

WHY DOES NOT THE WILD DUCK SLEEP, NOT SLEEP, NOR DROWSE

a short story by Sheelagh Russell



It was a proud sadness and a sad honour that emptied the cradle of its songs and a mother of the hope in her children, for on November Eve the good people stole away with the daughter of Diarmuid the Grey-Limbed, and took from the hearth laughter of a rainbow and warm skin the colour of a wild duck's egg.

The good people love the babes born out of their wishes, the soft-crying, the hungry, the newly-wise, and take them to grow strong on the milk of fairy cattle and the cribsongs of the wind, leaving in the infant quilts the true children of the earth, the feeble in mind and body, the crippled in spirit, the pitiable in feature. And it is a sad pride in the heart of the mother of the changeling.

It is not only the turf fire unattended which is dying takes with it the soul of the house. Mauraid of the Heron's Wing grew away from her mother's breast and her withered soul was suckled on the bitter wine of time. Years lay in her solemn eyes, upon her dark brow. The child grew away from childhood before she had put behind the infant's wrappings; beside the fire, in the cottage of Diarmuid the Grey-Limbed, the knotty cradle that had once held beauty swayed through the hours with all the tears and truth of the ages.

And the knowledge that comes to such a child is not the learning of the suns and moons of the seasons, the task of her

father, nor the workings of fancy born in her eyes as they followed the distant flight of the wild birds.

It was the day of seventeen years from the morning of the change in the cottage of Diarmuid the Grey-Limbed, and the old mountainy man had long been gone with his dry legs and his hickory cane. His frail wife still watched the cradle where now no babe wailed in the night.

Mauraid of the Heron's Wing had grown with the wisdom of the hare, the silence of the mossy rocks, and the awkward beauty of the wild herons who stretched their dull feathers, dun and beneath, the white of the faery thorn, in the moonlight. For the beauty was not in her face, with its savage grey eyes and warm brown skin. Nor was it in her form, as small and quiet as that of a young doe. It came from behind her outer cover, when her strange eyes flashed a cloudy, cold light and the rough skin glowed redly. And her beauty was greatest when she gazed at the journey of the wayward birds across the moon.

But the manners of Mauraid were not those to stir love in the souls of the men of the village, nor in those of the field, save the lonely poet who lived on the edge of the smooth lake of the herons and sang his silver songs on the beauty of wild wings. It was said of Tadhg that he could see the wind, for he had drunk of the milk of the sow. Tadhg loved Mauraid and took her away across the grass of

nine cows to his home in the rushes and the damp, away to the bedfellowship of the singer. This was the song he gave her,

"The songs of the violets are dying, O Caer, their voices are silent like the tiny shoes of the breeze, and the baby-downed, petal-downed leaves will soon cover their tear-shone faces. Must it be night and tomorrow and seven spring sunsets before you come with your music?"

"Come with your grey swany wings and your golden eyes dropping green waters, soft leaves in a pool and dim lights. Lights on a winter harp have waited, Caer, for a lake-maiden's fingers to weave them.

"The blue whispering flame of the river has covered the song of the master player. Caer, Aengus has drowned in the fire of wandering. Why do you not come with your harp and your tears?"

And Mauraid of the Heron's Wing sang verses of wonder at the glad life of the poet, and, while toiling in the magic of his arms, grew to love him, and cried out in sorrow. For the body of a changeling must not know fire, and the heart of Mauraid was warm with the flame of love. All that she left to her poet-lover was the beating of tiny wings and a warm stray feather in his nest.

And Tadhg sings prayers to the Sidhe, that in their love for him he may join the wild ducks and seek the love of the heron in the land of youth and no change.

