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A Night at Mara's House

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A Night at Mara's House

by Joe R. Christopher for Betty Wheeler

When I awoke, after a light, short sleep — nearby, still sleeping, my wife, my son, my daughter — the wind through bushes sighed, not yet to weep; against the moonless night, my wagon's outline, the axle broken, the horses fled from keep.

Against the dark, another shape was etched — and as it seemed, tall human figure faceless (or faced away) — as one who silently watched, for what I am not sure, through early nighttime; and when she spoke, the words were woman-voiced.

"Will you not come with me?" she asked; "you saw, 'fore the night came, against the sun my cottage — distant yet reachable by foot; the flaw in sleeping by yourselves is beasts a-creeping (most hungry beasts) which travelers would gnaw."

"We will, we will," I cried, waking my kin; "but tell me, who are you, here living lonely?" "When you have come to know me better, then you may call me by whatever name seems fittest. Meanwhile, let's walk to where we'll enter in."

I meant to protest her strange, untitled way, but then, most oddly, I could not call my surname — what clan was I? — nor given name could say, for who was I, to make demands? "Unknowing," she said, "your inner self's unfixed to stay."

And thus we rose and quietly followed her, away from grasses and the broken wagon, across the sands, throughout a patch of burrs and creosote bushes, across dry water channels, over an isolated stoney knur.

I wanted then to match her pace to pace, but surely she was seven feet in tallness; her strides could easily overmatch my race. I could not catch her though I tried to hurry; I could not, despite my panting, see her face.

The way was long, in sand and over rock; and, when I slowed as help for child in going, the woman slowed and said, "My doors don't lock, yet almost none would stay with me two nighttimes — still, what I teach, a soberness, none mock."

I worried about her words, though friendly in tone, so I spoke of where had been our destination, of where we'd hoped to see our children grown — but "Lo!" she said, "we come to end our journey," and there her cottage was, on a hillock of stone.

When she had reached and lit a horn-latern's light, there by the hearth, a barish room revealing, then she herself revealed — but what she'd dignify: her tall, full form in brown, like a monk's habit; her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.

"Now, Mister Vane," she said, "that narrow stair will lead you and your family to the garret: others have found thier sleep most peaceful there, while upon those beds were nightmare troubled — who knows what dreams a sleeping mind will snare?"

"My name's returned!" I cried. "Has it?" asked she; "perhaps, perhaps. This cottage is good for naming, but once outside, some names are like debris. To prove the house, here you may call me Mara. Now the night's late, and you'd best sleeping be."

We thanked her, then we climbed the narrow steps and dound upon a table a water pitcher.

Two loaves of bread — a feast for one who stops, or four, and so we ate and said our prayers; sleep came, as gently as tea in hot water steps.

Later that night, I suddenly awoke — a something, a cat's loud cry. A gabled window let in the moonlight. What animal that spoke? I went to see which wild feline was stirring; and there was Mara in a pale white cloak.

Of leopard or of mountain-lion size, two pure white cats were just before her crouching; she gestured as a child a pebble shies, and they in that direction the horizon sped for. "What does it mean?" I thought of this surprise.

Perhaps I dreamed it. I turned from the window, deep in thought, perplexed. My cheeks were wet, I noticed, and on my bed my wife in dreams did weep. I did not wake her, I did not ask the matter: I kissed her cheek, lay down, and fell asleep.

Next morning we awoke, the early sun across the floor its windowed pattern throwing; below, the odor told that bread was done — we found a large and crusted loaf on table, a water-pitcher there beside that bun.

I asked of veiled Mara which the road which led us to the famous berg Bulika; she said due west. I asked for bread bestowed; this day's new loaf inedible by marrow, she said. We thanked her for her charity showed.

With courtesy then, with words of polite intent, we gathered up the few things we could carry and faced the wasteland; but, before we went, I said that we could not have stayed, our sorrow. "No one with me a second night has spent."

We started . . . but yet . . . when he had left her door, I, glancing back, then thought I saw her veilled, her face than e'en my wife's far beautiful more; and, in that glance, though that I saw her weeping — that helpful, strange, unhappy manticore.

The 1985

16th Annual Mythopoeic Conference "A Kinship of Dancers"

The Mythopoeic Society's 16th annual Mythopoeic Conference is coming to the Mid-West! It will be held at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois on the weekend of July 26-29, 1985. Wheaton College is an ideal location because of the presence of the Marion E. Wade Collection of Inklings source material, as well as the complete papers of Madeleine L'Engle and other fascinating resources.

The Theme of the Conference will be "A Kinship of Dancers: Interplay in the Lives and Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams." As well as papers and panels there will be a masquerade, a procession, films, an art show, a banquet, a banner competition, and as is appropriate to the theme, a country dance.

To submit papers, volunteer for panels, request registration information, or simply send greetings, write to: Mythopoeic Conference XVI (Mythcon 16), P.O. Box A3120, Chicago, Illinois 60690.

The total room and board package, including 3 nights (at double occupancy), 9 meals (including the feast), facilities fee, and registration is \$120 until December 31, 1984; \$141.50 after January 1, 1985.

Registration only is \$20 until December 31, 1984, \$31.50 after January 1, 1985 (in addition, a facilities fee of \$21 will be required at the door).

Room and board, and Registration, may be available at the door, but costs will be higher. We strongly encourage you to register early!