

Brian Froud,  
"Water Faerie",  
in Brian Froud  
and Alan Lee's  
*Faeries* (1978).



# By Fynnon Ddu

Katherine Langrish

**T**he hearth-hob of the place called Hen Gaer crouched in long soaking grass at the edge of the old well, Fynnon Ddu, watching for frogs.

Hen Gaer wasn't much. It was a tumble of stones, a cluster of hawthorns growing on a rise between the river ford and the old stone road that the Welsh called Sarn Helen. It was brambles, and sudden pockets of bog, and the sound of hidden water. It was parched lines in the turf on a summer day. For a thousand years folk had come here and built their huts and houses, lived and left and been forgotten. And now new people had arrived and set to work.

From his hidden spot beside the well, the hob could hear them – out of sight but not out of earshot – chopping, hammering, shouting, whistling, talking. They'd been at it for days, grubbing up bushes, digging a bank and a ring ditch all around Hen Gaer, with a palisade on the top. Now they were flinging up a mound at one end of the site, layers of stone and raw red earth rising higher and higher. Buildings sprang up like mushrooms: sheds, storehouses, the timbers of a great hall. Cartwhips cracked, mules strained and slipped. The rutted tracks were axle-deep in mud.

'At last,' the hob murmured, rubbing his fingers. 'Soon there'll be housen and hearth again. Hot food a-cooking and warm ashes to sleep in. Ahh!'

He hugged his tattered rabbit skin around him and peered into the well. It was a long, narrow pool, lined with leaning mossy stones. At one end a spring bubbled up under a rough, rocky arch and trickled out at the other into a little deep-cut brook, and the dark water was full of weeds, cress and frogspawn. A small frog plopped into the pool and pushed through the skin of the water in a series of fluid kicks. The hob stiffened all over like a hunting cat. He shot out a hairy arm.

There was a swirl and a heave in the depths. The spring gushed up in a burst of fierce bubbles. The frog vanished in a fog of sediment.

'What did you do that for?' yelped the hob.

A slim, transparent hand slid up out of the water and wagged a finger at him.

'Taint fair, missy!' The hob was really upset. 'Tis hard enough a-catching they little critters, without you a-helping them. You got plenty!'

A face looked up through the brown water-glass, framed in drifting clouds of hair which spread away in filmy tendrils. The eyes were great dark blurs, the pale-lipped smile both shy and wild.

'You doesn't even eat,' the hob groused on. 'You doesn't know what 'tis to have an empty belly.'

The water spirit slipped upwards. Her head emerged from the water, glistening. In air and daylight she was difficult to see: a slanting glimmer, like a risen reflection. She propped narrow elbows on the brink and offered him a handful of cress.

'Lenten fare. That an't going to put hairs on me chest,' said the hob sulkily, but he stuffed it into his mouth and chewed.

A new bout of hammering battered the air. The water spirit flinched, and the hob nodded at her. 'Yus. Men. They'm back again at last.'

She pushed her dripping hair back behind one ear and spoke in a voice soft as a dove cooing in a sleepy noon. 'Who?'

The hob snorted, spraying out bits of green. 'Who cares who? S'long as they has fires, and a roof overhead, and stew in the pot –'

'Is it the Cornovii?'

'You allus asks me that.' The hob glanced at her with wry affection and shook his head. 'They'm long gone,' he said gently. 'They don't come back. Times change and so do men.'

'Was it such a long time?' She was teasing a water-beetle with a tassel of her hair. 'I liked the Cornovii. They used to bring me toys.'

'Toys?'

'Things to play with.' She looked up at him through half-shut eyes. 'Knives and spearheads, brooches and jewels. Girls and boys. I've kept them all.'

'Down at the bottom there? How deep do it go?' Hackles bristling, but fascinated, the hob craned his neck and tried to peer past his own scrawny reflection.

'Come and see.' She reached out her hands with an innocent smile, but he drew hastily back.

'No thanks!'

She looked hurt. 'I wouldn't drown *you*.'

'No, but you'd give me a good ducking, I know your tricks. An' I'm wet enough as 'tis. I don't remember the Cornovii. Before my time, I reckon. I come here with the soldiers what built the road. They made a way-fort here. Sirontium, they called it. I had me own little nook in the commander's house,' he boasted. 'Lovely, it was. Pretty patterned floors, with tunnels under 'em, all warm like.'

'I remember the soldiers. They put the stones here.' Proudly she patted the rim of the well. 'They gave me things too. They threw coins to me for good luck, and I gave it. I always kept the spring running and the water clean. They knew I was here, they made me a little altar and carved my name into the stone, although they didn't get it quite right, the sillies.' She laughed. 'They called me –'

'Well,' said the hob after a moment. 'What did they call you?'

'They called me – ach!' Spray flew as she smacked a petulant hand on the water, and the hob ducked.

'Oy, stop it!'

'I can't remember! No one's spoken my name for, oh, so long.' A frown furrowed her brow like a ripple in water. 'Hob – what was it?'

The hob bit his finger. His eyes slid away. He coughed. 'Dunno. Dunno if I ever heard. Um. Olwen?'

She shook her head.

'Flavia?'

'No.'

'Elen?'

'No.'

'Edith?'

'No.' She sounded angry and a little frightened. 'You *must* have heard it!'

The hob shrugged, uncomfortable. 'So? What's a name? Look at this place. Sirontium, it was, and then it tumbled down and they called it the Old Fort, Hen Gaer, and then no one was here but you an' me and the badgers till Cerdic come and built the farm. And then it was Swein's and Osmund's and Leofric's, and then it burned and the name went back to Hen Gaer again. And now it's rebuilding, and they'll call it summink different, and me as well, I shouldn't wonder. What's a name? Look at me! I've had plenty and owned to none. Lar, bwbach, hob – I an't particular.'

'Oh, you,' she cried scornfully, 'you're different. You live in housen.'

'And that's a sight better'n living in a pond,' the hob huffed. 'All or nuthin, that's your trouble. Adaptable, that's me. I an't proud, I an't hanging on for giftës and toys. I'll earn my keep, I don't mind a bit o' sweeping or what not – s'long as I gets a piece of sausage or a dish of cream now and then.'

'You don't understand. Oh, you're too like a mortal. What's a name then? It doesn't shape them. They come and go like mayflies. I don't belong in housen, I belong here!' She twisted her fingers together. 'If no one remembers me ... if I don't have a name ... if I'm forgotten ...' There was a terror in her gaze. 'that's *me* – all of me! I'll dwindle!' She beats the surface like a swan thrashing its wing. 'I was more than this, once! I was – I was, oh, *who*?''

'Wait!' The hob skipped, snapping his fingers. 'I got it!'

'You've remembered?' She sank into the rocking water and clung to the edge of the well, gazing at him with wide black eyes. 'Oh clever hob – you shall have *all* the frogs! And all the water snails – whatever you want. Tell me, tell me!'

'Now don't get yerself into a pickle, missy,' the hob growled. 'I never said I remembered your name; I don't believe I ever knew. But din't you just tell me them soldiers carved it for you? Mortals come and mortals go, but writ in stone lasts forever. It'll be here somewhere. All we got to do is look.'

'Oh, lovely soldiers! It was here! Right over the spring, I think ...'

The rocky arch protecting the spring was covered deep in spongy moss, and grown-over with grass and turf creeping down from above. The water spirit flung herself at it, clawing off the moss in chunks. She scratched and scabbled, and grooves gradually appeared in the stone: short lines, joined to other lines, green with age.

'Here it is! Here's my name!' she cried, and kissed the wet stone.

The hob cheered, his hair on end with excitement. 'Look at that, safe as housen all these years! Neat as bird-tracks in mud!'

She turned to him, eyes like dew in the sun. 'Now: what is it? Give me my name again. Make the marks speak!'

'Ah.' His face fell. 'We an't no further forward, then. I thought you'd know it when you saw it. I an't got the skill. I dunno how, missy.'

'You don't know how? But ...' The water spirit traced the grooves with a finger. 'This is my name, locked up in stone. What is the magic?'

'Mortal magic, missy,' he mumbled. 'I an't no scholar.'

Tears sprang from her eyes. The water bubbled up around her waist, and she struck and splashed at the stone. 'Give me my name,' she wailed. 'Speak, speak!'

A voice called, 'What was that?'

The hob craned his neck, sitting up like a squirrel to peek over the tall grass. 'There's men a-coming!' he whispered. 'Men! And missy, missy; – his black eyes suddenly brightened – 'that's who we need. Men made the marks, *men can read them!*'

She gazed at him, pale lips parted. 'But will they? Will they?'

'A-course they will. Bound to!' The hob shook both fists in triumph. 'Now you've scatted that moss off, they'll see the marks an' read your name. Din't I tell you? Good times is coming, for you as well as me. You'll be known again. They'll need you. They'll want the water clean and clear. Hush now. Hide and listen.'

They came trampling through the bushes, careless and noisy. 'Did you hear that splashing? Sounded like a duck. There's water somewhere near.'

'It'll be the well, my lord. I was told there was one. A holy well, the natives say.'

Frogs scattered ahead of their feet. The hob crept into the long grass, the water spirit sank silently down under the overhang of the arch.

'Here it is!' Boots swished within inches of the hob's nose. Two men stood with their backs to him, staring at the water. One wore a good green cloak over a mailshirt and sword, the other a long woollen robe, kilted up to show brawny calves and bare feet in sandals.

'It's some kind of an old cistern,' said the man with the sword. 'You can see those stones have been worked.'

'Foh,' said the other in disgust. 'It's full of frogspawn.'

'Oh, once we pull up the weeds and clear it out, it'll run clean enough. It's deep, look. This'll save us some labour. And right next to where we want the stables. I wonder who built it? A holy well, did you say? To which saint?'

'Some local one you've never heard of, I expect,' said the bare-legged man dismissively. 'If it's even true. This is a benighted country. I swear they make them up. Wait. My lord Fulke, look there! Letters! An old inscription.'

The hob sucked in a breath.

'Where? Oh, I see. Someone's been here already, scratching at the moss. Well, well: perhaps we've found our saint after all. I hope this doesn't cause trouble, I promised I'd dedicate our chapel to Saint Martin. Can two saints under one roof agree? You're my mass-priest, Gilbert. Read it. What does it say?'

The hob bit his lip gleefully and rubbed his hands together.

'Let me see. It's not that clear. If I can reach ...' There was a squelch and a splash as his foot slipped, and the other man laughed. 'Wet to the knee,' said Gilbert crossly. 'It's Latin, all right. Oh dear! This is no saint! "NYMPHA FONTIS ..." "To the nymph of the fountain."''

'Nymph?'

'A pagan spirit!' said Gilbert in a disgusted voice. 'A fairy, an elf – a demon! Wait, there's more. Uh ... "ET GENIUS LOCI". "To the nymph of the fountain and the spirit of the place."''

'But her name – her *name*!' whispered the hob, clenching his fists.

'I see! Fulke sounded grim. 'And that's all there is?'

'I think so. No.' Gilbert tore away more moss. 'More letters here, on the left. Ah, this could be her name –'

'Don't pronounce it!' Fulke yelled. 'Heathen stuff. Unlucky. I'll have the stone smashed up, to be on the safe side. It can go as infill for the chapel floor. We'll replace it with a plain slab.' He clapped Gilbert on the shoulder. 'Come along.'

They began to retrace their steps. 'I'll get the men to clean the well out tomorrow. The sooner we can begin using it the better, it'll save us taking the horses down to the river. By the way. We need a name for this place. I've been thinking, and it's come to me. The men are calling it "the red mound", because of the colour of the soil. Let's keep that up. We'll paint the tower and the ramparts red, to impress the natives. How do you like the sound of "La Motte Rouge?'"

'Very much!' Gilbert bowed. 'An excellent choice, my lord Fulke de la Motte Rouge!'

'I'm glad you think so.' Their voices faded. 'Names are important ...'

The hob waited until they'd gone. Then he crawled down to the edge of the well.

'Missy? Be you there? Come along, now,' he coaxed.

'Go away,' said a muffled voice from under the arch.

'Here's pretty toys for 'ee.' He tossed creamy hawthorn florets into the water. A quick hand plucked them out and sent them flying back.

The hob started to speak, bit it off, and sighed. 'Do it matter? Your sweet face is worth a mort o' names.' He crossed one hairy leg over the other and tipped his head back to look at the sky.

'Nymph!' Her voice caught. 'Fairy! Elf! Demon! *What am I*, hob? You said the good times were coming, but no, never again. They hate me. They'll break up my name and bury it and I'll never know what it was. My name is lost, my name is lost.'

'Mortals come and mortals go,' the hob mumbled. 'One day this lot will be gone too, and it'll be just you an' me and the badgers ...'

She didn't answer. Eventually he crept quietly away, lured by the savoury smell of roasting meat skewered over the campfires. Behind him, the spring's choked gurgle bubbled among the cresses.

It sounded like someone sobbing.

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