

Far away, in the land of Tír na n-Óg, there lived a king. Every seven years there was a race from the fort gates to the top of a steep hill. First to reach the throne on the hilltop was made king. Three times he had won the race, but now he was getting nervous.

One day he sent for the chief druid.

"I am worried that someone else will win the next race," said the king. "Then I would be king no longer."

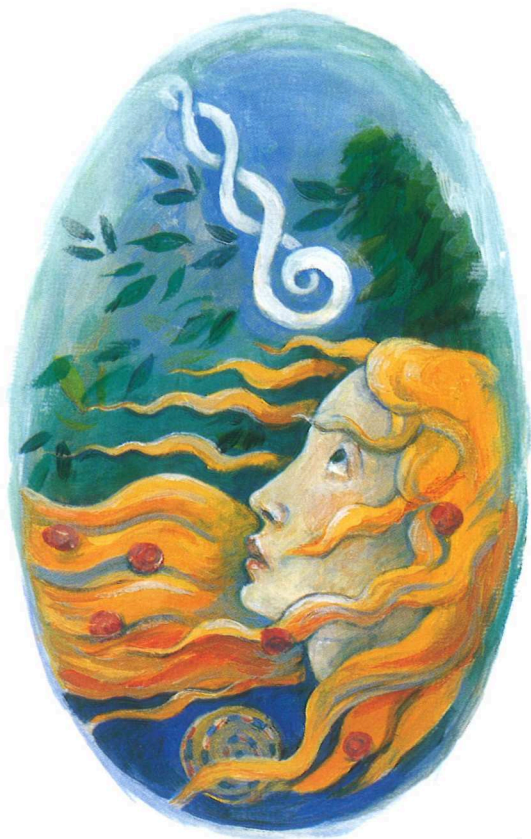
"Don't worry," replied the chief druid, "you are easily the fastest runner. The only person who will ever defeat you is the man your daughter will marry."

"What?" roared the king.

He thought of his only daughter, Niamh, who was so beautiful that every man who saw her fell madly in love with her. It was only a matter of time before she married. The king was furious.

"She will never marry!" he roared. "You must cast a spell on her that will make her ugly and disgusting."





"I cannot do such a thing," answered the chief druid, "I have known Niamh since she was born."

"And so have I," snarled the king. "But not even my own daughter will cause me to lose my crown!"

Then, snatching the chief druid's magic stick, he strode into the garden. With one touch his daughter's head became a pig's!

"Now," raged the king, "no one will ever marry you and I will rule for ever."

Poor Niamh! She ran to her room, screaming and sobbing. She could not believe that her father had done such a thing. What would become of her? Would she ever be an ordinary girl again?

One morning the chief druid came to visit her.

"Oh, Niamh," he said, "if only I could undo the harm your father has done!"

"Then help me, please!" cried Niamh. "Surely you can do something."

"There is only one way to get rid of this wicked spell," the chief druid explained.

"You must marry one of the sons of Fionn Mac Cumhail. If you succeed, the pig's head will disappear."

"But who would ever marry me as I am?" cried Niamh.

"I'm sorry," said the druid, "there is nothing else I can do."

All that day, Niamh thought of what the chief druid had said. At last she made up her mind. When darkness came she dressed herself in a





long hooded cloak. Then, taking her white horse, she set off for Ireland. Over the sea went the wonderful white horse, his hooves scarcely touching the water. Dawn mist shimmered as they reached the shore.

It did not take Niamh long to find Fionn Mac Cumhail and his sons. The forests rang with the shouts of their hunting and the nights echoed with their songs. One of Fionn's sons was named Oisín. He was strong and handsome, swift on his feet and fearless in battle. But he was also kind and gentle. Niamh watched from a distance as he rescued a trapped fawn.

'That is the only man I would marry,' she thought. 'But he is so handsome! Every woman in Ireland must be in love with him. What chance have I?'

But Niamh was desperate. Silently she followed Oisín everywhere, keeping in the shadows and never showing her face. One evening, after a good day's hunting, the Fianna went home. Oisín was left alone. He had so much to carry that he could not manage it all. Niamh darted out from the trees.

"Let me help you," she said. The sinking sun rested on her pig's head, and she almost turned and ran.

But Oisín just said, "Thank you, I have too much to carry alone."

They walked a long way. Oisín told her the names of the flowers and birds. At last they stopped to rest. The day was hot and, as Niamh took off her cloak, Oisín looked at her.



"You are very beautiful," he said, "except for the pig's head. How did it happen?"

Slowly, sadly, Niamh told him her story. Tears ran down her ugly face as she remembered her father's treachery.

"The only way I can become completely human is by marrying one of the sons of Fionn Mac Cumhail," she said.

"Is that all it takes?" laughed Oisín. "That's no problem! I am Oisín, son of Fionn, and I will marry you myself."

They were married at once. Gradually the pig's head disappeared and there was the real Niamh – eyes green as the sea, clouds of golden hair hanging to her waist. A band of diamonds glittered on her forehead and her dress shimmered with pearls. Oisín could not speak.

Out of the shadows came Niamh's faithful horse. Silver tassels hung from the polished saddle, beads of rubies dangled from the reins. But Oisín scarcely noticed. He could not take his eyes off this beautiful girl.

"I will never leave you," he said. "I will follow you to the ends of the earth."

"Then get up on my white horse," replied Niamh, "and come with me to Tír na n-Óg. There you will never grow old. You will be young and handsome for ever and have everything you could ask for. There the days sparkle with sunlight and the nights are never cold."

In a daze of love, Oisín mounted the horse. At once they set off, over mountains, rivers and rocks. Soon they came to the ocean. The white horse never stopped, his feet scarcely touching the waves as they crossed. Oisín barely noticed the wonderful places they passed: the water cities, the palaces of light. His face was buried in Niamh's gorgeous hair as it billowed around her. He no longer remembered who he was or what he had left behind ...









When they reached Tír na n-Óg, the king was overjoyed. Many and many a time he had wept for the evil he had brought on his daughter. Now, when he saw her, he begged her forgiveness.

"All my kingdom is yours," he said. "You and your husband will rule for ever."

So Oisín and Niamh began their life together in Tír na n-Óg. They fished in crystal waters, went swimming in warm lakes. They raced their horses on the sparkling beach, feasted on honey and fruit. Oisín made songs for Niamh as they wandered under the stars.

They were the happiest of lovers and Oisín had all he could wish for.

But though Oisín had forgotten his past life, it sometimes came back in his dreams. Then he was with Fionn, his father, and all his brothers and friends. They laughed and joked or hunted with reckless speed. Oisín would wake up then and cry out in grief, for all the loved faces had vanished and were lost in his dreams.

Early one morning Oisín said to Niamh, "It's no good, each day I remember more and more. I must go back to Ireland to see my father and friends."

"There's nothing to go back for," Niamh said. "You have been in Tír na n-Óg for three centuries. Your father and friends are all dead and gone."

"Nonsense!" laughed Oisín. "I've only been here a few years. I must go, Niamh, just for a day. Then I will return and never leave you again."

"Very well," Niamh said, "since I love you I will let you go. Take my white horse, but be very careful. You must not get off the horse. If you do, you will never see me or Tír na n-Óg again."





Then she kissed him tenderly, but her eyes were full of shadows ...

The white horse took Oisín across the sea as before. But though it pranced as lightly as ever, Oisín felt no joy. Clouds smothered the horizon, thunder echoed and died. At last the horse scrambled ashore. It was raining but Oisín didn't care. He thought of his father and friends – how surprised they would be to see him!

Suddenly he paused. Where were the woods he had hunted in? And the river – where were the stepping-stones? A bridge stretched over it, people were coming and going. How puny they looked, and how they stared at him! It was very strange.

"Where can I find Fionn Mac Cumhail?" he asked a girl. But the girl shook her head.

"Never heard of him," she said.

Puzzled and upset, Oisín rode further.

"Where are Fionn Mac Cumhail and his warriors, the Fianna?" he asked a group of men.





They looked at one another and shrugged. Then one old man spoke.

"Fionn and the Fianna? My grandfather used to talk about them. But they're all dead and gone this three hundred years."

Three hundred years! Oisín remembered what Niamh had said. Could it be true? He would go to the Hill of Allen where Fionn had his fort – surely he'd see them there! But the fort was in ruins. Weeds and nettles grew up between the stones.

Oisín was heartbroken. He could not believe that his father and friends were dead.

"I'll go to Tara," he thought, "to the High King himself. Surely there, someone will tell me the truth." He turned the patient horse around and headed north.



Beside the road some men were trying to lift a stone.

"They're so weak!" thought Oisín. "Not even six together can lift it, but I could do it with one hand."

He leaned from the saddle and tossed the stone easily into the cart. The men gasped. But instantly there was a snap! The stirrup broke and Oisín tumbled off the horse. As he hit the ground, Niamh's warning was screaming in his ears – but it was too late. The proud, handsome warrior disappeared



and Oisín became a withered old man. The white horse tossed his head and galloped away.

Someone rushed from a nearby hut. It was the holy man, Patrick. Lifting Oisín up in his arms, he carried him inside. For days he nursed him, while Oisín told him of Fionn and the Fianna and the days of long ago.

Then Oisín died.



It was the end of the Fianna, the last great band of heroes and poets. And maybe, too, it was the end of Tír na n-Óg, for Niamh of the golden hair was never seen again ...

