

THE DRUIDESS

A STORY FOR BOYS AND OTHERS.

BY
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Table of Contents

PREFACE.

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II. Gléand dé.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V. Why Ethne Hates the Christians.

CHAPTER VI. The Sacred Heart of Hibernia.

CHAPTER VII. Into the Arms of Moloch!

CHAPTER VIII. Ethne again as Leader.

CHAPTER IX. To the North.

CHAPTER X. Bards of Hibernia.

CHAPTER XI. Saint Columba.

CHAPTER XII. The Fair.

CHAPTER XIII. Man and Woman.

CHAPTER XIV. Leader of the Kymry.

CHAPTER XV. The Black Horse.

CHAPTER XVI. Ethelbert of Kent.

CHAPTER XVII. Ethne's Error.

CHAPTER XVIII. England's First Christian Queen.

PREFACE.

As this story touches upon history to a certain extent, perhaps too much licence has been taken with Ethelbert's movements in bringing him as far west as the Severn Valley. The union between the Britons and Saxons was suggested by the historical league formed between the Britons and those Saxons who revolted against the detested Ceawlin, and, settling in the valley of the lower Severn, took the name of Hwiccan. The date of this league was 592—eleven years after the destruction of Uriconium which in the following story is placed about 578. Some liberty, also, has been taken with the date of Ethelbert's marriage with Bertha, which took place in 584.

It seems hardly necessary to say that Banba and Fail are old bardic names for Ireland. And that the cities Gloucester, Cirencester and Bath were known in Roman days as Glevum, Corinium and Aque Sulio.

S. Kevin is known also as S. Coemgen.

The date of the Convocation at Druimceta is difficult to discover, but must have been during the reign of S. Columba's friend, King Aedh, 572-599.

DEDICATED TO MY NEPHEWS AND NIECES.

THE DRUIDESS.

CHAPTER I.

“The barbarians drive us to the sea; the sea drives us back to the barbarians; between them we are exposed to two sorts of death; we are either slain or drowned.”

(From the Britons' appeal to Aëtius—Commander of the Roman armies 446 A.D.)

Upon a cold, spring morning in the year of Our Lord 577, the closing scenes of a battle were being fought out on the western shore of Britain; in that part of the country then called Damnonia; on a stretch of low-lying land, between the two rivers—the Yeo and the Axe.

On the winning side stood the Saxons with the whole breadth of vanquished Britain behind them—on the losing, the Britons with but a narrow strip of land between them and the sea; that narrow strip of flat sea-shore.

There were women on both sides. Brawny-limbed, red-skinned Saxons with floating ruddy hair—fighting with a strength and valour worthy of the men beside them; as much at home in that scene of blood-shed as they were by their hearths making the trews and baking the bread of their lords and his ceorls. British ladies reared in the refinement and luxury that the Romans had made common in Britain; satin-skinned and white-handed, strangers to the lightest toil—now forced, in dire necessity, on the battle-field; but, once there, waging war with the spirit of their ancestress, Boadicea; smaller and slighter than their foes and untutored in the art of weapons, they were gifted with a

natural dexterity and passion that enabled them, in this hour of need, to be of service to their lords and brothers.

One, in particular, had been conspicuous in the long three days' fight, on account of her activity and skill. A slight, dark woman, raven-haired and white-limbed, clad in robes of royal saffron-colour, flashing with gold and emeralds. Often by her side was a youth, who bore a strong likeness to her; and these two, woman and boy, commanded the retreating Britons.

The boy was mounted on a beautiful Hibernian stallion, of a pure jet-black, and on the banners still drooping, here and there, overhead was the emblem of a Black Horse in opposition to the White Horse of the Saxons.

No leader could have shown more courage and spirit than this youth. In this last agony of defeat his example still inspired his followers; he gave no sign of the almost mortal wounds with which his body was pierced; his garments were red with blood, and his horse was smeared with white, where the sweat had lathered into foam—but on that stricken field every valiant warrior showed battle stains, and every jaded steed was pale with foam.

Strapped on the shoulder of the boy-leader was a small image of the Virgin, and in the ranks, behind him, were numerous emblems of the Christian Faith.

This was not only a battle between Saxon and Briton, it was also a battle between Christian and Heathen; and yet the woman, on the Christian side, from time to time broke forth into the Druidical incantations of early British days; this she

did in moments of savage passion as she stood upright in her car dealing forth death from the sheaf of arrows at her side.

In one corner of the battle-field the mist-cloud lifted wholly for a few minutes, and the sun shone on the thinned ranks of the Britons showing them woefully hindered in their movements by fallen warriors and horses; a mere sprinkling of young and strong remained; here and there a wounded man raised himself and still tried to use his bow. Old men and women fought on desperately. The war-dogs were still numerous—a veritable phalanx armed with spiked collars and goaded into savage rage, strangely horrible with their red, hanging tongues and bloodshot eyes.

In the sudden gleam of sunshine the boy saw that the woman leader was in extreme peril. She had driven her chariot so quickly over the grass—slippery with dew and blood—that her horse had fallen. The boy galloped over dead and dying to her side—as he rode he saw a javelin, aimed at the woman, pierce the side of the struggling horse.

At a sign from his friend, the youth, with rare dexterity, harnessed his own horse to her chariot, in place of hers. She pointed to a gap in the ranks of a small band of Saxons; and, mounting again on his steed, the boy galloped with her to the spot—the sharp knives of the chariots doing desperate work among a body of Saxon soldiers through which they ploughed.

It was the ancient method of warfare, which the woman by instinct had followed. At just such a gap in the ranks of the foe as she had chosen it was the custom to leap from the chariot and charge on foot; but now she remained standing in her car

and, suddenly cutting the traces, set her companion free to charge furiously on the surprised enemy—whilst she aided him by a quick shower of arrows. Her artifice succeeded; the boy bounded forward causing such havoc among a little band of Saxons that they—taken off their guard—turned and fled.

In the panic of the moment the enemy did not see that the boy's gallant horse had received his death-wound. With a last frantic attempt to obey his master's onward signal, the animal raised itself on its hinder limbs, pawed wildly in the air, gave one long, whistling breath and, with throat and nostrils choked with blood, fell back dead—and, in falling, fell upon his master.

It was the last act of the long, stubborn, futile resistance. The hovering fog-cloud swept down again upon the field as a curtain drops at the end of a scene.

The woman stood—listening. She could hear the steps of the retreating Saxons—but, beyond that, was another indistinct and distant clamour; her quick sense of hearing was confused; she bent and laid her ear to the ground. She listened intently and learnt that the main body of the Saxon host was advancing towards them.

Flight alone remained. She looked towards the flat sea-shore; the water only revealed itself for a stone's throw—all beyond was fog—the sea that was visible was sullen grey with furious, crested waves of dead-white foam. Even in that moment's glance she saw fugitives from her own ranks, perish on the ocean—washed from the frail rafts they had hastily made and set forth upon.

What of the boy lying crushed under his war-horse—was he dead?

He still breathed—but not all the strength she could summon was sufficient to extricate him from his position, had not a larger and stronger woman come to her aid. From her appearance the newcomer was Saxon, rather than British; she had the same blue eyes and yellow hair, the same strong features and heavy frame as the enemy from whom they were fleeing! With the strength and haste of despair the two women dragged the dead horse from the boy's body, and carried off the unconscious hero.

When they reached the shore they found a raft awaiting them; and in a few seconds they were being pushed off, through the surf, by a few remaining British slaves.

They were accompanied by two or three scores of their own countrymen; but of these the greater number were soon washed from their rafts and their drowned bodies cast back again upon the beach.

In a few minutes the approaching Saxons had reached the shore; some of the more blood-thirsty dashed through the water in pursuit, but they were either drowned or driven back by the waves.

Just as their bark had passed safely through the surf, the two women saw a dark form swimming swiftly towards them. The fair-haired girl gave a cry for joy, as she distinguished the head of a great war-hound above the water; the animal had been often by the side of the youth during the battle and now love of

his master drew him, bruised and bleeding, through the waves. The smaller woman would have beaten him off with her oar; but the other prevented her and aided the animal as he scrambled on to the raft, and threw himself beside the boy. The quarrel over the animal was so violent that the bark was in danger of foundering; the dark woman showed as much fury against the girl as she had shown that day against the enemy.

CHAPTER II.

GLÉAND DÉ.

In the days when cells and churches sprang up like mushrooms throughout Hibernia, Saint Kevin had chosen as the site of one of his monasteries that point on the eastern shore of Leinster, where the coast is rendered dangerous by sand-banks.

The little band of monks who dwelt there added to their life of toil a special watch upon the sea; they made the rescue of fugitive Britons their peculiar care; feeling it a sacred duty to protect members of the Faith, who had been driven from their homes by the fire and sword of the heathen. Moreover, S. Kevin, as a child, had been under the guidance of Petroc, a Briton, and for this reason Britons were particularly dear to his followers.

Some days after the battle in Damnonia, the monks, keeping their ceaseless watch upon the sea, saw a raft among the wreckage that the waves were bringing to the shore. At the peril of their lives they dashed into the water and dragged the raft safely to the beach. On it were four unconscious beings. A fine young chieftain with his body sadly pierced and wounded—like a marble Antinous from loss of blood; bearing marks of royal birth in his person and in his princely garments. With his head upon the young prince's feet was a great war-hound, hoary with age, his hair matted with brine and blood. A big fair girl lay with one arm round the hound's neck and the other clasped to her heart a man's sword and torques—of so rich and rare a pattern that only a great king could have

possessed them. A little removed from these three beings was a small dark woman from whom the simple monks recoiled at first, saying she had the air of a sorceress; she was clothed royally, like the boy, and was fair, too, as women are accounted fair in Hibernia—having long fine hair of ebony blackness.

It needed much care and skill to bring the three human beings from the death-like trance to which exhaustion and exposure had brought them. But the monks knew their work well; many a homeless Briton had found warmth and comfort at their hands; indeed, the little monastery was already so thronged by castaways that it was thought better to carry the three poor refugees to Saint Kevin's great monastery at Glendalough—where the sculptured saint may still be seen in the ancient ruin called Priest's house; he is the central figure in the triangular pediment of the doorway, bearing on his head the crown of the early bishops of Ireland.

Crowned with gold, he is represented to the world; yet, in the life he led in the wilderness, it must have been seldom that crown or mitre adorned his head. His monastery at Glendalough was too luxurious for him, and, for years at a time, he would withdraw himself into the heart of the woods, sheltering in a hollow tree or bee-hive hut; without fire, and existing on herbs and water. In the long trances of prayer, into which he would fall, the beasts rambled fearlessly around him, the birds perched on his arms and shoulders singing and twittering about him. At such times, he said, the leaves and branches gave forth divine music to him. It was the state of spiritual ecstasy common to the early saints; who tested to the full the efficacy of prayer from which they drew the spiritual

power that shed a greater influence than a life spent in ceaseless activity.

Glendalough, or Gléand dé, signified Valley of God; it seemed a fitting name, for there the tender-hearted monks laboured every day among the Britons whom they had rescued, sharing with them their own scanty food. Only a ragged hut of wattles with heather beds could be spared to the newcomers; but the monks brought cushions of down to spread upon the heather and begged, from the neighbouring chieftains, warm cloaks and skins of sheep and bear.

The women recovered before the boy.

When, at last they were able to sit up and look about them, their eyes—that had closed on scenes of bloodshed and storm—opened on green meadows dotted with apple-trees in full bloom and bordered by gardens filled with herbs and fruit-bearing plants. On a sunny slope stretched a vineyard, and in the distance were rows of bee-hives—bees and vines, sure sign of a monastery. Gentle-faced monks were at work on the soil, their songs mingling with the cheerful tinkle of carpenters and masons at their trades, for on the land around were being raised high, domed churches and beautiful carved crosses. On the breeze came the sound of silver bells.

When the wounded youth opened his eyes and saw this scene and heard its pleasant sound, he cried out that he was in Paradise.

“Tir Tairgirie!” he cried; the delirium of weakness was upon him. “The Saxons have slain body, but spirits have carried my soul hither to its resting place!”

He raved of Tir Tairgirie—the paradise of every Celt, the constant theme of their bards. Hidden from earthly vision by a cloud, full of lovely dwellings, grass and flowers; a place of unending day and perpetual fagless summer—abounding in meat and apples—free apples—free from disease or death.

As the young warrior slept the two women watched over him.

The rain—the frequent rain of Hibernia—came up on the wind, and beat through the wattles of the cote and on the arms and bosoms of the women. But they gave no heed to wind or rain so long as their warrior was protected—stripping their own bodies to add to the coverings the monks had begged for them from the chiefs around—purple cloaks, wrought with rich broidery by Fail’s fair daughters.

“Go!” said one woman to the other. “We need thee not—he and I.” The speaker had the cold, brilliant beauty of ebony and alabaster.

“No,” replied the other; “he woke with my name on his lips.”

“Ay!” said the first. “A dream cry—a wail of nightmare horror. Thou art his evil star. And with thy sobs, thy hoggish sighs and silly tears thou dost disturb his rest! Leave him to my care. I am sick of thy blunders.”

“Then will I wait on thee,” said the fair girl, bluntly. “Ay, though I hate thee, Ethne of the Raven Hair. I will put all within reach

of thy hand that thou need'st. I will go and come at thy beck and call—for thou hast rare skill in sickness, that I see—and I will serve him through thee.”

Ethne watched the boy jealously. An early training among the Druids had given her great knowledge in Nature's laws, and she knew that the loss of blood which was the warrior's chief danger could be cured by rest and food and air. She did not leave him night or day. Yet, as she watched him, there was neither love nor tenderness in her gaze.

On the fourth day after their journey to Glendalough he opened his eyes and looked at her. She saw the fever had left him.

“There, there,” she said, softly. “Sleep on now, and take your rest—wounds need time to heal, and time now we have in plenty.”

The boy would have raised his head, but at the attempt pain closed, like a vice, on his temples; a white arm, laden with bracelets, held him back on his pillow of heather.

His eyes dwelt on the white arm; he recognised the royal saffron-scent of the drapery that fell over it. With a feeble movement he turned so that his cheek might rest against it.

“Where is she—the Saxon—Elgiva?” he asked after a time.

“She prays,” was the answer; the boy knew, without looking, that there was a smile of scorn in the dark eyes and on the sneering lips above him.

Through the openings of the wattled cote in which he lay he had seen that the day was dark and gloomy; the sky so purple

with coming storm that the sprays of hawthorn aloft had a faint, pinkish tinge upon them. The day was as dark and tempestuous as his own sad soul.

“She prays,” continued the scornful voice, “and has she not need to pray—to offer up thanksgiving? The Saxons smote us on one cheek, then we offered the other—full and grievously have we been smitten on both. Therefore she may well be pleased at our performance of the Christians’ Duty!”

The woman paused, and when she spoke again there was rage as well as scorn in her tones.

“Never forget, boy, the fruit thy father’s Christian zeal has borne! In the shaping of thy future life, remember always, Cormac of Fail, that this mushroom faith has cost us our British possessions!”

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