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VII

THE WOMAN OF LLYN-Y-FAN

I

The Meeting

ONCE upon a time, in the days gone by, a man and his wife lived at the farm Blaensawdde in the shire of Carmarthen in south Wales. It was not by farming, however, that the husband maintained himself, but by combat and wars; and as often happens to those who follow the wars, he was killed, and three of his four sons with him. A fourth son of his was too young to carry arms, and when news of her affliction reached his mother, 'War shall not take away my fourth,' she vowed, and she kept the boy close to her skirts and set him to learn only those arts which a farmer should know.

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He was busied with this till there was none throughout the countryside more skilled than he in crops and weather and the care and pasturing of beasts. By this time too he was a man in feature, form, and favour, and as handsome a youth as mortal ever saw.

'Mother,' he said one day, 'is it not time for me to take a wife?'

'What wife shall that be?' she asked him.

'That,' he confessed, 'is what I do not know.'

No long time after this it happened that he drove his cows up on to the mountain, and because the sky was blue and the sun at its zenith, he sat down for a while by the lake there, and what with the warmth of the air, the sweet smell of the beasts, and the water lapping the lakeside, he fell from thinking to musing, then from musing to drowsing, and from drowsing declined into a dream-filled slumber. He had been sleeping for as long as it takes the sun to move one handbreadth through Heaven when he thought he heard a voice calling on him to awake, with this form of words:

'In drowsing and dreams
Naught's what it seems;
All's an illusion
That grows from delusion.
If your true love you'd see,
Then see her in me;
So quick, lad, awake,
And look on the lake.'

In a trice he sat up, shaking his head and rubbing his eyes, and there, seated before him on the surface of the lake, he

saw a maiden so beautiful that no lady of the olden time, though they were queens of the world and lovely as sea-shells, might equal, much less excel, her.

She was combing her hair with a comb of bright gold, and so golden was the maiden's hair that he could not tell what was hair, what was comb, what was sunlight. Her neck was whiter than the foam of the wave, and her palms and her wrists like the snow that falls on Christmas morning. Her eyes' blue was the blue of bugloss, and the mouth on her red as the reddest foxglove. And because the air was still and the water smooth, he could see her as in a mirror, in two images above and below; and nothing under Heaven's vault was more lovely than the water-image save the image glowing in air.

'Maiden,' he cried, and, 'Lady!' but could say no more for fear he should frighten her away. But because she stayed smiling before him, he went to the water's edge and held out his hands, offering her the crusted bread and goat's-milk cheese which his mother had prepared for him to eat on the mountain. At this she came gliding nearer, but only to shake her head and grimace at what he offered, and the voice he had heard in his dream came from between her lips, saying:

'Too hard is your bread:
Not with that I'll be fed.'

Hardly had the last word left her lips when she plunged quickly under the surface of the water, leaving him sorrowful and alone. He waited till the lowing of the cattle announced that it was time to make for home, but she did

not appear again, and when he descended the mountain he walked slow as a beetle and looked bemused as the moon-eyed cows.

'Why, son,' asked his mother, the moment her eyes beheld him, 'what has befallen you?'

He told her his story in full, even showing her what hard-baked bread he had left.

'True, son, I baked the bread harder than I use, and it was not to be expected that a queen among maidens should break her white tooth on it. But never fear,' she promised him, 'all that is wrong can be mended before the boots go under the bed.'

Without more delay she mixed dough and firmed it slightly in the oven. In the morning he went to the mountain with his cattle, and, by the time the sky was at its bluest and the sun burning overhead, was seated by the lakeside, waiting for the maiden to appear. But though minute followed minute and hour upon hour, there was no more sign of the maiden than if she were the creature of a dream. At last, however, he noticed how his cattle would keep making their way to the mountainous far side of the lake, though the grazing had always been poorer there. He hurried after them, and as he was scrambling along the slope, whom should he see but the maiden, seated on the water combing her golden hair.

'Maiden,' he cried, and, 'Lady!' and this time he had courage to continue when he recalled with what smiles she had looked at him the day before. 'Is there anything on earth can bring you from the lake to live with me?' At the same time he held out his hands, offering her the unbaked bread and ewe's-milk cheese his mother had prepared for

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him to eat on the mountain. But this time too she grimaced, saying:

'Too soft is your bread:
Not by that I'll be led.'

And no sooner had the last word left her lips than she plunged so slowly under the surface of the water that the ripples hardly noticed she was gone.

'Well, son,' asked his mother as he returned home towards nightfall, 'what has befallen you this time?'

He told her his adventure in full, even showing her what unbaked bread he had left.

'True, son, I made the bread softer than I use, and it was not to be expected that a queen among maidens should soil her red tongue on it. But never fear,' she promised him, 'all that is wrong can be mended before the boots go under the bed.'

Without more delay she mixed dough and baked it in a crimson-ash oven till bread came forth of such perfection that neither mother nor son had ever beheld the like. In the morning he once more drove the cattle to the mountain and seated himself by the lakeside, but for long there was no more sign of the maiden than if she were a creature of gossamer and mist. As evening fell he began to collect the cattle, and with heavy feet prepared to leave the mountain. Luckily he took one last look over his shoulder, and there to his delight saw the maiden seated on the lake as calmly as ever, combing her golden hair. He ran joyously towards her, and, 'Maiden,' he cried, 'Lady! Unless you love me, it is no better for me to live than to die.'

'A pity,' she said, 'to cause the death of a handsome

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young lad like you. But it would be wrong of me to keep you when you are in such a hurry to depart.'

'Lady,' he pleaded, 'a minute to you was an hour to me. Is there anything on earth can bring you to marry me?'

As he said this he held out to her the true-baked bread and cow's-milk cheese his mother had prepared for him to eat on the mountain. This time, to his delight, she nodded and said:

'True-baked is your bread:
And with that I'll be wed.'

'But remember,' she added, as he skipped for joy on the bank, 'that if during our wedded life you strike me three causeless blows, you shall lose me straightway and for ever.'

Hardly had she finished speaking when, with a sign to him to stay where he was, she plunged beneath the surface of the water. Hardly had he kissed the nearest cow for happiness when she returned, bringing with her a hoary-headed man of great dignity and stature, in a mantle of white brocaded silk with jewelled brooches on each shoulder, and a second maiden so like herself that it might have been her image in the water come to life and walking at her side. No two roses and no two pearls were ever so alike as they, and he stared from one to the other in consternation, wondering which was the maiden he loved best, and which her sister of a birth.

'Am I told truth, lad,' asked the hoary-headed man, 'that you want to marry one of my daughters?'

'Unless she loves me,' he replied, 'it is no better for me to live than to die.'

'A pity,' said the hoary-headed man, 'to cause the death of a healthy young lad like you. Just tell me which of my daughters it is that you love, and my consent will not be hard to win. Speak now: she on the right or she on the left?'

'I think,' he began, and then fell dumb as a door-knob.

'Speak louder, lad,' advised the hoary-headed man. 'I cannot hear you.'

'I think,' he began, and fell dumb as a doorknob again.

'Either you grow dumb, lad, or I grow deaf. Louder!' said the hoary-headed man.

It was at this desperate moment that one of the sisters thrust her foot a little forward, so that it slid into sight from under her mantle. It was a movement slighter than when a sleeping bird stirs a feather or a cat a hair, but not so slight that he did not notice it, and notice too that her sandal was tied with a wide, not a narrow tie, and its lace folded even as he had seen it earlier when only she was on the surface of the lake.

'This,' he said briskly, 'is the lady I love best.'

'Your choice is a good one,' agreed the hoary-headed man, 'so let us now discuss the dowry. What I am willing to give is this: as many sheep, cattle, goats and horses as she can count without drawing her breath anew. But I give warning, that if during your wedded life you strike her three causeless blows, you shall lose her straightway and for ever.' And because he was as wise as he was hoary-headed, he added: 'And lose the dowry too.'

At his signal, the maiden whitened her knuckles and tightened her eyes, and drew in the mightiest breath that anyone ever heard, and this was the way she counted: 'One-two-three-four-five, One-two-three-four-five' — and continued counting in fives faster than a fly's wing-beat till she was bent in her doubles and the breath all out of her. When she had counted the sheep she counted the cattle, and after the goats the horses, and long before she finished, her father's face grew grave. But because his word was his word, and a very good word, he did not hesitate before bending down to the surface of the lake and chanting this verse aloud:

'Spotted cow that's light and freckled,
Dotted cow with white bespeckled,
Mottled cow so brightly deckled,
Wend earthwards now.'

In this same fashion he called on the sheep and the goats and the horses, and what a wondrous sight that was, to see them come splashing out of the lake and stand booing and baaing, yeaing and neighing, in a tumultuous, spray-shaking throng.

Then the fond farewells were taken and the tears of parting shed, and before an eye might be dry again the hoary-headed man and his remaining daughter sank from sight beneath the surface of the water. The ripples had not forgotten them when the lady of the lake came to join her sweetheart on the shore, and he saw that the earth was as easy to her as the water had been. As the shadows lengthened on the lake they left the mountain, and all that wealth of dowry with them, and the lad's own cattle too. And be-

fore moontime and owl-light took over the land, they reached his mother's farm at Blaensawdde, where in no time at all they were married, and in hope to live happily ever after.



II

The Parting

Now season followed season and year upon year till their marriage was blest with three fine sons. By this time they lived at Esgair Llaethdy, six miles from the lake, and their joy and prosperity looked like lasting for ever – except for the threat of the three causeless blows.

It happened one year about egg-hatching time that there was a christening among the neighbours which they had promised to attend. But husband and wife were not of one mind about this, for she thought the house too distant and the road uphill, and though in the end she agreed to go with him, she was slow and reluctant in all her preparations.

'Wife, wife,' she heard him calling, 'are you not ready yet?'

'I shall still be ready sooner than I wish,' she retorted.

The next minute he came bustling out-of-doors. 'Where are the horses?' he reproached her. 'Unless you meant it, why promise to bring them to the door?'

'I shall bring them in good time,' she told him, 'if first you go back indoors and fetch me the gloves I left there.'

Because time was short he ran back in and came quickly out with the gloves. To his vexation she was standing exactly where he had left her. 'Get along, wife, get along!' he urged; and when she still made no move, he tapped her lightly on the arm to hurry her up.

'You forget your manners, husband,' she reproved him, 'and you forget what is not less important. What of your promise and the three causeless blows? The first is now struck. Pay more heed to the second!'

From that warning he saw how he must be very careful indeed, if so unmeant and so unhurtful a tap as that should count as a causeless blow. But it happened one year about nest-building time that there was a wedding among the neighbours which they had promised to attend. It was the happiest assembly, the bride like a linnet and her groom handsome as gorse, but when the merriment and good wishes were at their highest he was astonished to see his wife burst into a fit of weeping.

'Wife, wife,' he urged, tapping her arm, 'is this a time for weeping?'

'I weep,' she told him, 'because their troubles are now beginning. And so are ours too, for this is the second causeless blow.' And as she left the house in tears, she called back to him: 'Pay more heed to the third!'

From that day forth they vowed to be even more careful than before, for only one blow now remained to them, and that might be so easily given, in jest or forgetfulness. But it happened one year about nest-flushing time that there was a funeral among the neighbours which they had promised to attend. All was black and tearful there, but when the grief was at its deepest he was astonished to hear his wife burst into a fit of laughter. He raised his head, frowning, but all she did was laugh louder and yet louder, as though it was past her power to stop.

'Wife, wife,' he urged, tapping her arm, 'is this the place for laughter?'

'I laugh,' she told him, 'because the dead man's troubles are over. And so is our marriage too, for this is the third causeless blow.' And as she left the house, she called back to him: 'Farewell, husband, for ever!'

Quickly she made for the farm at Esgair Llaethdy, where she called all her animals together, those that had come out of the lake so long ago and all their progeny. First she called the cows:

'Spotted cow that's light and freckled,
Dotted cow with white bespeckled,
Mottled cow so brightly decked,
Plod homewards now.'

When the cattle heard her calling they came in from the fields and out from the byres, and four oxen at plough plodded to her with their plough behind them; and a little black calf just slaughtered came down off the hooks and ran to her, crying.

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Then she called the sheep:

'Kerry sheep long held in fold,
Merry sheep dong-belled with gold,
Fairy sheep song-spelled of old,
Drift homewards now.'

When the sheep heard her voice they ran to her from the folds and the walled pastures, the ewes with their lambs, the rams with their curly horns, and the brave bell-wether at their head, bawling.

Then she called the goats:

'Goat on high that's dry of coat,
Goat with eye so sly to note,
Goat whose cry is wry in throat,
Skip homewards now.'

The goats came skipping from the copses and leaping from the rocks, their beards a-wag and their ears held high. And when they pressed bleating about her she called to the horses:

'Horses tall and gay and bobtailed,
Horses small and bay and lobtailed,
Horses all, though grey and hobnailed,
Clomp homewards now.'

At once they surged whinnying round her, their noses hollowing her hands, their hooves going clomp, and their tails a-swish and a-sway. And when all these creatures were assembled in hosts they set off behind her for the lake of Llyn-y-Fan. They went, we are told, not in silence, but with the voices of joy proper to their kind. At their head walked

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the black bull of Esgair Llaethdy with weaving horns and nostrils red and steamy; and behind them three white stallions with whistling manes whose sandals clashed and thudded. And leading the bull was the woman of Llyn-y-Fan, with the little black calf beside her, quiet now and sucking at her thumb.

As moontime and owl-light took over the land they reached the lake, and a wondrous sight it must have been to see them splashing into the water, their backs flaked with quicksilver, and the lake healing over them, and the ripples forgetting the place, till of all that host of creatures not a trace remained save the furrow scraped by the plough the four oxen drew, and the hoofmarks in the dust of the road.

III

The Sequel

IN this fashion the woman of Llyn-y-Fan came from and returned to the Otherworld, and this would be the end of her story were it not for the three sons she left behind her, who were now full-grown young men. For while her husband knew by the destiny upon him that he had lost her for ever, the sons did not lose hope of seeing her again. One day that hope was rewarded: the eldest son was passing the gate known ever afterwards as the Physician's Gate when his mother appeared before him and instructed him that he had a great work to do in the world.

'What work is that, mother?'

'To heal the sick and tend the helpless,' she told him.

'Gladly, mother,' he answered, 'and so would my brothers do, had we the knowledge how.'

At this she handed him a satchel filled with recipes and prescriptions. 'Here is knowledge for thirty, much less three.' That was how these three brothers became the most skilled healers of the sick in Wales, and are known to this day as the Meddygon Myddfai, the Physicians of Myddfai. In that family there have been healers for eight hundred years, all with good fingers and good hearts. And that is the end of her story.