

# The Heart of the Spring

By W. B. Yeats

A very old man, whose face was almost as fleshless as the foot of a bird, sat meditating upon the rocky shore of the flat and hazel-covered isle which fills the widest part of the Lough Gill. A russet-faced boy of seventeen years sat by his side, watching the swallows dipping for flies in the still water. The old man was dressed in threadbare blue velvet, and the boy wore a frieze coat and a blue cap, and had about his neck a rosary of blue beads. Behind the two, and half hidden by trees, was a little monastery. It had been burned down a long while before by sacrilegious men of the Queen's party, but had been roofed anew with rushes by the boy, that the old man might find shelter in his last days. He had not set his spade, however, into the garden about it, and the lilies and the roses of the monks had spread out until their confused luxuriance met and mingled with the narrowing circle of the fern. Beyond the lilies and the roses the ferns were so deep that a child walking among them would be hidden from sight, even though he stood upon his toes; and beyond the fern rose many hazels and small oak trees.

'Master,' said the boy, 'this long fasting, and the labour of beckoning after nightfall with your rod of quicken wood to the beings who dwell in the waters and among the hazels and oak-trees, is too much for your strength. Rest from all this labour for a little, for your hand seemed more heavy upon my shoulder and your feet less steady under you to-day than I have known them. Men say that you are older than the eagles, and yet you will not seek the rest that belongs to age.' He spoke in an eager, impulsive way, as though his heart were in the words and thoughts of the moment; and the old man answered slowly and deliberately, as though his heart were in distant days and distant deeds.

'I will tell you why I have not been able to rest,' he said. 'It is right that you should know, for you have served me faithfully these five years and more, and even with affection, taking away thereby a little of the doom of loneliness which always falls upon the wise. Now, too, that the end of my labour and the triumph of my hopes is at hand, it is the more needful for you to have this knowledge.'

'Master, do not think that I would question you. It is for me to keep the fire alight, and the thatch close against the rain, and strong, lest the wind blow it among the trees; and it is for me to take the heavy books from the shelves, and to lift from its corner the great painted roll with the names of the Sidhe, and to possess the while an incurious and reverent heart, for right well I know that God has made out of His abundance a separate wisdom for everything which lives, and to do these things is my wisdom.'

'You are afraid,' said the old man, and his eyes shone with a momentary anger.

'Sometimes at night,' said the boy, 'when you are reading, with the rod of quicken wood in your hand, I look out of the door and see, now a great grey man driving swine among the hazels, and now many little people in red caps who come out of the lake driving little white cows before them. I do not fear these little people so much as the grey man; for, when they come near the house, they milk the cows, and they drink the frothing milk, and begin to dance; and I know there is good in the heart that loves dancing; but I fear them for all that. And I fear the tall white-armed ladies who come out of the air, and move slowly hither and thither, crowning themselves with the roses or with the lilies, and shaking about their living hair, which moves, for so I have heard them tell each other, with the motion of their thoughts, now spreading out and now

gathering close to their heads. They have mild, beautiful faces, but I am afraid of the Sidhe, and afraid of the art which draws them about us.'

'Why,' said the old man, 'do you fear the ancient gods who made the spears of your father's fathers to be stout in battle, and the little people who came at night from the depth of the lakes and sang among the crickets upon their hearths? And in our evil day they still watch over the loveliness of the earth. But I must tell you why I have fasted and laboured when others would sink into the sleep of age, for without your help once more I shall have fasted and laboured to no good end. When you have done for me this last thing, you may go and build your cottage and till your fields, and take some girl to wife, and forget the ancient gods. I have saved all the gold and silver pieces that were given to me by earls and knights and squires for keeping them from the evil eye and from the love-weaving enchantments of witches, and by earls' and knights' and squires' ladies for keeping the people of the Sidhe from making the udders of their cattle fall dry, and taking the butter from their churns. I have saved it all for the day when my work should be at an end, and now that the end is at hand you shall not lack for gold and silver pieces enough to make strong the roof-tree of your cottage and to keep cellar and larder full. I have sought through all my life to find the secret of life. I was not happy in my youth, for I knew that it would pass; and I was not happy in my manhood, for I knew that age was coming; and so I gave myself, in youth and manhood and age, to the search for the Great Secret. I longed for a life whose abundance would fill centuries, I scorned the life of fourscore winters. I would be—nay, I *will* be!—like the Ancient Gods of the land. I read in my youth, in a Hebrew manuscript I found in a Spanish monastery, that there is a moment after the Sun has entered the Ram and before he has passed the Lion, which trembles with the Song of the Immortal Powers, and that whosoever finds this moment and listens to the Song shall become like the Immortal Powers themselves; I came back to Ireland and asked the fairy men, and the cow-doctors, if they knew when this moment was; but though all had heard of it, there was none could find the moment upon the hour-glass. So I gave myself to magic, and spent my life in fasting and in labour that I might bring the Gods and the Fairies to my side; and now at last one of the Fairies has told me that the moment is at hand. One, who wore a red cap and whose lips were white with the froth of the new milk, whispered it into my ear. Tomorrow, a little before the close of the first hour after dawn, I shall find the moment, and then I will go away to a southern land and build myself a palace of white marble amid orange trees, and gather the brave and the beautiful about me, and enter into the eternal kingdom of my youth. But, that I may hear the whole Song, I was told by the little fellow with the froth of the new milk on his lips, that you must bring great masses of green boughs and pile them about the door and the window of my room; and you must put fresh green rushes upon the floor, and cover the table and the rushes with the roses and the lilies of the monks. You must do this to-night, and in the morning at the end of the first hour after dawn, you must come and find me.'

'Will you be quite young then?' said the boy.

'I will be as young then as you are, but now I am still old and tired, and you must help me to my chair and to my books.'

When the boy had left the wizard in his room, and had lighted the lamp which, by some contrivance of the wizard's, gave forth a sweet odour as of strange flowers, he went into the wood and began cutting green boughs from the hazels, and great bundles of rushes from the western border of the isle, where the small rocks gave place to gently sloping sand and clay. It was nightfall before he had cut enough for his purpose, and well-nigh midnight before he had carried the last bundle to its place, and gone back for the roses and the lilies. It was one of those

warm, beautiful nights when everything seems carved of precious stones. Sleuth Wood away to the south looked as though cut out of green beryl, and the waters that mirrored them shone like pale opal. The roses he was gathering were like glowing rubies, and the lilies had the dull lustre of pearl. Everything had taken upon itself the look of something imperishable, except a glow-worm, whose faint flame burnt on steadily among the shadows, moving slowly hither and thither, the only thing that seemed alive, the only thing that seemed perishable as mortal hope. The boy gathered a great armful of roses and lilies, and thrusting the glow-worm among their pearl and ruby, carried them into the room, where the old man sat in a half-slumber. He laid armful after armful upon the floor and above the table, and then, gently closing the door, threw himself upon his bed of rushes, to dream of a peaceful manhood with his chosen wife at his side, and the laughter of children in his ears. At dawn he rose, and went down to the edge of the lake, taking the hour-glass with him. He put some bread and a flask of wine in the boat, that his master might not lack food at the outset of his journey, and then sat down to wait until the hour from dawn had gone by. Gradually the birds began to sing, and when the last grains of sand were falling, everything suddenly seemed to overflow with their music. It was the most beautiful and living moment of the year; one could listen to the spring's heart beating in it. He got up and went to find his master. The green boughs filled the door, and he had to make a way through them. When he entered the room the sunlight was falling in flickering circles on floor and walls and table, and everything was full of soft green shadows. But the old man sat clasping a mass of roses and lilies in his arms, and with his head sunk upon his breast. On the table, at his left hand, was a leathern wallet full of gold and silver pieces, as for a journey, and at his right hand was a long staff. The boy touched him and he did not move. He lifted the hands but they were quite cold, and they fell heavily.

‘It were better for him,’ said the lad, ‘to have told his beads and said his prayers like another, and not to have spent his days in seeking amongst the Immortal Powers what he could have found in his own deeds and days had he willed. Ah, yes, it were better to have said his prayers and kissed his beads!’ He looked at the threadbare blue velvet, and he saw it was covered with the pollen of the flowers, and while he was looking at it a thrush, who had alighted among the boughs that were piled against the window, began to sing.