



The Lady of Lavernum

Mark Simpson

Mystery, Supernatural

5 min read

And there are times when the cold chills them to the bone, when they climb up onto their mothers' laps, into their mothers' arms, and they shiver and they shiver. They vibrate through their mothers' bodies like the oscillation of a bag of bones twanging on elastic. The mothers hold them close, and the wild leapings and darting flames of log fires throw dark and light across their faces. The reds and yellows are deep and vibrant, strong as the iridescent orange of molten metal between the blacksmith's tongs.

Yet the heat does not reach them, these young ones who battle each winter, whose scrawny frames offer no remittance from the rasping tongues of icy drafts under doorways, of heavy damp that climbs through the sodden air.

The mothers rock their chairs, the old oak runners creaking back and forth. They coo into those ears, marbled blue with cold, and stroke the matted hemp of their hair; they tell them the tale of The Lady of Lavernum who takes the children in, who takes away their coldness, who takes away their souls.

“She wears a cloak of strange thick hide,
She walks with eyes cast down
She scours the wood for living things
To add unto her gown.”

Outside, the snow is piled up in drifted banks. The moonlight echoes off the frozen rime that vitrifies the surface like burnt treacle. The night is still, the darkness of the woods complete. It is a black abyss which devours the shimmering half-light. The iron frames of twisted trees inveigle their limbs in and out of one another, a sparse inversion of the little ones on mothers' knees, til the mesh is as tough as a wire grille, the welcome as harsh as briars.

“The huntsman picks a well-known path,
He says there's nought to fear,
So why the gun clasped to his hip,
The cloths that block each ear?”

The mothers' whispers swirl in the half-asleep ears. They are white as bone and float in the same erratic orbits as the smokes from the huntsmen's fires. The children are warned of the Lady's song, how it drifts through the woods, sniffs at the roots and branches, wraps itself round the body like ivy round a trunk. In their fitful dreams, the words of the mothers form fragile images, no more than half-formed thoughts:

“The eyes of the Lady are warm and deep,
Her lap a loving embrace
But pity the child who's under the spell
Of the song, the smile, that face.”

One night, a child awakes. The burrowing cold has finally wrested her from sleep. Her body trembles beneath the threadbare sheets. Something is tapping at her window frame. She rises, traverses the room, bare feet soft on wooden floor. The wind is up tonight, whipping eddies in the empty sky; it is blowing the slender branch of an ash tree against the pane of her window frame. It is like the scraping of an animal's paw on an unopened door.

There is nothing to be wary of. Just the wind, and just the branch; just the restless tapping of a tree in a gale. As she turns away, she catches sight of a light at the edge of the woods. It is yellow-white and rocking gently from side-to-side. It is a lantern, she thinks, hanging from someone's hand, swinging in a gentle arc like the slender finger of the Ash scratching at her window.

The child jabs open the window a crack, wants to see who is holding this light. Perhaps it is the huntsman, or her father, returning from the night. A gentle melody drifts in through the window's opening, tip-toeing its way with light feet on the spiralling breeze. It sweeps in through her window and falls in coils around her, honey falling languidly from a spoon in great spirals of gleaming sweetness. At once, her room is warmer and softer; she thinks that she could fall back into this soothing tune, that it might be a plumped pillow beneath her head, the wondrous caress of a goose-feather eiderdown about her wasting flesh.

The song continues; it is drawing her away. It speaks of warmth and another world where children sleep and children eat. Amid the hollow cold of her bedroom, the gentle ribbons of the singing's ebb and flow are wrapping around her; they are hugging her close like the arms of a mother. How can she notice the tightening at her chest? Her lungs have been squeezed for so long by the cold, these constrictions are nothing new. Her rasping breaths form tiny ephemeral clouds in the air around her; they are tissue-thin; they are no more than the strands of unseen cobwebs that touch our face some mornings.

Gently, the song carries her down the stairs, past the room of her sleeping mother. In the living room the embers of the fire are a sleeping dog, the occasional flare a twitching eyelid, but the flames have died now and the blazing beast will not stir. The latch on the door has risen, and the mighty oak door, so swollen to obesity with cold and damp that in the daylight hours a heaving shoulder alone can move it, swings open with barely a whisper and the little one is drawn out into the luminous world of the moonlight.

The snow crinkles beneath her feet. They will find the padded footsteps in the morning. Still the lantern swings from side-to-side like a boatman's hurricane lamp carrying her through the night. Though her feet are bare, she feels no cold: the Lady of Lavernum absorbs the cold like ice-white blotting paper. She draws it into her veins 'til it courses round the shrivelled heart that beats unsteadily beneath the strange rough hide of the cloak that wraps around her.

The child is at the edge of the forest now, but the eerie light of the arcing lantern is losing her. It flashes at her in truncated beams, sliced up by the boughs of the trees. If her ears could hear, they would know that the forest is warning her, pleading with her to turn back home, for the door is still open behind her, the night wind scattering touches of snow on the brown woven mat of her hearth.

But there is a dark silhouette attached to the light, and from her the strains of the lullaby still waft their addling allure. The child cannot choose but enter. The horrible blackness of the woods swallows her up. What else can it do? The Lady has taken its will.

"In the dark of the heart of the awful woods
Where the wild wolves' mouths do foam,
Lies the dreadful den of Lavernum,
Which the Lady calls her home."

In the dark womb of the forest, the child approaches the wooden shelter.

Inside it is empty. No-one is there, though the rooms resound with the echoing tune. The vestments of children are strewn on the backs of chairs, piled up in corners, or hanging from the hooks on the walls. The child shivers. She knows she is far from home. The hypnotism of the music's spell is fading. Why bind a prisoner who has nowhere to run? The Lady of Lavernum has her prey.

Behind her, the child hears the heavy fall of a foot on the rotting boards. She turns, and in an instant fear freezes her soul, though the room is warm with the heat of an unseen fire. The Lady of Lavernum stands before her, draped in her great dun cape. Her eyes are hard as flint; no spark arises in those empty pallid orbs. The child is staring into the depths of an absence beyond her knowing. The Lady of Lavernum bends at the waist and the middle of her vast coat crumples and folds upon itself like sodden worsted. Up close, the child can see

it is stretched tight with patches of faded aureate cloth, stitched together with some greying wool. Its surface is clammy and calloused, covered with a fine down of different coloured hairs. It is the skin of a creature the little child knows all too well.

The Lady approaches her and her song is finally done. Now she whispers something dreadful in the child's ear, but the child hears only murmuring and the awful chill of breath upon her skin. The Lady stretches a twisted arm, as gnarled and furrowed as the trees of the wood. She draws it through the sleeve of her terrible coat, so the flaxen arm hangs limp. It is then that the child sees it. The lining of that hair-sheened cloak is a hideous tapestry of children's faces, of rigid hands and mangled limbs. The child feels she is staring into a waxy chamber of horrors; the eyes of the faces are yellow and closed and lidded, but the fingers twitch as if half-alive. Now the lady is unrobed and she jerks the awful coat in her hand so the faces and arms and legs dance like hideous marionettes.

The worst is yet to come.

“She weaves her coat from the young and dead
Whose lives she charmed and took
But look away, my little one,
When it hangs from her iron hook.”

And now she hangs it. The child looks on in torpid wonder. The heaped-up clothes and discarded rags are shifting on the ground. They unfold into human form. A child emerges from the nothing within each pile. The children are pale, gaunt, unseeing; they move at the urging of a force beyond them. One bears a broom and sweeps away at the granite fire-side; another scrubs at a great wooden table; two more are winding dripping clothes through a great wrought-iron mangle; there are others, perhaps six, perhaps seven, each hurrying away at some chosen chore while the Lady reclines in a throne-like chair and waits for the work to end.

The child looks on as if half-awake in a chilling dream, uncertain where the real has ended and the horror begun. The room is astir with activity, but each child seems to move in a cold detachment as though unaware of the presence of the others. The child senses her own future and shudders, but the Lady seems oblivious to her presence.

For several nights – though the days and nights seem to pass in equal hues of grey and dark – the child lies unsleeping on the floorboards and puts her mind to work. There are no sounds from the outside world: no bird seems to sing, no creature roars or sighs. The children continue about their spectral work for all of the hours that the Lady hangs her coat. But when she slips it from the hook and places it about her shoulders, the children disintegrate into the same old piles of clothes and rags, and the coat seems to come alive around her, its lining filling out and bristling with the little children's bodies.

The child yearns for the fire of her home; longs for the gentle rocking of the mother's knee; laments the opening of that window and the hearing of that tune.

In the half-light she recalls the words of those oft-heard verses:

“And the charm will not be broken,
For the children who rise in the heaps,
Til a chosen one might take that cloak,
While Lavernum, she sits and sleeps.”

So when the child hears the gentle trilling of the breath from the Lady's lips, she guesses that they tell of the falling of sleep and from her hard wood bed she slips. The coat is hanging limp and dreadful from the iron hook; the children are still bustling in the room, but they do not know her, do not see that she is there. With quivering hand, the child reaches up. The Lady stirs. Her hand shoots out, but falls again; the Lady sleeps on. Now the fingers of the child are playing round the collar of the great coat that hangs on the hook and she is lifting it, oh so carefully, for she fears both what is within it and also the Lady without.

She bolts for the door with the fearful bundle of skins clasped in both her hands. It stinks of stolen youth and the wretched wasted years. The woods are as dark as emptiness, and the snow as cold as tombs. The child is lashed by whipping saplings. Her feet tangle amid the web of roots; they sink in the marsh of mires. She glances back over her shoulder. There is as little behind her as there is in front. She senses the Lady has not followed her into the bowels of this forest.

For hours, she makes her way blindly through the night. She listens at every turn for some sound to guide her, but the woods are quiet tonight. The air is a fierce cold, but it holds no song, no haunting tune. The child

pushes on. At last, the black of the woods is thinning into dusky charcoal and then the first strokes of silver. She has reached the edge of the woods once more. The child hesitates in the final trees that flesh out the fringe of the woods. All that she has lost is calling her back. She sees her house, her bedroom window closed against the cold. It is late evening, and she can sense the fires burning in the hearth, so close that it spreads around her a wreath of warmth.

As she steps from the fringes of the woods, the door of her home swings outwards, and the mother appears on the threshold. The mother looks out, uncertain why she has opened her door to the night. Across the dusky twilight, she spies the child; her arms stretch out, her eyes are filling with tears.

She cries out, "My child, you have returned."

The cry echoes through the village. Other doors open, other mothers look out into the gloom. The mother is striding now, almost running towards her child. The heart of the child is swelling with joy. She too reaches out her arms for the mother. The bundle of skins falls from her arms and spreads itself on the ground.

The mother stops. Her eyes move down.

Other mothers are gathering now. Their eyes are all cast down. They all see what is there: the leathery yellow patchwork laid out on the white of the snow. They are turning now to the mother. They are holding her in their arms. Tears are flowing from her eyes; they are dripping from her face, forming dimples in the snow around her feet. Her knees have buckled. The mothers are holding her up; they are dragging her back to the house.

The child does not understand. Her arms are outstretched like rigor mortis. She is calling out for the mother; she is crying out for her mother.

The door has closed. The child is left alone.

"But once that coat is off its hook,
And the chosen one returned,
The village will smell the taint of the cloth,
And the child she will be spurned."

Gentle murmurs of a growing wind are circling round about the child. The dusty crust of the snow is peeled off

and blows softly, eddying round the child's legs and cheeks. The chill of the night air has been a stranger to her in her hectic fleeing through the forest, but now it has returned. It comes to gnaw at her neck and it chafes its teeth against her downy arms. The child shivers and the cold trembles, before falling upon her once more. The terrible yellow of the jag-stitched cloth is inviting her to return. It will bring her warmth; it will protect her against the icy wildness of the black forest into which they have forced her to return.

All doors are closed to her now. Lights shine in a few of the windows. Somewhere, unknown to the mothers of the village, other children are pulling back their curtains and watching the scene unfold. Eyes are wide without understanding.

The child plucks the coat from the wintry ground by the cuff of one sleeve. Gratefully and slowly, she unfolds an arm into it and thrusts her tiny hand out into the cold air. Then she drags the ghastly rag of skins across the narrowness of her shoulders and wrestles herself in through the other arm.

The faces and the fingers, and the thumbs and the toes, wriggle themselves alive in the lining. They bite and they hook, and they claw into the pelt of the new wearer until the awful coat has become a second skin. In her second skin, the young lady re-enters the darkness of the forest which once had held such fear.

In the midst of the forest there is a wooden shelter with harshly boarded floor. Littered inside it are heaps of clothes and haphazard bundles of lifeless rags. In a chair in the centre sits an old woman. They say she was once the mistress of those woods. Now her skin is white and lustreless; her hair falls in ragged sheathes across her shoulders. No breath stirs from within that sunken chest. The woman in the chair is dead.

But the Lady of Lavernum lives on.

“And child, I pray you, listen,
And mothers, I pray you, hear,
We harm the things we turn from,
They become the things we fear.”

Read more fairy tales on Fairytalez.com