A Night at Mara's House

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by Joe R. Christopher for Betty Wheeler

When I awoke, after a light, short sleep —
neary, 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,
'time 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,
the woman slowed and said, "My doors don't lock,
for who was I, to make demands? "Unknowing,
you may call me by whatever name seems fittest.
I could not, despite my panting, see her face.
her strides could easily overmatch my race.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and there her cottage was, on a hillock of stone.

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 —
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,
across the sands, throughout a patch of burrs
and creosote bushes, across dry water channels,
what clan was I? — nor given name could say,
we gathered up the few things we could carry
a water-pitcher there beside that bun.

And thus we rose and quietly followed her,
away from grasses and the broken wagon,
and dound upon a table a water-pitcher,
across the floor its windowed pattern throwing;
I, glancing back, then thought I saw her veilless,
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
her tall, full form in brown, like a monk's habit;
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and on our bed my wife in dreams did weep.
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, despite my panting, see her face.
and there her cottage was, on a hillock of stone.

I asked of veiled Mara which the road
... but yet . . . when we had left her door,
I, glancing back, then thought I saw her veilless;
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and, in that glance, thought that I saw her weeping —
that helpful, strange, unhappy manticore.

We thanked her, then we climbed the narrow steps
beside the hearth, a barish room revealing,
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and there was Mara in a pale white cloak.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and there was Mara in a pale white cloak.
and there her cottage was, on a hillock of stone.

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 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 our 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 crustless loaf on table,
a water-pitcher there beside that bun.

I asked of veiled Mara which the road
... but yet . . . when we had left her door,
I, glancing back, then thought I saw her veilless;
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
her face beneath a veil, so veiled from sight.
and, in that glance, thought that I saw her weeping —
that helpful, strange, unhappy manticore.

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