



Peter Radley

SIOBHAN'S PEARL

With songs by the Irish Grain Band.



Peter Radley
SIOBHAN'S PEARL
– Forgotten Songs and Legends –

Siobhan's Pearl - Sample

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Arthur McBride had lived in the village for a very long time. So long, in fact, that even the elders could not remember when he had arrived—only that he had always been there. Some swore he had been standing in the doorway of his shop when *they* first ran past him as children. Others claimed they had seen him as a boy themselves, though if pressed to say who his mother or father had been, they would only shrug.

The more superstitious folk said his parents must have been fairies, or had died so long ago that only the stones remembered them now. The more down-to-earth types insisted Arthur's father had been a travelling merchant who spent his life wandering the countryside, returning to the village only now and then to unload his wares and his son, before disappearing once more into the world of markets and fairs.

Arthur's father travelled the roads on a mule, selling copper pots, salt, candles, fire-stones, and rare pigments used by the brothers for their manuscripts. Arthur's childhood was spent among rattling wheels, wooden crates, creaking buckles and worn tarpaulins. He went everywhere: one dawn he would wake in the yard of a tavern, another night he would fall asleep beside the wall of a churchyard. He learned how to haggle, how to keep silent, and when to smile—even if he was trying to sell someone an utterly useless piece of junk.

Then, when he was older, and the day came when his father never returned from beyond the mountains, Arthur decided he would go no farther. He stayed in the village where fate had cast him—Fairy Mound. With the stock he found in the wagon that served as their storeroom, he opened a small shop. He settled in, slowly and steadily—just not in the way the villagers would have preferred.

For the wanderer's spirit had not died in him; it had merely sought a new adventure. He no longer roamed the roads—he roamed the hearts of women. One week he was seen by the riverbank with the baker's daughter; the next, he lingered far too long in the yard with the carpenter's widow. He was never rude, never demanding—but he always moved on. The villagers shook their heads, and the husbands and fathers grumbled most of all.

But the women... The women smiled at his name.

For Arthur—so they said—never disappointed the fairer sex. In anything. He was kind, courteous, and—perhaps strangest of all—he always said goodbye beautifully. As if he knew that the time they spent together was finite, but not worthless. As if he wished to leave behind a memory, not a claim. And that was so unusual in a man that many women could never bring themselves to be angry with him.



In the spinning-room the spindles whirred, and so did the tongues of the girls and women. It was a cheerful afternoon—as it always was when no men were around, for then it felt wonderfully safe to talk about them a little. Sunlight streamed through the open door, and someone happened to walk past outside—upright, cheerful, smiling.

"There goes Arthur," someone said, and the girls and women burst into laughter, all of them blushing just a little. They exchanged glances, and no words were needed. It was as if the man strolling past the door were not merely a villager, but a kind of old tradition—something everyone knew, something no one could quite resist. And perhaps no one wished to.

"At this rate there won't be a single woman in the village who hasn't been in his arms," someone remarked, with a smile that was not particularly modest.

"What will happen when he finally runs out of girls?" asked a fair-haired woman, genuine curiosity in her voice.

"Then he'll go to another village," came the answer, in several voices at once.

"Or he'll bring a girl from elsewhere. Like the priest bringing his sacristan."

"Or..." someone said softly, "one day he'll settle down."

For a heartbeat, silence fell. Even the spindles paused in their hands.

Then laughter broke out—warm, honest, a little painful, but mostly liberating. Even the woman who had spoken laughed. For it seemed everyone knew perfectly well: Arthur was not the sort of man who would ever truly come to rest beside just one person.



The next morning scarcely a soul had wandered into the shop when the girl arrived. She was not a striking figure—no ornate dress, no unusual jewellery—she simply stood at the counter and looked. Arthur, who was in the middle of pouring vinegar into a bottle, froze. The motion stopped, the vinegar overflowed, and he did not care.

He did not know what had happened to him. Only that something had changed in the span of a heartbeat. As though every action he had taken until then, every foolish smile, every dawn spent sneaking home had led him to this one pair of eyes.

The girl smiled and spoke softly. Arthur was never able to recall what she had said—for it did not matter. All he knew was that he wanted to hear that voice for the rest of his life. He answered—yet he remembered none of it later, only the colours, the scents, the heat spreading through his soul.

Barely an hour had passed when Arthur said: "If you want... my house is yours as well, from this moment. I know people wouldn't expect such a thing from me—perhaps you've heard how I've lived until now. But that's over. Because of you."

The girl did not reply. She simply smiled again—so beautifully that Arthur knew he had arrived.

And indeed, the whole village watched in bewilderment as the impossible unfolded. Arthur, the skirt-chaser, the butterfly boy who even flirted his way across the church pews, suddenly grew solemn. He closed the shop earlier, no longer passed by the spinning-room, the wanderer's whim quietened. Each morning the girl walked with him to the shop, and each evening they sat together on the porch, making plans for the wedding.

"Do you know what I'd do if you were my wife?" Arthur asked once.

"Will you tell me?"

"I'd wake you with apple cake every morning. And I'd sing to you, like the birds at dawn."

"Can you sing?" the girl asked with a playful smile.

"No. But if you were beside me, I'm certain I'd learn."

They laughed. And the summer, as though lingering just for their sake, refused to end.

Then one afternoon the girl rose from the table. She did not look at Arthur; her gaze drifted somewhere far away, into an unknown world.

"I must go now," she said. Her voice did not break, nor tremble. It was... peaceful.

Arthur did not understand.

"We must never meet again," she continued. "Please, if you truly love me, try to understand. Do not seek me. Do not search for me, because it will be in vain."

Arthur tried to speak, but no sound came. By the time he managed to force out a word—perhaps "no, this cannot be," or simply "stay"—the girl had already stepped through the door.

Arthur leapt up, the chair clattering to the floor. In two strides he reached the doorway. But when he got there... the girl was gone. Nowhere on the road, nowhere on the meadow, nowhere beyond the garden.

As though she had never existed.



Ever since the girl had gone, Arthur seemed torn out of the world. He could not fathom how it had happened. He could not understand why he had not been granted even a single word, a single question, a single *why*. The door had closed—and had never opened again.

Days passed, then weeks. The shop remained shut. Candles melted into the copper cups on the window-sill, bread mouldered in the kitchen, and the bucket overturned in the yard was left lying where it fell. Arthur did not eat, did not sleep. Sometimes he stared into nothing; other times he set off on foot, searching feverishly.

He walked the village, every street, every house, then set out for the neighbouring settlements. Some days he walked until dusk; on others he simply sat by the stream, as though the water might whisper an answer. He searched among stones, in gullies, in the clearings at the edge of the forest, in the shadows of fallen crosses. He searched for the girl who had said, "do not look for me"—and whom he now sought with growing stubbornness.

The older women—the ones with whom he had once shared a laughing cup of wine or a summer night—tried to comfort him.

"Arthur, I'm here," said one, her hand resting on the doorframe as though she might remind him of something.

"I'll bring you something to eat," offered another. "You look like a winter branch."

"You'll forget her in time," said a third, though her voice lacked conviction.

Arthur sent them all away. Not cruelly—but finally. "You don't understand. She isn't like any of you were. She's the one who..." The sentence never found its end.

The village no longer even wished to whisper about him. As the weeks passed, Arthur became less and less one of them. He was no longer merely a man in love—but something else. A man possessed, beyond help.



One evening, after three days away from home, Arthur met someone at the edge of a thicket. It was an old woman, bent of back, her shawl ragged and patched, known by everyone in the village yet welcomed by no one. They called her the wise-woman—though only in whispers.

Many feared her, and not only because of her appearance. Whenever someone's cow died, or their well ran dry, or the bread dough soured in the kitchen, there was always someone ready to blame the old woman. Yet if a man's leg was struck with fever, or grief settled into a woman's heart, the wise-woman's brews always helped. These brews were bought from Arthur's shop, for though people disliked the old woman, they needed her healing skill. Arthur, for his part, handled it sensibly—he was not afraid of her, and he gladly sold her wares.

The old woman looked him over, tilting her head. "You're pale, lad," she said. "Like the rising moon in a spring storm."

Arthur laughed—a slow, bitter sound. There was no trace left of the cheerful young man he had once been. "It isn't the moon that troubles me," he replied. "It's that I've lost someone without whom nothing has meaning. And there's no sign of her anywhere. Not by the stream, not on the road, not in the neighbouring villages. As though... she had evaporated from the world."

The wise-woman stepped closer. "Perhaps she never belonged to this world," she said softly. "Perhaps she was the fairy-king's daughter."

Arthur's eyes flashed. "If I didn't know that deep down you're not truly an evil old witch, I'd take that foolish head of yours and knock it against the stone cross at the edge of the village."

The old woman burst out laughing. It was a harsh, scratchy laugh—yet free of malice. "You're a strange one, Arthur McBride," she muttered. "Just foolish enough to want to believe,

and stubborn enough for your boots to remain stuck in the world of men."

Then she sat down on a stone and began to speak quietly. "There is a legend—I was a little girl when I heard it, yet my great-grandmother's mother knew it too. The fairy-king's daughter comes among mortals once every many years. She seeks something—perhaps a feeling, perhaps a sound... or someone. But even if she finds it, she must return. For she brings a magic with her, and she can remain in the mortal world only as long as that magic lasts. When it runs out, it would kill her. And so she leaves. She always leaves."

Arthur listened. His face revealed nothing—but something shifted inside him. "And if someone wished to follow her?" he asked.

The old woman spread her arms. "You cannot simply walk into the land of the fairies. You must know the way. And that way leads through madness."

"Show me anyway."

The wise-woman drew out a small pouch. It was damp, cold to the touch, and carried the scent of the forest—as though stones soaked in moss had lent it their fragrance. "Boil this," she said, "and drink it. Then set out. I don't know where you'll end up—perhaps nowhere. Perhaps you'll never return."

Arthur did not answer. He only took the pouch and turned towards home.

That night the brew boiled, steaming yellow in the copper pot. It smelled neither pleasant nor unpleasant—but Arthur paid this no mind. He drank it. The corners of the room stretched, and the fabric of the world seemed to split.

And Arthur set out.