



The House in the Lake

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Irish

Advanced
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A long, long time ago, there lived in a little hut, in the midst of one of the inland lakes of Erin, an old fisherman and his son. The hut was built on stakes driven into the bed of the lake, and was so high above the waters that even when they were stirred into waves by the wind coming down from the mountains they did not reach the threshold of the door. Around, outside the hut, on a level with the floor, was a little wicker-work platform, and under the platform, close to the steps leading up to it from the water, the fisherman's curragh, made of willows, covered with skins, was moored, and it was only by means of the curragh that he and his son, Enda, could leave their lake dwelling.

On many a summer evening Enda lay stretched on the platform, watching the sunset fading from the mountain-tops, and the twilight creeping over the waters of the lake, and it chanced that once when he was so engaged he heard a rustle in a clump of sedge that grew close to one side of the hut. He turned to where the sound came from, and what should he see but an otter swimming towards him, with a little trout in his mouth. When the otter came up to where Enda was lying, he lifted his head and half his body from the water, and flung the trout on the platform, almost at Enda's feet, and then disappeared.

Enda took the little panting trout in his hand; but as he did so he heard, quite close to him, in the lake, a sound like that of water plashing upon water, and he saw the widening circles caused by a trout which had just risen to a fly; and he said to the little trout he held in his hand:

“I won’t keep you, poor thing! Perhaps that was a little comrade come to look for you, and so I’ll send you back to him.”

And saying this, he dropped the little trout into the lake.

Well, when the next evening came, again Enda was lying stretched outside the hut, and once more he heard the rustle in the sedge, and once more the otter came and flung the little trout almost into his hands.

Enda, more surprised than ever, did not know what to do. He saw that it was the same little trout the otter had brought him the night before, and he said:

“Well, I gave you a chance last night. I’ll give you another, if only to see what will come of it.”

And he dropped the trout into the lake; but no sooner had it touched the waters than it was changed into a beautiful, milk-white swan. And Enda could hardly believe his eyes, as he saw it sailing across the lake, until it was lost in the sedges growing by the shore.

All that night he lay awake, thinking of what he had seen, and as soon as the morning stood on the hill-tops, and cast its shafts of golden light across the lake, Enda rose and got into his curragh.

He rowed all round the shores, beating the sedges with his oar, in pursuit of the swan; but all in vain; he could not catch a glimpse of her white plumage anywhere. Day after day he rowed about the lake in search of her, and every evening he lay outside the hut watching the waters. At long last, one night, when the full moon, rising above the mountains, flooded the whole lake with light, he saw the swan coming swiftly towards him, shining brighter than the moonbeams. The swan came on until it was almost within a boat’s length of the hut; and what should Enda hear but the swan speaking to him in his own language:

“Get into your curragh, Enda, and follow me,” said she, and, saying this, she turned round and sailed away.



Illustration from Edmond Leamy's Irish Fairy Tales (1906), M.A. Gill & Son. Ltd, Dublin.

Enda jumped into the curragh, and soon the water, dripping from his oar, was flashing like diamonds in the moonlight. And he rowed after the swan, who glided on before him, until she came to where the shadows of the mountains lay deepest on the lake. Then the swan rested, and when Enda came up to her:

"Enda," said she, "I have brought you where none may hear what I wish to say to you. I am Mave, the daughter of the king of Erin. By the magic arts of my cruel stepmother I was changed into a trout, and cast into this lake a year and a day before the evening when you restored me to the waters the second time. If you had not done so the first night the otter brought me to you I should have been changed into a hooting owl; if you had not done so the second night, I should have been changed into a croaking raven. But, thanks to you, Enda, I am now a snow-white swan, and for one hour on the first night of every full moon the power of speech is and will be given to me as long as I remain a swan. And a swan I must always remain, unless you are willing to break the spell of enchantment that is over me; and you alone can break it."

"I'll do anything I can for you. O princess!" said Enda. "But how can I break the spell?"

"You can do so," said the swan, "only by pouring upon my plumage the perfumed water that fills the golden bowl that is in the inmost room of the palace of the fairy queen, beneath the lake."

"And how can I get that?" said Enda.

"Well," said the swan, "you must dive beneath the lake, and walk along its bed, until you come to where the lake dragon guards the entrance of the fairy queen's dominions."

"I can dive like a fish," said Enda; "but how can I walk beneath the waters?"

"You can do it easily enough," said the swan, "if you get the water-dress of Brian, one of the three sons of Turenn, and his helmet of transparent crystal, by the aid of which he was able to walk under the green salt sea."

"And where shall I find them?"

"They are in the water-palace of Angus of the Boyne," said the swan; "but you should set out at once, for if the spell be not broken before the moon is full again, it cannot be broken for a year and a day."

“I’ll set out in the first ray of the morning,” said Enda.

“May luck and joy go with you,” said the swan. “And now the hours of silence are coming upon me, and I have only time to warn you that dangers you little dream of will lie before you in your quest for the golden cup.”

“I am willing to face all dangers for your sake, O princess,” said Enda.

“Blessings be upon you, Enda,” said the swan, and she sailed away from the shadow out into the light across the lake to the sedgy banks. And Enda saw her no more.

He rowed his curragh home, and he lay on his bed without taking off his clothes. And as the first faint glimmer of the morning came slanting down the mountains, he stepped into his curragh and pulled across the lake, and took the road towards the water-palace of Angus of the Boyne.

When he reached the banks of the glancing river a little woman, dressed in red, was standing there before him.

“You are welcome, Enda,” said she. “And glad am I to see the day that brings you here to help the winsome Princess Mave. And now wait a second, and the water-dress and crystal helmet will be ready for you.”

And, having said this, the little woman plucked a handful of wild grasses, and she breathed upon them three times and then flung them on the river, and a dozen fairy nymphs came springing up through the water, bearing the water-dress and crystal helmet and a shining spear. And they laid them down upon the bank at Enda’s feet, and then disappeared.

“Now, Enda,” said the fairy woman, “take these; by the aid of the dress and the helmet you can walk beneath the waters. You will need the spear to enable you to meet the dangers that lie before you. But with that spear, if you only have courage, you can overcome everything and everyone that may attempt to bar your way.”

Having said this, she bid good-bye to Enda, and stepping off the bank, she floated out upon the river as lightly as a red poppy leaf. And when she came to the middle of the stream she disappeared beneath the waters.

Enda took the helmet, dress, and spear, and it was not long until he came to the sedgy banks where his little boat was waiting for him. As he stepped into the curragh the moon was rising above the mountains. He rowed on until he came to the hut, and having moored the boat to the door, he put on the water-dress and the crystal helmet, and taking the spear in his hand, he leaped over the side of the curragh, and sank down and down until

he touched the bottom. Then he walked along without minding where he was going, and the only light he had was the shimmering moonlight, which descended as faintly through the waters as if it came through muffled glass. He had not gone very far when he heard a horrible hissing, and straight before him he saw what he thought were two flaming coals.

After a few more steps he found himself face to face with the dragon of the lake, the guardian of the palace of the fairy queen. Before he had time to raise his spear, the dragon had wound its coils around him, and he heard its horrible teeth crunching against the side of his crystal helmet, and he felt the pressure of its coils around his side, and the breath almost left his body; but the dragon, unable to pierce the helmet, unwound his coils, and soon Enda's hands were free, and before the dragon could attempt to seize him again, he drove his spear through one of its fiery eyes, and, writhing with pain, the hissing dragon darted through a cave behind him. Enda, gaining courage from the dragon's flight, marched on until he came to a door of dull brass set in the rocks. He tried to push it in before him, but he might as well have tried to push away the rocks. While he was wondering what he should do, he heard again the fierce hissing of the dragon, and saw the red glare of his fiery eye dimly in the water.

Lifting his spear and hastily turning round to meet the furious monster, Enda accidentally touched the door with the point of the spear, and the door flew open. Enda passed through, and the door closed behind him with a grating sound, and he marched along through a rocky pass which led to a sandy plain.

As he stepped from the pass into the plain the sands began to move, as if they were alive. In a second a thousand hideous serpents, almost the colour of the sand, rose hissing up, and with their forked tongues made a horrible, poisonous hedge in front of him. For a second he stood dismayed, but then, levelling his spear, he rushed against the hedge of serpents, and they, shooting poison at him, sank beneath the sand. But the poison did not harm him, because of his water-dress and crystal helmet.

When he had passed over the sandy plain, he had to climb a great steep, jagged rock. When he got to the top of the rock he saw spread out before him a stony waste without a tuft or blade of grass. At some distance in front of him he noticed a large dark object, which he took to be a rock, but on looking at it more closely he saw that it was a huge, misshapen, swollen mass, apparently alive. And it was growing bigger and bigger every moment. Enda stood amazed at the sight, and before he knew where he was the loathsome creature rose from the ground, and sprang upon him before he could use his spear, and, catching him in its horrid grasp, flung him back over the rocks on to the sandy plain. Enda was almost stunned, but the hissing of the serpents rising from

the sand around him brought him to himself, and, jumping to his feet, once more he drove them down beneath the surface.



Illustration from Edmond Leamy's Irish Fairy Tales (1906), M.A. Gill & Son. Ltd, Dublin.

He then approached the jagged rock, on the top of which he saw the filthy monster glaring at him with bloodshot eyes. Enda poised his spear and hurled it against his enemy. It entered between the monster's eyes, and from the wound the blood flowed down like a black torrent and dyed the plain, and the shrunken carcase slipped down the front of the rocks and disappeared beneath the sand. Enda once more ascended the rock, and without meeting or seeing anything he passed over the stony waste, and at last he came to a leafy wood. He had not gone far in the wood until he heard the sound of fairy music, and walking on he came upon a mossy glade, and there he found the fairies dancing around their queen. They were so small, and were all so brightly dressed, that they looked like a mass of waving flowers; but when he was seen by them they vanished like a glorious dream, and no one remained before him but the fairy queen. The queen blushed at finding herself alone, but on stamping her little foot three times upon the ground, the frightened fairies all crept back again.

"You are welcome, Enda," said the queen. "My little subjects have been alarmed by your strange dress and crystal helmet. I pray you take them off; you do not need them here."

Enda did as he was bidden, and he laid down his water-dress and helmet on the grass, and the little fairies, seeing him in his proper shape, got over their fright, and, unrestrained by the presence of the queen, they ran tumbling over one another to try and get a good look at the crystal helmet.

"I know what you have come for, Enda," said the queen. "The golden cup you shall have to-morrow; but to-night you must share our feast, so follow me to the palace."

Having said this, the queen beckoned her pages to her, and, attended by them and followed by Enda, she went on through the wood. When they had left it behind them Enda saw on a green hill before him the snow-white palace of the fairy queen.

As the queen approached the steps that led up to the open door, a band of tiny fairies, dressed in rose-coloured silk, came out, carrying baskets of flowers, which they flung down on the steps to make a fragrant carpet for her. They were followed by a band of harpers dressed in yellow silken robes, who ranged themselves on each side of the steps and played their sweetest music as the queen ascended.

When the queen, followed by Enda, entered the palace, they passed through a crystal hall that led to a banquet-room. The room was lighted by a single star, large as a battle-shield. It was fixed against the wall above a

diamond throne.

The queen seated herself upon the throne, and the pages, advancing towards her, and bending low, as they approached the steps, handed her a golden wand.

The queen waved the wand three times, and a table laden with all kinds of delicacies appeared upon the floor. Then she beckoned Enda to her, and when he stood beside her the fairy table was no higher than his knee.

“I am afraid I must make you smaller, Enda,” said the queen, “or you will never be able to seat yourself at my fairy table.”

And having said this, she touched Enda with the golden wand, and at once he became as small as her tallest page. Then she struck the steps of her throne, and all the nobles of her court, headed by her bards, took their places at the festive board.

The feast went on right merrily, and when the tiny jewelled drinking-cups were placed upon the table, the queen ordered the harpers to play.

And the little harpers struck the chords, and as Enda listened to the music it seemed to him as if he was being slowly lifted from his seat, and when the music ended the fairies vanished, the shining star went out, and Enda was in perfect darkness.

The air blew keenly in his face, and he knew not where he was. At last he saw a faint grey light, and soon this light grew broader and brighter, and as the shadows fled before it, he could hardly believe his eyes when he found himself in his curragh on the lake, and the moonlight streaming down from the mountain-tops.

For a moment he thought he must have been dreaming; but there in the boat before him were the crystal helmet, and the water-dress, and the gleaming spear, and the golden bowl of perfumed water that was to remove the spell of enchantment from the white swan of the lake, and sailing towards him from the sedgy bank came the snow-white swan; and when she touched the boat, Enda put out his hands and lifted her in, and then over her plumage he poured the perfumed water from the golden bowl, and the Princess Mave in all her maiden beauty stood before him.

“Take your oar, Enda,” she said, “and row to the southern bank.”

Enda seized his oar, and the curragh sped across the waters swifter than a swallow in its flight. When the boat

touched the shore Enda jumped out, and lifted the princess on to the bank.

“Send your boat adrift, Enda,” she said; “but first take out your shining spear; the water-dress and the crystal helmet will take care of themselves.”

Enda took out the spear, and then pushed the boat from the bank. It sped on towards the hut in the middle of the lake; but before it had reached halfway six nymphs sprang up from the water and seizing the helmet and dress, sank with them beneath the tide, and the boat went on until it pushed its prow against the steps of the little hut, where it remained.

Then Enda and the princess turned towards the south, and it was not long until they came to a deep forest, that was folding up its shadows and spreading out its mossy glades before the glancing footsteps of the morning. They had not gone far through the forest when they heard the music of hounds and the cries of huntsmen, and crashing towards them through the low branches they saw a fierce wild boar. Enda, gently pushing the princess behind him, levelled his spear, and when the boar came close to him he drove it into his throat. The brute fell dead at his feet, and the dogs rushing up began to tear it to pieces. The princess fainted at the sight, and while Enda was endeavouring to restore her, the king of Erin, followed by his huntsmen, appeared, and when the king saw the princess he started in amazement, as he recognised the features of his daughter Mave.

At that moment the princess came to herself, and her father, lifting her tenderly in his arms, kissed her again and again.

“I have mourned you as dead, my darling,” said he, “and now you are restored to me more lovely than ever. I would gladly have given up my throne for this. But say who is the champion who has brought you hither, and who has slain the wild boar we have hunted so many years in vain?”

The princess blushed like a rose as she said:

“His name is Enda, father; it is he has brought me back to you.”

Then the king embraced Enda and said:

“Forgive me, Enda, for asking any questions about you before you have shared the hospitality of my court. My palace lies beyond the forest, and we shall reach it soon.”

Then the king ordered his huntsman to sound the bugle-horn, and all his nobles galloped up in answer to it,

and when they saw the Princess Mave they were so dazzled by her beauty that they scarcely gave a thought to the death of the wild boar.

“It is my daughter, Mave, come back to me,” said the king.

And all the nobles lowered their lances, and bowed in homage to the lady.

“And there stands the champion who has brought her home,” said the king, pointing to Enda.

The nobles looked at Enda, and bowed courteously, but in their hearts they were jealous of the champion, for they saw he was already a favourite of the king’s.

Then the pages came up, leading milk-white steeds with golden bridles, and the king, ordering Enda to mount one of them, lifted Mave on to his own, and mounted behind her. The pages, carrying the boar’s head on a hollow shield, preceded by the huntsmen sounding their horns, set out towards the palace, and the royal party followed them.

As the procession approached the palace crowds came rushing out to see the trophies of the chase, and through the snow-white door the queen, Mave’s cruel stepmother, attended by her maids-of-honour and the royal bards, came forth to greet the king. But when she saw seated before him the Princess Mave, who she thought was at the bottom of the lake under a spell of enchantment, she uttered a loud cry, and fell senseless to the ground.



Illustration from Edmond Leamy's Irish Fairy Tales (1906), M.A. Gill & Son. Ltd, Dublin.

The king jumped from his horse, and rushing to the queen, lifted her up and carried her in his arms to her apartments, for he had no suspicion of the wickedness of which she had been guilty.

And the court leeches were summoned to attend her, but she died that very night, and it was not until a green mound, worthy of a queen of Erin, had been raised over her grave that the Princess Mave told her father of the wickedness of her stepmother. And when she told him the whole story of how Enda had broken the spell of enchantment, and of the dangers which he had faced for her sake, the king summoned an assembly of all his nobles, and seated on his throne, wearing his golden helmet, the bards upon his right hand and the Druids upon his left, and the nobles in ranks before him with gleaming helmets and flashing spears, he told them the story of the princess, and of the service which Enda had rendered to her.

“And now,” said the king, “if the princess is willing to take her deliverer for her husband, I am willing that she shall be his bride; and if you, my subjects, Bards and Druids and Nobles and Chiefs of Erin, have anything to say against this union, speak. But first, Mave,” said the king, as he drew the blushing princess to him, “speak, darling, as becomes the daughter of a king—speak in the presence of the nobles of Erin, and say if it is your wish to become Enda’s bride.”

The princess flung her white arms around her father’s neck, as she murmured:

“Father, it was Enda brought me back to you, and before all the princes and nobles of Erin I am willing to be his bride.”

And she buried her head upon the king’s breast, and as he stroked her silken hair falling to her feet, the bards struck their golden harps, but the sound of the joyous music could hardly drown the murmurs of the jealous nobles.

When the music ceased the king beckoned Enda to him, and was about to place his hand in Mave’s when a Druid, whose white beard almost touched the ground, and who had been a favourite of the dead stepmother, and hated Mave for her sake, stepped forward and said:

“O King of Erin, never yet has the daughter of a king been freely given in marriage to any save a battle champion; and that stripling there has never struck his spear against a warrior’s shield.”

A murmur of approbation rose from the jealous princes, and Congal, the bravest of them all, stepped out from the ranks, and said:

“The Druid speaks the truth, O king! That stripling has never faced a battle champion yet, and, speaking for all the nobles of your land, I challenge him to fight any one of us; and as he is young and unused to arms, we are willing that the youngest and least experienced amongst us should be set against him.”

When Congal had spoken, the nobles, in approval of his words, struck their shields with their swords, and the brazen sound ascended to the skies.

The face of the princess, blushing a moment before like a rose, became as white as a lily; but the colour returned to her cheeks when she heard Enda’s voice ringing loud and clear.

“It is true, O king!” said he, “that I have never used my spear in battle yet. The Prince Congal has challenged me to meet the youngest and least experienced of the chiefs of Erin. I have risked my life already for your daughter’s sake. I would face death a thousand times for the chance of winning her for my bride; but I would scorn to claim her hand if I dared not meet the boldest battle champion of the nobles of Erin, and here before you, O king, and bards, Druids, and nobles, and chiefs of Erin, and here, in the presence of the Lady Mave, I challenge the boldest of them all.”

The king’s eyes flashed with joy as he listened to the brave words of Enda.

“It is well,” said the king; “the contest shall take place to-morrow on the lawn outside our palace gates; but before our assembly dissolves I call on you, nobles and chiefs of Erin, to name your boldest champion.”

Loud cries of “Congal! Congal!” answered the king’s speech.

“Are you willing, Congal?” asked the king.

“Willing, O king!” answered Congal.

“It is well,” said the king. “We shall all meet again to-night in our banquet-hall.”

And the king, with the Princess Mave on his arm, attended by his bards and Druids, entered the palace, and the chiefs and nobles went their several ways.

At the feast that night the princess sat beside the king, and Enda beside the princess, and the bards and Druids, nobles and chiefs, took their places in due order. And the bards sang songs of love and battle, and never merrier hours were spent than those which passed away that night in the banquet-hall of Erin's king.

When the feast was over Enda retired to his apartment to spend the night dreaming of the Princess Mave, and Congal went to his quarters; but not to sleep or dream, for the Druid who had provoked the contest came to him bringing his golden wand, and all night long the Druid was weaving spells to charm the shield and spear and helmet of Congal, to make them invulnerable in the battle of the morrow.

But while Enda lay dreaming of the Princess Mave, the little fairy woman who gave him the water-dress, and crystal helmet, and shining spear on the banks of the Boyne, slid into his room, and she placed beside his couch a silver helmet and a silver shield. And she rubbed the helmet, and the shield, and the blue blade and haft of his spear with the juice of the red rowan berries, and she let a drop fall upon his face and hands, and then she slid out as silently as she came.

When the morning broke, Enda sprang from his couch, and he could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the silver shield and helmet. At the sight of them he longed for the hour of battle, and he watched with eager gaze the sun climbing the sky; and, after hours of suspense, he heard the trumpet's sound and the clangour of the hollow shields, struck by the hard-pointed spears.

Putting on the helmet, and fastening the shield upon his left arm, and taking the spear in his right hand, he stepped out bravely to the fight. The edge of the lawn before the palace gates was ringed by the princes, nobles, and chiefs of Erin. And the palace walls were thronged by all the beauties of the Court and all the noble ladies of the land. And on his throne, surrounded by his Druids, his brehons, and his bards, was the king of Erin, and at his feet sat the lovely Lady Mave.

As Enda stepped out upon the lawn, he saw Congal advancing from the ranks of the nobles, and the two champions approached each other until they met right in front of the throne.

Then both turned towards the throne, and bowed to the king and the Princess Mave; and then facing each other again, they retired a space, and when their spears were poised, ready for battle, the king gave the signal,

which was answered by the clang of stricken shields, and Congal and Enda launched their gleaming spears. They flashed like lightning in the sunlit air, and in a second Congal's had broken against Enda's shield; but Enda's, piercing Congal's helmet, hurled him senseless on the plain.

The nobles and chiefs could hardly realize that in that single second their boldest champion was overthrown; but when they saw him stretched motionless on the grassy sward, from out their ranks six warriors advanced to where the chieftain lay, and sadly they bore him away upon their battle-shields, and Enda remained victor upon the field.

And then the king's voice rang out clear as the sound of a trumpet in the still morning:

"Bards and brehons, princes and nobles, and chiefs of Erin, Enda has proved himself a battle champion, and who amongst you now will dare gainsay his right to claim my daughter for his bride?"

And no answer came.

But when he summoned Enda to his throne, and placed the lady's hand in his, a cheer arose from the great assembly, that proved that jealousy was extinguished in all hearts, and that all believed that Enda was worthy of the winsome bride; and never since that day, although a thousand years have passed, was there in all the world a brighter and joyous wedding than the wedding of Enda and the Princess Mave.

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