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# HOW THE HUSBAND OF THE THIN WOMAN LOST HIS BROTHER

*By JAMES STEPHENS*

## I.

**I**N the very centre of the pine wood called Coilla Doraca there lived not long ago two philosophers. They were wiser than anything else in the world except the salmon who lies in the pool of Glyn Cagny into which the nuts of knowledge fall from the hazel bush on its banks—he is the most profound of all living creatures, but the two philosophers are next to him in wisdom. Their faces looked as though they were made of parchment, there was ink under their nails, and every difficulty which was submitted to them even by women, they were able to instantly resolve. The Grey Woman of Dungortin and the Thin Woman of Inis Magrath asked them the three questions which nobody had ever been able to answer, and they were able to answer them. That was how they obtained the enmity of these two women, which is more valuable than the friendship of angels. The Grey Woman and the Thin Woman were so incensed at being answered that they married the philosophers in order to be able to pinch them in bed, but the skins of the philosophers were so thick that they did not even know they were being pinched. They repaid the fury of the women with such tender affection that these vicious creatures almost expired of chagrin; and once, in a very ecstasy of exasperation, after having been kissed by their husbands, they uttered the fourteen hundred maledictions which comprised their wisdom, and these were learned by the philosophers, who thus became even wiser than before.

In due process of time, two children were born of these marriages. They were born on the same day and in the same hour, and they were only different in this, that one of them was a boy and the other one was a girl. Nobody was able to tell how this had happened, and, for the first time in their lives, the philosophers were forced to admire an event which they had been unable to prognosticate; but having proved by many different methods that the children were really children, that what must be must be, that a fact cannot

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be controverted, and that what has happened once may happen twice, they described the occurrence as extraordinary, but not unnatural, and submitted peaceably to a Providence even wiser than they were. The philosopher who had the boy was very pleased, because, he said, there were too many women in the world, and the philosopher who had the girl was very pleased also, because, he said, you cannot have too much of a good thing. The Grey Woman and the Thin Woman, however, were not in the least softened by maternity : they said they had not bargained for it, that the children were gotten under false pretences, that they were respectable married women, and that, as a protest against their wrongs, they would not cook any more food for the philosophers. This was pleasant news for their husbands, who disliked the women's cooking very much ; but they said nothing, for the women would certainly have insisted on their rights to cook had they imagined their husbands disliked the results ; therefore, the philosophers daily besought their wives to cook one of their lovely dinners again, and this the women always refused to do.

They lived together in a small house in the centre of a dark pine wood. Into this place the sun never shone, because the shade was too deep, and no wind ever came there either, because the boughs were too thick ; so that it was the most solitary and quiet place in the world, and the philosophers were able to hear each other thinking all day long, or making speeches to each other, and these were the pleasantest sound they knew of. To them there were only two kinds of sounds anywhere—these were conversation and noise ; they liked the first very much indeed, but they spoke of the second with stern disapproval, and, even when it was made by a bird, a breeze or a shower of rain, they grew angry and demanded that it should be abolished. Their wives seldom spoke at all, and yet they were never silent : they communicated with each other by a kind of physical telegraphy which they had learned among the Sidhe—they cracked their finger-joints quickly or slowly, and so were able to communicate with each other over immense distances ; for by dint of long practice they could make great explosive sounds which were like thunder, and gentler sounds like the tapping of grey ashes on a hearthstone. The Thin Woman hated her own child, but she loved the Grey Woman's baby, and the Grey Woman loved the Thin Woman's infant, but could not abide her own. A compromise may put an end to the most perplexing of situations, and, consequently, the two women swapped children, and at once became the most tender and amiable mothers imaginable, and the families were able to live together in a more perfect amity than could be found anywhere else.

The children grew in grace and comeliness. At first the little

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boy was short and fat, and the little girl was long and thin; then the little girl became round and chubby, while the little boy grew lanky and wiry—this was because the little girl used to sit very quiet and be good, and the little boy did not.

They lived for many years in the deep seclusion of the pine wood wherein a perpetual twilight reigned, and there they were wont to play their childish games, flitting among the shadowy trees like little quick shadows. Sometimes their mothers, the Grey Woman and the Thin Woman, played with them; but this was seldom, and sometimes their fathers, the two philosophers, came out and looked at them through their spectacles, which were very round and very glassy, and had immense circles of horn all round the edges. They had, however, other playmates, with whom they could romp all day long. There were hundreds of rabbits running about in the brushwood; they were full of fun, and were very fond of playing with the children. There were squirrels who joined cheerfully in their games, and some goats, having strayed in from the big world one day, were made so welcome that they always came again whenever they got the chance. There were birds also, crows and blackbirds and willy-wagtails, who were well acquainted with the youngsters, and visited them as frequently as their busy lives permitted.

At a short distance from their home there was a clearing in the wood about ten feet square; through this clearing, as through a funnel, the sun for a few hours in the summer-time blazed down. It was the boy who first discovered the strange, radiant shaft in the wood. One day he had been sent out to collect pine cones for the fire. As these were gathered daily the supply immediately near the house was scanty, therefore he had, while searching for more, wandered further from his home than usual. The first sight of the extraordinary blaze astonished him. He had never seen anything like it before, and the steady, unwinking glare aroused his fear and curiosity equally. Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will; indeed, it has led many people into dangers which mere physical courage would shudder away from, for hunger and love and curiosity are the great impelling forces of life. When the little boy found that the light did not move, he drew closer to it, and at last, emboldened by curiosity, he stepped right into it and found that it was not a thing at all. The instant that he stepped into the light he found it was hot, and this so frightened him that he jumped out of it again and ran behind a tree. Then he jumped into it for a moment and out of it again, and for nearly half an hour he played a splendid game of tip and tig with the sunlight. At last he grew quite bold, and stood in it, and found that it did not burn him a bit; but he did

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not like to remain in it for a long time, fearing lest he might be cooked. When he went home with the pine cones he said nothing to the Grey Woman of Dun Gortin or to the Thin Woman of Inis Magrath, or to the two philosophers, but he told the little girl all about it when they went to bed, and every day afterwards they used to go and play with the sunlight, and the birds and the squirrels would follow them there and join in their games with twice the interest they had shown before.

### II.

To the lonely house in the pine wood people sometimes came for advice on subjects too recondite for even those extremes of elucidation, the Parish Priest and the tavern. These people were always well received, and their perplexities were attended to instantly, for the philosophers liked being wise, and they were not ashamed to put their learning to the proof; nor were they, as so many wise people are, fearful lest they should become poor or less respected by giving away their knowledge. These were favourite maxims with them :

You must be fit to give before you can be fit to receive.

Knowledge becomes lumber in a week, therefore get rid of it.

The box must be emptied before it can be refilled.

Refilling is progress.

A sword, a spade and a fact should never be allowed to rust.

The Grey Woman and the Thin Woman, however, held opinions quite contrary to these, and their maxims also were different :

A secret is a weapon and a friend.

Man is God's secret, Power is man's secret, Sex is woman's secret.

By having much you are fitted to have more.

There is always room in the box.

The art of packing is the last lecture of wisdom.

The scalp of your enemy is progress.

Holding these opposed views, it seemed likely at first that visitors seeking for advice from the philosophers might be astonished and captured by their wives; but the women were true to their own doctrines, and refused to part with information to any persons, saving only those of high rank, such as policemen, gombeen-men, and District and County Councillors; but even to these they charged high prices for their information and a bonus on any gains which accrued through the following of their advices. It is unnecessary to state that their following was small when compared with those who sought the assistance of their husbands, for scarcely a week

passed but some person came through the pine woods with his brows in a tangle of perplexity.

In these people the children were deeply interested. They used to go apart afterwards and talk about them, and would try to remember what they looked like, how they talked, and their manner of walking or taking snuff. After a little time they became interested in the problems which these people submitted to their parents, and the replies or instructions wherewith the latter relieved them. Long training had made the children able to sit perfectly quiet, so that when the talk came to the interesting part they were entirely forgotten, and ideas which might otherwise have been spared their youth became the commonplaces of their conversation.

When the children were ten years of age, one of the philosophers died. He called the household together and announced that the time had come when he must bid them all good-bye, and that his intention was to die as quickly as might be. It was, he continued, an unfortunate thing that his health was at the time more robust than it had been for a long time; but that, of course, was no obstacle to his resolution, for death did not depend upon ill-health, but upon a multitude of other factors, with the details whereof he would not trouble them.

His wife, the Grey Woman of Dun Gortin, applauded this resolution, and added as an amendment that it was high time he did something, that the life he had been leading was an arid and unprofitable one, that he had stolen her fourteen hundred maledictions for which he had no use, and presented her with a child for which she had none, and that, all things concerned, the sooner he did die and stop talking the sooner everybody concerned would be made happy.

The other philosopher replied mildly, as he lit his pipe :

"Brother, the greatest of all virtues is curiosity, and the end of all desire is wisdom; tell us, therefore, by what steps you have arrived at this commendable resolution."

To this the philosopher replied :

"I have attained to all the wisdom which I am fitted to bear. In the space of one week no new truth has come to me. All that I have read lately I knew before, all that I have thought has been but a recapitulation of old and wearisome ideas. There is no longer an horizon before my eyes. Space has narrowed to the petty dimensions of my thumb. Time is the tick of a clock. Good and evil are two peas in the one pod. My wife's face is the same for ever. I want to play with the children, and yet I do not want to. Your conversation with me, brother, is like the droning of a bee in a dark

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cell. The pine trees take root and grow and die—it's all bosh; good-bye."

His friend replied :

"Brother, these are weighty reflections, and I do clearly perceive that the time has come for you to stop. I might observe, not in order to combat your views, but merely to continue an interesting conversation, that there are still some knowledges which you have not assimilated—you do not yet know how to play the tambourine, nor how to be nice to your wife, nor how to get up first in the morning and cook the breakfast. Have you learned how to smoke strong tobacco as I do? or can you dance in the moonlight with a woman of the Sidhe? To understand the theory which underlies all things is not sufficient. Theory is but the preparation for practice. It has occurred to me, brother, that wisdom may not be the end of everything. Goodness and kindness are, perhaps, beyond wisdom. Is it not possible that the ultimate end is gaiety and music and a dance of joy? Wisdom is the oldest of all things. Wisdom is all head and no heart. Behold, brother, you are being crushed under the weight of your head. You are dying of old age while you are yet a child."

"Brother," replied the other philosopher, "your voice is like the droning of a bee in a dark cell. If in my latter days I am reduced to playing on the tambourine and running after a hag in the moonlight and cooking your breakfast in the grey morning, then it is indeed time that I should die. Good-bye, brother."

So saying, the philosopher arose and removed all the furniture to the sides of the room, so that there was a clear space left in the centre. He then took off his boots and his coat, and, standing on his toes, he commenced to gyrate with extraordinary rapidity. In a few moments his movements became steady and swift, and a sound came from him like the humming of a swift saw; this sound grew deeper and deeper, and at last continuous, so that the room was filled with a thrilling noise. In a quarter of an hour the movement began noticeably to slacken. In another three minutes it was quite slow. In two more minutes he grew visible again as a body, and then he wobbled to and fro and at last dropped in a heap on the floor. He was quite dead, and on his face was an expression of serene beatitude.

"God be with you, brother," said the remaining philosopher, and he lit his pipe, focussed his vision on the extreme tip of his nose, and began to meditate profoundly on the aphorism whether the good is the all or the all is the good. In another moment he would have become oblivious of the room, the company, and the



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corpse, but the Grey Woman of Dun Gortin shattered his meditation by a demand for advice as to what should next be done. The philosopher, with an effort, detached his eyes from his nose and his mind from his maxim :

"Chaos," said he, "is the first condition. Order is the first law. Continuity is the first reflection. Quietude is the first happiness. Our brother is dead—bury him"; and, so saying, he returned his eyes to his nose and his mind to his maxim, and lapsed to a profound reflection wherein nothing sat perched on insubstantiality and the Spirit of Artifice goggled at the puzzle.

The Grey Woman of Dun Gortin took a pinch of snuff from her box, and raised the caoine over her husband.

"You were my husband, and you are dead.

It is wisdom that has killed you.

If you had listened to my wisdom instead of to your own, you would still be a trouble to me, and I would still be happy.

Women are stronger than men—they do not die of wisdom.

They are better than men, because they do not seek wisdom.

They are wiser than men, because they know less and understand more.

Wise men are thieves—they steal wisdom from the neighbours.

I had fourteen hundred maledictions, my little store, and by a trick you stole them and left me empty.

You stole my wisdom, and it has broken your neck.

I lost my knowledge, and I am yet alive raising the caoine over your body; but it was too heavy for you, my little knowledge.

You will never go out into the pine wood in the morning, or wander abroad on a night of stars. You will not sit in the chimney-corner on the hard nights, or go to bed or rise again, or do anything at all from this day out.

Who will gather pine cones now when the fire is going down, or call my name in the empty house, or be angry when the kettle is not boiling?

Now I am desolate indeed. I have no knowledge, I have no husband, I have no more to say."

"If I had anything better, you should have it," said she politely to the Thin Woman of Inis Magrath.

"Thank you," said the Thin Woman; "it was very nice. Shall I begin now? My husband is meditating, and we may be able to annoy him."

"Don't trouble yourself," replied the other, "I am past enjoyment, and am, moreover, a respectable woman."

"That is no more than the truth, indeed."



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"I have always done the right thing at the right time."

"I'd be the last body in the world to deny that," was the warm response.

"Very well, then," said the Grey Woman, and she commenced to take off her boots. She stood in the centre of the room and balanced herself on her toe.

"You are a decent, respectable lady," said the Thin Woman of Inis Magrath, and then the Grey Woman began to gyrate rapidly and more rapidly until she was a very fervour of motion, and in three-quarters of an hour (for she was very tough) she began to slacken, grew visible, wobbled, and fell beside her dead husband, and on her face was a beatitude almost surpassing his.

The Thin Woman of Inis Magrath smacked the children and put them to bed, next she buried the two bodies under the hearth-stone, and then, with some trouble, detached her husband from his meditations. When he became capable of ordinary occurrences, she detailed all that had happened, and said that he alone was to blame for the sad bereavement. He replied :

"The toxin generates the anti-toxin. The end lies concealed in the beginning. All bodies grow around a skeleton. Life is a petticoat about death. I will not go to bed."