

The Salmon of Knowledge



One of Ancient Irelands Great Stories

"Truth in our hearts, strength in our limbs and deeds according to our words" was the motto of The Fianna the noble warriors who lived in Ireland long ago. It is said that no man could join the Fianna until he could pass the following tests. He had to be able to:

Recite the twelve books of poetry which told of the great deeds of the heroes of ancient Ireland.

Defend himself against the spears of nine warriors.

Race through the oak and birch woods of Ireland without breaking a twig.

Leap over a standing spear the height of himself.

Pass under a stick as low as his knee.

Remove a thorn from his foot while running.

The great leader of The Fianna was called Cumhall. His son Fionn was only a small child when the men of Clan Mórna killed Cumhall in battle. His mother was afraid that Clan Mórna would try to kill Fionn too. She asked two wise women to take to hide him in a safe place and care for him.

The wise women took Fionn to a lonely valley deep in the woods on Slieve Bloom in the centre of Ireland. The young boy learned from them many of the stories and accounts of the great heroes. Not only did they fill his mind with wondrous lore and tales they also took care of his physical education.

They taught him to swim by throwing him into a deep pool in the Nore River and leaving him to make his own way out. To train him to run quickly they made him herd hares in a field with no fence or hedge. Fionn grew up straight and tall. At last the day came for him to leave the lonely valley in Slieve Bloom and the wise women and go to one of the wise druids called Finnéigeas to learn the ancient art of poetry.

Finnéigeas lived beside the river Boyne in Cuige na Mí. He had chosen that place because it was always beside flowing river water that poetry was revealed to him.

Near to his cabin grew the nine hazel trees of knowledge. Their branches overhung a deep pool in the River Boyne. Nuts of wisdom fell from these trees into the pool and in that pool lived, the salmon of knowledge. The ancient druids had foretold that whoever first ate of this salmon would possess all the wisdom in the world.

Finnéigeas had fished for many long years, but failed to catch the salmon of knowledge. A short time after Fionn came to him he fished for the salmon and succeeded in catching it. Finnéigeas was delighted. He instructed Fionn to cook the salmon but not to eat any of it. Fionn cooked the salmon with care, turning it over and over. When it was ready he served it to his master.

Finnéigeas saw that Fionn was changed. In his eyes shone the light of wisdom.

"Tell me boy, have you eaten any of this salmon?" he asked.

"No master, I have not, but as I was cooking the salmon a blister rose on the skin and when I tried to smooth it down I burnt my thumb. I put it in my mouth to ease the pain."

Finnéigeas knew then that Fionn had received the wisdom of the salmon.

"Here, take the salmon of knowledge and eat it since you have tasted it first" he said returning the fish to him.

Fionn ate the salmon and as he did so he became possessed of all the wisdom of the world. From that time, he had only to bite the thumb that he had burned and he could discover the secrets of hidden magic and see into the future.

Fionn soon left Finnéigeas and journeyed to Tara where he went through many great trials on his way to becoming the leader of the Fianna like his father before him.