



Fiannaíocht – An Talún Órga

Leaders Note

An original story inspired by the rich environment we have inherited from our forefathers.

This story has been specially written for macaoimh and it can be read directly.

The Story An Talún Órga

By Ann Connell

It was a sad day in Talún Órga. News spread quickly as church bells rang out in heaving tones. Everyone in the kingdom understood the ominous meaning of the solemn peals. Their chieftain was dead. Solán was a good leader admired and loved by all the people. As the sun slipped from the sky a procession of mourners approached the castle gates. People had travelled from all over the kingdom to pay their last respects to Solán of Talún Órga.

It was not a large kingdom but Talún Órga was prosperous. You see Talún Órga means golden lands and there was a very good reason for that name. Right in the heart of the kingdom was the largest gold mine in Ireland. The people wondered if they would continue to benefit from the kingdom's fortune when the new chieftain came to power. More importantly, they wondered just who their new ruler would be. Solán had twin sons, Saol and Saibhreas, but they were identical at birth and nobody knew who the first-born was. Nothing would be revealed, though, until the council of elders and ministers met to read Solán's will.

A few days later they gathered in the main court of Solán's castle. Both Saibhreas and Saol had indeed grown since they were last seen in the courts of Talún Órga, but neither looked old enough to sit on the throne. The youths were just gone sixteen and as was the custom at the time, each had been sent to the household of another chieftain to learn the ways of court and about life as a warrior. They were not due to return home until their eighteenth birthday, but owing to their father's untimely death, had been summoned home early. Now they sat before the kingdom's ministers to find out what Solán's plans for them were.

Aire stood up. He was the most senior minister; his hands trembled as he cracked the wax seal on the important scroll. He began to read.

By now you will all know of my death. I was not blessed with a long life, but it was a happy one. I am glad that I can now join my beloved wife again but I regret, as I know Aoibhneas does, that we had no opportunity to know our sons as grown men.

It is because I don't know them well enough to name one as heir and that neither has an established birthright that I am compelled to ask this of you. Until one of my sons is crowned on his eighteenth birthday, I charge my ever-trusted minister and friend Aire, to govern the kingdom and to administer a contest between my sons.

Aire paused for breath. He was honoured at the trust Solán placed in him but wondered if he could ever judge between Saol and Saibhreas. He glanced at the boys. Both seemed glad of an opportunity to prove his worthiness. Aire continued reading.

I ask that Saibhreas be given charge of the goldmine and Saol the hunting grounds. Whoever profits the kingdom more in his endeavors is to become chieftain of Talún Órga.

Saibhreas grinned, he certainly must have been his father's favourite: the hunting grounds couldn't possibly be a profitable enterprise for Saol. He turned to his brother, "Why don't you leave now and save yourself the embarrassment of losing?" Saol said nothing. Aire approached them. "Well, the contest will begin tomorrow", he said. "You will be Mine keeper, Saibhreas, and you, Saol, will become Hunts leader." He wished them both luck, but Saibhreas chuckled sarcastically to himself and walked off. Aire looked at Saol, "Your father was a wise man, this is a fair contest." Saol watched as many young courtiers ran to his brother's side. Obviously, they also believed the contest was weighted in favour of Saibhreas.



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Saol awoke at the crack of dawn. He washed, dressed and headed to the kitchens. "Any chance of a bite to eat?", he asked Blasta, the friendly cook. "I see you haven't forgotten your boyhood habits, my young prince. I'd hoped you'd come." He sat down at the big oak table where she had a platter of warm brown bread and butter ready for him. There was a jug of creamy milk and a bowl of sweet honey too. He had forgotten how much he used to enjoy breakfasts in the kitchen. Blasta always fed him well. He devoured his meal, thanked Blasta and headed off towards the hunting grounds.

Autumn was indeed a handsome visitor. The trees wore deep reds and yellows. As the wind whistled through the branches, the leaves dropped cheerily forming a magnificent tapestry on the forest floor. The hunters soon arrived. Saol discussed the needs of the grounds with them. He learned that the numbers of deer and boar were falling rapidly. He discovered that salmon and trout were now rare to local rivers. He asked the hunters to allow him time to consider the problems facing him. Saol spent a week exploring the woodlands. He could see that most of the creatures were busy. Many prepared for a long winter's sleep, others for the arrival of young in early spring. Saol realised that winter would be difficult for the birds and animals; both food and shelter would be in short supply. He examined the river. It was overgrown with weeds in some places, in other places the riverbed had been built up to provide stepping-stones. Saol understood the need to cross the river but knew there was a better way.

Saibhreas began his first week as Mine keeper with breakfast in his private quarters. He summoned tailors and ordered new robes to suit his status. He sent for the mine's managers. He had no interest in how the gold was mined or processed. His only interest was in the finished product. He demanded that the daily output of the mine be doubled and that the miners work longer and harder. They had no choice but to do as he asked. In less than two years not only would this young man be their boss but also their king.

A week later everyone was certain Saibhreas would be victorious, it seemed a pity about Saol, he was a good-hearted lad but he had not inherited much in the line of wisdom from his father, or so whispered the rumours throughout the kingdom, especially when news of his hunting laws spread.

Saol called his hunters to a meeting and to her surprise, Blasta was asked to attend too. Seal began by asking questions of those present. The hunters confirmed his suspicions. They hunted any day the weather allowed. They never came home empty-handed. They were expert marksmen and an arrow would fly through the trees as soon as a creature was detected. Saol listened without commenting. Then he enquired of Blasta, "How are the stores of meat in the kitchen?" "Plentiful, my young prince," she replied, "These men of yours have already provided enough to last well into the spring." Saol smiled his gratitude to her. "It is as I expected, dear Blasta, you may now return to your duties." When she'd left, Saol turned to his men and told them there would be a lot of changes in their work. Instead of hunting wildlife during the winter months, they would help them survive. They would provide for the animals when food was scarce. They would cut down diseased trees and replace them with new ones. They would clear the rivers of weeds and build bridges in place of the stepping-stones. Then come spring, when the woodlands would resurrect into new life hunting could begin again, but only to meet the needs of the kingdom. Many hunters grumbled but Saol insisted, adding that if his plans weren't for the better, his brother would become king and they could return to their old ways. All present then agreed to do as Saol suggested.

In the months that followed Saol and his men learned great respect for the creatures of the wild. No king could be as majestic as a stag, no athlete as lithe as a squirrel, no courtier as graceful as a swan, no man as industrious as an ant. For four months no animal was killed in Talún Órga, but Saol had become the laughing stock of Saibhreas and his followers.

"Your task was to succeed at hunting, not to retire from it.", Saibhreas taunted. Saol said nothing, he knew he was doing what was best for the hunting grounds, and trying to explain to his brother would be pointless. Nobody dared laugh at Saibhreas. Everyone was certain he would be their new chieftain. Things were going well in the mine. The miners were working hard, anyone who didn't, lost a day's pay. In the four months since he had taken over the mine had become three times as profitable. He scoffed when he thought that in the same time Saol hadn't shot a single arrow from his bow. Spring soon came to Talún Órga. Daffodils and crocuses burst through the



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thawing earth. Leaves appeared on trees and birds' songs filled the air. Young animals took their first steps and fledglings fluttered cautiously above their nests. The countryside was breathing with new life. Again Saol called his men to meet him. He asked them to stalk through the woods and take note of the numbers of young animals. Each man seemed flabbergasted as he reported back. Stocks of deer and boar hadn't been so plentiful in years. Almost every female had given birth.

Saol beamed with pleasure, his plan was working. He thanked his men for their hard work and told them they were no longer hunters but gamekeepers. By now Saol had won the respect and admiration of his men. They realised that he was indeed blessed with his father's wisdom. They had also begun to really enjoy their work. They were happy and contented and their cheeriness was as infectious as the measles. Soon people all over the kingdom began to recognise that Saol was not the foolish boy they had previously regarded him as. They began to take great interest in the woodlands. They came to walk among the ancient oaks. They sat quietly in clearings hoping to glimpse a deer. They began to see the hunting grounds as a place of beauty and serenity rather than just a stockyard for the kingdom's kitchen.

Soon talk of Saol's great work was to be heard everywhere. Saol was happy. Saibhreas however, was enraged. The more he heard about his brother's success, the more his envy grew. Saol was now a real threat. He had to do something about it and the obvious thing was to improve on his own success. If he could raise output at the mines again ...yes, that was it. He could bring in workers from neighbouring kingdoms and keep the mines operating day and night. New tunnels could be dug and ten times more gold could be mined daily. He would also give plenty of work to the kingdom's builders because many more stores would be required to house the gold.

The mine's managers were not at all impressed with Saibhreas or his plan but he was Mine keeper and his word was final. Two months later the mines were busier than ever before. The daily output of gold went far beyond the prince's wildest expectations. The builders could barely keep up with the demand for storehouses. Saibhreas felt certain he was back on track to win his father's crown.

Aire observed the young princes continuously. He spoke to the gamekeepers and to the miners. He learned how both princes ran their enterprises. He witnessed the phenomenal amounts of gold in the storehouses. He watched as life returned to thrive in the woodlands. It took him a long time, but eventually Aire made his decision. However, it was a decision, which would remain secret until the twin's eighteenth birthday.

On the eve of that all-important birthday, Saibhreas was - roused from thoughts of his coronation by a heavy knock on his door. He opened it to find a very worried mine manager standing in front of him. "We decided not to tell you until we were certain, Sir." the man stuttered nervously, "Half of the tunnels are...are...empty, Sir. It's been over a week since the last traces of ore were removed.

Saibhreas paled, his knees weakened as he listened, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "And, Sir, the output of fifteen other tunnels has more than quartered. Sir, we've almost emptied the mine. The gold is nearly gone."

Saibhreas turned away from his visitor, the man's last words echoed around his head. Nearly gone, nearly gone, nearly gone. The room wheeled around him. Everything went dark and silent. Saibhreas was blinded by fury. His ears numbed in response to the rage that took possession of his heart and mind. He stood still, his face was drained of all living colour, were it not for his heavily thumping heart his visitor would have declared him dead.

The trance of silent fury was short-lived. The manager began to say something but without even looking at him, Saibhreas pushed him aside and stormed out of the room. He began to yell angrily those words that still echoed around his head. "Nearly gone, nearly gone. The gold is nearly gone." His words thundered through the corridors of the great castle, he slammed doors, he rang bells, he alerted everyone to the crisis. It wasn't long before all the courtiers, nobles and servants gathered about him in the great hall. He waited until his audience quietened.

"I am the bearer of bad news," he paused, he certainly had everyone's attention. "Talún Órga is no more. The mines are drained. The gold is gone. Talún Órga is dead. Gather up your belongings and flee this



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accursed land." Those in attendance were silenced by shock as Saibhreas repeated his disastrous news. "Talún Órga is dead. Talún Órga is dead, dead, dead..."

As his own words hit him, he became frenzied in rage once again. He ran from the great hall still shouting his message of doom. As soon as he was out of sight the dazed, eerie silence gave way to panic. As people began to fight their way to the door, Saol jumped up on a table. He pulled his hunting horn from his belt and blew so hard that everyone stopped and turned. "Listen to me!" he ordered. "My brother is wrong. Talún Órga is not dead. Okay, maybe the mines are now empty, but the storehouses are full. We've always known that gold doesn't grow, there was only ever a certain amount of it in the ground. We still have the gold and there is enough to keep us wealthy for countless generations to come."

Sighs of relief issued from all over the hall. Panic is a dangerous invader, it locks common sense away, but the wisdom of Saol's words sent panic on its way. The young prince continued.

"And even if every nugget of gold had disappeared, even then Talún Órga would not be dead. The mine may be precious to our kingdom but it is not its lifeblood. Our kingdom's greatest treasure is its land, its rivers and all the creatures that thrive in it. The jewel of Talún Órga is life itself and as long as there is life in our land, our land is alive."

All ground the hall people nodded in agreement. The old clock in the corner began to chime, one, two, three; finally, the clock struck twelve. It was midnight, nobody had realised it was so late. Aire called for attention. "Today is a day we have all awaited for quite some time. Eighteen years ago you rejoiced when our dearly departed queen gave birth to Saibhreas and Saol. Rejoice again today to behold his Majesty, our new chieftain, Saol of Talún Órga."



Hundreds of years have passed since Saol sat on the throne of Talún Órga. Nobody knows where the gold is now, but Saol's legacy to his kingdom still lives on. The everlasting jewel of Talún Órga was not the gold. It was the land itself, the river and the trees.