

# The lay of Aotrou and Itroun

by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 1892-1973

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In Britain's land beyond the seas  
the wind blows ever through the trees;  
in Britain's land beyond the waves  
are stony shores and stony caves.  
There stands a ruined toft now green  
where lords and ladies once were seen,  
where towers were piled above the trees  
and watchmen scanned the sailing seas.  
Of old a lord in arched hall  
with standing stones yet grey and tall  
there dwelt, till dark his doom befell,  
as still the Briton harpers tell.  
No child he had his house to cheer,  
to fill his courts with laughter clear;  
though wife he wooed and wed with ring,  
who love to board and bed did bring,  
his pride was empty, vain his hoard,  
without an heir to land and sword.

Thus pondering oft at night awake  
his darkened mind would visions make  
of lonely age and death; his tomb  
unkept, while strangers in his room  
with other names and other shields  
were masters of his halls and fields.  
Thus counsel cold he took at last;  
his hope from light to darkness passed.  
A witch there was, who webs could weave  
to snare the heart and wits to reave,  
who span dark spells with spider-craft,  
and as she span she softly laughed;  
a drink she brewed of strength and dread  
to bind the quick and stir the dead;  
In a cave she housed where winging bats  
their harbour sought, and owls and cats  
from hunting came with mournful cries,  
night-stalking near with needle-eyes.  
In the homeless hills was her hollow dale,  
black was its bowl, its brink was pale;  
there silent on a seat of stone  
before her cave she sat alone.  
Dark was her door, and few there came,  
whether man, or beast that man doth tame.

In Britain's land beyond the waves  
are stony hills and stony caves;  
the wind blows ever over hills  
and hollow caves with wailing fills.  
The sun was fallen low and red,  
behind the hills the day was dead,  
and in the valley formless lay  
the misty shadows long and grey.  
Alone between the dark and light  
there rode into the mouth of night  
the Briton lord, and creeping fear  
about him closed. Dismounting near  
he slowly then with lagging feet  
went halting to the stony seat.  
His words came faltering on the wind,  
while silent sat the crone and grinned.  
Few words he needed; for her eyes  
were dark and piercing, filled with lies,  
yet needle-keen all lies to probe.  
He shuddered in his sable robe.  
His name she knew, his need, his thought,  
the hunger that thither him had brought;  
while yet he spoke she laughed aloud,  
and rose and nodded; head she bow'd,  
and stooped into her darkening cave,

like ghost returning to the grave.  
Thence swift she came. In his hand she laid  
a phial of glass so fairly made  
'twas wonder in that houseless place  
to see its cold and gleaming grace;  
and therewithin a philter lay  
as pale as water thin and grey  
that spills from stony fountains froze  
in hollow pools in caverns hoar.  
He thanked her, trembling, offering gold  
to withered fingers shrunk and old.  
The thanks she took not, nor the fee,  
but laughing croaked: „*Nay, we shall see!*  
*Let thanks abide till thanks be earned!*  
*Such potions oft, men say, have burned*  
*the heart and brain, or else are nought,*  
*only cold water dearly bought.*  
*Such lies you shall not tell of me;*  
*Till it is earned I'll have no fee.*  
*But we shall meet again one day,*  
*and rich reward then you shall pay,*  
*whate'er I ask: it may be gold,*  
*it may be other wealth you hold.“*

In Britain ways are wild and long,  
and woods are dark with danger strong;  
and sound of seas is in the leaves,  
and wonder walks the forest-eaves.  
The way was long, the woods were dark;  
at last the lord beheld the spark  
of living light from window high,  
and knew his halls and towers were nigh.  
At last he slept in weary sleep  
beside his wife, and dreaming deep,  
he walked with children yet unborn  
in gardens fair, until the morn  
came slowly through the windows tall,  
and shadows moved across the wall.  
Then sprang the day with weather fair,  
for windy rain had washed the air,  
and blue and cloudless, clean and high,  
above the hills was arched the sky,  
and foaming in the northern breeze  
beneath the sky there shone the seas.  
Arising then to greet the sun,  
and day with a new thought begun,  
that lord in guise of joy him clad,  
and masked his mind in manner glad;  
his mouth unwonted laughter used  
and words of mirth. He oft had mused,

walking alone with furrowed brow;  
a feast he bade prepare him now.  
And „*Itroun mine,*“ he said, „*my life,*  
*‘tis long that thou hast been my wife.*  
*Too swiftly by in love do slip*  
*our gentle years, and as a ship*  
*returns to port, we soon shall find,*  
*once more that day of spring we mind,*  
*when we were wed, and bells were rung.*  
*But still we love, and still are young:*  
*A merry feast we‘ll make this year,*  
*and there shall come no sigh nor tear;*  
*and we will feign our love begun*  
*in joy anew, anew to run*  
*down happy paths—and yet, maybe,*  
*we‘ll pray that this year we may see*  
*our heart’s desire more quick draw nigh*  
*than yet we have seen it, thou and I;*  
*for virtue is in hope and prayer.“*  
So spake he gravely, seeming-fair.

In Britain’s land across the seas  
the spring is merry in the trees;  
the birds in Britain's woodlands pair  
when leaves are long and flowers are fair.  
A merry feast that year they made,  
when blossom white on bush was laid;  
there minstrels sang and wine was poured,  
as it were the marriage of a lord.  
A cup of silver wrought he raised  
and smiling on the lady gazed:  
„*I drink to thee for health and bliss,*  
*fair love,*“ he said, „*and with this kiss*  
*the pledge I pass. Come, drink it deep!*  
*The wine is sweet, the cup is steep!*“  
The wine was red, the cup was grey;  
but blended there a potion lay  
as pale as water thin and frore  
in hollow pools of caverns hoar.  
She drank it, laughing with her eyes.  
„*Aotrou, lord and love*“ she cries,  
„*all hail and life both long and sweet,*  
*wherein desire at last to meet!*“  
Now days ran on in great delight  
with hope at morn and mirth at night;  
and in the garden of his dream  
the lord would walk, and there would deem  
he saw two children, boy and maid,  
that fair as flowers danced and played  
on lawns of sunlight without hedge

save a dark shadow at their edge.  
 Though spring and summer wear and fade,  
 though flowers fall and leaves are laid,  
 and winter winds his trumpet loud,  
 and snows both fell and forest shroud,  
 though roaring seas upon the shore  
 go long and white, and neath the door  
 the wind cries with houseless voice,  
 in fire and song yet men rejoice,  
 till as a ship returns to port  
 the spring comes back to field and court.  
 A song now falls from windows high,  
 like silver dropping from the sky,  
 soft in the early eve of spring.  
*„Why do they play? Why do they sing?“*  
*„Light may she lie, our lady fair!*  
*Too long hath been her cradle bare.*  
*Yestreve there came as I passed by*  
*the cry of babes from windows high.*  
*Twin children, I am told there be.*  
*Light may they lie and sleep, all three!“*  
*„Would every prayer were answered twice!*  
*the half or nought must oft suffice*  
*for humbler men, who wear their knees*  
*more bare than lords, as oft one sees.“*  
*„Not every lord wins such fair grace.*  
*Come wish them speed with kinder face!*  
*Light may she lie, my lady fair;*  
*long live her lord her joy to share!“*  
 A manchild and an infant maid  
 as fair as flowers in bed were laid.  
 Her joy was come, her pain was passed;  
 in mirth and ease itroun at last  
 in her fair chamber softly lay  
 singing to her babes lullay.  
 Glad was her lord, as grave he stood  
 beside her bed of carven wood.  
*„Now full“* he said, *„is granted me*  
*both hope and prayer, and what of thee?*  
*Is ‘t not, fair love, most passing sweet*  
*the heart’s desire at last to meet?*  
*Yet if thy heart still longing hold,*  
*or lightest wish remain untold,*  
*that will I find and bring to thee,*  
*though I should ride both land and sea!“*  
*„Aotrou mine,“* she said, *„‘tis sweet*  
*at last the heart’s desire to meet,*  
*thus after waiting, after prayer,*  
*thus after hope and nigh despair.*  
*I would not have, thee run nor ride*

*to-day nor ever from my side;  
yet after sickness, after pain,  
oft cometh hunger sharp again.“  
„Nay, love, if thirst or hunger strange  
for bird or beast on earth that range,  
for wine, or water from what well  
in any secret fount or dell,  
vex thee,“ he smiled, „now swift declare!  
If more than gold or jewel rare,  
from greenwood, haply, fallow deer,  
or fowl that swims the shallow mere  
thou cravest, I will bring it thee,  
though I should hunt o'er land and lea.  
No gold nor silk nor jewel bright  
can match my gladness and delight,  
the boy and maiden lily-fair  
that here do lie and thou did'st bear.“  
„Aotrou, lord,“ she said, „'tis, true,  
a longing strong and sharp I knew  
in dream for water cool and clear,  
and venison of the greenwood deer  
for waters crystal-clear and cold  
and deer no earthly forests hold,  
and still in waking comes unsought  
the foolish wish to vex my thought.  
But I would not have thee run nor ride  
to-day nor ever from my side.“*

In Brittany beyond the seas  
the wind blows ever through the trees;  
in Brittany the forest pale  
marches slow over hill and dale.  
There seldom far the horns were wound,  
and seldom hunted horse and hound.  
The lord his lance of ashwood caught,  
the wine was to his stirrup brought;  
with bow and horn he rode alone,  
and iron smote the fire from stone,  
as his horse bore him o'er the land  
to the green boughs of Broceliande,  
to the green dales where listening deer  
seldom a mortal hunter hear:  
there startling now they stare and stand,  
as his horn winds in Broceliande.  
Beneath the woodland's hanging eaves  
a white doe startled under leaves;  
strangely she glistered in the sun  
as she leaped forth and turned to run.  
Then reckless after her he spurred;  
dim laughter in the woods he heard,

but heeded not, a longing strange  
for deer that fair and fearless range  
vexed him, for venison of the beast  
whereon no mortal hunt shall feast,  
for waters crystal-clear and cold  
that never in holy fountain rolled.  
He hunted her from the forest-eaves  
into the twilight under leaves;  
the earth was shaken under hoof,  
till the boughs were bent into a roof,  
and the sun was woven in a snare;  
and laughter still was on the air.  
The sun was falling. In the dell  
deep in the forest silence fell.  
No sight nor slot of doe he found  
but roots of trees upon the ground,  
and trees like shadows waiting stood  
for night to come upon the wood.  
The sun was lost, all green was grey.  
There twinkled the fountain of the fay,  
before a cave, on silver sand,  
under dark boughs in Broceliande.  
Soft was the grass and clear the pool;  
he laved his face in water cool.  
He saw her then, on silver chair  
before her cavern, pale her hair,  
slow was her smile, and white her hand  
beckoning in Broceliande.  
The moonlight falling clear and cold  
her long hair lit; through comb of gold  
she drew each lock, and down it fell  
like the fountain falling in the dell.  
He heard her voice, and it was cold  
as echo from the world of old,  
ere fire was found or iron hewn,  
when young was mountain under moon.  
He heard her voice like water falling  
or wind upon a long shore calling,  
yet sweet the words: „*We meet again  
here after waiting, after pain!*  
*Aotrou! Lo! thou hast returned—  
perchance some kindness I have earned?  
What hast thou, lord, to give to me  
whom thou hast come thus far to see,*“  
*„I know thee not, I know thee not,  
nor ever saw thy darkling grot.  
O Corrigan! ‘twas not for thee  
I hither came a-hunting free!*“  
*„How darest, then, my water wan  
to trouble thus, or look me on?*

*For this of least I claim my fee,  
 if ever thou wouldst wander free.  
 With love thou shall me here requite,  
 for here to long and sweet the night;  
 in druery dear thou here shall deal,  
 in bliss more deep than mortals feel.“*

*„I gave no love. My love is wed;  
 my wife now lieth in child-bed,  
 and I curse the beast that cheated me  
 and drew me to this dell to thee.“*

*Her smiling ceased, and slow she said:  
 „Forget thy wife; for thou shall wed  
 anew with me, or stand as stone  
 and wither lifeless and alone,  
 as stone beside the fountain stand  
 forgotten in Broceliande.“*

*„I will not stand here turned to stone;  
 but I will leave thee cold, alone,  
 and I will ride to mine own home  
 and the waters blest of Christendome.“*

*„But three days then and thou shall die;  
 In three days on thy bier lie!“*

*„In three days I shall live at ease,  
 and die but when it God doth please  
 in eld, or in some time to come  
 in the brave wars of Christendom.“*

In Britain's land beyond the waves  
 are forests dim and secret caves;  
 in Britain's land the breezes bear  
 the sound of bells along the air  
 to mingle with the sound of seas  
 for ever moving in the trees.

The wandering way was long and wild;  
 and hastening home to wife and child  
 at last the hunter heard the knell  
 at morning of the sacring-bell;  
 escaped from thicket and from fen  
 at last he saw the tilth of men;  
 the hoar and houseless hills he passed,  
 and weary at his gates him cast.

*„Good steward, if thou love me well,  
 bid make my bed! My heart doth swell;  
 my limbs are numb with heavy sleep,  
 and drowsy poisons in them creep.  
 All night, as in a fevered maze,  
 I have ridden dark and winding ways.“*

To bed they brought him and to sleep:  
 in sunless thickets tangled deep  
 he dreamed, and wandering found no more



the garden green, but on the shore  
the seas, were moaning in the wind;  
a face before him leered and grinned:  
*„Now it is earned, come bring to me  
my fee,“* a voice said, *„bring my fee!“*  
Beside a fountain falling cold  
the Corrigan now shrunk and old  
was sitting singing; in her claw  
a comb of bony teeth he saw,  
with which she raked her tresses grey,  
but in her other hand there lay  
a phial of glass with water filled  
that from the bitter fountain spilled.  
At eve he waked and murmured: *„Ringing  
of bells within my ears, and singing,  
a singing is beneath the moon.  
Grieve not my wife! Grieve not Itroun!  
My death is near—but do not tell,  
though I am wounded with a spell!  
But two days more, and then I die—  
and I would have had her sweetly lie  
and sweet arise; and live yet long,  
and see our children hale and strong.“*  
His words they little understood,  
but cursed the fevers of the wood,  
and to their lady no word spoke.  
Ere second morn was old she woke,  
and to her women standing near  
gave greeting with a merry cheer:  
*„Good people, lo! the morn is bright!  
Say, did my lord return ere night,  
and tarries now with hunting worn?“*  
*„Nay, lady, he came not with the morn;  
but ere men candles set on board,  
thou wilt have tidings of thy lord;  
or hear his feet to thee returning,  
ere candles in the eve are burning.“*  
Ere the third morn was wide she woke,  
and eager greeted them, and spoke:  
*„Behold the morn is cold and grey,  
and why is my lord so long away?  
I do not hear his feet returning  
neither at evening nor at morning.“*  
*„We do not know, we cannot say.“*  
they answered and they turned away.  
Her gentle babes in swaddling white,  
now seven days had seen the light,  
and she arose and left her bed,  
and called her maidens and she said:  
*„My lord must soon return. Come, bring*

*my fairest raiment, stone on ring,  
and pearl on thread; for him 'twill please  
to see his wife abroad at ease.*"

She looked from window tall and high,  
and felt a breeze go coldly by;  
she saw it pass from tree to tree;  
the clouds were laid from hill to sea.  
She heard no horn and heard no hoof,  
but rain came pattering on the roof;  
in Brittany she heard the waves  
on sounding shore in hollow caves.

The day wore on till it was old;  
she heard the bells that slowly tolled.  
„Good folk, *why do they mourning make?  
In tower I hear the slow bells shake,  
and Dirige the white priests sing.  
Whom to the churchyard do they bring?*"

„A man unhappy here there came  
a while ago. His horse was lame;  
sickness was on him, and he fell  
before our gates, or so they tell.  
Here he was harboured, but to-day  
he died, and passeth now the way  
we all must go, to church to lie  
on bier before the altar high."

She looked upon them, dark and deep,  
and saw them in the shadows weep.

„Then tall, and fair, and brave was he,  
or tale of sorrow there must be  
concerning him, that still ye keep,  
if for a stranger thus ye weep!

What know ye more? Ah, say! ah, say!"  
They answered not, and turned away.

„Ah me," she said, „that I could sleep  
this night, or least that I could weep!"

But all night long she tossed and turned,  
and in her limbs a fever burned:

and yet when sudden under sun  
a fairer morning was begun,

„Good folk, to church I wend," she said.

„My raiment choose, or robe of red,  
or robe of blue, or white and fair,  
silver and gold—I do not care."

„Nay, lady," said they, „none of these.

The custom used, as now one sees,  
for women that to churching go  
is robe of black and walking slow."

In robe of black and walking bent  
the lady to her churching went,

in hand a candle small and white,  
her face so pale, her hair so bright.  
They passed beneath the western door;  
there dark within on stony floor  
a bier was covered with a pall,  
and by it yellow candles tall.  
The watchful tapers still and bright  
upon his blazon cast their light:  
the arms and banner of her lord;  
his pride was ended, vain his hoard.  
To bed they brought her, swift to sleep  
for ever cold, though there might weep  
her women by her dark bedside,  
or babes in cradle waked and cried.  
There was singing slow at dead of night,  
and many feet, arid taper-light.  
At morn there rang the sacring knell;  
and far men heard a single bell  
toll, while the sun lay on the land;  
while deep in dim Broceliande  
a silver fountain flowed and fell  
within a darkly woven dell,  
and in the homeless hills a dale  
was filled with laughter cold and pale.  
Beside her lord at last she lay  
in their long home beneath the clay;  
and if their children lived yet long,  
or played in garden hale and strong,  
they saw it not, nor found it sweet  
their heart's desire at last to meet

In Brittany beyond the waves  
are sounding shores and hollow caves;  
in Brittany beyond the seas  
the wind blows ever through the trees.  
Of lord and lady all is said:  
God rest their souls, who now are dead!  
Sad is the note and sad the lay,  
but mirth we meet not every day.  
God keep us all in hope and prayer  
from evil rede and from despair,  
by waters blest of Christendom  
to dwell, until at last we come  
to joy of Heaven where is queen  
the maiden Mary pure and clean.

