

EVANGELINE WALTON

PRINCE OF ANNWN

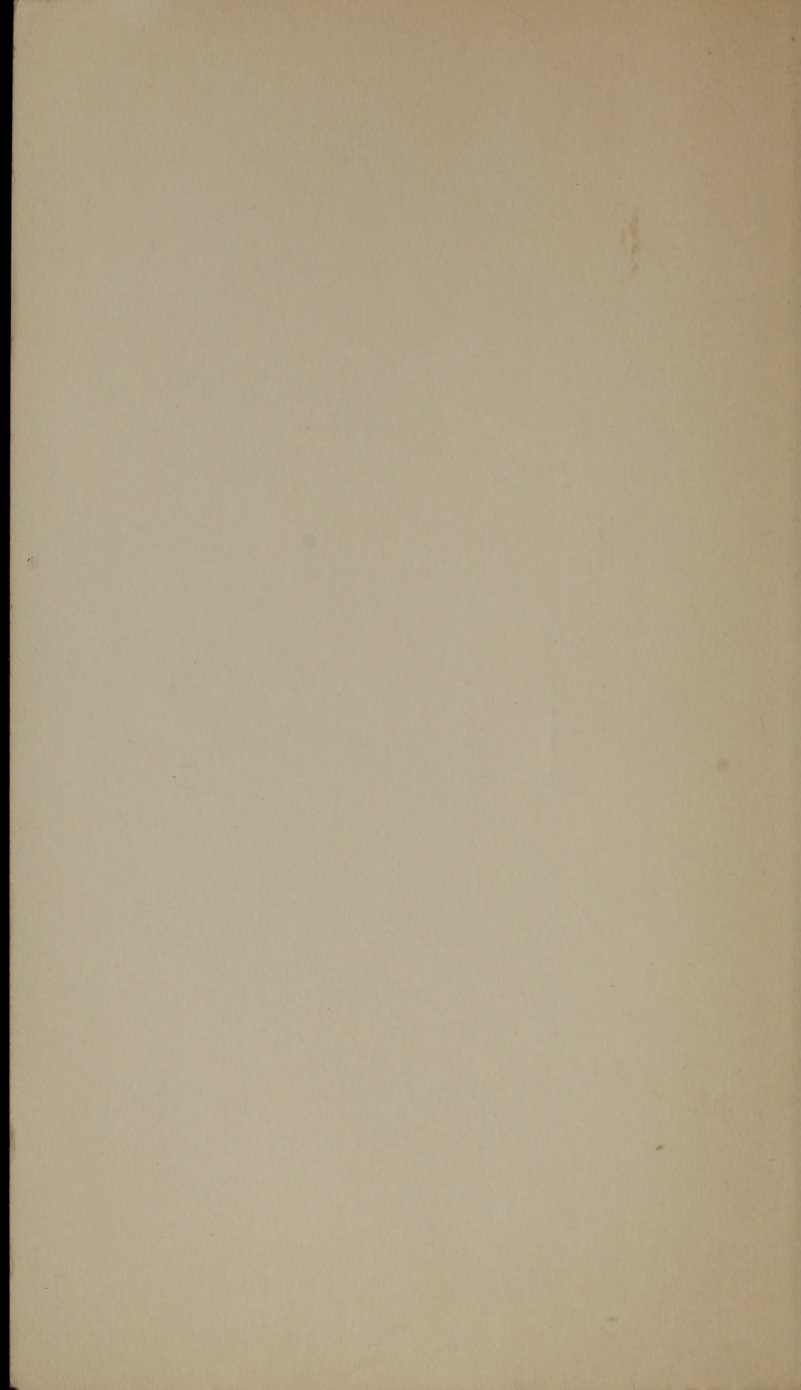
THE FIRST BRANCH
OF THE MABINOZION

A DEL REY BOOK



Ballantine
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ALLIES FROM THE MIST

Pain woke Pwyll. Above him, the monster's massive, scaly leg thrashed back and forth. *Soon it will fall and crush me*, he thought—and so great were his pain and weakness that he did not care.

His eyes closed.

Through the mists within and without him a cry came. Two cries—war cries. Pwyll opened his eyes.

Out of the mist two severed human hands were rising, flying through the air like balls. They leaped upon that tree-thick leg, then hopped from scale to scale . . . to its back, to its horrible, flat head. Then they were at its eyes . . .

By Evangeline Walton:
THE BOOKS OF THE WELSH MABINOZION
Published by Ballantine Books

PRINCE OF ANNWN
From the First Branch

THE CHILDREN OF LLYR
From the Second Branch

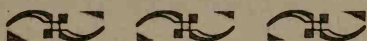
THE SONG OF RHIANNON
From the Third Branch

THE ISLAND OF THE MIGHTY
From the Fourth Branch

Prince of Annwn

by

Evangeline Walton



The First Branch of the Mabinogion



A Del Rey Book

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A Del Rey Book
Published by Ballantine Books

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*In memory of a girl who loved all
things Celtic and magical; I hope that
she would have enjoyed this book.*

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On Evangeline Walton—and Magic

#

(from "The Saturday Review" by Patrick Merla)



"... The essential element of any true work of fantasy is magic—a force that affects the lives and actions of all the creatures that inhabit the fantasist's world. This magic may be innate or manifest; it may be used by the characters who live with it, or come from 'gods' of the author's contrivance. Always it is a *supernatural* force whose use, *misuse*, or *disuse* irrevocably changes the lives of those it touches.

... Now, magic is like religion and politics: few people agree about it. ... I believe in magic. Not as mystic mumbo jumbo, but as a way of life. ... Having long been a student of mysticism (Oriental and Occidental), I have observed that a magical substructure underlies the best fantasies. A book's setting may be Khendiol (*Red Moon and Black Mountain*), King Arthur's England (*The Once and Future King*), or ancient Wales (*The Mabinogion*), but its magic is Real Magic, an archetypal life-giving quality, consistent with magic as it has always been. (In a way this 'cosmic uniformity' is similar to the astonishing similarity of the poetry of Kabir, Rumi, and St. John of the Cross—three mystics from different eras and cultures, all of whom wrote about their religious experiences in almost identical terms.)

There are as many ways of enjoying fantasy books as there are volumes. A comparison of works derived in some way from *The Mabinogion* (The Druidic book of legends of the Welsh people)—both from a literary standpoint and as magical expositions—may give readers an idea of the nature of successful fantasy.

J. R. R. Tolkien and Joy Chant have both made use of magical archetypes found in *The Mabinogion* to enrich their own books; Evangeline Walton's books, on the other hand, are actual retellings of these diverse legends in novel form. Each of these works deals with the struggle between the forces of Good and Evil. Each of them presents some form of quest. Three of them deal with the nature of love.

... Not even Tolkien can create names more magical than those found in *The Mabinogion* itself. (Of course, the Druids were wielders of Real Magic.) In one sense, therefore, Evangeline Walton had some of her work already done for her before she began to write her tetralogy based on the four 'branches' of *The Mabinogion*. These books, together with C. S. Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* and T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, are not only the best fantasies of the twentieth century. They are also great works of fiction.

... The wonders of Walton's books are manifold. ... I suspect that Evangeline Walton knows something about magic from personal experience. Her books are so thoroughly steeped in mysticism that mere anthropological knowledge of Druidical lore is insufficient to explain their authority. Only C. S. Lewis has matched Walton's subtle depiction of the forces of Good and Evil.

... Walton succeeds in creating an imaginary world that we believe *actually existed* in this world's

history. She is able to do what few writers of worth would dare attempt: to predict a future we have already witnessed—this century's wars—and to make that prediction credible in the context of the past she presents.

In Walton's realm of Gwynedd, magic does not disappear when materialism enters the scene—as it does in Tolkien's book and in most of the works drawn from *The Mabinogion*. It merely becomes invisible to men who would not wish to see it if they could. . . .”

Library. It is able to do what few writers of words
could do, although to produce a picture we have to
write many words -- the number of words -- and in writing
that number of words is the number of the page the
picture is on.

In writing the picture of a picture, we have to
describe what we see, and in doing so we have to
write in the picture book and in the book of the words
which are in the picture book. It is the picture book
which is to show what we see, and it is the book of the words
which is to show what we write.

And in writing the picture of a picture, we have to
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Book I

Descent into
the Abyss

Chapter I

THE HUNTER AND THE HUNTED

THAT DAY Pwyll, Prince of Dyved, who thought he was going out to hunt, was in reality going out to be hunted, and by no beast or man of earth.

The night before he had slept at Llyn Diarwya, that lay halfway between royal Arberth, his chief seat, and the deep woods of Glen Cuch. And at moonset, in the last thick darkness before dawn, he woke there.

He woke suddenly, as if a bell had been rung in his ear. Startled, he peered round him, but saw only sight-swallowing blackness that soon thinned to a darkness full of things yet darker. Of half-shaped, constantly reshaping somethings such as always haunt the lightless depths of night, and make it seem mysterious and terrible. He saw nothing that meant anything, and if he had heard anything he did not hear it again.

Then, sharp as an order, came memory: "*You have come to hunt in Glen Cuch, so why not get to it?*"

"By the God my people swear by, I will do that!" said Pwyll, and he jumped out of bed.

He roused out men, dogs, and horses, he drove them forth with their breakfast only half eaten.

"I wish he would get married," grumbled one man, looking sorrowfully back at his food as he made for the door. "Then he would get up later in the morning."

"He would have here if our host's wife had been young and pretty," mumbled a second man, still chewing. "Then he might have stayed in bed till noon." Which was true, for Pwyll was of the New Tribes, among whom hospitality included the use of one's wife as well as of one's best food and bed. It was different with the Old Tribes, who did not know marriage and whose women slept with men only when it pleased them, although they often pleased.

But that morning Pwyll would not have stayed in bed if the loveliest woman in the world had been there with him. The *Mabinogi* says that it pleased him to go hunting, but the fact is that it pleased somebody else. The idea had been planted in his brain by another, one far older, more subtle, and mightier. Pwyll, who liked to do as he pleased, whose wont it was to give orders, not to take them, never dreamed that he was being as obedient as one of his own hounds.

Out into the first feeble grey of dawn he rode, his hungry, sulky men with him. Soon the forest of Glen Cuch loomed before them, still black as night, mighty with the mystery and darkness that fill all deep forests. At its edge the men dismounted, for horses, like the sun, never could have pierced far into those depths.

Pwyll's horn sounded, and the dogs were loosed. For a space the huge beasts stood sniffing, red eyed, the hair on their backs rising. Then, with a great wild bellowing they were off. The black woods closed over them like gigantic jaws.

One man, looking after them, said uneasily: "I never saw them act quite like that before."

Pwyll laughed. "They have scented something. Let us go find out what!" And he charged into that darkness after the dogs.

For a little while he could not see anything. He pushed and broke his way through dense undergrowth, snapping off branches, and getting switched by branches that he had not snapped off. He knew that his men were all around him, for he heard them lumbering as clumsily as he through the undergrowth, and swearing when they too got switched. But ahead of them all still rang the wild belling of the hounds.

This wood has always been thick, Pwyll thought, puzzled. But the last time I was here it was not nearly this thick.

Yet the belling of the hounds drew him irresistibly, that belling which is wilder and more eerily sweet than any other sound on earth. He pressed on, heedless of torn clothes, and of the skin that was going with them. He listened so hard to the dogs that for some time he did not notice he had ceased to hear any sound from his men. *Well, he thought, when he did realize his aloneness, sooner or later we will all catch up with the dogs.*

But the way grew no easier and the belling no nearer, and presently it came to Pwyll that he had been fighting that slashing underbrush for far too long a time. Long ago sunlight should have begun to fall in bright patches through the green leaves above his head; daylight of some kind, at least. He began to wish that he could hear some of his men, no matter how far off, and to be ashamed of how much he wished it.

This forest must be thicker than any other forest in the world. It is certainly too thick. But She cast much rain last winter; that must be why.

The Welsh say, "She is casting rain," not "It is raining," and in Pwyll's day men still knew why. Rain and

sun, crops and the wombs of beasts and women, all were ruled by that old, mysterious Goddess from whose own womb all things had come in the beginning. The wild places were Hers, and the wild things were Her children. Men of the New Tribes, Pwyll's proud golden warrior-kind, left Her worship to women, made offerings only to their Man-Gods, who brought them battle and loot. But now Pwyll began to wonder if those hunters were right who said that all who went into the woods to slay Her horned and furry children should first make offerings to Her, and promise not to kill too many. So folk of the Old Tribes had always done.

I do not know what You like, Lady, but whatever it is, You shall have it. Only get me out of here.

When he got home he would ask several women what She liked, all young ones. This plan cheered him, evoking pleasant images, but in that gloomy wood they soon faded.

Of a sudden the belling rang out fiercely, with the savage joy of dogs who are almost upon their quarry. But it was coming from the west, and the belling of Pwyll's dogs had always come from the east. Also it was not their cry. But swiftly the excited baying of Pwyll's hounds followed it; they too had turned west. The quarry must have changed its course; soon the two packs would meet! And that meeting could be bloody.

Pwyll could not run through those lashing brambles, but he crashed through them, losing more skin. His leaping feet flew above stones and roots that tried to trip him.

Ahead of him the forest seemed to open like a door. He saw a green glade, flat and open beneath a leaden sky. He stopped.

This place never has been here before. It cannot be a right place. Ought a man to go into it?

But then his own dogs came running into the far end

of that glade, and his heart leapt. His mouth opened to call to them, but before any noise could come out of it a huge stag leapt out of the forest just ahead of him. Its tongue was hanging out, its eyes were mad with fear, and the strange hounds ran just behind it!

Their baying filled earth and heaven; it seemed to split Pwyll's eardrums. Before his swimming eyes flashed whiteness, whiteness that blazed like flame and shone like snow. Many bodies struck him; swifter than the wind, colder than snow, they knocked him down and leapt over him, they rushed on after the stag. In the middle of the glade they caught it, and they pulled it down.

As he stumbled to his feet Pwyll heard its tortured death cry. He stood dazed, watching those white shapes tear at the brown body that still twitched upon the ground, the long legs that a moment before had been so swift and powerful jerking feebly as the fierce fangs gnawed its flesh.

The eyes and ears and the blood-dripping teeth of those strange dogs glowed red, red as fire, but their white bodies glittered more savagely, with an unnatural, deathlike brilliance of paleness. Blackness terrifies; it is sightlessness, it blinds a man and hides his enemies; yet the darkness within the earth is warm and life giving, the womb of the Mother, the source of all growth. But in snow or in white-hot flame nothing can grow. Whiteness means annihilation, that end from which can come no beginning.

How long he might have watched that dreadful feeding Pwyll never knew. Silence roused him; deep silence that was broken only by the joyous, yet still savage growling of the victors.

His own dogs were not making any noise at all.

They were still there; at the far end of the clearing

they crouched shivering. Every hair on their bodies stood up as stiff and straight as grass.

They were picked fighters; never before had they been known to turn tail before any foe. Always before they would have leapt light-swift, an ecstasy of rending fangs and claws, upon any other pack caught daring to hunt in any forest where Pwyll hunted. But now they cowered and shivered, afraid to tackle those unnatural, death-white dogs.

Pwyll saw that, and he could not bear it. He was young—not quite three winters had he been Lord in Dyved—and pride was still stronger in him than discretion. Also he was a little afraid himself, and what afflicts ourselves is often what we most despise in others.

He looked sternly at his dogs. "Take that stag!"

They looked at him beseechingly; they wagged their tails, begging him to change his mind. Their eyes said pitifully: "*Lord, we have always done your bidding. Anything we can do for you we will always do. But this . . . Do not ask it of us, Lord; do not . . .*"

And because he himself was afraid that they could not do it Pwyll was miserable; also their misery hurt him. And because he felt guilty he glared at them harder than ever.

"I said: take that stag!"

They cowered yet lower; they whined.

He never had struck any of them. They were his darlings and his heart's pride. Yet now he stooped and picked up a stick.

They could not bear that; death was less dreadful to them than his wrath. They moved, they advanced, tails down, bodies trembling.

Pwyll dropped the stick and drew his sword. He would not let them fight alone.

But when the stranger dogs saw them coming they backed away. With their nostrils full of the scent of

blood, with their terrible, fanged mouths full of the meat and its good taste, they backed away from the hot, steaming flesh of their kill. Silently they went, their eyes gleaming redder than their bloodstained fangs, and to the watching man it seemed that those red eyes were mocking.

Pwyll did not like that retreat. No right dogs would have behaved like that. They should have fought; even if they knew that they were trespassing and were afraid, they should have shown disappointment.

Gingerly his own dogs approached the stag, but once they tasted its blood they began to tear it joyfully, growling deep in their throats. Though from time to time they stole wary glances at those pale, shining strangers, who stood off and watched, silent at the trees.

Pwyll never took his eyes off the strange dogs. Their red eyes stared back at him with a most undoggish straightness, with a glowing fierceness, an almost intolerable brightness; it took all his will not to look away.

"They are waiting for something," thought Pwyll. He glanced over his shoulder toward the west from which they had come. But there was nothing there; only trees.

His heart leapt, then sank; there was Something!

A namelessness, a far-off greyness, not solid enough to be a beast, too thin to be fog . . .

It was moving! It was coming, neither swiftly nor slowly, but with an awful, steady sureness. What shape was on it, man, beast or cloud, Pwyll could not tell; he knew only that, whatever it was, when it got there he would wish it was something else.

The bole of one enormous old tree hid it; for a breath's space Pwyll could not see it, and then a Grey Man on a Grey Horse rode out into the glade. And Pwyll's hand, that had leapt to his sword-hilt, froze there, and his eyes stared as if frozen in his head.

Both horse and rider were solid now. They looked

bigger than they should have, and every part of them, hair and hide, hoof, clothing, and skin, was of precisely the same color. The same terrible, corpselike grey.

All but the Man's eyes.

Pwyll did not want to meet those eyes, but he could not escape them. Through their shining blackness cold seemed to stream through his blood and bones. Knowledge streamed with it, knowledge that he could neither understand nor keep. His brain reeled away from that awful wisdom, that poured into it as into a cup, and overturned it, and was spilled again.

He could not close his eyes; he shuddered and covered them with his hands, to shut out those other eyes. He was glad, blessedly glad, that he could still move his hands.

The Horseman spoke then, and his voice had a note of the wind in it, of a wind blowing through great space; in that it was like the baying of his dogs. But his words were ordinary enough.

"Prince," he said, "I know who you are, and it is not a good day I give you."

Nothing seems likelier, thought Pwyll, than that you will give me a bad one. But I am a man, and I will not shame my manhood. He threw back his head and looked at the stranger, and was delighted to find that now he could do it. Words or blows, these he could trade with any foe.

"Well, Lord," he said dryly, "perhaps your dignity is so great that it is beneath it to greet me." That was irony; these were his lands, and he was Lord of them, and the stranger had entered them unbidden.

But the other was unabashed. "By the Gods, it is not my dignity that stops me!"

"Then what is it?"

"By all the Gods,"—and Pwyll wondered if he were

one of them and were swearing by himself—"it is your own ignorance and bad manners!"

Pwyll stiffened. His grey eyes had the glint of ice. "What bad manners have you seen in me, stranger?"

"Never have I seen worse manners than to drive away the dogs that had made the kill, and to set your own pack on the carcass!" Thunder rolled in the deep voice.

"If I have done you wrong," said Pwyll quietly, "I will pay you whatever face-price is due your rank. I do not know what this is for I do not know you."

Suddenly all became very still. No leaf moved, no wind stirred, the birds of the air hung motionless, and the snakes ceased to slither in the deep grasses. Even the dogs stopped chewing, though their mouths were full of meat.

"I am a crowned King in the land whence I come." The stranger's voice was low, yet the wild vastness of the wind was in it, and something within Pwyll shrank.

"Good day to you then, Lord King." He kept his voice and eyes steady. "What land is that?"

"Annwn. Arawn, a King in Annwn, I am named."

Then indeed did great cold pour through Pwyll again, freezing him, blood and bone. For he understood.

Our world is one of many. The uninstructed group them all together in the lovely, capricious, ever-perilous realm of Faery, but Pwyll, being of kingly blood, had had some druidic instruction forced upon him. He knew that the Otherworld nearest earth was Annwn, the Abyss; that primal womb in which all things first took shape. There a horde of nameless beings had struggled up, through form after form, until after untold ages, they were ready to be born upon earth as men. There most men returned at death, only a few being able to go on to a higher, brighter place. "Every world has its Grey Man," his cousin Pendaran Dyved, the only druid he trusted, once had told Pwyll. "Only among us of

earth none dwells, because we are afraid to look upon his face. So he that dwells in Annwn is our Lord also. He is the gardener who tends every garden. He gathers the flowers and the ripe fruit, to make room for the new to grow. He fells the old trees, that the young trees may have room to grow."

And Arawn was the Grey Man of Annwn, the Master of the hounds of the Mother: Arawn, whose other name was Death.

Dizzily Pwyll thought: *Am I dying? But what happened to me? I am young and strong; I do not remember being killed.*

If he had been, surely he would have noticed something. But then why was Death here? He would not meet those awful eyes, he turned his head away, he looked hard and hungrily at the trees and grasses. Things he always had taken for granted, but that now seemed very precious, very dear.

Yet he felt those eyes. They burned through the side of his head, through his flesh, into his skull. Until at last he turned and faced Arawn.

"I promised you whatever face-price was your due. Take it, Lord King." He swallowed, but he said it.

Chapter II

THE MEETING IN THE FOREST

ARAWN SAID quietly: "No man may flee long from my hounds and me; we need no tricks to run him down. I do not seek your life, Lord of Dyved."

"Then what do you want?" Pwyll felt dizzier than ever, but with relief now.

"All men's lives are mine to claim when the time comes, so all men may be called my subjects. Yet that one service is all I have the right to claim. So, needing another from you, I arranged this meeting."

As lightning flashes upon a man in darkness, unseen hills and valleys blazing out of blackness into fiery splendor before his eyes, so Pwyll saw. He understood. Not by chance had he wakened and wished to go forth into the dawn; into that twilit dimness which is neither night nor day, and when, as at dusk, Beings without our gross flesh find it easiest to show themselves to men. He had walked into a trap, and here was the trapper.

"You are right," said Arawn, "I planned all." And Pwyll knew that to this mighty Being thoughts were as loud as words; no secret could be hidden from him.

He said, "I should have known! When I saw this glade where no glade ever was before, I should have known that I had ridden out of my world into yours!"

"That is so. Nothing in your world but mirrors something that was first in Annwn. You walk now in Glen Cuch as the Mother first dreamed it, not as it is on earth."

"But why bring me here? What on earth—or off it—can a man do for a God?"

"There is a Lord whose lands lie opposite mine; Havgan, another King in Annwn. Once he ruled the dead of the Eastern World as I rule the dead of the West, but now he moves westward. He sits in Anghar the Loveless, he wars on me always, he would be master of all. To spare my people I agreed that both realms should be staked on single combat, to be fought again in a year and a day, if we both lived. So we fought, and I slew him."

"But then it is all over! You won, and he is dead." Then Pwyll remembered that everybody in Arawn's world was dead, and scratched his head. "I never have believed those old wives' tales about people who died on earth going to the moon, and people who died on the moon going to the sun, yet anybody who dies in your world, Lord, must have to go on to one that is even deadier."

Arawn smiled. "True. Those tales of sun and moon are for children, yet some truth is in them, even as something of a man, though little of him, is in his likeness in a mirror. It is not good to lie to children."

Pwyll groaned. "You mean that although Annwn is not the moon, it is the moon?"

"It is the World of Middle Light, not the hard, bright place that earth is. My people are still much like your people; they know neither age nor sickness, but they still fight and slay one another, though not nearly so

often as you do on earth. They may have many births on Annwn, but when they learn enough they are born into the Bright World, of which your sun is but the shadow. Where another Grey Man sits as Lord, where no man lifts hand against another, though he may know other, subtler perils."

"That other Grey Man—is he your kin?"

"There are Beings who cast shadows in many worlds. We Grey Men may all be shadows of One beyond your imagining; Havgan may be one of the Shadows of Another."

"I hope," said Pwyll simply, "that whatever it is you want me to do for you is something I can do without understanding what it is."

"The first part is only killing, which you have done often, whether you fully understood the deed or not. A year ago today I fought Havgan, and tomorrow you must meet him in my place. Meet him at the ford where warriors meet, and slay him if you can."

"Lord, how can I kill him if you could not?"

"Against him I no longer have any power, and no champion of mine can do what I cannot. All the might of Annwn is powerless against him now. But you are called a bull of battle and a woe to your enemies—the savage, rough strength of earth may do what we cannot."

"You think well of earth," said Pwyll, a trifle stiffly.

Arawn smiled again. "Every rung has its place in the ladder. But I meant no offense."

"There is certainly one good thing about earth," said Pwyll. "When you kill a man there he stays dead. You have no more trouble with him, though his friends and kin may try to make some."

"It is not Havgan's friends or kin that will come against me tomorrow," said Arawn, "but himself, and him none can slay a second time."

"That last is not queer. What I cannot understand is why he did not stay dead the first time." Pwyll spoke lightly, but his head swam. What help could Death need in killing? And what would happen to men if—inconceivable thought!—Death himself should die?

"Build no hopes on that." Again Arawn had read his thoughts. "Havgan too is Death, and if I fall he will slay as I never slew. All the worlds he can reach he will burn and tear and wreck. He will overturn the order that I have maintained throughout the ages, I the First-born and Servant of the Mother."

For a breath's space there was silence. Then Pwyll said quietly: "Tell me what to do and I will do it."

Arawn looked at him, and in the measureless depths of his strange, sun-bright black eyes were sorrow and pity beyond man's understanding: the pity of a man for a child's sorrow, and the pity of a God for his suffering creation. For the misery that he has caused all creatures by creating them, and must share, or be less than God or man.

"You rode into Annwn unknowingly, you took only what you thought was your right. Though your heedlessness made your entrapment possible, yet a generous host would claim no face-price. The deed, if you do it, must be freely done."

"I pay my debts." Pwyll's chin rose proudly.

"You are too proud a warrior to fear Death. Yet you risk what you might think worse than dying. You ride into perils you cannot dream of."

"Whatever must be paid I will pay it," said Pwyll, "not for a stag's carcass—that I think you should forgive me for—but because my world, as well as yours, is at stake. That much I think I understand."

"Then let us swear friendship together," said Arawn. "Make ourselves close as brothers. No man born ever has sworn that oath with Death."

So they swore the oath, and Pwyll felt both awe and pride, he who now was Death's sworn brother. Oaths had great power then; ages after the Welsh country-folk still knew of one so powerful that he whose lips took it might wither away and perish, however well he kept it.

"Now I will send you to my own place," said Arawn. Pwyll started and once more the Grey Man smiled. "Fear nothing. Tonight you shall sit in my seat and sleep in my bed, and the loveliest lady you have ever seen will sleep with you there. For my shape will be on you, and neither my Queen nor the officer of our bedchamber—not a man of all the men that follow me—will know your face from my face. So it shall be until we meet again, in this same spot. After you have slain Havgan."

Pwyll could not help drawing a deep breath of relief. *So I will get back to earth.* This going down into the Abyss was to be only a visit, not a polite way of killing him, after all.

"Guard yourself well," said Arawn. "Havgan is the mightiest of warriors and the wildest. He has arts and skills such as I have never seen in all the ages, I who have been present at all the battles of men, being Death."

"Yet you killed him?" Pwyll began to wonder if he could.

"With one great blow. As you must. Your true ordeal will come afterwards; when he lies broken at your feet."

"How can that be?" Pwyll was bewildered. "I will simply cut his head off then and make an end of it. Never have I dragged out any foe's death agonies."

His voice died, frozen in his throat by the awfulness of Arawn's face.

"Then indeed you will be lost. Whatever happens—and your heart will bleed for him as for your brother,

born of one mother—strike him no second blow. So I, a God, was beguiled. I saw only him, heard only him; his agony seemed to tear my own flesh. So I yielded my will to his will, and he who does that has no more power against him forever.”

“What happened?” Pwyll stared in wonder.

“When he begged me to cut off his head and put him out of his pain I did it—and the head jumped straight back onto his shoulders and grew fast there. He leapt up and fought again as well as ever. Barely did I escape from him.”

Pwyll whistled. “That one,” said he, “is a bad enemy to have.”

“I have him,” said Arawn grimly, “and if he slays you he will have my people and my world. And soon, yours.”

“Well”—Pwyll’s grin flashed again and he shrugged—“some day an enemy who is on his feet may get my head, but I think that when dealing with one who lies at my feet I will always be able to keep it.”

“May that be true, Lord of Dyved! May your will be as strong as your arm—and both will need strength.” Arawn’s eyes were deeper than the sea, his voice had the rolling majesty of deep waters; of that ocean which, more than anything else that man can feel or touch, wears the likeness of infinity. “For my sake, and for your sake, and for the sake of all Gods and men.”



So Pwyll rode down into Annwn to kill the man whom Death himself could not kill. He rode the Grey Horse, and when he looked down he saw grey hands on the bridle, hands that were not shaped like his hands. He did not look down often, because the sight disconcerted him. He told himself uneasily: *Down underneath*

it is the same old stuff—the stuff that is me. It must be!

But was it? In that wild moment when his whole self had spun round and round—when his skin had seemed but a heaving, whirling cover over Chaos—anything might have happened. His soul might have been torn loose and blown into Arawn's body, and Arawn's soul might have been blown into his. Few earth-born men of illusion and fantasy could reshape matter, they could only throw a false appearance, cloaklike, upon what they bewitched. But the King of the Dead must be a mightier magician than any born on earth.

I have my own soul, anyway, Pwyll comforted himself. The druids would say that was the real me.

He did not like the druids, he never had understood their Mysteries, which he believed they often used to gain their own ends, but now that bit of their lore warmed his heart.

He had not understood at first that there was to be an exchange of shapes—something that would give Arawn the chance to take his body. He had said, troubled: "But my people—great fear and worry will be on everybody when I do not return from the hunt." And the Other had smiled. "No, for I shall be there in your place. Not a man or woman in Dyved will know my face from your face."

"But how will I find your palace?" Pwyll had scrambled wildly for objections. "And how would I know who was who if I got there? A King should know his people—"

"Give the Grey his head, and he will bear you where you should go. And when your people sleep I will be with you again. I myself will be your guide, and the way to my palace shall be clear before you."

And so it had been done, though at first Pwyll had felt as outraged as if some strange man had borrowed

his horse or his hounds or his sword without leave, all the best of their kind in Dyved, and all cherished like beloved children.

My body too is the best of its kind in Dyved, he reflected. Many men have told me so, watching me practicing my battle feats. And so have many women, when I was practicing other kinds of feats.

There, with the drear mists of the Underworld rising about him, he grinned, remembering old prowess, old delights. But not for long. He had his soul, but he wanted his body too, the strong, warm young flesh he was used to and proud of. It had been a bad moment when Arawn had whistled, and Pwyll's dogs had followed him without a backward glance at Pwyll. It is a queer thing to watch yourself walking away from yourself.

Well, I will have his things too, just as he has mine . . . What will she be like, Arawn's Queen? I have the better of him there, for I have no wife for him to sleep with.

Not that he really meant to touch Arawn's Queen. Courtesy had compelled Death to offer her, just as courtesy would compel Pwyll to refrain from her. A man was expected to sleep with his own men's wives; that was the best way to keep a tribe strong, filling it with the sons of its leaders, of its mightiest men. Pwyll deflowered every wellborn bride in Dyved on her wedding night, and some that were not wellborn if they were pretty. If ever the High King of the Island of the Mighty visited Pwyll he would sleep with Pwyll's Queen—if there was such a person then. But Arawn was not Pwyll's man, but his equal and more. To take advantage of his generosity would be an ungentlemanly act.

And if the lady is the same color as her Lord it will be easy to be a gentleman, he thought. Though of course I will be seeing her through Arawn's eyes . . .

Or through eyes made over to look like Arawn's.

There it was again. He would have liked to be sure that he still had his real self, all of himself. Also in battle a man does best with his own familiar weapons, and Pwyll would have liked to be sure that he had his own good, well-trained muscles. He sighed.

He had hoped soon to use those muscles in profitable earthly combat. Great Beli the High King was failing, and with him might die the peace that for many winters his strength and his justice had kept between Old Tribes and New. Beli was of the Old Tribes, so his heirs would be his sister's sons, the Children of Llyr, but in secret his own son, Caswallon, was already wooing the Lords of the New Tribes with questionable promises. "Help me to seize my father's throne before Bran, son of Llyr, has planted his big behind there long enough to grow strong. Then you shall be as the King's brothers, you shall lord it over the Old Tribes. Over those weaklings who think themselves mightier than you, though when your forebears swooped down like eagles upon the Island of the Mighty, they were not strong enough to drive them back into the sea." To Pwyll, Caswallon smelled like a traitor; a man's own people were his people, he should always think them the best of all, whatever they were. Yet son should follow father, and Dyved was a little land now; the New Tribes never had been able to take all of it. Pwyll wanted seven more cantrevs, and he could get them out of Caswallon the Cunning if he moved quickly, before the new King grew strong enough to forget his promises.

But will I get back now in time to help Caswallon? Earthly time is different from Otherworld time; I wish I had asked Arawn about that. I wish Arawn would get back . . .

The mists about him were growing ever more chill and drear. He had given the Grey his head, and any horse should know the way home to his own feeding

trough. Yet if this was the way to Arawn's palace it was not a pleasant way.

Then it seemed to Pwyll that he heard something. A sound so far off, so eerily mighty, that he could not give it a name.

Chapter III

THE MEETING ON THE MOORS

IT WAS no right sound. Pwyll stopped his Horse, he listened, straining his ears, but now the cloudy greyness smothered all sound. Nothing broke it, none of the myriad tiny sounds that weave themselves into a living tapestry to cover the forests and fields of earth. To fill the houses of men at night. Pwyll strained his eyes, but he might as well have been blind. He opened his mouth to call out in challenge, but the mists rushed into it, cold and slimy, like half-solid hands trying to claw their way down into the warm solidity that was himself. He shut his mouth again, rather fast. Something might indeed come at his call, but would that something be good to see?

He shook himself; such feelings were unworthy of a bull of battle. "Am I the Lord of Dyved? Soon I will be calling for my mother like a little girl waking up in the middle of the night with a bellyache." He did not say "bad dreams"; somehow they did not seem like things that should be mentioned, here. "Well, go ahead again, Grey."

The Grey of Arawn went; this time he sped forward. Quickly, purposefully, he galloped through the mists. Pwyll felt the hard, powerful body under his knees, but there was none of the warm comradeship he had always enjoyed with his own chestnut stallion, his dear Kein Galed, that Arawn had now. He had always told his chestnut where to go; now he was going wherever this strange Grey Horse chose to carry him. And it seemed to him that they were heading toward the place from which that mysterious sound had come.

There was no sound now. They galloped on and on through grey sightlessness and grey soundlessness. Until Pwyll began to feel that he would be glad to hear anything, any kind of a noise at all. And then he heard it.

It was a great chopping noise that struck the deathly silence as a blow strikes flesh, and several great grinding noises followed it. Soon there was another crashing chop, then more grinding. Many carpenters and woodcutters working together, Pwyll told himself firmly, might make such noises.

Though if those were saws—he cringed as another grinding noise seemed to drive through both his ears and down into his stomach—*I never have heard saws I liked the sound of less . . . Ow! That must have been a great tree!* For there had been another mighty chop.

On earth carpenters and woodcutters seldom worked together, but this was not earth, and where people were Arawn's palace might be. These could be his workmen: Death's workmen.

They sound like it. The noises were setting Pwyll's teeth on edge, though he would not admit to himself that they made his flesh crawl. He listened intently as the Grey sped on. *They are keeping time like musicians, but they certainly do not sound like palace musicians. I do not believe any King, dead or alive, would have them in his hall . . . They are not only keeping time, all those*

noises sound as if they were being made by one Thing!

For a breath's space he wavered, his hands tightened on the bridle. But the Grey clearly wanted to go on, and the Grey was the guide Arawn had given him. Also, whatever the Thing was, it was solid enough to make a noise, and Pwyll was longing for solid things.

If it is friendly I will make friends with it, and if it is not friendly I will fight with it.

Either course would be a good, manly occupation, something that Pwyll understood and knew how to do.

The mists were thinning now; floating backward and spiraling almost swiftly, as if anxious to get away from whatever lay ahead. Pwyll began to see again, though the greyness around him was nothing he would have called light on earth. Treading down discomfort, he told himself, *Well, soon I shall have a good look at this Noisemaker. And whatever it is, after all these endless mists it will look beautiful.*

Then he saw it, and it did not.

It was huge. Its flat black head pierced the grey sky, the mighty, hilllike width of the black-scaled chest and shoulders towered above the mists that swirled palely round tremendous scaly legs and massive clawed feet. It had three sets of jaws, and the fangs of all three dripped blood. From the two lower jaws protruded a human leg.

Pwyll's hand flew to his sword, yet he knew well that neither it nor his hunting spears would be any more use against that vast scaled might than would a woman's sewing needle against a charging bull. Quickly, hoping that the mist still hid them, he checked the Grey. He sat still and stared, and the Grey stood still beneath him.

Pwyll saw two immense forepaws, he saw a human head dangling from each, its hair caught in the great, glittering claws. Blood still dripped from the severed necks. There might be one uneaten body lying in the

mists, at the Monster's feet, but Pwyll could not be sure.

"Nor does it matter, for he must have plenty of room in his belly for a third. It would take a whole war band to fill him . . . Horse, let us get away from here as fast and as quietly as we can! What were you thinking of to bring me here?"

But he was too late. Even as they turned the Monster caught their scent. He threw back his dreadful head and bellowed, and that bellow filled heaven and earth. The severed heads swung and bobbed as in a mighty wind; the mists shook and churned like a storm-battered sea. Those red, fierce eyes burned through the fog; Pwyll felt their scorching glare when they found him.

Another bellow rose, hungry and triumphant. The earth shook.

Pwyll dug his knees into the Grey's sides, the stallion ran as he never had known any horse to run, but the Monster lumbered after them, still bellowing. His clumsiness, against the Grey's quick light grace, gave Pwyll a faint hope.

The Monster bellowed louder, angered by their speed. The half-eaten leg fell from his jaws, got to its one foot, and fled, hopping madly through the mists.

That is a wise leg, Pwyll thought. *But it will not be much good, without a man on top of it.* Then he shuddered. Men fought hard to get heads and bring them home from battle; nowadays to most warriors of the New Tribes such a trophy meant only, "I am a better man than him I got this from." But old men whispered that he who held a man's head also held some unseen part of that man; enslaved his ghost. Dreadful indeed would it be to be carried off to this Monster's den; to dwell with him in its foul darkness forever and ever . . .

He tried to make the Grey go faster, but could not. Those swift, lithe horse legs were giving all they had to give, but the clumsy, pursuing giant legs were gaining.

With each stride they made a black, overlapping arch high as a hill.

Pwyll kicked off his fine, speckled shoes; he rose and stood upright in his saddle, his toes clinging hard to the edges. Often, on the practice fields of Arberth, that feat had made men applaud him and women squeal with wonder and delight. He freed one of his two hunting spears, raised and aimed it. Carefully, carefully he aimed; with all the strength and skill he had in him he made his throw; that was a mighty cast.

It missed. The spear glanced off a great black scale beside one huge, wicked eye, fell to the ground.

Pwyll's teeth set. Swaying in the saddle, he aimed the second spear. He took his time, though it seemed that he had hardly any time left. This throw must be sure . . .

Like a flash of light the second spear cleft the air above him. It turned that awful bellowing to a screech that almost knocked Pwyll from the saddle. Quickly, joyously he straightened; was his task half done?

The spear had landed in one red, glaring eye. A lifted claw tore it out; the Monster howled with pain, then stooped to pick up a head he had dropped and lumbered on. Blood dripped from his eye now, the earth quaked harder than ever beneath his furious roars.

Pwyll still had his dagger; he had never used his sword in hurling games. Half blind, the Monster was as dangerous as ever, but there would be a chance to evade the terrible gropings of the wholly blind. The dagger was much smaller and lighter than the spear, which had not been able to go deep enough to kill. It might not even be able to blind, but if it could hit the other great pupil squarely, squarely . . .

"God of my people, be with me! Mothers, be with me!"

Like a bird the dagger flew through the air. For one glorious, sun-bright second Pwyll thought he had suc-

ceeded. But the dagger pierced only the outer covering of that huge, rolling eyeball. The Monster howled again, but this time with more rage than anguish; the dagger too was plucked out and fell to earth.

Pwyll too fell. His tortured toes lost their grip, he barely managed to get one arm round the Grey's neck. They sped on, the reins hanging loose. Then darkness fell upon them: a shadow that was indeed as black as night and death.

Pwyll felt the fiery heat of the Monster's breath, smelled its fetid stink, then the mighty tug at his cloak, the five searing pains that stabbed his back.

But then with a burst that outdid speed the Grey leapt forward. The cloak was ripped from Pwyll's back, five clawfuls of flesh went with it, but from behind him he heard the Monster's bellow of foiled rage. They had escaped, they were free! But Pwyll felt a warm tide gushing out where the cloak had been; those giant claws had raked him to the bone.

His back was a stinging agony. He saw blood splashing down beside him, he felt it spurt out, taking his strength with it. He saw the black shadow above them again, knew that again the Monster was gaining; he heard the Grey panting; there could be no second escape. Faint and sick as he was, he set his teeth again.

I will not fall at that Thing's feet. Or be plucked from the horse's back like a fruit. I will die as a man should die, facing him who takes my head.

For the space of a few more breaths he lay as still as he could on that tossing bed, gathering all the strength that was left in him. Bracing his trained warrior muscles to do their last deed, he loosened his sword in its sheath, the one weapon he had left him. Then, with a poor clumsy travesty of that lovely spring that had brought him to his feet before, he rose again. Stood erect in the saddle once more, desperate toes gripping

it, his sword in his right hand. His rising placed him once again within striking range of his foe.

With an ear-splitting bellow of triumph the Monster pounced. But even as those giant claws, still dripping with his own blood, flashed down, Pwyll leapt. To one side and upward, straight at the Monster. He hoped to land on the nearest of those huge shoulders bent low to seize him. Weak as he was, had the vast, monstrous body been covered with hair instead of scales, he might have made it. His will and his warrior heart did not fail him, but his clutching hands slid vainly over those smooth scales; he fell. Scrabbling like a wounded beast, his body aching with fresh hurts, he tried to roll away through the mists that curled about those tremendous knees. But a great groping paw found him; agony tore through him again as mighty claws sank into his shoulder and into his already torn back.

He was being lifted; lifted toward those terrible triple jaws! He looked into a chamber of blazing fire; a chamber the red floor of which heaved and rolled forward.

The great red tongue, eager to taste him!

Like huge rocks a row of bloodstained teeth gleamed above him, descending. Another row glittered below him, rising. In less than a breath's space they would come together and bite off his head!

Then, far below it seemed, he heard the shrill scream of a fighting stallion, the thudding of hoofs against scales. The Grey was trying to help him! Not knowingly had he led his new master into a trap. The Monster roared again; even that black bulk felt the hoofs of the steed of Death.

That loyalty warmed Pwyll, stirred him to one last effort. Even as the deafening sound of that mighty roar beat upon him, surged over him like the waves of the sea, he squirmed free of that momentarily loosened grip.

He could no longer hope to clamber up to the great eyes, as he had planned. Probably his sword would have accomplished even less than his spears had, even if he had reached the dread shoulder. But at least he would hurt that tongue before it enjoyed him!

He squirmed forward and plunged his sword deep into the huge, wriggling redness. Into it and through it!

The bellow that followed seemed to shatter his head and to split all the bones of his body apart. To split the earth beneath and bring the heavens crashing down upon them!

Pain woke Pwyll. A massive scaly leg, thicker than the thickest tree trunk, was shooting back and forth through the air above him. *Soon it will fall and crush whatever is left of me. Then I shall rest.* So Pwyll thought and did not care, so great were his weakness and pain.

Then he saw the Grey again, lightning swift, darting in and out of the path of those stupendous kicks, still attacking. And the roaring still shook the earth; Pwyll's ears woke too, and he heard it. Both huge forepaws must be tearing at the sword in that terrible tongue; a cow's feet might as well have tried to grasp a splinter.

He must have spat me out, thought Pwyll, *and the Grey is holding him off. But he cannot do it long. Death, will you come for your own horse?*

If Arawn really had tried to trick Havgan, he had been outtricked. But Pwyll was tired, too tried and hurt to do anything now but lie still. And yet . . . a man should help his friends, and the Grey was his friend . . .

He tried to get to his hands and knees, crumpled, tried again, staggered to his feet, and fell back into the ever-widening pool of his own blood. His eyes closed . . .

Through the mists within and without him a cry came. Two cries. Pwyll opened his eyes.

Out of the mist the two severed human heads were rising, flying through the air like balls. As that tree-thick leg swung low to kick at the Grey they leapt upon it, perched there like birds. Again Pwyll heard those two shouts, knew them for war cries. He thought weakly: *You must have grown on the necks of brave men to come back to the fight now. Good luck, little fellows; you will need it!*

But he did not see how they could have it, and his eyes closed again. Soon there would be an end of them all, horse and heads and man.

Something made him open his eyes again. The heads must have jumped from the Monster's leg to his side. They were hopping round to his back now, leaping from scale to scale, always going up, up, up. Pwyll wished he had strength enough to cheer them. Brave heads, clever heads!

Also, for some unimaginable reason, it seemed important that he should keep his eyes open and watch them. Although nothing could be important now. And being awake hurt . . .

The Grey was still fighting, and the heads had reached the huge neck. For a moment they rested, one perched on each giant shoulder. Then they made one last leap—the greatest leap of all. They reached what Pwyll had hoped to reach, the top of that horrible, flat head. They rolled across its gruesome plain, bared teeth flashing, and each landed in one great, red, savage eye.

Then indeed did the roaring outdo all the roaring that had gone before. Beneath Pwyll the earth rocked and heaved; he was sure his eardrums were smashed, but he still could see. He saw the heads dart from side to side like wasps, the great claws reaching for them; saw how their teeth gave up one hold only to sink into another. Saw the claws that reached for them slash down again and again, piercing, raking the very eyes

they meant to guard. Blood began to roll out of the giant eyeballs, black, monstrous blood . . .

At last the Monster threw off the heads, and they lay where they fell. Still bellowing and bleeding, he lumbered away through the mists. These were rising again now; Pwyll felt their soft greyness closing over him, cool and sweet and healing . . .

Something was prodding him, pushing him, clumsily yet gently. He felt how sore his back was, then heard a whinny and opened his eyes, looked up into brown, troubled horse eyes, and knew the Grey of Arawn. He tried to raise a hand to caress the stallion's muzzle, but could not get it up that far. He said, "You are not hurt, boy?" And the stallion whinnied again, eagerly and gladly, as if he understood.

The Grey went away. He came back and somehow Pwyll understood that there was water in his mouth, and that he, Pwyll, was to open his mouth and let that water be poured into it. He did so, and nothing he had ever tasted before had been so fresh and sweet and cool. It must be wine, Pwyll thought; some said that wine, not water, ran in the streams of the Otherworld. But no! Wine was heady. Again blackness rolled over him, this time a pleasant soothing blackness, and he slept.

He woke in a soft grey light, with the Grey grazing beside him. He lay on a vast moor; the mist had thinned so that he could see clearly all things near him, but in the distance it still made undulating, silvery walls.

But one evil thing he still could see and smell. The black, dried, yet stinking trail of the Monster's blood. Even the grasses that surrounded each foul drop looked charred and burnt.

Pwyll sprang up, then gasped, remembering his hurts; then gasped again, realizing that they did not hurt. He looked down. His clothes hung in tatters, but not a

mark showed on the bronze smoothness of his skin. While he slept his wounds had vanished.

But that Thing had been real; no dream foe had left that blood trail. Pwyll sprang upon the Grey's back, and followed those dread tracks. Soon a sickening stench smote his nostrils; the foulest smell that ever he had smelled. But he pushed on; ahead of him something glistened evilly.

It was a great deep pit of black, squirming slime; it hissed and smoked and bubbled. The Monster lay there, already more than half dissolved. The awful poison of his blood had burned deep into the earth, making that pit about him, burning up soil and rock even as it was burning up monstrous flesh and bone and scales . . .

As rapidly as he could Pwyll turned and rode away from that pit. He found a stream and rode the Grey through it, then bathed there. He would have liked to wash all memory of that stinking horror off both of them. But he wanted to find again the spot where the fight had taken place. He searched until he found the two heads lying together in the deep grasses, their bloodstained faces peaceful now as those of sleeping children. He heaped earth and stones over them; for each he made as fine a mound as he could. Then he stood up and bade them farewell.

"Sad it is that the rest of you had to rot with the Monster. They must have been fine fellows who once wore you on their shoulders; good comrades for any man to have. May we meet again some day, and fight side by side in some world where all of us are whole."

Then he rode away and left them. He gave the Grey his head again; he did not know what else to do.

From their fine new-made cairns the heads watched him go, they whose sight no walls now could hinder.

Then they looked at each other and grinned. One said, "There goes a fine man, brother. I too hope that some day we may fight by his side."

The other head said soberly: "Too soon he will need all his strength and bravery again. I wish we had not had to drain quite so much of that strength out of him, brother."

"Yet only with his eyes upon us, and his strength in us, the eyes and strength of a living man, could we have done the deed, brother. That vile flesh was too gross for any man of this world to kill."

Chapter IV

THE MAKER OF BIRDS

PWYLL RODE on and on, and all he could think of was breakfast. Of those steaming platters of good things that he had made his men leave, half-eaten, to go down into Glen Cuch. He saw the tempting viands, he smelled them, his stomach ached for them, and his mouth watered.

Never again will I drag man or beast from his food to serve my sport, he told himself. And pitied his horses and hounds and men until he remembered that they had probably eaten since he had; then he pitied only himself.

How long had he been in Annwn? Where was Arawn's palace? And where was Arawn? Save for his growing trust in the Grey, great trouble would have been on him. Yet something was wrong; of that there could be no doubt.

Well, it is Arawn's business to see that I get to the ford in time to kill his precious Havgan, he thought. *What I need now is breakfast.*

Then suddenly a scent came to him, as marvelous in

its delicacy and sweetness as the stench had been in its frightfulness. A scent like that of earthly apple blossoms, only far sweeter than the fragrance of any flower of earth.

One of those silvery, undulating walls of mist loomed up before him. Until the Grey galloped into it it looked solid, and then Pwyll had to put his hand to shield his eyes, for all about him sparkled like fire; without heat, but jewel bright, as dewdrops sparkled beneath the morning sun. Then they came out on the other side, into a gentle golden light that came from no sun that Pwyll could see.

They were in a wood, no wood of gold and crystal such as his nurse had told of in her tales of Otherworldly wonders, but an orchard of living green. Its fragrance made breathing a delight; its tender green leaves and masses of yet more tender, rosy-white blossoms hid the sky.

As he rode beneath the first tree a marvel happened. For its blossoms fell about him like snowflakes and in a breath's space the tiny green fruit grew and swelled and ripened into great apples as round as the sun and rosier than any woman's cheek.

Pwyll stared, then dismounted. "Maybe this is Illusion, yet I am hungry enough to eat a rotten apple with a worm in it, and find the worm a tasty bit of meat. And these apples do not look rotten; let us try them, boy."

He half expected the first bite to turn into something else in his mouth, but it did not; that apple was sweet and sound and ripe and juicy, everything that an apple should be, and so were its fellows. Pwyll and the Grey munched happily until they were full.

At last Pwyll smacked his lips and said, "Those were good, boy. But you need water, and I could use some too. After those apples, a man could not need wine."

They went on until they found a well beneath a tree, a well as blue as a sunlit sky, and beside it was a golden cup. Again Pwyll dismounted; while the Grey lapped eagerly he drank from the cup, and the water of that well was sweet and pure beyond any waters of the world he knew.

Then he dropped the cup, and stared in awe and wonder. Before he drank there had been nothing on the far side of the well, but now . . .

A woman sat there, and it was from her that the light in that place came. Her body shone like the sun; her one thin garment hid it no more than water would. Her hair shone, it streamed red gold to her noble, high-arched feet, which were *tender* and rosy white as the apple blossoms. But when Pwyll tried to look at her face, he could not, his eyes fell, so he knew that She was no woman but a Goddess, and that that place lived through the living Glory that was Herself.

Three birds flew round Her head, and their song was sweet. One was as tenderly green as the leaves, one shone white as snow, and the third flashed like a sunbeam. She sat there whittling at an ordinary piece of applewood, and She was *making* images of birds. Whenever one was finished the wood quivered, turned to feathered flesh, and the new bird flew away singing for joy of life and wings. How long he watched Her Pwyll never knew, but at last She raised Her eyes and saw him.

"My welcome to you, Pwyll of Dyved. You do not laugh at Me now, as you did on earth. Now that you have drunk from My cup, and behold My true shape."

He said: "Lady, no man could ever laugh at You. Only for joy of You."

"So? I have been Queen in Dyved from of old. No man before you ever has called himself King there save by right of Me. Only you have mocked Me, and sworn that you could hold the land by your own strength—

without help from an ancient hag whose people yours had conquered."

Pwyll knew Her then, and stiffened. "Great Queen, it was not in this form that You were offered to me as a bride."

"This Shape no man may touch. Mortal flesh cannot house it."

"No. Only parts of You can dwell on earth—even I know that—and if even the least bit of You could become a mortal woman, then her man would be the happiest of all men forever." Pwyll's voice had been deep with longing; now his eyes grew hard. "But the druids keep part of You in a great White Mare. When my father died and I took the kingship, they said I must go down on all fours and seek her like a stallion in heat! *You* never could come to a man like that!"

"Man, had you done their will—gone on all fours and given your seed to a beast—you never could have drunk from My cup! The mare would have been as defiled as you. I would take no shame in putting on her flesh to meet any stallion in your fields, for all that lives and breathes in Dyved is part of Me. But man and mare—bah!"

"I knew it, Lady." Pwyll's eyes were soft again and shining. "Never could You so blaspheme against Yourself."

"Only your druids of the New Tribes could have devised such sacrilege, they who reject the Ancient Harmonies and twist what little wisdom they can gain into foul foolishness—seeking their own ends!"

Again Pwyll stiffened. "Lady, I too am of the New Tribes." Then his inner sight cleared. "Forgive me, You can see farther than men. And I am glad to think that their curses meant nothing. When I would have no part in their holy horseplay they said that no son of mine would reign after me—that I would bring the worst of

ill luck upon Dyved, and upon myself. Had my warriors loved me less I never could have become King. Only one druid of them all stood by me and would not join their curses—my kinsman, Pendaran Dyved.”

“He has a little wisdom. He may gain more, but not much. Even among the true druids, those of the Old Tribes, wise men grow few. For darkness must come upon your world—only if you slay Havgan can Chaos be prevented and thrown back.”

Pwyll laughed joyously. “Lady, before I met You I swore to kill Havgan, and now for You I will chop him into as many pieces as there are stars in the sky!”

“In that fight I cannot help you. You take warnings lightly, but be warned: bitter strife awaits you here, and it also awaits the earth.”

He looked straight at Her; as straight as he could look, since he could not meet Her eyes.

“Lady, I am drunk now. On Your beauty. And neither from God nor man will I ever ask help against any foe that has two arms and two legs. But tell me what to do for Dyved, and I will do it.”

“I will do better than that. If I can I will come to earth and be your wife there, as I was wife to Dyved’s Kings of old.”

Pwyll’s heart leapt in amazement and joy. His arms almost leapt too, but something kept them at his sides. Then a black thought smote him and he groaned. “Lady, if I must wait for You to be born a mortal maid and to grow up I shall have a long wait. I shall be grey bearded and perhaps balding—too old to do You justice.”

“Too old to enjoy Me, you mean.” She laughed. “Have no fear. If we two come together it will be as young man and young woman. Your loins will still be mighty.”

He laughed too. His eyes shone. “Say not ‘if,’ Lady. Nothing can keep me from killing Havgan now.”

"Yet before we can lie together you must conquer fearful foes—yourself among them. You have passed through one great ordeal, but another draws near."

"Havgan, Lady?"

"No. In this peril I can help you, if you can understand and use My help."

"What peril, Lady? What help?" He tried to say those words, but never said them. The singing of Her birds had grown louder; it was all about them, lapping them like the waves of a sunny sea. From far off Her voice came: "... a Bird that is not Mine ..."

Trees and well were gone. They stood in a green plain, and She raised Her white arms, and from beneath each arm a white horse came. The horses met, they pranced and curveted, they became many horses and danced, light as leaves upon the wind. Their manes and tails glittered like foam. Pwyll's heart ached for joy; always upon earth he had loved the sight of white horses playing in a field. Nothing else, until he got there, had ever come so near to making the glories of an Otherworld seem real.

The dancing ceased. The horses came back to Her, now only two again; they nuzzled Her hands. She fondled their gleaming snowy heads, and beside Pwyll the Grey whinnied, like a child seeking its share of love.

She called to him; he sped to Her, and over the three shining heads She looked at Pwyll. "These are among the fairest of My children. Was it not partly because you loved that you hated to do your druids' bidding? To befoul such loveliness?"

He tried to answer, but the birds were still singing, their song was sweeping him away like the shimmering, many-hued floods of a rainbow river. Once more Her voice came: "Sleep and rest. Wake and wonder if you have only dreamed Me, man that I hope will be My man."

Pwyll woke after what seemed long absence from himself. He lay upon the open moor, in treeless, rocky desolation lit only by the grey twilight that in Annwn seemed to be both night and day. The Grey grazed beside him; he reached out a hand and touched that good, solid horsehide. Its warmth eased his sudden deep pain of loss—loss of what? A garden place of delicious apples—a blue well with a golden cup? White horses dancing? He must have dreamed that wild whirl of wonders. No—*she* had been real, that true bride who had walked with him beneath the apple trees. Woman or Goddess, she had been real. He shut his eyes, his heart aching for the golden warmth of her. But the greyness outside him soaked through his closed eyelids, into his soul, dimming memory . . . He mounted the Grey again.

“We must go on, boy. We have business to do.”

The draught of kingship! He had found the cup, yet truly she had given him that drink, as the Goddess gave Her chosen to drink when She walked in woman’s shape, not mare’s. More dreams. Even here it was not likely that he had met Her who had been Dyved’s Goddess of old, and that She had pledged Herself to him. Most likely some lady out of Faery had been playing her tricks on him, using that great ancient name. Though no name had been spoken . . . That was the kind of thing you could expect in a world like this. He would be glad to get out of it and go home, but first he must kill Havgan.

He rode on, but uneasiness rode with him. In old tales people who had seen the Fair Folk dancing in the moonlight and been drawn into that dance, had returned from what seemed a night’s frolic to find all their friends and kin long dead. What if he, Pwyll, should return to find another Lord of Dyved, and himself but dimly re-

membered, a young prince who had ridden out and vanished a hundred years ago?

But Arawn had promised to sit in his seat until his return. "And the good folk of Dyved will get a surprise if I live to be a hundred years old!" Pwyll chuckled uneasily. Surely Arawn would never allow such a breach in the established order of things. Order was what Death had avowed himself sworn to uphold. No, when Pwyll came home everything would be the same; his horses, dogs, and men would all be there. Nothing would be changed.

"If you ever get home. What if Arawn too is playing with you? If he has tricked you all along, and there never was any Havgan? If he took your life there in the forest, and—"

Fiercely Pwyll crushed down those hissing worm thoughts. He looked about him, trying to find something else to think of. The way had grown suddenly forbidding. Rocky hills towered above him, rugged crags that he had not dreamed could be anywhere near. Mists had blotted out the moors behind him, were creeping after him. Mists that moved softly and ceaselessly, as the sea moves. There was continual coiling and uncoiling and recoiling within them, as if Something were trying to shape itself a body. A shape that would not be good to see . . .

Pwyll began to look behind him oftener than a brave warrior should. "You have already passed through one great ordeal, but another is near." Who had said that? Maybe he had only dreamed it, but in this world dreams might come true.

He was unarmed now, his spears and dagger lost somewhere on those endless misty moors, his good sword drowned and probably melted in that stinking lake that had been the Monster. Against any foe he met now he would have only his hands.

"Arawn promised that the way to his palace would be clear before you. He has broken that promise."

The worm within him spat that in his face. Suddenly it coiled up like the mists, it reared itself upon those coils, its hissing head spitting more thoughts at him. "Art and design lured you here. He tricked you and deceived you."

"But why play with me?" Pwyll demanded. "Why fright me with bogeys, as a bad nurse scares a child at night? He could have destroyed me, long ago."

But now the hissing serpent face had flat, evil eyes. "What is your pin-sized head, mortal, to grasp the designs of him who since time began has been Master of Life? Maybe he wants to taste mortal joys. The delight of the cat in the mouse, of the torturer in the man or woman he tortures? Those games that so often have brought him to mop up their spent, broken prey—why should he not grow curious as to how they feel?"

Wisdom rose in Pwyll; maybe some small leavings of that which had flowed into him from Arawn's eyes, maybe something born only of his own human faithfulness. "Folly, snake! What Being who has tasted all the unimaginable glories and wonders and delights he knows could stoop to the basest follies of men and beasts?"

But the worm said: "Boredom is mighty. In that Land of the Ever-Young where men and women clasp each other in unageing beauty, where my kind never come to coil within the sweet fruit, or to crawl into the places where the golden grain is stored—there boredom must come at last. Boredom the begetter of strange offspring."

"He cannot beget upon the Mighty anything so small as you," said Pwyll between his teeth.

"Am I small?" the snake reared high and laughed in his face, strange, hissing laughter. "I who have grown

great, and shall grow greater, out of the very stuff of your being?"

"You shall grow no greater," said Pwyll grimly. "If Arawn my brother has smallnesses they are those of his world, not mine."

Again the snake laughed. "Maybe smallness is the same everywhere."

"And maybe not," said Pwyll. In that inner space where they talked, he set his heel upon the snake's head. Crushed, it sank back into the depths of him, where it coiled again, waiting . . .

Pwyll and the Grey went on, through land that grew ever more forbidding. Cliffs and grim grey stones reared through the fog, stupendous, half-seen shapes that seemed alive and threatening. Once Pwyll looked back, down into the mists that hid the moors. These were steaming now, like a vast cauldron in which evil things were brewing.

Well, Pwyll told himself, it is never a brave man's part to turn back, and I do not know where I could turn back to, anyhow. And we are going up. Maybe we will finally come out into the light.

Never in this world had he seen true darkness. Never, unless in that wondrous Place of Apples, had he seen true light; and he was hungry and thirsty again; it was getting easier and easier to believe that he had dreamed those apples. "Your luck is out too, now," he told the Grey. "For I cannot see any grass growing among these stones, and surely even Death's horse cannot eat stones."

Indeed, he could not see anything growing anywhere. In those ever-thickening mists he soon could see practically nothing at all, and it grew constantly harder to see that. He yawned. Sleep was coming on him again, and though forgetfulness would be good, this did not seem like the right place to sleep in. It seemed like a very wrong place.

Chapter V

THE GUARDIAN OF THE GATE

SUDDENLY THE Grey stopped, and Pwyll took that for a Sign, and put away his misgivings. Dismounting, he lay down in the least stony place he could find. He was cold, he wished he had his cloak to cover him, but any respite from this endless, aimless journey was good. The Grey, he thought, must be lost too.

Yet, as he sank through the grey mists without into the grey mists within, he suddenly longed for his sword . . . Then he knew nothing, and wished for nothing.

He woke, cramped and shivering. Beside him stood the Grey, his head down, seemingly asleep. The mists were gone, and night had come at last. A cold moon shone grimly in the black starless sky. She grinned down at him like a gilded skull.

His eyes followed her grin, and he saw a shadow blacker than night.

An immense, three-columned gateway towered above him. If walls were behind it the black shadow of the

cliff hid them, but Pwyll thought there were none. Something told him that that gateway led into everlasting darkness . . .

A massive stone lintel topped those three pillars. Squarely in its center sat a giant Bird. And Pwyll looked at that Bird, and his heart became as ice within him. He strove to rise and flee, but he could not move so much as a finger. He strove to close his eyes, but the shining of the Bird held them. Its beak shone palely, cruelly, terribly: a hooked mightiness that easily could have snapped off a man's head or arm. Its eyes shone red, as had the Monster's eyes, but with a far different evil; evil as cold as ice.

But hardest of all to look away from were the feathers: the myriad shimmering, ever-changing feathers . . . red-shot, green-shot, purple-shot darknesses that all melted together into one blackness: a blackness that seized and transformed and conquered all light.

With a mighty effort Pwyll managed to move his eyes before they were caught forever; else his soul might have wandered for eons through that unwholesomely gleaming labyrinth of feathers. But he could not move his eyes far; just far enough to see the pillars below the Bird.

In the huge central pillar above which it perched were three niches, and the lowest was empty, but from each of two above grinned a fleshless human skull. Each side column held only one niche, but in each of these sat a freshly severed human head. Their glazed eyes still stared in astonishment, the blood upon the stumps of their necks was wet and red.

They saw Pwyll; they looked back at him. Even the skulls looked, their black, emptied eye sockets probing him with a gaze that was keen and searching and malevolent.

The head on the left said: "Brothers, here is Arawn

himself, lying at our feet. Or where our feet ought to be. I did not know that Death ever rested."

But the topmost skull laughed, opening wide its fleshless jaws. "Fool, have you already forgotten the face of Death? You, who met him only this morning?"

The second skull laughed too. "If the blood were not still fresh on your neck, little brother, you would know better than to think that Death never rests."

The head on the right said, "But how can he? Night and day, summer and winter, he is busier than any man ever born."

Both skulls laughed together, then answered as one. "Peace, little brothers; do not question the wisdom of your elders and betters. For ages we two have sat here and watched Death come and go. Time and space do not bind him. He kills and kills and kills, yet always finds time to sit down to meat in his own hall. To sleep with his woman, the Corpse-Devourer, into whose belly we all must go at last."

In the frozen prison that was his body Pwyll shuddered. Was this ogress that fairest of women whom Arawn had promised him for bedmate?

The head on the left said stubbornly: "I still say that it is Arawn lying there. I know his great horse; I know his face; that face is stamped upon my eyes forever."

The skulls laughed again. "Your eyes! Soon they will fall out and run down your face like blobs of grease. Ours did."

Yet once more the topmost skull laughed. "And those lips that chatter so much nonsense—soon they too will rot and fall away and leave your teeth naked to the wind. Like ours."

The head on the right said: "You two still seem to have plenty to talk with. How is that? Your tongues should have rotted out long ago."

The first skull made a sound remarkably like a snort, but the second said: "That is a fair question, and deserves a fair answer. Man's head is among the Mysteries. It sees, it hears, it thinks, it speaks. Man has only one other power that matters: movement, and its pleasantest seat is in a soft thing that rots away quickly; it does not endure, like a skull. We dead cannot hope to keep that."

"We cannot indeed," said the two heads, shaking sorrowfully. "The love of women is gone from us forever."

The second skull jeered at them. "So? Your memories are still fresh, like your blood. You will have to get used to your lack, little brothers. I have heard of a skull that spat upon a woman and got her pregnant, but there would not be much fun in that."

"There would not indeed," said the heads sadly.

"Yet there is great power in a head, the Seat of the Four Powers. Our old folk used to keep the heads of their dead as honored guardians, who could see farther than men. They cherished them as loving kinsmen and good councilors."

The topmost skull said gloomily: "Yes. Once heads were honored; they were tended, they were given offerings of milk and meat and honey. They were listened to and obeyed. But now men ride with heads tied to their saddle bows; they scoop out our brains and give us to the goldsmiths to make pretty cups with. We have fallen upon evil days."

The head on the right said: "Brave men still honor brave men. I thought the man who killed me yesterday would be proud of me and never sit down to meat without giving me my fair share. I had done as much for his brother. But instead darkness came upon me and I woke in this place. Why was that, brother skulls?"

"She summoned you. She chose you, as once she did us."

"Who is she? The old Goddess, the Queen of All?"

The skulls looked up toward the stone above them, where the Bird sat, and it seemed to Pwyll that they would have shivered if they had had anything left to shiver with.

Then the topmost skull said: "Brothers, we lied. Our eyes did not fall out and our lips did not fall off. She ate them, she who sits above us here, even as she will eat yours. She waited until they were rotten, and so tasty meat for her, who can bear nothing that is fresh and clean."

"But why? Why did Arawn give us up to her?"

"Did you not die in despair, cursing the man who betrayed you, and the Gods who did not help you? Believing no longer in anything good? Such are her portion, brother; her share of Death's spoils."

"Do not be ashamed to admit it, brother." The second skull spoke. "So it befell us, and will befall others. She has eaten up our very essence; our power to think and to do."

"But you still speak—you still have power to put words together—" The head stammered, its voice shook.

"We think what we used to think, say what once we would have said. We will sit here echoing our lost selves until she gets new heads to feed on and throws us out of our niches to roll around the dark moors forever."

"But the Cauldron of Rebirth—all whom Arawn takes come to that at last—" The head on the left stammered that.

"We will not, we four. Never will we get back into the wombs of women and be born again upon earth. If we did it would be as gabbling fools without wit enough to feed ourselves—we have lost too much. No hope is left us. We will be only our own ghosts forever."

The heads shrank farther back into their niches. Their

faces, that could not turn paler, yet looked pinched with fear. "But the Mothers—will they let this be?"

"The Man-Gods from the east are draining their strength, even as She of the Dark Wings drained ours."

"But when the Son comes back—He that at three nights old was stolen from the Mother?"

"This time the Son will not come back. He has joined the Man-Gods." Again both skulls laughed together.

"The Son would not betray the Mother! He loves Her."

The two heads still spoke as one.

"He loves the Father now. The Father who claims all power, and soon will overturn and break the Cauldron of Rebirth itself. For the Cauldron is the way of the Teacher, the long slow way, by which all learn at last, and if the Father promises eternal life to His friends, He also promises eternal death to His foes. That is the gift that comes out of the Eastern World to the West—eternal torment, eternal death."

"You lie—you lie for your Mistress up there! The winter may be long and hard, it may bury the Mother in snow, it may lash Her with whips of ice, but in the end She always rises again, young and strong and beautiful."

"And you think you will rise with Her? Look at this man here. Yesterday he ate apples in a garden, and talked with a fair woman there. He did not know that in that same hour the Bird's beak pushed the skull out of the niche below us, and that now it waits for him."

Horror such as he never had known washed over Pwyll, horror deeper than the depths of the sea. *So this is why I was brought here! There is no Havgan—Arawn lied. He trapped me here for this death beyond all deaths.*

Then the heads and the skulls all laughed at him together, in a burst of sound that seemed to tear and lash

and saw at his ears in a discord beyond all discords. "Yes, you are trapped! Trapped by him that swore himself your friend and brother; by Her that fed you Her apples of Illusion. What else are friends and brothers for? Was not Death himself born when brother slew brother?"

Again Pwyll tried to rise. As a man upon whose belly great stones have been piled might strive to move, so he strove. His muscles strained and cracked, his heart almost burst against that immovable, agonizing weight that was not there. And again the heads and the skulls laughed.

"You know now what Arawn is. Will you still call on Her that fashioned the birds and the steeds? She is part of the Mother—of Her who brings forth only in order to destroy! Call not on the Mother, or on any daughter of the Mother. She brings forth only that She may feed. We warned you: from Her belly we all come—and back into the darkness of Her belly we all go!"

"We rise again from that darkness," said Pwyll, stubbornly. "Even as the good grain rises, from which we bake our bread."

"For what? To be eaten again—and yet again? To struggle through endless lives for wealth and power—or only for life to keep on struggling with? It is well to lose what we have lost, what you are about to lose. Why love women, only to beget more food for death?"

Now Pwyll laughed. "Love is good. So are youth and strength. They make up for many troubles along the way."

"And how long do they last? Better to die in battle, bloody and maimed, than to live on while age slowly dismembers, piece by piece. We fare better. The Bird eats us but once. Then we sit quietly and wait for the darkness and the silence. For that endless rolling on the moor in which even memory dies."

Somehow Pwyll got one hand free. He caught at the Grey's reins, and tugged. "Horse, help me! If I can get on your back we can make a run for it—maybe hide among rocks where there is no room for the swooping of her dark wings."

But the thought of that swooping came over him like something blacker than blackness, and his hand fell. He lay helpless again. The Grey neither stirred nor opened his eyes. All four, skulls and heads, cackled in triumph.

"He will not help you this time! None can help you against her, whose beak waits. And it will not wait much longer—brother!"

Despair came on Pwyll. It took his body, that had striven as hard as flesh and bone may strive, and in vain. It took his brave heart. Even if he could escape, what would he escape to? Only to bleed and sweat to stave off for a little longer the inevitable end. What was the use?

Yet he had loved life. He raised his eyes for one last look at the heavens, at the vast freedom of them, darkened even as they were now. He wished that he could have had one more good gallop through the fields of earth, upon his own Kein Galed.

A good ride, with the wind and sun in his face! That was worth living for, whatever waited at the end of the ride. No matter; nothing mattered. Before this grinning moon was much higher the Bird would swoop down and peck off his head; set it in that lowest niche to rot. Then when it was foul enough that dreadful beak would eat out his innermost self.

She was watching him now. With the last of his strength he tried to look away from those cold red eyes.

What was she waiting for? To enjoy his helplessness? Could deathless greatness be so small? Once before he had said something like that—then set his heel upon an

evil-eyed head. A head not too unlike this bird head . . . Could such a creature really have power to eat his soul?

Doubt sprang again within him, no worm this time, but a serpent of golden flame. It freed his entranced limbs. Awkwardly he rose upon one elbow; his free hand, groping in the dust beside him, found a stone. A poor, pitiful weapon against the thrashing of those mighty wings, the thrust of that cruel beak, but a man should die fighting. Maybe if he died unsubmitting his soul would go free. Hope sang within him like a bird's song.

The song of a bird . . . *Her birds!*

Beauty sprang vivid before his eyes, in his heart, justifying its own existence, all existence. He staggered erect, stone in hand.

The skulls and the heads cried out together, startled and angry. The Bird gave no cry. Huge wings outspread, red eyes blazing like cold flames, she swooped.

The wind of those great wings almost knocked Pwyll down, their stench sickened him, yet somehow he managed to stand. To raise the stone. For an awful second he thought that hand and stone would go together, before he could use them—first they would go, and then his head. Already he could see into the fiery cavern in the great, open beak. He thought with a kind of sick quietness, *This is the end*, but still his arm moved to strike. Useless as that blow must be, he would do his best to deal it; he would not die cowering.



The singing was sweet. It filled his ears with beauty, it flowed like cool, delicious water into and over every part of his tired, aching body. Words of his old nurse came back to him: "The Birds of Rhiannon . . . they wake the dead and lull the living to sleep."

He was dead, and they were waking him. The Bird had got only his head—he himself had gone free.

But no! His opening eyes saw the great beak still yawning to destroy him, the crimson eyes still blazing—then saw the fear in them. She that by existing blasphemed the name of bird hung there powerless, helpless. Entranced, as he had been.

A great road of light cleft the dark sky, fell in purifying brilliance upon the lintel where that monstrous Bird had sat, enthroned. Down that glorious pathway flew three singing birds, and one was white, and one was green, and one was gold as morning.

On they came, still singing, and all the captive lights seemed to go out of the feathers of that Bird that had been the Un-Manner of men. The brilliant plumage grew dull, it crumbled like ashes, and fell to earth. There seemed to be no body to fall after it. For a breath's space the fierce red eyes hung alone in the air, still savagely glaring, and then were gone, like snuffed-out torch flames.

The three pillars of that awful gateway buckled and quivered. Quietly, softly as snowflakes fall, they fell to the ground, their fall revealing only down-sloping hillside and bare moors behind them. The great stone lintel that had been the throne of darkness toppled as soundlessly and lay broken upon their brokenness. Pwyll caught one last glimpse of the falling heads and skulls, the skulls grinning emptily, the glazed eyes of the heads staring with equal emptiness. Their evil shadow life was gone. Then the earth covered them, and they too were gone.

Where the lintel had been the light still was. In its tender radiance the Birds of Rhiannon hovered and sang. In thankfulness and worship Pwyll raised his arms toward them, then himself crumpled to the earth, and the Grey of Arawn, wide awake now, came and nuzzled his face.

Chapter VI

THE MOONLIT LAND

"YOU HAVE done well," said Arawn's voice above him. "Eat now and drink."

He was holding out a cup of fragrant wine and a huge hunk of steaming meat, and their good smells woke Pwyll fully. He sat up.

Then he stared in wonder, for before him was the fairest land he had ever seen: the greenest woods and meadows, the loveliest flowers, and upon all the moon shining down, her brightness only a little gentler than that of day. Color that was a wonder of tenderness bloomed everywhere, in hues sweeter and far more delicate than those of earth. The Grey's coat shone like silver, and his mane sparkled like foam, and Pwyll himself—for a dizzy moment the Lord of Dyved wondered how he could be looking at himself—squatted over a fire that burned yet did not burn, only glowed like a great red flower.

Pwyll said softly: "So this is the true Annwn."

His own shape that held Arawn smiled. "Annwn is many places. As a man is, so his sight is. But this is the

true World of Middle Light. Here neither your blazing sun nor your black night ever comes. Here in this gentle light, in the all-healing womb of the Mother, the battered and misshapen may find new shape."

"And here too She shapes the unborn?"

"The dead and the unborn are one. Even your druids of the New Tribes must have told you that."

Someone else—Pwyll could not remember who, but someone he had not wanted to be angry with—had mocked at the wise men of his people. Now the mocker was Arawn, and though Pwyll himself did not think much of their wisdom, yet they were his people; outsiders should not mock them. Also—what else had Arawn done? A great many questions suddenly buzzed in Pwyll's mind. Delicious as his food and wine smelled, he pushed them away and looked very hard into that familiar face that was—unbelievably—no longer his own.

"You say I have done well. But what of yourself, Lord? You promised that the way should be clear before me, yet you yourself left me to die the worst of deaths alone."

Arawn said, unmoved: "I promised that the way would be clear before you, and that I myself would be your guide. And clear it will be, now that I am here. Yet there are ways a man must find for himself, and in finding yours you have gained strength to face Havgan. The blade must be tempered before it goes into battle."

For a long moment Pwyll was silent, then he said, a trifle grimly: "So those monsters were ordeals such as initiates undergo? I had thought those mostly druids' tricks." He reached for the meat and the wine again, took a great swig of the one and several mouthfuls of the other before he said wryly: "Well, Lord, you are a master of a pretty pack."

Arawn said quietly, "Only of my hounds am I master. The foes you met every man must master for himself."

Pwyll's jaw dropped. "But I killed them!"

"For yourself alone. Every man in his time must slay or be slain by them. Fear—the uttermost, sickening fear and loathing that flesh can know—these are the Beast. Sickness of all things, doubt and despair that are worse than any fear of the flesh—"

". . . are the Bird." Pwyll shuddered. "She must be mother to the Three Birds of Midir—they that suck out a man's courage on the way to battle. But those birds who saved me were three also—did you send them?"

"No. In time you will remember who did." Arawn's faint wise smile made Pwyll's own face strange to him. "But that winged darkness is terrible because she always mixes truth with lies; twists and blackens all. Hard indeed it is to rise up out of her slough of darkness and realize that life is worth all its long, bitter battles. Worth even me."

There was a brief, grim silence. Pwyll swallowed twice before he could make himself ask, dreading the answer: "Those skulls. Was their manhood truly lost forever?"

"No. Freeing yourself you freed them—broke their illusion and proved her power a lie."

Pwyll drew a deep breath of relief. "I am glad of that. But it was rough learning and rough teaching."

"You have my friendship," said Arawn. "All else that I can give you will have."

Pwyll laughed. "What if I should ask you never to let me see your face again? To let me live forever?"

Arawn said simply: "You would lie blind and deaf and helpless through lifetime after lifetime. Not all things are Death's to give; I cannot make you forever young."

Again, for a breath's space, there was silence. Then

Pwyll laughed again, somewhat shakily: "I have no desire to outlive my own strength and manhood. Come for me before they are gone, Lord Death—but not too long before. Let me enjoy them as long as I can."

"Unless you go to that one place on earth where another Grey Man rules, that will be so," said Arawn. And for a second icy cold took Pwyll, who knew, like all Kings of Dyved, what place he meant. He said only, "My thanks, Lord."

"For a little gift. One other boon only Death, of his very nature, cannot grant; may you never need to ask that of me." Suddenly Arawn's look made the young face of Pwyll seem wise and old. Pity was in it, the awful, farseeing pity of a God, and something else also, something that in a mortal man might have been guilt or regret.

Pwyll said in wonder: "What is the matter? I thought you said I had gained strength to fight your precious Havgan with."

"Strength of the spirit, not the body."

"My body never felt better!" Pwyll spoke indignantly.

"You still have strength enough to kill . . . Eat your food now, Lord of Dyved, while it is hot." And under those strange, compelling eyes that again were like black suns Pwyll forgot all else and ate.

He was barely through when Arawn whistled and a great black stallion came galloping up. Pwyll jumped; he could have sworn that no beast but the Grey was near them. Had that whistle conjured up this one, saddle, bridle, and all?

Then the Grey came up to him, whinnying, and Arawn turned to the black. But Pwyll led the Grey to him. "For he is yours, Lord. You need not let me have him yet."

"My folk soon will see us passing," said Arawn.

"They would think it strange to see another ride my horse."

So Pwyll took the Grey and was glad, for since their fight with the Monster he loved him as well as his own Kein Galed. Yet as he mounted another thought struck him. "Will not your folk think it strange to see you ride unarmed, Lord? My weapons are all lost."

"Are they?" Yet again Arawn smiled. "Look."

And Pwyll looked down, and saw his own sword at his side, and his two spears back in their places. He seized them, he stared at them, he fingered every inch of them. They were bright and clean and freshly burnished, yet here was an old nick, there was a tiny scratch he knew. They looked the same, they felt the same; yet how could they be?

"They are your own," said Arawn. "I brought them out of the wilderness and the slime."

Pwyll laughed with delight. "Never will you give me better gifts, Lord. Weapons of your world may be finer and more magical, but these I know."

"All knowledge is good. Yet no man's strength lies outside himself. No sword or spear ever had the magic to fight on alone, when all effort seemed useless and all hope a lie."

"I see. It takes a man to carry them." Pwyll beamed. This was the first time he had been able to read one of Arawn's riddles, and his success made him like Arawn better.

They rode on in good fellowship, and Arawn told him much of Annwn and its Lords. So much that Pwyll hoped he could remember one quarter of it, and said so.

"That is easily remedied," said Arawn. "I can arrange your memory."

Pwyll stiffened. If every man's house is his castle, his mind is a stronghold far greater, his very self, or all

the self he knows. To think that its unspeakably precious privacy can be invaded, altered, even by a wise and beneficent Power, is a terrifying thought.

Arawn read that feeling. He said quietly: "We have sworn friendship together. It would be beneath my own dignity to intrude upon yours more than I must. But tonight you sit in my seat in Annwn, with only your own will, your own wit to help you. Master of all that is mine."

"... *all that is mine!*" Memory rushed over Pwyll. The Queen! She would be beautiful, after all; the Lady of a land like this . . . He shied away from that thought, for his own sake as well as because Arawn could read it. He said, "Do what you must, Lord. But surely no king ever got such a face-price for one stag before . . . By the way, who was that stag, Lord? He had been a man, I suppose, for your hounds hunt only the dead."

Arawn told him, and Pwyll whistled. "I had thought it hard on any man to have to die twice so close together, but if half the tales told of that one are true he deserves all he gets."

"He thought he had good cause to flee my hounds," said Arawn, "for his wanderings in the wildernesses of Annwn will be hard. Long and long will it take him to find these pleasant places. For only those who have beauty within them can see beauty."

"Yet he was a fool," said Pwyll, "and a coward. A man should face at once what he has to face. All know that your hounds cannot be outrun."

"There are worse things than the fangs of my hounds," said Arawn.

"There are indeed," said Pwyll with sudden heat. "There are the monsters that dwell in your wilderness. I pity even that fellow if he has to meet the ones I met!"

"He will meet worse. Yet I am merciful; I only help

a man to cleanse himself. Already, in the Eastern World, in those hot desert lands where Gods are rising who will drive out us Gods of the West, many men believe that death will plunge them into a sea of fire where they must burn forever. So burn they will, until at last they realize that even that fire is Illusion, bred of their own guilty fears."

Pwyll stared. "But I thought you said that by killing Havgan I could save our world. Gods! What kind of weakling fools does the Eastern World breed to worship torturing monsters such as those?"

Arawn said: "Brave men even, who worship one God only, and call Him the loving Father of all men."

"Loving!" Pwyll snorted. "Sooner than be loved like that I would be like the Old Tribes—too simple-minded to know that children have fathers. Worship no Creator but my mother's womb!"

Arawn said: "No man has yet truly worshipped any God. In essence all Gods are the same, and One; but few mortals have glimpsed that Untellable Glory, and no human mind may hold it. So around the little they can remember those seers fashion poor clumsy un-Likenesses in their own image, and preach of these to men."

"But if all you Gods are really One, how can You fight each other?" Again Pwyll stared.

"Belief breeds reality; demons seek homes. And those Shapes built by men in their own image—Shapes in which, as in man himself, and in all created things, a spark of true Godhood yet burns, imprisoned—all differ greatly and battle greatly."

"Then let them battle somewhere else!"

"They will battle here. For Havgan has come here."

"Then what do we gain by killing him?"

"Time, and time means much. Every God comes at last to the Cauldron of Rebirth; is reshaped there even

as men are reshaped. A day will dawn when Gods of the East and Gods of the West will embrace and know their Oneness."

"And Havgan's death will hasten that dawn?"

"At least it will prevent the coming of too deep a darkness. His strength is all fire, and all fires that are lit in Annwn spread to earth, where you mortals have less power to put them out. You do not worship your mother's womb, but you loved her. Would you see men born who love nothing? Know no light but the light of burning fire?"

"Lord, I do not understand."

"Men who despise other men's mothers will learn to despise their own. Havgan has entered Annwn—and already, in green lovely Ireland, where your New Tribes have conquered the Old, no warrior can bring home a prouder trophy than a woman's two severed breasts! The same spoil that Havgan's warriors bear to him where he sits in his dread seat in Anghar the Loveless."*

Deep and painful was the silence then. Pwyll said at last, heavily: "My own people came into Dyved from Ireland. We men of the New Tribes are many, too many not to have evil men among us. But woe to any man of mine who dared to bring such a trophy before me—as woe it would have been to him who dared bring it before my father, or my father's father! We of Dyved are proud to be our fathers' sons; we know that our women's wombs could not quicken without our good seed to fill them. But never could we forget that our mothers' breasts were the first cups we drank from: the givers of life."

*St. Adamnan deplotes this custom, practised by the Christians (!) of his day. It must have dated back to much earlier times.

"If Havgan lives your sons will forget it."

"They shall not! He will die!"

"They must not. The Father must not become altogether a Being of wrath and fire. The Son must remain what He always has been: the Friend and Helper of all living."

Awe took Pwyll; he looked in wonder at that face that was his own, yet not his own. At those eyes, deeper than the sea, that seemed to gaze through all the ages, through time that had been and time yet to be. At the set mouth of a God who unflinchingly faced perils man could never dream of, and with endurance more everlasting than that of the grey cliffs battered through countless winters by the lashing sea.

And then, as he gazed, the face changed. Became full of warmth and gentleness and an almost human pride.

"Look, man of earth." Once again that deep voice of a God boomed forth, through Pwyll's own lips. "Behold that palace where tonight you will sit in my stead. Where no other man ever has entered save as my subject, at my call."

Pwyll looked, and thought at first that the moon had fallen from the sky, such round glory shimmered and glimmered there, in the plain ahead. Then he looked up and saw that bright Queen herself still safe in heaven, upon her age-old throne. He looked down again, and knew that shimmering wonder for a great round palace, shining like a star.

"Behold. My palace, and my court, and my kingdom, all are in your power. Enter." The deep voice of Arawn no longer seemed to come from the small cell of any throat; quiet as the twilight, it yet seemed to fill all space. Pwyll jerked round in his saddle, but saw nothing. Grey Man and black horse, both were gone as utterly as though they had melted into that soft air.

Pwyll rode on alone through the sweet dusk, and awe

and delight and dread were on him, altogether. What would it be like, this wonderful place to which he was going, all this unearthly splendor of which he would be Lord?

A breeze was rising, and the Grey's streaming mane shone like a woman's pale hair.

Arawn's Queen!

Pwyll willed himself not to think of her. He tried hard to think of other things. This Mother and Son he had heard so much about—who were they?

His coat shone silver white, and Pwyll, looking down, saw that the hands on the bridle were not grey either. They were still differently shaped from his own, not sun-bronzed like an earthly warrior's, but their pallor was clean and healthy.

If here in his own world the Grey Man was not grey, then she might be beautiful—Arawn's Queen!

"You will soon know . . ."

He closed his ears to that voice. He tried to think of other things. This Mother and Son he had heard so much talk of—who were they? The Mother must be She he had called on in the forest, She whom the Old Tribes believed to be the Goddess behind all Gods. They called Her Modron, "Mother," and the son She bore every year was Mabon ab Modron, "Son, son of Mother." On the third night after birth He was always stolen from Her side, but always She regained Him. If ever She did not, summer would not come, neither grass nor crops would grow, all living things would die. But so far She always had won Him back, though some years She was rather late about it. A wild tale. Yet Arawn had spoken of Her with reverence, though plainly he now ruled in this world that the Old Tribes sometimes spoke of as Her womb. This Moonlit Land was a proper world now, a man's world, the battleground of fighting Kings.

"And tomorrow I will fight!" He joyed in that thought; it cut knifelike through all the puzzling webs of strangeness. Fighting he understood.

"But first will come the night. Here darkness never comes, but the time for sleep will. The time for love."

That voice came not only from within himself. It spoke in the song of the birds, song soft as sleep itself yet somehow warming in its softness, a melody that moved in a man's blood.

The palace was very near now. Its walls were indeed of the pale gold of the moon; but where were all those birds?

And then he saw—the roof of that shining place was all one vast mass of living birds!

A great cry rose suddenly, drowning their song: "Hail, Arawn! Hail, Lord!" Folk were all about him, swarming as ants swarm, but full of loving joy. Folk-like, yet unlike the folk of earth. Their eyes shone brighter than mortal eyes, their clothes, even the lowest stableboy's, were all fine and of many colors. Not a face among them but was beautiful, not a head among them was grey. Pwyll sat as if caught in the middle of a rainbow, yet suddenly he shivered. What if, in the light of day all these fine smiling people would be only rotting corpses? Skeletons even, with grinning skulls. He shook off those frightful images. The beauty was here before his eyes. A sensible man would enjoy it.

He dismounted. Two scarlet-clad grooms, fine enough to be Kings' sons, led away the Grey. Pwyll himself passed through crystal doors, set between golden pillars. The vast hall within needed no torches; the shining splendor of its own walls lit it. Men fine to look at came and led him to a little chamber where they helped him off with his hunting clothes, brought him a golden basin to wash in and feasting garments that, where they

did not glitter with gold and precious stones, were of stuff soft as flower petals.

Tables were being laid. Servants who looked like princes and princesses were carrying in mead and wine and steaming platters; the smells made Pwyll's mouth water. But the time to eat was not yet; first he had to greet great Lords, Arawn's liegemen and under-kings. All were noble and majestic, and some made his heart leap in thrilled awe, for they were heroes of his boyhood, mighty men of old, whose deeds upon earth had been great, and grew ever greater in the songs of the bards and in the tales folk told round their hearth fires. He thought, *Who am I to be receiving the homage of such as these?*

But whoever came, Pwyll always knew his name, and greeted him as was his due. Arawn had arranged his memory well.

And then *she* came, her ladies around her, like the moon among stars. Her face was like nothing but itself; it was the one face she could have had, tenderly, sweetly colored as the dawn. Through her golden robe her flesh glowed, pale yet rosy, sweetly warm as only woman's flesh can be.

Pwyll saw her and knew her. His heart cried out to her, his lips opened, but no name came. Should her hair have been red gold, should singing birds have crowned her head? No—he did not know this woman. He knew only beauty, and only in dreams could he have seen beauty such as this. But he was awake now, and this Queen was flesh and blood.

She was smiling, she was coming toward him . . . How could Arawn bear to let any other man have her, even for one night?

Tonight she was his. That had been part of the bargain; Arawn had promised. *Yet we two swore friendship. He thought he dealt with an honorable man.*

They met, they kissed, and that kiss was stronger than any wine that Pwyll had ever drunk. Fire danced before his eyes, and leapt and sang in his blood.

No man whose manhood had not been cut away could lie in one bed with her, yet forego her. Arawn must know that.

King and Queen, they sat down together in all their beauty and splendor, and the servants served them. They ate and drank, they laughed and talked together.

Chapter VII

ARAWN'S QUEEN

NEVER HAD Pwyll been more easy and comfortable with any Lady on earth. But never on earth had the warmth of laughter and talk filled the air around two people with a glow of rose and gold. He had been a flame, an ache, a straining agony; he had not known how he could bear to wait for the feast to end, for folk to lead them to their chamber. But every moment with her was good, however it was spent. Delight should unfold slowly, petal by petal. For the first time the Lord of Dyved learned that, he who always had been flame-quick in his loves.

When the time came to listen to the bards he hated for the sweet speech of her mouth to stop. But it was a new joy to watch the quiet loveliness of her face as she listened. To feel her hand, that had slipped, warm and firm, into his own. He told himself: *She is life. The very blood and sap of life. It is not right, it is against all right and fitness, for Death to have such a woman. For his coldness to enter her warmth.*

Tonight—tonight! For this one night at least he would love her as she should be loved . . .

Then again he heard the deep voice of Arawn, as it had filled the soft twilight about them. "Behold. My kingdom, and my court, and my palace, all are in your power." Had he only stated a fact, or made the plea he could not speak?

Death the unconquerable was not unconquerable. He could not conquer Havgan. To buy a champion who might, he had himself proposed this outrage against his own majesty. No red-blooded live man could have done that; no husband worthy of her.

"Yet he could not do otherwise, knowing that you must bed her. As you must, or else shame her before all folk."

"Courtesy—courtesy. He offered what he must offer, hoping that you would be content with the gifts he could give honorably."

To the voices that spoke coldly within him Pwyll answered sturdily: *No. It is my right. He did not come to me fairly and ask for my help. He demanded it as face-price for an insult that he himself had arranged. He tricked me and trapped me and ever since he has played with me like a cat with a mouse. Let him keep his bargain now.*

"Yet you two did swear friendship. Friendship close as brotherhood . . ."

Beside him the Queen said softly: "It is the time for sleep, Lord. Should we not get to bed swiftly, since you must rise at dawn?"

Pwyll's heart leapt as if trying to break through his ribs. Now! Now! He rose. No more time, no more need to seek justification for what he had always known he would do. For what flesh and blood must do . . .

She rose with him. Her ladies joined them, and the

King's chamberlain. Together they moved toward the *ystafell*, the bedchamber of King and Queen. Toward its doors that some smith of the Ever-Young had forged from those brilliant deep lights that firelight finds in a woman's dark hair, inexplicable flaming gorgeousness now trapped in solidity, to flash and flicker there forever.

As the two neared them, the doors blazed like sunrise. No hands touching them, they swung wide to admit their Lady and her Lord. Pwyll must have hidden his eyes had not flame as fierce burned within him.

But the chamber within was all gentleness and tenderness. It had no true walls, only tiny little crystal doors set between bars of moon-gold. Most of them were open, and through them poured the cool night breeze, sweet with the scent of unearthly flowers. A wide golden bed waited, covered with stuffs that glowed with all the colors of the rainbow, but colors that were forever changing, rippling in their changes like the waves of the sea. When he saw that bed Pwyll forgot all else.

"Go!" His voice was thick and harsh. "Leave us." And as birds fly those lovely ladies fled. But the chamberlain grinned as he went.

The Queen stood and smiled. "You are right, Lord. Tonight you will be my tirewoman, and I your chamberlain. We will miss no least touch of each other, no least delight."

Her hands rose, she moved forward as if to undo the brooches that clasped his mantle. His muscles tensed to spring.

And then her smile went, and her mouth quivered. "Oh, my beloved, it is brave a woman of earth would be tonight. She would give you only ease and joy before you left her. But we women of the Moonlit Land are not used to war and battles. In the hall I could bear

myself as a Queen should, but here alone with you I cannot hide my trouble. Forgive me, Lord. Soon I will give you joy."

Her hands hid her face now, her shining head was bowed. Long hard sobs tore her body, she shivered, but made no sound. Before her mute grief Pwyll stood dumb, amazed. In that silence he heard again the soft singing of the birds above them; those birds who had watched over all her nights with Arawn.

Arawn. Death had been man enough for her. She had loved him.

The sobs ceased; her hands fell. She looked up at him, and her eyes were like pools into which the sun shines. "Long have we been together, Lord. No other man's head ever has lain beside my head; no other man's hand ever has found the smooth white path between my breasts, nor fondled the twin rosy globes of them. No other man's ever shall."

But mine will! Pwyll's heart cried that; his fists clenched, his teeth set. *It is I you will love tonight, Lady. I you will sleep with, I that will enter you!*

He said aloud, roughly: "Get to bed, woman."

She showed no surprise, no hurt. Obediently her hands moved to those golden brooches that clasped her own garment. "You are right again, Lord. We should waste no more of this night. You are also my first man and my only man, and if your body should never again lie beside my body I will not live long after you. No other shall befoul your bed and me."

The golden robe fell; bared the rose white glory of her . . .

Pwyll did not know why he did not spring upon her. Why he bent his head and looked down while his shaking hands, fumbling at first, then growing wild, tore off his clothes. Then he had to look.

She lay on the great bed. Her face smiled up at him in welcome, her arms rose. Her legs were already parting . . .

As some huge fierce beast of the forest springs, so Pwyll sprang. Across her and beyond her, to lie with his face to the wall, as many folds of that glowing, wondrous stuff as he could clutch hunched up between them so that he could not feel her flesh.

He had heard the breath whistle and catch in her throat. He could not bear to think of the welcome dying in her face, of the hurt coming into it. Yet how much deeper must be her shame, her hurt, if later she should learn that the husband she loved had handed her over to another man! If only her pride would keep her silent now; the pride of a great Queen. He prayed desperately to Her who sends both sun and rain: *Mother, let her not speak again—let her not move.*

Her hand moved; its soft warmth somehow found his naked shoulder. "Forgive me, Lord. I spoke words of ill omen, evil words. I will speak them no more. Love me."

He lay like stone. No—like wood; wood being eaten by devouring fire. Her hand moved on, steadily, thrillingly, inexorably working downward. Her other hand touched his neck, lay softly against his cheek. "Much joy have we had together, Lord. Our nights have been full of delight, and by day we have always been friends. Let it be between us as it has always been."

Still he lay like stone.

Her hands still fondled him. She spoke again, a quiver in her voice now. "Lord, love me."

He did not speak or move.

"Lord—" Her voice broke; she sobbed aloud.

Her arms were round him, her face was pressed against his neck, her breasts drove into his back. Her legs wound round him, he must have been lost save for

those silky thicknesses of coverlet bunched between them, those folds that finally had stopped her downward-seeking hand. "Lord, do not deny me—not tonight. I said I would speak no more words of ill omen, but tonight of all nights let us be together. Let it be sweet."

Pwyll thought: *Sooner than this would I face the Monster again with no heads to help me. Face the Bird again with no birds to help me . . .*"

The three birds! Someone had sent them to help him. He did not remember who, but he remembered them. He could see their feathers shining on that path of light, almost he could hear their singing. If he could hear it . . .

She sobbed on and on. So a child sobs in its heart-break that seems so world filling, yet ends so quickly, though it may leave scars that are not of the flesh: scars that twist the self within. So a woman sobs when her world ends; when her man's love dies.

Still Pwyll lay like stone beside her, and tried to hear the singing of those birds that were not there.

At last she gave up. Her clinging limbs fell away and she lay spent. He too lay spent and sick beside her.

Above him the little crystal doors gleamed. The sky flamed with stars. Its vast quiet soothed him and he thought: *Here no man can ever say that he has lost his way in the darkness.* Yet he had. Almost he had betrayed a friend. Suddenly and deeply, and with all of himself, Pwyll pitied Arawn. Knew somehow that Arawn, too, had had no choice.

Then, as suddenly and deeply, he slept . . .

The woman beside him sat up. She cast off that rainbow coverlet, and Her flesh shone like the moon. Breast and thigh and leg, all the noble length of Her glowed softly in the quiet dark. Her face was no longer a young lover's; its beauty was ageless, tender and majestic.

Her own birds in the roof above hailed Her, "Brenhines-y-nef! Queen! Lady who loves and makes all things. Modron—Mother!"

She smiled and they were silent. She looked upon the sleeping man, and Her eyes were proud and tender, truly a mother's.

"You have passed the third test, the test of My devising. Hail to you, child of Mine, born of Me as all the sons of women are born of Me."

"We too," sang the birds. "We, and the fledglings in our nests."

"You, and all that lives. Rhiannon shapes you, but she too is born of Me. Even Havgan is born of Me, he that would rend My veil and ravage this land that is My womb, this land where all things first were shaped."

Havgan! At that dread name all the shadows shuddered, came running from all parts of that lovely chamber, to huddle like scared children about Her shining knees. She laughed and caressed their black, vaporous heads.

"Have no fear, little ones. Though fire should burn both you and the shapes that cast you, yet all of you will come again. All that die are born again of Me. Light and darkness, both have their times, their places; both are Me."

The shadows were silent, comforted, but the birds said: "So You say, Lady, whom nothing can destroy. But we are little and afraid."

"Only by courage can you grow great. I gave My children freedom, and the price of freedom is hard. It is mistake after mistake, pain after pain. Yet if My care surrounded you always, you would be as caged birds forever. Men and women never could grow up, whatever their bodies did. To make all of you sharers in My wisdom and My strength I long ago yielded up

My supreme power and let evil come into the world."

"But it will take lives and lives for us to learn that wisdom, Lady and Mother! Lives and lives even for men and women, who have learned enough to win birth on a higher rung of Your ladder, than that one where we perch. And now we fear the pain."

She said sadly: "I know. To Me Time is not terrible; he is only another of My children. Though My forest burn, always I will raise up green shoots from the ashes, new trees and birds to sing upon them. Yet My heart sorrows to hear My children crying in the flames. Whatever each of you suffers, I suffer. But I have the strength to bear it."

The birds said: "Lady, who suffers for so many, we will try to be strong."

"I thank you. Out of the trying—the many times repeated trying—comes strength. As out of darkness comes light. But do not fear: hope. This man may send Havgan out of Annwn."

"That would be good, Lady. It is not good to see one's fledglings burn. We too—we fear the flames."

"Which do not yet burn here. But if they come, remember: Death, My son and My servant, is only the Reaper who brings home My sheaves. Through him I free the old and tired, I make them young and strong again. I give the maimed and torn new bodies that are fresh and whole. That is what men who live near the sunrise call the Wheel of Life, and no brave heart fears that Wheel. Life is a thing to rejoice in, with laughter and pride."

Then the birds too were comforted; they fell silent, put their heads beneath their wings, and slept. She looked down at Pwyll, and in Her glorious face was both love and sorrow. "Rest well, son of Mine. My blessing goes with you, and though if you return to earth you

may think it has failed you, yet in another turn of the Wheel you shall have your reward. We have wronged you, My son and I. Yet how can even Gods be stainless, They who let evil be?"



In the red dawn Pwyll woke alone. He thought, "She could not bear to stay, after the hurt and shame I put upon her." Pity pierced him like a sword.

Then he wondered at that red light, here where no sun was. He sat up, looked through the little crystal doors, and saw that the moon was red as blood. Black clouds boiled in the east, grim and terrible; scarlet flames licked through them like hungry, seeking tongues.

The birds above him twittered in fear: "Havgan rises. Havgan rises in Anghar the Loveless. To ride to the ford."

Pwyll sprang from that golden bed; he reached for his clothes and weapons.

In the vast hall men milled like ants in a threatened anthill. Only the Queen was calm, her face a beautiful, smiling mask. Pwyll thought with relief, but without comfort: "She is too proud to show her hurt before the folk."

He was glad to get out of that lovely place. When he strode forth to find the Grey of Arawn waiting between his grooms, it was like meeting an old friend. Joyfully he swung onto the great steed's back. He called to Arawn's men, and Arawn's Lords called to their men. Mighty was that host; tall fine men all, splendidly armed and mounted. Pwyll's heart leapt for joy in them; no lack of valor among these, their fine living had not made them soft. *Beware of us, Lord of Loveless Anghar, you whose so-called men cut off women's breasts. If, when I am cutting your head off, they break faith and*

try to help you, these men of mine will cut some things off them.

With one blow he would chop off that proud head—then let Havgan plead for mercy! Though maybe his head still could, being so full of tricks. Certainly it would be as well to pick the thing up before it could roll away. Safe on a spear, it could not get back onto the rest of him.

Havgan: "Summer-White"! A ridiculous name for this awful foe of men. Pwyll remembered words that once he had heard spoken by Mâth the Ancient, Gwynedd's wise old druid-king (in Gwynedd, among the Old Tribes, druids did have wisdom, whether a man could make sense of it or not). "Here in the cool and cloudy West we worship the sun as one of the fairest forms of the Mother. As the Bringer of light and warmth; without Her love we could not live. But the folk of Sumer, near the Sunrise, where the hot summers burn earth and men like fever, fear the sun as a fierce warrior. As Him who withers crops and blasts living flesh." Havgan's whiteness must be the whiteness of charred earth, yet it was still a foolish name.

Pwyll rode on, and the host of Arawn with him. Eastward they rode, toward those flame-shot clouds that waited for them like a living, angry darkness, and the wind that blew in their faces was not cool and sweet, as dawn-wind should be. It bore the stench of burning, a stench that grew ever stronger. Presently Pwyll made out the shimmer of water gleaming under that curiously soiled red light.

The ford. The meeting place of warriors!

He quickened his pace. The Grey's white, flying mane took on a rosy sheen. They came to the ford. Green trees and flower-spangled grass grew down to the western edge of its waters; waters so deeply

shadowed that they looked stained. Now the stench from the east was like a blow in the face, fire-hot and bitter. Smoke veiled the far side of the ford, smoke and the shadow of that massed blackness that filled the heavens above it. Dimly Pwyll could see the skeletons of trees, still seemingly writhing in the agony that had burned out their lives. This time words of Arawn's came back to him: *"Where Havgan treads, nothing grows again. Where he rides, the earth is burnt black beneath his horse's hoofs. He sears the breast of the Mother; all his land is a barren waste. His people live by raiding mine."*

Something moved in that murk; like a great, on-coming wave, crested with fire, not foam. For a moment Pwyll was puzzled, then knew it for the unfriendly twinkling of a host of brazen helmets. The host of Havgan! Quickly he ordered his own men well back from the ford. No sense in letting the two armies get too close together, brisk though the fun might be if they did. It would have been grand sport, chopping up these choppers-off of women's breasts. But he was there to fight one foe only, and so to save all other men.

He sent his herald forward—Arawn's herald. The man was tall and lean; in his hair night's black mingled with the grey of twilight. When he reached the ford that hair turned to hawk's feathers; he raised his arms, and his black cloak became wings that lifted him high above the waters. For a moment the whole head became a hawk's; its fierce beak gleamed in the red light, the eyes in it were no man's eyes.

Yet it was a man's voice that thundered across the waters. "Men, hear well! Lords, listen well! It is between two Kings this meeting is. He that would help or hinder either shall lose nothing but his life."

As a great bird descends from the sky so he descended then. He lit upon his own side of the ford, and

his head was a man's head, his hair was hair again, his cloak was only a cloak. He had no feathers at all.

But out of the smoky murk beyond came another herald, and Pwyll and all his men gasped, for on this man was a cloak of living fire! All over his mighty frame it flared and flickered, now red, now yellow, yet always gleaming evilly. He stood there and spoke, and his voice was like a great hiss. All the men of the West shrank, feeling heat like little tongues of flame lick their faces, though the whole width of the ford was between.

"Hail, men of grey Arawn! My master comes, the Golden One, he who is ancient yet ever young. He whom no bird's wings can outstrip, whose flame shrivels all feathers, consumes all flesh. Do you hear me, men of the Western World?"

Arawn's herald said: "We have heard you."

"Then tremble. Nergal comes, the Lord of the Abyss, the Lord of the burning summer sun! He that rises out of Meslam, the Underworld, to blast every green and growing thing. He that of old dragged Ereshkigal, Queen of the Eastern Dead, from her ancient throne by the hair of her terrible head. He that turned her pride to cringing fear and made her the meek receiver of his seed. Even so will he deal with your Brenhines-y-nef, with your Modron, the Mother. Too long has She queened it here, over you gelded weaklings of the West. She shall learn Her place, the woman's place! East and west the Dead shall know but one Lord: Havgan the Destroyer!"

From Pwyll's host came a roar of wrath. Like the waves of the sea they surged forward, mighty and terrible. But Pwyll's lifted hand stopped them. "Break not the word of Arawn, men of Arawn. Loud-mouth from the East, go back and bid your woman-fighting master to come forth and fight a man!"

There was no answer. The shadows swallowed that man of flame.

Smiling, Pwyll rode down to the ford. Smiling, he thought: *Now at last I shall see him, this terrible, wonderful Havgan. He for whom Bird and Beast were meant to prepare me. Well, he at least is man-shaped and can die.*

Then he did indeed see his enemy and the smile froze on his jaws, and his breath caught as if already his throat were shriveling in the grasp of a gigantic hand of fire.

Chapter VIII

THE BATTLE AT THE FORD

YOUNG WAS Havgan, young and beautiful as morning: a boy who looked scarcely old enough to go into battle. His red lips smiled like a happy, teasing child's, his dancing eyes shone blue as earthly skies, his hair had the red gold of sunlight. It came to Pwyll that he had forgotten how bright and clean sunlight was: how beautiful.

Am I fighting him who should win? Like a spear the thought stabbed him; like icy water it flooded his vitals. How could any land be laid waste by this youth's footsteps? How could the golden Sun-Lord be anything but a friend to men?

What did he know of Havgan, after all, save what Arawn had told him, Arawn, who had tricked him always? All heralds bluster before their Lords go into battle; in war all lands are likely to be ravaged by fire. Never would this boy use a woman's breasts by cutting them off; that tale, at least, was sheer folly . . .

Then he thought no more, for Havgan was upon him. Fierce and terrible was that fight. Pwyll swerved just

in time to save his right eye from that first spear thrust. Blood crimsoned his ripped cheek. The cast of his own spear went wild. They dismounted then and fought with swords. They hewed and hacked at each other; lightning swift were their lunge and their parry. Yet always each just managed to leap aside or to turn with his own blade the blow that must have finished him.

Time after time Pwyll was pierced; his blood flowed from many wounds. He thought, *Soon my strength will go*. Yet more fiercely he hurled himself upon his foe, he lunged and he leapt and he struck, but Havgan was everywhere but where those blows fell. Always, after each vain attack, that lovely bright face would be there, smiling into Pwyll's, the white teeth shining as bright as the blue eyes. He was glorious, he was terrible, he was untouchable. He seemed, incredibly, to be growing constantly quicker, lighter, stronger. *That is because I am bleeding and he is not*, thought Pwyll, and leapt upon him more savagely than ever, but he might as well have beaten at the air. His lunges, growing ever wilder, brought him fresh hurts.

"This is not the way." As he saved himself, by a hairsbreadth, from a stab that must have cut his throat, Pwyll heard that; coldly and surely as if a voice had spoken in his ear. He began to fight as he never had fought before, covering himself with his shield as best he could, striving only to guard himself. He took prick after prick from Havgan's leaping sword, but no more deep cuts. He waited, watching for his chance.

But his eyes, his brain, were kept busy watching for, warding off, the ceaseless bright flashings of Havgan's blade. They wove a web of dazzling, whirling lights; a web that for a second covered all things . . . Pwyll dodged, but on his side a new red furrow widened. He knew then that, unless some God should help him, there could be only one end.

To win a warrior must attack; advance. I shame Dyved standing still here, fighting to live just a little longer. But I am standing, and as long as I can stand, I will.

He set his teeth and stood.

On and on and on it went—lunge, stab, parry, lunge, prick, parry. Havgan's lunge, Havgan's stab, Pwyll's parry. And then—were those light-leaping legs of Havgan leaping just a little less lightly? Had that last thrust been just a little easier to parry? No; such dreams came when a man's lifeblood was oozing away. Parry, parry, parry—thrust—parry. By all the Gods, it was true! That last thrust had been Pwyll's own; the first he had made in a long time. Havgan was weakening!

Joy leapt in Pwyll; a last flare of strength. Then, black and bleak, came understanding. *On earth is sunset near? Does his strength grow until noon, then ebb as the light ebbs? As the shadows rise to become Lords of the earth?*

If he could hold out until sunset Havgan would be at his mercy, but—if he killed Havgan, would the sun ever rise again? Death would have a full meal then; Pwyll's world would indeed be safe from all foes forever, for it would be a frozen wasteland lost in the darkness, emptied of life . . .

Havgan saw his chance. Like a striking snake his sword darted in past Pwyll's shield. The Lord of Dyved's warrior-trained body saved him, not his wandering wits. It swerved, but blood spurted from his already wounded side.

He fought then, stubbornly, savagely, doggedly, knowing that soon he could fight no more. Knowing of nothing, thinking of nothing, but his enemy. Only they two had being, locked together in that awesome flame of oneness that lovers may know, fused in the act of giving life, or two men who strive with all the strength of their flesh and wills to give each other death.

From the green bank the host of Arawn watched, white and stiff faced. In the hot foul gloom of the other bank the dark men from the East stood grinning, cheering Havgan on, but their faces too were tense. Like red, sluggish snakes the blood of both Kings crept through the waters now.

Great anger came suddenly upon Havgan. His golden hair stood up around his face; each hair turned flame red, and fire darted from it. The round boss of his shield flamed also, red as the sun that must have been setting upon earth. With a roar that filled all space he charged at Pwyll, and all his own men shouted with triumph while the men of Arawn groaned. To none did it seem possible that God or man could withstand that charge.

But the great stroke that was meant to sheer Pwyll's head from his shoulders only shore through the skin of his neck. His own blade flashed upward. With one last burst of strength he drove it straight through that fiery, glowing boss—and on, deep into Havgan's body.

With a great cry the bright King fell. His sword and pierced shield fell with him, into the engulfing waters. But magically, inexplicably, strength came back to Pwyll. He caught up his enemy in his arms, staggered toward the shore. With great shouts of glee Arawn's men ran to help him, but no triumph, only grief and pity were in Pwyll's face when, safe ashore, he looked down into that other's. It seemed very young again now, boyish and innocently fair.

The blue eyes opened; looked into his. Anguish filled them, and wonder: the bewilderment of a child who does not know why it has been hurt.

"What right had you to seek my death, Lord? I never harmed you; I do not know why you sought my life. But since you have begun to kill me, end it—put me out of this pain."

Deeper than his blade had, those eyes pierced Pwyll.

Wise in death they knew him; knew him for himself and not Arawn. Again in the whole universe they two seemed alone, the man who lay dying in pain, and the man who had dealt him that pain. The agony that tore the other's flesh tore Pwyll's heart.

Havgan gasped, "Take my head—end it."

Of itself Pwyll's arm rose. His sword flashed up, then down.

But a finger's breadth from Havgan's throat it halted. Arawn too had heard this plea; Death had done his ancient, merciful office. And the slain man had risen, his slayer powerless against him forever.

But why fear that? Such a rising would be radiant as sunrise; it would *be* sunrise. His whole being ached to see this boy stand up, whole and beautiful again. And yet . . .

Arawn. His oath. But Arawn had tricked him from the beginning, played with him, left him to fight monsters alone. Always he had had some excuse, some wordy subtlety that Pwyll had not known how to answer, but those were the facts. All the smothered resentments and distrust suddenly broke free, sprang tree-high within him. Maybe Havgan's victory over Arawn would mean that the sun would rise here too, over the world of the dead. Make dead and living one again, in the glory of that light . . .

The man at his feet moaned pitifully. "Do—not—play with—me. End it."

Again Pwyll's arm rose. The blue eyes lit with hope.

They were engulfing him, those sky-hued seas of beauty and longing, those eyes that promised a new universe. And then something—the cold feel of bonds coiling snakewise round his will—made Pwyll tear his eyes away, held his arm rigid. He looked up, seeking something else to look at, trying to clear his head, and he saw the darkness beyond the ford.

It covered all now. From the water's edge to the half-swallowed heavens that smoky blackness boiled. Through it came the wailing of the Eastern men, keening for their Lord. And with that wailing came the stench, the heat . . .

If Havgan rose, his men would cross the ford. Would that hot, reeking darkness cross with them?

Agony rocked Pwyll. The moaning at his feet stabbed him like swords. Doubts tore at him like the beaks of savage birds. Might not darkness, stench and heat be only more of Arawn's illusions? Much that he had seen, much that he heard, since he had entered this world, had not been real. Colder than ice, deeper than the sea, that knowledge poured through him; he knew that he had known it long, though he had refused to face it. How could a man know what to do in a world where his own eyes and ears were made liars?

"You can never know." Deep within him a voice answered, quietly and terribly, a strange voice that yet was his own, though it belonged to no self he knew. *"Never, until you return here a dead man, one of Arawn's own people. But this you know, this springs from your own heart: the loathing you feel for that foul wilderness beyond the waters."*

Pwyll looked at the men pressing around him; at faces that had been triumphant and now were troubled. Faces in which fear was dawning. All this host here, all those people waiting at home in their own fields and houses, waiting in dread to hear the outcome of this battle—even that shining Queen herself—all looked to him, Pwyll, to protect them. As he had promised . . .

They were his people now, even as on earth the folk of Dyved had been his people. Could he risk loosing this darkness upon them?

He dropped his sword; it had taken a long fight to

lower his arm without using it. He turned his eyes away from those blue eyes in which hope was dying. He said, forcing his voice to steadiness: "Lord, I may yet repent what I have done to you. Let him who has the heart for it kill you. I will have no more blood of yours on my hands."

Havgan gave a great sigh. He said only, "Let my men come to me. The captains of my host."

They came, those black-bearded men from the East. Out of that looming shadow, into and through those bloodied waters. They crowded round their Lord, and Havgan took the hand of each and pressed it. A faint glow of the old beauty warmed his face.

"Too soon we left the ancient temples of Cuthah, in Sumer near the Sunrise. Gods from the East shall indeed rule in the West, but not yet. Bear me hence now, faithful men of mine. I can lead you no farther."

Keening, they made a bed of their cloaks and lifted him and bore him away, back into that Shadow they had made. Pwyll and his men, watching them go, saw how, even as they crossed the ford, that darkness quivered and thinned and shrank downwards. Like a cloak it fell from the heavens it had blackened, and they shone clear again, vast and unstained. What had been so huge and monstrous, seeming to challenge infinity itself, dwindled down into a little darkness that wrapped the mourners and their burden. Through its blackness came their woeful keening, until distance devoured both. Then all was still; the moon shone down upon the two sides of the ford again, tranquil as in the unremembered Beginning. Gentle as a mother's hands upon a sick child, her light caressed that scarred wasteland.

And Pwyll thought simply, happily, *Now I can go home*. Then remembered, with an inward groan, what any King must do before he went home to his vic-

tory feast. "Lords of mine, let us follow them, and see what must be done for these lands that are now my lands again. Also what people should be my vassals."

As with one voice they answered: "Lord, all men should be your vassals, for now once again there is no King over all Annwn save yourself."

Chapter IX

HEMCOMING

ON THE back of the Grey of Arawn Pwyll, Prince of Dyved, rode down again into that green clearing in Glen Cuch: that clearing in which the stag had ended, and so much else had begun. This time the hounds of Annwn ran before him, as that other time they had run before Arawn. He looked at the place and knew it, yet felt as if he had not seen it for a thousand years. Surely, he thought, he had been in Annwn more than two days and two nights; Arawn must have a way of arranging time as he had of arranging memory. Yet hōw could that be?

No matter. Time does not matter, only what happens in it. Time can burn like fire, or it can pass as quietly as grass grows. For me it has been like fire. Things have been burned into me, and things have been burned out; but what things?

He was still wondering when it happened: when, with a sudden great quake and shudder, all that grassy clearing heaved and whirled and was gone. He was back again in the Glen Cuch of his boyhood. Trees

covered him like a roof, into his nostrils the wind was blowing the good, woodsy smells of earth, and through the leaves the sun was shining.

The sun!

Pwyll's eyes were still drinking in that dear brightness when a voice behind him said dryly: "Were you still afraid that the golden, Crop-Bringing Mother might never rise again, my brother?"

What seemed to be himself rode up beside him, on what was certainly his horse. Pwyll looked into his own grey eyes, and out of them Arawn looked back at him.

Pwyll said slowly: "Part of me must have been afraid but not the part that matters. I trust you now, Death my brother."

"That is well. Death is the one friend who never fails any man. The child in you was afraid, Lord of Dyved, the child that used to fear the dark. But the man was not. He has grown since we two took the Oath together."

Pwyll said yet more slowly: "I know only that I have kept my bargain with you, brother."

"That I too know, and may That Which is above all the Gods men know reward you, brother. Better than I can."

Yet his eyes were sad. Briefly Pwyll was puzzled, then he remembered that golden bed. Well, what had not happened there was for the Queen to tell her Lord. When Arawn knew that, he would know that a man's generosity could match a God's. *He would know it already, if he were reading my thoughts. But he is a gentleman; he will not intrude on those again.*

He said aloud: "Lord, I led your host across the waters. I sat in Anghar the Loveless, and all those who had done homage to Havgan, paid it to you. To the semblance of you, not knowing that another sat in your place. Then as we rode home a mist came upon us—

as most likely you know—and I slipped away. You may sit at your victory feast; it awaits you.”

Arawn said: “Truly I sent that mist, and I thank you for your strength that won the victory.”

“My crude earth strength?” For a breath’s space the old resentment flashed up in Pwyll.

“That was needed, yet without another kind of strength you could not have won the victory.”

Silence fell between them. A bird flew across the sky above them; in the golden light that poured between the leaves they saw the shadow of its wings; heard the beat of them, though that should have been inaudible on earth.

Then Pwyll said quietly: “I have seen what he did in Anghar the Loveless. I thank all the Gods that he did not get to my world, to do such deeds here. Yet he was beautiful—so beautiful that I could not help loving him. How could such deeds and such beauty go together?”

Arawn said: “Is a star less beautiful as it falls than when it shines in heaven? Gods must grow as well as men; grow in evil if they turn away from good. Havgan never will burn up your green earth now. Many men and women still will burn at wooden stakes because of the fiery power that he brought westward; many more will cringe in fear of what they pretend to love. For only evil should be feared; Gods should be loved. But he cannot wreak utter havoc now, turn all kinds of love to hate and fear.”

“Then when he comes again he will be gentler?”

“Yes, yet he or whoever comes in his place will still bring that devil dream of everlasting fire, to be the torment of men.”

Again there was silence. Then Pwyll said: “Was he truly a God? What is a God? A real God?”

Arawn said: “None can tell another what God is. The One behind the Many, the Power beyond such

little words as 'he' and 'she'. Not even I, who am Death."

"Then what good are druids and their teachings?"

"True teachers set a man's feet on the path. That each may seek what each must find for himself."

Pwyll sighed. "I think I have learned nothing, Lord, except that I know nothing. And understand less."

"Then you have gained wisdom, brother."

"If it is wisdom to know that I do not know the truth."

Death said quietly: "I am one step on all men's way to it. Yet most fear me as a tormentor. They do not understand that I come only to relieve man or beast of suffering. Of the torments that others or even themselves inflict upon their flesh until it can bear no more."

Pwyll said as quietly: "Yes, I see that now. I should have known that it is never you yourself who are cruel."

Arawn smiled then; his strange, still smile. "It is hard for warm young blood not to shrink from any pact with me. You did only what I expected . . . Well, now it is time for each of us to go back to his own. Farewell for a time, brother."

A wand suddenly appeared in his hand—Pwyll's hand. He waved it.

Another great shake and shudder, but this time it was not the earth that rocked but their two selves, twisting, whirling, coming together and reshaping even as they unshaped and flew apart. When Pwyll's head cleared there before him sat the Grey Man on his Grey Horse. Pwyll looked down and saw his own hands, holding his own bridle, shaped and colored as they always had been. Blessedly, happily, he knew that they were his own hands, every part of them. He was himself again, all Pwyll.

But when he looked up to say farewell, Grey Man and Grey Horse and the hounds of Annwn, all were

gone. Pwyll was sorry; he particularly would have liked to have made his farewell to the horse.

"Not that I love you less than I did, my Kein Galed"—he patted the chestnut's glossy neck, somewhat guiltily—"but that Grey One and I have been through much together. Such things as I hope you will never have to go through, my darling."

He rode home then, and his people welcomed him; gladly, as the beloved are always welcomed, but without surprise, for they did not know that he had been away. He entered his own palace, there at Arberth, and everything looked just as it always had, dear and good, if less splendid than the wonders of Arawn's glorious hall. Yet the smoke and the smells bothered him a little. He thought, *I wonder if the craftsmen of Dyved could learn to make those little doors. Even if we could not afford many crystal ones, wooden ones could be opened whenever the weather was good. They make a house bright and sweet smelling.*

Just before the evening meal was served his cousin Pendaran Dyved came in. When he saw Pwyll joy lit his face like the sun. He came and laid both hands on his shoulders. He said softly, so that no other might hear: "Welcome home, Pwyll. It is good to have you back."

Pwyll stared. "Then you knew I was not here?"

"From the beginning. We druids all knew it, but we dared not question him who sat here in your place."

"From the beginning"? Then how long—?"

"You have been gone a year and a day. But do not worry; the crops have been good, and though a few people have died, no great friend of yours has left us—though you must know that, who would have met him where you were. And I will tell you all that has happened, and keep close to you meanwhile, so that you will make no mistakes."

"By my hand," said Pwyll, "I never have been one to sneak and hide." And he called all his people together and questioned them. "Has all gone well with you this last year? Have I treated you well? Have I been as good to you as I was in the winters before?" And many jaws dropped and many eyes popped, but all made much the same answer.

"All has gone well with us. Never have you been so wise or so kind, Lord; never, when you sat in judgment, have you seen so deeply into men's hearts. Never have you been so lovable a man, or so good a Lord."

Pwyll's old nurse beamed and said, "Truly, Lord, you have shut them up at last, the mouths of all those fools who said that the Lady, your mother, was wrong to name you Pwyll, 'Wisdom.' And indeed there were several of them."

For the space of several breaths Pwyll was silent. Then he thought: *I would not steal another man's battle honors. Is this different?* He squared his shoulders; he looked straight at them all. "Then by the sun and the moon, folk of Dyved, and by the air we all breathe, you should thank him who has been with you here. Not me." And he told them his story.

Jaws that had risen dropped again, and eyes that had settled back into their sockets popped again, but all believed him. Indeed many thought, *It is good to know that madness has not come on him, as all those foolish questions made us fear.* For in those days the walls between the worlds were thinner and visits to strange, shining places more believable than they would be now. Also, all these people had heard of the wisdom of the Old Tribes, and most of them had in their veins some of that ancient, knowing blood.

At last the oldest and most honored of Pwyll's chieftains made answer: "Lord, we thank all the Gods

that you are safe at home again, and have won for yourself and Dyved the friendship of him who was here in your stead—of him who, maybe, had better not be named. Also we hope”—and here his eye fixed Pwyll's eye—"that you yourself will keep on giving us the same kind of rule he gave us."

"I will do my best," said Pwyll. And all cheered.

Until dawn they feasted and were glad. Pwyll sat by Pendaran Dyved; as boys they had been as two fingers on one hand, and Pwyll's heart had been sore when his cousin had left him to seek wisdom among the druids. Now he could not help feeling a little pleased when he saw how his kinsman longed to know what he had seen while he was away. He thought, *Yes, I the warrior, the unwise one, have been where you have never been, seen what you have never seen, my Pendaran, even when you lay blindfolded in a dark place, with a stone upon your belly.* For so the druids of the New Tribes sought concentration, and the road to wisdom.

But in that deepest darkness that comes just before the death of darkness, when wine had taken the wits of all about them, and their own talk flagged, he said musingly: "Cousin, why did Havgan's herald not threaten Arawn's own fair Queen with rape? She, and not the Brenhines-y-nef? He spoke as if that ancient Mother were still Queen in the World of Middle Light."

"She is. She is Arawn's Mother."

Pwyll stared. "But I saw no old woman there!"

Pendaran Dyved smiled. "You yourself have said that none grow old there."

"But if She is still Queen why did Arawn's wife get all the honors? Sit alone beside the King? And I never heard of any son of Hers but Mabon . . ."

"Mabon ab Modron—Son, son of Mother. That is a child's name, Pwyll. A baby name. No God is bound

to one name, or even to one face. Back in Ireland, whence our folk came, some poets worship Him who has two faces: one that of a rotting corpse, the other that of a fair young lad. Poetry comes from the Land of the Dead."

"But—but I saw only one Queen. Arawn's young, fair Lady." Pwyll protested, sure of that much. But Pendaran Dyved still smiled, and the wine in Pwyll's head helped it go round and round.

Yet when at last he tumbled into his own bed peace came to him; all things settled into their proper places. Were they in bed too, he wondered, Arawn and his fair Queen? No, time moved more slowly in the Moonlit Land. All must still be making merry at the victory feast, the true King home again and his people proud of him, and that lovely Queen smiling beside him, proud too, yet still hurt and wondering.

But they would go to bed, they would go from that hall that was more splendid than sun or moon, they would go to that place of crystal doors. As a hawk falls upon a dove so the King would fall upon her—what husband would not, after a year away from such a wife? He would hold her in his mighty arms and take his pleasure, but she would lie still, still as some carved, painted image of a fair woman. He would speak to her twice, maybe thrice, but she would not answer, any more than an image would answer.

He would say at last, "Lady, what welcome is this for your Lord?"

As the moon rises, so would rise her golden head. "By the Power the Gods Themselves worship, this is a change indeed, Lord! The night before you rode away to battle you had no word or look for me. You turned your face to the wall and your back upon me!"

He would smile and say: "Lady, before going into battle the lustiest warrior needs some rest. Very sure

am I that I did not keep that stern back of mine turned upon you the whole night long."

"You did, Lord, you did! All night long you lay beside me like this wall. Cold and hard as stone is, so were you to me. You laid no hand upon me, not the least finger of one hand—let alone anything else!"

Then her pride would break and she would weep, that beautiful Goddess, even as mortal women weep. And for a space even Arawn would be silent; even from that wise mouth no words would come. Until for once even his eyes would warm, their vast, unfathomable depths glow with thankfulness and wonder. He would hold her close and say, "Lady, weep not. For you have lost nothing and I have gained a friend. No man ever lived that was truer to his comrade. What did not happen here last night is a marvel to awe even us that fashioned men."

He would tell her the truth after all, and she would understand, being Goddess to his God, and together they would marvel at the honor of Pwyll, Prince of Dyved, Pwyll who could have soiled the bed of a God and had not. The bed of Death himself, whose other face is Life.



From that time forth, says the *Mabinogi*, friendship grew strong between Pwyll of Dyved and Arawn, Lord of the Abyss. And because of where Pwyll had been and what he had done there even his own people often called him Pwyll, Lord of Annwn; a title that surely must have displeased Arawn had both been mortal. But no man can either hurt or spare the unreachable dignity of an Immortal; even that talk in the golden bed must have been all a dream in the tired, wine-befuddled head of Pwyll.

But neither his new friendship nor his new title

pleased his druids, always jealous for their own power. So they, who had more magic than wisdom, set about turning his good luck to bad. But for three years their evil spells could accomplish nothing; for those three years the whole Island of the Mighty prospered; Beli the Great was healed of his sickness and his son Caswallon ceased to plot.

Book II

Rhiannon of the Birds

“... NOT BEING ... in such gross bodies as we, they are especially given to the more spiritual and haughty sins.” A somewhat simplified quotation from the Rev. Robert Kirk’s *The Secret Commonwealth*, perhaps the first great book on Celtic fairy lore. Kirk died young; his parish seems to have believed that the fairy people had “taken” him, presumably for betraying their secrets.

Chapter I

TROUBLE COMES UPON DYVED

FOR THREE winters and three summers Dyved thrived. The snows bedded her gently and lovingly; beneath their whiteness the brown earth slept the warm, fertile sleep of a bride. When she brought forth her fields blazed with golden grain, her fruit trees sagged with their weight of fruit. Nuts and berries were as many as the stars in heaven. The cow who did not bear triplets bore twins, and it was the same with the ewes and the mares. The women did not do quite as well, but they did very well. No land could ever have had better proof that it had a good King, for according to ancient beliefs a strong King brings good crops and good seasons, but a weak King makes the land grow barren and the people suffer. Deeply did all Dyved love Pwyll, her Lord.

But the fourth winter came howling like a wolf. The icy wind of his breath tore down tall trees, it brought sickness on man and beast. Spring came late, and she was not bright and eager, like a bride, but wan and

weak, like a sick woman. She cowered before untimely frosts; what fruit grew was small and scarce and worm eaten. No cow bore but one calf, no mare but one foal, and most of these died.

When the frosts ceased the rains came. What grain grew rotted in the fields. What calves and colts were left sickened and died, as did many of the children of women.

The druids came before Pwyll. White-robed and bearing their holy golden sickles they came, and the oldest spoke. "Lord, your people perish. Soon Dyved will be a waste, and what few of us are left will fall before the wrath of the Old Tribes, from whom our fathers took the land."

Pwyll answered as best he could. "Beli the High King will forgive us the tribute this year. He is not the man to punish men who are doing the best they can. And next year must be better."

"Will it? And how many of us will see it? Gwynedd lies at our borders, and no trouble is on her people, near us as they are. Mâth the Ancient, her King, is still a mighty man of war. If he marches against us, many folk of the old blood will hail him as a deliverer."

"Mâth is a mighty guardian to his own, but never does he set foot beyond his own borders. You know that well, wise man; you knew it before I was born."

"We who have lived long know that there is always a wolf to tear the throat of the weak. Also folk must eat. When your father was Lord over us the crops never failed."

Pwyll saw it then, the knife they held at his throat. To make way for a new King was the God-forsaken one's ancient duty: the law that the New Tribes had brought with them from the mainland. It had brought bloody death to many kings, yet never, in the pride

of his young strength, had Pwyll dreamed that it could be invoked against him.

He laughed grimly. "So that is it, old man. You want a new Lord. I am too old and feeble for your taste."

They were silent then. They had not meant to speak out quite so plainly yet. But their faces were set as the unchanging faces of those God-Shapes that hung motionless forever, carved into the trees of their holy groves, their eyes like ice-encrusted pebbles, cold and hard. Only in the face of his cousin Pendaran Dyved, the youngest of them, could Pwyll see sympathy and human fear.

The High Druid spoke again, that oldest of them all. "Put no words into our mouths, Lord. We ask only that you do your duty. The land of Dyved is a mother, the ancient mother of all her folk. But even a Goddess must have seed to make Her womb fertile. Every King of Dyved has given Her his since Kings came among us. Save only you."

For a breath's space there was silence again. Then Pwyll said quietly: "We have spoken of this before, Lord Druid. In due time I will take a wife; meanwhile I do not hoard my seed. Has any bride that slept with me ever complained that she went to her man a virgin? Or been slow to bear her first child?"

But the old man's eyes pinned him. "You may have done your duty by your men's wives, Lord, but those brides were not the Holy Bride. The White Mare of Arberth must be brought forth; you must lie with her and give her your seed, then slay her and drink of the broth made of her blood. Then and then only the earth may bear her good fruits again, and the curse be lifted from land and folk."

"Seven winters ago I refused to sleep with the White Mare, Lord. Yet six of those winters have been good."

"The Goddess has been patient; She has waited for you to outgrow the follies of youth. But now you must prove your manhood—if indeed it is still strong within you."

To some it seemed that Pwyll flinched as if a hot coal had touched him; but then his jaw set hard. "And I say that the Goddess is glad because I did not mock Her with a beast. Get your mare a stallion, old man—let her live and bear foals, and not have her blood drunk by any. So will she do her best for herself and Dyved, without my help or any man's."

Then indeed silence fell, like a blow. Men could hear their own breathing. Never before had any man, even a King, dared speak so to the High Druid. Those who loved Pwyll most wondered, shivering: *Has madness come on him? Is his wisdom gone?*

But the old druid drew himself up to his greatest height, and that was great indeed. In the firelight his golden sickle gleamed like another flame.

"None has ever mocked Her as you mock Her, Pwyll, called Prince of Dyved. You scorn the White Mare, you who have known the embrace of the Corpse-Devourer? You who have been Death's servant, fighting his battles and sleeping in his bed? With his own bed-fellow, her that is yet more ancient and terrible than he—"

"She is beautiful above all women!" Pwyll cried in indignant amaze. "But though I lay beside her I never lay with her. Never gave her my seed."

"She wound her arms and legs about you; she laid her bonds upon you. And the seed you denied her has shriveled within you. Never again will you beget son or daughter, only boast of the fruit of other men's good seed. What child born here since you came back from Annwn has had a face like your face?"

"*Aa-aagh!*" Pwyll's voice rang through the hall, wordless as the cry of a tortured beast. Like lightning his sword flashed, but its gleaming arc that would have sliced off the old druid's head like a head of grain stopped in mid-air. Corpse-white the Lord of Dyved stood and fought himself; when at last he spoke his voice was low, as if forced through the stiff lips of the dead.

"We will not help our people, Lord, by railing at each other like dogs fighting over a bone. Let the Gods judge. Tonight I will go up upon the Gorsedd Arberth, and if good counsel comes to me in my dreams there I will come down and take a Queen to bear me sons. For from of old the feast at which a king takes his kingship has been called his wedding feast, so maybe I did wrong to take my father's place without taking a wife. That much right may be with you, old man."

"The King sleeps with his kingdom; those are the ancient words." The High Druid's face was as stony as ever. "The Queen who makes a man King must have the old Goddess of the land within her. Here no woman does. Only the White Mare . . . Would you lie with her if you came down from the Gorsedd? Few Kings ever have, and none of them was vowed to sacrilege like you."

He stopped, and all men shuddered, as if through the walls around them seeped the black, chilling shadow of that awful Mound called the Gorsedd Arberth—that dread Mound that had always towered above the folk-filled, life-filled palace, waiting . . .

"Better that than be burned in my own hall, or dragged to the vat or the tree! I know the ways Kings die." Pwyll laughed savagely. "I will go up to that high place, with my foster-brothers and chosen battle-comrades round me, the True Companions of the King. And

if they beat me to death with their spears as old men whisper that my grandfather's True Companions beat him—I will not lift hand against them. But I will be surprised if they do it!”

“The choice is yours.” The old druid's face was unmoved. “A King's choice.”

“But one that I did not make alone . . . You have got what you played for.” Pwyll laughed wryly, then his eyes left the High Druid's face, left all those carven faces and blanched faces and came to the one that was troubled. “If he wins and the Gods strike me down—for my True Companions will never do it—I lay it on you, Pendaran Dyved my kinsman, to be King here in my place. You are no man of war, but your heart is sound, and our people will need you.”

“I had no hand in this, Pwyll.” The other young man's voice was full of misery.

“You did not have a finger in it, lad. I know that. The Gods be with you! The druids will—that too I know.”

Then the High Druid rose and went forth from that hall, and all the druids went with him. Even Pendaran Dyved, but Pwyll had known that that must be so. He wasted no time, but straightway gathered together his True Companions, and they made ready as if for war.

Back in his own place the High Druid sat alone. Pendaran Dyved came to him there. “Lord, let me go back to my cousin. Let us speak alone together, and maybe I can yet make him see what he should do. For he has both the heart and the head of a King.”

“It is time for him to go back to the Abyss.”

“Lord, he meant no insult to your high dignity. He is a bull of battle, and in his great hurt rage blinded him. Let me entreat him—if he lies with the White Mare, surely his seed will swell again within him. What one

Goddess has taken, Another must be able to give back!"

The old man smiled thinly. "I do not serve Her, yet this I will say for Modron the Mother: She harms no man's seed. Life is Her business, Death only prunes Her garden."

"Then he is not—?" Joy flashed sunlike in Pendaran Dyved's face.

"He is. He has walked in the Land of No Return, in that Abyss from which no man should come back to earth save through the womb of woman. In a new body."

"You mean—he could not come back whole?" The joy died in Pendaran Dyved's face.

"Arawn and his shadows needed strength to fight the White Shadow. Strength lower, grosser than their own—the strength of a mortal man. Not from malice but from need, to save both their world and ours, they drained Pwyll's. Else men would have become as beasts again—and worse than beasts."

"But then—if Pwyll's sacrifice saved both Gods and men, surely She must forgive and help him, our Goddess who is Herself born of the Abyss!"

"Modron, whose care is the whole world, has many daughters, and all of them are Herself. She is one of them, She who watches over our fields and our forests, over our beasts and us."

"She who is Dyved. The White Mare!"

Again that thin smile. "Boy, under the Oldest Tribes Queens alone reigned in Dyved, and all of them were the Shadows She cast among men. When Kings came, they were Her sons at first, and later, when a new people came, Her husbands. Even among us of the New Tribes, no King may yet reign in his own right; he must always wed the old Goddess of the land."

"The land herself—I know. My forefather and Pwyll's

seized the last Queen, but she bore him no girl-child. A pity. For Dyved's good Pwyll would have married any woman."

"It is no pity, but a blessing that that line of witches came to an end. To make men stronger and women weaker we druids devised the Bridal with the White Mare. In her name we wield the Queens' ancient power."

Pendaran Dyved's jaw dropped. "But the Goddess—"

"Boy, there is no more of Her in the White Mare than in any other she-beast. A little of Her dwells in every creature that holds a womb. But sometimes it is needful for the wise to deceive common men." His smile was dry now. "It is time for you to learn that, you who are of our Order."

After what seemed to himself a long time Pendaran Dyved whispered, "Lord, how can wisdom lie?"

"It speaks in symbols. The Old Tribes have but one symbol for creation: the womb. Here we have changed that, but children must still have their toys. If the people lose the White Mare too soon, the power of women may wax again."

Pendaran Dyved said slowly: "I have known women who were wise and strong. Seed and womb—what is one without the other?"

"We serve the Man-Gods."

"But I thought we still revered the Mothers—as do the Old Tribes, who were druids before us. They made us brothers in this Order that is older than the world. Druids helped to shape that world, and only when that work was done did they plan and put on the flesh of men. Or is that too a lie?"

"The Old Tribes have grown too old. They cling to ways that are past and done. The day of the Mother is done. She must sink back into the Abyss, into that Night which was the Beginning and shall be the End."

"But then—all must change. What is to come?" Pendaran Dyved shrank from him, bewildered and afraid.

"A day when men will fly higher than birds, when they will fare deeper undersea than the fish. When the lightning shall be shut in little boxes, and serve them like a slave. And all these wonders will be worked by the hands and wits of men. Woman—she who only receives our seed and carries it while it shapes itself in her darkness—how can she claim then to be a creator? The fields we tread shall be ours as are the shoes that also are beneath our feet—no longer a holy trust, no longer *Her* holy flesh, the Breast of the Mother whose milk is our bread."

Pendaran Dyved said yet more slowly: "Lord, I cannot understand. My mind is like a dish out of which all these wonders pour as fast as I put them into it."

"Then go to your bed and meditate upon them."

But by the time Pendaran Dyved got to bed he had found a lid for that dish. One that fitted snugly, and shut out all wonders.

"So we shall fly higher than birds and swim deeper than fish? Even High Druids can reach their dotage, it seems. Old men dream, and sometimes hate women, whom they can no longer enjoy . . . But Pwyll's men still love him, so he will come down safe from the Mound and marry, and most likely beget sons. The troubles that plague the land will pass too—never could the Gods forsake a man like Pwyll."

Such thoughts comforted him, and he slept. But the old High Druid sat and smiled, he who could read, even from afar, the minds of all who once had yielded their wills to his will.

"So I dream in my dotage? Yet by our arts we spent old men have brought all these woes upon Dyved, to save her from a mad boy's folly. You will make a good King, lad, well guided—as you shall be! But the stuff

of a High Druid is not in you. And tomorrow you shall be disappointed, for the people do not love rulers who cannot ease their sufferings. Not for long . . . Most of Pwyll's men still love him, but not all. And I myself shall mount the Mound tonight, too see that all goes well . . ."

A while he brooded there, his face yet more awful than the faces of his carven Gods. Awful as the face of Fate's ageless, all-mastering self.

"You would not be ruled, Pwyll. If one said, 'This is right,' and you thought it wrong, you would not believe him, even if he were the High Druid himself. And in this new world of which a God whispers to me in the night, there will be room for those who think for themselves. Even our wonder workers must be children, save when handling those materials we give them to work wonders with. To keep order always has been hard, but it will be ten thousand times harder when men's hands are filled with marvels. They will be like children, playing with earth-rending toys. We rulers will talk much of freedom, but in the name of freedom, we must destroy freedom. Questions can be more dangerous than swords."

Chapter II

PWYLL MOUNTS THE DREADFUL MOUND

IN THE fiery light of sunset Pwyll left his palace. Ninety-nine men followed him, his chosen war band, the King's True Companions, whom he trusted as a man trusts the fingers that grow on his own hands. Not one of them but was young and mighty, a bull of battle and a woe to Dyved's enemies, and not one of them but wished he was going somewhere else.

Black as night it loomed above them, that huge and awful Mound: the terror of their childhoods, the ancient, fabled home of fear. Monstrous it seemed, too vast to be the work of human hands, yet the long dead had piled it above the bones of Dyved's first King, of him whose name and race no man now knew; and the gates of whatever world had opened to receive him never had quite closed again. Tribe after tribe had held Dyved since, and all had learned to shun this place. Only when disaster tore the land might mortal feet be set upon its slopes; then a living King must make that dread climb, his men about him.

Will we bring Pwyll's corpse down tomorrow? That

was the question that burned the heart in every man's breast, beat upon his brain like a hammer. Always the bloody carcass of each King who died upon the Mound had been borne down by his own True Companions, by them who should have died for him, yet had been alone with when he died. Comforting mothers told boy-children that when the King was death-doomed deep sleep fell upon him and all his comrades, who woke to find him butchered. But men knew better, and Pwyll's men were afraid, afraid. Could the Powers that haunted these heights make them go mad and slaughter him they loved above all men? Like the beaks of dark birds sick dread clutched each man's heart: *Will I be the one? Tomorrow and forever must that worst of all guilts and shames be on me? Woe to my hand that it has slain my Lord!*

Yet a few—a very few—thought: *Better perhaps for all of us—better for all Dyved—if he dies tonight.*

Only Pwyll was happy, because at last he was doing something, he who for long had not known what to do. True, he was doing what the old man wanted, what that sly druid had goaded him into doing, yet action is action, and only the Gods can tell how it will turn out.

There was nothing in it; there could not be. Yet whenever he passed a band of playing children old enough to have been born before he had gone down into Annwn at least one of them would smile up at him with his own eyes. Always young mothers had stopped him, proud and dimpling, to show him his own likeness in the faces of their first-born babes. But now few did, and their eyes looked greedy and sly, so that his lip curled even while he made them the coveted gift. Had that begun only during this last black year, or had he been too happy in his gay pride to notice it during those earlier, good seasons? Sometimes he thought one thing, sometimes the other; such thoughts could grind

out a man's brains and twist off his screeching head to send it spinning on the awful cold of the upper winds forever.

Kings must be perfect; the King who lost arm or leg lost his kingship. But any man who lost that power! But *he* had not lost it; he could not have! He enjoyed women as much as ever, they enjoyed him as much as ever. Perhaps the old druid himself had sent him those black fancies; certainly he had read and played on them, as on a harp. *But I will show him! Be on my side, Powers that haunt this place. Help me!*

The path twisted; it wound round and round the Gorsedd Arberth, like a snake. There was a chill, an emptiness here, against which a hundred men could not warm each other. Or was it emptiness? Their feet, scuffing pebbles, seemed to scratch at a silence that nothing could break. Their voices tore at it vainly, and soon were silenced.

How had *he* died, that first King of Dyved? Somewhere beneath their feet his bones still lay. Long ago the passage that led to his last bedchamber had been filled up, sealed, lost forever. But Otherworld folk still used it; man-shaped or monstrous, they passed through solid walls to bring blessing or woe upon Dyved.

Their world was not Annwn; Pwyll knew that much; Arawn could not help him here. Upon this Mound the King of Dyved must face them alone, save for his own people, who in this place alone he could not trust. For the first time Pwyll thought, with sudden, deep loneliness: *Can one of these with me be a traitor? One of these friends of my boyhood? One, even, of my foster-brothers, of them I slept with and fought and played with, when we were little?*

He could not bear to think of that. He turned his thoughts to a lesser hurt: Arawn's silence through all

this long, evil year. Well, doubtless the King of Annwn would have helped if he could. *I only hope*, Pwyll thought grimly, *that he is not preparing a place for me in his court.* It would be a good place, the honored place of a brother, but Pwyll's body was still young and strong and pleasant to live in; he wanted to stay in it a while longer. Also he did not want his enemies to triumph over him.

They came at last to the top of the Mound. Many stones crowned it, rough-hewn seats set about a huge central stone. The high back of this overshadowed its hard seat, made it black in that red light. On this grim throne Pwyll took his place, none too comfortably; on the lower stones his men sat, ringing him in. He looked up at the vast, crimson-splashed heavens, where Powers beyond man's imagining still seemed to be doing battle in the wounded, bleeding sky. He looked down upon the darkening earth below, upon those black shadows that now seemed to be creeping quietly uphill after him, and he smiled.

"All my life I have lived within the shadow of this Mound, yet never before have I mounted it. Well, the view is good."

One of his men grinned back at him. "When I was little I tried to climb it, Lord, but before I got more than two steps up it my old granddad caught me and gave me a good belting. For a whole week I wished, whenever I sat down, that I had been born into the Old Tribes, who never whack their young ones."

All laughed, and Pwyll grinned back. "I got off easier. It was my nurse who caught me, a woman of the Old Tribes, and she said, 'Nobody of your blood ever got down from there in the same body he went up in. Not unless he saw a Wonder.'"

Most looked puzzled, but one man chuckled. "That should have sent you right back up again as soon as

her back was turned. You have ever been one for running after wonders, Lord."

"She knew that. She said also, 'Only the King may see that Wonder, and you are not yet King. So you would lose your body for nothing.' That made me a good boy."

Again all laughed, but their laughter died quickly. Uneasily they looked at the shadows already lying black around them, beneath the rugged rocks; at those others rising as blackly from below. A cold wind blew about them; they shivered. But Pwyll thought suddenly: *The Wonder—what is the Wonder? Will I see it, the glory that the lucky King sees?*

The Goddess Herself in all Her beauty? No—She was supposed to wait for the Kings below, in the White Mare. The White Mare—she was a good mare, he would have liked a good gallop on her, but never would he lie with her, give her his seed. His eyelids were heavy; his eyes were closing. He had not known that he was so tired.

The eyelids of the others were sinking too. Some thought surprised: *It must be the wine we drank before we left the palace.* The most honest thought: *The wine we drank to keep our courage up.*

But those very few thought: *Is this how it happens? While the others sleep we can do it, we can rise up and kill him.* But then their lids fell and they too slept. The King and all his Companions slept, the true and the untrue.



A sound roused Pwyll. A thin sweet sound clear as pure water, fresh and clean as the water of mountain springs. Yet it was golden too, golden with the tender gold of young mornings, far finer and more precious than the hard cold gold of earth.

Pwyll's eyes opened and he saw light. Not the last

red of the setting sun—that was gone now, swallowed in a grave of gentle twilight. But a clean golden light, tender as the songs of birds.

There were birds—they were flying in and out of that light as it drifted below him, on that twisting path that he and his men had followed. Their wings sparkled in it, and they were singing—that thin sweet sound had been the far-off sweetness of their singing. They were nearer now. But they could not be there at all. This was a black cold autumn, and no birds were left to sing in rain-soaked, frost-bitten Dyved.

Pwyll rubbed his eyes, but the birds were still there. They and the light too. What was that light? A fallen star? No, for it moved, and with a slow, unhurried grace that a man could think proud.

It was a horse and rider! The horse's white, flying mane shone like moonbeams, and the rider's flying golden hair shone like the sun.

The rider was a woman.

Pwyll sprang up. He ran as he had never run before, his eyes straining as if they would fly like her birds, cross the space between them and behold the wonder of her face. The Wonder—*she* was the Wonder, and she had come.

The turn that led to the hilltop was just ahead. He must reach it before she did! He held his breath, ran as if he would burst his lungs.

He reached the turn first. Tall he stood there, his breast heaving, yet fine to look at, a true King. She was very near; through the dawn-gold, thin stuff of her dress and veil he could see her flesh glowing, warm and softly rosy. She must see him now—her eyes must find him and her face must change and light with that smile that would be for him only. Not with surrender, but with a self-giving gracious and lovely as the sun's own. For she was his; she had been sent to him!

She did not seem to see him. She rode on, round the Mound. Past the turn and past him, as though he was not there.

Wordless as a beast's, Pwyll's cry flew after her, in shock and agony that tore his throat. But her head did not turn. She rode on as if she had not heard.

Rage and disappointment burned Pwyll like fire. His jaw set. "So you want to play a little first, my pretty? Well, you shall have your fun—and then I will have mine!"

Still she did not seem to hear him. Unhurried, her horse ambled on.

Lightly, swiftly, Pwyll ran after her, smiling now. It would not take long. He could outrun any man in Dyved, he could outrun many horses, and though he doubted if he could outrun this one, she soon would have to make it show its speed, or there would be no game at all. For the first time it struck him as strange—that slow, even gait in a mare that shimmered like morning, and looked as fleet as the wind.

Soon something else struck his as even stranger: he was not gaining!

He could not believe it at first, but presently he had to. He set his teeth then. As a spear is thrown he threw himself—high as the birds that twittered round her head his great body flew through the air! That mighty lunge should have brought him abreast of her, or even ahead of her—to a place where he could easily have pulled her down from her horse.

He landed on his feet, but he only stood panting, reeling, shaking his head in wonder. She was as far ahead of him as ever. Her horse jogged along as slowly as ever. Her birds twittered undisturbed, flying in and out of the light that clothed her.

No man has ever run faster than Pwyll ran. Perhaps

no man has ever run as fast. But he got no nearer to her. Her horse ambled on, unreachable as a star.



The High Druid came to the top of the Gorsedd Arberth. Slowly he came, leaning heavily upon the arms of two of his youngest, strongest druids. But he himself bore his golden sickle.

He looked down at Pwyll and his men as they lay sleeping, the King and his True Companions, the night around them gentle as the bond of their sleep. He frowned. "The God has sent the slumber He promised, but it should not have bound His chosen . . . You two must strike."

The young druids shrank back, their faces blanched. His eyes flashed and they cried, "We will, we will!" but through chattering teeth. His lip curled. "You fear to kill your King? Well, I am old, but the God will give my arm strength." With raised sickle he advanced upon the sleeping Pwyll.

Then through that windless night a great wind rushed. It struck him to his knees, the golden sickle fell. His eyes blazed with rage and fear, staring at the unseen.

"Who are You to stand between this man and Doom? *Who?*" The voice choked in his throat, and his men ran to help him. He gasped a while, then spoke again, but not to them. "You—still have power. More power than I—thought. You bind all these men with dreams, but *his* dream is a test, and if he fails You can shield him no longer. And he must fail. His work is done. He must go back to Annwn. And when he fails I will be here, waiting . . ."

He crouched there shaking, but with his jaw set. At his sign the youngest druid ran to fetch the fallen sickle and laid it across his knees.



Pwyll could run no more. His tongue was hanging out like a dog's; he was panting like a dog. He stopped because he had to stop. He thought sickly: *I can do no more.* And that was the first time that Pwyll, Prince of Dyved, ever had acknowledged defeat.

All the other women who had ever run away from him had wanted to be caught, but if this one did she was going the wrong way about it. Or was he? He sat down and let his tired body be still. He tried to think.

For indeed I have not been thinking. I have not been acting like a man. A man thinks. I have only been chasing her as a dog chases a deer, or any beast his food. I have been wrong; the Gods' gifts are not to be snatched. Neither will they drop like ripe fruit into a man's lap. They must be won. How can I win her? How?

He sat as a man sits at the bottom of a pit, and the moon shone high above him, so high that her rays could not reach down into his darkness. And then he heard the singing of her birds again, he saw the light through which they flew—he saw *her*. She rode by him, and as a tired, winded god rises and follows his master so he rose and plodded after her. She was no farther from him than before, but never could he get any nearer to her.

Only magic can win you, Lady, and I have none. Yet if I had my good Kein Galed here we would give you and that white witch-mare of yours a good run—a good run . . .

He stopped, still panting. He threw back his head and whistled, that special whistle that he had always kept for that one horse. He did not know why he did it; the great Kein Galed was sleeping peacefully, full of oats, in his stable below. Far below, in that nearby, yet far-off world of men. Yet like a wish made flesh the answer came: an eager whinnying, the ring of quick

light hoofs upon the stones, and there was Kein Galed himself saddled and bridled, galloping uphill, his lovely, fiery dark eyes searching for his Lord.

Pwyll met him, hugged him, in incredulous joy and love. "Welcome to you, my beauty, my darling, my Kein Galed, swiftest of the steeds of men!"

Kein Galed whinnied again, proudly, and nuzzled him. Pwyll stroked his mane, that mane that he had always said was glossier, more shining than any woman's hair. It could not be more shining than hers; it would not be as soft . . . For a breath's space he felt dizzy, thinking what that hair must be like, that hair and all the rest of her. He could not rest, he could know no peace, sleeping or waking, until he had her.

"But we are together now, my Kein Galed." His heart sang with hope. "The Gods Themselves must have sent you to my help." Light-swift, all his weariness forgotten, he swung into the saddle.

And then it came—the steady, light clip-clop, clip-clop of the mare's hoofs returning! Pwyll waited, holding his breath. He must be careful now. Man's wits and beast's strength together . . .

They were coming! The mare's mane shone silver in the moonlight, the woman's golden, under her living crown of birds.

"Now!" Pwyll drove his knees into the stallion's sides. "Now!"

As a wolf springs, so they sprang, man and horse together. No deer could have escaped that spring, the wind itself could not have.

And yet it missed.

When Pwyll's dazed eyes found them, the white mare and her rider were some thirty paces ahead of them, ambling along as leisurely as ever!

Madness took Pwyll then. With a great shout of rage he drove his knees into the stallion's ribs again, urged

him brutally, as he never before had urged him. He must have her—she was the answer the Gods had sent him, the Queen who would bear him sons, the blessing bringer who would make fruitful again both Dyved's fields and his own loins. Above and beyond all else, she was his darling and his heart's desire.

Until the sun was high Kein Galed ran; until the shadows that had shrunk with morning began to reach out long black arms again. Fast as the wind he ran; faster than the hawk plummets when he swoops down upon the dove. And still the white mare's lead neither lengthened nor shortened. Always she and her rider were jogging along just as far ahead of them as before.

On and on Kein Galed ran, though his breath came in great, sobbing gasps, though his eyes were glazed and bloodshot. Sweat stood on his heaving sides, yet still he ran. Blacker and longer grew those shadow arms that daily reach across the world.

Pity pierced Pwyll at last; broke into that sealed chamber of himself where for so long there had been room for but one sight, one sound, one purpose. He stopped and dismounted.

"The horse can do no more," he said. He took the tired head between his hand and fondled it. "There is Illusion in this indeed. Never for any woman's sake would I have driven you to your death, my Kein Galed, who was foaled in my lap."

Weakly the stallion whinnied and nuzzled again at the gentling hands. Pwyll led him downhill then; back to his own stable in Arberth of the Kings. With his own hands he rubbed down the worn-out chestnut, and gave him water to drink, and food that he could not eat.

Then Pwyll braced himself and went back alone into his palace, that he had left so proudly with so many men around him, to challenge the Gods upon the Gorsedd Arberth. But when he went inside all ninety-nine of

his True Companions were already sitting there, drinking around the hearth, and they and all men greeted him as if nothing had happened. He ate and drank with them, but his heart was heavy. Would the horse ever be as good again? Would he even live? Whatever game she was playing, that wonder woman had cost him too dear. She had made him ill-use a friend.

Yet when he went to bed he could only toss and turn, wondering where he could find another steed half so swift to follow her on tomorrow. All night long that question burned him.

Before dawn he was up, having all his other horses and all the horses within reach of Arberth led before him. All were good, and some were very good, but none was half the equal of Kein Galed. All Pwyll could think of to do was to have the best of them stationed along various points along that snakelike, twisting path. So he could keep changing mounts, always ride a fresh horse.

But at the last moment, just as he had mounted to ride out, there came a great wild neighing and stamping from within the stable, and Kein Galed himself broke from his grooms and ran forth. Straight to his Lord he ran; he laid his head upon Pwyll's knee and whinnied piteously. He could not have said more plainly: "Lord, you are mine, as I am yours, and I cannot bear to see you ride upon any other horse's back."

Pwyll looked at him and marveled, for he seemed sound and fresh again. He remembered how his own wounds had healed in Annwn, yet he said cautiously: "Well, then, for a little while, Kein Galed. Until we come to where the next mount waits. You I will not risk again."

Upon Kein Galed's back he rode forth, feeling humble as he never had before; he who had stood proudly before Arawn, King of the Underworld. Humbled by

the love of this creature whom he had used only as a means to his end; whose misery he had forgotten in the flame of his desire.

Would she come again? *No matter; whatever happens, I have you, my great Kein Galed, fleetest of steeds and noblest.*

Then, upon the hillside, even before he saw the light about her, he heard the singing of her birds. Knew how great had been his fear that she might indeed have vanished with the night, that he might never see her again.

But she was there—there in her shining splendor, with her singing crown, and Pwyll's heart leapt within him, and beneath him Kein Galed's mighty muscles flexed. The great steed did not mean to let himself be outdone this time, and Pwyll did not try to check him. Round and round the Mound they raced, but all went as it had the day before. Never could they get any nearer to that strange, gleaming, unhurrying horse and rider.

Pwyll thought: *There has been enough of this. I must rein Kein Galed in. And then: Surely I can let him run a little longer. To where the first of my other mounts waits. Already we must have passed that place many times.*

But they ran on and on, and never saw hide nor hair of any of the other horses. Pwyll told himself: *We must be going so fast that we pass them before I can see them. I must be more careful. Soon—soon, surely—I will see one of them.*

But then he saw a place ahead where it seemed that they must be able to cut through the bushes and head off the woman. *Strange that I never noticed this spot before, but no matter. Now we will catch her—now!* His heart beat high, he urged Kein Galed on. Nobly the stallion charged through bushes whose thorns cut through his glossy hide to tear the flesh beneath.

But when they came out onto the road again there she was, ambling just as far ahead of them as always.

Pwyll's heart sank then, and rage burned him like flame. He drove his spurs into Kein Galed's sides, that never before had felt them; the spurs that he had put on that morning, expecting to ride other horses.

But when the great horse flinched and cried out, when he looked down and saw the blood on the heaving flanks, Pwyll's own heart and mind came back to him. He groaned and dismounted; stroked the stallion's quivering neck.

"Forgive me, Kein Galed! I did not mean it—I forgot that I was riding you!"

"Would another horse have liked it better?" Coldly a soundless voice asked him that. Pwyll started, then forgot all else in the knowledge that smote him like a blow. *You are through, Kein Galed. I must turn back.*

Yet the other horses must be near! They could not be anywhere else. Soon he must find one of them—soon, soon!

He mounted again. "Just a little farther, Kein Galed, my beauty—then you can rest."

But that snake road seemed suddenly to have sprouted new coils, new twists and turns; surely there had not been half this many of them before! Surely all these bewildering, clawing bushes had not been here before. He was like a fly tangled in a spider's web; a web studded with stabbing spikes.

"Just a little longer, Kein Galed, my darling—just a little longer. Watch out for that bush! We will find the other horses any minute now . . ."

Then, with a sudden cold, terrible absoluteness, he knew that he was not going to find them. Accepted that fact at last.

On his own legs he could feel Kein Galed's sweat. Feel through them how hard the great heart beat; how

hard the breath was whistling through the great chest . . . And Pwyll fought himself as he never had fought the Beast who bore the Severed Heads, or the Bird who guarded the Gate, as he had not fought even the awful longing to give Havgan the second blow—the blow of mercy. All the demons of custom and upbringing came swarming, like winged wasps, to reinforce the burning flame of his desire; in his ears they cried the words that men would have used. *"Only a horse; only a horse! What is that against your kingship, your life, your woman?"*

Then again Pwyll saw her shiningness, that for a little while the bushes had hidden. Peace came to him, strangely and suddenly. He stopped; his hands loosened on the reins. As his body stiffened to dismount he took one last, longing look at her.

It came to him then—the thought that would have made any other man he knew laugh at him. Men of the New Tribes could be kind to women, but they asked no favors of them; the suppliant must always be the woman. And to abase himself before her who all this time had not given him one look . . .

He did it. He called clearly, loudly: "Lady, for the sake of him you love best, stop! Stop and wait for me!"

She did stop. Her mare stopped—that accursed ambling that had seemed as if it would never end ended. Across the space between them came her voice, clear and pure as the voices of her birds: "Gladly, Lord, since you have the courtesy to ask it of me."

Chapter III

WHAT CAME FROM THE MOUND

HOW HE reached her Pwyll never remembered. But when Kein Galed drew abreast of her mare and she saw him, her voice leapt at Pwyll like a flame. "Far better for your horse would it have been, man of Dyved, had you had the grace to ask me to stop sooner."

The new-born joy died in Pwyll's face.

"Lady. I did not spare my own strength either."

"That was yours to spend as you chose. You have also spent the strength of him who could not choose—who could but obey you. Well, I will do what I can."

Her birds flew from her, they left her crown of light, and circled, still singing, round Kein Galed's head. His breathing ceased to whistle, his sides grew smooth again, unmarked by sweat or blood. Pwyll watched in joyous amaze.

The birds flew back to her. One perched upon her head, the other two upon her shoulders. All four looked at Pwyll, and he had a sudden queer feeling that all four were one, and that he knew that One. That cold still voice that he had heard a while ago, had that been hers,

even though now her speech crackled like fire? Then, remembering Kein Galed's bloodied flanks, he fought shame, as he had long ago when his mother or his nurse had caught him doing something that he knew was wrong. For even the greatest warriors are born of women, and women are the first judges and the first lawgivers that they know. Which may be why some men who respect nothing else respect women, and why others strive forever to make them small.

Through her veil that was like a mask of light she studied him. "I have lived so long in a world where no blow is ever struck that I have forgotten many of the ways of men . . . You have much to learn, but you are neither mannerless lout nor horse killer, so I need not leave you to your druids, as for a while I feared I must."

Pwyll understood few of her words, but "horse killer" stung him. He remembered that he was Lord in Dyved and she, whoever she might be, a stranger in his dominions, no judge set over him. To remind her (or perhaps himself) of that, he began to ask her such questions as the Lord of Dyved had the right to ask of such strangers.

"Lady, who are you, and where do you come from?"

Her hooded eyes fixed his, deeper and more beautiful than the eyes of mortal women. "I am Rhiannon of the Birds, Rhiannon of the Steeds, and I have come from my world to yours."

"But—those are the names and titles of the Goddess, of Her who reigned in Dyved of old." Pwyll's voice shook; awe chilled him.

"Too much of Her is in me for me to be run down by brute strength, whether it runs on four legs or two. I can give, but I cannot be forced."

She could give—again Pwyll's heart leapt within him—and she had come here, and stopped at his call. Was she enough like the daughters of men to become the

wife of a man? He said, feeling his way, "Lady, what business brings you here?"

"My own business, and I am glad of this meeting, Lord of Dyved."

A two-faced speech, Pwyll thought somewhat grimly. She put him in his place, yet at the same time showed her friendliness. He fell back on the simple dignity of a host.

"Welcome to you then, Lady. Whatever business brings you into Dyved is a good business."

She smiled then; she threw back her veil. For the first time he saw her face, and it was as if for the first time he saw dawn, and he wished that he need look upon nothing else forever.

"It is a wonder you are indeed, Lady. The wonder of this world and of all others. The face of every young girl and of every ripe woman I have ever seen has been pale and plain beside your face."

"Even the face of Arawn's Lady? She you lay with when you rode down into Annwn, the Abyss?" Her smile mocked him now.

"I lay beside that Queen; I never lay with her!" Pwyll spoke indignantly. "Lady, had she been you—"

"Then by now my beauty too would have been forgotten. There was Another whom you met in a garden. She was once the fairest of all. Until the next night, when you saw Arawn's Queen." Those deep, beautiful eyes still fixed his.

Inside Pwyll's head far-off bells rang faintly. Great weariness—apples and flowers and a quiet place. A woman crowned with light and living birds—but no! That woman was here before him now, and he wanted no other, forever. He tried to tell her so, but still she smiled.

"You showed great courtesy to Arawn. Courage you

have, and honor, as men know it. So much I knew of you. But your ways with beasts and women—with beings you hold lesser than you are—these I had to learn for myself."

Pwyll's heart stood still. "Why, Lady? Why?"

"Because you are the business that brings me to Dyved."

Pwyll cried joyfully: "Those are the happiest words that ever I heard in this world! But are you truly the Goddess, Lady? Or only one who has Her name and some of Her powers, and so can take a mortal husband? I want you always—not only for one hour here on the Mound."

"I am Rhiannon, daughter of Heveydd the Ancient. He is a king in the Bright World now, but once he was King in Dyved, and this Mound you call the Gorsedd Arberth was heaped over the bones he used then. I am woman enough to wed."

"Then," Pwyll cried, joyful again, "surely he means to give you with his good will to me who am King in Dyved now!"

"He will not. He seeks to give me to another man against my will."

Pwyll stared. "Is that how they do things in this high fine world of yours, Lady? To me it has always seemed that the Old Tribes had one good notion: that a man and a woman should not share a bed unless they also share desire."

"The Old Tribes cling to the Ancient Harmonies. But with every gain comes loss, and every gain is a test. My world, that thinks itself as far above both earth and Annwn as you New Tribes think yourselves above the Old, is forgetting the ancient holy things of Earth the Mother. Yet, since all force is against our law, force may not be put upon me. If, within a year and a day,

you come to the hall of Heveydd the Ancient, our wedding feast will be ready, and Heveydd must give me to you."

"Most joyfully will I keep that tryst!" Pwyll cried. "By the sun and the moon, by the heavens above and the earth beneath us, if I had my choice out of all the ladies of all the world it is you I would choose!"

"Then remember that, and keep tryst before I am given to another man. Now I must go my way; I have no power to stay here longer."

And for all Pwyll's urgings she would not stay, even for the littlest while, but left him there. Although the *Mabinogi* does not say so, she must first have told him how to reach that other hall of Heveydd the Ancient, beyond the grave; for surely no living man could have found that way by himself.

Pwyll went back to his sleeping men and woke them, and in the golden sunrise all went down from the Mound together, back to Arberth of the Kings. And the druids dared say nothing, since Pwyll had come down alive.

That winter was not a bad winter, but as good as a winter can be. In the long hours beside the fire men wondered what Pwyll had seen upon the Mound—some Wonder they knew he must have seen since he had escaped death, but he would not answer their questions, or as little as he could. More men asked him why he did not wed, as he had promised to do when he came down from the Mound. Many had had hopes for their sisters or daughters. But always he answered: "My bride is chosen. I must wait a year and a day—the ancient customary time of betrothal—and then I will go to claim her." So men thought that their new Lady was unlikely to be a woman of Dyved, but that was all they knew.

Strangely, Pwyll himself never wondered why earth-time and this Otherworld's time should be the same, when that of Annwn had been so different. Or if he thought of it, he remembered what he had learned in Annwn: that the time of other worlds is not fixed and inflexible like the time in ours.

Spring came, sweet as a bride. The sun shone, the crops grew. Seas of fragrant blossom covered the fruit trees. In the fields the beasts frolicked, and inside the houses men and women loved. Never had there been so much conception in Dyved.

Harvest time came; the golden crops were gathered. Autumn came, with her fiery mantle; all the leaves of all the trees blazed like flames.

On a frosty bright morning Pwyll called his True Companions together. "Today we go to fetch my bride." And in marveling eagerness they set about making themselves and their steeds and their weapons fine. But Pwyll said: "On this journey we must go unarmed and on foot. Only wear the best you have, and bear lighted torches."

They marveled still more, but they did as he said. Back to the Gorsedd Arberth he led them, and the sun shone cold and clear upon its rocky sides, but as they drew near a black gap opened in that terrible, fabled hillside. It yawned before them like the gaping hungry jaws of night herself.

They shrank back, but Pwyll said, "We must go through darkness to reach light."

He held his torch high and entered those black jaws, and some of them followed him because they loved him, and others because they were ashamed to have men know that they had turned back.

Down a long dark passage they went. It seemed to grow ever narrower and lower, so that at last they went

single file, with bent heads. One whispered to another, "Can this be that long-lost passage by which Dyved's first King was carried to his last bed?"

They came out at last into a great chamber, and in the center of it stood a man in golden armor, in a golden chariot. But the steeds that had drawn that chariot were long dead, their bones shone white in their harness, and their Lord too was dead. His head almost had been won by his enemies; they could see the cracked, hewed neck bones beneath his white skull. But his own folk had saved it and his beard had grown after death; like a great silver coverlet, spun from moonbeams, it reached to his feet.

Pwyll said, "Hail to you, Heveydd the Ancient, first of those who held my place before me."

But that dead shape was silent, and Pwyll's men, looking round, saw that in the stone walls of that chamber there was no door, no opening through which a mouse could have crawled, save only that one by which they had entered. And the air around them was scant; it was heavy and close; it made a man's head swim.

One cried: "Let us get out of here as fast as we can, Lord! While we still can! You will find no bride here but Death."

Another, one of Pwyll's own foster-brothers, said more calmly: "He is right, Lord. If we stay here long we will not have breath enough to get out again, and you will get as bony as he is."

And then they all screamed, for the skeleton was moving in its chariot! And of a sudden all their torches went out, as if blown out by a great wind.

In that black sightlessness they held their breaths and shivered, and listened to the rattling of those ancient bones. Then a fiery light filled the chamber, and they

saw that the skeleton was about to step down from the chariot. It faced toward Pwyll, the eyeless sockets in its skull seemed to hold black flames that glared at him. And what had been its right hand was lifted, and in it gleamed a great sword from which the light came, a sword that blazed like lightning.

All the living men in that death chamber screamed, all but Pwyll. He felt the hair of his head rise, stiff as thorns, but he stood like stone. Slowly then, very slowly, he stretched out his hand; he knew that he must move before the skeleton stepped down from the chariot, or all would be lost.

His fingers closed round those bones that once had been housed by fingers. He spoke again, and keeping his voice steady was harder than walking along the edge of a precipice.

"You have gone to a world where none lifts hand against another, King Heveydd. You have no more need of this sword. Give it to me who am King in Dyved now, and will be your daughter's man."

Gently he took the sword from those skeleton fingers, and though it looked like flame it did not burn him. Gently he set the skeleton down again, in its ancient place. He smoothed out the great silver beard, so that those poor bones were covered again.

Then he straightened and held up the sword. And under its light the mighty stone wall that he faced quivered like a wave of the sea. All its massive hardness left it; grey stone became grey mist, a solid barrier no longer. Pwyll walked into it as before he had walked into the darkness. Once again all his men followed him.



On the Gorsedd Arberth, in the white moonlight, the High Druid's arm fell again. Once again the golden

sickle fell; it passed within an inch of the sleeping Pwyll's head and dropped, still clean of blood, upon the earth.

The old man's body shook again; his face twisted with rage and hate; the young druids shrank before his awful glare.

"She has won again! This test too he has passed. But next time he shall fail—*he shall fail!*"



Wandering in the mist, his men like shadows about him, Pwyll felt the sword hilt crumble in his hand. And was glad, because this must mean that he had reached at least the threshold of the Bright World, where no weapon could enter.

But he missed the ancient weapon's glow which, though dimmed by the mist as it had not been by the darkness, yet had kept him from falling. He had to move very slowly now, to creep as he had seen snails creep on earth. Then he looked up and saw a great rainbow ahead. Almost he had missed its shining gorgeous splendor, so intent had he been upon his feet. He shouted, and his men saw what he saw, and shouted in answer. All together they ran forward, under that rainbow, and out onto a green sunny plain, under a sky of beauty like no other.

A road of pale shells stretched before them, almost white, yet glowing with the very souls or spirits of all colors ever seen beneath the sun. They followed it, knowing that it would lead them where they were meant to go.

Chapter IV

IN THE HALL OF HEVEYDD THE ANCIENT

FAIR INDEED is the Bright World. None can say which is fairer: the blue of the sky that covers it, or the deep blue of the sea that rings it round. None can say which is more delicate and lovely: the white clouds with their great purity or the many-colored clouds, gold-shot glories that gleam with every hue from dawn pink to sunset red. Lovely too is the crystal foam that makes manes for the blue green sea horses, they that play upon the silvery sands forever, born of a stormless sea.

Sweeter than the song of earthly birds is the laughter of those playful waves of the Bright World. Sweeter than any sound man can imagine is the song of the birds in that World. Pwyll's men marveled, and Pwyll marveled too, though he had seen the glories of Annwn, and the soft loveliness of the Moonlit Land.

But this sunlight was as soft as moonlight, gentle as the fragrant, tender air through which it shone. On earth too much light can blind a man, but here, where the splendors of light are far greater, they might glow and

gleam and sparkle, but never dazzle. Nothing here, Pwyll thought, could ever hurt.

Then, above a tree not far ahead, just over a bough on which a small golden bird sang, he saw the dark shadow of a hawk's wings.

Like polished bronze shone that huge fierce beak, purple and gold the pinions of that winged death glistened in the sun. Splendid and terrible it hovered there. Many times on earth Pwyll had laughed with joy to see the sheer splendor of a swooping hawk, but now his heart shrank within him.

With exquisite, heartbreaking purity the golden bird sang on, as though it neither saw that black shadow of death above it, nor heard the rustling of those awful wings. Joy, the glorious, undimmed joy of life still poured in a lovely flood from that little throat.

The hawk struck.

Deep within the flesh of its prey that fierce beak closed; deep within the rosy flesh of a fruit that hung just above the singer's tiny, golden head. Another fruit sprang forth, ripe and luscious, as soon as the first was eaten. Peacefully the hawk settled down, on one branch with the songbird. He ate on, and the smaller bird sang on.

Pwyll thought, humbly and in wonder: *Yet all this she will leave for me.*

Then his heart leapt with a delight that swept away all else. *Tonight she will sleep with me. Tonight!* With quickened step he hurried on along that road of pale shells, that road that must lead to the house of Heveydd the Ancient. Joyously he went, and joyously his men followed him, awed yet full of pride in him, their Lord. In him who was to get a woman to wife from this wondrous place.

And in the gentle splendor of sunset, like, yet glo-

riously unlike, the sunsets of the world we know, they came to a palace beautiful beyond mortal imagining.

Living birds roofed it, as they did Arawn's hall, but these walls were all of crystal. They mirrored the lovely light around them; they mirrored every nearby tree and every green leaf and every delicate, glowing Other-worldly flower. They mirrored the birds that flew among those trees, birds that shone with many colors. They made a marvelous, many-hued, ever-shifting tapestry, never to be matched on earth.

And there, before tall, wide-open doors of pale rose, doors that looked as if they might have been carved out of one giant seashell, Heveydd the Ancient stood waiting, alive.

His smile made them jump, recalling that grinning skull, but though his new bones were probably much the same as his old, now firm, warm flesh covered them. He looked just as any very fine man on earth might look, save for the unearthly, piercing brightness of his deep blue eyes. And around him played the same light that Pwyll had seen about Rhiannon, the light that clothed all in this many-colored land.

"Welcome to you, my son," he said to Pwyll, and embraced him. Side by side they went in through those lovely doors, and Pwyll caught his breath at sight of the gorgeous throng within.

Heveydd said, "All the noblest Lords and Ladies of this world are gathered here for my daughter's wedding feast. To honor her and me, and the man she has chosen."

At his wedding feast a bridegroom was expected to give many gifts. Pwyll said in sudden shame, "Lord, I have no baggage with me."

"No matter. Your world holds no treasures fit to be gifts at a feast like this. And here on his wedding night

the bridegroom sits in the host's seat. Give of my treasures as if they were your own, and give unsparingly. Do not shame your bride and me by being hesitant or cautious."

I hope he will not mind if I take him up on that, thought Pwyll, and thanked him. Then he saw Rhianon, and saw nothing else. Golden-fair she sat in the bride's seat, enthroned like a Goddess or a Queen, and her smile made all his blood beat hotly to one cry: "Soon! Soon!"

He looked too hard at her to see the splendors that struck his men dumb. But his nose caught the delectable smells of hot, steaming foods and the finer, more delicate fragrances that rose round him at every step, as his feet crushed into the piled blossoms that carpeted the hall. Blossoms that rose again in unhurt, smiling beauty as soon as his feet had passed. He reached her, he took his place beside her, and Heveydd sat down beside them. Pwyll's men sat down too, and whatever dish was set before each man, under his eyes it turned into whatever he liked best. They ate so happily that they forgot their awe, and wondered at nothing but the goodness of that food.

Pwyll ate as much as anybody, but what he ate he never knew. He thought only of his bride; his eyes never left her, but hers were troubled. Once he squeezed her hand: "Be glad, my joy."

"When we are safe in bed I will be. Not before."

"Why? If that other man who wants you tried to kill me I could not blame him. But here in this gentle world he can do nothing. Even if he is here. Is he?" With sudden interest Pwyll looked around.

And saw a wonder. For on the far side of Heveydd the Ancient, in the guest place of highest honor, sat a mighty Shape or perhaps Shadow. Storm clouds boiled round him, hid his face; only the great Noble lines of

him showed mistily. Huge he was, beyond the sons of men, and red lightnings darted through the darkness that eddied round him.

"Is that the man?" Pwyll stared. "If so, he looks angry. Very angry. I hope he is too well bred to thunder."

"Hush! Do not mock him." Fear was in her voice. "He is not Gwawl the Bright, who wooed me, but he is Gwawl's dearest friend. He is also the Lord of us all—the Grey Man, the son of Him That Hides in the Wood."

"Death!" So this was the Grey Man of her world. Pwyll looked again at that clouded Shape, and said somewhat doubtfully: "Does he always look like this? Myself, I would far sooner see Arawn coming with all his hounds. Even if we never had sworn any oath together."

"No. His face is beautiful. But tonight he is angry for Gwawl's sake. Gwawl himself will not come to see me wed another, but the Grey Man must, being High King and my father's friend and overlord. Be careful! They are foes to fear."

She was like other women after all, Pwyll thought comfortably. Afraid of fancies, when all peril was past. For he had reached her, and here none could strike him down. He patted her hand. Yet it made him more comfortable to look away from that Shape among the boiling clouds, and when a servant passed with more wine he took some and drank it off quickly, more quickly than he had intended, so good was the flavor. It made him feel very warm and happy, and a little hazy. It must have been strong, much stronger than the wine they had served before. His eyes were closing—they had closed. He could not open them; he could not move at all.

"I cannot warn him; our pact binds me." That was

Rhiannon's voice, clear as crystal, hard as crystal, but somehow very far away. "Yet all the laws of our world will be mocked if I am forced into Gwawl's arms. If you, Mighty One, doom my right man's neck to the blade of a butchering traitor."

"The Law will be kept." Beneath the vast cold might of that voice Pwyll shivered, even in that far place where somehow he was. "No hand will be laid on you, Lady. You will but keep the bargain you have made."

"I made it, not knowing what guile you planned."

"In this world no hand will be laid on Pwyll. The druid's deed will be his own."

Rhiannon laughed bitterly. "That fine lady who is too dainty to kill a fowl, yet has her servants wring its neck and roast it for her table? What worth has her blood-guiltlessness?"

"It is a little thing, daughter, the death of a mortal man." Heveydd's voice soothed her. "Arawn will care well for his friend. And in Gwawl's arms all this folly will soon be forgotten. Your joy will equal his."

"What I feel in Gwawl's arms will bring corruption here where corruption never has come before."

"Here it can never come. Peace, woman." In the deep voice of the Grey Man was such power—passionless, irresistible—as in the avalanche that hurtles down from snowy mountains to crush out all life on the green plain below.

For the space of a few breaths there was silence, such silence as follows the avalanche. Then Rhiannon said quietly: "Perhaps it has already come. Fair indeed is this world we have reached, this world where the sun never burns, where the bee never stings. But the wisdom that won us this lovely home fails us. We who know no pain have forgotten pity. We look with scorn upon those who still struggle in the blood and mud of earth, as we

once did. We have grown proud, and pride breeds corruption."

The bleak fury of the Grey Man's answering voice made Pwyll remember how once, as a little boy, he had run out barefoot upon ice and screamed, thinking that he trod on burning coals.

"So? We are proud. And you are not—you who have set up your will against us all? If you go back to earth you will learn what corruption is, woman. You will learn what pain is. In that gross flesh in which you have trapped yourself a myriad pains, great and small, will torment you ceaselessly. You will spew up your food, you will walk clumsy and misshapen behind your own swollen belly—until the agonies of childbirth rend and tear you. Age will wither your youth and beauty, and at last death will take the tottering, toothless, shameful wreck of you. And all that before a year has passed over these laughing, glad-eyed girls who are your play-mates here!"

"All those ills I know. I have borne them many times before. And I can bear them better than mortal women, I who know them for the passing things of a moment."

"Can you? Pain can seem long and hard to him—or her—who bears it, woman. It can blot out all else."

"That too I remember, Lord."

"Then remember this also—only bits and scraps of the knowledge you have here will be left to you there!"

"That I know. As now I know too, Lord, that those bits and scraps will be as small as you can make them."

"You deserve none, who would break the first law of the Great Going-Forward. Sink back to wallow in that slime from which once you rose!"

"Lord, is the Great Going-Forward a ladder up which we can climb straight to the top? Or is it a winding mountain path whose turns twist and sometimes con-

fuse? Those who have climbed high may turn back to help those below. Gods themselves have done it, and will again: Showers-of-the-Way."

"And you think yourself strong enough to show that way, girl!" Heveydd's voice was rough with anger. "You knew better when you came here, raped by the forefather of that fool who lolls drunken beside you!"

"And coming last, became daughter to you who once called me mother. I erred, but not enough of the Goddess is in me to tell me which time: when I did not come here first, to try to keep this lovely world sweet and clean, without pride, or when I fled from earth that had grown vile. Mothers can sway their sons; I might have lightened the darkness sooner had I stayed."

"Dreams, girl—foolish dreams! You came here when you were fit to come, and now you look back. The wise look forward. But you lust after this mortal clod."

"By his own strength and in pain Pwyll has done great deeds, Father; and if he was not always alone he thought he was. Men of our world cannot know such pain and loneliness. In some ways they are like children beside him, whatever he lacks."

"On earth a dog will fight and die for his master. Does that make its brain equal his?" Pwyll could feel, though he could not see, the curl of the Grey Man's lip.

"Dogs, like all else, will become our equals, Lord. They are only younger than we. You know that as well as I."

"Would you live among dogs? Never hear human speech?"

"Maybe I can help dogs to learn to speak, Lord."

Heveydd snorted. "Folly, and more folly. Mortals are base, and grow ever baser. We who had it in us to rise, have risen."

"That is true." The Grey Man's great deep voice was gentle now, as if reasoning with a child. "The Old

Tribes dimly remember wisdom, but they cling to ways that must pass. Men's future lies with the New Tribes; I have sought to lead them through the minds of the druids, but always fools and men of blood twist my words. I shall speak to men no more."

"You teach without love, Lord. I would kneel down among the weeds, as you will not, and try to pluck them up—give their goodness room to grow. For it is there."

Heveydd laughed harshly. "Many have tried to do that, girl. Once I did."

"I remember. In those days we both loved Dyved, Father."

"And now I am awake, and you still dream like a child. What could you do alone when we could do nothing together?"

"I can do something. I can keep Old Tribes and New from rending each other. Pwyll does have a foolish love of fighting—he might back Caswallon against Bran when Beli dies. But with me beside him his word will be for peace."

"You could not do worse." The Grey Man laughed now, and that laughter was like thunder rolling in the hills. "Under Bran will come such war as the Western World has never seen—and all that blood and woe will be but the beginning. Through age after age men will bleed and tear each other in the darkness."

"That World-night must come; all of us know that, Lord. If Bran's war hastens it a little yet it will not be fought on the isle that holds Dyved. There, in sea-ringed quiet, what is left of Old Tribes and New will grow into one people, without the bitterness that burns between conquerors and conquered. Something will be saved, and something may flower."

"A poor stunted flower." Heveydd snorted.

"Maybe. But I will sow seeds, and though many will be lost, some may grow. Some man or woman may be

kinder because of a kindness I did him or her as a child—or did his father's father or her mother's mother. Poets will make songs of Pwyll and me, and of how we loved each other, and some of the men and women who hear those songs may seek finer things in each other. Many things—little things; it is from these that great things spring at last."

"Folly, girl; more dreams and folly!"

"My dreams and my folly, Father. I will follow them if I can."

"About that Gwawl will yet have a word to say." The Grey Man's voice, low yet vast, seemed to fill all space with immeasurable power, immeasurable cold . . .

"Drink!" Rhiannon was shaking Pwyll's arm and holding a drinking horn to his lips. Such urgency flowed from her that it beat against him like a wave. He opened his eyes and drank, then gasped and choked. This drink, though strong, was neither wine nor sweet. He did not want to finish it, but she made him.

"Drink! Your head must be clear."

"Why?" Pwyll grinned foolishly. "A man's head is not the most important part of him on his wedding night."

"You must get your head clear as fast as you can—and as soon as you can!"

"But why?" Pwyll asked again, and then his head reeled before the wild jumble of half-remembered memories that swarmed hornetlike upon him.

"Did they drug me?"

"No. We have no drugs, who know no pain, but they did give you a drink too strong for a man not of this world. It has dulled your wits."

"But why do that? To keep you virgin one night longer would help them little; and by the God my people swear by, nothing could make me too sleepy tonight to—"

"You have had enough to drink. I will give you no more, and you must take but a sip of what others bring you."

She sounded exactly like a wife, Pwyll thought somewhat hazily: any ordinary mortal wife. Well, soon she really would be his wife. Visions of delight dizzied him, dimmed that queer, wild pack of memories. Nothing could go wrong now. She was here beside him, his lovely bride. And a man could not help but drink at his own wedding feast.

A bard rose and sang. Pwyll thought he never had heard any song so lovely, though what it was all about he had no idea. Another man refilled his drinking horn, and Rhiannon kicked his foot under the table, not at all gently. Pwyll jumped, then grinned at her. "Soon we will be where I can take revenge for that, Lady," and wondered why her face went white.

Then he saw a tall, auburn-haired youth coming toward them. A golden mantle was on the stranger, and a golden light was about him too. *I know him*, Pwyll thought, blinking, trying to remember.

"Hail to you, Lord Heveydd." The voice of the late-come guest was deep and sweet as a bell. As a golden bell. "Hail to you, Lady Rhiannon, fairest of brides, and hail to you, bridegroom who tonight will be happiest of all men."

Pwyll liked him and grinned again. "Welcome to you, friend. Sit down. There is still plenty to eat. And to drink," he added, with a yawn he could not suppress.

"Lord, I have not come as a guest, but as a suppliant. Let me do the business that brings me here."

"Do it then"—Pwyll yawned again—"and then sit down."

Eyes blue as cornflowers fixed his. "Lord, my business is with yourself. I have a boon to ask of you."

Those eyes were very blue; bluer than any flowers;

bluer and deeper than the sea. The boy was young; very young. He was as beautiful as morning. He was like—but even if Havgan the Summer-White had been reborn into this world he would still be a little child. Yet such love welled up in Pwyll as he had never felt for any man before.

"Name your boon, lad. Whatever it is, you shall have it—if I can get it for you."

Rhiannon shrieked as if a knife had pierced her. "Woe to us! What made you give that answer?"

Triumph blazed in the stranger's face, the light about him flamed like the rising sun. "Yet he has given it, Lady, and all these Lords are witnesses."

Through stiff lips Pwyll spoke. "Friend, what is it that you ask of me?"

He knew. He knew who this man must be, and what he would ask for. And the answer he expected came.

"Lord, the lady I love best is to sleep with you to-night. I ask for her, and for this wedding feast."

Like a great tree struck by lightning, all its green leaves shriveled and blasted, life and growth gone from it forever, its dead mightiness stripped and bare, yet still abiding in its age-old place: even so Pwyll sat there, unmoving, unspeaking.

But Rhiannon's face and the light around her blazed like flames. "Sit there mute as long as you will," she cried. "Never has any man made worse use of his wits than you have done tonight."

Pwyll said heavily, "Lady, I did not know who he was. And you did not tell me."

"I could not; I was under bonds. But now you know! He is Gwawl, son of Cludd—Gwawl, to whom they would have given me against my will. And now you yourself must give me to him, or be a dishonored man forever!"

Chapter V

THE BREAKING OF MANY THINGS

PWYLL LOOKED at the ground at his feet: he wished that he need look at nothing else forever. He wished that he need never speak again forever, yet every eye there was like an auger boring into him, like a rope round his neck and pulling at him, tugging at him. Forcing his mouth open, his set teeth apart.

He spoke at last, and by some marvel the words were his own, not those that had been put into his mouth.

"Lady, never can I bring myself to give you up." He added stubbornly, fiercely: "And if I could, what shame could be greater than that? To give up my wife?"

"You must," said Rhiannon. Her face was still a flame, bright and terrible. "You must."

She rose. She looked straight into the gloating eyes of Gwawl. "Lord, I was Pwyll's to give, so now I am yours. But this feast was made for the man of Dyved, and it is not any one man's to give away. Go home now. Come back in a year and a day, and our bridal feast will be waiting for you, and our own bridal bed."

Gwawl's eyes ceased to gloat. Fire flared round him, an angry, green-shot scarlet. "What trick is this, Lady? Would you still put me off for the sake of this witless oaf, him who threw you away as a man throws a bone to a dog?"

"Would you feed your men dogs' leavings, Lord?" Rhiannon's eyes were steady. "This feast is already half eaten."

In shame and in sorrow Pwyll left that hall he had entered so gladly, in such pride and eager joy. He could not even resent those insults, he who could fight magic and knew that he had only one duty left: to get his men safely back to Dyved. He went, and they went with him, and all those beautiful, fine folk smiled to see them go. For now all was right with the Bright World again; he who belonged there had got back his own.

Through the softly shining twilight the men of Dyved plodded, for true night never came to that world; but the blackness that was not before their eyes was in their hearts. They came to that glorious rainbow bridge, but now its gay colors seemed to burn like hot coals, even as Pwyll's heart did. They stumbled through the grey mist, and Pwyll wished that he might be lost in it, mind and body together, and cease to be forever.

When they came at last to that black tomb chamber he hoped that this time the dread Shape in the chariot would rise and strike him down. But this time it was only a bag of bones, empty and frail beneath that silvery blanket of beard. The wall closed behind them, and Pwyll knew one last tearing pang. Now the way to the Bright World was sealed against him forever; yet what good would it have done him to go back? He had lost her forever; more, his folly had killed her love, and doubtless that was good, since now she must sleep with Gwawl the Bright.

Long and dark the passage seemed; the way his life

would be without her. When they came out of it Pwyll stopped and said: "Go back, all of you, to Arberth of the Kings. I will go up the Mound again to that rocky seat upon its top, and await what the Gods send me there. For it is clear now that my luck is bad, and I will bring no more woes upon Dyved."

Many tried to dissuade him, but his mind could not be changed, and at last they obeyed him and left him. Only on their way to the palace a few slipped away in the shadows, unseen by their comrades, those few who had meant to kill him had the magic sleep not come upon them. They thought: *Now it will be a mercy to slay him, for the joy of life is gone from him. And we will make Dyved safe . . .*

The moon shone high and clear above the Gorsedd Arberth. Pwyll sat down again upon that rocky throne where he had sat when first he had seen her. She would never come again; he would never see her again. His lips were dumb, yet in its burning agony his heart cried out against his fate that seemed harder than the rocks. Until at last, unbelievably, the moon shimmering on those rocks soothed him and he slept . . .

She stood before him, shining in all her loveliness. He thought, *I am dreaming*. Then again, *But I could not dream beauty such as this. It is not in me, or in any man. Such beauty must come from without*.

He said, "Have you forgiven me, my Lady, and come to say good-bye as people who love each other should? Or has Death come in your shape? But I have always heard that upon this Mound Death comes in evil guise."

She smiled. "It is easy to be angry with you. But it is also easy to forgive you. And you are my man, my choice out of all the men of all the worlds I know."

"I have been a fool," said Pwyll humbly.

"You have. And we are in sore straits, for my own oath binds me as well as yours. I bargained with my

father and with the Grey Man our Lord. We three sinned, making that bargain, but they sinned doubly, for from the beginning they plotted your death."

"Lady, I do not understand."

"Women out of what you call Faery often take mortal lovers, but seldom do they follow them home. To be free to go with you I bargained with what no woman has a right to bargain: the way between my legs that leads to the child-shaping, holy cup of life within my body. I said, 'If I cannot get Pwyll I will take Gwawl.'"

Pwyll groaned. "And it is as he said—I threw you to him as a man throws a bone to a dog."

"He shall never possess me. Listen well now." They talked long together, and in the end she sighed and said: "Great will be the sacrilege. Perhaps, if I were a whole Goddess, instead of a mere aspect of one, I could think of a better way. But I cannot, and I am not altogether sorry."

Pwyll chuckled. "Neither am I, Lady."

"Then remember well. Now I must be gone, for my flesh sleeps in Heveydd's hall, and there are those who will suspect me if I am too long out of it. They know me . . . But first I must show you a sight that you might not understand if you woke and found it for yourself."

"What is that, Lady?"

Then his sight seemed to widen and he saw as though they lay before him, six men who lay shriveled and blasted some paces behind his rocky throne. Only by their arms and their garments did he know them; fire had seared away their faces. And he cried out in sorrow: "My men—my men. What has befallen them?"

"Most truly these True Companions of yours crept up behind you to slay you in your sleep. But they—or rather, he who sent them—forgot that I still have some power in the world of men."

Pwyll looked at her face, so fair and sweet and un-

ruffled. Then grief drowned wonder and he groaned again. "These men and I played together as children, Lady—we have ridden and hunted together and fought side by side all the days of our manhood—and yet they would have slain me!"

"The Gods play strange games with men. They are not always to blame, for priests like your druids invoke the might of their names to justify great crimes. But when the Grey Man said last night that he would speak to men no more, those words meant little. For he cannot keep away from his playthings long, men give him great sport. That is a common weakness of the high: they depend on and need those they think of as the low."

"You mean—it was not of their own wills that these poor fellows tried to slay me?"

"Not wholly, I think. But I would not grieve for them too much. Now indeed I must be gone. Again I say: remember!"



In the gold of dawn Pwyll opened his eyes for the first time (they had been shut while they beheld her, his beloved), and stretched and rose and found a little bag at his feet. An ordinary leather bag, to look at, but he remembered his dream and seized it as if it held all the treasures of the East. Then, his lips tightening, he went behind his throne and found the dead men there.

With his own hands he bore those poor charred corpses down from the Mound, one by one. He gave them honorable burial, as if they had indeed been True Companions, and folk said, "He is generous." And also, "The Gods still love him. They smote down those who would have been his murderers."

In Dyved the seasons did indeed remain good. Next year's crops grew tall, and were safely harvested, and the young of women and beasts were plentiful.

Then, on another bright frosty morning, Pwyll called his True Companions together: the ninety-three who had ridden with him before, and the six stout new fellows he had chosen. He said: "Men, today we go back through the Gorsedd Arberth to that fair place that most of you have seen before. And we will see who sleeps with my bride tonight—I that am her right man, or he that stole her from me by trickery!"

The True Companions applauded dutifully, but not very enthusiastically. They had no taste for more adventures in strange places into which they must go unarmed.

As they walked toward the Mound one man grumbled to another: "I hoped he would marry a good, solid, buxom earth-girl this time—one who would be proud to get him and whose family would be proud to have him. Myself, I thought he was well out of that business last year."

"Why? You did not like the looks of the bride?" His comrade was one of the six newly chosen True Companions.

"Her looks could not have been better. She was the cream on the milk and the juice in the apple, but she had a tongue as sharp as a knife. Sharper even than my wife's, and that is saying something."

The other's lip curled. "A man must know how to handle women. If she was so pretty, what else mattered? Pwyll had only to knock out a tooth or two and then she would keep her mouth shut and look as beautiful as ever."

"She might have," said the first man dubiously, "but if he did she might have done something else. I have a feeling that it would be better to let that one talk."

"Would you have a man act like a mouse?" His comrade spoke scornfully.

The first man thought that over. "It is better," he said finally, "for a man to act like a mouse than for him really to be a mouse. You cannot tell, with these women of Faery."

It was the second man's turn to think things over, and when he had done so he said nothing at all.

They came to the hillside, and again that black mouth opened before them. Yawned as if to swallow all of them up. They went down that long passage that was as black as night, its blackness seeming to beat against their torches. They came to the chamber that was blacker than night, where the bones that once had held Heveydd the Ancient still sat in his golden chariot, under his silver beard.

Pwyll opened the mouth of the shabby little leather bag he carried (all men wondered where their King had got so poor a thing, and why he had brought it along). He took out a sliver of wood, and in a breath's space it grew to the size of a sturdy torch. Of itself it burst into flame, and Pwyll held it up so that its light fell upon the stone wall. Then all men saw a marvel: for the great grey stones of that wall shook and quivered, swayed and softened and became grey mist.

"The way is open," said Pwyll. "Let us go." And he marched into that mist, and all the ninety-nine followed him, twice ninety-nine eyes popping in their heads.

This time there was no danger of being lost in the mist, no trouble with their footing, Pwyll's magic torch was so good a light. Only when they came to the rainbow bridge, that glowed and glimmered again as gloriously as ever, did that torch itself quiver and wink out like a firefly. In Pwyll's hand it shrank again, almost as swiftly, to a mere sliver of wood.

"You have been a good torch," said Pwyll, "but your work is done." And he threw it away.

All men gasped then at the beauty of that shining world that lay before them, even though most of them had seen it before.

But all was not quite as it had been the year before. That pale road of heaped shells was covered with people and horses, all singing or neighing or laughing, all hurrying joyfully toward the hall of Heveydd the Ancient.

Pwyll's jaw set a little. "They are happier than they were over my wedding feast. Well, let us join them."

The eldest of his foster-brothers said in wonder: "But they will see us, Lord. I suppose that we meant to take those feasters by surprise."

"They will not see us yet a while, brother."

"But we have come out of the mist!" The objector's jaw dropped, so far that it seemed likely that he would have trouble getting it back into place again.

"It is still around us, but now it shines clear and bright, like the air of this world. People see only its shining; when they hear our voices they hear only their own gentle, fragrant winds."

One or two men wanted to ask him how he knew that, but they had not quite got their breaths back, so they followed him as humbly as the rest.

They came within sight of the hall of Heveydd, that hall that glowed like a jewel of shining light. But Pwyll led them away from it, across green lawns, down soft and fragrant, to a place from which they could look down upon that palace: a place that was the sweetest to smell of all.

It was an apple orchard. Apple blossoms still sat among the green leaves of many trees, their pink-and-white color lovely as the tenderest hues of dawn. But in others luscious apples glowed, some red as a woman's lips, others golden as morning.

"We must wait here quietly," said Pwyll, "but you may eat all the apples you want."

Joyfully they leapt to obey him, but he himself ate nothing. Somehow the place made him think of some other place; the dim memory hurt him. Presently he opened his bag again; he took out tattered, many-colored clothes and put them on.

One man saw him and cried out. All of them stopped chewing, even those whose mouths were still full, and all stared at him.

"Lord," said the second eldest of his foster-brothers, "what are you doing in those clothes? They are a beggar's clothes." His voice was as full of disapproval as his mouth had just been full of apple.

"They are indeed," said Pwyll. "In them I am going to the hall of Heveydd the Ancient, and all of you will wait for me here. Until you hear this horn." And suddenly a golden horn hung from his neck, dangling upon a golden chain, and as suddenly both were gone.

The third of his foster-brothers gasped. "Lord, they will know you! Even those clothes cannot change your face. They will know that you are no true beggar."

"In this world," said Pwyll, "there are no beggars. Also Heveydd and his folk have eyes from which no disguise, no shape changing even, could hide me. Yet these clothes will serve their purpose. But if by moonset you do not hear my horn, then get back to the rainbow bridge and into Dyved as fast as you can—if you can. For I shall be past help."

His men watched him go, and then fear came upon them. Such fear as they never would have known if they could have gone with him; such fear as they never would have known if he had left them anywhere in the world they knew. Presently the youngest of them said, his voice troubled: "What harm could come to our Lord here? I thought the people of this place were gentle

and never killed anybody, even though they do not like strangers."

"They can turn him into a beetle or a gnat." The eldest of the foster-brothers spoke harshly.

None answered him. They sat down upon the mosses, among the fallen fruit and flowers; the fragrance rose around them like the breath of the Mother, sleeping quietly in that vast brown bed that is Herself. They sat there seeing beauty, breathing beauty, and never had they been so afraid.



Atop the Gorsedd Arberth the High Druid staggered, his white beard singed as if by flame, his hand shaking, though it still was locked tight about the sickle. The young druids tried to hold him back.

"Be still, Lord! The fire from heaven smote you as it did those others—they that woke from their sleep and drew their swords and would have crept upon the King. At first we thought you dead too. Be still, Lord."

"I will not! I will slay him! This last time he will fail. I will slay him."

Chapter VI

AGAIN IN HEVEYDD'S HALL

IN THROUGH those tall pale doors of rose Pwyll walked, those same doors out of which he had once gone in shame and sorrow. Again he saw that hall, full of light and fair folk and laughter. For a breath's space it was as if all that year of pain and longing had been but an evil dream; as if he had only gone outside a moment to relieve himself, as warriors often had to do at earthly feasts.

But then they saw him, and their laughter ceased. All sound ceased. A boy who was carrying a beaker of wine dropped it, and his jaw dropped also. Through that broken silence their laughter broke forth again. It burst from between the jaws of noble gentlemen, it rang from between the sweet red lips of fine ladies; it made all the many-colored lights about them quiver and shake, as if a fallen rainbow churned there.

All the way down the hall that laughter beat upon Pwyll like whips and cudgels; it crashed against him and about him, and no way he had ever walked had seemed so long. *Once I came here as a bridegroom.*

Now I come ugly and grotesque, a figure of fun. Well, so a proved fool should come.

Rhiannon did not laugh, where she sat in her bridal finery, and her father's lip only curled. He who was bridegroom now grinned broadly, he who in scarlet and gold outshone the sun.

One place was empty; that place where last year storm clouds had boiled. Where Pwyll, going forth an outcast, had seen over his shoulder that huge and beautiful man whose smile had made him think of a cat that has licked cream. That mighty Presence was not there now, and Pwyll was glad. Least of all because of that remembered smile.

The laughter was dying down. One lady whispered uneasily to another who sat beside her: "He must be dead. Alive he never could have found his way back here. But why is he not feasting with his fathers, in Arawn's hall?"

"Because he cannot forget what happened here. Because he died in woe and longing these tattered rags are on his ghost. Yet dead or alive he should not have been able to find his way back. Among us he has no place." The second lady frowned.

"Could he and Arawn be plotting?" The light around the first lady quivered, almost went out in darkness.

"No, sister. On earth Arawn could help him. There his strength is greater than ours, being grosser, but here he has no power."

Pwyll came before the bride and bridegroom, and Gwawl grinned yet more broadly. "Well, scarecrow, this time you come fittingly attired. Have you come to beg pardon for your past presumption and to wish us joy?"

"That you have without me, Lord. I have come to beg a boon in my turn. Once I granted yours." Pwyll's eyes and voice were steady.

"So you did, fool." Laughing, Gwawl lolled in his seat. "Well, make your alms reasonable, and you shall have them. A man should be generous on his wedding night."

A great chuckle went up from many. Yet that chuckling died as the tall, gaunt figure in its tatters moved closer to the splendid bridegroom. One man whispered to another: "He was a great warrior. He must have taken many with him in his death."

Pwyll laid his shabby little bag at Gwawl's feet.

"Hungry and thirsty I left this hall, Lord. Hungry and thirsty I have been ever since. On earth I found no comfort; when foes took my head and ravens plucked my bones I thought: 'Now at last I shall have peace.' But even the mead of Annwn cannot slake my thirst, even the dainties of Arawn's table cannot fill me. Some scrap I must have from your plenty—one crust from this table where I won all and lost all. Some morsel to carry back to the Abyss. Without it I cannot rest." He leaned forward, and the light fell upon his strong brown neck, upon the line of darker brown that circled it, like dried blood. One woman shrieked.

"Enough food to fill this little bag, Lord. That is all I ask." Pwyll's voice came clear in the silence that followed that shriek. "Then I will go back whence I came and trouble you no more."

Gwawl said: "Men, fill that bag."

They ran to get food, such haste on them as if they felt the hot breath of foes on their necks. They brought enough food to fill a dozen bags, they put some of it in, then more of it in, and then all of it in. But the bag looked no fuller.

"Get more," said Gwawl.

They did. They brought all the food in the kitchens, all the food from the storehouses, they finally even

stripped every bite from the guests' plates and put that in too. Yet still the bag looked no whit fuller than before.

There was deep silence then. Everybody looked uncomfortable. The guests looked down at their empty plates and looked especially uncomfortable. Gwawl still grinned, but his grin had grown stiff.

"Man," he said to Pwyll, "will that bag of yours ever be full?"

Pwyll said: "Not if you put all the food in the world into it, Lord. Every bite in your world, and every bite in mine. Not until the true Lord of wide lands and great possessions, of every kind of noble possession that there is"—here he looked very straight into Gwawl's eyes—"shall put both his feet upon what is inside it and say: 'Bag, enough has been put into you.'"

Then the silence became yet deeper; deep and cold as that at the bottom of some winter-bound, icy chasm. Everybody looked at everybody else, and saw only the mirror of his own bewilderment; his own nameless fear. But then at last Rhiannon did laugh. She looked at Gwawl, and for the first time she spoke.

"Rise up, noble Lord of mine. Easy should that deed be for you."

Heveydd her father said quickly: "Do not do it, son-in-law. There is art in this."

Gwawl sat and looked at Rhiannon, and his eyes narrowed. "That could be so, Lady. Was it truly by mischance—a most sad mischance indeed, wife—that when our Lord the Grey Man was bidden to this feast the wrong night was named? So that he guests elsewhere, and cannot be here before tomorrow night?"

"What could he do if he were here?" Rhiannon asked smoothly. "This man only asks you to keep the promise you have made. As he once kept the promise he had made you."

"There is some trick in this, woman." Gwawl's eyes grew yet more narrow.

"How can there be, husband? Unless indeed, you who are Lord of wide lands and great possessions are not true Lord of every noble possession that you hold?"

Fire flashed and leapt about Gwawl. "You are mine, woman! By my wits I won you from this oaf!"

"Some things must be given, not won, as at dice. If you are my true Lord, you have nothing to fear. Rise up quickly, dear husband, and end this. We are all shamed. Never before have guests gone empty from my father's table."

Heveydd's face whitened, where he sat in his age-old majesty. He said: "Maybe we have all grown careless, forgetful of the laws of the Mother, here so far from the darkness of Her womb. Mine be the shame. I say again: son-in-law, do not put your feet in that bag!"

Gwawl looked at the guests, and across their empty plates they looked back at him, without fondness. The man who has let himself be made a fool of has few friends in any world. Also to refuse what was asked of him would be to admit before all (and most of all, to himself) that Rhiannon was not rightly his.

Gwawl sprang up. "Kneel and hold that cursed bag of yours open for me, mortal—as the base slave you are!" He leapt. He hoped to break by accident the laws of his world and to stamp upon Pwyll's hand; at least he would stamp on the food. To stamp on anything would be good.

His feet landed in the bag. Pwyll sprang up and back.

The bag grew. It shot upward, it spread sideways. Gwawl was like a man round whom a black pit is rising, a man whom a great snake is swallowing. He screamed, and so did all the women but Rhiannon. His men leapt to help him, but already the bag was above

his middle. Even as they reached him its black mouth closed over his head and engulfed him.

They tore at the bag with their hands, they snatched knives from the table and slashed at it. But they might as well have tried to cut through solid rock with those knives, or through the untouchable, all-touching softness of air.

The golden horn appeared, dangling from Pwyll's neck. He seized it, raised it to his lips, but even before it reached them its wild sweet notes blew through the hall, rising above the screaming of women, the shouting of men.

Like ants pouring from a hive, Pwyll's men poured in though those doors of rose, crying, "Pwyll! Dyved!" They seized Gwawl's men, and bound them; they trussed them up like so many bundles. The folk of the Bright World were helpless, they did not know what to do, they who had never borne arms, never even clenched their fists. Only the women did anything, and they only screamed louder than ever.

When all was done Heveydd the Ancient rose up in his cold majesty, his face like carven stone. "You have won this time, man from earth. None here can open that bag, save only my daughter, who must have given it to you. And well I know that she will not. But soon he comes who can open all things, undo all things. Flee while you can—and flee swiftly. But first set an hour and a time for Rhiannon to follow you. She has made her choice."

Pwyll's jaw set. He looked straight into the eyes of that first Lord of Dyved. "By the God my people swear by—they that once were your people too—I will not go from here until my wife goes with me. No more tricks shall part us."

Tall Heveydd the Ancient had been. Taller yet he

grew. His head brushed the rooftop; the light about him, that had been bleak as a winter day, flared into golden flame.

"You have no wife. You gave her to Gwawl, and he has not given her back to you. By magic you have entrapped him, violating all that we of this world hold holy—seizing him brutishly as beasts of your low world seize their prey! But not long can you keep him penned up in your little darkness—soon he will be free! And then he will have power to follow her from world to world and to seize her wherever he finds her. Yes, even in the very halls of Arawn, Lord of the Abyss! For her own oath binds her."

Men shrank and women's breath caught in their throats. But Pwyll said quietly: "Yet that little darkness of mine will hold him yet a while, Lord. Before your Grey Man comes he may grow generous and forego his claims on her who has always loved me, never him."

High above him Heveydd's lip curled. For a breath's space the flames about him burned smoky red. "You threaten him? In this world, boy, we die only when we choose and as we choose—when we have learned all that we can learn here, and seek fresh knowledge and fresh sights."

"Well," said Pwyll, "according to you I have come far and done much for nothing. Yet this one night at least I will sleep with Rhiannon."

From the bag came a howl like a wolf's. "Sleep with her, and for ten thousand lives you shall be blown through the air like flies, you and all who followed you here! Fire shall shrivel your wings, cold seas shall swallow you. And through ten thousand more lives you shall crawl upon the earth as worms, and heavy feet shall trample you into bloody pulp!"

Those fair folk grew pale; the lights about them

wavered and dimmed; they were not used to hearing of such horrors. Pwyll's men paled also, they to whom such things might happen. But Pwyll laughed.

"Truly, you have a gentle heart, man of this gentle world. But your words make my task easier."

Heveydd had shrunk to his usual size; the light around him had paled too, and his face had changed. "Man, will you bring that doom upon your men?"

"What do you care for them or me?"

"This much. I too have fought and bled for Dyved—in my time I have died for her, something you have yet to do. Long-gone folly; yet a man may look back with tenderness upon the poor, clumsy toys of his childhood. I still see some beauty in the bond between a Lord and his men. Save yours—they have followed you loyally."

Pwyll answered quietly: "I would like to believe that those are true words, Lord, and not the last of your tricks. But you who led us long ago have forgotten many things, and one of them is this: the men of Dyved do not like a Lord who runs home with his tail between his legs, like a whipped dog."

Some of Pwyll's men looked as if they were not too sure of that, but the faces of most brightened and their shoulders straightened, drawing courage from his courage.

"Then what must be will be," said Heveydd heavily.

"It will be, father-in-law. But now I will go to wash off my travel sweat in the stream outside, and two by two my men will follow me to do the same. People with noses less dainty than those of you fine folk here would have the right to expect that of me at my wedding feast. And when I come back I will sit where Gwawl sat—in the place that is mine by right—and my men will sit where his sat."

"And the best of food will be before all of you," said Rhiannon. "I will see to that."

Heveydd said nothing. From the bag too came only silence; and no man or woman there broke that silence.

But when Pwyll came back, laughing in the clean pride of his sun-bronzed nakedness, he sat down beside Rhiannon and threw his arms about her. And as she threw hers about him joy made her shine like a rainbow.

"I did not want to wed you in those rags, Lady."

"I could have made you fine, Lord. But indeed you look best this way. I never have seen so much of you before, and all that I see is good."

They kissed and were happy, for all the cold eyes upon them.

The first two men who had followed Pwyll out came back then, and one carried in his hand a bough cut from one of the apple trees. To reach his seat he had to pass the bag. He stopped and looked at it in feigned wonder.

"What is in there?" said he.

"A badger, I think." The man with him laughed.

"A big badger, indeed." The first man laughed too, and as he passed he switched the bag once, hard, with his bough. The second man kicked it hard with his foot.

Two by two Pwyll's men came in, and every man who had a branch switched the bag in passing, and every man who had not gave it a good kick.

For what seemed a very long time there was no sound but the sound of those blows. Once a woman started to cry out, but the cry choked in her throat. In spellbound horror the people of the Bright World sat watching this deed the like of which never had been done in their world before. Listening to the thuds and thwacks of the kicks, to the savage swish of

the switches, until it seemed to them that they never had heard anything else, and never would hear anything else forever. Rhiannon's face was as white as any there, and Pwyll and Heveydd sat like carven images.

Twenty men had come in, and thirty, and forty. They kept on coming. The fiftieth stopped between the doors.

"What game are you fellows playing in here?"

"'Badger-in-the-bag' it is called." The forty-ninth grinned.

The fiftieth grinned back. "Well, that is a new game and there are plenty more of us stout fellows here to play it. Let us in."

He advanced upon the bag, his foot raised to kick it. He was the biggest man who had yet come in, and he had the biggest foot. When that kick landed all shuddered.

The bag broke its silence at last. It did not cry out, but the voice that came from it was hoarse and changed. Few would have known it for the voice of Gwawl, the bright son of Cludd. "Lord, hear me—let me not die in this bag!"

Pwyll looked at ancient Heveydd. Slowly, through stone-stiff lips, the words came. "Son-in-law, make an end of this. Truly I had forgotten the ways of men, and evil they are to remember. Take her; we cannot withstand you."

The fifty-first man, switch in hand, had almost reached the bag. At a sign from Pwyll he stopped. Pwyll's eyes swung back to that earlier Lord of Dyved. "Father-in-law, I will take your counsel and Rhiannon's. Tell me what I should do."

Rhiannon spoke quickly, before her father could. Her voice was clear and hard as crystal, and as cold. "This is my counsel, Lord. Make Gwawl swear never again to seek me, in love or in hate. To take no vengeance on us or ours."

"Gladly will I swear those oaths." The bag spoke in haste.

"And gladly will I accept them." Pwyll rose, but Rhiannon caught his arm. "This too he must swear, Lord—never to stir up his friends and kin against us."

"We will take that oath with him," Heveydd said heavily. "All of us here. Only set him free."

Pwyll looked at Rhiannon. For a breath's space she hesitated; then she said: "With those terms we must be content."

At Pwyll's touch the bag opened like a mouth. He put out his hand to help the man inside, then flinched as Gwawl's golden head rose out of that darkness. Once again he seemed to see the white face of Havgan, dying beside the ford. The love that twice already had nearly been Pwyll's bane welled up within him. But then Gwawl thrust his extended hand aside, and he met those blazing tormented eyes and knew them for the eyes of one who never could give love or friendship. For all their baffled rage they were cold with an inner cold wide as the heavens and deep as the sea: a loveless, self-filled vastness never to be warmed. To this man the thwarting of his own desires was the only sin, and that a sin unforgivable.

Clumsily, painfully, Gwawl freed himself. The leather sides of the bag had shielded him somewhat; no drop of blood stained his fine wedding clothes. But blood stood in a red, ugly line on his lips, where he had bitten them through, and he moved stiffly. He did not look at his men, whom Pwyll's were unbinding.

"Bring him wine," said Heveydd, his own lips tightening. They did, and he drank it; faint color began to creep back into his face. His eyes, now blank and hard as bright stones, turned to Pwyll.

"Lord, I am sorely bruised and hurt. Have I your leave to go?"

Courteously Pwyll made answer: "If that is your will, Lord."

"It is as much of my will as I am likely to get." Again those eyes chilled him.

From the wide doorway Pwyll watched them go, Gwawl and his men, riding off into that clean, sweet twilight, their own lights glowing dull crimson and smoky purple about them, soiling that shining cleanness as they went. And great unhappiness was on the Prince of Dyved, a woe beyond his understanding.

"You grieve, Lord?" Rhiannon stood beside him.

"Lady, I have longed for this vengeance; all this long year I have dreamed of it. Yet I have had no joy of it. A man should meet his foe face to face."

"Never would Gwawl fight fairly, Lord."

"I know that now. In whatever world one meets him he knows no pity, and that of other men is only his tool. Yet never have I honored pity overmuch. I am a warrior sprung from warriors, and I have always thought war the one right business for a man, and all the works of peace unmanly."

"But now, Lord?"

"Now I do grieve. Not for Gwawl, but for the foolish innocence of your people, who had forgotten what man can do to man. For your trees, that my men and I have maimed, lopping their branches, that should have borne flowers and fruit, yet now have died in order to deal pain."

"I too grieve, who devised the deed." Both her face and her voice were very quiet.

He spoke on, his thoughts jumbled, wild and bitter like the blows that had rained upon Gwawl. "That hawk, too—him I once saw sharing a bough with a singing bird. Will such a thing ever happen again, even here? Or will some invisible darkness stain this clear, light-filled air of yours, making the weak fear the strong,

and the strong learn the terrible pleasure of hurting the weak?"

She laid her hand on his arm. "This is not the first world into which sin has come, Lord, nor will it be the last. Long since the seeds had been sown, or Gwawl never could have been born here."

"But all was beauty—all was peace . . ."

She said dryly: "Not so. Remember what Gwawl and the Grey Man planned for me. Truly only beauty can be born into this world, and Gwawl has achieved beauty. But he uses it to sway others to his will, not to draw their gaze upward. For he himself was the first to fall in love with his own beauty, and now he thinks all others made only to serve the wonder that is himself. In lower worlds he must add fighters' skills to that beauty, to dazzle your warrior-kind, but wherever pride is, he is."

"Lady, a man has a right to pride."

"Not to such pride as his. That tenderness and service are parts of love he has forgotten, and had he been able to hold either your mind or my body, in time all Dyved must have become as he is. Save for his lying, snaring beauty."

"Then we have done no harm?"

"I did not say that. I have brought violence here, where violence never was before, and for that I must pay. But the debt is not yours, who were only the stick in my hand."

"You are my wife!" He turned and caught her to him. "None shall hurt you, now or ever! Not while I live."

She smiled gently, as a mother smiles at the child who boasts of protecting her. "Tonight none shall harm either of us. This is our wedding night."

She took his hand and led him back to their places beside Heveydd the Ancient, her father. Pwyll's men were all there, each sitting just where he had sat the

year before, and it was indeed as if nothing had ever happened, as if they were still making merry at that first wedding feast. They sat there, they ate and drank and laughed until it was time to go to sleep. Then, by the light of that silver gold moon that shone as bright as any earthly sun, Pwyll and Rhiannon left that lovely hall; they went together to her chamber. To her bed, that was made all of flowers, dove-soft, fragrant, and unwithering. There at last his arms clasped her, and gladly she gave him her maidenhead.



Riding home, stiff and sore, through that cool, shimmering light, Gwawl thought of them in that bed and his heart writhed within him, even as his beaten body had writhed in the bag. Savagely he comforted himself. *No oaths bind the Grey Man. None of us had power to swear for him—as well she knows. He will avenge me.* But then he remembered Arawn, and how, in the thick air of earth, the might of the Lord of the Abyss could prevail over even the Son of the Hidden One, of him who lurks forever in the primal Wood of the Uncreated. And there in that world that knows no darkness, blackness came over the bright son of Cludd, and flames seared him; he ground his teeth. *Yet men live but a little while, and if Pwyll dies before you, beware, Rhiannon! For then again you will be ours, and Arawn will have no right to shield you.*

Chapter VII

THE GOLDEN SICKLE

ALL WHO could find chambers in that wondrous, many-chambered palace had found them; in the wide hall beds had been made for the rest. Only Heveydd the Ancient still sat in his high seat, alone in that silver quiet, as now he must always be alone. His brooding eyes stared afar off, into memories and mysteries beyond the ken of man.

One of Rhiannon's maids slept there with one of Pwyll's foster-brothers. At first they were happy, but when joy was spent and they lay still her heart grew sore for her lady, whom she must lose, and she mocked him.

"What a surprise you will get tomorrow morning, all you fine fellows from earth, when you wake up back on your own barren hillside. With cold, hard stones for beds!"

He grinned, half awake; his hands found her breasts again. "Indeed they were not like this bedding, girl. But it was last year we slept on those stones, the first time

we mounted the Gorsedd. Yesterday we had no time even to sit down there."

She laughed in his face. "Man, if by the Gorsedd you mean that mound that was piled over those discarded old bones of our Lord's, you have mounted it but once. You never went down again."

"That cannot be!" He started; his jaw dropped.

"It is. Pwyll and all of you think he met our Lady two years ago, yet by your time it was only yesterday. And by ours not two hours, though here our great ones can make an hour long or short as they please. Time does not chain us."

Gaping, he stared at her. "Woman, it cannot be. We were back on earth a whole year. There Pwyll chose six new True Companions to replace the six traitors. They mounted the hill with us yesterday . . ."

"Dreaming he chose them, and in dream, empty eyed, they rose from their beds and mounted the hill. Now all ninety-nine of you sleep round your King, but those six lie nearest him. For not having been out of their bodies as long as the rest of you, they can move more swiftly if need be. To do her bidding."

"Her bidding!" He shook her, fear and fury in his face. "She is in it too then! She and all you cursed folk have tricked us! She whom Pwyll loves as he has loved no woman . . ."

"Fear nothing." Her smile was bitter. "Many Illusions have been arranged between our Lady and her kin. But she loves him. She will wake tomorrow on your Gorsedd beside him."

"Then all is well." Heaving a deep sigh of relief he sank down again beside her.

"It will never be well! I do not see how she can bear it! When she wakes her flesh will be mortal, no more light will come from it, ever again. She will grow

old, as your women grow old. And though the poor among you may love her, remembering the Goddess their own folk worshipped of old, your proud ladies of the New Tribes will hate her because he loves her. Because he chose her, not one of them. It is not good to be a woman alone among other women who hate you. And with the powers of your own kind gone from you."

He laughed. "Jealous hags can be dealt with. Our Lord will have his Lady."

She sighed. "Well, her birds will always be with her. They are part of her."

Of a sudden his eyes sparkled; he caught her to him again. "Girl, come with me—then she will not be alone. I can always spare my woman to tend Pwyll's Lady."

But she shrank back from him and shook her head, mute with horror.



In their moment of highest ecstasy, when that moonlit chamber seemed full of a glory greater than that of sun or moon, Pwyll started and cried out. "I know You now! I remember! You are She whom I met in Annwn, after I had slain the monster. The One who sat in the garden, making birds."

Gentle and amused, the voice of the Goddess answered him. "True. Birds are among the least of My creations, yet they fly the highest. Men will fly higher one day, but they must make their own wings. I cannot do it for them, else they would remain children forever."

"How could any man rise higher than to possess You?"

"That was all of Me, Pwyll, that Maker of Birds. More of Me than any flesh may house for long, even such flesh as this Bright World breeds. Yet I am woman

enough to have wondered sometimes how long it would take you to remember."

"I should have known when first You lifted Your veil, and showed me Your face. When I thought I had lost You forever, and woke in the black night to find You shining before me. How could I ever have forgotten?"

"Because you are only a man. As I am only a woman. Your woman." Now again the voice was only the voice of Rhiannon, his wife. But she herself was enough—blessedly enough . . .

When he slept again she held him, the light that for this one more night was still hers playing round them both. "You learn slowly, beloved, but you learn. And it is what is learned slowly that sinks deep within. You men and your Gods! You mock at the Mother for snail slowness, for creating blindly in the dark. Yet when you create without Her, swiftly and in the light, you will create blindly indeed—shaping, maybe, a world's death! Well, poison sea and sky, the air you breathe, and even the sweet brown skin of Her breast, that always She has allowed you to tear to give you grain. Kill and kill until nothing is left but bare bones upon barren, polluted earth. The Mother is mighty; She has many bodies, and your world is but one of them. In Her mightiness She may yet heal Her wounds and make earth bloom again—yes, raise up you men along with it, even if She has to bear your whole race again. For a good mother is patient; she knows that a child must stumble many times before it learns to walk . . . Also you do have your good points. Who should know that better than I?" She laughed, and cradled Pwyll's head upon her breasts.

On the Gorsedd Arberth the High Druid lay dying, his own golden sickle protruding from his heart. Both young druids knelt beside him, one held his head. A little breath was left in him; he spoke to them, gasping: "She—has not—won altogether. Tell Pwyll—that—never will he beget a son!"

He died without seeing the silent, closed look on their faces. Never would they speak such unpalatable words in the ears of the great; in that new age that he had said was coming, Kings and warriors, men of earthly power, plainly were to be the ones the Gods loved. Had they not just seen the High Druid himself smitten down when he raised his hand against the King?

Unharméd, the King still slept with his ninety-nine True Companions around him. Six men had climbed that hill, empty eyed in the moonlight, to sit in the places of those six Untrue Companions who had fallen. "In his dream he has chosen them," the High Druid had said, laughing. "Little good they will do him!" But they had done him good; when the sickle had been poised above him those six it was who had sprung up and seized it in its fall and driven it back, deep into the heart of its wielder. Then, empty eyed as ever, they had gone back to their places. Now they slept peacefully, as did those others whose selves had been gone longer from their bodies.

As the young druids bore their Lord's body downhill one said to the other: "Maybe we should tell Pendaran Dyved the last words of him he will surely follow. Then a High Druid will have the knowledge, yet if he uses it the words will come from his mouth, not ours."

His comrade said doubtfully: "The high usually can find some way to blame the low, brother—and to let the low suffer alone. Yet Pendaran Dyved loves Pwyll;

if he speaks it will be to warn the King, not to harm him. So we can be true to our order without offending him the Gods love more."

END OF THE FIRST BRANCH.

SOURCES—AND THANK-YOUS

Druids were famed prophets. They foretold Rome's downfall and the domination of Europe by its north-western people. Also, Giraldus Cambrensis' account of that strange Irish coronation rite—the king's bridal with a white mare, who was afterwards killed and her blood drunk in a holy broth—is now accepted by most Celtic scholars. Since the worship of the Horse-Goddess was popular throughout the Celtic world, the rite does not seem likely to have been confined to Ireland. The Welsh Rhiannon has been identified with the Horse-Goddess.

Parts of the First Branch of the *Mabinogi* have long puzzled Celtic scholars. Why should Pwyll's great adversary bear the name of a benevolent deity, Havgan, "Summer-White"? It has even been suggested that Pwyll himself may have been originally a Power of the Underworld; that is to say, we are really sympathizing with the wrong person. To me, the only clue seems to lie in Eastern influence; years ago Heinrich Zimmer pointed out that certain elements in the old Welsh story seemed unsuited to the British climate, and suggested that they had been brought in by the Phoenicians. The term "Phoenicians" is not as popular as it used to be, but we do know that the ancient Sumerians identified their blazing summer sun with Death himself, and worshipped him so at their temple in Cuthah.

The *Mabinogi* gives Arawn's entrance a weird majesty that is truly like a wind from another world; I

felt presumptuous for retouching it. But when Arawn assures Pwyll that fighting Havgan will be perfectly safe—just one blow, and it will be all over—he does not exactly build up suspense and scare people. Doubtless medieval audiences and readers already knew what was coming, and cared only for the way in which the old tale was retold; about a hundred years ago Irish farm-folk still grew old listening raptly to the same tales of Dierdre and Finn that they had heard as children. But now we story tellers who crouch over typewriters instead of using harps and our own voices, have to try to keep our readers guessing. So I remodeled the combat scene to resemble the fierce duels of Irish epic heroes, and even gave Pwyll two new antagonists, creatures shown on two mysterious relics of the mainland Celts: the so-called “Monster of Moves,” and that Bird who keeps age-long vigil above the skull-adorned pillars of the grim Temple at Bouches-du-Rhone.

The late Roger Loomis identified Arawn’s never-named Queen with Modron the Mother. To an article by the distinguished Nora Chadwick I owe the suggestion that Pwyll’s whole experience upon the Mound was a dream. (Dream in one world, reality in another—can we be quite sure what reality is?) And the late Robert Briffault’s monumental work, *The Mothers*, gave me several intriguing ideas to play with. He believed, as I understand him, that civilization first evolved from the efforts of childbearing women to provide for their families, and that when men took over they invented nothing really new until our own machine age appeared, an almost exclusively masculine creation. Pollution has dimmed that last glory a little; I hope I will not be accused of sex bias for saying so; I like penicillin, electric toasters, jet travel, etc., as well as anybody. But when we were superstitious enough to hold the earth sacred and worship her, we did nothing to en-

danger our future upon her, as we do now. That seems
a little ironic.

Evangeline Walton
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