

“The Salmon Man” by Colin Urwin

Audio Transcript

[Ethereal music on harp and steel tongue drums]

[Music quiets as Urwin begins to speak]

Many years ago, there was a farmer called Randall. The Glendun River ran down through his land to the sea. His animals drank from it. And when Randall was a boy, he had often tickled trout along its banks, catching them with nothing more than his bare hand.

As an older man, he cared for the river. Some people said, even more than he did for his own farm. He trained trees to grow over the pools, to shield the salmon where they lay. He fenced off the banks along the gravel redds where they spawned, to keep the cattle from disturbing them.

He fished for the salmon with a Greenheart rod and jewel-like flies he tied himself from the gaudy feathers of the pheasant and the jay. He purposefully blunted the hooks so as not to harm the fish. And in all his years, he never killed a single one. He only marveled at their beauty and returned them to the water to go on their way. Some people said they had heard him talking to the fish. They said he was touched, and behind his back they called him the Mad Salmon Man.

Randall was a widower. He had a family of four daughters, all grown up and away, and one son called Bradan. It was always understood that Bradan would one day take over the farm. He shared his father’s love of the river and the salmon. As a boy, his father had taught him how to fish in the same gentle way.

As they sat by the river, his father told him the wonderful story of how the young salmon went on a great adventure into the wild Atlantic Ocean, how they faced all kinds of dangers and enemies before returning to their native glen and the river where they were spawned.

Bradan grew into a fine young fella. Everyone said he was the spit of his father. He was clever and handsome and full of ideas. He told his father he wanted to make the best of what Mother Nature and Providence had granted them.

“We could bring a fine gentleman here to fish,” he said. “Rich anglers would pay good money to catch our salmon in such beautiful surroundings.”

“They are not our salmon, son,” his father said. “They are wild and free. We would have to cut down trees to make way for these... gentlemen. They would kill every fish they caught. We must *watch over* the river, not profit from it.”

It was the same whenever Bradan wanted to make changes on the farm—dig a drain through the meadow or make a ford across the river. His father always said no, in the most delicate and reasoned way.

“New kings make new laws,” he said. “Your time will come, but by then you will be older and wiser.”

Bradán respected his father, but still in all, he felt frustrated. He wanted to make his mark on the world, and he began to look outwards to satisfy his ambitions. You see, young men from the glens who did not inherit their father’s farm, or could not make a decent living from it, often looked to the sea.

Bradán watched the tall ships come into Cushendun Bay and sail away again. Soon, the seed of an idea began to germinate in his mind. And then one day he said to his father, “I want to go away to see the world.”

Randall fell into a deep melancholy. [Mournful fiddle tune begins] He knew that once his son got the taste for adventure, found a wife in some foreign land, he might never return.

As always, Randall went to the river to think about things. He took his fishing rod and his net. But this day, he just sat by a pool and smoked his pipe in quiet contemplation. He watched the dippers bobbing up and down beneath the fast-flowing streams, a kingfisher diving from its perch to take the minnows in the shallows. He saw a family of otters at play and a heron standing motionless on one leg.

Every living thing must follow its natural inclination, he thought. And although his sadness weighed like a stone in his heart, Randall knew then that his son must find his *own* way to become a man.

And then, suddenly, a huge salmon’s back broke the water black and shining. It happened again, and Randall halfheartedly cast his fly. The fish snatched it, first time, and without much of a fight, Randall brought it to the side and cut it up in his net. As he laid it out on the grassy bank to remove the hook, the fish spoke!

“Do you remember me, Randall?” [Chuckles] Randall rocked back on his heels.

“Salar. It cannot be!” he said.

“I assure you it can, and it is!” said the fish. “I am king of the salmon, I. You have been a friend to us, always. Now you are in need. Let me be a friend to you.”

“But, Salar, I—”

“Bring your son here, to me. I will show him something of the world. And if he survives, he will return to his native glen and follow this river home.”

“But what if he were to be eaten or killed?”

“There are many dangers in this world, but I give you my word: I will do all in my power, which is considerable, to return him to you.”

Well, Randall went away home with his mind in turmoil. And the weeks passed.

The night before young Bradan was due to depart, Randall asked his son to take one last walk down along the river with him. Bradan was busy packing his gear, but his father was so forlorn, he could not refuse.

When they came to the pool where Randall had caught the salar, he said, "Sit down a minute, son."

"Yes, Father," Bradan said.

The conversation was awkward, and Randall began to feel *guilty* and *foolish*.

Then suddenly, he saw the back of a salmon break the water. Just then there was a great flash of light [arpeggio on the harp], and flipping and flopping on the bank where Bradan had been was a little silver salmon smolt, the length of a man's hand. Randall guided it into the brown river, and it took off in a fizz of bubbles. It skipped and splashed on the surface of the pool before disappearing downstream.

Salar's head appeared above the water. "Be here next autumn," he said. "You will need to catch your son if you want to have him back."

And then he was gone.

Randall had a year to wait, but when the salmon returned the following autumn, he lived up to his reputation as the Mad Salmon Man. He fished the Glendun River morning, noon, and night. He caught dozens of fish and released every one. He went out in the dark with a lantern to scare off poachers and otters. He spent every waking hour on the river. He watched the salmon at rest in their lies. He watched them leap over the falls and spawn in their redds.

But soon autumn turned to winter. Winter turned to spring, spring to summer, summer to autumn once more. And it was the same again. Dozens of fish caught, and no sign of his son. Randall began to curse his own stupidity. Salar had tricked him. He was a cold-blooded fish! What would he know of a young man's needs or a father's love?

The following autumn, Randall dragged himself to the river. He could not give up while there was a glimmer of hope or an ounce of strength left in him. He caught dozens more fish and released them all. And then, on the very last day of the season, he was watching the salmon gather in the shallows. A hen fish turned on her side, and with a few swishes of her tail, she hollowed out a nest. A large, copper-colored cock fish rushed in and danced in ecstasy alongside her. As she released hundreds of eggs, he covered them with his milk, and together they buried them in the gravel.

Randall cast his line at the spent fish, and it rose to take the fly delicately in its mouth. Randall brought it gently to the side and eased it into his net.

He lifted it clear of the water, and the moment he laid it on the grassy bank, there was a flash of light. [arpeggio on the harp] And Bradan lay there, coughing and gasping for breath, his skin pale and his lips blue. Randall clapped his back and rubbed his limbs. He took off his coat and draped it over his son. And he laughed and laughed and cried tears of joy.

[Harp music continues]

That night, Bradan sat with his feet almost in the fire, trying to heat them. He told his father how he had crossed the ocean with Salar, been hunted by seals and dolphins, saw great wheels and giant sea monsters in battle, escaped the jaws of a shark and the nets of fishermen, swam under blue icebergs the size of mountains in the land of the midnight sun, and learned wonderful shanties from wise old turtles and ancient seabirds. But when the impulse to return came upon them, he said, they never stopped for food or rest until they reached Cushendun Bay.

In the weeks and months and years that followed, Bradan rarely spoke of his adventures again, although he was often heard singing his strange songs, which always made his father smile. Every autumn, a strange restlessness came over him, [music stops] and he *never* felt warmth in his feet again. When he slept by the fire at night, his eyes were always staring wide open.

After his father passed away, Bradan became the sole guardian of the river, and the people called *him* the Mad Salmon Man. And I don't know what old Bradan did with the rest of his life, but I *can* tell you he married a local woman, and they had a family. They say his human descendants lived in Glen Dunn for a long time, [harp returns] and some of his salmon line are still in the river to this day.

[Music continues then fades out]