

The Adventures of the Sons of Eochaid Mugmedon

There was a wondrous and noble king over Erin, namely, Eochaid Mugmedon. Five sons he had: Brian, Ailill, Fiachra, Fergus, and Niall. The mother of Brian, Fiachra, Fergus and Ailill was Mongfinn, daughter of Fidach. The mother of Niall was Cairenn the curly-black, daughter of Sacheil Balb, king of the Saxons. Niall was hated by Queen Mongfinn, for Eochaid had begotten him on Cairenn instead of on her. Great then was the hardship which Cairenn suffered from the queen: so great was the hardship that she was compelled to draw the water of Tara, apart, and every handmaid in turn in sight of her; and even when she was with child with Niall, she was forced to do all that in order that the babe might die in her womb.

The time of her lying-in arrived, and yet she ceased not from the service. Then on the green of Tara, beside the pail, she brought forth a man-child, and she durst not take up the boy from the ground, but she left him there exposed to the birds. And not one of the men of Erin dared carry him away, for dread of Mongfinn since great was her magical power, and all were in fear of her. Then Torna the poet came across the green, and beheld the babe left alone, with the birds attacking it. So Torna took the boy into his bosom, and to him was revealed all that would be thereafter. And he said:

Welcome, little guest; he will be Niall of the Nine Hostages.

In his time he will redden a multitude.

Plains will be greatened, hostages will be overthrown, battles will be fought.

Longside of Tarn, host-leader of Mag Femin, custodian of Maen-mag.

Revered one of Almain, veteran of Liffey, white-knee of Codal.

Seven-and-twenty years he will rule Erin, and Erin will be inherited from him for ever.

Good indeed was Niall's beginning and his success, manly, rough-haired, till he died in the afternoon on a Saturday by the sea of Wight, slain by Eochaid son of Enna Cennselach.

Torna took the boy with him, and fostered him; and after that neither Torna nor his fosterling came to Tara until the boy was fit to be king. Then Torna and Niall came to Tara. 'Twas then that Cairenn, Niall's mother, as she was bringing water to Tarn, chanced to meet them. Said Niall to her: "Let this work alone."

"I dare not," she answered, "because of the queen."

"My mother," said he, "shall not be serving, and I the son of the king of Erin." Then he took her with him to Tara, and clad her in purple raiment.

Anger seized Mongfinn, for that seemed evil to her. But this was the will of the men of Erin, that Niall should be king after his father. Wherefore Mongfinn said to Eochaid: "Pass judgment among thy Sons, as to which of them shall receive thy heritage."

"I will not pass judgment," he answered; "but Sithchenn the wizard will do so." Then they sent to Sithchenn the smith, who dwelt in Tara, for he was a wise man and a wondrous prophet.

The smith set fire to his forge in which the four sons were placed. Niall came out carrying the anvil and its block. "Niall vanquishes," said the wizard, "and he will be a solid anvil forever." Brian came next, bringing the sledgehammers. "Brian to be your fighters," said the wizard. Then came Fiachra, bringing a pail of beer and the bellows. "Your beauty and your science with Flachra," said the wizard. Then came Ailill with the chest in which were the weapons. "Ailill to avenge you!" said the wizard. Last came Fergus with the bundle of withered wood and a bar of yew therein. "Fergus the withered!" said the wizard. That was true, for the seed of Fergus was no good, excepting one, Cairech Dergain of Cloonburren. And hence is the saying "a stick of yew in a bundle of firewood."

To bear witness of that the shanachie sang:

*Eochaid's five sons, Niall the great anvil,
Brian the sledge-hammer for true striking,
Ailill the chest of spears against a tribe,
Fiachra the blast, Fergus the withered.*

*Fiachra has the drink of ale,
Ailill has the warlike spears,
Brian has the entrance to battle,
But Niall has the prize.*

Now this was grievous to Mongfinn, and she said to her sons, "Do you four sons quarrel, so that Niall may come to separate you, and then kill him."

Then they quarrelled. "I wish to separate them," said Niall.

"Nay," said Torna, "let the sons of Mongfinn be peaceful." Hence is the proverb.

Then Mongfinn said that she would not abide by Sithchenn's judgment. So she sent her sons to the same Sithchenn to ask for arms. They went to the smith, and he made arms for them; the weapon that was finest he put into Niall's hand, and the rest of the arms he gave to the other sons. "Now go to hunt and try your arms," said the smith. So the sons went and hunted, and it happened that they went far astray.

When they ceased from straying they kindled a fire, broiled some of their quarry, and ate it until they were satisfied. Then they were thirsty and in great drouth from the cooked food. "Let one of us go and seek for water," they said. "I will go," said Fergus. The lad went seeking water, till he chanced on a well and saw an old woman guarding it.

Thus was the hag: every joint and limb of her, from the top of her head to the earth, was as black

as coal. Like the tail of a wild horse was the gray bristly mane that came through the upper part of her head-crown. The green branch of an oak in bearing would be severed by the sickle of green teeth that lay in her head and reached to her ears. Dark smoky eyes she had: a nose crooked and hollow. She had a middle fibrous, spotted with pustules, diseased, and shins distorted and awry. Her ankles were thick, her shoulderblades were broad, her knees were big, and her nails were green. Loathsomely in sooth was the hag's appearance.

"That is so," said the youth. "'Tis so indeed," said she.

"Art thou guarding the well?" asked the youth.

"Yea truly," she answered.

"Dost thou permit me to take away some of the water?" said the youth.

"I will permit," she answered, "provided there come from thee ~cme kiss on my cheek."

"By no means!" said he.

"Then no water shalt thou get from me," said she.

"I give my word," he answered, "that I would rather perish of thirst than give thee a kiss."

The lad then went back to the place where his brothers were biding, and told them that he had not found water. So Ailill went to look for water, and chanced on the same well. He too refused to kiss the hag, returned without water, and did not confess that he had found the well. Then Brian, the eldest of the sons, went to seek water, chanced on the same well, refused to kiss the old woman, and returned waterless. Fiachra then went, found the well and the hag, and asked her for water. "I will grant it," said she; "but give me a kiss."

"I would give few kisses for it."

"Thou shalt visit Tara," said she. That fell true, for two of his race took the kingship of Erin, namely Dathi and Ailill Wether, and no one of the race of the other sons, Brian, Ailill, Fergus, took it. So Fiachra returned without water.

So then Niall went seeking water and happened on the same well. "Give me water, O woman," said Niall.

"I will give it," she answered, "but first give me a kiss."

"Besides giving thee a kiss, I will lie with thee!" Then he threw himself down upon her and gave her a kiss. But then, when he looked at her, there was not in the world a damsel whose figure or appearance was more loveable than hers! Like the snow in trenches was every bit of her from head to sole. Plump and queenly forearms she had: fingers long and slender: calves straight and beautifully colored. Two blunt shoes of white bronze between her little, soft-white feet and the ground. A costly full-purple mantle she wore, with a brooch of bright silver in the clothing of the

mantle. Shining pearly teeth she had, an eye large and queenly, and lips red as rowanberries.

"That is many-shaped, O lady!" said the youth.

"True," said she.

"Who art thou?" said the youth.

"I am the Sovereignty of Erin," she answered; and then she said:

*O king of Tara, I am the Sovereignty:
I will tell thee its great goodness, etc.*

"Go now to thy brothers," she said, "and take water with thee, and the kingship and the domination will for ever abide with thee and thy children, save only with twain of the seed of Fiachra, namely, Dathi and Ailill Wetber, and one king out of Munster, namely Brian Boru ("of the Tribute")-and all these will be kings without opposition. And as thou hast seen me loathsome, bestial, horrible at first and beautiful at last, so is the sovereignty; for seldom it is gained without battles and conflicts; but at last to anyone it is beautiful and goodly. Howbeit, give not the water to thy brothers until they have granted thee seniority over them, and that thou mayest raise thy weapon a hand's-breadth above their weapons."

"So shall it be done," said the youth. Then he bade her farewell, and took water to his brothers; but did not give it to them until they had granted to him every boon that he asked of them, as the damsel had taught him. He also bound them by oaths never to oppose himself or his children.

Then they went to Tara. There they raised their weapons, and Niall raised his the breadth of a hero's hand above them. They sat down in their seats with Niall among them in the midst. Then the king asked tidings of them. Niall made answer and related the adventure, and how they went seeking water, and how they chanced on the well and came to the woman, and what she had prophesied to them. "What is the cause," said Mongfinn, "that it is not the senior, Brian, that tells these tales?"

They answered, "We granted our seniority and our kingship to Niall for the first time in exchange for the water."

"You have granted it permanently," said Sithchenn, "for hence-forward he and his children will always have the domination and kingship of Erin."

Now that was true, for from Niall onward no one, except with opposition, took the kingship of Erin save one of his children or descendants, until the Strong-Striker of Usnech, Maelsechlann son of Domnall. For it was taken by six and twenty of the O'Neills of the North or of the South, that is, ten kings of the kindred of Conall and sixteen of the kindred of Eogan; as said the poet:

*I know the number that took
Erin after Niall of the lofty valor,
From laegaire's reign, if it be a fault,*

To the Strong-Striker of Usnech.

*Loegaire and his sons, I will not conceal,
Diarmaid and mighty Tuathal,
Nine of sound Aed Slane,
And seven of the clans of Colman.*

*Sixteen kings of lofty Eogan,
Ten of cruel-savage Conall:
Niall got with speedy course
The kingship always for his race.*

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