

A Spooky Irish Story



By Lady Jane Wilde

Adapted by Jana Elizabeth

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To listen call:

A rich woman sat up late carding wool while her children and servants slept. A knock came at the door and a voice said: “Open! Open!”

“Who’s there?” said the woman of the house.

“I am the witch of the one horn,” came the answer.

Against her better judgement, the mistress felt compelled to get up and open the door. A woman entered - but Mary! What a strange woman she was, for a horn grew out of her forehead! She sat down in silence by the fire and began to card thread with violent haste. Eventually she said:

“Where are the others? They are taking too long.

Then, there came a second knock on the door. “Open! Open!” said a voice. A second woman entered, this time with two horns growing from her head. In her hand she carried a spinning wheel, and she sat down by the fire and began to spin wool. At length there was a third knock on the door, and the third woman entered, this one with three horns on her head.

And so it continued, until there were twelve women in all sitting around the fire, the first with one horn, the last with twelve.

Together they sang an ancient rhyme. Strange to look upon, and frightening to hear, were these twelve women with their horns and their wheels, carding, and spinning, and singing quite uninvited in the front room of the house. The mistress felt weak, and though she tried to rise and call for help, she was quite unable to do so for the witches of the horns had cast a spell upon her.

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She sat beside the haunted stream
While 't was crimsoned yet with the sunset beam,
And her long black hair with the wild winds flew,

And her robe was a robe of snowy hue,
And she gazed with sad, dark-glancing eye
Where Mac Caura's towers rose proud and high.

Then one of them called out to her in Irish:
"Éirigh I do sheasamh, a bhean, agus beirigh císte!"
"Rise woman and make a cake!"

And the lady looked around for a pot to bring water from the well so that she could mix it with flour, but in her stupor she could not find one.

She went out to the well where she tried to fill it but of course she was unable to, because the water ran through the holes.

"At last she sat down by the well, exhausted by her efforts, and she wept.

It was at this moment, close to despair, that she heard a gentle voice say:
"Listen to me, for I am the spirit of the well, and I shall keep you safe.
Take some clay and moss from the ground, use it to patch up the sieve.
Then you may fill it up with water."

Return to the house with the water and as you pass through the door,
call out: "The mountain of Fenian women and the sky over it are all
on fire!"

And she did so.

Upon hearing these words the twelve horned women rushed around
the room wailing and shrieking most accursedly, before finally departing
via the windows and up the chimney.

The woman went out to the well to thank the spirit for his kind advice
that had surely saved both her and her family from a terrible fate.

"It is too soon to rejoice for the women will surely return unless you
follow my instructions exactly." And then he told her what she should
do. She listened carefully and followed the instructions to the letter.

Firstly she sprinkled water with which she had washed her child's feet
outside the door and all along the path.

Secondly she took the cake which the witches had made while she was
outside and placed a few crumbs of it in each of the mouths of her sleep-
ing children.

Thirdly, she took the cloth which they had woven and placed it half in
and half out of the chest.

Finally she barred the door with a great wooden cross beam, lodging it
in the jams. When she had done these things, she sat down and waited.
But not for long. Soon the witches were back, whirling around the house
and screaming most fearfully.

"Open, open footwater!" they cried.

"I can't," replied the footwater, "because I am scattered all along the
path."

"Open cake that we have baked," called the witches.

"I can't, for my crumbs are on the lips of the sleeping children," replied
the cake.

"Open cloth that we have woven," screeched the witches.

"I can't," replied the cloth. "For I am trapped half in and half out of the
chest."

“Wooden beam, open the door!” called the witches.

“I can’t because I am lodged in the jams across the door,” replied the wooden beam.

Then the witches rushed through the air with cries, uttering curses on the spirit of the well who had wished their ruin, before they fled back to Slievenaman (which means ‘The mountain of the women’) which was their dwelling.

In the morning the lady of the house found a cape dropped by one of the witches.

Some five hundred years later the very same witch’s cape was still kept by her family as a memento of the awful struggle with the twelve horned women that evening, long ago.