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Opening extract from

Spellbound Tales of Enchantment from Ancient Ireland

Written by

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To my colleagues, Nessa and Elaina – *S.P.*
For my Mother with love – *O.W.*



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Spellbound

Tales of Enchantment from Ancient Ireland



Retold by
Siobhán Parkinson

Illustrated by
Olwyn Whelan



FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Contents

Butterfly Girl	6
The Enchanted Deer	20
Land Under Wave	25
The Children of Lir	38
The Enchanted Birds	44
Cú Chulainn and Emer	51
Labhra with the Horse's Ears	60
Pronouncing the Gaelic Names	65





Butterfly Girl

A long time ago in Ireland, there lived a beautiful princess whose name was Etain. She was so beautiful that when she went walking, the birds of the air stopped singing to stare at her, the wind stopped sighing through the treetops and all the animals held their breath.

Her clear and lovely cheeks were as soft and smooth and red as foxglove petals. Her eyebrows were as black as a beetle's wing, and her teeth were like a shower of pearls. Her eyes were hyacinth blue and her lips were red. Her limbs were straight and soft and smooth. Her skin was as pale as sea-foam and her hands as white as a dusting of snowfall.

A chieftain called Midir fell in love with Etain the Beautiful, and before long the couple were married. But when Etain arrived as a bride at Midir's castle, she discovered that her new husband was married already.

Midir's first wife was not happy at all. In fact, she was so angry and jealous that she decided to get rid of Etain. So she cast a magic spell and turned the beautiful young girl into a butterfly. Then she left Midir's house and went back to her own family.

Poor Etain! She could not walk or talk or eat proper food or sleep in a bed or do anything that people do. She had to live her life now as a butterfly.

But she was just as beautiful as a butterfly as she had been when she was a princess. Her shimmering wings were the most exquisite shades





of mauve and violet and pink and crimson, and her eyes shone like precious jewels.

She could not speak, but she could sing, and her voice was sweeter than the music of the sweetest harp. Everywhere she flew, she made people happy. Sick people got better and hungry people felt full, and everyone danced and sang for sheer delight.

Only Midir was sad, because he had lost his beautiful young wife. But everywhere he went, the butterfly Etain flew along beside him and sang sweet songs to cheer him up. At night, when he lay down to sleep, she fluttered round his head and flapped her wings gently, so that he nodded off to the soft humming of her crimson wings. Gradually he got used to having a gorgeous butterfly as his companion instead of his lovely wife.

Now, Midir's first wife heard that Midir and Etain were still together, even though Etain was a butterfly.

"This won't do!" she muttered. "I have to find another way to get rid of Etain." So she thought up a wicked plan. She closed her eyes and waved her arms and cast a new spell. "Blow, wind!" she cried.

Suddenly a great gust of wind came roaring in from the sea. The leaves were stripped from the trees, the grass was snatched out of the earth, and the waves of the sea came crashing towards the shore. The people all ran indoors and closed their windows, and waited for the storm to pass. But the poor little butterfly Etain had not the strength in her gorgeous wings to fly away from the storm. She was blown about and whirled around, and finally she was whisked right out to sea.



Etain was carried so far out to sea by the storm that for seven long years the poor little butterfly could not find her way home. All day long she flew over the waves, desperately searching for land. And at night, the only places she could find to rest were rocks and deserted islands in the middle of the ocean.

After seven desperate years at sea, Etain finally managed to find her way back to Ireland. As soon as she landed and had rested her weary wings, she set off to look for Midir. But she had no idea what part of the country she was in, or where to begin to look for Midir's castle.

She flew up to the top of a tree, to see if she could spot anything that would give her a clue, but all she could see were rocks and stones and grassy pathways that she could not recognise. It was no use, she thought. She would never find Midir.

Just then, she spied a young man she knew. His name was Aengus, and he was a relation of Midir's. She fluttered down from her treetop and alighted on Aengus's shoulder.

Now, Aengus knew that Etain had been turned into a butterfly and whooshed out to sea by Midir's first wife all those years ago. And although Etain could not speak to him, he recognised her at once.

"Good morning, Etain!" he said to the pretty little butterfly who was perched on the shoulder of his cloak. "You are welcome home to Ireland."

Etain gave a joyful little flap of her wings.



Aengus took the butterfly Etain home with him. He made a little house for her, with windows, so that she could fly in and out. Everywhere he went, he carried the butterfly house with him, so that he could look after Etain and make sure she was all right.

All was well for a while, but then Midir's first wife got to hear that Etain had arrived back in Ireland. She grew very angry again. She closed her eyes and waved her arms and cast another magic spell. She blew up another powerful wind, and poor little Etain was driven out to sea again.

When Aengus found that the little butterfly house was empty, he knew perfectly well who was to blame. He stormed off to Midir's first wife's house, and when she came out to see who was knocking on the door, Aengus cut her head right off with one swift swipe of his sword.

"At least Etain will be safe now," he said as he mounted his horse. Then he galloped away, leaving the headless body of the evil woman bleeding on the ground.



Poor Etain was still out at sea, being blown about by the wind, just as before. After many years, she managed to find her way back to Ireland again, and this time she flew into a banqueting hall and landed, splash, in a glass of wine. The wine glass belonged to the wife of a chieftain called Étar. Étar's wife was chattering merrily to the person next to her, and she never noticed that a pretty little butterfly had landed, splash, in her wine. Without looking into her glass, she drank the wine and swallowed the butterfly Etain along with it.

You might think that was the end of poor little Etain – but it wasn't. The butterfly flew right down into the woman's body and found a nice warm spot, where she settled down and went into a deep sleep.

Some months later, Étar's wife gave birth to a baby girl. And… have you guessed it? This new baby was really Etain. She wasn't a butterfly any more, but had changed into a human baby girl.



The baby did not remember anything about her life as a butterfly, or her life before that as the wife of Midir. She was just a normal baby, who needed to be fed and looked after by her parents and to grow up and learn about the world.

Étar and his wife named their new baby Etain, and the new Etain grew up to be just as beautiful as the first one.

Now, just as the new Etain was growing into a young woman, the High King of Ireland was looking for a wife. He sent his men out to find a suitable girl for him to marry. The king's men rode up and down the country, riding the length and breadth of Ireland, in search of a wife for the king. They rode over and back across the land, and they met many lovely young girls, but it was not until they found Etain, daughter of Étar, that they knew they had discovered the right young woman for the king.



The king's men went back to the royal palace and told the king about the beautiful girl they had found. They told him where she lived, and they said that he should go and take a look for himself.

So the king went out looking for this beautiful young girl, Etain. He followed the directions his men had given him, and one day he found her. She had come to a well to wash her hair. He knew it must be Etain, because she was so beautiful.

She was wearing a rich crimson cloak fastened with a brooch of silver and gold. The king moved his horse behind a tree and he watched as she lowered the hood of her cloak.

Her clear and lovely cheeks were as soft and smooth and red as foxglove petals. Her eyebrows were as black as a beetle's wing, and her teeth were like a shower of pearls. Her eyes were hyacinth blue and her lips were red. Her limbs were straight and soft and smooth. Her skin was as pale as sea foam and her hands as white as a dusting of snowfall.



She wore a comb of silver and gold in her glorious hair. When she loosened her hair from its comb, it bloomed like a flower. She washed her hair in a basin of silver with four gold birds engraved on it, and it was bright with tiny crimson gems.

The king straightaway fell in love with this beautiful girl. He came out from behind the tree and spoke to the lovely young woman, and it was not long before they were married.

But the High King was not the only man to love Etain. In the king's army was a man called Ailill, and this Ailill fell so badly in love with Etain that he thought he would die of love for her. Gentle Etain got to hear that poor Ailill was very unhappy, and she agreed that she would meet him one evening and try to cheer him up. Now you will remember that in her past life Etain had been married to a man called Midir. Midir got to hear that Etain was back in Ireland,

that she was married now to the High King, and that she had arranged to meet the lovesick Ailill.

Midir was overcome with jealousy. He cast a spell on Ailill, which made him fall fast asleep, and so he missed his appointment to meet Etain. Then, while Ailill was sleeping, Midir put on Ailill's cloak and took Ailill's sword and shield, and set off to meet Etain in Ailill's place.

When Etain met 'Ailill' (who was really Midir), he told her the whole story. "Etain," he said, 'I know you are just a young girl, but I have to tell you that in another life you were a butterfly."

Etain was astonished to hear this strange news.

"And before that," said Midir, "you were my wife."

"But…" started Etain, still amazed.

"A wicked woman who was jealous of our happy marriage turned you into a butterfly, and then later you were reborn as the very same girl you used to be."

Etain shook her head. This could not be true. She was the wife of the High King, not of this strange man.

"All these years, Etain, I have been searching for you, and now I have found you, you must come back with me to my castle and live there with me as my loving wife."

"But I am married to the king," said Etain, "and he is a good man. I cannot just leave him and go with you."

"But you are really my wife, not his."

Etain thought about this for a while. She wanted to be fair to Midir, but she did not want to leave her husband. In the end, she said, "Well, Midir, if you can persuade my husband the king to let you



kiss me, then I will know that he does not love me as much as you do, and I will go with you."

So the next day, Midir went to the king and challenged him to a game of chess.

"I bet you fifty horses that I can beat you," he announced. "Fifty of my finest steeds, grey and black and white, and all with silver manes."

The king loved to play chess, and he loved it even more if there was a good prize to play for, so he readily agreed. Midir came to the king's castle the following evening, and they played and played, until long past midnight.

Midir was a champion chess player, but he was too clever to win this game against the king. After many hours of play, he made a bad move, and the king pounced and won the game.

"Ah, you are the better player!" said Midir, and he stood up to go home. "I will send the horses at first light tomorrow morning. And tomorrow night, we will play again?"

The king was delighted to have won, and he eagerly agreed to another match.



Every night for a month, Midir and the king played chess, and every night, Midir made sure the king won the game.

The king won silver and gold from Midir, rings and jewels and swords and shields, tapestries and blankets and furnishings, and fine copper pots and oak chests inlaid with precious metals and full of delicious foods, herds of cattle and tracts of land, bolts of silken cloth and embroidered cloaks, and precious stones and barrels of wine and fine leathers and skins and wools.

Midir handed over all the winnings without a murmur.

In the end, Midir said he was going to have to give up playing chess with the king.

"I can't go on playing you," he said. "Every time we play, I lose more of my riches. If I go on like this, I will be a poor man."

But by now the king had got used to winning, and he wanted to go on winning. "One last game," he said, "and you can name your own prize."



Midir pretended to think long and hard about this offer, and in the end, he agreed.

The next evening, Midir came to the royal castle and, as usual, the two men played late into the night. But what was not usual was that this time Midir planned to win.

"Checkmate!" he cried at last, and the game ended.

"You won!" said the king, astounded.

"Yes," said Midir, trying to sound surprised. "I suppose my luck has changed."

"And what would you like as your prize?" asked the king. "I can give you fifty fine horses, for example, grey ones and black ones and white ones, and all with silver manes."

"No, thank you," said Midir. "I have plenty of horses."

"Jewels?" said the king. "Silk? Oak chests? Rugs?"

"No," said Midir. "What I would like is a kiss from your wife, Etain the Beautiful."

"You want to kiss my wife?" stormed the king. "That is outrageous! I will not hear of it."

"You said I could name my prize," said Midir quietly. "If you go back on your word now, no one will ever believe you again when you make a bargain."

And so the king had to agree. His honour was at stake.



When Midir came to the castle the next evening to claim his kiss, Etain was in the banqueting hall, serving wine. Her clear and lovely cheeks were as soft and smooth and red as foxglove petals. Her eyebrows were as black… well, you know the rest.

The king watched as Midir strode through the banqueting hall and walked right up to Etain, put his arms round her and kissed her.

And then an amazing thing happened. As Midir and Etain kissed, their cloaks and garments fell away to reveal beautiful white feathers covering their bodies. Right in front of the king and his courtiers, Midir and Etain turned into white swans and, with their graceful necks entwined, they flapped their wings softly and flew into the air, up through the chimney and right up, up into the sky.

Away they flew, the pair of them, up through the clouds, and all that was left in the banqueting hall was their human clothing, shining brightly on the floor near the fireplace. And overhead the people could hear the steady swish, swish, swish of swans' wings, as Etain and Midir flew away, together at last.