



# *The Wonderful Tune*

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Celtic

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*Advanced*  
*13 min read*

Maurice Connor was the king, and that's no small word, of all the pipers in Munster. He could play jig and reel without end, and Ollistrum's March, and the Eagle's Whistle, and the Hen's Concert, and odd tunes of every sort and kind. But he knew one far more surprising than the rest, which had in it the power to set everything dead or alive dancing.

In what way he learned it is beyond my knowledge for he was mighty cautious about telling how he came by so wonderful a tune. At the very first note of that tune the shoes began shaking upon the feet of all who heard it—old or young, it mattered not—just as if the shoes had the ague; then the feet began going, going, going from under them, and at last up and away with them, dancing like mad, whisking here, there, and everywhere, like a straw in a storm—there was no halting while the music lasted.

Not a fair, nor a wedding, nor a feast in the seven parishes round, was counted worth the speaking of without 'blind Maurice and his pipes.' His mother, poor woman, used to lead him about from one place to another just like a dog.

Down through Iveragh, Maurice Connor and his mother were taking their rounds. Beyond all other places Iveragh is the place for stormy coasts and steep mountains, as proper a spot it is as any in Ireland to get yourself drowned, or your neck broken on the land, should you prefer that. But, notwithstanding, in

Ballinskellig Bay there is a neat bit of ground, well fitted for diversion, and down from it, towards the water, is a clean smooth piece of strand, the dead image of a calm summer's sea on a moonlight night, with just the curl of the small waves upon it.

Here it was that Maurice's music had brought from all parts a great gathering of the young men and the young women; for 'twas not every day the strand of Trafraska was stirred up by the voice of a bagpipe. The dance began; and as pretty a dance it was as ever was danced. 'Brave music,' said everybody, 'and well done,' when Maurice stopped.

'More power to your elbow, Maurice, and a fair wind in the bellows,' cried Paddy Dorman, a hump-backed dancing master, who was there to keep order. 'Tis a pity,' said he, 'if we'd let the piper run dry after such music; 'twould be a disgrace to Iveragh, that didn't come on it since the week of the three Sundays.' So, as well became him, for he was always a decent man, says he, 'Did you drink, piper?'

'I will, sir,' said Maurice, answering the question on the safe side, for you never yet knew piper or schoolmaster who refused his drink.

'What will you drink, Maurice?' says Paddy.

'I'm no ways particular,' says Maurice; 'I drink anything, barring raw water; but if it's all the same to you, Mister Dorman, may be you wouldn't lend me the loan of a glass of whisky.'

'I've no glass, Maurice,' said Paddy; 'I've only the bottle.'

'Let that be no hindrance,' answered Maurice; 'my mouth just holds a glass to the drop; often I've tried it sure.'

So Paddy Dorman trusted him with the bottle—more fool was he; and, to his cost, he found that though Maurice's mouth might not hold more than the glass at one time, yet, owing to the hole in his throat, it took many a filling.

'That was no bad whisky neither,' says Maurice, handing back the empty bottle.

'By the holy frost, then!' says Paddy, 'tis but cold comfort there's in that bottle now; and 'tis your word we must take for the strength of the whisky, for you've left us no sample to judge by'; and to be sure Maurice had not.

Now I need not tell any gentleman or lady that if he or she was to drink an honest bottle of whisky at one pull, it is not at all the same thing as drinking a bottle of water; and in the whole course of my life I never knew more than five men who could do so without being the worse. Of these Maurice Connor was not one, though he had a stiff head enough of his own. Don't think I blame him for it; but true is the word that says, 'When liquor's in sense is out'; and puff, at a breath, out he blasted his wonderful tune.



“Crabs of monstrous size spun round and round on one claw with the nimbleness of a dancing master, and twirled and tossed their other claws about like limbs that did not belong to them.”

Illustration by H.J. Ford, published in *The Lilac Fairy Book* by Andrew Lang (1910), Longsman, Green and Company.

‘Twas really then beyond all belief or telling the dancing. Maurice himself could not keep quiet; staggering now on one leg, now on the other, and rolling about like a ship in a cross sea, trying to humour the tune. There was his mother, too, moving her old bones as light as the youngest girl of them all; but her dancing, no, nor the dancing of all the rest, is not worthy the speaking about to the work that was going on down upon the strand. Every inch of it covered with all manner of fish jumping and plunging about to the music, and every moment more and more would tumble in and out of the water, charmed by the wonderful tune. Crabs of monstrous size spun round and round on one claw with the nimbleness of a dancing master, and twirled and tossed their other claws about like limbs that did not belong to them. It was a sight surprising to behold. But perhaps you may have heard of Father Florence Conry, as pleasant a man as one would wish to drink with of a hot summer’s day; and he had rhymed out all about the dancing fishes so neatly that it would be a thousand pities not to give you his verses; so here they are in English:

The big seals in motion, Like waves of the ocean, Or gouty feet prancing, Came heading the gay fish, Crabs, lobsters, and cray-fish, Determined on dancing.

The sweet sounds they followed, The gasping cod swallow’d— ‘Twas wonderful, really; And turbot and flounder, ‘Mid fish that were rounder, Just caper’d as gaily.

John-dories came tripping; Dull hake, by their skipping, To frisk it seem’d given; Bright mackrel went springing, Like small rainbows winging Their flight up to heaven.

The whiting and haddock Left salt water paddock This dance to be put in; Where skate with flat faces Edged out some old plaices; But soles kept their footing.

Sprats and herrings in powers Of silvery showers All number out-numbered; And great ling so lengthy Was there in such plenty The shore was encumber'd.

The scallop and oyster Their two shells did roister, Like castanets flitting; While limpets moved clearly, And rocks very nearly With laughter were splitting.

Never was such a hullabaloo in this world, before or since; 'twas as if heaven and earth were coming together; and all out of Maurice Connor's wonderful tune!

In the height of all these doings, what should there be dancing among the outlandish set of fishes but a beautiful young woman— as beautiful as the dawn of day! She had a cocked hat upon her head; from under it her long green hair—just the colour of the sea— fell down behind, without hindrance to her dancing. Her teeth were like rows of pearls; her lips for all the world looked like red coral; and she had a shining gown pale green as the hollow of the wave, with little rows of purple and red seaweeds settled out upon it; for you never yet saw a lady, under the water or over the water, who had not a good notion of dressing herself out.

Up she danced at last to Maurice, who was flinging his feet from under him as fast as hops—for nothing in this world could keep still while that tune of his was going on—and says she to him, chanting it out with a voice as sweet as honey:

I'm a lady of honour Who live in the sea; Come down, Maurice Connor, And be married to me. Silver plates and gold dishes You shall have, and shall be The king of the fishes, When you're married to me.

Drink was strong in Maurice's head, and out he chanted in return for her great civility. It is not every lady, may be, that would be after making such an offer to a blind piper; therefore 'twas only right in him to give her as good as she gave herself, so says Maurice:

I'm obliged to you, madam: Off a gold dish or plate, If a king, and I had 'em, I could dine in great state. With your own father's daughter I'd be sure to agree, But to drink the salt water Wouldn't do so with me!

The lady looked at him quite amazed, and swinging her head from side to side like a great scholar, 'Well,' says she, 'Maurice, if you're not a poet, where is poetry to be found?'

In this way they kept on at it, framing high compliments; one answering the other, and their feet going with the music as fast as their tongues. All the fish kept dancing, too; Maurice heard the clatter and was afraid to stop playing lest it might be displeasing to the fish, and not knowing what so many of them may take it into their heads to do to him if they got vexed.

Well, the lady with the green hair kept on coaxing Maurice with soft speeches, till at last she over persuaded him to promise to marry her, and be king over the fishes, great and small. Maurice was well fitted to be their king, if they wanted one that could make them dance; and he surely would drink, barring the salt water, with any fish of them all.

When Maurice's mother saw him with that unnatural thing in the form of a green-haired lady as his guide, and he and she dancing down together so lovingly to the water's edge, through the thick of the fishes, she called out after him to stop and come back. 'Oh, then,' says she, 'as if I was not widow enough before, there he is going away from me to be married to that scaly woman. And who knows but 'tis grandmother I may be to a hake or a cod—Lord help and pity me, but 'tis a mighty unnatural thing! And my be 'tis boiling and eating my own grandchild I'll be, with a bit of salt butter, and I not knowing it! Oh, Maurice, Maurice, if there's any love or nature left in you, come back to your own ould mother, who reared you like a decent Christian!' Then the poor woman began to cry and sob so finely that it would do anyone good to hear her.

Maurice was not long getting to the rim of the water. There he kept playing and dancing on as if nothing was the matter, and a great thundering wave coming in towards him ready to swallow him up alive; but as he could not see it, he did not fear it. His mother it was who saw it plainly through the big tears that were rolling down her cheeks; and though she saw it, and her heart was aching as much as ever mother's heart ached for a son, she kept dancing, dancing all the time for the bare life of her. Certain it was she could not help it, for Maurice never stopped playing that wonderful tune of his.

He only turned his ear to the sound of his mother's voice, fearing it might put him out in his steps, and all the answer he made back was, 'Whisht with you mother—sure I'm going to be king over the fishes down in the sea, and for a token of luck, and a sign that I'm alive and well, I'll send you in, every twelvemonth on this day, a piece of burned wood to Trafraska.' Maurice had not the power to say a word more, for the strange lady with the green hair, seeing the wave just upon them, covered him up with herself in a thing like a cloak with a big

hood to it, and the wave curling over twice as high as their heads, burst upon the strand, with a rush and a roar that might be heard as far as Cape Clear.

That day twelvemonth the piece of burned wood came ashore in Trafraska. It was a queer thing for Maurice to think of sending all the way from the bottom of the sea. A gown or a pair of shoes would have been something like a present for his poor mother; but he had said it, and he kept his word. The bit of burned wood regularly came ashore on the appointed day for as good, ay, and better than a hundred years. The day is now forgotten, and may be that is the reason why people say how Maurice Connor has stopped sending the luck-token to his mother. Poor woman, she did not live to get as much as one of them; for what through the loss of Maurice, and the fear of eating her own grandchildren, she died in three weeks after the dance. Some say it was the fatigue that killed her, but whichever it was, Mrs. Connor was decently buried with her own people.

Seafaring people have often heard, off the coast of Kerry, on a still night, the sound of music coming up from the water; and some, who have had good ears, could plainly distinguish Maurice Connor's voice singing these words to his pipes—

Beautiful shore, with thy spreading strand,  
Thy crystal water, and diamond sand;  
Never would I have parted  
from thee, But for the sake of my fair ladie.

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