

The Changeling

One dark, stormy winter night in the Irish midlands, a young woman lay in bed beside her husband, unable to rest. Her sleeping husband's breath rose and fell with the contented regularity and their son lay sleeping in his cradle beside them, but there was something stirring outside their house that made the woman feel uneasy. All of a sudden, the door of the house was flung open and two strangers walked in, bringing a ferocious gust of wind and the pelting rain with them.

The man was a fearful looking creature, tall and thin with dark, curled hair that appeared to have a life all of its own. The old woman that accompanied him cradled a sickly-looking child in her arms, her haggard face as hard as stone.

The woman went rigid with fear in her bed as she watched as the new arrivals warmed themselves by the fire. The man looked across at the cradle, his beady, probing eyes resting on her baby boy who lay within. After several minutes of this intense gazing, he stood from his seat and walked over to the cradle. Panic shot through the young woman's body and she fainted.

When the young woman regained her senses, she called out to her husband.

“Wake up!”, she cried. “There is someone in the house! Light a candle, quickly!”

Her husband leapt out of bed, found a candle and lit it. It shed just enough light to see the strange couple before the old hag blew it out. He lit the candle a second and third time, but each time it was blown out again to a malicious, trilling shriek of laughter. Abandoning the candle in frustration, the man grabbed at the old hag, but she was devious and slipped through his grip.

“Get out of my house!”, he roared at her.

With that, he threw the door open, forced the old hag out with a red hot rod from the fire, bolting the door securely after her. Quickly, he found the discarded candle and lit it again.

“Our beautiful son!”, his wife lamented. “Our son has been taken! Look, husband, at the weak, bony creature that has been left in his place. He is covered in hair and even though he looks like our own son, his shrivelled little face looks like that of an old man!”

Her husband looked into the cradle, and seeing this sickly creature in his son's place, the blood drained from his face and he sank onto the bed in dismay. The couple's wails of anguish were carried across the raging winter storm for all in the surrounding townlands to hear.

Just then, a young woman opened their door and walked in, even though it had been locked. She was a pleasant looking woman, though shrouded in an air of enchantment, and wore a red handkerchief tied around her head.

“What ever are you crying for?”, she asked. “It is the middle of the night! Surely you should be fast asleep in your bed.”

“Look at the child in the cradle”, the man told her. “Our son has been taken and this poor weak creature has been left in his place. Is it any wonder that we cannot sleep when our hearts are so heavy with grief?”

He told the woman the whole story of what had happened that night, too stunned to question who she was or why she was there.

She listened to every word and when he had finished his sorry tale, she went over to look in the cradle. A large smile spread across her face.

“I don't see what there is to smile about”, said the man, anger welling up deep inside him.

“This is my own child,” she explained to the distraught couple. “He was taken from me this very night by one of my own kind. I am of the fairy race and they thought that your son was a fine, handsome child so they exchanged him for mine. I'm sure you understand, I would prefer to have my own son than any mortal child in the whole world.”

The young fairy woman was so delighted to find her son again, she explained to the couple how they might get their own son back.

“Listen very carefully and follow my instructions exactly”, she said. “You must go to the old ring fort on the hill on the next full moon and take three sheaves of corn and some fire with you. Burn one sheaf after the other, and when the second sheaf is burning, you will see an old man appear before you.

He will ask what it is you wish for. Demand your son from him, and he will do it without question. Despite the great power of the fairy folk, we are weak in the face of fire and would not risk our fort being burnt down.”

With that, the young fairy woman took her child in her arms and disappeared out the door before the couple could ask any questions.

Difficult as life was without their son, the young couple toiled on until the next full moon hung in the night sky. The man went to the old ring fort on the hill as instructed, anxious to get his son back. He took the three sheaves of corn from his bag and used fire to light the first sheaf, and then the second. Just as the fairy woman had predicted, an old man appeared.

“What is it that you want from us?”, he asked.

“I demand that you give me back my son. If you do not, I will burn this fort to the ground and you and your fairy folk will be left without a home”, the man replied with such conviction that great commotion could be heard within the ring fort and the air suddenly swelled with panic and fear. The old man raced back into the fort and brought out the baby boy.

“The power of fire is too great for us”, he said. “Here is your son, but take some advice from an old man. To keep him safe from fairy power, draw a circle around his cradle tonight using a hot coal.”

The man carried out this charm and his son grew up into a strong, successful man. The same fairy fort still stands to this day, for the man would let no harm come to it. Not a stone was overturned, a single tree disturbed or so much as a handful of

earth removed. The local people still enjoy the sweet low music of fairy bagpipes floating across the mound when the moon is full.