

IRISH FOLK-LORE.

The Legend of Lough Dearg.

FINN MACCOOL'S THUMB OF KNOWLEDGE.

THIS is the strange and beautiful legend, told in melodious Gaelic by the winter hearths in the mountains of Donegal, of how Lough Dearg at once obtained its name and was consecrated and established by St. Patrick as a place of pilgrimage and prayer for his faithful children from that day forward:

Long, long ago, two thousand years backward in the misty past, Connaught was possessed by the clan from which descended the great Finn MacCool. A short time before the birth of Finn, a great Munster clan, the MacMornas (who were of the Firbolg race) made a descent on Connaught, and conquered and put to death all (as they thought) of the Clanna Baoisgne, including Finn's father, Cumhol (Cool), for a Druid had warned them that should one escape, the conquered clan would, in that individual, survive to regain possession over the ancient inheritance, and to rule over the conquerors, thus making them in turn the conquered. But a few escaped—a very few. One was Finn's mother, who was shielded by a woman of the MacMornas, and very soon after gave birth to a posthumous child, whom she named Finn. As he grew up, the MacMornas (not knowing his tribe or his father) surnamed him Gall Fin, the fair stranger; and as such he continued to be known until the great crisis in his life arrived, which happened in this way:

While he was yet young, Finn became distinguished among the youth of the MacMorna for his prowess and dexterity in all the manly games and sports in which they (in their day) trained themselves. His mother, too, watched the wonderful and pleasing development of his powers with a fond eye, and cherished the hope that in him the great wrong done their kin would yet be avenged. But, except to Finn himself, she imparted to none the secret regarding his extraction, well knowing that its divulgence would only be the cause of his immediate death at the hands of the MacMornas.

More and more wonderful daily grew the young, fair-haired stranger's great powers, till on the occasion of one of the great annual gatherings of the tribe, for the purpose of athletic contests, which were then carried out with great pomp and ceremony in Eire, on a great plain in the presence of the King and his court, a caman (or hurling) match having been arranged between the youth of the King's immediate district and those of the remainder of the clan, these latter, finding themselves short of their leader, who had been hurt in a previous contest, they were given Finn as Gall Fin to take his place, which proved the turning point in Finn's life. He went boldly into the contest at the head of his men, drawing upon him, by reason of his splendid physique and graceful athletic carriage, the eyes of all the vast multitude, who eagerly looked forward to the contest. The admiration of the great gathering was still greater when the play commenced, and Finn, with his followers, again and again pressed back their opponents against their hail, and forced the nag through, despite the very worthy efforts of the King's men. It was then objected, on the part of the beaten ones, that they were unevenly matched, Finn as Gall Fin being in himself equal to half a dozen players. Finn consented to drop out six of his men, and with the remainder play the King's men. This was agreed to, and the play again began, amid the excitement of the thousands who hotly speculated on the probable result of the game under the new relations of the contestants. But they were not long in suspense, for the nag having been once more balked, or struck off, the manly form of Finn was to be seen ever close by, and always in the hottest part of the field, moving steadily, well supported by his men, in wedge form, for the opposite hail, through which, as before, they succeeded in putting the nag with comparative ease, notwithstanding the very desperate play of their almost

ever witnessed at those sports before. The King and his followers were in a bitter mood. Finn, elated with his success, and yet aware of his own powers—in particular of one feat which he had often ere this successfully performed—now publicly offered, by himself alone, to play the King's men, insisting as a condition that, should he win, his opponents should each have to submit to a single blow of his caman, whilst he, in case of defeat, would agree to bear a blow from each of theirs.

His offer was accepted. The contestants took the field. The vast and excited crowds closed in. Cheer after cheer rolled up their thunders of encouragement to the brave young Finn. A great scowl sat on the face of the King. Finn's opponents could not disguise the uneasy expression that insisted on making itself visible on their features. Finn was calm and determined. The nag was placed. The crowds held their breath as Finn, with his caman resting easily on his shoulder, advanced to strike it. He struck it—an upward blow. As it came down he intercepted its fall with another upward and onward stroke, given with unerring precision. His opponents closed in around him, anticipating its lion might march through yelping curs which he disdained to notice, and, catching it with another deft stroke in its fall, sent it forward and upward once more, moving stately after it again in the midst of the surging crowd of contestants. And thus steadily did he progress across the field, never once allowing the nag to touch the earth, till, reaching near enough to the opposite hail, he, with one forward, sharp and vigorous stroke, sent it whistling through.

The thousands of spectators that had until now let not a murmur escape them, burst forth into a tremendous roar of applause that startled the sleeping echoes in the hills and rolled along the quiet valleys from the plain. The King's men threw down their camans in despair, and moodily offered themselves for their merited punishment. Finn, commencing at the head of the line, was giving each a blow that laid him senseless, and had already given the terrible blow to six of them, when the King, moved with wonder and rage, jumped up, asking aloud, "Who is this Finn—Gall Finn?" To which Finn's mother, stepping boldly and proudly out from the crowd, defiantly replied, "Finn MacCumhal (Cool), denied of no one!"

Thus the secret was out. "Seize him!" cried the King. A hundred armed men rushed to obey the order. But the brave Finn was too quick for them. Getting his mother upon his back, he started off at top speed, and even thus hindered, far outstripped his pursuers through wood and brake, over hill, dale and plain. For twenty-four hours he did not once pause in his career, even to look behind him.

By this time he had reached the shore of a lake; he stopped and found that he was not now pursued. He turned to leave his mother from off his back, but to his great grief, found that from his rapid race through wood and scrub, she had, unknown to him, been torn bit by bit by briar and bush, till now, when he would have congratulated her on her safety, only the lower portion of her legs which he had grasped in his hands during the flight remained. He sadly flung them on the bleak shore and went his way.

At midnight he reached the falls of Assaroo, beside Ballyshannon, where, finding two fishermen roasting a salmon, he asked them for something to eat. They, being fatigued, asked Finn to attend to the preparation of the fish while they snatched a few moments' sleep, warning him on no account to allow it to blister. They slept, but a blister, despite Finn's caution, arose on the fish, which he at once pressed with his thumb in order to destroy it. The hot juice stung his thumb, which he pushed into his mouth, when lo! he found himself instantly gifted with that second sight, which was one of his wonderful faculties

tasting it supernatural knowledge; and this was the object the fishermen had in view in roasting the salmon. Finn was at once made aware that if the fishermen awoke they would kill him, so, taking a club that lay by, he dispatched them; and, again chewing his thumb, in order to find if any of his kindred still existed, he found that in a certain cave on the sea coast there lived one of his tribe, an aged man, whom, accordingly, he set out to see. When he had found this old man, and explained to him who he was, and the adventures he had come through, his aged kinsman was well pleased, and said that in him their tribe should be great again. He then told him to repair once more, in disguise, to the court of the MacMornas, where he should find their principal men competing for the chieftainship. The old man said that the mission for which he had been preserved would now be fulfilled, since he had met him (Finn), and that accordingly Finn would find him dead next morning, when he was to take off his head and set out for MacMorna's court, carrying with him the head and also an enchanted pin which the old man gave him, and having arrived there, he was to enter into all the contests, defeating the several competitors, and lastly he was to challenge any man present to throw the head over MacMorna's castle, which all would fail to do except Finn himself, who should succeed by first inserting the enchanted pin in the head.

As the old man had said, he was dead in the morning, and Finn followed carefully his advice, the result being that the Clan MacMorna, moved to admiration at the wonderful feats and great prowess of the strange man, hailed him chief, and installed him with great ceremony and rejoicings. After Finn had succeeded to the chieftainship, he founded the celebrated order of Fenians, and attracted to their ranks all the varloons and powerful and adventurous spirits in the island—an order whose gallant deeds, framed in a halo of glory and romance, were destined to be told and sung for all time.

Now, the Fenians did not reside permanently in any one place, but traveled about from place to place, over the land, pitching their camps now here, now there, as circumstances and advantages offered. On one of their journeys they passed along the shores of the same lake at which, many years before, Finn had paused from his wild flight. Finn recognized it, and, walking thoughtfully along, he perceived still remaining on the ground one of his lost mother's bones. He lifted it in his hand, and perceived a maggot in it. He chewed his thumb and, from the knowledge thus obtained, remarked in a sad and reflective tone of voice to his comrades: "If that maggot only got enough water it would be the cause of distress and woe to many." Conan MacMorna, one of Finn's lieutenants, and a man of peculiarly cross and cynical temperament, seized the bone, and throwing it into the lake, said: "If there be water enough there let it have it." This bad action bore its fruits, for in the course of years the maggot developed into a most hideous and formidable monster, which devoured every living thing and left the country deserted and desolate within a radius of seven miles of the lough. Things remained so till the time of St. Patrick, when, on his travelling north, people warned him not to venture near the deserted lake, or that the monster would surely destroy him. St. Patrick, hearing the tale of it, resolved to go forward and encounter it. On his approaching the lake the dread animal came up out of its waters, and, roaring and bellowing in a most terrific manner, went out to destroy the holy man. The saint, strong in the faith that was in him, approached it undaunted, and as it would leap on him he struck it with his staff, causing it to give one dread roar that was heard to the four corners of Erin, and to turn from him and flee towards the lake, its way being marked by a river of blood which streamed from the wound caused by St. Patrick's stroke. The hideous thing plunged into the lake and died, dyeing the waters crimson with its blood, from which circumstance the lough came to be called Lough Dearg. St. Patrick then ordained that no living thing should ever after inhabit its waters, and to this day it is without a fish; moreover, if a living fish be carried to it and deposited therein, it will die. He

tence, and instituted for that purpose the pilgrimage which is observed, let us hope, as piously now, fourteen hundred years after the event, as what it was while yet the blood of the monster stained the waters of the lake.



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