

The Magic Weaver

by Melissa Shaw-Smith

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THERE is scarcely a place in Ireland where the countryfolk will not have a tale to tell you of mysterious fairy happenings. They will point to a twisted hawthorn tree or a mossy bank with hidden crevices. They will gaze off into the distance and talk of fairy rings up in the hills or around the dark mountain lakes. You will be warned that you may not always recognize a fairy when you meet one. Then they'll shake their heads and say that fairies are not evil by nature, but they can be very tricky, and bad luck to you if you cross them.

In the wilds Ireland there once lived a brave and honest chieftain by the name of Conal. It came to pass that the king of the province granted him a piece of land. No higher honor could be bestowed upon a man. Conal began at once to build a castle for his wife, Emer, and their children, Aengus, Aoife, and Finn. The chieftain chose a spot on a hilltop where he could look out for miles in each direction. He and his family could not have been happier.

Unbeknown to Conal, living deep within the hillside was a powerful fairy, or *Duine Sidhe*, called the Hillman. For many seasons he alone had laid claim to the hill. The wizened old fairy peered from his hiding spot behind a hawthorn tree and saw the great stone slabs being rolled into place for the castle walls. He ground his teeth with fury.

“Who dares to disturb my lovely, lonely spot!” shrieked the Hillman. Without wasting a moment, he wove a magic spell.

Pacing round the rocks and muttering under his breath, he conjured up the vapors rising from the night bog. To them he added the howling gales that brought fisherman to their doom. He poisoned roots and toadstools gathered in the gloom of the forest. He twisted together the sorrows of lost souls and the teats of mermaids, weaving them all into an evil enchantment. Cackling with vicious laughter and twirling around one skinny leg, he sang:

*I cast a veil upon these walls
dust and gloom and raven calls.
Sunlight and beauty are all around*

But only misery shall here be found.

He threw the spell over the castle walls like a cobweb. Instantly, a cloud of sorrow descended, enveloping the castle and the family. From that day on, a great melancholy hung in the air, and magic bound Conal and his family to the castle, holding them as tight as flies in a spider's web.

Inside, all was drab and gray. A bunch of wildflowers plucked from a meadow in the valley would wither and die when carried through the gates. A basket of rosy apples would turn dry and tasteless. But worst of all, the children would drift around the rooms like ghostly shadows, unable to laugh or play.

It used to be that the hills would ring with Aengus's merry shouts when he went riding with his father. Now he sat gazing into the fireplace with eyes as dull as ash. Not a sound passed the lips of Aoife, whose sweet voice could once rouse the lark from the thicket. The youngest, Finn, who once rushed hither and thither like a babbling brook, now moved as slowly as a snail.

Many seasons came and went as Conal and Emer tried to rid the castle of the evil enchantment. They summoned wise men, who, to no avail, recited ancient poems and spells. Old women full of country lore sprinkled water from holy wells. Not even the greatest wizards from far and wide could undo the Hillman's magic.

One day Finn was sitting on a rock at the castle gates. With his chin in his hands, he gazed sadly down at the valley sparkling in the sunshine. Suddenly, he heard a strange sound, and a movement in a clump of gorse bushes caught his eye. Finn sighed and turned away.

The sound came again. It was an animal whimpering in pain. In spite of himself, Finn rose and, with feet of lead, forced his way down the hillside. Peering through the branches, he found himself staring into the soft, brown eyes of a dog who stood nearly as tall as he.

Finn put out his hand and touched the rough fur of the dog's head. Instantly, a tingle of warmth started in his fingers and crept up his arm. Finn blinked and pulled back.

Speaking softly, Finn coaxed the dog forward. "There's a good fella now. Easy does it. Come here and let me see what ails ye."

Hobbling on three legs, the dog pushed its way out of the bushes. The huge animal leaned up against Finn, and the boy felt its warmth seeping into him.

Bending down, he gently lifted the wounded paw. “That’s a mighty big thorn ye have there, but I’ll have ye good as new in no time.” When Finn had eased out the thorn, the dog gave him a lick that nearly sent him backward into the gorse bushes. “Where’s your master, me fine boyo?” asked Finn.

The dog turned its head as though listening to something. Finn cupped his hand around his ear and listened, too. Up the hill on the breeze came the distant sound of voices calling and cattle bawling. “So your master is at the fair, is he? Right, so. Away with us—we’ll go and find him!”

Finn paused—what could have put that idea into his head? Such was the castle’s enchantment that if a ball were thrown to him, he could hardly raise his hand to catch it. But now, with his hand on the dog’s neck, he was bounding down the hill toward the fair. If he let go of the shaggy mane for an instant, it felt as if a great force were pulling him back toward the castle.

When they reached the town square, Finn’s eyes grew wide. I must be in fairyland, he thought. A boy his age chased a squealing piglet between stalls piled high with loaves of bread. A red-faced man, waving a stick festooned with woolen socks, called out his wares. Women carried baskets while sniveling toddlers clung to their red flannel petticoats. Finn walked as if in a dream, not letting go of the dog for a second.

He watched as two men struck the price of a black heifer with a spit and a slap of hands. He stroked the velvety nose of a small donkey standing patiently with its turf-filled panniers. He stopped to listen to a lively jig being coaxed from a tin whistle by a raggedy tinker. And all the while the great dog padded quietly beside him. As evening came on, the din subsided, and the market folk turned for home.

Suddenly, the dog stiffened and sniffed the air. It started forward, jerking Finn along. Through the gathering dusk, a gleam of color caught Finn’s eye. Getting closer he could see a magnificent cloak wrapped around a tall man with a shock of red hair. From the slump of the stranger’s shoulders, Finn could tell he wasn’t happy.

In an instant, the dog took off toward the man, leaving Finn behind. At the sound of the dog’s nails clicking on the cobblestones, the man whirled around and, letting out a great shout of joy, threw his arms around the animal’s neck.

Finn hung back in the shadows and watched the two frolicking like spring lambs. Then he turned to go, forcing one leaden foot in front of the other. He hadn't gone far before a hurtling body blocked his way. The dog gazed up at Finn with his soft, brown eyes and whined.

"Come here, lad." The red-haired man signaled to the boy.

"This is your dog, I'm thinking," said Finn.

"My best friend and all," replied the man. "I lost him on the way to the fair, and my heart has been heavy ever since. Tell me yer name so I can thank ye kindly for finding him."

"My name is Finn."

"Well, Finn, m'lad, I'm Arlen the Weaver, and mighty glad to have met ye." He rested his hand on the boy's shoulder. Finn could feel its heat right through his jacket. He found his eyes drawn to the glowing colors of Arlen's cloak. It seemed as if the very fields and hills had been woven into it.

"Now, 'tis late, and we should be on our way. Let me gather my wares, and I'll walk the road home with ye." The weaver gathered up the bright shawls and blankets into his basket. "Maybe yer mammy and daddy wouldn't mind giving me a corner of the kitchen hearth for the night?"

"Ye would be welcome, but ye might not want to stay," said Finn hesitantly.

"Don't worry yerself," said Arlen. "Many's the strange place I've put me head down before now."

As the three trudged through the night, Finn became silent and downcast once more. Arlen drew his cloak about him to ward off the chill that was creeping down the hillside to enshroud them. Before long the gray castle walls loomed in front of them. Arlen held up his big hands as if testing the air.

"Ah, the work of the fairies, I'm after guessing," said Arlen, nodding gravely.

Finn did not have the energy to reply. His sad family greeted the weaver cordially and offered food and a bed for the night.

The next day, an eerie silence stirred Arlen from his slumber. He found Finn in the shadows of the great hall. The dog lay beside him with its huge head resting in the

boy's lap. A wave of sadness came over Arlen for the fate. that had befallen this good family.

“On the third sunrise of the month of June, I'll be back with a little something for ye,” he said to Finn. Then, calling to his dog, Arlen left the castle and set off into the morning mist, whistling a merry tune.

From then on, time dragged in the spellbound castle. It seemed to catch in the folds of the children's clothes and weigh down their very bodies and souls. Once the image of a pair of soft, brown eyes came to Finn, and he felt a spark of warmth flare in his chest. But the memory of the dog and its master floated just beyond reach.

Meanwhile, the weaver and his faithful companion tramped the length and breadth of the countryside. Arlen was a busy man indeed. He gathered mist from the hills and dew-speckled cobwebs from the grass. On the seashore, the waves swept up to his feet, carrying pearls and shells. The small animals of the hedgerow dropped wildflowers into his basket, and the soaring lark snatched sunbeams from the sky.

Having collected all he needed from far and wide, Arlen sat himself at his old wooden loom. His deft fingers flung the shuttle back and forth, weaving threads together from the warp and the weft. The cloth flowed out of the loom as if by magic.

One morning, a strange sound awoke Finn. Someone was whistling. Suddenly, he remembered Arlen's promise. The boy dragged himself out of bed and stuck his head out the window. He saw Arlen striding up the hill, his dog trotting at his heels. A large willow basket was slung over his shoulder, and rays of light glowed through its woven branches. Finn thought he felt a warm hand pass over his cheek.

“Aengus, Aoife, he's come! Arlen the Weaver has come!” Finn opened the castle door.

“Top of the morning to ye. Third sunrise of the month of June, if I'm not mistaken.”

Finn's mouth fell open, for over Arlen's shoulder, he could see a weak ray of sunshine through the gray cloud that hovered over the castle.

“I promised ye a wee present, 'Tis a bit of my own handiwork.” The weaver placed his basket on the cold stone floor.

The family entered the hall and crowded around Finn as he cautiously slid the lid off the basket and pulled out the woven cloth. “Why, ’tis soft as water,” said Finn, running it through his fingers.

“It has as many hues as a raindrop!” Aoife exclaimed.

Aengus breathed deeply. “Can ye smell the heather and the wild orchids?”

“I hear the waves on the shore and the calling of the seabirds,” said Conal.

“’Tis warm as a summer’s day.” Emer stroked it.

A strange light made Finn raise his head. “Look!” he shouted.

A great transformation was coming over the castle. The magic cloth radiated into the gloomy hall, driving out the gray shadows. At that very moment, the sun burst through the windows, making the cloth gleam like stained glass. The children stared at one another in wonder. A rosy glow crept up their cheeks, chasing away the ghostly pallor. It was as if an invisible hand had lifted a dusty cobweb off them.

Finn felt the corners of his mouth twitching. He raised his fingers to trace the upward curve of his lips. He glanced at Aengus and Aoife. They, too, had their hands pressed to their cheeks, cradling their smiles. Conal and Emer looked at their children’s happy faces and laughed. Within the blink of a cat’s eye, the whole family was laughing and hugging and weeping with tears of joy.

All the while, Arlen stood there with his dog, smiling and waving away their heartfelt thanks. Only he knew the magic that had been woven into the cloth. At that moment, a roar of rage from deep within the hillside shook the castle walls.

“I’m thinking that fairy will take his magic elsewhere from this day forth.” Arlen winked at Finn.

The celebrations went on for days. Arlen the Weaver had the place of honor at the feast table. Conal hung the magical cloth over the fireplace, and people came from far and wide to gaze at it. No one left the castle without a smile and a feeling of contentment.

As for the Hillman, he was never heard of again. But, if you ever come upon a hawthorn tree on a lonely hillside, take care. Fairies can be very tricky, and bad luck to you if you cross them!