

THE STORY MUSEUM

The Children of Lir

There was once a king in Ireland called Lir. He had four children whom he loved very much, so much that when his wife died he could not bear to think of them growing up without a mother. His wife had been all the world to him but he was determined to marry again to give his children a mother, and he chose as his bride the younger sister of his dead wife. Surely she would love his children as much as he did.

But she did not. In fact she resented them and was jealous of his love for them. She was the queen now, and she should have all of his attention. The children were getting in the way and she determined to rid the palace of them. Surely with the children gone Lir would treat her in the way he should.

So one summer morning she went to Lir and told him of a treat she had planned for the children, a picnic by the lake. They would love it, she was sure. Lir was delighted. At last she was taking an interest in the children. Gladly he watched them drive out of the gates in his chariot, the children chattering and excited, the queen smiling and gracious. His family.

The sun sparkled on the water of the lake. It was the most beautiful summer's day and the children ran straight into the water. The queen watched them splash and chase, their laughter and chatter mingling with the song of the birds and the gentle rush of tiny waves on the pebbled shore. The queen watched them but her heart was hardened against them and she did not waver.

She called their names and they turned to her still laughing, but the laughter faded as they saw the flint of her eyes, the set of her jaw. For a long moment time stood still. The echo of their laughter hung in the air. The birds were silent and even the ripple of waves on the shore was stilled. The queen raised her arms and as the children clung together they saw the sparks fly from her outstretched hands, and her mouth curve into a smile of such cruelty that the children turned to run. But as the sparks landed on their faces, their arms, their legs, they felt their necks begin to lengthen and stretch and their feet grow wider and flatter. They could feel their mouths pulled painfully into beaks and the sharp pin pricks of feathers sprouting all over their bodies. The queen watched as they turned before her eyes into four beautiful swans. They heard her harsh, cruel laugh and they began to cry, hot tears flowing down their newly formed feathers and dripping into the water of the lake. They looked at her with such sadness and bewilderment that for a moment she relented. She left them their voices so they would at least be able to talk to each other and then she left them there on the lake, four beautiful swans with human voices, and she went back to the palace.

But the charioteer had got there before her. Loyal to Lir and the children, he had told the king what he had seen. 'Is it true?' Lir called to the queen as she returned. 'I have heard such a terrible story!' But the queen laughed. 'They will be fine,' she said, 'and we will be better without them. I am your queen now. You need no-one but me.' And she stood before him, proud and haughty and with no hint of remorse.

Then Lir was overcome with fury. Grabbing a druid's wand, he pointed it at the queen and such was the strength of his anger that she became in an instant a demon of the air, a puff of smoke that disappeared and was never seen again.

Lir hurried to the lake where his children were, and when he saw the swans swimming in sad circles he went down on his knees and he wept. But they swam to him and in their familiar voices they comforted him, and he them. Now Lir wanted nothing more than to be with his children. He moved his house to the lake and he never left them. They were strangely happy for many years, talking and singing in their human voices, glad to be together. And many people travelled to the lake to see the beautiful swans who could talk and sing and the old man who lived so peacefully with them.