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MacCodrum of the Seals



Before the first sailors turned the prows of their ships seawards to discover what lay beyond their own homelands, the King and Queen of the sea dwelt below the waves in peace and happiness. They had many lovely sea-children, brown-eyed and straight of limb, who spent the livelong day playing with the wild sea-horses and swimming through the groves of purple sea-anemones that grow on the ocean bed. They loved to make music, these fabulous people who lived in the sea, and wherever they went there was a sound of singing like the laughing of the waves.

But one day a great sadness came to the King of the sea and his carefree children, for the Queen their mother fell ill and died, and was buried with much sorrowing among the coral caves of their kingdom. And when she had gone, there was no one to look after the sea-children, to comb their beautiful hair and lull them to sleep with soft sea-music. The King saw their uncombed hair that hung like the matted seaweed, and he heard them tossing restlessly at night when they could not get to sleep; and he thought to himself that he should find a new wife to take care of his children.

Now in the dark sea-forest there lived a strange sea-witch,

and it was she whom the King asked to be his new wife, although he felt no love for her, for his heart was buried in the coral caves where his dead Queen lay. The sea-witch thought that it would be a fine thing to be Queen of the sea and rule over such a vast kingdom; and so she consented to marry the King, and became the stepmother of the sea-children. But she was a bad stepmother, for when she saw the brown eyes and straight limbs of the sea-children, she was jealous of their beauty, and resentful that anyone more lovely to look upon than herself should dwell in the sea.

One day she went back to her dark sea-forest and picked the evil yellow berries of the sea-grape that grew there. From these she distilled a magic potion, and wished a cruel enchantment upon the sea-children. She wished that they should lose their straight-limbed bodies and be changed into seals. As seals she wished that they should swim through the sea for ever, except for one day each year, when they could regain their own shapes from sundown to sundown.

This magic came upon the sea-children as they played with the wild sea-horses and wandered among the groves of purple sea-anemones that grow on the ocean bed. Their bodies thickened and lost their shape; their lovely arms were turned into clumsy flippers; and their fair skins were overcast with silken coats of grey and black and golden brown. But they still kept their soft brown eyes, and still they were able to make the music that they loved.

When their father discovered what had happened, his anger against the wicked sea-witch was very great, and he banished her to live in her dark sea-forest for ever. But he could not undo the magic she had wrought. Then the seals

who had once been sea-children sang their lament that they could no longer stay with their father in the place where they had once been happy, but could now be happy no longer. And sorrowfully the old King watched them swim away.

For a long, long time the seals travelled far over the seas. Once a year, from sundown to sundown, they would find a strip of shore concealed from human eyes, and here discard their silken skins of grey and black and golden brown, and step forth in their old, lovely shape. But their sport and playing on the shore never lasted long, and at the second sundown they would put on their skins again and slip back into the sea.

Men say that the seals fist came to the Western Isles as secret emissaries from the courts of the Norse kings of Lochlan. Whatever the truth of this may be, it is certain they grew to love this misty western coast, for to this day you may see them as they linger round the Isle of Lewis; or at Rona, which is the Isle of the Seal; or in the Sound of Harris. The people of the Hebrides learnt the legend of the sea-children, and it was known that for one day of the year a man might come across them as they made sport on a strip of shore from sundown to sundown.

It happened that there was once a fisherman called Roderic MacCodrum, of the Clan Donald, who lived by himself on the Isle of Bernerary, in the Outer Hebrides. One day he was walking along the shore where his fishing-boat lay when he heard a sound of singing coming from a group of rocks near by. Cautiously he approached the rocks and peered over the top of them. There before his eyes was a group of sea-children taking their please until the sun went down for

the second time. Their long hair streamed behind them as they played, and their eyes were alight with joy. He did not look long, for he knew that the seals were shy of mortal men. But as he turned to go back, he caught sight of a heap of silken skins—grey and black and golden brown—lying on a rock by his side, where the sea-children had discarded them. He picked up one of golden brown that shone with the brightest sheen of all, and he thought to himself that it would be a fine trophy to take back to his shore-side cottage. So he took it with him he went, and hid it for safe keeping above the lintel of his cottage door.

Now shortly after sundown that evening, as Roderic was mending his fishing-net before his hearth-side, he heard a strange sad noise outside the cottage door. When he looked out, there stood the fairest woman he had ever seen. She was straight of limb, and her eyes were brown and soft. She wore no garment on her white-skinned body, but her gold-brown hair fell thickly down and hid her comeliness.

'Oh, help me, help me, mortal man,' she pleaded. 'For I am a hapless daughter of the sea. I have lost my silken seal skin, and may never return to my brothers and sisters until I find it again.'

Even as he invited her over the threshold of his cottage and gave her his plaid for a covering, Roderic knew full well that this lovely child of the sea was none other than the owner of the skin of golden brown that he had stolen away from the shore that morning. He had only to reach up to the lintel, take down the hidden seal skin, and she would be free to swim away and rejoin her brothers and sisters of the sea. But Roderic looked at her as she sat by his hearth-side; and he

thought how pleasant his life would be if he could keep this fair seal Woman as his wife, to cheer his loneliness and bring joy to his heart. So he said:

'I cannot help you to find your silken seal skin. I doubt some man came by and stole it as it lay upon the shore—and by now he will be far away. But if You will stay here and consent to be my wife, I will honour You in my home and love you all my life.'

The sea King's daughter lifted her brown eyes full of sorrow to the fisherman's gaze.

'If indeed my silken skin has been stolen and there is no hope that I may ever recover it, then I have no choice but to remain with you and become your wife,' she said. 'For I could hope for no greater kindness than that you have shown to me, and I should be to afraid to venture into the mortal world alone.'

Then she sighed for the life of the Sea that she thought she would never know again.

'But I would fain be with my brothers and sisters of the sea, who will wait for me and call my name in vain.'

The fisherman's heart smote him at her distress, but he was so enchanted by her beauty and her gentleness that he knew he could never let her go.

For many years Roderic MacCodrum and his fair seal wife lived in the cottage by the shore, and many children were born to them: children with gold-brown hair and soft voices for singing. And the people who lived about that lonely isle called Roderic 'MacCodrum of the Seals', because he had taken a seal woman to be his wife; and his children they called 'the Children of MacCodrum of the Seals.' Throughout this

time the Sea King's daughter remembered always her great sorrow. She would walk alone by the Shore, listening to the *ceol-mara* that is the music of the sea and the *gait namar* that is the laughter of the waves. And sometimes she would glimpse her brothers and sisters as they swam by the shore, and sometimes she would hear them calling, calling the name of their long-lost sister. And she wished she might join them again with all the longing in her heart.

There came a day when Roderic set out as usual for his fishing, talking fond leave of his wife and children. But on the way to his boat a hare crossed his path, which is a sure sign of ill-luck. Roderic was in two minds whether to turn back or not after this unlucky portent; but he glanced at the sky and said to himself:

'It is only a bit of windy weather that will be my ill-luck today; I have known plenty of storms blow up over the sea before now,' and he went on his way.

He had not been gone long when the wind did blow up. It whistled over the sea, and it whistled round he cottage on the shore the sea, and it whistled round the cottage on the shore where his wife and children were left behind. The youngest child was out on the shore, putting shells to his ear to listen to the sea-music that he loved, and his mother called to him to come inside. Just as he stepped across the threshold the wind blew an even fiercer blast, and the cottage door banged shut with a clash that set the turf thatch a shuddering. And dislodged at last from the lintel where it had lain hidden ever since Roderic first placed it there for safe keeping, down fell the silken seal skin that the belonged to his fair seal wife.

Never a word she spoke aloud against the man who had kept her there against her will for all the long, long years that had passed. But she put off her mortal's clothes, and she clasped the seal skin to her. Then she took one farewell of her children and went down to the sea. And there, while the wild sea-horses frolicked off-shore, she clad herself in her skin of golden brown and swam out across the water. Soon she turned to gaze her last upon the little cottage where she had perhaps known a little happiness in spite of her unwillingness to dwell there. And along the frothing line of surf that rolled in from the great Atlantic she saw her children standing forlorn upon the shore. But the call of the sea was stronger for her than the cry of her earth-born children; and far, far away she swam, singing for joy and happiness as she went.

When Roderic MacCodrum came back from his day's fishing, he found an open door upon a cottage deserted for ever of a woman's care, with no sign of a peat-fire flame in the hearth to welcome his return. Fear filled his heart, and he reached up to the lintel of the door. And when he discovered that the seal skin had gone, then he knew that his lovely wife had returned to the sea. Great was his grief as his weeping children told him how their mother had taken but one farewell and left them alone upon the shore.

'Black was the day that a hare crossed my path as I went to my boat,' sorrowed Roderic. 'For the wind blew strong, and I had but an ill day's fishing; and now this great calamity is fallen upon me.'

He never forgot his fair seal wife, but grieved for her all the days of his life. And remembering that their mother had been a seal woman, for ever after that time the sons of Roderic

MacCodrum, and their sons after them, were careful never to disturb or harm any seal that they might see. And they were called the Clan MacCodrum of the seals, which become known throughout North Uist and the Outer Hebrides as a sept of the Clan Donald.