The Banshee

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Of all the superstitions prevalent amongst the natives of Ireland at any period, past or present, there is none so grand or fanciful, none which has been so universally assented to or so cordially cherished, as the belief in the existence of the banshee. There are very few, however remotely acquainted with Irish life or Irish history, but must have heard or read of the Irish banshee; still, as there are different stories and different opinions afloat respecting this strange being, I think a little explanation concerning her appearance, functions, and habits will not be unacceptable to my readers.

The banshee, then, is said to be an immaterial and immortal being, attached, time out of mind, to various respectable and ancient families in Ireland, and is said always to appear to announce, by cries and lamentations, the death of any member of that family to which she belongs. She always comes at night, a short time previous to the death of the fated one, and takes her stand outside, convenient to the house, and there utters the most plaintive cries and lamentations, generally in some unknown language, and in a tone of voice resembling a human female. She continues her visits night after night, unless vexed or annoyed, until the mourned object dies, and sometimes she is said to

continue about the house for several nights after. Sometimes she is said to appear in the shape of a most beautiful young damsel, and dressed in the most elegant and fantastic garments; but her general appearance is in the likeness of a very old woman, of small stature and bending and decrepit form, enveloped in a winding-sheet or grave-dress, and her long, white, hoary hair waving over her shoulders and descending to her feet. At other times she is dressed in the costume of the middle ages—the different articles of her clothing being of the richest material and of a sable hue. She is very shy and easily irritated, and, when once annoyed or vexed, she flies away, and never returns during the same generation. When the death of the person whom she mourns is contingent, or to occur by unforeseen accident, she is particularly agitated and troubled in her appearance, and unusually loud and mournful in her lamentations. Some would fain have it that this strange being is actuated by a feeling quite inimical to the interests of the family which she haunts, and that she comes with joy and triumph to announce their misfortunes. This opinion, however, is rejected by most people, who imagine her their most devoted friend, and that she was, at some remote period, a member of the family, and once existed on the earth in life and loveliness. It is not every Irish family can claim the honour of an attendant banshee; they must be respectably descended, and of ancient line, to have any just pretensions to a warning spirit. However, she does not appear to be influenced by the difference of creed or clime, provided there be no other impediment, as several Protestant families of Norman and Anglo-Saxon origin boast of their own banshee; and to this hour several noble and distinguished families in the country feel proud of the surveillance of that mysterious being. Neither is she influenced by the circumstances of rank or fortune, as she is oftener found frequenting the cabin of the peasant than the baronial mansion of the lord of thousands. Even the humble family to which the writer of this tale belongs has long claimed the honourable appendage of a banshee; and it may, perhaps, excite an additional interest in my readers when I inform them that my present story is associated with her last visit to that family.

Some years ago there dwelt in the vicinity of Mountrath, in the Queen‘s County, a farmer, whose name for obvious reasons we shall not at present disclose. He never was married, and his only domestics were a servant-boy and an old woman, a housekeeper, who had long been a follower or dependent of the family. He was born and educated in the Roman Catholic Church, but on arriving at manhood, for reasons best known to himself, he abjured the tenets of that creed and conformed to the doctrines of Protestantism. However, in after years he seemed to waver, and refused going to church, and by his manner of living seemed to favour the dogmas of infidelity or atheism. He was rather dark and reserved in his manner, and oftentimes sullen and gloomy in his temper; and this, joined with his well-known disregard of religion, served to render him somewhat unpopular amongst his neighbours and acquaintances. However, he was in general respected, and was never insulted or annoyed. He was considered as an honest, inoffensive man, and as he was well supplied with firearms and ammunition—in the use of which he was well practised, having, in his early days, served several years in a yeomanry corps—few liked to disturb him, even had they been so disposed. He was well educated, and decidedly hostile to every species of superstition, and was constantly jeering his old housekeeper, who was extremely superstitious, and pretended to be entirely

conversant with every matter connected with witchcraft and the fairy world. He seldom darkened a neighbour‘s door, and scarcely ever asked any one to enter his, but generally spent his leisure hours in reading, of which he was extremely fond, or in furbishing his firearms, to which he was still more attached, or in listening to and laughing at the wild and blood-curdling stories of old Moya, with which her memory abounded. Thus he spent his time until the period at which our tale commences, when he was about fifty years of age, and old Moya, the housekeeper, had become extremely feeble, stooped, and of very ugly and forbidding exterior. One morning in the month of November, A.D. 1818, this man arose before daylight, and on coming out of the apartment where he slept he was surprised at finding old Moya in the kitchen, sitting over the raked-up fire, and smoking her tobacco-pipe in a very serious and meditative mood.

„Arrah, Moya,“ said he, „what brings you out of your bed so early?“

„Och musha, I dunna,“ replied the old woman; „I was so uneasy all night that I could not sleep a wink, and I got up to smoke a blast, thinkin‘ that it might drive away the weight that‘s on my heart.“

„And what ails you, Moya? Are you sick, or what came over you?“

„No, the Lord be praised! I am not sick, but my heart is sore, and there‘s a load on my spirits that would kill a hundred.“

„Maybe you were dreaming, or something that way,‘ said the man, in a bantering tone, and suspecting, from the old woman‘s grave manner, that she was labouring under some mental delusion.

„Dreaming!“ reechoed Moya, with a bitter sneer; „ay, dreaming. Och, I wish to God I was ONLY DREAMING; but I am very much afraid it is worse than that, and that there is trouble and misfortune hanging over uz.“

„And what makes you think so, Moya?“ asked he, with a half-suppressed smile.

Moya, aware of his well-known hostility to every species of superstition, remained silent, biting her lips and shaking her gray head prophetically.

„Why don‘t you answer me, Moya?“ again asked the man.

„Och,“ said Moya, „I am heart-scalded to have it to tell you, and I know you will laugh at me; but, say what you will, there is something bad over uz, for the banshee was about the house all night, and she has me almost frightened out of my wits with her shouting and bawling.“

The man was aware of the banshee‘s having been long supposed to haunt his family, but often scouted that supposition; yet, as it was some years since he had last heard of her visiting the place, he was not prepared for the freezing announcement of old Moya. He turned as pale as a corpse, and trembled excessively; at last, recollecting himself, he said, with a forced smile:

„And how do you know it was the banshee, Moya?“

„How do I know?“ reiterated Moya, tauntingly. „Didn‘t I see and hear her several times during the night? and more than that, didn‘t I hear the dead-coach rattling round the house, and through the yard, every night at midnight this week back, as if it would tear the house out of the foundation?“

The man smiled faintly; he was frightened, yet was ashamed to appear so. He again said:

„And did you ever see the banshee before, Moya?“

„Yes,“ replied Moya, „often. Didn‘t I see her when your mother died? Didn‘t I see her when your brother was drowned? and sure, there wasn‘t one of the family that went these sixty years that I did not both see and hear her.“

„And where did you see her, and what way did she look to-night?“

„I saw her at the little window over my bed; a kind of reddish light shone round the house; I looked up, and there I saw her old, pale face and glassy eyes looking in, and she rocking herself to and fro, and clapping her little, withered hands, and crying as if her very heart would break.“

„Well, Moya, it‘s all imagination; go, now, and prepare my breakfast, as I want to go to Maryborough to-day, and I must be home early.“

Moya trembled; she looked at him imploringly and said: „For Heaven‘s sake, John, don‘t go to-day; stay till some other day, and God bless you; for if you go to-day I would give my oath there will something cross you that‘s bad.“

„Nonsense, woman!“ said he; „make haste and get me my breakfast.“

Moya, with tears in her eyes, set about getting the breakfast ready; and whilst she was so employed John was engaged in making preparations for his journey.

Having now completed his other arrangements, he sat down to breakfast, and, having concluded it, he arose to depart.

Moya ran to the door, crying loudly; she flung herself on her knees, and said: „John, John, be advised. Don‘t go to-day; take my advice; I know more of the world than you do, and I see plainly that if you go you will never enter this door again with your life.“

Ashamed to be influenced by the drivellings of an old cullough, he pushed her away with his hand, and, going out to the stable, mounted his horse and departed. Moya followed him with her eyes whilst in sight; and when she could no longer see him, she sat down at the fire and wept bitterly.

It was a bitter cold day, and the farmer, having finished his business in town, feeling himself chilly, went into a public-house to have a tumbler of punch and feed his horse; there he met an old friend, who would not part with him until he would have another glass with him and a little conversation, as it was many years since they had met before. One glass brought another, and it was almost duskish ere John thought of returning, and, having nearly ten miles to travel, it would be dark night before he could get home. Still his friend would not permit him to go, but called for more liquor, and it was far advanced in the night before they parted. John, however, had a good horse, and, having had him well fed, he did not spare whip or spur, but dashed along at a rapid pace through the gloom and silence of the winter‘s night, and had already distanced the town upward of five miles, when, on arriving at a very desolate part of the road, a gunshot, fired from behind the bushes, put an end to his mortal existence. Two strange men, who had been at the same public-house in Maryborough drinking, observing that he had money and learning the road that he was to travel, conspired to rob and murder him, and waylaid him in this lonely spot for that horrid purpose.

Poor Moya did not go to bed that night, but sat at the fire, every moment impatiently expecting his return. Often did she listen at the door to try if she could hear the tramp of the horse‘s footsteps approaching. But in vain; no sound met her ear except the sad wail of the night wind, moaning fitfully through the tall bushes which surrounded the ancient dwelling, or the sullen roar of a little dark river, which wound its way through the lowlands at a small distance from where she stood. Tired with watching, at length she fell asleep on the hearth-stone; but that sleep was disturbed and broken, and frightful and appalling dreams incessantly haunted her imagination.

At length the darksome morning appeared struggling through the wintry clouds, and Moya again opened the door to look out. But what was her dismay when she found the horse standing at the stable door without his rider, and the saddle all besmeared with clotted blood. She raised the death-cry; the neighbours thronged round, and it was at once declared that the hapless man was robbed and murdered. A party on horseback immediately set forward to seek him, and on arriving at the fatal spot he was found stretched on his back in the ditch, his head perforated with shot and slugs, and his body literally immersed in a pool of blood. On examining him it was found that his money was gone, and a valuable gold watch and appendages abstracted from his pocket. His remains were conveyed home, and, after having been waked the customary time, were committed to the grave of his ancestors in the little green churchyard of the village.

Having no legitimate children, the nearest heir to his property was a brother, a cabinet-maker, who resided in London. A letter was accordingly despatched to the brother announcing the sad catastrophe, and calling on him to come and take possession of the property; and two men were appointed to guard the place until he should arrive.

The two men delegated to act as guardians, or, as they are technically termed, »keepers«, were old friends and comrades of the deceased, and had served with him in the same yeomanry corps. Jack O'Malley was a Roman Catholic—a square, stout-built, and handsome fellow, with a pleasant word for every one, and full of that gaiety, vivacity, and nonchalance for which the Roman Catholic peasantry of Ireland are so particularly distinguished. He was now about forty-five years of age, sternly attached to the dogmas of his religion, and always remarkable for his revolutionary and anti-British principles. He was brave as a lion, and never quailed before a man; but, though caring so little for a LIVING man, he was extremely afraid of a DEAD one, and would go ten miles out of his road at night to avoid passing a „rath," or „haunted bush." Harry Taylor, on the other hand, was a staunch Protestant; a tall, genteel-looking man, of proud and imperious aspect, and full of reserve and hauteur—the natural consequence of a consciousness of political and religious ascendency and superiority of intelligence and education, which so conspicuously marked the demeanour of the Protestant peasantry of those days. Harry, too, loved his glass as well as Jack, but was of a more peaceful disposition, and as he was well educated and intelligent, he was utterly opposed to superstition, and laughed to scorn the mere idea of ghosts, goblins, and fairies. Thus Jack and Harry were diametrically opposed to each other in every point except their love of the cruiskeen, yet they never failed to seize every opportunity of being together; and, although they often blackened each other's eyes in their political and religious disputes, yet their quarrels were always amicably settled, and they never found themselves happy but in each other's society.

It was now the sixth or seventh night that Jack and Harry, as usual, kept their lonely watch in the kitchen of the murdered man. A large turf fire blazed brightly on the hearth, and on a bed of straw in the ample chimney-corner was stretched old Moya in a profound sleep. On the hearthstone, between the two friends, stood a small oak table, on which was placed a large decanter of whisky, a jug of boiled water, and a bowl of sugar; and, as if to add an idea of security to that of comfort, on one end of the table were placed in saltier a formidable-looking blunderbuss and a brace of large brass pistols. Jack and his

comrade perpetually renewed their acquaintance with the whisky-bottle, and laughed and chatted and recounted the adventures of their young days with as much hilarity as if the house which now witnessed their mirth never echoed to the cry of death or blood. In the course of conversation Jack mentioned the incident of the strange appearance of the banshee, and expressed a hope that she would not come that night to disturb their carouse.

„Banshee the devil!“ shouted Harry; „how superstitious you papists are! I would like to see the phiz of any man, dead or alive, who dare make his appearance here to-night.“ And, seizing the blunderbuss, and looking wickedly at Jack, he vociferated, „By Hercules, I would drive the contents of this through their sowls who dare annoy us.“

„Better for you to shoot your mother than fire at the banshee, anyhow,“ remarked Jack.

„Psha!“ said Harry, looking contemptuously at his companion. „I would think no more of riddling the old jade‘s hide than I would of throwing off this tumbler“; and, to suit the action to the word, he drained off another bumper of whisky-punch.

„Jack,“ says Harry, „now that we are in such prime humour, will you give us a song?“

„With all the veins of my heart,“ says Jack. „What will it be?“

„Anything you please; your will must be my pleasure,“ answered Harry.

Jack, after coughing and clearing his pipes, chanted forth, in a bold and musical voice, a rude rigmarole called »The Royal Blackbird«, which, although of no intrinsic merit, yet, as it expressed sentiments hostile to British connection and British government and favourable to the house of Stewart, was very popular amongst the Catholic peasantry of Ireland, whilst, on the contrary, it was looked upon by the Protestants as highly offensive and disloyal. Harry, however, wished his companion too well to oppose the song, and he quietly awaited its conclusion.

„Bravo, Jack,“ said Harry, as soon as the song was ended; „that you may never lose your wind.“

„In the king‘s name now I board you for another song,“ says Jack.

Harry, without hesitation, recognised his friend‘s right to demand a return, and he instantly trolled forth, in a deep, sweet, and sonorous voice, the following:

SONG.

„Ho, boys, I have a song divine!
Come, let us now in concert join,
And toast the bonny banks of Boyne—
The Boyne of »Glorious Memory«.
„On Boyne‘s famed banks our fathers bled;
Boyne‘s surges with their blood ran red;
And from the Boyne our foemen fled—
Intolerance, chains, and slavery.
„Dark superstition‘s blood-stained sons
Pressed on, but crack went William‘s guns,
And soon the gloomy monster runs—
Fell, hydra-headed bigotry.

„Then fill your glasses high and fair,
Let shouts of triumph rend the air,
Whilst Georgy fills the regal chair
We'll never bow to Popery."

Jack, whose countenance had, from the commencement of the song, indicated his aversion to the sentiments it expressed, now lost all patience at hearing his darling »Popery« impugned, and, seizing one of the pistols which lay on the table and whirling it over his comrade's head, swore vehemently that he would „fracture his skull if he did not instantly drop that blackguard Orange lampoon."

„Aisy, avhic," said Harry, quietly pushing away the upraised arm; „I did not oppose your bit of treason awhile ago, and besides, the latter end of my song is more calculated to please you than to irritate your feelings."

Jack seemed pacified, and Harry continued his strain.

„And fill a bumper to the brim—
A flowing one—and drink to him
Who, let the world go sink or swim.
Would arm for Britain's liberty.
„No matter what may be his hue.
Or black, or white, or green, or blue.
Or Papist, Paynim, or Hindoo.
We'll drink to him right cordially."

Jack was so pleased with the friendly turn which the latter part of Harry's song took that he joyfully stretched out his hand, and even joined in chorus to the concluding stanza.

The fire had now decayed on the hearth, the whisky-bottle was almost emptied, and the two sentinels, getting drowsy, put out the candle and laid down their heads to slumber. The song and the laugh and the jest were now hushed, and no sound was to be heard but the incessant „click, click," of the clock in the inner room and the deep, heavy breathing of old Moya in the chimney-corner.

They had slept they knew not how long when the old hag awakened with a wild shriek. She jumped out of bed, and crouched between the men; they started up, and asked her what had happened.

„Oh!" she exclaimed; „the banshee, the banshee! Lord have mercy on us! she is come again, and I never heard her so wild and outrageous before."

Jack O'Malley readily believed old Moya's tale; so did Harry, but he thought it might be some one who was committing some depredation on the premises. They both listened attentively, but could hear nothing; they opened the kitchen door, but all was still; they looked abroad; it was a fine, calm night, and myriads of twinkling stars were burning in the deep-blue heavens. They proceeded around the yard and hay-yard; but all was calm and lonely, and no sound saluted their ears but the shrill barking of some neighbouring cur, or the sluggish murmuring of the little tortuous river in the distance. Satisfied that „all was right," they again went in, replenished the expiring fire, and sat down to finish whatever still remained in the whisky-bottle.

They had not sat many minutes when a wild, unearthly cry was heard without.

„The banshee again," said Moya, faintly. Jack O'Malley's soul sank within him; Harry started up and seized the blunderbuss; Jack caught his arm. „No, no, Harry, you shall not; sit down; there's no fear—nothing will happen us."

Harry sat down, but still gripped the blunderbuss, and Jack lit his tobacco-pipe, whilst the old woman was on her knees, striking her breast, and repeating her prayers with great vehemence.

The sad cry was again heard, louder and fiercer than before. It now seemed to proceed from the window, and again it appeared as if issuing from the door. At times it would seem as if coming from afar, whilst again it would appear as if coming down the chimney or springing from the ground beneath their feet. Sometimes the cry resembled the low, plaintive wail of a female in distress, and in a moment it was raised to a prolonged yell, loud and furious, and as if coming from a thousand throats; now the sound resembled a low, melancholy chant, and then was quickly changed to a loud, broken, demoniac laugh. It continued thus, with little intermission, for about a quarter of an hour, when it died away, and was succeeded by a heavy, creaking sound, as if of some large waggon, amidst which the loud tramp of horses' footsteps might be distinguished, accompanied with a strong, rushing wind. This strange noise proceeded round and round the house two or three times, then went down the lane which led to the road, and was heard no more. Jack O'Malley stood aghast, and Harry Taylor, with all his philosophy and scepticism, was astonished and frightened.

„A dreadful night this, Moya," said Jack.

„Yes," said she, „that is the dead-coach; I often heard it before, and have sometimes seen it."

„Seen, did you say?" said Harry; „pray describe it."

„Why," replied the old crone, „it's like any other coach, but twice as big, and hung over with black cloth, and a black coffin on the top of it, and drawn by headless black horses."

„Heaven protect us!" ejaculated Jack.

„It is very strange," remarked Harry.

„But," continued Moya, „it always comes before the death of a person, and I wonder what brought it now, unless it came with the banshee."

„Maybe it's coming for you," said Harry, with an arch yet subdued smile.

„No, no," she said; „I am none of that family at all at all."

A solemn silence now ensued for a few minutes, and they thought all was vanished, when again the dreadful cry struck heavily on their ears.

„Open the door, Jack," said Harry, „and put out Hector."

Hector was a large and very ferocious mastiff belonging to Jack O'Malley, and always accompanied him wherever he went.

Jack opened the door and attempted to put out the dog, but the poor animal refused to go, and, as his master attempted to force him, howled in a loud and mournful tone.

„You must go," said Harry, and he caught him in his arms and flung him over the half-door. The poor dog was scarcely on the ground when he was whirled aloft into the air by some invisible power, and he fell again to earth lifeless, and the pavement was besmeared with his entrails and blood.

Harry now lost all patience, and again seizing his blunderbuss, he exclaimed: „Come, Jack, my boy, take your pistols and follow me; I have but one life to lose, and I will venture it to have a crack at this infernal demon.“

„I will follow you to death‘s doors,“ said Jack; „but I would not fire at the banshee for a million of worlds.“

Moya seized Harry by the skirts. „Don‘t go out,“ she cried; „let her alone while she lets you alone, for an hour‘s luck never shone on any one that ever molested the banshee.“

„Psha, woman!“ said Harry, and he pushed away poor Moya contemptuously.

The two men now sallied forth; the wild cry still continued, and it seemed to issue from amongst some stacks in the hay-yard behind the house. They went round and paused; again they heard the cry, and Harry elevated his blunderbuss.

„Don‘t fire,“ said Jack.

Harry replied not; he looked scornfully at Jack, then put his finger on the trigger, and—bang—away it exploded with a thundering sound. An extraordinary scream was now heard, ten times louder and more terrific than they heard before. Their hair stood erect on their heads, and huge, round drops of sweat ran down their faces in quick succession. A glare of reddish-blue light shone around the stacks; the rumbling of the dead-coach was again heard coming; it drove up to the house, drawn by six headless sable horses, and the figure of a withered old hag, encircled with blue flame, was seen running nimbly across the hay-yard. She entered the ominous carriage, and it drove away with a horrible sound. It swept through the tall bushes which surrounded the house; and as it disappeared the old hag cast a thrilling scowl at the two men, and waved her fleshless arms at them vengefully. It was soon lost to sight; but the unearthly creaking of the wheels, the tramping of the horses, and the appalling cries of the banshee continued to assail their ears for a considerable time after all had vanished.

The brave fellows now returned to the house; they again made fast the door, and reloaded their arms. Nothing, however, came to disturb them that night, nor from that time forward; and the arrival of the dead man‘s brother from London, in a few days after, relieved them from their irksome task.

Old Moya did not live long after; she declined from that remarkable night, and her remains were decently interred in the churchyard adjoining the last earthly tenement of the loved family to which she had been so long and so faithfully attached.

The insulted banshee has never since returned; and although several members of that family have since closed their mortal career, still the warning cry was never given; and it is supposed that the injured spirit will never visit her ancient haunts until every one of the existing generation shall have „slept with their fathers.“

Jack O‘Malley and his friend Harry lived some years after. Their friendship still continued undiminished; like »Tam O‘Shanter« and »Souter Johnny«, they still continued to love each other like „a very brither“; and like that jovial pair, also, our two comrades were often „fou for weeks thegither,“ and often over their cruiskeen would they laugh at their strange adventure with the banshee. It is now, however, all over with them too; their race is run, and they are now „tenants of the tomb.“