

Breda's two young brothers had arrived, and were calling for supper, and the next hour was spent busily enough. Then the kitchen was cleared, and the neighbors began to drop in. The first was a small, dark woman, who wore a plain shawl wrapped closely round her head. She stepped softly in her bare feet, and gave no greeting as she settled herself near the fire.

"Is it all well with you tonight, Mrs. Hartigan?" asked Mrs. O'Hara in Gaelic.

"'Tis well tonight," was the answer in the same language; "but there's trouble coming to some before the year is out."

"And good luck to others," said a new voice, and a little woman with white hair came in and seated herself. "God save all here," she continued, with a glance round.

"God save you kindly, Mrs. O'Rourke. We were missing you this long time," said Mrs. O'Hara.

"The little pig that was sick," Mrs. O'Rourke answered. "I daren't cross the door for fear he might slip away on me."

A few more neighbors came in. Mrs. O'Hara's house was small, but the kitchen had the advantage of not being over full of furniture, and all who came were sure of a welcome. Breda looked anxiously at the door; she had half expected Willie Sheridan, but he did not appear. Presently Mrs. O'Rourke began to sing. She sang in the traditional way, with her mouth nearly shut, moving her lips only enough to form the words. She had chosen a mournful air, and the sounds, sweet as they were, made Breda shiver. While the others were applauding, she slipped over to Mrs. Hartigan and sat down near her.

"Mrs. Hartigan," she whispered, "did you ever hear the Fairy Queen?"

"Did I?" Mrs. Hartigan spoke out loudly, and the eyes of all the room were turned on her. You shouldn't say such things, child; they don't like to be spoke of."

"But did you really ever hear it yourself?" asked Breda anxiously.

"I did," said Mrs. Hartigan.

"Did it bring you bad luck or good?" inquired Mrs. O'Hara.

"Bad," was the answer. "I was going along with a basket of fresh turkey eggs, when a heard of the rubbing and grinding of it below in the heart of the earth, and with that I let a screech out of me, and I fell, and my leg twisted under me, and the eggs in a hundred pieces."

Some of the boys near the door laughed, and Mrs. Hartigan looked angry.

"'Tis all very well to laugh," she said; "but the pain in your own leg, nor is it in your own turkey eggs."

"Well, it might have been worse, anyway," said Mrs. O'Hara. "Ill luck didn't follow you long."

Mrs. Hartigan leaned forward mysteriously.

"'Tis this is the way it is," she said; "if you're only going to hear an' over by yourself like, they don't mind you. 'Tis if you have something on your mind, like courting or marrying, that harm will come to you. There was Kathleen Dooney, that was to be married to Michael Shea; sure they heard the Quern, and the next thing was the match was broken off, and he went to America and died there."

"And a good riddance for her, too," suggested a red haired man who sat on the table.

"And there was Johnny Sullivan was out walking with his girl, and they heard it, and what did he do but drop dead on the spot; and Patsy Spillane heard it the same day, him and the girl he was courting, and they did or he'd be a dead man now."

"Ah, sure, you don't believe those things," said Mrs. O'Hara, uneasily.

"They can't stand courting," said Mrs. Hartigan; "and if they can't break off the match any other way they kill the man."

"Don't be talking about courting before all the boys and girls," said Mrs. O'Hara. "Come we're wasting all the time. Who's going to dance?"

They got up a reel, and Breda, who was in no humor to dance, took the concertina and played. They had more dances afterwards and another song; but at last the little boys went to bed in the inner room, and the neighbors went away. Then Mrs. O'Hara, her small frame sweltering with triumph, turned to her daughter.

"You don't know what brought Mrs. Sheridan here to-night?" she asked Breda, her heart beginning to thump.

"To know would we have you marry Willie," announced Mrs. O'Hara.

Breda sat down by the table, and rested her head on her hand.

"'Tis a good match for you, and no mistake," continued her mother; "and I will say Mrs. Sheridan is a sensible woman. 'Tis better," says she, 'to have a girl that would be well brought up, and saving, and nice in her ways, than one with a fortune that maybe would waste more than she brings, and be trapping about in her fine clothes before the neighbors; and besides,' says she, 'Willie has taken an uncommon fancy to her.' She's a nice woman," continued Mrs. O'Hara; "and if she finds you pleasant in the house, you'll find her the same. She won't be interfering, nor nagging, nor quarrelsome in any way. Why don't you speak, Breda? You've had time enough to think about it now."

"I'm frightened," gasped Breda.

"Well, so was I frightened," admitted Mrs. O'Hara, "and so are many girls; but you've known Willie Sheridan so long, and you and him such friends, 'tis jumping for joy you ought to be. But for all I think I'll just tell Mrs. Sheridan you are frightened," and not let them think you can be had for the asking. We can be going on all the same about your clothes."

"Mother," Breda roused herself. "I don't know that I want to get married at all."

"There's there," said Mrs. O'Hara, soothingly; "we won't talk about it any more to-night. Go to sleep, and

pleasant dreams to you. We'll let them wait a bit for an answer. It does a boy no harm to keep him waiting, so you don't keep him too long. And we'll just look over the hens tomorrow, and see which you can take; for I won't have you go empty handed. 'Tis a deal a better match that we could have expected for you, not that I told Mrs. Sheridan so."

She talked on, while Breda went to bed, but not to dream of Willie. "They can't bear courting, and if they can't break it off any other way they kill the man," she murmured to herself again and again, as she lay sleepless. Evidently no comfort was to be had from Mrs. Hartigan; but Mrs. O'Rourke was a wise woman of another description, and as soon as the morning's work was over Breda had thrown her grey shawl over her head, and was crossing the field to Mrs. O'Rourke's cottage. The old woman was sitting by the fire knitting. She looked up pleasantly in response to Breda's greeting.

"I thought I'd look in and ask how was the little bonny getting on," said the girl, timidly.

"Oh, he's mending finely," Mrs. O'Rourke answered. "Sit down by the fire, and tell me what news have you."

Breda sat down and took off her shawl; but if she had news she did not care to tell it. She sat still and let Mrs. O'Rourke talk.

"'Tis a fine autumn," said Mrs. O'Rourke, "and the sea is wonderful quiet. All the same there's a great voice in it around by the cliffs, and a strange sound sometimes in among the caves."

"You don't think 'tis anything else but the sea, do you?" Breda asked, eagerly.

"Well, you know," Mrs. O'Rourke looked hard at her knitting; "they say the Quern is within there."

"But you don't think it's any harm, do you?" asked Breda. "I mean, I-I heard it myself yesterday, and then Mrs. Hartigan—"

"Mrs. Hartigan has a deal of stories, but those that heard the Quern and did had their own reasons for dying. Everyone knew Johnny Sullivan's heart was weak and 'twas the leap he gave, or maybe the fright he got, that killed him. And Michael Shea used to drink; that was his old Pat. Dooney broke off the match. It wasn't hearing the Quern that ailed them, and whether or no, I never heard of any harm coming through it to a girl."

"Oh, but—" Breda broke off, confusedly. "Did you ever hear it yourself?" she asked.

"I did so," Mrs. O'Rourke laughed. "I was courting when I heard it," she added.

"Oh, then, it was all right that time," Breda cried. "You married all the same."

"I married sure enough," Mrs. O'Rourke rested her knitting on her knees, and gazed through the open door with a smile on her lips. "He was a nice boy, after all, she said."

"And sure, ill-luck couldn't come except it was the will of the Almighty," continued Breda.

"Well, I don't know, my dear," said Mrs. O'Rourke. "Sometimes I think there's more will than the Almighty's in the world; and besides, it isn't one thing that does the good or the harm straight away, but one thing touches another, and that touches something else, and so on—like it won't be because I saw a bunch of pink heather, and I going into Dingle, that you'll maybe marry Willie Sheridan, and yet you mightn't only for I seeing it."

Breda jumped as probably Mrs. O'Rourke had intended she should. "It was Willie Sheridan I was walking with on the cliff," she confessed. "We weren't courting, you know, only talking; but what would the pink heather have to do with it?"

"It was last July twelvemonth," began Mrs. O'Rourke. "I was going into Dingle on a Saturday, and you mother says, 'Hannah,' says she, 'will you bring me the makings of a blouse for Breda, and please yourself about the color.' Well, presently I saw on the bank above me a bunch of heather, very bright and rosy, and what should I see in Dingle but a piece of print the very same, rosy pink, with little markings on it that were like the sprigs of heather themselves. 'Give me two and a half yards of that,' says I. Well, my dear, you made the blouse, and you wore it one fine Sunday."

"Who's the girl in the pink blouse?" says Willie Sheridan. "Don't you know Breda O'Hara?" says I. "I didn't see her face," says he. "I only thought 'twas a pretty color." Now I'm not saying," continued Mrs. O'Rourke impressively, "that he mightn't have noticed you in a blue blouse, or in a white one; or that if he hadn't noticed you that day he mightn't have another, but he never took his eyes off that pink blouse all the time you were coming along the road, and 'twas from that day out he seemed to take a fancy to you."

"His mother came over yesterday to know would I marry him," whispered Breda, blushing furiously.

"It did not seem to be news to Mrs. O'Rourke."

"Good luck, and the blessings of God to you," she said in Gaelic.

"But I'm frightened," Breda whispered, "suppose any harm should come to him."

"Willie Sheridan's a good, steady boy," said Mrs. O'Rourke. "You've no call to be frightened."

"He says 'tis all just nonsense," said Breda, "that the noise is nothing but the sea."

"Well, I wouldn't say that," said Mrs. O'Rourke. "It's as well not to call things nonsense; but there's nothing can hurt you except you give it a handle, like if he was uneasy or quarrelsome, or given to drink, and he's none of that. I wouldn't be afraid with Willie Sheridan at all."

Breda came away only half comforted. Crossing the field she met Willie himself.

"Have you got my answer for me?" he asked, with a fierceness which she

knew meant shyness turned the wrong way about.

"Not yet, Willie," she faltered. "You've known me long enough," he declared.

"It isn't that," Breda stammered. "'Tis because of what you and I heard. It may be nothing at all, but all the same if anything were to happen to you I'd never—"

she broke off sobbing.

Willie soothed and coaxed to no purpose. Then he appealed to Breda's mother and to his own, and found to his disgust that they would not support him in denying the possibility of the Quern's existence. It might be there or it might not, and they did not believe it need hinder him and Breda from marrying. But Breda shook her head, and went about her white and said that Willie's heart sank lower every day.

One morning, however, he woke bright and purposeful. After breakfast he walked out to the cliff, and having tried various experiments in jumping and stamping on the ground, and remained for some time lying flat and listening hard, he secured a large red handkerchief to the end of a short stick which he carried, and inserted the other end of the stick firmly in a crack, just below the edge of the cliff. That done he walked home, and presently caught Breda's young brother Mike coming out of school.

"Tell your mother that you're coming along with me," he said, "and that you won't be back till late."

Mike ran off obediently, and returned quickly.

Willie produced a big piece of home-made cake and an apple.

"You can eat those while we go along," he said. "We're going to get out the boat."

The boat was of tarred canvas on a skeleton of laths. Lying face downwards, it looked like an enormous mussel shell. Like the laths, and grinding as the creatures went round and round, now and then lifting a head to look at him, and then vanishing beneath the water; for he could now see that he was up to his knees in a pool that extended about twenty feet under the cliff, and was rather more than half as broad as it was long.

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Mike stared with wide open eyes. "Won't you be in dread?" he asked.

"I won't have Breda fretting any longer," said Willie stoutly.

"Mightn't I go in with you just a little bit of the way?" asked Mike, divided between a longing for adventure and a dread of the supernatural.

"No," Willie decreed, "you stay in the neavogue, and just keep paddling about till I come to you. The tide is going out, so don't come in too near, but don't go too far away or you won't be able to get her in by yourself."

They were near the cliff by this time. Willie's red handkerchief hung down and marked the exact spot they wanted, but Willie felt a momentary disappointment for there was no cave directly underneath.

"There's a cave a little bit to the east," suggested Mike, but Willie had recited something.

"No," he said, "the cave's mostly hollow into the east. We'll try round the little bit of a corner here."

They rowed carefully for there were many rocks to threaten the neavogue, but a few yards to the left, and hidden as Willie had suspected, by the corner of the cliff, they found what they wanted—a low, dark opening in the rock. There were a few feet of shingle beach between them and it. Willie took off his shoes and stockings, and turned up his trousers before stepping over the side.

"What will I do if you don't come back?" asked Mike anxiously.

"If I don't come back you may call me a fool," answered Willie, as he stooped low to enter the cave. It was very wet and slippery. He had to kneel as he struck a match and lit his torch. The light revealed a cave like many others he had been in. There was solid rock all round, and it was evident that at full tide it was very nearly, if not completely, filled with water. It was no great height, and by which he had entered and to that he was well as his torch. He lit one and fixed it, not without difficulty, on the wet rock. The additional light showed him that he was now at the entrance to a narrow tunnel. It was low to enter except on hands and knees, and it sloped gradually upwards and downwards. Holding his torch within arm's length Willie could only discern that it seemed to continue at the same height for some distance, and that it was very wet—in fact a little stream of water, partly dripping from the roof, partly, perhaps, left by the waves, was constantly trickling down. And now something had made his heart beat violently. So far there had been intense silence, but now suddenly the sounds which he had heard before from above began again. The grinding and rumbling were louder, and mingled with them was what sounded like a splash—not the cheerful splash of cars, but a dull, sullen splash, such as waves sometimes give when they are held in by a stern rock.

Willie almost expected to see some hideous creature issue from the tunnel. A wild desire to rush back to Mike and the neavogue seized him. He set his teeth hard and thought of Breda, resisting the temptation even to turn and look at the daylight. Then another thought struck him. The sea was not entering through this cave, but possibly there might be an entrance somewhere else, and on a lower level, through which the waves were rushing. The idea gave him courage, and he cautiously prepared to enter the tunnel. He took a moment to decide whether to go head or feet foremost, and chose the latter. He would much have preferred

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As to Breda, her pride in her lover's courage was so great that she would no rather have braved the anger of the Sidhe than have disappointed him.

So the neighbors around, and the parishes behind, and the districts beyond, all came to the wedding, and they danced steps and reels, and last of all, the Rince Fada, and the red-haired man sang "Paisdin Fionn," and they all joined in the chorus—"Isabella D. Tuckey in the Freeman's Journal, Dublin."

"Those heavy swells do no harm," said Willie, "but we'll have to keep off the rocks."

"Where are we going?" Mike asked eagerly.

"We're going to find out what the Quern the frightened Breda is made of," said Willie. "I'm going in with a torch and matches, and you'll stop out side and mind the neavogue."