

THE QUEEN AND THE FOOL

I have heard one Hearne, a witch-doctor, who is on the border of Clare and Galway, say that in "every household" of faery "there is a queen and a fool," and that if you are "touched" by either you never recover, though you may from the touch of any other in faery. He said of the fool that he was "maybe the wisest of all," and spoke of him as dressed like one of the "mummers that used to be going about the country." Since then a friend has gathered me some few stories of him, and I have heard that he is known, too, in the highlands. I remember seeing a long, lank, ragged man sitting by the hearth in the cottage of an old miller not far from where I am now writing, and being told that he was a fool; and I find from the stories that my friend has gathered that he is believed to go to faery in his sleep; but whether he becomes an Amadan-na-Breena, a fool of the forth, and is attached to a household there, I cannot tell. It was an old woman that I know well, and who has been in faery herself, that spoke of him. She said, "There are fools amongst them, and the fools we see, like that Amadan of Ballylee, go away with them at night, and so do the woman fools that we call Oinseachs (apes)." A woman who is related to the witch-doctor on the border of Clare, and who can Cure people and cattle by spells, said, "There are some cures I can't do. I can't help any one that has got a stroke from the queen or the fool of the forth. I knew of a woman that saw the queen one time, and she looked like any Christian. I never heard of any that saw the fool but one woman that was walking near Gort, and she called out, 'There's the fool of the forth coming after me.' So her friends that were with her called out, though they could see nothing, and I suppose he went away at that, for she got no harm. He was like a big strong man, she said, and half naked, and that is all she said about him. I have never seen any myself, but I am a cousin of Hearne, and my uncle was away twenty-one years." The wife of the old miller said, "It is said they are mostly good neighbours, but the stroke of the fool is what there is no cure for; any one that gets that is gone. The Amadan-na-Breena we call him!" And an old woman who lives in the Bog of Kiltartan, and is very poor, said, "It is true enough, there is no cure for the stroke of the Amadan-na-Breena. There was an old man I knew long ago, he had a tape, and he could tell what diseases you had with measuring you; and he knew many things. And he said to me one time, 'What month of the year is the worst?' and I said, 'The month of May, of course.' 'It is not,' he said; 'but the month of June, for that's the month that the Amadan gives his stroke!' They say he looks like any other man, but he's leathan (wide), and not smart. I knew a boy one time got a great fright, for a lamb looked over the wall at him with a beard on it, and he knew it was the Amadan, for it was the month of June. And they brought him to that man I was telling about, that had the tape, and when he saw him he said, 'Send for the priest, and get a Mass said over him.' And so they did, and what would you say but he's living yet and has a family! A certain Regan said, 'They, the other sort of people, might be passing you close here and they might touch you. But any that gets the touch of the Amadan-na-Breena is done for.' It's true enough that it's in the month of June he's most likely to give the touch. I knew one that got it, and he told me about it himself. He was a boy I knew well, and he told me that one night a gentleman came to him, that had been his land-lord, and that was dead. And he told him to come along with him, for he wanted him to fight another man. And when he went he found two great troops of them, and the other troop had a living man with them too, and he was put to fight him. And they had a great fight, and he got the better of the other man, and then the troop on his side gave a great shout, and he was left home again. But about three years after that he was cutting bushes in a wood and he saw the Amadan coming at him. He had a big vessel in his arms, and it was shining, so that the boy could see nothing else; but he put it behind his back then and came running, and the boy said he looked wild and wide, like the side of the hill. And the boy ran, and he threw the vessel after him, and it broke with a great noise, and whatever came out of it, his head was gone there and then. He lived for a while after, and used to tell us many things, but his wits were gone. He thought they mightn't have liked him to beat the other man,

and he used to be afraid something would come on him." And an old woman in a Galway workhouse, who had some little knowledge of Queen Maive, said the other day, "The Amadan-na-Breena changes his shape every two days. Sometimes he comes like a youngster, and then he'll come like the worst of beasts, trying to give the touch he used to be. I heard it said of late he was shot, but I think myself it would be hard to shoot him."

I knew a man who was trying to bring before his mind's eye an image of Aengus, the old Irish god of love and poetry and ecstasy, who changed four of his kisses into birds, and suddenly the image of a man with a cap and bells rushed before his mind's eye, and grew vivid and spoke and called itself "Aengus' messenger." And I knew another man, a truly great seer, who saw a white fool in a visionary garden, where there was a tree with peacocks' feathers instead of leaves, and flowers that opened to show little human faces when the white fool had touched them with his coxcomb, and he saw at another time a white fool sitting by a pool and smiling and watching the images of many fair women floating up from the pool.

What else can death be but the beginning of wisdom and power and beauty? and foolishness may be a kind of death. I cannot think it wonderful that many should see a fool with a shining vessel of some enchantment or wisdom or dream too powerful for mortal brains in "every household of them." It is natural, too, that there should be a queen to every household of them, and that one should hear little of their kings, for women come more easily than men to that wisdom which ancient peoples, and all wild peoples even now, think the only wisdom. The self, which is the foundation of our knowledge, is broken in pieces by foolishness, and is forgotten in the sudden emotions of women, and therefore fools may get, and women do get of a certainty, glimpses of much that sanctity finds at the end of its painful journey. The man who saw the white fool said of a certain woman, not a peasant woman, "If I had her power of vision I would know all the wisdom of the gods, and her visions do not interest her." And I know of another woman, also not a peasant woman, who would pass in sleep into countries of an unearthly beauty, and who never cared for anything but to be busy about her house and her children; and presently an herb doctor cured her, as he called it. Wisdom and beauty and power may sometimes, as I think, come to those who die every day they live, though their dying may not be like the dying Shakespeare spoke of. There is a war between the living and the dead, and the Irish stories keep harping upon it. They will have it that when the potatoes or the wheat or any other of the fruits of the earth decay, they ripen in faery, and that our dreams lose their wisdom when the sap rises in the trees, and that our dreams can make the trees wither, and that one hears the bleating of the lambs of faery in November, and that blind eyes can see more than other eyes. Because the soul always believes in these, or in like things, the cell and the wilderness shall never be long empty, or lovers come into the world who will not understand the verse—

Heardst thou not sweet words among
That heaven-resounding minstrelsy?
Heardst thou not that those who die
Awake in a world of ecstasy?
How love, when limbs are interwoven,
And sleep, when the night of life is cloven,
And thought to the world's dim boundaries clinging,
And music when one's beloved is singing,
Is death?

