

The Fairmaid Comb

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(Guyana)

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Everybody in the village was proud of Mr Wilkie, and long after he was dead, people still spoke about him as if he was still alive. He used to be the richest man there. He had a very large house, with a big garden, lots of animals, even a motor car. Nobody knew for sure how he got so rich but on a Saturday night, when the moon was full and people sat on their back steps, chewing sugar cane, or eating boiled crab and swapping stories, this is the tale they tell of how Mr Wilkie got rich.

When Mr Wilkie was a young man in his twenties, he lived in a little one-room house, all alone, by Bush Corner, as they used to call the dam. Then one night he had to go to the neighbouring village for a wake. His Aunt Jess had died. He didn't really like the old woman. She was mean and stingy and there was very little love lost between them. But he had to show his face or he'd have to answer too many questions afterwards.

So there he was at the dead-house, full of people eating and drinking, playing cards and cracking jokes, and singing all the usual wake hymns as loudly as their lungs would allow them. Some shouted and screamed, others groaned in low tones, all in an attempt to show their 'grief' at the loss of the beloved one. 'Hypocrites, the lot of them!' thought Wilkie, and as the din grew more intense, the more eager he was to leave.

He was a rather quiet man, and the noise and confusion got too much for him, so when he thought that no one was looking he slipped quietly out of the house, slid step by step along the dam that ran beside the wallaba palings, crossed a bridge further up and took the road for home.

It was just after midnight and it was pitch dark, but he knew the way and he wasn't really afraid. The only trouble was that he had to pass a koker, and people said that at night when everyone was asleep and the moon had gone in, the fairmaids came out to sit on the koker to comb their long hair. Wilkie never really paid any attention to this but nevertheless when he neared the koker he slowed down. Surely there was someone or something there" His heart began to beat *bup! bup! bup!* He walked more slowly holding his breath. Suddenly he heard a sound, like when you tearin' fugi, a slight thud on the ground, and a *bujung!* in the water. Someone had let out a suck-teeth, thrown something away, and then jumped into the deep black water in a hurry.

At first, Wilkie didn't know what to do. He couldn't turn back; he couldn't go forward; he stood there, as if a carpenter had nailed him to the ground. Meanwhile, his heart was beating *budup bup, budup bup, budup, budup bup*. Then he picked up courage and moved. His right foot kicked something, and

when he picked up the object, he saw that it was a comb. He put it in his pocket, hurried home to his house, the perspiration still dripping from his forehead, ran up the few steps to his door and made for bed as quickly as he could.

Later, he put the comb under his mattress and next day went about his work as usual. But, at night, when he lay down to sleep, he heard a gentle knocking at the door. He sat up, and listened. A woman's voice was crying, 'My comb! My comb! Please, Sir! My comb!' Wilkie didn't answer; he was too afraid. He played for time and soon he heard the *flip flap, flip flap* of her tail, slipping from one treader to the next. Then he knew who his visitor was: the fairmaid of the koker.

He was very puzzled, when, in the morning, he found a huge pile of money outside his door. He quickly gathered up the lot, put it in a canister under his bed, and said nothing. He had never handled so much money in his life. For a long time, he sat thinking about the money in the canister, not really believing that it was there.

The following night, the same thing happened. His fairmaid visitor came crying for her comb. He was too frightened to answer, and sure enough, next morning, there was another huge pile of money outside his door. Wilkie collected it carefully, put it with the rest in the canister and sat thinking for a long time. He was glad for the money, but he wasn't greedy and he didn't want anything to do with Water People. Gossipers in the village would soon begin to talk and he couldn't face that. What was he to do!

At the other end of Bushe Corner, Ma Bec lived in a little house by the pump. She was the village adviser. So, he went to see her. 'Maanin', Ma Bec,' he called out. 'Yu de home?'

'A who da caalin' mi su soon?' replied a cheerful, welcoming voice. And Ma Bec stood at the door. 'Come, son; laang time awi na taak. We you bin aal dis time?'

'Ma Bec, mi gat something fu awi taaak.'

'Come, mi baay, le mi hear wa yu gat fu tel mi. yu know Ma Bec always gat time fu liss'n.'

So Wilkie and Ma Bec sat on the steps and he told her all about the fairmaid and the comb and the money. Ma Bec listened carefully, and for a long time after Wilkie had finished speaking, remained silent, until he began to wonder if she was there, at all.

'Wa mi mus't du?' asked Wilkie. 'Mi na want nutten fu du wid dese Water People; mi na wan greedy man, but mi kyan do wid di money; yoou know how ting baad.'

Then Ma Bec answered. 'Shi gwine come, again, tonight. Lef wan big basket outside, and when shi come tell shi fu lef di money and tek di basket and gu an' bale out di sea. Yu na gu see shi no mo.'

'T'ank you! T'ank you, Ma Bec!' said Wilkie, and hurried home to his house.

That same night just as Ma Bec said, the fairmaid turned up, crying all the time for the comb. At first Wilkie couldn't even talk, he was so afraid. Then

as she continued to cry, he gathered up enough courage to shout at her. He told her to leave the money and to take the basket he had left outside, and bale out the sea with it.

He listened, his heart going *budup, budup*, all the time. The crying stopped; he was less tense. Then after a while he heard the *sl-i-i-ip slap, slip slap, sl-i-i-ip sl-a-a-ap* of her tail down the steps until the sound faded into the silence and the dark.

Wilkie didn't wait for day-clean. He got up quickly, collected the largest largest pile of money you ever did see, put it with the rest in the canister and lay awake for a long time, not even able to think straight.

In the morning, he opened the canister. The money was really there. It was real money, too. The first thing he did was to go to Ma Bec to report. He told her of the night's events and gave her some of the money. Ma Bec, once more, assured him that the fairmaid wouldn't return to molest him.

Very soon afterwards, people began to notice that Wilkie was wearing better clothes; he was building a bigger house on the public road; he was spending more money and he hadn't gone gold diggin' and come back. When anyone asked, he would show the comb, and then the old people would shake their heads knowingly. They understood.

So, on a moonlight night, on the back-steps, over boiled crab, or sugar cane, people in the village tell the tale of Mr Wilkie and the fairmaid comb. And where is the comb? Buried somewhere in Mr Wilkie's backyard. And where is the fairmaid? Still baling out the sea with a *mucru* basket.