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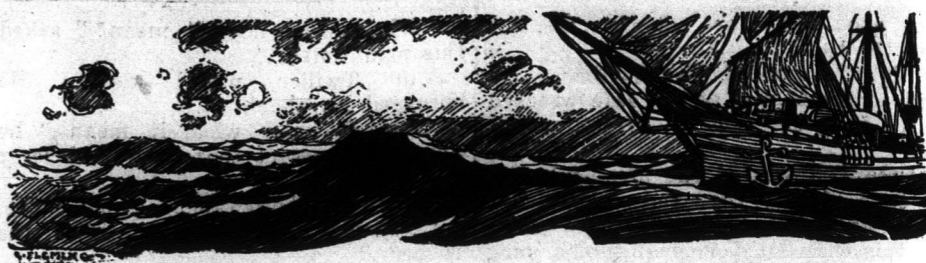
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A Daughter of the Island.

By Dorothy Baird.

A dead silence had fallen upon the cheery dinner party. Host, hostess, and guests gazed at one another in mute terror, so unearthly was the sound that had attracted the attention of all. Again it came. A wild wail, then, as the keening died away, a woman's name, clearly pronounced in ringing tones:

"Merle O'Neile."

Again the terrible, petrified silence, horror laden, then again the musical heart-breaking keening, again the woman's name.

Miss O'Neile pushed back her chair with a fierce, defiant gesture, then stood erect.

"It isn't true," she said, in low, tense tones. "The banshee hasn't been heard for years. It's some horrible, horrible trick."

"Plain Miss O'Neile," she was called. Impeccable men had often lamented her lack of beauty, spiteful women had often remarked among themselves how strange it was that rich girls are always hideous. Yet now, standing against the dark background of oak wainscoting, her tall, awkward figure took something of dignity; flushed with frightened defiance her plain face showed a becoming animation.

Two men near the window rose and pulled aside the heavy red curtains.

A snowy landscape sparkled under a clear, bright moon, not a living thing was visible. Very slowly they drew back the curtains and returned to their places.

"Apparently you Irish cannot leave your banshees in the old country," said a man higher up the table. He was not prepossessing in appearance. Dark and swarthy, a peculiar curve of lip and eyebrow gave him a sinister expression.

"I don't understand," she said. "For a hundred years—silence—then—"

The situation was becoming strained. The guests bent their eyes upon their plates, the servants busied themselves furtively at the sideboard. Miss O'Neile still stood half turned to face the window, and her breath came in short sharp jerks. In a moment she seemed to grow calmer. She made as if she would sit down again.

"I am an Irish woman," she said, in level tones. "And to an Irish woman these things are somehow different. But I will endeavour to be American in my attitude to my banshee and regard her as a delusion and a snare. At any rate," raising her voice a little, so that it rang resolute, courageous—"at any rate, at the worst, I can show that an Irish woman knows how to meet death—ay, and the fear of death."

Approving glances sought plain Miss O'Neile's face. She acquired an interest for herself apart from her money.

But the merry happy party was hopelessly marred. It was a relief when the ladies withdrew. Left to themselves the men instinctively drew together.

"What a horribly weird experience!" said one of the juniors. "I could feel the cold shivers running all down my back."

"Do you know anything about the O'Neile banshee? Is it authentic?"

John Hardy eyed his questioner before replying. Lawrence Mott was bronzed by wanderings in foreign lands, wanderings which had given him a self-reliance, an air of quiet strength beyond his years.

"The O'Neiles," said John Hardy slowly at last, "The O'Neiles are one of the few old families whose records are kept intact. I saw them myself some years ago."

"And the banshee?" asked Lawrence. "The banshee was a regular institution up to a hundred years ago. Her appearances or utterances are recorded over and over again, and upon authority which seems indisputable. Take the last instance. It was at a family gathering. All the notabilities of the country-side were present. Bishop, clergy, magistrates, heaven knows who, attested to having heard the banshee keen and call the name of the reigning O'Neile."

"And—?"

"And he was killed in the hunting field three months later."

"Then it means—?"

"It has always meant death within the year."

A dead silence fell on the party. There was nothing attractive about plain Miss O'Neile. She was rich and that was all. She possessed no particular charm of manner, no brilliancy in conversation, and yet the evening's occurrence had saddened everyone. After all, she was young, her wealth could give her all that the world has to give, and according to precedent, she must die.

"Can't anyone kill the silly thing?" asked the youth of the party. Fear had shattered his conversational powers. The laugh which followed was hardly mirthful.

"Oh, I say," exclaimed another man, "we're all getting the creeps. Shall we join the ladies, Mr. Hardy?"

They found the women gathered in little groups, talking fitfully and with bated breath. Merle O'Neile seemed the only one who was perfectly self-possessed. She was at the piano, playing softly. As the men entered she rose, laughing.

"I was trying to pick out the cadences of the banshee's keening," she said lightly. "It is a pity such a thing should not be recorded for posterity."

And then her gaze met that of Lawrence Mott, and for the first time in her life, plain Miss O'Neile read admiration for herself in a man's eyes. He did not speak, but that long look from the serious, honest blue eyes was both comforting and inspiring. She thought of it often in the days that followed. The remembrance comforted her when she was alone, and the realization of the possibilities that the next year held for her forced themselves upon her comprehension and caused the woman in her to tremble with fear. It comforted her, too, when other men flattered her with soft sayings that she knew to be false. That look from Lawrence Mott's eyes was true and genuine. It was as balm to her hungry soul.

But from the hour of the banshee's prophecy, Merle O'Neile was never without her small following of men—suitors presumably, but hardly lovers. And she who had longed to be as other girls and to know the love of men, felt only bitterness creep into her heart. She fought against it. She tried to persuade herself that at any rate they pitied her, that they instinctively believed the banshee, as she did, and wished to make her last year of life pleasant. But her heart denied this view of the case, the gossip she overheard confirmed her suspicions. Nobody meant her to overhear the gossip, and yet, somehow, she came to know that the men jokingly declared that a man could put up with a plain wife for a year, if she was rich, and that Mrs. Hardy laughed about the "O'Neile banshee," calling it a "Match-maker." In the face of this it was hard to think the best of her wooers.

Perhaps it would have been easier had they been a nicer set of men. With the exception of Lawrence Mott there was not one whom Merle felt that she could trust,