

The Gray Lake

Waysiders : stories of Connacht

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“ *The Shuiler's Child,*” “ *The Lady of Deerpark,*” “ *The Bribe,*” &c.

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“ I can see every colour in the water except gray,” said the lady who was something or a sceptic.

“ That,” said the humorist, tilting back his straw hat, “ is the very reason they call it the Gray Lake. The world bristles with misnomers.”

“ Which explains,” said the lady sceptic, “ why they call Eamonn a *seannachie.*”

“ Hi !” called out the humorist. “ Do you hear that, Eamonn ?”

“ *Cad tá ort ?*” asked Eamonn. He had been leaning out over the prow of the boat, looking vaguely into the water, and now turned round, Eamonn was always asking people, “ *Cad tá ort ?*” and before they had time to answer he was saying, or thinking, something else.

“ Why do they call this the Gray Lake ?” asked the lady sceptic. “ It never looked really gray, did it ?”

“ Of course it did,” said Eamonn. “ The first man who ever saw it beheld it in the gray light of dawn, and so he called it *Baile Loch Riabhach,* the Town of the Gray Lough.”

“ When might that be ?” asked the lady sceptic drily.

“ The morning after the town was drowned,” said Eamonn.

“ What town ?”

“ The town we are now rowing over.”

“ Good heavens ! Is there a town beneath us ?”

“ *Seadh,*” said Eamonn. “ Just now I was trying if I could see anything of the ruins at the bottom of the lake.”

“ And you did, of course.”

“ I think so.”

“ What did you see ?”

“ Confusion and the vague, glimmering gable of a house or two. Then the oars splashed and the water became dense.”

“ But tell us how the town came to be at the bottom of the lake,” said the man who rowed, shipping his oars. The boat rocked in the quick wash of the waves. The water was warming in vivid colours under the glow of the sunset. Eamonn leaned back in his seat at the prow of the boat. His eyes wandered away over the water to the slope of meadows, the rise of hills.

“ *Anois, Eamonn,*” said the lady sceptic, still a little drily. “ The story !”

Long and long ago, said Eamonn, there was a sleepy old town lying snug in the dip of a valley. It was famous for seven of the purest springs of water which ever sparkled in the earth. They called it the Seven Sisters. Round the springs they built an immense and costly well. Over the well was a great leaden lid of extraordinary weight, and by a certain mechanical device this lid was closed on the well every evening at sundown. The springs became abnormally active between sundown and sunrise, so that there was always a danger that they might flood the valley and destroy the people. As security against this the citizens had built the great well with its monster lid, and each evening the lid was locked over the well by means of a secret lock and a secret key.

The most famous person in the town of the Seven Sisters was the Keeper of the Key. He was a man of dignified bearing, important airs, wearing white silk knee-breeches, a green swallow-tail coat, and a cocked hat. On the sleeve of his coat was embroidered in gold the image of a key and seven sprays of water. He had great privileges and authority, and could condemn or reprieve any sort of criminal except, of course, a sheep stealer. He lived in a mansion beside the town, and this mansion was almost as famous as the seven famous springs. People travelled from far places to see it. A flight of green marble steps led to a broad door of oak. On the broad oaken door he had fashioned one of the most remarkable knockers and the most beautiful door knob that were known to Europe. Both were of beaten gold. The knocker was wrought in the shape of a key. The door knob was a group of seven water nymphs. A sensation was created which agitated all Ireland when this work of art was completed by five of the foremost goldsmiths in the land. The Keeper of the Key of the Seven Sisters issued a Proclamation declaring that there was a flaw in the rounding of one of the ankles of the group of seven water nymphs. He had the five goldsmiths suddenly arrested and put on their trial. “ The Gael,” said the Keeper of the Key, “ must be pure-blooded in his art. I am of the Clann Gael. I shall not allow any half-artist to come to my door, there work under false pretence and go unpunished.” The goldsmiths protested that their work was the work of artists and flawless as the design. Not another word would they be allowed to speak. Bards and artists, scholars and men skilled in controversy, flocked from all parts to see the door knob. A terrible controversy ensued. Sides were taken, some for, others against, the ankle of the water nymph. They came to be known as the Ankleites and the anti-Ankleites. And in that tremendous controversy the Keeper of the Key proved the masterly manner of man he was. He had the five goldsmiths convicted for failure as supreme artists, and they were sentenced to banishment from the country. On their way from the shore to the ship that was to bear (them away their curragh sprang a sudden leak, and they were all drowned. That was the melancholy end of the five chief goldsmiths of Eirinn.

Every morning at daybreak trumpets were blown outside the mansion of the Keeper of the Key. The gates of a court-yard swung open and out marched an armed guard, men in saffron kilts, bearing spears and swords. They formed up before the flight of marble steps. A second fanfare of the trumpets, and back swung the great oaken door, disclosing the Keeper of the

Key in his bright silks and cocked hat. Out he would come on the doorstep, no attendants by him, and pulling to the great door by the famous knob he would descend the marble steps, the guard would take up position, and, thus escorted, he would cross the drawbridge of the moat and enter the town of the Seven Sisters, marching through the streets to the great well. People would have gathered there even at that early hour, women bearing vessels to secure their supply of the water, which, it was said, had an especial virtue when taken at the break of day. No mortal was allowed nearer than fifty yards to the well while the Keeper proceeded to unlock the lid. His guard would stand about, and with a haughty air he would approach the well solus. The people would see him make some movements, and back would slide the enormous lid. A blow on the trumpets proclaimed that the well was open, and the people would approach it, laughing and chattering, and the Keeper of the Key would march back to his mansion in the same military order, ascend the steps, push open the great door, and the routine of daily life would ensue. For the closing of the well at sundown a similar ceremony was observed. The only additional incident was the marching of a crier through the streets, beating great wooden clappers, and standing at each street corner calling out in a loud voice : “ Hear ye people that the lock is on the Seven Sisters. All’s well !”

In those days there was a saying among the people which was in common usage all over Ireland. When a man became possessed of any article or property to which he had a doubtful title his neighbours said, with a significant wag of the head, “ He got it where the Keeper gets the Key.” This saying arose out of a mysterious thing in the life of the Keeper of the Key. Nobody ever saw the secret key. It was not in his hands when he came forth from the mansion morning and evening to fulfil his great office. He did not carry it in his pockets, for the simple reason that he had had no pockets. He kept no safe nor secret panel nor any private drawer in his mansion that the most observant among his retainers could espy. Yet that there was a secret key, and that it was inserted in a lock, anybody could see for himself, even at a distance of fifty yards, twice a day at the well. It was as if at that moment the key came into his hand out of the air and again vanished into air when the proper business was over. Indeed, there were people of even those remote and enlightened days who attributed some wizardry to the Keeper of the Key. It added to the awe in which he was held and to the sense of security which the proceedings of his whole life inspired in his fellow-citizens. Nevertheless had the Keeper of the Key his enemies. A man of distinction and power can no more tread the paths of his ambitions without stirring up rivalries and hostilities than can the winds howl across the earth and leave the dust on the roads undisturbed. The man who assumes power will always, sooner or later, have his power to hold put to the test. So it was with the Keeper of the Key. There were people who nursed the ambition of laying hands on the secret key. That secured, they would be lords of the town of the Seven Sisters. The reign of the great Keeper would be over. His instinct told him that these dangers were always about. He was on the alert. He had discovered treachery even within the moat of his own keep. His servants and guards had been tampered with. But all the attempts upon his key and his power had been in vain. He kept to the grand unbroken simplicity of his masterly routine. He had crushed his enemies whenever they had arisen. “ One who has survived the passions of Ireland’s poets,” he would say—for the poets had all been Ankleites—“ is not likely to bow the knee before snivelling little thieves.” A deputation which had come to him proposing that the well should be managed by a constitutional committee of the citizens was flogged by the guards across the drawbridge. The leader of this deputation was a deformed tailor, who soon after planned an audacious attack on the mansion of the Keeper of the Key. The Keeper, his guards, servants and retainers were all one night secretly drugged and for several hours of the night lay unconscious in the mansion. Into it swarmed the little tailor and his constitutional committee ; they pulled the whole interior to pieces in search of the key. The very pillows under the head of the Keeper had been stabbed and ransacked. It was nearing daybreak when the Keeper awoke, groggy from the effects of the narcotic. The guard was roused. The whole

place was in confusion. The robbers had fled, leaving the great golden knocker on the door hanging from its position ; they were removing it when surprised. The nymphs were untouched. The voice of the Keeper of the Key was deliberate, authoritative, commanding, amid the confusion. The legs of the guards quaked beneath them, their heads swam, and they said to each other, “ Now surely is the key gone !” But their master hurried them to their morning duty, and they escorted him to the well a little beyond daybreak, and, lo, at the psychological moment, there was the key and back rolled the lid from the precious well. “ Surely,” they said, “ this man is blessed, for the key comes to him as a gift from Heaven. The robbers of the earth are powerless against him.” When the citizens of the Seven Sisters heard of what had taken place in the evil hours of the night they poured across the draw-bridge from the town and acclaimed the Keeper of the Key before his mansion. He came out on the watch tower, his daughter by his side, and with dignified mien acknowledged the acclamations of the citizens. And before he put the lid on the well that night the deformed tailor and his pards were all dragged through the streets of the Seven Sisters and cast into prison.

Never was the popularity of the Keeper at so high a level as after this episode. They would have declared him the most perfect as the most powerful of men were it not for one little spot on the bright sun of his fame. They did not like his domestic habits. The daughter who stood by his side on the watch tower was a young girl of charm, a fair, frail maiden, a slender lily under the towering shadow of her dark father. The citizens did not, perhaps, understand his instincts of paternity ; and, indeed, if they understood them they would not have given them the sanction of their approval. The people only saw that the young girl, his only child, was condemned to what they called a life of virtual imprisonment in the mansion. She was a warm-blooded young creature, and like all warm-blooded creatures, inclined to gaiety of spirits, to impulsive friendships to a joyous and engaging frankness. These traits, the people saw, the father disapproved of and checked, and the young girl was regarded with great pity. “ Ah,” they would say, “ he is a wonderful Keeper of the Key, but, alas, how harsh a father !” He would not allow the girl any individual freedom ; she was under eternal escort when abroad ; she was denied the society of those of her years ; she was a flower whose fragrance it was not the privilege of the people to enjoy. It may be that the people, in murmuring against all this, did not make sufficient allowance for the circumstances of the life of the Keeper of the Key. He was alone, he stood apart from all men. His only passion in life had been the strict guardianship of a trust. In these circumstances his affections for his only child were direct and crude and, too, maybe a little unconsciously harsh. His love for his child was the love of the oyster for its pearl. The people saw nothing but the rough, tight shells which closed about the treasure in the mansion of the Keeper of the Key. More than one considerable wooer had approached that mansion, laying claim to the pearl which it held. All were met with the same terrible dark scowl and sent about their business. “ You, sir,” the Keeper of the Key would say, “ come to my door, knock upon my knocker, lay hands upon my door knob—my golden door knob—and ask for my daughter’s hand ! Sir, your audacity is your only excuse. Let it also be your defence against my wrath. Now, sir, a very good day !” And when the citizens heard that yet another gallant wooer had come and been dismissed they would say, “ The poor child, the poor child, what a pity!”

The truth was that the daughter of the Keeper of the Key was not in the least unhappy. She had a tremendous opinion of her father ; she lavished upon him all the warm affection of her young ardour. She reigned like a young queen within the confines of her home. She was about the gardens and the grounds all day, as joyous as a bird. Once or twice her governess gave her some inkling as to the suitors who came to the mansion requesting her hand, for that is an affair that cannot be kept from the most jealously-guarded damsel. The governess had a sense of humour and entertained the girl with accounts of the manner of lovers who, as she

put it, washed up the marble steps of the mansion to the oak door, like waves on a shore, and were sent back again into the ocean of rejections. The young girl was much amused and secretly flattered at these events. “ Ah,” she would say, in a little burst of rapture, “ how splendid is my father !” The pearl rejoices in the power of the oyster to shut it away from the world.

Now (continued Eamonn), on the hilly slopes of the country called Sunnach there was a shepherd boy, and people who saw that he was a rare boy in looks and intelligence were filled with pity for his unhappy lot. The bodach for whom he herded was a dour, ill-conditioned fellow, full of curses and violent threats, but the boy was content in the life of the hillsides, and troubled very little about the bodach’s dour looks. “ Some day,” he would say to himself laughingly, “ I will compose terrible verses about his black mouth.” One day the shepherd boy drove a little flock of the bodach’s lively sheep to the fair in the town of the Seven Sisters. As he passed the mansion of the Keeper of the Key he cried out, “ How up ! how up ! how up !” His voice was clear and full, the notes as round and sweet as the voice of the cuckoo. The daughter of the Keeper of the Key was seated by a window painting a little picture when she heard the “ How up !” of the shepherd’s voice. “ What beautiful calls !” she exclaimed, and leaned out from the window. At the same moment the shepherd boy looked up. He was bare-headed and wore his plaids. His head was a shock of curly straw-coloured hair, his face eager, clear-cut, his eyes golden-brown and bright as the eyes of a bird. He smiled and the damsel smiled. “ How up ! how up ! how up !” he sang out joyously to his flock as he moved down to the fair. The damsel went back to her little picture and sat there for some time staring at her palette and mixing the wrong colours.

That evening the Keeper of the Key, as was his custom, escorted his daughter on his arm, servants before and behind them, through the town of the Seven Sisters, viewing such sights of the fair as were agreeable and doing a little shopping. The people, seeing the great man coming, made way for him on the paths, and bowed and smiled to him as he passed. He walked with great dignity, and his daughter’s beauty made the bystanders say, “ Happy will it be for the lucky man !” Among those they encountered was the shepherd boy, and he gazed upon the damsel with rapture in his young eyes. He followed them about the town at a respectful distance, and back to their mansion. The shepherd boy did not return to the hilly country called Sunnach that night, nor the next night, nor for many a long day and night. He remained in the town of the Seven Sisters, running on errands, driving carts, doing such odd jobs as came his way, and all because he wanted to gaze upon the daughter of the Keeper of the Key. In the evening he would go by the mansion singing out, “ How up ! how up ! how up !” as if he were driving flocks past. And in the window he would see the wave of a white hand. He would go home, then, to his little back room in the lodging-house, and there stay up very late at night, writing, in the candle-light, verses to the damsel. One Song of the Shepherd Boy to his Lady has survived :

*Farewell to the sweet reed I tuned on the
hill,
My grief for the rough slopes of Sunnach
so still,
The wind in the fir tree and bleat of the
ewe
Are lost in the wild cry my heart makes for
you.
The brown floors I danced on, the sheds
where I lay.
Are gone from my mind like a wing in the*

boy :
Dear lady, I'd herd the wild swans in the
styes
If they knew of lake water as blue as your
eyes !

Well, it was not very long, as you can imagine, until the Keeper of the Key observed the shepherd boy loitering about the mansion. When he heard him calling past the house to imaginary flocks a scowl came upon his face. "Ah-ha !" he said, "another conspiracy ! Last time it was a hunchback tailor. This time they come from the country. They signal by the cries of shepherds. Well, I shall do the driving for them !" There and then he had the shepherd boy apprehended, bound, and put in a cell. In due course he was accused and sentenced, like the famous goldsmiths, to banishment from Eirinn. When the daughter of the Keeper heard what had come to pass she was filled with grief. She appeared before her father for the first time with tears in her eyes and woe in her face. He was greatly moved, and seated the girl by his side. She knelt by his knee and confessed to the whole affair with the shepherd boy. The Keeper of the Key was a little relieved to learn that his suspicions of a fresh conspiracy were unfounded, but filled with indignation that such a person as a shepherd should not alone aspire to but win the heart of his daughter. "What have we come to," he said, "when a wild thing from the hills of Sunnach comes down and dares to lay his hand on the all but perfect water nymphs on the golden knob of my door ! Justice shall be done. The order of banishment is set aside. Let this wild hare of the hills, this mountain rover, be taken and seven times publicly dipped in the well. I guarantee that will cool him ! He shall then have until break of day to clear out of my town. Let him away back to the swine on the hills." The girl pleaded that the boy might be spared the frightful indignity of a public dipping in the well of the Seven Sisters, but her father was implacable. "Have I not spoken ?" he said sternly, and the damsel was led away by her governess in tears.

The people flocked to the well as they might to a Feis to see the dipping of the shepherd boy. Cries of merriment arose among them when the boy, bound in strips of hide, was lowered by the servants of the Keeper of the Key into the mouth of the great well. It was a cold, dark, creepy place down in the shaft of the well, the walls reeking, covered with slimy green lichen, the waters roaring. The shepherd boy closed his eyes and gave himself up for lost. But the Seven Sisters of the well kept moving down as fast as the servants told out the rope, until at last they could not lower him any farther. The servants danced the rope up and down seven times, and the people screamed and clapped their hands, crying out, "All those who write love verses come to a bad end !" But the poet was never yet born who had not a friend greater than all his enemies. At that moment the spirits of the Seven Sisters rose out of the water and spoke to the shepherd boy.

"O shepherd boy," they said, "the Keeper of the Key is also our enemy. We were created for something better than this narrow shaft. We cry out in bitter pain the long hours of the night."

"Why do you cry out in bitter pain ?" asked the shepherd boy.

"Because," said the spirits of the Seven Sisters, "we want to leap out of this cold place to meet our lover, the moon. Every night he comes calling to us and we dare not respond. We are locked away under the heavy lid. We can never gather our full strength to burst our way to liberty. We dream of the pleasant valley. We want to get out into it, to make merry about the trees, to sport in the warm places, to lip the edge of the green meadows, to water pleasant gardens. We want to see the flowers, to flash in the sun, to dance under the spread of great

branches, to make snug, secret places for the pike and the otter, to pile up the coloured pebbles, and hear the water-hen splashing in the rushes. And above all, we want to meet our lover, the moon, to roll about in his beams, to reach for his kiss in the harvest nights. O shepherd boy, take us from our prison well !”

“ O Seven Sisters,” asked the shepherd boy, “ how can I do this for you ?”

“ Secure the secret key,” they said. “ Open the lid while we are at our full strength in the night.”

“ Alas,” said the shepherd boy, “ that I cannot do. The Keeper has made of it a magic thing.”

“ We know his great secret,” said the spirits of the Seven Sisters. “ Swear to set us free and we shall tell you the secret of the key.”

“ And what reward shall I have ?” asked the shepherd boy.

“ You shall have the hand of the daughter of the Keeper of the Key, the Lady of your Songs,” they said. “ Take her back to the hills where you were so happy. We shall spare you when we are abroad.”

“ Then,” said the shepherd boy, “ I swear to release you.”

“ The Keeper of the Key,” said the spirits of the Seven Sisters, “ has a devil lurking behind the fine manners of his body. In secret he laughs at the people. He has the blood of the five goldsmiths on his hands. It was by his connivance the curragh sprang a leak, and that they were drowned. They were true artists, of the spirit of the Gael. But they alone knew his secret, and he made away with them before they could speak. His great controversy on the water nymphs was like a spell cast over the minds of the people to cover his crime.”

“ What a demon !” cried the shepherd boy.

“ The key of the well,” said the spirits of the Seven Sisters, “is concealed in the great golden knob of the oaken door, and upon that has concentrated the greatest public scrutiny which has ever beaten upon a door-knob in the story of the whole world. Such has been the craft of the Keeper of the Key ! When he comes out in the morning and evening, and while drawing the door after him, he puts a finger on the third toe of the fourth water nymph. This he presses three times, quick as a pulse-beat, and, lo, a hidden spring is released and shoots the key into the loose sleeve of his coat. On returning he puts his hand on the golden knob, presses the second toe of the third water nymph, and the key slides back into its hidden cavity. This secret was alone known to the goldsmiths. They went to the bottom of the sea with it. In this way has the Keeper of the Key held his power and defied his enemies. When the scholars were making epigrams and the bards warming into great cadences on the art of the ankle of the water nymph, this Keeper of the Key would retire to his watch-tower and roll about in secret merriment.”

“ What a fiend !” cried the shepherd boy.

“ He had caused to be painted in his room a scroll surrounded by illuminated keys and nymphs and tumbling cascades, and bearing the words, ‘ Let us praise the art which conceals art ; but let us love the art which conceals power.’ ”

“What a monster!” cried the shepherd boy.

“In this way,” said the spirits of the Seven Sisters, “has he lived. In this way has he been able to keep us from our freedom, our lover. O shepherd boy——”

Before another word could be spoken the shepherd boy was drawn up on the rope. The water rose with him and lapped lightly over his person so that he might seem as if he had been plunged deeply into the well.

When he was drawn up to the side of the well the shepherd boy lay on the ground, his eyes closed, feigning great distress. The people again clapped their hands, and some cried out, “Now little water rat, make us a new verse!” But others murmured in pity, and an old peasant woman, in a Breedeen cloak, hobbled to his side and smoothed back his locks. At the touch of her soft hands the shepherd boy opened his eyes, and he saw it was the daughter of the Keeper of the Key disguised. With the connivance of her governess, she had escaped from the mansion as an old peasant woman in a cloak. The shepherd boy secretly kissed her little palms and whispered, “I must come to you at midnight. As you value your life have the guards taken from the outer door, only for two minutes. Make some pretext. I will give the shepherd’s call and then you must act. Do not fail me.”

Before more could be said the servants roughly bundled the old peasant woman aside, carried the shepherd boy to his lodgings, and there threw him on his bed. “Remember,” they said, “that you remain within the walls of the town of the Seven Sisters after break of day at your peril.”

At midnight the shepherd boy arose and approached the mansion of the Keeper of the Key. He could see the two grim guards, one each side of the oaken door. Standing some way off he gave the shepherd’s call, making his voice sound like the hoot of an owl. In a little time he saw the guards move away from the door; they went to a side entrance in the courtyard, and presently he could hear them laughing, as if some entertainment was being provided for them; then measures were passed through the iron bars of the gate to them, and these they raised to their lips. At this the shepherd boy ran swiftly up the steps, approached the door, and pressed three times, quick as a pulse-beat, the third toe of the fourth water nymph, and immediately from a secret cavity in the knob a curious little golden key was shot forth. This the shepherd boy seized, flew down the steps, and scaled over the town wall. He ran to the great well and stooped over the lid. He could hear the Seven Sisters twisting and worming and striving beneath it, little cries of pain breaking from them, Overhead the moon was shining down on the well.

“O Seven Sisters,” said the Shepherd boy, “I have come to give you to your lover.”

He could hear a great cry of joy down in the well. He put the key in the lock, turned it, and immediately there was the gliding and slipping of one steel bar after another into an oil bath. The great lid slowly revolved, moving away from over the well. The Seven Sisters did the rest. They sprang with a peal of the most delirious laughter—laughter that was of the underground, the cavern, the deep secret places of the earth, laughter of elves and hidden rivers—to the light of the moon. The shepherd boy could see seven distinct spiral issues of sparkling water and they took the shape of nymphs, more exquisite than anything he had ever seen even in his dreams. Something seemed to happen in the very heavens above; the moon reached down from the sky, swiftly and tenderly, and was so dazzling that the shepherd boy had to turn his face away. He knew that in the blue spaces of the firmament overhead the moon was embracing the Seven Sisters. Then he ran, ran like the wind, for already the water

was shrieking down the streets of the town. As he went he could see lights begin to jump in dark windows and sleepy people in their night attire coming to peer out into the strange radiance outside.

As he reached the drawbridge he saw that the men had already lowered it, and there was a great rustling noise and squealing ; and what he took to be a drift of thick dust driven by the wind was gushing over it, making from the town. A few more yards and he saw that it was not thick brown dust, but great squads of rats flying the place. The trumpets were all blowing loud blasts when he reached the mansion of the Keeper of the Key, the guards with their spears pressing out under the arch of the courtyard, and servants coming out the doors. The great oak door flew open and he saw the Keeper of the Key, a candle in his quaking hand. A great crying could now be heard coming up from the population of the town. The water was bursting open the doors of the houses as if they were cardboard.

“ O Keeper of the Key,” cried the shepherd boy, “ the Seven Sisters are abroad. I am obeying your command and returning to the swine on the hills. The despised Sunnach will be in the dreams of many to-night !”

The candle fell from the hand of the Keeper of the Key, and he could be seen in the moonlight groping for the door-knob, his hand on the figures of the group of water nymphs. In a moment he gave a low moan and, his head hanging over his breast, he staggered down the marble steps. “ Alas,” cried the guards, “ now is the great man broken !” He made for the drawbridge crying out, “ The lid, the lid. Slide it back over the well !” The guards and servants pressed after him, but not one of them ever got into the town again. Across the bridge was now pouring a wild rush of human panic. Carriages, carts, cars, horsemen, mules, donkeys, were flying from the Seven Sisters laden with men and women and whole families. Crowds pressed forward on foot. Animals, dogs, cats, pigs, sheep, cows, came pellmell with them. Drivers stood in their seats flaying their horses as if driven by madness. The animals rolled their eyes, snorted steam from their nostrils, strained forward with desperate zeal. Once or twice the struggling mass jammed, and men fought each other like beasts. The cries of people being trampled to death broke out in harrowing protest. For a moment the shepherd boy saw the form of a priest rise up, bearing aloft the stark outline of a cross, and then he disappeared.

Over that night of terror was the unnatural brilliance of the swoollen moon. All this the shepherd boy saw in a few eternal moments. Then he cried out, “ How up ! how up ! how up !” and immediately the damsel tripped down the broad staircase of the mansion, dressed in white robes, her hair loose about her shoulders. Never had she looked so frail and beautiful, the lily of the valley ! The shepherd boy told her what had come to pass. She cried out for her father. “ I am the daughter of the Keeper of the Key,” she said. “ I shall stand by his side at the well in this great hour.”

“ I am now the master of the town of the Seven Sisters,” said the shepherd boy. “ I am the Keeper of the Key.” And he held up the secret key.

The damsel, seeing this, and catching sight of what was taking place at the draw-bridge, fell back in a swoon on the carpet of the hall. The shepherd boy raised her in his arms and fled for the hills. Along the road was the wild stampede of the people, all straining for the hills, pouring in a mad rush from the valley and the town. Behind them were the still madder, swifter, more terrible waters, coming in sudden thuds, in furious drives, eddying and sculping and rearing in an orgy or remorseless and heartrending destruction. Down before that roaring avalanche went walls and trees and buildings. The shepherd boy saw men give up the

struggle for escape, cowering by the roadside, and women, turning from the race to the hills, rushed back to meet the oncoming waters with arms outspread and insanity in their wild eyes.

Not a human creature escaped that night of wrath except the shepherd boy and the damsel he carried in his arms. Every time the waters reached his heels they reared up like great white horses and fell back, thus sparing him. Three times did he look back at happenings in the town of the Seven Sisters. The first time he looked back the water was up to the last windows of houses that were three storeys high. All the belongings of the householders were floating about, and people were sinking through the water, their lives going out as swiftly as twinkling bubbles. In an attic window he saw a young girl loosen her hair, she was singing a song, preparing to meet death as if she were making ready for a lover. A man at the top of a ladder was gulping whiskey from a bottle, and when the water sprang at his throat he went down with a mad defiant cry. A child ran out an open window, golden locks dancing about its pretty head, as if it were running into a garden. There was another little bubble in the moonlight. . . . The second time the shepherd boy looked back the swallows were flying from their nests under the eaves of the houses, for the water was now lapping them. An old woman was hobbling across a roof on crutches. Men were drawing their bodies but of the chimney-pots. A raft on which the Keeper's guard had put out slowly, like a live thing lazily yawning and turning over on its side, sent them all into the common doom. A man with a bag of gold clutched in his hand, stood dizzily on the high gable of a bank, then, with a scream, tottered and fell. . . . The third time the shepherd boy looked back nothing was to be seen above the face of the water except the pinnacle of the watch tower of the mansion, and standing upon it was the Keeper of the Key, his arms outspread, his face upturned to the moon, and the seven water nymphs leaping about him in a silver dance.

After that the shepherd boy drew up on the hills with the damsel. He was quite exhausted, and he noticed that the activity of the waters gradually calmed down as daybreak approached, like things spent after a night of wild passion. When at last the day quivered into life on the eastern sky he called the damsel to his side, and standing there together they looked out over the spread of water. The town of the Seven Sisters was no more.

“ Look,” cried the shepherd boy, “ at Loch Riabhach !” And drawing back he cast out into the far water the secret key. There it still lies under a rock, somewhere in the lake over which our boat is now drifting. And the shepherd boy and the damsel there and then founded a new town beside the lake, and all who are of the old families of Baile Loch Riabhach, like myself, are their descendants. That, concluded Eamonn, is the story of the Gray Lake.

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