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Intermediate Book



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## THE LONELY LADY

I

THERE is in Ireland a lake named Inchiquin. The lake was not always there. A castle once stood where now the soft water dimples and dreams. On calm days, it is said, if we peer through the limpid water we may still see the quivering outline of its walls, and old men tell us that this is the tower of "The Lonely Lady."

Who was she, and how came her tower down there you ask. Listen, then, to the story of Inchiquin.

Long, long ago, in the dim days before history, a mighty Chief ruled the lands of Inchiquin. He was as brave as a wild boar, and as handsome as a king, but he was still unwed, for never yet had he met a maiden he could love.

Not far from the tower was a cave, and near the cave was a bubbling well. The water from this well was purer and fresher than any other; yet people shunned the spot, because it was said that a lady dwelt within the cave, and came each morning at daybreak to drink of the water.

For a time the Chief paid no heed to these tales. He knew that this lady must be of fairy birth, and wise men had warned him to beware of such. Yet one morning, having been caught in a mist while out

hunting, he was returning to the castle at dawn, and as he rode through the castle-yard, he caught sight of the Lonely Lady.

She was running, and seemed to be in breathless haste. Her little bare feet twinkled like white doves upon the pavement. Ever and anon she glanced back over her shoulder as if in fear; and her bright green robe fluttered softly in the morning breeze. Small she was and very full of grace, and the heart of the Chief brimmed over all at once with love.

Leaping from his horse, he overtook her ere she reached the cave, and besought her not to leave him.

"You are seeking grief, though you know it not," was her reply.

"Nay," said he, "I am seeking my best happiness."

"Then, are you willing to pay the price?" she asked him.

"There is no price too heavy," he made answer.

The lady looked at him with bright searching eyes; but as she gazed, her heart melted towards him.

"I yield, Sir Chieftain," she whispered softly.

"But this is the price you must pay—never to bring friend or stranger as guest into our home, for I must ever be the Lonely Lady. If not, I shall bring woe on him I love. Think well," she added wistfully. "There is yet time to change your mind."

But the Chieftain, looking in her eyes, could think of nothing but their beauty.

"With you, I am content," he answered. And that day the Lonely Lady became mistress of fair Inchiquin.

## II

For many years the Chief and his wife lived in peace and love together. Two children were born to them—a boy and a girl. The boy was tall and handsome like his father; but the girl was small in stature, and she had the bright bird-like glance of the fairy folk.

The Chief kept his promise. None came to break bread with him at Inchiquin; nor did they ever go to visit their neighbours. Day followed day, and night succeeded night; but all the days and nights were just the same. The Lonely Lady was as beautiful as ever. Time neither dimmed her eyes nor stole the rose from her cheek. Yet sometimes she seemed afraid lest her lord was weary; and then she would scan his face with a wistful glance, and he would turn away to hide a yawn.

For the Chief of Inchiquin did grow weary at length. He longed to be out in the world of men once more; and one day he found courage to tell her so. There were to be races on the Plain of Kood. The Chief had a fine race-horse, and he said he wished to go there and try his fortune.

The Lady of Inchiquin made no complaint. "Come back alone, if you love me," was all she said; and that night he did as she desired.



"Come back alone, if you love me."

His horse had won the race; and next day, full of pride, he rode forth again. Once more he returned alone; but now he was flushed and restless, and no longer found joy in his home.

On the third day he again rode forth. "Farewell, sweet wife!" he cried; but, even as he spoke, he was in haste to be gone, and he scarcely heard her warning: "Come back alone, if you love me and Inchiquin."

The long day passed. Again the Chief won the race. Many men flocked round him—some in envy, and some in praise.

"The Lady of Inchiquin will be proud of her lord," said one.

"If there be such a lady," sneered another.

Then the Chief of Inchiquin was very wroth, and swung round swiftly on the speaker.

"My wife," said he, "is the loveliest lady in Ireland."

"Show her to us, and we will believe you," they cried; and, in his anger, the Chief said: "Come!"

So they rode in hot haste through the twilight to Inchiquin; and it was not until they reached the gateway that he knew his folly. There, in the courtyard, hard by the old fairy well, he saw his wife with her son and daughter by her side. Fair and slim, clad in the strange green garment she had long since laid aside, she stood and gazed at the strangers, and in her bright eyes there was anger as well as grief.

Full of remorse, her husband ran towards her. But he was too late. Hand in hand, the three retreated before him, until they sank like shadows into the well, and were gone.

But this was not all. While the Chief and his friends stood spellbound with dismay, lo! the waters of the well began silently to overflow. In a swift space the pavement tiles were covered; the water lapped softly over the Chieftain's feet; and he awoke to the knowledge that his tower was doomed.

With all haste he and his comrades rode away. And they were none too soon: when they looked back, the waters were rising fast, and by the next day's dawn the tower was covered.

Far and wide, over the fields and woods, the waters spread, until that pleasant land became the silvery lake of Inchiquin. For the fairy folk are not to be trifled with; and, if a man marry a fairy, he must keep his vows.