



# *The King of Erin and the Queen of the Lonesome Island*

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Irish

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*Intermediate  
27 min read*

There was a king in Erin long ago, and this king went out hunting one day, but saw nothing till near sunset, when what should come across him but a black pig.

“Since I’ve seen nothing all day but this black pig, I’ll be at her now,” said the king; so he put spurs to his horse and raced after the pig.

When the pig was on a hill he was in the valley behind her; when he was on a hill, the pig was in the valley before him. At last they came to the sea-side, and the pig rushed out into the deep water straight from the shore. The king spurred on his horse and followed the black pig through the sea till his horse failed under him and was drowned.

Then the king swam on himself till he was growing weak, and said: “It was for the death of me that the black pig came in my way.”

But he swam on some distance yet, till at last he saw land. The pig went up on an island; the king too went on shore, and said to himself: “Oh! it is for no good that I came here; there is neither house nor shelter to be seen.” But he cheered up after a while, walked around, and said: “I’m a useless man if I can’t find shelter in some

place.”

After going on a short space he saw a great castle in a valley before him. When he came to the front of the castle he saw that it had a low door with a broad threshold all covered with sharp-edged razors, and a low lintel of long-pointed needles. The path to the castle was covered with gravel of gold. The king came up, and went in with a jump over the razors and under the needles. When inside he saw a great fire on a broad hearth, and said to himself, “I’ll sit down here, dry my clothes, and warm my body at this fire.”

As he sat and warmed himself, a table came out before him with every sort of food and drink, without his seeing any one bring it.

“Upon my honor and power,” said the king of Erin, “there is nothing bad in this! I’ll eat and drink my fill.”

Then he fell to, and ate and drank his fill. When he had grown tired, he looked behind him, and if he did he saw a fine room, and in it a bed covered with gold. “Well,” said he, “I’ll go back and sleep in that bed a while, I’m so tired.”

He stretched himself on the bed and fell asleep. In the night he woke up, and felt the presence of a woman in the room. He reached out his hand towards her and spoke, but got no answer; she was silent.

When morning came, and he made his way out of the castle, she spread a beautiful garden with her Druidic spells over the island,—so great that though he travelled through it all day he could not escape from it. At sunset he was back at the door of the castle; and in he went over the razors and under the needles, sat at the fire, and the table came out before him as on the previous evening. He ate, drank, and slept on the bed; and when he woke in the night, there was the woman in the room; but she was silent and unseen as before.

When he went out on the second morning the king of Erin saw a garden three times more beautiful than the one of the day before. He travelled all day, but could not escape,—could not get out of the garden. At sunset he was back at the door of the castle; in he went over the razors and under the needles, ate, drank, and slept, as before.

In the middle of the night he woke up, and felt the presence of the woman in the room. “Well,” said he, “it is a wonderful thing for me to pass three nights in a room with a woman, and not see her nor know who she is!”

“You won’t have that to say again, king of Erin,” answered a voice. And that moment the room was filled with a

bright light, and the king looked upon the finest woman he had ever seen. “Well, king of Erin, you are on Lonesome Island. I am the black pig that enticed you over the land and through the sea to this place, and I am queen of Lonesome Island. My two sisters and I are under a Druidic spell, and we cannot escape from this spell till your son and mine shall free us. Now, king of Erin, I will give you a boat to-morrow morning, and do you sail away to your own kingdom.”

In the morning she went with him to the seashore to the boat. The king gave the prow of the boat to the sea, and its stern to the land; then he raised the sails, and went his way. The music he had was the roaring of the wind with the whistling of eels, and he broke neither oar nor mast till he landed under his own castle in Erin.

Three quarters of a year after, the queen of Lonesome Island gave birth to a son. She reared him with care from day to day and year to year till he was a splendid youth. She taught him the learning of wise men one half of the day, and warlike exercises with Druidic spells the other half. One time the young man, the prince of Lonesome Island, came in from hunting, and found his mother sobbing and crying.

“Oh! what has happened to you, mother?” he asked.

“My son, great grief has come on me. A friend of mine is going to be killed to-morrow.”

“Who is he?”

“The king of Erin. The king of Spain has come against him with a great army. He wishes to sweep him and his men from the face of the earth, and take the kingdom himself.”

“Well, what can we do? If I were there, I’d help the king of Erin.”

“Since you say that, my son, I’ll send you this very evening. With the power of my Druidic spells, you’ll be in Erin in the morning.”

The prince of Lonesome Island went away that night, and next morning at the rising of the sun he drew up his boat under the king’s castle in Erin. He went ashore, and saw the whole land black with the forces of the king of Spain, who was getting ready to attack the king of Erin and sweep him and his men from the face of the earth.

The prince went straight to the king of Spain, and said, “I ask one day’s truce.”

“You shall have it, my champion,” answered the king of Spain.

The prince then went to the castle of the king of Erin, and stayed there that day as a guest. Next morning early he dressed himself in his champion’s array, and, taking his nine-edged sword, he went down alone to the king of Spain, and, standing before him, bade him guard himself.

They closed in conflict, the king of Spain with all his forces on one side, and the prince of Lonesome Island on the other. They fought an awful battle that day from sunrise till sunset. They made soft places hard, and hard places soft; they made high places low, and low places high; they brought water out of the centre of hard gray rocks, and made dry rushes soft in the most distant parts of Erin till sunset; and when the sun went down, the king of Spain and his last man were dead on the field.

Neither the king of Erin nor his forces took part in the battle. They had no need, and they had no chance.

Now the king of Erin had two sons, who were such cowards that they hid themselves from fright during the battle; but their mother told the king of Erin that her elder son was the man who had destroyed the king of Spain and all his men.

There was great rejoicing and a feast at the castle of the king of Erin. At the end of the feast the queen said: “I wish to give the last cup to this stranger who is here as a guest;” and taking him to an adjoining chamber which had a window right over the sea, she seated him in the open window and gave him a cup of drowsiness to drink. When he had emptied the cup and closed his eyes, she pushed him out into the darkness.

The prince of Lonesome Island swam on the water for four days and nights, till he came to a rock in the ocean, and there he lived for three months, eating the seaweeds of the rock, till one foggy day a vessel came near and the captain cried out: “We shall be wrecked on this rock!” Then he said, “There is some one on the rock; go and see who it is.”

They landed, and found the prince, his clothes all gone, his body black from the seaweed, which was growing all over it.

“Who are you?” asked the captain.

“Give me first to eat and drink, and then I’ll talk,” said he.

They brought him food and drink; and when he had eaten and drunk, the prince said to the captain: "What part of the world have you come from?"

"I have just sailed from Lonesome Island," said the captain. "I was obliged to sail away, for fire was coming from every side to burn my ship."

"Would you like to go back?"

"I should indeed."

"Well, turn around; you'll have no trouble if I am with you."

The captain returned. The queen of Lonesome Island was standing on the shore as the ship came in.

"Oh, my child!" cried she, "why have you been away so long?"

"The queen of Erin threw me into the sea after I had kept the head of the king of Erin on him, and saved her life too."

"Well, my son, that will come up against the queen of Erin on another day."

Now, the prince lived on Lonesome Island three years longer, till one time he came home from hunting, and found his mother wringing her hands and shedding bitter tears.

"Oh! what has happened?" asked he.

"I am weeping because the king of Spain has gone to take vengeance on the king of Erin for the death of his father, whom you killed."

"Well, mother, I'll go to help the king of Erin, if you give me leave."

"Since you have said it, you shall go this very night."

He went to the shore. Putting the prow of his bark to the sea and her stern to land, he raised high the sails, and heard no sound as he went but the pleasant wind and the whistling of eels, till he pulled up his boat next morning under the castle of the king of Erin and went on shore.

The whole country was black with the troops of the king of Spain, who was just ready to attack, when the

prince stood before him, and asked a truce till next morning.

“That you shall have, my champion,” answered the king. So there was peace for that day.

Next morning at sunrise, the prince faced the king of Spain and his army, and there followed a struggle more terrible than that with his father; but at sunset neither the king of Spain nor one of his men was left alive.

The two sons of the king of Erin were frightened almost to death, and hid during the battle, so that no one saw them or knew where they were. But when the king of Spain and his army were destroyed, the queen said to the king: “My elder son has saved us.” Then she went to bed, and taking the blood of a chicken in her mouth, spat it out, saying: “This is my heart’s blood; and nothing can cure me now but three bottles of water from Tubber Tintye, the flaming well.”

When the prince was told of the sickness of the queen of Erin, he came to her and said: “I’ll go for the water if your two sons will go with me.”

“They shall go,” said the queen; and away went the three young men towards the East, in search of the flaming well.

In the morning they came to a house on the roadside; and going in, they saw a woman who had washed herself in a golden basin which stood before her. She was then wetting her head with the water in the basin, and combing her hair with a golden comb. She threw back her hair, and looking at the prince, said: “You are welcome, sister’s son. What is on you? Is it the misfortune of the world that has brought you here?”

“It is not; I am going to Tubber Tintye for three bottles of water.”

“That is what you’ll never do; no man can cross the fiery river or go through the enchantments around Tubber Tintye. Stay here with me, and I’ll give you all I have.”

“No, I cannot stay, I must go on.”

“Well, you’ll be in your other aunt’s house to-morrow night, and she will tell you all.”

Next morning, when they were getting ready to take the road, the elder son of the queen of Erin was frightened at what he had heard, and said: “I am sick; I cannot go farther.”

“Stop here where you are till I come back,” said the prince. Then he went on with the younger brother, till at

sunset they came to a house where they saw a woman wetting her head from a golden basin, and combing her hair with a golden comb. She threw back her hair, looked at the prince, and said: "You are welcome, sister's son! What brought you to this place? Was it the misfortune of the world that brought you to live under Druidic spells like me and my sisters?" This was the elder sister of the queen of the Lonesome Island.

"No," said the prince; "I am going to Tubber Tintye for three bottles of water from the flaming well."

"Oh, sister's son, it's a hard journey you're on! But stay here to-night; to-morrow morning I'll tell you all."

In the morning the prince's aunt said: "The queen of the Island of Tubber Tintye has an enormous castle, in which she lives. She has a countless army of giants, beasts, and monsters to guard the castle and the flaming well. There are thousands upon thousands of them, of every form and size. When they get drowsy, and sleep comes on them, they sleep for seven years without waking. The queen has twelve attendant maidens, who live in twelve chambers. She is in the thirteenth and innermost chamber herself. The queen and the maidens sleep during the same seven years as the giants and beasts. When the seven years are over, they all wake up, and none of them sleep again for seven other years. If any man could enter the castle during the seven years of sleep, he could do what he liked. But the island on which the castle stands is girt by a river of fire and surrounded by a belt of poison-trees."

The aunt now blew on a horn, and all the birds of the air gathered around her from every place under the heavens, and she asked each in turn where it dwelt, and each told her; but none knew of the flaming well, till an old eagle said: "I left Tubber Tintye to-day."

"How are all the people there?" asked the aunt.

"They are all asleep since yesterday morning," answered the old eagle.

The aunt dismissed the birds; and turning to the prince, said, "Here is a bridle for you. Go to the stables, shake the bridle, and put it on whatever horse runs out to meet you."

Now the second son of the queen of Erin said: "I am too sick to go farther."

"Well, stay here till I come back," said the prince, who took the bridle and went out.

The prince of the Lonesome Island stood in front of his aunt's stables, shook the bridle, and out came a dirty, lean little shaggy horse.

"Sit on my back, son of the king of Erin and the queen of Lonesome Island," said the little shaggy horse.

This was the first the prince had heard of his father. He had often wondered who he might be, but had never heard who he was before.

He mounted the horse, which said: "Keep a firm grip now, for I shall clear the river of fire at a single bound, and pass the poison-trees; but if you touch any part of the trees, even with a thread of the clothing that's on you, you'll never eat another bite; and as I rush by the end of the castle of Tubber Tintye with the speed of the wind, you must spring from my back through an open window that is there; and if you don't get in at the window, you're done for. I'll wait for you outside till you are ready to go back to Erin."

The prince did as the little horse told him. They crossed the river of fire, escaped the touch of the poison-trees, and as the horse shot past the castle, the prince sprang through the open window, and came down safe and sound inside.

The whole place, enormous in extent, was filled with sleeping giants and monsters of sea and land,—great whales, long slippery eels, bears, and beasts of every form and kind. The prince passed through them and over them till he came to a great stairway. At the head of the stairway he went into a chamber, where he found the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, stretched on a couch asleep. "I'll have nothing to say to you," thought he, and went on to the next; and so he looked into twelve chambers. In each was a woman more beautiful than the one before. But when he reached the thirteenth chamber and opened the door, the flash of gold took the sight from his eyes. He stood a while till the sight came back, and then entered. In the great bright chamber was a golden couch, resting on wheels of gold. The wheels turned continually; the couch went round and round, never stopping night or day. On the couch lay the queen of Tubber Tintye; and if her twelve maidens were beautiful, they would not be beautiful if seen near her. At the foot of the couch was Tubber Tintye itself,—the well of fire. There was a golden cover upon the well, and it went around continually with the couch of the queen.

“Upon my word,” said the prince, “I’ll rest here a while.” And he went up on the couch, and never left it for six days and nights.

On the seventh morning he said, “It is time for me now to leave this place.” So he came down and filled the three bottles with water from the flaming well. In the golden chamber was a table of gold, and on the table a leg of mutton with a loaf of bread; and if all the men in Erin were to eat for a twelvemonth from the table, the mutton and the bread would be in the same form after the eating as before.

The prince sat down, ate his fill of the loaf and the leg of mutton, and left them as he had found them. Then he rose up, took his three bottles, put them in his wallet, and was leaving the chamber, when he said to himself: “It would be a shame to go away without leaving something by which the queen may know who was here while she slept.” So he wrote a letter, saying that the son of the king of Erin and the queen of the Lonesome Island had spent six days and nights in the golden chamber of Tubber Tintye, had taken away three bottles of water from the flaming well, and had eaten from the table of gold. Putting this letter under the pillow of the queen, he went out, stood in the open window, sprang on the back of the lean and shaggy little horse, and passed the trees and the river unharmed.

When they were near his aunt’s house, the horse stopped, and said: “Put your hand into my ear, and draw out of it a Druidic rod; then cut me into four quarters, and strike each quarter with the rod. Each one of them will become the son of a king, for four princes were enchanted and turned into the lean little shaggy horse that carried you to Tubber Tintye. When you have freed the four princes from this form you can free your two aunts from the spell that is on them, and take them with you to Lonesome Island.”

The prince did as the horse desired; and straightway four princes stood before him, and thanking him for what he had done, they departed at once, each to his own kingdom.

The prince removed the spell from his aunts, and, travelling with them and the two sons of the queen of Erin, all soon appeared at the castle of the king.

When they were near the door of their mother's chamber, the elder of the two sons of the queen of Erin stepped up to the prince of Lonesome Island, snatched the three bottles from the wallet that he had at his side, and running up to his mother's bed, said: "Here, mother, are the three bottles of water which I brought you from Tubber Tintye."

"Thank you, my son; you have saved my life," said she.

The prince went on his bark and sailed away with his aunts to Lonesome Island, where he lived with his mother seven years.

When seven years were over, the queen of Tubber Tintye awoke from her sleep in the golden chamber; and with her the twelve maidens and all the giants, beasts, and monsters that slept in the great castle.

When the queen opened her eyes, she saw a boy about six years old playing by himself on the floor. He was very beautiful and bright, and he had gold on his forehead and silver on his poll. When she saw the child, she began to cry and wring her hands, and said: "Some man has been here while I slept."

Straightway she sent for her Seandallglic (old blind sage), told him about the child, and asked: "What am I to do now?"

The old blind sage thought a while, and then said: "Whoever was here must be a hero; for the child has gold on his forehead and silver on his poll, and he never went from this place without leaving his name behind him. Let search be made, and we shall know who he was."

Search was made, and at last they found the letter of the prince under the pillow of the couch. The queen was now glad, and proud of the child.

Next day she assembled all her forces, her giants and guards; and when she had them drawn up in line, the army was seven miles long from van to rear. The queen opened through the river of fire a safe way for the host, and led it on till she came to the castle of the king of Erin. She held all the land near the castle, so the king had the sea on one side, and the army of the queen of Tubber Tintye on the other, ready to destroy him and all that he had. The queen sent a herald for the king to come down.

“What are you going to do?” asked the king when he came to her tent. “I have had trouble enough in my life already, without having more of it now.”

“Find for me,” said the queen, “the man who came to my castle and entered the golden chamber of Tubber Tintye while I slept, or I’ll sweep you and all you have from the face of the earth.”

The king of Erin called down his elder son, and asked: “Did you enter the chamber of the queen of Tubber Tintye?”

“I did.”

“Go, then, and tell her so, and save us.”

He went; and when he told the queen, she said: “If you entered my chamber, then mount my gray steed.”

He mounted the steed; and if he did, the steed rose in the air with a bound, hurled him off his back, in a moment, threw him on a rock, and dashed the brains out of his head.

The king called down his second son, who said that he had been in the golden chamber. Then he mounted the gray steed, which killed him as it had his brother.

Now the queen called the king again, and said: “Unless you bring the man who entered my golden chamber while I slept, I’ll not leave a sign of you or anything you have upon the face of the earth.” Straightway the king sent a message to the queen of Lonesome Island, saying: “Come to me with your son and your two sisters!”

The queen set out next morning, and at sunset she drew up her boat under the castle of the king of Erin. Glad were they to see her at the castle, for great dread was on all.

Next morning the king went down to the queen of Tubber Tintye, who said: “Bring me the man who entered my castle, or I’ll destroy you and all you have in Erin this day.”

The king went up to the castle; immediately the prince of Lonesome Island went to the queen.

“Are you the man who entered my castle?” asked she.

“I don’t know,” said the prince.

“Go up now on my gray steed!” said the queen.

He sat on the gray steed, which rose under him into the sky. The prince stood on the back of the horse, and cut three times with his sword as he went up under the sun. When he came to the earth again, the queen of Tubber Tintye ran over to him, put his head on her bosom, and said: “You are the man.”

Now she called the queen of Erin to her tent, and drawing from her own pocket a belt of silk, slender as a cord, she said: “Put this on.”

The queen of Erin put it on, and then the queen of Tubber Tintye said: “Tighten, belt!” The belt tightened till the queen of Erin screamed with pain. “Now tell me,” said the queen of Tubber Tintye, “who was the father of your elder son.”

“The gardener,” said the queen of Erin.

Again the queen of Tubber Tintye said; “Tighten, belt!” The queen of Erin screamed worse than before; and she had good reason, for she was cut nearly in two. “Now tell me who was the father of your second son.”

“The big brewer,” said the queen of Erin.

Said the queen of Tubber Tintye to the king of Erin: “Get this woman dead.”

The king put down a big fire then, and when it was blazing high, he threw the wife in, and she was destroyed at once.

“Now do you marry the queen of Lonesome Island, and my child will be grandchild to you and to her,” said the queen of Tubber Tintye.

This was done, and the queen of Lonesome Island became queen of Erin and lived in the castle by the sea. And the queen of Tubber Tintye married the prince of Lonesome Island, the champion who entered the golden chamber while she slept.

Now the king of Erin sent ten ships with messages to all the kings of the world, inviting them to come to the wedding of the queen of Tubber Tintye and his son, and to his own wedding with the queen of Lonesome Island.

The queen removed the Druidic spells from her giants, beasts, and monsters; then went home, and made the

prince of Lonesome Island king of Tubber Tintye and lord of the golden chamber.

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