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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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The Groac'h Of The Isle Of Lok

In old times, when all kinds of wonderful things happened in Brittany, there lived in the village of Lanillis a young man named Houarn Pogamm and a girl called Bellah Postik. As their mothers were great friends, and constantly in and out of each other's houses, they had often been laid in the same cradle, and had played and fought over their games.

'When they are grown up they will marry,' said the mothers; but just as every one was beginning to think of wedding bells, the two mothers died, and the friends, who had no money, went as servants in the same house. This was better than being parted, of course, but not so good as having a little cottage of their own, where they could do as they liked, and soon they might have been heard bewailing to each other the hardness of their lots.

'If we could only manage to buy a cow and get a pig to fatten,' grumbled Houarn, 'I would rent a bit of ground from the master, and then we could be married.'

'Yes,' answered Bellah, with a deep sigh; 'but we live in such hard times, and at the last fair the price of pigs had risen again.'

'We shall have long to wait, that is quite clear,' replied Houarn, turning away to his work.

Whenever they met they repeated their grievances, and at length Houarn's patience was exhausted, and one morning he came to Bellah and told her that he was going away to seek his fortune.

The girl was very unhappy as she listened to this, and felt sorry that she had not tried to make the best of things. She implored Houarn not to leave her, but he would listen to nothing.

'The birds,' he said, 'continue flying until they reach a field of corn, and the bees do not stop unless they find the honey-giving flowers, and why should a man have less sense than they? Like them, I shall seek till I get what I want—that is, money to buy a cow and a pig to fatten. And if you love me, Bellah, you won't attempt to hinder a plan which will hasten our marriage.'

The girl saw it was useless to say more, so she answered sadly:

'Well, go then, since you must. But first I will divide with you all that my parents left me,' and going to her room, she opened a small chest, and took from it a bell, a knife, and a little stick.

'This bell,' she said, 'can be heard at any distance, however far, but it only rings to warn us that our friends are in great danger. The knife frees all it touches from the spells that have been laid on them; while the stick will carry you wherever you want to go. I will give you the knife to guard you against the enchantments of wizards, and the bell to tell me of your perils. The stick I shall keep for myself, so that I can fly to you if ever you have need of me.'

Then they cried for a little on each other's necks, and Houarn started for the mountains.

But in those days, as in these, beggars abounded, and through every village he passed they followed Houarn in crowds, mistaking him for a gentleman, because there were no holes in his clothes.

'There is no fortune to be made here,' he thought to himself; 'it is a place for spending, and not earning. I see I must go further,' and he walked on to Pont-aven, a pretty little town built on the bank of a river.

He was sitting on a bench outside an inn, when he heard two men who were loading their mules talking about the Groac'h of the island of Lok.

'What is a Groac'h?' asked he. 'I have never come across one.' And the men answered that it was the name given to the fairy that dwelt in the lake, and that she was rich—oh! richer than all the kings in the world put together. Many had gone to the island to try and get possession of her treasures, but no one had ever come back.

As he listened Houarn's mind was made up.

'I will go, and return too,' he said to the muleteers. They stared at him in astonishment, and besought him not to be so mad and to throw away his life in such a foolish manner; but he only laughed, and answered that if they could tell him of any other way in which to procure a cow and a pig to fatten, he would think no more about it. But the men did not know how this was to be done, and, shaking their heads over his obstinacy, left him to his fate.

So Houarn went down to the sea, and found a boatman who engaged to take him to the isle of Lok.

The island was large, and lying almost across it was a lake, with a narrow opening to the sea. Houarn paid the boatman and sent him away, and then proceeded to walk round the lake. At one end he perceived a small skiff, painted blue and shaped like a swan, lying under a clump of yellow broom. As far as he could see, the swan's head was tucked under its wing, and Houarn, who had never beheld a boat of the sort, went quickly towards it and stepped in, so as to examine it the better. But no sooner was he on board than the swan woke suddenly up; his head emerged from under his wing, his feet began to move in the water, and in another moment they were in the middle of the lake. As soon as the young man had recovered from his surprise, he prepared to jump into the lake and swim to shore. But the bird had guessed his intentions, and plunged beneath the water, carrying Houarn with him to the palace of the Groac'h.

Now, unless you have been under the sea and beheld all the wonders that lie there, you can never have an idea what the Groac'h's palace was like. It was all made of shells, blue and green and pink and lilac and white, shading into each other till you could not tell where one colour ended and the other began. The staircases were of crystal, and every separate stair sang like a woodland bird as you put your foot on it. Round the palace were great gardens full of all the plants that grow in the sea, with diamonds for flowers.

In a large hall the Groac'h was lying on a couch of gold. The pink and white of her face reminded you of the shells of her palace, while her long black hair was intertwined with strings of coral, and her dress of green silk seemed formed out of the sea. At the sight of her Houarn stopped, dazzled by her beauty.

'Come in,' said the Groac'h, rising to her feet. 'Strangers and handsome youths are always welcome here. Do not be shy, but tell me how you found your way, and what you want.'

'My name is Houarn,' he answered, 'Lanillis is my home, and I am trying to earn enough money to buy a little cow and a pig to fatten.'

'Well, you can easily get that,' replied she; 'it is nothing to worry about. Come in and enjoy yourself.' And she beckoned him to follow her into a second hall whose floors and walls were formed of pearls, while down the sides there were tables laden with fruit and wines of all kinds; and as he ate and drank, the Groac'h talked to him and told him how the treasures he saw came from shipwrecked vessels, and were brought to her palace by a magic current of water.

'I do not wonder,' exclaimed Houarn, who now felt quite at home—'I do not wonder that the people on the earth have so much to say about you.'

'The rich are always envied.'



'For myself,' he added, with a laugh, 'I only ask for the half of your wealth.'

'You can have it, if you will, Houarn,' answered the fairy.

'What do you mean?' cried he.

'My husband, Korandon, is dead,' she replied, 'and if you wish it, I will marry you.'

The young man gazed at her in surprise. Could any one so rich and so beautiful really wish to be his wife? He looked at her again, and Bellah was forgotten as he answered:

'A man would be mad indeed to refuse such an offer. I can only accept it with joy.'

'Then the sooner it is done the better,' said the Groac'h, and gave orders to her servants. After that was finished, she begged Houarn to accompany her to a fish-pond at the bottom of the garden.

'Come lawyer, come miller, come tailor, come singer!' cried she, holding out a net of steel; and at each summons a fish appeared and jumped into the net. When it was full she went into a large kitchen and threw them all into a golden pot; but above the bubbling of the water Houarn seemed to hear the whispering of little voices.

'Who is it whispering in the golden pot, Groac'h?' he inquired at last.

'It is nothing but the noise of the wood sparkling,' she answered; but it did not sound the least like that to Houarn.

'There it is again,' he said, after a short pause.

'The water is getting hot, and it makes the fish jump,' she replied; but soon the noise grew louder and like cries.

'What is it?' asked Houarn, beginning to feel uncomfortable.

'Just the crickets on the hearth,' said she, and broke into a song which drowned the cries from the pot.

But though Houarn held his peace, he was not as happy as before. Something seemed to have gone wrong, and then he suddenly remembered Bellah.

'Is it possible I can have forgotten her so soon? What a wretch I am!' he thought to himself; and he remained apart and watched the Groac'h while she emptied the fish into a plate, and bade him eat his dinner while she fetched wine from her cellar in a cave.

Houarn sat down and took out the knife which Bellah had given him, but as soon as the blade touched the fish the enchantment ceased, and four men stood before him.

'Houarn, save us, we entreat you, and save yourself too!' murmured they, not daring to raise their voices.

'Why, it must have been you who were crying out in the pot just now!' exclaimed Houarn.

'Yes, it was us,' they answered. 'Like you, we came to the isle of Lok to seek our fortunes, and like you we consented to marry the Groac'h, and no sooner was the ceremony over than she turned us into fishes, as she had done to all our forerunners, who are in the fish-pond still, where you will shortly join them.'

On hearing this Houarn leaped into the air, as if he already felt himself frizzling in the golden pot. He rushed to the door, hoping to escape that way; but the Groac'h, who had heard everything, met him on the threshold. Instantly she threw the steel net over his head, and the eyes of a little green frog peeped through the meshes.

'You shall go and play with the rest,' she said, carrying him off to the fish-pond.

It was at this very moment that Bellah, who was skimming the milk in the farm dairy, heard the fairy bell tinkle violently.

At the sound she grew pale, for she knew it meant that Houarn was in danger; and, hastily changing the rough dress she wore for her work, she left the farm with the magic stick in her hand.

Her knees were trembling under her, but she ran as fast as she could to the cross roads, where she drove her stick into the ground, murmuring as she did so a verse her mother had taught her:

"Little staff of apple-tree,
Over the earth and over the sea,
Up in the air be guide to me,
Everywhere to wander free"

and immediately the stick became a smart little horse, with a rosette at each ear and a feather on his forehead. He stood quite still while Bellah scrambled up, then he started off, his pace growing quicker and quicker, till at length the girl could hardly see the

trees and houses as they flashed past. But, rapid as the pace was, it was not rapid enough for Bellah, who stooped and said:

'The swallow is less swift than the wind, the wind is less swift than the lightning. But you, my horse, if you love me, must be swifter than them all, for there is a part of my heart that suffers—the best part of my heart that is in danger.'

And the horse heard her, and galloped like a straw carried along by a tempest till they reached the foot of a rock called the Leap of the Deer. There he stopped, for no horse or mule that ever was born could climb that rock, and Bellah knew it, so she began to sing again:

"Horse of Léon, given to me,
Over the earth and over the sea,
Up in the air be guide to me,
Everywhere to wander free"

and when she had finished, the horse's fore legs grew shorter and spread into wings, his hind legs became claws, feathers sprouted all over his body, and she sat on the back of a great bird, which bore her to the summit of the rock. Here she found a nest made of clay and lined with dried moss, and in the centre a tiny man, black and wrinkled, who gave a cry of surprise at the sight of Bellah.

'Ah! you are the pretty girl who was to come and save me!'

'To save you!' repeated Bellah. 'But who are you, my little friend?'

'I am the husband of the Groac'h of the isle of Lok, and it is owing to her that I am here.'



'But what are you doing in this nest?'

'I am sitting on six eggs of stone, and I shall not be set free till they are hatched.'

On hearing this Bellah began to laugh.

'Poor little cock!' she said, 'and how am I to deliver you?'

'By delivering Houarn, who is in the power of the Groac'h.'

'Ah! tell me how I can manage that, and if I have to walk round the whole of Brittany on my bended knees I will do it!'

'Well, first you must dress yourself as a young man, and then go and seek the Groac'h. When you have found her you must contrive to get hold of the net of steel that hangs from her waist, and shut her up in it for ever.'

'But where am I to find a young man's clothes?' asked she.

'I will show you,' he replied, and as he spoke he pulled out three of his red hairs and blew them away muttering something the while. In the twinkling of an eye the four hairs changed into four tailors, of whom

the first carried a cabbage, the second a pair of scissors, the third a needle, and the fourth an iron. Without waiting for orders, they sat down in the nest and, crossing their legs comfortably, began to prepare the suit of clothes for Bellah.

With one of the leaves of the cabbage they made her a coat, and another served for a waistcoat; but it took two for the wide breeches which were then in fashion. The hat was cut from the heart of the cabbage, and a pair of shoes from the thick stem. And when Bellah had put them all on you would have taken her for a gentleman dressed in green velvet, lined with white satin.

She thanked the little men gratefully, and after a few more instructions, jumped on the back of her great bird and was borne away to the isle of Lok. Once there, she bade him transform himself back into a stick, and with it in her hand she stepped into the blue boat, which conducted her to the palace of shells.

The Groac'h seemed overjoyed to see her, and told her that never before had she beheld such a handsome young man. Very soon she led her visitor into the great hall, where wine and fruit were always waiting, and on the table lay the magic knife, left there by Houarn.

Unseen by the Groac'h, Bellah hid it in a pocket of her green coat, and then followed her hostess into the garden, and to the pond which contained the fish, their sides shining with a thousand different colours.

'Oh! what beautiful, beautiful creatures!' said she. 'I'm sure I should never be tired of watching them.' And she

sat down on the bank, with her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, her eyes fixed on the fishes as they flashed past.

'Would you not like to stay here always?' asked the Groac'h; and Bellah answered that she desired nothing better.

'Then you have only to marry me,' said the Groac'h. 'Oh! don't say no, for I have fallen deeply in love with you.'

'Well, I won't say "No,"' replied Bellah, with a laugh, 'but you must promise first to let me catch one of those lovely fish in your net.'

'It is not so easy as it looks,' rejoined the Groac'h, smiling, 'but take it, and try your luck.'

Bellah took the net which the Groac'h held out, and, turning rapidly, flung it over the witch's head.

'Become in body what you are in soul!' cried she, and in an instant the lovely fairy of the sea was a toad, horrible to look upon. She struggled hard to tear the net asunder, but it was no use. Bellah only drew it the tighter, and, flinging the sorceress into a pit, she rolled a great stone across the mouth, and left her.

As she drew near the pond she saw a great procession of fishes advancing to meet her, crying in hoarse tones: 'This is our lord and master, who has saved us from the net of steel and the pot of gold!'

'And who will restore you to your proper shapes,' said Bellah, drawing the knife from her pocket. But just as she was going to touch the foremost fish, her eyes fell on a green frog on his knees beside her, his little paws crossed over his little heart. Bellah felt as if fingers

were tightening round her throat, but she managed to cry:

'Is this you, my Houarn? Is this you?'

'It is I,' croaked the little frog; and as the knife touched him he was a man again, and, springing up, he clasped her in his arms.

'But we must not forget the others,' she said at last, and began to transform the fishes to their proper shapes. There were so many of them that it took quite a long time. Just as she had finished there arrived the little dwarf from the Deer's Leap in a car drawn by six cockchafers, which once had been the six stone eggs.

'Here I am!' he exclaimed. 'You have broken the spell that held me, and now come and get your reward,' and, dismounting from his chariot, he led them down into the caves filled with gold and jewels, and bade Bellah and Houarn take as much as they wanted.

When their pockets were full, Bellah ordered her stick to become a winged carriage, large enough to bear them and the men they had rescued back to Lanillis.

There they were married the next day, but instead of setting up housekeeping with the little cow and pig to fatten that they had so long wished for, they were able to buy lands for miles round for themselves, and gave each man who had been delivered from the Groac'h a small farm, where he lived happily to the end of his days.