

## **An Irish Myth – The WOOING OF ETAIN**

### THE WOOING OF ETAIN

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I.1.

Never such a shivering tale be told  
Etain bathing by the stream one day  
Saw a horseman whose brooch and hair were gold  
He was a man in beautiful array  
His shield and buckle gold, his eyes were grey  
His strap of silver and his five pronged spear  
Gold as the barley at the turn of year.

I.2.

The rider told her of the fairy forts  
Was this prophecy, or was it dream  
Desecration of the fairy world imports  
A nightmare of what we are or seem  
And battle with kings who would deem  
It honor to dispute her name  
But peace within her beauty not reclaim.

I.3

The maidens shied away from such a man  
Others made bold to hold his silver gaze  
Then Etain remembered heaven’s plan  
Something that would haunt her all her days  
The King’s eye healed, another king to faze  
The drowned horses, and the Tethbae birds  
She to be swallowed in the big Queen’s curds.

I.4

The hooves danced with the cutting of the blades  
In tunic red and cloak of deepest green  
He turned his back to Etain and her maids  
Heading back to lands as yet unseen  
She would remember what such colors mean  
Borrowed from her the green eternal world  
The red was rowan berry, death unfurled.

I.5

The High King thought she was his to woo.  
And won her after a summer’s night  
Her heart did not stir for him, as who  
Rode in the memory like a vision of the light  
The king possessed her, did not own her sight  
Nor touch, nor hearing, she was yet another’s  
Whose mystery dwelt in the lives of others

I.6

He saw her unwind her plaited golden hair

Loosening the golden balls with a silver comb  
Her tunic was red and green, each golden layer  
Like the year's turning, handsome as they come  
As sweet as life crammed in a honeycomb  
Her arms, silken, slender, white  
Her head a silver circle in the night.

I.7

Years later, when all that was left was talk  
In Tara there was held a loving feast  
At such momentous meeting lovers balk  
But Echu the King had his magic tryst  
And sent out word the greatest was the least  
Etain's famous beauty now enriched him  
He had seen her bathing, it bewitched him.

II.1

The King's brother, Ailil, was stricken  
The Druid said it was love or jealousy  
So he pleaded with Etain that she quicken  
His life, though he was vowed to celibacy  
Three times a date was set, three times fallacy  
Until stood before Etain her former prince,  
Her husband, Midhir, not forgotten since

II.2

The day she saw him in his red and green  
Reminders of the holly and the berry  
The scent of wild flowers to the eye unseen  
The secret of the eternal in the merry  
Faultless land of the fairy queen  
Which she was, eternal, and he her mate  
Living in an unfallen, unblemished state.

II.3

"I was once your husband in a fairy land  
Where there is no birth in sin or pain  
Only children born to a joyous band  
With yellow hair, white skin, and foxglove stain  
Not withering to age, but honeyed rain  
Sweet water, mead, making a pleasant drink  
Eternal life is promised at the brink

II.4

My first wife, Fuaimneach, was a sorceress  
With a red rowan wand she cast a spell  
Turned you into a pool of water, no less  
Than what was between us, to create hell  
She then turned you into a worm as well  
And as a scarlet butterfly you flew with me  
In a wild tempest across the sea.

II.5

Your father's wife swallowed you in a drink  
You were born on Earth, and lost to me  
How deep is Paradise, I can only think

It meant nothing when you weren't there to be  
Loved by your husband, you know I am he  
Come to reclaim you to your rightful place  
In fairyland within a mythic race.”

#### II.6

The earth-husband, Echu, had a visitor  
A stranger clad in purple and in gold  
With a chess game challenged the Inquisitor  
Let him win, five fold and ten fold  
Dark grey horses, broad-chested, with firm hold  
Wide nostrilled, swift, dappled red ears  
Enamelled bridles for the fifty dears.

#### II.7

The next night there was wagered fifty boars  
Curly-haired, fiery, contained in a blackthorn vat  
Fifty white red-eared cows and calves without sores  
Fifty swords, gold-hilted, ivory blades to follow that  
Three-headed wethers, fifty cloaks. He spat  
Another wager to clear stones, lay a road  
The fairy folk at night worked at such a load.

#### III.1

The final stake was a kiss from Echu's queen  
A month postponed, the hire of fighting men  
But she had already dreamt the red and green  
Her husband had to give permission when  
Midhir asked for a kiss, and in that crafty ken  
Their lips met, and when she opened her eyes  
She was back in the fairy Paradise.

#### III.2

Echu saw two swans with a golden chain  
Fly disappearing into the air  
And in the fairy land, life renewed again  
Etain was to give birth to his heir  
On the first of May, the child was born, so fair  
By Midhir's request, also called Etain  
He didn't mind another's child to gain

#### III.3

By a silver stream mother and daughter dreamed  
Their life eternal, beautiful and kind  
Etain the younger, wondered how life seemed  
So dull, when tales of mortal mind  
Of feast and famine, light and dark combined  
To her, an interesting, fascinating story.  
Tara in its golden Celtic glory.

#### III.4

Echu, at home, longed for his wife  
He dug up mounds to find the fairy fort  
Each morning not a blade of grass or life  
Disturbed the rolling hills of Tara's court  
While ravens came to stir anger, stayed to sport

Blind dogs and cats stood guard with limping hounds  
Scleth and Samhair, Echu's anger knew no bounds.

### III.5

Midhir came back to Tara, to ask  
Why he was persecuted by the King  
"I do not consider you wooed fairly in the task  
You who sought magic ways to bring  
My wife Etain to the world of eternal ring"  
"I will by tomorrow Etain return  
If you desist from deeds, my name to burn".

### III.6

By the third hour on the morrow there were fifty  
Etains in the mist surrounding the mound  
An old hag whose age count was quite thrifty  
Stood before him without a single sound  
Which of them was his true love in the round?  
He saw one with a genuine aura  
Who appeared to be a skillful pourer.

### III.7

That night, with Etain sleeping on his arms  
He found love, remembering his youth  
And he was quietened by her fairy charms  
Her freshness, with her show of ruth  
Till Midhir mocked him with the awful truth  
Confessing his joy to him across the water  
Learnt he had slept with his own, and Etain's daughter.

### IV.1

Such treachery broke the heart of the earthly king  
He now looked at his daughter-wife with pain  
How he was saddened in this golden ring  
Had lost his soul his bitter heart to gain  
Sick at heart that he had with his daughter lain  
She was now pregnant with his child  
So he banished her forthwith to the wild.

### IV.2

Etain was faced with the cruelty of the world  
She who already had been to Paradise  
Now in the wild wood, with the king's anger hurled  
At her beneath the stormy, earthly skies  
She would have to grow old in pain, be wise  
The infant to whom she would give birth  
Snatched from her, to be cradled in the earth.

### IV.3

The men came and snatched away the child  
A beautiful girl, with embroidered cloth  
The name, Etain thrice-born was now defiled  
She was going to be destroyed through wrath  
As the evening hour drew upon the moth  
Wondering which men were angels, which were weak  
To smile on a little girl, not vengeance seek.

IV.4.

Her mother, stricken, wept both night and day  
Mourning her daughter she never would see  
She who was beautiful, was now bereft  
Of gladness, grace, of joy that could not be  
A desert life as dry as dust, no glee  
But mourning like the grey and bitter hag  
Who brought her to earth, the burden of a nag.

IV.5

There were no more feasts at Tara, now deserted  
The King died, his mind and heart oppressed  
Etain searched the mounds, they were converted  
Against the Sidhe a borderland undressed  
To which rough soil her silken face was pressed  
And so to death, it seems for being a mother  
The king her husband, to whom she was wife and daughter.

IV.6

Mind against mortal raged and won the day  
Death was a cup as bitter as the gall  
When offered life, no one seemed to pay  
The end foreclose, to live or not the pall  
Death had such sting, why do we live at all  
Only the fairy folk know the answer  
To live forever as a golden dancer

IV.7

Who can choose to be mortal or immortal?  
A fairy love that can last forever  
A threshold on this earth that has no portal  
Choosing can mean from those we love we sever  
All healing love bands, as if never  
To the wildwoods ringing our departure  
Never signaled by the one-eyed archer.

V.1

With her tunic embroidered at the breast  
Young Etain was taken to the woods  
The men stopped at Findlam's for a rest  
Resolved to go no further the bud  
Where rested the green and red royal blood  
To a guard-dog puppy she was given  
To a humble cottager, at last forgiven.

V.2

Her existence brought a blessing on the couple  
Her beauty all over gained renown  
Her face was fair and full, her body supple  
In beauty, she was given Nature's crown  
And all who knew her loved her, not a frown  
Lived on her handsome forehead, but a glance  
As she embroidered made hearts dance.

V.3

The years went by, untroubled rural calm

The mortal parents were bursting with pride  
The king forgot the child, the dreadful sham  
And soon to mortal doors, which opened wide  
And closed again, as he, his story died  
But in people's hearts there remained a story  
Of Tara, its blight and its glory.

V.4

Eterscelae was a new king in the province  
He heard of Etain's beauty, and resolved  
To go and woo her, he would convince  
Her parents that with her was dissolved  
All harm, all evil, problem not yet solved  
The world with love and wonder would not cease  
There would be a beginning of a peace

V.5

She had been brought up in isolation  
Now to learn the touch of human hand  
A bird flew above in exaltation  
Rested his breast on hers in loving band  
Eyes closed, he stroked her as the land  
From whence she came, from dear earth as a child  
Would come the son of Eterscalae, bound in geasa\*, smiled.

V.6

Born with three gifts, the greatest gifts to see  
What could not be seen by any of sight  
Nor judgment, that brought good to be  
But his father's sins were endless as the night  
Not to shoot birds, in Tara, around in flight  
There was hope that harm in Etain be undone  
Not a stranger be admitted to the dun.

V.7

So Etain birthed a new hero who grew only to die  
Between times, carved out a noble life  
Loved and honoured, though neither could fly  
Back to the end of youth, the end of strife  
Conara, son of Eterscalae with promise rife  
Broke geasa, his heroic antique vows  
The night he was slain in Da Derga's lodging house.

\*promise

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