

PAUTR BAH HOUARN

THE MAN WITH THE IRON STAFF

Once upon a time there lived a young man in Lower Brittany. When he was still a boy he was stronger than anyone for miles around, and the older he grew, the stronger he became. When he was ten years old he tried to uproot a mighty oak, and the onlookers heard the roots crack. When he was fifteen years of age, he lifted it half out of the ground, and when he was eighteen he plucked it out as if it had been a wisp of straw.

“Now is the time to set out into the world,” he said. “Let us see if I can find anyone stronger than I am.”

The young man went to the blacksmith, and asked him to make an iron staff.

“I want to take this with me on my journey,” he said. “It must be the heaviest and the strongest you have ever made.”

The blacksmith set to work and for eight days you could hear the roaring of the forge, and the clanging of the hammer on the anvil. At last the staff was finished.

“Is this my staff?” cried the young man. “It is only fit for a child,” and he snapped it across his knee.

Once again the blacksmith set to work. This time he toiled day and night for two weeks, without stopping to rest. When the staff was as thick as the hub of a cart the young man weighed it in his hands.

“It might do for a man of middle strength,” he said. “But it will not do for me.” So saying, he once more broke it across his knee.

The blacksmith set to work and this time he laboured night and day for a month. He cast burning brands into the furnace, and sent up showers of sparks with the blows of the hammer. When the staff was finished it was as thick as a ship’s mast.

“That is just what I wanted,” said the young man. “Now I can begin my journey.”

He set out towards the East. When he came to the edge of the forest he saw a lame woodcutter walking towards him. On his back he carried three tree-trunks.

“I think that you would make a good companion,” said the young man. “I need strong fellows like you. Will you travel the world with me?”

“Gladly,” said the woodcutter, and fell into step beside him, still carrying the load on his shoulders.

Soon they came to a millpond. The wheel was not turning and the mill boy was outside, playing quoits with the millstones.

“Those stones must be very heavy,” said the Man with the Iron Staff. “What are you doing with them?”

“Oh, I am just playing about while I wait for the water to rise, and I can start my mill again,” said the miller’s boy.

“Would you like to join us?” said the Man with the Iron Staff.

“Gladly,” said the miller’s boy, and lifting the millstones onto his shoulder he fell into step beside them.

They walked on in this way for a long time. At last, when the sun was setting, they saw a dense forest, and at the entrance to the forest a wide, deep river.

“Let us cross over,” said one of them.

“Yes, let us cross over,” agreed the others. The Man with the Iron Staff planted his staff on the ground, and leapt over the water; the lame woodcutter laid his tree trunks from one shore to the other, and crossed over, and the miller’s boy threw his millstones onto the river bed, and used them as stepping stones.

Before long they came to a little hut. In the door stood a poor man who seemed very sad.

“Who is the owner of this forest?” they asked him.

“The owner of this forest used to live in the castle nearby,” said the man. “However, he disappeared one day, no one knows where, and since then the castle has been inhabited by spirits, and no one dares enter.

“We shall see about that,” said the three friends. “Where is this castle?”

“It is down that path on the left,” said the man. “Remember – whatever you do, beware of the man with the beard.”

They followed the path, and soon came to high walls. Night had fallen, and everything was still, save for the night birds and the bats. The great door was open, and they passed through it and came into a magnificent apartment. Here they spent the night, and next morning they began to discuss how they could live comfortably in the castle.

They decided that each day two of them would go out hunting, while the third person stayed behind to make the midday meal.

“Come, come,” said the lame woodcutter. “We will take it in turn to

stay at home, and I will take the first turn. When the stew is ready, I will ring the dinner bell.”

The other two set out, and the woodcutter began cooking. He prepared a fine vegetable stew, and after it had been simmering for some time over the fire, he decided that it was ready. He was about to ring the bell, when he heard a noise at the top of the chimney. Some pebbles fell down, and a little soot.

“No doubt it is an owl, disturbed by the smoke,” thought the woodcutter, and he went on with what he was doing.

Two minutes later, down fell two more stones and then a stone was thrown into the stew, which splashed out onto the floor.

“Watch out, whoever you are,” cried the woodcutter. “I’ll be up that chimney before you can come down any further.”

Before he had finished speaking, a tall old man, with a beard so long that it was wound seven times about his waist, jumped down out of the chimney into the kitchen.

He picked up the woodcutter by the belt as easily as if he had been a child and laid him, tightly bound, beneath the hearthstone. Then he knocked over the cauldron and disappeared.

Meanwhile, the two other travellers had grown weary of hunting, and could not understand



why they had not heard the dinner bell.

“Either the woodcutter is asleep or something has happened to him,” they said. “Let us go back.”

When they entered the kitchen a sad sight met their eyes. The stew had run right up to the threshold, and broken pots and pans were all about. The woodcutter himself was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly they heard a groan from under the hearthstone. They lifted it up, and saw their poor comrade.

“The man with the beard did this to me,” said the woodcutter. “I was no match for him.”

“Never fear,” said his friends. “We will avenge you – just let him show his face here again!”

Next day the miller begged to be left behind. He put his mill stones down beside him, and set about his housework. The stew was soon cooked, and it was nearly midday, when two or three pebbles suddenly fell into the cauldron.

Before the miller had time to seize his millstones, the man with the beard was beside him, and in a second he had been seized and thrown into a wash tub. The man with the beard set the millstones on top and disappeared.

When the others did not hear the dinner bell they guessed that some misfortune had overtaken their friend. They hurried back and found the kitchen in the same disorder as the day before; as for the miller, he was nowhere to be seen.

“The devil take that bearded fellow,” cried the Man with the Iron Staff. “I wager that he has killed our friend.”

Filled with anger, he seized the millstones and threw them across the room, and sent the cover of the tub after them. They heard a groan and saw the poor miller lying bound and gagged. They set him free, and he told them what had happened.

“Very well, now it is my turn,” said the Man with the Iron Staff. “I will make short work of this fellow.”

Next morning, his friends set off hunting, and he remained behind. He began to prepare the stew, but he was on guard, and he kept his staff within reach. Suddenly, two or three pebbles were thrown into the stew, and he saw the end of a long beard.

“Aha, my friend, I’m ready for you!” cried the Man with the Iron Staff. Waving his terrible staff he brought the giant to the ground, fastened his beard beneath the roller of the mangle and nailed it down. Then he rang the bell.

“Did you overcome him?” asked the miller and the woodcutter, when they returned home.

“Come and see,” he replied, and led them to the mangle. However, the man had vanished, leaving behind his beard.

“Let us follow him,” cried the Man with the Iron Staff. “I must know who this man with the beard is.”

They followed the drops of blood that the giant had left behind him, and came to a large cave in the heart of the forest. In the middle of the cave was a sort of well, which seemed to be bottomless.

“He must be in there – let us go after him!” they cried.

“I will go first,” said the lame woodcutter. “If there is any danger, I will tug on the rope.”

For half an hour he went down and down, and the rope unwound and unwound. Suddenly the rope was tugged violently, and the two friends hastened to pull him back up.

“What did you see?” they asked.

“I saw a huge fire – which must be Hell itself,” said the woodcutter.

“I will soon find out,” said the miller, and he was let down in his turn.

He went down for an hour, but before he reached the bottom, he tugged on the rope.

“What did you hear?” asked the other two.

“I heard human voices which said: ‘When the oven is ready, throw him in,’” said the miller

“I too wish to go down,” said the Man with the Iron Staff.

He went down and down for half a day. At last he reached the bottom and saw a magnificent castle. At the door stood an enormous oven, and a crowd of servants, who were filling it with bread.

“To whom does this castle belong?” asked the Man with the Iron Staff.

“To a great and powerful lord who has never met his match,” replied the servants. “However, just now he is very ill – and he will not see you.”

“Hmm, we shall see about that,” said the Man with the Iron Staff.

“You are welcome to try,” said the servants, “but beware his temper. We already have a great baron, who tried to defeat him, in chains. They say that he has a fine castle above ground.”

The young man from Brittany entered the castle. Sentinels barred his way, but with one blow of his staff he tossed them aside and entered the sick room.

The giant was in bed, and three maidens, each as fair as the day, were bandaging the cuts on his face.

“Mercy, young man,” cried the giant. “You are the stronger. Grant me my life, and you may take away these maidens, whom I have been keeping prisoner.”

“Gladly,” said the young man, and he took one of the girls, tied her to the rope, and set her travelling upwards to his two friends.

However, when the time came to send up the second maiden, and he tugged on the rope, there was no reply. The Man with the Iron Staff picked up the second girl, and climbed up back to the opening. Here he found his two comrades. They were fighting with each other over who should get to



have the first maiden.

“Peace friends,” said the Man with the Iron Staff, “here is another of them. Take care of them both until I come back up with the third prisoner.”

Once more the Man with the Iron Staff slipped back down to the bottom. Barely had he touched the ground, but the rope was pulled back up. The miller and the lame woodcutter were deserting him.

“I am lost,” he thought, “unless the man with the beard can help me.”

He hurried back to the sick man, and asked him how he could escape from that place.

“I will show you a way,” said the man. “Here is a magnetic key – hold up one end towards the opening, and you will soon be out.”

The young man did as he was bidden. He took the third maiden, and her father, the imprisoned baron, and with the key in his hand was carried back above ground in the blink of an eye.

In the meantime, his two companions believed that they had rid themselves of him forever. They were living in the deserted castle, and each had taken a maiden for himself.

Filled with anger, the Man with the Iron Staff rushed into the castle, and sent the two traitors flying, pursued by many blows from the Iron Staff.

After this, he married the prettiest of the three maidens, and they lived very happily together.

I myself was at the wedding and received a fine loaf of white bread and butter, and a bowl of cider, and returned home very well satisfied.