

From *River Witch*, Cheryl Burman



The hot end-of-summer weather drains Catherine's energy to the point she can do nothing except languish on the sofa, feet shoeless on the ottoman, her back against a tapestried cushion. Her aunt brings her hot drinks of the best Indian leaf tea, saying if such drinks cool the natives of the searing Indian sub-continent they will assuredly cool Catherine. Mrs Bryce brings her elderflower cordial.

'Do you think that high and mighty Courtney-Brown would give us a chip or two of ice from his ice-house?' Mrs Bryce rolls her eyes at the impossibility of it.

Catherine laughs. 'It would melt long before it arrived here.' She takes the long glass. 'Besides, with this water straight from the well, the drink is perfectly refreshing.'

'Water from the other well is what you need, Miss Catherine.'

'Other well?'

'The sacred well. St Ceyna's.' Mrs Bryce folds her arms under her bosom. 'Powerful stuff. When my mam was ill with milk fever with the youngest, Betty, may she rest in peace, it was the saint's water cured her right off. Granny Williams, good woman she was and wise in the ways of herbs and wildflowers, used it in her fenugreek poultice. Showed me how to make it.'

'Surely it was the fenugreek which righted your mother. Did the water matter?'

Mrs Bryce arches her brows. 'It did, Miss Catherine, it did. And now I must attend to dinner before your father is home asking why he's waiting for his meal.'

Catherine sets the cordial on a side table which also holds an unread book and a lawn handkerchief she is supposedly embroidering. With her skull stuffed with sheep's wool, sewing or reading is impossible in the dry airlessness of noon. She lifts her legs onto the sofa, rests on the cushion and closes her eyes. Led by Mrs Bryce's comments, her mind wanders to St Ceyna's deep waters. Papa had taken her there when she was eight years old, to show her this place of local legend and general beauty.

It was autumn. Catherine's pony breathed frosted drops into the air while its hooves crunched the red and gold leaves carpeting the ground as richly as any of the Turkish rugs at home.

'Who was St Ceyna?'

‘A Welsh princess, from long, long ago. A great beauty, yet she never married and lived as a hermitess at the end of her life.’ Papa arched his brows. ‘People say she talked with the spirits of the forest and the streams.’

Catherine had stared into the stone-walled, rectangular clear pool, conjuring a long-haired beauty bathing under a silver moon. They visited three more times, in the days before her wearying illness kept her tied to the house like a cow in its stall.

Her body relaxes, her breathing deepens as she sinks into the well’s imagined, languorous coolness. Today, the leaves sheltering the pool would be heavy with the mature green of late summer. A penultimate taste of life before the final glittering display, a last burst of joy, heralds their death in the frozen nights.

How might it feel to glitter with joy before death? If she is dying – as she believes she is – Catherine badly wants to glitter first, instead of this lethargic fading away she can do nothing about.

She broods all afternoon, and as she plays with the chilled vegetable soup Mrs Bryce serves for supper to tempt Catherine’s sparrow appetite. When the bowls are cleared and the family settled in the drawing room, Catherine sits up straight on the sofa, a finger marking her place in her book. While it takes effort to sit thus for any length of time, she has to demonstrate how strong, how well she is, otherwise her father will deny her immediately.

‘Will you take me to St Ceyna’s well, Papa?’

‘St Ceyna’s? Why do you wish to go there?’ He puts aside his newspaper and frowns from his chair by the side of the empty fireplace.

Aunt Lottie glances up from the cushion cover she is embroidering with white lilies and golden daffodils. ‘Why indeed?’

‘Aunty! Papa!’ Catherine puts desperation into her voice. ‘I’m tired of staying in the house all day with only the garden for a change of scenery. I need to see somewhere different before winter locks us in forever.’ She takes her finger from the book and clasps her hands beneath her chin. ‘Please, Papa?’

He waves his pipe. ‘I understand, my dear, truly. I’d gladly take you if it were possible. However, you’re not strong enough to ride, and the carriage is impractical on that narrow, overhung track. I don’t see how it can be done.’

‘It can’t.’ Aunt Lottie snips a yellow thread. ‘You’re unwell, Catherine. Doctor Newton says you need to rest. Gallivanting off into the forest is not resting.’

Catherine pouts. ‘If I rest any longer I’ll die of boredom long before I die of whatever ails me.’

‘Catherine!’

Her aunt’s horror shames Catherine’s outburst into apologies. ‘Of course I’m not dying. I’m sorry, Aunt, my words were in poor taste.’ A bright smile will encourage

Papa to say yes. ‘It seems I’m recovering, aren’t I, if I have this desire to go somewhere?’

‘Not the well.’ Papa lifts the newspaper and flicks over a page.

‘I can ride Molly. I do remember how to ride, Papa. It’s not far.’

He puts the paper down for a second time, along with his pipe. ‘I’m sorry, my dear. You’ll have to make do with the carriage and a short promenade along the river.’

Aunt Lottie eases stem-green thread through a needle. ‘Far more sensible, if the sun isn’t too fierce.’

All those people, jostling their unwashed bodies too close, greeting each other with loud cheeriness and banal chat.

‘No thank you,’ Catherine says. She surrenders her upright stance and wriggles her aching shoulders into the sofa. ‘I’ll stay here and dream of St Ceyna instead.’

And dream she does, while her longing to visit the well grows into an obsession through the last days of August. The imagined cooling freshness consumes her. In her dreams she floats on the waters, the wet caress soothing her arms and legs, sliding silken across her naked body. Her head thrown back, her light blonde hair trails its lengths on the glassy surface as St Ceyna’s dark hair did all those centuries ago. She wakes in a knot of damp nightgown and sheets, flushing at the memory of her own dreamed nakedness.

She must visit. She must. At least to run her fingers through the water, touch the drops to her face and eyes, to her arms. She will remove her boots and stockings and cool her toes. The waters cannot cure her body. She is certain they will refresh her spirit.

Catherine’s desire, her desperation, can’t wait on permission.



The rhythm of the mare lulls Catherine into a dreamlike state. The path weaves in leisurely loops between blunt-edged quarried stones, clumps of fern and stands of bracken up to a ridge. The coolness beneath the trees breathes like a living creature, as if ancient eyes measure her progress through the forest. Maybe the spirit of St Ceyna follows Catherine’s journey to the well, encouraging her with whispers and the fluttering of a hand on her shoulder.

Molly tosses her head and snickers. Catherine keeps on, the rapid guilty thudding of her heart which has accompanied her out of the house, up the track and into the forest, quieting the closer she comes to the waters she thirsts for.

From the ridge, the narrow valley which was home to the saint falls away to a thin, straight stream which feeds the sacred well. The beech and oak are as Catherine

remembers: thick with age, entwined branches shelter the rough stone rectangle which encloses the pool in imitation of elaborate trusses sustaining a church roof above a nave.

Catherine halts Molly at the trees' edge. Someone else is here. A girl two or three years younger than she is, and with a tumble of dark curls falling over her cheeks, kneels above the water to dip a pitcher. Mottled sunlight shimmers on her arched body as if she is attended by dancing water sprites.

Catherine watches, delighted. Has she been granted a vision of St Ceyna in her youth?

The girl sets the pitcher on the ground and turns to Catherine. No vision after all. Here perhaps is a sturdy farmer's daughter, or she could belong to a shopkeeper. She is dressed well, although plainly, in a blue calico frock with a white collar. A muslin bag on a plaited thread swings from her neck. Her feet are bare. A pair of black boots stuffed with white stockings are lined up neatly not far away.

'Hello,' the girl says. 'Have you come to collect water too?'

'No.'

'To bathe?' The girl jumps to her feet and comes closer.

The dappled sunlight follows her and Catherine peers closely, unsurprised if fairies really did play about her head and shoulders. When the girl reaches out to Molly's nose and strokes it, Catherine senses the mare relax under the caress, ears forward. A farmer's daughter?

'No, not to bathe.' Catherine grows hot, momentarily living her dreams. 'Perhaps my face and hands, maybe dip my feet, to cool them, to cool myself.'

'I bathed my feet earlier.' The girl brushes aside a wet strand of curls. 'The cold water makes your skin tingle.' She continues to stroke Molly's nose. 'You're beautiful, aren't you?'

Molly wickers in agreement and Catherine says, 'You've an excellent way with horses. I'd swear she understood you.'

The girl glances up, a smile tugging at her lips. Pride gleams in her cornflower blue eyes and Catherine is captivated, wants to ask: 'You can talk to horses?' She bites her tongue on the silly question.

'Are you going to bathe your face?' the girl says. 'Can you dismount by yourself?'

Catherine hesitates. It might be the flaw in her plan. The block at home meant she could mount Molly by herself, settling comfortably in the side-saddle as if it hasn't been nearly a year. However ...

'I can. The trouble is, I'm not sure I'll be able to re-mount. And it's a long way to walk home.'

‘I’ll help you.’ The girl squares her broad shoulders. ‘I’m strong. It’s all the farm work I do. In any case, there’s that.’ She points to a broad, uneven stump a few feet away.

Catherine hesitates no longer. She lifts her legs from the pommels, sits side-on and jumps to the ground, twisting to face the mare as she does so.

‘Bravo!’ The girl claps her hands. Then, ‘Are you all right, Miss?’ as Catherine sways, dizzy, and rests her head on Molly’s flank.

‘Yes, yes. I’m fine.’

‘I don’t think so. Are you faint? Here, lean on me and we can use the stump as a seat.’

Fuller-figured, the girl is strong as promised, easily able to support Catherine’s slender body.

‘Apple cider is what we need.’ She lays her hand on Catherine’s forehead where beads of sweat prickle. ‘Good for dizziness. Or ginger tea and honey. For now ...’ She gently pushes Catherine’s head down. ‘Stay there while I fetch you water.’

Catherine grips the edge of the stump, willing the dizziness to stop. Nausea rises in her throat and she swallows it down. And if she can remount, she worries she won’t be able to stay in the saddle. Papa may well be right: she is not well enough to ride, not in this sticky air. His anger at her foolishness, his disappointment in her, worsens her discomfort.

A patterned clay mug of well water appears under her nose. Her hands tremble as she takes hold of it and sips. A liquid sherbet coolness fizzes in her parched mouth, tingling on her tongue. She gulps the rest with the passion of a lost, thirst-tormented soul falling upon an oasis.

‘Are you feeling better?’

‘Thank you, yes. It’s silly, I have dizzy spells, my head is heavy. It’ll pass soon.’

The girl lifts Catherine’s chin and frowns into her eyes in the manner of Dr Newton. Catherine quashes a desire to laugh, not wishing to insult her young nurse.

‘Your eyes.’ She frowns. ‘Aaron would ...’

‘Aaron would what? Who’s Aaron?’

The girl steps back. ‘No-one. At least, it doesn’t matter. Are you better?’

Catherine searches her warm eyes. The notion a ghost or a spirit attends her, comes again. ‘I am, and I’ll bathe my face as I promised myself.’ She glances over to the neatly lined up boots. ‘Unless we might be surprised by other visitors, I’ll dip my toes too.’

‘Few come here this time of day. We – I – rarely see a living soul.’

Catherine lets the plural pass. This Aaron she supposes, probably a young farmhand with a good countryman’s rudimentary knowledge of basic ailments. The

reference to a 'living soul' appeals to her, makes sense. Whether a ghost or a robust young girl, her helper belongs in this place, a living human spirit surrounded by careful, watchful souls; a vivacious foil to its deep shade and coolness.

Fanciful notions. Her aunt would tell her to read fewer novels.

She gives the girl a sly look. 'Let's hope we too have St Ceyna to ourselves.'



Over the time they spend sliding their bare feet through the cold water, Catherine's colour rises from waxen to the soft pink of apple blossom. Hester's new friend tells how she lives in Shiphaven, loves to read and hates to sew. Hester tells about life on the farm and how she would love to read more and also hates to sew. There's no choice though, because it's how she and Mother bring more money to the farm.

'It isn't doing as well as it should, despite Will, my oldest brother, trying hard to persuade Father to try more modern ways like our landlord insists.' She rolls her eyes. 'Father, bless him, says the old ways work and there's no reason to change them.'

Catherine reaches across and touches the little bag around Hester's neck.

'Is this something to do with old ways?'

Hester fondles the bag. 'Feverfew. Aa— It was a gift.' She lifts the muslin to her nose and sniffs it before tucking it into the collar of her frock. 'It's feverfew, to protect me and make me strong.'

'You and Mrs Bryce, our housekeeper, would get on well.' Catherine leans down to trail her hand in the water, giggles. 'She firmly believes certain herbs, spices, dried leaves, can cure all manner of things, all the more so if they're mixed with water from a sacred well.'

Catherine's giggles stop when Hester says, 'Your Mrs Bryce is right. My great-grandmother cured people with such *potions*, as Mother calls them.' She wraps a curl around her finger. 'I would love to help people the same way.' A peek confirms Catherine doesn't mock her ambition. 'I'm trying to learn this lore, from a ... a friend, an older friend who understands it well, and Father would agree it's an honourable way of life. My mother ...' She shrugs. 'It's why I haven't told Father, although I'd love to, I hate deceiving him.' The unquietness which lives deep inside her over the deception stirs, as it often does. 'He'd say I need Mother's blessing too, and she would never ...' She lets the silence tell the story.

Catherine lays her fingers on Hester's arm. Her eyes are wistful. 'I'm sorry, and also happy for you. To have a purpose, a vocation, is wonderful. Me ...' She withdraws her hand to press her fist into her breast. 'I'm useless, a mere decoration, a ...'

‘... star on a Christmas tree,’ Hester fills in, laughing, sad for those wistful eyes. ‘You’re beautiful, a shining star, and that’s purpose too, isn’t it?’

She has made Catherine smile, if only for a moment, for Catherine peers up through the leaves, squints at the sun’s lower position and frowns.

‘It’s getting late. Papa will be furious.’ She pushes herself up from the stones and offers Hester a hand. ‘I do feel much, much better.’ Her voice is serious, thoughtful. ‘Mrs Bryce could be right, about there being magic in the waters.’

Hester walks beside Molly and Catherine as they follow the winding path through the forest to the track. Catherine fascinates her. It’s not just her extraordinary clothes, better than anything her mother sews for the town’s ladies, or her exquisite mare, which Hester has fallen in love with. It’s her delicate kindness, her high breathy laughter and the way she delighted in the cool freshness of St Ceyna’s magical waters.

When they part, Hester strokes Molly’s neck under the silken mane. ‘Take care of her, won’t you?’ she says softly into the horse’s ear.

Molly tosses her head. *I always do. When they let me.*