his tail, bore it back to the place where Covan was standing.

‘The roe, and the duck, and the salmon are here,’ said Covan to the old man, when he reached the cottage. And the old man smiled on him and bade him eat and drink, and after he hungered no more, he would speak with him.

And this was what the old man said: ‘You began well, my son, so things have gone well with you. You set store by your mother’s blessing, therefore you have been blest. You gave food to the raven when it hungered, you were true to the promise you had made to me, and did not suffer yourself to be turned aside by vain shows. You were skilled to perceive that the boy who tempted you to leave the temple was a teller of false tales, and took with a grateful heart what the poor had to offer you. Last of all, difficulties gave you courage, instead of lending you despair.’

And now, as to your reward, you shall in truth take your sister home with you, and your brothers I will restore to life; but idle and unfaithful as they are their lot is to wander for ever. And so farewell, and may wisdom be with you.'

'First tell me your name?' asked Covan softly.

'I am the Spirit of Age,' said the old man.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com