

OUR LITTLE
CELTIC
COUSIN OF LONG AGO



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by

EVALEEN STEIN





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CHAPTER I

The TailltENN FAIR

The August sun was shining brightly over the Irish meadows skirting a narrow river that glittered with such a silvery light you would never have thought its name was the Blackwater. Neither would you have supposed the place on its bank in front of which were moored scores of oddly built boats was really the very tiny old village of Tailltenn. No, you would have declared that it was a gay though rather queer looking city, and could scarcely have believed that in a week's time all its noise and bustle would vanish and only the few wattled houses of the village be left.

For Tailltenn in August, when its great fair was held, and Tailltenn the rest of the year were two very different places.

But never mind about Tailltenn the rest of the year, for our story begins right in the middle of the fair, which was surprisingly like our fairs of to-day. And this seems strange, considering that it was almost

exactly nine hundred years ago; that is to say, it was August of the year 1013.

But people nine hundred years ago liked to show and buy things and enjoyed racing and games and entertainment of all kinds just as well as we do, and anyone who could amuse was sure to have plenty of folks looking on. So it was that the Celtic boy, Ferdiad, who had stopped to watch a specially skilful juggler, soon found himself squeezed into a crowded circle of people and presently a red-headed lad of about his own age was pushed close beside him.

Both smiled good-naturedly, and, "Look!" cried Ferdiad, bending his eyes on the juggler, "I have counted, and he has nine swords and nine little silver shields and nine balls, and he keeps them all up in the air at once and hasn't let one fall!"

"He's the best I ever saw!" said the other boy gazing admiringly at the man, who was dressed in a loose tunic of saffron-colored linen with a wide girdle of scarlet. On his legs were long tight-fitting trousers of the same material and his shoes were of thick leather without heels and laced with red cords. A short scarlet cape with a pointed hood lay on the ground where he had thrown it when he began his performance.

Suddenly, with a few dextrous movements, he caught one by one the balls and swords and shields he had been tossing about, and snatching up one of the latter began passing it among the crowd.

A few small silver coins were dropped into it and two or three little silver rings which often passed instead of coins. People used but little regular money and generally paid for things by exchanging something else for them, as perhaps a measure of wheat or honey, which every one liked; or, if the thing bought was valuable, often a cow or two did for money.

As now the juggler was coming their way with his shield, the two boys strolled off together; for though each had a few silver rings tucked into his girdle for spending money, they had other plans for disposing of these.

When they had gone a short distance they stopped and looked each other over. Both were tall and straight and well grown for their age, which was about twelve years; and their bare heads shone in the sunlight, Ferdiad's as yellow as the other boy's was red. Ferdiad wore a tight scarlet jacket with sleeves striped with green and a kilted skirt reaching just above his bare knees; below them were leggins of soft leather laced

with cords tipped with silver as were also his moccasin-like shoes. He had a short cape made of strips of brown and green cloth sewn together, but as the day was warm this hung over one shoulder and was only loosely fastened by a silver brooch. The other boy, who had come from a little different part of the country, was dressed in the fashion of his own home. His jacket was much like Ferdiad's except that it was yellow, and instead of kilts he wore long tight-fitting trousers of gray; his cape also was gray figured with black.

Presently he said to Ferdiad, with a frank smile, "My name is Conn and my home is in the kingdom of Munster where my father is a bo-aire. I guess yours must be a flaith from the colors of your clothes. My foster-father is a bo-aire, too, and we came to the fair this morning in our chariot and I drove all the way from near Kinkora where we live. What is your name?"

"Ferdiad O'Neill," answered Ferdiad; but seeing Conn look bewildered, "O'Neill," he explained, "means my father's name is Neill; you know 'O' stands for son of."

"Yes," said Conn in surprise, "but why do you have *two* names?"

"Well," replied Ferdiad, "my father says that the

high king, Brian Boru, wants people to start having two names instead of just one. You see, if each family settles on a second name that they can add to their first, then you can tell better who folks are and who are their kin. My father, who is a flaith as you guessed, don't want to put anything after his own name for everyone in the kingdom of Meath, where my home is, knows him as Neill. But he says I may as well begin with the two names. I suppose everybody will have family names afterwhile."

"I suppose so," said Conn, who had been listening with interest. "I hadn't heard about it before, but if you can start a family name by adding 'O' to your father's, then I would be Conn O'Keefe!" and he laughed at the odd new fashion. "But," he went on, "who is your foster-father?"

"He is Angus the poet," answered Ferdiad with a touch of pride. "We live beyond Kells on the Blackwater, and we all came to the fair yesterday. We rowed down the river in our curragh."

Now do not suppose that these two boys were orphans because they talked about their foster-fathers. Far from it! In fact, most Celtic boys, and many girls too, were extra well supplied with parents; for they usu-

ally had not only their own real fathers and mothers but also the foster-fathers and mothers with whom they lived from the time they were seven, or even younger, until they were seventeen. This custom of putting children to be trained in the home of some one else seems strange to us, but the Celtic people of those days thought it the best way to bring them up. Sometimes their foster-parents were close friends of their own fathers and mothers and took the children for the sake of the affection they felt for one another; and sometimes people placed their children with some one they thought specially fitted to train them, and then they paid a certain sum of money for it, or, more likely, a number of cows.

For the Celtic people then had no large cities and few towns even, but lived mostly in the country and the more cows they had the better off they considered themselves. They were divided into tribes or clans with chiefs of different degrees of rank. A bo-aire, as was Conn's father, though a respectable chief, owned no land but was obliged to rent it of some higher chief, or flaith, such as Ferdiad's father; but a bo-aire always had plenty of cattle of his own. So probably Conn's foster-father received enough fat cows to pay for the support of the boy.

Indeed, the Celtic laws decided just what must be paid for feeding and clothing foster children, and decided also, according to their rank, what they should eat and wear; and every one paid a great deal of attention to the laws. It was because of these that Conn had barley porridge with a lump of salty butter on it for breakfast while Ferdiad ate oatmeal with saltless butter which was considered finer; if either had been a king's son he would have had honey on his porridge. And because of these same laws Conn and Ferdiad at once knew each other's rank; for sons of flaiths might wear red, green and brown clothes, while the colors for boys of bo-aire were yellow, black and gray.

But while we have been talking about them, the boys have not been standing still. They had decided at once to be friends, and "My foster-father said I was to go around and find what I wanted to look at," said Conn, "but I think it would be more fun seeing the fair together."

"So do I!" answered Ferdiad. "Let's look around and see what's going on."

CHAPTER II

**Ferdiad and Conn
See the Sights**

The boys were just starting off together when a sudden shouting arose.

“O, look over there!” cried Ferdiad, “I believe they are beginning to course the hounds!”

Both lads ran across a space of green grass to where a low wattled fence enclosed a large oval race-course. People were gathered about it talking excitedly as they watched the lively capers of a dozen or more large wolf hounds that several men held in leash by long leather thongs. The dogs were straining impatiently at their collars, and the moment the signal was given and they were unleashed, “*Br-rh-rh-rh-rh-rh!!*” off they darted, their noses pointing straight ahead and their long legs and powerful bodies bounding past so swiftly that neither Ferdiad nor Conn could make out one from another.

But in a few moments the fastest began to sweep ahead, and Conn cried out excitedly, "Look! Look! That big light brown one I picked out is leading!"

"Not now!" called back Ferdiaid, as they hurried along the fence following the racing dogs with their eyes. "No! now it's the one with the white tip to his tail!"

"Whew!" shouted Conn, as "*Br-rh-rh-rh-rh-rh!*" with a deep roar the baying pack swept past again, "If there isn't that bright blue one that was 'way behind leading them all now!"

And, sure enough, when the panting hounds came around the last quarter of the track it was the bright blue that leaped first across the streak of white lime that marked the goal. There was a great shouting and clapping of hands by the bystanders as the tired dogs were led off.

"Whose hound was it that won? Do you know?" asked Conn of Ferdiaid.

"I heard a man say he belonged to Prince Cormac of Cromarty," answered Ferdiaid. "They say the prize is an enameled dog-collar and a leather leash trimmed with silver. I wonder when the high king will give it to him?"

“Not till the end of the fair, boy,” said a tall man standing near. “The high king isn’t here yet but is coming to-morrow, and there will be games and chariot races yet, and, last of all, the poets’ and story-tellers’ contest.”

“Well,” said Conn as the boys turned away, “that hound race was good,—but I never thought the blue one would win! He was such a handsome color I suppose Prince Cormac must have had him specially dyed for the fair.”

“I dare say,” said Ferdiad, “but I have a green hound at home that is just as handsome, and my foster-mother says when she colors the next wool she spins maybe she will have enough red left to dye another one.”

For the Celts thought oddly colored animals very pretty, and women when they dyed the yarn which they all spun for themselves often emptied what was left in their dye-pots over the family pets. So a purple cat or blue or red dog was no uncommon sight.

But the boys had wandered off from the race track and had come to an open space where were a number of booths covered with green boughs. Here merchants were selling all sorts of things; there were

bows and arrows, swords, shields and spears, bronze horns and trumpets and harps, homespun woollen and linen cloth, and fine silks from beyond the sea, and there were wonderful bracelets and necklaces and torques, a kind of twisted collar, and brooches, all of finely wrought gold and silver; for the Celts, both men and women, loved to wear quantities of golden ornaments and nowhere in all the world were there more skilful goldsmiths than theirs.

In one of the better built booths covered with a thatched roof several scribes were busy. Each held in his lap a thin board with a sheet of vellum on which he wrote, dipping his swan-feather pen into ink held in the tip of a cow's horn fastened to the arm of his chair. Some were writing letters for people who had no ink or vellum of their own or perhaps could not write themselves; while others were copying from books beside them, all of which were for sale. No one had dreamed yet of printing books on presses, so copying them by hand was the only way to make them. Some of the books had initial letters painted in gold and colors, and as the boys passed they looked critically at these.

“They are not so well done as some at the Kinkora

monastery where I go to school,” said Conn. For the most beautiful books were made by the patient hands of the Celtic monks.

“No,” said Ferdiad, “I dare say not. And they can’t compare with the books at the monastery of Kells near where we live.”

“Oh,” he went on eagerly, “you just ought to see the Great Gospel of Saint Columkille that is kept at Kells! The monks there say there’s nothing like it in the whole world!”

“I’ve heard something of that book,” said Conn, “but I don’t know much about it. What is it?”

“Well,” answered Ferdiad, “it’s hundreds of years old and painted with the most wonderful borders and initials and pictures that anybody ever made! The patterns are so fine and the lines lace in and out so perfectly that they say if your eyes are sharp enough you can count hundreds of loops and ornaments on a spot no wider than your finger!”

“I don’t see how anybody ever painted patterns like that!” said Conn. “Who made it?”

“Nobody knows for sure,” answered Ferdiad. “Some say Saint Columkille had it made and some say he did it himself. But everybody declares that

whoever painted it, an angel must have guided his hand, for nobody could have done it without help from Heaven. And then the book has the most wonderful gold case you ever saw!" For most handsome books then each had its own box-like case of gold or silver or carved wood or ivory.

Just then a horse's whinny caught the boys' attention and they went over to the pens where horses and sheep and cows were for sale, and enormous wolf-hounds some of them as large as calves. Around these hounds especially was always a crowd of interested buyers, for the Celts delighted in racing them; also these powerful dogs were useful in protecting their homes at night and in chasing off the packs of wolves that roamed through the great wide forests that covered so much of the land. Presently both boys began to sniff hungrily as they came to that part of the fair where the food was being sold.

"Let's get something to eat!" said Conn, "Aren't you hungry?"

"Yes" said Ferdriad, looking up at the sun, "it's past midday!" And they made their way toward the nearest booth. Beside it was an open fire and over this hung a great bronze kettle in which pieces of

meat were boiling. A man in cook's cap and apron stood by with a long hook of bronze.

"We would like some of your meat, sir," said Ferdiad, and at once the man hooked out some pieces which he placed on an earthen platter; this he set on a low wooden table on the grass beside him, and the boys sitting down on the ground began eating with their fingers as people did then. They finished with some milk served in cups hollowed out of yew wood and some wheaten cakes which the cook's wife had kneaded up with honey and baked on a hot flat stone in front of the fire.

When the boys had eaten, "You be my guest, Conn," said Ferdiad as he paid the man with one of the small silver rings he took from his girdle.

By this time the crowd seemed to be moving toward the grassy space within the race track, so of course Ferdiad and Conn went along. When they reached the place a wrestling match had already begun and after that was running and jumping and quoit throwing and fencing contests, and all the while there was a blaring of trumpets and blowing of great horns or else somebody was twanging on a

harp or shaking castanets of bone, keeping up a noise and excitement for all the world like fairs of to-day.

When the sports were over the afternoon was almost spent and Ferdriad and Conn fairly tired of sight seeing. "Come on," said Ferdriad, "let's go find our curragh and take a row on the river before you go back to your foster-father."

"All right!" said Conn, and off they went toward the river. Near its bank was another grassy space and scattered through it were a number of houses, all of them round; for that was the shape most Celtic people preferred. Each was built of poles placed upright in the ground forming a circle; long rods of hazel from which the bark had been peeled were woven between the poles, making a wattled wall, and the cone-shaped roof was thatched with rushes. These houses, which belonged to the fair and had been built long before for the use of the high-born people attending it, had been freshened up with coats of lime, some glistening, dazzling white in the sunlight, and others decorated with bright stripes in different colors.

Several gayly dressed ladies were walking about and there was a sound of harpstrings in the air. "Are those queens?" asked Conn of Ferdriad, for it was his

first visit to the fair and he had found Ferdiad had been there before.

“Yes,” said Ferdiad, “and my foster-mother is one of the ladies attending the Queen of Meath, so she and my foster sister, Eileen, stay in the big house under the big quicken tree. These houses are for the queens and their ladies and those yonder are for the kings.”

For you must know that Ireland was a land not only of many kinds of parents but also of quantities of kings and queens. The country was divided into ever so many little kingdoms belonging to different tribes or clans, and, as I have told you, in these tribes were many chiefs or flathis of different degrees of rank, but over them all in each kingdom was the king. Some of the kingdoms were larger and stronger than others, so the kings varied in power; but none of them was so important as the high king who ruled them all just as each of them ruled the chiefs under him. But though the high king was called the King of Ireland, the smaller kings fought and quarreled so much among themselves, and so many bold chiefs from countries near by were always trying to gain a foothold in Ireland that the high king seldom really governed the whole land. However, the one who

came nearest to doing it was the great Brian Boru, who hadn't come to the fair yet but was expected the next day. Ferdriad pointed out to Conn a long wooden house built on top of a grassy mound in the middle of the fair where the high king would stay, and close beside it another large building where he would give another great feast in the evening.

Meantime all the other fifteen or twenty kings with their queens and followers were having the best kind of a time and behaving in the politest way to each other; for no matter how much they fought at other times, no one dared to start a quarrel at any of the Celtic fairs, for everybody knew perfectly well that the punishment was death.

But Ferdriad and Conn had come to the water's edge and were just looking for the right boat when a little girl with flying yellow curls came racing toward them, her blue mantle fluttering and her little sandaled feet twinkling as she ran. "O, Ferdriad," she called out, "I was just wishing you would come! Mother says I may go for a little ride on the river if you will take me!"

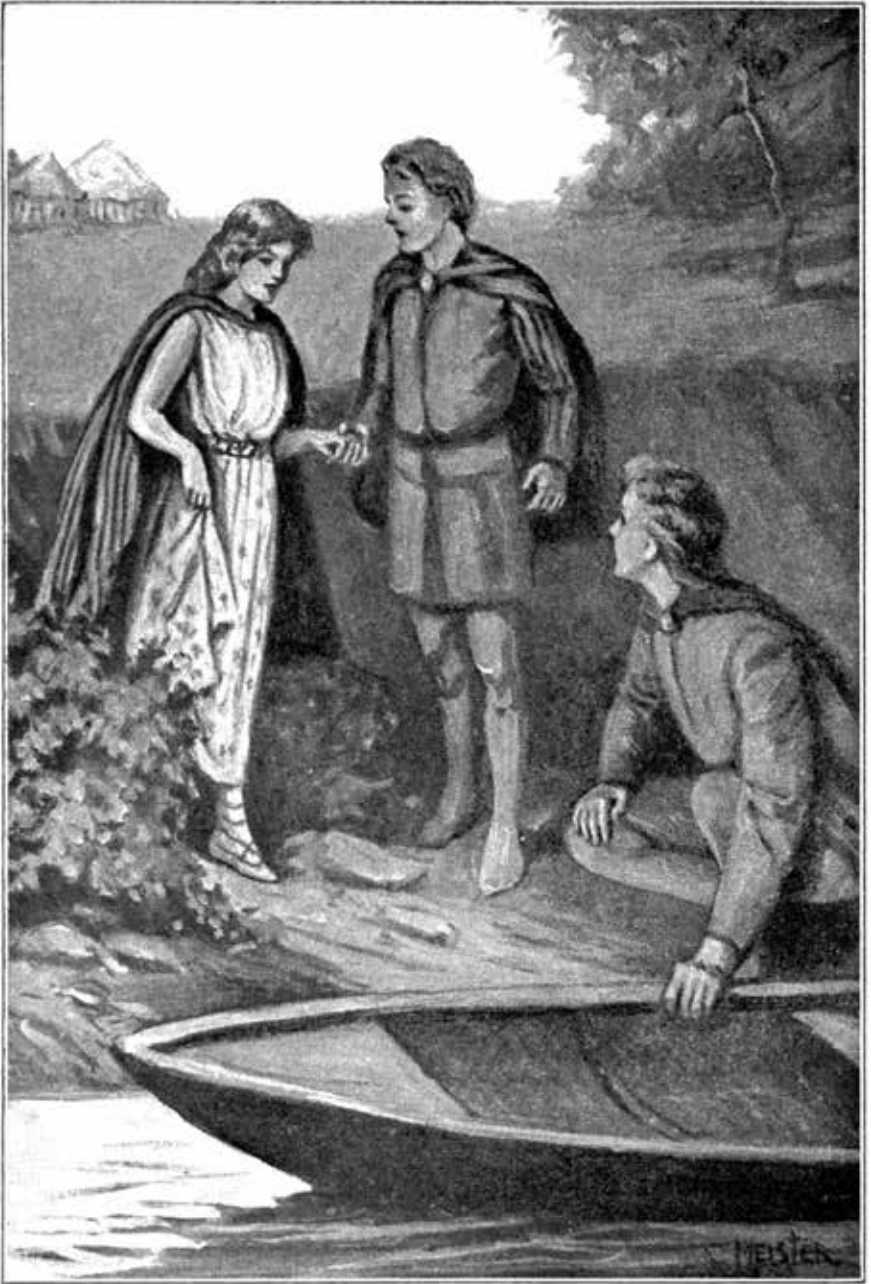
Then seeing Conn, whom she had not noticed

in her eagerness, she drew back with a touch of bashfulness.

“This is my new friend Conn, from Munster,” explained Ferdiad, “and he is going with us. Conn,” he added turning to the boy who was staring shyly at the little girl, “this is my foster-sister, Eileen.”

At this Eileen, with a friendly smile for the new friend, took Ferdiad’s hand as he helped her clamber down the bank and they picked out the boat in which they had come to the fair. It was the kind the Celts called a “curragh” and was made of wickerwork covered with tanned cow-hides which had been stained a dark red. When Eileen had stepped daintily in and seated herself and the boys followed, “Let’s go across the river and see how the fair looks from the other side,” she said, “and then let’s go around the bend and back!”

And Ferdiad and Conn taking up the long oars of hickory did exactly as Eileen commanded.



THEY PICKED OUT THE BOAT IN WHICH THEY HAD COME.