

The Thirteenth Son of the King of Erin

Jeremiah Curtin

Irish

*Intermediate
21 min read*

There was a king in Erin long ago who had thirteen sons, and as they grew up he taught them good learning and every exercise and art befitting their rank.

One day the king went hunting, and saw a swan swimming in a lake with thirteen little ones. She kept driving away the thirteenth, and would not let it come near the others.

The king wondered greatly at this, and when he came home he summoned his Sean dall Glic (old blind sage), and said: "I saw a great wonder to-day while out hunting,—a swan with thirteen cygnets, and she driving away the thirteenth continually, and keeping the twelve with her. Tell me the cause and reason of this. Why should a mother hate her thirteenth little one, and guard the other twelve?"

"I will tell you," said the old blind sage: "all creatures on earth, whether beast or human, which have thirteen young, should put the thirteenth away, and let it wander for itself through the world and find its fate, so that the will of Heaven may work upon it, and not come down on the others. Now you have thirteen sons, and you must give the thirteenth to the Diachbha."

“Then that is the meaning of the swan on the lake,—I must give up my thirteenth son to the Diachbha?”

“It is,” said the old blind sage; “you must give up one of your thirteen sons.”

“But how can I give one of them away when I am so fond of all; and which one shall it be?”

“I’ll tell you what to do. When the thirteen come home to-night, shut the door against the last that comes.”

Now one of the sons was slow, not so keen nor so sharp as another; but the eldest, who was called Sean Ruadh, was the best, the hero of them all. And it happened that night that he came home last, and when he came his father shut the door against him. The boy raised his hands and said: “Father, what are you going to do with me; what do you wish?”

“It is my duty,” said the father, “to give one of my sons to the Diachbha; and as you are the thirteenth, you must go.”

“Well, give me my outfit for the road.”

The outfit was brought, Sean Ruadh put it on; then the father gave him a black-haired steed that could overtake the wind before him, and outstrip the wind behind.

Sean Ruadh mounted the steed and hurried away. He went on each day without rest, and slept in the woods at night.

One morning he put on some old clothes which he had in a pack on the saddle, and leaving his horse in the woods, went aside to an opening. He was not long there when a king rode up and stopped before him.

“Who are you, and where are you going?” asked the king. “Oh!” said Sean Ruadh, “I am astray. I do not know where to go, nor what I am to do.”

“If that is how you are, I’ll tell you what to do,—come with me.”

“Why should I go with you?” asked Sean Ruadh.

“Well, I have a great many cows, and I have no one to go with them, no one to mind them. I am in great trouble also. My daughter will die a terrible death very soon.”

“How will she die?” asked Sean Ruadh.

“There is an urfeist, a great serpent of the sea, a monster which must get a king’s daughter to devour every seven years. Once in seven years this thing comes up out of the sea for its meat. The turn has now come to my daughter, and we don’t know what day will the urfeist appear. The whole castle and all of us are in mourning for my wretched child.”

“Perhaps some one will come to save her,” said Sean Ruadh.

“Oh! there is a whole army of kings’ sons who have come, and they all promise to save her; but I’m in dread none of them will meet the urfeist.”

Sean Ruadh agreed with the king to serve for seven years, and went home with him.

Next morning Sean Ruadh drove out the king’s cows to pasture.

Now there were three giants not far from the king’s place. They lived in three castles in sight of each other, and every night each of these giants shouted just before going to bed. So loud was the shout that each let out of himself that the people heard it in all the country around.

Sean Ruadh drove the cattle up to the giant’s land, pushed down the wall, and let them in. The grass was very high,—three times better than any on the king’s pastures.

As Sean Ruadh sat watching the cattle, a giant came running towards him and called out: “I don’t know whether to put a pinch of you in my nose, or a bite of you in my mouth!”

“Bad luck to me,” said Sean Ruadh, “if I came here but to take the life out of you!”

“How would you like to fight,—on the gray stones, or with sharp swords?” asked the giant.

“I’ll fight you,” said Sean Ruadh, “on the gray stones, where your great legs will be going down, and mine standing high.”

They faced one another then, and began to fight. At the first encounter Sean Ruadh put the giant down to his knees among the hard gray stones, at the second he put him to his waist, and at the third to his shoulders.

“Come, take me out of this,” cried the giant, “and I’ll give you my castle and all I’ve got. I’ll give you my sword of

light that never fails to kill at a blow. I'll give you my black horse that can overtake the wind before, and outstrip the wind behind. These are all up there in my castle."

Sean Ruadh killed the giant and went up to the castle, where the housekeeper said to him: "Oh! it is you that are welcome. You have killed the dirty giant that was here. Come with me now till I show you all the riches and treasures."

She opened the door of the giant's store-room and said: "All these are yours. Here are the keys of the castle."

"Keep them till I come again, and wake me in the evening," said Sean Ruadh, lying down on the giant's bed.

He slept till evening; then the housekeeper roused him, and he drove the king's cattle home. The cows never gave so much milk as that night. They gave as much as in a whole week before.

Sean Ruadh met the king, and asked: "What news from your daughter?"

"The great serpent did not come to-day," said the king; "but he may come to-morrow."

"Well, to-morrow he may not come till another day," said Sean Ruadh.

Now the king knew nothing of the strength of Sean Ruadh, who was bare-footed, ragged, and shabby.

The second morning Sean Ruadh put the king's cows in the second giant's land. Out came the second giant with the same questions and threats as the first, and the cowboy spoke as on the day before.

They fell to fighting; and when the giant was to his shoulders in the hard gray rocks, he said: "I'll give you my sword of light and my brown-haired horse if you'll spare my life."

"Where is your sword of light?" asked Sean Ruadh.

"It is hung up over my bed."

Sean Ruadh ran to the giant's castle, and took the sword, which screamed out when he seized it; but he held it fast, hurried back to the giant, and asked, "How shall I try the edge of this sword?"

"Against a stick," was the reply.

“I see no stick better than your own head,” said Sean Ruadh; and with that he swept the head off the giant.

The cowboy now went back to the castle and hung up the sword. “Blessing to you,” said the housekeeper; “you have killed the giant! Come, now, and I’ll show you his riches and treasures, which are yours forever.”

Sean Ruadh found more treasure in this castle than in the first one. When he had seen all, he gave the keys to the housekeeper till he should need them. He slept as on the day before, then drove the cows home in the evening.

The king said: “I have the luck since you came to me. My cows give three times as much milk to-day as they did yesterday.”

“Well,” said Sean Ruadh, “have you any account of the urfeist?”

“He didn’t come to-day,” said the king; “but he may come to-morrow.”

Sean Ruadh went out with the king’s cows on the third day, and drove them to the third giant’s land, who came out and fought a more desperate battle than either of the other two; but the cowboy pushed him down among the gray rocks to his shoulders and killed him.

At the castle of the third giant he was received with gladness by the housekeeper, who showed him the treasures and gave him the keys; but he left the keys with her till he should need them. That evening the king’s cows had more milk than ever before.

On the fourth day Sean Ruadh went out with the cows, but stopped at the first giant’s castle. The housekeeper at his command brought out the dress of the giant, which was all black. He put on the giant’s apparel, black as night, and girded on his sword of light. Then he mounted the black-haired steed, which overtook the wind before, and outstripped the wind behind; and rushing on between earth and sky, he never stopped till he came to the beach, where he saw hundreds upon hundreds of kings’ sons, and champions, who were anxious to save the king’s daughter, but were so frightened at the terrible urfeist that they would not go near her.

When he had seen the princess and the trembling champions, Sean Ruadh turned his black steed to the castle. Presently the king saw, riding between earth and sky, a splendid stranger, who stopped before him.

“What is that I see on the shore?” asked the stranger. “Is it a fair, or some great meeting?”

“Haven’t you heard,” asked the king, “that a monster is coming to destroy my daughter to-day?”

“No, I haven’t heard anything,” answered the stranger, who turned away and disappeared.

Soon the black horseman was before the princess, who was sitting alone on a rock near the sea. As she looked at the stranger, she thought he was the finest man on earth, and her heart was cheered.

“Have you no one to save you?” he asked.

“No one.”

“Will you let me lay my head on your lap till the urfeist comes? Then rouse me.”

He put his head on her lap and fell asleep. While he slept, the princess took three hairs from his head and hid them in her bosom. As soon as she had hidden the hairs, she saw the urfeist coming on the sea, great as an island, and throwing up water to the sky as he moved. She roused the stranger, who sprang up to defend her.

The urfeist came upon shore, and was advancing on the princess with mouth open and wide as a bridge, when the stranger stood before him and said: “This woman is mine, not yours!”

Then drawing his sword of light, he swept off the monster’s head with a blow; but the head rushed back to its place, and grew on again.

In a twinkling the urfeist turned and went back to the sea; but as he went, he said: “I’ll be here again to-morrow, and swallow the whole world before me as I come.”

“Well,” answered the stranger, “maybe another will come to meet you.”

Sean Ruadh mounted his black steed, and was gone before the princess could stop him. Sad was her heart when she saw him rush off between the earth and sky more swiftly than any wind.

Sean Ruadh went to the first giant’s castle and put away his horse, clothes, and sword. Then he slept on the giant’s bed till evening, when the housekeeper woke him, and he drove home the cows. Meeting the king, he asked: “Well, how has your daughter fared to-day?”

“Oh! the urfeist came out of the sea to carry her away; but a wonderful black champion came riding between earth and sky and saved her.”

“Who was he?”

“Oh! there is many a man who says he did it. But my daughter isn’t saved yet, for the urfeist said he’d come to-morrow.”

“Well, never fear; perhaps another champion will come to-morrow.”

Next morning Sean Ruadh drove the king’s cows to the land of the second giant, where he left them feeding, and then went to the castle, where the housekeeper met him and said: “You are welcome. I’m here before you, and all is well.” “Let the brown horse be brought; let the giant’s apparel and sword be ready for me,” said Sean Ruadh.

The apparel was brought, the beautiful blue dress of the second giant, and his sword of light. Sean Ruadh put on the apparel, took the sword, mounted the brown steed, and sped away between earth and air three times more swiftly than the day before.

He rode first to the seashore, saw the king’s daughter sitting on the rock alone, and the princes and champions far away, trembling in dread of the urfeist. Then he rode to the king, enquired about the crowd on the seashore, and received the same answer as before. “But is there no man to save her?” asked Sean Ruadh.

“Oh! there are men enough,” said the king, “who promise to save her, and say they are brave; but there is no man of them who will stand to his word and face the urfeist when he rises from the sea.”

Sean Ruadh was away before the king knew it, and rode to the princess in his suit of blue, bearing his sword of light. “Is there no one to save you?” asked he.

“No one.”

“Let me lay my head on your lap, and when the urfeist comes, rouse me.”

He put his head on her lap, and while he slept she took out the three hairs, compared them with his hair, and said to herself: “You are the man who was here yesterday.”

When the urfeist appeared, coming over the sea, the princess roused the stranger, who sprang up and hurried to the beach.

The monster, moving at a greater speed, and raising more water than on the day before, came with open mouth to land. Again Sean Ruadh stood in his way, and with one blow of the giant's sword made two halves of the urfeist. But the two halves rushed together, and were one as before.

Then the urfeist turned to the sea again, and said as he went: "All the champions on earth won't save her from me to-morrow!"

Sean Ruadh sprang to his steed and back to the castle. He went, leaving the princess in despair at his going. She tore her hair and wept for the loss of the blue champion,—the one man who had dared to save her.

Sean Ruadh put on his old clothes, and drove home the cows as usual. The king said: "A strange champion, all dressed in blue, saved my daughter to-day; but she is grieving her life away because he is gone."

"Well, that is a small matter, since her life is safe," said Sean Ruadh.

There was a feast for the whole world that night at the king's castle, and gladness was on every face that the king's daughter was safe again.

Next day Sean Ruadh drove the cows to the third giant's pasture, went to the castle, and told the housekeeper to bring the giant's sword and apparel, and have the red steed led to the door. The third giant's dress had as many colors as there are in the sky, and his boots were of blue glass.

Sean Ruadh, dressed and mounted on his red steed, was the most beautiful man in the world. When ready to start, the housekeeper said to him: "The beast will be so enraged this time that no arms can stop him; he will rise from the sea with three great swords coming out of his mouth, and he could cut to pieces and swallow the whole world if it stood before him in battle. There is only one way to conquer the urfeist, and I will show it to you. Take this brown apple, put it in your bosom, and when he comes rushing from the sea with open mouth, do you throw the apple down his throat, and the great urfeist will melt away and die on the strand."

Sean Ruadh went on the red steed between earth and sky, with thrice the speed of the day before. He saw the maiden sitting on the rock alone, saw the trembling kings' sons in the distance watching to know what would happen, and saw the king hoping for some one to save his daughter; then he went to the princess, and put his

head on her lap; when he had fallen asleep, she took the three hairs from her bosom, and looking at them, said: “You are the man who saved me yesterday.”

The urfeist was not long in coming. The princess roused Sean Ruadh, who sprang to his feet and went to the sea. The urfeist came up enormous, terrible to look at, with a mouth big enough to swallow the world, and three sharp swords coming out of it. When he saw Sean Ruadh, he sprang at him with a roar; but Sean Ruadh threw the apple into his mouth, and the beast fell helpless on the strand, flattened out and melted away to a dirty jelly on the shore.

Then Sean Ruadh went towards the princess and said: “That urfeist will never trouble man or woman again.”

The princess ran and tried to cling to him; but he was on the red steed, rushing away between earth and sky, before she could stop him. She held, however, so firmly to one of the blue glass boots that Sean Ruadh had to leave it in her hands.

When he drove home the cows that night, the king came out, and Sean Ruadh asked: “What news from the urfeist?”

“Oh!” said the king, “I’ve had the luck since you came to me. A champion wearing all the colors of the sky, and riding a red steed between earth and air, destroyed the urfeist to-day. My daughter is safe forever; but she is ready to kill herself because she hasn’t the man that saved her.”

That night there was a feast in the king’s castle such as no one had ever seen before. The halls were filled with princes and champions, and each one said: “I am the man that saved the princess!”

The king sent for the old blind sage, and asked, what should he do to find the man who saved his daughter. The old blind sage said,—

“Send out word to all the world that the man whose foot the blue glass boot will fit is the champion who killed the urfeist, and you’ll give him your daughter in marriage.”

The king sent out word to the world to come to try on the boot. It was too large for some, too small for others. When all had failed, the old sage said,—

“All have tried the boot but the cowboy.”

“Oh! he is always out with the cows; what use in his trying,” said the king.

“No matter,” answered the old blind sage; “let twenty men go and bring down the cowboy.”

The king sent up twenty men, who found the cowboy sleeping in the shadow of a stone wall. They began to make a hay rope to bind him; but he woke up, and had twenty ropes ready before they had one. Then he jumped at them, tied the twenty in a bundle, and fastened the bundle to the wall. They waited and waited at the castle for the twenty men and the cowboy, till at last the king sent twenty men more, with swords, to know what was the delay.

When they came, this twenty began to make a hay rope to tie the cowboy; but he had twenty ropes made before their one, and no matter how they fought, the cowboy tied the twenty in a bundle, and the bundle to the other twenty men.

When neither party came back, the old blind sage said to the king: “Go up now, and throw yourself down before the cowboy, for he has tied the forty men in two bundles, and the bundles to each other.”

The king went and threw himself down before the cowboy, who raised him up and said: “What is this for?”

“Come down now and try on the glass boot,” said the king.

“How can I go, when I have work to do here?”

“Oh! never mind; you’ll come back soon enough to do the work.”

The cowboy untied the forty men and went down with the king. When he stood in front of the castle, he saw the princess sitting in her upper chamber, and the glass boot on the window-sill before her.

That moment the boot sprang from the window through the air to him, and went on his foot of itself. The princess was downstairs in a twinkling, and in the arms of Sean Ruadh.

The whole place was crowded with kings’ sons and champions, who claimed that they had saved the princess.

“What are these men here for?” asked Sean Ruadh. “Oh! they have been trying to put on the boot,” said the king.

With that Sean Ruadh drew his sword of light, swept the heads off every man of them, and threw heads and bodies on the dirt-heap behind the castle.

Then the king sent ships with messengers to all the kings and queens of the world,—to the kings of Spain, France, Greece, and Lochlin, and to Diarmuid, son of the monarch of light,—to come to the wedding of his daughter and Sean Ruadh.

Sean Ruadh, after the wedding, went with his wife to live in the kingdom of the giants, and left his father-in-law on his own land.

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com