

The Maiden Of The Green Forest

MANY a palace lies under the waves that wash Cymric land, for the sea has swallowed up more than one village, and even cities.

When Welsh fairies yield to their mortal lovers and consent to become their wives, it is always on some condition or promise. Sometimes there are several of these, which the fairy ladies compel their mortal lovers to pledge them, before they agree to become wives. In fact, the fairies in Cymric land are among the most exacting of any known.

A prince named Benlli, of the Powys region, found this out to his grief, for he had always supposed that wives could be had simply for the asking. All that a man need say, to the girl to whom he took a fancy, was this: "Come along with me, and be my bride," and then she would say, "Thank you, I'll come," and the two would trot off together. This was the man's notion.

Now Benlli was a wicked old fellow. He was already married, but wrinkles had gathered on his wife's face. She had a faded, washed-out look, and her hair was thinning out. She would never be young again, and he was tired of her, and wanted a mate with fresh rosy cheeks, and long, thick hair. He was quite ready to fall in love with such a maiden, whenever his eyes should light upon her.

One day, he went out hunting in the Green Forest. While waiting for a wild boar to rush out, there rode past him a young woman whose beauty was dazzling. He instantly fell in love with her.

The next day, while on horseback, at the same opening in the forest, the same maiden reappeared; but it was only for a moment, and then she vanished.

Again, on the third day, the prince rode out to the appointed place, and again the vision of beauty was there. He rode up to her and begged her to come and live with him at his palace.

"I will come and be your wedded wife on three conditions: You must put away the wife you now have; you must permit me to leave you, one night in every seven, without following after or spying upon me; and you must not ask me where I go or what I do. Swear to me that you will do these three things. Then, if you keep your promises unbroken, my beauty shall never change, no, not until the tall vegetable flag-reeds wave and the long green rushes grow in your hall.

"The Prince of Powys was quite ready to swear this oath and he solemnly promised to observe the three conditions. So the Maid of the Green Forest went to live with him.

"But what of his old wife?" one asks.

Ah! he had no trouble from that quarter, for when the newly-wedded couple arrived at the castle, she had already disappeared.

Happy, indeed, were the long bright days, which the prince and his new bride spent together, whether in the castle, or out doors, riding on horseback, or in hunting the deer. Every day, her beauty seemed diviner, and she more lovely. He lavished various gifts upon her, among others that of a diadem of beryl and sapphire. Then he put on her finger a diamond ring worth what was a very great sum—a king's ransom. In the Middle Ages, monarchs as well as nobles were taken prisoners in battle and large amounts of money had to be paid to get them back again. So a king's ransom is what Benlli paid for his wife's diamond ring. He loved her so dearly that he never suspected for a moment that he would ever have any trouble in keeping his three promises.



~ IN A MOMENT HE
FORGOT EVERY WORD
HE MEANT TO SAY ~



But without variety, life has no spice, and monotony wearies the soul. After nine years had passed, and his wife absented herself every Friday night, he began to wonder why it could be. His curiosity, to know the reason for her going away, so increased that it so wore on him that he became both miserable in himself and irritable toward others. Everybody in the castle noticed the change in their master, and grieved over it.

One night, he invited a learned monk from the white monastery, not far away, to come and take dinner with him. The table in the great banqueting hall was spread with the most delicious viands, the lights were magnificent, and the music gay.

But Wyland, the monk, was a man of magic and could see through things. He noticed that some secret grief was preying upon the Prince's mind. He discerned that, amidst all this splendor, he, Benlli, the lord of the castle, was the most miserable person within its walls. So Wyland went home, resolved to call again and find out what was the trouble.

When they met, some days later, Wyland's greeting was this:

"Christ save thee, Benlli! What secret sorrow clouds thy brow? Why so gloomy?"

Benlli at once burst out with the story of how he met the Maid of the Green Forest, and how she became his wife on three conditions.

"Think of it," said Benlli, groaning aloud. "When the owls cry and the crickets chirp, my wife leaves my bed, and until the day star appears, I lie alone, torn with curiosity, to know where she is, and what she is doing. I fall again into heavy sleep, and do not awake until sunrise, when I find her by my side again. It is all such a mystery, that the secret lies heavy on my soul. Despite all my wealth, and my strong castle, with feasting and music by night and hunting by day, I am the most miserable man in Cymric land. No beggar is more wretched than I."

Wyland, the monk, listened and his eyes glittered. There came into his head the idea of enriching the monastery. He saw his chance, and improved it at once. He could make money by solving the secret for a troubled soul."

Prince Benlli," said he, "if you will bestow upon the monks of the White Minster, one tenth of all the flocks that feed within your domain, and one tenth of all that flows into the vaults of your palace, and hand over the Maiden of the Green Forest to me, I shall warrant that your soul will be at peace and your troubles end."

To all this, Prince Benlli agreed, making solemn promise. Then the monk Wyland took his book, leather bound, and kept shut by means of metal clasps, and hid himself in the cranny of a rock near the Giant's Cave, from which there was entrance down into Fairyland.

He had not long to wait, for soon, with a crown on her head, a lady, royally arrayed, passed by out of the silvery moonlight into the dark cave. It was none other than the Maiden of the Green Forest.

Now came a battle of magic and spells, as between the monk's own and those of the Green Forest Maiden. He moved forward to the mouth of the cave. Then summoning into his presence the spirits of the air and the cave, he informed them as to Benlli's vow to enrich the monastery, and to deliver the Green Forest Maiden to himself. Then, calling aloud, he said:

"Let her forever be, as she now appears, and never leave my side."

"Bring her, before the break of day, to the cross near the town of the White Minster, and there will I wed her, and swear to make her my own."

Then, by the power of his magic, he made it impossible for any person or power to recall or hinder the operation of these words. Leaving the cave's mouth, in order to be at the cross, before day should dawn, the first thing he met was a hideous ogress, grinning and rolling her bleared red eyes at him. On her head seemed what was more like moss, than hair. She stretched out a long bony finger at him. On it, flashed the splendid diamond, which Benlli had given his bride, the beautiful Maid of the Green Forest.

"Take me to thy bosom, monk Wyland," she shrieked, laughing hideously and showing what looked like green snags in her mouth.

"For I am the wife you are sworn to wed. Thirty years ago, I was Benlli's blooming bride. When my beauty left me, his love flew out of the window. Now I am a foul ogress, but magic makes me young again every seventh night. I promised that my beauty should last until the tall flag reeds and the long green rushes grow in his hall."

Amazed at her story, Wyland drew in his breath.

"And this promise, I have kept. It is already fulfilled. Your spell and mine are both completed. Yours brought to him the peace of the dead. Mine made the river floods rush in. Now, waters lap to and fro among the reeds and rushes that grow in the banqueting hall, which is now sunk deep below the earth. With the clash of our spells, no charm can redress our fate."

"Come then and take me as thy bride, for oath and spell have both decreed it as thy reward. As Benlli's promise to you is fulfilled, for the waters flow in the palace vaults, the pike and the dare (fish) feed there."

So, caught in his own dark, sordid plot, the monk, who played conjurer, had become the victim of his own craft.

They say that Wyland's Cross still recalls the monk, while fishermen on the Welsh border, can, on nights with smooth water, see towers and chimneys far below, sunk deep beneath the waves.