

Tregeagle

(Extract from the Story of Tregeagle, as related in
Robert Hunt's "Popular Romances of the West of England.")

By Robert Hunt

Tregeagle was wealthy beyond most men of his time, and his wealth purchased for him that immunity which the Church, in her degenerate days, too often accorded to those who could aid, with their gold or power, the sensual priesthood. As a magistrate, he was tyrannical and unjust, and many an innocent man was wantonly sacrificed by him for the purpose of hiding his own dark deeds. As a landlord, he was rapacious and unscrupulous, and frequently so involved his tenants in his toils, that they could not escape his grasp. The stain of secret murder clings to his memory, and he is said to have sacrificed a sister whose goodness stood between him and his demon passions; his wife and children perished victims to his cruelties. At length death drew near to relieve the land of a monster whose name was a terror to all who heard it. Devils waited to secure the soul they had won, and Tregeagle in terror gave to the priesthood wealth, that they might fight with them and save his soul from eternal fire. Desperate was the struggle, but the powerful exorcisms of the banded brotherhood of a neighbouring monastery, drove back the evil ones, and Tregeagle slept with his fathers, safe in the custody of the churchmen, who buried him with high honours in St Breock Church. They sang chants and read prayers above his grave, to secure the soul which they thought they had saved. But Tregeagle was not fated to rest. Satan desired still to gain possession of such a gigantic sinner, and we can only refer what ensued to the influence of the wicked spiritings of his ministers.

A dispute arose between two wealthy families respecting the ownership of extensive lands around Bodmin.

[Tregeagle is produced as a witness, having been summoned back from the grave by the defendant. He gives evidence, but, after the trial, cannot be removed. The powers of good and evil fight for him. The churchmen save him from the evil spirits by imposing on him a task that shall endure to eternity. Such a labour is difficult to find.]

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One of the lawyers, remembering that Dosmery Pool was bottomless, and that a thorn-bush which had been flung into it, but a few weeks before, had made its appearance in Falmouth Harbour, proposed that Tregeagle might be employed to empty this profound lake. Then one of the churchmen, to make the task yet more enduring, proposed that it should be performed by the aid of a limpet-shell having a hole in it.

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His old enemy, the devil, kept a careful eye on the doomed one, resolving, if possible, to secure so choice an example of evil. Often did he raise tempests sufficiently wild, as he supposed, to drive Tregeagle from his work, knowing that if he failed for a season to labour, he could seize and secure him. These were long tried in vain; but at length an auspicious hour presented itself.

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The winds arose and raged with a fury which was irresistible, and hail beat so mercilessly on all things, that it spread death around.

Long did Tregeagle stand the “pelting of the pitiless storm,” but at length he yielded to its force and fled. The demons in crowds were at his heels. He doubled, however, on his pursuers, and returned to the lake; but so rapid were they, that he could not rest the required moment to dip his shell in the now seething waters.

Three times he fled round the lake, and the evil ones pursued him. Then, feeling that there was no safety for him near Dosmery Pool, he sprang swifter than the wind across it, shrieking with agony, and thus—since the devils cannot cross water, and were obliged to go round the lake—he gained on them and fled over the moor.

Away, away went Tregeagle, faster and faster the dark spirits pursuing, and they had nearly overtaken him, when he saw Roach Rock and its chapel before him. He rushed up the rocks, with giant power clambered to the eastern window, and dashed his head through it, thus securing the shelter of its sanctity. The defeated demons retired, and long and loud were their wild wailings in the air. The inhabitants of the moors and of the neighbouring towns slept not a wink that night.

Tregeagle was safe, his head was within the holy church, though his body was exposed on a bare rock to the storm. Earnest were the prayers of the blessed hermit in his cell on the rock to be relieved from his nocturnal and sinful visitor.

In vain were the recluse’s prayers. Day after day, as he knelt at the altar, the ghastly head of the doomed sinner grinned horribly down upon him. Every holy ejaculation fell upon Tregeagle’s ear like molten iron. He writhed and shrieked under the torture; but legions of devils filled the air, ready to seize him, if for a moment he withdrew his head from the sanctuary. Sabbath after Sabbath the little chapel on the rock was rendered a scene of sad confusion by the interruptions which Tregeagle caused. Men trembled with fear at his agonizing cries, and women swooned. At length the place was deserted, and even the saint of the rock was wasting to death by the constant perturbation in which he was kept by the unholy spirit, and the demons who, like carrion birds, swarmed around the holy cairn. Things could not go on thus.

[Tregeagle is removed from one place to another, and finally fixed at Land’s End at the task of spinning ropes from the fine sand of the shore.]

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Even until to-day is Tregeagle labouring at his task. In calms his wailing is heard; and those sounds which some call the “soughing of the wind,” are known to be the moanings of Tregeagle; while the earning storms are predicated by the fearful roarings of this condemned mortal.