

The Wild Red Steed

By NORAH M. HOLLAND

Illustrated by EMILY HAND

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THE Wild Red Steed stood upon the summit of Slieve Dearg, gazing across the wide stretch of country that lay beneath him. To north and south of him rose the shadowy outlines of the Wicklow hills, whose slopes he had ranged untrammelled for so many years. Beneath his feet he could see the wooded glens and silver waters of the Liffey, as it sang upon its way over shining sands to the sea, and the peat smoke curling blue over the roofs of the Dun of King Laogaire, that stood upon its banks; and he stamped angrily as the reek of that smoke rose to his nostrils. Until the day, some twelve months ago, when, standing upon the mountain summit, he had watched the waves whiten to the dip of oars as the galleys of the King flashed across the blue waters to the shore, he had been sole monarch of these glens and streams, for he was of the kin of the Sidhe and in his veins ran the wild blood of those steeds who bore the Hosts of the Hills forth to battle and to chase. Age could not touch him nor time dim the fiery splendour of his eyes nor lessen the vigour of those mighty limbs. Alone he ruled and there was none dared dispute his sway. But now he was supplanted—the stranger had come to the fair land of Eire and his woodlands were his no longer. Day after day he had seen the white walls of the dun rising slowly from the woods that embowered them, until they stood at last, tall and stately, roofed with fragrant cedar and with windows and doors barred with cunningly wrought bars of bronze. And fierce hatred had burned within his heart as he watched. Who were these puny mortals who had dared to invade his solitudes? He tossed his proud head his long red mane streaming seaward, and snorted forth his wrath to the hills.

Down in the valley men hastened to and fro, some hewing down the great trees that grew along the river bank so that of their trunks palisades might be built to guard the dun from attack by man or beast; some felling the slender ash saplings and trimming them into lance shafts; others had set up a rough smithy upon the shore and were busily forging spear-heads of iron or tempering and burnishing the bright steel of sword blades. So they toiled and sweated as they had done ever since, leaving land and friends and kindred behind them and braving the wrath of Manannan and the lures of the maghdean mara, they had sailed forth into the sunset to find the fair coasts of Eire and build them a new home in her murmuring forests. Far across the seas they had sailed and many wonders they had seen. Their gay, silken sails, were dimmed with the brine of strange waters; strange stars had shone upon them from alien skies; their hands had grown weary with labour at the oar; they had looked Death in the face many a time during that long and perilous journey and had not been afraid. But now their voyaging was over and they had found peace at the last. So they sang as they laboured and were glad at heart, dreaming of hunts within the glens and valleys, and upon the sides of the mountains that rose so green before their eyes, and of feasts within the great hall of the dun that their hands had builded. King Laogaire himself worked among them, a royal figure, in shining armour and purple cloak, with a great brooch of gold upon the left shoulder, while within the dun Queen Ethne sat among her maids, spinning the white wool or weaving tapestries of wondrous design that should cover the bare, rough-hewn walls.

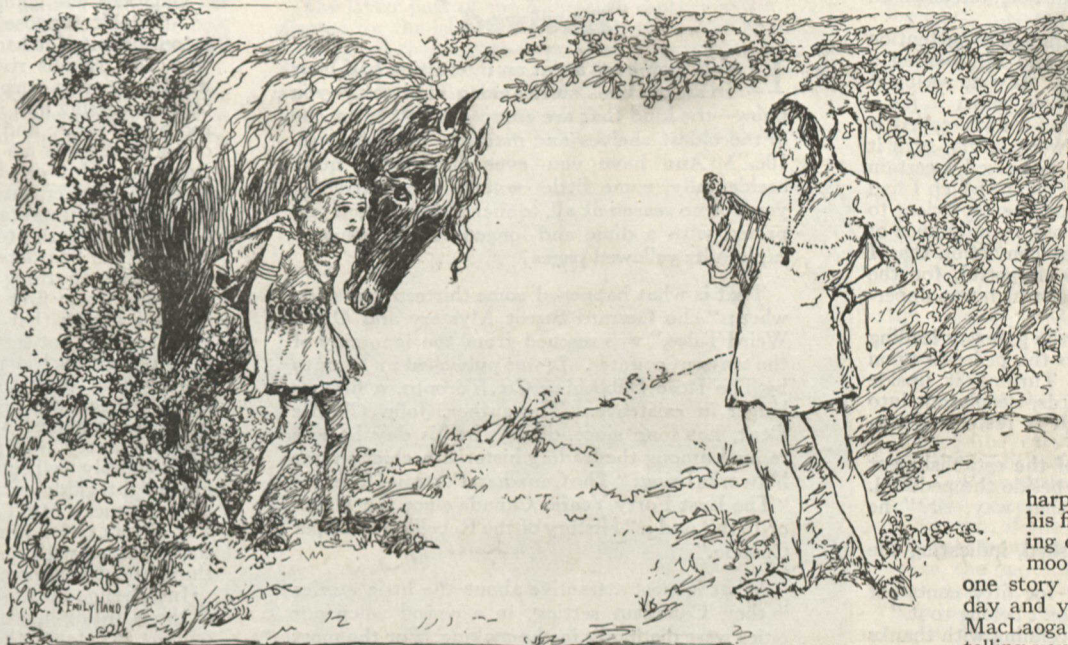
The galleys were drawn high up on the yellow sands of the bay, close to the dun. Their sails were hanging idly, and around their sea-battered hulls played the children of the men-at-arms, now scrambling up the tarry sides and standing shouting upon their decks or running across the oar-benches; now tumbling tumultuously down again and racing along the shore to secure possession of some brightly-colored shell or strand of sea-weed, laughing and quarrelling over the treasure as children have done in all ages. Sturdy, healthy urchins they were, black-haired and blue-eyed, brown of cheek and bare of foot; but on the deck of the largest galley sat one lad alone, looking with dreamy grey eyes across the waters that creamed in upon the wide stretch of yellow sand. His feet were shod with sandals of soft buck-skin, brodered and clasped with gold; his saffron tunic was belted with a broad band of the same metal. A golden torque encircled the slim, boyish neck, golden armlets were upon his arms and a short cloak of purple—the royal colour—was wrapped about his shoulders. For this was Feargus, the only son of the great King Laogaire, and as he sat there leaning against the carved beak of

Glossary of Gaelic Pronunciations and their Meanings

DUN.....	Dhoon.....	Fortress
GEASA.....	Gassa.....	An obligation
GO LEOR.....	Galore.....	In plenty
LAOGAIRE.....	Leary.....	
MAGHDEAN MARA.....	Mad-yan mara.....	Sea-maidens
MANANNAN.....		The Celtic Sea-God
SEANNACHIE.....	Shannaky.....	Teller of tales
SIDHE.....	Shee.....	Fairy folk
TIR NA N-OGE.....	Teer nan oge.....	The land of youth

his father's galley, he was thinking bitterly how gladly he would have changed all his grandeur for the straight limbs and sturdy body of one of those lads who raced and shouted upon the beach below.

For Feargus was a hunchback. The shoulders covered



"And does there be no repentance upon you, Prince Feargus, that you will be going crooked all your days?"

by the purple cloak were wried and twisted, though a knightly soul dwelt within the misshapen body and the boyish heart was full of dreams of the life of adventure and chivalry that might never be his. Often he had looked across the waters to the hills that lay beyond, and seeing the red steed standing there, outlined against the golden clouds of evening, had felt within him a passionate love of and longing for its strength and beauty and swiftness; a longing that someday he, too, might stand straight and lithe and splendid upon that summit and look out across the waters to the sunset. Then the voices of the others as they played and shouted upon the beach before him had ascended to his ears. Feargus Cam—crooked Feargus—they called him, with unconscious boyish cruelty and his heart swelled almost to bursting as he heard the name, for at its sound, his dreams fell away from him and he remembered his twisted shoulders and ungainly form and fain would he have hidden himself from the sight of all men.

At last the sun fell behind the summits of the western hills. Adown the slopes the purple shadows lengthened, and the valleys grew full of soft darkness. A silver star or two winked out in the sky and the winds woke and called to each other across the tree tops in deep harp notes.

Feargus climbed laboriously down from the deck of the galley and made his way to the great hall of the Dun. Here torches of pine knots blazed along the walls, their smoke curling up into the fragrant rafters of cedar, and the men-at-arms were feasting and shouting over the horns of brown mead. Up the hall he went, slowly and wearily, to his seat at the high table by his father's side.

KING LAOGAIRE smiled at his son over the golden goblet of wine that sparkled on the board before him, and Ethne the Queen put forth her hand and drew the lad to her side.

"It is late you are, my son," she said, "and it is good entertainment that you have missed. For a man of the hills has come to our Court this night and he a bard and a seannachie; and it is stories that he has and songs go leor and he telling them, the way our hearts would be glad within us, and you not here to listen."

Feargus glanced across at the stranger bard who sat upon the dais near by, and the man of the hills looked back with dark eyes that twinkled from under his shock

of red hair with a gaze half friendly, half mischievous. A strange figure he was, white-faced and elfish-looking, clad in hosen and tunic of untanned doeskin. About his neck on a thin gold chain hung the wrest or key of the harp that stood near him, and his long, shadowy, unsubstantial-looking fingers played ever with it as he ate. His eyes met the boy's eager face and his smile broadened.

"Do not be troubling yourself for that, Prince Feargus." His voice was rich and deep, with a lurking note of laughter in it. "It is stories I have yet and songs enough for the singing, and it is geasa with me not to refuse while one would be listening."

He paused for a moment, touching the strings of his harp lightly, until they thrilled beneath his fingers with a sound like the whispering of the sea against the beach upon a moonlit night, then went on: "And it is one story I have that was given to me this day and you to be listening to it, O Feargus MacLaogaire. Hear me now, while I will be telling you of the Promise of Aengus."

"Now Aengus the Dreamer is of all the High Gods of Eire the best beloved, for it is he that guards the Fountains of Quiet and keeps the keys of the ivory gates of Sleep. It is there that he stands forever, with the shadow of slumber within his eyes. Round his feet the poppies grow and his hands are full of winged dreams; and he sending them forth upon the earth to bring deep peace and rest to the weary hearts of men."

"Yet once there came a day when the dreamer grew away of dreaming. He sickened of the long, bright days of Tir-na-n-oge, where summer never wanes, where there comes not rain, nor hail, nor any snow, but the apple boughs swing in the warm wind, and they ever in blossom, and the birds sing forever among the branches, and the turf is emerald green. And he longed for the brief, broken life of earth, with its joys and trials, its hopes and its sorrows, with a great longing. So it came to pass that he left his silver fountains and flowers of dream for a time, to walk in the stony ways of men. And a short while he lived among them and saw their cares and sorrows and heavy troubles, and his heart was moved within him."

"Then, ere he sought once more the passionless peace and immortality of Tir na-n-oge, he stood upon the summit of Slieve Dearg and, stretching out his hands over Eire, he made a promise. And the promise was that if, on Midsummer Eve, mortal man should go alone and at midnight, and he bearing the weight of heavy sorrow, and should stand between the three great stones that crown the mountain and name aloud his wish, it should be granted to him."

"Then Aengus left this earth forever and once more he stands among the poppies in the dreamy valleys of Tir na n-oge, with the keys of quietness in his hands."

As the tale ended, the man of the hills swept his hand across his harp-strings in one long, crashing chord, and rose to his feet, his eyes fixed upon Feargus' face.

"And what would you be thinking of my tale, Feargus MacLaogaire?" he laughed. "The promise of Aengus still holds, but it is alone and in the dark you must be seeking it. Is it fear that is on you, O King's Son?"

Feargus, too, rose to his feet, his eyes on the stranger's face.

"It is not, O man of the Hills," he answered, "but it is strong desire that is on me to put that promise to the test. To-morrow is Midsummer Eve, and if my father will be giving me permission, it is then I shall set forth."

(Continued on page 24)

"The Princess Irene"

ALTHOUGH children wait eagerly each month for Miss Holland's fairy tales, the comments that have drifted into us from all points, establish the fact that they are a source of keener delight to "grown-ups."

By way of variety we will publish in our April issue one of Miss Holland's fairy plays—"The Princess Irene." It has been produced by private drama leagues to marvellous advantage, but is being published for the first time, and exclusively, in Everywoman's World.

—THE EDITORS.