

The Windows of Wonder
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The young woman wheeling the bicycle came up the roadway out of the bogland valley. Behind her, bulk on bulk outhrown across all exits, the mountains squatted. Beyond the valley a headland had thrust itself out into the sea. Over the scene hung the clarity that was a promise of rain.

On the crest of the gap the woman turned her bicycle. Placing her forearms on the handlebars, she eased her body, and looked steadfastly down into the valley she had just left. She saw the dark floor of low-lying land. She saw the ranked ricks of turf and beside them the glitter of white shirts. She saw the bright cabins and the scrawl of a hidden stream. Last of all she saw the tiny school in its cluster of windwhipped trees.

The woman's eyes became filled with a remote smouldering. Her breath came forcefully through her nostrils.

Six months before she had seen this valley for the first time. Her friends had tried to dissuade her from acting as substitute teacher in the valley school. "A queer clannish crowd--a place of appalling feuds and astonishing whims." "When the place gets you you'll start clawing the walls. ... The children will eat you with their big brown eyes."

The woman shifted her gaze from the valley to the distant sea. Out there the white-caps were lighting and quenching in the angry water.

Perversity had made her take the post. She remembered her first day—her first week in the valley. The ominous faces at the cottage windows as she rode past....The solemn principal who was flesh and blood of the valley. ...She taught the junior division—the senior boys and girls. The school-children sitting in grave rows consumed her with their large brown eyes and afforded her the traditional minimum of co-operation. Sometimes she felt afraid. Sometimes she was tempted to scream aloud, to abandon herself to welcome hysteria, to use her nails as God had intended they should be used. But day after day had found her counseling herself to the patience necessary for the finding of the keys to the children's natures.

She had tried laughter: they had turned their heads sideways as if they were looking at an insane person. She had tried music: the music she was acquainted with was so wholly apart from their own grace-noted plaints that, on realizing her mistake, she had stopped suddenly. She had tried the unorthodox—leaping, grimacing and mimicry: one day she discovered in mid-antic that the principal was glaring at her through the glass partition. After this she yielded herself up to despair. Then, when she wasn't endeavouring, she stumbled on the secret.

It was a reading lesson. She had begun to explain the word "legend" which appeared in the text. "A legend is a tale of some event that happened so long ago that we have no means of telling whether it is true or not. You remember, children, the story of the *Children of Lir*?"

There was no sudden light in the children's eyes. Could it be that ...? Mastering her emotion, she asked: "Hands up, the children who know the story of the *Children of Lir*?"

No hand moved. It wasn't possible! Was this the sole valley in Ireland that had let the legend die? Still, the children were obedient and dutiful. If they had heard the tale they would have....

"Of *Deirdre of the Sorrows*? Of the *Fairy Palace of the Quicken Trees*? Of the *Fate of the Sons of Usna*? Of *Diarmuid and Grainne*? Surely, some child...?"

The children's eyes grew browner and rounder and wider. The girls stolidly planted their stout-soled boots beneath them while the bare toes of the boys squirmed on the boarded floor.

The woman was afraid to trust herself to words lest she should break into uncovered tears. She looked left, then right. She felt trapped and crushed. She looked at the wee ones and the ones that were not so wee. 'Oh, children ...' she began

Briskly she gathered them in a ring around her.

'Listen, children,' she said. 'I don't know if you can understand me or not. But you must try: It's the only way. Someone has robbed you of a very precious thing. I will not have you cheated. This thing I speak of is neither gold nor silver neither a red nor a green jewel. It is something a great deal more valuable. The other things I teach you—the figures, the words, the lines and the letters—are not so important—as yet. Please try to understand! How shall I begin to tell you of the treasure you have lost? Your minds are like rooms that are dark or brown. But somewhere in the rooms, if only you can pull aside the heavy curtains, you will find windows—these are the windows of wonder. Through these you can see the yellow sunlight or the silver stars or the many-colored wheel of the rainbow. You've all seen a rainbow?' The heads nodded. 'Isn't it beautiful?' The heads nodded vigorously.

“The windows I speak of are the legends of our people. Each little legend is a window of wonder. Each time you hear a story or ponder upon a story or dream yourself into a story or break or remake a story, you are opening a window of wonder. Children, please, please try to understand.”

"Perhaps I had better begin with the story I myself like best: *Oisín in the Land of the Ever Young*. Are you ready, children?" The solemn heads nodded in affirmation. "Long, long ago there lived..."

The woman on the hill-top sighed and looked across the northern rim of the valley. A Martello tower stood black against the livid northern sky. In the air between, the clean gulls were moving inland. The whimper of the nearing rain was in the chill wind that blew from the left hand,

She remembered the complaints of the parents, the semideputations, the cabin growlings and the slow contemptuous stares of elders from over the half-doors. Most keenly of all she recalled the stern rebuke of the principal—at the apparent waste of teaching time. Then she began to dissemble, for she had felt the children's imaginations coming alive under her care: she knew that something precious was being born in them. Already they were fusing warmly into her nature: the stir of their new life was implicit in the bright cries they uttered as they played along the valley. Now she and the children were conspirators—while she pretended to be reading from a textbook she was telling yet another tale, opening up another window of wonder. By now the children had begun to demand the stories. Their eyes that had been dull were ready to leap and frolic on small provocation. Now there was comradeship between the teacher and the taught.

And then the old mistress had returned. The young teacher's stay in the school was abruptly ended.

The evening smoke had begun to drift low from the chimneys of the valley. The watcher sighed and turned away.

It was then that she noticed the old russet-faced man. He was standing inside a rough timber gate on the roadside, resting his elbows on the top spar. His fists were securely clenched. A russet man with a russet face and merry blue eyes under a black caubeen. The young woman changed colour. Turning the bicycle, she faced it for the distant town. She had her right foot on the off pedal and was hopping with her left foot when he addressed her:

"Wait! Wait!"

One leg on the ground, one leg on the pedal, she waited.

"Come hether, woman!"

After a moment of puzzled delay she obeyed. The old man and the young woman looked at one another. His eyes were the bluest she had ever seen.

"You're the school-missus."

"I am ...was!"

"I heard the children talkin' about yeh. So you're leavin' us?"

"I am!"

"All!" Slyly: "With no one to say good-bye to yeh only me. An' they have me down for bein' half-cracked. There's a lone bird like me in every parish in Ireland."

He laughed. It was a half-regretful but lovely laugh.

A warmth flowed between them. She looked first at his face, then at his clenched fists. She was dreaming his face young when he apprised her red-handed and, narrowing his eyes, said half-fooling, all in earnest:

"If I was fifty years younger, I'd chance me luck with yeh. me lovely woman. An' I'm not so sure that I'd fail; An' why do I say that? Because I know your mind the same as I know me own mind. You're a woman to whom I could talk about the grandeur of a lark, the swingin' of a caravan or the Resurrection of Our Lord. Together, me an' you, we'd open up many an' many a window of wonder. Then we'd be..."

He made to place his palms together and interlace his fingers. When he found his fists clenched he laughed at his small folly. Smiling he held out the two fists: "A present I have for yeh an' yeh goin'. A token to remember us by. Look!"

She watched the gnarled fists unlock. Clinging to the coarse palms were two butterflies—two Red Admirals—one on each palm. The blades of the butterflies' wings swung slowly from side to side to reveal their full beauty.

Her laughter and his laughter cancelled the disparity of years between them. She was bright-eyed: he was sure and old. Her breath came faster. The old man wore a smile of confidence and satisfaction.

Carefully and with a movement that reminded her of a conjurer he removed the butterflies from each palm with the thumb and forefinger of the other hand. The butterflies began to beat and thrum for freedom.

The old man tossed them into the air. At first, the butterflies flew wide apart: then the craziness of their flight begot a pattern. At last they found one another and began to lock and frolic and entwine their flights as they climbed higher and higher into the dark heavens.

The old man turned away, then strode slowly up the field. The young woman mounted her bicycle and began to pedal down into the town valley.