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A Land Beneath the Waves

A long, long time ago, when the earth was very young, there was a land of tiny people. Within that land there was a part called Elfinwalia, a beautiful place with gentle hills and silver streams, and trees which grew right down to the shoreline to meet golden-white, singing sands. Beyond the shore was a shining sea whose colour changed from blue to green, or white or cream, depending upon how the sun was shining on it. Everywhere there was the sound of singing, a breeze sang in the trees, the ripples on rivers and streams made a sound like singing and the waves of the sea created a deep-throated song. Even the speech of the little people was more like singing.

Here and there were clusters of families of elflike creatures. One of these families lived close to the edge of the trees, near to the shore, with a river running by, a family of elf-mother, elf-father and three little elflings. Their lives were happy and contented. Elf-father worked hard in the patch of ground he had cleared, growing fruit and vegetables. Sometimes he would go hunting with the other elf-fathers and when they brought back an animal they had caught there was meat for the families and the skins for making clothing. Elf-mother was busy looking after their little round home, keeping it clean and tidy. She was excellent at making clothes for all the family but most of all she was skilled in magic.

The young elflings, Gutto, Bryan and Rhodri, were quite mischievous and took great delight in playing pranks upon each other, and also, if the opportunity arose, on mother and father-elf. Although this did not happen very often! Because they were identical in looks it was sometimes easy to mistake one for another. To overcome this elf-mother made a little hat from soft deer-skin for each of them, one coloured green for Gutto, blue for Bryan and red for Rhodri, and at the top of each little hat was a tiny bell. These little bells were magic bells and they would ring if the elflings tried to change hats, and they would chime a different tune if they removed them altogether. When they were at home and didn't need the hats, and when they went to bed, the magic kept the bells silent.

Elf-father used to go out fishing sometimes in his little round, flat boat, called a coracle, on the nearby river. He hardly ever went out on the open sea, for the river held many plump salmon or trout. When the elflings grew older elf-father would take one or the other out with him on his fishing trips. The coracle was too small to hold more than two, but the elflings accepted that and after some time they had all had their turn, watching and learning how father-elf steered the little craft.

One day, when elf-father and mother had gone out to collect berries and mushrooms, and attend to the hives which produced their honey, the elflings thought it would be good to take out the coracle themselves. Bryan, more timid than his brothers, wondered how three of them would fit into the little boat, but Gutto, the one who seemed the leader, reasoned that as they were smaller than father-elf there would be room for the three of them. They all had watched how father-elf had steered the coracle with the paddle and it had looked simple and easy, so they set out, intending to go only a little way down the river and then come back.

At first it was great fun, but after a while Rhodri noticed that they were no longer near the shore and the boat seemed to have taken on a life of its own. No matter how they tried to steer, it just kept going round and round in circles, caught in the current of the river. Using the paddle seemed to have no effect. The bells on their hats began to ring noisily with a mournful tune and a strong rushing wind added to the sound. The elflings huddled together, terrified, then, suddenly, just as they thought the sound would deafen them, the ringing stopped and the wind was no longer blowing. The silence seemed more frightening than the noise. Looking round in fear they saw that they were on the open sea, water all around, and the shore and tree-line far, far away. Gutto picked up the paddle which had lain, useless, in the bottom of the boat and tried to steer back to the land. After a little while they all realised they were still going round and round, and rather than getting nearer to land they were getting further and further away.

“Oh, what shall we do?” wailed Bryan

“Let’s call to the Spirit of the Deep!” cried Rhodri. He had heard elf-father talk about how some elf sailors had been saved in a storm, after calling to the Spirit.

They called and called until their voices were hoarse, but nothing changed. Daylight was fading and they were still out on the open sea.

When elf-mother and father had heard the bells ringing they had raced back home. They saw that the boat had gone and there was no sign of the elflings and guessed what had happened. Elf-mother used her magic and in her mind could see the elflings on the open water and, although they were now silent, could still hear the ringing of the little bells on the hats.

“We’ll call the Spirit of the Deep to help” announced elf-father.

“No,” replied elf-mother, “she only helps if she is needed in the deep, deep ocean. Our elflings are still on the surface. We’ll call to Draig Goch- he is our only hope.”

Much later, after a night of fear and trepidation, just as dawn was breaking, the bells on the elflings’ hats began to ring, softly at first, then gradually getting louder and louder, with a different tune. The elflings felt their little boat moving and, after a while, slowly began to see the outline of the trees on the shore in the distance, and they could feel a warm breeze blowing them landwards. With one last push a big wave brought the coracle up on to a sandy beach. Their bells were still ringing, insistently and after a few seconds the elflings were overjoyed to see elf-mother and father bursting through the trees, coming to meet them. Elf-mother and father were angry with the elflings for being so careless and thoughtless, but delighted that they were back safely.

Many years passed and the elflings grew up and had elflings of their own, but they never forgot their ordeal and never again went out with the coracle on their own until they were grown-up. Their little hats with their bells were lost and buried over the years and eventually forgotten in the oceans of time.

Gudrun and her twin brother, Iolo were walking on the seashore near their home in a pretty, seaside town on Cardigan Bay. They loved the area where they had lived all their lives. It was so peaceful and, although sometimes it did seem as if they were on the edge of civilization, their childhood had been almost idyllic, and they had always felt safe and secure. Now, though, they were both about to go to university and were a little apprehensive about going away.

“Oh, I shall miss all this,” said Gudrun, sweeping her arm towards the sea.

“So shall I,” sighed Iolo... “So many memories.”

“But we’ll be back in the holidays,” replied Gudrun, to comfort her brother, “It’s not as if we’re going away for ever.” After a little while she continued, “Remember all the stories that Mum told us about all the myths and legends from Cardigan Bay? What was it called, Cantre’r Gwaelod - the Lowland Hundreds – the lost land of Wales, a land under the sea?

“Oh, yes, something about a princess allowing a well to overflow, and it drowned the land for miles,” mused Iolo.

“And isn’t there a different legend about a king getting drunk and forgetting to close the sluice gates which kept the sea out, so the kingdom was drowned?” chuckled Gudrun, “and the stories some of the old folks tell about the sound of bells ringing under the sea.”

“Ah, yes,” agreed Iolo, “Aren’t they supposed to be from a time when all this was land, with forests, and perhaps villages, stretching out twenty or thirty miles towards Ireland. In fact, we’ve seen those tree stumps, reputedly from a sunken forest, up in Ynyslas and Borth, remember?”

“Yes, and remember that old guy we chatted to in Aberdovey, telling us the story about the bells of Aberdovey? I think it’s been made into a song,” Gudrun remarked.

Iolo laughed, "Yeah, the bells are supposed to be heard on stormy Sunday mornings, they reckon, at the time people would have been going to church. But I remember Dad once saying that some of the legends go back eons ago, before the time of King Arthur. Although whether he actually lived has never been proved. But it was a time when people were into good and bad spirits influencing their lives, and there were many superstitions about bells as well."

"Oh, yes," interrupted Gudrun, "he told us that the reason we have such lovely-tasting water in Wales is because a long, long, time ago Celtic priests threw bells into rivers, streams and springs to get rid of the bad spirits to make the water pure!"

The twins chuckled at their memories as they walked along the shore. Suddenly, Gudrun stopped and giggled, "Let's go and search in the rock pools, like we used to do when we were kids."

She raced over the pebble bank to the many small pools left by the out-going tide. Iolo followed and together they bent over one pool, searching for coloured stones and different shells, seeing tiny fish and small crabs. A rather unusual fossil-like stone caught Gudrun's eye and as she scooped it up out of the water she exclaimed, "Look at this, Iolo, it looks like a tiny elf's hat with an even tinier bell on top! How old do you think it is? Do you think it could be something from long ago?"

Iolo looked at the stone, then at Gudrun. Then, shaking his head in amusement declared, "You're mad! Come on, I'll race you back to the Red Dragon's Cave." As they ran along the seashore their footsteps crunching on the pebbles muffled the sound of bells ringing under the waves!

Dorothy Jones