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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

UNDINE'S KYMRIC SISTERS

Undine, liebes Bildchen du,
 Seit ich zuerst aus alten Kunden
 Dein seltsam Leuchten aufgefunden,
 Wie sangst du oft mein Herz in Ruh!

DE LA MOTTE FOUQUÉ.

THE chief object of this and several of the following chapters is to place on record all the matter I can find on the subject of Welsh lake legends: what I may have to say of them is merely by the way and sporadic, and I should feel well paid for my trouble if these contributions should stimulate others to communicate to the public bits of similar legends, which, possibly, still linger unrecorded among the mountains of Wales. For it should be clearly understood that all such things bear on the history of the Welsh, as the history of no people can be said to have been written so long as its superstitions and beliefs in past times have not been studied; and those who may think that the legends here recorded are childish and frivolous, may rest assured that they bear on questions which could not themselves be called either childish or frivolous. So, however silly a legend may be thought, let him who knows such a legend communicate it to somebody who will place it on record; he will then probably find that it has more meaning and interest than he had anticipated.

I.

I find it best to begin by reproducing a story which has already been placed on record: this appears desirable on account of its being the most complete of its kind, and the one with which shorter ones can most readily be compared. I allude to the legend of the Lady of ILyn y Fan Fach in Carmarthenshire, which I take the liberty of copying from Mr. Rees of Tonn's version in the introduction to *The Physicians of Myđvai*¹, published by the Welsh Manuscript Society, at ILandoverly, in 1861. There he says that he wrote it down from the oral recitations, which I suppose were in Welsh, of John Evans, tiler, of Myđfai, David Williams, Morfa, near Myđfai, who was about ninety years old at the time, and Elizabeth Morgan, of Henffys Lodge, near ILandoverly, who was a native of the same village of Myđfai; to this it may be added that he acknowledges obligations also to Joseph Joseph, Esq., F.S.A., Brecon, for collecting particulars from the old inhabitants of the parish of ILandŷusant. The legend, as given by Mr. Rees in English, runs as follows, and strongly reminds one in certain parts of the Story of Undine as given in the German of De la Motte Fouqué, with which it should be compared:—

‘When the eventful struggle made by the Princes of South Wales to preserve the independence of their country was drawing to its close in the twelfth cen-

¹ As to the spelling of Welsh names, it may be pointed out for the benefit of English readers that Welsh *f* has the sound of English *v*, while the sound of English *f* is written *ff* (and *ph*) in Welsh, and however strange it may seem to them that the written *f* should be sounded *v*, it is borrowed from an old English alphabet which did so likewise more or less systematically. *Th* in such English words as *thin* and *breath* is written *th*, but the soft sound as in *this* and *breathe* is usually printed in Welsh *dd* and written in modern Welsh manuscript sometimes *ð*, like a small Greek delta: this will be found represented by *đ* in the Welsh extracts edited by me in this volume.—J. R. —

i] *UNDINE'S KYMRIC SISTERS* 3

ture, there lived at Blaensawde¹ near Llandeusant, Carmarthenshire, a widowed woman, the relict of a farmer who had fallen in those disastrous troubles.

'The widow had an only son to bring up, but Providence smiled upon her, and despite her forlorn condition, her live stock had so increased in course of time, that she could not well depasture them upon her farm, so she sent a portion of her cattle to graze on the adjoining Black Mountain, and their most favourite place was near the small lake called Llyn y Fan Fach, on the north-western side of the Carmarthenshire Fans.

'The son grew up to manhood, and was generally sent by his mother to look after the cattle on the mountain. One day, in his peregrinations along the margin of the lake, to his great astonishment, he beheld, sitting on the unruffled surface of the water, a lady; one of the most beautiful creatures that mortal eyes ever beheld, her hair flowed gracefully in ringlets over her shoulders, the tresses of which she arranged with a comb, whilst the glassy surface of her watery couch served for the purpose of a mirror, reflecting back her own image. Suddenly she beheld the young man standing on the brink of the lake, with his eyes riveted on her, and unconsciously offering to herself the provision of barley bread and cheese with which he had been provided when he left his home.

'Bewildered by a feeling of love and admiration for the object before him, he continued to hold out his hand towards the lady, who imperceptibly glided near to him, but gently refused the offer of his provisions.

¹ 'Blaensawde, or the upper end of the river Sawde, is situate about three-quarters of a mile south-east from the village of Llandeusant. It gives its name to one of the hamlets of that parish. The Sawde has its source in Llyn y Fan Fach, which is nearly two miles distant from Blaensawde House.'

He attempted to touch her, but she eluded his grasp, saying—

<i>Cras dy fara ;</i>	Hard baked is thy bread!
<i>Nid hawŵ fy nala.</i>	'Tis not easy to catch me ¹ ;

and immediately dived under the water and disappeared, leaving the love-stricken youth to return home, a prey to disappointment and regret that he had been unable to make further acquaintance with one, in comparison with whom the whole of the fair maidens of *ILandeu-sant* and *Myŵfai*² whom he had ever seen were as nothing.

‘On his return home the young man communicated to his mother the extraordinary vision he had beheld. She advised him to take some unbaked dough or “toes” the next time in his pocket, as there must have been some spell connected with the hard-baked bread, or “*Bara cras*,” which prevented his catching the lady.

‘Next morning, before the sun had gilded with its rays the peaks of the *Fans*, the young man was at the lake, not for the purpose of looking after his mother’s cattle, but seeking for the same enchanting vision he

¹ The rendering might be more correctly given thus: ‘O thou of the crimped bread, it is not easy to catch me.’—J. R.

² ‘*Myŵfai* parish was, in former times, celebrated for its fair maidens, but whether they were descendants of the Lady of the Lake or otherwise cannot be determined. An old pennit records the fact of their beauty thus :—

Mae eira gwyn
Ar ben y bryn,
A'r glasgoed yn y Ferdre,
Mae bedw mân
Ynghoed Cwm-brân,
A merched glân yn Myŵfe.

Which may be translated,

There is white snow
 On the mountain's brow,
 And greenwood at the Verdre,
 Young birch so good
 In Cwm-brân wood,
 And lovely girls in *Myŵfe*.'

had witnessed the day before; but all in vain did he anxiously strain his eyeballs and glance over the surface of the lake, as only the ripples occasioned by a stiff breeze met his view, and a cloud hung heavily on the summit of the Fan, which imparted an additional gloom to his already distracted mind.

'Hours passed on, the wind was hushed, and the clouds which had enveloped the mountain had vanished into thin air before the powerful beams of the sun, when the youth was startled by seeing some of his mother's cattle on the precipitous side of the acclivity, nearly on the opposite side of the lake. His duty impelled him to attempt to rescue them from their perilous position, for which purpose he was hastening away, when, to his inexpressible delight, the object of his search again appeared to him as before, and seemed much more beautiful than when he first beheld her. His hand was again held out to her, full of unbaked bread, which he offered with an urgent proffer of his heart also, and vows of eternal attachment. All of which were refused by her, saying—

Llaith dy fara!
Ti ni fynna'.

Unbaked is thy bread!
I will not have thee¹.

But the smiles that played upon her features as the lady vanished beneath the waters raised within the young man a hope that forbade him to despair by her refusal of him, and the recollection of which cheered him on his way home. His aged parent was made acquainted with his ill-success, and she suggested that his bread should next time be but slightly baked, as most likely to please the mysterious being of whom he had become enamoured.

'Impelled by an irresistible feeling, the youth left

¹ Similarly this should be rendered: 'O thou of the moist bread, I will not have thee.'—J. R.

his mother's house early next morning, and with rapid steps he passed over the mountain. He was soon near the margin of the lake, and with all the impatience of an ardent lover did he wait with a feverish anxiety for the reappearance of the mysterious lady.

'The sheep and goats browsed on the precipitous sides of the Fan; the cattle strayed amongst the rocks and large stones, some of which were occasionally loosened from their beds and suddenly rolled down into the lake; rain and sunshine alike came and passed away; but all were unheeded by the youth, so wrapped up was he in looking for the appearance of the lady.

'The freshness of the early morning had disappeared before the sultry rays of the noon-day sun, which in its turn was fast verging towards the west as the evening was dying away and making room for the shades of night, and hope had wellnigh abated of beholding once more the Lady of the Lake. The young man cast a sad and last farewell look over the waters, and, to his astonishment, beheld several cows walking along its surface. The sight of these animals caused hope to revive that they would be followed by another object far more pleasing; nor was he disappointed, for the maiden reappeared, and to his enraptured sight, even lovelier than ever. She approached the land, and he rushed to meet her in the water. A smile encouraged him to seize her hand; neither did she refuse the moderately baked bread he offered her; and after some persuasion she consented to become his bride, on condition that they should only live together until she received from him three blows without a cause,

Tri ergyd diachos.

Three causeless blows.

And if he ever should happen to strike her three such

blows she would leave him for ever. To such conditions he readily consented, and would have consented to any other stipulation, had it been proposed, as he was only intent on then securing such a lovely creature for his wife.

‘Thus the Lady of the Lake engaged to become the young man’s wife, and having loosed her hand for a moment she darted away and dived into the lake. His chagrin and grief were such that he determined to cast himself headlong into the deepest water, so as to end his life in the element that had contained in its unfathomed depths the only one for whom he cared to live on earth. As he was on the point of committing this rash act, there emerged out of the lake *two* most beautiful ladies, accompanied by a hoary-headed man of noble mien and extraordinary stature, but having otherwise all the force and strength of youth. This man addressed the almost bewildered youth in accents calculated to soothe his troubled mind, saying that as he proposed to marry one of his daughters, he consented to the union, provided the young man could distinguish which of the two ladies before him was the object of his affections. This was no easy task, as the maidens were such perfect counterparts of each other that it seemed quite impossible for him to choose his bride, and if perchance he fixed upon the wrong one all would be for ever lost.

‘Whilst the young man narrowly scanned the two ladies, he could not perceive the least difference betwixt the two, and was almost giving up the task in despair, when one of them thrust her foot a slight degree forward. The motion, simple as it was, did not escape the observation of the youth, and he discovered a trifling variation in the mode with which their sandals were tied. This at once put an end to the dilemma, for he,

who had on previous occasions been so taken up with the general appearance of the Lady of the Lake, had also noticed the beauty of her feet and ankles, and on now recognizing the peculiarity of her shoe-tie he boldly took hold of her hand.

“Thou hast chosen rightly,” said her father; “be to her a kind and faithful husband, and I will give her, as a dowry, as many sheep, cattle, goats, and horses as she can count of each without heaving or drawing in her breath. But remember, that if you prove unkind to her at any time, and strike her three times without a cause, she shall return to me, and shall bring all her stock back with her.”

‘Such was the verbal marriage settlement, to which the young man gladly assented, and his bride was desired to count the number of sheep she was to have. She immediately adopted the mode of counting by *fives*, thus:—One, two, three, four, five—One, two, three, four, five; as many times as possible in rapid succession, till her breath was exhausted. The same process of reckoning had to determine the number of goats, cattle, and horses respectively; and in an instant the full number of each came out of the lake when called upon by the father.

‘The young couple were then married, by what ceremony was not stated, and afterwards went to reside at a farm called Esgair ILaethdy, somewhat more than a mile from the village of Mydfai, where they lived in prosperity and happiness for several years, and became the parents of three sons, who were beautiful children.

‘Once upon a time there was a christening to take place in the neighbourhood, to which the parents were specially invited. When the day arrived the wife appeared very reluctant to attend the christening,

alleging that the distance was too great for her to walk. Her husband told her to fetch one of the horses which were grazing in an adjoining field. "I will," said she, "if you will bring me my gloves which I left in our house." He went to the house and returned with the gloves, and finding that she had not gone for the horse jocularly slapped her shoulder with one of them, saying, "go! go!" (*dos, dos*), when she reminded him of the understanding upon which she consented to marry him:—That he was not to strike her without a cause; and warned him to be more cautious for the future.

'On another occasion, when they were together at a wedding, in the midst of the mirth and hilarity of the assembled guests, who had gathered together from all the surrounding country, she burst into tears and sobbed most piteously. Her husband touched her on her shoulder and inquired the cause of her weeping: she said, "Now people are entering into trouble, and your troubles are likely to commence, as you have the *second* time stricken me without a cause."

'Years passed on, and their children had grown up, and were particularly clever young men. In the midst of so many worldly blessings at home the husband almost forgot that there remained only *one* causeless blow to be given to destroy the whole of his prosperity. Still he was watchful lest any trivial occurrence should take place which his wife must regard as a breach of their marriage contract. She told him, as her affection for him was unabated, to be careful that he would not, through some inadvertence, give the last and only blow, which, by an unalterable destiny, over which she had no control, would separate them for ever.

'It, however, so happened that one day they were together at a funeral, where, in the midst of the mourning and grief at the house of the deceased, she appeared

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10

CELTIC FOLKLORE

[CH.

in the highest and gayest spirits, and indulged in immoderate fits of laughter, which so shocked her husband that he touched her, saying, "Hush! hush! don't laugh." She said that she laughed "because people when they die go out of trouble," and, rising up, she went out of the house, saying, "The last blow has been struck, our marriage contract is broken, and at an end! Farewell!" Then she started off towards Esgair ILaethdy, where she called her cattle and other stock together, each by name. The cattle she called thus:—

<i>Mu wlfrech, Moelfrech,</i>	Brindled cow, white speckled,
<i>Mu olfrech, Gwynfrech,</i>	Spotted cow, bold freckled,
<i>Pedair cae tonn-frech,</i>	The four field sward mottled,
<i>Yr hen wynebwen.</i>	The old white-faced,
<i>A'r las Geigen,</i>	And the grey Geingen,
<i>Gyda'r Tarw Gwyn</i>	With the white Bull,
<i>O lys y Brenin ;</i>	From the court of the King ;
<i>A'r tŷo du bach,</i>	And the little black calf
<i>Syŷ ar y bach,</i>	Tho' suspended on the hook,
<i>Dere dithau, yn iach adre!</i>	Come thou also, quite well home !

They all immediately obeyed the summons of their mistress. The "little black calf," although it had been slaughtered, became alive again, and walked off with the rest of the stock at the command of the lady. This happened in the spring of the year, and there were four oxen ploughing in one of the fields ; to these she cried:—

<i>Pedwar eidion glas</i>	The four grey oxen,
<i>Syŷ ar y maes,</i>	That are on the field,
<i>Deuoch chwithau</i>	Come you also
<i>Yn iach adre!</i>	Quite well home !

Away the whole of the live stock went with the Lady across Mydfai Mountain, towards the lake from whence they came, a distance of above six miles, where they disappeared beneath its waters, leaving no trace behind except a well-marked furrow, which was made by the plough the oxen drew after them into the lake, and