

The Legend of the Glaive

By Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

Fair-shoulder, Fionula fair,
The wondrous child of Lin's old race,
Answered the hero of the raven hair
Of the strong hand and princely grace,
The great Cathair.

“Five leagues hen'ce doth the Norseman lie
Beneath his cromlech gray;
Three miles round no soul draws nigh From eve till dawn of day.
Nor friend of man, nor horse, nor hound,
Nought that hath life must cross that ground;
And in that cromlech, side by side,
The dead man and his sword abide.
And if thou lovest me as thou swearest,
And for my love thou greatly darest,
Alone tonight thou'lt seize for me
The giant glaive of the King of the Sea.
And so, for aye, his fame and thine,
And, with thy fame more humbly mine—
Like three harps sounding in the hail
To the same high story,
Of hero glory,
Shall ring for ever in the ears of all.”

Oh! who'd have dreamed that beneath the grace
Of that rich and wondrous form and face,
In the midnight blue of her dewy eye,
As she dropt her gaze with a blush and sigh,
Alas! could lie
Such cruelty?
Or who could deem
That beauty's talisman should gleam—
A spell to blast him, not to bless—
From the white brow of the sorceress?

Her little sandalled foot before,
Flushed with the wildening light of beauty,
He kneeled and swore—
“Lady, this moment overpays,
The long eclipse of future days—
'Tis my joy to dare, to die my duty,

If only from my endless night
One lingering star ascends of light
Worthy of thine auroral crown,
And of true love's forlorn renown.

The story of my adoration,
Like a jewel from the sea
Where I am lost, returned shall be,
A relic and a decoration;
And minstrels mingle, in the Feats of Fame,
My requiem with thy living beauty's flame."

With those words Cathair is gone,
And Fionula is alone.

The hero's hair blew back and showed
His gleaming eyes and forehead broad;
His marble face and haughty head,
In resolve already dead.

On to the altar and the knife,
Like one renunciant of his life,
Who nears the sacrificial goal
Holding in his hand his soul—
On, on he paces, mute, alone,
By moss-grown cairn and druid stone,
Broad fields of corn and sloping meadow,
And level light and lengthening shadow,
By purpling hills and yellow woods,
And blazonry of western clouds
That o'er pale green and amber sky,
Weltering in cold and crimson, lie.

Bathed in the evening's spirit tender,
A brown bird sitting on a spray
Whistles its happy soul away,
And thrills with life the silent splendour.
The glorious moment wanes and dies,
And Night rides up the Eastern skies—
Line behind line, and hand in hand,
In sable cloaked, the aërial band,
From pole to pole, ascending far,
In every helm a blinking star;
While their voiceless march before
Like dust the white mist rises hoar.

So darkness and the dew and hush
Of night came down on slope and bush,

And every glen and blue ravine
Was filmed with smoky haze.
And autumn's glow and russet green
Grew blurred and waste before the gaze
Of Cathair as he went by,
And beetling mountain, stark and high
And fringe of hedgerow 'gainst the sky,
And wild flowers 'neath his foot that lay,
Together melted into gray,
Together in gloom were lost.

As through the Lisses three he crossed,
He knows that unseen shapes are near,
And tittered words are in his ear,
Now here and now there,
Faint harping and singing
And fairy spurs ringing,
And the whirr of their coursers' shrill tremble in air,
And hovering glee and hovering pain
Their fearful burthen o'er his brain,
Their dreadful fancies shedding;
As swiftly o'er the throbbing sward,
Through haunted vapours treading,
He sees loom black before his tranced regard
Morrua's forest, nobly wild,
Afar in billowy verdure piled.

Far behind him crept blackness and flickering glimmer,
To the northward, slow mounting, the tempest was rising,
While luridly glaring all earth lay expecting,
Voiceless and breathless, the yell of the tyrant.

Thus he entered the high, vacant halls of the forest:
No bird in its branches, no antler beneath them,
Nor boom of the beetle, nor bay of the wild dog.
Only, Priestess of Mystery, glides a White Shadow,
On her lip her forefinger—and faithful he followed,
Well knowing his fate led him on to the combat,
Well knowing a mandate of silence upon him.
The trunks of the great trees like time-furrowed castles,
Gray glimmered through darkness impassive and awful,
Broad at base and at battlement broader the oak boles.
And a canopy dusky, snake-twisted, of branches,
Like crypts of cathedrals, low-groined and broad-pillared,
Stretched mazily this way and that in perspective.

As sweet the evening glories faded
O'er Fionula's bower,
A lone sad voice the maid upbraided,
Charming the twilight hour.
With parted lips and hand to ear
She harkened to the melody
So wildly and so faintly clear,
At the open casement dreamily.
The lonely splendour of a star
Lay trembling in her virgin tear;
And with the music, night or far,
There fell upon her heart a fear;
Swift round her ivory throat she drew
The cloak that doth in crimson fold her—
Swift round her shoulder, veined with blue,
And polished as a statue's shoulder;
Then snapped the jewel in her cloak,
Still through the casement wildly gazing,
Like one whom spirit-songs have woke
From earthly sleep to sights amazing
The Princess to the postern hied,
Upon her throat the jewel's spark;
Her hand her pearly ear beside,
Her great eyes gleaming through the dark.

*“From close of flower, till song of lark,
By mist or moonshine, hill and hollow—
To follow still and still to hark—
To hearken still and still to follow.”*

Strange music of an ecstasy—
'Twas hardy sound, and came unsought;
She smiled, and listened to the lay
As listening to a sad, sweet thought.
Glares in the west a stain of blood,
The Wizard North its black storm raises—
And eastward o'er Morrua's wood,
One great white star portentous gazes.

Sitting, spinning in the hall,
With lamps alight, the sunset after,
The whirring task her maids speed all
With silvery song and girlish laughter.
But, like an apparition, she
Is lost—and lost—and lost for ever,
And O their loving eyes shall see

The splendrous Fionula—never.
Lost; but her love she'll never find—
Sooner the foam wreath in its wake,
O'er ocean's waste, in ocean's wind,
The flying ship shall overtake.

Through the woods of Morrua and over its root-knotted flooring,
The hero speeds onward, alone, on his terrible message;
When faint and far-off, like the gathering gallop of battle,
The hoofs of the hurricane louder and louder come leaping,
There's a gasp and a silence around him a swooning of nature,
And the forest trees moan, and complain with a presage of evil.
And nearer, like great organ's wailing, high-piping through thunder,
Subsiding, then lifted again to a thousand-tongued tumult,
And crashing, and deafening and yelling in clangorous uproar
Soaring onward, down-riding, and rending the wreck of its conquest,
The tempest swoops on: all the branches before it bend, singing
Like cordage in shipwreck; before it sear leaves fly like vapour;
Before it bow down like wide armies, plumed heads of the forest,
In frenzy dark-rolling, up-tossing their scathed arms like Maenads.
Dizzy lightnings split this way and that in the blind void above him;
For a moment long passages reeling and wild with the tempest,
In the blue map and dazzle of lightning, throb vivid and vanish;
And white glare the wrinkles and knots of the oak-trees beside him,
While close overhead clap the quick mocking palms of the Storm-Fiend.

Now southward drift the din and glare,
Like navies battling in the air;
On boom the thunder and the wind,
And wreck and silence lie behind,
While whirlwind roars and lightning burns,
The hero neither tires nor turns.
'Mid the wild wail of shrilly boughs,
And pealing thunder's claps and soughs;
And by the lightning's livid tapers,
And the black pall of eddying vapours,
He follows the White Shadow's call,
That never swerved for flash or wind,
And never stops nor looks behind,
But leads him to his funeral.

The forest opens as he goes,
And smitten trees in groups and rows
 Beneath the tempest's tune,
Stand in the mists of midnight drooping,
By moss-grown rocks fantastic stooping,
 In the blue shadows of the yellow moon.

And in the moonlight, bleached as bones,
Uprose the monumental stones,
Meeting the hero suddenly
 With a blind stare
 Dull as despair.
The formless boulder that blocked the door
Like a robed monster broad and hoar
 He twice essayed to earth to throw
With quivering sinew, bursting vein,
 With grinding teeth and scowling brow.
From his dark forehead with the strain,
Beads start and drop like thunder-rain;
And in the breathless tug and reek,
All his lithe body seems to creak.
 The mighty stone to earth is hurled,
Black gapes the violated door,
Through which he rushes to rise no more
 Into this fair, sad world.

Where high the vaults of midnight gape
In the black waste, a blacker shape—
And near against a distant dark,
He could the giant Norseman mark
A black tarn's waters sitting by;
Beneath a brazen, stormy sky,
That never moves but dead doth lie,—
And on the rock could darkly see
The mighty glaive beside his knee.
The hero's front and upreared form,
Loomed dim as headlands in a storm.
No more will flicker passion's meteors
O'er the dead shadow of his features,
Fixed in the apathy eternal
That lulls him in repose infernal.
The cornice of his knotted brows
A direful shadow downward throws
Upon his eyeballs dull and stark,
Like white stones glimmering in the dark;
And, carved in their forlorn despair,

His glooming features changeless wear
Gigantic sorrow and disdain,
The iron sneer of endless pain.
From the lips of the awful phantom woke
A voice, and thus, by the tarn, it spoke:—

“Son of Malmorra, what canst thou gather here?”

The spell was broke that struck him dumb,
And held his soul aghast and numb,
 With a wild throb,
 A laugh, and sob,
The frenzied courage came again
Of Cathair, the Prince of men.
With planted foot, with arm extended,
And his ferine gaze distended,
Back flowed the cataract of his hair
From the gleaming face of the great Cathair;
And he shouted lion-voiced,
Like one defying who rejoiced:—
“Thorgil, king of the wintry sea,
Of the nine-gapped sword and minstrel glee,
Of mountains dark and craggy valleys,
Of the golden cup and hundred galleys,
Malmorra’s son, myself, have sworn
To take thy sword or ne’er return
The Norseman’s phantom, black and dread,
Turned not, lifted not his head.
Mute, without anger or alarm,
As shadow stretches, stretched his arm;
Upon the hilt his hand he laid,
The metal dull one bell-note made—
One cold flash from the awakened blade
Flecked the waste sky with flying glare,
 Like northern lights
 That sport o’ nights,
Shuddering across the empty air.
High overhead, where died the light
Through the wide caverns of the night,
The imprisoned echoes, whispering first,
Afar in moaning thunders burst.
Mortal armour nought avails—
Shearing the air, the enchanted blade
Of Thorgil a strange music made;
The brazen concave of the sky
Returns its shrilly sigh,

Above—around—along—
With the roaring shiver of a gong.
Black night around him floating, and booming of the sea
Have borne away the hero on the spirit-maelstrom free;
The shadows round him deepen in his soft and dreamless flight—
The pause of a new birth,
A forgetting of the earth,
Its action and its thinking,
A mighty whirl and sinking,
A lapsing into Lethe, and the ocean caves of night.

A silvery song is in his ears,
A melody all sad and lone,
The voice that Fionula hears,
And follows still by brake and stone.
It is the voice of early years,
The early love long dead and gone.
His wounded head is on her knee,
Her hand his sable locks among
And still the song enchantingly
By that remembered voice is sung
And dreamily he opes his eyes.
Beneath in rosy lustre lies,
With many a shivered line of gold,
A misty lake in many a fold
Of wood, and slope, and rock, and hill,
And riven peak, and winding nill.
Long golden reeds and floating lilies tell
Their secrets and rejoicings to the breeze,
And every flowery star and bloomy bell
That glow like oriel windows 'neath the trees,
In gules and azure mottling the soft sward,
In fragrance and dim music sigh,
And sleep, and wake, but never die.
Such is the blessed mystery
That of their weakness is the ward.
Here memory doth the hour beguile
And never too much pains or cheers,
Here all things sad are with a smile,
And all rejoicing is with tears.
Through everything there thrills a gladness,
Through everything there throbs a sadness;
And memory, love, and gratitude
A glory shed on every mood.

How to this hour she is sometimes seen by night in Munster.

By the foot of the old Keeper, beside the *bohreen*,
In the deep blue of night the thatched cabin is seen;
'Neath the furze-covered ledge, by the wild mountain brook,
Where the birch and the ash dimly shelter the nook,
And many's the clear star that trembles on high
O'er the thatch and the wild ash that melt in the sky.
"Shamus Oge" and old Teig are come home from the fair,
And the car stands up black with its shafts in the air,
A warbling of laughter hums over the floor,
And fragrant's the flush of the turf through the door.
Round the glow the old folk, and the colleens, and boys
Wile the hour with their stories, jokes, laughter, and noise;
Dogs stretched on the hearth with their chins on their feet lie,
To her own purring music the cat dozes sweetly;
Pretty smiles answer, coyly, while soft spins the wheel,
The bold lover's glances or whispered appeal.

Stealing in, like the leather-wings under the thatch,
A hand through the dark softly leans on the latch,
An oval face peeps through the clear deep of night,
From her jewels faint tremble blue splinters of light.
There's a stranger among us, a chill in the air,
And an awful face silently framed over there;
The green light of horror glares cold from each eye,
And laughter breaks shivering into a cry.
A flush from the fire hovers soft to the door,
In the dull void the pale lady glimmers no more.
The cow'ring dogs howl, slowly growls the white cat,
And the whisper outshivers, "God bless us! what's that?"
The sweet summer moon over Aherloe dreams,
And the Galtees, gigantic, loom cold in her beams;
From the wide flood of purple the pale peaks up-rise,
Slowly gliding like sails 'gainst the stars of the skies;
Soft moonlight is drifted on mountain and wood,
Airy voices sing faint to the drone of the flood,
As the traveller benighted flies onward in fear,
And the clink of his footsteps falls shrill on his ear.
There's a hush in the bushes, a chill in the air,
While a breath steals beside him and whispers, "Beware!"
While aslant by the oak, down the hollow ravine,
Like a flying bird's shadow smooth-gliding, is seen
Fionula the Cruel, the brightest, the worst,
With a terrible beauty the vision accurst,
Gold-filleted, sandalled, of times dead and gone—
Far-looking, and harking, pursuing, goes on;

Her white hand from her ear lifts her shadowy hair,
From the lamp of her eye floats the sheen of despair;
Her cold lips are apart, and her teeth in her smile
Glimmer death on her face with a horrible wile.
Three throbs at his heart—not a breath at his lip,
As the figure skims by like the swoop of a ship;
The breeze dies and drops like a bird on the wing,
And the pulse of the rivulet ceases to ring;
And the stars and the moon dilate o'er his head,
As they smile out an icy salute to the dead.

The traveller—alone—signs the cross on his breast,
Gasps a prayer to the saints for her weary soul's rest;
His "gospel" close pressed to the beat of his heart,
And fears still to linger, yet dreads to depart.
By the village fire crouched, his the story that night,
While his listeners around him draw pale with affright;
Till it's over the country—"God bless us, again!"
How he met Fionula in Aherloe glen.