LEGENDS

The Children of Lir

Archeologists have found evidence for an early Celtic people who are here called the De Danaan, who built burial mounds that later inhabitants, a newer wave of Celts, here referred to as the Milesians after their leader Mil of Spain, called fairy mounds or ‘sidhs.’

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


Ireland Long ago there dwelt in Ireland the race called by the name of De Danaan, or People of the Goddess Dana. They were a folk who delighted in beauty and gaiety, and in fighting and feasting, and loved to go gloriously apparelled, and to have their weapons and household vessels adorned with jewels and gold. They were also skilled in magic arts, and their harpers could make music so enchanting that a man who heard it would fight, or love, or sleep, or forget all earthly things, as they who touched the strings might will him to do. In later times the Danaans had to dispute the sovereignty of Ireland with another race, the Children of Miled, whom men call the Milesians, and after much fighting they were vanquished. Then, by their sorceries and enchantments, when they could not prevail against the invaders, they made themselves invisible, and they have dwelt ever since in the Fairy Mounds and raths [earthworks] of Ireland, where their shining palaces are hidden from mortal eyes. They are now called the Shee, or Fairy folk of Erinn, and the faint strains of unearthly music that may be heard at times by those who wander at night near to their haunts come from the harpers and pipers who play for the People of Dana at their revels in the bright world underground.

At the time when the tale begins, the People of Dana were still the lords of Ireland, for the Milesians had not yet come. They were divided, it is said, into many families and clans; and it seemed good to them that their chiefs should assemble together, and choose one to be king and ruler over the whole people. So they met in a great assembly for this purpose, and found that five of the greatest lords all desired the sovereignty of Erin. These five were Bóv the Red, and Ilbrech of Assaroe, and Lir from the Hill of the White Field, which is on Slieve Fuad in Armagh; and Midir the Proud, who dwelt at Slieve Callary in Longford; and Angus of Brugh na Boyna, which is now New Grange on the river Boyne, where his mighty mound is still to be seen. All the Danaan lords saving these five went into council together, and their decision was to give the sovereignty to Bóv the Red, partly because he was the eldest, partly because his father was the Dagda, mightiest of the Danaans, and partly because he was himself the most deserving of the five.

All were content with this, save only Lir, who thought himself the fittest for royal rule; so he went away from the assembly in anger, taking leave of no one. When this became known, the Danaan lords would have pursued Lir, to burn his palace and inflict punishment and wounding on himself for refusing obedience and fealty to him whom the assembly had chosen to reign over them. But Bóv the Red forbade them, for he would not have war among the Danaans; and he
said, “I am none the less King of the People of Dana because this man will not do homage to me.”

Thus it went on for a long time. But at last a great misfortune befell Lir, for his wife fell ill, and after three nights she died. Sorely did Lir grieve for this, and he fell into a great dejection of spirit, for his wife was very dear to him and was much thought of by all folk, so that her death was counted one of the great events of that time.

Now Bóv the Red came ere long to hear of it, and he said, “If Lir would choose to have my help and friendship now, I can serve him well, for his wife is no longer living, and I have three maidens, daughters of a friend, in fosterage with me, namely, Eva and Aoife and Elva, and there are none fairer and of better name in Erin; one of these he might take to wife.” And the lords of the Danaans heard what he said, and answered that it was true and well bethought. So messengers were sent to Lir, to say that if he were willing to yield the sovereignty to Bóv the Red, he might make alliance with him and wed one of his foster-children. To Lir, having been thus gently entreated, it seemed good to end the feud, and he agreed to the marriage. So the following day he set out with a train of fifty chariots from the Hill of the White Field and journeyed straight for the palace of Bóv the Red, which was by Lough Derg on the river Shannon. Arriving there, he found about him nothing but joy and glad faces, for the renewal of amity and concord; and his people were welcomed, and well entreated, and handsomely entertained for the night.

And there sat the three maidens on the same couch with the Danaan Queen, and Bóv the Red bade Lir choose which one he would have to wife.

“The maidens are all fair and noble,” said Lir, “but the eldest is first in consideration and honour, and it is she that I will take, if she be willing.”

“The eldest is Eva,” said Bóv the Red, “and she will wed thee if it be pleasing to thee.” “It is pleasing,” said Lir, and the pair were wedded the same night. Lir abode for fourteen days in the palace of Bóv the Red, and then departed with his bride, to make a great wedding feast among his own people.

In due time after this Eva, wife of Lir, bore him two fair children, a daughter and a son. The daughter’s name was Fionnuala of the Fair Shoulder, and the son’s name was Hugh. And again she bore him two sons, Fiachra and Conn; and at their birth she died. At this Lir was sorely grieved and afflicted, and but for the great love he bore to his four children he would gladly have died too.

When the folk at the palace of Bóv the Red heard that, they also were sorely grieved at the death of their foster child, and they lamented her with keening and with weeping. Bóv the Red said, “We grieve for this maiden on account of the good man we gave her to, and for his friendship and fellowship; howbeit our friendship shall not be sundered, for we shall give him to wife her sister, namely Aoife.”

Word of this was brought to Lir, and he went once more to Lough Derg to the palace of Bóv the Red, and there he took to wife Aoife, the fair and wise, and brought her to his own home. And Aoife held the children of Lir and of her sister in honour and affection; for indeed no one could behold these four children without giving them the love of his soul.

For love of them, too, came Bóv the Red often to the house of Lir, and he would take them to his own house at times and let them spend a while there, and then to their own home again. All of the People of Dana who came visiting and feasting to Lir had joy and delight in the children, for their beauty and gentleness; and the love of their father for them was exceedingly great, so that he would rise very early every morning to go down among them and play with
them.

Only, alas, a fire of jealousy began to burn at last in the breast of Aoife, and hatred and bitter ill-will grew in her mind towards the children of Lir. And she feigned an illness, and lay under it for the most of a year, meditating a black and evil deed. At last she said that a journey from home might recover her, and she bade her chariot be yoked and set out, taking with her the four children. Fionnuala was sorely unwilling to go with her on that journey, for she had a misgiving, and a prevision of treachery and of kin-slaying against her in the mind of Aoife. Yet she was not able to avoid the mischief that was destined for her.

So Aoife journeyed away from the Hill of the White Field, and when she had come some way she spoke to her people and said, “Kill me, I pray ye, the four children of Lir, who have taken the love of their father from me, and ye may ask of me what reward ye will.” “Not so,” said they, “by us they shall never be killed; it is an evil deed that you have thought of, and evil it is but to have spoken of it.”

When they would not consent to her will, she drew a sword and would have slain the children herself, but her womanhood overcame her and she could not. So they journeyed on westward till they came to the shores of Loch Derryvaragh, and there they made a halt and the horses were outspanned. Aoife bade the children bathe and swim in the lake, and they did so. Then Aoife by Druid spells and witchcraft put upon each of the children the form of a pure white swan, and she cried to them:---

“Out on the lake with you, children of Lir!
Cry with the waterfowl over the mere!
Breed and seed of you ne’er shall I see;
Woeful the tale to your friends shall be.”

Then the four swans turned their faces towards the woman, and Fionnuala spoke to her and said, “Evil is thy deed, Aoife, to destroy us thus without a cause, and think not that thou shalt escape punishment for it. Assign us even some period to the ruin and destruction that thou hast brought upon us.”

“I shall do that,” said Aoife, “and it is this: in your present forms shall ye abide, and none shall release you till the woman of the South be mated with the man of the North. Three hundred years shall ye be upon the waters of Derryvaragh, and three hundred years upon the Straits of Moyle between Erinn and Alba, and three hundred years in the seas by Erris and Inishglory, and then shall the enchantment have an end.”

Upon this, Aoife was smitten with repentance and she said, “Since I may not henceforth undo what has been done, I give you this, that ye shall keep your human speech, and ye shall sing a sad music such as no music in the world can equal, and ye shall have your reason and your human will, that the bird-shape may not wholly destroy you.” Then she became as one possessed, and cried wildly like a prophetess in her trance:—

“Ye with white faces! Ye with the stammering Gaelic on your tongues!
Soft was your nurture in the King’s house—
Now shall ye know the buffeting wind!
Nine hundred years upon the tide.

The heart of Lir shall bleed!
None of his victories shall stead him now!
Woe to me that I shall hear his groan,
Woe that I have deserved his wrath!”

Then they caught and yoked her horses, and Aoife went on her way till she reached the palace of Bóv the Red. Here she and her folk were welcomed and entertained, and Bóv the Red inquired of her why she had not brought with her the children of Lir.
“I brought them not,” she replied, “because Lir loves thee not, and he fears that if he sends his children to thee, thou wouldst capture them and hold them for hostages.”

“That is strange,” said Bóv the Red, “for I love those children as if they were my own.” And his mind misgave him that some treachery had been wrought; and he sent messengers privily northwards to the Hill of the White Field. “For what have ye come?” asked Lir. “Even to bring your children to Bóv the Red,” said they. “Did they not reach you with Aoife?” said Lir. “Nay,” said the messengers, “but Aoife said you would not permit them to go with her.”

Then fear and trouble came upon Lir, for he surmised that Aoife had wrought evil upon the children. So his horses were yoked and he set out upon his road southwestward, until he reached the shores of Loch Derryvaragh. But as he passed by that water, Fionnuala saw the train of horsemen and chariots, and she cried to her brothers to come near to the shore, “for,” said she, “these can only be the company of our father who have come to follow and seek for us.”

Lir, by the margin of the lake, saw the four swans, and heard them talking with human voices, and he halted and spoke to them. Then said Fionnuala: “Know, O Lir, that we are thy four children, and that she who has wrought this ruin upon us is thy wife and our mother’s sister, through the bitterness of her jealousy.” Lir was glad to know that they were at least living, and he said, “Is it possible to put your own forms upon you again?” “It is not possible,” said Fionnuala, “for all the men on earth could not release us until the woman of the South be mated with the man of the North.” Then Lir and his people cried aloud in grief and lamentation, and Lir entreated the swans to come on land and abide with him since they had their human reason and speech. But Fionnuala said, “That may not be, for we may not company with men any longer, but abide on the waters of Erinn nine hundred years. But we have still our gift of Gaelic speech, and moreover we have the gift of uttering sad music, so that no man who hears it thinks aught worth in the world save to listen to that music forever. Do you abide by the shore for this night and we shall sing to you.”

So Lir and his people listened all night to the singing of the swans, nor could they move nor speak till morning, for all the high sorrow of the world were in that music, and it plunged them in dreams that could not be uttered.

Next day Lir took leave of his children and went on to the palace of Bóv the Red. Bóv reproached him that he had not brought with him his children. “Woe is me,” said Lir, “it was not I that would not bring them; but Aoife there, your own foster child and their mother’s sister, put upon them the forms of four snow-white swans, and there they are on the Loch of Derryvaragh for all men to see; but they have kept still their reason and their human voice and their Gaelic.

Bóv the Red started when he heard this, and he knew that what Lir had said was true. Fiercely he turned to Aoife, and said, “This treachery will be worse, Aoife, for you than for them, for they shall be released in the end of time, but thy punishment shall be forever.” Then he smote her with a druid wand and she became a Demon of the Air, and flew shrieking from the hall, and in that form she abides to this day.

As for Bóv the Red, he came with his nobles and attendants to the shores of Loch Derryvaragh, and there they made an encampment, and the swans conversed with them and sang to them. And as the thing became known, other tribes and clans of the People of Dana would also come from every part of Erinn and stay awhile to listen to the swans, and depart again to their homes; and most of all came their own friends and fellow pupils from the Hill of the White Field. No such music as theirs, say the historians of ancient times, ever was heard in Erinn, for foes who heard it were at peace, and men stricken with pain or sickness felt their ills no more; and the memory of it remained with them when they went away, so that a great peace and
sweetness and gentleness was in the land of Erinn for those three hundred years that the swans abode in the waters of Derryvaragh.

But one day Fionnuala said to her brethren, “Do ye know, my dear ones, that the end of our time here is come, all but this night only?” Then great sorrow and distress overcame them, for in the converse with their father and kinsfolk and friends they had half forgotten that they were no longer men, and they loved their home on Loch Derryvaragh, and feared the angry waves of the cold northern sea. But early next day they came to the lough-side to speak with Bób the Red and with their father, and to bid them farewell, and Fionnuala sang to them her last lament. Then the four swans rose in the air and flew northward till they were seen no more, and great was the grief among those they left behind; and Bób the Red let it be proclaimed throughout the length and breadth of Erin that no man should henceforth presume to kill a swan, lest it might chance to be one of the children of Lir.

Far different was the dwelling place which the swans now came to, from that which they had known on Loch Derryvaragh. On either side of them, to north and south, stretched a wide coast far as the eye could see, beset with black rocks and great precipices, and by it ran fiercely the salt, bitter tides of an ever-angry sea, cold, grey and misty; and their hearts sank to behold it and think that there they must abide for three hundred years.

Ere long, one night, there came a thick murky tempest upon them, and Fionnuala said, “In this black and violent night, my brothers, we may be driven apart from each other; let us therefore appoint a meeting place where we may come together again when the tempest is overpast.” And they settled to meet at the Seal Rock, for this rock they had now all learned to know.

By midnight the hurricane descended upon the Straits of Moyle, and the waves roared upon the coast with a deafening noise, and thunder bellowed from the sky, and lightning was all the light they had. The swans were driven apart by the violence of the storm, and when at last the wind fell and the seas grew calm once more, Fionnuala found herself alone upon the ocean tide not far from the Seal Rock. And thus she made her lament:—

“Woe is me to be yet alive”
My wings are frozen to my sides.
Well-nigh has the tempest shattered my heart,
And my comely Hugh parted from me!

O my beloved ones, my Three,
Who slept under the shelter of my feathers,
Shall you and I ever meet again
Until the dead rise to life?

Where is Fiachra, where is Hugh?
Where is my fair Conn?
Shall I henceforth bear my part alone?
Woe is me for this disastrous night!”

Fionnuala remained upon the Seal Rock until the morrow morn, watching the tossing waters in all directions around her, until at last she saw Conn coming towards her, and his head drooping and feathers drenched and disarrayed. Joyfully did the sister welcome him and after a long while, behold, Fiachra also approaching them, cold and wet and faint, and the speech was frozen in him that not a word he spake could be understood. So Fionnuala put her wings about
him, and said, “If but High came now, how happy should we be!”

In no long time after that they saw Hugh also approaching them across the sea, and his head was dry and his feathers fair and unruffled, for he had found shelter from the gale. Fionnuala put him under her breast, and Conn under her right wing and Fiachra under her left, and covered them wholly with her feathers. “O children,” she said to them, “evil though you think this night to have been, many such a one shall we know from this time forward.”

So there the swans continued, suffering cold and misery upon the tides of Moyle; and one while they would be upon the coast of Alba and another upon the coast of Erinn, but the water they might not leave. At length there came upon them a night of bitter cold and snow such as they had never felt before, and Fionnuala sang this lament:—

“Evil is this life.
The cold of this night,
The thickness of the snow
The sharpness of the wind—

How long have they lain together,
Under my soft wings,
The waves beating upon us,
Conn and Hugh and Fiachra?

Aoife has doomed us,
Us, the four of us,
Tonight to this misery—
Evil is this life.”

Thus for a long time they suffered, till at length there came upon the Straits of Moyle a long night of January so piercing cold that the like of it had never been felt. And the swans were gathered together upon Seal Rock. The waters froze into ice around them, and each of them became frozen in his place, so that their feet and feathers clung to the rock; and when the day came and they strove to leave the place, the skin of their feet and the feathers of their breasts clove to the rock, and they came naked and wounded away.

“Woe is me, O children of Lir,” said Fionnuala, “we are now indeed in an evil state, for we cannot endure the salt water, yet we may not be away from it; and if the salt water gets into our sores we shall perish of it.” And thus she sang:—

“Tonight we are full of keening;
No plumage to cover our bodies;
And cold to our tender feet

Are the rough rocks all awash.

Cruel to us was Aoife,
Who played her magic upon us,
And drove us out to the ocean,
Four wonderful, snow-white swans.

Our bath is the frothing brine
In the bay by red rocks guarded,
For mead at our father’s table
We drink of the salt blue sea.

Three sons and a single daughter—
In clefts of the cold rocks dwelling,
The hard rocks, cruel to mortals.
—Ware full of keeping tonight.”

So they went forth again upon the Straits of Moyle, and the brine was grievously sharp
and bitter to them, but they could not escape it nor shelter themselves from it. Thus they were,
till at last their feathers grew again and their sores were healed.

On one day it happened that they came to the mouth of the river Bann in the north of
Erinn, and there they perceived a fair host of horsemen riding on white steeds and coming
steadily onward from the southwest. “Do ye know who yon riders are, children of Lir?” asked
Fionnuala. “We know not,” said they, “but it is likely they are some part of the People of Dana.”
Then they moved to the margin of the land, and the company they had seen came down to meet
them; and behold, it was Hugh and Fergus, the two sons of Bóv the Red, and their nobles and
attendants with them, who had long been seeking for the swans along the coast of the Straits of
Moyle.

Most lovingly and joyfully did they greet each other, and the swans inquired concerning
their father Lir, and Bóv the Red, and the rest of their kinsfolk.

“They are well,” said the Danaans; “and at this time they are all assembled together in the
palace of your father at the Hill of the White Field, where they are holding the Festival of the
Age of Youth. They are happy and gay and have no weariness or trouble, save that you are not
among them, and that they have not known where you were since you left them at Lough
Derryvaragh.”

“That is not the tale of our lives,” said Fionnuala.

After that the company of the Danaans departed and brought word of the swans to Bóv
the Red and to Lir, who rejoiced to hear that they were living, “for,” said they, “the children shall
obtain relief in the end of time.” And the swans went back to the tides of Moyle and abode there
till their time to be in that place had expired.

When that day had come, Fionnuala declared it to them, and they rose up wheeling in the
air, and flew westward across Ireland till they came to the Bay of Erris, and there they abode as
was ordained. Here it happened that among those of mortal men whose dwellings bordered on
the bay was a young man of gentle blood, by name Evric, who having heard the singing of the
swans came down to speak with them, and became their friend. After that he would often come to
hear their music, for it was very sweet to him; and he loved them greatly, and they him. All their
story they told him, and he it was who set it down in order, even as it is here narrated.

Much hardship did they suffer from cold and tempest in the waters of the Western Sea,
yet not so much as they had to bear by the coasts of the ever-stormy Moyle, and they knew that
the day of redemption was drawing near. In the end of the time Fionnuala said, “Brothers, let us
fly to the Hill of the White Field, and see how Lir our father and his household are faring.” So
they arose and set forward on their airy journey until they reached the Hill of the White Field,
and thus it was that they found the place: namely, desolate and thorny before them, with naught
but green mounds where once were the palaces and homes of their kin, and forests of nettles
growing over them, and never a house nor a hearth. And the four drew closely together and
lamented aloud at that sight, for they knew that old times and things had passed away in Erinn,
and they were lonely in a land of strangers, where no man lived who could recognize them when they came to their human shapes again. They knew not that Lir and their kin of the People of Dana yet dwelt invisible in the bright world within the Fairy Mounds, for their eyes were holden that they should not see, since other things were destined for them than to join the Danaan folk and be of the company of the immortal Shee.

So they went back again to the Western Sea until the holy Patrick came into Ireland and preached the Faith of the One God and of the Christ. But a man of Patrick’s men, namely the Saint Mochaovóg, came to the Island of Inishglory in Erris Bay, and there built himself a little church of stone, and spent his life in preaching to the folk and in prayer. The first night he came to the island the swans heard the sound of his bell ringing at matins on the following morn, and they leaped in terror, and the three brethren left Fionnuala and fled away. Fionnuala cried to them, “What ails you, beloved brothers?” “We know not,” said they, “but we have heard a thin and dreadful voice, and we cannot tell what it is.” “That is the voice of the bell of Mochaovóg,” said Fionnuala, “and it is that bell which shall deliver us and drive away our pains, according to the will of God.”

Then the brethren came back and hearkened to the chanting of the cleric until matins were performed. “Let us chant our music now,” said Fionnuala. So they began, and chanted a solemn, slow, sweet, fairy song in adoration of the High King of Heaven and Earth.

Mochaovóg heard that, and wondered, and when he saw the swans he spoke to them and inquired of them. They told him that they were the children of Lir. “Praised be God for that,” said Mochaovóg. “Surely it is for your sakes that I have come to this island above every other island that is in Erinn. Come to land now, and trust in me that your salvation and release are at hand.”

So they came to land, and dwelt with Mochaovóg in his own house, and there they kept the canonical hours with him and heard mass. And Mochaovóg caused a good craftsman to make chains of silver for the swans, and put one chain between Fionnuala and Hugh and another between Conn and Fiachra; and they were a joy and solace of mind to the Saint, and their own woe and pain seemed to them dim and far off as a dream.

Now at this time it happened that the King of Connacht was Lairgnen, son of Colman, and he was betrothed to Deoca, daughter of the King of Munster. And so it was that when Deoca came northward to be wedded to Lairgnen she heard the tale of the swans and of their singing, and she prayed the king that he would obtain them for her, for she longed to possess them. But Lairgnen would not ask them of Mochaovóg. Then Deoca set out homeward again, and vowed that she would never return to Lairgnen till she had the swans; and she came as far as the church of Dalua, which is now called Kildaloe, in Clare. Then Lairgnen sent messengers for the birds to Mochaovóg, but he would not give them up.

At this Lairgnen was very wroth, and he went himself to Mochaovóg, and he found the cleric and the four birds at the altar. But Lairgnen seized upon the birds, by their silver chains, two in each hand, and dragged them away to the place where Deoca was; and Mochaovóg followed them. But when they came to Deoca and she laid her hands upon the birds, behold their covering of feathers fell off and in their places were three shrunken and feeble old men and one lean and withered old woman, fleshless and bloodless from extreme old age. And Lairgnen was struck with amazement and fear, and went out from that place.

Then Fionnuala said to Mochaovóg, “Come now and baptize us quickly, for our end is near. And if you are grieved at parting from us, know that also to us it is a grief. Do thou make our grave when we are dead, and place Conn at my right side and Fiachra at my left, and Hugh
before my face, for thus they were wont to be when I sheltered them on many a winter night by the tides of Moyle.”

So Mochaovóg baptized the three brethren and their sister; and shortly thereafter they found peace and death, and they were buried even as Fionnuala had said. And over their tomb a stone was raised, and their names and lineage graved on it in branching Ogham; and lamentation and prayers were made for them, and their souls won to heaven.

But Mochaovóg was sorrowful, and grieved after them so long as he lived on earth.