



# The Legend of the Woman of Water

*Catalonia - Spain*

The Gorg Negre is a pond of dark water that opens up at the foot of a waterfall in the Gualba Creek, at the Montseny mountain massif, northern Catalonia. In ancient times, there were many astonishing and startling stories about it, such as the one that says that, on stormy days, threads of mist could be seen rising from the pool, which then ascended the rugged mountain slopes until they formed a great dark cloud in the sky above.

In medieval times things like this led the people of the area to believe that the Gorg Negre was inhabited by witches and evil sorcerers. However, other stories from the region assert that the inhabitants of the pool were much kinder ... and more attractive.

Legend goes that, one summer night, the owner of Can Prat, a farmhouse near the Gorg Negre, set out for a walk through the beech and chestnut woods in order to cool off after a day of scorching heat. Under the light of the full moon, he traced his path until he entered the ravine of the Gualba Creek and, shortly afterwards, he reached the Gorg Negre. Fascinated by the reflection of the moon in its waters, and disbelieving in stories of witches and sorcery, the man decided to sit down in silence on a flat, sloping rock on the banks of the pool.

Suddenly, the reflection of the moon in the water began to falter, while, at the other end of the pool, a naked woman of extraordinary beauty emerged from the depths. She sat on the mossy bank and raised her arms to slowly comb her long hair.

Undoubtedly, the woman had not seen the man from Can Prat sitting on the rock and the latter, enraptured by the beauty of the young nymph, hardly dared to breathe so as not to betray his presence. However, after a few seconds, the woman stopped combing her hair and began to look around warily, as if a sixth sense had warned her of a strange presence. Finally, their eyes met.

At that precise moment, the man knew that his heart could never belong to anyone but this strange woman who had risen from the waters.

‘Excuse me if I startled you,’ he said softly as if in ecstasy, and then added, ‘What’s your name?’

The woman did not answer. She simply stared at him with her deep green eyes, as if assessing the situation and wondering whether she was in danger. She was also wondering whether she would have to do what she had done before when she had taken those men who had tried to possess her against her will to the bottom of the pool.

For a few minutes, the man from Can Prat kept asking her questions, without moving from his place so as not to alarm her, lest she disappear into the depths and he would never see her again. But the woman did not answer his questions, limiting herself to observing him and assessing the risks. She did find the man attractive, but she regretted that he was a human and obviously did not have a good image in her community. But, finally, seeing that the man did not attempt an approach, she decided to approach him herself.

The man felt himself falling madly in love with her beauty, her divine face and her otherworldly gaze.

‘Please tell me who you are,’ he pleaded, feeling faint.

Confronted with his tenderness and kindness, the woman finally decided to trust him and respond.

‘I’m a maiden of the waters,’ she said in a heavenly voice, shy but serene. ‘I’m not mortal like you, but neither am I immortal. My world is not like yours, and we’re driven by different rules and laws ...’

They talked for a few minutes, after which the woman made a sign as if to say goodbye, before starting to dive again.

‘Wait! Don’t go yet,’ the man said, ‘May I see you again?’

The woman stopped and smiled, and her smile was like a glimpse of the paradise for the man.

‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Come back here in three days’ time, at this very hour.’

And, still smiling, looking at him from the depth of her green eyes, she plunged silently into the waters of the pool, leaving only faint ripples on the surface of the water.

In this way, the man from Can Prat and the woman of the water saw each other at night on the banks of the Gorg Negre for many weeks, telling each other about their different worlds, confessing their sorrows and their longings. That was until, one day, the man dared to ask her the question he had wanted to ask from the very moment their eyes met:

‘Will you be my wife?’ he said in a whisper which almost sounded like a plea.

The undine looked at him silently with that otherworldly gaze of pondweed and moss, of white pebbles and dry leaves on the surface of the water.

‘You’ll be the mistress of Can Prat,’ he continued, ‘and you’ll do and undo the tasks and business of the house alongside me, on an equal footing.’

The nymph hesitated for a moment. If she said ‘yes’, she would have to leave her world, the watery world in which she had been born and in which she felt free and confident. She would have to plunge into a strange world, possibly frequently hostile, given the way humans behaved. But she felt very attracted to the man who treated her with such gentleness and kindness. On the other hand, there was nothing to bind her inexcusably to the world of the depths which she found so predictable and boring at times.

Flashing that heavenly smile that transported the man to paradise, the woman of water replied:

‘Yes, I’ll marry you – but under one condition,’ she added.

‘What condition?’ he asked expectantly.

‘That you swear to me that you’ll never ever, under any circumstances or for any reason, raise your voice to me and remind me of my origin as a maiden of the waters. And if you break your oath, I’ll leave you and you’ll never see me again.’

The man from Can Prat swore right there and then, before his god and before her gods, that he would never commit such imprudence. And so it was that the woman of water ended up becoming the mistress of Can Prat.

The years went by and the water woman not only proved to be an exemplary wife – on an equal footing with her husband, which was strange among their acquaintances, considering the times. Moreover she also became a firm mainstay of the Can Prat estate. Her profound intuition allowed her to make decisions, and guide her husband in his commercial activities, with a level of prudence and judgement that would be difficult to match.

But the undine also made her husband think twice whenever he was determined to undertake a project that might be detrimental to the land, water and air, to the forests, animals and insects, however profitable it might seem to him. Her extreme sensitivity, and her ability to perceive the feelings of all beings and elements, allowed her to discern when it was convenient to carry out an enterprise and when it was not. This was to the point that, with such an admirable ruler and advisor, the owners of Can Prat came to be highly regarded in the very palace of the Counts of Barcelona.

As for their family life, two fruits of their union, a boy and a girl, filled the rooms of Can Prat with joy and happiness. Both children had the same beauty and the same otherworldly gaze as their mother and exhibited the intuition, sensitivity and intelligence characteristic of their species. The woman of water was devoted to them, providing them with the careful education according to the world of humans. But she also opened and exercised in them subtle perceptions which allowed them to empathise and converse not just with themselves but also with all living beings in their surroundings, as well as with the spirits of the wind, earth, water and fire.

This is how their lives carried on for quite some time, but habit and daily routine end up numbing even the most fervent passions and the day came when the master of Can Prat made a terrible mistake.

Husband and wife were estimating the production of a good piece of land they had recently acquired when, suddenly, they began to discuss the type of crop that could best thrive there. The man was insisting on growing some species of plants that, as she well knew, would create serious imbalances in the soil and water of the area. The argument grew increasingly heated until, losing his senses, the man from Can Prat shouted loudly at his wife:

‘But what do you know about soils and crops? You’re nothing but a poor water nymph. If I hadn’t taken you out of the river, you wouldn’t be...!’

The man did not finish his sentence, for he stopped dead in his tracks, horrified at what he had just said. He had forgotten his oath!

But the damage had already been done. Without giving him time to react, the water woman sped away towards the Gorg Negre, as if she had been snatched by her gods, and the Can Prat man found himself unable to catch up with her. He eventually reached the dark pool just in time to see the last ripples, left by her lovely body, vanish from on the surface of the water. Her clothes lay limp, still warm, on the same rock on which he had sat on the day they met.

The man, kneeling by the pool, wept disconsolately begging her forgiveness, pleading for her return while wiping his tears with the garments of the nymph, whom he had not known how to respect and keep by his side.

Night came and the man from Can Prat did not want to leave the pool, lest the nymph emerge again, as on that distant night of the full moon when he fell madly in love with her. Only with the first light of dawn, did he finally decide to return home to the children he had had with her, so as to take care of them in their mother’s absence.

The man from Can Prat never saw his wife again. Desperate at her loss, he spent his days going back and forth between the Gorg Negre and his house, crying out for her in tears as he searched through the woods,

and trying to catch her by surprise at night in the pool. He watched the waters for hours, lest she emerge from the pool and he wasn't there.

And when, exhausted, the owner of Can Prat withdrew to rest, the woman of water would surreptitiously slip into the house and, climbing the slate stairs, would visit her daughter and son, caressing and kissing them tenderly, singing them undine songs to lull them to sleep. And when the house was completely silent the nymph would, before leaving, let tears of sadness fall on the oak table in the dining room; tears that, when dawn came, would be transformed into precious pearls. The man from Can Prat would pick up these pearls, astonished, but without being able to discern where they came from. In this way, the woman of water continued to watch over the abundance and wellbeing of her husband and children at the Can Prat farmhouse. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2022), written in the Ridaura farmhouse, less than a mile from the Gorg Negre.

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## Comments

Women of water are beings from Catalonian mythology that seem to be closely related to the nymphs, undines or naiads of Greek mythology, although they can be found in countless traditions all over the world. According to the Gran Enciclopèdia Catalana, "It is a derivation of the myth of the spirit of the waters, present in all cultures, with elements which bring it closer to the Germanic variants of this myth" (Dona d'aigua, 2022). In this sense, women of water would be the elemental spirits who protect water, along with gnomes – protectors of the earth –, sylphs – protectors of the air – and salamanders – protectors of fire – although the classifications of these imaginal beings – by no means imaginary beings, *see* Corbin (1981) and Chittick (1994) – branch out into the protection of trees, mountains, ravines, rivers, oceans, caves and other elements and beings of nature.

Popular tradition says that undines do not age or die of disease, although they are not entirely immortal. They often appear in Greek founding stories as the wives of kings or great personages, perhaps as a

way of justifying their lineage's lordship over a certain territory and its natural environment.

According to Amades (1974), the term 'women of water' has a prehistoric origin in Catalonia, even before the term *fada*, 'fairy', which has also been given to these beings. Furthermore, in the Catalanian popular tradition it is said that they can be easily caught by surprise and observed on the Night of Saint John, or on any night with a full moon.

## Sources

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## Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 11: Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education, health care, and economic opportunity.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Principle 5b: Establish and safeguard viable nature and biosphere reserves, including wild lands and marine areas, to protect Earth's life support systems, maintain biodiversity, and preserve our natural heritage.

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

c) Strengthen families and ensure the safety and loving nurture of all family members.

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Principle 12: Uphold the right of all, without discrimination, to a natural and social environment supportive of human dignity, bodily health, and spiritual well-being, with special attention to the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

Principle 12c: Honor and support the young people of our communities, enabling them to fulfill their essential role in creating sustainable societies.

