



THE SEA-MAIDEN

WHO BECAME A

SEA SWAN

THE SEA-MAIDEN WHO BECAME A SEA SWAN



THE sea swan told the story to the pigeons of the rock, and the Boy-who-Knew-What-The-Birds-Said heard every word of it.

I was once a sea maiden, she said, and my name was Eevinn, and I was known through all the kingdoms that are under-wave for my beautiful hair—my long, beautiful, green hair. Something was in me that made me want to dance, and I used to rise up through the water, and dance on the shore of the island that is called Hathony.

Mananaun, as you know, is Lord of the Sea, and what he commands in the Kingdom-Under-Wave has to be. Now Mananaun made a promise to a king of an earth kingdom, and the promise was that he would give this king whatever he asked for. The king died, according to the ways of men, and his son, whose name was Branduv, came to rule in his stead.

Branduv called Mananaun out of the sea, and he asked that he renew the promise he had made to his father. The Lord of the Sea did not want a promise to lapse because of the death of a man, and he renewed it to the man's son. Then Mananaun told him he would take him and show him the Kingdoms of the Sea and whatever he saw that he desired there would be given to him. He took him in his boat of glass, the Ocean Sweeper, to visit the Kingdoms of the Sea.

They came to Moy Mell, the Plain of Pleasure, and there Mananaun gave Branduv a branch of everlasting blossoms; they came to another kingdom and there Mananaun gave him a sword that was the best wrought in the world; they came to a third Kingdom and there Mananaun gave him a pair of hounds that could run down the silver-antlered stag. But as yet Branduv the King had asked no gift from Mananaun.

At last they came to Mananaun's own kingdom, Silver-Cloud Plain, and there Branduv was left alone while Mananaun drank the ale of the Ever-Living

Ones. Branduv saw from the shores of Silver-Cloud Plain the boat, Ocean Sweeper, and he directed that the boat bring him to the island of Hathony. And the boat travelled as the one in it wished.

Only one thing, said the sea swan, had ever made me fearful of dancing on the shore of the island of Hathony, and that was the presence of a pair of ravens. These ravens had once been sea maidens, but they had desired men for husbands, and had gone to them. But the men forsook them, and they become first witches and afterwards ravens. Ever since their change of shape they wished harm to the maidens of the sea. At first I had been frightened of them, but then I had seen them flapping about so often that I was only a little afraid.

I came up through the sea and I danced upon the shore of Hathony, and the play of the waves was in my dance, and my long soft green hair fell over my foam-white, foam-soft body. I danced on, O my listeners, and as no one had ever seen me dance, I thought no one looked upon me now.

But King Branduv of the earthly kingdom saw me. He saw me as I danced by the waves, and I was the fairest thing he had ever looked upon. At first he was all wonder and no robber's thoughts were in his mind. But the ravens came to him. One perched on one shoulder and one perched on the other, and one said, "If you carry Eevinn off you will have the fairest



wife in all the world," and the other said, "If you leave her here you will never look on anything as fair again."

The ravens flapped before him to guide him to a place in the dark rocks where he might hide and to which I would come. He followed where they

led, but I saw his shadow on a rock. I drew back and the sea took me and drew me into its depth.

"The sea has taken her," said Branduv to the ravens.

"Mananaun is Lord of the Sea," said one of the ravens. "And Mananaun has promised you a gift, and he cannot refuse what you ask," said the other raven.

Then the ravens flapped away as Mananaun arrived on the island of Hathony and came to where Branduv was standing.

"You have asked me for a gift," said Mananaun. "Think now of what you desire before I take you back to your own island."

Then said Branduv, "What I ask is that you bestow upon me the sea maiden, Eevinn, who was dancing here upon the shore."

Mananaun lifted his spear in anger—but then he remembered he was bound by a promise to Branduv. He lowered the spear he had raised.

“I will give you any other gift you ask,” said he, “even my own boat, the Ocean Sweeper.”

“I hold you to your promise,” said Branduv, “and I declare to you that I shall take no other gift unless it be the maiden who was here dancing by the sea.”

“It must be then that I give her you,” said Mananaun, but his face was dark.

Down he went to the Kingdom-Under-Wave and he came to the black mansion where lived the seven spinning women of the sea. He spoke as speaks a King who has a hard thing to do.

“A law has to be broken,” said he.

“What law, Lord?” said the spinning women.

“The law that saves our maidens from taking part in the stormy lives of men.”

“We would rather that anything else but this should happen, Lord,” said the seven spinning women.

“This thing must happen,” said Mananaun, “and the maiden Eevinn must go to Branduv the King.”

“She must be prepared for this,” said the seven spinning women.

They came to me and they told me that the man whose shadow I had seen on the rock now claimed me for his wife and that Mananaun would not

gainsay him. When I heard this, O my listeners, the life nearly left me.

This comfort the seven spinning women gave me: I was to be brought to Branduv's island so that I might become used to the earthly kingdom, but my eyes were not to fall on him until the green had left my hair and the brown that the sun makes had come upon my cheeks. So I came to Branduv's island and lived by the seashore and the women of the island attended me.

How different was this earthly land from the Kingdom-Under-Wave. With us there was but the one mild season, the one mild light. Here there was glaring day and terrible darkness, bitter winds and the hot beams of the sun. With us there were songs and tales, but the songs were about love or about the beautiful things we had seen. Here the tales and songs were about battles and forays and slaying with the sword. What they told of their loves was terrible, with so much violence and unfaithfulness in them.

The soft green tints were going out of my hair and the sun was putting brownness in my cheeks. Soon my hair would be wheaten-colored like the hair of the women of the islands and my cheeks would be brown like theirs. And then the day would come when I should have to be with the man whom I looked upon as my enemy.

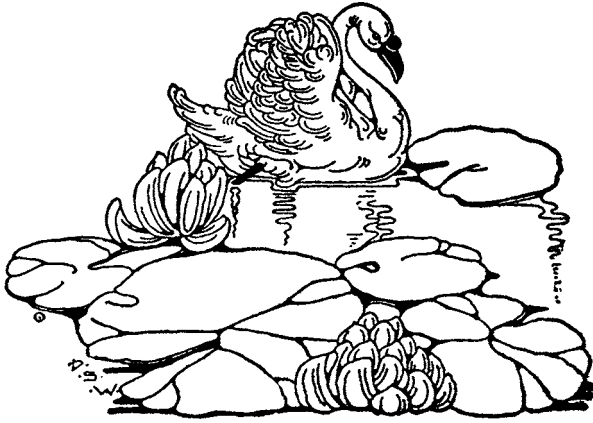
I used to stay by the shore and speak with the birds that came in from the sea, for I knew their language. Never again could I go back to the Kingdom-Under-Wave. Green shade after green shade left my hair, brown tint after brown tint came into my cheeks, and what could I do but envy the birds that could fly away from the islands of men. And when the green had nearly gone altogether from my hair I thought of a desperate thing to do.

I sent a message to my sisters, and I sent it by many birds, so that if my sisters did not get it by one they might get it by another. I asked in my message that they send me a draft from the Well under the Sea, and that they send it in the cup that the seven spinning women guarded. It would be terrible for any of my sisters to come to Branduv's island with the draft and the cup, but I begged that they would do it for me.

The days went by and the green color was now only a shade in my hair, and brownness was on my cheeks. The earth-women said, "Before this old moon is gone our King will come to wed you."

Then one day I found on the shore the cup I had asked for. My sisters had brought it and the draft from the Secret Well was in it. I lifted the cup in my hands and took it to where I lived.

"Come to us," said the earth-women, "so that we may undo your hair, and see if the King may come to wed you."



They loosened my hair, and said, "There is no shade of green here at all. We will bid the King come as early as he likes tomorrow."

I lay that night with the cup beside me, and when I rose I knew I would drink from the cup my sisters had sent me—drink the draft that would change me into a bird of the sea.

And while I sat with the cup beside me and my hair spread out, Branduv, the king of the island, came to me. It may have been that I was becoming used to the sight of the people of the earthly kingdoms, for as I looked upon him he did not seem terrible to me. He looked noble and eager to befriend me and love me. But the cup was in my hands and I put it to my lips and drank it when he took a step towards me. I changed and became what I had wished to be—a sea swan.

O my listeners! Maybe it would have been well if I had wed that King and be as the women of the earthly islands. For now as I fly over the sea Branduv's look comes before me, and I remember how eager he was to befriend me and eager to love me and I am not content when flying over the sea. I am lonely here on these earthly islands, for I am now a swan, and what has a swan to do with the lives of men?

Such was the story that the sea swan told the pigeons of the rock, and the Boy-Who-Knew-What-The-Birds-Said heard it all, and never forgot a word of it.

