

The Blood-Eagle

By R. H. Benson

One night when I went to my room I found in a little shelf near the window a book, whose title I now forget, describing the far-off days when the religion of Christ and of the gods of the north strove together in England. I read this for an hour or two before I went to sleep, and again as I was dressing on the following morning, and spoke of it at breakfast.

“Yes,” said the old man, “that was one of my father’s books. I remember reading it when I was a boy. I believe it is said to be very ill-informed and unscientific in these days. My parents used to think that all religions except Christianity were of the devil. But I think St. Paul teaches us a larger hope than that.”

He said nothing more at the time; but in the course of the morning, as I was walking up and down the raised terrace that runs under the pines beside the drive, I saw the priest coming towards me with a book in his hand. He was a little dusty and flushed.

“I went to look for something that I thought might interest you, after what you said at breakfast,” he began, “and I have found it at last in the loft.”

We began to walk together up and down.

“A very curious thing happened to me,” he said, “when I was a boy. I remember telling my father of it when I came home, and it remained in my mind. A few years afterwards an old professor was staying with us; and after dinner one night, when we had been talking about what you were speaking of at breakfast, my father made me tell it again, and when I had finished the professor asked me to write it down for him. So I wrote it in this book first; and then made a copy and sent it to him. The book itself is a kind of irregular diary in which I used to write sometimes. Would you care to hear it?”

When I had told him I should like to hear story, he began again.

“I must first tell you the circumstances. I was about sixteen years old. My parents had gone abroad for the holidays, and I went to stay with a school friend of mine at his home not far from Ascot. We used to take our lunch with us sometimes on bright days—for it was at Christmas time—and go off for the day over the heather. You must remember that I was only a schoolboy at the time, so I daresay I exaggerated or elaborated some of the details a little, but the main facts of the story you can rely upon. Shall we sit down while I read it?”

Then when we had seated ourselves on a bench that stood at the end of the terrace, with the old house basking before us in the hot sunshine, he began to read.

“About six o’clock in the evening of one of the days towards the end of January, Jack and I were still wandering on high, heathy ground near Ascot. We had walked all day and had lost ourselves; but we kept going in as straight a line as we could, knowing that in time we should strike across a road. We were rather tired and silent; but suddenly Jack uttered an exclamation, and then pointed out a light across the heath. We stood a moment to see if it moved, but it remained still.

“‘What is it?’ I asked. ‘There can be no house near here.’

“‘It’s a broomsquire’s cottage, I expect,’ said Jack.

“I asked what that meant.

“‘Oh! I don’t know exactly,’ said Jack; ‘they’re a kind of gipsies.’

“We stumbled on across the heather, while the light grew steadily nearer. The moon was beginning to rise, and it was a clear night, one of those windless, frosty nights that sometimes come after a wet Jack plunged at one place into a hidden ditch, and I heard the crackling of ice as he scrambled out.

“ ‘Skating to-morrow, by Jove,’ he said.

As we got closer I began to see that we were approaching a copse of firs; the heather began to get shorter. Then, as I looked at the light, I saw there was a fixed outline of a kind of house out of which it shone. The window apparently was an irregular shape, and the house seemed to be leaning against a tall fir on the outskirts of the copse. As we got quite close, our feet noiseless on the soft heather, I saw that the house was built altogether round the fir, which served as a kind of central prop. The house was of wattled boughs, and thatched heavily with heather.

‘I felt more and more anxious about it, for I had never heard of ‘broomsquires,’ and also, I confess, a little timid; for the place was lonely, and we were only two boys. I was leading now, and presently reached the window and looked in.

“The walls inside were hung with blankets and clothes to keep the wind out; there was a long old settle in one corner, the floor was carpeted with branches and blankets apparently, and there was an opening opposite, partly closed by a wattled hurdle that leaned against it. Half sitting and half lying on the settle was an old woman with her face hidden. An oil-lamp hung from one of the branches of the fir that helped to form the roof. There was no sign of any other living thing in the place. As I looked Jack came up behind and spoke over my shoulder.

“ ‘Can you tell us the way to the nearest high-road?’ he asked.

“The old woman sat up suddenly, with a look of fright on her face. She was extraordinarily dirty and ill-kempt. I could see in the dim light of the lamp that she had a wrinkled old face, with sunken dark eyes, white eyebrows, and white hair; and her mouth began to mumble as she looked at us. Presently she made a violent gesture to wave us from the window.

“Jack repeated the question, and the old woman got up and hobbled quietly and crookedly to the door, and in a moment she had come round close to us. I then saw how very small she was. She could not have been five feet tall, and was very much bent. I must say again that I felt very uneasy and startled with this terrifying old creature close to me and peering up my face. She took me by the coat and with her other hand beckoned quickly away in every direction. She seemed to be warning us away from the copse, but still she said nothing.

“Jack grew impatient.

“ ‘Deaf old fool!’ he said in an undertone, and then loudly and slowly, ‘Can tell us the way to the nearest high-road?’

“Then she seemed to understand, and pointed vigorously in the direction from which we had come.

“ ‘Oh! nonsense,’ said Jack, ‘we’ve come from there. Come on this way,’ he said, ‘we can’t spend all night here.’ And then he turned the side of the little house and disappeared into the copse.

“The old woman dropped my coat in a moment, and began to run after Jack, and I went round the other side of the house and saw Jack moving in front, for the firs were sparse at the edge of the wood, and the moonlight filtered through them. The old woman, I saw as I turned into the wood, had stopped, knowing she could not catch us, and was standing with her hands stretched out, and a curious sound, half cry and half sob came from her. I was a little uneasy, because we had not treated her with courtesy, and stopped, but at that moment Jack called.

“ ‘Come on,’ he said, ‘we’re sure to find a road at the end of this.’

“So I went on.

“Once I turned and saw the little old woman standing as before and as I looked between the trees she lifted one hand to her mouth and sent a curious whitistling cry after us, that somehow frightened me. It seemed loud for one so small.

“As we went on the wood grew darker. Here and there in an open patch there lay a white splash of moonlight on the fir needles and great dim spaces lay round us. Although the wood stood on high ground, the trees grew so thickly about us that we could see nothing of the country round. Now and then we tripped on a root, or else caught in a bramble, but it seemed to me that we were following a narrow path that led deeper and deeper into the heart of the wood. Suddenly Jack stopped and lifted his hand.

“‘Hush!’ he said.

“I stopped too, and we listened breathlessly. Then in a moment more,—

“‘Hush!’ he said, ‘something’s coming,’ and he jumped out of the path behind a tree, and I followed him.

“Then we heard a scuffling in front of us and a grunting, and some big creature came hurrying down the path. As it passed us I looked, almost terrified out of my mind, and saw that it was a huge pig; but the thing that held me breathless and sick was that there ran nearly the whole length of its back a deep wound, from which the blood dripped. The creature, grunting heavily, tore down the path towards the cottage, and presently the sound of it died away. As I leaned against Jack, I could feel his arm trembling as it held the tree.

“‘Oh!’ he said in a moment, ‘we must get out of this. Which way, which way?’

“But I had been still listening, and held him quiet.

“‘Wait,’ I said, ‘there is something else.’

“Out of the wood in front of us there came a panting, and the soft sounds of hobbling steps along the path. We crouched lower and watched. Presently the figure of a bent old man came in sight, making his way quickly along the path. He seemed startled and out of breath. His mouth was moving, and he was talking to himself in a low voice in a complaining tone, but his eyes searched the wood from side to side.

“As he came quite close to us, as we lay hardly daring to breathe, I saw one of his hands that hung in front of him opening and shutting; and that it was stained with what looked black in the moonlight. He did not see us, as by now we were hidden by a great bramble bush, and he passed on down the path; and then all was silent again.

When a few minutes had passed in perfect stillness, we got up and went on, but neither of us cared to walk in the path down which those two terrible dripping things had come; and we went stumbling over the broken ground, keeping a parallel course to the path for about another two hundred yards. Jack had begun to recover himself, and even began to talk and laugh at being frightened at a pig and an old man. He told me afterwards that he had not seen the old man’s hand.

“Then the path began to lead uphill. At this point I suddenly stopped Jack.

“‘Do you see nothing?’ I asked.

“Now I scarcely remember what I said or did. But this is what my friend told me afterwards. Jack said there was nothing but a little rising ground in front, from which the trees stood back.

“‘Do you see nothing on the top of the mound? Out in the open, where the moonlight falls on her?’

“Jack told me afterwards that he thought I had gone suddenly mad, and grew frightened himself.

“ ‘Do you not see a woman standing there? She has long yellow hair in two braids; she has thick gold bracelets on her bare arms. She has a tunic, bound by a girdle, and it comes below her knees: and she has red jewels in her hair, on her belt, on her bracelets and her eyes shine in the moonlight: and she is waiting,—waiting for that which has escaped.’

Now Jack tells me that when I said this I fell flat on my face, with my hands stretched out, and began to talk: but he said he could not understand a word I said. He himself looked steadily at the rising ground, but there was nothing to be seen there: there were the fir-trees standing in a circle round it, and a bare space in the middle, from which the heather was gone, and that was all. This mound would be about fifteen yards from us.

“I lay there, said Jack, a few minutes, and then sat up and looked about me. Then I remembered for myself that I had seen the pig and the old man, but nothing more: but I was terrified at the remembrance, and insisted upon our striking out a new course through the wood, and leaving the mound to our left. I did not know myself why the mound frightened me, but I dared not go near it. Jack wisely did not say anything more about it until afterwards. We presently found our way out of the copse, struck across the heath for another half-mile or so, and then came across a road which Jack knew, and so we came home.

“When we told our story, and Jack, to my astonishment, had added the part of which I myself had no remembrance, Jack’s father did not say very much; but he took us next day to identify the place. To our intense surprise the house of the broomsquire was gone; there were the trampled branches round the tree, and the smoked branch from which the oil lamp had hung, and the ashes of a wood-fire outside the house, but no sign of the old man or his wife. As we went along the path, now in the cheerful frosty sunshine, we found dark splashes here and there on the brambles, but they were dry and colourless. Then we came to the mound.

“I grew uneasy again as we came to it, but ashamed to show my fear in the broad daylight.

“On the top we found a curious thing, which Jack’s father told us was one of the old customs of the broomsquires, that no one was altogether able to explain. The ground was shovelled away, so as to form a kind of sloping passage downwards into the earth. The passage was not more than five yards long; and at the end of it, just where it was covered by the ground over-head, was a sort of altar, made of earth and stones beaten flat; and plastered into its surface were bits of old china and glass. But what startled us was to find a dark patch of something which had soaked deep into the ground before the altar. It was still damp.”

When the old man had read so far, he laid down the book.

“When I told all this to the Professor,” he said, “he seemed very deeply interested. He told us, I remember, that the wound on the pig identified the nature of the sacrifice that the old man had begun to offer. He called it a ‘blood-eagle,’ and added some details which I will not disgust you with. He said too that the broomsquire had confused two rites—that only human sacrifices should be offered as ‘blood-eagles.’ In fact it all seemed perfectly familiar to him: and he said more than I can either remember or verify.”

“And the woman on the rising ground?” I asked.

“Well,” said the old man, smiling, “the Professor would not listen to my evidence about that. He accepted the early part of the story, and simply declined to pay any attention to the woman. He said I had been reading Norse tales, or was dreaming. He even hinted that I was romancing. Under other circumstances this method of treating evidence would be called ‘Higher Criticism,’ I believe.”

“But it’s all a brutal and disgusting worship,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” said the old man, “very brutal and disgusting; but is it not very much higher and better than the Professor’s faith? He was only a skilled Ritualist after all, you see.”