



The Shee an Gannon and the Gruagach Gaire

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Irish

*Intermediate
20 min read*

The Shee an Gannon was born in the morning, named at noon, and went in the evening to ask his daughter of the king of Erin.

“I will give you my daughter in marriage,” said the king of Erin; “you won’t get her, though, unless you go and bring me back the tidings that I want, and tell me what it is that put a stop to the laughing of the Gruagach Gaire, who before this laughed always, and laughed so loud that the whole world heard him. There are twelve iron spikes out here in the garden behind my castle. On eleven of the spikes are the heads of kings’ sons who came seeking my daughter in marriage, and all of them went away to get the knowledge I wanted. Not one was able to get it and tell me what stopped the Gruagach Gaire from laughing. I took the heads off them all when they came back without the tidings for which they went, and I’m greatly in dread that your head’ll be on the twelfth spike, for I’ll do the same to you that I did to the eleven kings’ sons unless you tell what put a stop to the laughing of the Gruagach.”

The Shee an Gannon made no answer, but left the king and pushed away to know could he find why the Gruagach was silent.

He took a glen at a step, a hill at a leap, and travelled all day till evening. Then he came to a house. The master of the house asked him what sort was he, and he said: "A young man looking for hire."

"Well," said the master of the house, "I was going to-morrow to look for a man to mind my cows. If you'll work for me, you'll have a good place, the best food a man could have to eat in this world, and a soft bed to lie on."

The Shee an Gannon took service, and ate his supper. Then the master of the house said: "I am the Gruagach Gaire; now that you are my man and have eaten your supper, you'll have a bed of silk to sleep on."

Next morning after breakfast the Gruagach said to the Shee an Gannon: "Go out now and loosen my five golden cows and my bull without horns, and drive them to pasture; but when you have them out on the grass, be careful you don't let them go near the land of the giant."

The new cowboy drove the cattle to pasture, and when near the land of the giant, he saw it was covered with woods and surrounded by a high wall. He went up, put his back against the wall, and threw in a great stretch of it; then he went inside and threw out another great stretch of the wall, and put the five golden cows and the bull without horns on the land of the giant.

Then he climbed a tree, ate the sweet apples himself, and threw the sour ones down to the cattle of the Gruagach Gaire.

Soon a great crashing was heard in the woods,—the noise of young trees bending, and old trees breaking. The cowboy looked around, and saw a five-headed giant pushing through the trees; and soon he was before him.

"Poor miserable creature!" said the giant; "but weren't you impudent to come to my land and trouble me in this way? You're too big for one bite, and too small for two. I don't know what to do but tear you to pieces."

"You nasty brute," said the cowboy, coming down to him from the tree, "'tis little I care for you;" and then they went at each other. So great was the noise between them that there was nothing in the world but what was looking on and listening to the combat.

They fought till late in the afternoon, when the giant was getting the upper hand; and then the cowboy thought that if the giant should kill him, his father and mother would never find him or set eyes on him again, and he would never get the daughter of the king of Erin. The heart in his body grew strong at this thought. He sprang on the giant, and with the first squeeze and thrust he put him to his knees in the hard ground, with the second thrust to his waist, and with the third to his shoulders.

“I have you at last; you’re done for now!” said the cowboy. Then he took out his knife, cut the five heads off the giant, and when he had them off he cut out the tongues and threw the heads over the wall.

Then he put the tongues in his pocket and drove home the cattle. That evening the Gruagach couldn’t find vessels enough in all his place to hold the milk of the five golden cows.

After supper the cowboy would give no talk to his master, but kept his mind to himself, and went to the bed of silk to sleep.

Next morning after breakfast the cowboy drove out his cattle, and going on farther than the day before, stopped at a high wall. He put his back to the wall, threw in a long stretch of it, then went in and threw out another long stretch of it.

After that he put the five golden cows and the bull without horns on the land, and going up on a tree, ate sweet apples himself, and threw down the sour ones to the cattle.

Now the son of the king of Tisean set out from the king of Erin on the same errand, after asking for his daughter; and as soon as the cowboy drove in his cattle on the second day, he came along by the giant’s land, found the five heads of the giant thrown out by the cowboy the day before, and picking them up, ran off to the king of Erin and put them down before him.

“Oh, you have done good work!” said the king. “You have won one third of my daughter.”

Soon after the cowboy had begun to eat sweet apples, and the son of the king of Tisean had run off with the five heads, there came a great noise of young trees bending, and old trees breaking, and presently the cowboy saw a giant larger than the one he had killed the day before.

“You miserable little wretch!” cried the giant; “what brings you here on my land?”

“You wicked brute!” said the cowboy, “I don’t care for you;” and slipping down from the tree, he fell upon the giant.

The fight was fiercer than his first one; but towards evening, when he was growing faint, the cowboy remembered that if he should fall, neither his father nor mother would see him again, and he would never get the daughter of the king of Erin.

This thought gave him strength; and jumping up, he caught the giant, put him with one thrust to his knees in the hard earth, with a second to his waist, with a third to his shoulders, and then swept the five heads off him and threw them over the wall, after he had cut out the tongues and put them in his pocket.

Leaving the body of the giant, the cowboy drove home the cattle, and the Gruagach had still greater trouble in finding vessels for the milk of the five golden cows.

After supper the cowboy said not a word, but went to sleep.

Next morning he drove the cattle still farther, and came to green woods and a strong wall. Putting his back to the wall, he threw in a great piece of it, and going in, threw out another piece. Then he drove the five golden cows and the bull without horns to the land inside, ate sweet apples himself, and threw down sour ones to the cattle.

The son of the king of Tisean came and carried off the heads as on the day before.

Presently a third giant came crashing through the woods, and a battle followed more terrible than the other two.

Towards evening the giant was gaining the upper hand, and the cowboy, growing weak, would have been killed; but the thought of his parents and the daughter of the king of Erin gave him strength, and he swept the five heads off the giant, and threw them over the wall after he had put the tongues in his pocket.

Then the cowboy drove home his cattle; and the Gruagach didn't know what to do with the milk of the five golden cows, there was so much of it.

But when the cowboy was on the way home with the cattle, the son of the king of Tisean came, took the five heads of the giant, and hurried to the king of Erin.

"You have won my daughter now," said the king of Erin when he saw the heads; "but you'll not get her unless you tell me what stops the Gruagach Gaire from laughing."

On the fourth morning the cowboy rose before his master, and the first words he said to the Gruagach were:

"What keeps you from laughing, you who used to laugh so loud that the whole world heard you?"

"I'm sorry," said the Gruagach, "that the daughter of the king of Erin sent you here."

"If you don't tell me of your own will, I'll make you tell me," said the cowboy; and he put a face on himself that was terrible to look at, and running through the house like a madman, could find nothing that would give pain enough to the Gruagach but some ropes made of untanned sheepskin hanging on the wall.

He took these down, caught the Gruagach, fastened his two hands behind him, and tied his feet so that his little toes were whispering to his ears. When he was in this state the Gruagach said: "I'll tell you what stopped my laughing if you set me free."

So the cowboy unbound him, the two sat down together, and the Gruagach said:—

"I lived in this castle here with my twelve sons. We ate, drank, played cards, and enjoyed ourselves, till one day when my sons and I were playing, a wizard hare came rushing in, jumped on our table, defiled it, and ran away.

"On another day he came again; but if he did, we were ready for him, my twelve sons and myself. As soon as he defiled our table and ran off, we made after him, and followed him till nightfall, when he went into a glen. We saw a light before us. I ran on, and came to a house with a great apartment, where there was a man with twelve daughters, and the hare was tied to the side of the room near the women.

"There was a large pot over the fire in the room, and a great stork boiling in the pot. The man of the house said

to me: "There are bundles of rushes at the end of the room, go there and sit down with your men!"

"He went into the next room and brought out two pikes, one of wood, the other of iron, and asked me which of the pikes would I take. I said, 'I'll take the iron one;' for I thought in my heart that if an attack should come on me, I could defend myself better with the iron than the wooden pike.

"The man of the house gave me the iron pike, and the first chance of taking what I could out of the pot on the point of the pike. I got but a small piece of the stork, and the man of the house took all the rest on his wooden pike. We had to fast that night; and when the man and his twelve daughters ate the flesh of the stork, they hurled the bare bones in the faces of my sons and myself.

"We had to stop all night that way, beaten on the faces by the bones of the stork.

"Next morning, when we were going away, the man of the house asked me to stay a while; and going into the next room, he brought out twelve loops of iron and one of wood, and said to me: 'Put the heads of your twelve sons into the iron loops, or your own head into the wooden one;' and I said: 'I'll put the twelve heads of my sons in the iron loops, and keep my own out of the wooden one.'

"He put the iron loops on the necks of my twelve sons, and put the wooden one on his own neck. Then he snapped the loops one after another, till he took the heads off my twelve sons and threw the heads and bodies out of the house; but he did nothing to hurt his own neck.

"When he had killed my sons he took hold of me and stripped the skin and flesh from the small of my back down, and when he had done that he took the skin of a black sheep that had been hanging on the wall for seven years and clapped it on my body in place of my own flesh and skin; and the sheepskin grew on me, and every year since then I shear myself, and every bit of wool I use for the stockings that I wear I clip off my own back."

When he had said this, the Gruagach showed the cowboy his back covered with thick black wool.

After what he had seen and heard, the cowboy said: "I know now why you don't laugh, and small blame to you. But does that hare come here still to spoil your table?"

"He does indeed," said the Gruagach.

Both went to the table to play, and they were not long playing cards when the hare ran in; and before they could stop him he was on the table, and had put it in such a state that they could not play on it longer if they had wanted to.

But the cowboy made after the hare, and the Gruagach after the cowboy, and they ran as fast as ever their legs could carry them till nightfall; and when the hare was entering the castle where the twelve sons of the Gruagach were killed, the cowboy caught him by the two hind legs and dashed out his brains against the wall; and the skull of the hare was knocked into the chief room of the castle, and fell at the feet of the master of the place.

“Who has dared to interfere with my fighting pet?” screamed he.

“I,” said the cowboy; “and if your pet had had manners, he might be alive now.”

The cowboy and the Gruagach stood by the fire. A stork was boiling in the pot, as when the Gruagach came the first time. The master of the house went into the next room and brought out an iron and a wooden pike, and asked the cowboy which would he choose.

“I’ll take the wooden one,” said the cowboy; “and you may keep the iron one for yourself.”

So he took the wooden one; and going to the pot, brought out on the pike all the stork except a small bite, and he and the Gruagach fell to eating, and they were eating the flesh of the stork all night. The cowboy and the Gruagach were at home in the place that time.

In the morning the master of the house went into the next room, took down the twelve iron loops with a wooden one, brought them out, and asked the cowboy which would he take, the twelve iron or the one wooden loop.

“What could I do with the twelve iron ones for myself or my master? I’ll take the wooden one.”

He put it on, and taking the twelve iron loops, put them on the necks of the twelve daughters of the house, then snapped the twelve heads off them, and turning to their father, said: “I’ll do the same thing to you unless you bring the twelve sons of my master to life, and make them as well and strong as when you took their heads.”

The master of the house went out and brought the twelve to life again; and when the Gruagach saw all his sons

alive and as well as ever, he let a laugh out of himself, and all the Eastern world heard the laugh.

Then the cowboy said to the Gruagach: "It's a bad thing you have done to me, for the daughter of the king of Erin will be married the day after your laugh is heard."

"Oh! then we must be there in time," said the Gruagach; and they all made away from the place as fast as ever they could, the cowboy, the Gruagach, and his twelve sons.

On the road they came to a woman who was crying very hard.

"What is your trouble?" asked the cowboy.

"You need have no care," said she, "for I will not tell you."

"You must tell me," said he, "for I'll help you out of it."

"Well," said the woman, "I have three sons, and they used to play hurley with the three sons of the king of the Sasenach, and they were more than a match for the king's sons. And it was the rule that the winning side should give three wallops of their hurleys to the other side; and my sons were winning every game, and gave such a beating to the king's sons that they complained to their father, and the king carried away my sons to London, and he is going to hang them there to-day."

"I'll bring them here this minute," said the cowboy. "You have no time," said the Gruagach.

"Have you tobacco and a pipe?" asked the cowboy of the Gruagach.

"I have not," said he.

"Well, I have," said the cowboy; and putting his hand in his pocket, he took out tobacco and a pipe, gave them to the Gruagach, and said: "I'll be in London and back before you can put tobacco in this pipe and light it."

He disappeared, was back from London with the three boys all safe and well, and gave them to their mother before the Gruagach could get a taste of smoke out of the pipe.

“Now come with us,” said the cowboy to the woman and her sons, “to the wedding of the daughter of the king of Erin.”

They hurried on; and when within three miles of the king’s castle there was such a throng of people that no one could go a step ahead. “We must clear a road through this,” said the cowboy.

“We must indeed,” said the Gruagach; and at it they went, threw the people some on one side and some on the other, and soon they had an opening for themselves to the king’s castle.

As they went in, the daughter of the king of Erin and the son of the king of Tisean were on their knees just going to be married. The cowboy drew his hand on the bridegroom, and gave a blow that sent him spinning till he stopped under a table at the other side of the room.

“What scoundrel struck that blow?” asked the king of Erin.

“It was I,” said the cowboy.

“What reason had you to strike the man who won my daughter?”

“It was I who won your daughter, not he; and if you don’t believe me, the Gruagach Gaire is here himself. He’ll tell you the whole story from beginning to end, and show you the tongues of the giants.”

So the Gruagach came up and told the king the whole story, how the Shee an Gannon had become his cowboy, had guarded the five golden cows and the bull without horns, cut off the heads of the five-headed giants, killed the wizard here, and brought his own twelve sons to life. “And then,” said the Gruagach, “he is the only man in the whole world I have ever told why I stopped laughing, and the only one who has ever seen my fleece of wool.”

When the king of Erin heard what the Gruagach said, and saw the tongues of the giants fitted into the heads, he made the Shee an Gannon kneel down by his daughter, and they were married on the spot.

Then the son of the king of Tisean was thrown into prison, and the next day they put down a great fire, and the deceiver was burned to ashes.

The wedding lasted nine days, and the last day was better than the first.

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