

Banshees

By Anonymous

Of all Irish ghosts, fairies, or bogles, the Banshee (sometimes called locally the “Boheentha” or “Bankeenthat is the best known to the general public: indeed, cross-Channel visitors would class her with pigs, potatoes, and other fauna and flora of Ireland, and would expect her to make manifest her presence to them as being one of the sights of the country. She is a spirit with a lengthy pedigree—how lengthy no man can say, as its roots go back into the dim, mysterious past. The most famous Banshee of ancient times was that attached to the kingly house of O’Brien, Aibhill, who haunted the rock of Craglea above Killaloe, near the old palace of Kincora. In A.D. 1014 was fought the battle of Clontarf, from which the aged king Brian Boru, knew that he would never come away alive, for the previous night Aibhill had appeared to him to tell him of his impending fate. The Banshee’s method of foretelling death in olden times differed from that adopted by her at the present day: now she wails and wrings her hands, as a general rule, but in the old Irish tales she is to be found washing human heads and limbs, or blood-stained clothes, till the water is all dyed with human blood—this would take place before a battle. So it would seem that in the course of centuries her attributes and characteristics have changed somewhat.

Very different descriptions are given of her personal appearance. Sometimes she is young and beautiful, sometimes old and of a fearsome appearance. One writer described her as “a tall, thin woman with uncovered head, and long hair that floated round her shoulders, attired in something which seemed either a loose white cloak, or a sheet thrown hastily around her, uttering piercing cries.” Another person, a coachman, saw her one evening sitting on a stile in the yard; she seemed to be a very small woman, with blue eyes, long light hair, and wearing a red cloak Other descriptions will be found in this chapter. By the way, it does not seem to be true that the Banshee exclusively follows families of Irish descent, for the last incident had reference to the death of a member of a Co. Galway family English by name and origin.

One of the oldest and best-known Banshee stories is that related in the *Memoirs* of Lady Fanshaw.¹ In 1642 her husband, Sir Richard, and she chanced to visit a friend, the head of an Irish sept, who resided in his ancient baronial castle, surrounded with a moat. At midnight she was awakened by a ghastly and supernatural scream, and looking out of bed, beheld in the moonlight a female face and part of the form hovering at the window. The distance from the ground, as well as the circumstance of the moat, excluded the possibility that what she beheld was of this world. The face was that of a young and rather handsome woman, but pale, and the hair, which was reddish, was loose and disheveled. The dress, which Lady Fanshaw’s terror did not prevent her remarking accurately, was that of the ancient Irish. This apparition continued to exhibit itself for some time, and then vanished with two shrieks similar to that which had first excited Lady Fanshaw’s attention. In the morning, with infinite terror, she communicated to her host what she had witnessed, and found him prepared not only to credit, but to account for the superstition. “A near relation of my family,” said he, “expired last night in this castle. We disguised our certain expectation of the event from you, lest it should throw a cloud over the cheerful reception which was your due. Now, before such an event happens in this family or

¹ Scott’s *Lady of the Lake*, notes to Canto III (edition of 1811).

castle, the female specter whom you have seen is always visible. She is believed to be the spirit of a woman of inferior rank, whom one of my ancestors degraded himself by marrying, and whom afterwards, to expiate the dishonor done to his family, he caused to be drowned in the moat." In strictness this woman could hardly be termed a Banshee. The motive for the haunting is akin to that in the tale of the Scotch "Drummer of Cortachy," where the spirit of the murdered man haunts the family out of revenge, and appears before a death.

T. J. Westropp, M. A., has furnished the following story: "My maternal grandmother heard the following tradition from her mother, one of the Miss Ross-Lewins, who witnessed the occurrence. Their father Mr. Harrison Ross-Lewin, was away in Dublin on law business, and in his absence the young people went off to spend the evening with a friend who lived some miles away. The night was fine and lightsome as they were returning, save at one point where the road ran between trees or high hedges not far away to the west of the old church of Kilchrist. The latter, like many similar ruins, was a simple oblong building with long side-walls and high gables, and at that time it and its graveyard were unenclosed, and lay in the open fields. As the party passed down the long dark lane they suddenly heard in the distance loud keening and clapping of hands, as the country-people were accustomed to do when lamenting the dead. The Ross-Lewins hurried on, and came in sight of the church, on the side wall of which a little gray-haired old woman, clad in a dark cloak, was running to and fro, chanting and wailing, and throwing up her arms. The young girls were very frightened, but the young men ran forward and surrounded the ruin, and two of them went into the church, the apparition vanishing from the wall as they did so. They searched every nook, and found no one, nor did any one pass out. All were now well scared, and got home as fast as possible. On reaching their home their mother opened the door, and at once told them that she was in terror about their father, for, as she sat looking out the window in the moonlight, a huge raven with fiery eyes lit on the sill, and tapped three times on the glass. They told her their story, which only added to their anxiety, and as they stood talking, taps came to the nearest window and they saw the bird again. A few days later news reached them that Mr. Ross-Lewin had died suddenly in Dublin. This occurred about 1776."

Mr. Westropp also writes that the sister of a former Roman Catholic Bishop told his sisters that when she was a little girl she went out one evening with some other children for a walk. Going down the road, they passed the gate of the principal demesne near the town. There was a rock, or large stone, beside the road, on which they saw something. Going nearer, they perceived it to be a little dark, old woman, who began crying and clapping her hands, Some of them attempted to speak to her, but got frightened, and all finally ran home as quickly as they could. Next day the news came that the gentleman near whose gate the Banshee had cried, was dead, and it was found on inquiry that he had died at the very hour at which the children had seen the specter.

A lady who is a relation of one of the compilers, and a member of a Co. Cork family of English descent, sends the two following experiences of a Banshee in her family. "My mother, when a young girl, was standing looking out of the window in their house at Blackrock, near Cork. She suddenly saw a white figure standing on a bridge which was easily visible from the house. The figure waved her arms towards the house, and my mother heard the bitter wailing of the Banshee. It lasted some seconds, and then the figure disappeared. Next morning my grandfather was walking as usual into the city of Cork. He accidentally fell, hit his head against the curbstone, and never recovered consciousness.

"In March, 1900, my mother was very ill, and one evening the nurse and I were with her arranging her bed. We suddenly heard the most extraordinary wailing, which seemed to come in

waves round and under her bed. We naturally looked everywhere to try and find the cause, but in vain. The nurse and I looked at one another, but made no remark, as my mother did not seem to hear it. My sister was downstairs sitting with my father. She heard it, and thought some terrible thing had happened to her little boy, who was in bed upstairs. She rushed up, and found him sleeping quietly. My father did not hear it. In the house next door they heard it, and ran downstairs, thinking something had happened to the servant; but the latter at once said to them, 'Did you hear the Banshee? Mrs. P— must be dying.' ”

A few years ago (*i.e.* before 1894) a curious incident occurred in a public school in connection with the belief in the Banshee. One of the boys, happening to become ill, was at once placed in a room by himself, where he used to sit all day. On one occasion, as he was being visited by the doctor, he suddenly started up from his seat, and affirmed that he heard somebody crying. The doctor, of course, who could hear or see nothing, came to the conclusion that the illness had slightly affected his brain. However, the boy, who appeared quite sensible, still persisted that he heard some one crying, and furthermore said, "It is the Banshee, as I have heard it before." The following morning the head-master received a telegram saying that the boy's brother had been accidentally shot dead.

That the Banshee is not confined within the geographical limits of Ireland, but that she can follow the fortunes of a family abroad, and there foretell their death, is clearly shown by the following story. A party of visitors were gathered together on the deck of a private yacht on one of the Italian lakes, and during a lull in the conversation one of them, a Colonel, said to the owner, "Count, who's that queer-looking woman you have on board?" The Count replied that there was nobody except the ladies present, and the stewardess, but the speaker protested that he was correct, and suddenly, with a scream of horror, he placed his hands before his eyes, and exclaimed, "Oh, my God, a face!" For some time he was overcome with terror, and at length reluctantly looked up, and cried:

"Thank Heavens, it's gone!"

"What was it?" asked the Count.

"Nothing human," replied the Colonel—"nothing belonging to this world. It was a woman of no earthly type, with a queer-shaped, gleaming face, a mass of red hair, and eyes that would have been beautiful but for their expression, which was hellish. She had on a green hood, after the fashion of an Irish peasant."

An American lady present suggested that the description tallied with that of the Banshee, upon which the Count said:

"I am an O'Neill—at least I am descended from one. My family name is, as you know, Neilsini, which, little more than a century ago, was O'Neill. My great-grand-father served in the Irish Brigade, and on its dissolution, at the time of the French Revolution had the good fortune to escape the general massacre of officers, and in company with an O'Brien and a Maguire fled across the frontier and settled in Italy. On his death his son, who had been born in Italy, and was far more Italian than Irish, changed his name to Neilsini, by which name the family has been known ever since. But for all that we are Irish."

"The Banshee was yours, then!" ejaculated the Colonel "What exactly does it mean?"

"It means," the Count replied solemnly, "the death of some one very nearly associated with me. Pray Heaven it is not my wife or daughter."

On that score, however, his anxiety was speedily removed, for within two hours he was seized with a violent attack of angina pectoris, and died before morning.²

² *Occult Review* for September, 1913.

Mr. Elliott O'Donnell, to whose article on "Banshees" we are indebted for the above, adds: "The Banshee never manifests itself to the person whose death it is prognosticating. Other people may see or hear it, but the fated one never, so that when every one present is aware of it but one, the fate of that one may be regarded as pretty well certain."