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The Bog Singer

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THE BOG SINGER

By ST. JOHN WHITTY

THE voice rose clear and sweet outside, and wound its way in through the window-hole of the cabin.

Katty Morrisy's arm dropped from the wheel, and the yarn lay idle in her hand. She looked over at her mother, who sat huddled up before the fire. Mrs. Morrisy had been deaf for ten years, yet Katty wondered vaguely that anything so sweet and full as the singer's voice should fail to penetrate even her ears.

She sat listening and making no attempt to move, her eyes fixed dreamily on the window-hole. The voice rose higher and wilder, till the stars seemed to quiver in sympathy, and then fell through a minor key that sounded like the sobbing of the wind turned into a passion of human sorrow.

Katty's eyes filled with tears, but she made no move towards the door.

For more than a week this had happened every night. No sooner was the door fastened and the soft whirr of the spinning-wheel begun, than the singer's voice came from far across the bog, coming nearer and nearer till it sounded close to Katty Morrisy's cabin walls.

On the first occasion she had darted out of the door: as she opened it the singing ceased. She went round to the back of the house, searching in the shadow of the turf stack, beside the stunted thorn bush, looking everywhere where there was enough substance in the open bog land to shelter a human creature. But there was nothing to be seen or heard. She went in again, and stood by the window listening, but could hear nothing but the plaintive call of the curlew and the little wind among the bog grasses.

The next night the song began again, but ceased the moment she went to the door. She could not make up her mind to tell her mother.

"How would I explain to the likes of her the sound there does be in it? It's singing right through the ears into the heart, and the pleasure has cryin' along with it through the length of the song. 'Tis queer, it is, even to myself, who has the hearing; and then if I was tellin' herself there was no one it at all good or bad . . . !"

So Katty gave up both quest and explanation, and was content to sit each night with hands in lap listening to the beautiful voice that might have won applause in great cities, but seemed content to rise into the starlit night above the Connacht bog pools, where none but Katty Morrisy and the wild bog creatures might hear.

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The singing ceased at last, but Katty still sat gazing dreamily at the turf sparks. The old woman had fallen asleep, with her beads in her hands. A little wind came through the window-hole and fluttered the soft ashes into little whirls.

Outside a shadow moved. A gnome-like figure crossed the tussocks till it stood in the dim ray of light thrown through the window from the fire inside. The head, shoulders and chest were those of a man, but from the waist downwards the figure might have been that of a boy of ten.

Michael Quinlan stood still and listened, and then slowly passed his hands over his face.

He could hear the anguished voice across the years, as his dying mother clasped him to her.

"Oh, man! oh, man! the face of you would win heaven itself for you!"

"And me body might fit Hell's keyhole be the same token," Michael had answered with a laugh.

"Oh Mother o' God," the woman had moaned, "was it pity gave to the likes o' him an angel's face?"

"An angel's face!" Michael whispered to himself again, "and maybe a singing voice. It's all I can be giving her, God knows."

He still hesitated. All his life he had lived in that lonely stretch of bog. Once only, long ago, his mother had taken him when a child to the town. He had got separated from her, and soon found himself surrounded by a little mob of boys, who jeered and hooted and made fun of his deformity. It was the first time he had known himself different to his fellows, and his sensitive mind shrank before their brutality. He was ugly, and people would dislike looking at him. How could he hide himself, he wondered.

Hardly less difficult to bear after this were the commiserating remarks of the other women to his mother upon her ill-grown son.

"Mother, will I be growin' soon?" Michael had asked during the somewhat silent trudge home.

"No, then, ye won't!" answered the woman bitterly. Then she turned to look down at him, and he saw the love and tears shining together in her eyes, and felt comforted as he clutched hold of her hand.

They never went to the town again, and from that day, on the rare occasions when he met any of his neighbours, he pulled down his old caubeen across his nose and turned up the collar of his coat, so that they might see as little of him as possible. So it happened that he had lived in the bog for nigh twenty years without them having seen his face.

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In his heart he had treasured the memory of his mother's words that he had at the least a comely face, for he loved beauty as the flowers desired the sun. For many months back he had hidden himself near the bog path that he might catch a glimpse of pretty Katty Morrisy going to and from the little town, with the brown hair curling round her head like the ripples in the bog pools; and for a glimpse of the tilt of her head and the lilt of her fresh young voice Michael thought the day well lost.

But on the day when Brian Connelly first saw her home, Michael felt something stir in his breast. He saw in the tall, well-knit figure one of his old tormentors at the long ago fair; his red touzled hair had struck him even then as curious head-covering for a boy.

And now he stood hesitating on the tussock by her window. He would try whether his mother's words were true: if she shrank from him—well, what ailed the world to him after that.

Noiselessly he collected a heap of turf, and, standing on it, he looked boldly in at the window.

Katty's eyes turned slowly from the fire and fixed themselves on the face in the open hole.

Michael's heart leaped, but he did not move his eyes from hers. No surprise was on her face; she looked as if she had met something long expected. She wondered why she felt no surprise that a strange man should look so at her, and the blood mounted slowly to her cheeks. Michael saw it, and spoke:

"Are you liking the singing, Katty Morrisy?" he asked in his soft musical voice.

"I am, then; liking it well, I was. Is it yourself is after making it?"

"It is so. Many's the night I do be standing here calling at you in the songs I'm making for you, and mebbe you wouldn't know I was in it at all."

Katty's hand stretched out instinctively to the wheel.

"What has you calling me?"

Michael made no answer, and Katty looked up. She saw the tumbled hair that lay across the broad forehead as the wind flung it, the tender sensitive mouth; and then she looked at the eyes, grey and dark in the shadow of the thatched cave, and she asked no more questions, but turned away her head.

"Herself had a right to ask you in; but sure she's tired out, the craythur, with tramping the bog the day."

She moved over to the door as she spoke.

"Don't be minding the door at all, for I'll never go in with you at all, Katty Morrisy," said Michael imperatively.

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"And what would ail ye not to come in?"

"There's a power on me," he whispered.

Katty turned a startled face to his and crossed herself.

"No, then, it's the power o' God on me, and there's no call to fret yourself, Katty Morrisy; but I won't be getting nearer to yourself than where I am, and there's no going against it. And isn't it good enough for me to be looking at ye?"

"What name is on ye?" asked the girl promptly.

Michael hesitated.

"They do say I'm the Bog-singer," he said, after a pause.

"Bog-singer? It's a queer enough name to a man."

The old woman stirred and looked around.

"What ails ye to be stopping the wheel, girl?" she asked querelously. Without waiting for an answer, she commenced her beads again; and when Katty looked up, the window was empty.

Each night Michael sang above the rushes and bog grasses, not much taller than they, and afterwards came to the window—a man wooing a woman. Each night he went home a misshapen elfin creature, but with the great Light lighting up his happy heart. Where was it taking him to? Maybe he did not know, maybe he did not care.

Once Katty broke the rule and insisted on opening the door. He sprang off the little heap of turf and flung himself down in a little patch of bramble and long grass, his heart thumping with fear. Katty passed so close that the brambles caught in her dress, and she loosened them petulantly as she ran on in search of him.

For three nights Michael stayed away, and on the fourth he could hold out no longer. He had been thinking during his absence and his heart was full. He sang a little crooning song, and then paused. Then, lifting his voice, he sang as he had never sung in his life: above the quaking mosses, the shimmering moonlit pools: above the nests of brooding birds, who turned their dainty heads to listen—above the soft night-wind the notes rose, till they seemed to touch the stars and make them tremble with a pain like his own. Who has heard the voice of the Peri at the gate of Paradise? Sad and plaintive and low it must be. But who shall hear the voice of the human heart when hope has died, and not cover the face and turn away the eyes.

Michael came to the window. Katty sat with her arm against the wheel, sobbing.

"Katty," he said softly.

With a little cry she jumped up and came over to him.

"I thought ye had gone from me for good," she sobbed.

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He stretched out his arms to her, and she came, and he kissed her; yes, her cheeks, her mouth.

"What ails you to sing the way you'll break my heart? What ails you not to come in to me?" she asked reproachfully.

"I'm leaving you, Katty, for good. There's Brian Connelly will be looking after you, and I gone out of it."

Katty raised her face, but Michael's was covered with his hands. Noiselessly she slipped over to the door. As the latch clicked he looked up; in an instant he slipped down from the window. The moon had gone behind a bank of clouds, and he ran towards the brambles. But Katty was too close behind him, and he turned again towards one of the larger bog pools. Coming out of the firelight, Katty's eyes were dazed, but she followed the sound of the running footsteps. Michael hesitated a moment. In another minute at most the moon would ride above the clouds. He stepped out on the quaking moss, intending to get behind a clump of rushes. He slipped and recovered, slipped again and began to sink. A horrible fear clutched at him. The clouds were growing filmy white where the moon was coming up. One more wrench and he might get behind the rushes in time. Michael looked again: the glory was spreading across the sky, and he could hear quick footsteps behind. He made up his mind.

Deliberately he pushed himself further down into the sucking bog.

"Keep back, Katty; it's the sucking bog!" he shouted, as the moon's rim rose up above the black mass.

She hesitated on the brink, and caught sight of him.

"Oh, Love o' Mary, pity you!" she cried piteously, wringing her hands. "What will I do for you! What will I do!"

"Well, then, I'll be coming out if you'll give me time to think of it, Katty aroon. Where's the danger in it, anyway?"

"Well, then, you are surely strong enough to pull yourself out of it?" she asked, somewhat reassured.

"Listen to me, Katty. Is it minding you'd be, and I not to come out of it? Is it loving me you are, mo croidhe?"

"Ay, it is loving you the width o' the world, I am surely," exclaimed Katty, sinking on her knees at the edge of the quaking moss.

Michael was up to his armpits now, and he caught at a bunch of rushes.

"There's not, in God's earth, a creature I am loving like yourself, Katty Morrissy, and that's Heaven's truth. But I'm thinking Brian Connelly is the fine big man to mind a girl; there'd be little

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harm would come to Brian Connelly's wife, for he has a heavy fist on him. But mind ye, Katty Morrissy, there's that I've got that Brian will never find."

The rushes were snapping one by one under the strain.

"What has ye talking of Brian and you drowning?" asked Katty bitterly. "Will I run for Brian to get you out of it?"

"Ay, Katty, you'll run for Brian, alannah. Tell me the words you are after saying again."

"What words are ye meaning?" called back Katty, as she ran.

"Say, are you liking me?"

"Ay, sure enough, I'm loving you; I'm loving you!"

The night wind brought them back to him, and he raised his face up to the stars.

"Loving you, loving you! Och, Brian Connelly, poor Brian Connelly."

The last rush snapped and broke.