

The Story of Conn-Eda

Katharine Pyle

Irish

Intermediate

29 min read

King Conn of Ireland had one noble son named Conn-eda, and he was as dear to his father as the apple of his eye, — none dearer. His mother had died while he was still a child, and after a while the King, his father, married again. He married the young daughter of his chief priest, but he did not marry her because he loved her, and that is the truth. He married her because his councilors told him that it was a wise thing for him to do, for this chief priest was very powerful.

The new Queen was a cruel woman, and her hatred of Conn-eda was bitter and deep. She hated him because he was so handsome and free-hearted, and she hated him because he was so dear to his father, but most of all she hated him because every one looked to him as the one who would sometime be their king, and there was no knowing how soon that would be, for already his father was old and feeble.

After a while the young Queen had a child of her own, and then she hated Conn-eda worse than ever and was always plotting how she could get rid of him, for she wanted the kingdom to come to her own son.

Now there was a woman who lived down back of the castle in a poor tumble-down hut, and it was said that she knew more than a little about magic, and every one was afraid of her. She was the hen-wife, and had charge of all the chickens that belonged to the castle. She was a handsome woman and a strange one, and no one could tell whether she were young or old, and she might have been either.

One day the Queen went by herself down to the hut to visit the hen-wife, for she wished to ask her advice. She

was not ashamed to go, either, because of the woman being an enchantress.

“Queen Durfulla,” said the hen-wife, “I know why you have come to me, and what you are after wanting.”

That surprised the Queen, and she said, “What is it I am wanting, then?”

“You are wanting to rid yourself of young Conn-eda, and it is for my advice you have come hither. But I am not one to give something for nothing. What reward will I have if I give you my advice?”

“What reward will you be wanting?” asked the Queen.

“It’s none so much and none so little. Give me enough wool to fill the hole between my arm and body when I set my hand on my hip with my elbow out, and give me enough red wheat to fill the hole I shall bore with my distaff, and my advice is yours for the asking.”

Well, the Queen could not help smiling at that, for it seemed but a small reward for any one to ask, and she gladly agreed to give it.

“Then have the wool and the wheat brought here to-morrow,” said the hen-wife. “Twenty cartloads of wool, and twenty cartloads of wheat will be none too much to fill the hollow between my arm and body and the hole I’ll make.”

The Queen thought that was a strange thing to say, and that the hen-wife must be dreaming, but all the same she was back at the hen-wife’s door the next day, and close after her came twenty cartloads of wool and twenty cartloads of wheat, with the horses pulling and the carters cracking their whips.

The hen-wife stood in the doorway with her hand on her hip and her elbow out, and the men took an armful of wool and put it in the hollow of her arm, but it fell through the hollow and inside the house. They stuffed another armful in between her arm and body, and the same thing happened to it. Not until the house was so full of wool that it could hold no more were they able to fill the hollow of the hen-wife’s arm as she stood in the doorway.

“And now for the wheat,” said the hen-wife.

Then she led them to her brother’s house which was close by, and climbed up on the roof. The roof was of peat, and she bored a hole down through the peat with her distaff, so that as fast as they poured the wheat into the

hole, it ran down into the house, and not until the house was so full that it could hold no more could they fill the hole, too.

“Now I am satisfied,” said the hen-wife, but that was more than the Queen could say, for she was a mean woman. However, if the hen-wife could tell her how to rid herself of Prince Conn-eda, it was more to her than all the wheat and wool that ever were grown.

“Now listen well to what I tell you,” said the hen-wife. “You have paid me faithfully and fully, and I am ready to keep my part of the bargain, too. Far and far enough from here, there lies a great dark lake, and the name of it is Lough Erne. Under its waters lives the King of the Fiborg race, a race that lives in the water most happily. There, in the King’s garden, grow three golden apples. In his stable stands a grand black steed. In his castle lies the puppy-hound Samur, and great are the magic powers of that hound. You must send Conn-eda to get these things for you, and to fetch them back within a year and a day and it’s not a living being who can seek those things and not lose his life in the seeking, unless he has magic to help him.”

“But how can I send Conn-eda?” asked the Queen, “for he is not a child that he must do my bidding.”

“That also I will tell you,” replied the hen-wife.

She then brought out a chessboard and chess-men and gave them to the Queen. “Do you take these home with you,” she said, “and call Conn-eda to come and play a game of chess with you. I have set a charm on the men, and I have set a charm on the board, so that you will be sure to win ; but before you play you must make a bargain with the Prince that whichever loses shall pay a forfeit to the winner, and the forfeit you shall ask of him is that he fetch to you the three things I have told you of. But be sure that you play only the one game, for after that is played the charm will lose its power.”

The Queen was pleased with the advice the hen-wife gave her, and she took the chessboard and the chessmen and promised to do in all things as she had been told. Then she hastened back to the castle. No sooner was she there than she sent for Conn-eda to come and have a game of chess, and he came at her command and sat down at the board with her.

“It is not for nothing we will play together this day,” said the Queen, “but whichever loses shall pay a forfeit to the other, and the forfeit shall be whatever the winner chooses to demand.”

To this Conn-eda agreed. He had it in his head that the Queen was planning some trick against him, but he did

not fear her, for he made sure he could beat her at the game. So they sat down to play, and Conn-eda was a good player, and the Queen was a poor one, but it seemed as though there were a mist before the Prince's eyes, and when he thought he had made one play he found he had made another, and presently he saw he had lost the game, and the Queen was the winner.

Then she laughed aloud and pushed the board from her. "The game is mine, Conn-eda," she cried, "and it is for you to pay the forfeit. Whatever I ask for, that shall you pay, no matter what be the cost."

When the Prince heard that, his heart was troubled within him, and he said to her, "What is that forfeit that you will demand of me?"

"This is the forfeit," the Queen replied.

"Within a year and a day you shall bring to me three golden apples, and a grand black steed, and the magic puppy-hound Samur and they all belong to the King of the Fiborg people. He lives at the bottom of Lough Erne, but where that is I know not, and you must find it for yourself."

When the Prince Conn-eda heard that, he knew the Queen had indeed tricked him, and the forfeit he was like to pay was that of his life. But he dissembled and hid his fear, and said, "The forfeit I will pay, if it be in mortal power to do so. And now we will play another game, and again it shall be for a forfeit, with the loser to pay it."

The Queen was so full of triumph that she forgot the warning of the hen-wife and willingly agreed to play once more with Conn-eda.

But now the magic had gone out of the board, and this time the Prince was the winner.

When the Queen found she had lost, her face grew pale, and her heart sank down within her.

"You have won, Conn-eda," said she. "And what is the forfeit I must pay to you?"

"The forfeit is this," said Conn-eda. "For the year and the day that I am away, you must sit at the top of the highest tower of the castle and eat nothing but as much red wheat as you can pick up with the point of your bodkin."

That was a hard fate for the Queen, but after all, it would be only for a year and a day, and at the end of that time she would be free again and rid of Prince Conn-eda forever, so the bargain was not so hard as it seemed at

first hearing. So the Queen went up and took her place in the high tower, and the Prince mounted his horse and rode out into the world in search of the golden apples, the grand black steed, and the magic puppy-hound Samur.

But first Conn-eda went to a Wise Man he knew, who was a friend of his. Many and many a favor the Prince had done for him, and now it was time to ask one in return.

The Wise Man heard Conn-eda galloping up and came out of the house to meet him, and the Prince lighted down from his horse and greeted him respectfully.

“I am in great trouble,” Conn-eda began, “and I have come to you to see if you can help me.

“That I guessed at once from your face,” replied the Wise Man, “and you had best begin at the beginning and tell me the whole story, for it ‘s only after I Ve heard the whole of it that I’ll best know how to help you.”

So the Prince began and told the Wise Man the whole matter from beginning to end. He told of the Queen’s hatred toward him and of the ways she had tried to injure him ; he told of how she had bidden him to play a game of chess with her, and of how he had feared her and yet made no doubt of winning the game ; and he told of how in some strange way he had become the loser, and how the Queen had claimed a forfeit from him, and what it was she had claimed.

“And we played still again, and that time it was for her to pay the forfeit” ; and he told what the forfeit was that he had demanded of her.

“And it was no more than her just dues,” said the Wise Man. “I make no doubt but that the Queen has sought to make you lose your life in this business, and it was a clever brain that thought out this trick. There is some one back of it other than the Queen.”

He thought for a while, and then he spoke again. “ There is but one person who would have known of the golden apples, the grand black steed, and the magic hound Samur, and that one is the Wise Woman who lives in the hut down back of the palace. She calls herself a hen-wife, but of a truth she is Carlleach of Lough Corib, and the sister of the Water King himself. There are four of the water people, three brothers and one sister. The first is King of the Fiborgs, and the second is under some enchantment. The third lives in a house next to that of the hen-wife, and the fourth is Carlleach herself. And now, my son, I will do what I can to help you. Where Lough Corib is I know not, but out in my stable is a little shaggy black horse. He is not much to look at, but he is

great in power. Take him and ride whithersoever he carries you, and leave the rein loose on his neck that he may choose his own way. He will take you to the crag where the Bird of Wisdom sits. Three days in every three years the bird sits there, and it's little that goes on in the world that he does not know about. This is the time for him to be sitting on the crag, and if he will but speak, he can tell you how to set about finding the lake and the Water King's treasures."

The Wise Man then took out a very beautiful and very precious jewel from a box that stood on a shelf behind the door and gave it to Conn-eda.

"If the Bird of Wisdom will not speak," said he, "give him this jewel in his claw, and then it may be that he will answer you."

Conn-eda took the jewel and thanked the Wise Man kindly, and then he went out to the stable and led forth the shaggy little black horse and mounted himself on him, instead of his own fine steed, and indeed the little horse was not much to look at. But no sooner was Conn-eda on his back than he found what a worth-while horse he was, for away he went lighter than a bird and swifter than the wind, and it was like no other riding that Conn-eda had ever done.

A long way and a short way went the shaggy black horse, and all the while Conn-eda let the

rein lie loose, so that the horse was free to choose his own way, and then they came within sight of a cliff, and on the cliff sat a great gray bird. It sat so still it might have been a part of the rocks for any motion that it had, and the eyes in its head were as dull as cold, dead stones.

The horse halted before the cliff and bade the Prince speak to the bird. "For it is the Bird of Wisdom of which the Wise Man spoke," said he, "and unless it can tell us what to do next we might as well turn back the way we came for we'll never win to the lake where the King of the Fiborgs lives."

Then Conn-eda lifted up his voice and called to the bird. Three times he called to it, but the bird never stirred even a feather, but sat there still as though it were carved from the rocks.

Then the shaggy steed said, "Give it the jewel, Conn-eda, and perchance it will speak."

The Prince took the jewel from his bosom where he carried it and held it up so that it sparkled in the sunlight, and again he called to the bird ; and this time it turned its head and looked at him, and its eyes grew bright as

though a fire were lighted within it. Then it flew down and caught the jewel in its claw and flew back with it to the cliff.

There it sat, and opened its beak, and cried in a harsh voice, "Conn-eda! Conn-eda ! Son of the King of Cruachan, I know why you have come and what you would have of me. Light down and lift the stone that is close to the right forefoot of your steed. Under it you will find a ball and a cup. Take them up, for you will have need of both of them. The ball you must roll before you and follow wherever it leads you. It will bring you to the place whither you would go. The cup you will need later."

Then the Bird of Wisdom closed its beak, and the light died out of its eyes, and again it sat as still and gray as though there were no breath of life in it.

Conn-eda lighted down and looked for the stone the bird had told him of, and he could not miss it for the horse's right fore hoof was against it. He lifted it up and there he found a cup and ball. The cup he placed in the bosom of his shirt, but the ball he threw before him, according to the bird's bidding, and on and on it rolled, up hill and down dale, over bog and through briars, with Conn-eda on the shaggy steed following hard after it.

After a while it led them to the edge of a lake so dark and deep you might have thought there was no bottom to it, and into this lake the ball bounded and so was lost to sight. The Prince was in despair. "Now what are we to do?" cried he. "If we follow the ball, we are like to be drowned in the deep waters of the lough, and if we do not follow it, we will never win to the palace of the Water King."

But the shaggy steed bade him take heart. "We must indeed still follow the ball," said he, "but even so it is possible no harm may come to us. And now sit tight, my master." With that the horse plunged into the lough, and down and down through the still cold waters.

Conn-eda sat close, as the steed bade him, and presently they came through the water and out into a land of pleasant meadows and flowing streams. The lake was above them like a sky, with the sun shining down through it, and not a hair of either of them was wet, and the ball was lying there at their feet.

"Now Conn-eda, light down," said the steed, "and reach your hand first into one of my ears and then into the other. In the one you will find a small wicker basket, and in the other a flask of heal-all water. We will need them both, for now we are drawing near to the dangerous part of the adventure."

The Prince did as he was told and put his hand into the horse's ears, first into one and then into the other. In

the one he found the wicker basket and in the other the flask of water. Then he mounted again and off he rode, and the ball that had been lying still all this time rolled before them to show the way, and they followed close after it.

After a bit they came to the end of the meadow and there was a great stretch of water with a causeway leading across it, and along the causeway rolled the ball. But Conn-eda drew rein, and no wonder, for the causeway was guarded by three great fiery serpents. They lay there stretched across and across it, and the smoke rose up from their breathing in three great columns, and as the Prince looked at them, his heart melted within him like wax, for they were a fearful sight.

But the shaggy steed bade him take heart. "It's the truth, Conn-eda, that we must pass those fiery serpents," he said. "Backward we cannot go, so forward we must. Now open the basket, and you will find in it three pieces of meat. As I leap over the serpents you must throw one piece into the mouth of each of them. If you do this, we may pass safely over them, and pray that your aim be good, for if you miss the mouth of any of them, it will be death both for you and me."

So Conn-eda opened the lid of the basket and found the pieces of meat and took them out, and the steed set out along the causeway, straight toward where the monsters lay.



“The serpents reared up and opened their fiery jaws.” Illustration by Katharine Pyle, published in Fairy Tales from Far and Near by Katharine Pyle (1922), Little, Brown, and Company.

As horse and rider came near them, the serpents reared up and opened their fiery jaws, and made at Conn-eda and his steed as though to devour them ; but the Prince was ready, and as the steed leaped over them Conn-eda threw a piece of meat into each of the flaming mouths ; not one of them did he miss.

At once the serpents were satisfied, and their heads sank down, and they lay as though asleep. But the steed alighted on the causeway far beyond them, and Conn-eda’s hands held lightly to the reins.

“Conn-eda, are you still astride of me ?”

“ I am,” answered the Prince, “and none the worse for the danger we passed over.”

“Now it comes to me that you are a noble and heroic Prince,” said the steed, “and I have high hopes that we may win through all our adven- tures with great reward to both of us at the end of them.”

Then on they went, and on they went until they came to a flaming mountain, and the heat of it was very great.

“Are you sitting firm on my back ?” asked the shaggy black horse.

“ I am sitting firm,” replied the Prince.

“ Then stir not. Look neither to the right nor left, nor up nor down, for I am going to leap over the mountain, and if my leap is broken by so

much as a hairbreadth, we will both fall into the flames, and that will be the end of us.”

When Conn-eda heard this, fear seemed to clutch at the very heart of him, but he settled himself in the saddle, and when the horse leaped, he kept in mind what had been said to him, and looked neither to the right hand nor the left, nor up nor down, nor stirred so much as a hair- breadth in his seat.

The good steed carried him over, but they were not so high above the mountain but what the flames came up and licked Conn-eda’s feet and his clothing.

“Are you still alive, Conn-eda?” asked the steed, when they alighted upon the other side of it.

"I am just alive, and no more," replied Conn-eda, "for I am greatly scorched."

"That is both well and ill," said the horse. "Well that you are still alive, and ill that you are so sore burned. Take the flask and rub some of the heal-all that is in it on your burns, and they will pass away."

This Conn-eda did, and at once his burns disappeared as though they had never been there, and his flesh and skin were all well and sound again.

"The worst of our dangers are over now," said the shaggy black horse, "but other things are still to be done that you may find hard in the doing. Now mount and ride again, and I can tell you we are not far from the palace of the Water King, whither we would be going."

Conn-eda mounted again, and on they rode and fast they went, and then they came within sight of a castle, with shining domes and turrets, and great golden gateways.

Here the shaggy steed bade the Prince again light down.

"Now, Conn-eda, listen well and answer truly," said the steed, "for on what happens next hangs both your fate and my own. So now tell me of a truth, have I served you well?"

"None could have served better," replied the Prince.

"Have I saved your life, or have I risked it?"

"You have saved it, and except for you I would have lost it far back on the road."

"And now the time has come to prove whether or no you are grateful. Put your hand in my ear and take out the dagger you will find there. Fear not and shrink not, but drive it into my heart, for thus and thus only can you reward me for what I have done for you."

When the Prince heard these words from the steed, he was filled with horror. "Never, never will I do such a cruel and wicked thing," he cried. "Rather would I drive the dagger into my own heart than into yours."

"If you will not, you will not," said the shaggy black horse, "but this I tell you plainly; except you do this thing, both you and I must perish."

Well, the steed talked on and on, and at last Conn-eda consented to do as he was asked, though it seemed to

him his hand must wither in the doing.

“That is well,” cried the steed, as soon as he had consented. “And now I will tell you what further you must do. As soon as you have driven the dagger into me, strip off my hide, and get into it yourself. You will then be free to go in and out of the castle as you please, though other

wise you would be slain by the people there the moment you entered. Go through the golden gateway in the center, and the first thing you will see is a leaping silver fountain. Fill the cup you found beneath the stone with this water and bring it back and sprinkle the water over me. Then all will be well. But oh, Conn-eda, haste haste in your going and coming, for as soon as you have left me, the birds of prey will gather about me, and if they tear me to pieces, there will be no further help for me.”

Conn-eda promised to do in all things as the steed bade him, and he then put his hand in its ear and found the dagger it had told him about. But he trembled so that he had scarce strength to even so much as point the dagger at the steed, let alone strike him. But this was all that was needed, for as soon as the dagger was turned toward him, it flew forward, carrying Conn-eda’s hand with it, and buried itself to the hilt in the steed’s heart, so that he fell dead.

Then the Prince wept bitter tears over his dead companion. After awhile he arose and took the dagger to strip off the hide as he had promised ; but there was no need of cutting, for no sooner did he catch hold of the hide than it came off like a loose glove from the hand within it, and the hide was as soft and fine as though it had been tanned by the king of tanners.

Conn-eda got into the hide, and then he did not stay nor tarry but hastened away to the castle, as the steed had bidden him, and in through the golden gateway.

There within was a great hall with many people moving about in it, and warders at the door, but no one spoke to him nor stayed him. In the center of the hall was the leaping silver fountain of which the steed had told him, and to this the Prince hastened and he filled his cup with its water, and then back he ran the way he had come, to where the steed was lying.

But swift as had been his going and coming, he was only just in time, for already the birds of prey were gathering, and he had to fight them with his sword before he could drive them away. Then he sprinkled the water from the cup upon the body of the steed, and no sooner had he done this than a strange thing happened,

for at once the steed was gone, and there in its place stood a young and handsome prince, and he was so tall and so noble in his air that Conn-eda had never seen the like of him.

The young man came over to Conn-eda and took him in his arms, and his face was streaming with tears, but they were tears of joy.

“Conn-eda,” said he, “you have saved me from a hard and cruel fate, and little did I think I would ever come back into my own shape again and live as other men do. I am own brother to the Water King, and it was because of a cruel enchantment that I was obliged to go about in the shape of a shaggy little black horse.

“The enchantment held me fast, and only if one would ride me back to the castle and through true love would slay me and sprinkle me with water from the fountain, could the spell be broken.

“This you have done for me, Conn-eda, and never will I forget what I owe you. And now come with me back to the castle of my brother, that he may make you welcome.”

So Conn-eda and his companion went back to the castle, and there the joy was so great that the king gave Conn-Eda the treasures the Queen had requested. The Queen saw him coming up the road, and when she saw he brought what she sought, she threw herself from the tower in despair. Conn-eda planted the three golden apples in his garden and instantly, a great tree bearing the same fruit grew. The rest of the land was fertile and rich, with plenty of crops for all. And so Conn-eda ruled for many years with his people blessed with a rich abundance during his reign. So great a ruler was he that the province of Connacht, or Conn-eda, was named for him.