

The Lady of the Fountain.

by Andrew Lang
from *The Lilac Fairy Book*

In the centre of the great hall in the castle of Caerleon upon Usk, king Arthur sat on a seat of green rushes, over which was thrown a covering of flame-coloured silk, and a cushion of red satin lay under his elbow. With him were his knights Owen and Kynon and Kai, while at the far end, close to the window, were Guenevere the queen and her maidens embroidering white garments with strange devices of gold.

‘I am weary,’ said Arthur, ‘and till my food is prepared I would fain sleep. You yourselves can tell each other tales, and Kai will fetch you from the kitchen a flagon of mead and some meat.’

And when they had eaten and drunk, Kynon, the oldest among them, began his story.

‘I was the only son of my father and mother, and much store they set by me, but I was not content to stay with them at home, for I thought no deed in all the world was too mighty for me. None could hold me back, and after I had won many adventures in my own land, I bade farewell to my parents and set out to see the world. Over mountains, through deserts, across rivers I went, till I reached a fair valley full of trees, with a path running by the side of a stream. I walked along that path all the day, and in the evening I came to a castle in front of which stood two youths clothed in yellow, each grasping an ivory bow, with arrows made of the bones of the whale, and winged with peacock’s feathers. By their sides hung golden daggers with hilts of the bones of the whale.

‘Near these young men was a man richly dressed, who turned and went with me towards the castle, where all the dwellers were gathered in the hall. In one window I beheld four and twenty damsels, and the least fair of them was fairer than Guenevere at her fairest. Some took my horse, and others unbuckled my armour, and washed it, with my sword and spear, till it all shone like silver. Then I washed myself and put on a vest and doublet which they brought me, and I and the man that entered with me sat down before a table of silver, and a goodlier feast I never had.

‘All this time neither the man nor the damsels had spoken one word, but when our dinner was half over, and my hunger was stilled, the man began to ask who I was. Then I told him my name and my father’s name, and why I came there, for indeed I had grown weary of gaining the mastery over all men at home, and sought if perchance there was one who could gain the mastery over me. And at this the man smiled and answered:

“‘If I did not fear to distress thee too much, I would show thee what thou seekest.” His words made me sorrowful and fearful of myself, which the man perceived, and added, “‘If thou meanest truly what thou sayest, and desirest earnestly to prove thy valour, and not to boast vainly that none can overcome thee, I have somewhat to show thee. But to-night thou must sleep in the this castle, and in the morning see that thou rise early and follow the road upwards through the valley, until thou reachest a wood. In the wood is a path branching to the right; go along this path until thou comest to a space of grass with a mound in the middle of it. On the top of the mound stands a black man, larger than any two white men; his eye is in the centre of his forehead and he has only one foot. He carries a club of iron, and two white men could hardly lift it. Around him graze a thousand beasts, all of different kinds, for he is the guardian of that wood, and it is he who will tell thee which way to go in order to find the adventure thou art in quest of.”

‘So spake the man, and long did that night seem to me, and before dawn I rose and put on my armour, and mounted my horse and rode on till I reached the grassy space of which he had told me. There was the black man on top of the mound, as he had said, and in truth he was mightier in all ways than I had thought him to be. As for the club, Kai, it would have been a burden for four of our warriors. He waited for me to speak, and I asked him what power he held over the beasts that thronged so close about him.

“‘I will show thee, little man,” he answered, and with his club he struck a stag on the head till he brayed loudly. And at his braying the animals came running, numerous as the stars in the sky, so that scarce was I able to stand among them. Serpents were there also, and dragons, and beasts of strange shapes, with horns in places where never saw I horns before. And the black man only looked at them and

bade them go and feed. And they bowed themselves before him, as vassals before their lord.

“Now, little man, I have answered thy question and showed thee my power,” said he. “Is there anything else thou wouldest know?” Then I inquired of him my way, but he grew angry, and, as I perceived, would fain have hindered me; but at the last, after I had told him who I was, his anger passed from him.

“Take that path,” said he, “that leads to the head of this grassy glade, and go up the wood till thou reachest the top. There thou wilt find an open space, and in the midst of it a tall tree. Under the tree is a fountain, and by the fountain a marble slab, and on the slab a bowl of silver, with a silver chain. Dip the bowl in the fountain, and throw the water on the slab, and thou wilt hear a might peal of thunder, till heaven and earth seem trembling with the noise. After the thunder will come hail, so fierce that scarcely canst thou endure it and live, for the hailstones are both large and thick. Then the sun will shine again, but every leaf of the tree will by lying on the ground. Next a flight of birds will come and alight on the tree, and never didst thou hear a strain so sweet as that which they will sing. And at the moment in which their song sounds sweetest thou wilt hear a murmuring and complaining coming towards thee along the valley, and thou wilt see a knight in black velvet bestriding a black horse, bearing a lance with a black pennon, and he will spur his steed so as to fight thee. If thou turnest to flee, he will overtake thee. And if thou abidest were thou art, he will unhorse thee. And if thou dost not find trouble in that adventure, thou needest not to seek it during the rest of thy life.”

‘So I bade the black man farewell, and took my way to the top of the wood, and there I found everything just as I had been told. I went up to the tree beneath which stood the fountain, and filling the silver bowl with water, emptied it on the marble slab. Thereupon the thunder came, louder by far than I had expected to hear it, and after the thunder came the shower, but heavier by far than I had expected to feel it, for, of a truth I tell thee, Kai, not one of those hailstones would be stopped by skin or by flesh till it had reached the bone. I turned my horse’s flank towards the shower, and, bending over his neck, held my shield so that it might cover his head and my own. When the hail had passed, I looked on the tree and not a single leaf was left on it, and the sky was blue and the sun shining, while on the branches were perched

birds of very kind, who sang a song sweeter than any that has come to my ears, either before or since.

‘Thus, Kai, I stood listening to the birds, when lo, a murmuring voice approached me, saying:

“O knight, what has brought thee hither? What evil have I done to thee, that thou shouldest do so much to me, for in all my lands neither man nor beast that met that shower has escaped alive.” Then from the valley appeared the knight on the black horse, grasping the lance with the black pennon. Straightway we charged each other, and though I fought my best, he soon overcame me, and I was thrown to the ground, while the knight seized the bridle of my horse, and rode away with it, leaving me where I was, without even despoiling me of my armour.

‘Sadly did I go down the hill again, and when I reached the glade where the black man was, I confess to thee, Kai, it was a marvel that I did not melt into a liquid pool, so great was my shame. That night I slept at the castle where I had been before, and I was bathed and feasted, and none asked me how I had fared. The next morning when I arose I found a bay horse saddled for me, and, girdling on my armour, I returned to my own court. The horse is still in the stable, and I would not part with it for any in Britain.

‘But of a truth, Kai, no man ever confessed an adventure so much to his own dishonour, and strange indeed it seems that none other man have I ever met that knew of the black man, and the knight and the shower.’

‘Would it not be well,’ said Owen, ‘to go and discover the place?’

‘By the hand of my friend,’ answered Kai, ‘often dost thou utter that with thy tongue which thou wouldest not make good with thy deeds.’

‘In truth,’ said Guenevere the queen, who had listened to the tale, ‘thou wert better hanged, Kai, than use such speech towards a man like Owen.’

‘I meant nothing, lady,’ replied Kai; ‘thy praise of Owen is not greater than mine.’ And as he spoke Arthur awoke, and asked if he had not slept for a little.

‘Yes, lord,’ answered Owen, ‘certainly thou hast slept.’

‘Is it time for us to go to meat?’

‘It is, lord,’ answered Owen.

Then the horn for washing themselves was sounded, and after that the king and his household sat down to eat. And when they had finished, Owen left them, and made ready his horse and his arms.

With the first rays of the sun he set forth, and travelled through deserts and over mountains and across rivers, and all befell him which had befallen Kynon, till he stood under the leafless tree listening to the song of the birds. Then he heard the voice, and turning to look found the knight galloping to meet him. Fiercely they fought till their lances were broken, and then they drew their swords, and a blow from Owen cut through the knight’s helmet, and pierced his skull.

Feeling himself wounded unto death the knight fled, and Owen pursued him till they came to a splendid castle. Here the knight dashed across the bridge that spanned the moat, and entered the gate, but as soon as he was safe inside, the drawbridge was pulled up and caught Owen’s horse in the middle, so that half of him was inside and half out, and Owen could not dismount and knew not what to do.

While he was in this sore plight a little door in the castle gate opened, and he could see a street facing him, with tall houses. Then a maiden with curling hair of gold looked through the little door and bade Owen open the gate.

‘By my troth!’ cried Owen, ‘I can no more open it from here than thou art able to set me free.’

‘Well,’ said she, ‘I will do my best to release thee if thou wilt do as I tell thee. Take this ring and put it on with the stone inside thy hand, and close thy fingers tight, for as long as thou dost conceal it, it will conceal thee. When the men inside have held counsel together, they will come to fetch thee to thy death, and they will be much grieved not to find thee. I will stand on the horse block yonder and thou canst see me though I cannot see thee. Therefore draw near and place thy hand on my shoulder and follow me wheresoever I go.’

Upon that she went away from Owen, and when the men came out from the castle to seek him and did not find him they were sorely grieved, and they returned to the castle.

Then Owen went to the maiden and placed his hand on her shoulder, and she guided him to a large room, painted all over with rich colours, and adorned with images of gold. Here she gave him meat and drink, and water to wash with and garments to wear, and he lay down upon a soft bed, with scarlet and fur to cover him, and slept gladly.

In the middle of the night he woke hearing a great outcry, and he jumped up and clothed himself and went into the hall, where the maiden was standing.

‘What is it?’ he asked, and she answered that the knight who owned the castle was dead, and they were bearing his body to the church. Never had Owen beheld such vast crowds, and following the dead knight was the most beautiful lady in the world, whose cry was louder than the shout of the men, or the braying of the trumpets. And Owen looked on her and loved her.

‘Who is she?’ he asked the damsel. ‘That is my mistress, the countess of the fountain, and the wife of him whom thou didst slay yesterday.’

‘Verily,’ said Owen, ‘she is the woman that I love best.’

‘She shall also love thee not a little,’ said the maiden.

Then she left Owen, and after a while went into the chamber of her mistress, and spoke to her, but the countess answered her nothing.

‘What aileth thee, mistress?’ inquired the maiden.

‘Why hast thou kept far from me in my grief, Luned?’ answered the countess, and in her turn the damsel asked:

‘Is it well for thee to mourn so bitterly for the dead, or for anything that is gone from thee?’

‘There is no man in the world equal to him,’ replied the countess, her cheeks growing red with anger. ‘I would fain banish thee for such words.’

‘Be not angry, lady,’ said Luned, ‘but listen to my counsel. Thou knowest well that alone thou canst not preserve thy lands, therefore seek some one to help thee.’

‘And how can I do that?’ asked the countess.

‘I will tell thee,’ answered Luned. ‘Unless thou canst defend the fountain all will be lost, and none can defend the fountain except a knight of Arthur’s court. There will I go to seek him, and woe betide me if I return without a warrior that can guard the fountain, as well as he who kept it before.’

‘Go then,’ said the countess, ‘and make proof of that which thou hast promised.’

So Luned set out, riding on a white palfrey, on pretence of journeying to King Arthur’s court, but instead of doing that she hid herself for as many days as it would have taken her to go and come, and then she left her hiding-place, and went into the countess.

‘What news from the court?’ asked her mistress, when she had given Luned a warm greeting.

‘The best of news,’ answered the maiden, ‘for I have gained the object of my mission. When wilt thou that I present to thee the knight who has returned with me?’

‘To-morrow at midday,’ said the countess, ‘and I will cause all the people in the town to come together.’

Therefore the next day at noon Owen put on his coat of mail, and over it he wore a splendid mantle, while on his feet were leather shoes fastened with clasps of gold. And he followed Luned to the chamber of her mistress.

Right glad was the countess to see them, but she looked closely at Owen and said:

‘Luned, this knight has scarcely the air of a traveller.’

‘What harm is there in that, lady?’ answered Luned.

‘I am persuaded,’ said the countess, ‘that this man and no other chased the soul from the body of my lord.’

‘Had he not been stronger than thy lord,’ replied the damsel, ‘he could not have taken his life, and for that, and for all things that are past, there is no remedy.’

‘Leave me, both of you,’ said the countess, ‘and I will take counsel.’

Then they went out.

The next morning the countess summoned her subjects to meet in the courtyard of the castle, and told them that now that her husband was dead there was none to defend her lands.

‘So choose you which it shall be,’ she said. ‘Either let one of you take me for a wife, or give me your consent to take a new lord for myself, that my lands be not without a master.’

At her words the chief men of the city withdrew into one corner and took counsel together, and after a while the leader came forward and said that they had decided that it was best, for the peace and safety of all, that she should choose a husband for herself. Thereupon Owen was summoned to her presence, and he accepted with joy the hand that she offered him, and they were married forthwith, and the men of the earldom did him homage.

From that day Owen defended the fountain as the earl before him had done, and every knight that came by was overthrown by him, and his ransom divided among his barons. In this way three years passed, and no man in the world was more beloved than Owen.

Now at the end of the three years it happened that Gwalchmai the knight was with Arthur, and he perceived the king to be very sad.

‘My lord, has anything befallen thee?’ he asked.

‘Oh, Gwalchmai, I am grieved concerning Owen, whom I have lost these three years, and if a fourth year passes without him I can live no longer. And sure am I that the tale told by Kynon the son of Clydno caused me to lose him. I will go myself with the men of my household to avenge him if he is dead, to free him if he is in prison, to bring him back if he is alive.’

Then Arthur and three thousand men of his household set out in quest of Owen, and took Kynon for their guide. When Arthur reached the castle, the youths were shooting in the same place, and the same yellow man was standing by, and as soon as he beheld Arthur he greeted him and invited him in, and they entered together. So vast was the castle that the king’s three thousand men were of no more account than if they had been twenty.

At sunrise Arthur departed thence, with Kynon for his guide, and reached the black man first, and afterwards the top of the wooded hill, with the fountain and the bowl and the tree.

‘My lord,’ said Kai, ‘let me throw the water on the slab, and receive the first adventure that may befall.’

‘Thou mayest do so,’ answered Arthur, and Kai threw the water.

Immediately all happened as before; the thunder and the shower of hail which killed many of Arthur’s men; the song of the birds and the appearance of the black knight. And Kai met him and fought him, and was overthrown by him. Then the knight rode away, and Arthur and his men encamped where they stood.

In the morning Kai again asked leave to meet the knight and to try to overcome him, which Arthur granted. But once more he was unhorsed, and the black knight’s lance broke his helmet and pierced the skin even to the bone, and humbled in spirit he returned to the camp.

After this every one of the knights gave battle, but none came out victor, and at length there only remained Arthur himself and Gwalchmai.

‘Oh, let me fight him, my lord,’ cried Gwalchmai, as he saw Arthur taking up his arms.

‘Well, fight then,’ answered Arthur, and Gwalchmai threw a robe over himself and his horse, so that none knew him. All that day they fought, and neither was able to throw the other, and so it was on the next day. On the third day the combat was so fierce that they fell both to the ground at once, and fought on their feet, and at last the black knight gave his foe such a blow on his head that his helmet fell from his face.

‘I did not know it was thee, Gwalchmai,’ said the black knight. ‘Take my sword and my arms.’

‘No,’ answered Gwalchmai, ‘it is thou, Owen, who art the victor, take thou my sword’; but Owen would not.

‘Give me your swords,’ said Arthur from behind them, ‘for neither of you has vanquished the other,’ and Owen turned and put his arms round Arthur’s neck.

The next day Arthur would have given orders to his men to make ready to go back whence they came, but Owen stopped him.

‘My lord,’ he said, ‘during the three years that I have been absent from thee I have been preparing a banquet for thee, knowing full well that thou wouldst come to seek me. Tarry with me, therefore, for a while, thou and thy men.’

So they rode to the castle of the countess of the fountain, and spent three months in resting and feasting. And when it was time for them to depart Arthur besought the countess that she would allow Owen to go with him to Britain for the space of three months. With a sore heart she granted permission, and so content was Owen to be once more with his old companions that three years instead of three months passed away like a dream.

One day Owen sat at meat in the castle of Caerleon upon Usk, when a damsel on a bay horse entered the hall, and riding straight up to the place where Owen sat she stooped and drew the ring from off his hand.

‘Thus shall be treated the traitor and the faithless,’ said she, and turning her horse’s head she rode out of the hall.

At her words Owen remembered all that he had forgotten, and sorrowful and ashamed he went to his own chamber and made ready to depart. At the dawn he set out, but he did not go back to the castle, for his heart was heavy, but he wandered far into wild places till his body was weak and thin, and his hair was long. The wild beasts were his friends, and he slept by their side, but in the end he longed to see the face of a man again, and he came down into a valley and fell asleep by a lake in the lands of a widowed countess.

Now it was the time when the countess took her walk, attended by her maidens, and when they saw a man lying by the lake they shrank back in terror, for he lay so still that they thought he was dead. But when they had overcome their fright, they drew near him, and touched him, and saw that there was life in him. Then the countess hastened to the castle, and brought from it a flask full of precious ointment and gave it to one of her maidens.

‘Take that horse which is grazing yonder,’ she said, ‘and a suit of men’s garments, and place them near the man, and pour some of this ointment near his heart. If there is any life in him that will bring it back. But if he moves, hide thyself in the bushes near by, and see what he does.’

The damsel took the flask and did her mistress’ bidding. Soon the man began to move his arms, and then rose slowly to his feet. Creeping forward step by step he took the garments from off the saddle and put them on him, and painfully he mounted the horse. When he was seated the damsel came forth and greeted him, and glad was he when he saw her and inquired what castle that was before him.

‘It belongs to a widowed countess,’ answered the maiden. ‘Her husband left her two earldoms, but it is all that remains of her broad lands, for they have been torn from her by a young earl, because she would not marry him.’

‘That is a pity,’ replied Owen, but he said no more, for he was too weak to talk much. Then the maiden guided him to the castle, and kindled a fire, and brought him food. And there he stayed and was tended for three months, till he was handsomer than ever he was.

At noon one day Owen heard a sound of arms outside the castle, and he asked of the maiden what it was.

‘It is the earl of whom I spoke to thee,’ she answered, ‘who has come with a great host to carry off my mistress.’

‘Beg of her to lend me a horse and armour,’ said Owen, and the maiden did so, but the countess laughed somewhat bitterly as she answered:

‘Nay, but I will give them to him, and such a horse and armour and weapons as he has never had yet, though I know not what use they will be to him. Yet mayhap it will save them from falling into the hands of my enemies.’

The horse was brought out and Owen rode forth with two pages behind him, and they saw the great host encamped before them.

‘Where is the earl?’ said he, and the pages answered:

‘In yonder troop where are four yellow standards.’

‘Await me,’ said Owen, ‘at the gate of the castle, and he cried a challenge to the earl, who came to meet him. Hard did they fight, but Owen overthrew his enemy and drove him in front to the castle gate and into the hall.

‘Behold the reward of thy blessed balsam,’ said he, as he bade the earl kneel down before her, and made him swear that he would restore all that he had taken from her.

After that he departed, and went into the deserts, and as he was passing through a wood he heard a loud yelling. Pushing aside the bushes he beheld a lion standing on a great mound, and by it a rock. Near the rock was a lion seeking to reach the mound, and each time he moved out darted a serpent from the rock to prevent him. Then Owen unsheathed his sword, and cut off the serpent’s head and went on his way, and the lion followed and played about him, as if he had been a greyhound. And much more useful was he than a greyhound, for in the evening he brought large logs in his mouth to kindle a fire, and killed a fat buck for dinner.

Owen made his fire and skinned the buck, and put some of it to roast, and gave the rest to the lion for supper. While he was waiting for the meat to cook he heard a sound of deep sighing close to him, and he said:

‘Who are thou?’

‘I am Luned,’ replied a voice from a cave so hidden by bushes and green hanging plants that Owen had not seen it.

‘And what dost thou here?’ cried he.

‘I am held captive in this cave on account of the knight who married the countess and left her, for the pages spoke ill of him, and because I told them that no man living was his equal they dragged me here and said I should die unless he should come to deliver me by a certain day, and that is no further than the day after to-morrow. His name is Owen the son of Urien, but I have none to send to tell him of my danger, or of a surety he would deliver me.’

Owen held his peace, but gave the maiden some of the meat, and bade her be of good cheer. Then, followed by the lion, he set out for a great castle on the other side of the plain, and men came and took his horse and placed it in a manger, and the lion went after and lay down on the straw. Hospitable and kind were all within the castle, but so full of sorrow that it might have been thought death was upon them. At length, when they had eaten and drunk, Owen prayed the earl to tell him the reason of their grief.

‘Yesterday,’ answered the earl, ‘my two sons were seized, while they were hunting, by a monster who dwells on those mountains yonder, and he vows that he will not let them go unless I give him my daughter to wife.’

‘That shall never be,’ said Owen; ‘but what form hath this monster?’

‘In shape he is a man, but in stature he is a giant,’ replied the earl, ‘and it were better by far that he should slay my sons than that I should give up my daughter.’

Early next morning the dwellers in the castle were awakened by a great clamour, and they found that the giant had arrived with the two

young men. Swiftly Owen put on his armour and went forth to meet the giant, and the lion followed at his heels. And when the great beast beheld the hard blows which the giant dealt his master he flew at his throat, and much trouble had the monster in beating him off.

‘Truly,’ said the giant, ‘I should find no difficulty in fighting thee, if it were not for that lion.’ When he heard that Owen felt shame that he could not overcome the giant with his own sword, so he took the lion and shut him up in one of the towers of the castle, and returned to the fight. But from the sound of the blows the lion knew that the combat was going ill for Owen, so he climbed up till he reached the top of the tower, where there was a door on to the roof, and from the tower he sprang on to the walls, and from the walls to the ground. Then with a loud roar he leaped upon the giant, who fell dead under the blow of his paw.

Now the gloom of the castle was turned into rejoicing, and the earl begged Owen to stay with him till he could make him a feast, but the knight said he had other work to do, and rode back to the place where he had left Luned, and the lion followed at his heels. When he came there he saw a great fire kindled, and two youths leading out the maiden to cast her upon the pile.

‘Stop!’ he cried, dashing up to them. ‘What charge have you against her?’

‘She boasted that no man in the world was equal to Owen,’ said they, ‘and we shut her in a cave, and agreed that none should deliver her but Owen himself, and that if he did not come by a certain day she should die. And now the time has past and there is no sign of him.’

‘In truth he is a good knight, and had he but known that the maid was in peril he would have come to save her,’ said Owen; ‘but accept me in his stead, I entreat you.’

‘We will,’ replied they, and the fight began.

The youths fought well and pressed hard on Owen, and when the lion saw that he came to help his master. But the youths made a sign for the fight to stop, and said:

‘Chieftain, it was agreed we should give battle to thee alone, and it is harder for us to contend with yonder beast than with thee.’

Then Owen shut up the lion in the cave where the maiden had been in prison, and blocked up the front with stones. But the fight with the giant had sorely tried him, and the youths fought well, and pressed him harder than before. And when the lion saw that he gave a loud roar, and burst through the stones, and sprang upon the youths and slew them. And so Luned was delivered at the last.

Then the maiden rode back with Owen to the lands of the lady of the fountain. And he took the lady with him to Arthur’s court, where they lived happily till they died.

From the ‘Mabinogion.’