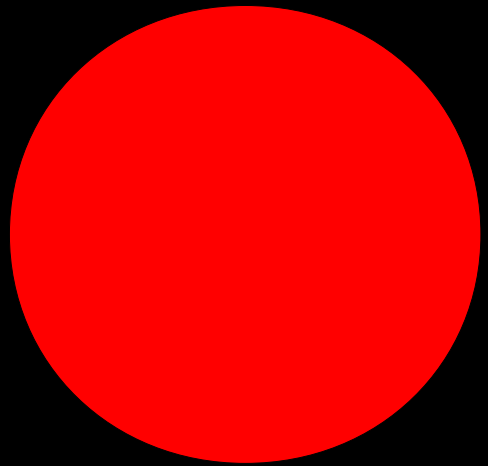


asotir

*BLOOD
BY
MOON
LIGHT*



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Lady Agatha was alone

Her lord had gone to take the measure of his lands, and his voice calling to his hounds came from far-off through her window, till it was hidden in the wind.

And she heard a great wave breaking on the stones of the Irish land, washing to the Western Sea; and a cry went with it, from a stricken old woman in a hut beyond the hill.

And Lady Agatha heard a third voice calling; and that was Aengus' voice.

She shut the window to stop the voice, but the room waxed so warm she had to open up again. His song went on and on. And the beat of the riders was everywhere; and Lady Agatha fell asleep at last.

And Master Aengus' song went right into her sleep.

She knew now why the riders came. They came for her.

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The Saga of the Black Spear:

- I. Black Spear Father
- II. Black Spear Tamer
- III. Black Spear Rulers
- IV. Black Spear Betrayer

HE HEARS THE WIND IN THE SEDGE

I wander by the edge
Of this desolate lake
Where wind cries in the sedge:
*Until the axle break
That keeps the stars in their round,
And hands hurl in the deep
The banners of East and West,
And the girdle of light is unbound,
Your breast will not lie by the breast
Of your beloved in sleep.*

—William Butler Yeats

Blood by Moonlight

by asotir

Eartherea Books



Here and Beyond



Eartherea Books

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Blood by Moonlight

Part I

The Last Days of the Sun

1. Of Master Aengus & His Love

THERE IS a land that is nearest the moon; and there in that land was once a fine young lady, bargained her way into a great manor house, and was the envy of the county by the banks of the Bride. The lady lived with the old lord of the manor, and some called her the old lord's ward, and some called her his wife.

The lady passed her time in reading, though mostly only novels, and one most of all, and the spine of it all worn smooth, the way it was her best-beloved. She took down and opened this old book one time, and started reading in the middle. And all at once she pushed the book away and said, 'Ah, and the like of *that* will never be happening to me.'

And there was a poor, proud farmer, loved the fine young lady. But his love was so cursed that even the wind in the sedge by the desolate lake would be crying out to him, *Never, never...*

'Let her come back to this place, then!' Master

Aengus would shout.

But the wind in the sedge cried, *Never, never...*

So Master Aengus left the lake behind. His fields, his farmhouse and his milch-cow went untended, and his dog cried from the post in vain.

He was a strange one, Master Aengus: not the everyday run of a farmer at all. His hands were long, with knuckles round as quail's eggs, and sparse black hairs growing upon the backs, like reeds bent by the wind. And he had a gap in his right eyebrow, where a pale scar ran. And there was a lock of white hair grown out in his dark locks above his left ear.

On the road he passed a stream, and stopped to watch the millwheel turn. Round and round went the quern, grain before it, meal behind it. The rain feeding the stream, the stream raising the millwheel, the millwheel turning the quern, the brown grains grinding, and all the world against him. Master Aengus left the mill and miller, and went up on the hill.

Where he sat on an old, broken millstone at the cross-roads, and waited in the rain. Until the damned day fled, and the golden green rain dissolved in black mist.

The lady then was dining, and laughing with her friends.

In the night Master Aengus slipped around the village, climbed the high stone wall, and tracked up

the path he knew so well.

Where he found the rut of seventeen paces, where like a dog he padded up and down. Until a candle gleamed in the window above, and a small pale hand unlatched the casement.

She looked out of the casement into the deep night. Then she looked down and saw him. He was standing in the worn place in her garden, there where he always stood, with his blushes and rude ragged hair.

She stood quite still when she saw him. She was afraid of him. She was afraid most of all of his eyes.

Then Master Aengus said to her:

‘Agatha beloved, make the wind a liar, come down to me here and delight my heart!’

‘No, Master Aengus, I’ll not do that tonight.’ Lady Agatha said, and turned behind her fan into her chamber, and closed the casement. She felt her heart beat very fast.

From her shoulders she let fall her India muslin wrapper, and she slid with a whisper into pallid golden sheets, and gave herself to dreams.

In her garden a great slashing stroke cut down a lady’s-rose in the night. And he stole away, did Master Aengus, across hay meadows to the wood in the park, the lord’s preserve. Where he lay against a hazel log, and held the flower on his breast.

‘Oh, Agony,’ Master Aengus sighed. Her given name was Agatha, but in his heart he called her Agony, for she was that to him.

Come first light Master Aengus woke. There was six days’ beard on his cheek, but the lady’s-rose was still wrapped up tight in itself. And he heard a winding horn, the lord’s horn calling up the green and golden dawn.

That morning she rose out of bed and bathed and dressed herself, just as she always did. But that morning it seemed to her she saw something different about the light, and the shadows in the corners of her room, and the worn book lurking on the nightstand by her bed.

She went down to breakfast, and found the others there before her: ‘Have I been sleeping overlong?’ she asked.

Lady Felicia, her closest friend, laughed and answered, ‘Scarcely that! But it’s a wonder you could have slept, my dear, through the clatter that went on.’

‘A bit harsh, my dear,’ muttered dear old Sir James.

‘Sir James awoke early, still in the night, really, and insisted on breakfast straightaway,’ said Dame Letitia.

‘Oh, I was hungry, and fancied a bit of bacon,’

muttered Sir James. And at that Lady Agatha, Miss Cecily, and even Mr Humphreys laughed. And even the laughter of her friends struck Lady Agatha as odd and precious on that morning.

The old lord walked in, came up to Lady Agatha and put his arm about her waist. He kissed her cheek nicely, taking his rights of her, and turned to his friends and guests to say, 'I've been up for hours already, while you've been laying abed.'

'Oh, but when weren't you the first to be rising?' asked Lady Felicia. 'Sometimes I wonder if you sleep at all.'

'Tonight,' he answered, 'was special – and today is too. Drink and eat heartily, my friends,' he said, 'the way it's a day for celebrating. Today is Agatha's birthday, and she is twenty-one today, and tonight,' he added, drawing her closer to him in his long, thin arm, 'tonight she shall come into her estate, and her dream will be realized.' At this all the gentlemen tapped their glasses and chorused, 'Bravo!' and the ladies stepped forward to offer Lady Agatha heartfelt felicitations, to which she could only reply, blushing happily, 'I'd forgotten all about it.'

The old lord loosed his grip of her, strode to the doors and threw them open. 'Mac Bride! Mac Bride!' shouted he. The old countryman appeared in the gravel of the drive, tall, dark, and waiting.

‘Do you now,’ commanded the old lord, ‘Mac Bride, wake up the master of the hunt, let the horses be saddled, and unleash the hounds! By God, we’ll hunt on this fine morning of the Lady Agatha’s birthday!’

The old countryman bowed and answered, ‘Aye, my lord,’ and vanished to do his master’s bidding.

So the old lord whistled up a hunt, and they went riding in his park. First went the portly master of the hunt, and followed the old lord’s guests and friends, the wealthy men and their well-fed ladies, and the old lord himself on his stallion.

Behind them rode Lady Agatha in a green riding habit, looking about her and delighting in the fineness of the day. And then she saw the farmer standing in her way.

She drew up rather than ride him down, and he caught her reins in his brutal hands with the great round knuckles and the sparse black hairs.

‘Agatha, now make the wind a liar, come down to me here, hide me from the world behind the curtain of your hair!’

She laughed: that was nerves and breathlessness. ‘No, Master Aengus, I’ll not do that today!’

He let go her reins, and she left him standing there. Lady Agatha spurred her milk-white mare on, flashing through the trees, faster, faster.

Master Aengus stood watching her. The golden dawn lit up the half of his face, its bristles and hard lines, and his glittery cold wise eyes.

He held up his sword, that his father had won at Boyne, where he had lost all else. 'If I could only hate you, Lady, and be free! But it's the world I hold condemned, for it's put you up on a milk-white mare, and left me only a rusted blade.'

Cursing he put back his father's sword, and left the lord's preserve.

In the blue west a fiery moon was falling: Beltane Moon she was, and it May Day Eve. Beltane is a favoring fire, the way at one time the Druids made fires with spells, driving cattle between them against evil. Master Aengus kissed to the moon a golden guinea on a chain at his throat. Then he went away.

And it was a day and more than a day, and no man heard tell of him.

And that night, while the others lay sleeping, Lady Agatha could not sleep. There was a burning in her breast, and her thoughts and hopes racing round and round, at all the promises the lord had made her, and all those he had already fulfilled. She took a lamp down the hallway, past all the doors of the bedchambers of their friends and guests, sleeping soundly. At the sound of Sir James' trumpetous snore, she smiled.

But in her mind's eye there flashed the sight of the brutal hands with the great round knuckles and the sparse black hairs.

She went into her own room and quietly closed the door. Upon her pallid golden bed she sat, and picked up her book, and stroked its smooth spine before she let it fall open on the counterpane: there on that page she let her finger fall, and there on that word she began to read: 'Yes,' she answered, 'and let you return to me on the morrow, at this very hour, Master Aengus. And then – may be! – I'll go down to you.'

So she slept, but months went by, and he never came.

2. Of the Thing That He Did

ON SUMMER'S eve Lady Agatha went riding, through the long dusk sparkling with bonfires from every hill, and by chance it was Master Aengus' farm she was riding past. His house was fallen in, dwelt in by deer and foxes; his fields were fallow, his milch-cow gone away, his dog tracked and slain for taking sheep. But no man, not even a King's man, would take over that farm, for the curse that lingered there.

'It's a shame,' said a man, 'for the land to be barren and wasting away. Won't his people come to claim the place?'

'You know he hasn't any people at all,' said another. 'Even old Tadgh and Maille May, they only took him in, the way they weren't blessed with any children of their own, so they say. He was a founding child.'

'Where,' she wondered, 'has he gone to, then?' She felt gentleness toward him, now he was gone away forever. For she felt safe at last from his eyes

and from the feelings she felt underneath the fear, like the feeling the hind must feel when the hunter tracks her. But the sight of his farm was as if a cold hand put its fingers down the neck of her. Glad she was to put that ruin at her back!

And Master Aengus stood upon a spine of hills, between Earth and Heaven in the burning, burning night. The rush of the sea swarmed round him like the wildest blessing, and the gentle air was thick with it.

And Master Aengus pushed into the air onto the far side of the hill over the strand. That was how he won through at last, into the back of beyond, where no mortal men may ever pass. And the fire in the air swarmed and buzzed around him like a hundred thousand bees. But Master Aengus pressed on still.

A track of stones led down to a little stone hut. He bent and beat on the door with his staff.

‘Who’s there?’ was asked.

‘Open to me, now!’ shouted Aengus.

The latch stirred, and the door opened three fingers wide. An old, old crone peeped out. She was so old her feet might well have walked the earth before the first grass grew.

Master Aengus smiled a wild smile into that lovely face. ‘Give me the heart of my Lady Agatha

and let her yield to me, or else the peace of death I'll never see.'

But those words broke the crone's face into a grin. She banged the door shut, and her old voice said, 'Fool Aengus! D'you think I don't mind what wind cries in the sedge?'

'Come out!' cried Aengus. But his staff and his voice broke on the stones.

Leaving, he broke a yellow pin-wheel in the garden path. It was a thing done out of spite. But far away a wave came crashing on the shore, curling all around the Irish land.

And Lady Agatha prospered, to hear the world tell of it, and gave herself to reading. Still and all, to some she seemed unsatisfied with all the gold she'd won. Her lord was kind enough to her, but he loved his hounds and horses every bit as much; and he was old, with an old man's ways.

There was never a harvest for promise like that year's harvest. It promised fair to be as rich as Lady Agatha, as folk said, and make truth of the saying that on Bron Trogain, the start of the harvest, the Earth lay in labor under the grain, the way *bron trogain* is the trouble of the Earth.

On the day after Bron Trogain the old lord had a word with the magistrate, and Master Aengus was

outlawed, and the King's men rode out on his trail with their white hounds.

And Lady Agatha went to the desolate lake.

She had never gone there, never since the day Master Aengus had espied her, and she had spoken a thing – no, he couldn't have heard her murmur, not clear across the lake.

Lady Agatha let trail the reins and wandered in the sedge. The red sun of Lammas Eve shone off the waters into her eyes and it was sad she was, the way the cold was gathering in the upper airs, and it was nearly summer's end.

But Master Aengus was caged in a hollow tree at the edge of a wood under a spine of hills, and he with a bit of meat on the end of his sword to roast over his fire, when one of the King's hounds found him. Big it was, sow-white, its ears red as rowan berries. The baying of the other hounds sounded from out the mist, and the King's men close behind.

Master Aengus dipped the bit of meat into the fire, bringing out the juices, and offered it to the hound. For a moment the hound was wavering between man and meat; then it set its jaws about the meat. Master Aengus spitted the dog on his sword, and ran it through.

The baying of hounds rang off the hills. Master

Aengus left his father's sword in the hound. Far away in the wood something glimmered white in the mist. It was a pooka or a hind a-fleeing into a thicket. Master Aengus followed it.

That same evening Lady Agatha went riding in the wind and rain, and it was black night before she ventured back into the manor house, river-wet through cloak and dress and stockings, pale of face, her hands like knots in the leather reins. She let her maid undress her, and she warmed herself in the fire in her chamber, and slipped into her bed to sleep.

Into a hollow land the white thing led Master Aengus, where the bogs quaked round his feet. The soft rain feeding his fever, splashing on his brow, shuddering to steam, until bright laughter stopped him.

A lady with a silver cloak and crown of hair was sitting on a stone. Her brow was a lily, her eyes were twinkling and her lips red as bleeding blackberries.

'Why are you laughing, then?' asked Master Aengus.

'Are you not a farmer from the Bride?' asked the beauty in her turn. 'I've heard tell of you.'

'What thing have you heard?'

'Ah, this and that! That your looks were such,

folk took to calling you Aengus for a jest; that your manner was such, they called you Master, poor as you were. And that you know many a difficult and dangerous thing: in short, that you are a free thinker, and a philosopher.

‘And what has that won you, Master Aengus? Lady Agatha still blushes when you gape at her. Not all the potions ever blent will win you what you want!’

‘What then but die?’ asked Aengus.

‘Have you courage? Would you dare all?’

‘I would dare nothing, for nothing’s all to me.’

‘Then you might do something after all. And then the curse against your love will be ended, and your lady will consent to love you – or rather, she will conceive for you the strongest amorous desire. But if you do it, Aengus! Then her longing for you will be short-lived, and meanwhile all her world will be ruined and waste!’

The beauty smiled, daring and tempting and urging all at once.

‘I will do it.’

The beauty pointed with a twig. ‘Go into this hollow. In your shirt you’ll be shivering, and your throat it will be dry. It’s Samhain now and the Winter’s Moon, elder than the Sun. Not all the fire of day can thin the mist on this holy last night, with

Winter wanting to be born.

‘And you will hear a singing down the way, like a nightingale. Draw near, but make no sound.

‘In an island in the bog you’ll be finding a slender maiden singing, and she alone and drawing in the mud with a willow-wand. Little older than a girl she’ll be in her grass-green coat.

‘Catch her if you can, but if she prove too quick, it’s with cleverness you must coax her out. Hold on fast, and don’t be letting go until she promise all you want! She has the secret, though she will be swearing she doesn’t know it at all. And if she will not, then tell her, do it for my sake. And if still she will not, then show her this.’

From her sleeve the beauty drew a small white stone, rounded and smooth, the size of a hen’s egg.

Master Aengus took the stone, the leag lorgmhar. He went down the path. The beauty’s silver voice calling after him:

‘She’ll be telling you your love can never be, dark Aengus. Your love, and your love only in all the world, is so cursed: and why should that be so? But there is a way. Would you wake the Unappeasable Host, Aengus? Would you break the Axle, would you prick the Sun’s blood-red black boil, for one woman’s sake? Could any man’s love be so mad or singular?’

Master Aengus went into the hollow. In his shirt he was shivering, and his throat was dry, just as she said it would be. It was Samhain and the Winter's Moon, and not all the fire of day could thin the mist on that last night, with Winter wanting to be born.

And then he heard a singing down the way, like a nightingale.

Agatha woke up in her golden bed.

Now, that was New Year's Eve by the cottagers' calendar, when all the souls are loosed. In spite of the rain, the land was brightened by hundreds of bonfires lighting on the hills; needfires the country-folk called them, burned to rekindle the Sun against winter night. Lady Agatha huddled underneath the pallid golden sheets, hearing a sound of hoofbeats, of a hundred hundred riders coming forth. And she heard a gentle woman laughing: and she could not sleep. It was four weeks before the fever would be leaving her.

The next evening was clear and fine, and the rich men and their well-fed ladies in the manor house were delighting in the splendors of the sunset. It was most unseasonably warm.

And in the last moment of the day, a small black speck showed on the sun's broad face.

Lady Agatha all at once asked, 'Whatever became

of the strange lonely farmer was ever chasing me, was Master Aengus not his name?' But they didn't know.

All that night the rich folk lay sleepless in the heat. Cambric upon cambric and the finest India muslins were let drape upon the floor.

Lady Agatha was alone. Her lord had gone out to take the measure of his lands, and his voice calling to his hounds came from far-off through her window, till it was hidden in the wind.

And she heard a great wave breaking on the stones of the Irish land, washing to the Western Sea; and an anguished cry went with it, from a stricken old woman in a hut beyond the hill. For the girl had told her tale.

There was a story the cottagers told to make sense of the word, Samhain, and it was like this. *Suain* is a *gentle* sound, and at Samhain *gentle* voices sound.

And Lady Agatha heard a third voice calling; and that was Aengus' voice.

She went to the window, but was seeing not a soul. She shut the window to stop the voice, but the room waxed so warm she had to open up again. His song went on and on. And the beat of the riders was everywhere; and Lady Agatha was so forlorn, that she fell asleep at last.

And Master Aengus' song went right into her sleep.

She knew now why the riders came. They came for her.

For four weeks the air waxed warmer.

For four weeks the spot grew bigger on the Sun's broad face, like a fat beetle that ate of it.

And every night, the Moon in the sky grew rounder, and fuller, and nearer by.

For four weeks the days grew shorter. Mist like soot obscured the sky. Weary and spent, the wealthy men and well-fed ladies were crying for a good long rest: in all those days and nights, they had not known sleep, no, not a wink of sleep at all. But Lady Agatha slept straight through those nights, and the days too, with a secret smile upon her mouth.

And the twenty-seventh day was brutal and dark.

And in the evening of that day the skies broke clear. And in the last moment of that day the blood-red blackness swallowed the Sun's broad face; and the third wave shattered all the stony Irish coasts. They both heard it, she and he; but none of those others did.

Shooting stars rained out of Heaven in the dusk of that day, and the wealthy slept at last. They slept as they had never slept before. They slept like dead

souls. Oh, but they slept!

And the date of that day was the 28th day of November, in the year of Our Lord 1757.

But that night Lady Agatha did not sleep.

‘Aengus,’ she murmured, waking.

The old lord was standing over her bed. ‘Why do you call that name?’ he asked. His face was a dreadful mask.

‘Because he’s there below, and it’s his voice I hear singing out my name,’ she answered gaily.

Lady Agatha stretched out her limbs, and she rose out of bed in only her shift, and stepped across the room.

She heard the old lord shouting for his steed, and riding after the Sun.

She lighted a lantern, hot between her hands. She paced about her golden bed. Tumult was rising in her roselike breasts, and a hollow in her like the apostate’s regret.

She leaned against the casement, peering into black. There was a glow lacing the hilltops, as from forty flaming cities. The pregnant trees murmured with the growing chaos, and the black air shook, with the elongating Night.

‘Oh,’ she cried and sighed at once, ‘Oh, Aengus!’

He stepped from a tree into her light. In the danc-

ing glow his face gleamed darkly, sweating, as from some toil terrible and great. She was hearing his song again, and it welling in her, drowning out her own voice, until she danced to it.

She knew that he had caused these things.

‘Who are you, Master Aengus, and what are you, that you can summon up the winds, the clouds, and this Night? What are you, that you dare do such things?’

‘I am yours,’ he answered, and gestured with his hands, and more winds came, like hot breaths, and she was watching the gestures he made with his fine and lovely hands.

And she was afraid no more.

The warm night swam in Lady Agatha’s titian hair, her eyes were dim with passion, sultry desire was roused in her strawberry lips. Red naked beneath her fine lawn shift she reached and called to him hoarsely, ‘O my Beloved, my aching sweet love, come up to me here, clothe me with your kisses and lie alongside me for the night!’

‘Yes,’ he answered, ‘for one Night.’

Part II

The Rising of the Moon

The First Year of Night

In the first year of that Night, the Waking stayed close about their homes. They never strayed far from their own front doors.

What had taken place across the world? Why was it always Night now, and never Day? It bewildered and befuddled them. They knew not what to make of it. They did not know what had become of the Sun. They did not know why they Woke and their lovers, kin, friends, both High and Low alike, still Slept. They did not know why the Sleeping could not awakened. And every moon-dark they thought to their hearts, 'Surely now the Sun will rise.'

But the Sun did not rise.

1. How They Lived After

YES,' HE ANSWERED, 'for one Night.'

Darkness and heat blotted out the stars, and Lady Agatha coiled in the great carved bed with Master Aengus. There was a brilliance in the south, there was a rain of fire. Thick showers steamed with the smell of ash. Heavy, hot-breathed clouds caressed the earth.

Hour after hour it was lasting, long into what should have been day, until at last the clouds were parting, and a placid flow of light emerged out of the east, of the second moonrise of that Night.

Master Aengus took Lady Agatha by the hand, and led her out of the great carved bed. Fires burned in all the manor's hearths, and candles shone on the walls and ceilings. Bright was that house, and warm. Ceol-sidhe of pipers and harpists was heard from far-off rooms, while the table was spread with rare delights, and the bricks glowed ruddy with cheer. She kissed him, and he smiled. They went back into bed. She was wanting him still; but was it

not a lie?

The Moon rose a third time, and a fourth. But the Sun rose no more. The Sun had burst into a million bits of fire; the Sun was gone; the girdle of light was unbound.

The Moon, alone among a million strange stars, lighted new contours on the old Earth. By bubbling seas, blackened hills, and shrunken lakes, there was only darkness where light had been looked for, where the cities all had been.

It was as if an age of man had passed.

The great cities of the world were still. London, Paris, Vienna, Rome, were that many crags of stone. Their doors were shut; behind those doors, in sealed, dark chambers, the former rulers of the world slept on.

Others, the Wakeful, went out of their rooms. They stepped silently into their Night. Beyond the black outlines of towers and houses they saw the land beyond, rust red and violet in the silver light.

What was it had marked them, that they few should wake while all the rest slept on? There is no telling. Cataclysms render no accounts. But many of them were children.

The Wakeful left the stone-paved streets behind them, and went out scattering among the fields and hills, to build what had never yet been built, and

make anew what had been forgotten.

Now, as to Master Aengus and Lady Agatha, the miraculous had taken place. His song went on and on and she was happy at his side. But sure, it was a lie.

Now the first month of the Night ended, and another took its place. And thirteen Moons went over, till the stars wheeled round to touch the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

The Second Year of Night

In the second year of that Night, the Waking stopped looking to see the Sun again. They grew to greet the Night as their own. They gave over their grieving for the loss of the Sleepers. And they began to wonder, What might they find in darkness down the road, over the hill, and on the far shore?

So they donned their hats and bonnets and they shut their doors behind them, softly without locking them (for they did not wish to wake the Sleepers), and they wandered out into the Night-Land to greet the other Waking.

2. Of the Three Gifts He Made Her

WHEN SHE stood out of bed in icy dark, Lady Agatha shivered.

His song had stopped. The rooms were still. The tables were bare. For the first time since the setting of the Sun, she looked outside the windows. And it was Night.

In the main hall she met Master Aengus. He came holding one small candle. In the candlelight it was his old dark face again, bent in on itself.

He reached to take her hand, but she withdrew it.

He bowed and uttered, 'After you, my lady.'

The Moon rose again, but the bright fires, the ceol-sidhe, and the magical feast never returned.

'Surely,' she said, 'you don't think I'll be staying here with you?' And she saddled her mare and rode away off.

She traveled down the King's road. Out of the sky a chill was falling, and a bit of snow, but out of the

ground warmth was rising, from deep out of the sun-burned earth, and the snowflakes melted in midair. The stones and hills, all charred and singed as they were, gave back the warmth of the fallen Sun. And a soft whisper was singing in the wind, like a sigh or like the sea. She could almost make out the voice of that whisper, but its words were too faint or strange.

On either side of the road the Night-Land spread darkly in the Moon. The fields were untenanted and still, the hedges black tangles, the streams sullen silver strands. She passed some carts along the way, emptied and forsaken. The dray ponies had slipped their yokes and gone off to places unknown.

Lady Agatha shivered.

‘This isn’t my land at all,’ she wondered. ‘Where is my home?’

She stopped at a public house, feeling hungry, but the windows of the place were dark and the chimney cold. The landlord was sleeping, and the enchantment of his sleep locked the door fast to all hands.

She saw a few figures alone on the grass fields, and they dark and twisted, and their gambols unpleasant and odd. She avoided them, and held to the King’s road.

After some hours, the road led her up a slope and over a hill, and she saw a great house down the

way. The house had a familiar look, and lights were gleaming in some of its windows, and so she rode down towards it, until she drew her mare up short. She stared at the great house.

It was indeed a house she knew. It was the old lord's manor house she had left behind her hours before.

She turned her mare, crossed to the far side of the road, and passed through the hedge into the fields.

She was following the swale of a valley for a time, along a little nameless stream, until the stream took a turn, and she saw a great house on a hill. Lights were gleaming in some of its windows, and it was the old lord's manor house in her way again.

Lady Agatha turned her mare about, and plunged into a wood. She was wending her way through the wood, and coming out the far side, and seeing a great house beyond the trees.

It was her manor house again.

'Och!' she cried in anger, and spun her mare back into the wood.

Which she traversed, and came out again by another side, and another again; but whatever the side of the wood she was coming out of, it was always the old lord's manor house waiting up the way, and himself, Master Aengus, quietly abiding within, smoking

his pipe no doubt and telling off the hours until she came back to him.

Lady Agatha threw herself down on the grass beside her mare in a little clearing in the middle of the deep dark wood, and wrapping herself in her silver riding cloak, she made herself sleep. The Moon rose up over the tops of the trees and shed an oval of light on her.

After a time she woke, and looked about. She was lying in the oval drive, and the manor house was sprung up around her with all its walls and windows.

Lady Agatha fetched a sigh, stabled her mare, and went into the house.

She heard him smoking in the hall, but she went up the stairs to her own room and closed the door.

The other bedchambers were all shut fast. At moonrise Lady Agatha made a tour of the hallways, going from door to door. She missed Lady Felicia and Sir James, and prayed that somehow they might waken to her knocking and rescue her. No door was locked; but no door would open.

‘They’re sleeping yet, Miss’ said the old countryman, Mac Bride. ‘It wouldn’t be right to be bothering them.’

Next moonrise Lady Agatha tried the doors again. The old lord did not return. Mac Bride stayed on

to serve Master Aengus. A few cottagers still waked in the village. Not many.

That moon Master Aengus lingered at her side. He was the tenderest, humblest, most solicitous of jailers.

He chose her dresses and helped pin her hair. Then she looked less like herself and more like his vision of her: sad, elegant, dangerous. Her melancholy seemed only to increase his desire. He sat and spoke to her of his philosophy, of arcane, erudite things. She sat obediently by his side. At length, before he had done, she left the room.

When next the Moon rose, a cool and shivering image on the waters, Master Aengus went to hunt. Having no powder, he hunted with lures and his grandfather's long bow. When he returned, he cooked potatoes and turnips, carrots and cold carcasses over turf fires in the kitchens. He ate his stew out of gleaming copper bowls, with sterling forks, at the lord's long table. Lady Agatha ate in her room.

'Come,' he said to her, 'and let's have a game.'

So she played him at chess. Now Master Aengus would be winning; now Lady Agatha. Each strove silently, with a great will, to win.

And all the while their bodies, bending together over the table, were speaking to each other. And when the king had fallen, Master Aengus touched

her hand, softly, and Lady Agatha let her fingers trail across his bared wrist, delicately, so that her touch was no heavier than an hare's breath; and the end of it was always the same, they two lying in bed together, in the great carved bed the lord had let build especially: and they two still wordless but for their little moans and cries.

To deny it ran past all her powers, for the strength of his spells lay still upon her. It was her body loving it, and never herself at all. So she swore it was so in her heart, and would hear of nothing else.

But when it was done, she gathered her clothes over her bare body, blushing, and she fled to her own room and her own bed to rest. He watched her go with his eyes. And so in the dark of the moon, they rested unsleeping and dreaming apart.

'Why can't I leave?' she demanded.

'There's nowhere else for you to find welcome,' he answered.

'Am I your prisoner, now?'

'No, but I'm yours.'

'Then let me go!'

But all he did was smile and shake his head; and 'I love you,' he told her – and she flinched.

'Once it was, you were kinder to me than that.'

He looked at her, at her reproachful eyes. There

was a question in his eyes. He did not ask it.

‘You miss the colors of the day,’ he said. ‘You’re wrong. The colors of Night surpass them. Wait, and I’ll be bringing them to you.’

For two moons and a darkness in the attic he worked, and brought her down a bolt of cloth. And it was white, that cloth, and brighter than white. White as the stars, white as snow upon the lofty places in the cold. No fold nor wrinkle might be seen in all that bolt, but only white, and white.

For a moment, Lady Agatha’s eye brightened at the beauty of it; then the lost look came back into her face. He left the cloth in her room, and every moon she was looking on it, but she never would touch it.

The old man, Mac Bride, was tending to the house. He hadn’t time to see about the grounds, and they slowly growing wild. Lady Agatha was passing many an hour with him. She spoke his name as the cottagers had, ‘Mac Bridey,’ and ‘Mac Birdie.’

As a man Mac Bride had been summoned to the manor to attend the old lord’s birth. It was a custom to foster a rich man’s son on a countryman. The child was sent to stay with his foster family until his seventh year. The odd thing about this fostering was that it was Mac Bride had come to the manor. He had been there ever since. He became the old lord’s

godfather, and it was said the child's luck resided in his godfather.

'You served him for so long,' said Lady Agatha. 'How can you serve this one now, who took his place and came into our house as if he were the lord? Do you not condemn him all to Hell?'

He answered, 'I served Aengus once before. Now I'm serving him again.'

'You're waiting for our lord's return, and watching for your chance,' said Lady Agatha.

'No, it's not that I'm doing now,' answered the old man.

It snowed now and again, lightly melting on the sun-burned ground. In spite of the snow the airs were mild, and the snows were melting as soon as ever they fell, and mist rising out of the fields, warm and sticking on the skin. They called it the Fire-Warm Winter, they that woke in it. For though Heaven spun cold where the bright Moon rode, the ground underfoot was as warm to the touch as the floor-bricks of a hearth, and the lough waters were warm, and the Sea was warm as well. It was as though a secret fire burned on deep in the dark soft bosom of the Earth.

Lady Agatha stole out across the dying lawns to a dale where the rill of a spring made the mud black, and a broken tree attacked the stars. She sat buried

in the huge bearskin her lord gave her when he wooed her.

But Master Aengus left the empty house, and he went to the dark valley. He knew where to go.

She knew him first by the one white lock on his left temple, and crouched down in the bearskin, hoping he would not see her. But he did.

No words of greeting passed between them. Master Aengus pulled the jeweled pins from the veil spun round her eyes; and he kissed her dark and enigmatic hair. And he caught Lady Agatha by the waist, and the bearskin fell open on the mud, baring her body, milky as the moon, baring her breasts, delicate as the caps of mushrooms quivering in moonlight. Her back he was pressing against the rough tree bark, so that it was like to cut her.

‘You are so beautiful,’ he said, and she cringed.

The same question was in his brow, but he told her only, ‘There are other colors of the Night.’

For two moons and a darkness more he worked in his attic, and brought her down a second bolt.

Red was that cloth, all but unseeable, sensible rather by the touch. The red of blushing or of tears, of nudity, of the bedrock still glowing, secret and rebellious, from the blood-dark fires of the fallen Sun.

Lady Agatha reached for the cloth, and it was bleeding its warmth into the palm of her hand. But

she let her hand fall, and she turned away.

Master Aengus had a pet in that house, a long-haired cat, white with a small face and dark blue eyes. She was ever following at his heels, mewing after him. After every dinner Master Aengus would be having the cat on his lap, combing the snarls out of her fur, so that her purring droned in the hall. Lady Agatha disliked that cat.

Lonely she was, except for Mac Bride. She missed her friends dearly, and Lady Felicia especially.

When the Moon rose, she saw the countryman walking down the drive, and she put on her cloak and followed after him. She was walking as fast as she might to catch up, but the countryman's legs were long, and they were on the far side of the village before she caught sight of him. She was on the point of calling him to stop and wait for her, when she saw that he was following the crooked lane up to Master Aengus' ruined farm. Then she bit back her call, and went after him quietly.

At the end of the lane she looked out around the hedge, and saw Mac Bride.

The old man was walking round the ruins of Master Aengus' farmhouse, withershins west to east and south to north, and muttering something every time he passed the broken gate. She was straining her ears to grasp at his words, but this is all the sense

she could make out of them, though she heard them three times over, once each time the old countryman passed the gate:

‘Sleep now and stay sleeping, the way we’ve no need at all for you to be slipping your spoon into our porridge again.’

After the third time he said these words, if those were indeed the words that he said, the old man locked the gate, looked sternly at the ruins, and turned back. She was only just able to conceal herself in the hedge as he passed.

Lady Agatha crept out after Mac Bride had passed, and walked up to the ruined farmhouse. She stopped at the gate, and was looking a long time, and all the same she could see nothing stirring there, and wondered what it could have been the old man had been addressing.

‘What is Master Aengus, Mac Bride?’ she asked, when next she saw him. ‘What kind of a thing is he, the way he could do all he did?’

‘He calls himself,’ he answered, ‘a man.’

‘Well, but what was he like as a boy? Mac Bride, you know all the secrets of the county, tell me his.’

‘Ah, he wasn’t the best-loved boy, Miss! He studied and read, and was the oldest child you could think of. Not a bit like his brother, now,’ he mused.

‘A brother!’ she said. ‘I never heard he had a

brother!’

‘Och, yes, and a fine scamp of a lad he was.’

‘Whatever became of him? Surely he wasn’t living in the county these past three years.’

The old countryman seemed out of sorts at the question, and not disposed to answer. All he would say was, ‘That the tale of it was he fought the English, and was outlawed: skipped away across the sea one jump ahead of the hangman, and passed into the kingdom of France.’

They were quiet for a time. She was waiting to see if the old countryman would say more; but he could hold his tongue, could old Mac Bride. Then she asked him that question she had never dared before:

‘What became of our lord then, in the evening of the last day when he rode away?’

The old man put down the turf-bundle beside the hearth. The sods Mac Bride gathered were the finest sort, the way he knew the best places to be getting them. He let the white cat rub her chin against his fingertip.

At length he said, ‘When the heat rose, and the clouds seemed like they caught fire, your old lord took it ill. It was the look of him, like a man dreading something for a long while, and finally sure it will not come: then it comes.

“Mac Bride,” he calls, running from the house, “Saddle my horse, there’s quick work to be done!” I brought him the horse, the earth-colored one. Sure, it was a younger man’s steed, and he too old and weak to master him; but he was ever the one to fight against the truth of himself.

‘Round the house he rode, gun in hand, searching every shadow. He went up on the hills, and I following after, I cannot tell you why. The wind is fierce and hot in my eyes, and his horse’s tail is shaking wild as flames, and the white of its eyes gleaming in the sooty dusk. He spins the horse round with a curse, but the thing is done in a moment: a great fire ball swoops out of the sky and strikes him in a blaze. There was only the stallion left, burnt bloody dead, and of your lord’s body nary a sign.’

‘Och, why did you never tell me this before?’

‘Sure, you never asked before.’

Lady Agatha blushed. She had not dared to ask before, for the joy in her had blent together those last hours; she thought she had not heard her lord ride out until she lay in Master Aengus’ arms.

Master Aengus left all the keys to the house with Lady Agatha: all, that is, but one.

‘What’s mine is yours,’ he was telling her. ‘Only do not go into that room.’

He took her into the attic, and pointed out the door to her. Then he went and locked himself into that room. It was where he studied. It was where he made the cloths. She went into the yard below and gazed up at the room's one window, and it round, and seeming broken by the Moon.

Lady Agatha said to Mac Bride, 'Mac Bride, be opening now the door to the room in the attic, for I would go in there.'

But Mac Bride shook his head and answered, That the master had left her all the keys, and Mac Bride none, so he couldn't let her in.

She smiled.

Neither Master Aengus nor Mac Bride knew she had her own keys, from the time before the Night. And when Master Aengus was gone away hunting, she went up the stairs, locking all the doors behind her. At the top of the stairs lay the white cat. Lady Agatha took the cat by her collar and sent her down the stairs; the cat mewed, but she went.

Lady Agatha crossed the attic to the little locked door. Every key of hers she tried upon that lock, and at the last, the smallest and darkest of the bunch, the lock turned.

And in she went.

There was moonlight glinting off the broken glass, and there was her candle gleaming.

On a little table beneath the window were a stone cup of wine, an inkwell, a bundle of quills and a small jeweled snuffbox.

On either side the walls were bending in with shelves of old books, and great cracking parchments curled inside leather bags. One parchment lay open on the table, held at one edge by a small white stone, smooth and rounded as a hen's egg.

Lady Agatha drank the wine in the cup, the way seeing it reminded her of how thirsty she was. She looked on the parchment, but she could make no sense of it. The charactery, all crabbed and bent, looked as though the quill had been slashing and tormenting the flesh of the parchment. She took out another parchment, but could read that one no better. She fetched her down a third, and another still: And the last one she could read.

By this wisdom he trapped me, she thought. I will read it too.

She tried the jeweled snuffbox, but could not open it.

She was closing the door behind her, when her eyes fell on the stone cup. It was full of wine again, though she hadn't filled it. She smiled and thought 'Good, now! He won't be missing it!'

Coming down again, she saw a small black spot in the hollow of her hand. Some soot or ink on the

doorlatch must have rubbed off on her palm. She tried to clean it, but the spot remained, like a plague spot. She kept it out of Master Aengus' eyes, and went on visiting the room all the same.

And she found at last the Smaragdine Table etched upon a yellowing parchment. And she studied that book as though all her life hung by it, and it held her faster than novels.

She was eating with him now, he at his end of the table, she at hers. She ate her stew piping hot, clanging her spoon in the copper bowl. And she chose her prettiest dresses, and wore fragrance in her hair and cachets in her bosom. It pleased her, the way she knew she was breaking his pishogue spell. She felt his eyes burn after her, and was glad.

And it was many a moon since she had last gone into his bed. How he was wanting it! But Lady Agatha was free again. So free she snared herself.

It happened in the darkness, when the Moon was hid. Lady Agatha was in her room, bathed in the light of nine candles. In the light his bolt of red cloth caught her eye.

And she held it over her, letting its touch cascade down her body. She looked at herself in the glass. What a daring dress that cloth would make! She did off her dress and regarded herself proudly, naked in her shift and that sheet of flame. It was like hot

breath on her and hot wine within her.

Aengus, she knew, was resting in his room. She had never watched him dreaming. Setting down the cloth with care, she took a candle and stepped into the hall.

Soft as smoke she passed the bedchamber doors shut fast on the sleeping lords and ladies. Until she reached the hall's end, and the great groaning door of the lord's room. For a moment she paused, and the wanting to go in was like a tongue of flame tickling the insides of her.

She thought of him lying alone in the great carved bed. But was he dreaming, now? Perhaps he was thinking on her and wanting her. Was he staring at this same door – laughing perhaps, in that proud silent way of his? Did he know she was standing there, her hand touching this cold brass latch? Was this only his spell after all?

She shuddered. And she fled down the hall and down the stairs, out into the quenching Night.

Lady Agatha was walking steadfastly, with no thought but to be going, as quickly and quietly as she could, and be never coming back again. From the upper window in the manor she appeared a straw doll in her shift. Round about her the long darkness rolled away, away.

A little cold light soon appeared in the southeast, from the rising moon. The hills and fields awakened strangely gentle to her light. Stark warm it was, being Oimell, the starting of Spring. The cottagers had said that *oi* is a name for sheep, and that is when sheep would come and be milked.

Lady Agatha had surely trod this same path a hundred times during the day, but she hardly knew it now. The world of Night was nothing like the day. This was his world. He'd made it for her prison, to trap her in her need.

She slowed her pace. Panic snatched at her. Where was she to go in this Night-Land of his? Where in this darkness might she be free of him?

The fear was not leaving her until she bent her knee. The auburn rings of her hair fell about her eyes, and her fingers curled through the short, stiff grass burned in their bones like ice.

She saw in the hollow of her hand a small black spot.

She looked up, and beheld the manor before her. She sighed, stood up, and walked in.

The house was watchful, dark, and still. The candles had guttered and died in her room, clouding it with the perfume of their deaths. The acrid odor harried her.

Lonely she was, and lonely she stayed, all alone

in his Night-Land.

She shut her door and locked it. Soon he would be rising, and might knock at her door. Weak and wearied, she slid into bed between the ice cold sheets. She ran her hands lightly over her curled-up legs, her arms, and her trembling body, hugging herself, kissing her knees. She was colder than the sheets, cold as a dead girl fished from a pond. She felt hopeless and spent.

Sounds reached her from below. He was waking and eating. Soon she heard the door open and close, and steps on the stones. There were two sets of them – his and Mac Bride's. They were going out hunting, making a noise of it – did they think to mock her now?

Weak as she was, Lady Agatha went to the kitchen, heated water, and hauled it up to her room. She set the pitcher down beneath her window, where moonlight danced in the bath, rippling round the room.

Before yielding to the steaming waters, Lady Agatha saw herself in the glass.

She saw her silver, slender legs, her thin shoulders, her shadowy hair, and the spiral of her back, clear now of those marks of the tree-bark.

But the black spot on her palm still marked her, and the other mark, the shameful one he had put

upon her, that was there still: a small red star like the marks the tattooed sailors wore, and it seeming to say, This one, she belongs to Master Aengus.

For a long while Lady Agatha was alone in the house. Beltane came and Winter's end; Lughnasadh came and the harvest start, when handfasting weddings were commonly made, and still she abode in the manor house alone.

Then Master Aengus came back alone to her. There was blood on his breeches.

'I need you,' he said, and she hated him for it.

And he drew from his bag his seven Moons' work, a third bolt of cloth, and the last. And it was black.

Black of the skies behind the stars, of the hills in rainstorms when the moon is hid below ground. Black of great age, of hidden places, secret thoughts, untold things. The blackness in the belly of a woman when first she puts her hand there, and feels a certain stirring.

And that cloth Lady Agatha took from him. She was looking down in it as if gazing in a deep, deep well.

He took her to bed, and she let him. She hadn't the strength to fight. It was like breathing again after having her face held under water.

When he loosed her she thought, I cannot stay

here in his bed like this. But somehow she might not go, and fell into dreaming at his side.

She dreamed she was crawling through a wood, bending under brambles, and the thorns catching and tearing her clothes, and she calling, 'Aengus! Aengus! Come down to me here!' In the dream she could not hold back her tears, and the pillows were wet with them.

Master Aengus sat over her, watching. When she woke it was his face she saw first. There was wariness in his eyes. A bit of anger, too. At last he asked her, that question he had not asked before:

'What then do you want of me?'

She answered through her tears, defiantly, 'If you loved me you would know. O, you should know!'

'I know. But I'll not give it to you unless you ask.'

She shook her head on the pillow. She wanted that last of all, to be asking him for anything. She bit her lip to hold back the words. But at last, ere the Moon rose, she said:

'Bring back the Sun, bring back the world of day again!'

'You will rue it,' said Master Aengus. 'It is here and now that we will find our only happiness.' But he no more than she would ask for any kindness now.

Lady Agatha went on looking at him, unspeaking,

the way she didn't dare speak.

'Very well,' said Aengus.

And for the second time that Night the stars touched the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

The Third Year of Night

In the third year of that Night, the Waking in their wanderings felt drawn to certain spots.

Hilltops and glens and bends in the river, inlets on the coasts, some islands, ancient ruins in the wild, forest thickets, tall bare outlooks over the great cities. There was something about those spots, something nameless and beyond describing in any words from the Day, that in breathed the Night more fully than the other places in the world. They called these the Strong Places.

There the Waking felt as if they had come home again to places they had never known before.

3. Of Agatha by Moonlight

MASTER AENGUS made ready to go. He emptied the attic room, packed his parchments in a bag and bound it to his horse. The old countryman was helping him.

‘Will you be wanting me along?’ Mac Bride asked.

Master Aengus shook his head. ‘Alone I did the thing, and alone I’ll be undoing it.’ He looked back to the manor, to Lady Agatha standing in the doorway. ‘You’ll look after her?’

‘So long as she’ll be staying here,’ said Mac Bride.

Master Aengus walked toward the house. Lady Agatha was wearing a robe of blue Pekin Muslin, and in her hair three green feathers.

‘I am going now,’ he said. ‘It is a far road I must be taking, if I am to do your bidding.’

‘Go then,’ she said.

‘Come with me.’

‘And find this house ever in my path?’

‘I take off that blessing. You may put this manor at your back and never see her more, if that should be your pleasure. Only come along with me.’

‘No.’

Deep in his eyes anger was lashing, like a storm far off the coast. ‘You want me to betray the Night? It’s my mother land. And why should I turn traitor for your asking of it?’

‘Do it,’ she said.

Master Aengus nodded, all quiet and still and terrible.

‘You knew nothing,’ he told her, ‘of living ere we met. It was only the way you’d been taught you were following. I did know how to live, but my life lacked an end. You became that end. I’d have done anything for you. I did do what no other would have, to win you.’

‘Well you may say it,’ said she, ‘but what did you have in our former life? You lost nothing when the Sun declined: myself, I lost all. You wagered the world, which was none of yours, for some hours of my love. But even those hours were only a trick you played on me. It was never myself who wept for you, but only a doll you made in my likeness.’

‘What did you win then, but my body’s love, and that spell-wrought and untrue. It was only this end of yours that you were seeking, and never myself at

all. So you made me your wh—; did you think I'd be loving you for that? Did you dream you'd find a lawful *wife* in what you'd made of me?

Now there was but sadness and wisdom in his look. As for Lady Agatha, she felt almost a softening for him, watching the man trudge back to his horse. But when he mounted, his mare reared, and Master Aengus turning her, called back in a dark voice,

'Love is desire, desire is love! A *wife*, do you say now? Were you *his* wife any more? But myself, I'd no bit of a need for a *wife*!'

'May you,' she shouted after him, 'be damned all to Hell, Master Aengus! May you be blasted and waste, for what you did to me!' Tears blinding her eyes like veils, and she swinging the door with a bang against him on his dark mare riding off.

The young moon was high above the fields, when Master Aengus went away. And she was the Beltane Moon.

When he was gone, the manor seemed colder and darker, as though it had been only Aengus had kept alive the last bit of warmth and cheer.

Lady Agatha ate with Mac Bride in a side room. She was almost chattering, speaking of Lady Felicia, Miss Cecily, and dear old Sir James, but not a word did she say of Aengus. The old countryman watched her, waiting as it seemed.

‘And you, Mac Birdie?’ she asked him. ‘Did you leave no family behind you in the day?’

The old man shrugged and answered, ‘I had a daughter once.’

Now this surprised her, to be thinking of Mac Bride, old as he was and a fixture belonging to the manor, as a man and a lover and a father to a girl. In the years she had been growing up in the county, Lady Agatha had seen and heard tell nothing of a wife or a daughter to Mac Bride, and she had to be asking, ‘What became of her?’

He put down his spoon and wiped his mouth, and she thought he hadn’t heard her, when he looked up at her and answered, softly, ‘She was a wayward girl. As wayward as yourself.’ And it seemed that subject was closed.

‘Mac Bride,’ she said, ‘will you do me a favor?’

‘Sure, and name it.’

‘Tend to the house. See that no rogues despoil her.’

‘Would you be going, then?’

‘Yes, and before the world is any older. I’ll not be staying, and waiting like a wife for him! But you must stay, Mac Bride, and guard the lords and ladies sleeping.’

‘No,’ he answered, ‘I’ll not do that.’

‘What, Mac Bride! You lived here all your life,

and you'll not even see to the place?'

'I had a life before this place. And it was never the house I came to serve.'

'Stay for your lord, then. He may return some day.'

'No, that one will not be coming back, the way he is gone out of life.'

'Well, what of Master Aengus? He'll be returning at all odds.'

'When the master returns to this house, it will mark the hour of his death,' answered Mac Bride.

She peered at him, at his face as rough and plain as a lichenous stone. 'What are you then, Mac Bride?' she wondered in her heart.

He nodded, as though he was divining her very thought.

'The Sleepers will be well enough, Miss. The enchantment shutting their doors will seep through all the house after we two have gone, until in the end it will be at some cost that any of us three will be able to open the front door; and for anyone else it shan't be done at all. No thieves will be harming them.'

'Will they never waken? Is it a tomb we're dining in?'

'They will waken surely, if—' He stopped.

'—If Master Aengus succeed, and call back the

day.' It was a truth she had already known.

She had an odd dream on that dark of the moon. In the dream she met a woman on the road. 'Mary bless you, and where are you for?'

'I'm meeting my darling,' answered the woman in her dream. 'We're bound for the abbey. And you?'

'I don't know.'

'Have you no sweetheart, now?'

'I did have, once,' answered Lady Agatha in her dream, knowing what a lie that was.

'Then quick find another! And Mary bless you, indeed!' And laughing the woman rode away.

Clothed in her finest traveling-dress, Lady Agatha offered Mac Bride farewell and blessings before taking to the road. She carried with her some dresses and things, and her beloved book. So she mounted her mare and was off.

She rode down the lane, down to the somber village and its houses closed with sleep. She forded the Bride on horseback, swimming against the slick, dark stream. She cut across Squire Kimball's fields, the path she always followed to the King's road.

And this time she won free of the house, truly. Aengus' saying proved true. The road did not bend

back upon itself. The manor did not swing back into her way. And for a time she was breathing lightly in the turnings of the road. Then she straightened her back and rode faster; and the summer air behind her scattered her bright laugh.

The air was mild as milk, and she hot in her dress, so she rode for a darkness and a moon naked in her shift, that was pale with rippling like the waves curling in to shore.

And it was a wonderful delight she was feeling rising up in her. She was free of him, free of that house! The vast Night seemed to be welcoming her. The darkness, hiding so much from sight, seemed quick with promise, and all the land seemed gentle.

She was alone now, and must be depending entirely upon her wit and talents to be making her way; but she was sure she would be finding all she would be wanting at the end of the King's road, in Dublin. There in the great city would be the most people, people of the Day.

She saw the city from afar, waiting to welcome her, and she rode quick to meet it.

But Dublin in the Night was a ruinous place.

Lady Agatha rode the empty streets in darkness, and the ache of it deepening in her breast, the way she had known such delights in that city, once upon a time. And now the place was like a quarry

pit dug poor beneath the stars.

Its chimneys breathed no more cheerful coal smoke, its windows all were black, its streets shone oily and slick. Somewhere behind the stones ten thousand souls lay sleeping, walled in by their dreams. But in the quiet, moonlit darkness, they were no better than dead; and the city a place out of Egypt or Sodom, cursed by God, shunned and haunted.

Lady Agatha shivered and shook. She rode those forsaken streets no more than an hour, before the dread and the horror of it drove her out into the countryside.

Then the darkness did not seem so kindly to her, but forbidding and mean-hearted. Instead of the friendly green of grasses, blue of sky, and gold of haystacks, she was seeing nothing but black lands and white ribbons of streams, and red, caught in glimmers at the edge of things, like the deep burning of rage.

Along the way she ate off the trees and briars of black Ireland. The fruit, ripened in the moonlight, had a different taste. She was finding it bitter.

Waste it seemed to her, and every village forsaken and lone, until she saw a ruddy brightness on a hill.

She rode up the hill, and found a child burning

planks and twigs in the middle of a crossroads.

‘What are you doing now, child?’ she asked.

The child looked at her, put a finger up along its cheek and answered, ‘Wait. They’ll be coming.’

She tethered her mare at a bush by the way and let her graze. And after a time other children were coming, bearing bundles of twigs and logs and many other things, and casting them onto the pile. And soon the needfire mounted halfway up the sky, roaring and reddening the hill.

‘What are you burning?’ she asked the child.

‘Whatever we want,’ it answered, and danced around the fire.

More of them came, curious folk, boys and girls and bent old folk, and many tongues were spoken among them, though there seemed no lack of understanding. Only the very young and the very old were there, children and grandfolks, and no parents. They wore the dress of different lands; some were fair and some were dark, and some dressed in fineries and some in rags. But there was a robber’s look and a gleam in the eye of all of them, so they seemed all kindred.

Some were smoking pipes, and some were singing, and some were dancing, and many were laughing, laughing as it seemed without reason or end. And some were hammering planks together

and building.

There below the crossroad, where there had never been any stone raised before by living hand, tents, Tinkers' wagons, and weird scaffolding loomed against the black sky. It would have been Midsummer's Eve during the day. Lady Agatha caught raucous laughter, and the lewdest Tinker songs, and the clapping of unseen hands.

Off to one side she saw two great stallions, and on the horses sat a woman and a man. They were at the far edge of the firelight, and the redness just caught at them, so that the tails of the horses and the backs of the woman and man were drifting into the black between the pale white stars.

The woman and man wore wide hats, masks, and heavy riding cloaks draped from their shoulders. The man's cloak was scarlet, and on its shoulder was embroidered in black the letter A. The woman's cloak was black, and bore the same letter in scarlet.

The dancers went round and round, and from time to time one of the riders gestured, and a young strong lad, or a bold lass, went shyly before them and spoke words with them for awhile.

The strange child went past her, and Lady Agatha called after it, 'Who are those two now, and what will they be wanting with the lasses and the

lads?’

The child laughed and said a thing, but all she could catch of it was, ‘—to the abbey!’

The firelight limned the scaffolding with a hellish light, and the rising planks were seeming almost alive, as if this was a place where the timbers dwelled, and no human folk at all; and Lady Agatha rode away from there, thinking if anything this was a worse place than lost Dublin itself.

She wandered inland away from the roaring night-blue sea, to a marsh land, the border of the county of bogs. The air was quiet there, and the whispers in the winds so soft that at times she wasn’t even hearing them.

A few small hovels stood by the road, pitched on the bog’s edge like a village. During the Day the squatters of the place had earned their bread with the hard toil of digging in the bogs, carving out peat-clods and drying the turf for fuel.

Now the cottages were darkened and still. For a moment Lady Agatha thought she saw the dark form of a woman standing pointing beside one cottage, right on the lip of the bog. Agatha raised her arm to wave to the woman, but a sudden weakness took her as of labor, and an ache as of childbirth, and she tumbled out of the saddle to the ground.

The dark form moved – it was a woman, after all.

Softly the countrywoman bent over Lady Agatha lying in her fine white dress, dirty and bemired. Then putting fingers to mouth, the woman whistled thrice. Six ragged children appeared quick as the wind, and together they bore Lady Agatha into the farthest hovel.

Where the countrywoman laid a black shawl over Lady Agatha, where she lay on a stone by the blue turf-fire. When Agatha moaned and showed some life was still in her, the woman gave her to drink. Porter it was, more warming than the fire.

‘One of the weakening-spells you had, let her bless you,’ the woman told Lady Agatha. ‘They come over some when they are lacking. A lady so fair, it’s sure some men will be missing you.’

‘It’s brightness and warmth I’m wanting,’ answered Lady Agatha. ‘Not any man at all.’

‘You’re like poor Agnes then,’ said the woman. ‘Moy-rua, six mouths to feed, and a seventh on the way! My darling took off in the fire. He went to the abbey, to gain a great fee. It tore at him cruel to see me working so hard. But surely my love’ll be coming back to me! Only, the thing of it is, when he comes back, what of the grawls? He’s got no great love for them.’

Outside, Agnes' children played in the bogs. It was every blessed one of them had stayed awake, freed from catechism and labor and glad of it all as of a high holiday.

'Here, now,' said Agatha, 'take this book and read it to your children. It is a favorite of mine, and I'm sure they'll love to hear the tales.'

The woman took the book in her hands and squinted at its smooth, worn spine.

'You'd not leave your children, now?' asked Agatha. 'For him?'

'Well, but the grawls can see to themselves, after all. And I do yearn for him!'

Lady Agatha drew off her jewelry, and put rings and pins and bracelets into the poor woman's hands.

'Take these and be selling them, and feeding your children,' she said. 'Do not go away with him, he will prove you false as before. I would give you this too, but it is dear to me as my life, and I cannot bear to lose it.'

That piece, the only she withheld, was an emerald on a gold chain. It was himself, the lord, gave it to her for the price of her beauty on that night when she had gone, a captive bird drunken with kindness, into his bed. So young, so very young she had been!

'And promise me now you would not go with

him.'

'O Miss, I cannot be saying any such thing, and if that is the price of your bounty I cannot take it at all.'

'Take it, take it!' scolded Lady Agatha. 'It is for your kindness now. But tell me at least you will think of your children.'

Agnes held the jewels in her lap, more wealth than she had ever known. Lady Agatha could not see her eyes.

That fell out on Imbolc or Midwinter, when Brigid's fires are lit. And upon that same darkness, while Lady Agatha was resting in the loft, she heard voices at the door.

'Come inside, and bide a while,' called Agnes' voice softly. There was a lilt in the voice, and all the weariness gone clean out of it, the way Agatha hardly knew it.

And a man's voice answering, 'Ah well, Nessie, and you know it's not for them I've come. Come back out instead, close the door my dear, and give me kisses three.' She heard Agnes laughing like a girl, and the closing of the door, and nothing more.

'Children,' she whispered. 'Do you not hear the voice of your father, now?'

'We hear it,' their whispers answered her. 'But

whoever told you he was our father?’

When Agatha rose out of dreaming, Agnes was not in the cottage nor anywhere near, and her pot by the fire was cold.

Lady Agatha walked out of the hovel. The moon was not yet up. A few stars were glimmering through the clouds. Agnes’ children were looking at the other cottagers, slyly.

From the back of the house a dark causeway led snaking down into the bogs. Deep into the wet black earth the people of the hovels had been digging, cutting cliffs out of the hills, delving into the past. In the mud at her feet Lady Agatha found a silver spur. Carefully she wiped it shining and clean, looking down the causeway.

Surely it was this way Agnes had fled with her lover, forsaking children for the sake of lust. In the Day, Lady Agatha would have sent sheriffs and the King’s men after her. But no one would return her to her duty in this Night.

Lady Agatha left the silver spur for the children and rode away, turning at hazard, until the bogs were well behind her.

Behind her Agnes’ children passed the silver spur between their dozen dirty hands. They looked up past the cottages, and saw a fire burning on a

far-off hill, and they gathered twigs, quietly, and trooped off towards the fire.

As to Lady Agatha, she was wandering for many a moon, through Beltane and Lughnasadh, bitterness in anger burning her, until she found herself at the edge of a wood. And even there she was not free of him and the shame he had put on her.

Below the wood, down the slopes, some dark stones of buildings littered the riverbank like tombstones. And if it had been still day, Lady Agatha would have said the place had the look of the city of Cork. But what place was it in the Night-Land?

Under the moonlight many birds were gathering. The birds were small and black and swift, coming in troops of twenty and thirty, some out of east, and some out of west. Those out of east all flocked together at one end of the city, and those out of west flocked at the other end. They were squealing and squawking at each other, for hours on end. She watched them with admiration, and not a bit of fear.

She sank down on the moss and closed her sore sad eyes. And she was resting in the moonlight, and nursing her bitterness, and dreaming what to do.

While the woman was dreaming, the winds fell slack, and the sky cleared above, so that Moon and stars shone straight down on the old face of Earth.

Upon a strange sound and noise made as well on the one side as on the other, the birds took wing into the sky, and the two sides encountered each other with such a terrible shock, as the Night sky darkened with their feathers. And the starlings fell upon the houses, into the river, and over all the Irish land, wounded and slaughtered, dead in the streets, rent, torn, and mangled.

4. Of Aengus on the Watchtower

MASTER AENGUS rode down to the sea, to the point of Knockadoon Head. He had gone there always, ever since his seventh birthday when a lady had taught him the Moon's first name. And that had been the start of his seeking after knowledge, possessed him all his life. As if it had been rather wholeness he was seeking, and to retrace his steps to a place forgotten and lost.

The roar of the white sea came calling, as the wind off the cliffs caressed him. The immeasurable mass of the Sea, like some inverted continent, broke groaning on the rocks.

'Yes,' said Aengus, smiling: 'and I missed you, too.'

There was a pile of stones on Knockadoon Head, and that old, very old. Once heroes of the Five Kingdoms had lived here. It had been their dun, their fortress. Perhaps the beautiful Hound himself had stormed these walls; perhaps Finn had feasted

here; perhaps Diarmid and Grainne had found here an hour of shelter stolen from their endless circle flight.

The top of the pile was broken, and there in the gap Master Aengus stood, the salt winds kissing and curling his hair. From thence he looked into the stars burning the waters of the bay.

He thought on the woman who had been, once, his fever. No more was he feeling that madness for her. No more was she that magical creature, distant and strange, he'd seen across the lake. She was only Agatha. She was too real now.

'Tell me then, my darlings,' murmured Master Aengus, 'Where is that song that once she waked in me? Where did it go?'

As a boy Master Aengus had gone upon one rare dry summer night into the lord's preserve. Soon his dog had left him, hot after a rabbit. Aengus himself walked alone through cool moon shadows, moss beneath his feet, ferns against his shins. He was fancying himself the lord, and that all this was belonging to him.

He found a secret hayfield on that night, fenced in by trees. He stood half in shadow, enchanted by the stalks all yearning toward the Moon. He stepped unchallenged into her whiteness, and walked into their whispers.

Many a time afterward he was searching for that field, asking the tenants far and wide, but he never did find it again. All he was finding were common fields, not magical at all, like his.

Master Aengus did not go to church, neither the new-painted churches of the English masters, nor to the outlawed gatherings of the priests of his kind. He had his own Bible. He had written it himself. It was a book of but one page, and on that page but one line, and on that line but one word, *No*. But he never said *No* to his hayfield.

Much later, a grown man buried in studies, he was feeling love for the first time in his life, for the smartly-dressed young beauty whose family was ruined in all but their name, and who was the old lord's mistress, though some called her his ward, and others still his wife.

He saw Lady Agatha across the lake, and he heard a song rising in him, and Aengus recalled the summer night long lost, and the whisper of the haystacks. He almost heard the whisper again, and almost knew its meaning. To catch a word here and a sound, and the sense of it just beyond his grasp. But all he found he understood was what wind cried in the sedge. And then a chill green rain was falling, and the lake was desolate.

He had not dreamt the knowing of her body

would mean the killing of her song.

And now in the dark of the moon on the Tower over the sea on Knockadoon Head Master Aengus held a *cípin* of birch in his hand. He snapped the twig against the old stone. 'So be it,' said he. 'I do not love her. I will not love her. I'll never love again.'

Anger lashing out of his eyes, he pointed up the frayed bit of twig to the moon over the sea. 'I'll go back to my studies and put a bad name upon love. No more songs for me! I defy you now more than ever I did before.'

And Master Aengus threw away the *cípin* down into the Sea, into its white and roaring mouth. He listened to the waves. He had promised a thing to her: would he do it? Would he dare?

'Yes, it's truth,' he muttered, nodding down; 'and for memory of her song, I'll do her this bidding, and bring her back the Day.'

If he could. If it could be done at all.

It had taken every bit of Master Aengus' learning, and the most part of his strength, to break the axle and pierce the boil and drown the Sun in Night. And since that time it was as if part of his knowledge was blotted from his mind, and a part of his strength was lost. He did not know Agatha had been stealing his wisdom, poring over his texts in the attic room.

Master Aengus made a circle of hand-small

stones about him on the top of the tower, and laid himself down in the middle of it.

For a full Moon and a moon Master Aengus stayed on the tower by the Sea. He rose when the Moon went down, and when she rose he dreamed, so that her light became part of his dream. And in his dream Master Aengus traced the path to that place where he must go, and he did what he must do, to waken Day and summon back the Sun.

When he started forth from dreaming, it was in a palsied sweat he was. He shuddering, and dragging his bent tormented body to the edge of the stones, and looking down into the mouth of the abyss.

And still the Sea was roaring, whitely roaring. It gave him back some peace into the heart of himself, to hear that endless song go on. He listened for awhile, gave her his blessing and went down.

Slowly, as if still dreaming, Master Aengus rode through the warm summer of the Night, past hay-fields and dark woods, until he came into the county of bogs.

He rode the deep paths below the wet black cliffs of peat. The moonlight shone off the treasures buried in the peat, relics of the ancient nights: shirts and cartwheels, spoons, combs, bits of leather and hair. Those things had been buried there since be-

fore St. Patrick's day. Deeper and deeper into the past he rode.

Master Aengus rode out of the bog into fallow fields. The old moon was thin and broken in the cloud-flecked sky; the land was dim and strange. It would have been Lammas in the day. It was then he saw her, on a hilltop far away.

Delicate and graceful she was, palely gleaming. Her side was to him, her face to the moon. Her body it was a slender arching shoot, undulant as a willow.

She was a small hind, and her coat was white.

For a long time Aengus was watching her. She was a brightness almost light, and somehow shadow for all that, so he could not see her clearly. It made her less real.

Then she bowed and pawed the ground, as if to curtsy to the falling moon. And she trotted away and was gone.

The darkness was well on, and Master Aengus lying on the bare ground, and his cheek on the hard dirt road. He groaned, and rubbed the dreams away. He had forgotten the hind now. He remembered his promise to Lady Agatha, and the perilous path he must tread.

He started on his way.

He went up the hill out of the county of bogs,

into the green hills, and he went on his way, and all at once he halted, and stared down on the ground.

He found a trail of tiny hoofprints on the ground. They were such as a small hind might have made. For a long while, Master Aengus stared at that trail. Then he left the path he'd been following, and went in the way of that trail. It was the hunter in him, he might not help himself.

In the middle of Ireland he came upon a wood, and round the wood stretched a thicket of hedge. The trail led up to a stone patch in the ground before the hedge, and no hoofprints led away out from the stone. Master Aengus tracked round that stone patch, and up and down and back and forth before the hedge, but no other hoofprints were there to be seen, only those leading up, and not a one leading on away. Here the trail ended. Master Aengus sat on the stone.

He had lost the trail. His hunting skill had failed.

After a time he looked through the ragged hedge, and spied something white moving on the other side.

Very quiet he was, as he lifted himself up with his hands on the icy stone, and crept forward to the hedge, and peered through its pinholes at the thing

that was there.

It was the white hind.

It was the first time he had seen her from so close. Her pelt was white as ice. She was horned, and a collar of gold clasped her neck. She was standing and stooping, and nibbling on greens sparsely scattered among the tree boles. Easily she moved a few steps to her right.

Now, he whispered in himself to her, I have you, and you'll not be free of me again.

Master Aengus stepped along with her. The hind was taking no notice him. But he was looking through the hedge, searching for an opening big enough for himself to be slipping through.

High was the hedge, half again his height, and he'd never be scaling it in time to catch her before she darted away into the depths of the wood. The only passages through the branches and boles of the hedge were no bigger than his hand.

The whiteness of her moving down behind the hedge, and Master Aengus creeping with her, step for step and move for move.

Down the way he could see a path in the field, and a darkness like an hole in the hedge.

'Be still now, my pet,' whispered Master Aengus. He took a step toward the path.

But at that, the white hind lifted her head,

turned about, and pranced deeper into the wood out of sight.

Master Aengus raced to the path. He bursting through the opening in the hedge and dashing into the wood, but seeing no sign of the hind.

A light snow began to fall. It was early for snow to be falling.

In the middle of that wood Master Aengus found a lake. The branches of the trees were white, and the margin of the lake a silver collar made of ice. But the snowflakes shuddered and burned to water in the black face of the lake; and Aengus stood there stonily.

On the farther shore something was standing by the ice collar of the lake. It was a small four-legged beast, and its pelt was all of white.

It was herself. She was the white hind.

Master Aengus stood very still, waiting for her to come around the lake.

But the hind lifted her head and looked about. It was shy and nervous she was; she knew he was about. She was turning, and about to go away into the wood.

I cannot run fast enough to catch her, he thought.

Master Aengus pulled an arrow to his ear.

I'll catch her only in the flank, he thought. A

little wound, just to bring her down. I'll bind her, heal her, and tame her for my pet.

To the arrow he whispered, 'Go fetch me what I'm seeking, and carry it back to me.'

And if he missed, and the arrow struck too deep? But she was almost gone now, and all at once the bowstring slipped his fingers, and the arrow leapt away across the lake.

It caught her in the flank; the White Hind staggered from the wound, but the arrow flew back across the pond, and stuck in Master Aengus' thigh.

He cried out and fell heavy on the bosom of the Earth; the hind gave a little leap and vanished away.

Lady Agatha started, and opened her eyes.

She was lying on her mare's saddle cloth, her body gray in shadow, the folds of her skirts agleam with rime in moonlight. Her mare was gone.

She felt the duration of her dreams in her shoulders and in the ache of her hips. It seemed the longest time.

Where have I been, she was wondering. What have I done?

She brushed the ice flakes from her skirts. Ice flakes, and it Summer still, by the calendar of Day! Behind her she saw a wood ringed by a high hedge, that just at her back opened in a deep, dark hole.

Before her a path was leading down across a river into the Night. The path was dark with the litter of black feathers. A few fires were burning on faraway hilltops. Arising out of dreams of the Day, of brightness and society, Agatha was shaken by the sight of the Night-Land. It was as though some immense Hand had stretched forth and blighted the land, despoiling it of human folk, of cheer, of reason, of safety. Somewhere behind those fields, Master Aengus worked.

Silently she withdrew into the hedge.

In the interrupted moonlight she wandered through the wood. The unleaved branches wove like wicker in the sky, burned by fires in the last day, blackened into peace. A sort of path was opening before her. A little snow was starting to fall. Far ahead at a crossing, a beautiful creature stood in her way.

It was a small white hind, horned, wearing a torc of gold about her neck.

Sure now, this is a creature too beautiful to live, Agatha thought. A mere hour will doom her.

The white hind tossed her head and regarded the woman shivering down the way. The hind was bloodied at her flank.

‘Who has wounded you, now?’ asked Agatha. ‘It’s no more than you deserve, prancing about so

trusting and innocent.'

The sight of the hind rankled her. She was angry at her. The helpless, sad-eyed, weakling! She was glad she was wounded – she wished she would die.

The hind trotted off, limping and slow. Agatha followed the blood spots in the snow through the silent, burnt forest. Soon the snow halted and stars cut through the clouds.

She noticed she was limping. A tiny stone on the inside her shoe was cutting her instep, a bitter wound.

The spots ended at a small ice pond, still and black as sleep. The vanishing tip of the moon glinted off the ice, and sank into the black.

Agatha could see a woman in the ice.

Rumpled and soiled was that woman's dress, and her face ghastly pale, the mouth pursed and hard like the pit of a fruit, the eyes huge and dark. The look on that face she had seen too many a time for her to be forgetting it now. It was a look had frightened her below her window on evenings long ago, in the face of Master Aengus.

But who should the woman in the ice be now but herself?

Lady Agatha shook her head, and laughed, and that was the ugliest sound.

And once more the stars wheeled round to touch the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

The Fourth Year of Night

In the fourth year of that Night, the Waking began to make a new society, without any looking back at the societies they had moved in during the Day.

It no longer mattered what a man or a woman had been during the Day. The Low were now High and the High were Low, and yet some that had been low were Low still, and some that had been high were High as before. There was no way to foretell these things.

But there were some who seemed to have hidden bonds with the Strong Places, and to know them as the Strong Places began now to know them.

5. Of the Maid in the Wood

BEYOND the pond the blood spots failed, or she lost them; the path continued up. There everything was white, even the trees in snow coats. The stars were eating up the sky as Lady Agatha climbed among them. Beyond the hill the bow of the moon slipped hugely into earth.

In another clearing, silent in starlight, nine trees stood in a half ring before a snowy hall. Lady Agatha stepped into the untouched snow, feeling it over the top of her shoes, secret and chilling.

The nine trees were swaying as she passed them. The dim starlight discovered strange features in the bark, like faces smiling and closed.

At the door of the cottage she halted. Seeping through the cracks of the door was the savor of onions, potatoes, carrots, turnips and gravy. She all but felt her knees give way, the smelling of it was so wonderfully keen.

Her fist, frozen and hard, rapped upon the door. A soft voice answered from within. It was a young

woman appearing at the door, slender as a grass stalk.

Her hair was black as black could be, unpinned and fine, clouding her face. Her face was small and delicate. The palest blush colored her cheek, but her skin was else as clear as whey. She wore a simple homespun kirtle, and you would have called it white had you not seen it against her skin. Her fingers were a wonder, slender and long, whiter than the ninth wave of the sea.

She was the prettiest country-girl Agatha had ever seen.

‘Let her love all here,’ Agatha blessed the girl.

‘Mary increase you,’ answered the lass for a failte in her turn.

‘I can offer you nothing for your pain,’ said Agatha. ‘But will you take me in, and let me warm myself?’

‘Surely,’ said the country-girl, pushing back the door. ‘Poor lady, you are burning up. Come in, sit by the hearth.’

Lady Agatha allowed herself be led across the clean swept earth to a hob-seat on the stones of the hearth. The girl drew off a bit of stew from the cauldron over the fire, pressing a bowl of it into Agatha’s cupped stiff hands, and talking all the while, the way of one too long alone.

All at once she stopped with a blush of a smile and said, 'I am Maid Mielusine.'

'I am Lady Agatha.'

'It's the company I'll be glad of. I hope you will stay a good long while! I wish we can be like sisters, do you think that may be?'

Lady Agatha was leaning back against the stone, watching the stew in the bowl on her hands, unwilling to eat it right away, unwilling to show her eagerness. She looked up at the girl, at her trusting eyes. 'Yes,' she said. Her voice was hoarse, with a bit of wildness lurking in it; a perilous voice; the voice of a lost soul.

'Oh, but you must be thinking me only too forward! There's that difference in our stations, after all. But if you could stay awhile, after you are well...'

'Sure, this illness I'll never be well of,' said Agatha.

The girl fell silent, abashed at her own eagerness. Lady Agatha carefully supped the stew, cleaning the bowl and setting it down by the hearth.

'It is calm here in this place,' she was murmuring. 'There is peace here, and you are innocent, Maid Mielusine, as I was. The perfume of your innocence pervades your house. I am tired now, and weary so that I wish I could sleep as the Sleepers

are sleeping. But it's the fever dancing round in me, and I cannot rest for dreaming. . . '

'You speak so wonderfully,' whispered the girl. 'Anyone could tell you're a great lady.'

'I had such dreams, once. I was pretty enough, and free.' She was staring into the fire, into white lines and black knots, and the red tips of the flames where they vanished into smoke.

'And he loved me,' she was murmuring, 'and abandoned all to be chasing on my heels. And in my innocence I was scorning him, and mocking his pain with laughter. Folly!'

'Moy-rua, it's a bad fever has caught you, Miss. Let her spare you! Don't fret, there is no one else about.'

That darkness Lady Agatha lay in the girl's bed, the way Maid Mielusine could not rest. Three times the girl climbed to the bedside, looking on her visitor to see that she was real, and really there.

In her dreams the lady had turned her face away to where the dark roof timbers swept down close and cozy above the bed. The lady lay there, wan and flushed by turns, and her hair bedraggled, and her gown in tatters. But there was no mistaking her quality, as Maid Mielusine was assured. She was a lady.

Maid Mielusine sighed for clean delight.

With the rising of the Moon Lady Agatha woke and clambered down out of the warm bed in her shift. There in the middle of the cottage she found herself alone. She stood by the fire awhile, warming her hands and thinking. In the firelight she looked on her palm marked with its black spot.

Maid Mielusine came back with a pail of water. Her cheeks were less pale now, and some of the threads of her hair had strayed across her brow.

‘And how are you now, Miss?’ she asked. ‘But you shouldn’t have risen! Will you be wanting anything?’

Agatha shook her head no.

Then they ate a bowl of cream together, and spoke of this and that.

During the day, Maid Mielusine told her, she had been living in a cottage with her ma and her da and her sisters, Grisalta and Merrwyn, and Mielusine the baby. But when her ma died, her da changed.

‘Och, he was right enough with my sisters, but with me he was hard hearted, I cannot tell you why. Of the three of us girls, I looked the most like our ma, but still my da was giving me the hardest chores, to be cleaning the pens and cleaning the

hearth until I smelled of dirt and ash.

“Sini, you’re no good,” he’d be saying. “Sini, you’ve a pinched face. Sini, your nose is thin!”

‘Until one night my sisters wakened me, whispering, “Sini dear, our da’s gallous cruel with you, and it’s worse he’ll be to you before he’s better. Let you get dressed now, and we’ll go from him for ever and a day.”

‘Shoes in hands, we tiptoed out. The night was like summer in Italy, as they say in our county. The stars were shining in the dew on the grass, and we girls walking barefoot in heaven.

‘We had taken some cakes, and ate nuts and mugoreens from the sweet briars along the way. Soon in the wood it was so warm we did off our clothes, and naked in their shifts went bathing in a pool, giggling and free. We little knew the Night was hanging over us all.

‘The next day the sky was black until the red burst out of the spot on the Sun, and fire was raining out of the clouds everywhere, and I like a baby crying and running, the way I lost my sisters in the wood and found them never again.’

The Maid fell silent, stirring a wooden spoon in her pot over the turf. The lady observed her out the corner of her eye.

‘So you are all alone here?’ asked Agatha.

‘Ah,’ said the maid, ‘I’m not so all alone as that, Mary save me. There are my guardians; or should I be calling them my children now! Would you see them, Miss? They’re so eager to be meeting you!’

The country-girl drew her guest outside. They went into the middle of the snow, to the nine trees planted in a crescent. Now Lady Agatha saw that those trees were not bending of the wind, the way there was none, but of their own will.

In the gnarled wood Agatha saw faces very plainly smiling down at her: knotty cheeks, knotty eyes, and wide-pecked mouths. They had no necks, and their arms were branches, some doubly and some triply jointed. Their roots served for squat legs and curling feet.

One by one the trees were bowing, stepping forward, and introducing themselves to her.

‘They are my friends,’ said Mielusine, giggling at Lady Agatha’s astonishment. ‘They cleared the glade, dug me stones for warmth, and built the Honey House.’

‘What now!’ growled one. ‘She is our first guest!’

‘Aye now, Tadgh! You’re right about that!’

‘Celebration now! Dancing and mead!’

‘Mead and dancing, you mean!’

Laughing in gnarled voices, the trees were tipping over and crawling into the hall, mindful of their

branches brushing through the door.

The maid served them from her cauldron, and poured mead for the trees. Merry they were all, though keeping their distance from the fire. They were singing and drinking and winking, and even went so far as to make the maid dance a jig with them, clumsy as they were.

Mielusine fell back at last breathless beside Lady Agatha, and brushing her locks from her brow. 'Ah!' she was saying, 'That's work, now!'

'But this is a marvel,' said Agatha. 'What are these trees, that they speak and walk and dance?'

'Well, but I told you, sure, how as I lost my sisters? And then I'd nowhere else to go, it being all night and strange, and so I went back to my da's. But the cottage door was closed with sleeping. Then I wandered in the wood, until an owl and a swallow told me the magic of honey. It was honey I spread over the mouths of the trees, and charmed them into life.'

'And here we are!' said Finn, loudly, the way mead was ever raising his voice. 'Mary bless us, as good as saplings, some of us!'

'Ho, but Finn, you've a few holes now, begging your pardon – better watch those woodpeckers!'

'Watch yourself, Ned my lad, for your bark is curling!'

‘Sini, come hither, bide a while upon my knee?’

One great tree swept up the maid from her seat and swung her round in a great galloping reel. The others stamped the earth with their rooty feet, marking time of the measure and shouting their complaints and cheer.

‘Shawnee, boy, don’t be so boisterous, can’t you see you’re all but bumping Sini to the ground?’

‘Moy-rua, I am a hobby-horse, and let her make me a fast one!’ said Sean; and sure enough in a matter of moments the maid, giggling and blushing, slipped to the ground. Ned swept her up in his branchy arms and spun her round the hall, his rooty feet clumping and kicking the floor.

By moonfall the trees were mopping their brows and blowing out their brown cheeks, and stumbling out to their circle again. Where they stood leaning in the snow, snoring and snorking.

The smoke curled blue and cheery from the hole in the roof of the hut under the Moon. Inside Lady Agatha and Maid Mielusine sat on the hob by the hearth and told each other of their lives. Lady Agatha told of dances and masquerades, of journeying to Dublin and across the sea to London, where the King’s house was. Maid Mielusine blushed to have nothing to be telling but her own narrow life.

‘Why do you not go looking for your sisters?’

‘But I’m afraid of what I might be finding, there outside the wood.’

‘So pretty you are, and living like a hermit.’

‘Well, but I have my trees now, and we are happy.’

‘Are you now? I dare say cows will be happy enough grinding their teeth in the middle of a field. But a girl of your charms might aspire to more. Look at you now, your hair all tousled and draggling. Let me comb it out for you.’

With an amber comb she combed the girl’s tresses; and the while she was combing, Lady Agatha set to singing a bit of old poetry, with softness and ease as of long practice:

*... come forth,
And taste the air of palaces; eat, drink
The toils of empirics, and their boasted
practice;
Tincture of pearl, and coral, gold, and am-
ber;
Be seen at feasts and triumphs; have it
asked
What miracle she is? set all the eyes
Of court a-fire, like a burning glass,
And work them into cinders, when the jew-
els*

*Of twenty states adorn thee, and the light
Strikes out the stars! That, when thy name
is mentioned,
Queens may look pale; and we but show-
ing our love,
Nero's Poppaea may be lost in story!*

Lady Agatha's voice murmured away, and Maid Mielusine felt the words sinking inside her, seducing secret dreams.

'I'm sure we must seem low to you, Lady Agatha. You are used to such fineness of manners. I'm sorry for my trees. Their hearts are kind, and maybe I'm no better, and too humble and coarse to be your friend.'

'You are not low, merely untutored. That you could feel such regret shows you capable of better.'

'Will you tell me more of courts and ladies?'
Agatha eyed the Maid thoughtfully.

'What is it you're wanting to know?'

'Oh – fashions, dancing, and courtly manners! I've dreamt of it always, you see, to be a lady, elegant and sought after!'

'But that's the least part of a lady, Mielusine. These elegant ladies are the stupidest showhorses you ever did see. What truly makes a lady is much more than that.'

'What, then?' the maid was asking after a bit.

‘Ah, as for that, you do not want to know it, Mielusine! I did not know it, and am sorry now I learned.’

‘Tell me, please, Agatha! For how else will I ever be anything but the merest, commonest country-girl?’

‘There is danger in my lessons, Mielusine. Stay rather as you are, the way you are pretty as the third moon, and that ought to be enough for anyone.’

‘I see,’ sighed the Maid, letting her head tilt down to her breast, and looking away.

But it was late for warnings. In the Day Mielusine had been content to be a cottager’s daughter forever, the way that would never be changing any more than the Sun. But now the Sun was gone, and in the darkness trees could catch life, and why could herself, Maid Mielusine, not become a lady?

‘It is love makes a lady,’ said Agatha, after a long bit of silence. ‘Love and suffering ennobling her.’

‘Don’t my trees love me?’

‘Your trees? They know no more of love than you, my goose. There are two paths of love, Mielusine. Bright and broad is a boithrin, and that green lane glimmering in the Sun beside golden flowers all the way down to the blue Sea. But I can’t be helping you there, you see, it’s not that path I know.’

‘What is the other path like, Agatha?’

‘Ah, that one, now! Narrow, twisty, treacherous. You cannot see the end of it at all. And its banks are hemmed in with primroses dark and voluptuous as Eve’s own lips. But their brambles clutch and scratch at you, and a dark man waits hidden in the thorns. He’ll watch you suffering, and smile and offer you his hand, but he’ll press you back with the whole of his body into the swallowing fragrance of the briars.’

Mielusine stared at the lady, her eyes big as her fists. Agatha caught that look, and laughed a bitter laugh.

‘That is all I know of love. It’s the great heart is not poisoned by it. Only one or two ladies of a hundred might have managed it. These are the ones, bear the secret marks of their passions on their bodies and their souls. But the rest of us, we have been maimed by it, soured and gone old before our years.’

Lady Agatha’s voice was falling away into the merest whisper, and it was only the hissing of the fire filling out the silence.

‘It is wonderful, what you said,’ whispered Mielusine. ‘Ah, do you dream I could ever be like the one or two?’

‘It must come out of the untouched depths of you, out of your untried heart.’

‘Please.’

‘I might teach you, Mielusine,’ said Agatha after a bit. ‘But I’d want you to repay me.’

‘I’ll do anything,’ said the girl.

‘Do not be promising so quickly as that! It’s a burden and a danger you’d be taking onto yourself. Who are you but a girl, helpless and innocent as a hind, to be daring anything so terrible? You make me laugh! But here now, don’t be pouting, girl! Forgive me. A dark man’s put a spell on me, and I cannot be breaking it. And I’d be wanting you to save me.’

Sadly, Mielusine shook her head. ‘It’s not a blessed thing I know about spells; let her save me from all such!’

‘Isn’t beauty sorcery?’

The maid looked at Lady Agatha for a long while. Then she said solemnly, ‘I don’t understand. But I will do anything you tell me. Only, teach me love.’

Lady Agatha went on combing the fine black tresses, but she was not answering the maid, only looking at the fire, and her thoughts far away.

‘I will make you beautiful, Mielusine,’ she was murmuring. ‘Beautiful, beautiful. . .’

‘Am I really pretty?’ Mielusine asked. ‘I’ve never seen a mirror.’

‘I will make you a mirror in the face of every man. And most of all in his.’

That darkness it was the Maid lay down in her bed, the way Lady Agatha would have it no other way.

Lady Agatha went before the hearth. Where like a dog she cast herself down on the warm stones. And she gazed upon her open hand, upon its hollow with its little black spot.

Oh Aengus, Aengus, why did you need embitter all the sweetness on the world, and change the day to Night?

She buried her face in her arms. But like a poison still she felt his fever working in her blood, like rust, like sickness, like a pregnancy. It was his song, come back to torment her.

6. How Agatha Taught the Maid of Beauty

A ENGUS BROKE the arrow from his thigh. But a sliver of the head, and perhaps a bit of the hind's own blood, stayed in the wound and lamed him. And the pain was not half so hurtful as the sight haunting him, of the dark spot of red on the white white coat, put there by him.

'Come back to me, let me heal you,' he cried. But the White Hind was gone.

Only her curse echoed in his ears, in silver tones across the ice:

You, who hunted me, will find no cure for your wound, not from herb, nor root, nor sage, nor poison, until the woman wakes, who for love of you will bear a greater pain than any woman ever bore.

He knelt in the snow by the burning black lake, and cursed himself aloud.

And after a time he rose and he turned, and he trudged out of the wood. Round and round the ring of hedge he walked, until in the snow he was finding

some tracks; he took those tracks to be hers, and followed after them.

Behind him in the wood, a dark man stepped out from behind the bole of a tree, and walked down to the lake.

He was tall, that man, and wore a dark gray greatcoat *cóta mór* against the cold, and a tricorne hat, and a muffler round about his neck and chin. The dark man stooped and picked up the fallen bow and arrows, and he followed the footprints out of the wood. He was trailing after Master Aengus, and keeping his distance.

From that hour onward, Master Aengus wanted nothing in the world so much as the White Hind: and she the one creature of all creatures denied him.

Winds went in the way of him, and he was wandering, Master Aengus, through wood, through hills, and through fields, even to the shores of the English Sea. Imbolc passed by with a thousand thousand need-fires burning, and the Cailleach took in her firewood, so much that it was a sure sign the cold would be staying, and and Beltane and Lughnasadh. He had put Lady Agatha out of his mind. It was the White Hind in his dreams, and the fever going round in him, the way he was starting to hear a new song, the song of the White Hind.

It was her curse on him singing in his heart:

You, who hunted me, will find no cure for your wound, not from herb, nor root, nor sage, nor poison, until the woman wakes, who for love of you will bear a greater pain than any woman ever bore.

One darkness I will find you, he muttered, and I will do what I will do. We are meant for each other, you and I, hind and man, game and hunter.

And a thought came to him.

In the brightness of day, it would be easier to find her.

As the moons passed over the Honey Hall, Agatha taught Mielusine manners and speech and dancing, and the art of beauty. It was hard Mielusine was finding the lessons. Never had she dreamt there would be so much to it, and a right way and a wrong, of doing every blessed thing. But Agatha's whisper came back to her. *I will make you beautiful, Mielusine. Beautiful, beautiful...*

So Mielusine submitted, and worked at her lessons with a heart and a half.

And Lady Agatha was teaching her a mystery, and that the hardest of lessons: the art of promise, and of seeming to know what could never be known.

'I do not know the mystery,' Mielusine was saying. 'I have never suffered, I have never loved.'

'And what does that matter, now? Become the

veil concealing you. What will Aengus know, seeing only the veil as he will? When once he has torn it, then you will have loved; and when you see what lurks at the back of his eyes, then you will have suffered. Draw away from him then, and he will follow you for ever and a day after: it's free I'll be then. But else it will be yourself who is lost in my place!

Now, Lady Agatha had kept the cloths Master Aengus' art had made for her. And she made for Mielusine a gown out of the white, paler than starlight and brighter than the moon. It suited Mielusine just so, and she was enchanting in it.

'Agatha, how can you make such a thing?' she asked. 'There's surely magic in your needles and shears!'

Lady Agatha's pale lips smiled, and she put away her pins.

'Agatha, what is it? Mary spare you!'

Agatha looked on the maid without seeing her. Then she shook her head and took up her pins again.

'No, it is nothing, nothing at all.'

'Have you some hurt about you? Can I not heal it?'

'It is not – well, it is love.'

'But how can love be bringing you such pain?'

'You don't know love,' muttered Lady Agatha.

Once on a time the maid could hold her tongue no longer, and she said, 'Tell me of your love, Agatha. Do tell.'

They were alone in the hall, but Lady Agatha glanced about even so. 'I knew love once,' she answered. 'I thought I knew. But he was untrue as a dream.'

'But did you never love another? Did you never love?'

Agatha thought of the lord, the old rich man bent from the loneliness of his years.

'No,' she said. 'I never loved. It was not love, or it was not I. Listen, Mielusine. It was this very Aengus, caught me in love. He murdered my protector and, come the Night, held me prisoner in his house.'

'I hate him for what he did to you,' said Mielusine. 'I hate him!'

'Oh, as for that, I'm much in love with hating him. But Mielusine! Even here in your house far away, and I not even knowing where in all the world he is, it's my body calling out to him, and in dreams he's coming mocking me. I'll never be free, unless you save me.'

'But how can I be doing that, Agatha?'

'It's unbreakable his spell over me will be, unless someone else should win his heart and break it. Be my arrow, Mielusine! That would end his power.'

‘I will try, Agatha. Let her help me! Tell me now, what must I know, what must I do, to be winning Master Aengus’ heart.’

And Lady Agatha set to telling her.

Maid Mielusine had her trees build a bed for Lady Agatha. They did that grudgingly; they made but half a job of it; but Agatha delighted in its rough planks and its straw closing about her body with barely room to turn. She had had no such lovely bed since she was a girl. It was cold that winter, but Lady Agatha made the little bed warm with her own warmth.

It was there, in the house of innocent Mielusine, that Agatha first began dreaming of Master Aengus. It was of his hands upon her body she was dreaming, in the first Moon of the Night, and of her mouth on his.

Spring in the Night-land was not far away off. The snows melted back to black. The women went out of the hut more often. The maid was ever asking after Master Aengus.

‘Tell me the way of him, Agatha. Tell me his weakness, and how I may be hurting him best.’

‘Here is his portrait, Mielusine. He is dark, and sometimes sullen; knows many a secret thing, and cares nothing for the shows of beauty or wealth. So

he says.

‘And his voice is like a shiver of beaten iron. And there is anger in him, letting him know at rare times joy, but happiness never at all. His step is brisk even when he’s bound for nowhere. And what he sees when he looks on a field or hill or stone or woman, that is not what any other man would be seeing. If he think you shallow he will despise you, but if he find you pure (and that’s but another saying of the same thing), then he will love you, for an hour or a day, to distraction. Until a word or a look of yours will tear the veil of his delusion.’

They turned back by the way of the ring of nine trees then, and all the nine bending and bowing and smiling down on the maid, jealous of each little favor she bestowed on this one or that. Agatha was quiet for a time, lost in her own musings.

At the door of the hut Agatha came up to a stop, sudden-like, and gripped the maid’s shoulder, tight as an owl’s grip.

‘Never soften toward him, Mielusine! Whatever she may be feeling in her heart, no lady will show affection for such a man as Master Aengus. She knows that that would be the ruin of her.’

The maid was breathing hard, and biting her lip. Agatha loosed her hold, and the two went in. Mielusine pulled the door to behind them. ‘Is he so

cruel then?’

‘He is worse than cruel, Mielusine. He is sincere. And he is capable of passion, that is more than longing and stronger than love. ’Tis the rare soul has the heart for it.’

‘Is passion finer than love, Agatha?’

She laughed, a woeful laugh, to see in her heart how easily she drew the maid in upon the toils of her web. ‘Perhaps for a few. But the passion of a Master Aengus is like a blow, like hatred, like murder. Such a man needs a lady equal to his challenge, taking his love and making it her own. It is war between them, Mielusine, and was I not telling you from the start, you’d not be liking my lessons?’

The maid was looking into the fire. And she was thinking, deep in her heart: He only loved her, after all. But aloud she said,

‘I think you might still love him, Agatha, no matter what you say.’

A dismal, delighted laughter was breaking from the lady’s lips; she answered, ‘Perhaps ’tis so, apprentice! But do not be taking my weakness for a strength!’

And Mielusine was thinking: All Lady Agatha said, of the great lady loving and suffering and loving still, is it not the very truth of her?

They went into their separate beds, those two,

and bade each other fair sleeping. The Maid lay awake and still, pondering questions deep and dire. Agatha fell sleeping, deep and bitter sleep that would bring her no refreshment when she had woke; sleep full of dreams.

And last of all in that dark of the moon, she dreamed of the mark she had put on him.

The echoes of his song were yet lingering in her head, and the manor house still bright with fire, when Master Aengus held her red naked in the great carved bed, and kissed the hollow of her back. It was the last rising of the moon before the house fell still and cold; and he holding her as though knowing what was to come.

He was sucking in her flesh between his teeth, and the warmth she was feeling there turned hot as a poker. She broke from him, startled, and kneeled on the floor on the far side of the bed.

It was my mark I was putting on you, he said. I was marking you there where none will ever see, save you in your glass, and I.

She felt in the hollow of her back, the small up-raised skin small as a fingertip, pointed as a star.

Now, he said, Let you mark me where all the world will see.

She cast back her hair and let her eyes wander angrily about his naked body. An odd stinging was

burning the tips of her breasts.

He put out his arm, showing the wrist. *Here.*

She leaned over and pressed a quick kiss there. But she was shaking her head no.

Mark me, he said.

She put her lips on the skin so thin that even in the gloom she could see the dark veins joining and parting like streams in the bogs.

Draw in the skin with your lips and your tongue.

She was tasting the salt and the oils of him, the dark inexplicable life of him passing between her teeth. She was aroused, angry and afraid all at once, and she bit the warm blood into her mouth, until the rankness of it choked her and she had to turn away spitting and coughing on the floor.

He'd worn a bandage on his wrist for half a Moon thereafter. The mark showing there was sometimes ghastly and pale, like a blister's dead flesh. Agatha hated it. Himself he seemed proud of the mark, as if it had been his mark over her, like a bill of sale, and for that she was hating and softening toward him all at once.

And now, lying in the rough, narrow bed, feeling the spot upon her like a birthmark, she was dreaming of her marking of him: the thin skin trapped between her teeth, the acrid sudden warmth. If she had bitten any deeper, he had perhaps died of it. His

blood had tasted bitter, bitter at first. It was as if she might never be spitting out the last of it. As if the least drop of it had entered into her veins, infecting her with his madness and enchantments.

That Spring Lady Agatha made a gown out of the red cloth for the maid. It was scarlet as Magdalena's smile, and the way it was cut it left the girl seeming more naked than nakedness itself. She herself went scarlet, did Mielusine, looking down at herself caught in that gown.

'Oh,' she whispered. 'Does it have to be indecent?'

'I will make it fit you,' Lady Agatha said. 'Do not be hesitating or it will be spoilt.'

The girl stepped down the hall, glancing at the wonder of the gown herself was wearing. The trees were staring as if their eyes would pop like corks: Mielusine was seeing herself in those knotty eyes, a wonder strange and daring.

Mielusine stepped out. The frosty air rushing in set the trees shivering. Mielusine smiled, and walked back in.

Returning, she wasn't quite the same.

* * *

Now, while Maid Mielusine's charms were blooming, Lady Agatha's were withering. She would not let the least of Mielusine's hairs be straying in any way unflattering; her own she left uncombed. She made gowns for Mielusine in the height of fashion; she left rents in her own frayed skirts, or patched them but indifferently.

And still the Night was lingering. Had he forgotten his vow to her? Had he perished on the way?

'Nay now,' she whispered, sitting hugging her knees in her bed. 'It's alive he must be, and I know it. I am not done with him yet.'

But his spell was now so strong over her, she was dreaming of him every darkness, her body taut for what he had wakened in her, those things unknown in the three full years she had been the old lord's ward.

In the red fire glow, in the house of innocent Mielusine, Agatha would be warm and wanting him in her bed. But when she was rising, for very shame she planned out her retribution all the more severely.

Do you think you've prevailed, now? she was asking. Do you think you can despise me? Let you wait, O Aengus! You'll see my Mielusine, and it's weak you'll be then, a common man again, and I'll be laughing, free of the likes of you...

One night he had come below the manor windows singing songs of sorrow. Oh, they were horrid songs for he was no singer, and the misery in his voice murdering every note.

Embarrassed for the sake of Lady Felicia, Agatha was opening her window and casting down the first coin her hand came upon, and that a golden guinea. 'Pray take that for your pains,' she called to him, and shut the casement. The very next day she saw him in the village, and he wearing a chain round his neck, and on the chain her golden guinea.

He was a part of her life wasn't ended yet. But it would be herself would be deciding when they next would meet, and how that should be.

I paid you for your song, my Master. And now you must be paying me for mine.

Imbolc lay behind them, and Beltane followed after, and yet the Night-Land stayed cold, and the snows fell back across the hills. Winter lingered.

In the dark of the moon, Agatha went to the pond. It was frozen over still. She was wearing a broad cloak she had made of castoff woolen patches: warm it was, and she underneath it mother-naked without even a shift.

There was a cutting wind, and the sky beclouded, and darkness out of the sky above and the

earth below, and all the Sleepers sleeping and the Wakeful dreaming, and Agatha crouching over the pond. For twelve Moons and a moon she had been fashioning the Maid. For twelve Moons and a moon she had been readying herself to do for the Maid what went beyond all nature.

She scratched away some snow, making the black earth show through. And she took those things she had been gathering, and set herself to work.

That darkness Mielusine might not rest. But seeing Lady Agatha gone out, and herself all alone, she crept out of bed.

Hastily she threw off her bedshift and stepped into the red gown.

She stood in the center of the hall, upon a stone, stretching to her tallest. And the gown glowed in the emberlight, gleaming along the ridges of its folds, restively rousing as it rose to swallow the dim pale body of the maid.

Extravagantly Mielusine cast bundles of wood into the hearth. The fire awoke the scarlet of the gown; the crimson in the flames danced between the rafters, and Mielusine's own nakedness within the gown cast back the same color.

If only one were here to see! she thought.

‘I am ugly now,’ Lady Agatha had told her, ‘but I know the virtue of beauty, that is the worship of the earth. It bears its moral burden, beauty. You must be beautiful to be good. Mielusine, it’s this you were made for. It’s a duty you’ve been shirking living here alone like a frog under the ice, charming trees to life by your innocence. It wasn’t chance led me to your door. On this Night you are of the Wakeful, Mielusine. Wake then!’

Now Mielusine knew the vanity of being pretty in a house in the empty wood. She was wanting the aching of love, the rapture in it, the wasting from it. She’d been heeding Lady Agatha’s lessons.

*Where is one to find me now? she wondered.
Who will see and claim me?*

The fire was low again, the red gown put away, and Mielusine snug in bed when Lady Agatha, dark-faced and frozen, brought into the hall what she had made.

She touched the girl under her chin.

‘Behold the final seal of your beauty,’ she said.

Mielusine looked on it as a girl would have looked on the burning shrine of Saint Brigit. ‘It is the loveliest thing I ever did see,’ she said softly as a prayer. ‘But it is too fine and fairy-like for me.’

‘It is the likeness of the White Hind. And it is yours.’

It was a demimask with horns above, a braided tail behind, and for the throat a golden torc. Lady Agatha placed the girl's hand upon the mask, making her feel its gentleness.

'Three masks I made for you, Mielusine,' Lady Agatha was saying. 'The mask of manners, the mask of fashion, and this one last of all. When you will be wearing this, you will be as undeniable as Venus in Her zone.'

'No man but will be drawn to you alone. No hour will see him free of the longing for you. The sight of you will be wine in his brain, hashish in his blood. Gladly will he offer his life for but a smile and word of praise from you, his judge and his redeemer.'

But that talk frightened Mielusine. 'Oh, Agatha, it's in your debt I am, for all you taught me. But that is a power too heavy for me. Let her spare me, I cannot wear it!'

Even then the young moon was rising, and the trees were knocking at the door and vying angrily with one another, who would be first to greet the maid. Hastily Mielusine hid the mask in her chest before the trees might glimpse it.

The trees behaved themselves that moon, and did not bicker or fight, or trip one another with their rooty toes. They saw the maid's distress and were wondering, each in himself, what bad thing he had

done to trouble her.

The maid was quiet and pale, and no happiness in her. Softly Lady Agatha went among the trees, feeding them mead until they staggered out to their ring, leaning at odd angles, drunk in dreaming.

In the hob seat by the hearth Lady Agatha dried the girl's tears and combed her hair. Mielusine sat with her shoulders half turned, and her head held away, in just the right way to be showing herself. Her eyes were troubled and far away, and her breast rising and falling.

Lady Agatha murmured, 'Now you are beautiful.'

Slowly the maid bent back her head on her swanlike throat, and looked upon her friend. She looked at her with the look Agatha had been teaching her, the look of sadness, and of seeming to know the unknowable. And Agatha thought to herself, *Mask or no mask, did Aengus see her now, it's damned in love he'd be with her.*

'It's still love I don't know,' said Mielusine, in a gentle, dreaming voice. 'Who will teach me that lesson, Agatha?'

'When the time is right, I will find you a man.'

That darkness Mielusine lay in bed, and beneath the sheets her hand lay reaching for the touch of the

mask of the White Hind. And the dreams were coming to her there, and she dreaming on a great house golden alive with candlelight, music, and dancing. Herself was walking in the road outside, not daring to go in though she wore her fine white gown. But something was drawing her up the road toward the house, slowly up to the dark, open gate.

Master Aengus met her there. He was only a figure in the gate, black against the gold yard, but Mielusine knew him.

In the darkness gleaming white as nudity, she curtsied and greeted him as Agatha had taught her.

You are not my lady, he said angrily: *Where is she?*

His eyes were daggers, and Mielusine in her dream was stumbling, down the falling road, away, away. . .

She sat shivering in her bed, bowing her head. Through the veil of her hair, she glanced at Agatha in the rough bed. Something of youth and peace was softening Agatha's face, streaked with dirt though it was.

All the same, I am more beautiful than she. I am! And yet my beauty is only what she made of it. Were I there in rags, dirty and coarse, would I be beautiful then? She is.

My prettiness is empty and vain. Her beauty

is pure and passionate. It's suffering ennobles her. She is walking the treacherous path. Her quality is proven. Master Aengus saw to that.

I want to be like you, Agatha. I want you to be proud of me.

She crept down out of bed, and quietly opened her chest. It was there for her, its gentleness so deceiving, its emptiness so magical. She lifted up the mask, and looked on it for a long, long while.

But even you are lacking this, Agatha. And I will follow you down that path. I will dare that adventure. It's only because I love you so, Agatha, I must have a teacher no less than yours. I will have Master Aengus be teaching me of love.

7. Of the Bitterness of Beauty

IN THE night-land laws were forgotten, prisons emptied, and tax-men shut up snoring. Titles were tossed aside, armies disbanded, churches left locked and forsaken. The world of Day had been ruled by men pious and old; the Night was for the young, the charming, and the wicked. Courts were opening everywhere, round needfires lined with tents and rude wagons for now, but soon building palaces with tilting gables.

Outside the quiet wood, outside the ring of hedge, the land of Ireland was sparkling with thousands of such fires, burning into eyes brilliant with hopes, ambitions, wild desire. It was no world for the faint of heart. Only one law was dredged up out of the past. Pleasure ruled all their wild hearts; and the seat of their parliament was in the abbey in the mist.

Alone in all the landscape of the Night, alone of all the Wakeful, Master Aengus looked to summon

back the Sun.

There had been a rock in his dream of bringing back the Sun; he climbed where the blind birds wheeled. There had been water in his dream; he crossed the sea into the dark continent of Europe. There had been voices in his dream; he stole through the ruins of cities, oppressed by the sleepfulness of the peoples of the Day. Through all that year Master Aengus searched.

And the Sodality of Light found Master Aengus, in a ruinous abbey on the Rhine, and offered him a way to the bright shore, where the Black Sun was shining, if he would forsake the White Hind. He answered them, 'Before your light I will take my darkness, because it is mine.'

Master Aengus went into the kingdom of France, and from France he went to the kingdom of Spain, and from Spain he went by way of the black, blind sea to Scotland, where all the children ruled, and from Scotland to Wales, where he found no way to summon back the Sun. At last, defeated, he sailed back to the Irish land, on the dark of the moon when Lady Agatha used his art to conjure up the Mask.

Now the former happiness of the Honey Hall was gone. Maid Mielusine teasingly would be trying

her arts upon the trees, and a jealousy sprang up amongst them they had never known before. Each boasted of the smallest duais of a kiss the maid granted him, until another won a more recent award, driving the first into the dark wood, groaning and hacking dead trees with his ax.

Agatha left the Maid and her trees, and she went out of the hall without her cloak. She walked up the top of the hill, where the trees were sparser, and the sky loomed over the dark. The Moon was just rising out of the south: the second moon after she had made the Mask, and the fields still span-gled with the red embers of a hundred needfires. The brightness of the Moon and stars was glimmering off the snow, but clouds soon came, blotting out the sky again, and light, stinging snow began to fall. And for a space of three hours she was standing on the hill cloakless in the snow, shivering, looking out.

What had happened? Where was he?

She turned back down the hill.

Maid Mielusine was stirring the mash in her cauldron in the glade for the animals in her byre. Pigs and cows she had, that had come grunting and lowing to her in the darkness, lost, and she'd taken them in for pets.

Agatha stayed by the edge of the wood, watching the maid and wondering, *Is she ready yet? Is she*

strong enough?

Already Agatha knew she had waited too long. The dream of the moonlight was troubling her. And yet she herself was putting off those words to Mielusine: ‘Come get your gowns, we will be going now, to hunt down Master Aengus.’

Lady Agatha saw one of the trees lurching across the glade, and bending over the maid. The Maid, alarmed, dropped her paddle and hurried away with the tree into the wood.

Lady Agatha watched them go. *Not yet*, she was thinking. *She is too tender-hearted still, and harmless.*

Straightway Mielusine had seen the terror on the wooden face. ‘What is it, Conn?’ she asked. ‘What has happened?’

‘Something – something awful, Miss. Let her spare me, it’s Owen. I killed him. Yes, I’m sure he’s dead.’

‘Take me to him,’ cried Mielusine. Along the way she coaxed the tree to be telling her what had happened.

‘It was my idea, Miss,’ Conn said. ‘We were digging, and Owen pulled out a big stone split in two, warm and beautiful. I said to him then, “This is just the right stone to hollow out, the way the birds will be coming and drinking from it. You know how

Mielusine loves her birds.” It was my idea, Miss, and I only wanting to please you.’

‘Yes, Conn. But Owen?’

‘Well, Owen said that was just what he’d been thinking all along. He wanted all the praise for it, you see, to cut me out completely.

‘So I got mad and said, “Why, you termite nose! It was me came by the idea. You would’ve used the stone like all the others you get, to warm your rooty toes when you snore. Get another rock for that, but I’m taking this one, and it’s me’ll make the bird pool for Maid Mielusine!” ’

‘Does it matter that much who made it, now?’

‘No, Miss, I suppose not. Yes! You are so lovely now. We know we don’t deserve you. It was my idea. Why should that knot-nosed Owen win a kiss for it?

‘But he wanted it, you see, and wouldn’t let go. So “Owen,” says I, “I’ll take that stone now if you please, and if you won’t, then I’ll take it with your hands attached.” And I pull out my ax to show him I mean it. I was sure he’d back off then, Miss. Only he didn’t.

‘Next thing is, we’re on the ground kicking, and there’s Owen reaching for his shovel to give me a whack. That maddened me, and I went for him. I guess the ax was still in my hands, and when I came to my senses there I was standing and swinging, and

Owen on the ground, and splinters flying out of him.'

Tears welled in the maid's eyes. 'Is that what happened now?'

'Yes, Miss, and I'm ashamed for it. Straightway I flung down that curst ax of mine and came begging your pardon before my nerve failed. I'm hateful, and you'll never smile on me again.'

His step slowed. 'That's it, Miss,' he said. 'Just over that knoll. I can't go nearer, Miss, don't ask me!'

'All right, Conn,' said Mielusine.

There was earth mounded up on all sides in the glade, strewn about with rocks from the pits in a tri-na-chiele. In the middle lay a broad round stone, and Owen.

Mielusine knelt over him. Her gentle hands ran up and down the knotty flesh. She was feeling the deep gouges in him, where the wood shone raw and fresh. On every hand the faces of the others were peeking from behind the piles.

'Come, my lads, and help me,' she called to them. 'I do not think that he is quite beyond all hope, but I must have him back inside the hall.'

Charily they came down amongst the dirt-heaps, even Conn. They shouldered Owen's body, and trudged the long way home.

Inside the door they laid him down. Great sug-

ary tears were oozing from their eyes. Softly Lady Agatha stepped inside the door, watching.

Mielusine hung Owen's belt on his peg on the wall. She took water from her cauldron and washed Owen all over, head to toe, root to crown, covering him with the bubbling warm foam. By his branching hair she held him, drying him with towels.

Then she made a paste with herbs and her honey, thick in the bottom of a dark old crock. And she filled in his wounds with the paste, squeezing the gashes together. With the last of her honey, she daubed his wooden lips.

Then, at last, she was kissing him. She was kissing his eyes and his honey-smeared lips.

But when Mielusine washed Owen he did not sputter. And when she daubed the honey on his lips, his mouth did not open. And when she kissed his lips there was only the taste of honey in her mouth, and under that a bitterness, of raw wood.

Tears were streaming from the Maid's eyes onto the great, long, chopped-at log. She turned to the others; but at the look that was on her then they all shrank back. Last of all Mielusine's eyes sought out her friend, Lady Agatha, standing by the door. For a still, soft moment the two women were regarding each other.

Agatha turned, and stepped out of the hall.

On the border of the Night, Agatha looked up to the Moon. Still was the air, silent and deathly the wood on the dark hill side.

From the beginning, the Maid had been pretty as the reflection of a star in a pool's calm water. The difference is always this, the way prettiness is innocent, beauty is knowing, prettiness comes of nature and beauty of art. And all art is dangerous.

Lady Agatha had made her beautiful in the way Master Aengus thought of beauty. She knew and none better, what beauty he was seeking. She had made a country-girl into the embodiment of Master Aengus' dream, the better to be snaring him and freeing herself. But at the same time she robbed Mielusine of her innocence.

Had Mielusine still been innocent, then the charm of her honey would have brought back Owen's life.

It is almost ready she is, Lady Agatha thought. She begins to know, what a thing her beauty is. Now let her take pleasure in it.

Lady Agatha lifted her head, taken by a sound in the air. It was not the wailing from the hall, of the virgin Maid and her trees. It came from down the hill, from the deep of the wood.

It was the beat of horses Lady Agatha was hearing, and the baying of hounds, and the shouts of

men.

Part III

The Waxing of the Moon

1. Of What Lay Buried Beneath the Sea

DOES HE come to us now? she wondered. Fifty horsemen rode into the moonlight, reining in their mounts. Their dogs swarmed around Lady Agatha, white as sows with blood-red ears, showing their teeth.

Gray were those men, steeped in old sins. They might have been King's men in the Day.

The foremost tilted back his hat and laid his hand gently upon the stock of his gun. 'Mary bless all here,' said he in a foreign voice, shouting down the hounds.

'Let her increase you,' answered Agatha. 'What can we be offering you gentlemen?'

'Hunting a rogue, my girl,' he said. 'A thief, and a murderer no doubt. Have you seen aught of him? For he's surely come into this wood.'

'We've seen no one, the way you fine sirs are the first guests we've had since Day. But one of our men saw tracks in the snow down the way yonder.'

As well to be rid of them, she was thinking.

Grimly the men traded glances. 'My thanks, girl. Tell your men to be keeping their eyes open, and you keep to your door. If we cannot find him before moonfall, perhaps we'll be accepting your hospitality.'

Then 'Away, my lads!' he rumbled, and the pack of them turned. Only Lady Agatha called after them asking, 'But just what is it this man's done to you?'

At which the hindmost looked back at her. It was a murderous half-smile on his lips, and he answering her, but his foreign tones were beyond her ken under the crashing-away of horses and hounds.

The door to the hall was open a crack, and the cottager's daughter looking out with reddened eyes.

'What was it?' she was asking.

Lady Agatha smiled and answered, 'The last running of the law.'

Now the door opened wide and the trees appeared, bearing the chopped log between them. In the glade they dug and planted it, the fallen tree that had been Owen. Mielusine was weeping and moaning over him, and the knotty trees chanting, some last rites they were inventing.

Lady Agatha went into the hall.

Just at moonfall the sounds of the chase re-

doubled – screams, brays, and gunshots exploding in the quiet wood.

After a time the echoes lapsed away.

Lady Agatha sat at her sewing. Maid Mielusine sat by the door looking out at Owen, unable to eat.

The trees were in their circle again. Their branches were bristling now at those strange sounds, and what they might be meaning for the maid.

In the middle darkness shouts rang off the door and Lady Agatha went out.

‘You may tell your masters now it’s done,’ the gray man told her. ‘The traitor’s dead. We’ll not be troubling you more, the way it’s a hard track to be following, and a long way to be going home for us.’ He seemed tired and hollowed out, now his work was done, and he empty-handed from it all.

They all fifty rode away then.

‘It’s never they’ll be finding their home again, I’m thinking,’ Agatha said. ‘They played the Night and lost.’

‘What of the man they were chasing?’ Mielusine said. ‘At very least we can see him rightly buried.’

‘With what rites? Is it a priest you’ll be looking for now?’

‘Faith, it might be Master Aengus!’

Agatha looked at the girl. She had not seen

such strength in the pale face before. It raised a touch of doubt in herself. 'It isn't him,' she said. 'It could not be. But if you must, we will go looking.'

In thin darkness they were wending their way down the hill, the maid and the lady, and the trees slowly catching up. Oimell Moon it was, the beginning of Spring by the old calendar of the day, and the hill still caked in snow.

It was fear was in the trees. They had been happy once on a time, alone with Mielusine. Lady Agatha had ended that. Now those horsemen were come, with guns and growling dogs. What other evil fortune would follow?

In a deep lost place they found a horse, its reins caught in a tangle of thorns growing from the snow. The skin of snow in the place was torn, and the black earth seeping through like blood. Not far off they found the man, face down in snow.

Agatha stared at him, fearful now. He was of a height and a color and a shape, could have been Aengus after all.

'Is he dead now?' whispered Maid Mielusine.

Lady Agatha soothed the horse and bent over the rider. She caught him by the shoulder, turning his head.

It was a stranger.

'No,' she said, breathing. 'This one's not Aen-

gus.'

'But how goes it with him?' asked the maid, stepping closer.

'He's shot, and the hounds have worried at him,' Agatha said. 'And those are not his only wounds.'

The man let out a groan. 'But not dead now,' he said '—not yet.'

He tried a thin wan smile, but his face paled and his eyes rolled up and round. All the blood ran out of his head and he slumped back on the snow, moaning.

'He is burning with fever,' said Agatha. 'And pale from bloodloss . . . but his voice is from a land across the sea,' she added wonderingly.

The Maid turned to the trees, only now arriving. 'We must bring him to the hall.'

Grumbling, the trees set about lashing wythes and cípíns together. When they lifted the stranger up on the bier, the wet white snow under his body was black and red with blood.

He was shaking and shivering with wet, was Master Aengus, when he stepped back upon the wet Irish sand on the dark of the moon. He put back his cloak, and raised his face in the snow and icicle rain, and looked up into the secret huddled masses

of hills.

Now he was driven back almost to the place he'd started from. And now the dream was lost, and he knew not at all how to be bringing back the Sun.

'What now?' he muttered. 'What now, and where?'

He shouldered his pack, and set off down a path. In thirteen darknesses Master Aengus journeyed round the coast, to the great cliffs of Moher over the Western Sea.

That was Imbolc Moon now, Candlemas, and the land was starred with a thousand needfires cold and white in the Night. During the Day, the land would have been greening, and Spring not far afield. But still the deep cold it was gathering, and at the back of the north the Sea was groaning and cracking with ice.

Atop the cliffs, at the very edge, Master Aengus stood, wind curling his hair, his head swimming with suaran.

He made a rope and clambered down the cliffs, and found a little strand hidden tucked away neat as a puffin's nest. He limped along the strand, over rocks and cobbles chased with ice. The waves curled round him silver in the Moon's pale light, like the combed manes of petted ponies; and the end of the Sea seemed far away.

And from the waves Master Aengus heard the sea-morgans calling out to him and singing, and their song drew tears from his dark face, the way the morgans sang to him.

He found a curagh caught upon the strand, and over it one wrapt in a seaman's woolen coat, a tri-corn low on his brow. His head was big as a pump-kin, and the collar and his muffler concealed his face.

'Is it your curagh?' asked Master Aengus. 'What will you take to let me sail it out upon the waves?'

That one turned his icy eyes on him, and all at once Aengus knew him.

The muffled figure answered him never a word. He raised his arm, and one long finger pointed to the sea.

Aengus kept his eye upon the muffled one, while he put his bundle in and took the curagh into the sea's bright foam. At that the thing upon the shore turned and started pacing slowly back and forth, its black shoes breaking the ice upon the sand, crack-crunch, crack-crunch. Thirteen steps north and thirteen south, slowly, like a clock.

The wind blew the waves between the floes to dancing wild reels, but Master Aengus on the moon-path stood up in the curagh, pulling the sheet taut in his fingers, and the little boat shot forth as if out

of a cannon, skipping across the waves.

The Imbolc Moon sank, and darkness swallowed up the little boat. Round about blind fishes came, souls of lost drowned girls, speaking girlishly:

‘What is this boat my hand is feeling? What man is here, so far from land?’

‘I am Master Aengus,’ he answered, defiantly: ‘Tell me the secret of the Sun. How may I do what I will do?’

‘We know, we know!’ said a second. ‘Let us help him now!’

‘Nay,’ said the third: ‘we are blind, now. What good would it do us, even if Aengus could do what he will?’

‘Go back then if you will, but we will help him on.’

And the blind girls caught the curagh with their cold slippery arms, two at the stern and one at the bow, lashing their long fantails with all their might, bounding forward faster than the wind.

Master Aengus heard their voices piping in the hiss-wash of the waves, and he thought of Agatha’s voice, the way she had been in the Sun.

Deep in the Western Sea the sightless fish-girls took the boat, to the island that was there.

‘Is this the end of my journey?’ asked Master Aengus.

‘Go ashore, and eat your fill!’ the fishes answered slyly. ‘Mind you don’t get burned!’ There west of all lands they left him, and swam back to the shallows.

At moonrise Master Aengus stepped out on the shore.

On the island he found water and fruit, and it was warm there. He went up among the tall waving grasses, looking eastward for the way back: but the tidal waters came climbing after him, washing up to the trees.

Master Aengus climbed higher, but the waves climbed after him. Until he reached the top of the island and it all sank down beneath him, under the water, and Master Aengus with it.

The waters were boiling around Master Aengus’ head, bubbles bright as candles about his eyes. He sank straight down, holding his breath.

In the sea-light he could see plowed fields green with sea weeds, and the blue spires of lost churches, and folk working on the land.

Master Aengus felt warmth beneath his feet. The top of the hill was a ridge, and it rippled like a scallop’s shell. And through the cracks a light was streaming in thick golden ropes.

It was the Sun, buried in the seabed.

Master Aengus knelt and put his fingers to the ridge. With all his strength he strove to open the crack. But the heat burned his hands even in water; and the last of his strength went out of him like a drop of water on hot coals. Bubbles bursting from his lips, and he sinking on the ridge, and moving no more.

2. Of the Irish Witch

MIELUSINE WAS nursing the nameless man. At first she would give him her own bed, but Lady Agatha would not hear of it. They covered him with blankets and left him on one of the benches. At the point of moonrise the Maid found him sprawling naked on the ground. He was groaning strange words and scratching the scabs of old wounds, and his nails red with his own blood. Mielusine was horrified.

She washed him all over with water from her cauldron, and the trees bound him in blankets with their belts. They put him in Agatha's bed, and Agatha slept on the floor by the Maid's bed.

The Moon was rising and sinking again, and the man still groaning in sleep through it all.

At the last, when the snow was melting up the hill, reason of a sort came back into the man's dark eyes. Mielusine loosened the bonds on him and let him dream freely, smoothing his hair and cooling his dampened brow.

‘He is healing now,’ said Lady Agatha. ‘You saved him, Mielusine.’

Mielusine sighed. She was thinking of Aengus.

‘He is well-born, Mielusine: comes of finer folk than you have ever known. Still, he might find you pretty.’

Mielusine bowed her head. ‘My heart is trembling.’

‘For love, so soon?’ asked Agatha.

‘For fear,’ answered the Maid.

‘The life you knew is over now. Prove your art on him, make him fall in love with you.’

‘Yes,’ answered the maid. ‘I’ll do that.’

She was looking athwart the dreaming man, to the black shape of Owen planted in the yard. What was she thinking of? Her mouth was smiling.

The next darkness Lady Agatha and the stranger went away. Mielusine and her trees were eating when the two of them returned, and Agatha presented him.

Pale he was still from his fever, but his hair was cut and combed, his beard shaved, and he wearing clothing Agatha had made for him. Indeed he was well-made after all, and straight off the trees were hating him. He said his name was Eudemarec, and his country the principality of Brittany.

‘My lady,’ he said to Mielusine, ‘your woman here told me it is thanks to your kindness I regained my health. I’m at your service for your pains.’

‘I could not let you die,’ she answered.

‘Many could not have helped it,’ he said. Then the blush was deepening on Mielusine’s cheek, and she caught at her white gown with one hand, absently, casting down her gaze.

She is perfect, Agatha was thinking. Could I have taught her that?

Sullenly the trees made room on the bench for the man, and he shared their meal, complimenting the Maid on the excellence of it.

‘Well, what I’m wanting to know,’ grumbled Neil, ‘is who were those others, and what wrong you did to them.’

‘Neil!’ protested the maid; but the stranger only smiled.

‘Old comrades in arms of mine they were,’ he answered softly.

‘Will you not tell us your story?’ asked Mielusine.

Eudemarec sighed. ‘It’s only this,’ he said, ‘that I’m so long on this road after my enemy, I hardly know the start of it now. And there’s pain in it for me, and the man I might have been.’

A silence was flowing down from the rafters.

The trees were swaying in their places, supping mead. Mielusine was all but speaking, but Agatha made a sign to still her.

And in that silence, they heard the Breton's voice as if it came out of the rafters, as he began his tale.

'I come,' said the voice, 'from a rich and noble house...'

It was a house among the oldest in Brittany, descended from the Roman legate Postumius. In the third year of his legateship Postumius found a maiden on a hill. On her arms she bore the marks of Druids, and in her hands she held a golden cup.

'I stole it from the Druids,' she called down to him. 'Who drinks from it will have health proof against all sickness, and live a fortunate life.'

Postumius took the cup, and he took the maiden for his wife, the way her hair was golden as the cup. He betrayed his city and fled with her where the mists come rolling over the woods from deep in the uncrossable Sea.

That was the founding of Eudemarec's house. And the heart of his house was the gold cup.

Father would pass it to the boldest of his sons. The baptisms of the family were always made with it. In war and darkest time, through plague and burning, that cup was handed down, until it came

into Eudemarec's father's hands. Eudemarec was his father's seventh child, and the favorite. It was his the cup would be.

One day Eudemarec was called into his father's study. To the young man's eye it seemed a great age had been added to his father: overnight he was shrunken and infirm.

'My son,' he said, 'it's foolish I've been, and a curse is fallen on us all through my folly. Mablaith, my black-eyed, black-haired, black-hearted Irish witch, is gone. And the cup of our fathers is gone away with her.'

'I will win it back,' said Eudemarec. 'In seven days' time I will strike Mablaith down for treachery, and you'll drink from the cup with your own lips. I swear it!'

But a month had passed, and he had found neither cup nor maiden, when he learned that his father was dead.

'Now you are lord over our lands,' Eudemarec's brother, the jansenist abbé, told him. 'Give up this seeking for vengeance on the woman, who is damned. The cup is idolatry, let it be gone with the godless past.'

Eudemarec did not listen. That night he turned his back on his brother and his lands, and he walked with the gray mists deep into Broceliande,

the forest without end. His hatred for Mablaith was his only thought. He knew she was near, but he could not find her.

It chanced he heard an owl in the mist. He followed its voice and found a yew tree, and under the tree a little hut, and in that hut Mablaith was hid. He found her sitting by the fire.

‘And with that,’ said Eudemarec, ‘I laid a pistol up along her head.’

Mielusine shuddered, but Agatha said, ‘Go on.’

‘Mablaith, seeing her life was balanced on the point of a pin, pleaded with me. “My noble young Sir,” she told me, “let you not be cruel to me! I did not steal the cup – your father gave it to me! It was always you I was longing for. So often I saw you,” she said, “wanting your touch when it was only his old hands on me. If at last I took the cup, it was only that I knew he’d be sending you after it.”

‘Her bright face was stained with tears, and all at once I knew she had not been running from me all that time, but only waiting for me to come to her. . . .’

For a long while in the dim hall, before the trees and Mielusine, Eudemarec did not speak, lost in that moment – his mind reeling, Mablaith sobbing, the wind in the forest, the pistol heavy in his hand.

He had always, he said, longed for Mablaith. It was that desire so fired his hatred. And then he

looked down and saw the pistol in his hand. What a blasphemy her death had been, the bright face broken and the brains black with powder on the wall! He threw down the pistol.

‘In that moment,’ he said softly, ‘I was lost, and hers.’

He betrayed his father and all his fathers. He never returned home; he kept to his ionarbadh. He renounced his own name, and took to calling himself Eudemarec, that had been the name of an ancient enemy of his house.

Eudemarec and Mablaith lived at the forest’s edge; he sold the cup and they lived well enough. When their monies were dwindling, he took Mablaith with him into town, to the gaming houses. ‘Hold my hand,’ he told her: ‘I cannot lose, and you are there.’ He played at faro, and he won. Soon he had won enough to make his own bank.

Each night Mablaith was going with him, until the jealousy in him, at the looks other men were giving her, made him send her home. And then he did not always win. The end of it was not hard to see, for when he won sums he spent them on gifts for her, and when he lost he went into debt.

Then the last Day came.

Night fell, this endless Night, and passion for the cards kept Eudemarec awake. But Mablaith

alongside him was sleeping, and she did not awaken.

It was then Eudemarec took to the road, wild for its danger. He fell in with bandits. They were robbing with impunity: there were no soldiers in the Night.

To the empty village at the forest's edge the band was returning, where Mablaith lay sleeping in the chamber only Eudemarec could enter, for grace of having been sitting there beside her when the Night fell. Eudemarec stored the robbers' treasure in Mablaith's chamber, where it was secure.

And they trained rampant thorns to grow about the village against all intruders, leaving only one gateway clear.

In their empty hours the bandits were gambling and wagering their hoard. Eudemarec laughed at the poorness of their dreams; he laughed when he wagered and lost. Without Mablaith wealth was empty. The others marveled at him; that was why they trusted him.

Only one piece Eudemarec never wagered. The cup of his fathers had been won in a raid. He did not drink from it; he laid it upon Mablaith's breast, wreathing her chill fingers about its stem.

When the ramparts of brambles were complete, Eudemarec went no more a-raiding. He was worry-

ing lest he return and find the gateway grown over. The others they were grumbling, and eying the door to the chamber that was closed to them. But still and all they went.

Eudemarec feared none of their wild words. He lingered in the empty village, in the treasure room. Treasures stacked to one side, Mablaith sleeping to the other. His eyes were on her.

It was a long while Eudemarec was silent. Then he heaved up a great sigh, and carried on:

‘Softly I stepped to the bedside. I bent over her, my shadow slipping over her, and I kissed her cold, cold mouth. I laid my hands upon her shoulders, bent down, and kissed her cold, cold mouth again.

‘I had lighted a hundred candles outside the chamber, for within it no flame could live. The candles making an oppressive heat, the sweetness of their burning making the air unbreathable.

‘Golden and russet gleamed the treasure, saffron and silver the countenance of my love, my bride. Her pallor seemed to me the height of beauty. Her loveliness was greater for having been consumed.

‘It seemed I slept – I must have slept, the way I did not dream.’

Once more Eudemarec fell silent, so that Lady Agatha and the maid thought him lost in the brambles of his story. He fetched a sigh, and spoke again.

‘That darkness – that darkness I left the village. I left all that treasure. I closed off the gateway through the brambles. No one can enter there now, until the dawn come and kill all those nocturnal thorns. But will the dawn ever rise again?’

‘Behind me I could hear my bandits riding round the ramparts, discharging their guns, hacking with cutlasses at the iron thorns, vainly trying to burn away the barrier. I turned my back on them.

‘I was thinking of rumors I had heard. Fantastical wild tales; but who is to say what lies outside possibility when the Sun has fallen, and Night outlasts the year?’

‘It was rumored the Sleepers would awaken, once the Sun returned. And there was only one path to that end.

‘I gave no thought to the bandits, or that they might waste their time in tracking me. And yet that is what they did. The thieves turned soldier in hunting me. It was they, reached me at last here in your wood.

‘But I burned with seeking for my enemy, and paid no heed to them. I searched in the east, in Europe, England, Scotland, Wales. Now I know he is not far from here. He came to Ireland Imbolc Moon.

‘In the name of my love and for her sake, tell me now if you have heard of this one, Mablaith’s

own countryman and my enemy. He it was, they say, unbound the girdle of light and waked the Unappeasable Host. It was by his doing Mablaith was put asleep, and only by his death, they say, will Day return to waken her.

‘Tell me if you have heard of Master Aengus and where he may be found, for I have sworn an oath upon this lock of Mablaith’s hair that I will kill him, put an end to Night and summon back the Sun.’

3. How She Learned of Him

IN THE shallows the fish-girls swam and played. One said, 'It's cold the Sea is now. Shouldn't the Sun be warming it? Has Aengus not fulfilled his lady's bidding?'

'He never meant to,' said the other.

'Not Aengus! Let's learn what became of him.'

'Well, I still don't know what it has to do with us,' grumbled the third.

The three fishes swam back into the West, to the isle beneath the water. On the sea-floor they found the body of Master Aengus, all rough and charred from burning.

The fish-girls tugged and tugged, and they bore dead Aengus on their backs, in the long streams of their drowning hair, beneath the Imbolc Moon.

'Where to leave him now?' asked the second fish.

'Not here! I hear a frightful thirteen steps upon the sand, to and fro, like a clock.'

'It's far the nearest, and my back hurts,' grum-

bled the third.

So the fish-girls took Aengus up the coast, outside of Inishark and Inishbofin, and curved inside of Inishturk into the river at the flood. Past the water-change they left the body, on a bank of weeds and reeds.

To the frogs and herons on the bank the fish-girls said,

‘Let you go now over the hills to the lady and have her send her bandits, for there is one here having need of her, and it’s only she by her art can restore him.’

And when the Sea ran out so did the three fish-girls, and the body hung high up on the weeds, drying and black against the silver halo of the moon.

In the Honey Hall a silence fell after the Breton told his tale. For a long while no one was answering his question, concerning Master Aengus. The trees, half-drunken, had long since stopped listening. Agatha sat very still. Mielusine blushed so deeply the red of it suffused her breasts beneath her gown.

‘The man you speak of,’ she said at last, ‘—what was his name, now?’

‘The devil,’ answered Eudemarec, ‘named him Master Aengus.’

‘And it was he, you say – one man alone, brought an end to the Day? But why?’

‘It’s said lust for a woman drove him on to it.’

‘That may well be – that may well be,’ stammered Mielusine. ‘But we are alone in this wood. And I cannot say that I ever heard of this man. Nor have any of us here—’

‘Nay, I know him,’ said Agatha.

The Breton looked on her – looked on the sparkle in her eye, the color in her cheek, and the bitter hunger in her mouth.

‘What have you heard of him?’

‘That he was a poor free farmer, dared woo a lord’s young lady. He had no power to enrich the fields, but his one philosophy was to blaspheme against God and set a woman in His place. So he ended the world to win her, and it was a cold portion he got for his pains. Where he is now I do not know, but for a time he was holding the lady prisoner in Ballynoe, in County Cork not far from the banks of the Bride, so you might look there to start.’

The Breton’s eyes took shine. ‘Ballynoe, do you say now? In County Cork?’

‘Aye, hard put to by the river Bride.’

Mielusine put out the trees, and went to bed herself. But all through that darkness Lady Agatha and the Breton sat up speaking; he was asking, she

answering.

And as soon as ever she could next moonrise, Mielusine drew Agatha apart, asking, was it true? 'Was it Master Aengus, put out the Sun?'

Lady Agatha looked at the maid. Mielusine had never seen her so alive and proud. 'Aye,' she answered, 'it was he.'

'And it was for you he did all that?'

'Nay, now: he did it for himself.'

Afterward there was not the same closeness between the Maid and Lady Agatha as there had been before. Mielusine was left alone with Eudemarec, and that was for the best.

In the wood the Maid and the Breton were gathering mushrooms, spied on by the trees. Little enough work the trees were doing, but only such as to win the Maid's attention. Eudemarec laughed when he saw them peeping; at that their faces ran brown with sap, knotting up in squints.

Agatha left the lovers and went down outside the wood, and walked the length of the hedge encircling it. And at every hole in the hedge she stopped and glared at it, muttering binding words, 'Let her not be passing out through you, unless it's the two of us as one.'

Now as to Mielusine, she was more full of her-

self than ever in the highwayman's eyes. She could not help but be trying her new arts on him. The Breton smiled at her, and treated her courteously; but elsewhere there was no whit of the earnestness Lady Agatha had told her of.

He plucked up a wide flat mushroom and showed it to her. She thought he was standing rather close. Nervously she moved apart; he moved with her, coming closer still; reached out of a sudden and brushed back a tangled wisp of her black hair, whispering, 'Mielusine!'

She started and skipped back; Eudemarec leaned against a tree and laughed. 'Don't you know,' he said, 'this is the Beltane Moon? That sport you're playing, Mielusine, it's no sport to be playing,' he said, 'unless you are ready to win.'

The dark Moon rose, and the silver Moon fell. The tides of the Sea swarmed in the darkness all black, and out to sea beneath the waves something red shining darkly, gleaming now with this swell and now with that: and that thing was the Sun, buried deep beneath the bottom of the Sea by the cursing of Master Aengus, that was dead now, and hung in the silver reeds above the tide.

And while Master Aengus hung in the silver reeds dead, a faint dim dream occurred to him.

He dreamt a shadowy woman in white was lifting him down and laying him on the grass. And she stroked his hair and pressed her mouth to his, and brought him back to life.

That was the dream that came to the dead man. But outwardly there was no sign of it in his still gaunt black body.

Now, out of the bushes on the braes above the river, a timid beast came down, and looked on the man's form caught among the reeds. It was a small white hind, and two horns were emerging out of her head, and round her neck was clasped a torc of gold.

The White Hind sniffed at the sea-wet clothes of the man, and licked a little at his salty hand.

And from a hill over the river valley a dark man stood out from behind a tree. He was wearing a dark gray cóta mór. In his hand he held a bow, and quickly he strung it, nocked an arrow in its string, and drew an aim on the beast.

But the White Hind started at a sudden sound. Down the valley rode a riding-band, and she darted away.

The horses beat nearer. Their riders were so many robbers and jades, come hunting Master Aengus. And they a wild-looking, splendid, throat-slitting bunch, clad in broad-brimmed hats and silver spurs, and heavy riding cloaks, and scarlet rid-

ing cloaks adorned with the black letter A and black riding cloaks embroidered with that same letter A in scarlet, too. They cut him down with their scians and made a bier for him, and bound up his body in reeds and in sedge. They took the bundle of his parchments the fish-girls had left at the side of him.

And the riders wheeled their ponies and their stallions round about, laughing and discharging silver pistols into the clouds for sport, aiming at stars between the gaps of clouds. And they rode themselves away up-country, and they carried the dead man far away, to the white shining abbey dreamt up in the mist.

At the edge of the bay the dark man watched them go. He unstrung his bow, and put up his pack again across his thin bony shoulder, and he followed after the robbers' trail.

Some moons later, a bit of warmth came seeping out of the deep places in the earth.

Behind the thick black hedge, inside the dark close wood, in the Honey Hall, Eudemarec the Breton felt his strength rising back into himself, and his arms ready to gripe and grasp, and his legs ready to stride and stroll. And in the presence of the Maid he felt some of his wounds come round well again; little did he guess that was the work of Agatha, that

sang little songs of healing over him whenever he lay himself down to sleep.

And one dark of the moon, Agatha bent low across the Breton in his bed, and breathed out a secret little song, so that the perfume of her breath entered fragrant within his broad-spreading nostrils, and he caught his breath and almost woke, although she would not let him. And the song of her went softly and simply into his heart,

*Master Aengus,
Master Aengus,
Master Aengus waits for you.*

The dark Moon was rising again, and Agatha woke and rose from her spot on the floor before the Maid's bed. She saw the other bed was void, and she stepped out of the door.

At the end of the glade the Breton was standing, looking at the Moon.

'Let her bless you,' said Agatha.

He stayed looking out into the sky, and it was as if he did not hear. But after a space he breathed, and asked,

'How big is the Night-land do you think, and how many moons' riding, between this place and Ballynoe in County Cork, hard put to by the banks of the Bride?'

Then Agatha smiled a little bitter smile. Yes, she thought, *he heard me even so.*

‘It is far and wide,’ she answered him, by way of testing him.

‘And how old will I be, when at last I might be reaching it?’

‘As old as you will be at that time,’ she answered, ‘if you stayed here in this place instead.’

Eudemarec made ready to be setting out again. And to her surprise Lady Agatha, too, found herself restless to be going, restless to be doing. Maid Mielusine saw it in them both, and sighed; she had no great urging to be off away from her home there.

One moon Agatha went off to the pond to wash the linens; Eudemarec took his horse away riding. Maid Mielusine went about her affairs and tended to her trees, and tended to her hut, and tended to the animals coming to her byre. Alone she was, in the rising of the moon; alone she was in its falling. And there was no sign nor sight of Eudemarec, nor of Agatha either.

That moon Mielusine kept her stew waiting a good long time, enduring the trees’ grumbling, to wait for the Breton and the lady, and they neither of them showing their faces at the door. At moon-fall Mielusine went herself to the pond. Where she found the heap of linens by the water, and the tracks

of the Breton's horse, and naught else.

Mielusine sighed. She knew what had befallen.

'It was the lady, for all her rags, Eudemarec better liked; and now they two are gone away together, and I am left alone.'

She went and sat herself down on one of Owen's roots.

The next moon rose, and that moon fell, and her grieving only worsened. It was a worse loss even than the loss of her sisters she was feeling.

Gone now is my beauty, gone now my fortune, gone my friend, and they are all gone. With them went Mielusine the lady, Mielusine Master Aengus' love. What is left? Only Mielusine the cottager's daughter, the little pinch-faced Sini.

Now, when Eudemarec rode his horse to the pond where Agatha bent to her washing, he let his horse wander, and himself stood speaking to her. She did little to encourage him, and was answering hardly at all.

He was telling her of the world of Night.

'Now some, accounted dream-eyed in the daylit world, thrive and do great things; and others, once mighty, now are as beggars by the way.' And he told her of the many gentle cities were a-building, in places overlooked by day.

‘Why, there are whole cities in the mountains of the Rhine, and a mist maunders over them, and you cannot reach even half a league near to the walls of them. Every living soul, man and woman, child, horse, and dog, lies deep in the unwakeable Sleep. There are strange towers built over the dry fields deep in France, and they are pressing the grape there as if it were the flesh of Bacchus reborn they are crushing into wine.’

Agatha wrung out a cloth, scratched back the thick tangle of her dirty hair. Eudemarec took a stone and skipped it out across the pond; still she would not answer.

‘Then again, below the mountains,’ he went on, ‘I saw white-clad priests in Rome, bowing on the rooftops of basilicas, praying to the Black Sun, the Moon’s half brother.

‘In Spain the priests are sleeping: a Counter-Inquisition is on foot, and they are raising the Horned God. In the palace of the kings of France peasants walk about barefoot, making love in marble halls before the gilded doors of slumbering nobles. Beautiful harlots in Paris are hailed as once Empresses were in Rome.’

Agatha took a stone, and stroked it back and forth upon one of his shirts, worrying at a stain. The Breton fetched him up a sigh.

‘How strange it is, then, that only here in this small forest would I be finding word of my enemy. And I had not even entered here but for the simplest chance.’

She stopped at that, and fixed his eye. ‘What pointed you here?’ she wondered.

‘Why, a woman on the road pointed the way, saying here was surely someone who could help me.’

She frowned. ‘A woman!’ she exclaimed. ‘And was it a lady, dressed in the height of fashion?’

‘No, now: it was a countrywoman old in her rags.’

Agatha returned to her washing, and he continued in his musings. ‘The strangest place I found, was here in this land: in a lough of mists there is a land, and there I found another lough, where the Lady Arianna has conjured up her white abbey.’

‘I have never heard of her,’ said Lady Agatha.

‘Ah, but you should have done! There are wonders in her court. Once, far across the lough in the dark of the moon, I even caught a glimpse of the lady herself, shimmering on the water.

‘All her bandits and trollops followed after her. Behind her went her three maids, and at her side walked her champion. A bit apart walked another, in a plain coat and breeches. There is a strange tale hangs about him, and later I met and spoke with

him.'

Lady Agatha cast down the linens and sighed. 'Amuse me then, Eudemarec, if you must pester me. Tell me of the man.'

'Well, he is somewhat above the common height, and lean. There is something in his eye – he is always searching for a thing he claims he lost; and he spoke of strange things such as no other man would think of.

'He is called Arianna's Bacach. And indeed he is lame in one leg. *Bacach* means lame in your speech, does it not?'

'It is generally the meaning of folk when they say it,' she answered, turning back to her washing.

'They say in the night of No Moon after Imbolc, river-frogs and herons hopped up to the lough, and called to the lady in croaks and screeches and howls. Then the lady sent her bandits to the river, and they came back with the man.

'He was dead, or very near it. Arianna labored over him many a moon, and brought him back to health.

'They say he had gone on a geis set upon him by a woman, into the Western Sea. And there below the waves he struggled to summon back the Sun; but of course he found only his own death when he set out from these shores.'

Lady Agatha turned on him sharply. *Aengus*, cried her heart. *Master Aengus is that man!* But aloud she was saying, 'This cannot be true, what you say. Admit it, sir: it is a lie.'

'By Mablaith, it is the truth I tell you!'

'Go on then, describe this man to me,' said Agatha. 'Were his hands long, with knuckles round as quail's eggs, and sparse black hairs growing upon the backs, like reeds bent by the wind? Did he have a gap in his right eyebrow, where a pale scar ran? And was there a lock of white hair grown out in his dark locks above his left ear?'

'You know him then, my lady. It is the very man.'

'I know his double! But did he wear a chain about his neck, holding a golden guinea?'

'No – but he wore a chaplet of laurel that the lady herself had put upon him, the way they said, laurel is the poet's gold, as much as the blessing of the dead, and the rare right word.'

'Tell me then, Eudemarec: you said he spoke of strange things. What things? Did he speak to the Moon as though he knew her secret name?'

'He did that,' said the Breton with a laugh.

'And did he claim to know what lay at the back of the winds when they ran, and what things the grass-stalks sang, when the Moon goes down? And

had he seen the sky beyond the Sun and Moon?’

‘As I say, this Bacach was a man of wisdom.’

‘And did he not speak of a lady he loved. Did he not tell of how he longed for her and wronged her. Did he not tell you how he lost her, and braved what no other man had braved, to win her back – in vain? And did he not speak her name?’

Eudemarec considered, and shook his head.

‘Lady, compose yourself,’ he said. ‘Yes, his words ran along some such lines. He was searching for one, and he said he would give his life to gain her back, and repair the wrong. That he would never see her again. And that knowledge cut his heart to the roots.’

‘Yes . . . yes,’ said Agatha. She turned away, to hide her face away from him. *Let no man see me in the weakness of my need*, she thought.

‘But it was not a woman he spoke of,’ said Eudemarec.

She turned back.

‘No,’ he said again. ‘Rather it was a white hind he had wounded.’

Lady Agatha took his arm. ‘What is this you say,’ she asked, ‘—a hind?’

‘He had searched the world for her, but hadn’t found her. Oh, he went on and on about the hind. He never spoke of any woman. Unless by the hind

he meant a lady?’

‘It cannot be true,’ said Agatha. ‘It must be a lie.’

She sat and held her head between her hands. She hardly heeded him.

‘It seems you knew this man,’ Eudemarec said at length. ‘Pardon me if what I said distressed you. Maybe I should be leaving you now. But it’s the first time we two have been alone apart from the Maid. And it’s almost well I am now; soon I’ll be going. But I would not go alone.’

‘Ask then,’ she said through her hands. ‘You’d know what it is Maid Mielusine is whispering to me in your regard?’

‘No, Agatha. I’d know rather what it is you are whispering to her.’

Lady Agatha uttered a bleak, mirthless laugh.

‘What, now?’ he asked.

‘Oh Eudemarec! Don’t you see the comedy in it? – That between the beauty and the one in rags whose hair hangs like river-weeds, you should choose me?’

‘Your maid is fair as Day, but this is Night. Your quality gleams through your rags. Why do you hide? I know your wild heart all the same.’

‘Do you, now?’

He stood up over her, close and near, so that the warmth of his body was strong as arms embracing

her. 'We have both known passion, you and I. We have both betrayed what was dear to us. Our loves are waiting in the Day. But we need not wait alone. Let us join hands.'

She swept back her skirts from him.

'But you don't know!' she mocked. 'You met him face to face, and you don't even know it!'

He looked at her, a blank look; her laughter stung him, stronger now than ever.

'Would you know then, what sort of man is this Bacach? Would you be knowing the place of your enemy, and mine? It's there where you found him! They are the same, those two. The Bacach is Master Aengus, Eudemarec!'

'No,' he breathed.

'Moy-rua, yes! And it's this Bacach who loosed the girdle of the Sun and doomed the Day, and it's himself who left your Mablaith to languish unto death!'

4. How the Trees Were Stilled

LATE IN the darkness of that moon, at last, Maid Mielusine ladled out her cooking to her trees. Herself, she ate no part of it.

She sat in the hob seat in the hearth and looked into the embers burning out. Maid Mielusine fell quiet, bending in upon herself. *They are gone now*, she saying to herself, over and over and over again. *Prince Eudemarec has taken Lady Agatha away, and they two are gone now beyond the hedge out of this wood, out into the Night-land broad.*

The trees grew louder and coarser than ever, if that was possible. They weren't sorry at all those two had gone. Mielusine was theirs again, and no one else would claim her: no!

And they fell to boasting amongst themselves, who of them would prove her best guardsman.

'It's me!' shouted Neil. 'I'll be her best protector!'

'I'll be letting nobody near her!' shouted Sean.

And Griff and Sean and Neil they were towering out from the benches, and butting crowns amongst the rafters, knocking up a frightful din, the others shouting them on, shoving forward and back.

Maid Mielusine on the hob by the hearth bent her head, glaring at them. The trees weren't looking often her way, the way her looks for them were so very mad.

All at once she leapt up: caught a firebrand from the hearth, swinging it, shouting 'Leave! Leave! Leave!'

Mielusine flung the door shut on them; she was tearing off the white gown, digging in her chest for her homespun clothes. But her eyes were falling on the slumbering red gown, and she was feeling how unfair all of it was.

Again and again she was regretting being shy with Eudemarec. Again and again she was taken with thoughts of how pleasant it would have been to have been *kissed* by him: to be *kissed* by any man at all! The thought of it started something burning up in her, dreadful and fine. And all alone she was curling up on the hearthstones in the glow of the fire, and wishing in her misery to be sleeping endlessly, ignorant of the world.

I must be rising soon, she was dreaming in herself at last. *The way it must be moonrise already*,

and my animals in the byre hungry and lone. But she did not move.

At last she was hearing a sound at the door, and Mielusine saw someone standing there, half shadow, shining through the damp veil of her tears.

‘Am I dreaming now,’ Mielusine was whispering, ‘or is it truly you?’

The figure reached out its arms, beckoning.

‘Mielusine!’ the figure called.

‘Mielusine, Eudemarec is gone, he bore me to the hedge at the edge of the wood but I couldn’t go farther with him. He knows where Master Aengus is now, Mielusine, and is gone to kill him. It was I told him where to find him!

‘And now I cannot keep away, but it draws me like adamant, I must be going there, but my thoughts are running, round and round – Mielusine, it’s that you must be coming with me, or I will be falling dead in a ditch along the road even if I could be getting out of here. Will you, Mielusine? Will you come with me after Eudemarec, and keep him from killing Master Aengus?’

The Maid crawled to her feet. She was leaning back against the hearth, her hand half raised. In her belly it was hollow, as though she had been struck there. The tips of her breasts against the coarse wool of her kirtle were burning, burning. Then she

answered,

‘Surely I’ll go with you, Agatha. Weren’t we planning it all along? He’s going to Master Aengus? Take me along with you.’

And Lady Agatha filled a corna with goat’s cream and drank of it, and offered it to the maid.

‘Drink,’ she said, ‘and finish it.’

Mielusine turned the corna round, to the white kiss on the rim where the lady had drank, and pressed her lips to the very spot, drinking and feeling the lady’s eyes looking that deep into hers.

Outside the Honey Hall, the moon and her Night-land they were beckoning them. And they went out of the hall, those women, and slipped away into the Night.

As to the trees, they were hiding themselves out of shame and suffering in the dug-up glade where Conn killed Owen. They were standing there, bent over among the lifeless trees. And their thoughts were running in the same stream-bed, and it’s sad and lonely they were, and worried for the maid.

And their branches were creaking in the chill night’s wind.

What is wrong with Maid Mielusine? creaked the branches of this one. *Why don’t she come deck us with flowers and straw rings as she used?*

It's all Agatha's fault, creaked the branches of that one. She's ugly. I hate her! How did we ever take her for a lady, now?

Mielusine loves her. And besides, she made her the lovely white gown, and transfigured her.

They all were sighing the same sad song, twisting back toward the hall where herself, as they thought, lay dreaming.

You knot-heads, let her char you all! What's the matter with you now? broke in one sharply as the snapping of a limb. *It's not with you she's wanting to play! Moy-rua, can't you see Miss Mielusine's a lady now herself?*

There was stillness in the glade after that. Only the chill wind sougning and sighing in the branches of the dead trees. The eight friends waited, but it was in vain, the way Maid Mielusine wasn't coming round to find them and shoo them all home for a good hot meal. Come the next darkness they crept back to the hall – they had to.

They reached the clearing. They looked squinting across to the hall. The door was open wide, and the gate of the byre was open too, and Mielusine's pets were gone. It was dark in the hall, and still.

The trees crept closer. There was no sound within, and fear was all but curling up their rooty toes.

Inside the hall they found it empty and cold, and bed-clothes and cups scattered about, all trina-chiele. But in the dirt outside the door, in a curve round the base of the bird-pool they eight had made, white stones spelled the words,

FARE
WELL

They stared at those stones, at those marks left in the dirt. But long as they stared, the words would not be transforming themselves into any better news than that.

‘She’s gone, she is,’ groaned Griff, after a good long while. ‘Maid Mielusine is gone.’

‘Will she be returning, now,’ wondered Neil.

‘It was Conn drove her away,’ said Ted. That was the start of another quarrel between them, the worst one yet, and it ended when they all broke away, and trudged down the hill on different paths. But each in his own path was slowing and stiffening.

It was Maid Mielusine had charmed them into life. Now Mielusine was gone.

And in the end they stopped altogether, near the hedge at the ends of the wood. Separately they closed their knotty eyes, bending back their arms in the most comfortable way. Their faces were blending back into bark. Their toes were sinking into the

warm ground, holding them in place. Drowsy they were, and falling asleep, sleep such as trees know that live hundreds of years, the unquick life of trees.

But just before he stopped entirely, and the wood in him stiffened into its old hardness forever, and the rough bark crusted over the features of his face, then at that moment every tree sighed, a sigh as soft and plaintive as the old wind through the branches of the naked midwinter twilight. And he prayed in his last sigh, 'Do not lose sight of me utterly, Maid Mielusine, but remember me from time to time.'

'Remember me,' sighed Barry, and

'Remember me,' sighed Griff.

'Remember me,' sighed Neil, while far away across the wood,

'Remember me,' sighed Will, and

'Remember me,' sighed Ted, while Tadgh sighed far away,

'Remember me.'

'Remember me,' sighed How.

'Remember me,' sighed Conn.

Conn was the last of them, the last of them still quick in their slow woody way, and Conn's sighing was the last of all their magic, dying in a wide ring round the half-burnt wood. They moved no more, nor spoke, nor sang, nor dug, nor drank. They were

no more than trees. Do trees drink or dance?

And from then onward there was nothing to tell them from their burned brethren, but the one thing:

From the splinters of his crown, from the knot once a nose, from onetime fingertips, each of those eight was sprouting tender shoots, so pale in the moonlight they might have been gold.

Maid Mielusine was walking alongside Lady Agatha down the path.

And Lady Agatha was saying, 'It was at the pond I told him. "Is it true?" he asks me. His horse is nearby; in an instant he's mounted, and drawing me up behind him. And we're riding, and the branches shooting past, down this very path. But at the wood's edge we reach the hole in the hedge, when all of a sudden the hedge-claws push against me, and light me down on the moss. Eudemarc rides on through, stops his steed and whirls it round.

'And he calls, "Come on, Agatha! Come riding with me!"

'I leap after him, but again the hedge won't let me pass. Oh, for the curse of too much wisdom! My own cleverness defeating me, the way I was casting a spell across the hedge not to be letting you leave without me, lest the Breton carry you off; but the

hedge loves you, and won't let me go alone either, lest you be trapped in the wood behind.

'I groan and call to him, "I cannot go farther, man!"'

"No?" he asks me. Och, you should have seen the man! There's a mad gleaming in his eye, and he making his horse to dance. Holiness is taking hold of him, the purity of vengeance, and he handsome as never before.

Again he asks me: "No? Then bide you here, my sweetest, grimmest Agatha: and I'll bring you Master Aengus' head in a basket!" And he rides away. He rides so fast, he must be halfway to the Sea by now!

'He will not really hurt Master Aengus?' asked Mielusine after a bit.

'Wasn't he a cut-throat now, on the edge of Broceliande? Didn't he learn of sword-cutting and pistol-shot from the finest dueling-masters in Nantes? Master Aengus is no soldier, Mielusine.'

The path was widening, the starry fields shining through. Already they could see the dense wall of the hedge, broken at the path's end in the way of a gate.

Mielusine slowed her step.

'Come on, now,' urged Lady Agatha.

Mielusine was looking back. She wasn't wanting to be leaving. Too soon it was coming, the mo-

ment she must be bidding farewell to this place.

She looked up, about and back again. The black trees were so comforting! A sudden pang was striking her: *My trees now, where are they, what will they do?*

‘Come along, we must be hurrying,’ said Agatha. Mielusine looked down, at the claw of the lady, pulling on her arm.

And ahead through the fine weave of the hedge and blackened branches was shining the tip of the arc of the Moon: dreamlike it was, and reminding her somehow of Aengus.

‘Yes,’ she breathed, ‘you are right. We must be hurrying.’

And the two women slipped out through the hedge, and on the gleaming road took up Eudemarec’s trail into the heart of Ireland.

5. Of the Each Dubh

THEY WERE walking now, walking through the Night. Summer had come round again, cool and belated, but an end to the snow at least. There was a stillness swallowing the Night-land, and only their steps on the road were cracking, loudly, like grain brayed in a mortar.

‘Och, this silence!’ cried Agatha one moon. ‘It’s mad it’s driving me, the way only my mad thoughts are filling it, all about Aengus, and madness, and death. Sing, Mielusine, will you please?’

‘What could I be singing, against this great high ceiling of stars and black clouds?’ asked the Maid.

‘It matters nothing, as to that: only sing. Sing a cradle song, sing something, sing nonsense sounds, so you sing away this crying in my self!’

Then Maid Mielusine took pity on her friend; she lowered her head, and thought; and after a moment, along with the crunch of their footsteps, the maid’s voice, wavering as a child’s, went out into that airy vastness. She sang songs she had learned

of her mother at the cradle, she sang songs for washing and for work, and for resting by the evening fire.

That would have been Midsummer Eve in Day, and they wandering through a county burning with bonfires and the laughing of gentle folk. Overhead the sky drew across itself a covering in a muslin of cloud, breaking at times, showing the Moon. A chaplet of primroses wreathed the Moon, shivering like Mielusine's voice.

The next moonrise they found a post-house beside a bank of rowans. Abandoned it seemed, but for a dim glow in the window.

An old man was waiting inside. He welcomed them in with a fine fialte; his name he gave as Connor; and he was so quaint and foolish-wise, Mielusine soon loved him. 'No questions now,' said he: 'Eat, drink, be warm by my fire! Mary bless such travelers as you, to fill the empty hours!'

'We are looking for a Breton, must have passed this way,' said Lady Agatha. 'Do you know what way he took? He was bound for the abbey of Arianna, wherever that may be.'

'Is that where he's headed now? Aye, I know him,' said Connor. 'Was in a fearful hurry he was. But he took the long road to be going to the mist. If he'd deigned to speak with a man, I might have set

him right.'

'Which way? We must be catching him.'

'Ah, settle yourself, girl!' he said.

He bent over the fire, reddening the tobacco in his dudeen. 'I can set you on a way, will have you there in half the time he'll take. I'll even lend you a horse to be beating him. But for this you must be paying me – no coins, now! For it's the love I have of travelers' tales, and now that I alone am running the place, with no interference of others, it's the only currency I'll take!'

'Then it's a grand tale I'll be giving you,' Lady Agatha said. And then and there she set out a tale of how she and Mielusine had come to the post-house; a tale full of lost loves, duels and perilous flights: a tale worthy of her beloved novel, and not a word of it true. Maid Mielusine sat agape at it, but Connor listened with not a blink of his eye.

'Well,' he said at last, puffing on his dudeen. 'Well, well! Girl, this is the fanciest tale I ever yet heard. And are you sure you've got it all straight, now?'

And he laughed, and Agatha joined him.

'So you've told me one,' he said, 'let me tell you another! Did you ever hear of the Man Who Should Have Slept?'

He smiled at their frowns, and spat into the fire.

‘Och, ’tis the strangest tale! It was himself, sitting there across from me at this very table, told me the tale! He came from a far kingdom across the seas, and in the last evenings of the Day, he alone saw the spot growing on the face of the Sun, and knew what that betokened.

‘He knew, you see, the Night was coming, and he knew, too, that he was meant to be one of the Sleepers. But he knew how to fight against the Sleep, and he willed himself awake. And he alone, out of all the Sleepers, stayed awake in the Night, though at a cost – a dear cost, I can tell you, having seen the grisly grim eye in his dead gray face. I could have reached out and touched it myself, the man was as close to me as that!

‘Tell me,’ said Connor, leaning over the table and lowering his voice, though no one was about: ‘Did you never wonder, why was it we woke, while so many others are Sleeping? I’ll tell you. We are all of a kind, we Wakeful. Unspoken words, more secret even than the freemasons’, bind us all as one.’

‘Ah, it was an accident, sure, and no more than that,’ Lady Agatha said. ‘Listen, stage-keeper, if you like tales so much. Do you want to know why the Night fell, and what man brought all this on our heads?’

‘Och, you’ll not be telling me the old tale of our

Master Aengus and his lady, will you girl? There are half a dozen stories more amusing than his. Everyone's heard of him; but who can tell where he ended, and where his lady is? And what's the good of a tale without a proper ending?'

She stared at him.

'Oh, I've heard many a better tale,' he went on. 'And here's the one I like best. It was no one man woke the Unappeasable Host, as what one man could? – but it was the groaning and the prayers of us all – all us Wakeful, now. We in our hearts, beaten down with taxes, press-gangs, and the heaping-up of laws, we all were calling them out. And now we've only so much Night to cut loose the reins of the world, ere the blessed dawn break and all the Sleepers wake! It's them are sleeping, but us dreaming the new world up over their heads, and before they waken, why it'll be done!'

'What will the new world be like, Mr Connor?' asked Mielusine.

'Ah. Ah, now. 'Twill be a world,' he answered, puffing with all solemnity, 'where the past will be dead, clean uprooted from the earth. It will be a world where what a fellow holds in his hand and what he holds in his head will not be the same, but what's in his head will be worth more! It will be the world of all Desiring, and Reaching, and Pleasure.

'Twill be the world of our own making, Miss. We've but to dream for it.'

Mielusine said, 'Someone's spying on us.'

'Ah, now,' said Connor, 'Here's Siobhan.'

A young woman emerged from the shadows at the back of the house.

She was dark and graceful, and pretty, the way she was biting her lip. She wore a dark woolen dress with a long dark shawl, and her black hair was spilling out in a mass of unruly ringlets halfway down to her knees. Her eyes were dark, narrow, and odd.

'Let her bless you,' she whispered.

'Wasn't I telling you?' Connor asked with a snort of a laugh. 'Where else but in the Night would a wild young maid be burning up her time with an old gentleman such as myself?'

She took his hand and kissed it. 'It's that you tell the grandest tales,' she murmured.

Mielusine reached out and laid the palm of her hand across the woman's lower belly. Siobhan held Mielusine's hand there, and laughed.

'Isn't it grand?' she asked, shaking her head and looking sideways at Connor. 'It was during this Night he was conceived.'

* * *

Come moonrise Connor took them to the stable, and brought them out a horse.

And black was that horse; tall, great of body, too. Only his eyes could be properly seen, gleaming red, and the splash of a star on his forehead, moving against the clouds.

‘Here is my joy,’ breathed Connor.

‘He is a miracle,’ murmured Agatha. ‘How comes it that you, in this post-house, keep a horse worthy of a sultan?’

‘Did I not tell you, we’ve only to dream? It was Porter found me as much as ever I did him. Steady, girl! You both must ride him, for no other horse could match him! He’ll take no saddle nor bridle, but if you hang on, and whisper in his ear, he’ll bear you smooth as a Lughnasadh wind.’

Lady Agatha climbed on the each dubh easily, but the Maid hung back. ‘He’s wild, I’ll fall and die,’ she whispered.

‘Let you take hold of my arm and climb up,’ commanded Lady Agatha. ‘Mr Connor, help her – put up your skirts, Mielusine, grip him with your ankles and your knees. Wreathe your arms about my waist; I’ve a mind to see how fast he is!’

‘Moy-rua, let him choose his own pace,’ said Connor. ‘But you now, it’s a deoch an dorrus you must be drinking, to speed you on your way. Here’s

the corna now, and be drinking down to its bottom. Isn't it my own poteen, that warmer than porter, that warmer than mead?'

Lady Agatha swallowed down the burning hot liquor, and the three of them, Agatha, Connor, and Siobhan, made Mielusine empty the corna too, though she was unwilling.

'And when,' said Connor, 'you've reached the place you want to be, let him be fed and leave him, and he'll find his way back here to me, if it's here he's a mind to be. Now farewell, and Mary watch over you!'

Lady Agatha hugged the bony neck to her breast, burning from the white poteen.

'Go where I'm going, Porter!' she breathed. 'Go!'

Porter took a turn about the yard, tossing his head and whinnying to his mares in the stable. Then he surged straight for the hedge across the road, knowing the way without telling, and he leapt into the field beyond: and they were off, and the post-house already far behind.

Oh, but what a ride that was!

They were crossing fields, streams and fences as fast as memory. In the county of bogs Porter was dashing and darting beneath quarried cliffs of peat, fragrant with roots and all the buried past. Mud and spray were drenching the women's legs, and they

must be closing their eyes and averting their faces.

‘Oh, can you go no faster?’ whispered Agatha in his ear.

Faster than the Moon they were moving, and the wind sweeping back the mane of the each dubh, and the women’s hair streaming back like banners black and reddish-bronze.

The horse’s flanks were shivering now. It was harder to be holding on. And dimly in the distance, in the last light of the Moon, a glimmering lit the edge of the world.

That was the ridge of Connor’s warning to them: beyond it lay the county of mist, and in the middle of the mist they’d be finding the lough, the crannog, and the abbey of the Lady.

And far far ahead, they spied a fluttering, of a starling on the wing. And Agatha whispered:

‘Let you catch me that starling, and pass her before she cross the ridge.’

Violence shuddered through the steed. The wind was snapping the women’s dresses like sails, fraying and rending.

Mielusine was laughing, she was so scared, shutting her eyes. Agatha’s eyes were narrow as a Russian girl’s. Grand was Connor’s poteen, the way they would have been thrown into a ditch long before then, but for the fire of it searing their arms and

their limbs and helping them hold on.

Now the starling was a quarter mile ahead, a stone's cast off the ridge. Porter was laboring up the long slope. And the Moon slipped behind the dark rise to the left.

The foam boiled off the stallion's neck, stinging and burning Lady Agatha's eyes. She rubbed them on her shoulder and looked back in time to see the starling, bobbing in the air, fall behind them as they shot past. And beyond the ridge stretched a lake, bright as a mirror, as far as the eye could see.

Over the ridge, across the road raced the each dubh, helpless to stop: they fell into the water with a stinging great splash, even as Agatha cried out her exultation.

But strangely, they plunged into the lake without being wet; and it was not water, but mist, so thick its surface cast back the moonlight like waves.

And all that darkness until moonrise they were descending the inner slope, walking and leading the horse. They had to, the mist was so thick in that county. Mielusine was lying moaning on Porter, and he in a muck sweat, his sides bleeding, near dead with the racing.

'Oh, my poor darling, my Porter,' moaned Mielusine, 'will you be well again? Oh, I'm all sore and shaking, Agatha, why did you bid him to go so

fast?’

Lady Agatha led the way. She paid the Maid no mind. Only one thought she was thinking, and that was this, how far a lead Eudemarec had, and where was he now?

Heavier and heavier weighed Aengus in her mind.

The fury of the ride had been a respite, but the poteen was burned out of her now. ‘So comes the prisoner home into his jail,’ she was murmuring. ‘Not hopefully and not defiantly, but merely because he must. Because in truth he never left.’

It was not that she was wanting to see Aengus again. She was dreading it. She was hoping he would have gone away, no man knew where. She had no trust in herself, in what she would do when she saw him. And she was hating herself for it.

Three times the Moon rose, and three times she fell; in the county of mist the mist was brightening a bit when as the Moon was rising, and the mist was darkening a bit when as the Moon was hid. The women went on, now leading the horse, now riding Porter, slowly now in that treacherous land.

Maid Mielusine never knew that in the darkness while she lay resting, Lady Agatha would be rising, and twisting grass-stalks in her fingers, and walking about in the black mist, that like a thou-

sand dewy mouths was tormenting her, gnawing at her face and hair and hands.

Agatha would not eat, lest the comfort let her rest. She fled from her dreams, that were still betraying her.

‘How long since I slept last, I wonder?’ she would ask herself, and be counting and reckoning up the moons as a distraction.

‘Agatha, is it time to be going again?’ murmured the Maid sleepily from her blankets on the grass.

‘Hush now, and be sleeping again, my puss,’ said Agatha, and passing her palm over the Maid’s brow; Mielusine’s eyes lowered, and the easy peace of sleep returned over her face. Then Agatha took up her pacing again, pacing up and down, to and fro, back and forth, in a rut of seventeen paces, even as once he had, long ago in the world of the Sun.

Deep in the county of mist they climbed across a hillside, that was like a huge barrow or tomb-yard of ancient kings and warriors from the Five Kingdoms. From the top of that barrow they were looking down on a cluster of folk. The folk were leaving, and Lady Agatha led the way down to where those others had been. By the path was the Lady’s Well caught in a circle of stones.

‘I know of this place,’ said Agatha, wondering. ‘But it’s not here this place should be; or am I all turned about again?’

It was the way of the Night-land, that no map was solid and safe, but all the places shifted and slid about, and a body never knew what place would appear on the road ahead.

‘What is the name of it?’ asked Mielusine.

‘And I drank of the water of this well,’ said Agatha. ‘I was that young and proud, and it wasn’t the country-boy courting me I was wanting, but a man of some estate, wealthy and of power.’

She lifted out some water from the well, holding it cupped in her hands. ‘Drink it, now,’ she said to Mielusine. ‘Drink, and think on Master Aengus.’

‘Yes, I’ll do that,’ answered the maid. And she lapped the water out of the lady’s hands. But the each dubh would not drink out of that well.

Now, as soon as Agatha dipped her hands in the water of the well, it started to rise. It rose up to the lip of the circle of stones holding it, and overflowed, and ran down in a little stream between the slopes.

‘Come along,’ said Agatha. She took Maid Mielusine by the hand, and they followed the stream.

Down they traveled, deeper in that mist, the land rising and falling, and on the hillsides hun-

dreds of fruit trees, wild apple, quince and pear. The little stream was running between the hills, snaking between the trees, and the women were following it.

And the deeper into that vale they went, the deeper came a sleepiness into Agatha, so that she could scarcely stay awake.

How long since I slept last, I wonder? she was asking herself, but that answer did not come.

They passed one thousand tents and wagons, filled with dangerous wild-looking folk; and the gleams in the eyes of those men caused the Maid to shrink closer to Agatha for safety. Glad she was, when they came out from the midst of that encampment!

The Moon was falling. That was the Lugh-nasadh Moon, Lammas in the old calendar of Day. And from ahead a rich smell of rotting reached them, and the lapping of little waves.

'Is it the lough? Can we stop now?' asked Mielusine. She was so tired she was almost falling.

But tired as the Maid was, the lady was worn by an even deeper fatigue. She had drunk none of the water of the Lady's Well, and now an utter sleepiness was overtaking her.

How long since I slept last, I, I cannot – 'oh! I cannot go on!' sighed Agatha. She pulled the Maid forward, almost falling on her.

‘Mielusine,’ she whispered into the Maid’s ear, ‘over that rise now, the lough is surely lying. Listen! Do you not hear that clanging of iron upon iron, like a bitter bell? Mielusine, let you go on before me. Go on and call back to me, tell me what you’re seeing!’

Mielusine, impelled by her friend, went after the stream up between the apple trees. Soon she was vanished in the mist beyond. The beating of the iron bell rolled across the unseen water.

Agatha knelt down on the moss beside the little stream. Sleepiness conquering her, and she scarce able to keep her eyes open. Into the stream she murmured,

‘Mielusine, I cannot see! What is it you’re seeing?’

The Maid’s little voice came back along with the ripples, answering. ‘Yes, it is the lough! I see dim yellow lights to the left, of a small village. And out in the lough the mist is a white cloud, and other lights are gleaming like witch-lights over marshes.’

Agatha crept closer to the stream to hear better over the rushing of her sleepiness, and whispered into the water, ‘Mielusine, I cannot see! What is it you’re seeing?’

Faintly the Maid’s voice sprang up out of the ripples. ‘I see another light close to hand. Three torches burn at the water’s edge. Two men are there

in silver and scarlet coats, and one ringing an iron bell upon a pole.'

Agatha let close her eyes. So sweet, so sweet some bit of sleep would be! She wormed yet closer over the water, put her lips down just over it and breathed, 'Mielusine, I cannot see! What is it you're seeing?'

But no answer was coming from the stream. The Maid was stricken silent.

For in the water of the lough was a swanlike barge, and on it stood a woman. It was tall she was, masked, and enfolded in a rich enormous cloak, that was black and chased with silver.

And on the mud where the stream ran laughing in the lough, two men were walking. They took another step apart with every peal of the bell. They held pistols in their hands, gleaming white and cold. And they were in the midst of a pistol-duel, those two.

One man was a stranger to the maid; the other was Eudemarec.

'Eudemarec! Eudemarec, it's me, it's Maid Mielusine!' she called. But the Breton paid her no mind. He had thoughts only on his duel, and the killing of his enemy.

In the misty torchlight Maid Mielusine could barely make the stranger out. But there was some-

thing wrong with his leg, the way he was limping.

Back in the mist, by the edge of the stream, Agatha's head was nodding; her eyes they were closing in sleep, and her breath was heavy, deep, and slow. She was hearing her breathing, and nothing else, and no voice reaching her from the duel by the lough.

'Eudemarec, let you be stopping,' Mielusine cried.

From the lough the tall lady lifted her eyes and held the Maid's gaze. And in that stare Mielusine felt a great fear, and found she could not speak, nor move, nor think.

And the lady spoke to her and told her, chill as mist, 'Girl, be still: you will spoil the game.'

Then the bell rang, one last time; the shivers of iron ran out and back across the waters of the lough; and the two men turned to face each other, across a gulf of thirteen paces.

Agatha sighed, and fell into sleep; her head nodded down, and her lips touched the water of the stream coming from the Lady's Well.

Eudemarec was standing very still, and the stranger was raising his pistol. The stranger took aim and fired. That shot boomed like cannon-fire across the quiet lough. But the stranger's aim was careless, and the recoil all but threw him down, leav-

ing the Breton unscathed.

And a drop of the water of the well wetted Agatha's lips, so she tasted it, and drank; then all at once the weariness was leaving her, and she jerked back her head, and looked about her: Where was she, and what was that crash she had heard, like thunder?

Eudemarec smiled.

'Now, Master Aengus, you devil, you monster, you hell-spawn,' he uttered, 'I have you now.'

He leveled his pistol. Calmly he drew back the hammer with his thumb, and tightened his finger over the trigger. The hammer fell; the muzzle roared; white flame burst from it.

Agatha staggered to her feet, and looked about. In that roar the stranger fell.

Aengus! her heart was crying. *Aengus!*

Eudemarec crossed the stream and strode over to the body.

The stranger moaned on the wet mud, and stirred a bit.

'What,' muttered the Breton, 'still alive, after that? You take a deal of killing, sir.' He drew a second pistol from his belt.

'Hold,' said the lady, raising her black-gloved hand.

Eudemarec brought the muzzle of the pistol

down against the stranger's head. 'No,' muttered Eudemarec. 'I'll not hold. Not if it cost me my life.'

'It will cost you more than that.'

'He robbed me of my love, and she was all I valued more.'

'You'll find yourself another love. Besides, your job is done. Your man is dead. Isn't that right, girl?'

Agatha let her feet follow the stream, the way the sound of those shots seemed to be coming from that way. The grass beneath her feet turned wet and muddy, and she saw dim yellow lights to the left, of a small village. And out in the lough the mist was a white cloud, and other lights were gleaming like witch-lights over marshes, even as the Maid had said.

Mielusine came down to the lakeside. She turned the heavy woolen clad shoulders of the fallen man, and laid the head of him into her lap. Brushing back his hair she was looking on him, wondering, Was this truly Master Aengus?

The cheek of him was rough, and marks of torment were traced about the closed eyes. His flesh was waxen, bloodless. The Maid was stroking his closed, bent face, smoothing the lines, until a sort of peacefulness was coming over it. Calm was he seeming, calm and cold as death itself.

She felt the man's throat. There was no move-

ment there.

Hot tears stung her eyes. 'It is true,' she groaned. 'He is dead now.'

Agatha heard faint voices by the water's edge, and she wandered on as though she still dreamed. It was against herself her feet were fighting, as though they were knowing what she'd find ahead, and wishing to spare her the sight and the knowing of it. But she went on. She could see another light close to hand. Three torches burned at the water's edge. Two men were standing there in silver and scarlet coats, and one holding the pull-rope to an iron bell upon a pole.

Eudemarec looked down on the body of the unknown foreigner he had sworn to murder. It was far away now that oath seemed to him, buried behind ramparts of thorn in the Broceliande.

'But if he is dead,' he wondered, 'why is it still Night?'

'It's the wrong tales you've been heeding,' answered the lady ironically. 'It was only that man there, could have brought back the Sun. Now he's dead, and the Sun will never shine again. Mary bless you for it!'

Agatha stopped, staring at the two men by the bell. The boatmen left the bell, heeding a gesture of the lady; they went down the mud-flats by the rip-

ples of the lough and gathered up the body of the dead man. And they bore the body up the slope away from the water. In the grass at the edge of the orchards they buried it. Their spades crunched into the pebbly earth; and when the men beat down the filled-in soil, the sounds resounded over the glimmering lough like the strokes of hammers.

Every blow of those spades upon the Earth beat heavy on the heart of Agatha, as though it was herself they had buried, and were sealing away from life in the Earth.

The lady stood at the head of the little grave. She crushed and sprinkled a few leaves over the black mound. A smell of peppermint filled the air. The lady stooped and whispered to the Earth, while the Maid wept and sniveled.

Agatha from a distance was looking on, amazed. *It isn't truth*, she was thinking. *This is some foul theater-piece, it cannot be real.*

The lady stood, and looked to the Breton. He was staring at the grave.

What thoughts and dreams scattered themselves through the brain of him, seeing it done, and the end of his long quest?

For many moons Eudemarec had searched for the man, the legendary Aengus who had unbound the girdle of light. Now he'd accomplished his oath.

And now, because of that, the Sun would never be rising again. And now, because of that, Mablaith would sleep until the end of the world. It was Mablaith Eudemarec had killed this hour.

‘You fought with style,’ said the lady, passing to the water’s edge. ‘You will come with us into the abbey.’

‘I want to go also,’ said Mielusine.

Agatha made her feet move forward. She came near to the grave.

‘Let you come then,’ allowed the lady. ‘You are delicate as the heather of this land. It’s one of my wards you’ll be, and a dancer in the casino.’

‘And Agatha,’ added Mielusine.

Agatha knelt at the side of the grave. She gripped the dirt in her fingers. Now tears were welling in her eyes, but she spoke no word. Only a little mewling came out, like a cat’s.

‘Not her,’ said the lady. ‘She’s the last of all I’ll be letting in. Well, girl? Are you coming?’

‘Agatha,’ Mielusine said softly. She got no answer. She looked to the barge, to the lady waiting there. She was so glamorous that Mielusine went to join her.

With an unhasty pace the boatmen poled the Swan barge out upon the lough, toward the white buildings of the abbey emerging from the silver mist.

Drinking at the water's edge, Porter was watching them go. When the ferry at length was dissolving in the mist the horse tossed his head. He nudged the huddled woman by the grave, but got only a mew for answer.

The each dubh trotted up the path, and a dark man stepped out in his way, took hold of his reins, and leapt upon his back.

The man straightened his dark gray cóta mór, and bent over Porter's neck, and whispered these words into his ears:

'Go where I'm going, Porter! Go!'

In the glow of the Moon rising beyond the mist, the Each Dubh gathered speed, and bore the dark man away over the hills beyond the wild orchards.

6. How She Lingered by the Lough

ROUND THE lough away from the tents where the bandits dwelt, those that would be going over to the abbey, there stood an old village, left over from the day; and the villagers came out of their doors only when the Moon was gleaming through the mist, and the lights of the crannog were snuffed.

The crannog in the lough had been there since before St. Patrick. With hundreds of timbers and thousands of stones as big as men's heads, ancient hands had built up the island in the lough. There the abbey had stood safe from the raiders, the chieftains, the warriors and the Northmen. For hundreds of years since then it had gone abandoned, left for boys to go fishing from in day, for birds to be nesting on in night.

In the last day the fires had rained in a great ring around that county, until sheets of mist and darkness swallowed them all.

It was only afterward that the villagers first

glimpsed witchlights out on the lough. The villagers learned the abbey was rebuilding on the crannog. And they found that if their cows ate of the sedge over the lough in the Night, no butter would be coming from their cream. After that it was out of nearby streams the villagers were drawing their water, and never the lough itself.

In the village they were telling how the lough was tainted, and lured folk into sinning. They all came to that place, all wives whose husbands were Sleeping, and all husbands whose wives were Sleeping. They brought the money of their spouses to the abbey, and spent it on their lovers.

In the village they were telling of wayward children playing too near the lough in the white moons of summer. How they fell drowsy in the sedge, covered with mist while lights danced on the water. And how, come moonrise, anxious mothers found them curled up at the water's edge, seeming asleep, smiling sweetly. But they were dead.

Some in the village were telling how those children were not dead at all, but stolen away to serve in the abbey, where they never got older. It was only models of clay left at the water's edge, so true to life they were fooling even the little ones' own mothers.

And they were telling how, if a girl's love could not be, for the anger of her father or the enmity of

kin, then she would go to the abbey and drown her heartsickness in laughter and lust; else she would go in darkness to the water, and clothed round with wildflowers she would surrender herself to the lough bubbling up around her. And she would be lying on the dark bed of the lough, among the deep reeds dead.

You might even be catching such a one if you flung a net into the deep. But it was ill-luck and accursed to wake her, if you were not meant to charm her sore heart and be her lover. So none of the village lads tried, though some of the abbey-folk, as it was said, had done.

In the bright of the Lammas Moon the villagers ventured out, and found the woman by the grave. She was rocking on her haunches, back and forth, mewling. Not a word would she speak to any of their questions or remarks. In the end they took her in and tended to her. They were thinking she had lost her reason.

She was drinking the broth they were giving her, and eying them suspiciously. One of the men stood over her, and looked her in the eye.

‘Did you run into folk from the abbey, child?’ he asked. ‘Is that what happened? What were they doing now, that it left yourself in such a state?’

‘Mary bless you,’ said an elder woman of them,

'I'll tell you. 'Twas the tall hero, came first to the water. He shouts his challenge across the lough, and it echoing back answerless. Only at moonfall, the ferry comes gliding out, and the two men fight for the sake of the beautiful young miss, and the lady of the lough presiding over it all. It's back to the crannog they went.'

The woman opened her mouth and said, 'The crannog?'

'Oh, but you mustn't think of going there, shivering and half naked as you are. 'Twould be the death of you.'

The stranger woman pushed the older one back and went out into the lane. Children were playing there, and the eyes of men and women upon her.

'She has the mark on her now, and it's the greatest shame,' whispered one.

'I warrant she was fair, one time,' answered another.

'Fair, aye: a magistrate's darling, forsaken when the day died.'

She turned on them.

'How will I be crossing to the crannog?'

They stared at her. None of them were answering her at first.

'Moy-rua, none of us will row you there,' said a man at last. 'The ferry's the only way. And it only

goes after moonfall; and they're choosy who they take.'

That was all the answer she got.

Muddy sedge skirted the lough away from the village. The stranger woman scooped up water and drank from her black-marked palm. It was warm, that water, running in her belly with secret life.

All that moon, she stayed by Aengus' grave.

All her bitterness was burnt out of her now. He was punished and dead, the way she would never be seeing him again. But the memory of him was yet alive. She missed him.

All that moon, there was one small break in the cloud of mist. A ray of moonlight was falling onto Master Aengus' grave and the woman kneeling there keening her grief.

The keening went on long after the moonlight failed. But at last the woman's voice broke, and she slumped on the dirt.

Late in the dark of the moon, one of those Swan boats was poled over to land from the crannog. From the boat stepped the lady in the silver cloak. She ignored the grave and the sleeping woman, and walked about the lanes of the village. Her quick,

light step passed among the cottages where the grownups of the villagers were lying abed dreaming. As she went, the lady hummed to herself a sprightly tune.

The children of the villagers, now, hearing the humming, rose and went to her. They crowded round her in their nightshirts, clamoring softly, 'Take me with you! Take me! Take me!'

The lady smiled on them, and handed them all little sweets and candies and drops wrapped in silver-paper. And she sent them back into their homes, and they were chewing and sucking on the sweets for the rest of the darkness, until they fell into their beds dreaming. And ever thereafter those children stayed up when the Moon went down, and dreamed when the moonlight flooded their little rooms, and talked back to their parents; and it was a trouble to their parents to be rousing them when the Moon rose.

The lady passed back into the ferry, and let herself be taken back into the crannog. But from up in the land hoofbeats echoed across the waters, and the great each dubh Porter showed himself on the crest of the hill thorned with the wild low trees. A man in a dark gray cóta mór stepped off the steed, gave him sweets, and sent him back to his master. Meantime the dark man stood on the top of the hill

looking down over the lough. He dug his hands into the deep pockets of his coat, and pulled out a bag full of hand-small stones. Those he scattered in a circle in the grass about him, and sat down on his haunches.

Silently the dark man buried himself in his cóta mór gazing down over the mist on the water, waiting.

Lights were burning on the lough that darkness, but no more Swan boats crossed. Only, just before moonrise, one was softly poled to shore. The two ferrymen, muffled in great cloaks, climbed the slope. One bore a lantern, its iron panels shut so that only a thin beam licked the ground.

They put the lantern down by the grave, and set to digging furtively. They took care not to waken the woman curled at their feet.

On the top of the slope the man in the dark gray cloak watched them, and he touched the peak of his tricorne hat to the grave of Master Aengus; but it seemed the ferrymen didn't notice the man, hidden as he was behind the circle of his stones. They ended their work, and took back to the abbey that thing they had been sent to fetch. It was only just in time they were: the Moon was already burning at the edges of the mist, when their poles sent back their ripples to the shore.

The rising Moon woke the mourner, and she

went down to drink once more. She sat by the grave in the patch of moonlight. She did not guess what they had done, while she had lain sleeping; she did not guess what things befell in the abbey on the crannog across the water, deep in the whiteness of the mist.

When darkness came again, the ferrymen poled the Swan boat across and back again, as their business bade them. From the encampment people were coming, leaving their tents and wagons and carriages, and themselves going over to the abbey.

They were an odd blend. Some gentle men and gentle ladies, others marked like tinkers; wenches and rogues, minxes and bandits, jades and rascals; farmers and fishermen; these rushing, and those laughing wickedly; the others fingering the hilts of their scians or the pommels of their pistols.

And some were stopped along the way by a sad-eyed creature in rags, calling to them from the sedge,

‘Take me across with you, Sir!’

But they were shaking their heads. ‘It’s no place for you, girl. Go back to your village and marry. It’s still being done, you know, for all that it is Night.’

And the creature went to the mooring-pole, ask-

ing the boatmen to carry her across.

‘What will you be paying?’ they asked.

‘I will pay you after,’ answered the creature.

‘If you lack courage, you cannot cross.’

‘I am Lady Agatha. Is that courage enough for you?’

The ferrymen looked each other in the eye. ‘You are the Lady Agatha? It was for you the Irishman sank the sun? Then you will never cross, the way you are the lady’s enemy.’

And once more the stars wheeled round to touch the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

When the Moon returned, and the lights across the lough faded again, and the creature was left behind. From over the rise the village waked again, and some of the village women were pitying the creature sitting in the sedge, and leaving her baskets of food.

Now some hours passed, and the Moon was after falling, and a group of girls came sneaking out of the village, nervous as geese, passing the creature on the way to the mooring-pole.

‘Where are you bound?’ she asked them.

‘Surely we’re for the abbey,’ they answered her, ‘to enter the lady’s service.’

‘What will you be doing there?’

‘Clean and cook, and serve and sew and all. And we’ll be learning to be like them, and after nine Moons they will be giving us each for a duais a brand-new chest, and bright pretty gowns, plates and cups, and all we need to be winning our loves.’

‘Let me be going with you.’

‘But she only sent for seven! If you go, one of us must stay behind.’

Then in her need the creature drew out the last of her belongings. Gold its chain, the emerald bright as her eyes had been in day.

‘Now what one of you will be taking this for her dress, and the right to go across with you?’

The girls were eying one another, but hung back.

‘Please,’ she breathed, ‘it’s all I have, and I must cross.’

‘Lady, you may have my place,’ said one. ‘I will cross another time. But keep your jewel, the way I wouldn’t know what to do with it.’

‘Hold it for surety then, or sell it for a house full of plate and linen, the way it is worth ten times that.’

Still the girl wavered, shaking her head. But it fell out that an old woman from the village was passing, and she scolded the girl something terrible for being so foolish, and talked her over to taking the

jewel.

Then in the lake water the girls washed the mud from the poor sad creature, and were drying her with their aprons and hiding her from prying eyes while she drew on the homespun dress, even while the boatmen came, and tied up the Swan boat on the mooring-poles.

The girls went in a flock to the mooring-pole and into the boat. The stranger woman was shivering with damp and fever, bent low in the middle of the girls lest the boatmen notice her.

The boatmen hardly looked upon one out of yet another group of girls lured by the glamour of the witchlights into running away from their homes and risking themselves in the abbey. Where some would be finding their fortune, and others their ruin, but all alike in this, that they would never be able to go back into their village and take up the life they had known before.

And the lantern at the ferry's prow was burning in their eyes, and the lantern at the mooring-pole fading away, and with it the shore, the village, and the land. In darkness they were gliding across the whispering water, and in their ears were growing the sounds of revelry, the closer they were to the crannog in the lough, and the white walls of the abbey emerging from the mist.

Part IV

The Full Moon

The Fifth Year of Night

In the fifth year of that Night, some Special Ones became known. And they walked apart from all their brother Waking.

And the others, who were the most part of the Waking, sought the Special Ones to be their teachers.

And some apprentices learned well at the hand of the Special Ones.

1. Of the Leag Lorgmhar

GENTLY, THE swan boat bumped upon the crannog.

The ferrymen slung the ropes about the mooring poles, and the seven girls walked up the planks and onto the ground of the crannog. The mist seemed thicker here, and the girls were feeling its chill droplets kissing their cheeks; on the girls' hair the droplets caught the light like brilliants. Hanging in the mist, moving about, globes of brightness slowly swam over head. Some of the globes were no larger than a man's head, others a full fathom wide. The globes trailed spiny black tails that were propelling them through the air.

At the end of the mooring a woman was waiting, and she was Old Meg. Old Meg looked the girls over with her bright, bright eyes while they were curtsying to her; then she swept her arm back behind of herself.

'Welcome,' said Meg.

The girls looked about, eating up the wonder-

ful sights of the place. In the moonlight the abbey and the crannog could never be seen from the village, the mist was so blinding white. But in the dark of the moon could be seen, not so much the thing itself, but only the image of its lights in the water. Through the dark of the moon the abbey was ablaze, and the village dark and closed. Only, here and there, a shutter softly opened, and a young lad or pale-eyed lass would be gazing out into the mist, and wondering. They never beheld the true shape of the abbey, they who dared not cross and enter service there, as these girls did.

‘Well,’ said Meg, the mistress of the girls, looking them over; ‘this crop seems a bit better than the usual run of what straggles over; all but you, the last one there: why, you’re hardly a girl at all, and have a proud look in your eyes.’

The creature stared back at Meg. Meg sighed, threw up her hands and said, ‘Well, what ever can the lady expect of me, when I’m getting such as this! Come along then, girls, don’t be gawking, it’s impolite, and likely to win you a whipping hereabouts. Mark me, come along now!’

Meg took the girls round the buildings to their beds, the better to be showing them the place, and telling them their duties. Quietly they trooped round beneath the high, white stone walls. Through the

airs around them swam the witchlights, globular, effulgent fish, trailing snaky tails, breathing out brightness from their gills.

The abbey was not so much built by the setting of stone upon stone, as spun like a spider's bridge. Its halls and rooms were never the same, but changeable as the body of a woman. Sometimes this building was the refectory, sometimes it was the brewery; the lady chapel there, now: next darkness, maybe the garden would be in its place. It could be a maze at times, and you never knowing what would be the room beyond the door you were opening. But there was a place for the servants, and a place for the kitchens, and a place for a bell-tower rising over the shell of a basilica, and a place for Arianna's blood-hounds; that much at least could be said.

And the grandest building there was the casino. Once of a time it had served as the Abbot's home and offices; now the Italian pleasure-house, it rose seven stories to the lady's chamber at the top of its forward tower, called the Lady's Tower; under which were the bedchambers of the gentle folk, the lady's wards and robbers, and down below them gaming rooms and showing halls, and a feast hall. At its rearward wall rose the framework for another tower, on which a few men were working; that was called

the Bride's Tower, but its oldest stones were centuries old, and no one would speak of the tale that lay behind it. From the front doors of the casino to the lady's rooms above, seven stories up, coiled an immense marble staircase, one hundred steps and a step all blackened with muck; but all the other rooms of the casino were properly clean.

'This will be your duty,' Meg told the proud, proud girl; 'what is it we're to be calling you again?'

'Agnes,' the girl replied, flashing her eyes.

'Agnes, well now, Agnes, then: you needn't be helping any of the others in their tasks, Agnes, no, you're much too fine and good for that, old Meg can tell your quality, Agnes, but all you need be doing is the cleaning of the Hundred Steps and a Step. And you needn't even be working the whole nine months out, but as soon as all the steps are white as a child's teeth, it's free you'll be. But if you fail, you go empty-handed.'

And Meg laughed when she said it.

The serving-girls slept in a dark, low hall, half-buried in the crannog, and ever wet with lake-water seeping up under their beds. Three times fifty cots there were, for three times fifty girls.

And some were sobbing for homesickness, and some sighing for love, and some deep in dream, their

labors had been so hard. Many were naked in the arms of their lovers in the upper chambers, or filling their mouths with wine and sweet-meats in the casino. They were the girls had been there longest, and would not go back home.

Again and again the swan-boats poled across the lough, discharging and collecting the wild folk of the abbey, the robbers, the gamblers, the rogues and the jades. No one saw the dark man in the cota mor squatting on the hill. Until he rose, as though after making up his mind, and stepped out of the circle of his stones. Gently he strode down to the water's edge, holding his tricorn low and his muffler high over his face, and he joined the others waiting, and was ferried across with no questions into the white buildings grown up on the crannog.

Maid Mielusine had been welcomed to the abbey, the way she was the lady's ward. She was given chambers high in the casino, and told to prepare herself, the way in time she must be welcomed by the waters. But Mielusine kept to her chambers, and did not dress, and did not go down the Hundred Steps and a Step in the processions.

So she stayed there, lonely and longing, looking out the window into the bright mist. Witch-lights swam in and out of the window, glowing in her

chambers, some of them pink, others greenly glowing, or golden or amber or gray. It was the virtue of those fish to be dark and drinking in the light while the Moon was rising, and breathing back light when she sank. Some of the serving girls, those who had been there longest, brought her up food and the oddments she was needing; it was themselves told her of the abbey.

‘In the abbey,’ said one, ‘all is intrigue and passion. Here is no mourning for the Day. In the abbey Arianna built her playground, and stocked it well with meat and drink, amusements, women, and men.’

‘Arianna!’ exclaimed Mielusine. ‘Who is she now, and where did she come from? I was never hearing of her in the day.’

‘Och!’ cried one girl. ‘The Lady Arianna was fished up out of the bed of the lough, after a sleep longer than centuries, by a horseman who had come.’

‘Nay, why are you filling her head with such nonsense?’ cried another. ‘The truth of it is, Miss, that in the day Arianna was no better than a common adventuress.’

‘Yes, and she killed the King’s chief magistrate in a castle in Wales.’

‘No, that’s not it at all! Miss, listen to me, I’ll be

telling you the truth. I heard it from a certain gentleman, and he in a position to know, that Arianna is a foreigner out of the East.'

'No, not the East: it's Italy she hails from, now: Venice, I heard said. She was a noblewoman there, shut up in a convent by her family for the hotness of her blood—'

'Hold your tongue now, don't be filling her head with lies!' shouted another, giggling: 'Truth is, Arianna was a courtesan, who tempted men from the shade of the Coliseum in Rome.'

'No, you're wrong,' said the first, and 'You're the lying one!' said another. Every serving girl was telling Mielusine a different tale; and there were too many tales of Arianna.

So Mielusine kept for many darkneses undressed in her chambers, and was frightened to be going down in the processions, the way even the serving girls there were splendid. She was standing naked in her shift in the high open windows of her bedchamber. She was looking out into the burning silver mist, feeling its droplets on her throat and her breast, tasting its watery perfume, breathing it in. And the mist off the lough was rousing desires in Maid Mielusine for longing, for daring, for recklessness, and for more.

In her loneliness she was thinking more and

more on Master Aengus. She could not get beyond it, that he was dead. Lady Agatha had taught Mielusine dances and all manner of things, with only Master Aengus in mind; now he was no more, what was the good of her?

His rooms, high in the bell-tower, were still empty. No one was admitted there.

One moonrise, when the lady and the court lay down to dream, Mielusine dressed herself, uncomfortable in the heavy dress after going so long in only her shift. She touched open the door to her bed-chamber, and crept down out onto the crannog. The moonglow was burning her cheek like the blush of a secret sin. She walked across the lawns between the high buildings into the blasted, black shadow of the basilica. She stepped into the ruin and softly climbed the bell-tower stairs to Master Aengus' door.

And she turned the latch in the door, and stepped into the darkness beyond.

A great ways down below her, in the pleasure-house, Agnes was nearing the Hundred Steps and a Step. It was her first time at her chore. In the abbey, the servants toiled while the gentle ladies dreamed.

She looked up those steps, at the dirt on them, at the black on them.

She had a pail of soapy water, a scrub brush

and a rag. She was dipping the brush into the water and scrubbing the step; and after a bit she was wiping the step off with the rag, rinsing the rag in the water; and when the water was black, but the step no less so, she was bearing the pail out, emptying it, filling it, and staggering back.

At last, come moonfall, the first step seemed a little less black and a little more gray. She sighed, wiped her brow and thought to herself, *That's better, now! And next time better still!*

But when she came back the next moonrise, the step was even blacker than the others. The way she was starting over again, moon after moon, and every blessed moon.

In the dark of the moon she was not resting, but went out looking on the windows of the pleasure-house. She heard the music, the laughter, and the indolent voices of the nobles of the Night. She was hating them all for their ease and pleasures. And she was looking up higher, to the windows fading into mist, and wondering which was Arianna's.

The serving-girls took their meals in a low hall alongside the kitchens. Agnes ate on a rock over the water, looking into the lough, until it was time to be back at her chore.

The steps she had cleaned were foul again, as always. There was no end to it, it seemed. Standing

before them one time more, her pail in one hand and her brush in the other, her shoulders shaking and tears starting from her eyes, she moaned, 'But how can this be? Who is doing this?'

'I will show you, Miss,' said a voice behind her – and that was a voice she knew.

Maid Mielusine stood a long time in Master Aengus' room. It was quiet in the cold bare bell-tower, and black dark. All she could make out was a little glimmering of the mist beyond the bells; by its light she could see nests built up in the crannies, of rooks and owls, evil birds. In front of herself stood a small table, and on it a packet and a white stone smooth and rounded as a hen's egg. Mielusine touched the stone, and all of a sudden she heard an ominous cough.

She stood stone still.

A slight rustling she heard. Someone else was there. A servant of the lady, perhaps – or a thief with his hand on his sharp scian dagger.

Mielusine turned and fled those dark rooms, fled down the ladders and stairs, out to the lawn and into the gaming rooms. It was the brightness and warmth and human voices lured her there, the way the gamblers heeded no clock.

For a time Mielusine was wandering among the

tables, looking on the games and understanding none of them. At that hour only the most ardent gamblers were there, and the rooms were quiet but for the murmuring of wagers and the clinking of coins. Some there went masked, some wore wigs, some still wore their coats.

Mielusine stopped beside the table of the Wheel. She liked seeing it spinning and the silver ball bounding into its compartment all by chance. They were laying down their wagers on a field of black and red squares. It was a mystery to Mielusine how some were winning, and others watching fortunes raked away and lost.

She was feeling something hard in her hand. Opening her fingers she saw the leag lorgmhar.

She had never picked it up. Of course she hadn't. But it must be that she had taken it unthinkingly, startled by the cough. And now she ought to be returning it, but she daren't go back into the bell-tower.

The players were laying their wagers on the field. Hastily Mielusine placed the stone on the square of the Red.

'What's this, now? What sort of a wager is that?'

It was one of the lady players speaking. She was masked, but the maid could see that her hair was brown, lighter than chestnut, and that she had

the longest, loveliest throat. The servant at the table stopped the wheel, and all eyes turned to Mielusine and the white stone.

‘Take the thing back, I say,’ demanded the lady, glaring at Mielusine through her mask.

‘The lady can wager what she pleases, can she not?’

‘But ’tis a common stone, of no value at all!’

Mielusine would have taken back the thing; but the crowd was gathering, hemming her in.

Next one was calling for Banker Ino. It was a dwarf he was, with a great head on his body, and his face laughing, wise and sour at once. Someone hoisted him onto the table where he stood over them all like a little god.

‘Now, then,’ he pronounced, rocking back and forth, ‘what’s the problem here?’

‘It’s only the lady here placed a wager, Banker Ino.’

‘It was a common stone she put down! There you see it, on the Red. Make her take it back.’

‘She can wager what she likes,’ said another.

‘But,’ asked the servant, ‘what should I be giving her if she wins?’

The dwarf looked from the stone to Mielusine in her white dress, and she blushing and wishing she could only sink into a puddle and die, and be done

with it all.

‘Well, now,’ said the dwarf, very slowly in his child’s voice, ‘I wouldn’t be calling it a thing of no value at all, the way the lady herself is standing pledge behind her wager. ’Tis a white wager she’s playing, to be redeemed at the winner’s own choosing. Who’s to say that’s of no value?’

‘Not I to be sure.’

The last was uttered by a gentleman in a most grotesque and sneering mask. He was tall as the Banker was short, and his hair curling silver at his brow, and his voice as silver as his curls. His eyes were so gentle and kind, Mielusine was thinking she had never before seen such feeling eyes.

‘I will be backing the lady’s wager, if she will permit,’ he was saying. He took up the stone and let fall a thick handful of bank-notes in its place.

Even the dwarf was taken aback at the gesture, clucking, ‘But, sir, the amount—’

‘You’re right, of course,’ the man apologized. He dredged in his pocket and strewed another handful of notes on the pile, the way it was spilling over half the field. The players looked agape on what a fortune it was, even in the extravagant Night.

Ino laughed and clapped his hands. ‘Bravo! If the Maid Buan has no further complaints?’ he added, bobbing in the objector’s direction.

She, with a pretty if irritated wave of her golden fan, inclined her head. 'Sure, if the gentleman is bent upon charity to the point of his ruin.'

'Let spin, then,' bade Ino. And the chamber the silver ball fell into was the thirty-and-sixth, and it was red.

'Will you take your winnings now?' asked the gentleman in the sneering mask at Mielusine's side.

'Oh – I couldn't,' Mielusine said.

'The wager stands, then,' he said. Of course that hadn't been Mielusine's meaning at all. But the cheers made her feel as bold as if it had been.

That spinning the ball fell in the sixteenth chamber, and it too was red.

'Again?' asked the gentleman softly.

Mielusine felt a warm wave rising in her at the sound of his voice. There was more money on the table than she in all her life had ever dreamt of. 'All right,' she breathed.

And the number was two, and red.

'Once more, for our mutual good fortune?'

'Oh, let that be an end to it, please!' begged Mielusine. She only wanted to leave the crowd behind and be back in her chamber again.

'As madam commands,' said the dwarf, bowing gravely. 'You've taken half my profits of the month! As to the gentleman, his part will find its way back

to me. But will you not take pity on me, dear Miss, and allow me to reinvest your winnings in my bank? I assure you a good per centage.'

'Shall I?' Mielusine wondered.

'Take at least so much for extravagance,' said the gentleman, brusquely putting a fistful of notes into her hand.

'How can I ever be thanking you?' she asked. 'You risked so much for me!'

'Ah, as to that, I had good fortune now, until you broke it. If I'd lost my winnings, my creditors had had to go a bit longer before drinking my blood. Now I must be leaving, the way they will soon hear of this. I must be spending the moneys before they do. And when next you are in difficulty, dear Lady of the Stone, let you call upon Vasquez, and then you can be thanking me by enjoying a little less of luck!'

With which he was gone, and the throng scattering, and Maid Mielusine standing by the dwarf, before a great pile of money on the table. They all were looking at her with such eyes, and she made up her mind to be no longer afraid, but to be descend with the other wards in the procession every darkness.

And she saw that after all she still was holding the Leag Lorgmhar.

2. Of the Lady of the Lough

BUT HOW can this be? Who is doing this?' Agnes moaned.

'I can tell you, Miss,' said a voice.

Agnes turned. A bit of a smile hung on her lips.

The man that was standing there was lean and tall and old, and he was no stranger to her, the way he was Mac Bride, the old servant of the manor.

'Well, Mac Bridey. Of course you are here.'

The old cottager bowed, and gave her back a grin. 'Will your ladyship come with me now, and let an old countryman enlighten a lady?'

'Please, do not be calling me "lady" here, Mac Bride, I've no heart left for such ironies.'

He led her across to a little room in a wall. Old tools and broken buckets were covered in dust in the corners. 'Here you must abide me when your work is done, at moonfall. I will bring you your dinner and show you a thing.'

At the end of her working, she put away rags and buckets and brushes, and met Mac Bride at

the closet. Soon they were settling in the dark, and only some light entering through a crack in the door panel, where Agnes put her eye.

She saw men in scarlet and silver climbing through the witchlights swimming up the stairs.

‘Soon they will be coming,’ Mac Bride said.

‘Who?’ she asked.

‘Look, and see for yourself.’

From the landing high above, a strange procession was descending. Foremost came the lady’s servants dressed like maids and pages of years long gone. After them came the hundred robbers of the lough, the jades and rogues, minxes and bandits, each belted with sword or pistols; and the wenches wore each a scian at her belt. They wore cloaks of scarlet embroidered with the letter A in black, or cloaks of black with the letter A in scarlet; and on the heels of their boots silver spurs, the like of which she had seen before.

‘And out of all these desperadoes,’ said Mac Bride, ‘she will choose one to be her champion, for a darkness, a Moon, or a year, as she please. She has a crescent silver ring. When she chooses a champion she places this ring on his little finger, pressing the finger back. But when she tires of him, then the lady takes back the ring while he is sleeping, and – and the rest I will not tell you.’

After the robbers came a most splendid lady. Her hair was firelike in the glow of the enchanted fish; her eyes were green, and she wore a crimson purple gown. She was tall and slender, and so regal in her bearing that Agnes had to exclaim, 'Is it Arianna, now?'

'Nay,' answered Mac Bride, taking for a moment her place at the crack. 'But it is only Maid Niam, one of her wards.'

Agnes looked again. 'You are right,' she said. 'For her bearing is not proud enough. But this one, now: she is the lady for a truth!'

'Tell me her features, the way I'm sure you're wrong again.'

'Her hair is brown, lighter than chestnut, gleaming as with diamonds. She has the longest, loveliest throat I've ever seen. She carries a fan of gold, and her gown is dark and rich as the finest chocolate from the new world.'

'Ah: that is Maid Buan, another of her wards; she's proud enough for two.'

'Now there is a man dressed like an admiral. He is tall and beautiful, and well he knows it, too! He walks with the swagger of a lion.'

'That is Gwangior, the lady's champion,' Mac Bride said. 'And after him you will see another of her wards, and she the newest and fairest: it's said

you know her.'

'Yes,' answered Agnes quietly.

It was Maid Mielusine in her white gown; and though she may have walked less boldly than the others, she surpassed them in the delicacy of her movements, the fineness of her features, and the openness of her eyes.

Seeing the Maid, Agnes felt all at once her own ugliness, and how far she had fallen. When she could look again, the landing above the stair was empty – save for one.

'Arianna.'

She breathed the word, the way she could not speak above a whisper.

Mac Bride nodded.

'Now you have seen her. Tell me the way of her, then.'

Agnes parted her lips, and after a moment closed them.

There was no way to describe that one. There was only height, and slenderness quick as moonlight, and eyes like arrows. Of colors, there was none, the way there gleamed from her only a thick, resplendent whiteness, like the braiding together of all colors. And there was pride, desire, sultriness, and danger, the way she was the body of that unending Night.

‘I cannot say,’ whispered Agnes. ‘But she descends the stair as if she were walking down the sky.’

Then Agnes could look no more upon the lady, but lowered her eye to the human face of Mielusine. Then she saw at Mielusine’s side another: Eudemarec. His look was that of a man whose thoughts are far away.

Arianna raised her arm. Agnes heard the opening of the great doors of the abbey onto the Night.

‘You know your tasks,’ Arianna called out to her bandits: ‘Now go!’

And with a wild whooping and a clattering of swords and spurs, the robbers went into the night. Where the Swan Boats waited to ferry them over, nine at a turn.

Agnes fell back into the gloom of the closet. A greenish, yellowish, bluish anti-image of the scene was burning in her eyes, filled by the lady of the lough.

‘So that is my enemy,’ she murmured.

‘It is for her sake your work is undone,’ Mac Bride said. ‘Each darkness Arianna is sending her bandits across the lough to fulfill her wild kailees. And when they return from their kailees, their boots are black with mud from the bogs, and they dirty the steps worse than they did the time before, the

way it is their great delight to outdo themselves incessantly.'

'But what is this Arianna, and how did she win such power? Why do they follow her?'

The countryman laughed. 'Ah now, as to that, there are as many different tales as you could waste your time in counting! But Miss, this is the Night-land, and you must learn to think as do the Night-folk. These men and ladies come into Arianna's service because she is ours. It's her beauty has drawn us here – and by that word you must understand more than any eye could see. *Why*, do you ask? Because it pleases *her*.'

'I do not understand,' she said.

'When you do, it's free of this place you'll be,' he answered her.

It was late when the countryman led Agnes back to her bed to rest. 'You'll be finding me where the lamps are burning,' he told her. 'It's in charge of the fires I am.' Then he let her be.

In the dark, low hall, half-buried in the crannog, Agnes undressed to her shift and crept into her cot just inside the door. She listened for awhile to the sounds of the girls filling the hall with their unspeakable dreams. From far away, through the windows set under the ceiling like milky eyes, the music of the abbey and the beat of dancing feet was

reaching her.

Agnes fell a-dreaming of the procession, the maids, and the unutterable lady of the lough. Toward the darkness' end she was turning in the cot, her hair streaming from one side to the other. And once she whispered a name aloud: 'Aengus!'

3. How the Maid Entered the Court

ONCE IN moonlight, whenas all the abbey folk were asleep other than gamblers and servants, the dark man in the dark gray cóta mór went striding round the crannog at the water's edge. Three times he went round the crannog, going against the sun.

When he stopped he stood in the shadow of the ruined bell-tower. Slow now, the dark man raised his head and looked up to the tower. From the ground the bell-tower was rising into the whiteness of the mist, and vanishing away.

The dark man stepped forward, and laid his hand on the age-old stones of the bell-tower. Long and lean and sinewy was that hand, and the bones showed in it like bolts and rods of iron.

The dark man looked about from under the brim of his tricorn, and satisfied himself that no others went about. He shifted about his bow and his pouch of arrows on his back. Then he reached

up higher, and let his fingers sink into the cracks between the stones, and he drew himself up. He reached up then with his left hand, higher still, and dug the tips of his fingers into the cracks between his stones, and drew himself higher.

Hand over hand the dark man climbed the wall of the bell-tower. The mist wrapped round him and swallowed him up.

Old Meg went by, between checking on her girls; she tarried by the bell-tower, and looked up that way; she saw nothing there of the dark man, the way he was hidden already in the high mist.

And the mist brightened and whitened around the dark man climbing. It was to the uppermost airs of the mist he had climbed; climbed higher still; climbed out into the moonlight air above the mist.

Over his head was a great window open in the wall, under the roof of the bell-tower. The end of a telescope was showing there.

The dark man shifted his hands, and followed the cracks between the stones in the wall, and went softly, and crept around the window. He climbed up to the rooftop. Where he stood breathing with heaviness, and unbending the iron bolts of his fingers stained with the lichens from the age-old stones.

He leaned out over the parapet of the rooftop, and looked out below. Below him the window

opened, and he could see the telescope, and hear the sighs of the man languishing within.

The dark man in the dark gray cóta mór smiled, and sat tailor-fashion on the stones, and began his vigil on the bell-tower.

As to Eudemarec now, he wasted his hours gambling, the way there was nothing else to be interesting him. Maybe it was because he didn't care, but he was winning all his hands and enriching himself; he enjoyed to spend his winnings adorning the dancers he welcomed to his bed.

Once he spent a whole moon gaming; he took the bank and went on winning; then he was losing, and then winning again. Maid Buan, the proud one, was wagering hard against him.

Eudemarec knew Maid Buan well by now: she was always coming into the gaming hall and gambling away the treasures men were showering upon her for her favors, vainly; and she would challenge hardest whatever man won the most that moon, the way she found him shining with the glory of the luck of all his winnings, and handsome, and it seemed the moon glow shone on and gathered round and round him. On this moon, the glow was shining on Eudemarec's head and hands, and now she was striving with a heart and a half to break his

bank. But as to the Breton, no thought was in his head outside of the cards and their numbers, and he didn't even know it when Maid Buan's treasures were depleted, and she turned on her heels with a fury and left; he didn't even know it when the Moon went down and the mist darkened.

In the end he pushed back his chair away from the table, and with deadly eyes stared at the piles of his winnings, gold and silver coins, and rings and chains and chains.

He stifled a yawn in the back of his sleeve.

'For Maid Mielusine's bank,' he said, and went out.

The lawns were still. It was almost the hour of moonrise again. A few guests were hastening to catch the last ferry to land. The ferrymen then put up their boats and went in to their suppers.

The lough was murmuring gently. The fog was soft on the Breton's cheek. There was a sort of stillness, as of death. Very slowly the mist brightened, and the waters of the lough were brightening. In the county of mist, moonrise was never known until after it had come.

Eudemarec looked into the silver in the lough.

'Arianna,' he breathed, as though taken by surprise with the thought. 'Arianna d'argent.'

* * *

At that time, Arianna had three maids, Maid Buan, Maid Ferb, and Maid Niam. Each had charge of fifty maids, and it was the way of them, that they would tend the wild orchards round the lough. Maid Buan saw to the apples, Maid Ferb to the pears, and Maid Niam had charge of the quinces.

Arianna herself kept a garden, luxuriant beyond all telling, at one end of the crannog. And the fragrance that garden exhaled into the dark airs of the Night, commingled with the mists of the lough, and carried over the whole county.

Now as to Mielusine, she was waking and walking with the Moon, and still evading the court. The Swan Boat did not cross when the Moon was up, but Mielusine often looked across the waters to the apple orchard, where the little grave was.

‘Ino, why am I here?’ she asked sadly. ‘What do I look for?’

The banker laughed. ‘You’re looking for what many do, Wood-Maid: a doorway back to Day.’

Mielusine sighed. ‘Yes, I don’t like the Night. It’s sneaking and nasty.’

‘Don’t let the lady catch you saying that,’ warned the dwarf.

It was Ino, convinced her at last to be showing herself at court. While many bandits went roaming after adventure, others attended Arianna.

Each darkness the lady walked the crannog, and the witchlights colored the mists, and threw long gleams across the waters of the lough.

‘Mielusine,’ asked the lady, ‘why do you slander the darkness?’

‘It’s only that it makes me shiver, ma’am,’ said Mielusine, not daring look at Arianna’s magpie eyes. ‘There’s so much unseen in it.’

‘It is its virtue,’ answered Arianna. ‘Whatever you see must be as it seems, and nothing else. There are no regrets in Night.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘We give no sanctuary here, Mielusine. You must join us or go back.’

‘I cannot be going, ma’am! Where else can I learn of love?’

The lady laughed a silvery laugh. ‘If you would stay, you must be welcomed by the waters. It is a custom all here must undergo.’

‘What shall I do?’

The lady led Mielusine to the water’s edge. That was on the end of the crannog, and the vapor of the garden thick and warm about them. The stones were piled high and steep about, like skulls crowding up out of the lough: the water opened deep and black beneath their feet.

Arianna pointed down into that sluggish mere.

‘Come the full Moon you’ll go into the lough or leave us, little maid.’

The lady said those words on the dark of the moon. And it was thirteen darknesses Mielusine had, to be going to the water’s edge and looking down, and thinking up her fear. Until that darkness came.

‘Go down into the lough, Mielusine, bring back a reed from the lough bed, and tell us what you see there.’

The lady’s whisper burned the maid’s ears, and she shuddered. ‘Those who lack courage cannot stay here,’ whispered Arianna wickedly. ‘The beasts will harm you only if you wish them to.’

Mielusine looked up into Arianna’s eyes. Very small and childlike Mielusine seemed, and the gentlemen and ladies whispering among themselves, so sure that she would not survive the trial.

Others helped her out of her gown, and naked as a pearl white scarf shivering in the breeze, Mielusine stood on the rocky edge. She had not even a shift on, not a stitch.

She could not swim a stroke, but thought to herself, *Better to drown than suffer the taunts of the ladies, laughing behind their fans.*

She pinched her nose, did little Sini, and jumped.

For a time the cottager's daughter was clinging to the rock, and the water was lapping round her, and in the witchlights the ladies of the court saw her kicking legs flashing under the water. The ends of her hair were snakes writhing on the surface. Then she went under, and the ladies saw a glimmering deep down, but then it wavered and vanished among the gleams of the witchlights on the waves.

Down into the oily blackness struggled Mielusine.

On the rocks the ladies took their ease awaiting her. Ino was going among them, whispering into their ears. They all laughed gracefully and maliciously to hear his words, and eagerly nodded their agreements.

At first Mielusine closed her eyes, kicking and waving her arms. But soon she found she could see, after a fashion, even in the water.

Great shapes were moving past her, and with a shudder she kicked away deeper. The water pressing against her, pushing her back up, and herself fighting and fighting against it.

The water broke, and Maid Mielusine paddled to the rock. Arianna herself stretched down her hand to her.

'Give me the reed, and tell us how you fared.'

Mielusine shivered. Her hair slid straight and

slick down her back. Her small, narrow face was gleaming in the torchlight, and she had never looked so lovely. Her slender trembling arm held up the lake-weed.

‘I went down,’ she said, gasping still. ‘The water didn’t – didn’t want to let me. I remembered what you said. The water seemed warmer, deep down. I went deeper.’

‘On the bottom was a green and golden light. I took the reed. Then I saw a blue maiden lying on the sand. She was dressed all in flowers, and very beautiful. She was curled up on her side, and pillowed her face on her hands. Her eyes and her mouth were smiling in a dream. Then I had no breath, and swam up with the bubbles.’

‘Welcome,’ said Lady Arianna, and drew Maid Mielusine lightly up beside her. Straightway some minxes came forward to dry Mielusine and dress her again.

‘Who was the maiden?’ asked Mielusine.

‘One who died and never found her lover,’ answered Arianna.

‘What was her name? Does everyone see her so?’

‘Each sees something different, now come, eat and rest,’ whispered the dwarf in her ear. ‘The lady showed you great favor, don’t try her patience! See

the jewels I've won! I wagered the ladies that you would pass the test, and now half these shall be yours.'

Ino laughed wickedly, and danced a little jig.

Then Mielusine was kissed by the bandits and minxes of the abbey, and they made a feast, with dancing and singing, and named that darkness after Mielusine, seating her in the seat of honor in the casino hall.

None of them noticed the solitary figure in the shadows by the door. She was but a girl of the maid-servants, and of the least of them, winning no favor, the way she was still wearing the homespun dress of her village: and its hem black and ragged from the dirty work she did.

When all the court had passed, the girl stepped out from shadow, and resumed her pacing round the isle. The gamesters were in the gaming-rooms, the robbers out on their lickerish quests, the maids in the orchards, the gentlefolk in the hall, and Arianna gone alone into her garden. Only the maidservant strode the outer grounds between the abbey and the waves.

She rounded the servants' building. She went past the dark pens where Arianna's fifty hunting hounds were pent, scratching at the ground, snuffing at the vapor of the garden, whining hungrily.

She went across the lawns to the crannog's end, and by chance she lingered to a stop at the water's edge where the maid had had her trial.

There she stayed, looking down into water.

She was thinking, perhaps, of the lovers she had spied about the crannog, kissing in dark corners. Perhaps she was wondering what made the lovers so happy.

And wasn't she wondering, too, whether herself would ever again be happy?

She had been angry as a girl, with poverty and the pride of her parents, who would not accept the English, or change their church. She had been thankful to the old man who had lifted her out of that poverty. She'd had moments of gladness by him, surely: when he gave her a horse or new gowns, or took her off to London. But happiness, now?

The maidservant sighed, and kicked a stone into the water; it vanished underneath the ink. She looked on her palm, on the black spot there.

Her one time of happiness was when the Night first fell. What did it matter that he had made a spell to give her that? And he was dead, now: she herself had seen him dead and buried.

The boatmen at the mooring-poles watched the bandits laughing and rushing into the casino. Through the doors voices were reaching them, wel-

coming them, raised in a song to honor Mielusine; and the singing filled the crannog, so that the bandits did not even notice, far away beyond the hounds' pens, beyond the kitchens and Arianna's garden walls, the small upright figure pensive on the lough.

4. How Arianna Hunted

THEREAFTER, when the maids went to the orchards, Mielusine went with them. She did not go to tend to the trees, the way she was a dancer. But she stopped at the edge of the apple trees, by a little mound of fresh-turned earth; and she was singing little songs over it, and tending the grave of Master Aengus.

She planted an apple there, so that his soul should grow up into that tree, and in after years she might talk to him in the branches.

Once in the village she asked after Lady Agatha. 'The mad creature? Surely she pined away for grief, poor thing. Och, 'tis evil, this Night!'

The girl who'd given Agatha her place in the Swan Boat Mielusine did not meet, the way that one had not returned to the village, but had met with one of the robbers, and ridden away with him over the hills; he returned to the abbey with the emerald in his glove, but without the girl.

Mielusine passed only an hour under the or-

chards; then she went to the dancing-masters, to her lessons. She wondered when she should again see Vasquez. Ino had told her this much, that 'the rascal ran overmuch into debt, and is in hiding till he pay enough not to get his throat cut on sight!'

Mielusine hoped she might be seeing him soon. When she lay in her bed she thought of him, and of what he looked like beneath his ugly mask.

Agnes went to the stairs before the moon rose. Soon the witchlights dimmed, and the bandits were in bed, and the Hundred Steps and a Step blacker than the moon before.

Agnes sighed, kneeled before the first step, spilled soap and water across it, and set to scrubbing.

A few passed her on the stair, servants, lovers, and gamesters keeping all hours. At first Agnes had stared at them, as if her look might have made their heels less dirty; now she didn't glance up, even when one stopped and lingered.

She went on working, eying the muddy shoes out of the corner of her eye. Let him gape! Her skin had thickened by now.

'Agatha?' was asked.

The brushes halted in her hand. A sort of shiver ran up her arm. Her heart was beating very fast, and

she had no wish other than to be hiding in some dark place. Then she sighed, shook back her dank locks, and looked him in the eye.

‘Yes, Eudemarec. It’s me you’re seeing here.’

‘My lady, what are you doing?’

She smiled wearily at the outrage in his voice. ‘Cleaning the steps, to be sure. Or trying to.’

‘But why?’ He stooped to offer her his hand, but she hid her hands in her skirts.

‘It’s here I was directed,’ she answered. ‘It’s my task.’

‘I will put an end to this,’ he said.

‘Please do not. I will finish this! And if they learn who I was, it’s out from the isle they’ll put me.’

He sat on the step above her, laying his arms out on his knees. He regarded her closely. Then he laughed, gloomily, shaking his head. ‘Is there nothing I can do for you, then?’

‘No, nought beyond giving me the pleasure of your speech for a moment, and telling me how you are,’ she said, stooping once more to her duty.

‘Ah, as for me now, what should I tell you? This is my nature, to be laughing when the outlook’s bleakest, and to be saddest when all goes well. But tell me now: will you forgive me for the deed I did?’

She looked gravely into his sea-gray eyes.

‘Aye,’ she was murmuring. ‘He was meant to

die here. And 'twas my doing more than yours. You were no more than an arrow I loosed at him.'

'I am sorry for it now. It was a fool's errand. Do you miss him very much?'

She bent over the brush again, scrubbing hard. 'Enough.'

For a long time silence went between them, and only the sound of the bristles chafing at the bandits' dirt. Then he said, softly, 'I killed Mablaith with the same shot. It was only your Aengus could have brought back the Sun. Now none of the Sleepers will ever be waking.'

'Already Mablaith seems dim to me, as if she had been someone in a tale I heard. And—' he reached out for the post of the rail, and grasped it. 'And my heart goes out to Arianna.'

Agnes took hold of the Breton's knee. 'Beware of that one.'

A bit of a smile haunted his lips. 'I'm a gambler at heart, Agatha. And the dream of any gambler is to set a copper against a fortune in gold, and win.'

'She is cold and cruel,' said Agnes.

'She is as beautiful as a snowfall in the Moon,' he answered. 'Her body has the strength of the brightest scian. What does it matter that I am an apostate, a very atheist, since I forsook my father and loved Mablaith in the wood? The game on the

tables no longer appeases me. I would wager all I have, against the highest good Night can offer.

‘For now, the highwayman Gwangior is her champion; but ’tis said she’s tiring of him, and casting about for her next love. I will win her favor, or else I care not what befalls me.

‘Oh, Agatha,’ he went on, softly, for the pleasure of speaking his secret: ‘Every darkness I venture forth to be the one whose tale entertains her the most. Every darkness she’s asking me: “Eudemarec, what have you to say now?” And I hang my head and answer, “I’ve nothing at all to say.” “Faith, the honor of Brittany is lagging!” she says then, and all the robbers, gentlemen and ladies, laugh.

‘And for all that, I swear there is a twinkle in her look, meant only for my eyes. She is starting to love me, Agatha: and her love for me will not end as all her other loves have ended, but it will outlast the Night.’

Agnes did not answer. She went on brushing and washing the step. After a long while, he was taking his leave of her, promising to come speak with her again.

Agnes looked up after him, watching him go out by the little servants’ door, the way the main doors were shut and locked while the moon shone.

There was a great pity in her eyes.

When the moon rose, the crannog was quiet, save for the clink of coins from the gamblers in their house, and the whispering of the serving girls. The dark man in the cóta mór strode about the grounds, walking from shadow to shadow, pausing now and again and standing still, as though he were listening or looking for something. But whenever he heard steps coming near him, the dark man slipped back into a shadow.

That moon a lady came to the abbey.

She walked up the way the moonglow was shining for her, through the mist, to the main doors. Now, it happened that on that moonrise someone had forgotten to close the main doors to the abbey. There they were, standing wide open, and the lady walked up into the entranceway.

She wore a long black dress that covered her up, arms and all, in black, and left only her bosom bare. Over her head she wore a long black veil, tucked under her chin, wound round her throat and trailing down behind her. Her hands were covered in black gloves. At her side came a man, and a fine bravo he was, swaggering in with a saber at his side.

Agnes paused in her washing of the steps, and watched the lady at the entranceway. After a time some rogues and wenches appeared from the gam-

ing hall, and greeted the lady with many fine words and flourishes. 'Lady Ann!' they were saying. 'Lady Ann, welcome back to you, won't you be joining us?'

The lady nodded lazily, and followed the robbers and trollops out. As she passed the steps, Lady Ann's eye fell on Agnes, and Agnes met her gaze stare for stare; then the lady was gone, and her bravo's boots were echoing down the passage after her.

It seemed to Agnes she had seen the lady once before, but she couldn't remember where.

Maid Mielusine was walking about the abbey in the moonlight, going into the untrod places, pausing before the shadowy corners, and she would never have told herself that it was the rogue Vasquez she was hoping to be encountering. But when she saw him, then all at once she knew it.

He bowed to her in an overdone sweep, and put back his tricorne over the top of his grinning mask and silver hair. 'Delighted,' he said, 'to find you again, Maid Snowflake. Will you walk a ways with me?' Not waiting for an answer, he took her arm and started forward.

Along the way she was thinking of what she should be saying to him, when he cast a look back over his shoulder, and unthinking Mielusine asked,

‘What’s there, Mr Vasquez?’

He answered, ‘Oh, I only caught sight of a few of my creditors a while back, and I’d be just as happy not to have any words with them just now. Beside of which, I’m glad for the chance to talk with yourself, Maid Snowflake. You’ve been on my mind,’ he said.

‘Have I, Mr Vasquez?’

Her breathing was troubled, her face hot and cold by turns, and it seemed to her that her steps were awkward and ill-placed with every step.

Side by side they were walking, and all at once she noticed that he was holding her hand in his; and it was done so smoothly, and felt so natural, that she hadn’t even been aware of the moment when the thing was done, and had it been him taking her hand, or her taking hold of his? This thought made her burn, and she envied him the safety of his mask, and she was looking away across the water and feeling she ought to be saying something and that they ought to be speaking, the way their silence was too eloquent of itself.

So ‘From what part of Spain are you from, Mr Vasquez?’ she asked him; to which he laughed and answered, ‘From no part of it at all, Maid Snowflake, but it was this blessed bit of an island saw me born and raised. And my name isn’t Vasquez at all, but of my true name I’ve no more of a notion than yourself,

the way my natural parents didn't see fit to own me. They gave me up at birth, and I was a foundling child, not so very far from here as things go.'

Then he was asking after her birth and upbringing. To such questions the maid had prepared many a glamorous answer, but to this man she could only tell him the truth of herself, little Sini, and her sisters Grisalta and Merrwyn.

'Ah,' he answered, 'I'd have liked to have known your sisters, you make them sound so appealing,' and Mielusine bit her lip, thinking he was right to say so, and that her sisters were beautiful, and put her to shame even to be speaking of them.

'Faith, my own home life was no finer,' he said lazily, seeming unaware of her confusion. 'The way my foster father was only a countryman, but a farmer of his own land at least, and never a tenant on an English lord's lands.'

'But how is it everyone calls you with a Spanish name?' she asked.

He paused in his step, and tossed a stone out into the lough, and gestured across it with a *cípin* to the village lights across the way. 'It happened out there, outside of the mists, in Ireland,' he said. And for the first time she heard pain and anger back of the laughter in his voice.

'My foster father went to war against the En-

glish at Boyne, like all proper men of blood and fire – not that they were victorious for all that, or for all that their cause was the just one of their own freedom and homeland. And ever after,’ said Vasquez, ‘I held it hard against the English, the way I was sure that my own father had fought against them and fallen, and that, lacking their taxes and rents and takings of land to feed their King’s men’s appetites, my own father and mother would have been glad to keep me and raise me in comfort and honor. Instead I was bred up like an alien child in a drafty poor farmhouse, and saw my foster father old and broken after his defeat, and not even brave enough to flee. And my foster brother was not much better, studying all night like a priest, and not daring to raise his eyes against the English lords.

‘But myself now,’ he said, ‘I minded me of my true parentage, and I raised my eyes against the lords, and more than my eyes, and I was fighting them at every turn, until in the end the King’s law hounded me, and I had to flee across the sea. First I went into France, where so many of the princes of Ireland had gone to after Boyne; but I drifted farther away, hating even to be looking on the sea that lapped the English shores. I went into Spain, and took to calling myself Vasquez, though it wasn’t until this Night that anyone was believing I was Vasquez,

though I am, as yourself can plainly see, one of the Black Irish, and dark as any man from Granada. And my blood,' he said with a rueful little laugh, 'runs as hot.'

And as if to prove it was so, he stretched his arm out over the water, and caught a snowflake in his weather-strong palm; and straight away the snowflake burned to water on his dark skin.

There followed a silence. At length Maid Mielusine put her hand out and let it rest on his shoulder. She was feeling a longing to be alongside him, and comfort him for all his pains and dreadful, manly hatreds burning away in him and disfiguring him underneath his laughter and jests.

He rose of a sudden, cast aside the cípín, and led her away. Before them the ground of the crannog stretched to its farthest point, where the lady's garden was, and the byre of her hunting hounds. Vasquez stopped of a sudden, and looked back. She stopped along with him.

'What is it?' she asked.

He wasn't answering at first, but still stared back. The Moon was almost fallen, and much of the abbey was sunk in gloom, and the first of the witchlights, floating about the abbey's walls, were sparking and starting to glow, but not lighting the shadows much.

‘I thought I saw someone.’

He turned back to her. And then the eyes in his mask fell on her as if they saw her for the first time, and she swayed slightly forward, closer into his body, so that she could feel the warmth of his chest in its nearness to her breast, and she bit her lip, and right away stopped that, the way he was looking now at her lips and her mouth, and she didn’t know whether to close it or smile with it, only it felt suddenly huge and ungainly spread across the lower half of her face; all of Lady Agatha’s lessons were lost to her then; she found herself leaning forward even more, and he was bending and inclining towards her, and she saw his firm full mouth, and resolute chin, under the shadow of his mask. He turned his head and looked away.

‘Who’s there?’ he muttered, and she heard a note of danger in his voice.

He took a step back and drew his cloak across his shoulders. Mielusine looked.

‘It’s no one at all,’ she answered, but he was gone, and already swiftly striding through the mists at the end of the crannog, and turning beyond the lady’s garden past the byre.

Then she was ashamed, and for a moment she wanted to run after him, only her feet wouldn’t move at all, and she looked back in terror at the abbey.

She saw a dark, tall, and lean shape emerging out of the gloom, attended by seven of the swimming witch fires.

‘Why,’ she said, ‘It’s only Mr Mac Bride, who has charge of all the fires and candles here. He’s not a creditor of anyone.’

But the sight of him, and the thought of herself white and nearly naked, alone on the ground by the water’s edge, shamed her and shamed her for what she’d been desiring, and she went back into the abbey, and didn’t follow after Mr Vasquez. And it was a long time, she was feeling guiltily, before she’d be seeing him again.

But it was not Mac Bride alone. For the way of it was, an hour earlier, in Arianna’s bedchamber at the top of the tower, Gwangior, her champion, awoke. And he reached for the lady, but she was not there in that room. And he found his hand bare: there was no ring upon his finger.

Then he knew that she had cast him off.

And all at once fear took hold of Gwangior, who had never known fear in all his thieving life; and he shuddered and shook, and threw on clothing and fled down the Hundred Steps and a Step, and out into the mists; it was his frantic footsteps Vasquez heard.

And Gwangior found a Swan barge waiting, and a ferryman at the ready for him, despite the hour. Gwangior searched the boatman's face; there was nought but stone to see there, and never any feeling at all. It was as though the man saw nothing before him other than a dead man, and a set of bones.

Gwangior shook all over, as if with ague.

But in the heights of the tower, Arianna let clothe herself, and she clothed herself in soft-tanned leather, with a jaunty cocked cap; and she took up a bow, and arrows.

And Arianna went down to her pen, to her hounds. There she let drop a shirt that she had herself stripped from Gwangior's chest whenas they twined together: all stained with his sweat and his scent it was.

'There, my darlings, you know what you are to do now, do you not?' she purred; and all the hounds leapt at her skirts. And the lady Arianna passed with her hounds across the lough, and in the darkness of the mists somewhere in the orchards, amidst the wild apples, pears and quinces, there were dark doings and the sound of a man screaming, screaming without end, full of bloody horror and pain, until at last it fell stop, and was drowned in the howling of ferocious hounds.

And all dainty and trim, Arianna returned to

the crannog, and behind her the ferryman poled the Swan barge, bringing back the torn and mangled body of Gwangior. In the boat before, Arianna sat calmly, and daubed with her kerchief at her tears.

5. Of the Dancer

FOR SIX darknesses of the moon the witchlights were swimming low about the grounds, shrunken and dim; the candles went unlit, and merriments were suspended. And Arianna dressed darkly, darkly veiled, mourning Gwangior, who had been in the day the fiercest highwayman in the British Isles.

For a time Agnes gained upon the steps, the way the robbers weren't going out on their kailees. She reached as far as the thirteenth step; she'd never seen so many clean at once. Eudemarec came to pay her a call from time to time, and his words lightened her labor. But it was not long to last.

When the candles were burning again, the witchlights swam up higher in the air, and the robbers were dressing more boldly than ever, if that was possible. Many were going to the dancing hall, to watch the dancers practicing: reels and wild jigs, contradances, quadrilles, minuets, pavaues – all the elder dances, and the ones they were creating. In

the day the dancing hall had been the Lady Chapel. Huge it was and starry bright, the way the fishy witchlights loved to swim high up under the stone ribs of the arches.

All the dancers practiced hard, most of all the nine who were the lady's wards, the way their time was coming. 'Let you wait, now,' they were whispering, and laughing slyly at Mielusine, who didn't understand. 'Wait for a masquerade!' Mielusine was grateful for a moment of rest now and again, the way her legs were sore and burning.

On the close of that moon, while the robbers fared abroad on their kailees, the Swan Boat put out onto the lough. Aboard were three: two ferrymen, and a third figure clouded in a dark red cloak. They poled out so deep in the mist they were not seen from the crannog at all. The middle figure slipped out of the dark red cloak and sank into the waters of the lough, sank deep into the black waters of the lough.

Later on, the Swan Boat was poled back to the crannog. Two ferrymen poled the boat, and between them stood the Lady of the Lough, holding a reed, and it was white-naked she was, standing in the belly of the boat. Her face was pale as a new lamb's pelt, and her dark hair streaming wetly down her back, and her body small as a virgin's. She gave the

reed to a man standing at the edge of the crannog, and he bowed to her and welcomed her into a great, warm, mantling cloak; the color of the cloak was as silver as herself.

‘Let her bless you, young lady,’ said Mac Bride, the way it was himself welcoming her. The old man bent like a stork, and kissed her two hands.

‘Only you, Mac Bride?’ she asked him, very calmly. ‘I was looking for another.’ Then naked under the warm white cloak, she passed him up the crannog unseen into the lady’s garden, and the silver-chased gate shut fast behind her.

The ferrymen nodded to the old countryman, the way they were mute; he gave them silver coins and sent them back to the landing; himself he walked round the circle of the crannog three times with a lantern in his hand, cleansing it free of all sin.

He never knew – or did he, now? – of the black-shadowed niche in the abbey wall, where someone was standing watching him. Agnes held her breath, and watched him pass. When the witchlights were fading, she went back into the abbey and to the Hundred Steps and a Step. And she never told Mac Bride of seeing him circling the crannog, nor of anything else she’d seen.

* * *

The winter was long, it lingered all year, and the weather held cold and black, and snow ever falling out of mist over the lough. Only the wan lights of the village, reflecting off the water amongst the reeds and sedge, showed there was any world at all beyond the crannog. By an open window in the dancing room, Mielusine would go gazing into the lough, resting upon a high railing in the wind, thankful for its coolness.

Eudemarec had told her of Agatha. 'Will you not help me keep her spirits up?' he had asked. 'For she must be surely lonely, toiling the long hours at her endless task.'

Why, she was wondering, would she not see Agatha? The answer was coming to her, only this, that she had betrayed her teacher. But she didn't know how.

When the Moon rose, the other dancers went to their beds, hot baths, and suppers with their lovers. Mielusine lingered over the lough, warming herself in a velvet cloak Ino had given her out of their winnings. Mielusine understood that she was wealthy now, the richest of the wards, with as much money in her bank as the boldest bandits. She didn't know what that meant, and little she cared, though she was glad to see Ino rubbing his hands and dancing his jigs at their fortune.

Little flakes of snow were wetting her cheeks, and she turned and went in, the way she knew the Moon now was somewhere up in the blackness behind the clouds.

She went out to the coiling stair and looked at the woman on the steps. That one had all her mind on the third step, scrubbing and rinsing and scrubbing again in the sallow light of a greasy candle.

For a time the Maid was lingering by the hangings, watching. She thought, *Surely she is much changed from the time I knew her in the wood. But how? Perhaps that she is younger.*

The woman on the step heaved her shoulders, stood and carried out her pail for fresh water. Mielusine stepped behind the hanging.

Back once more in the silent, solemn hall, Mielusine lighted a candle at the edge of the stage. The witchlights were dark, and only a hint of the moonlight gleamed off the leading in the colored windows high up in the walls of the ancient Lady Chapel. She thought of Vasquez. How long it had been since she'd seen him!

Already Lughnasadh had gone by, and the rogues and minxes had laughingly all made their handfastings, moons and moons ago. Soon, too soon, Mielusine would have to dance before the lady and the court; and she wasn't ready at all. She

stepped up on stage, took off her cloak, and began to dance. Round and round she flew, and it seemed to her that for the very first time she was getting the reel right, and showing some grace; and the prettiness of her gestures was entering into her. And the prettier she felt, the lonelier she felt, so that it was like a great ache inside her, black and chilling as the wet outside the windows.

‘You will always know love, Mielusine,’ Lady Agatha told her once. ‘You like a man, you fancy him; still and all it is not love, the way you are doing what you want. Then he is on your mind; it isn’t that you want to be thinking about him, indeed you don’t; all the same you do. You are bound by a fever, and you’ll not want to think it love, the way it comes only from your blood and the edges of your bones.

‘Is it love , you are asking? If you are afraid, then it is love.’

Mielusine stopped her dance of a sudden. She heard someone clapping in the darkness beyond the stage. She skipped to retrieve her cloak and hide herself.

‘Who is it? Who’s there?’ she called.

A figure emerged, ruddy in the candlelight. The man stopped clapping, picked up the candle, and offered Mielusine his hand. He wore only a wide sleeved shirt and muddy riding breeches. His hair

was clubbed and powdered. She could not see his face, the way he wore a bodach mask, and it the most grotesque and ridiculous the maid had ever seen.

‘It is Maid Mielusine, is it not? You’re damned pretty, dancing here alone on a dark moon!’

‘Hello, Mr Vasquez,’ she said.

Agnes found a cat upon the steps, intrigued by the smell of the soap. She was a fat, white puss, with long hair, a small face, blue eyes, and a tight black collar.

Agnes set down the pail, smiling.

‘Well-met, puss!’ she exclaimed. ‘Did Mac Bride bring you from the manor? He never told me so.’

The cat bounded up in her lap, asking Agnes to scratch her chin. Agnes caressed her. The cat’s droning song reminded her of happier times.

‘How sleek is your coat! Now, someone has been brushing and combing you, taking great care; and I know Mac Birdie was never doing any such thing as that.’

Agnes frowned, stroking the cat. She looked out the window. High up, the walls of the bell-tower were dim and dark in the snow. It was said the Bacach had had his rooms there, when he lived.

The pails, the brushes, and the rags Agnes put

away in the closet; and carrying the cat in her arms like a child against her breast, she went out into the snow, crossed to the tower, and began to climb into the dark.

‘Do not stop,’ said Vasquez. ‘Dance again. Dance for me now.’

‘Yes,’ breathed Mielusine.

She slung the cloak from her shoulders and began to dance for him. He moved with her, holding the candle between them, the better to be watching her. Mielusine was looking into his eyes in the mask, paying no mind to her steps. Her body had no weight at all.

He set the candle on the floor and took her hands. ‘Now let you dance *with* me,’ he said. So they did.

He was holding her very close, and through her shift she was feeling the heat of him. And watching. What would his kiss taste of? Would it be sweet like cake, biting like porter, or fresh like a pear?

‘Come,’ he murmured, wrapping her in her cloak. ‘Do not dress. All are resting save the gamblers; none will see you.’

They went onto the dark lawns by the lough. For awhile they were walking in the snowy mist, not speaking, only walking in the snowy mist.

He leaned up against her, pressing her upon a iron gate. His mask was dark against the smearing lights of the village far away across the lough.

‘Why,’ she breathed, ‘do you always wear this mask?’

He kissed her ear and answered, softly, ‘The way I cannot rest, Maid Snowflake.’

‘But do you never dream?’

‘To dream,’ he laughed, ‘perchance to sleep.’

‘It’s sad,’ she said, ‘you make me. Who can cheat his dreams and not go mad?’

‘I am mad,’ he answered, kissing her. ‘What else would you be asking of a will o’ the wisp, a Beltane child, a Tinker’s foundling?’

She could feel his breath, hot and dry on her cheek. He was stroking her hair, her cheek, her throat, her breast.

‘Not here,’ she said. ‘... the dogs...’

It was by the pens of the lady’s hounds they were. She heard their scratching and whining very close.

‘Old friends of mine,’ he muttered in her ear. ‘I brought you here to show them. Go on – show my friends how pretty you are!’

He turned her round, dropping her cloak. In the gloom she saw the hundred white eyes of the hounds, their dark red ears, and their pink tongues

licking the night. Herself she was gleaming, pressed against the iron in her dancing dress.

The dress they all were practicing dancing in, it was a silk shift open for freedom of movement, nothing at all, and compared to it nakedness would have seemed chaste. The stinging flakes bit straight through it, dizzying Mielusine. Vasquez slipped two fingers beneath the ribbons of the shift, sliding them off her shoulders; she crossed her arms just in time to catch it at the tips of her breasts.

Mielusine gasped.

She was feeling the warmth of him, smelling his flavor mingling with the warm odors of the dogs and the icy sweet smells of the lady's garden. Slowly she let the shift slide down her, its caress soft as Vasquez' breath on her nape. She kicked it aside, with a showy, dancer's kick. His hands streamed down her sides with the melting snow, and red naked she leaned full against the iron bars, turned away from him, reaching up to grip the top of the gate with both hands. The ice cold metal kissed her cheek, her breasts, her thighs. She heard him take a breath behind her, sharply like a kiss.

The dogs gathered round, whining and clawing the earth. Mielusine felt no shame at it – she was burning, burning, burning.

All at once she could hold no more, and her

cramping fingers broke from the iron.

‘Oh my Beloved,’ he said into her ear, ‘my Beloved, my Beloved, my Beloved.’

She sank onto her velvet cloak. He was still kissing her, very cleverly on her shoulder and throat, and she was sobbing for the ache in her body and the sadness in her heart, the way then at that moment, closer to this man than she had been to anyone since she’d been an infant in the arms of her ma, she was feeling alone in the world.

Still and all she was proud lying there on the snowy hard ground before the gate, proud he had chosen her, proud of her deed, and proud of her pleasure, of her pleasure above all.

After that moon, she went no more to the grave beside the apple trees.

6. Of the Bell-tower

AT THE top of the bell-tower was a door of oak, and it cracked, dark, round at the top, and hinged with black wrought iron. The latch too was of iron, cold under Agnes' thumb.

For a time she was standing there, not making up her mind; then the cat mewed. Agnes pressed the latch and entered the room where Master Aengus had lived, when he lived here as Arianna's Bacach.

In the Bacach's chambers books, papers, instruments, dishes, linens and cushions were scattered about the floors. A few lone embers shone red in a makeshift grate; at the left was darkness, and black lines of a scaffolding beyond the bells.

It seemed someone had taken over his rooms after all.

The snow was ending, and a little starlight showing in the night through the high openings, chopping the floor into black and gray fragments. The bell-tower climbed above the mist, so that the starlight could be seen shimmering on the top of the

mist as off a calm lake.

From the crannies over the bells came an ominous croaking, of rooks in tangled nests.

The puss leapt down out of Agnes' arms and ran across the mess. She bounded up the scaffolding by a brass telescope to settle in the lap of a man.

Daintily prancing, the puss was turning in the man's lap, and his hands scratching her ears, absent-like, until she curled up, veiling her eyes in the plume of her tail.

The starlight shone off the white cat and the telescope. It outlined the man's dangling trouser-legs, and his shoes and hands. The upper part of him, though, was darkness.

She was afraid of a sudden, with a great overmastering fear, and she wanting nothing better than to be fleeing the place; her throat was choking, strangling, and the words she would not utter barely escaped her into the room:

'Master Aengus!'

Something stirred up there, making no more sound than the whir of a bird's wings. Agnes felt eyes turning her way, peering through the gloom. She was glad of the darkness for this, that it spared him the sight of her stained worn skirts and bare arms raw and red with soap.

'Who are you calling for?'

The voice was rich and resonant, but softer than Aengus' voice, less sharp, less knowing. It was the voice of a man is dreaming all the time. But was it his voice?

'You, now,' she answered boldly.

Out the great window their voices were carrying, up above the mist. The dark man on the rooftop leaned forward closer to the edge, listening.

'Why did you call me that?'

'Surely it's your name.'

He was silent a while. 'Here they call me the Bacach. The Lamé One.'

'What did they call you elsewhere?'

He was stroking the cat, drawing his fingers soft and slow through the thick white fleece.

'I don't remember.'

She had seen him shot and buried. She'd moistened his grave with her tears. But had that man been Aengus? She'd seen him but dimly – he'd had the shape of Aengus, and not his shape. And this one—

'What do you remember?'

In the faint starlight his fingers were dark in the pale fur. For a moment Agatha's heart leapt, the way she thought she saw the pallor of a scar on his inner wrist.

'I remember a flood,' he said softly. 'Water rush-

ing, boiling up. I remember a cathedral of light, and the voices of women singing, like angels, like sirens, sweet and paradisiac.'

'What else?'

'Nought else.'

'Nothing of – what you were before?'

'No.'

'Did they not tell you what you were?'

The fingers clutched the cat's fur. 'They told me,' he answered, 'that I am the murderer of the White Hind. Because of me, she is no more seen about these isles.'

'Aengus,' she moaned, 'and do you not know me?'

'Why, surely I know you,' he answered. 'I've seen you wandering about the lawns below, and the old countryman told me your name. You're Agnes who is washing the stair.'

'And Lady Agatha?' she asked.

'I know of a Lady Agatha,' he said, sounding pleased to be able to answer her. 'She was in a story. There was a man in love with her. But she didn't love him back.'

'What was the end of the story?'

He nudged the telescope, pointing it from star to star. It was as if that old story did not interest him. He was forgetting her already. 'The man died.'

I don't know what became of the lady.'

After a while she went back out the door.

She trudged back to the Hundred Steps and a Step, each one blacker than the rest with mud and muck ground into the marble's skin. They would never be cleaned, not by a hundred hands working twenty years; they would stay black for ever and a moon after. She stepped on them with her wooden shoes, scraping their faces with her heels.

But something stopped her. The last step, now, did it look a little bit less black than all the others to her eyes?

She thought to herself, *Master Aengus is alive.*

And she stepped out the servants' door and looked straight up into the black ruin fading into mist.

'I will win back your heart, Master Aengus. For all you have forgotten now, the memory will come back to you, and myself I will win back your heart.'

In the moonlight the old countryman, Mac Bride, was feeding the lady's blood-hounds. He was holding a bucket full of bloody scraps, and as the hounds ran round him leaping, he was doling out the scraps, calling them all by name as though they were his old friends: 'Here, Francesco! Do you like that, Estéban? Wag for it, Waltherius! Ho now, Cormac!'

The last scrap he saved for the smallest, a floppy-eared pup. It was only recently Arianna had found a pup bold enough to be one of her pack, so she'd let it into the pens with the rest, and now her troop were fifty-one. She had named this latest Gwangior.

Mac Bride left the hounds' byre and washed his pail in the lough.

When he stood up, the old man's lean body rose like a pine tree against the moon-path on the water. He called out in a soft voice, speaking words older than Gaelic unto the fishes and weeds clustering under the water at his feet. For a time Mac Bride was listening. Strange was his face: a Firbolg's face.

He went into the pleasure hall by a back way, quietly round. From a doorway he looked across to the woman bent over the Hundred Steps and a Step.

For so many moons she had been toiling, and now she was expert in her labor: the way the Moon was almost sunk, and she had reached the seventh step.

Which if she cleaned, there would remain only ninety and four to clean. And even so, come moon-rise those seven would be black as ever, and she would have to be starting all over again.

The old countryman was shaking his head in turning away, the way he was hearing Agnes singing

at her task.

That moon Agnes heard voices coming up off the water. She left her work and drifted down closer to the edge.

The last Swan boat was ready by the mooring poles. A bravo of a man was aboard, giving his hand to help aboard his lady. She was dressed all in black, and her arms were swathed in black, and her hands were in black gloves, and a black veil of lace was wound round her face and trailing down her back. Only her bosom was bare, and it was white as the moon outside the mists. The lady and her bravo were laughing and bidding farewell to their friends on the stones.

‘Lady Ann,’ called Agnes, ‘I know who you are.’

The lady fixed her eyes on her through the veils.

‘Do you now, my girl?’ she said.

‘Don’t you remember me? It was I gave you jewels once, and pins, in your home.’

‘Ah,’ she answered, ‘was it you, now?’

‘You’re much changed.’

‘Thank you for it. Faith, the trinkets came in handy here – how else would we have won all that we now have? But I’ll pass you back all that’s remaining. I’ll throw it over to you, can you catch it?’

‘I’ll catch it. But Lady Ann, what do you hear of

the children?’

‘The grawls?’ The lady’s peals of laughter rang out on the water. ‘Well, and well! It’s the devil’s own time they’re having of it, on their larks and wild kailees! Sing them a song if you see them, my girl! Now farewell!’

‘Farewell, Lady Ann,’ she said. The couple’s friends had gone up already into the abbey, and Agnes was standing by the mooring poles alone, gazing into the mist brightening in the moonglow. She took up what the lady had throw back to her, and went back to her labor. All that moon she was working, but only with half a heart, the way her eyes were always stealing back to the beloved old book, with its spine worn smooth, hiding its stories well-known to her heart.

Come darkness, Agnes went to her cot in the low hall where the girls were dreaming. She was always the last in of those who would be coming. She took off her woolen dress, smoothed her shift and lay down into her cot. And she was so weary in herself that she could not help but be happy in her heart.

But she heard, in the long darkness of the hall, sighs and groans, and the sounds of some girls weeping softly into their pillows, fretting away with homesickness and heartweariness, and Agnes rose

up and went to the sides of their cots one after another and asked them,

‘What is it now that’s troubling your dreams, dear one?’

And one after another they were answering her, saying, ‘It’s hard the work is here, and I miss my ma and my da and my brothers at home.’

‘Come with me, and I’ll smooth away your trouble,’ Agnes told the girls.

She led them to her own cot by the doorway, where they all clustered round. And Agnes pulled out a dog-eared book, and it was so well-used the whole of its spine was worn away, and the girls might read no title there. And putting the book open, and singing down a witch-light and rubbing the last glow out of its scales, Agnes starting reading the tale of Prince Og and Princess Maeve, which in the course of its course runs much as follows:

Out of all the gentle places remaining in the Innis Fodhla, Agnes read, the two strongest were those of the moon and of the woods. But the gentle place of the moon was better-peopled and defended: it was the last true stronghold of gentleness left in the isle. As for the Princess of the woods, Princess Mab, she was hunted by men and Englishmen, and saw her hills built upon with castles of conceit, and her woods cut low, or tamed into parks for hunting, until

in the end she was left with only a few sides of hills scattered widely, and a few tangled shadowy corners of woods, as the last shrunken yards of what was once an empire.

The last of her folk clung to her, but they too dwindled, hunted by the Englishmen, until in the end only one hart and one hind were left to her. And then a hunting party found them out, and cut off the hind's head and shouldered her flanks home to their cooking pots.

Now nine days after this, the Man of the Bog happened to be in that place, setting his traps and lairs. It wasn't after foxes and badgers the Man of the Bog was hunting, but after this and that: strange curious things: a bit of moonshine, a patch of mist, a cobweb, a will o' the wisp. The Man of the Bog was checking his traps and his lures, when he heard a sobbing in the wind: went over the hill-side and found the Princess Mab weeping over her last fallen faithful one, but she was bright as a mirror for all her sadness, and the Man of the Bog in an instant was falling in love of her. 'Come away into my arms,' he was saying, 'my bright Princess Mab, and I'll be making you forget all your causes for bitterness and pain.' And she, being gentle and a princess, longed for his kisses, and went weeping to his arms.

And for a time they abided in the wild moors and the Bog, where only the wayward go, and are soon trapped and lost for ever. And all that time they were as happy as any of their kind could be with the counties overrun with Englishmen and Protestants.

The daughter of this pair was the Princess Maeve, and she was born in the same moonlight as saw the birth of Prince Og. All throughout the gentle places the birth of the Moon Princess' son was proclaimed, and in a few dank places under leaves folk talked of the birth of Princess Maeve as well.

Then and there the Man of the Bog and Princess Mab decided they would wed their daughter to the son of the Moon Princess, the way her mother was a Princess without a county, and her daughter would be a Princess in nothing but her name. And this, they reckoned, was to be the last Great Hope of the gentle folk, that the uniting of the Moon and the Hill should make a place and a county strong enough to withstand the assaults of the World. Even the Moon Princess placed the kiss of her lips on this agreement, and nothing in all the gentle places was looked for with such eagerness as this uniting, and the offspring of the union, though the promised spouses were still no more than twinklings in their leafy cribs, and each had yet to endure its fostering abroad in the arms and houses and homes of men.

Into the world and homes of men went Prince Og, but it was into the world and lairs of the beasts that Princess Maeve was meant to go, and for seven years she was brought up as a beast of the field and the woods. But it was only the curse of the Moon Princess awaiting Princess Maeve when those seven years of the World had passed.

‘Now,’ said Agnes, closing up her book, and kissing its spine, ‘are you thinking your lot is so bad, and your service here an exile, an ionarbadh? Then think on poor Princess Maeve, and count yourselves lucky at that.’

So she was sending them back to their cots, with dry eyes and soothed hearts. Then all at once Agnes looked up, the way the witchlight had swum away, and a long, thin shadow was falling out of the mist across the low eye-shaped window of the low, long hall. The shadow stirred, and moved away. Into the darkness Agnes went, but only nine dim witchlights were swimming there, and no one else.

‘Who were you, now?’ Agnes murmured. She looked up at the ruined bell-tower dark in the mist. But then the weariness of her work was weighing on her, and she went back to her lonely cot inside the doorway.

* * *

That darkness was a long one. And Agnes dreamed the old servant of her lord, Mac Bride, came and stood over her cot. He held a witchlight by the tail.

‘Come with me, Miss,’ he was telling her, ‘and I’ll do you a service.’

She smiled at him in her dream, and went out of the hall, across the lawn, to the gleaming abbey. Mac Bride led her up the steps and in by way of the open gates.

‘Turn now,’ he told her, ‘look to the lough.’

It was late in the darkness. At the water’s edge the Swan Boat was bumping up to the mooring pole, and nine men and women in wild attire were leaping up aland.

Mac Bride in her dream said, ‘These are the lady’s robbers back from their kailees. They are the first back this darkness. Look to their boots, now!’

And she saw their boots blackened with mire.

Then she might hold her peace no more, but in her dream addressed them.

‘Gentle sirs and ladies,’ she said, ‘I know you are wearied from your hunts, and that your joints must be chill from the damp. Your one desire is to return to the fire-warmed rooms, array yourselves, kiss your sweethearts and attend your lady.’

‘But think first of what you do here, when you return with boots and shoes full of the black mud of

the bogs. See your trail up the outer steps; look on the steps you mean to mount! They are black, but the foremost ones are white, and clean. It was myself cleaned them, and it was all I could do, during the hours you were abed, to scrape the mud from six of them, and make a start at the seventh. Six, of a hundred and one!

'If you go on as you are, then these six by next moonrise will be blacker than the other ninety and five. Have pity on me, I beg you, for my heart is breaking from the uselessness of all I do, that is as quickly undone, by you. My years will go for nothing, and I will die here as I started. As if I had not lived at all. Do not rob me of my life, do not murder me, but take care, I implore you, and tread lightly on my dreams.'

Those words were among the hardest she had ever uttered, even in a dream; there were tears in her eyes and her voice was near breaking under the weight of them.

And the riotous bandits praised the scrub woman, the way she was as desperate as themselves. Out through the doors they went, and washed off their boots in the lough.

By then was another Swan Boat returning, and another load of robbers approaching the abbey. Agnes must repeat her words, fully thirteen times,

all the long darkness, until her voice was cracking and her eyes red with tears, and she was tossing about in her cot. In the long low hall the other serving girls gathered round her, touching her shoulder and speaking her name, softly, softly, 'Agnes! Agnes!' Until at last she answered.

After their meal, the girls went to their appointed tasks. Agnes took her brushes and pail and went into the abbey by the side door, the way the crescent gates were shut, and all the robbers dreaming and touching their lovers high above her.

Agnes bent over the first step. And she saw to her surprise that it was not black but white, white as the pelt of the White Hind, and shone in the moon-glow like a mirror.

And after that darkness the trollops and bandits never failed of washing their boots in the lough, and struck off the clods of mud staining their breeches and hems before they came into the abbey. Indeed, so clean were their feet from then on, that they tended rather to take old dirt up, and left the stairs cleaner for their passing, the way it was their great delight to outdo themselves incessantly. Each moon now Agnes cleaned seven steps more; on the next moon when she came, she saw those seven were cleaner than she'd left them. And in less than

thirteen moons, all the Hundred Steps and a Step were sparkling; and they never needed cleaning, ever again.

It was proclaimed that there would be held a masquerade on Samhain, on the long dark of the moon: and all diversions would be enjoyed at that ball, and a special exhibition of the dancers. At that ball Arianna would make her choice, who would be her next champion.

The time of the masquerade came nearer, and all the dancers fearing it. But Mielusine now, she was quiet all the time, and a bit sad, the way she never danced now so well as she had that once, when only one pair of eyes could see. In all the time since, Mielusine hadn't once heard any word from Vasquez. And still and all she told Ino to be paying Vasquez' debts.

The dwarf squawked, but 'Haven't I money enough for it, now?' said she. 'Then do as I bid you, Banker Ino.'

What now was comforting her, was a strange thing: it was the small white stone she'd stolen from Master Aengus' room. Mielusine kept the leag lorgmhar on the table by her bed, and touched it to her lips before she rested. The leag lorgmhar guarded her dreams. She was glad she hadn't re-

turned it, the way it now was hers.

Now after kissing the stone the dancer had a dream, and this was the way of it.

Atop the bell-tower, the door to Master Aengus' rooms was open; in front of the bells a man was standing, and he reaching for her, saying, 'Come.' And the voice of the man in the dream was Vasquez' voice.

The dream left her, and Mielusine rose up out of bed. Moonbeams were pouring into her window, swirling with the mist. Mielusine stepped into the light, turning slowly, silently watching her limbs making whirlpools in the mist. The power of the dance was entering into her, the way she was yielding to it, moving beautifully as some wild thing footing the strait paths of a hill. In a way she was leaving herself behind; she was the dance she made.

Drawing her velvet cloak over her shift, bare footed, shaking her black ringlets, Mielusine went out of her room. The lawns of the crannog were powdery with snow, cold and clean on her toes. The broken steps and ladders were patchwork in the moonbeams falling through chinks in the wall. The door, it was not open as in her dream; but easily it yielded to her small hand, and in she danced, silent as a moonbeam.

He was there awaiting her. She knew he would

be.

But who was he?

He was sitting by the bell beneath the telescope. His arms were braced against the window frame, and his legs dangling out over the ledge, and himself leaning far into the night. Beyond him the sky was ablaze with stars, shining on the surface of mist, bright like the sea.

It was long since the Maid had looked upon the stars in their nakedness. The sight swam in her like porter; her breath was sweetened even more by the thought of the dark man aloft.

He hadn't seen her yet. Mielusine felt no fear of him. Still dancing, she glided to him and said,

'Faith, what is it you're looking for?'

The figure looked back. Mielusine saw the outline of his face against the stars; it seemed he was staring at her. Then he twisted his body and swung his legs back in, leaning weakly against the window frame.

'For the cowardice to jump,' he answered her. He did not speak in Vasquez' voice; it was another's voice – one she knew. 'But I'll never be finding it, the way I know she is still out there, somewhere hidden in the white. Who're you?'

'I am Mielusine. Weren't you waiting for me? Now I am come. Teach me, please.'

He stood, none too surely, and stepped into the room. For a moment she was losing sight of him; then a light flared up from a bit of straw in the embers; he was lighting the candles on the table.

In the light his face seemed less drawn and tormented than she remembered. She did not wonder to see again the face that once she had seen buried under an apple tree. Curiously she looked on the bandages wrapping his breast: once white, now dirtied with dark, old blood.

‘Come on then,’ he told her. ‘Didn’t she send you for this? Do you know what you’re wanting from me, or are you only coming for a look?’

He was bending over the table, and not looking at her at all. There was a hanging gathered by the table, and Mielusine danced in close to it.

‘Stand there!’ he commanded. ‘’Tis better so, your face in shadow. They’ll be telling a more honest fable. I see you are young, and pretty enough – but you were not always pretty, nor were you powerful in Day.’

Mielusine saw in his hands a stack of beautiful cards, and he drawing them together and apart with his long, strong fingers.

‘What are you about?’ she asked.

‘Didn’t she tell you a thing about me?’

Mielusine, her face still in shadow, smiled. He

sighed. 'Arianna should say a thing before she sends her wards to me.' He thrust the cards across the table.

'Draw them into three stacks.' So she did.

He began laying the cards out across the table. Mielusine had seen cards at fairs, but never any so large or beautiful, or with those strange names. And now he was telling her about herself as though he'd known her all his life. Mielusine was enchanted. How could he know such things?

'And that is all I have to be telling you.'

Over their heads on the rooftop, the dark man sat in tailor-fashion within the tent of his dark gray cóta mór, and he was hearkening to their words, and hearing them all quite clearly. But still he only listened, and did not move, not yet. Only now, he grinned. Skulls grin as broadly as the dark man grinned.

The Bacach leaned back, and a bit of pain caressed his face, and Mielusine saw how weary he was with no resting, the way he was spending all his hours here thinking of his love until it was a poison in him, and searching for her in the water and in the mist, and everywhere else she wasn't.

Mielusine felt bewildered. Was this the secret of love?

'What card is that?' she asked. To one side lay

one card face down.

‘’Tis the final card,’ he answered. ‘The card of the querent – of the seeker. ’Tis your card. Turn it up if you like: it is not for me to do.’

Mielusine reached out for it, feeling its riddle calling to her. He added while she was reaching, ‘You needn’t show it to me or even be telling me what it is. It’s only to you that card need be speaking.’

She took it between her fingers. On the card was painted a beautiful woman pouring water from two ewers. Mielusine laid the card on the table.

‘Le Stelle,’ she murmured, reading what was written across the bottom of the card. ‘What does it mean?’

He looked at her searchingly, the way she was glad for the hanging and its shadow.

‘The word, d’you mean, or the card?’

‘The word.’

‘The word means, “the Stars.”’

‘’Tis a pretty card.’ She wasn’t even blushing a bit, though the lady on the card was naked as a tree in winter.

‘It isn’t there to be pretty,’ he said. He was angry now, raking the cards into a heap. ‘Learn from it. Now let you be going. If Arianna wasn’t sending you here you shouldn’t have been coming. Be going now!’

She glided back before his vehemence. He was rising, but already Mielusine was passing out of his rooms in silent wonder, leaving him and his pain behind her like a bad dream.

Round and round and down the steps she spiraled. Gladness was in her heart. She felt the moonlight burning her breasts. In the empty dancing hall she cast down her cloak and kicked off even her shift, and was dancing round in the dark, naked as a tree in winter, naked and free, and whirling ever faster before the small white stone.

The way she was finding the joy of the dance again, and making its mystery her own.

One spot only on all the Hundred Steps and a Step remained dark, a spider-shaped stain near the top-most riser, nine steps from Arianna's door. Agnes was cleaning it almost with love, the way it was the end of her labors. So full of her task was she, she did not even notice the step falling behind her, nor the soft rustle of the lady's skirts.

As to the Maid Buan now, whose skirts and step they were, she was looking on the serving woman with wonder. Sure now, she thought, there are marvels in the Night! That this creature could have made shine the Hundred Steps and a Step!

'And it was a clever seamstress I heard you

were,' exclaimed Maid Buan, 'but these steps are so bright, 'tis a far better charwoman you must be.'

The serving-girl looked up at the maid from beneath a mop of tangled, greasy hair. 'I thank you for it,' she answered, 'but I cannot say, from all I've heard, that you make that good a lady.'

Maid Buan laughed. 'But you're the rare insolent one! 'Twould almost seem you've a lover here of some repute, that you'd dare say such words to me! Are you not Agnes? Maid Mielusine tells me it was you who made her fine white gown, and is it the very truth?'

The serving-girl nodded.

'Serve as my seamstress, then, and make me a gown for the lady's masquerade. It's rich your reward will be if you please me. All tools and materials I'll furnish, and you may be staying in my rooms with my servants if you please.'

In the serving-girl's wild eyes, green as leaves in a windy wood, something was dawning, and she looking far beyond the maid. For a moment Maid Buan thought the woman must be simple; that she might even be so peculiar as to refuse her; but at length Agnes pursed her lips and bowed her head and answered,

'It's sorry I am, Maid Buan, for the sharpness of my tongue. To be your seamstress would be my

honor.' She looked up sharp into Buan's eyes.

'I will make you a gown.'

Maid Buan was surprised that so simple a saying could mean so much to her: all at once a vision entered her head, of herself at the masquerade, the lodestone of the bandits' eyes.

'Tis well,' she said. 'I have the stuff already, it is samite, sendaline, cloth of gold—'

But the strange serving-girl was shaking her head, telling her solemnly, 'I will make you a black dress.'

Fitting-forms, silver pins and needles, spools of thread, bolts of silks and satins, bows, ribbons, fine linens: beautiful things, and the sight of them, so long forgotten, made Agatha's eyes smart.

Come moonrise she set to work, and while the Maid and her servants were dreaming beneath their lovers' touch, Agnes spun and sewed and snipped by the light of the Moon.

And she sang as she cut, and she hummed as she sewed, only she made no sound singing, the way all the melodies were only in the gown. She made her a black gown, and freed herself, in that dress, of the steps, of the snow, and of the Hind: of moonglow and starlight and all things white like bones, like grins, like innocence.

It was the last bolt of cloth that Master Aengus made, his nine moons' work, that Agnes made into that gown.

Now, come moonrise the serving-girl dressed Maid Buan for retiring, and then the maid dismissed her. It was even then that Agnes would be entering the maid's chambers to take up again her work.

Then Agnes saw how Maid Buan undraped the black velvet hangings from a certain glass on the wall and looked deeply into it. Her face burned redly, then paled, and her eyes were distraught; Maid Buan sighed, shook her head, and returned the hanging to cover the mirror. Sadly she went into her bedchamber, alone, and Agnes felt a tug of sorrow for her, though she didn't know why. Each moonrise Agnes watched Maid Buan perform the same ceremony before she went into her bedchamber, alone. Then Agnes looked long on the black hangings, before she sat herself down and took up her needles and thread.

It had been the fashion for gowns to be elaborate, with embroidery, lace and needlework, and layer upon layer of linens; and Agnes knew that such would be the very taste of Maid Buan. But in the black gown Agnes eschewed all ornament, and cut simply, so that its lines should not be in any way

obscured.

And on the skirt of the gown she wove tiny brilliants in patterns of the stars zodiacal, the way that light played upon it, shimmering, winking. But the narrow bodice of the gown she left bare of brilliants. The way the gown was blackest round where the back and bosom would show, cloudlike and celestial. Only upon the left bosom of the bodice, Agnes was wanting to place one jewel. But there was nothing in Maid Buan's jewelry-case she was liking; so she left it bare.

And the skirt, all scattered with brilliants, was soft, and wide like a country girl's attire.

Along with the gown Agnes was making two shoes, tiny things of black with silver buckles set with three brilliants. She did not know just the shape of Maid Buan's feet, the way she was making the shoes to fit her own. And she made a clip for the hair with the last three brilliants in the jewelry case. And she made a black mask as well, for half the face; and she cut eyes out of the mask, and they long and narrow.

When the gown was done and the shoes set beside it, then Agnes looked on it and falling in love with her work said,

'No one will wear this gown but myself.'

Then there were only three moons left before the masquerade. For two moons Agnes fitted the gown to herself. And on the last moon of all she caught up what fabrics came first to hand, the samite, the sendaline, the cloth of gold, and with handfuls of lace, ribbons and ruffles, she stitched together another gown for Maid Buan. The maid was quite pleased with it, and it was quite good enough for her, too.

And when that second gown was finished, Agnes looked again on the black velvet hangings that covered Maid Buan's mirror on the wall. And she stepped over to them and lifted them, uncovering the rich, strange carvings of the frame; and she looked deeply into the image in the dim, silvery glass.

With the rising of the final Moon before Samhain, Agnes went down to the long low hall and laid herself down to rest. Weary as she was, she was yet a-tremble, for the pleasure of the thought of the beautiful black gown. And then fear began to grow in her, and doubt. Sure now, someone would know her as the woman who washed the steps; the bandits would cast her out from the ball before a general mockery.

She paced the hall, and stepped up to the window. The moon was sinking through the grass. And at last the girl did manage, uneasily, to rest: then

her resting sat on her like a stone, and she couldn't get up.

And the Moon sank, and once more the stars wheeled round to touch the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

And the masquerade began, and Agnes slept on.

7. Of the Masquerade

DURING THE last moons before the masquerade, Lady Arianna was closed up in her garden, alone. Never a soul saw her in that time; but sometimes lovers strolling beneath the garden wall heard a soft low humming there.

And in that time, on the streets of the village across the lough, the countryfolk were shaking their heads. And their young daughters went down to the lough fifty at a time, ringing the bell and calling to the ferrymen, 'Take me across, now! Let me go into service in the abbey!' 'No, take me instead, I'm more clever and willing!'

And in the long low hall the serving girls were hugging and kissing one another, the way they knew their service was reaching an end, and soon they would be rewarded and sent home again. The thought of their old parents was making them smile a sly and wicked smile. They were no more the sweet obedient lasses they'd been when they had come.

'It is not the same for me,' Agnes told them. 'I'll

be taking no duais, let the steps be as bright as they can be.'

Agnes had dwelt on the crannog in the mist then almost the full term of service. Nine Moons had risen in the time since she had come across on the Swan Boat. And more, the Hundred Steps and a Step were clean, and many a time Old Meg came calling for Agnes, to be sending her on her way. But Agnes kept away from her, and could flee when she wished into Maid Buan's chambers, where Old Meg dared not set foot.

In the bell-tower on the moon before the lady's masquerade there was darkness and quiet, save for the soft hiss of the embers, and the passing of moonbeams through the window.

In that window the man was sitting, one leg dangling in the room, the other bent on the sill. He was dressed plain and dark, the way free-holding farmers might have gone to church in Day. His hair was dark and unruly, with a streak of silver above the left temple; his face was troubled. In his lap was curled his long-haired white cat. Her chin was resting on his hand. On the windowsill beside the man's foot lay a card, face down.

The shining mist washing and lapping at the wall beneath the window made no sound. Far

away stretched that waterish silence underneath the moon. Clouds came, covering the moon, the way the darkness deepened, and the room was lost to sight.

There was a war being waged in the soul of the Bacach. The different and various selves of him were fighting one against the others.

On top of them all sat the Wounded Lover, who loved the White Hind. But she was slain. Who had slain the White Hind? A vagabond man, a dark soul, a hideous rascal. And he grieved and would have wept the clock round, for the loss of his White Hind.

But under that self there lurked the Avenger. He hated the killer of the White Hind, and he cursed that killer, and damned him for all eternity.

But close under the side of the Avenger there hid the Observer. He knew some part of the truth, though he was mute and might not speak. But the Observer felt a chill steel scian blade piercing his heart when he heard the curses of the Avenger.

Then there was the Sly self, that laughed at himself and all the other selves for their pains and their furies and fears.

There was over the Sly self the Philosopher, that cared nothing for any of them, and set their pains at nought. He it was looked into the stars, and reckoned their movements, and had no care for anything under Heaven.

And there was the Madman, and this was the the self that the Bacach feared most of all. Round and round the Madman turned, and with a cutting blade he slashed at himself, and raged and bit.

And last and least of them all, there was a nameless self, that had the secret and the answer to all the pains and fears and anger of the other selves. But this one lived in terror of some great shadowy Thing that never showed its face. It was not mute, the nameless self, but it hid deep away in the folds and the corners, and never came out.

Sometimes the Bacach remembered, but memories were too much to bear, and sank back into the stuff of dreams. Sometimes the Bacach wished, but his wishes too were painful, and worse they went beyond his grasp, and he turned his back on them.

'Bacach!' sounded a soft voice from where the moonbeams had fallen. For the moon over the county of mists had set; darkness blacked the sky; blackness filled the bell-tower.

'Who is calling me,' asked the man, turning his head.

'Do you not know me, my Bacach? Shame be to you for that!'

There'd been no sound or any light from the steps; and surely the man would have noted any such thing in the black, silent tower.

Over their heads, on the roof of the bell-tower, the dark man in his dark gray cóta mór leaned closer over his knees. His eyes narrowed into slits, and he was listening now with a heart and a half.

‘My heart is restless, my Bacach. I’m going to the garden gate time and again. Not even darkness soothes me. I’m finding no pleasure in my food or drink, my blood hounds or my blossoms.’

‘You are bored,’ he answered.

‘What then will revive my interest?’

‘Your new champion will do that.’

‘Who will he be, Bacach? What man would you choose for me?’

‘One you do not know, with a mind of his own.’

‘Oh, Bacach, how I treasure you!’

‘Then let me go!’ he cried; and the vehemence of his pain left a trembling in its wake.

The dark man on the rooftop reached forth, and gripped the edge of the parapet in his long lean fingers, and drew himself that closer to the edge.

‘Where would you be going?’ she asked, in an injured voice.

He gestured. There was a glow, half as of phosphorous, in the darkness where his fingers traced.

‘There’s only death waiting out there for you, Bacach,’ the voice reminded him.

‘One time I’ll leave,’ he promised her. ‘I’ll swim

away in this lake. I'm only waiting, the way I don't know where else to find her.'

'What a stubborn child you are! Don't be thinking to match your magic against mine! Twice now I've conjured you back out of death, and now you belong to me three times over, body and soul, and it's here with me I want you.'

He drew his fingers over his brow, like a sign. 'Tell me what I was before. Was my name Master Aengus?'

'Who's been whispering that name to you?' she hissed. 'I forbid it!'

The cat mewed, and she jumped to the floor with a soft thump-bump of paws.

Now the lady's voice purred more soothingly, closer to the man's ear, though still there was no sight of her in the dark beyond the bells.

'Draw the cards for me, Bacach,' she said. 'Tell me of my lover.'

In the dark he lighted a candle and laid the cards, and answered all her questions. But his mind must have been elsewhere that time, the way, when time came to turn the card of the querent, it was two cards he'd laid down there by accident. One was *La Torre*, and the other *La Temperanz*. And when those cards were upturned, the unseen visitor's laughter rang off the old bells.

‘O Bacach, I had a dream this moon. Untie its riddle for me. This is the way of it. I was on top of the casino, walking back and forth, waiting for someone. The night was frosty, and the stars so bright that I could reach my hand out and almost pluck them from the sky.

‘Then the stars dimmed, and I saw through the mist all my Swan boats burning on the lough. The fires went onto the land and were eating up all the trees of my orchards over the hills as far as the eye could see, making such a heat that the mists of this county were dispelled, leaving us naked under Heaven.

‘I called below, three times: at the third call there was a stirring, and my wards roused the bandits, and they rushed to save my orchards. There was still one ferry boat unburning, tied to the mooring pole.

‘But there was unseen to all of us a little red-brown mouse, and she chewing the rope of the ferry, sharpening her little white teeth. The last Swan Boat swung away, and my bandits fell stumbling into the water, drowning.’

The dark man on the rooftop drew on his strong long fingers, and pulled himself up standing.

‘What else betid?’ asked the Bacach.

‘Only the heat of the fires and the furious

golden light surrounding me, and I woke.'

The man turned back into the window, dropping both legs into the lapping mist. He tugged on the white lock of his hair, and the dark man overhead could see him quite clearly now in the candle-glow.

'It's a hard dream,' he said carefully. 'I must ponder it.'

'Do that,' said the lady's voice. 'And now I mind me of it, you too were in the dream, O Bacach, standing on a rock, watching the little brown mouse. You knew how her labors would end, and yet you said nothing at all.'

Her voice sighed away into the silence of the lapping mist, yet a certain peril hung still in the air. Overhead the clouds moved on, baring the breast of the moon again. The Bacach picked up the cards beside him on the sill, and stepped down into the room, hiding from the stars. He lighted the twisted, bubbled end of another candle on the table, and shuffled and dealt out the cards.

'I will test your fortunes, brown mouse.' That drawing was unclear; but the card of the querent showed a winged trumpeter summoning forth a man and two women naked from the ground. And the name on that card was *Il Giudizio*.

'Once more, once more,' he was whispering:

‘and how many times is that? I’ll draw out her portrait once more, to see if I may find her.’ And for the hundredth time or more he was laying the cards for the White Hind.

The reading he was getting, it was confusion and obscurity.

At last he came to the down-turned card of the querent, of the White Hind. He was staring on that card for the longest time. Then carelessly he flipped it over. It was the same, of course. That card was always the same for her.

A hundred times or more he had drawn for her, always that one same card. And sitting staring at it, he was wishing he hadn’t dismissed the girl in the shift and velvet cloak, or at least that he could be remembering the name she’d given him.

The card of the White Hind was the card of a beautiful woman kneeling beside a pool, pouring water from two ewers, and the sky over her head ablaze with lights. And she naked as a tree in winter, and under her the words, *Le Stelle*.

The man stood, gathered the cards carefully in his hands, and put them into his pocket.

And the stillness about the abbey was broken by strains of music through the walls, the way the moon was sunk, and the darkness rising, and Ar-

ianna's masquerade beginning.

For a time the Bacach was listening to the distant airs.

'Yes,' he said: 'I will go to this ball. She is there.'

So he straightened his coat, drew his fingers through his hair, and for the first time in the nine Moons since his burial, the Bacach left the bell-tower.

And the dark man in the dark gray cóta mór crept down the wall to the window to the bell-tower room, and swung lightly in. A time he tarried, shuffling through the Bacach's papers and going through his things; then he went off through the door, after the Bacach.

In the dancing hall Mac Bride had left a thousand candles burning, and schools of the fishy witch-lights swam about the rafters, and folk were entering wigged and masked. This was Arianna's masquerade, when she would choose her champion; and all the gentlefolk of the Night were gathering to honor her, and vie for the honor of being chosen.

The doors of the dancing hall were open onto lighted lawns where a thousand couples were strolling and casting coins into the lough. The silver coins were flashing and sinking in the inky waters, spilling round the sleeping damsel curled upon her

side on the lakebed, while the currents tousled the ringlets of her hair.

And in the witchlights all the ladies were graceful and all the gentlemen elegant. There was a glamour cast over them all that darkness by Arianna, the way that all their flaws were hidden, and all their beauties shone. It was no hard task to tell the men apart despite their masks, but the ladies were transfigured into enigmas, and that was the lady's desire.

Now, all the bandits were bursting to discover which of the ladies was Arianna, the way they would be devoting their attentions to her, to be chosen her champion. There was even a deal of wagering as to which lady was Arianna, and which bandit should be the first to unmask her. Some were saying that she had not yet arrived, others that she would not come at all, but only watched them from a secret recess. And still others were claiming she would come and go many times, in many masks.

Many gamblers wagered on a lady all in gold, and her hair dusted gold over its native darkness. She had the grace of a Tinker, her smile was smooth as a liar's tongue, and upon her breast she wore a pin in the shape of an L.

But others put their money on a lady dressed in scarlet, the very hue of fresh-spilt blood. Her bared, slender shoulders were a provocation, her laughter

lazy and insolent, and her mask it was the mask of a fox. She was the center round which many orbited, including Banker Ino, who was held to be wittier than the bandits, and privy to the lady's secrets.

And many put their chances on another lady all in gold; and Maid Buan was delighted with the acclaim her gown was gathering her, and she danced every dance with a different rogue. But at the end of the masquerade Maid Buan still went back to her chambers alone, though even she herself couldn't have told you why.

But most chose out a lady in white as Arianna: and she was Mielusine.

She wore her white gown, and the mask of the White Hind. And beholding herself in the glass, a fan in her hand, her bosom bared, her hair powdered and set, the enchanted mask upon her with its braided tail curving round her throat, Mielusine had had to reach out and touch the glass to be sure it was herself, indeed.

And in stepping down the stair, something had come over her, some shadow of a dream. She moved with sureness and was unknown by even her teachers, the way she was become the promise unfulfillable, the mystery, and the veil.

Dance after dance she moved about the floor, and she drank wine and breathed in the odor of the

lough without, until she was so happy, that she felt herself twinned, and beheld herself beneath herself, laughing and floating and herself sweetly drunken upon flattery and the clamor of all men's desire.

She saw Vasquez dancing with two ladies at once; he was easily known, the way he wore his bodach mask.

'For shame,' called Mielusine upon his head, 'and what would your dancing friend say if she saw you so?'

From her words he knew her, but was not at all abashed.

'My patroness must surely know,' he said, 'that even as I gained from her what I most desired, so she won from me what herself most longed for.'

Mielusine considered the matter, sheltered by her fan, then laughed. 'You do not deceive yourself, Sir. But for this at least you must bear shame, that you appear unmasked at Arianna's masquerade.'

The two ladies bursting into laughter of the most wicked tones, and Vasquez for once in his life discomfited, not knowing how to respond: wasn't that the most delicious moment for Mielusine in all that darkness?

She moved on with a flourish into the whirling dancers and took command of the floor, the way all were applauding her, and their glad cries echoed by

the screaming of a hawk flown into the hall. Three times the hawk screamed, stopping all chatter, stopping all dancing.

It was the cry of that bird, woke Agnes at last.

She sat straight up in her cot and rubbed the dreams from her eyes. Through the low eye-shaped window light was streaming. There was a great brightness from witchlights swimming about the grounds.

It was the masquerade. And how many hours since it had begun?

She thought to herself, *It was fated; I am too late; I cannot go now.*

Then she was gathering up the gown and leaving the hall. She passed to the snowy rocks beyond Arianna's garden. There she set down her bundles, and drew off her shift.

The night was cold, and the black water colder still. She bit her lip and stepped in until she was quite swallowed up.

Bathing below the surface, sinking, she looked back up toward the night. The abbey shone there, fiery and swirling like a weeping of suns; Agnes swam up into its fire, drawing in a great breath.

Now, three of Arianna's most feared bandits were strolling nearby, smoking and arguing which

lady was Arianna's mask. Then Ali put up his arm and said,

‘Behold the Lady of the Lough.’

Emerging from the water with a reed in her hand was a lake-wet, red naked girl. With grace and ease she dried herself from her bath. She set her hair up, and only then began to cover the perfection of her shape. At first it seemed a pity to the bandits, that such beauty must be disfigured by clothing; but when they saw the black gown on her like a second skin, then they saw that beauty embellished a hundredfold.

‘Surely, this is some goddess born out of the lough,’ murmured Sir Stephen.

‘She has not been at the masquerade, else I should have remarked her,’ vowed Phillippe. ‘Ali, in truth, this is our lady, or else her double on earth. Now, let us three keep this secret, and let no one else hear of it: so we may reduce the number of our rivals.’ The robbers agreed, and stole back into the hall.

Over the doors of the casino, an emerald was hanging on a spider's thread. A sign of bronze reflected it, graven with these words:

For the Fairest

All the ladies had reached for that jewel, but it

had crawled up the spider thread out of their reach, leaving them laughing, somewhat scornfully, and cursing the dwarf, the way it was sure to be his work.

Agnes saw the jewel, but never the sign. It was the same emerald the village girl had taken for her place on the Swan Boat, and it was the same emerald the old lord had given Lady Agatha long, long before, when the Sun still shone.

She reached up and took it into her palm. She fastened it to the left breast of her gown where it belonged. Only then did she see the sign.

This cannot be, she said in herself, *I cannot be the fairest, with this black spot on my palm*. But the spot was gone, and her hand pale and pink as a girl's. And she could not have said when she had last seen the spot.

As soon as Agnes entered the hall, bandits and self-made princes drew to her. She was the lady herself: they were sure of it! Setting her black skirts swirling, showing her ankles and even a bit of her calf, Agnes lost the last bit of her reserve.

'Surely,' she answered to all and no one there, 'and I am the Spirit of the Dark of the Moon.'

But the other ladies were crying at the blue-green hawk flying about the candles. And they complaining to the bandits, 'Will none of you rid us of

this bird?’

The bandits set themselves a new rivalry, but the falcon scorned their efforts. Some, more hot-headed, were calling for pistols, but the redhaired vixen flatly forbade such violence.

Now as to Eudemarec, he was that time gathering morsels of meat from the banquet. Whistling he coaxed the bird down to his arm. He set it on an open windowsill, feeding it bits of meat on the back of his fist.

In this way the Breton restored the merriment of the dance, and condemned himself to serve as the falcon’s guardian the rest of the darkness. For awhile the ladies were admiring the hawk’s fierceness, until the music called them back, all but one, small and young, hardly of an age to join that company. Her gown was pearl gray and blue, and her mask in the fashion of a dove.

‘How ferocious!’ she sighed. ‘Are you not worried lest it attack you? For I have read that such creatures are by nature cruel, and torment their prey before devouring it.’

‘Though there may be such creatures in the world, she is not of that number. Should we condemn her for boldness, when we will pet the lamb whose flesh will later dress our table, though we disdain from butchering it ourselves?’

‘I don’t know that,’ answered Zelig. ‘I had a kitten once. She nipped my hands and left tiny dimples in my skin. But when she grew she batted field-mice until she killed them, and left them by my bed. I had to give her away in the end, I couldn’t bear it any more.’

‘She only honored you after her fashion,’ answered Eudemarec. ‘Later, when your claws have grown, you will understand.’

‘I should like,’ said the girl, ‘to touch it; but it will peck at me.’

‘I will undertake that she does not.’

Timidly Zelig stroked the feathers of the bird. The falcon was eying her nervously, but made no move to attack.

‘Her feathers are soft,’ murmured the girl; and the falcon spread its wings and flew out the window and was gone.

So Eudemarec was freed of the falcon, but now the maid Zelig was following him everywhere, hanging on his elbow. Agnes saw this, and contrived to draw Eudemarec apart a moment.

‘Eudemarec, I am Agnes. You’ll never find Arianna with this downy chit trailing you. Would you be freed of her?’

‘Agnes! Is it you, indeed? But no, though I thank you, ’twould be unkind. I have already lost

my chance, and I'll lay down my cards now, the way I've lost this hand.'

Zelie returned, tugging at Eudemarec's sleeve: 'Hawk-tamer, come quick, the dances are starting!'

These were the performed dances, and all ringed the stage to watch the dancers. One after another the dancers thrilled the company, until it was Mielusine's turn.

She stood before the blaze of footlights for a moment.

The masked throng waited on her, and she was losing the memory of her practiced steps. *What was the first of all my moves, and then what came after that?* she was crying out inside herself. *I cannot remember them all, I cannot remember even a one of them!*

Then she threw off her cloak. *It isn't Mielusine facing them, now: it is the lady in the mask of the White Hind. Let them see only her, and let only herself guide my movements now.* It was in her limbs and in her heart, the way she ruled them now. She signed the music to commence, and she danced.

It wasn't the way she had danced by herself, beautiful though that had been. This, with all eyes devouring the sight of her, was better. She felt the power of the mask on them all, gentlemen and ladies: it was her power, and the music and move-

ments burning out of her. And it was a little drunk she was, drunk on the desire the men were feeling for her, and the dancer herself burning to be lying red-naked in the arms of them, every blessed one.

Hidden in the burning footlights, in the midst of the throng, stood a man unmasked. He gazed up at the bold beauty playing with the desire of all.

So the Bacach first beheld Mielusine in the mask of his White Hind.

The crowd surged closer to the burning footlights. From beyond that barrier of light, the red mouth of the White Hind bright and hot smiled beckoning back at them.

The trees in the burnt enchanted wood would not have known her for their shy sweet Maid during that dance. She was so bold she shocked even the bandits.

Mielusine bowed, and cloaked herself again during the applause. Two other dancers came on, their faces glum, the way they knew how little would be their reward for following her.

Behind the stage Mielusine was laughing, swimming in the love of the admirers.

It was a need in her strong as breathing, to be among these men; to stand so close that their presence embraced her, and she was drowning in the

smell of them. She could feel their gaze upon her as hands caressing her body, and she was that pleased.

‘Later, sirs!’ she told them. ‘When the others have finished, then let you seek me in the hall.’

‘Will I be seeing you there?’ asked Vasquez.

‘If I want you to,’ she answered. The insolence of the reply seemed native to her. She laughed, seeing him go. Hadn’t he been right after all?

In the ebb, she saw the Bacach. His face seemed itself a mask, waxen and yellow, tinged with old pain.

‘Do not go,’ he cried. ‘What is this mask? Do you know? Are you the White Hind?’

‘No, I’m only a dancer,’ she answered, and in the press slipped away, eluding them all, gliding into Night. It was her pleasure just then to be swimming in the mist and witchlights away from them all.

The Bacach went after her. For an instant he saw her, palely roseate in the floating witchlights, rounding the ruined walls of his basilica. Then she was gone. His heart was kicking, his hands trembling, his brow chill.

He followed.

And the mists covered both of them, and the witchlights swam on, thickening the mists with their brightness.

* * *

All balls must end, even that one; the music ceased, and the ladies, the maids, and the bandits climbed the snowlike Hundred Steps and a Step. Soon the slender young Moon would be rising.

The nine young girls under Mac Bride's command, yawning great yawns, set to snuffing out the thousand candles.

Zelie, the child dressed as a dove, asked Eudemarec to escort her to her door, and they climbed to apartments where the Breton had never been. The girl smiled shyly. 'Will you not step in a moment, sir, until I may get a candle lit?'

'Surely I'll do that,' answered Eudemarec.

They passed within the large carven door, they passed into inner chambers where no witchlights swam, and all was black as ink.

In the darkness the Breton heard the falling of her cloak; he heard a rustling at the snowclad windowsill; in the open starlight he saw the falcon lighting there. Then he turned, the way the candle flared to the kiss of the match; and Eudemarec beheld there Lady Arianna, unmasked, unclothed, in glory.

The Sixth Year of Night

In the sixth year of that Night, the students broke from their Teachers.

For in spite of all tricks, most students had learned nothing, could do nothing out of the ordinary – could do no more, in fact, than they had done during the Day. And they blamed the Special Ones and said they hoarded their secrets.

But others among the apprentices had become Masters, and contested with their Teachers for pre-eminence.

Fellowship and brotherhood were lost. There was a falling-out, and it came to hard words, blows, and killing.

8. How He Met the White Hind

AGNES DID NOT want her masquerade to end. Upon shining lawns beneath the dimming witchlights she danced on, wild-souled, surrounded by a dozen bandits. But even they at the latter end left her, despairing that she should ever reveal herself as the lady. Alone she danced on, her skyblack skirts swirling.

An odd mist hung over the ground, just about the feet. Mac Bride's nine girls were killing the abbey's candles and fires; across the lough, lights were winking on; through the upper airs the glow of the young Moon was gleaming, and cutting through the mist.

Agnes stopped, and her skirt swirled to embrace her. 'For luck,' she whispered, drawing off the emerald and casting it into the lough.

It splashed there softly and sank, drifting down the syrup of the waters. It came to a rest beside the sleeping maiden drowning in her hair, and Agnes

never saw that gem again.

She walked about the crannog through the snow, her spirits cooling, the mist making her cough. Every room below was still and dark; only through the upper windows gleams of candles reddened the mist. Even the gambling had ceased. For a time Agnes stood quietly in the shadow of the broken basilica, under the bell-tower. At length, alone, she turned back to her cot.

She found someone already there, and that was Mielusine.

‘Master Aengus was following me,’ the Maid told her, ‘and I feeling sorry for him. It wasn’t that way I wanted to be meeting him. You told me he was dangerous, but he seemed a lost little boy. This hall seemed the best hiding place, so I asked after your bed.’

‘Do not go,’ breathed Agnes. ‘The other girls must be about their duties, but let us rest together as we did before, the way I’m so lonely. I also was thinking of him, and the pain of it lingers, it lingers in me. Sweet Mielusine, will you forgive me for goading you to what I would have had you do?’

‘Dearest Agnes, I missed you.’ They hugged each other, and then, still in their fine gowns white by black they lay together in the little cot, holding tight.

‘Mielusine, would you be going from here?’ whispered Agnes. ‘I am going, but you may stay if you like.’

‘No, I’m going. But we cannot leave Master Aengus.’

‘No. Eudemarec will help us rescue him.’

But they neither of them saw the Breton in the darkneses that followed. He was the lady’s champion, and she hardly let him leave her apartments; he wasn’t eager to go, either.

At length Arianna had herself arrayed: paraded Eudemarec down the crescent stair, and in front of all put on his finger the moon ring, pressing back his finger. Then Mielusine drew him aside, where he spoke with them both in private.

‘Is he alive, now,’ said he, ‘and I didn’t kill him? But that’s the finest news! Surely I’ll help you!’ He was too happy to deny them anything. He even agreed to say nothing to Arianna.

So it fell out, that on the brightness of the Moon, when Arianna lay dreaming the deepest of dreams, Eudemarec dressed himself, kissed her hand, and tiptoed down the stair.

But Agnes couldn’t help herself, and she was drawn back into Maid Buan’s chambers, using the key she had made. She had to look one last time into the glass on the wall there.

It was quiet in those rooms. Agnes stepped up to the wall and drew back the black velvet hangings, uncovering the ornate carvings of the frame and the dim silvery shine of the glass. She looked deeply within. And after a time she was whispering to herself old words out of the deep of her soul:

... set all the eyes

Of court a-fire, like a burning glass,

And work them into cinders, when the jewels

*Of twenty states adorn thee, and the light
Strikes out the stars!*

She stopped then, the way she felt another presence: cast her look about, and saw Maid Buan standing in the door naked in her bedshift.

Agnes let the hangings fall, but the maid caught them and took her hand and kissed it.

‘Is it true, now?’ asked Maid Buan in a whisper. ‘Was it the same sight I saw in the glass, as yourself were seeing?’

‘What sight did you see?’ asked Agnes.

‘I saw – but it couldn’t be you! But it’s truth and nothing else this glass will show! Here now, let me look, and you look also, and tell me what you see of me!’ And she cast up the hangings and stood before the glass. Agnes looked there with her.

She saw there a face, and it was like the maid's face.

It was a face *like* the maid's face, only stuffed and swollen up with pride and daunting haughtiness, cold and repellent. Agnes for shame looked away, and Maid Buan let the hangings fall.

'But you, in the mirror, now,' the maid was murmuring, 'you were so – so beautiful! Are you truly so fine and so flawless as that?'

'No, it's only the artistry of the glass, and I'm no more than you're seeing now before you.'

The maid was shaking her head. 'This,' she answered, 'is the artistry of the glass, that it shows back what's more true than the eye can see. And every moonrise I'm gazing into it, and looking for some betterment, but every moonrise it shows me the truth of myself, and how vain and empty a showhorse I am. Tell me now, seamstress, what are you, that you are unparalleled in the glass, and yet you toil here as a servant? How is it you achieved such beauty, and can you not help me to be overcoming that thing, that thing, now – what you saw there in the glass?'

Agnes was silent, turning it over in her mind. Then she smiled kindly and said, 'I'll do what I can do for you, and the rest you must be doing for yourself. All right?'

‘Yes, yes,’ answered Maid Buan.

Agnes took the maid by the hand. ‘Come,’ she said.

And she led the maid into her bedchamber, and led her into her bed. The moon glow was falling strongly through the windows, the way the maid’s rooms were high up in the tower, and near to the thinnest layer of the mist.

Right away Maid Buan’s eyes closed in the moonlight, and her face lost its lines of troubling, and her breathing grew slower and deeper. Agnes sat on a stool beside the bed, and she lay three flowers alongside the maid’s head, of the rose that blooms in the night, and the hidden rose, and the Lady’s rose. And she stroked the maid’s hand, and breathed along with her breath for breath. The perfume of the roses lay thick about the bed, but Agnes could see, that though the maid rested deeply, she wasn’t dreaming. Agnes leaned in over the maid’s face, deep into the pillow of scent of the roses, and she whispered three words in Maid Buan’s ear, softly like a secret: ‘You may remember.’

The maid’s hand clutched Agnes’ tightly, and her breathing stopped and started. Agnes could see her in dreaming, and softly she let go the maid’s hand and slipped out of the chamber.

* * *

Now in the middle of that moon Maid Buan's eyes open, and she rises up out of her bed and summons her serving-girl. She orders the girl to put over her Maid Buan's cloak, the dark one, heavy and hooded.

Then she takes her mask and goes out of her chambers, and steps down the Hundred Steps and a Step, and no one is there to meet her.

Maid Buan goes out through the great doors, that are hanging open, and that is strange, the way they are never open when the lady lies resting, and her abbey sleeps. But now they are.

And Maid Buan walks out to the landing, where a Swan boat is standing waiting, with a boatman, and his head is bowed, and his face is muffled, so naught of his features are to be seen. Maid Buan steps into the Swan boat, and the boatman shifts with his pole, and the Swan boat slips from the shore of the crannog in the mist.

Around the lough the boatman guides the Swan boat. Maid Buan lifts her head, and she sees the abbey all white in the mist, turning about before her eyes. Three times they go about the abbey, soft, stealthy, smooth, and there is no person at all to be seen on the shore, only the white buildings of the abbey turning in the mist.

And never has it shone so beautifully in the maid's eyes before now, the way her breath catches

in her throat.

Now after the third time round the shore the boatman guides the Swan boat to the landing, and Maid Buan steps up ashore again.

She walks up to the great doors of the abbey, and now they are shut before her. There is a serving-girl there working, cleaning the bronze and carvings. And this girl is the first soul Maid Buan has seen since leaving her chambers.

Maid Buan, she goes up to the girl, and hands her her mask, and says to her,

‘Now let you be the Maid, and let me be taking your place.’

The girl says not a word, but she takes the mask, and Maid Buan’s heavy cloak, and the maid puts on the girl’s homespun dress.

The girl she goes away, and Maid Buan now is all alone, and a Maid about the place no longer. And she takes the rags in her hand, and she touches them to the bronze and the carvings of the great doors, and she sets herself to cleaning them.

And when the Moon rose next, and the light of the Moon glowed in the mist again, Buan was done with her work for that darkness, and she went to where she knew the serving-girls slept, and she found the cot of that girl who wore the mask of Maid Buan in

the chambers high above. Buan lay herself down and rested, and when the Moon sank again she rose up and went to the great doors, and she cleaned them again.

There was a carving in the door, and it a girl's head, very lovely, but made green and dark by the mists of the lough. Each darkness Buan was cleaning that carving, and it coming lighter and more burnished under the touch of her hand, and that work did Buan's soul good, and was setting her at peace with her heart. She loved that carving and that face, and the great doors, and what she did with them.

Now as to the Bacach, he had shut himself up in his rooms those darknesses, and was searching the stars in his telescope. His ate little but drank deeply, of the rainwater that fell in buckets on the bell-tower roof. But sometimes when the Moon was brightest, he crept about the forsaken lawns, looking for the hind.

Servants came and left him food. They came in silence and darkness, the way they were not disturbing him. The Bacach hardly noticed them. But when one of them opened the door loudly, and held a glaring candle before her, the candle burned his eyes; he cursed her and bade her begone.

'I will begone, and you will be gone along with

me,' she answered. 'Master Aengus, come.'

She was in white, and she wore the body of a woman, but she was the White Hind.

He climbed down out of the sky, slowly.

'You are here,' he said. 'You are real.'

She held out her hand to him. He took it: there was no substance in it. His frozen, nerveless fingers felt nothing.

They went down onto the lawn. Agnes was waiting there.

'How is he?' she asked. 'Aengus, how goes it with you?'

'I'm numb,' he answered, looking on his White Hind.

'Here is Eudemarec,' whispered Mielusine.

The Breton stopped short at the sight of Agnes. 'Why, what new metamorphosis is this?' he asked.

Agnes smiled and bowed to him. Her hair was clubbed in a queue, and she wore a tricorn hat, boots, breeches, and waistcoat beneath a cóta mór. 'Don't I make a pretty boy? I learned well enough how skirts and silks fare on the road.'

Eudemarec laughed.

'You have a familiar look to me,' said the Bacach.

'Don't you know me?' asked Eudemarec.

'No.'

‘I am the man who killed you.’

‘Ah,’ said the Bacach.

‘And are you really the love-mad Irish farmer, put out the sun? Are you Master Aengus, indeed?’

‘I am the Bacach. I draw the cards for Arianna.’

‘You must draw mine some time.’

The man reached into his pocket and drew out a card at hazard on his fingertips. The Breton turned it over: it showed a man walking the road, his belongings slung on his shoulder, a pup nipping at his heels. ‘*Il Matto*,’ Eudemarec read. ‘What does it mean?’

‘It means, farewell,’ answered the Bacach.

Mielusine murmured, nervously, ‘Let us be going.’

They passed under the abbey in silence, to the mooring pole and Swan Boats.

‘One we will take, and the rest burn,’ Agnes said. ‘They’ll not soon be on our trail.’

‘That is not the way,’ spoke a voice from the darkness.

‘Who’s there?’ asked Eudemarec.

‘Let you not harm him, he is a friend,’ said Agnes.

He came out of the blackness north of the abbey, walking slowly, like a heron, he was so tall and lean. His smile was crooked as his legs.

‘Greetings, Miss,’ he said sardonically.

‘Mary bless you, Mac Bride,’ she answered. ‘And what brings you out under the fullness of the Moon?’

‘Ah, as to that,’ he murmured, in a sing song tone, with a long sideways look at the Bacach, ‘It was ever my pleasure to be strolling by the lakeside. But what have we here? Is it a war-party I’m looking on?’

‘We’re leaving, Mac Bride.’

‘Then have a fair voyage, Miss, and Mary speed you to your destination!’

‘Mac Bride, Master Aengus is going with us.’

At that the old countryman turned, looking from the face of the Bacach to Mielusine’s mask. ‘Is he, now?’ he muttered.

‘Don’t try to stop us, old man,’ warned Eudemarec. He put a pistol to Mac Bride’s breast. ‘It wouldn’t be worth the pain of it, you see.’

‘Stop it now, and put aside the gun!’ cried Agnes sharply. ‘Mac Bride, Aengus is a dead man here in this place. We’re taking him off to restore him to himself. Will you help us?’

‘You’d never be doing it this way,’ he told her. ‘The lady knows this scheme already; she had it in a dream. The fire will rouse them, and they’ll be on your trail before you lose sight of the crannog.’

‘It’s a gamble we’re ready to take,’ said the Breton.

‘Is there another way for it?’ asked Agnes.

The old countryman looked on her quietly, in the strangest way. He was on the very verge of speaking, and yet holding his tongue.

From one of the windows a light gleamed, and the casement swung out. In the candlelight Agnes knew the face of Old Meg, looking down on them all with an evil intent. For a moment she stared; then ducked away back into the hall.

‘Please, Mac Bride,’ pleaded Agnes. ‘We haven’t the time. You helped him once with a good heart. Can you stand by now, and be his jailer?’

He said, very gently, ‘Your heart has changed, Miss.’

‘You are lovely,’ said the Bacach to Mielusine. ‘You’ll not run from me again, will you?’

A door banged open in the servants’ building, and three burly men approached. They were Arianna’s ferrymen, roused by Meg. ‘What are you doing there?’ they demanded. At the sight of the Bacach they scowled. It was worth the worst of Arianna’s wrath to let the Bacach get away off the lough. Ever since he had been killed in the duel across the lough, this was her strictest command.

‘Be at ease,’ said Eudemarec calmly, showing

them the ring. 'I am her champion. She sends me to escort these three into the forest and show them the right path.'

'Lady Arianna said he wasn't to go. Only Arianna can say anything other than that.'

'Oh, I think I can show you the fallacy in your argument,' answered Eudemarec, and drew out a brace of pistols, leveled at their belts.

'Now,' he said coolly, 'there are three of you, and I've but the two pistols; so if you have the blood of Turks, you may yet overpower me and fulfill your command, which I maintain is a false one, the way it's herself is sending me here. But then two of you will die with balls in your bellies. Choose between you which, for 'tis a matter of indifference to me.'

The ferrymen stood glaring at him.

'Well, then,' said Eudemarec after a bit: 'if you want to live, stand over by the mooring pole, and untie the boat.'

'This is not the way,' said Mac Bride. 'Leave them and their boats, the way others will be coming to work on them, and the alarm will soon be sounding.'

'Is there another way?' asked Agnes.

The countryman nodded. 'There is one.'

They trooped along the crannog, the countryman and Agnes, the ferrymen, Eudemarec, Mielu-

sine and the Bacach. They passed the casino, the Lady Chapel, and the servants' quarters. They rounded the basilica and went quietly past the byre, where the blood hounds whined and scratched the earth at the sight of Eudemarec. Close to Arianna's garden, the lean old man stopped.

He sat on his heels over the water, and fished in it a little with his long, bony hand. It was the candle burning in the eyes of himself, was giving him the strangest look.

'It was long ago, long,' he told them. 'When the crannog was built, we made a secret causeway, the way we would never be needing boats if we hadn't any, if we had the wisdom. We piled up stones almost to the surface of the water, deep enough so as not to be seen by the eye, and following a tortuous path. My daughter used it once of a time,' he said. Then he stretched out his arm and took her hand. 'Tis a path I know; feel it now, and don't be forgetting.'

With his fingernail almost cutting her palm, Mac Bride traced in Agatha's hand the twisting and the turning of the causeway out of the crannog. The flesh of her palm was streaked white like lightning, showing the path.

'There's no need for this, you know,' she told him. 'Come with us, Mac Bride. We'll have use for

you.'

But the old man shook his head. 'I'll not be such a traitor, Miss. And this is the way of it, if you want to win Aengus for yourself, it's you must do the doing of it, not I. Go on then, and let her bless you! The boy was ever a soft point in my heart. It runs in the family, as you might say.'

'Eudemarec, at least let you be coming with us,' she begged. 'Arianna will hold it against you.'

'I will win her round, never fear,' he said with a grin. 'She is not evil. I would know evil in her. Neither is she good. She dwells with beauty, and beauty has its own law. She'll not betray her love. And if she does . . . why, then I lose the wager! It would be worse to see her no more.'

'If you are going, go now,' said Mac Bride. 'Look to the Moon, how high she is.'

With that, the old man left them, back into the abbey, and did there whatever it was that he did. Mac Bride kept his own accounts.

'Bless you, old friend,' called Agnes after him.

She dipped her booted foot into the lough, probing: found the causeway stones. She slogged forward, splashing; behind her came Mielusine, holding her skirts in one hand and Agnes' hand in the other. The Bacach followed them awkwardly into the dark water.

Step after step, turning upon turning: they walked upon the water deeper and deeper into the lough, like three magicians.

‘Go with my love, Agnes,’ called Eudemarec after them softly, watching the three of them whitely blending into mist. ‘Win back the memory of your lover, the way he cannot know you but love you.’

He turned back to the ferrymen. He leaned against the wall of her garden, looking them up and down. ‘’Tis the brightness of the Moon,’ he said. ‘A long one. You’ve not by any chance got a pack of cards about you, do you?’

All that moon Eudemarec held the three ferrymen captive; and Agnes and Mielusine led the Bacach past his grave up through the orchards. Along the way they passed a small ring of hand-small stones set in a vantage point. The paths were beaten bare through the white snow, and Agnes climbing easily and swiftly. But the man with his limp could go but haltingly, and the women had often to help him.

When the Moon set they took a bit of rest, then started on their way again. They went on after moonrise, while the brightness passed over their heads. They had climbed very high by then, and were close to the end of the mist.

But when the Moon sank, then the man fell on

his knees for very weariness, clutching at his thigh.

‘Get up, come along,’ urged Agnes.

‘He cannot be going any more,’ answered Mielusine, ‘And we’ve not the strength to carry him.’

‘Do you not,’ said Agnes, ‘see that we are at the very edge of this county of mist? I can see stars over my head, where the mist is thin! – But what sound is that, now? Merciful Mary!’

This was the way the Lady Arianna rose out of her dreams, with a rich slow stretching and coaxing of blood back into her limbs. She was smiling to be thinking of her new beloved; but she found the room empty beside herself.

Down she looked from her window to the Swan boats, and knew something was amiss.

Eudemarec met her at the casino door with the ferrymen at his back. He hid nothing from her, and confessed all.

‘Did I not deny you this already?’ she asked him coldly. He had broken his promise to Agnes, you see, and spoken of it to the lady after all. ‘Well, but I will forgive you the one naughtiness; after all, timid men are none to my liking. Your fault will be undone, though, the way I will be finding him and bringing him back to me; as for these women, now, I don’t care what befalls them, so long as it is none

of it good. And what will you do now, Eudemarec, to make this up to me?’

He smiled, and kissed her palm. When the darkness was ending, they went up to her chambers, and were no more seen. She was very tender with him that time, and wept tears over him in her joy.

But when Eudemarec woke out of a dream by moonlight, he saw that Arianna’s ring was no longer his. His fingers were bare. Then an overmastering fear took him, and he left her side, even as Gwangior had done and fifty others before him, and he fled into the wild orchards after Agnes and Mielusine.

Behind the Breton a dark man covered in a tricorn and a dark gray cóta mór took another Swan boat and rowed himself across the lough. He stepped atop a hill into the ring of hand-small stones, and watched the Breton fleeing.

The Moon sank, and the darkness gleamed off the face of the waters of mist lapping the tall abbey. Arianna rose, and called her girls, and had them bring her hunting dress.

‘It is her pack,’ said the lame man, listening. ‘It is the lady’s blood hounds, and Arianna is hunting again.’

The sound gave back some strength to him, the way it was taking his thoughts away from his leg. He

stood up, flanked by the woman and the White Hind on the hill side, looking back down into the mists. The baying and the howling of hounds were growing through the ghostly trees.

‘They are coming this way,’ whispered Mielusine through her mask. ‘Are they hunting us?’

‘It may be,’ said the man. ‘It may be the lady. She wants a new blood hound.’

‘Come on, then,’ begged Agnes, plucking at their sleeves.

They went on their way as best they could. Mielusine was leading the way, her strong thighs easily pushing away the ice. It was the man who stumbled, on nothing at all, at the very lip of the ridge, with the waves of mist breaking just over their heads. And ever behind them was swelling the baying of the hounds, to a frenzy.

And blending with the hounds’ cries another howling reached their ears: inhuman, from a human throat.

‘Eudemarec!’ moaned Agnes.

Mielusine was stilled, and the Bacach bent back his head, kneeling below her white skirts. But Agnes, weeping and cursing at her friend’s fate, plucked at their coats, and pulled them up and after her.

‘Let you be hurrying, let us go on,’ she said

moaning, 'we must go on out of this awful deadly mist.'

So they fled out of that county. And in the dark of the moon a hundred riders sallied forth, passing with wild whoops of joy beneath the branches of the orchards, out into the bare land on the lady's greatest of all kailees, to hunt down and fetch back her Bacach, no matter how long it would be taking them. The moonbeams made a path for the robbers to be following, and there was only Grain's shore where the lovers might be finding haven. But they had never heard of Grain as yet.

The man in the dark gray cóta mór saw Eudemarec's end, and the pack of hounds scattering back down to the lough. He watched all that with a grim face, showing no more concern than a hanging judge.

Then he stood and slung the old quiver and bow across his shoulders, and took up the lovers' trail.

9. Of the Dwellers in the Night

IN THE LAST summer of Day, while the King's men tracked down Master Aengus, the ripe hay grass in the fields the countryfolk worked for the good of their landlords had shaken in the wind. The grass had shaken because it was tall. It had shaken because it would not be tall for long.

In the Night the kings were dead. The houses of parliament stood empty. The lords that did not lie abed sleeping stood begging on the open roads. Generals and admirals gave their orders to the winds. The seas were empty but for the most desperate of men, and they half piratical. Princes of the church fared no better than their brothers of the state. The Wakeful trusted more strongly in the good people in the mead than in the gods in the cathedrals, now open to wind and rain. Mary was worshipped, but as if she had been Morgan or Aphrodite.

In Day, the Sun had showed what was, and what had been, and what must be. In the dark

there was only the suggestion of what could be, what might have been, and what yet may come. The contrast fed ambitions. Now there was a choice.

In Day some, like Master Aengus, had carried their darkness about with them. Now all those who had lived through the fire had made their peace with darkness. And in the bargain, darkness had showed them – wonderful things.

It was a transfiguration not only of the world, but of the men as well.

In Day, what had they done? Plowed fields, sowed seeds, dried hay, dug roots, mined peat, fished the deep, stocked cellars, wove and sowed, cooked, ate, spoke of the old subjects, fed fires against the cold. Each of them penned in by what he did, how much land he owned or tilled, what his church was, what tongue he spoke, who his father had been, and his father's father. . . In the Night all that was forgotten.

The children showed them the way. The children loved the Night, the way all those children who had bad dreams in darkness were sleeping; and the waking children never knew a better holiday, and laughed, and took the grownups by the hand, and were showing them the way.

It was as though all those Wakeful had paused: stood still in their forward-going, let the towers of

the world come crashing down, and looked about them out of altered eyes, pondering what they might build out of moon-painted fields.

Nowhere was this felt more strongly than among Tinkers.

The Tinker had known the Night of old. Not for him was working the day long like the tenants, and sleeping through the night to be strong for more work. The Tinker owned the open roads, and slept beneath the stars, and watched the wild winds tearing the dark cold nights of winter. The Tinker had been waiting for the dark. Tinker lads and lasses were born with the dark in their blood.

Their grandparents had ruled these hills and rocks. Once they had been masters. Then foreigners had come from the sea, there had been battles and blood, and the old masters were struck down into bondage. In time new foreigners had come from the sea, and again there had been battles and blood, and the old masters struck down into bondage.

Seven times it had happened in the Irish land. Seven new races of masters, seven new races of slaves.

Only a few of those beaten never submitted, but they went into the hills, into the bogs, and into the wild heart of the land. They built their houses on wheels, the way no land was left them that would not

soon be taken back away from them. They lived by their wits and their courage, and spat on the roadside when anyone spoke of the Law. And they were known as Tinkers, though many a folk called them *Clan Ulcin*, that is to say, the Children of Evil.

Now in the Night amongst all the Wakeful the Tinkers were sowing bawdy songs, whispers of unspeakable deeds, and willful desires; and they were plowing darkness over those dreaming fields, dressing them to bear what was never known before. Animals dream only when they sleep, and so had the cottagers done, forgetting their dreams in daylight.

There was no more daylight now, thanks to Master Aengus and his mad love.

It was a rarity of Ireland, the Innis Fodhla, that so many of her tramps were descended from her former rulers, dispossessed and hunted, too stubborn or proud to leave. They were the gleanings left behind by invasion, war and rebellion. And if the cottagers had forgotten their heritage, their heritage had not been forgetting them.

And now the cottagers were dreaming with open eyes as the Tinkers had done, and breathing in the hot smoke of the Tinkers' open wild fires.

And it was as if Black Eden had come back to Innis Fodhla, and they were freed after a thousand years of servitude.

And through it all the dark man in his cóta mór, the Man Who Should Have Slept, went walking with his longbow and quiver across his shoulders, shaking his head and muttering, 'Shame, now! Shame, shame, shame!'

Then he bent his head, and took up again the traces of the lovers' trail.

Part V
The Waning of the Moon

1. How They Fled

ACROSS silver fields beneath ice-clad stars, Agnes and Mielusine led the Bacach, down to the western coast, after what was left of the roads of day. They entered into lowlands empty and still beneath the Moon. The winds were frosty out of the north, though Imbolc came soon enough and Brigid's fires, and by the reckoning of Day Winter's end was nearing. Powdery snow was still falling, even in the lowlands, even on the coast, turning the black land white.

All that season they were fleeing, fleeing through the snow, fleeing over ice. Now and again they would be stopping on hills or lookout points. Through the lands below they could see bands of bright-hued riders, women and men, roving through the fields: the lost nobility of the Night: Firbolgs, Tuatha de Danaan, Celts, Normans, Tinkers and robbers, and every blessed one of them Arianna's.

All those folk were scouring the lands for the Bacach; once they almost caught him, and were rid-

ing over the bridge Agnes hid him under. Mielusine's horns were scraping the old stones over their heads, and the pounding of hooves ringing in their ears, and the man shaking for cold, the way the ice was swimming round his socks. Agnes coughed until a dark red stained her sleeve.

She led them up higher, on the moors. She led them over the spines of the Sliabh-na-Mban. There were no Wakeful there. Now and again they were finding a broken-down farm, and Agnes was digging spuds and turnips for them. Even so they were starving.

Cold waxed that summer, colder still. The Snow-Cold Summer that summer was called, by those that Woke in it. Agnes swore it had never been so cold in Ireland in Day. And if the Sun did not return, she knew, colder and colder each summer would burn, until all the world was frozen dead as ice, and Arianna ruled over a frozen waste.

Dotting the white fields were the standing stones, left there from long ago, the way that they were called the beds of Diarmid and Grainne. In hollows of such stones, out of the snow, they lay down all three together, overlapping their coats. To Agnes the cold was a bright knife in her lungs, cutting her with coughing. As for Mielusine, though herself was healthy, her splendid white dress was trailing tat-

ters, and she looking the ghost in her mask.

Always, Mielusine wore the mask of the White Hind upon her face. Only when the man lay dreaming would Agnes let Mielusine put off the mask.

‘But he’s only the worse for it,’ said Mielusine. ‘His love is turning into longing from such closeness. It’s in his eyes, have you not seen it? It’s an enchantment growing over me like sin. When he’s looking at me, he’s seeing something else.’

‘When you’re wearing it he adores you, and is that so dreadful? But let you be fighting the enchantment his eyes are weaving for you, or you’ll be lost for ever.’

‘’Tis only the mask he loves, and never me at all.’ But in her heart Mielusine was wondering.

‘Black and red and white are the colors of my love,’ the man was singing, as they trudged along their way.

‘Red and black and white is she.

White is her body, pale as the
Snow of one night;

And red is her collar of red gold and her
horns,

That are redder than crushed fox-glove;

And black are her eyes with the riddle of
skies.

‘Black and red and white are the colors of
my love,
Red and black and white is she.
My love will wear no colors,
Only black, only white;
But when she is red, then there is no color
Anywhere else in the world.’

So the long cold darkness wore on, with never
an end of fleeing for them, chased after by all the
mighty of the Night.

There was a snow falling, and they sitting under another bridge upon a stream of ice. Mielusine lay dreaming of food; Agnes sat up waking with the man, they both of them looking on the dancer in her dreams.

It is the mask, Agnes was thinking. But she knew better.

The Maid had been just the proper sort of prettiness, in her coloring, her form, and her heart. Herself, Agnes, had polished her into the consummation Aengus would have most desired. She’d foreseen this end from its beginning. She’d meant for it to happen. But still she envied Mielusine, the way she was yet beautiful, and the end of his desire.

‘Aengus,’ she whispered. ‘Aengus.’

‘Yes?’

‘Do you know that you are Master Aengus then, and not the Bacach?’

‘I know that is how you are calling me.’

‘Do you still remember nothing?’

‘I have visions, and perhaps they are coming from the past, and perhaps they are yet to be.’

‘And do you remember how you cursed me? You cursed me with desire for you, when you put out the Sun.’

‘Aye, so you have told me.’

‘It is truth,’ she said, and kissed him.

It was only his mouth against hers she was feeling, and not a kiss at all. He was longing for the White Hind, and she could never be that for him.

‘Do not be crying, Agnes,’ he said softly. And it was hating him surely that she was then.

It snowed blackness for a long while round that bridge. A fit of coughing shook Agnes, near breaking her ribs. The man lay down dreaming, and Agnes bent over the girl, tugging off the mask. She was looking at it a long while.

When the clouds broke and the moon whitened the world again, Agnes told Mielusine to put the mask on.

‘Do you know where you are leading us?’ asked the dancer. ‘Where there is a town, and people, and

warmth?’

‘Go back to Lough Mask then, and your rich life in the abbey if you’re unhappy.’

‘I cannot be wearing this mask any more. It is so heavy it will choke me!’

‘You’re whimpering like a child, can’t you at least be still?’

In the end, Mielusine would not wear the mask. She put it off, and let him see her face. It seemed to make no difference to the man.

Hard was the going in the snow, deep as it was. It was caking to their shoes, and the ground underneath ragged and treacherous.

Agnes came to her senses. ‘What’s that I’m seeing?’

‘Is it will o’ the wisps?’ asked the maid.

‘No,’ said the man, ‘those are *her* folk.’

Wan yellow lights were flickering and weaving down the slopes to the left of them, to the right of them, before them and behind. Now Agnes could see them clearly. They were lanterns. In a great narrowing ring the bandits and minxes were closing on them. A shout reached their ears, followed by a pistol shot. One of the bandits had seen them.

In bounds the bandits’ horses were climbing the snows, kicking up drifts behind them.

The yellow lanterns were swinging by the saddles, and the dark cloaks of the horsewomen and horsemen billowing in the winds, and their black scarves over their faces showing only their eyebrows and piercing, wicked eyes. Closer and closer they came.

They rode the hill side, sweeping it in circles, until they'd covered it all, and not a cat's space was untrodden by their horses' hooves. But they met only one another, and none of those three. The bandits and minxes looked one another in the eye, fiercely; then they laughed, relishing the chase, and raced away down the hill towards the nearest wood, a small crop of black in the white waste.

It was the man of the three, had found the low mound underneath the snow with a little tunnel leading into it. The tunnel was lined with undressed stones, and at its end a little round chamber. The man gathered oddments of dry turf there with moss and leaves and grass, and started a fire. The ruddy flames were cheering Mielusine, and she smiling for the first time since Arianna's masquerade.

'It's faster our clothing would be drying if we took it off,' said Agnes.

'That would be immodest,' protested Mielusine.

'Since when did a dancer complain of modesty?'

‘Do not be speaking to her in such a voice,’ commanded the man.

Agnes was that disgusted with them, she went out into a hollow in the snow on the hill side. Where she coughed, and hugged herself for warmth, and kept a lookout for bandits. She felt at her belt under her cóta mór, where she’d hidden a scian dagger. The clouds were clearing, and she looked into the stars, and they the stars of Lughnasadh.

‘Lughnasadh, and here I am sitting in snow, and not a blade of green grass to be seen,’ she said. And she looked out across the land.

Soon enough in spite of the snow, she could see firelights burning from every hilltop. Round the fires the robbers were gathering, lured there by the Tinkers to their old, wicked rites. For a time at least the three would be safe.

Alone, hugging her knees to her breasts, Agnes was shivering, and at length her eyes closed, and she was resting.

It was the first time the man and Mielusine had been alone together, since the masquerade. . .

Agnes was dreaming of Aengus and the dancer inside the hill. She was seeing the Maid sitting by the fire, and she was seeing Aengus looking on the Maid.

There was a silence in the barrow. Those two

had nothing to be saying to each other.

At the first, Mielusine would be looking away from Aengus' gaze. She would not wish to acknowledge him so openly. At length she would look side-long at him: and seeing his look, and his piebald body, red and white, she could not help but smile. He would smile too.

Agnes saw the whole of it in her dream. She knew them both so well, the way she had lived alongside one from two years' time, the way she had taught the other every look and manner to be having with a man.

The dancer would have risen then, and glanced down on her ruined dress. Surely it was in a sorry state! And shyly Mielusine would remove it, turning her back, her shoulder veiling her mouth, hiding its secrets. Quickly she'd shiver on her other dress, the red, red dress, that would be crimsoning all the barrow even to the fire. She would be feeling warmer then, less timid, less reserved.

Her own beauty would be seducing her as much as anything Aengus might think or do. But she would be thinking to herself, What is it he sees, looking on me so? It was in her own eyes, herself as no longer Mielusine, but as the Hind, that magical creature of all his dreams and longings. What a trap that was!

He was very near to her. There was that wonder in his eyes. With one fire-warmed finger he traced a line down her brow, past her ear, down her throat, to the hollow of her collar.

Mielusine shuddered at that touch, even as herself, Agnes, had once on a time shuddered at it, and felt the tingle of it descending into the hollow of her breasts.

He was holding the mask before her. Perhaps that slight movement of her head was but the last wave of her shudder. He put the mask onto her, and she did not deny him. Her dark eyes peered out childishly from the cutout eyes.

It was afraid she was then, as Agnes had not been on the falling of the Night, all at once afraid: of him and of his eyes, of his longing for the thing she was not, of the touch of his hands on her body.

And Mielusine would be remembering what herself, Agnes, had told her, long ago in her lessons:

‘Do not stop for fear. It is the very sign of love, fear is. Passion will mark you and change you forever, it’s that you’ll be fearing. A great lady will feel fear the first time, the first time it is real. She’ll not be flinching for that, but she’ll seize the nettle every time. It’s that that makes her great.’

So the Maid would only shiver, not deny, as Aengus laid bare her body, pale and soft and deli-

cate as new-fallen snow.

Her skin gleaming roselike in the fire. The floral scent of her escaping from captivity, mingling with the smoke. And Aengus drinking it in. Mielusine sighing, leaning back, and raising her arms above her head.

She was in a sort of Mesmeric trance. She felt her heart beating through the long veins of her throat, but her senses were numb to all else but his touch, and the physical possession of his gaze. Aengus reached up and touched, ever so lightly, the insides of her tiny wrists. How he'd loved doing so to Agatha's wrists! He ran his hands like silent snowfalls down along the outside of her arms. Mielusine would feel every one of the invisible, downy hairs of her arms responding to the passing fingertips.

As to Aengus now, he would love the delicate, fragrant hairs that flowered in the rounded hollows underneath her arms. He'd be loving the slender, arching throat. The tiny, half-buried breasts and their burning tips. The limbs stretching out long and glimmering, and quivering chastely at his touch, as if shivering at some sudden chill.

He would kiss her open lips beneath the mask, and she clutching his hair in her hands would force him hard and deep down on her lips; and when at last she let him break that kiss, then Mielusine

would sigh, and a single note would escape her lips, sweet and pure as a child's, like the note she'd sung on the dark road way.

Agnes heard that note. Even out on the hill side in the snow, she heard it.

With eyes shut fast she saw it, all and all of it. It was as if herself, Agnes, lay in Master Aengus' arms beside the fire. She envied Mielusine Aengus' love; envied Aengus his perfect, foolish passion.

She bore the dancer no ill heart. It was the White Hind she was hating, the way it was the Hind truly possessing Aengus, and the Hind her only rival.

'Och, Aengus,' she groaned into her knees, 'Aengus, now has your name become Agony to me. . .'

She coughed another red spot into her palm. She lay in a ball inside her coat, and at last she dreamed again.

When she roused herself the Moon was sinking, and a flock of black birds flying against it. The need-fires were dark and dead. Agnes found something in the snow beside her.

It was the mask of the White Hind.

When she ventured down into the barrow, she found Aengus lying in his somber clothing by the

gray ashes. Mielusine was gone. The red dress was still there, folded up neatly as though she'd never put it on.

2. Of Their Quarreling

THEY WENT on their way, the two of them, the man and Agnes. They followed the dancer's tracks in the snow.

'Where is the White Hind?' he was asking. And she answering, 'Gone ahead, and left you this mask. We're to follow.'

'But why did she not take me along?'

'The White Hind flies like the wind when she's a mind to, and you are slow, and lame. Take care, or I'll leave you too.'

They sat under a hedge. Above them three dark women went past against the stars, speaking Gaeilgte on a hill.

Aengus lay dreaming, and Agnes went apart and tried on the mask. But she couldn't squeeze her face through the narrow opening.

From his dreams the man rose groaning, tears rolling down his cheek like ink.

'I dreamt I saw the White Hind,' he told her. 'She was going down a lane, and mayflies swam in

the light like gold dust. There was a dark man beside the Hind. He was leading her by a leash tied to her golden collar, and they were going away from me. They were beautiful together. O Man, I hate you. You have the White Hind, you alone of all, and you boast of it.'

'Aengus, what befell when you tried to summon back the Sun?'

'It was some place by the Sea. I was forbidden entrance. Oh, I cannot recall.'

'Bring back the Sun, Aengus. You swore you would. I put that task on you.'

He did not answer.

Along the way they came by the side of a curious house, tall and crooked. In the topmost window one light was burning, and Agnes was leading him away from that place, when the door creaked open, and someone came out after them, calling 'Agnes! Agnes!'

She went back to the house. The doorway was dark, but the stars glinting off the snow showed a figure standing there, gathered up in black folds. The figure moved – it was a woman, after all: dressed all in black, veiled in black lace, and only her bosom bare.

'Agnes,' she called, 'Agnes, girl, is it you?'

‘Yes,’ she answered.

Lady Ann the cottager once, the Lady-trollop now, took her aside and spoke quick words to her.

‘Agnes, you must go with soft steps. I’ve sent my man out to be finding you, and here you are on my doorstep! There’s someone tracking you, and he means you no good by the look of him. Only six moons past he was here, eating off my platters, and drinking my ale, and talking away. Be careful, now, he’s surely near here!’

‘Who is it?’ she asked.

‘Why,’ answered Lady Ann, ‘it’s the Man Who Should Have Slept, to be sure! Didn’t you know he was no friend to you and yours?’

‘No,’ she answered, ‘but I thank you for the warning.’

‘Let her bless you, my girl! If it weren’t for you I’d never been a lady!’ But already Lady Ann’s voice was softened by the snow, the way Agnes was hurrying back on her tracks, and thankfully finding the man still leaning upon the broken tree. She took his hand, and led him away as quickly as he might go.

They followed the dancer’s tracks in the snow. In a valley, the footsteps were covered by the tracks of many horses; and on a stony hill where the wind had blown away the snow, they lost the trail.

‘I know where she has gone,’ said Agnes. But she led him away from where they had been following. Meek as a child he followed her.

‘Aengus,’ she called back to him.

‘Yes.’ It was no more than a whisper, that voice of his.

‘What day would it be, if we still had days?’

He looked up at the stars. ‘August the twenty seventh.’

‘And it’s winter, still?’

‘Yes.’

‘What is happening? What’s become of the world?’

‘It’s Night, and the Lady is pining for her Baccach.’

Mostly the snows they were light, but some were heavy and drifting. Trails vanished beneath them and the going was gallous heavy.

And little they knew of it, but wherever they went they were followed, and wherever they stopped they were watched from the hilltop behind them. The tall gaunt man buttoned up his cóta mór against the snows, and silently tracked the lovers.

One darkness she left Aengus sleeping, and she went around a wood. She climbed a snow-clad wall, and looked across a rising of fields in a coat of silver

and snow. Looked, and there beyond a hedge she saw the high stone manor house that she had left.

It was silent and dark beneath the snow. There were no lights, no scent of smoke. Inside, the rich men and their ladies, all of the Lady Agatha's friends, were sleeping still in their beds. The thickness of their sleeping wrapt around the house and its grounds.

Round the grounds some riders were riding, and they wearing the black and scarlet cloaks of the county of mist. But she got past them, and slipped up the hedge alongside the snow-covered drive.

And she was thinking, no doubt, of the wood and dried peat Mac Bride had stacked there, all ready now for the burning. She was that tired now; cruelly, heavily tired. Her rests had turned deeper and sweeter in the cold. Her dreams had turned so beautiful. . .

Somehow she managed, by the merest crack, to open the servants' door, and she slid into the shadowy interior. She was that thin after her long traveling. The door shut fast behind her.

Moonlight and starlight were shining off the snow and glowing through the ice-stained windows, with a still, soft, blueness, and she stepped quietly, with the grace of a girl going into church, painfully aware of the echo of every step she makes.

She walked through the downstairs hall, through the dining rooms and public rooms, and she thought of being there long ago, on her twenty-first birthday.

That, she thought, was years ago; and yet in days not very long ago; am I older now, or am I still only twenty-one? The Sun hasn't gone round but half a year since then. But no, what am I thinking? The Sun hasn't gone around at all.

So thinking, strangely, she climbed the servants' stairs. Out into the upper hall she came. Where for a time she stood, looking on the door to the lord's room. The great door bent half open, showing her a glimpse of the bed, where she had lain alongside Master Aengus.

The rest of the doors in the hall were closed and shut fast. A torpor like the fullness of sleeping after too heavy a meal on an early summer's afternoon, that was weighing on her, slowing her steps and slowing her thoughts, like the dust slowly turning in the snow-glow through the windows. Once more out of habit, like a dream, she tried the doors to the Sleepers' bedchambers: and now one doorlatch turned for her, and the door seemed almost ready to yield. She muttered over it words she learned from Master Aengus' tables and parchments: pushed open the door and stepped in.

The door in her hand was drawing back to close itself, but, taken by a notion that if she let the door close on her she would be trapped there, and tumble down in sleeping till the end of the world, she held it firmly, while she bent forward and down over the figure wrapped up in sheets and bedclothes like a mummy.

‘Sir James! Sir James, can you hear me?’

And she murmured a bit of something else out of Master Aengus’ tables.

And the snow whirled up outside the window, and the door leapt to close itself, and almost snatched itself out of her hand, but she held it fast – and the Sleeper’s breast rose and fell in a sigh, and his lips parted, and one cheek twitched.

‘Sir James, what is it you’re seeing? Can you not see me?’

And a branch threw itself against the window in the wind, and the Sleeper’s eyelids twitched, and underneath them the balls of his eyes darted about.

‘Sir James, what is it you’re feeling? Can you not feel my hand?’

And she reached out and took hold of his thumb.

Then his eyes flew open, his nose snorted in a breath of cold air, his lips parted – his face was full of dread and horror at something – something in the

room about him which she could not herself see – and his eyes rolled about, caught sight of her, and for a moment seemed to know her, and sought to warn her, of the dreadfulness of dreams, of the evil of the Night, of the emptiness of desire – when the door leapt back to its jamb, pulling her back, her hand wrenching away from him, and he lapsing at once into a deathlike mask of sleep. Until she fell out into the hall again.

She breathed there uneasily, and felt in the air about her the hostility of the Sleepers, meant for her.

It's not, she thought to herself, waking they're wanting – not so long as the Night lasts. How dreadful Night must appear to them, that are not used to it. And she thought, They are dreaming of Day, and let them dream on, without the hindrance of my meddling.

She descended the front steps and went out the main doors, and saw on the drive nine of Arianna's rogues and jades awaiting her.

One laughed, and drew his silver pistol, and thumbed back the hammer of it.

Very still she stood there. But she would not go back into the house. So she stepped down to meet them.

'You may take me,' she told them, 'and do your worst to me; but you'll never win him back into that

jail.'

One of the bandits jumping down off his horse strode to her, and knelt in the snow in front of her.

'Lady,' he said, 'we've no wish to be hurting you. You may come along with us now, or go another way, as pleases yourself. It's only the Bacach we're seeking, to carry him back into the mist, and into the crannog. And that for his own welfare, the way there is many a danger for him out in this country. And most harmful of all is that place,' he said, raising his arm at the house, 'the way that place, if it find the Bacach again, will see him die and fall down into dust. Never let him come here! Never let him see its walls again!'

'Thank you,' she told him, 'for your kindness. Only, why are you helping me? I'm no friend to the Night or any of you all!'

'Lady, do not be wronging yourself so! You cleaned the Hundred Steps and a Step, did you not? And do you think any daughter of Day could be doing that?'

Down the long drive she walked, and along either hand of her the robbers and jades in their scarlet and black cloaks bowed, and took off their hats to her. But still in her heart she didn't trust them, so she went first to the lake, the desolate lake. Where for a time she listened to the wind crying in the dead

dry sedge along the ice, crying, 'Always! Always!'

'Ah, and we'll see about that,' she said, and when the Moon went down into the hill she gave the riders the slip and stole away back to him.

She led the man down along the Bride. Bandits hidden in the village almost captured him, but knowing the lay of that land, Agnes eluded them, and she took the man away eastaways, across the Blackwater and across the Suir.

A flock of black birds, bigger than crows, flew over their heads, and Agnes felt ill at ease. Were birds not Arianna's messengers?

'I feel kinship with the birds,' said the man, looking up after them. 'I want to be free like them. Birds, let you be coming back for me!'

'It was ever strange fancies taking your heart,' she told him, walking in the moonshade of a hedgerow.

After a while he said, 'What was I like, before?'

And she began to tell him of himself, of the ruined man he'd been, and how he'd wooed her, and how he'd drowned the Sun to win her, and vowed to bring it back.

He only said, 'It's the White Hind I remember, and nothing at all before her.'

‘It’s lying you are,’ she answered him. ‘You do remember. You remember it all. You only say you can’t recall it, the way you couldn’t be facing me otherwise.’

They did not speak after that. They went a long way together, fleeing the bandits, hiding under hedges and rocks in the high places.

The man was carrying the mask, looking on it always.

‘Why do you seek the White Hind? What is it you are looking for, then?’

‘I look for myself,’ he answered, gazing on the mask.

‘Are you lost, then?’

‘I am here, but my wholeness is missing.’

‘Go away, Master Aengus! Go where you will never see her, never hear of her, where no one will bring her to your mind!’

After a long while, the man sighed, and lay down with the mask cradled in his arms. He sang, softly, a mad song:

‘Over the earth is moving the wind
Relentlessly; I stand here
Still; she at the back of the wind
And beyond.

‘She travels here, she travels there

Wherever her fancy leads;
But her fancy never leads her
Where I am.'

She stared at him. She pulled at him, but the man wouldn't be budging from that place, and so she must lie down beside him, and lay the half of her cóta mór across him to warm his crippled leg.

Slowly the stars wheeled into and out of clouds.

About the middle of the darkness Agnes rose, and she took the mask of the White Hind away from him, and going far apart she put it under hard earth beneath the snow.

And she left him, and walked by herself in the snowy Night.

It was three moons, she did not go back to him.

Meanwhile the Bacach lay dreaming in the snow. He didn't know that Agnes had risen from his side, or that she had stolen away the mask, or that she had gone away. He didn't know that the Man Who Should Have Slept was even then sharpening the points on his arrows. He didn't know that something else was watching after him from a bit of wood on a nearby hill. That was a little beast of the wood, pale as the snow, delicate and arching as a willow, with small silver horns and a golden torc twisted round

her neck.

The Bacach lay dreaming while the White Hind slipped out of the wood and crept down softly to his side. He lay dreaming still while the dark man appeared on a far-off hill, and raised his bow, and shot an arrow into the beast.

The White Hind took the arrow full in her throat, and she staggered, and tarried, dreadful tar-rying; she swayed a little over the man laid out on the snow before she fell, heavy falling; and she died.

The man in the dark gray cóta mór stepped down over the Bacach, and troubled his leg with the tip of his boot. The Bacach stirred, but the man bent over and whispered to him, 'Now, now, brother, don't trouble yourself! It's nobody that's here, it's nobody at all, only your long lost beloved brother Fergus, come to pay a call! Dream now and stay dreaming! Dream of your love lying and dying for love in your arms.'

The dark man laughed, and uncovered his face. And his face was ghastly and grim and mad, the way he hadn't dreamed in all the months of the Night. He couldn't be dreaming, you see, and he didn't dare rest, for fear he might fall asleep like all the Sleepers. Because he was the Man Who Should Have Slept.

'Well,' said he, grinning, 'my brother Aengus, won't you even bid your dear brother Fergus good-

evening? It's so long since we grew up together, and swore ever to be true to each other, when we mingled our blood together. Where are your fancies, airs, and powers now? Who studied better, you or I? And who learned best?

'You stayed at home after our father fell, but myself, I took the rebel road, and I went across the Sea for it, and worked on the work of our land, and you doing nothing but studying after your heart's desire. And I hated you for that, and for the traitor you are.

'I knew it was your work, when I saw the black spot on the Sun,' he said. 'It was in a far land I was then, but I still found the needed ingredients to mix a brew to keep me wakeful in spite of anything you or the old man could do! Oh, this Night of yours is a fine thing, brother, if it let me come back to my homeland, and kiss my kin once more.'

And he said, 'Oh, I came back again to the Bride, and I waited and watched, until I found your trail. You let my love die, brother, and you stood by while the King's men hounded me out of home and country, but you never were thinking that one fine night would see me revenged on you!'

The dark man slung off his bow, and put that into the Bacach's hand; he slung off his pouch of arrows, and tucked it up under the Bacach's arm.

And he took up and brandished a sword in his hand.

‘What are you thinking, brother Aengus, that you find me with our father’s sword? It was me should have gotten it, not you; I found it again in the Night; it was in a dead hound’s breast; fancy that, right where you left it! You’ll not get this back again!’

The Man Who Should Have Slept turned and left the Bacach with a laugh. And after a time the Bacach was freeing himself out of his dreaming, and stirring and opening his eyes.

He sighed, and saw at his feet a lady stretched out, as lovely as the lee. She was dressed all in white, torn and ragged and airy as lace. Her long throat was arching up his thigh where the old wound beat, and her head in his lap, and in her throat an arrow, and the blood from the arrow staining all the front of her gown, and the snow also all about her skirts and feet and where he sat was red, red with her cold, cold blood.

For a time he was staring at the dead woman stretched out on the snow. He had never seen her before, never in his life; but there was something about her, something – and then he saw in her pale brow by the start of her dark hair two small nodes like the start of silver horns, and round her throat a

torc of twisted gold.

The man looked down and saw in his hand his grandfather's longbow, and a quiver of arrows alongside his leg. He looked up, and his hands cast aside the bow and arrows, and his eyes saw that three blackbirds were flying across the clouds by the Moon, high up away from the Earth.

His cry was choked off under the clouds, and few would have guessed it came out of a human throat.

3. Of the Dark Wood

IT WAS three moons, Agnes did not go back to him. Then she found his tracks and followed them.

A line of wagons crossed her path. The wagons were brightly-painted and clad with tin, and the pans and pails hanging from the sides rang and clattered like rain.

‘Let her love you, young man! And what are you doing walking through the gentle Night, alone?’

‘It’s searching I am for another. Tall and dark he is, with one white lock, and not strong, the way he is limping. Have you seen him?’

‘Not the buckle of his shoe. But climb up with us, and if we find him on the way, you will, too.’

‘I’ve got to be finding him, do you see. His wits are limping too, and I don’t know what will become of him.’

‘Climb up, and we’ll keep a sharp eye out! We are going to the Fire – do you not count the stars? I’m Bera, and these are my girls Brigit and Buana. And you now, young man, what are we to be calling

you?’

She answered, softly, ‘Aengus.’

The old Tinker woman smiled a smile that split the whole of her face in two. She held out her hand. ‘Aengus, climb up, and we’ll look for your friend along the way.’

‘Yes,’ she answered, and taking the woman by the hand, she went up beside the daughters on the plank seat.

The line of wagons sang and rang, down dale, up slope, with lanterns swinging like fire-flies from their tails. Alongside the wagons went many on horseback: some Tinkers like the wagoneers, but the rest wild women and men with pistols and scians at their belts, and eyes bright in the dark. Arianna’s bandits and jades, hunting the Bacach. But they didn’t know her on Bera’s wagon, the way she was another Tinker, and in disguise.

The Tinker girls talked to her, and laid their hands along her knee, and she must be telling them something of herself and the man she was looking for, but she could never remember, afterward, what it was she told them. In her heart she was cursing herself for the harsh words she’d lain on him. In the middle of it she broke down coughing, and staining her handkerchief red, so Bera put her back in the wagon and laid her down, and one of the girls

lay alongside of her for warmth. They clucked their tongues and turned their eyes sorry-wise, and the mother shook her head. Then the two girls quarreled over which of themselves would be getting to lie alongside the young man to warm him.

But Agnes was drifting in warm and in dozing, deep into the deep. Dim and faint she was hearing them quarreling, and the words of the tale their ma was telling them to keep them still and attentive; so far away it seemed to her, so far herself seemed from herself!

‘But didn’t she fight against it?’ asked Buana.

‘Oh, it wasn’t that she didn’t,’ answered Bera from the front. ‘But what was it she could do?’

‘Run away,’ said Brigit.

‘Fie now,’ said Bera. ‘She was only a girl, and the other was the Lady of the Lough! Only a few of the gentle people could have stood up to her. And less than a few would have defied her as Princess Maeve was doing.’

Agnes closed her eyes, listening to the Tinker women talking on about the fairy tales as though they were truth.

‘And when will the curse be put off her?’ asked Brigit, the way in stories there is always a way to put off curses, and the way is always found, unlike in life.

‘This is the way of it,’ answered the mother, ‘that Princess Maeve will only return to her own shape upon her betrothal to Prince Og. But Prince Og defied the lady, and she cursed him with forgetfulness, and exile in the Day-land, forever, and there in that place he fell in love with a human girl, a daughter of Adam; and as to Princess Maeve, she followed another path.’

‘Hush now,’ whispered Buana, ‘you’ll be waking young Aengus from his dreaming.’ Agnes felt the brush of soft lips across her brow, and a fragrant breath murmuring, ‘Dream, sweet man, dream.’ So she did.

It wasn’t they not knowing, was she woman or man. It was only they letting people be what they wanted to be. She wore a man’s clothes and a man’s name; so it was a young man the girls tended to, and a young man they carried in their wagon, and laid down on the outer circle in the red light of the needfire.

The heat of the great fire was blackening the hill, melting the snow even outside the rings of wagons, and warming the ground. And the heat of the Fire washed over the young man on the ground in three great waves. It dried her hair, it dried her clothes, it dried her flesh and bones.

* * *

She sat up, looking in the Fire.

It was a huge beehive risen on the hill. The flames were spiraling up and about, wreathing into smoke. And from one hand a dozen lasses came out of the dark, bearing over their heads a great nest of wildflowers, primroses and brambles, blooming even in the snow in the Night. And atop that nest lay the body of a girl all in white, tattered and airy as lace, with a great red scarf wrapped round and round her throat, and a golden torc clasping round the scarf.

The lasses took the nest up to the needfire, and they shifted to place it on the top, so that the flames withered the roses and wildflowers, and the thorns sparked, and the body of the dead girl was joining with the smoke, and becoming no more than air itself.

About the needfire were gathered a thousand or more of the bandits and jades, Arianna's folk. And on the far side of the fire Agnes could see a fine fair carriage, drawn by twelve horses, and Arianna herself was standing there, grieving.

'But who was she?' Agnes was asking. To which one in passing answered in low tones,

''Twas one well-loved by the old Man of the Bog. But she is flown now with the birds.'

Then Arianna turned on her heel, and went up inside her carriage; her coachman cracked his whip,

and lady and robbers and jades rode galloping away into the Night-land, searching for her Bacach as they had done for moon upon moon, with gallous small success.

At which the Tinker lasses and youths came ringing the fire again, and were grasping one another's outstretched hands, and beginning a slow somber dance. In time the steps of them flashed quicker, the way it was not for long they could be withholding their joy in the great vast spaces of the Night-land. The last of the robber women and men were dancing with them, and their silver spurs were flashing in the fire. From out of the dark on every hand others were climbing, carrying bundles of twigs and logs and many other things, and casting them onto the pile.

More of them came, curious folk, boys and girls, and bent old people, and many tongues were spoken among them, and there seemed no lack of understanding. They wore the dress of different lands; some were fair and some were dark, and some in finery and some in rags. But there was a look and a gleam in the eye of all of them, so that they seemed all kindred.

A child came up to her with a cípín of birch in his hand.

'What are you burning?' she asked the child.

‘Whatever we want,’ answered the child, and asked her, shyly, ‘What do *you* want?’

Bitterly she shook her head. The child moved on around the fire, and she reached into her sack, and took out a book, much used, so that the title on the spine had worn out with smoothness.

It was the book she had loved so, when she had lived, and the Sun had shone.

She let the old thing fall open to any page, and she read there: and the words came back to her, so that she could keep on reading them, even closing her eyes, even closing the book.

And unsteadily she rose, and stepped forward, and the dancers broke their ring for her, and she stood inside it. The great breath of the flames was burning into her face, like hot summer sunshine, and against it she narrowed her eyes, and breathed in fire. And she cast the book on the fire. Sparks and ash flew out of its lies into her eyes, drawing out tears. She looked through the tears and saw a woman on the yonder side of the fire.

This woman was dancing alone around the fire, dressed in a cloak reddened by the flames, proudly glowing and alluring with the sins of the flesh. The woman paused in the turns of her reels, and her shadowy, mysterious eyes caught Agnes’ own. Then the woman danced on, and others joined the circle.

‘Come dance,’ sang Brigit, beckoning, ‘with us, Aengus! Take my hand with me!’

‘Nay, now,’ answered Buana. ‘It’s with me Aengus will be dancing!’ But the young man shook her head, and quietly stepped back to the dark edge of the fire.

The rush of the ring swept the Tinker girls round out of sight on the fire’s far side, shrieking and laughing. Children were dancing after them, seven children in a row: they were Agnes’ children. All at once they caught sight of her and pointed her out, singing, ‘We know who *you* are! We know what *your* heart desires!’

She looked on them with no words in her at all. Then the dread of them took hold of her, and she slipped away into the darkness, and went down the hill side to a dark wood, ingrown and tangled with brambles and dense dead bushes.

She had nothing then. She had lost her lord and manor house, and her friends of the day, and Mielusine, and her beauty, and her hope, and her book, and Aengus.

Round the wood she walked, looking for a trail, until the glow of the needfire was only a lost smudge of red in the sky beyond the twisted, thick, black boughs.

Some cottagers were living beside the wood,

themselves coarse as homespun, still brown after those years without the Sun. Agnes thought them quite the loveliest people she had ever seen.

‘Mary love you, surely we been watching the trails,’ they said, giving her a failte and sitting her before a smoky peat fire on the only seat in the cottage, and it old, and in no good repair. It was odd, they to be burning turf and living at the edge of a wood.

‘We always watch for strangers and suchlike, it been hard to get some things since all went dark. You now, Miss, have you any goods?’

She could only offer them a hank of tobacco out of one of her coat pockets; they snatched it up gleefully and reddened their dudeens at the fire. But they knew nothing of Aengus.

‘Nay, now, none has been afore you for ever so long – seven moon or more: and them bandits on horses hot on the chase of something, but we hid from all them. All’s we gets is the madman in the wood. He howl, he howl, Lady! Whenas he’s close, it’s damned little rest we can be getting, the way he howl. Listen! There, now! Och, why don’t merciful Mary send him down a well, or break trees over his head!’

Outside the cottage Agnes heard a dim moan. It grew to a yell, a shriek. The cottagers’ children

stopped up their ears. It went on and on, longer than a human voice might last. Then it broke, and faded away.

‘Moy-rua, he’s been doing it for ever,’ they told her. ‘He’s devil-haunted, poor miserable creature. And when he howl, we may churn and churn, but no butter will come. Why can’t that blasted devil chase him crost to the far side of the wood? – Or bring clouds in on bright moons. That’s when he’s worst, whenas the Moon’s most brightest.’

But Agnes felt her blood chill, the way that cry was in his voice.

And she went from the cottagers, burdened with jars of berries, and bags of nuts. Puffing happily on their pipes, the woman and man sent her off with a blessing.

‘Be well, be merry, Miss in a man’s breeches! Let her keep you warm and dry! Go east now, skirt the blue bogs, and you’ll be finding Grain’s county alongside the Sea. She maybe will be curing you. Do not be going into the wood, it’s an evil, nought but badness dwells there.’

‘Let her bless you,’ said Agnes, kissing the both of them.

She left the cottage behind her on her right hand, trailing round the wood, stepping closer and closer in to it. The eye of the spying Moon discom-

fited her.

The wall of brambles, tangled dead weeds, brake and bush shifted warily past her. Over the brambles she could see dead, white, rotting trunks; crooked branches curling low; black leaves bunching, blotting out the stars. She heard the rooting of boars, the rustle of small sneaking things, and owls and birds of the night. And she heard the cries of Master Aengus, gone mad in the middle of that wood. But there was no path through that wall.

She bent down by the wall of the wood, feeling the tangles. It was like wicker, and stronger than stone walls, the way not even cannonballs might have breached it. In some places the weeds were woven close as woolen mittens.

She dipped her hands into the weeds, taking them back with a shudder when thorns cut her palm.

The dampness breathed through her coat. She was feeling a burning round her brow and a dryness in her throat ever since she slept on the snowy hill side.

And after a time she felt an opening in the wall.

It was a dark hole down on the ground, half-covered with a fringe of grass. It must have been a fox's path; but if she left the bags of nuts and berries outside, and took off her cóta mór, she might just

squeeze into it.

The brambles coiled about her inside the black tunnel. Her breeches were wet with mire. Where the brambles crossed the tunnel she took them carefully between her fingers, bent them down and put her knee upon them. Behind her, her knees, cut by the brambles, left little curling trails of blood. She crawled further ahead, reaching her hand into the black.

Where her hand touched a thing, slender and slight. She took it into her bosom, and went on crawling.

The Moon must have fallen while Agnes was creeping down the tunnel. Weary as she was, seeing nothing at all about her, she dared not stop, the way she might be meeting some beast coming out from the far end.

At last she won clear. She crawled up a little mossy knoll, where the ground was some less damp, and there, in darkness, she let her limbs bend back out straight, until the soreness was fading and she could dream.

The Moon was peering through the branches when Agnes rose. On the broken trunk of the tree over her, she saw in the moonlight two words, crudely scratched out of the bark, one above the other:

GODDESS

STOP

Agnes traced the letters with her fingertips. Then she took out of her bosom the card she'd found in the tunnel. There was a couple drawn on the card, a man and a woman, both red naked, chained by collars on their wrists beneath a winged giant.

Il Diavolo, the card read.

And once more the stars wheeled round to touch the Samhain mark, when all souls and dreams are loosed. And for four and twenty hours the Moon did not rise nor shine.

The Seventh Year of Night

In the seventh year of that Night, the Masters, those who Woke and Spoke to the Strong Places in the Night-Land, put forth their Powers.

They Cast Out the other Waking away from the Strong Places. And they raised stones or air or water or fire about the Strong Places, and forbade the others from every walking there again.

4. How She Sang to Him

SHE WANDERED through the wood. In the brightness of the moon she heard the raging of the madman. The black leaves shook with his birdlike cries.

Her stockings, shirt and breeches were shredded by brambles, her shoes muddied and torn. Her hair was full of twigs and leaves, and the fear of Arianna's bandits was in her, the way she could hear their hunting horns sounding outside the wood.

Could they hear him crying, too? Could they tell his voice, that voice that no other man was ever using?

On tree trunks she cut the thin grooves of his name, AENGUS. But she found no other scratchings beside the first.

'Come down to me, Aengus,' she was calling. 'Come down out of the branches of trees. Let your feet feel the ground again: behold in my eyes the sight of the man that once you were: not so wild, not so driven by the winds, but mine.'

She knew he was near. But he did not answer.

She was drinking from a stream, and saw pale wood chips floating past her on the dark water. There were twelve, and then one larger.

‘Aengus, did you send me these? What did you mean by it?’

Agnes built a hut of fallen branches, ferns, and brambles. She made fires there, warming her bed. Her hut breathed blue smoke in the darkness, filling the wood and leading her home.

She hoped he would be lured by the smell of her cooking, and built a nest for him up a nearby tree. She rested dreaming that he was there; and when she might not dream she spoke to him, hoping her words like the smell of her fire would be reaching him.

‘Don’t go, Aengus, come back! Let me warm your rain-chilled body, let me soothe your chafed red hands!’

But he never came or answered.

And she found a hollowed log, lined it with leaves and put food in it beneath the trees. It was often empty. Was it Aengus who ate it, or a badger?

The dark of the moon came circling back. That cold was the bitterest ever. The stream froze over, and the branches cracked in the blackness loud as pistol shots. And her cough deepened, like a plague

cough, like a death cough.

It seemed to her he had become the wood, and the wood was him. Gathering berries from a rowan tree, she thought he must have eaten some. Hearing the owl screech, she thought he heard it too. The creak of branches in the wind spoke with his voice. It couldn't be anyone else's, the way there were no other people left in the world.

Through the black claws of branches, she gazed upon the Moon. She was the Samhain Moon, and herself so cold, and Winter still waiting to be born. And what, she wondered, would that Winter be after a Summer of snow and ice? She'd never live to see its end.

'Is this our Eden, Aengus?' she said to him from the door of her hut. 'Is this our Paradise?'

That darkness she crept out into the glen. Something huddled over her tray. It started at her presence, spread its wings and flew into the tree.

'Aengus, don't go! I can tell you the beginning of your pain, and it's only I can set you free of it!'

There was no sound or stirring answering her, but still and all Agnes sat against the hut, sending her thoughts far back; and she told him:

'It was the first of May, it was, and the Sun was hot and bright, and all the ladies riding to the lake. Dame Letitia and Lady Felicia were speaking of their

lovers, but I, I had nothing to say.

‘And across the lake I saw a dark and solitary man. He was standing on a rock gazing down into the lake. He didn’t even cast a glance our way. Miss Cecily told me it was a farmer without friends, and he was often seen on the meads with his dog; a cold, backward man, but something of a philosopher.

‘Then under my breath I was saying, “Never, Master Aengus, will you be happy without love; and never while the Sun shines will you love anyone but me.” Then all at once a black swan flew up from the lake, and out of all the ladies by the lakeside your dark eye fell on me.

‘I blushed hot as foxglove, repenting my rash words. I had to look away at once, the way I couldn’t after tell whether you but glanced at me or stared all the while we were there.

‘After that, I had your house pointed out to me, lonely and apart, half fallen from neglect. I heard the tales they told about you. Once or twice I even saw you, walking in our preserve.

‘I had never noticed you nor heard your name before. Now it seemed you were ever in my path. I had loved looking out my windows on the meadows; now it was always you there, dark and still and watching. The morning after a rain I found footsteps in my flower beds, and knew that they were yours. I

thought, "What does he want? Why does he haunt me?" Oh Aengus, why could you not have been foolish and light like any other lover?

'Talk of the mad farmer who chased me was ever on my friends' laughing lips. And I thought after all, it was only proper that you love me. It was none of them who'd won your heart.

'Then you were gone away,' she added, after awhile.

'You stood no more upon the meadow grass, there were no more footsteps under my rosebeds. Your house, half shambles, came to be shunned. It was easier without you, yes! Never again did I think of you, I swear, until the night before the last day. It was ever on such a night that you would come for me.

'I didn't miss you. But I mightn't sleep that night. I couldn't breathe, I opened my windows and you were there.

'Then all at once I longed for you as I longed for no other man. You were unhandsome, and the sweat of the horrible thing that you'd done came gleaming off your brow. I did not know my longing was but a trick, a thing you put on me. I stepped back to be away from you, but when you entered I took hold of you and kissed you, viciously, and laughed. . . .'

Agnes hugged her knees to her breast, rocking slightly back and forth.

‘I said what I said by the side of the lake, and that was the start of it all, for you, for me. . . ’

And a cry came croaking down to her, hardly human, the way she had trouble making it out: two words:

‘Why, lady?’

‘Why, Agatha?’

She was pacing the woods, weighted by his question. Why had she spoken those words by the lake? Why Aengus? And why word her geis in that way? She tried to recollect herself as she had been on that bright day, but that one was a stranger to her now. Only the wooing of her geis stood out in her mind, unforgotten.

She left him food on the tray, as before; when the Moon rose the food was untouched. She knew he hungered for her food. She knew he starved for it. One darkness, at last, he ate of it.

Come moonrise Agnes found him lying on the moss beside the tray. Her herbs had put peace in him.

It was a great black crow she was looking at, with one white feather on its wing, a bent leg, and human eyes.

She took him in by her little fire, and cradled him in the crook of her arm. While he slept she was silent, listening to the wood. She heard an owl screech very near. Then the fancy seized her that Arianna was there; she covered the fire and scooped leaves over both their bodies to hide them.

‘Now I’ve grown half as mad as you,’ she muttered. ‘But while I hold you I’ll never let you go, let lady and bandits come as they like.’

At length she rested. It came onto her slowly, in stages, and this was the way of it. First she was aware of his breathing, the rustle of leaves at his breathing. Then it was the rapid beating of his bird-like heart she was hearing, deep under the feathers. Her own heartbeat she heard as well. And she thinking, *If music has the power to charm, so does love have strength to heal, and let my love now heal your poor burning brain, my Aengus, though I am so tired.*

She felt her own heart slowing. So she rested.

When she opened her eyes he was gone. There was only a feather caught in her sleeve.

She saw him across the glen, crouching on a root, ready to flit up into the branches. But his feathered form was larger now, and he was almost a man again.

‘Aengus,’ she cooed sleepily, holding out her

arms. 'Come again.'

And warily, like one half-tamed, he hopped down off the root and came back to her, walking with darting steps.

She took his hands in hers.

'We must go now,' she said. 'We must find shelter, and a way to summon back yourself. Even if it means losing you. Aengus, will you come with me?'

The way he looked at her he might still have been a crow.

Firmly she took his hand, and led him out of the wood.

In the fields they were wandering in snow up to her waist, though the stars were harvest stars, and Winter after being born. They went down south and eastaways, down to the Irish Sea.

They went by starlight, and hid in the shadow of a hedge or rock by moonlight, when the lanterns crossed the distant hills, and the bandits' horns were blowing. Agnes let drape the long braid of her hair down between them while they dreamed.

She was dreaming of flowers springing up and growing strong, taking her strength, like Day being born out of her bones. Her coughing was hindering her, and weakness and weariness, and a rising tide of sleep, dark and sluggish as death.

From the hilltop behind them they were still watched.

The woman stumbled and could go no more. The pair of them lay down in the snow under a hawthorn tree, the way there was no other shelter to be found. When the Moon rose, she shone down on them like an evil lantern lighting the bandits' way.

Through the icy mist hanging over them like tent cloths, Agnes was watching the Moon. 'Aengus,' she murmured, 'are you there? I am burning. Fetch me water.'

Aengus melted snow in the hollow of his hands, and she licked at it. They had nothing better to be eating. He looked on her, saying nothing. But it seemed to her a bit of reason was returning to his eyes. Or was it her reason was failing?

That moon she lay in the hollow under the hawthorn tree, waking and dreaming dreadful dreams. She knew she must find strength to move on with the darkness. But when it came, she hadn't.

With the next moon her fever had lessened, but herself weaker. She was no better on the next darkness, or the next, or the darkness after that. But already they had tarried there too long. They must be going.

He was lifting her, and she leaning against him, and he hobbling with her, and they step by step go-

ing down a hill.

That walk was torment to her. Her head was thrown back against his shoulder, and she feeling the ground through his stagger, and the stars moving and jiggling with them, like her starry black skirts.

‘Aengus, Aengus, set me down.’

It was later, and the Moon was glaring through the clouds. Blown snow was a forest now.

She lay back on the snow. It felt so good that she lost all care for anything except to go on lying there until the dawn. In the back of her mind the flowers were blooming, tall in the Sun above her bones in the dark Night of the Earth.

She rolled back her head on the snow. On the hill side near them a cave was opening. ‘We must go in there,’ she murmured. ‘We must go out of moonlight. But I cannot. . .’

It was bliss to cease even the little effort of speech. She had no desire. Sure, and this is what the angels feel.

Mutely the man knelt over her, hiding her face from the Moon. He watched her, but she did not move.

It began to snow again. He took off his chaplet of laurel and laid it on her hand. He picked her up,

and took her into the cave.

From the hilltop a figure was climbing down after them. He was a dark man, dressed in a tricorne, a muffler, and a long dark gray cóta mór.

The dark man stepped down to the cave-mouth. For a time he was standing there. Then with a turn of his head he strode forward.

Far ahead, deep in the hill side, among the warmth of the stones, the man carried the woman. The cave stretching on before him, and he following it, down and up again, until it was ending, and he coming out the far side, into a green meadow, into a grianan. There was the tang of the Sea in the air, and the mewing of sea-birds.

And it was bright there, with the glow of early evenings or of late nights; the sky ended in a pale band over the Sea, of rose and violet wherein the stars were drowned. The Sea was still, with expectancy, and the light of the sky shone off it green as copper. The land down to the Sea was covered with long dark grasses, bowing to the Sea, down to the cobbles of the surf.

The man nestled the body of the woman down into the grass. He straightened her coat, her breeches, and her braided hair. He wiped a bit of dirt off her cheek, and stroked her dry, cold brow,

and murmured, 'Agatha. . .'

5. Of the Grianan

ON THE FAR side of the hill Master Aengus found a little hut built above the Sea. He rapped on the door with a stick.

‘Who’s there?’ was asked.

‘Someone is hurt,’ said he.

An old fishwife peered out of the dark door. She was offering him no pleasant faile. But looking him up and down, she grumbled, ‘You look well enough.’

‘It’s not me who’s needing your help. It’s my lady, lying yonder on the hill. Please, can you not help us?’

‘Ah, very well then,’ she said, none too surely. Drawing on a shawl she followed him up the sands.

For a long while the woman looked over the fallen Agatha, and she said never a word. Then she fixed Aengus with her eye.

‘Bring her along,’ she said.

Light and yielding was the girl in his arms. The rising sea-breeze caught at the stray hairs escaping from her braid, about the nape of her neck. Her

cheek was so pale it was blue. It was strange not to hear her coughing.

The crone bade him place his lady on the hut's one cot, covered over with dried sea weeds. How did this come to be, she was asking him.

'It fell out on the journey,' he told her. 'I don't know the tale of it too well. She was hurt.'

'She is dying.'

The old fishwife paced round her cauldron where it hung on a chain, and round the dark embers of the fire. 'I am old and weak,' she was muttering, 'What do you want of me? I cannot save her. No one can.'

'Ah,' said Master Aengus.

Not a tear, not a solitary tear, did Master Aengus shed. He only was nodding his head. All his life he'd been seeking wisdom, ever since his seventh year, when a beautiful lady had taught him the Moon's first name. Now he knew that Sorrow was her name.

He picked up Agatha's chill hand and placed it over her breast. He turned and left the hut.

The old woman went out of her hut after a time. Down the beach she found him sitting on a rock, looking at the waves.

The waves came and went and came again,

eternally, and it was not hard to see what way his thoughts ran.

‘It’s sorry I am,’ said the fishwife, ‘for my rudeness. But it was plain truth I spoke.’ It might have been a stone she spoke to, he was answering her so little.

‘I’m Grain,’ said she. ‘People come to me when there’s nowhere else for them to go. I can help in little things. Sometimes in large things, too. But I cannot save your lady. Maybe,’ she was adding, after a bit, ‘maybe you can.’

His head turned, slowly, and his eyes looked over his shoulder to her.

‘Bring back the Sun, Master Aengus. It’s brightness and warmth your lady is needing now. In this Night she’ll die as sure as grass is green.’

He bent his head.

‘I can’t bring back the Sun.’

‘If it isn’t yourself, then no one can.’

‘Once before,’ he said, ‘I tried. That was near the death of me then, and look on me now! The half of what I did before would be beyond me now.’

Old Grain nodded. She put her hand upon his shoulder. Then she turned to leave.

‘Wait,’ he said. ‘Before you go, tell me how you would have had me bring back the Sun.’

* * *

Down the coast in a grassy inch, a stream was curling about a little island covered with quince trees, pear trees, and wild roses. The trees were in blossom again: it was that mild on the skirts of the Sea. Master Aengus waded into the smell of all that blooming, that weighted down his heart. Dripping wet he was, climbing up the bank.

And he heard a singing down the way.

In a grassy glen a girl was sitting on a stone seat, weaving blooms together. At her side were perched a swallow and an owl. Her back was to Master Aengus, and for a time he stood watching her.

She was wearing a white woolen kirtle, and her arms were bare and rosy. Her hair was a cloud of black threads floating on the breezes about her face. There was a grace in the way she held herself, like a girl who is knowing how to dance.

The owl and swallow hooted and chirped and flew off into the bushes. The girl turned of a moment, her eyes widening at the sight of the half-wild creature across the glen. She dropped her basket.

‘Stay, don’t run!’ he shouted after her. ‘I’m no stranger, Mielusine! I am Aengus – Aengus that you knew.’

Mielusine peered back through the branches. She looked at the man.

His eyes were wild and yellowed, his cheeks cut, hair dirty and tangled, beard bushy, clothes feathered and ragged, hands blackened, feet bare, nails but broken talons. Still, it had the look of him, somehow.

‘Yes,’ said he. ‘It’s myself you rescued from the abbey.’

‘And Agatha?’

‘In a hut kept by an old woman on the strand. She’s resting, but is ill.’

‘Cannot Grain be helping her?’

He looked away. ‘What do you do here?’

‘Grain gave me this orchard to tend. Here I’m growing flowers and tending to the trees. Women come to me wanting Grain’s help, and I give them dried flowers, and baskets of red fruit to entice their sweethearts. And when they win them, then they are blood-wed, as they say, though their marriage may be lasting a life, a year, or a moon.’

Then they sat on the seat, and spoke for a time about this and that.

‘I only wanted to know,’ he told her, ‘the mystery of love.’

‘When you know the mystery, you have no love,’ she said.

‘I only wanted to master it: when I loved, whom and how much.’

‘When you have mastery, you have no love,’ she said.

‘I only wanted forgiveness, for the wrong I did her.’

‘When you ask forgiveness for your passion, you have no love,’ she said.

He looked at her. ‘Did Agatha tell you this?’

‘Ah, it’s not what she knows,’ said the dancer in answer. ‘My bare body told me this, when Vasquez touched it.’ She reddened, as though for shame; turned her face away. After a bit she was asking, ‘And you now, Master Aengus: she brought back your memory?’

‘Yes,’ said he.

‘And now she is dying. Is there nothing to be done?’

‘Only Day might cure her. I must go down the well by the dun.’

The dancer shuddered. ‘It’s a horrible place.’

‘Will you help me? Can you?’

‘I might. But Master Aengus, yourself you are half starved. Have you strength enough to wake the Sun?’

He lifted his hands, and the ragged sleeves fell away from his wrists, showing the dark thin lines of his blood. Across the one wrist was the crescent of a scar, faded and tired. ‘I have all of this,’ he was

saying, 'and nought else.'

Mielusine was for a long time still. 'You're not like Agatha told me,' she said at last. 'If I said I'd followed you, and that I took the mask from the place where Agatha hid it, and that I have it still: what would you ask me?'

'The White Hind is dead,' he answered. 'She died bloody murdered on my lap, a hundred and one moons ago.' He looked on her. His eyes were hard. 'You have the mask?'

'It's what I told you. Shall I don it?'

'Do you want to?' he asked.

'I'm asking, is all.'

He answered, 'Mielusine, Agatha is my lady. But if you wear the mask I will fall in love with you again, and stay here with you always, or go, if I go, only at your bidding.'

'Then you wouldn't be going into the dry well and braving its perils to bring back Day?'

'Only if you asked it of me.'

'No,' she answered, 'I do not believe you, Master Aengus. You are a part of Agatha, and she is part of you.'

She was so serene that he said, 'I might have loved you had I known you. You are like some earthly goddess now, and worthy of all Lady Agatha's teachings, the way you have gone past

them all.'

'Ah,' she said, 'I'm only a dancer. But I can help you, I think, a little, with this.'

Out of her pocket she drew the leag lorgmhar, smooth and rounded as a hen's egg.

6. Of Aengus in the Sea

OVER THE sea was a bluff, driven up by thick slabs of stone; and the waves foamed over those rocks, and gulls and rooks wheeled in those airs. A pile of rubble stood on the bluff. Once it was a strong man's dun. Folk said the Druids built it before the first grass grew.

Before its gates the well was sunk.

It was dry, that well, a low circle of the same gray stones, bleached by the casts of birds. Deep in the well the stones were black as hearthstones. And in the brightness of that county, with the sky bright on the glassy sea, Master Aengus looked down into the well. Dark and black it was. He thought he saw a little light far down in it flickering, like a candle. But there was no sight of the beast.

Aengus let down into the darkness a ladder of rope. 'Are you ready?' he asked.

Grain held a lantern in her hand. Mielusine was cloaked with a red mantle against the sea-breeze. The dancer nodded.

‘Och, my heart trembles for the two of you,’ muttered the old woman. ‘Are you sure you’ve taken all measures?’

Half was he swallowed up beneath the stones. Ghastly pale was his face in the lantern light; and his jaw was set.

‘I will do it,’ he told her.

The fishwife pressed into his palm a bit of trefoil.

‘If it’s hot you’re feeling, eat a stalk of this. But save enough for coming back.’ He closed his fist about the green.

And she was handing over to him the lantern, and he was going down into the well. Mielusine went after, bearing a basket of quinces.

Grain’s face shrank with the closing of the mouth of the well above them, but the moaning of wind was growing.

Deep down in the well the ladder ended, but that was near enough the bottom so they could climb down the rest of the way. The sides of the well were rough stone, hard gravel, and broken bits of pottery. It was dry as bone.

‘Aengus,’ whispered the dancer, ‘I’m afraid for you.’

Before them a tunnel led down into the earth. They followed it in silence, to where the tunnel

widened, showing three dark, gaping mouths.

And stretched out before the three openings was a thing as big as a horse and white as dead bones: Henwen, the monstrous sow of men's nightmares and fears.

Such a thing you never have seen in life. Her jaws could have gulped down a man's head. Two of the cave mouths she lay across, growling, her breath rough as yew-bark. Directly the two entered her cave she started up and snarled and snapped at them. But Mielusine scattered quinces before her, and held out in her hand the white stone.

The huge sow snorted at the fruit, but she licked at Mielusine's hand, and nibbled daintily at the quinces.

'Do you see, Master Aengus?' said Mielusine, patting Henwen's great bobbing head. 'She's just hungry, after all, half-starved for love.'

But Master Aengus was already stealing down the tunnel Grain had told him of, moving swiftly in the black and brightness, catching and feeling the walls close around him.

Mielusine took the lantern and went back up the ladder. She and Grain rolled it up and carried it away.

The small, dark shapes of the two women walked slowly down the broad beach under the

weight of the bright clouds in the sky, back to the hut.

Mielusine glanced back. 'Who is that,' she asked, 'standing over the well?'

'Where?' asked Grain. The old woman shaded her eyes against the gleam of the waves and squinted. 'Ah, but my dim eyes can hardly see a thing in all this gloom.'

'He is standing over the well,' answered the maid. 'A tall, thin man hidden in a tricorn and a dark gray cóta mór.'

'Could it be our Aengus?'

'No,' answered the Maid, 'no, but it seems I know the fellow.'

Fergus, the dark man, watched the women pass. When the coast was clear, he stepped up to the well, and peered deep down inside.

In the hut it was dark but for the dim glow of the embers. Mielusine and the old fishwife crouched over the cot, tending to the dying woman. From outside the hut came the sounds of wind and rising waves.

'She is weaker now,' said Grain. 'She has been unwell that long a time.'

'I shouldn't have left them,' said Mielusine.

All at once a great crash sounded from without, and the sod roof shook.

‘What wave is it?’ cried Mielusine, covering Agatha with her body.

Grain answered in a hushed voice: ‘He is there.’

The dancer rose, and catching her skirts round her legs with her hands, stepped outside the hut.

Agatha moaned, and twisted in her place. Grain had taken off the damp, mouldy shirt and breeches, ragged from the thorns of the wood, and dressed her in one of Mielusine’s shifts, and covered her with blankets. The old woman took a bit of straw, lit it off the embers and held it over the bed.

Agatha’s face was pale and flushed by turns, and the sweat standing on her brow, and her teeth chattering with cold, in spite of all the blankets covering her.

Then the straw burnt out, and shadows swallowed up the sight of her.

Out on the sands the dancer twirled her skirts with her hand. She stopped on the cobbles of rocks above the wrinkling lace hem of the waves.

‘Hello, Mr Vasquez,’ she said.

The dark man standing at the well-side bowed to her with an ironic flourish.

‘Will you dance for me, Maid Snowflake?’ he asked.

‘Surely,’ she answered, ‘I’ll do that, Mr Vasquez,

after we talk a word or two.'

'What is it you'd be wanting to know?'

'Why you're here, and why you wear the mask you wear, and who you were, and who you are, and where it is you're going, Mr Vasquez,' she answered him.

He laughed, and ran his fingers over the fabric of the mask. 'It's not so much,' he said, 'you're asking.'

'There was a piece of the Sun,' said the fishwife, sitting rocking over the lady in the darkened hut. 'It was the very heart of the Sun, to tell by the heat of it. It fell into the Sea yonder; for the longest time we lay buried by mist singing up out of the boiling sea; lobsters and crabs were tossed up cooked onto the cobbles and sand.

'In time it cleared,' she sang, soft and gentle like. 'And some of the boys went out onto the water, to see what they could see. They dove into the deep. But only darkness was there, and a black heat rising from the seabed. The way we knew it had gone into the Earth, swallowed up forever. But later, in the darkness, we were seeing strange lights flashing out of the well up by the old dun.'

And another crash sounded from outside the hut, like a fearsome wave tearing round all the

coasts of the Innis Fodhla.

A wind tore through the cracks of the hut, and the fire in the embers roused and sprang up.

Agatha's dim lips opened, and she breathed, 'Aengus. . .'

'He has found it,' whispered Grain.

The warm wet spume was draining away from Vasquez' dark gray cóta mór, and Mielusine felt her gown clinging to her through the wet. In spite of the fearsomeness of the wave, he by his singing, and she by the quickness of her feet and the weight of the white stone, had held off being washed out into the deep.

'Tell me then, and tell me true,' said the dancer.

He answered, 'Well, and I will.' He held up his hand, considering; and it was plain that his thoughts went into the past and he was forgetting the well and what Master Aengus did there; and that was just what the dancer was desiring.

'Once of a time,' said the dark man, 'old Tadgh and Maille May were visited: that fell out on an evening just at the moment the first stars come forth. A woman and a man, wrapped up in their cóta mór, shawls, mufflers, bonnets and hats, asked the cottagers if they hadn't a boy, a *dark* lad, living with them? And they went on and told the shape

of your Aengus, Maid Snowflake, to the last feature and trait. Tadgh and Maille May looked each other in the eye, and didn't know what to say. When Aengus himself, a tall lanky boy, appeared in the doorway next to them. And it was just his seventh birthday, or near it, if you trust what the calendar says.

'Then the strange couple were much relieved,' said Vasquez, 'and they told how they had heard such good things of the cottagers, and they said that they were the best of parents, "and we have here a lovely child," they went on, "and we know of nobody who'd be better at raising it than yourselves," and they handed over to them another boy. Of course, old Tadgh and Maille May fell in love with the child from the start, and raised it after Aengus, and those two got on so well together, that in after years they were swearing blood brotherhood, and sharing all the secrets in each other's hearts, and went under the sod as one, and were of the same mind in all things; all things, that is, save for one. And it was said the second boy was a Tinker's child, the way he was dark, with a red, red lip, and I know the tale well, having heard it enough, the way the child was myself.'

'Go on,' said the dancer, 'if you please, and tell me all of it, Mr Vasquez. It will do you good.'

So the dark man took up his tale again, and all

the while, unbeknownst to himself, he was speaking his words in a rhythm like chanting, and moving his feet to the swaying of her hands and hips, the way indeed the very waves out of the Sea were starting to do.

‘Far and wide,’ said Grain over the shivering, dreaming lady in the cot, ‘we were sending, to find one to go down there and heal the Sun’s heart, the way she’d be rising again. But the few daring enough to try never returned. They were longing for Day; but it’s only a true child of the Night could be winning there.’

‘Aengus, beware!’ hissed the lady in her dream.

The old woman took her hand and lightly stroked it.

‘Agatha,’ she said, ‘what are you dreaming? Tell me what you’re seeing, Agatha, the way my eyes are blind to it, and I cannot see it at all!’

‘The tunnel,’ muttered Agatha in her dream. A fit of coughing took her, so that for a time she was too weak to speak, and her hand closed tight and cold in Grain’s, like one who has been drawn up drowned out of the deep.

‘He is stealing down the tunnel,’ whispered Agatha. Her eyes were still shut, and it was her dream she was telling the fishwife. ‘The darkness is

burning with growing flames, and winds are beating up out of the deeps of the tunnel. The streams of fire are pouring round him, but he is unburned. . . .’

. . . And deep underground, under the bed of the Sea, in the deep cave, Aengus paused, the way he was feeling her thought on him and her heart beating along with his.

The fire was burning, breathing, roaring all round. The stone walls glowed red and white and blue with the heat of those fires. Nothing human could have lived there; but Aengus stood against it, armored in the last of his art, and he pushed on forward again, and fought and battled down into the breath of pure fire.

Deeper and deeper he walked, bending his head low against the fire, beating it away from him with his arms; his shoes burnt black in the flames, and the iron buckles of his shoes melted away; and even Aengus had to pause.

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

‘He has eaten the first stalk of the green, and feels cool now in the oven! And he is staggering farther down, and the flames are red hot beating against him. He is falling!’

. . . Deep under the Sea, in the pits of the Earth, Aengus fell with his hands before him onto the hot

fiery floor of the cave. His coat burned clean off him, and his hair waved and flashed in the fire, and the sweat off his brow boiled off his dark skin where it gleamed like a mirror of diamond and iron.

And the breath that went in by his mouth was all fire, and flames were turning in his lungs, and fire was going up and down his blood with the air that went into his lungs. It was near boiling, Aengus' blood; it was near catching fire and bursting out from his veins and tearing him apart still living.

Aengus looked up, and saw down before him the end of the cave, and the entrance in fire to the Chamber that lay beyond.

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

'Girl, girl!' breathed the old woman. 'It's on fire you are, you're all burning up!'

'But on the ground he eats the second stalk, and he is managing to rise to his feet again. His body is black with soot, and the flames are bright yellow, tearing at him, battering him.

'And the flames are white, and the tunnel walls lost in brightness. Aengus is standing as if over the edge of a white blind cliff. The heat growing in him, and he with but the one stalk clutched between his fingers, and it the smallest of the three.'

Grain took a wet cloth, and she laid up along

the girl's brow, and the heat there made the cloth bubble and steam.

... And Aengus where he stood in the entrance to the Chamber felt a soothing coolness on his brow, the way the girl was taking some of the hot breath of the fire away off from him.

And he pushed against the flames, and shoved into the fire.

Inside the Chamber it was hotter still, the hottest yet, and the flame was like pure light, like the heart out of the Sun, and so vast was that Chamber, that its walls all fell away, and Aengus stood on the brink of a space that seemed unending, broader than the sky, deeper than Day.

Aengus squeezed his eyes against the pure hotness of heat, and he tried to see with his eyes deeper against the light that roared and shot and streamed out against him.

And it was like he trod on light itself, the way the brightness of the hot was all around him, and under and over him. And it was so bright his shadow fled away from there.

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

'Waves of light are swirling up, rising round and round. It's like music they are, the beating coils of light. But the music is flawed. There is the slightest

break in it, like a halting of breath.

‘Aengus! Aengus! Do not go so near it!’

Winds were tearing off the waves, casting spray like rain across the face of Mielusine and the mask of Vasquez.

‘Tell me more, Mr Vasquez. Tell me all.’

‘Out of exile in a far land, when this Night fell, I came back into Ireland,’ he answered, and his words were reft out of his throat as though against his wishes. ‘And I hunted him, who’d killed my love, and left my foster parents to die in the ripeness of their age, and he looking still so young when I, born on the same year as the calendar tells, wore the face of a man twenty years older – thirty years older, forty or more! And I took up his bow and arrow, and took to trailing him across the fields of the Night.’

‘To kill him?’ she asked.

‘Nay, now! What man can kill the devil? But I know his love as well as he’d known mine. She was the very spirit and joy and romance and deep delight of the Night, was the White Hind: I knew she’d be about him where he was, watching after him, though never showing herself, for fear of the curse was lying between them. In the abbey I had to take pains, the way the old Man of the Bog was there before me, and he’d know me – so I put on this

mask and kept myself out of the way of him. And in time you nicely took Aengus away out of the abbey, away out of safety. And when he lay dreaming, now,' he said with a laugh, 'and all alone, the White Hind couldn't help herself, and went down to him, and gave me such a clear shot, now!'

'You didn't!' cried Mielusine.

'I did, and she's dead!' shouted the man.

At once she stopped, still as death herself: and he had to stop, and all the face of the Sea, like a painting, or a carving on a cathedral door, had to stop, all stop, for one moment: then the heart in her took up beating again, Mielusine breathed, stepped, swung her arm, and all the rest fell back in step with her.

'Now he's out there, the doomed devil,' said Vasquez, just as though he wasn't aware of the death of the moment that had passed over him. He stretched forth a hand to her.

'Come with me now,' he beckoned, 'Maid Snowflake, come with me up to the dun, and we'll stop up the mouth of the well with hand-small stones, so Aengus has no way out.'

'Come with me instead, Mr Vasquez,' she called, and danced out of his reach down along the waves. Her bright eyes were stormy as the waves, and she was dancing him after her, and dancing the waves

up too, higher and deeper over their heads.

She was seeing, but he was not, that they two were no more alone in the Sea's edge in the storm. There was another there, and it bore the likeness of a man's shadow standing at the edge of the sand.

Mielusine gestured, and the man stepped into the waves.

'Show me your face, Mr Vasquez,' she called.

And she danced back, and he trod a step after her.

'Show me your face, and the grimness of it, Mr Vasquez.'

He reached for her, she danced away, and helpless, he staggered after her.

'You should have been sleeping, Mr Vasquez. You are the Man Who Should Have Slept – aren't you, Mr Vasquez?'

Mielusine waved her hands, and the shadow stepped up behind Fergus in the waves.

'Stop, come back,' groaned Fergus, but she only danced on farther afield.

'You should have been dreaming, Mr Vasquez,' she called. 'Look at your face now, shame on you! Can you stop dreaming and stop from going mad, Mr Vasquez? Ah, but your face is telling me another tale, Mr Vasquez!'

She reached out her hands, dancing back

deeper under the waves. And he, helplessly stumbling after, followed step for step.

Until the shadow behind him could reach him, and locked up both his arms in his grasp.

In the far corner of the hut Grain was huddling, hiding. She was covering her face with her shawl, and muttering prayers in a tongue long forgotten upon the face of the world. But out of her prayer she was asking, in spite of herself,

‘Tell me what you’re seeing, Agatha. Tell me, the way my eyes are blind to it, and I cannot see it at all!’

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

‘He is standing over it! It is on the floor between his feet, the root of the flaw in the light!’

... Up and down, round and round about Aengus, the pure light of the heart of heat and of all things hot danced and swirled, round and round with the beat of Maid Mielusine’s wild dance above, back in the world that we know, in the dark of the end of the unending Night.

And Aengus reached, and it seemed to him he held something struggling in his arms.

But not all evenly, nor all cleanly, did the hotness swirl; but there and here Aengus could discern

a little flaw, and a break in it, like a gasp, or the snag of a sleeve on a sliver of wood in a rough plank.

And somehow Aengus could not find the source of that break, until all at once, as if the girl's words rang out in his ear, he looked down between his feet.

And he saw it there.

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

'Small it is, dark and round, the size of a man's brains, and the white flames bending round it.

'Aengus, do not – ah! He has it in his hands, he is picking it up!'

... Against all the strength and the madness of the light, against all the evil of it bending and bearing up over and against him, its very enemy, Aengus bent low, and he drove and strained, and managed to bring his arms down, and shove his hands deeper into the heart of all that hotness, to the thing that lay buried there.

With a great will, Aengus was bending his fingers and clamping them round that thing, and he was pulling and tearing at it with a heart and a half, until it began to break free. Then it was with twice the effort in his heart, Aengus strove with the thing, and now all at once it was as if the pure hotness of that heat knew what he was about, and it came to his aid, or he would never have done the thing, not

even Aengus, not even himself.

And all at once the thing tore free; Aengus staggered backward in the light, and the pure hotness of heat throbbed and thundered through the unending space of that pit.

‘And now the music of the light is restored. And fiercer it’s growing, and awful beyond denial.’

... Back Aengus staggered, and he was finding himself at the entrance to the Chamber once more, and fighting his way back up the cave with the fire tearing and shooting at his back, twice as hot, thrice as fearsome, four times as evil. And it hit against him in the back of him, and threw him forward and down on his face.

And the thing in his arms tore free of his grasp.

The storm rose up in a great tower over their heads, and Mielusine danced across the waves, a wild and dangerous dance. Fergus tore himself free, and turned to face the shadow. The face of Fergus went all white, and Mielusine laughed.

‘Aengus! You!’ shouted Fergus. And he swept out their father’s sword.

But the shadow dipt its hand in the sea, and sent bits of salt scattering into his brother’s eyes, and it leapt forward and caught Fergus’ wrists in the lock of its fingers. And for a time they were strug-

gling there, and the great waves throbbed and thundered about them both beneath the dancing feet of the girl.

Fergus threw the shadow back, and went for him; but the stroke of the sword went past the twisting shadow, and cut only brine instead of flesh; the shadow rammed into Fergus' chest, and the sword broke out of Fergus' hand and dropped into the Sea.

Under the Sea swam the shadow, and Fergus after it, and the great waves roiling the sand and stones of the shore up and about them. Deeper the shadow dove, and Fergus after it, down to the bottom where the sea-bed glowed red and orange from the heat of the fires of the heart of the Sun below.

In the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned and tore.

'But no! he's eaten the last stalk, and manages to hold his footing. But it was the last!'

...All the cave filled with fire; it tilted and it spun. Aengus was pitched backward as though he were swimming down, down toward the mouth of the Chamber where the new-wakened Sun was growing and bursting like fifty kegs full of gunpowder and pitch.

The Sun growled, and groaned, and roared out,
Awake, Awake again!

But in the calm little hut by the seashore the girl in the cot turned her fingers upon the rough planks of the cot, and her nails tore and dug into the cracks in the wood.

...And Aengus turned his fingers upon the stone of the cave, and his nails tore and dug into the cracks in the stone. And he held on, and did not fall back into the mouth of the Sun.

Slowly Aengus went now, slower and slower his feet and his hands were gripping and pushing back the stone.

Something was calling him. Some voice was calling out his name from the back of him, deep in the Chamber of the heart of the Sun. And it was a dire duty in his heart to be turning and looking back and beholding the source of that voice.

‘Go on, go on! Don’t be halting, don’t look back! What are you listening to? What words are you hearing breathed upon the fire?’

...He lowered his head, and he was starting to look back; and all at once the cave twisted and spun like a wild pony; there was no standing or holding on to it then.

‘Tell me what you’re seeing, Agatha. Tell me, the way my eyes are blind to it, and I cannot see it at all!’

But then the crash sounded from without the

hut, and it shook the Earth.

Deep under the waves Fergus swam, and he saw his father's sword half-buried in the sand; he reached out his hand for it.

But the hand of the shadow flashed there before Fergus' hand, and it was the shadow gripped the sword, and turned it and stabbed it, deep in the black heart of Angus' brother.

But then the crash sounded from above, and it shook the Earth. The third great wave of Ireland broke on all the coasts, and bluffs fell into waters, and stones shattered in foam, and vast bites of beaches were swallowed into gray-green waters. Grain shrieked: Agatha's body shook and went lifeless and limp in that last of all moments.

And the shore to the grianan was the hardest hit; and the peak of the wave smashed into the little hut, breaking its walls and toppling its chimney and burying all within.

And the third wave ripped away the dead bones of the dark man, the Man Who Should Have Slept, with the sword still sticking out of it, and the dancer laughed a wild laugh and danced up on the white spume of the wave, all the way up to the headland over the dun, where she lighted down nimble as a sea-bird on the wild grass blades.

She turned, wet through and drenched, her white dress clinging to her, her black hair streaming wet and wild down her back, and her lips red as Arianna's cloaks.

'Take him away across the Sea, my wave!' she sang, still dancing and showing the leag lorgmhar. 'Take him away back to his place, and let him be happy there, and wash away out of his heart all the evil robbing his peace and his contentment!'

And the while she was dancing, the wave was rolling away, away across the Sea, until it rolled over the far horizon.

But within the cave beneath the Sea it was quiet for that moment. Huddled on the sooty ground, Master Aengus loosened his grasp of the sword hilt that he felt but might not see. And the feeling of waves over his back left him, and he raised his head.

He found that he had fallen in the cave of fire, and soon the winds were swirling up again out of the deeps. But he saw, too, that the shock of the wave had cast him up out of the reach of the flames, and around him was only light.

No more than light glancing up the tunnel walls, and he lying on the cool floor, his eyes open and staring, his lungs sucking in the unburnt air in sobs.

Later he was rising to his feet, and picking up the stone. He climbed the last reach of the tunnel, past the sleeping Henwen and up the well-wall, easily. The clouds in the sky were breaking, and the wave falling away out into the glassy deeps of the Sea, its mother. The stars were peeping down on Ireland, and a rosy light was shining, of the moon-rise.

Master Aengus laughed, the way he knew he'd won. And he knelt and touched his brow, and prayed out his thanks to the Moon aloud.

But that was ill done.

The End of the Seventh Year of Night

In the end of the seventh year of that Night, the Earth shuddered underfoot. There was a pause – a breath was taken and held.

All the Waking felt it, those with Power and those without. They all wondered what it might portend. And when the burning blinding Brightness came, they shut their eyes and turned their faces away.

They didn't know what it could mean. They had forgotten Day. They had forgotten Sun. Only at the end of the first hour of the Dawn did the memories flood back to them.

7. Of the Lady's Share

IN THE pale light, in the calm after the great storm of the wave, in the cool after the burning of the Sun's bright heart, Master Aengus walks along the strand. His path is not straight, but is weaving here and there between the pits eaten out of the strand by the third wave.

He is looking at this shell, and circling that stone, and he is breathing in the wet salt air, and hearing the songs of the morgans in the waves. There is a sort of drunkenness in him, light and breathless, and his eyes look on the face of the world with the wonder of a child. And so bright is he shining, that he is casting no shadow on the bosom of the Earth.

In the wreckage down the way, two figures were standing. It was only after a time that Aengus was aware of them.

The smaller he knew, and the name of her he knew, and that was Grain. The other was taller, and of fairer form. She was a young lady dressed in a

black woolen dress such as fishwives wore. A scarlet scarf was caught about her throat, her breast was bare, and her hair bound about her head shone with streaks of red gold. From that, Aengus knew she wasn't Mielusine: nor was she, the way the dancer was standing higher up on the grasses by the hill. Next to her on the rocks were perched her sister owl and swallow.

'Tch, for shame, look at yourself!' scolded old Grain.

He had to laugh at the sight of himself. The fires in the cave had burnt off his tattered clothes, burnt back his hair and burnt off his beard, and all the filthiness was burnt clean away from him. The fire had even burnt away the scratches on his arms and the lines in his face, as if it polished him. His skin was pale and burning bright, and where his bare feet touched the sand steam was rising, the way he was yet coal-hot. He hadn't even felt his nakedness.

Old Grain shooed him back, and he stumbled into the waves, raising hissing clouds of steam. The old woman drew him back, but he was still hot, so in he went again, and Mielusine danced him out, and now he had his shadow back. And the third time it was the lady in black and red that quenched him, and drew him out by the hand.

Naked, shining with water, Master Aengus took

Lady Agatha in his arms and kissed her.

‘You are younger now than ever I knew you,’ said Agatha, holding him at the ends of her arms. ‘And even handsome!’

But Grain, clucking her tongue, covered him up in her shawl. He let her do that, but his eyes were full of Agatha.

‘But I’m not the White Hind,’ she told him.

‘No,’ he answered her, ‘you are the woman I love.’

He said that so earnestly that she had to laugh.

Then he gave the old fishwife the blackened ball out of the heart of the Sun, and she turned it over and over, looking at it closely.

‘This,’ she said, ‘is no stone, but the skull of your enemy, Master Aengus, all charred by the fire. It’s his dreams that have been cursing you.’

But Master Aengus frowned. ‘Who hated me so?’

‘No, but I know,’ said Agatha. ‘Is it not my old lord?’

‘Aye, that was the one.’

‘But what had he to do with me?’ Aengus wondered.

‘Faith, what had he not to do with you? Do you not know how at birth you were put in his cradle, and he was taken away to your own mother? You

two were born of an hour, for all that you came of age before him, and he was old when you were still taken for a youth. After seven years, your mother brought him back, and would have taken yourself away with her, only you proved stubborn, and must stay in the world of men. Then your mother cursed you with forgetfulness and ionarbadh, and left you as you were.'

'And he was old from my first memory of him,' wondered Aengus.

'Not wholly was your heritage to be denied. For every year that took its toll on him, you paid but an hour's fee. You had forgotten, but he was cursed with remembering, as of dreams, those first seven years of his. As who indeed could be forgetting marvels?

'Not his fine house, his hounds, his carriages, nor his stables pleased him, but were as tarnished gold. Why else was he forever going off alone with his hounds? It wasn't the fox or the stag he was hunting for!

'He was hating you with all his heart, Aengus, but you were too innocent to see the truth of that. . . Is it any wonder the both of you loved the same auburn beauty, with her eyes bright as the moon of your home?'

Then Grain hummed, lightly to herself:

‘Yaaaaaaa . . . ai!’

And Mielusine brought down the leag lorgmhar and broke the skull like an egg. Grain let the charred fragments fall to the sand, but drew out of them a little red jewel, perfect as a dream. She held it out behind her, and made as though to hurl it to the waves.

‘Hold, now,’ said Master Aengus, frowning. ‘You still have not told all. If old Tadhg and Maille May were not my parents, then who were? And who was this mother of mine, of whom you seem to know so much?’

‘Now, that is a question you ought not have asked,’ said the old woman. She pointed with her cípín, fear in her eye. ‘The way you are Prince Og, and your mother is the Lady of the Lough, and she’s coming even now to claim you.’

The Earth under their feet was shaking like waves, and over the hill a hundred riders rode, resplendent in scarlet and black cloaks and cutlasses. Behind them was a coach drawn by eight white mares, and round it bounded a great pack of blood hounds.

Grain shrank back. It was the look in her eyes of a gambler wagering high, and seeing the prize almost in his grasp, only to lose with the last card.

And Agatha knew then that in the last evenings

of the day, the horsemen hadn't come for her at all. They had come for *him*.

The bandits and wenches thundered around; the coach wheeled to a halt. Arianna stepped forth. A silver fan in her hand, her step imperious, and wrath in her eye. From the coach windows the faces of her maids peered out.

Grain cowered, and Mielusine and Lady Agatha curtsied, and even Aengus knelt on one knee in the black shawl.

'You think to cheat me,' said Arianna.

'Did you think you could pray to my Moon aloud, Aengus, and not pay me so much as a penny for a duais? Do you think this will all end happily for you four, and badly now for me? No, but it's one of your lives I'll be taking for my injuries.'

Then Mielusine spoke first and said, 'These two have suffered enough because of you. But I without my sisters am still lost. Take me then, and let them live.'

'No,' said Agatha. 'You won't do that for him, Mielusine. Only I should have that right. I will go with you, Lady, and little difference it will make, the way I am near dying anyway. But let Aengus go, and be happy.'

'Neither you nor you will go,' swore Aengus. 'Nor myself, either. But we will bring back the Sun

and burn away your mists, Arianna.'

'I can yet forestall the Sun from rising for all that you have done, foolish boy! Ask her, if you doubt me.'

And she pointed her fan towards the fishwife. Old Grain nodded.

'You tried to rob Eudemarec away from me,' resumed the lady. 'Were you thinking you could take him from me without replacing him? It's you I'll be taking, Master Aengus. For you alone of all men loved me and yet did not love me well; you loved me with your heart alone, therefore it is your heart I will have torn in two.'

And she dashed down on the sand a slender chain, and on the end of it a golden guinea.

'I took this as the price of your life, Aengus. Now I'll buy you back.'

He bent and picked it up. He had to.

He looked on Agatha.

He looked on her for the last time. As if he would seal forever the sight of her as she was in that moment: distraught, pale from weakness and so beautiful it made his heart ache.

'Lady Arianna,' he said, 'you called to me once, in a hayfield in moonlight, when I was seven winters old. I turned my back to you then, and cast aside your parentage, and held myself to be a man,

though I was never one of Adam's sons. Then my bride called out to me, and you cursed her and me. You took away my memory, but now some part of it is coming back to me, in spite of all your doing. Even so, I accept your judgment.

'I will go with you,' he said, 'and serve you in your abbey in the mist. But in return you will watch over Lady Agatha as once you watched over me, and shelter her as one of your own.'

Then he stepped up over the wreckage on the strand, and stood on the sedge with Arianna. But Agatha said, 'Wait.'

She drew out of her scarf a small bundle and unwrapped it. In the nest of rags, the little jeweled snuffbox sparkled like a gathering of stars.

'I took this from you along the way,' she said. 'I cannot open it. Will you be needing it?'

'Mielusine will open it,' he said.

The dancer took the box, and putting her fingers to it she laid it open, easily, discovering what was within. It was a velvet black ribbon threaded with scarlet, with a cameo of ivory, of the face of the third night's Moon.

'Until now, I myself had never seen what was within the box,' said Aengus. 'It was Mac Bride gave me that snuffbox, upon my twenty-first birthday.'

'It was herself gave it to me to give you,' said

Mac Bride among the bandits. 'What did I tell you then of it?'

Aengus was looking at Agatha. 'That what lay within it would be hidden forever until I found the woman to whom I should belong. That it was only she it would fit.'

Then Mielusine was clasping the necklace round Lady Agatha's throat, which it fit that snugly and well. Agatha put her hand up to the velvet warming to her flesh.

'She will have to watch over you now,' said Aengus.

Agatha stepped forward, with a little 'Aengus!' on her tongue.

'Hold your place,' said the lady. 'You have chosen, stay where you belong.'

The bandits led Master Aengus to the coach, the blood hounds nipping at his heels. The lady stepped up after him.

'Lady! Lady!' It was Mielusine calling.

'Yes, Dancer?'

Mielusine cast down her gaze, then looked up boldly. 'Will it go well with you, if I am returning to the lough?'

'Were you happy there?'

'I was. What will my beauty win me in Day? Riches, perhaps, and back door acclaim, and to be

called a doxy and a whore? But in your abbey I will be a lady.'

'It's wise you've grown, Dancer. Very well: come into the coach.' Two of the jades covered Mielusine with one of the scarlet cloaks, and it was himself, Mac Bride, held the door and helped her up.

'You must have servants if you're to be a lady,' said Arianna. Mielusine looked behind her, and saw the owl and swallow growing, and turning into her sisters.

'Grisalta!' she cried, and 'Merrwyn!' And the three of them embraced, and set to telling one another tales of all they'd been doing during the long Night.

But Aengus where he sat bent his head and squeezed his eyes. 'What is it now, boy?' asked Mac Bride.

'The White Hind,' answered the man. 'She's dead.'

'Is she now?' asked the old cottager with a breath.

'Yes,' said Mielusine, breaking from her sisters. 'Mac Bride, Mr Vasquez killed your daughter.'

'Ah, you people of Day,' sighed Arianna. 'Look where I'm looking, and tell it over again.'

They looked up the strand, and saw a young lady walking down to them. She was wearing a long

white gown, the side of it all reddened, and in her hand she bore an arrow.

Mac Bride, the old Man of the Bog, went to his daughter. But Arianna was there before him, and she called to the lady, 'Princess Maeve, where have you been hiding?'

The Princess frowned and answered, 'It's what I don't know.' She held out the arrow. 'I dreamed I was sleeping,' she said, slowly, 'for many years.'

'So you were,' said Arianna. 'Dream again, safe from all harm.' She took the arrow from the lady and stepped back; and then it wasn't a lady at all, but a small hind standing there, with silver horns, a collar of gold, and a white coat streaked along one side with a doeskin colored streak.

The old Man of the Bog knelt beside the White Hind, took her head in his long, lean hands, and stroked her soft white brow.

'Ah, you were wayward as a girl, when you sided with my fosterling Prince Og. Then you were made to serve the lady in her abbey for seven of our years; but you were wayward, wayward, and fool that I am, I taught you the secret of the causeway, and you ran away home again.

'But for that the lady haunted and cursed you, and in your mother's arms you became again what you'd been when we fostered you, a beast of hill and

wood, hunted by men. Then your mother was saddened to death over the loss of you. And I,' he said, 'I hardened my heart against you, the way you were so wayward, and the death to me of your mother. It was glad I was, to go back into Day and watch over Aengus again from afar. But is this truly the only way to save you now?'

Arianna handed Mac Bride the bloody arrow, and answered, 'No man's arrows could kill her, but this came from my father, and was shot by a man who learned our secrets. It's the only way to be saving her now, to let her be the Hind.'

'Go on then,' he muttered into the White Hind's ear. 'Go on then, and trust no men with their bows and lures.'

The White Hind pranced away up across the grianan. Agatha and Mac Bride and Aengus watched her go.

'So that's why you loved her,' said Agatha. 'You remembered Princess Maeve, and saw her in the White Hind.'

'No,' said Aengus, 'I didn't remember her. I longed for the Hind.'

'But it's only a story, of Princess Maeve and Prince Og.'

'All our lives are only stories, Miss,' answered Mac Bride, 'when they're told to somebody else.'

The coach started, and in the window Agatha saw Aengus' face looking back to her. And she heard the words Arianna spoke to him: 'It was never for that world you were born, Master Aengus. Now you are going home again.'

And the silver bandits mounted, and in a clapping, a creaking, and a barking they all rode up away over the hill with Master Aengus and Mielusine, and were gone.

Mac Bride only stayed behind, and held Lady Agatha to comfort her. But she tore herself away, went down the strand and knelt on a heap of cast up seaweed, where she bowed her head, tore the braids out of her hair, and let the waves splash round her skirts.

'Tis best this way,' said Grain. 'The way Agatha could not have lived on in the Night; and he must be ever hounded and hunted in Day for what he'd done.'

'Yet even if they had been able to live there together, unknown,' answered Mac Bride, 'with such a love as now possesses them, they would have been friendless. Men would hate them, women would envy them, and before long the soldiers of the King would be marching round to tear them all asunder.'

Grain sighed. 'Those who love with a true love have no other needs, and make the worst of rebels.'

Only in death could they have been united there.'

Then she leaned back, and flung the red gem to the waves.

Deep into the Sea the red gem floated, past waving bands of weeds, under schools of flashing fish; deep into the dark the red gem sank, into the land that was sleeping under the waves.

And soon the waves quieted, and the pale band of gold and blue brightened and spread up into the sky, pointed like the crown of Christ or of Hercules, putting an end to Lady Agatha's long ionarbadh, and shining on the green, green hills; and an intolerable brightness burst out of the Sea, and it was dawn, and the beginning of another day.

The First New Year of Sun

In the first new year of Day, those Waking who had no Powers, and who had been Cast Out of the Strong Places, found themselves in the second hour of the Dawn walking down old familiar paths again. To their old front doors. They opened their doors and looked inside. They found their lovers, their kin, their friends, and all the other Sleeping, stretching in their chairs and beds and opening their eyes.

But the Special Ones raised their walls higher against the Sun, and shut themselves away. They walled off the Strong Places forever from the harsh light of the world. They clung to their Powers and the company of their own kind.

The Waking shared breakfast with those who had been Sleeping through all those Seven Years. And the Waking tried to tell the Sleeping what they had missed, the strange lands and unheard-of adventures of the Night of Seven Years. But the Sleeping rubbed their eyes and yawned and said only, 'Enough of your dreams, now let me tell you mine.'

The Waking held their tongues at that, and the world went on – as if only one night of twelve hours had passed across the world, and not one of seven years.

But some of the Waking never forgot those years, and over and over again they were telling of them, in fairy tales, and painting of them in unworldly colors and strokes, and singing of them with fire and too-great joy. They knew one another by what they read and saw and heard in the new schools of art. And though their children never knew what it was to walk and breathe the airs of Night-Land, all the same they remembered, in their dreams and in their blood, when ecstasy took them, when they danced and sang, when they heard the tales of the fantastic, when they saw strange building and unearthly paints, what their fathers and mothers had lived through.

And faintly through all the art works born of that impulse, there ran the traces of the Strong Places and the Special Ones, walled away from the world forever by their own devising. Always those traces can be found with longing and a sense of loss and regret. But they are gone to us all the same.

Afterword

ON THE morning of November 29, 1757, Sir James, Dame Letitia, Lady Felicia, Miss Cecily, and Mr Humphreys woke up in their chambers in the manor house. The servants woke as well, and the wealthy men and their ladies enjoyed a hearty breakfast.

It was a topic of some curiosity amongst them, that the lord and his lady had deserted them in the night; but they knew the old lord's eccentricities, and soon enough their questions were answered by Lady Agatha when she returned to them. She told them the truth, that the lord had fallen in a duel over her honor, and that the man who'd killed him, Master Aengus, had fled their country.

That same morning a gruff, callused cottager woke up in his hut, and gave three calls for his youngest.

'Sini! Sini, you lazy bones, come fetch me my porridge!' he shouted. But the rest of the cottage was empty, and the countryman's daughters fled

away in the night. They never came back, either, and the cottager lived on in loneliness, grumbling at anyone addressing him, and ending his days in peevish sourness.

On that morning of November 29, 1757, the world wakened, as it always did. An unusual night seemed to have passed, the way so many had died, and so many births were to be recorded; but it was no great marvel, the way the odd facts seemed all to be applying only to the poor folk, Tinkers and such like trash; and whoever gave a Tinker's damn for them? Governments took their seats and began another day of taxing their nations, judging their criminals, and sending them to gaols, prison, and hemp.

But the folk who had Wakened through Night into Day remembered, and carried a little bit of the Night about with them for the rest of their lives. And the ones who had been *born* in the Night were gifted with dreams for ever, and they looked on the world through eyes bred to the Night-land. They only came alive at the falling of the day.

With the help of Mac Bride, Lady Agatha took over the old lord's estates. They hung up over the main door an arrow, and forbade all further hunting on the estates. The rich men and their ladies found her much altered, sad and dreamy-eyed; soon enough even Lady Felicia lost patience with her and

went to lodge with other hosts.

But herself, Lady Agatha, voyaged to Italy, where for all that winter she bathed in the Mediterranean sun. Her health was coming back to her, but in the secret place in her back was still the small red star, and in the spring she went back into Ireland. On Beltane Moon, she built a Need-fire out of drift-wood on the lawn, burning all night, the way Beltane is a favoring fire, for then the Druids had made fires with spells, driving cattle between them against evil. And there was merriment enacted there, and love-making among strangers, the way all there wore masks.

And on Midsummer's Eve Lady Agatha rode down to the shore alone, beneath the dun at Knockadoon Head. She swam naked in the sea, and shivered beneath nought but a shawl, waiting for the dawn, that always came, always. And for this folly of swimming in the Western Sea she suffered her cough to come back.

November Eve came, Samhain, for suain is a gentle sound, and at Samhain gentle voices call. Lady Agatha found Mac Bride in a riding coat, his few belongings tied in a sack.

'Faith, where are you off to?' she asked him.

'It's to Lough Mask I'm going, to the Lady of the Lough,' answered he.

‘Take me along with you.’

He looked at her sternly, shaking his head; it was plain he wanted to be obliging her, only the thing she was asking was forbidden. He said at length,

‘Yes. If you want it.’

And together in the sunset those two were riding across the fields, leaping stiles and hedges, outracing the Sun, until they rode over the ridge into the watery mist, that could be entered at no other time.

Master Aengus waited for them there at the bottom of the lough.

He had not died, but he lived as Arianna’s man in her abbey on the lough, where an endless twilight darkened into night. The bandits and wild ladies and the elder folk had flocked to Arianna in the mist; second only to her was the Lady of the Stone, the one they called the Dancer. She lived in the second tower of the Abbey, the Bride’s Tower, that was finished at last, with her sisters, Maid Grisalta and Maid Merrwyn.

And Agatha joined him in those darkling misty lands, under the orchards, and for one night they were together, speaking quickly, catching up on all their news. Holding each other with all their strength, beneath a quince tree, for one night.

When the night was brightening into dying, Mac Bride told her he would not leave that place again. 'It was only to be helping you I went back into the foreign land at all,' he told her.

Alone Lady Agatha rode over the ridge, out into the misty dawn, and found it was not a night that had passed there in the foreign land of the day, but a full month of the Moon.

In all the years after Lady Agatha was wintering in the Italian sun, building her Beltane fire, bathing beneath Knockadoon Head, and riding to her ghostly lover in the lough every November Eve.

As the years went by, she grew older at but half the quickness of those around her. But Master Aengus in the orchard aged hardly at all, the way he was living in Tir-na-n'Og. Soon enough Agatha matched him in seeming year for year, and after that looked older. Master Aengus did grow older, a little, the way he aged a month's time every night she came to join him, and he took back a little of her age, and put it on himself.

Even so, Master Aengus never forgot the Princess Maeve, the White Hind. He saw her prancing in the wood in white moonlight on Midsummer's Eve, even as Agatha in the foreign land was diving in the sea-foam. It is not to be thought he was so utterly faithless as that, to be forgetting her. But

he kept his faith after his own fashion, as he did all other things.

Once riding to him Lady Agatha mistook the height of a stile and was thrown from her horse and killed.

She was old then, but the grandchildren of her friends were fully grown, and their children old enough to have danced their first mask in the Need-fire light.

They did not bury her in the church with the rest of her kin, but put her under Earth on her lawn, beneath where the grass was dead and the ground bare, the way she had been building there her Need-fires for nigh a hundred years.

Master Aengus waited in the watery mist below the ridge. And when he saw she would not come, then he broke out across the ridge and dared steal even over the fields of the foreign land, going only by night, and hiding himself by day. He went to the manor house, now falling in ruins, ill maintained for all Agatha's extravagance in keeping about her vagabond poets and wild-souled beauties who cared for nothing at all but love and pleasure, and only their own loves at that: were they not the children of the Night?

All fallen in ruins was the manor house, and the grass grown up wild about it, and the hedges of

its mazes tall as castle walls. It was almost fallen beyond all recognizing.

But Aengus knew where to go.

There was a little marker there. It was of wood as she had wanted, the way it would soon be gone, burnt beneath the driftwood of the next year's bonfire, and the next year's after that.

Master Aengus had aged a day for every step he had taken out of his mother's land. He sat by the marker all the night long, weary and breathless. Once he had stood beneath her windows yonder, and cut a bloom from her garden, a single bud of the night-blooming rose.

When the dawn broke, the Sun's rays, marching green across the rimy lawns, discovered not Master Aengus sitting, but only a few moldy bones fallen beside the marker.

And the Sun rose, cruel and all-seeing as it ever is.

A young woman in a dark dress came out on the lawn. Her eyes were light as sea-waves, and her face fair, and in her reddish dark hair was a streak of white. She was the daughter of the daughter of the daughter of those two, and her name was Siona Mac Ulcin.

'Bury the bones with my great-grandmother,' she said to the servants. 'She told me he would

come.'

Come October, 1858, on her way to Italy, Siona Mac Ulcin took the stage round Ireland with one of her young men friends. She stopped at old Connor's stage on the way, and she told the master there her story. Himself now was Connor's great-great grandson; his great granddad had been Shawn Ruadh, Siobhan's son; and he made Siona tell the tale out three times, until he had it right.

In his turn he told it to his guests, the ones he most liked, the way it was his best-loved tale. They stayed over to hear it out: it took all the night to tell, and who wouldn't have tarried, to hear the truth of why the Sun had ceased to shine, and to recall the feats of daring in the Night of Seven Years? Traveler told it out to companion, and the latter told it out in turn. So it has come in a long, long line; and now in my turn I pass it on to you.

THE END
OF THE TALE OF
MASTER AENGUS
&
LADY AGATHA,
AND THE LADY
OF THE
LOUGH.

Also Available

The witch went out

in the snow in the night in her bare feet, naked under her nightdress. She carried an apple and a paring knife in a stone bowl. She set the bowl in the snow before the Juniper Tree, took the apple and pared the red skin from the white flesh. . .

The knife slipped and bit into the mound at the bottom of her thumb. She licked blood from her thumb and squatted over the bowl.

She sat in the snow drifting down on her hair, staring at her red blood on the white snow.

‘Give me a child,’ she said. ‘Give me a child as hot as blood and as pure as snow.’

And the witch slipped from her nightdress and embraced the Juniper Tree. The branches scratched her pale bare skin, leaving little trails of blood. . .

— from **The Juniper Tree**

The Naked Damsel

The armored men parted and the damsel stepped forth.

‘Now,’ said Arthur, ‘what has brought you here?’

‘This,’ she answered, and let fall the furred mantle to the floor. Beneath that mantle the damsel stood naked, and wore nothing beside the black veil and a heavy sword belted over her slim waist.

‘What is this sword you wear?’ asked the King. ‘Maiden, to stand so naked with a sword ill beseems you.’

‘The Lady Lille of Avalon,’ she answered, ‘has made me this scabbard and Belt of the Strange Clasp, so that the sword may not be drawn but by the best knight in the world, of the greatest heart and strength of arms, untouched by treachery, tricks or villainy. And I have come to your court, O King, to see if I may find that knight here among you. . . .’

— from **The Killing Sword**

‘What do you think of the stranger?’

‘He is nothing,’ said Gundoen. ‘Much wreckage washes to our shores. He’ll bring us no ill-luck, if that’s what you fear. And if he does, why then his death will end it.’

She shook her head. ‘Not that.’ She wondered how much of her dream she should tell him.

‘What then?’

‘He is . . . of death.’

Gundoen chuckled. ‘Do you believe with the Pious One?’

‘No. He is no more than mortal, certainly. But there is something else.’

‘What?’ His voice grew concerned. ‘Hertha-Toll, what have you seen?’

She looked about, leaned closer.

‘His eyes,’ she whispered. ‘They are the eyes of a Madpriest.’

— from **The Former King**



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