

THE STORY OF OISIN

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I R E L A N D

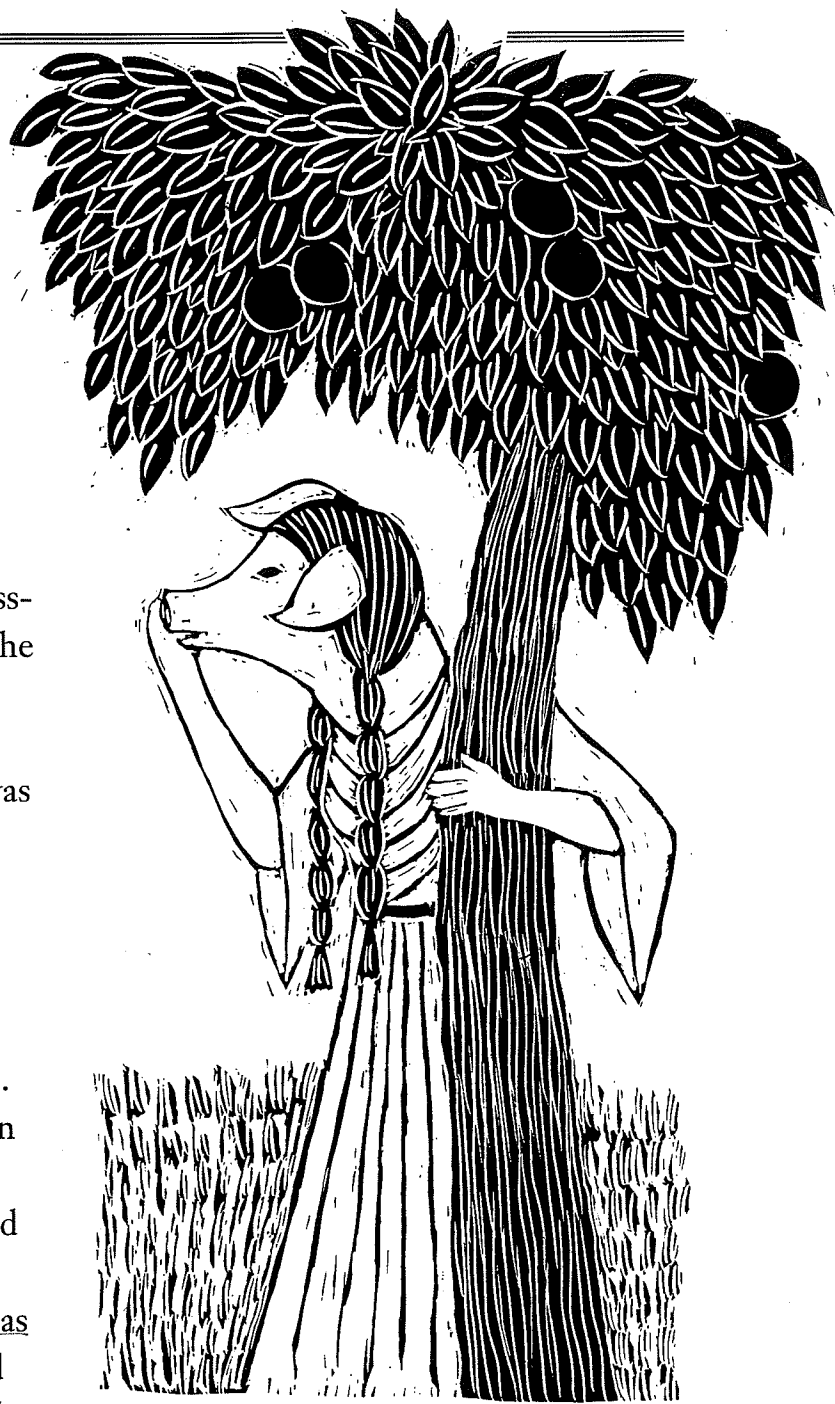
There was a mystic land called Tir Na N-og, or the Land of the Blessed. It was in the clouds and beyond the Western Sea, and no one ever grew old there. The King of Tir Na N-og had ruled there forever, and yet he was afraid that someone might take his throne from him.

The king called his Druid, or wiseman, to him and asked, "Will I always rule in Tir Na N-og?"

"That you shall," said the Druid. "Unless your daughter marries. Then her husband will rule in your place."

Now, the Princess was a kind and beautiful woman, and the king loved her. But he did not love her as much as he loved his own power. So he called his daughter to him and said, "I shall make sure that no man ever wants to marry you!" And with that, the king changed the girl's head into the head of a pig.

The girl wept bitterly, and the Druid was filled with remorse that he had given such information to the king.



"Listen to me, my dear," said the Druid. "You need not have this pig's head forever. If you go back to Erin and find Oisin, the son of Finn MacCumhail, and if you can convince him to marry you, then your own lovely face will be restored. Furthermore,

you will have for yourself one of the finest young men on Earth as a husband, for Oisín is as wise and kind as he is brave and strong. Bring him back here to Tir Na N-og, and he shall be King."

The Princess stopped her weeping just a bit. She said, "And how am I going to convince a man to marry a woman with a pig's head?"

"Ah, that I truly do not know," said the Druid, scratching his head. "You will have to use your ingenuity."

The Princess was filled with doubt, but there seemed no other path to take. Descending through the clouds from Tir Na N-og to Erin, she found herself in a thick forest. The sound of axes felling trees sounded not far away, and all about her feet lay piles of cut wood. Soon the sound of chopping stopped, and the Princess heard the laughter of young men coming closer and closer. Quickly she hid behind a tree.

Four handsome lads appeared. "Now that we've got a good supply of firewood here," said one of them, "we must carry it back to our father's home."

"Not I!" said another lad. "I am too tired."

"We'll cut wood but not carry it!" said the other two.

"Then who is to do it, brothers?" asked the first young man.

"Do it yourself, Oisín," the three laughed. And they left him and went away.

Oisín sat down, quite discouraged. "I can't carry all this wood!" he muttered to himself.

The Princess, trembling with fear but determined to conquer it, stepped out from behind the tree. "Perhaps I can help you," she said shyly to Oisín.

Oisín leapt to his feet, thoroughly startled. "Upon my word!" he exclaimed. "Never have I seen such an ugly woman!"

"I was not always thus," said the Princess, beginning to weep again. "My face was once as fair as any woman's in Erin. Will you listen to my story?"

"Most willingly," said Oisín, sitting down again.

And so the Princess told him of the cruel enchantment, and of how she would regain her own face only if he, Oisín, would consent to marry her, and of how Oisín would then become King of Tir Na N-og.

"If that's the situation," said Oisín, "why, I'll marry you immediately!"

And he did, and immediately the Princess's pig head was replaced with her own beautiful one.

"Now, my dear husband," said the princess, "I cannot stay here in Erin any longer. Come, follow me back to the Land of the Blessed." She took Oisín's hand and led him through clouds and mist to Tir Na N-og.

In that mystical place, the old King welcomed his daughter, for he was deeply sorry for what he had done to her. Gladly he handed over his throne to his new son-in-law. Now Oisín was King, and his bride was the Queen of this land of youth and beauty.

The time passed swiftly because it was a time of happy days. In Tir Na N-og, there was always feasting and games and music and laughter. Oisín felt blessed indeed to be ruler of such a pleasant kingdom. But after a while, he began to think about his father and his brothers and his friends and his home in Erin. He was curious to see how they were faring and sad to think that he might never see his aging father again. Oisín shared these thoughts with his wife.

"Ah, dear husband," said the Queen. "How long do you think you have been here?"

"About three years," said Oisín.

"No, you have been here for three *hundred* years," said his wife. "All the people you long to see in Erin have long since died. Even the land itself is different. You would recognize very little there. Be content here. Stay with me."

But Oisín grew insistent. "Just once," he said. "I want to go back to Erin just once. Then I shall return to you."

"There is only one way you can do that," said the Queen. "You must ride my white horse through the mist to your homeland. But you must never get off the horse. If your foot so much as touches the ground, you will be lost to me forever."

"Then my foot shall never touch the ground," promised Oisín. "Have the white horse brought to me."

The horse was a marvel of strength and beauty, with soft, intelligent eyes, and swift as the wind. Mounting this steed, Oisín bade farewell to the Queen, assuring her again that he would return quickly. The Queen watched as the horse galloped into the clouds, bearing her beloved husband. Then she turned away.

In no time at all, Oisín was in Erin. He rode through the countryside toward his father's home. How strange the land looked. The forests were almost gone. "My brothers have been busy at their woodcutting, I see!" thought Oisín. Stranger still, nearing his father's land, he saw no barns or cottages, only heaps of stone.

And when he reached the place where his father's house had stood, there was only a mass of rocks and weeds.

Oisín began to weep. "It is as my wife told me," he cried. Everything I once knew is now gone! I shall return to Tir Na N-og."

As he turned the reins to head back, he spied an old man coming along the road.

"I say there, my good man," called Oisín. "What has become of the great family of Finn MacCumhail, the family that once dwelled here? Are there none of them left?"

The old man looked at him quizzically. "Ah, sir," he said. "They all died long, long ago. Long before I was born. Indeed, long before my grandmother was born! See," he said, kicking away with his boot a tuft of grass. "There is the old, mouldering

tombstone of Finn MacCumhail himself."

"Please hand it up to me," said Oisín. "I wish to read what it says."

"Get down from your horse and do it yourself!" said the old man. "I am an old, weak fellow, and you are young and strong!" And with that the old man went on his way.

Oisín leaned from his saddle, reaching down for the tombstone. Farther and farther over he leaned, as the horse whinnied in alarm.

Just as his hand was almost touching the tip of the stone, Oisín's foot slipped from the stirrup, his toe touched the ground, and he fell from the saddle. The great white horse bolted away and stood mournfully at a distance, staring at the man who had been his rider. Just a moment ago so strong and young, Oisín was now withered and ancient.

"Come, White Horse," said Oisín, his voice crackled with age. "Carry me back to Tir Na N-og!"

But this of course, could not be done. The horse bowed its head in farewell, and then disappeared into the mists, returning to the Land of the Blessed where the Queen stood sadly waiting. ♦