

CHAPTER XXX: THE ISLE OF THE MYSTIC LAKE

THE island they came to next was larger than most of those they had seen. On one side grew a wood of yew trees and great oaks; and on the other side was a grassy plain, with one small lake in the midst. A noble-looking house stood on the near part of the plain, with a small church not far off; and numerous flocks of sheep browsed over the whole island.

The travellers went to the church, and found in it a hermit, with snow-white beard and hair, and all the other marks of great old age. Maildun asked who he was, and whence he had come.

He replied, "I am one of the fifteen people, who, following the example of our master, Brendan of Birra, sailed on a pilgrimage out into the great ocean. After many wanderings, we settled on this island, where we lived for a long time; but my companions died one after another, and of all who came hither, I alone am left."

The old pilgrim then showed them Brendan's satchel, which he and his companions had brought with them on their pilgrimage; and Maildun kissed it, and all bowed down in veneration before it. And he told them that as long as they remained there, they might eat of the sheep and of the other food of the island ; but to waste nothing.

One day, as they were seated on a hill, gazing out over the sea, they saw what they took to be a black cloud coming towards them from the south-west. They continued to view it very closely as it came nearer and nearer; and at last they perceived with amazement that it was an immense bird, for they saw quite plainly the slow, heavy flapping of his wings. When he reached the island, he alighted on a little hillock over the lake; and they felt no small alarm, for they thought, on account of his vast size, that if he saw them, he might seize them in his talons, and carry them off over the sea. So they hid themselves under trees and in the crannies of rocks; but they never lost sight of the bird, for they were bent on watching his movements.

He appeared very old, and he held in one claw a branch of a tree, which he had brought with him over the sea, larger and heavier than the largest full-grown oak. It was covered with fresh, green leaves, and was heavily laden with clusters of fruit, red and rich-looking like grapes, but much larger.

He remained resting for a time, on the hill, being much wearied after his flight, and at last he began to eat the fruit off the branch. After watching him for some time longer, Maildun ventured warily towards the hillock, to see whether he was inclined to mischief; but the bird showed no disposition to harm him. This emboldened the others, and they all followed their chief.

The whole crew now marched in a body round the bird, headed by Maildun, with their shields raised; and as he still made no stir, one of the men, by Maildun's directions, went straight in front of him, and brought away some of the fruit from the branch which he still held in his talons. But the bird went on plucking and eating his fruit, and never took the least notice.

On the evening of that same day, as the men sat looking over the sea to the south-west, where the great bird first appeared to them, they saw in the distance two others, quite as large, coming

slowly towards them from the very same point. On they came, flying at a vast height, nearer and nearer, till at last they swooped down and alighted on the hillock in front of the first bird, one on each side.

Although they were plainly much younger than the other, they seemed very tired, and took a long rest. Then, shaking their wings, they began picking the old bird all over, body, wings, and head, plucking out the old feathers and the decayed quill points, and smoothing down his plumage with their great beaks. After this had gone on for some time, the three began plucking the fruit off the branch, and they ate till they were satisfied.

Next morning, the two birds began at the very same work, picking and arranging the feathers of the old bird as before; and at midday they ceased, and began again to eat the fruit, throwing the stones and what they did not eat of the pulp, into the lake, till the water became red like wine. After this the old bird plunged into the lake and remained in it, washing himself, till evening, when he again flew up on the hillock, but perched on a different part of it, to avoid touching and defiling himself with the old feathers and the other traces of age and decay, which the younger birds had removed from him.

On the morning of the third day, the two younger birds set about arranging his feathers for the third time; and on this occasion they applied themselves to their task in a manner much more careful and particular than before, smoothing the plumes with the nicest touches, and arranging them in beautiful lines and glossy tufts and ridges. And so they continued without the least pause till midday, when they ceased. Then, after resting for a little while, they opened their great wings, rose into the air, and flew away swiftly towards the south-west, till the men lost sight of them in the distance.

Meantime the old bird, after the others had left, continued to smooth and plume his feathers till evening; then, shaking his wings, he rose up, and flew three times round the island, as if to try his strength. And now the men observed that he had lost all the appearances of old age: his feathers were thick and glossy, his head was erect and his eye bright, and he flew with quite as much power and swiftness as the others. Alighting for the last time on the hillock, after resting a little, he rose again, and turning his flight after the other two, to the point from which he had come, he was soon lost to view, and the voyagers saw no more of him. It now appeared very clear to Maildun and his companions that this bird had undergone a renewal of youth from old age, according to the word of the prophet, which says, "Thy youth shall be renewed as the eagle." Diuran, seeing this great wonder, said to his companions; "Let us also bathe in the lake, and we shall obtain a renewal of youth like the bird."

But they said, "Not so, for the bird has left the poison of his old age and decay in the water." Diuran, however, would have his own way; and he told them he was resolved to try the virtue of the water, and that they might follow his example or not, whichever they pleased. So he plunged in and swam about for some time, after which he took a little of the water and mixed it in his mouth; and in the end he swallowed a small quantity. He then came out perfectly sound and whole; and he remained so ever after, for as long as he lived he never lost a tooth or had a grey hair, and he suffered not from disease or bodily weakness of any kind. But none of the others ventured in. The voyagers, having remained long enough on this island, stored in their curragh a large quantity of the flesh of the sheep; and after bidding farewell to the ancient cleric, they sought the ocean once more.

Now once again, when winds and tide combine,

The flying cnrragh cleaves the crested brine.

Far to the west an island rose to view,

With verdant plains, clear streams, and mountains blue.

An aged hermit, bred in Erin's. land,
Welcomed and blessed the chieftain and his band;
Brought food and drink, and bade them rest awhile,
And view the wonders of that lovely isle.
Lo, from the sea, three birds of monstrous size,
With vast wings slowly moving, cleave the skies;
And as they nearer drew, the sailors saw
One held a fruit branch firmly in his claw.
Down by the clear, mysterious lake they light,
Eat from the branch, and rest them from their flight.
The aged bird, with plumes decayed and thin,
Paused on the brink awhile, then, plunging in,
He bath'd and smooth' d his feathers o'er and o'er,
Shook his great wings and rested on the shore.
Now while the other two his plumes arrange,
Through all his frame appears a wondrous change:
His eyes grow bright, his head erect and bold,
His glossy plumage shines like burnished gold;
Free from old age, his glorious form expands;
In radiant youth and beauty proud he stands!
Such was the gift that lake of wonder gave;
Such was the virtue of its mystic wave.

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