

Fionn MacCumhaill and the Lamb, as told by Joe Heaney of Connemara

Well, you know who Fionn MacCumhaill was; I explained that. Anyway he was traveling through the mountains with eight of his men, and they came to a house. And seeing that the night was bad, they said “We’ll ask for lodging here ‘til morning.” And they went in, there was a very, very ancient old man sitting at the fire. And there was one of the most beautiful women they ever saw in their life, sitting on another corner of the fire. And when they came in, the old man welcomed them, and they sat down, and he said to the woman, “Get up and get them something to eat.” And she laid out the most gorgeous feed you ever saw in your life, for them, and they sat down.

Now there was Goll mac Morna, a very strong man. Probably one of the strongest men that ever lived. There was Oisín and his son Oscar. Conan Maol Monachtan [???]. This is the man that was always causing trouble: Conan Maol. He was baldy headed, and there’s a little story about him. And once upon a time the Fianna Éireann was under a spell, in a certain courthouse. And they were all tied stuck to the floor, they couldn’t get out of it. And they found out the only way they’d get released is to take a pint of blood out of Fionn MacCumhaill’s head. This is to tell you a little bit about Conan; he was always in trouble. And put the blood around the area they were on the floor, so they could get up then. And they did, and when they came to Conan Maol, there was no blood left. So they had to pull him off the floor, and he left an awful lot of the back end on the floor. And they did, then they killed a sheep, and tied that skin around his back, and every year they used to cut five yards of wool off that side of his back. And that used to make a jacket and a trouser for them. And for Conan.

But he was always insulting people and getting into trouble. And while they were eating, there was a lamb tied to the wall, and the lamb broke loose. And he came around the table and he started, now, and he knocked over the table. And Fionn MacCumhaill said to Conan, “Get up and tie that lamb.” Conan went up and the lamb knocked him down too. And then he said to each and every one of them, even to Goll mac Morna, “Get up and tie,” and the lamb knocked him down too. And Fionn said, “I suppose I’ll suffer the same fate,” which he did.

And the old man got up and tied up the lamb. And then when the meal was over, Fionn MacCumhaill said to himself, “I’ll go over and talk to this pretty lady,” so he did, and she said, “You had me once, and you cannot have me again.” And she said the same thing to all the Fianna that was with Fionn. So they slept there that night, and in the morning when they were leaving, Fionn MacCumhaill said to the old man, “We came here last night, and we had your hospitality. Will you please tell me something: why is it that you could tie the lamb up, and we couldn’t? Why is it that the girl said ‘you had me once,’ and I never saw her in my life before,” he said, “and ‘you can never have me again’?”

“Well,” he said, “The lamb was Life. And,” he said, “Life can tie you up, anytime it wants. The girl is called Youth. You had that once, and you’ll never have it again. And I am Death. And I have the power over Life and Youth, and that’s why I could tie that lamb, and you couldn’t.”

So that’s the story about that.

