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THE HARE-HOUND AND THE WITCH.

BY JOHN BANIM.

Your genuine witches, who

seemed not creatures of the earth. And still were on it!"

withered old women, who united in their persons the decrepitude of age with the most marvellous powers of locomotion; half spirits, half mortals; who seemed to live solely for the purpose of paying back to the whole human race the hatred lavished by men, women and children on themselves: who could blight the farmers hope of plenty; cheat his cows of their milk, and his wife of her butter; cause the clouds to gather, and the tempest to scourge the earth; and yet creatures of contrariness! who, possessed of this awful power, could not, or would not, redeem themselves from rags, hunger, and misery;—they, your genuine witches, as we have already called them, exist, not, alas! at present, in our own green Island: extinct though not forgotten is their race, like that of our noble moose-deer, our formidable wolf, and our as formidable wolf-dog.—Degenerate emulators of them, indeed, we still boast; individuals who dip into futurity by the aid of our card cutting or cup-tossing, or who find our stolen property, or vend charms against the peevish malice of the little sprites of the moonbeam; but, compared with their renowned predecessors, these timid assertors of supernatural endowment may be said to disgrace their calling; and, moreover, even they are fast sinking in repute, as well as diminishing in numbers.

But we would attempt to preserve, in the following pages, some fit idea of the importance of a true Irish witch of the good olden time. We are aware that the chief event which must wind up our story—the sudden appearance, namely, of a lost heir—(we have the courage to speak it out, so soon)—is a threadbare one; it can't be helped, however; and it, at least, is fact, to our own knowledge; although we are not quite as fully accountable for the respectable traditions that surrounded it with such pleasing wonders as we are about to relate, and which form the real interest of our narration.

On the western coast of Ireland is a certain dangerous bay: into it the broad Atlantic rolls his vast waters. Two leagues inland from its mouth high black cliffs frown over it, at both sides, of which the bases are hollowed into caverns; and when the winds blow angrily—and any wind can effectually visit the open and exposed estuary—tremendous and terrific is the roar, the dash, and the foam, which deafen the ears, and distract the eyes of a spectator. That hapless vessel which, in a storm, cannot avoid an entrance into this merciless turmoil of mad waters, has sealed its doom.

Formerly a great number of ships, from different countries, used to be dashed to splinters against the iron-bound coast; and a few people conjecture that the diminution of such terrible accidents, in the present day, is partially owing to some improvement in seamanship, or else to the timely warning now given to distant mariners, by lights erected at the mouth of the bay. But other persons, and by far the greater number in the neighborhood, think that the comparative paucity of wrecks may more naturally and satisfactorily be accounted for in another way. In fact, there does not now reside, as formerly there did, in an almost unapproachable cavern, high up on the face of one of the black cliffs, "a real witch of the right sort."

Not that her witchship always dwelt in her cave; no, her visits to it were but occasional. Nor did it ever become necessary for her to proclaim her presence on the coast, by exhibiting her person; the results of her close neighborhood sufficiently "prated of her whereabouts." Farmers' wives toiled in vain at their churns; and when no butter would come, self-evident it was that the witch was at that moment in her cavern, seated on her heels before a vessel of plain water, from which, by drawing a dead man's hand through it, she appropriated the produce of other people's honest labor. Cows suddenly went back in their milk; and then it was known that, by passing a wheat straw between her finger and thumb, the witch amply filled her can, while the owner of the beautiful animal uselessly wrought at its udder. Cattle swelled, and died, too; and once again, every one knew who was in the cave under the cliff; and if none of those events, or similar ones, proved her disagreeable proximity, the direful storms and the frightful wrecks in the bay abundantly warranted it. Often, amid the howling of the tempest she had raised, swelled her shrieking voice; and while the despairing creatures in the doomed vessel topped each short, high, foam-mantled billow, which nearer and nearer dashed them on to their dread fate, the terrified watchers on the cliff's brow have heard her devilish laugh, until at length it broke into frenzied loudness, as the ship burst, like a glass bubble, against the sharp rocks under her dwelling-hole.

No one could tell whence she came, or when, for a time no longer visible on the coast, whither she went. Occasionally, she was observed in conference with certain notorious smugglers; and the men appeared, it was well known, to petition and bribe her for a fair wind with witch to enter the bay, and for a foul one to keep their pursuers out of it. And this was fully proved by the fact, that invariably their light lugger got in, and was safely moored in some little creek against danger of coming storm; while the moment the revenue cutter appeared in the offing, out burst the wildest winds, from the witch's cavern, and up swelled the sea and the bay, in mountain billows; and his Majesty's vessel was sure to be wrecked during the night.

Like all her sisterhood of that famous period, she could change herself, at pleasure, into various shapes. We give a serious proof of her talent in this respect.

A few miles from the coast which she so despotically ruled, resided a considerable landed proprietor. A great hunter of hares and foxes was he. His wife had just blessed him with an heir to his estate, and the boy was their only child. Of this event the good squire was not a little proud; for, in case of his not leaving male issue, his property was to pass away to a distant, obscure, and neglected relation, whom its immediate possessor neither loved nor liked; for the heir-presumptive was mean in his habits and associations, uneducated and graceless; and it would be a sad thing to know that the fine old family acres were to go into such hands.

Shortly after his wife's confinement, and while she and her baby were "doing well," the squire, to dissipate the recent anxiety he had suffered, sallied forth for a hunting. His pack of harriers were his attendants, on this occasion, for the hare was the object of the day's sport.

And, surely, never had such a hare been followed by dogs; or "schoed" by mortal lips, as the hare he and his friends and pack started, and hunted, upon that memorable day. From breakfast to dinner time, a sweeping and erratic chase did she lead them, all the dogs at full stretch, and the horses at top speed. Various accidents happened to the sportsmen; one maimed his steed; another fractured his collar-bone; some swamped in bogs; and none, except our good squire and his huntsman, escaped without injury or disaster. But, from starting to pulling up, they gallantly kept at the dogs' tail.

After an unprecedented run, the hare suddenly scudded towards the cliffs of the bay, immediately over the witch's cavern. The good harriers pursued; and the eager squire did not stay behind them; his huntsman closely following. The hare gained the verge of the cliff. Sheela, the prime bitch of the pack, just had time to close her, make a chop at her, and take a mouthful of flesh from her haunch before she leaped down the face of almost a precipice. Dogs and horsemen were at a pause; none dared follow her.

In some time nearly all the other discomfited members of the hunt came up, soiled, wounded, or jaded. They heard of the termination of the chase; and all wondered at the extraordinary freaks of the little animal, which had so distressed and baffled the best harriers and the best hunters in the country, taking men and horses together.

"By—!" suddenly exclaimed the huntsman, a young fellow of known hardihood of character, swearing a great oath, "I'll tell ye how it is! ye are after huntin' the witch o' the cave straight under us! It isn't the first time that creatures like her have made a laugh, in this way, of nearly as good men as we are, all standin' here together."

Most of his auditors ridiculed the speaker;—one or two, however, looked grave; perhaps in patronage of his assertions; perhaps because the pains and aches resulting from their many falls during the day, lengthened their faces, darkened their brows, and puckered their lips. The huntsman offered, if any one would accompany him on the dangerous enterprise, to scale down the cliff, penetrate the witch's cavern, and prove his saying. One did volunteer to be his companion: an humble friend of his own, forming an individual of the crowd of gaping peasants assembled round the gentlemen hunters.

The adventurers succeeded in reaching and entering the awful cave. Upon their return, over the line of the cliff, they reported that they had found the witch at home, stretched, panting, and exhausted, upon some straw, in a dark corner of the cave; that they had dragged her much against her will (and, indeed, her screams certainly had reached the squire and his friends above) to the light, at its opening; had, with main force, examined her person; and, sure enough, had found a deficiency of flesh in her haunch, with plainly the marks of Sheela's teeth in and about the wound, from which the blood freshly streamed. To be sure, the better informed of the hearers of this story, or at least a majority of them, still laughed at it; but whatever they might think, those to whom the talents

and capabilities of witches were better known, firmly believed that the squire and his companions had hunted all that day a hare, which was no hare after all; and that the courageous little Sheela had tasted flesh of a forbidden kind.

And happy had it been for the squire and his pet bitch had they proved less eager after their sport. Poor Sheela died in great agonies upon the very night of that day, and her master was doomed to a speedy punishment for his own audacity.

Nothing daunted at the idea of whom he had been hunting, he took the fields again a few days after; and now no question could be raised as to the nature of the game he a second time started and pursued. Puss did not, indeed, immediately make for the sea; but this was only a ruse to effect her own malignant purposes. She wanted to get her enemy alone at the edge of the cliff, and for this purpose, her speed and her manners quite outdid those of a former day: so much so, that, in a few hours, even the dare-neck and dare-devil huntsman was thrown out, and returned with a lamed horse and a sprained ankle to the gentlemen who had suffered before him, leaving the squire alone close upon the dogs.

For a considerable time he and his master's friends awaited the re-appearance of the persevering Nimrod. Finally they repaired to the cliff, which the huntsman had left him speedily approaching. There they found his horse without a rider; but himself they never again beheld. The unbelievers in witchcraft immediately surmised that his high-blooded hunter had borne him against his will to the edge of the cliff, and had there suddenly started back; and that, by the quick and violent action, the unhappy gentleman had been thrown forward out of his saddle, and precipitated from rock to rock hundreds of feet downward. A few who were able for the effort, cautiously descended towards the sea. On their way they discovered their friend's hunting cap on the sharp pinnacle of a rock; its iron headpiece was stove in; and it became evident that after having been loosed from its wearer, by the force of the concussion which had fractured it, the squire's body had tumbled still farther downward. They reached the sea's level. His remains were not visible; they must have fallen into the sea, and been floated away by its tide. The witch of the cavern disappeared with her victim,—victims we should say: for her vengeance on the squire was not limited to his own destruction. At the story of his shocking death, hastily and injudiciously communicated, his wife, yet enfeebled by her recent confinement, sickened, and in a few days died; nay, nearly within the hour of her departure from this world, her only child, the heir to her husband's estate, disappeared; no one could tell whether or by what means. Strange enough to say, however, part of the baby's dress was found on the identical pinnacle of rock where his father's hunting-cap had been met with; and, in the minds of the educated and wealthy of the neighbourhood, this circumstance started doubts of fair dealing towards father and child. Suspicion, however, could fasten itself upon no object; and inquiry and investigation did not lead to any solution of the mystery. It need not be added, that by far the greater number of the population of the district smiled at the useless efforts to establish a case of human, that is, ordinarily human agency: or that they went on tranquilly believing that the squire and his family, not forgetting his bitch, has been punished for the mouthful snatched by young Sheela from the haunch of a certain person.

Twenty years after the time of the tragedy we have detailed, our story is resumed. The once indigent and despised relation, of whom mention has before been made, sits at his breakfast table in the old family house. He is in his forty-fifth year. Like other gentlemen of his day, he carries in his hair the contents of a large pomatum pot; four tiers of curls rise over his ears; and on the top of his head is a huge *toupee*, and a great *quene* lolls, like an ox's tongue, between his broad shoulders. On his loose, wide-sleeved, long-skirted, frock-like coat, is a profusion of gold embroidery; a lace cravat coils round his throat; ruffles flaunt over his knuckles; his gaudy waistcoat reaches only to his knees; and satin are his breeches, and silk his hose, and ponderous square silver buckles are in his shoes. So much for the outside of the jocular Squire Hogan. As to his interior pretensions, and, indeed, some of his exterior ones, too, the least said is soonest mended. He had never been able to raise himself above much of the homely acquisitions of his youth; but though we cannot present to the reader, in his person, the model of the true Irish gentleman of his day, we do not introduce him in the character of—(to repeat what every one said of him)—"as worthy a soul as ever broke the world's bread."

Squire Hogan, upon the morning when we meet him, paid earnest attention to his breakfast. Cold roast beef often filled his plate, and as often rapidly disappeared. And yet something seemed

to gratify his mental palate as well as his corporeal one. A gleish, self-contented smile played over his round, ruddy face; his small blue eyes glittered; and, to the accompaniment of a short liquorish laugh, occasionally were drawn up at the corners, as he glanced at his daughter, a good-natured, good tempered, sensible, and (of course) beautiful girl of nineteen, who sat opposite to him, sipping her coffee and picking her muffins. And, whenever their eyes met, well did Catherine know that the clucking of her papa had reference to some little triumph which, as he believed, he had cleverly and cunningly achieved over herself. At length the good squire relaxed in his meal; emptied the silver tankard of October which lay at his hand; leaned back in his chair, and laughingly said, "By Jove, Kate, my girl, I nicked you there!"

"Indeed, papa, you played me a roguish turn," assented Kate, convinced, from experience, that it was very pleasant to her parent to have the talent of his practical jokes fully admitted.

"Where did I tell you we were driving to, out of Dublin town, eh?"

"You told me, sir, with as serious a face as you could make, that we were only going to visit a friend, a few miles out of Dublin."

"Ho ho! Good, by Cork! Choice! a capital hoax, as I'm a living sinner! and I told you this confounded lie, with such a serious face, you say?"

"With such a mock-serious face, I meant to say, papa."

"Right, Kate! you are right, beyond yea and nay: a mock-serious face; yes, and there lay the best of it; if I had not been able to keep myself from laughing, you might have suspected something; but I was able, as you yourself say, and as you now don't deny; though, by Jove, Kate, it was enough to make a dead man shout out, seeing you sitting opposite to me, and believing ever word I told you!"

"You kept up the farce cleverly, I must, and do admit it, sir."

"Didn't I, Kate, didn't I? And here we are, this morning, eighty miles from Dublin, in our own house, and taxing no man's hospitality. But, devil's in it! there's no fun in playing a good trick on you, Kate."

"Why so, dear papa? am I not as easily blinded as your heart could wish?"

"To be sure you are! What else could you be? I never met man, woman, nor child, that I could not puzzle. That's not the thing at all. No; but succeed as I may with you, 'tis impossible to make you a little cross. Why, if I had a lass of spirit to deal with, there would be no end to her tears, and her pouts, and her petitions, the moment she found that I was whisking her away from her balls, and her drums, and her beaux, and all the other dear delights of Dublin."

"And I hope that my merry papa does not really wish to have me peevish and short tempered, even for a greater provocation?"

"Kiss me, Kate; I believe not; and yet I don't know, either, by Cork! There would be fun in tormenting you a bit, in a harmless way. But, Kate, can you give a guess why I ran away with you in such a devil of a hurry?"

"Let me see, papa. I remember your telling me of some original matches you had on hands, here, before we set out for Dublin. Perhaps you have engaged the two cripples to run a race on their crutches?"

"No; that's put off—ho, ho!"

"Or the two old women to hop against time, carrying weight for age?"

"Ho, ho! wrong again!"

"Probably you have succeeded in making the two schoolmasters promise to fight out their battle of the squares and angles with their respective birches; their scholars standing by to show fair play?"

"Ho, ho, ho! No; though that's a matter not to be let slip out of reach, neither."

"Then all my guesses are out, papa."

"I'll help you, then. Tell me, you little baggage, what is it on earth you most wish for?"

"Indeed, my dear papa, I have no particular wish to gratify at the present moment."

"Get out! get out, for a young hypocrite!—Kate, wouldn't something like a husband be agreeable to you?"

The girl blushed the color of a certain young gentleman's coat, and drooped her head. Of that certain young gentleman, however, her worthy father knew nothing; at least, in connexion with the present topic.

"Oh, ho! I thought I saw how the land lay."

"Indeed, my dear papa—"

"Say nothing more about it. Leave it all to me, lass. I'll get him for you. None of your half dead and alive fellows, that you could knock down with a tap of your fan; no, he shall be an able, rattling, rollicking chap, able to take your part by land or sea. Did your mother never tell you how I came by her, my girl?"

Kate, dispirited by her father's coarse humor, as well as by other things, answered in the negative.

"I'll tell you, then, as truly as if she were alive to hear me. Though as poor as a church mouse at that time, I was a hearty young shaver; ay, as hearty, though not so matured, as I am this day, now that I am squire of the towland, and a justice of the peace, to boot. By the way, I wish they'd make the parish clerk a justice of the peace in my stead; for I hate to be trying to look as grave as a mustard-pot, and as solemn as a wig block. Well, I was at a Christmas raffle, Kate, and your mother's father was there too; as comical an old boy as you'd wish to know! I had a great regard for him, by Cork! and so, away he and I ruffled, and he lost to me every throw, until at last I didn't leave him a stiver. "All I've won from you, and my watch to boot, against your daughter Nelly!" cries I, of a sudden. "Done! cries he; and we threw again; and he lost, and I won again; and that's the way I got your mother, Kate!—And now, do you guess anything else I'm going to say about yourself, Kate!"

"O papa, I hope—"

"I know you do hope. Yes, Kate, I am going to provide for you in something like the same way—"

"Now, good heavens, papa—"

"Don't speak a word more till you hear me out. At the last club dinner in Dublin, Ned O'Brien calls me aside with a face as long as my own when I'm on the bench; and after a long winded beginning, he prays my interest with you, Kate. "To be sure, man," says I, "you must have it." Then, up sneaks George Dempsey, and his business was the same. "By Cork, I'll court her in style for you, my boy," was my word to George. And then, Mick Driscoll takes a turn at me, and begs of me, for the Lord's sake, to listen to him; and I was obliged to listen to him, all about his title-deeds and his pedigree; and he, too, craved my countenance, with the prettiest girl, and (what he *didn't* call you) the richest heiress in the province; and, by Jove! I'll do my best for you, Mick," says I; and Mick nearly pulled the arm out of my body shaking my hand; but I'm not done yet. Harry Walshe made his way to me; and the boy to my fancy is Harry Walshe, Kate. "I'm up to the saddle-skirts in love with your beautiful Kate," says Harry. "Pull away, my hearty fellow," answers I; "never fear, but I'll poll for your election."

"My dear papa—"

"Let me make an end, as I told you, Kate. Well, after dinner, and the bottle going merrily round, and every one of us right jovial, I rehearsed for the benefit of the whole company all the promises I had made, and a high joke it was; and then, 'Here's what I'll do among you all, my good boys,' says I; 'let every one of Kate's woovers be on the turf the first morning of the next hunting season, each mounted in his best style; let there be no pull in from the cover to the death, no baulking or shying, but smooth smack over everything that offers; and the lad that mounts the brush may come a courting to my daughter Kate.' Well, my girl, you'd think they had all lost their wits at this proposal; such joy amongst them, such shouting; many a bottle the rivals emptied, each to his own success; and in ten days from this blessed morning, the match comes off, my girl; and whoever wins, Kate will have a woover worth throwing a cap at."

Kate remained silent; tears of mortification and annoyance, unseen by her father, streaming from her eyes.

But the cream of the jest I have not told you, Kate. Rattler is in training, privately, the last two months—no one the wiser; and, harkee, Kate! by Cork's own town, I intend to start for you, myself! and the brush I'll wear in my own cap; and then, if I hav'n't my laugh right out, why, in that case, 'tis the divvle that made little apples!"

And before the sensitive, and high minded and spirited girl could reply, away went her father to superintendent Rattler, greatly clucking over his scheme; and poor Catherine sat alone to blush and weep at the thought of being made, by her own father, the object of a vulgar and foolish contention.

Other sad thoughts mingled with her reveries. The unostentatious military hero, to whom, while in Dublin, she had all but pledged her troth, had promised, in answer to a letter she despatched to him from the first post where she had halted with her father, on their flight from town, to make his appearance in the country, and try his fortune with the squire; but days had now rolled over, and he came not; neither did he send a line to account for his absence. This was a sad mortification to the pure ardency of a first love, in the breast of such a girl as Catherine; particularly when she recollected the most disagreeable predicament in which her father's unthinking folly and indelicacy had placed her.

(To be concluded in our next.)

There is no nobility like to that of a good heart, for it never stoops to artifice, nor is wanting in good offices when they are seasonable.