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books

MERLIN'S
HARP

ANNE ELIOT CROMPTON

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Merlin's Harp

When I was yet a very young woman I threw my heart away. I fashioned a wee coracle of leaf and willow twig and reed, a coracle that sat in the hollow of my two palms. In this I placed my wounded, wretched heart, and I set it adrift on the rain-misted wavelets of the Fey river, and I watched it bob and whirl, sail and sink. Ever since then I have lived heartless, or almost heartless, cold as spring rain, the way Humans think all Fey live. Humans I have known would be astounded to learn that I ever had a heart that leapt, brightened, fainted, quickened, warmed, embraced, froze, or rejected, like their own.

I grew up in a strangely Human way in a home, with a sort of family. My mother Nimway, my brother Lugh, and I lived in Lady Villa on Apple Island, which Human bards have named Avalon. I say we “lived” there. Most nights we slept within the villa walls. We cooked many a meal over the stone circle fireplace in the villa courtyard. When we sought each others’ company we looked in the villa, in certain of the old rooms, a special room for each of us. My mother’s room had faded waves painted on its walls, and strange, leaping fish, such as we never caught in the Fey lake. My small room was painted about with vines—unlike those that clung

to and camouflaged the villa walls—and clusters of purple fruits. Because of these pictures, Lugh and I always believed that there were worlds beyond the Fey forest, where mysterious creatures lived. Few Fey children grow up knowing that.

Like other children, I went away to join the Children's Guard as soon as I could care for myself. But unlike other children, I remembered the villa as my home, I remembered the Lady, my mother, and I always knew that Lugh, the big, pale boy who often stood guard with me, was my born brother. We had sucked the same breasts and learned to walk on the same cool, tiled floor. We were special to each other, as no other two children were.

And though I never said so till our Guard time ended, and then only to my best friend, Elana, I always knew that when I grew up and left the Guard I would go home.

The villa grew about us and entwined our lives as vines entwined the villa. Apple Island held us apart from mainland Fey forest and our silent Fey neighbors. Living on the mainland we would have glimpsed neighbors from afar, as we glimpse other wild creatures; by slow, easy approaches we would have come to know many of them by name, and some as friends. But the lake trapped us, for the most part, with each other.

Living like this, as in a Human family, I grew an almost Human-like heart. This was a deformity. Even on the bright spring morning when I climbed Counsel Oak with my best friend Elana, I knew I could not live much longer with this heart.

The Lady, who knew so much, must have known I had it.

Elana knew. She did not mind because she had a heart too. In

truth, hers was bigger and warmer than mine, and fast growing desperate. I could have had no notion how desperate, for such intensity had no precursor in our Fey world.

Counsel Oak towers over all the apple trees of Avalon. At that time his massive trunk yawned half-open where it had been split by a bolt from heaven long ago. A lesser tree would have drooped and dropped and given back its life to the Goddess. But the young oak that we would call Counsel reared on up, seeking the sun.

Up we climbed, Elana and I, from huge branch to smaller branch, past new leaf and mistletoe, through thrush song and warbler flight. A few days before we had left the Children's Guard at last, still wrapped in the "invisible" cloaks in which Guards spy from treetop and thicket on the Human kingdom beyond our forest. We had lingered a bit, building shelters and scavenging. Then I had said to Elana, "Come home with me." And Elana had come.

I perched now in the highest crotch that would bear my very slight weight. Elana settled lower, for she was a big girl; she carried real weight. Together we looked out over all of Apple Island, and the Fey lake with its dark, encircling forest, and the small, shimmering streams that fed the lake, and the wide river that flowed away east to the kingdom.

Uncounted white-blooming apple trees crowded the island below us. The trees hid Avalon's two dwelling dens, but I knew where they were. Otter Mellias's newly built cabin stood on stilts over the water on the east shore. Lady Villa crouched among willows on the west shore. Had we climbed Counsel Oak in times long past we could have seen the villa from here. It would have shone out at us, dazzled us, white stone among bright gardens. We might have seen

giant, Human figures like those painted on the villa walls stride across the courtyard, or talk beside the fountain. The fountain spat water back then, so the Lady said.

Elana whistled like a blackbird. I looked down and saw her raise plump hands in silent sign-talk. She signed, *Listen to the leaves.*

I had told her that Counsel's rustling leaves gave advice. So the Lady said. Now I listened to the leaves, but heard no words. I shrugged.

Elana looked sadly up at me, her round face white as the apple blossoms below. Her red-brown braid lay against a bough like sun-spattered bark. She signed, *Ask! Ask the Oak: will he notice me now?*

I signed down, *Who? Will who notice you?*

Almost frantically, *He! The one I long for!*

I sighed. We had discussed this "one" before now. I believed my friend must be bewitched, like a Human heroine in some bardic song. In all the forest there was only one for her. If he lay with her, then she would bloom like spring. If he scorned her, she feared to wilt clean away. Meantime, she had lain with no one, not ever, not even at the Flowering Moon dances, though we were both now blood-blessed by the Goddess. The same was true of me, but for no such weird reason.

Again I listened to the wind in Counsel's leaves; and this time I thought I heard a distant whisper. *Down.*

I signed to Elana, *Down. That's all the leaves say. Down.*

Listen again, Nivienne!

Listening once more, I thought I heard, *Maiden. Down.*

And then soft, far voices sang together,

Maiden, look down.

Look down, Maiden.

Down, down,

Adownderry, look down.

So it was true, what the Lady said! Counsel Oak's leaves gave counsel. But he told us what he wished us to know, not what we asked. I leaned over and around and looked down through leaves and mistletoe. And down there among the ancient apple trees, I saw a shining mystery.

It stood tall alone by itself, as no Fey would ever stand. Disdaining shielding shadow, it gleamed in full sunshine, obvious as a tree—or as a Human, who thinks his own kind kings of the world.

Once I had seen a red stag stand like that, careless and proud; and his summer coat had shone with that same bronze tint. The East Edge Children's Guard had feasted on him for days and days.

I twirled my "invisible" cloak around me and started down the oak, hand under hand. I passed Elana lifting her fingers to ask *What? Where?* and slipped down the trunk like a shadow. Above me I heard the soft shifting of Elana's weight as she followed. Dropping to earth I slunk, crouching, from one gray-green trunk to the next, snuffling up hints like a vixen. My nose soon told me that was no stag ahead. I smelled smoke, dust, a body washed seldom, and certainly not recently. A body fed on meat. I paused behind an alder thicket and peered through.

Against an apple trunk leaned a very tall, very pale maiden. Her height was surprising, and so was her skin: milk white, like Elana's,

and gold freckled. She raised a thin, empty face to the sky. One of her hip-length bronze braids had fallen loose. The other was still held by a shiny red ribbon, which wound around and down its length.

I saw only her radiance. Forgetting all sense and the strong testimony of my nose, I thought, *Here is the Goddess herself!* In that unforgettable moment I felt what Humans feel when they glimpse one of us. I shrank together. Mouth dry, hair stiff, I crouched beneath her pale gaze, still as hare beneath circling hawk. Since then, because of that unforgotten moment, I have dealt gently with many an innocent Human.

Elana's breath blew hot on my neck. At least I did not face the Goddess alone! One of my kind breathed on me and gripped my shoulder with a slightly shaking, heavy hand.

My friend Elana was bigger, heavier, than I was, but not stronger. Elana had no sliver, no crumb or morsel of magic in all her awkward body or childish mind. I crouched between her and the Goddess. I felt I must protect her from the Goddess. She was my friend. I had to face the Goddess for both of us.

I collected my mind, snatched back some sense, paid heed to my nose. I noticed that the Goddess's white tunic, which should shine like the sun, was deeply soil-grimed. Her overgown, wondrously blue and richly embroidered, was bramble-shredded, her slender white wrists bramble-blooded. I saw by her wide, vague eyes that she was heavily drugged. *Dirt!* said my nose, *Meat! Mead! Grand Mushroom!* A great breath of relief filled my lungs. This was no Goddess.

Then, what was it?

A female Human, that's what it was. A Human, naturally taller than myself, but not much older; thin, drugged, unarmed. Not so much as a knife poked out of her brightly embroidered girdle. Her freckled hands hung, helpless.

A female Human stood under the blooming trees of Apple Island, where no Human foot had trod since the Romans went away (so said the Lady). And I, young Nivienne, recently a Child Guard, had found her! What would the Lady do if she crouched in my place?

I rose up and walked around the alders. Behind me, Elana gasped. Calmly I approached the prey till my nose nearly touched her breast. Calmly I looked up into her rain gray eyes. I said, "Woman, what are you doing here?"

Her eyes widened. The pupils nearly covered the iris. She had feasted richly on Grand Mushroom—or, more likely, someone had feasted her. Slowly she drew herself up to her full, impressive height and spoke strange words. They rustled past me like the wind in Counsel's leaves. I said, "What?" And then my ears repeated the words, and I knew they were Latin. Because of the Lady's friend Merlin, his harp, and his songs, I knew a little Latin.

She said again in Latin, "Rude boy! Tell me where I am."

She did not know! It was not her doing that she stood on Apple Island, magic-guarded home of the Lady, home of me, Nivienne.

I flashed a grin up at her, openmouthed. This gesture displayed my sharp-filed canine teeth to full advantage. This gesture should show her beyond all doubt where she stood, and in what danger.

With sudden, sure knowledge I said, "Otter Mellias brought you here!"

At my shoulder, Elana murmured, "The Otter! Of course! Who else?"

Only he could have done this. Only Mellias, who dared live on Apple Island near the dangerous Lady, would have dared seize and drug this Human, roll her into a coracle (with the help of merry friends, no doubt), and pole her over here where no Human had set foot since the Romans. He would have done it for spiteful fun—more fun than spite. Anyone else who snatched a Human girl at dusk from a Fey forest edge would have played with her, then left her body in a thicket. Only the Otter would imagine this escapade.

Mellias was young, like my brother; not long out of the Guard; brown and cheerful as an otter. Over on the mainland I used to spy on him as he entertained his many friends with song and story, or invented new steps for the Flowering Moon dance, or worked up new tunes on his pipe.

When Mellias came over to the island and built his heron-nest cabin, I swam over one evening from the Guard and sneaked in. Mellias was fishing off his deck, back turned to the inner cabin. I fluttered like a moth from neat bedroll to neatly hung bow, sling, javelin, ax, to neatly folded shirts, trousers, cloak. I marveled at the ordered space in that cabin, the respectful care of things. Under the folded trousers I found a small crystal. Most Fey keep some such protective device, even if they know no magic. My hand closed on this and lifted it away, even as I drifted like a breeze out the curtained door. Even now, Mellias's crystal swung on a thong from my neck.

I grinned up at my Human. Her head lolled back against the apple trunk. She murmured, "Arthur will come."

I shook my head till my black braid swung. No one would come. "Mark me. Arthur will come."

Her knees gave way. She sank down the trunk with a slow ripping sound as the blue overgown tore on the bark, and she landed in a half-conscious heap. Down there on the cool earth in the shade her aura showed up: a narrow, pale green flicker, strongest in the areas of the heart and genitals. Grand Mushroom had dimmed and dulled it, but I suspected it had never been strong or bright.

I knelt down and took the large, pale Human hand in my small, dark one. I had touched Human hands before, and was not surprised to find it warmly alive like my own.

Elana squatted and touched the loose ribbon-bound braid. She touched lightly at first, then her fist closed on the braid as she worked to bring the red ribbon free. It came hard, and the woman whimpered, "What are you doing?"

Elana bit her plump lip and pulled. Out came the knife from her belt and sliced the ribbon in three places. It slid off the braid.

The helpless woman muttered, "Arthur will drown you."

I said, "The blue gown is nice. Enough for two shirts."

"Torn," Elana remarked. "Dirty."

"The girdle."

"Aha!" Elana sliced the girdle in half without harming the white body—or even the tunic—under it, and we pulled it from under the woman's weight.

"Enough," said Elana. I looked at the stained white tunic. "No," said Elana, "it's filthy." She was right. Also, there were little rips running through it. It had not been woven or sewn for forest wear.

The woman said in clear Latin, "Arthur will drown both you witches."

"What are those words she says?" Elana asked me.

"Latin. She talks Latin." Elana had never heard Merlin's Human songs or ancient stories.

"Does she understand what we say?"

"I doubt it."

"Ah." Elana looked down at the now unconscious form with a new sort of interest. If the woman could not talk to us or understand us, she was not even of Human value; she was a wounded wild creature we had found. Elana suggested, "We could eat her."

I said, "Leave her to Mellias." He was the hunter.

But I laid hold of her loose braid and pulled from it three bronze strands, each finer than the finest wool thread ever seen. These I braided together and thrust into my pouch. Elana asked me why I did this. I could only shrug. Sometimes my spirit told me to do things, and I did them, not knowing why.

I rose. Elana crouched a moment more, looking up at me, and I noticed how like she looked to our victim: the same pale skin (though not as pale), light hair, tall build. It was not the first time I had thought Elana might have Human blood.

She stood up, holding the cut pieces of ribbon and girdle. We wrapped our invisible cloaks carefully about us and stepped away, moving from shadow to shadow, breaking no twig.

Behind us, the tall white woman in the white tunic lay heaped under the apple tree, breathing as though asleep. She was no threat to us or Apple Island or the Fey forest. When Mellias finished with her he would make sure of that.

Flitting past Counsel Oak I heard his leaves murmur a name: *Arthur*.

I had heard that name before, long ago. I had heard it whispered in the night when Merlin and the Lady thought I slept. I had heard it muttered in the courtyard as I braided reeds on the doorstone. And once, coming swiftly into the courtyard, I had heard the Lady say it clear as a cuckoo. "Arthur! A good thing it was we gave the sword to your Arthur."

I paused on the trail, grasping at memories like dreams. This name Arthur... Bear Man?... conjured up a Human hero, an armed giant astride a huge horse, one of whom Merlin might sing a Latin lay.

Arthur will drown both you witches.

Most likely Arthur was a common kingdom name?

Under my shirt, Otter Mellias's crystal warmed my breast.

Smiling, Otter Mellias stepped into my path.

Mellias was smaller than I, thinner, sprightlier. He wore quiet dun deerskin, invisible as our cloaks, but sunlight woke new winking lights in his braid, at his neck, wrists, and ankles. I had never seen gems before, but I knew that these were gems, and I knew whose they had been.

I said coldly, "Mellias, that Human back there. What will you do with her?"

He smiled at me close-mouthed, shielding his fierce canines. Well I knew that Mellias liked me. I thought I might like him, too, at the next Flowering Moon dance. I was feeling ready, maybe...almost... for my first lover.

"Nivienel!" He murmured, "You are jealous of my bronze girl."

I shrugged this off. "She is the first Human to set foot here since the Romans. The Lady will not be pleased."

"The Lady is like an Old One, from before the Humans came. I respect her magic endlessly. But she is my friend. Almost like you, Nivienne. So do not fear for me."

I recoiled as though from a rearing adder. "Fear! I fear for none, Mellias—least of all for you!"

"Good. You have no heart, Nivienne. One of these days your power will rival the Lady's." Mellias looked past me to Elana. "What do you think, will Nivienne dance with me when the moon flowers?"

Elana, behind me, must have answered him with her fingers. He laughed. "One of you girls, think of me! I think of you all the time. When you see the moon rise in flower, when you hear drum and pipe, remember me. Either one of you. Both of you." But Mellias's brown eyes clung to mine.

For the space of a haughty sigh I looked away and Mellias vanished.

I said to Elana, "Let's go home."

Lady Villa is built of earth's bones; rock. Yet not rock as it lies in earth, but what the Lady called "dressed rock." As a child I thought it must certainly have been formed by magic. I could not believe that Humans had raised it, stone by stone. But so the Lady said.

I cried, "Humans have no magic!"

"Be not so sure, Nivienne. Remember, Merlin is half Human. Human druids and witches work magic. Then too, the strongest power in the world is a Human mystery of which we Fey are ignorant."

I stared up at her.

"Well. Every creature has its own mystery. But as for this villa, Humans built it as they usually build, with hands and iron tools."

Disbelieving, I looked around at the thick stone walls, the flagged floors on which I had learned to walk. "Those villagers out there in the kingdom did this with their hands?"

"Their great grandfathers did. But it was not their idea. They built it for the Romans who lived here then."

"Where are these Romans now?"

"They went away. Then the forest moved in, and the boar and the bear and the Fey. Nothing remains here now of the Romans but this villa and the apple trees."

For many years no one had sheltered in the villa. It stood out, stark white stone against the green or dun island. Looking across the lake, neither friend nor foe could fail to see it. So the villa housed bats, owls, and adders till slowly, gently, it sank back into the forest. Kind vines crawled over it. Lichens greened the harsh white stone. Apple saplings and alders crowded against its walls. And one day the Lady, heavy with child—with me!—looked across the lake and saw the villa only because she knew it was there.

Hah! The perfect birthing den! Sheltered, defensible, and nearly invisible now. She heaved herself into the nearest coracle, poled across, and bore me just within the entrance.

There at the entrance a pebble picture is embedded in the floor. A graceful girl carries a basket among tall, foreign flowers. Her back is turned to us. Her light brown hair—like Elana’s—flows down her green gown. Her feet are bare. Thoughtfully she touches a flower as she would touch a friend.

I was born on this picture. I learned to walk on it, and named my colors from it. I think my brother Lugh and I must be the only Fey children in the world who ever saw a picture—and such a strange picture, at that—of a foreign girl with foreign flowers. I think this picture prepared both of us for our unusual destinies.

I named the girl in the picture Dana. After “Mama,” “Dana” was the first word I said. Later I asked the Lady why Dana and her flowers had no auras.

We stood together in the shadowed entry, looking down at Dana by our feet. The Lady said, “The artist who created her was Human.”

“Human!” My childish ideas about Humans danced in confusion.

“Most Humans do not see auras. Many Fey do not.”

I stared up at the Lady. At that time—now long, long ago—she looked very much as I look now. Though she seemed tall to my young eyes, in truth she was smaller than Mellias; her grave, quiet features were delicately molded as if from brown river-clay. Her black braid swung below her hip. At home in the villa she wore graceful linen gowns that Merlin brought from afar.

Her aura swirled slowly around her, a gently sparkling silver mist like sunny, windless water. It filled the dim entry where we stood; we were as though drowned in it, as if we stood at the bottom of a deep pool. I had no idea then that my mother’s aura was

extraordinary. I had not yet seen the usual narrow, muddy auras that herald small minds, or minds domineered by bodies—except, of course, for wild creatures. I knew the slow, green pulse of plant auras; the flashing, vanishing brilliance of bird or fish auras; and I had glimpsed from afar the wider, steadier auras of bear and deer. But I thought then that every thinking creature—Fey or Human—would naturally walk in a broad, bright mist like the Lady, like Merlin. If Lugh’s aura was orange and narrow and sometimes muddy, well, that was because he was just a young boy. He, and his aura, would surely grow.

Not to see auras would be half blindness. How would you know what to expect of a living being? How could you walk past it, or turn your back on it? You could not know what it felt, what it might do.

The Lady laughed softly down into my upturned face. “Nivienne, your aura leaps like a flame! You love to learn.”

I still love to learn.

As the lone, and often lonely, girl-child of Apple Island I imagined the girl in the floor picture, Dana, and chattered to her, till she rose up off the floor, turned and showed me her homely, gentle face. She drifted with me through the villa, a secondary ghost, a thought-form I myself projected. There were other spirits there.

At dusk I might meet a bent old woman straining under burdens. If I met her at the north end of the villa her burdens would be piles of clothes: laundry or sewing. At the south end she would struggle with a heavy sack of peas or beans.

In the courtyard I sometimes glimpsed a merry little boy about

my own age. He pulled a little wheeled cart over the paving stones, or lined up dim carved figures on the rim of the dead fountain. Once I saw him jump about in the fountain, splashing invisible water.

Unlike the exhausted old woman, the boy seemed to notice me. He would pause in his play to stare in my direction. I tried to talk to him, but the Lady warned me.

"Do not encourage ghosts, Niviene. Give them no power."

"I want to play with him!"

"You are lonely. One of these days you will go free in the forest and meet living friends."

Doubtfully, I stared up into the Lady's calm, brown face. I knew a little about this "going free in the forest." My brother had told me somewhat on his rare, secret visits.

"Why secret?" I asked him once in sunshine, beside the fountain.

"Gods, Niv, the others mustn't know! They'd get sick, laughing at me." Graphically, Lugh acted out how sick "they" would get.

"Why?"

"Look, I'm not...I'm supposed to...I'm practically grown up, Niv."

"You are not." Lugh stood a head taller than me. I had to look up to him. But I had to look up to everyone, even my ghost-friend Dana.

"You know, I guard you. I keep dragons and Humans out of the forest. And I take care of myself. I hunt and steal for me. I find my night shelter, for me. I'm grown up, Niv."

I find my night shelter, for me. I thought of the Lady's bearskin cloak,

wrapped around us both, of her warmth along my back, her arm over me, me curled into her warm body all the way.

I decided and declared, "I won't go free in the forest! Not ever."

"You'll have to," Lugh assured me.

"Not me."

"Everyone does. Even you."

But I decided there and then that I would always stay in Lady Villa. And in a sense, I always have.

After my birth the Lady stayed. The villa made a fine den. Sunshine poured into the protected courtyard. Not all the roofs leaked rain. You could sleep dry on a stormy night, warm in winter. And we were left entirely alone.

The Fey always keep a respectful distance, one from another. But with the Lady they kept also a fearful distance.

Humans fear us Fey and leave us very much alone. They call us "the Good Folk," though we are not good to them; and "the Fair Folk," though we are dark. They never speak our name aloud: "Fey."

In much the same way, the mainland Fey feared my mother. They called her "the Lady," never by her name, Nimway. Their fishing coracles stayed well out from the island. Only those in great need sought her healings and prophecies. Till slippery Otter Mellias raised his neighboring cabin, Apple Island belonged strictly to her, Lugh, and me. Apple Island and Lady Villa trapped us and transformed us into a unit resembling a Human family, in which a growing child would grow a feeling heart.

The Lady's friend Merlin, a half-Human mage, was almost a part

of this “family.” He would come and stay, sometimes for a season, and then return to the outside kingdom.

Because he was half Human, Merlin had once had a family. He had even known his Fey father. I thought this stranger than his magic. From birth I had watched the Lady raise wind and call wild creatures, but I knew nothing of my father, or any other relative.

Merlin once whittled me a small whistle shaped like a thrush. Whittling, he told me, “My mother was Human. My father was Fey.”

I stared from the wooden thrush to his intent face. The Human mother I could imagine: shared bed-cloak, warm breasts—a giant version of my own mother. But the Fey father...

So Merlin had been a child, like me?

At that time his hair and Human-style beard were brown, his thin shoulders straight. The slim white fingers that whittled my thrush were not of different lengths, like the Lady’s, or Lugh’s. Four of them were of one length, like mine. And they were all equally dexterous. All my young life I had watched those fingers shape oak cakes, scale fish, or sweep across harp strings. I loved Merlin’s pale hands, and sometimes I flexed my own brown, even-lengthed fingers and tried tricks with them; but mine were less talented, stiffer, than Merlin’s.

I asked him, “Were you like me, Merlin?”

He glanced a smile at me across the thrush-shaped whistle. “Yes, and no. I was small. I lived with my mother, and people left us alone. But...” He paused to study the whistle, over, around, and under.

“But what, Merlin?”

“I was Human, and I had power.”

I understood. Small Merlin had magical talent. He dreamed true

and talked with ghosts, as I could not talk with the merry little boy in the courtyard.

I said, “I see ghosts.”

“You have power too. Very certainly, you have power, and will have more.”

“Will I grow up magic?”

“I see you growing up powerful. You are Nimway’s daughter, after all.”

“I wish I knew my father.”

“You Fey do not need fathers, Niv.”

“How did you know your father?”

“We used to run off to the woods to see him. Always near midsummer time, when the Goddess smiles and Humans forget to scowl.” Merlin handed me the finished whistle. “What does this wood tell your hands?”

My small hands cradled the thrush-whistle. “It says, *Rain...*” I pressed it to my cheek. “It loves rain, Merlin, and sun...but something’s been eating it. It doesn’t feel good.”

“That’s why I cut that branch out.”

“But it’s still alive.”

“Not for long. See, you can watch the aura fade.”

In truth, the faint green aura faded a bit farther as I watched.

A shadow moved over my head. I felt the Lady’s vibrant presence behind me. Merlin said to her, “Small Niviene has power.”

She murmured, “Naturally. She, at least, is mine.”

After this, Merlin and the Lady trained me daily. Mage children learn the warts-off spell first of all, because it works so easily. I