

## Month 7: The Story of Cormac Mac Airt

Once there was a High King in Ireland by the name of Cormac Mac Airt. He was a strong and brave king, and the land prospered under his rule. Cormac had a wife Eithne, beautiful and clever, and two children – a son, growing every day in strength and courage, and a daughter, kind and gentle. Cormac had all that any man – any king – could wish for and yet, he was not happy. Something was missing, and as he looked out over the beautiful green land of Tara, he could feel its absence within him.

Suddenly he heard it, an otherworldly music like nothing he had ever heard. And like Bran before him, he heard the music calling to him with a sweetness that was almost unbearable. As the sound grew louder, he saw a young man coming towards him – tall, with golden hair and a fine purple cloak with a shimmering green and silver lining. In his hand he held a silver branch with three golden apples hanging from it. He shook the branch gently and the strange music filled the air.

Cormac greeted the young man and asked him about the branch. “Tell me”, he said, “about the branch – what is its nature and where does it come from? What must I give you to make it mine?” The young man answered, “It comes from the Isle of Apples, the Land of Promise, the Land Beneath the Waves. It has great power, for when you shake it, everyone who hears it forgets their sorrow. And I will give it to you in exchange for three wishes.”

Cormac did not hesitate. “Done!” he said and stretched out his hand for the branch. The stranger smiled. “I’ll be back in one year” he said, “to claim my first wish.”

With that, he departed, and Cormac thought little more of him until a year later when once more, looking out over the land, he saw the young man approach. “I’ve come for my first wish,” he said, “and it is to have your daughter come away with me.” The king paled, for he loved his daughter dearly, but he had given his word and so he had no choice but to let her go. “I will return next year for my second wish, said the young man, and there was great mourning in Tara, until the king shook the silver branch and all sadness was forgotten.

A year later, the stranger came again and this time he asked for the king’s son. The king wept bitterly, for his son was his pride and joy. “I will give you my whole kingdom if you only leave my son with me,” he said, but the stranger refused and so Cormac had to bid his son farewell.

Well, you would think things couldn’t get any worse, but they did – for the year after, the young man appeared again and this time demanded the king’s wife. At this stage Cormac was a broken man. “You may as well take my life too,” he said, “for you have taken everything that I love.” “Why do you not use the silver branch to forget your sorrow?” asked the young man. Cormac answered “No magic nor music can heal sorrow and regret – the most they can do is make you forget for a little while. If you will not return my family, I will follow you and die in the attempt to bring them home.” The stranger said nothing, just smiled and took the queen’s hand, and led her away into the mist.

Cormac followed through the mist into the land of the Sidhe and on for many miles, but no matter how he tried, he could never catch up with them – they always seemed just about to

disappear into the distance, always walking south into the sun so that he was dazzled by the golden light.

Cormac saw many wonderful and magical sights on his journey through the land of the Sidhe, far too many to recount here. Eventually though, he came to a beautiful silver house thatched with white feathers. In the courtyard outside there was a great fountain with five silver streams flowing from it. Over the fountain there were nine hazel bushes, and beneath them, five silver salmon swam in the water. A couple sat on high thrones behind the fountain. One was a glorious queen with golden hair, and the other was the young man who had taken Cormac's family.

The queen smiled. "Welcome," she said "to the Isle of Apples, the Land of Promise. This is where your family is, and you should know that they are safe and well. For them, it is as if a single day has passed here in the kingdom of Manannan, Ruler of the Ocean." She gestured to the young man beside her and Cormac bowed deeply, for he realised he was in the presence of the great goddess Aine, and the god Manannan beside her. Turning to the king, he said "I would return to you this magic branch and all its wonder if you would give me back my loved ones. For not all the music in the world can make up for the loss of those who are dear to us. Or, if you will not return them to me, I will stay here and give up my kingdom to be with them."

Then Manannan seemed to shift and change from a young man into a figure of great age and wisdom, and he said "No, Cormac – go back to your own land and learn to be a wise king as well as a powerful one. You have been led here to learn your next task, which is to seek true judgement for the rest of your life. Take your family with you, for you have learned now to truly value them. I will let you keep the branch of sweetness but I also have another gift for you, the Cup of Truth, which will break into three pieces when three lies are told over it, but will become whole again when three true things are said."

Cormac and his family feasted that night with the god and goddess. They ate their fill and listened to sweet music and talked together and were grateful to be reunited. The next morning when Cormac awoke, he found himself at home with his family, the magical branch and the Cup of Truth by his side.

Over time, the king became known as Cormac of the Long Beard, one of the greatest of all Irish kings. He was known to be wise and merciful, and a man of excellent judgement with the help of his magic cup. During his reign, Ireland was a golden land, prosperous and peaceful, and always full of music.