

The Korrigan

Brittany, France

IF YOU'RE TRAVELING THROUGH BRITTANY, you'll come upon many moss-covered fountains. They're very beautiful, but you'll notice over every one of them is a cross or a little statue of the Virgin and Child to guard the fountain. You see, in the old days people were very frightened of these fountains. They thought they belonged to korrigans; spirits who haunt these fountains.

One day long ago, there was a farmer's wife. She went down to speak to her husband in the fields one afternoon and left her baby in the cradle. He was a lovely baby, just about six months old, with hair like ripe wheat and blue eyes like cornflowers. His mother kissed him goodbye and went down to the fields.

Just then, a korrigan passed by. Spying the open door, she looked in and saw the beautiful baby. She wanted him so she picked him up and took him, replacing him with her own wrinkled, ugly spawn.

When the mother came home, she wondered what was wrong with her baby. He'd always been so sunny and sweet; now he was cranky and upset. She said to her husband, "I think there's something wrong."

"Oh, he's just changing," her husband said. "Babies grow. He'll soon be a child."

Days went by. He didn't grow much bigger, but he grew cleverer. He watched her all the time, but in a spiteful sort of way. The wife wondered what could be wrong with him. She spoke to her husband again and he said, "Well, he's not a baby anymore. He's a little child."

As the years went by, he could walk and he could talk, but he never was nice. He never was loving. And he never smiled.

One day, a neighbor came home. It was a rainy night, and he'd come from the market where he'd bought a little calf. In order to stay dry, he wrapped his cloak around himself with the calf under his arm; the back of it draping over the horse. As he passed by, he heard the child say.

*Egg before white hen I knew,
Acorn before oak.*

But never before saw I three heads under one cloak!

Now that, thought the neighbor, was a strange thing. The child couldn't be more than six years old, but he sounded like an old man. He told the farmer's wife, and she became even more frightened. But when she told her husband, he brushed it away.

She decided to test him. One day, she got an eggshell and put some porridge into it, then put it in a pot to boil. The child said, "Mama, what are you doing?"

And she said, "I'm making supper for your father's workmen."

"Supper?" he said.

"Yes," she said, "this is how you make supper for workmen."

He looked at her and he said:

Acorn before oak I knew,

Egg before white hen.

But never saw I in one eggshell supper for twenty men!

The mother became terrified. That night, after the child had gone to bed, she and her husband sat up talking. She told of how, when she sent him out to milk the cows, he tormented them; when she sent him out to mind the chickens, he hurt the chickens, too. He hurt everything he came across, and he watched her all the time. "I fear he will do us harm next," she said to her husband.

"You're right," he said. "I was a boy once myself, but I didn't do things like he does. I'm going up to his room, and we'll see what's going on."

He went up to the room where the boy was sleeping. Though he looked asleep, the boy was watching him under his eyelids. As soon as the boy saw his father, he let out a screech – it was such a terrible screech, you could have heard it miles away. A moment later, the door was flung open and a woman appeared. She had with her a little boy about ten years old, with hair the color of ripe wheat, and eyes as blue as cornflowers!

"Take him! Take him!" she screamed wildly. "Give me back my own!"

And out of the bed leapt the korrigan's child and into his mother's arms. The farmer and his wife had their own child again, and they lived happily ever afterwards.



