

Oisín in the Land of Youth

HUNDREDS OF YEARS after Finn and his companions had died, Saint Patrick came to Ireland bringing the Christian religion with him. He had heard many stories about the adventures of the Fianna and he was interested in these old heroes whom the people spoke about as if they were gods. Their story was written into the very landscape of Ireland; hills and woods resounded with their legends, rivers and valleys bore their names, dolmens marked their graves.

One day a feeble, blind old man was brought to Patrick. His body was weak and wasted but his spirit was strong. Patrick preached the new doctrines to him but the old warrior scorned the newcomers and their rituals and in defiant response sang the praises of the Fianna, their code of honour and their way of life. He said he was Oisín, the son of Finn himself. Patrick doubted the old man's word since Finn had been dead for longer than the span of any human life. So to convince the saint that his claim was true, Oisín, last of the Fianna, told this story.

After the battle of Gowra, the last battle the Fianna fought, Oisín, Finn and a handful of survivors went south to Lough Lene in Kerry, a favourite haunt of theirs in happier times. They were dispirited because they knew their day was over. They had all fought many battles in their time, but this last battle had brought them total defeat and bitter losses. Many of their companions had been killed at Gowra, among them the bravest warrior of the Fianna, Oisín's own son, Oscar. When Finn, the battle-hardened old veteran, had seen his favourite grandson lying dead on the field, he had turned his back to his troops and wept. Only once before had the Fianna seen their leader cry and that was at the death of his staghound Bran.

Around Lough Lene the woods were fresh and green and the

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early mists of a May morning were beginning to lift when Finn and his followers set out with their dogs to hunt. The beauty of the countryside and the prospect of the chase revived their spirits a little as they followed the hounds through the woods. Suddenly a young hornless deer broke cover and bounded through the forest with the dogs in full cry at its heels. The Fianna followed them, rejuvenated by the familiar excitement of the chase.

They were stopped in their tracks by the sight of a lovely young woman galloping towards them on a supple, nimble white horse. She was so beautiful she seemed like a vision. She wore a crown and her hair hung in shining, golden loops down over her shoulders. Her long, lustrous cloak, glinting with gold-embroidered stars, hung down over the silk trappings of her horse. Her eyes were as clear and blue as the May sky above the forest and they sparkled like dew on the morning grass. Her skin glowed white and pink and her mouth seemed as sweet as honeyed wine. Her horse was saddled and shod with gold and there was a silver wreath around his head. No one had seen a better animal.

The woman reined in her horse and came up to where Finn stood, moon-struck and silent. 'I've travelled a great distance to find you,' she said, and Finn found his voice.

'Who are you and where have you come from?' he asked. 'Tell us your name and the name of your kingdom.'

'I am called Niamh of the Golden Hair and my father is the king of Tír na n-Og, the Land of Youth,' the girl replied.

'Then tell us, Princess Niamh, why have you left a country like that and crossed the sea to come to us? Has your husband forsaken you or has some other tragedy brought you here?'

'My husband didn't leave me,' she answered, 'for I've never had a husband. Many men in my own country wanted to marry me but I wouldn't look at any of them because I loved your son.'

Finn started in surprise. 'You love one of my sons? Which of my sons do you love, Niamh? And tell me why your mind settled on *him*?' he asked.

'Oisín is the champion I'm talking about,' replied Niamh. 'Reports of his handsome looks and sweet nature reached as far as

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the Land of Youth. So I decided to come and find him.'

Oisín had been silent all this time, dazzled by the beautiful girl and when he heard her name *him* as the man she loved he trembled from head to toe. But he recovered himself and went over to the princess and took her hand in his. 'You are welcome here, lovely Niamh,' he said softly to her. 'You are the most beautiful woman in the world and I would choose you above all others. I will gladly marry you!'

'Come away with me, Oisín!' Niamh whispered. 'Come back with me to the Land of Youth. It is the most beautiful country under the sun. You will never fall ill or grow old there. In my country you will never die. Trees grow tall there and trees bend low with fruit. The land flows with honey and wine, as much as you could ever want. In Tír na n-Og you will sit at feasts and games with plenty of music for you, plenty of wine. You will get gold and jewels, more than you could imagine. And a hundred swords, a hundred silk tunics, a hundred swift bay horses, a hundred keen hunting dogs. The king of the Ever Young will place a crown on your head, a crown that he has never given to anyone else, and it will protect you from every danger. You will get a hundred cows, a hundred calves, and a hundred sheep with golden wool. You will get a hundred of the most beautiful jewels you've ever seen and a hundred arrows. A hundred young women will sing to you and a hundred of the bravest, young warriors will obey your command. As well as all of this you will get beauty, strength and power. And me for your wife.'

'Oh, Niamh, I could never refuse you anything you ask and I will gladly go with you to the Land of Youth!' Oisín cried and he jumped up on the horse behind her. With Niamh cradled between his arms he took the reins in his hands and the horse started forwards.

'Go slowly, Oisín, till we reach the shore!' Niamh said.

When Finn saw his son being borne away from him, he let out three loud, sorrowful shots. 'Oh, Oisín, Oisín, my son,' he cried out, 'why are you leaving me? I will never see you again. You're leaving me here heartbroken for I know we'll never meet again!'

Oisín stopped and embraced his father and said goodbye to all his friends. With tears streaming down his face he took a last look at them as they stood on the shore. He saw the defeat and sorrow on his

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father's face and the sadness of his friends. He remembered his days together with them all in the excitement of the hunt and the heat of battle. Then the white horse shook its mane, gave three shrill neighs and leapt forward, plunging into the sea. The waves opened before Niamh and Oisín and closed behind them as they passed.

As they travelled across the sea, wonderful sights appeared to them on every side. They passed cities, courts and castles, white-washed bawns and forts, painted summerhouses and stately palaces. A young fawn rushed past, a white dog with scarlet ears racing after it. A beautiful young woman on a bay horse galloped by on the crests of the waves, carrying a golden apple in her right hand. Behind her, mounted on a white horse, rode a young prince, handsome and richly dressed with a gold-bladed sword in his hand. Oisín looked in awe at this handsome couple but when he asked Niamh who they were, she replied that they were insignificant compared to the inhabitants of the Land of Youth.

Ahead of them and visible from afar, a shining palace came into view. Its delicate, marble façade shone in the sun.

'That's the most beautiful palace I have ever seen!' Oisín exclaimed. 'What country are we in now and who is the king?'

'This is the Land of Virtue and that is the palace of Fomor, a giant,' Niamh replied. 'The daughter of the king of the Land of Life is the queen. She was abducted from her own court by Fomor and he keeps her a prisoner here. She has put a *geis* on him that he may not marry her until a champion has challenged him to single combat. But a prisoner she remains for no one wants to fight the giant.'

'Niamh, the story you've told me is sad, even though your voice is music in my ears,' Oisín said. 'I'll go to the fortress and try to overcome the giant and set the queen free.'

They turned the horse towards the white palace and when they arrived there they were welcomed by a woman almost as beautiful as Niamh herself. She brought them to a room where they sat on golden chairs and ate and drank of the best. When the feast was over, the queen told the story of her captivity and as tears coursed down her cheeks she told them that until the giant was overcome she could never return home.

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'Dry your eyes,' Oisín told her. 'I'll challenge the giant. I'm not afraid of him! Either I'll kill him or I'll fight till he kills me.'

At that moment Fomor approached the castle. He was huge and ugly and he carried a load of deerskins on his back and an iron bar in his hand. He saw Oisín and Niamh but did not acknowledge their presence. He looked into the face of his prisoner and straight away he knew that she had told her story to the visitors. With a loud, angry shout he challenged Oisín to fight. For three days and three nights they struggled and fought but, as powerful as Fomor was, Oisín overpowered him in the end and cut off his head. The two women gave three triumphant cheers when they saw the giant felled. When they saw that Oisín was badly injured and too exhausted to walk unaided, they took him gently between them and helped him back to the fortress. The queen put ointments and herbs on his wounds and in a very short time Oisín had recovered his health and spirits. They buried the giant and raised his flag over the grave and carved his name in ogham script in stone. Then they feasted till they were full and slept till dawn in the feather beds that were prepared for them.

The morning sun awoke them and Niamh told Oisín they must continue on their journey to Tír na n-Og. The queen of the Land of Virtue was sad to see them go, and indeed they were sad to leave her, but she was free now to return home, so they said goodbye to her and that was the last they saw of her. They mounted the white horse and he galloped away as boisterously as a March wind roaring across a mountain summit.

Suddenly the sky darkened, the wind rose and the sea was lit up by angry flashes of light. Niamh and Oisín rode steadily through the tempest, looking up at the pillars of clouds blotting out the sun until the wind dropped and the storm died down. Then, ahead of them, they saw the most delightful country, bathed in sunshine, spread out in all its splendour. Set amid the smooth rich plains was a majestic fortress that shone like a prism in the sun. Surrounding it were airy halls and summerhouses built with great artistry and inlaid with precious stones. As Niamh and Oisín approached the fortress a troop of a hundred of the most famous champions came out to meet them.

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exclaimed. 'Have we arrived at the Land of Youth?'

'Indeed we have. This is Tír na n-Og,' Niamh replied. 'I told you the truth when I told you how beautiful it was. Everything I promised you, you will receive.'

As Niamh spoke a hundred beautiful young women came to meet them, dressed in silk and heavy gold brocade, and they welcomed the couple to Tír na n-Og. A huge glittering crowd then approached with the king and queen at their head. When Oisín and Niamh met the royal party, the king took Oisín by the hand and welcomed him. Then he turned towards the crowd and said. 'This is Oisín, Finn's son, who is to be married to my beloved daughter, Niamh of the Golden Hair.' He turned to Oisín. 'You're welcome to this happy country, Oisín! Here you will have a long and happy life and you will never grow old. Everything you ever dreamt of is waiting for you here. I promise you that all I say is true for I am the king of Tír na n-Og. This is my queen and this my daughter Niamh, the Golden-haired, who crossed the sea to find you and bring you back here so that you could be together for ever.'

Oisín thanked the king and queen and a wedding feast was prepared for Oisín and Niamh. The festivities lasted for ten days and ten nights.

Niamh and Oisín lived happily in the Land of Youth and had three children. Niamh named the boys Finn and Oscar after Oisín's father and son. Oisín gave his daughter a name that suited her loving nature and her lovely face; he named her Plur na mBan, the Flower of Women.

Three hundred years went by, though to Oisín they seemed as short as three. He began to get homesick for Ireland and longed to see Finn and his friends, so he asked Niamh and her father to allow him to return home. The king consented but Niamh was perturbed by his request.

'I can't refuse you though I wish you had never asked, Oisín!' she said. 'I'm afraid that if you go you'll never return.'

Oisín tried to comfort his wife. 'Don't be distressed, Niamh!' he said. 'Our white horse knows the way. He'll bring me back safely!'

So Niamh consented, but she gave Oisín a most solemn warning.

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'Listen to me well, Oisín,' she implored him, 'and remember what I'm saying. If you dismount from the horse you will not be able to return to this happy country. I tell you again, if your foot as much as touches the ground, you will be lost for ever to the Land of Youth.'

Then Niamh began to sob and wail in great distress. 'Oisín, for the third time I warn you: do not set foot on the soil of Ireland or you can never come back to me again! Everything is changed there. You will not see Finn or the Fianna, you will find only a crowd of monks and holy men.'

Oisín tried to console her but Niamh was inconsolable and pulled and clutched at her long hair in her distress. He said goodbye to his children and as he stood by the white horse Niamh came up to him and kissed him

'Oh, Oisín, here is a last kiss for you! You will never come back to me or to the Land of Youth.'

Oisín mounted his horse and turning his back on the Land of Youth, set out for Ireland. The horse took him away from Tír na n-Óg as swiftly as it had brought Niamh and him there three hundred years before.

Oisín arrived in Ireland in high spirits, as strong and powerful a champion as he had ever been, and set out at once to find the Fianna. He travelled over the familiar terrain but saw no trace of any of his friends. Instead he saw a crowd of men and women approaching from the west. He drew in his horse and, at the sight of Oisín, the crowd stopped too. They addressed him courteously, but they kept on staring at him, astonished at his appearance and his great size. When Oisín told them he was looking for Finn Mac Cumhaill and asked of his whereabouts the people were even more surprised.

'We've heard of Finn and the Fianna,' they told him. 'The stories about him say that there never was anyone to match him in character, behaviour or build. There are so many stories that we could not even start to tell them to you!'

When Oisín heard this a tide of weariness and sadness washed over him and he realized that Finn and his companions were dead.

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Straight away he set out for Almu, the headquarters of the Fianna in the plains of Leinster. But when he got there, there was no trace of the strong, shining white fort. There was only a bare hill overgrown with ragwort, chickweed and nettles. Oisín was heartbroken at the sight of that desolate place. He went from one of Finn's haunts to another but they were all deserted. He scoured the countryside but there was no trace of his companions anywhere.

As he passed through Wicklow, through Glenasmole, the Valley of the Thrushes, he saw three hundred or more people crowding the glen. When they saw Oisín approach on his horse one of them shouted out, 'Come over here and help us! You are much stronger than we are!' Oisín came closer and saw that the men were trying to lift up a vast marble flagstone. The weight of the stone was so great that the men underneath could not support it and were being crushed by the load. Some were down already. Again the leader shouted desperately to Oisín, 'Come quickly and help us to lift the slab or all these men will be crushed to death!' Oisín looked down in disbelief at the crowd of men beneath him who were so puny and weak that they were unable to lift the flagstone. He leaned out of the saddle and, taking the marble slab in his hands, he raised it with all his strength and flung it away and the men underneath it were freed. But the slab was so heavy and the exertion so great that the golden girth round the horse's belly snapped and Oisín was pulled out of the saddle. He had to jump to the ground to save himself and the horse bolted the instant its rider's feet touched the ground. Oisín stood upright for a moment, towering over the gathering. Then, as the horrified crowd watched, the tall young warrior, who had been stronger than all of them together, sank slowly to the ground. His powerful body withered and shrank, his skin sagged into wrinkles and folds and the sight left his clouded eyes. Hopeless and helpless, he lay at their feet, a bewildered blind old man.