

The Blood-Stone Tragedy (A Druidical Story)

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SHERIDAN excused himself from walking on an elderly lady on account of the bad weather. Soon afterwards she met him alone. "So, Mr. Sheridan," said she, "it has cleared up." "Just a little, ma'am; enough for one, but not enough for two."

A BORE, meeting Douglas Jerrold, said, "Well, what's going on to-day?" "I am," said he, as he passed him.

WHAT is the difference between the North and South Pole? Why, a world of difference, to be sure!

"I DON'T believe it's any use to vaccinate for small-pox," said a backwoods Kentuckian, "for I had a child vaccinated, and in less than a week after he fell out of a window and was killed."

AN Irishman was told by a teacher that his charge for tuition was two guineas the first month and one guinea the second. "Then, he jabs!" said Pat, "I'll begin the second month first!"

A GENTLEMAN at a theatre said to his companion, "Who is that ugly creature who has just entered the box opposite?" "Why, sir, that is my sister." "No, no, sir," cried the other; "I mean that shocking monster with her." "That, sir, is my wife."

"WHY did you set your cup of tea on the chair, Mr. Jones?" said the landlady. "It is so very weak, ma'am, I thought I would let it rest."

As Pat, an odd joker, and Yankee more sly, Once riding together, a galloper passed by, Said the Yankee to Pat, "If I don't make too free,

Give that galloper its due, and pray where would you be?" "Why, honey," says Pat, "faith I that's easily known— I'd be riding to town by myself all alone."

SEATED on the outside of a mail-coach, in the days when the iron horse was still unknown, a gentleman saw two young ladies sitting opposite to him, one of them evidently being very ill. As the coach stopped to change horses, the other young lady began to alight. The gentleman immediately offered his assistance, saying as he did so, "I fear your companion is ill. I hope it is nothing serious?" "Serious enough," replied the lady; "it is the heart." "Not an aneurism, I hope?" "No-o-o," sobbed the young lady, "it is a cornet of busbars."

"ARE you fond of tongue, madam, and I like it still."

TOMMY was a little rogue whom his mother had hard work to manage. Their house in the country was raised a few feet from the ground, and Tommy, to escape a well-deserved whipping, ran from his mother and crept under the house. Presently the father came home, and hearing where the boy had taken refuge, crept under to bring him out. As he approached on his hands and knees, Tommy asked, "Who's after you too?"

THE BLOOD-STONE TRAGEDY. A Druidical Story.

"HUSH!" said my fellow-traveller, holding up his hand with a warning gesture, and glancing at his wife, who was snugly ensconced amongst her rugs in the corner. "Hush!"

"My dear sir," I remonstrated, "my reference to Doctor Price—"

"Hush!" interrupted my companion, in a more authoritative voice. "Not a word!"

Now, this was very mysterious conduct. The gentleman who curtailed my remarks so brusquely had entered the carriage at Rugby with his wife, and we had been whiling away an hour or so of our journey by retelling our views upon current subjects to each other. Having chatted over one topic or another, some unlucky impulse had led me to refer to Dr. Price and his recent attempt at the revival of Druidism by the cremation of an infant. To my surprise my allusion had a marked effect upon my companion, who became much agitated, and checked me in the decisive manner which I have quoted.

"Ah! it's all right," he resumed, bending over and looking down at his wife. "She is asleep. Come over here into the far corner, so that she cannot hear us if she wakes."

I obeyed this mysterious injunction, with many surmises in my mind as to the cause of so much precaution.

"It's a painful subject to her," he said, nodding his head in the direction of the sleeping woman. "I have known her have an attack of acute mania on hearing an allusion made to it."

"Made to what?"

"To Druidism."

"What an extraordinary thing!" I ejaculated. "I have been keeping the papers from her during the last week," continued my acquaintance, "so that she should not hear of this escapade of the doctor. I am convinced it would have a very bad effect upon her mind."

"Indeed!" I remarked, not without a growing conviction that my companion was a little wrong in the upper story.

"Ah! of course, you don't understand," he said, smiling at my evident bewilderment. "The fact is, that just before our marriage—some ten years ago—my wife had a very terrible experience in connection with Druidism. It did not get into the papers at the time, but there are a good many people alive who can testify to the facts. It shattered her nervous system, and anything which recalls it knocks her over very much."

With this short preface, my new friend, leaning well forward and speaking in a low voice, with many precautionary glances at his sleeping wife, told me the story of her extraordinary adventure. I have endeavoured to set it down in his own words as far as I can, but I cannot imitate the earnestness of his manner, nor the weird effect produced by the flickering carriage-lamp, and the presence of the unconscious heroine of this strange story.

"I don't know whether you know Wales well," he began; "but even if you do, it is not at all likely that you have ever journeyed as far as

Llandoran. It is an out-of-the-way little mountain village up in the north, not far from the sea, a place which is hardly marked in the maps, and where no tourist ever goes unless he stumbles upon it by accident. This was our fate in the autumn of '72, and we were so taken by the pretty surroundings and the primitive peasantry, that we made it our resting-place for some time. We were a fairly large party—my brother Stephen and his wife, my present wife, with her two brothers, and three friends of mine from London. Altogether we had a very jolly time of it, and astonished the quiet-living Cymric population not a little, until our holiday was brought to an abrupt and tragic termination.

I must tell you that my wife—or Miss Madison, as she was in those days—was of a most adventurous disposition. She appeared to be absolutely insensible to fear. I was continually remonstrating with her as to the risks which she ran, and her brothers did all they could to restrain her, but without avail. The more we spoke, the more daring would she become. We were compelled, at last, to leave her behind when we intended to do any serious mountaineering, for fear she should meet with some accident.

One morning, when we came down to breakfast, we learned to our surprise that Miss Madison had been seen to leave the inn alone at early dawn, in her walking-dress, and to take the direction of the mountains. Her intention, evidently, was to steal a march upon us by visiting alone some of those places which we had gone to without her. We were all rather alarmed by this escapade of the wild girl; but our alarm deepened into positive terror when the whole day passed without our hearing a word of her. The district was a notoriously dangerous one. The mountains, without being remarkably high, were jagged and steep, and intersected by numerous chasms. Several fatal accidents had occurred of late in the vicinity. No wonder, then, that I felt a sinking at my heart when I left the inn that night at the head of a party with torches in search of the woman whom I had already begun to love.

"I will tell you the story now from her point of view, and give you the facts which we heard afterwards from her own lips.

"Leaving the inn, then, and laughing to herself at the way in which she was giving us the slip, she made the best of her way into the mountains. The morning was a beautiful one, and the crisp, bracing air increased her natural activity and endurance, so that she had walked a very long way before the thought of fatigue entered her mind. She had gone on at random, following the little goat-paths from one rugged valley to another, until she had lost sight of all the familiar landmarks, and found herself in a desolate labyrinth, surrounded on every side by precipitous crags, and without the smallest sign of human life. Many women would have been terrified in her position, but, as I have said, she was constitutionally brave; so, finding it hopeless to retrace her steps, she pushed on, in the hope of reaching some eminence from which she could catch a glimpse of the outside world.

"As she advanced, the scenery became bleaker and more dismal. The mountains in those regions are always desolate, being hardly picturesque enough to attract tourists, and too barren to allow any one to settle among them. She stumbled along among great boulders, and along the bed of a dried-

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'She had gone on at random, following the little goat-paths from one rugged valley to another, until she had lost sight of all the familiar landmarks, and found herself in a desolate labyrinth, surrounded on every side by precipitous crags, and without the smallest sign of human life.

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retrace her steps, she pushed on, in the hope of reaching some eminence from which she could catch a glimpse of the outside world.

'As she advanced, the scenery became bleaker and more dismal. The mountains in those regions are always desolate, being hardly picturesque enough to attract tourists, and too barren to allow any one to settle among them.

'She stumbled along among great boulders, and along the bed of a dried-up stream, with lofty granite walls on each side of her without break or opening. Following the track of the old torrent, she traced it at last to a place where there had evidently been a cascade, as the bed of the stream descended precipitously for thirty or forty feet.

'Hoping by ascending to obtain some idea of her whereabouts, my wife clambered up this steep incline, and succeeded with some difficulty in reaching the top.

'The sight before her was an extraordinary one. The gap through which the stream had forced its way was the only entrance to a little ravine, surrounded on all sides by high, dark cliffs. This secluded nook formed a cul-de-sac about two hundred yards long and fifty broad, ringed in by fir trees, which sprouted from the base of the rocky walls.

'In the centre of the clear space in the middle was a large flat slab, round which were placed a number of stones, standing upon their ends, and forming a double circle. This arrangement was evidently artificial, and my wife looked round, in the hope of seeing some signs of human life.

'To her great delight she perceived among the trees a rough sort of hut, to which she hurried, with the intention of getting some refreshment if possible, and then of inquiring her way homewards.

'The rude door of this wooden dwelling was ajar, and Miss Madison, after knocking several times without receiving an answer, pushed her way in.

'The room in which she found herself was a small one, and furnished in the roughest manner possible. A heap of goat-skins in the corner appeared to have been utilised as a bed, and a large block of wood in the centre was

evidently intended as a table, as the remains of a meal, in the shape of a couple of bones, were lying upon it.

What struck the young lady most, however, in this extraordinary apartment were the walls, which were thickly covered with curious inscriptions, painted on it in dark letters.

These were in some unknown language, which she conjectured to be Welsh; but there were others, especially over the door and in the centre of each wall, which were evidently designed as symbols or charms, consisting of the same letter, repeated a number of times in different shapes and forms.

'My wife was standing in the door-way, regarding all these strange things with natural curiosity, when she became aware of a shadow which intervened between her and the sun. Turning round, she saw behind her the most extraordinary mortal that she had ever beheld.

'He was an elderly man, with long, floating hair and a grizzled beard, which descended over his breast. He could not have been less than six feet four inches high, and the breadth of his shoulders and length of his arms denoted extraordinary strength, while the great club upon which he leaned might have served him either as a support or as a weapon.

'His dress was a sort of ragged gown, which had been originally white, but was now weather-stained and dirty. What struck my wife, however, more than either his other features or his strange attire, were his eyes, which were of a light, almost colourless blue, but which projected considerably, and shifted from one object to another without remaining still for an instant.

"Hail, lady!" he exclaimed, advancing towards Miss Madison, and speaking in a well-modulated voice. "For five moons I have waited for you. Why hast thou tarried so long?"

'Considerably astonished, but more amused than frightened, the young lady took a step or two back from this strange apparition, who walked slowly forwards, waving his hands rhythmically from side to side.

"The blood-stone is dry!" he cried, "the blood-stone is dry! Shall it be said that in the days of the fifteenth avatar there was no man

who would honour the old gods, and no woman who would dare lie down upon the blood-stone? Britain's noblest and fairest have stretched themselves upon that cold couch. You are worthy of the honour, maiden. Thy cheek is unblanched, and thy hand is steady. So should she be whom the high gods select."

'My wife had begun by this time to realise that the man in front of her was a maniac, though she had not yet fathomed the meaning of his strange words. She endeavoured to conceal her fright as much as possible, however, and to conciliate her fierce-looking companion.

"You must lead a lonely life, sir," she said. "Who are you, and why do you dwell up here alone?"

"Who am I?" he cried, tossing his long, thin arms in the air. "I am Ap-Griffiths, of the pure blood of Arisdenna, seventieth in descent from the high priest Mona, who was second brother to the great Queen Boadicea. Woman, I am the last of the Druids. All round," he continued, mournfully, "men have left the old creed. None bow to the high gods now. Only we are staunch and true, maiden; you and I the slayer and the slain."

'Thoroughly alarmed by this time, my wife endeavoured to edge away to the mouth of the little glen, but the maniac, who was wildly excited, caught her by the wrist and dragged her over to the spot where the stones were.

"Have I not done it well!" he cried. "There have been many larger, but none more complete. What is there wanting? Here is the blood-stone," pointing to the flat slab in the centre; "it has been dry for many years, but when you lie on it, maiden, with the flames roaring around you, and when your life-blood hisses upon the hot stone, then the gods will know that there are believers yet. Nay, do not shudder and shrink. Your vile body may be charred and tortured, but your spirit will soar above the stars, ever exulting in a happiness which no words can depict. Mark my stones. Thirty-four without, and twenty-three within, according to the direction of the learned and holy Mona. I have a trench, too, around the blood-stone, and my instrument is as it should

be." Here he drew a long, keen knife from his bosom. "All has been ready for months, save only the victim, and now the great gods have sent me that also."

'My wife was, as I have already told you, a woman of great courage and resource. It was evident to her in a moment that to attempt to escape was impossible, in the presence of so agile and powerful an adversary. Her only hope of safety lay in humouring and outwitting him. She wined towards him, therefore, and assumed as much calmness as she could, while she asked the terrible question—

"When am I to be sacrificed?"

"At the middle hour of the night," said the maniac, with decision.

'She felt instinctively that it was useless to plead her sex, her age, or her helplessness to this sanguinary fanatic. The sun was already low down on the horizon, and there would be only a few hours to pass before she should find herself stretched upon the fatal blood-stone. Her last chance lay in the use she might make of that short period.

"I am ignorant," she said, "of many of the things of which you speak I have much to learn before I can die."

"You are right, maiden," he said; "there is much which none can teach in these latter days save those who still have the priestly blood in their veins. Come with me into my dwelling, and I will discourse with you concerning many things, that when thy soul is loosened from its bonds it may know whither it speedeth."

'With these words the Druid, as I will call him, led Miss Madison into the hut, and commanded her to be seated on a rough wooden bench which stood opposite the door. He himself lay down upon a couple of goat-skins at her feet, and began to talk to her with great volubility and earnestness.

'Much of his conversation was unintelligible to her, and occasionally he would break into rude doggerel verses, but she could understand enough to gather that he was laying down the precepts of the old British faith. Poor girl! her mind was too full of horror to allow her to pay much attention to his disquisition.

'Certain death seemed to stare her in the face and death in its most horrible form. Look which way she would, there seemed to be no possibility of escape. Through the half-open door she could see that the night was drawing in. The Druid observed it too, for, suddenly ceasing his harangue, he sprang to his feet, and seized a great chopper which leaned against the wall.

"I must leave you for a time, maiden," he said. "There is much to be done before the darkness comes. The wood is to be cut for the funeral pyre, for I swear to you that none who ever lay upon that hard bridal couch shall have had a more seemly ending than thine shall be."

'With these words he hurried out of the hut, and Miss Madison could tell by the crashing sound that he was cutting among the fir trees which surrounded the valley.

'For a moment a ray of hope came into her mind. Might she not slip past him while he was engaged in his work, and gain the mouth of the ravine without his detecting her? She rose with the determination to risk everything upon the chance, when, to her unutterable horror, she found that the cunning miscreant had, in some unaccountable way, managed to slip the noose of a rope round her ankles while he lay at her feet, and that she was firmly pinioned to the bench.

'It was only then that the relentless cruelty and unbending resolution of the monster who had captured her came fully home to her. She screamed piteously for aid, though she knew that her cries were as useless as her struggles would be. She was entirely at the mercy of the maniac.

'He came back upon hearing her cries, and stood in the door-way, looking down at her with a look of melancholy upon his face. It was so dark now that it was difficult for her to distinguish his features.

"Lady," he said. "this is not what I had hoped. How shall thy courage bear thee up at the supreme moment if thou shrinkest now? You have been honoured above all women by the selection of the gods. Canst thou not prove thyself worthy of the choice? Learn, too, that thy cries are of no avail, for there is no human ear for many a mile. Thou art not the only one on whom death will come to-night. When the red light of thy

pyre tinges the crags of Conmorris, and thy holocaust is completed, then Ap-Griffiths, the last of the priestly line, shall pass away with his mission gloriously fulfilled. My life, as well as yours, maiden, terminates at the coming of the fifteenth avatar, which my knowledge teaches me will be at the twelfth hour of this night."

'Driven to desperation, my poor wife prayed and begged for mercy from the madman, using every possible entreaty and expostulation to prevent him from carrying out his murderous design. Her prayers, however, had the exactly opposite effect, for, flying into a paroxysm of rage, the Druid sprang upon her, forcing her down on the bench, to which she was already pinioned.

"Wicked and ungrateful Woman!" he roared, winding a cord round her body, and securing her more firmly than before, "would you persuade the only faithful one to turn false? Not a word more, or I must silence your tongue. You have already committed a grievous sin."

'With these words, he seized his chopper once more, and went back to his work, cutting great faggots, and piling them around the fatal blood-stone.

'Gradually the darkness of night settled down upon the little valley. The poor girl stretched, more dead than alive, upon the rough bench could distinguish the gaunt outlines of the madman as he wielded his chopper with demoniacal fury. Then the sound ceased, and she lost sight of him in the gloom.

'When the moon came out, however, she perceived him once more, kneeling among the perpendicular stones. He was bowing his head, waving his arms, and giving other symptoms of being engaged in religious devotion. Then he stood up, and burst into a rude, wild chant, which reverberated through the little ravine, and was echoed back from the rocky walls.

'During this time, the very possibility of escape had ceased to occur to Miss Madison. S

Suddenly, however, her senses, strained to an unnatural tension, detected a sound in the distance. She listened once more in a quiver of excitement, and again it seemed to her that the breeze bore a faint note to her ear, not unlike the sound of a horn.

Could it be that her friends had hit upon the right track? She lay perfectly still, able to hear the beatings of her own heart. For five minutes all was silence, save the monotonous chant of the maniac. Then again the same long wail struck upon her ear, apparently rather louder and more near than before. The Druid seemed to hear it, too, for he ceased his incantation, and paced uneasily backwards and forwards.

'By her calculation it could not be more than eleven o'clock. She had, therefore, an hour before her if the maniac adhered to his former plan. The suspense was agonising. She lay, with her eyes shut, counting the seconds, and waiting for a repetition of the sound; but all was as silent as the grave.

'Minute passed after minute. Half the hour was gone without any sign of her rescuers. Mother quarter passed, and the madman began to take a last look at the pyre, and to make his final preparations. Then he struck a light, and ignited the base of the mound of sticks. The dry, resinous pine-wood crackled and spluttered, while long tongues of flame licked round the borders of the fatal blood-stone. He approached the door of the hut. "The time has come, maiden!" he said.

'It must have been a weird sight - the column of fire shooting up into the air, throwing fantastic shadows among the gaunt fir trees and the Druidical stones, - within the circle of light the white-clad maniac, and in front of him the shrinking girl!

He was in the very act of undoing the cords which bound her, when, from the mouth of the glen came a loud peal from a horn, and a chorus of human voices, all shouting together. The light of the fire had attracted the rescue party.

'The Druid started like a hunted beast. "Too late!" he roared; "too late! Thy doom is sealed! Thou must die!" He caught up the bench and the prostrate woman, and, running with incredible speed, he laid her beside the roaring flames, while he drew his long knife from his bosom. My poor wife's last recollection is of the fierce face looking down at her, the savage, colourless eyes, and the uplifted knife.

'When she came to herself, friendly faces were around her. Her head was pillowed upon my breast, and the first word that passed her dear lips was my name. The Druid was lying on his back, some little way off, with his head cut open. I shall never get such a stick again as the old friend which I broke that night over his crazy skull. It was touch and go, though, for if I had got up one moment later, the fellow's knife would have been in Mary's heart.

'We got her down to the inn at Llanduran, but she developed brain fever next day, and for weeks her life was despaired of. Such an impression has the adventure made upon her that the least incident which may recall it has a very bad effect upon her. That is why I have concealed the episode of Dr Price from her knowledge.'

'And the Druid?' I asked.

'Oh, he turned out to be a very well-known man of science and archaeologist. He had been erratic in his conduct, and was therefore confined in the Merthyr Lunatic Asylum, but he escaped some six months before, and all clue to his whereabouts was lost. He must have spent the whole time in this nook among the mountains, practising his pagan rites, and living on the goats and anything he could pick up.'

'What became of him, then?'

'Oh, that is about the queerest thing in the whole queer story. Whether the crack with my stick depressed some bump, or how it acted, I don't know; but the fact remains that when he had recovered his senses he was as sane as you and I, and has, as far as I know, remained so ever since. They kept him in the asylum for some time for fear of a relapse, but they let him out eventually. Hush! she's waking up. Yes, they will have a lively time at the beginning of the next session, to all appearance. Don't you think so, my dear?'