Finn Mac Cumhal, spelled as Finn Mac Cool or Coul in English, one of the great legendary Celtic heroes of pre-Christian Ireland, was thought to have lived during the reign of the High King Cormac mac Art in the third-century CE. Legends about Finn and the Fianna, a forest dwelling troop of hunter-warriors, were passed on orally by bards and learned men called filidh.

For the full introduction to this story and other stories with introductions, see *The Allyn & Bacon Anthology of Traditional Literature* edited by Judith V. Lechner. Allyn & Bacon/Longman, 2003.


In the reign of Cormac mac Art, grandson of Conn of the Hundred Battles, the order of precedence and dignity in the court of the High King at Tara was as follows: First came great Cormac, the kingly, the hospitable, warrior and poet, and he was supreme over all. Next in order came the five kings of the five Provinces of Ireland, namely, Ulster, Munster, Connacht, Leinster, and Mid-Erinn. After these ranked the captains of the royal house, of whom Finn, son of Cumhal, was the chief.

Now the privileges of the Fianna of Erinn were many and great; to wit, in every county in Ireland one townland, and in every townland a cartron of land, and in the house of every gentleman the right to have a young deer-hound or a beagle kept at nurse from November to May, together with many other taxes and royalties not to be recounted here. But if they had these many and great privileges, yet greater than these were the toils and hardships which they had to endure, in guarding the coasts of all Ireland from oversea invaders and marauders, and in keeping down all robbers and outlaws and evil folk within the kingdom, for this was the duty laid upon them by their bond of service to the King. Now the summer half of the year was wont to be ended by a great hunting in one of the forests of Ireland, and so it was that one All-hallowtide [Samhain], when the great banquet of Finn in his Dún on the Hill of Allen was going forward, and the hall resounded with cheerful talk and laughter and with the music of tympan and of harp, Finn asked of the assembled captains in what part of Erinn they should proceed to drive out game on the morrow. And it was agreed among them to repair to the territory of Thomond and Desmond in Munster; and from Allen they set out accordingly and came the Hill of Knockany. Thence they threw out the hunt and sent their bands of beaters through many a gloomy ravine and by many a rugged hill-pass and many a fair open plain. Desmond’s high hills, called now Slieveughter, they beat, and the smooth, swelling hills of Slievenamuck, and the green slopes of grassy Slievenomon, and the towering rough crags of the Decies, and thence on to the dark woods of Belachgowran.

While the great hunt was going forward Finn with certain of his chief captains sat on a high mound to overlook it. There, with Finn, were Goll and Art mac Morna, and Liagan the swift runner, and Dermot of the Love Spot, and Keelta, son of Ronan, and there also was Conan
the Bald, the man of scurrilous tongue, and a score or so more. Sweet it was to Finn and his companions to hear from the woods and wildernesses around them the many-tongued baying of the hounds and the cries and whistling of the beaters, the shouting of the strong men and the notes of the Fian hunting horn.

When they had sat there awhile one of Finn’s men came running quickly towards him and said—

“A stranger is approaching us from the west, O Finn, and I much dislike his aspect.”

With that all the Fians looked up and beheld upon the hillside a huge man, looking like some Fomorian marauder, scowling and ugly, with a sour countenance and ungainly limbs. On his back hung a dingy black shield, on his misshapen left thigh he wore a sharp broad-bladed sword; projecting over his shoulder were two long lances with broad rusty heads. He wore garments that looked as if they had been buried in a cinder heap, and a loose ragged mantle. Behind him there shambled a sulky, ill-shapen mare with a bony carcase and bowed knees, and on her neck a clumsy iron halter. With a rope her master hauled her along, with violent jerks that seemed as if they would wrench her head from her scraggly neck, and ever and anon the mare would stand and jib, when the man laid on her ribs such blows from a strong ironshod cudgel, that they sounded like the surges of the sea beating on a rocky coast. Short as was the distance from where the man and his horse were first perceived to where Finn was standing, it was long ere they traversed it. At last, however, he came into the presence of Finn and louted before him, doing obeisance. Finn lifted his hand over him and bade him speak, and declare his business and his name and rank.

“I know not,” said the fellow, “of what blood I am, gentle or simple, but only this, that I am a wight from overseas looking for service and wages. And as I have heard of thee, O Finn, that thou art not wont to refuse any man, I came to take service with thee if thou wilt have me.”

“Neither shall I refuse thee,” said Finn; “but what brings thee here with a horse and no horseboy?”

“Good enough reason,” said the stranger. “I have much ado to get meat for my own belly, seeing that I eat for a hundred men; and I will not have any horseboy meddling with my ration.”

“And what name dost thou bear?”

“I am called the Gilla Dacar (the Hard Gillie),” replied he.

“Why was that name given thee?” asked Finn.

“Good enough reason for that also,” spake the stranger, “for of all the lads in the world there is none harder than I am for a lord to get service and obedience from.” The turning to Conan the Bald he said, “Whether among the Fianna is a horseman’s pay or a footman’s the highest?”

“A horseman’s surely,” said Conan, “seeing that he gets twice the pay of a footman.”

“Then I am a horseman in thy service, Finn,” said the gillie. “I call thee to observe that I have here a horse, and moreover that as a horseman I came among the Fianna. Have I thy authority to turn out my steed among thine?”

“Turn her out,” quoth Finn.

Then the big man flung his mare the rope and immediately she galloped off to where the Fian horses were grazing. Here she fell to biting and kicking them, knocking out the eye of one and snapping off another’s ear and breaking the leg of another with a kick.

“Take away thy mare, big man,” cried Conan then, or by Heaven and Earth were it not that Finn told thee to let her loose I would let loose her brains. Many a bad bargain has Finn
made but never a worse than thou.”

“By Heaven and Earth,” said the gillie, “that I never will, for I have no horseboy, and I will do no horseboy’s work.”

Then Conan mac Morna took the iron halter and laid it on the stranger’s horse and brought the beast back to Finn and held it there.

Said Finn to Conan, “I have never seen thee do horseboy’s service even to far better men than this gillie. How now if thou wert to leap on the brute’s back and gallop her to death over hill and dale in payment for the mischief she hath wrought among our steeds?”

At this word Conan clambered up on the back of the big man’s mare, and with all his might he smote his two heels into her, but the mare never stirred.

“I perceive what ails her,” said Finn. “She will never stir till she has a weight of men on her equal to that of her own rider.”

Then thirteen men of the Fianna scrambled up laughing behind Conan, and the mare lay down under them, and then got up again, they still clinging to her. At this the big man said, “It appears that you are making a sport and mockery of my mare, and that even I myself do not escape from it. It is well that I have not spent the rest of the year in your company, seeing what a jest ye have made of me the very first day; and I perceive, O Finn, that thou art very unlike the report that is made of thee. And now I bid thee farewell, for of thy service I have had enough.”

So with downcast head and despondent looks the big gillie shambling slowly away until he had passed out of view of the Fianna, behind the shoulder of the hill. Having arrived here he tucked up his coat to his waist, and fast though be the flight of the swallow, and fast that of the roe-deer, and fast the rush of a roaring wind over a mountain top in mid-March, no faster are these than the bounding speed and furious flight of the big man down the hillside toward the West.

No sooner did the mare see that her master had departed than she too dashed uncontrollably forward and flew down the hillside after him. And as the Fians saw Conan the Bald and his thirteen companions thus carried off, willy nilly, they broke into a roar of laughter and ran alongside mocking them. But Conan, seeing that they were being carried off in the wake of the big man of evil aspect, of whom none knew whence or who he was, he was terrified and began reviling and cursing, and shouted to Finn, “A palsy seize thee, Finn; may some rascally churl, that is if possible of worse blood than thyself, have thy head, unless thou follow and rescue us wheresoever this monster shall bring us.” So Finn and the Fianna ran, and the mare ran, over bare hills and by deep glens, till at last they came to Corcaguiny in Kerry, where the gillie set his face to the blue ocean, and the mare dashed in after him. But ere he did so, Liagan the Swift got two hands on the tail of the mare, though further he could not win, and he was towed in, still clinging to his hold, and over the rolling billows away they went, the fourteen Fians on the wild mare’s back, and Liagan haled along by her tail.

“What is to be done now?” said Oisín to Finn, when they had arrived at the beach.

“Our men are to be rescued,” said Finn, “for to that we are bound by the honour of the Fianna. Whithersoever they are gone, thither must we follow and win them back by fair means or foul; but to that end we must first fit out a galley.”

So in the end it was agreed that Finn and fourteen men of his bravest and best champions should sail overseas in search of the Gilla Dacar and his captives, while Oisín remained in Erinn and exercised rule over the Fianna in the place of his father.

After a while, then, a swift galley was made ready by Finn and stored with victual, and
with arms, and also with gold and raiment to make gifts withal if need should be. And into the ship came the fifteen valiant men, and gripped their oars, while Finn steered; and soon the sea whitened around their oarblades, and over the restless, rolling masses of the many-hued and voiceful billows, the ship clove her way to the West. And the Fians, who were wont to be wakened by the twittering of birds over their hunting booths in the greenwood, now delighted to hear, day after day as they roused themselves at morn, the lapping of the wide waters of the world against their vessel’s bows, or the thunder of pounding surges when the wind blew hard.

After many days the sharpest eyed of the men of Finn saw far-off what seemed a mountain rising from the sea, and to it they shaped their course. When they had come to that land they found themselves under the shadow of a great grey cliff, and beneath it slippery rocks covered with seaweed. Then Dermot, who was the most active of the company, was bidden to mount the cliff and to procure means of drawing up the rest of the party, but of what land might lie on the top of that wall of rock none of them could discover anything. Dermot, descending from the ship, then climbed with difficulty up the face of the cliff, while the others made fast their ship among the rocks. But Dermot having arrived at the top saw no habitation of man, and could compass not way of helping his companions to mount. He went therefore boldly forward into the unknown land, hoping to obtain some help, if any friendly and hospitable folk could there be found.

Before he had gone far he came into a wild wood, thick and tangled, and full of the noise of streams, and the sough of winds, and twittering of birds, and hum of bees. After he had traversed this wilderness for a while he came to a mighty tree with densely interwoven branches, and beneath it a pile of rocks, having on its summit a pointed drinking horn wreathed with rich ornament, and at its foot a well of pure bright water. Dermot, being now thirsty, took the horn and would have filled it at the well, but as he stooped down to do so he heard a loud, threatening murmur which seemed to rise from it. “I perceive,” he said to himself, “that I am forbidden to drink from this well.” Nevertheless thirst compelled him, and he drank his fill.

In no long time thereafter he saw an armed warrior of hostile aspect coming towards him through the wood. No courteous greeting did he give to Dermot, but began to revile him for roaming in his wood and wilderness, and for drinking his water. Thereupon they fought, and for the rest of the afternoon they took and gave hard blows, neither subduing the other, till at last as darkness began to fall the warrior suddenly dived into the well and was seen more. Dermot, vexed at this ending of combat, then made him ready to spend the night in that place, but first he slew a deer in the wood, and made a fire, whereat he roasted pieces of the deer’s flesh on spits of white hazel, and drank abundantly of the well water, and then slept soundly throughout the night.

Next morning when he awakened and went to the well he found the Champion of the Well standing there and awaiting him. “It is not enough, Dermot,” said he angrily, “for thee to traverse my woods at will and to drink my water, but thou must even also slay my deer.” Then they closed in the combat again, and dealt each other blow for blow and wound for wound till evening parted them, and the champion dived into the well as before.

On the third day it went even so; but as evening came on Dermot, watching closely, rushed at the champion just as he was about to plunge into the well, and gripped him in his arms. But none the less the Champion of the Well made his dive, and took down Dermot with him. And a darkness and faintness came over Dermot, but when he awoke, he found himself in a wide, open country, flowery and fair, and before him the walls and towers of a royal city. Thither the champion, sorely wounded, was now borne off, while a crowd of his people came round Dermot, and beat and wounded him, leaving him on the ground for dead.
After night had fallen when all the people of the city in the Land Undersea had departed, a stalwart champion, well armed and of bold appearance, came upon Dermot and stirred him with his foot. Dermot thereon awoke from his swoon and, warrior-like, reached out his hand for his arms. But the champion said, “Wait awhile, my son, I have not come to do thee hurt or harm. Thou hast chosen an ill place to rest and slumber in, before the city of thine enemy. Rise and follow me, and I shall bestow thee far better than that.” Dermot then rose and followed the champion, and long and far they journeyed until they came to a high-towered fortress, wherein were thrice fifty valiant men-at-arms and fair women; and the daughter of that champion, a white-toothed, rosy-cheeked, smooth-handed, and black-eyebrowed maid, received Dermot kindly and welcomefully, and applied healing herbs to his wounds, and in no long time he was made as good a man as ever. And thus he remained, and was entertained most royally with the best of viands and liquors. The first part of every night those in that Dún were wont to spend in feasting, and the second in recreation and entertainment of the mind, with music and with poetry and bardic tales, and the third part in sound and healthful slumber, till the sun in his fiery journey rose over the heavy-clodded earth on the morrow morn.

And the King of that country, who was the champion that had aroused Dermot, told him this was the land of Sorca, and that he had showed this kindness to Dermot for that he himself had once been on wage and service with Finn, son of Cumhal, “and a better master,” said he, “man never had.”

Now the story turns to tell of what befell Finn and the remainder of his companions when Dermot left them in the ship. After a while, seeing that he did not return, and being assured that some mischief or hindrance must have befallen him, they made an attempt to climb the cliff after him, having noted which way he went. With much toil and peril they accomplished this, and then journeying forward and following on Dermot’s track, they came at last to the well in the wild wood, and saw near by the remains of the deer, and the ashes of the fire that Dermot had kindled to cook it. But from this place they could discover no track of his going. While they were debating on what should next be done, they saw riding towards them a tall warrior on a dark grey horse with a golden bridle, who greeted them courteously. From him they enquired as to whether he had seen aught of their companion, Dermot, in the wilderness. “Follow me,” said the warrior, “and you shall shortly have tidings of him.”

Then they followed the strange horseman into the forest by many dark and winding ways, until at last they came into a rocky ravine, where they found the mouth of a great cavern opening into the hillside. Into this they went, and the way led them downward until it seemed as if they were going into the bowels of the earth, until at last the light began to shine round them, and they came out into a lovely land of flowery plains and green woods and singing streams. In no long time thereafter they came to a great royal Dún, where he who led them was hailed as king and lord, and here, to their joy, they found their comrade, Dermot of the Love Spot, who told them of all his adventures and heard from them of theirs. This ended, and when they had been entertained and refreshed, the lord of that place spoke to Finn and said:—

“I have now, O Finn, within my fortress the fifteen stoutest heroes that the world holds. To this end have I brought you here, that ye might make war with me upon mine enemy the Champion of the Well, who is king of the land bordering on mine, and who ceases not to persecute and to harry my people because, in his arrogance, he would have all the Under World country subject to himself alone. Say now if ye will embrace this enterprise and help me to defend my own: and if not I shall set you again upon the land of Erinn.”

Finn said, “What of my fifteen men that were carried away on the wild mare’s back
overseas?” “They are guarding the marches of my kingdom,” said the King of Sorca, “and all is well with them and shall be well.”

Then Finn agreed to take service with the King of Sorca, and next day they arrayed themselves for battle and went out at the head of the host. Ere long they came upon the army of the King of the Well, and with him was the King of the Greeks and a band of fierce mercenaries, also the daughter of the Greek King, by name Tasha of the White Side, a maiden who in beauty and grace surpassed all other women of the world, as the Shannon surpasses all rivers of Erinn and the eagle surpasses all birds of the air. Now the stories of Finn and his generosity and great deeds had reached her since she was a child, and she had set her love on him, though she had never seen his face till now.

When the hosts were met, the King of the Greeks said, “Who of my men will stand forth and challenge the best of these men of Erinn to single combat that their metal may be proved, for to us it is unknown what manner of men they be.” The son of the King of the Greeks said, “I will go.”

So on the side of Finn, Oscar, son of Oisín, was chosen to match the son of the Greek King, and the two hosts sat down peacefully together to watch the weapon play. And Tasha the princess sat by Finn, son of Cumhal.

Then Oscar and the King’s son stepped into their fighting place, and fierce was the combat that arose between them, as when two roaring surges of the sea dash against each other in a fissure of the rocks, and the spray cloud-bursts from them high into the air. Long they fought, and many red wounds did each of them give and receive, till at last Oscar beat the Greek prince to the earth and smote off his head. Then one host groaned for woe and discouragement, while the other shouted for joy and victory, and so they parted for the night, each to their own camp. And in the camp of the folk of Sorca they found Conan the Bald and the fourteen men that had gone with him on the mare’s back.

But when the night had fallen, Tasha stole from the wizard of the Greek King his branch of silver bells that when shaken would lay asleep a host of men, and with the aid of this she passed from the camp of the Greeks, and through the sentinels, and came to the tent of Finn.

On the morrow morn the King of the Greeks found that his daughter had fled to be the wife of Finn, son of Cumhal, and he offered a mighty reward to whosoever would slay Finn and bring Tasha back. But when the two armies closed in combat the Fians and the host of the King of Sorca charged so fiercely home, that they drove their foes before them as a winter gale drives before it a cloud of madly whirling leaves, and those that were not slain in the fight and the pursuit went to their own lands and abode their in peace; and thus was the war ended of the King of Sorca and the Lord of the Well.

Then the King of Sorca had Finn and his comrades before him and gave them praise and thanks for their valour. “And what reward,” he said, “will ye that I make you for the saving of the kingdom of Sorca?”

“Thou wert in my service awhile,” said Finn, “and I mind not that I paid thee any wage for it. Let that service even go against this, and so we are quits [even].”

“Nay, then,” cried Conan the Bald, “but what shall I have for my ride on the mare of the Gilla Dacar?”

“What wilt thou have?” said the King of Sorca.

“This,” said Conan, “and nothing else will I accept. Let fourteen of the fairest women of the land of Sorca be put on that same mare, and thy wife, O King, clinging to its tail, and let them be thus haled across the sea until they come to Corcaguiny in the land of Erinn. I will have
none of thy gold and silver, but the indignity that has been put upon me doth demand an honourable satisfaction.”

Then the King of Sorca smiled, and he said, “Behold thy men, Finn.”

Finn turned his head to look round, and as he did so the plain and the encampment of the Fairy Host vanished from his sight, and he saw himself standing on the shingly strand of a little bay, with rocky heights to right and left, crowned with yellow whin bushes whose perfume mingled with the salt sea wind. It was the spot where he had seen the Gilla Dacar and his mare take water on the coast of Kerry. Finn stared over the sea, to discover, if he might, by what means he had come thither, but nothing could he see there save the sunlit water, and nothing hear but what seemed a low laughter from the twinkling ripples that broke at his feet. Then he looked for his men, who stood there, dazed like himself and rubbing their eyes; and there too stood the Princess Tasha, who stretched out her white arms to him. Finn went over and took her hands. “Shoulder your spears, good lads!” he called to his men. “Follow me now to the Hill of Allen, and to the wedding feast of Tasha and of Finn mac Cumhal.”