

THE QUEEN OF THE KORRIGANS

A fairy tale from Brittany

Retold and adapted by Sophie Masson

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ONE STORMY wild evening in a small coastal town in Brittany, an old woman went from door to door, begging. Clothed in stinking rags, with lank thin hair, hands like dry claws, one eye missing and the other puffy and red, she was a pitiful and fearsome sight. Everyone shut their doors and windows to her. *She will bring bad luck to us!* she said, or *Our children will be frightened just looking at her*, or *We have so little ourselves, why should we care about anyone else?* Even the animals seemed to want nothing to do with her; birds hid in dry corners, mice skittered away in fright and dogs howled as she went by, a lonely figure in the raging storm and the pelting rain. And so it went on till she reached the last house. The house of a man named Pereg-Mari.

Pereg-Mari lived by himself since his parents had died many years before and he had never married or had children of his own. He had worked on the sea-salt marshes all his life, gathering the fine scented grey salt, the ‘flower of the sea’ that is prized around Brittany and much further afield. Despite all his hard work, he was poor as winter, and sometimes did not have even enough to be able to eat his fill at night and had to go hungry to bed. But he had a heart rich in summery kindness, and when he saw the old woman at the door, he immediately let her in. As she came dripping over the threshold, his dog Nolwenn, which had been dozing by the fire, bolted under the table, but Pereg-Mari took no notice of her. Sitting the old woman by the fire, he brought her a cloth to dry herself with, then a bowl of hot cabbage soup and a piece of bread. ‘I am sorry, it is all I have, *mamm-gozh*, grandmother,’ he said, but she smiled, and nodded her thanks. When she had finished, he saw she was still shivering a little, so he went to get her a blanket from off his own bed.

But when he turned around, the blanket dropped from his hands in sheer surprise, for what did he see? The pitiful old beggar woman in rags had vanished; instead there stood a small, beautiful, ageless woman with long golden hair, dressed in dazzling red clothes. ‘Pereg-Mari, I am the queen of the korrigans,’ she said, ‘and

as alone of all in this town, you offered kindness and shelter to one in need, I will offer you something that has not been given to a mortal man for over a hundred years.'

'Oh, thank you, Your Majesty,' said Pereg-Mari, cautiously, for he knew that the korrigans, beings something like fairies and something like dwarves, could be tricky people to deal with.

The queen smiled. 'You are polite and do not ask questions,' she said, 'and I like that too. Now, then, you are invited to my palace, in the hollow lands. Bring three sacks with you, and you can fill them up with as much treasure as you can easily carry. But mind! Don't be greedy. And make sure you are back before the first cock crows.'

Well, of course Pereg-Mari promised to do just as he was told, and so out they went into the night together, leaving Nolwenn behind, for the dog most resolutely would not come. And oddly or not so oddly perhaps, outside the storm had calmed, the rain had stopped, it was now a bright and starry night. Soon they were out of the town and at the place where a great old *menhir*, a standing stone, overlooked the sea. The queen rapped once on the stone and lo and behold it moved aside with a harsh grinding sound and Pereg-Mari saw stairs cut into the earth below, leading down, down, down, and lit with golden torches flaming on either side. 'Come,' said the queen, and he followed her, at first a little afraid but soon calmer and then excited as he heard the sound of lively music and smelled delicious smells such as he had ever smelled before, coming from below.

Down they went into the hollow underground lands of the korrigans, into a large banqueting hall lit with more of those golden torches, and there was a crowd of korrigans, all shapes and sizes, some beautiful like the queen, others, well others not quite so beautiful, but all dressed in red. Red flowing cloaks and silken-worked red waistcoats, red velvet gowns and red ribbons on red shoes...it was a splendidly strange sight. As the queen came in, the korrigans cheered, and cheered again when she told them why Pereg-Mari was there, and they all shouted, 'He must dance with us, and feast with us, and laugh with us, in celebration!'

Pereg-Mari was not slow to agree for music was playing that made his feet want to dance, and there was food on the table to make his mouth water, and the korrigans did not seem at all like the tricky folk of old tales, but cheerful and easy people. The treasure could wait; he could see it in chests around the sides of the hall: chests

filled with gold pieces and ropes of pearls and sparkling gems and crowns and all kinds of glittering things. It would not go anywhere, he thought; and it was still the dead of night, he had plenty of time. Besides, it did not do to offend the korrigans. The queen had told him not to be greedy; and if he insisted in gathering the treasure first, would that not look greedy indeed? So he left the three sacks near a chest and happily joined the crowds at the table and on the dance floor, with the queen in the centre, her golden hair flying as she danced on the lightest feet of all in that place.

The night wore on most cheerfully and Pereg-Mari quite forgot about the treasure and the queen's warning. Then quite suddenly, into that hall came a shaft of red light, and the korrigans cried, 'The dawn, the dawn is coming, and we must cease our revels for now!' Well, Pereg-Mari was jolted out of his forgetfulness, and he realised that if dawn was coming, the cock's crowing would not be far behind. Stammering thanks and apologies, he picked up his sacks, filled them with as much treasure as he could easily gather, and fled back up the stairs, faster, faster, as he heard the harsh grinding sound of the menhir starting above his head.

He emerged breathless into the last of the night, just as the menhir moved to seal the entrance to the korrigans' hall. Thin red fingers of dawn light were in the sky to the east but as yet no cock had crowed, so Pereg-Mari took to his heels and raced as fast as he could towards home, the bags full of treasure bouncing on his shoulders, rather painfully, but he took no notice. He got to the outskirts of town just as the first cock crowed, and to his own door just as the second cock crowed. The bags still felt heavy, bruising-heavy on his shoulders so Pereg-Mari thought all must be well. 'The queen must have meant I had simply to be out of the korrigans' hall before the cock crowed, and so I was,' he thought, as pulling open his door, he went in, to find Nolwenn sitting by the fire, waiting for him with a reproachful look on her face.

'Don't worry, see, I am safe and well. And rich!' he told her, and he opened the drawstrings of the first bag, tipping out—oh dear! Stones, not sparkling, but grey and muddy; shells, all broken and sharp; and seaweed, stinking like it had been in the sun for days. He opened the second bag—it was the same; and the third—but you can imagine it. There was no treasure, not a bit of it, nothing at all, just dirty smelly things that he had to haul out of his house, with Nolwenn regarding him sadly as if to say, *Of course, how can you trust those kinds of folk, they always repay a kindness with a trick.* Well, Pereg-Mari was downcast for a while, but he was not the sort to stay downcast

for long, so off he went to his work on the salt-marsh, with Nolwenn trotting at his heels. He was still not rich but he had had an experience not given to a mortal man in over one hundred years and he was not at all sorry for that.

In the evening they turned back for home but when they reached his door, Nolwenn started growling, and Pereg-Mari wondered at that. Pushing open the door cautiously, he came in—and found the queen of the korrigans sitting by a roaring fire, warming her hands. ‘Good evening, Pereg-Mari,’ said the queen, smiling.

‘Good evening, Your Majesty,’ said Pereg-Mari, most politely. ‘Thank you for lighting the fire.’

‘That is quite all right. But you are most likely hungry after your long day,’ she said.

‘I am, Your Majesty,’ said Pereg-Mari, avoiding Nolwenn’s stern eye as she slunk in under the table and glared at the korrigan queen.

‘Well, there is everything you need in there,’ said the queen, pointing to a pot that sat on the table, a pot Pereg-Mari had never seen before. ‘Just say what you’d like to eat, and lift the lid.’

Pereg-Mari looked at her. Could he believe her? But what harm would it do? So he said, ‘A roast chicken, like at the markets, with roast potatoes, and some sausages for my dog Nolwenn.’ He lifted the lid—and gasped, as a delicious smell of roast chicken and rich sausages filled the air.

‘You were kind to me,’ said the queen of the korrigans. ‘And I cannot forget that. And although you missed out on the treasure, you were not bitter about it. I like that too. I know you are poor and cannot always afford to eat properly. So here is my gift to you—a pot that will always give you what you want to eat, and that will never run dry.’

Pereg-Mari loved the sound of that, but he was cautious. What if it turned out like last time, and the roast chicken turned into something horrid? He was about to say, ‘Is there anything that I must not do to....’ when the queen of the korrigans interrupted him, saying, ‘No ifs, no buts, no warnings. This pot is yours, Pereg-Mari, you’ve earned it. It will always feed you, and your dog, all the rest of your life.’

‘Thank you, oh thank you, Your Majesty,’ Pereg-Mari stammered, and bowed low but when he lifted his head up again, the queen of the korrigans had vanished and Nolwenn had crept out from under the table, her tongue hanging out, her ears

pricked. Pereg-Mari could see she felt just like he did—hungry as a hunter, with those smells tickling her nose.

‘Oh, my, what a feast we’ll have, Nolwenn!’ he exclaimed, fetching her dish and his own plate from the sideboard and piling each high with delicious food. And from that day on, he and Nolwenn always ate to their fill, and never went hungry to their beds.

They never saw the queen of the korrigans again; but sometimes, when the nights are bright and starry, Pereg-Mari leaves his dog dozing by the fire and walks to the great old menhir overlooking the sea. It has never moved aside again; but Pereg-Mari sometimes fancies he can hear music far below, under his feet, and he sees again the great hall, all lit with golden torches, with the korrigan crowds in whirlwinds of dazzling, rustling red. He smiles then and thinks to himself, ‘I am a fortunate man, a most fortunate man indeed!’

Afterword

Brittany (*Bretagne* in French, *Breizh* in Breton) is a region of north-western France, and an ancient province with a distinct Celtic culture and language close to but not the same as that of Wales and Cornwall. It has had a long and turbulent history; Bretons are famously independent, and in the past have often fought against centralising rule from France, whether that be under the monarchy or the republic. Traditionally, Brittany, a land of deep forests, a few hard-scrabble coastal towns, small villages and isolated farms, was poor economically speaking but rich in cultural terms, with a great love of and skill in music, poetry and stories. And they have been influential in terms of world literature, as well: it was from Breton storytellers, with their close links to Welsh and Cornish sources, that 12th century French writers like Chrétien de Troyes and Marie de France first heard the tales of King Arthur for instance, and these writers subsequently influenced all the others who came after them, in England, Germany, and many other places, turning the Arthurian saga into a global phenomenon.

Breton folklore is rich in stories of many kinds of supernatural beings, including, to name just a few, the water-fairies or sirens known as *marie-morganes*; the *Ankou*, a personification of Death; and the *bugul-noz*, a shapeshifter who can change from shepherd to wolf. And of course *korrigans*, the most widespread of all. The korrigans are a diverse people, in size, shape, looks and character. They are always

humanoid, sometimes pixie-size, sometimes dwarf-size, sometimes the size of smallish humans. They can be beautiful or ugly, helpful or unpleasant, they have magical powers (like fairies) and love treasure (like dwarves). They like the colour red, live in hollow hills, in caves and in sea-grottoes; their homes are often associated with the *menhirs* (standing stones) and *dolmens* (stone tables, once burial chambers) which are found in many parts of Brittany. Like fairies, korrrigans are generally ruled by a queen (sometimes there will also be a king consort); they love singing and dancing and also, like the fairies, they dislike greed and rudeness, but are themselves whimsical and not altogether reliable. Occasionally, they will also steal children, but they don't seem to be deterred by iron.

There's a connection to Brittany in my family—my youngest sister Gabrielle is married to a Breton, and their children, my nieces and nephews, proudly claim Brittany as part of their family heritage—but I've also chosen to retell this story because of a fascination since adolescence with Celtic cultures, including Brittany's. Within the world of Breton folklore, the korrrigans have particularly interested me and indeed I have written my own version of their world in my YA novel *In Hollow Lands* (first published in 2004, and republished in 2014), which is set in the 14th century and uses both Breton folklore and history and the Arthurian legend to weave a tale of magic, love, betrayal and danger, with the korrrigans as very important—and unpredictable—characters. It is that unpredictability which also attracted me to translate and retell *The Queen of the Korrrigans*.

The Queen of the Korrrigans is a traditional Breton tale which has several versions: in some the main character is a salt-marsh worker, in others a fisherman. He's always poor, and most have him living alone, with one version giving him a wife, and in another there's a mention of a dog. The setting varies too—sometimes it's a small town, sometimes an isolated cottage, but always the sea is close by. I've combined a few versions and added flourishes of my own. What I love about this story is not just the evocative picture it draws of the magical, alien world of the korrrigans and the surprise twist at the end: but also the simplicity and kindness of the main character—which never falters and which brings an unexpected reward, when all seems lost.