

The Banshee

by D.R. McAnally Jr.

Although the Irish have the reputation of being grossly superstitious, they are not a whit more so than the peasantry of England, France, or Germany, nor scarcely as much addicted to superstitious beliefs and fancies as the lower class of Scottish Highlanders. The Irish imagination is, however, so lively as to endow the legends of the Emerald Isle with an individuality not possessed by those of most other nations, while the Irish command of language presents the creatures of Hibernian fancy in a garb so vividly real and yet so fantastically original as to make an impression sometimes exceedingly startling.

Of the creations of the Irish imagination, some are humorous, some grotesque, and some awe-inspiring even to sublimity, and chief among the last class is "the weird-wailing Banshee, that sings by night her mournful cry," giving notice to the family she attends that one of its members is soon to be called to the spirit-world. The name of this dreaded attendant is variously pronounced, as Banshee, Banshi, and Benshee, being translated by different scholars, the Female Fairy, the Woman of Peace, the Lady of Death, the Angel of Death, the White Lady of Sorrow, the Nymph of the Air, and the Spirit of the Air. The Banshee is quite distinct from the Fearshee or Shifra, the Man of Peace, the latter bringing good tidings and singing a joyful lay near the house when unexpected good fortune is to befall any or all its inmates. The Banshee is really a disembodied soul, that of one who, in life, was strongly attached to the family, or who had good reason to hate all its members. Thus, in different instances, the Banshee's song may be inspired by opposite motives. When the Banshee loves those whom she calls, the song is a low, soft chant, giving notice, indeed, of the close proximity of the angel of death, but with a tenderness of tone that reassures the one destined to die and comforts the survivors; rather a welcome than a warning, and having in its tones a thrill of exultation, as though the messenger spirit were bringing glad tidings to him summoned to join the waiting throng of his ancestors. If, during her lifetime, the Banshee was an enemy of the family, the cry is the scream of a fiend, howling with demoniac delight over the coming death-agony of another of her foes.

In some parts of Ireland there exists a belief that the spirits of the dead are not taken from earth, nor do they lose all their former interest in earthly affairs, but enjoy the happiness of the saved, or suffer the punishment imposed for their sins, in the neighborhood of the scenes among which they lived while clothed in flesh and blood. At particular crises in the affairs of mortals, these disenthralled spirits sometimes display joy or grief in such a manner as to attract the attention of living men and women. At weddings they are frequently unseen guests; at funerals they are always present; and sometimes, at both weddings and funerals, their presence is recognized by aerial voices or mysterious music known to be of unearthly origin. The spirits of the good wander with the living as guardian angels, but the spirits of the bad are restrained in their action, and compelled to do penance at or near the places where their crimes were committed. Some are chained at the bottoms of the lakes, others buried under ground, others confined in mountain gorges; some hang on the sides of precipices, others are transfixed on the tree-tops, while others haunt the homes of their ancestors, all waiting till the penance has been endured and the hour of release arrives. The Castle of Dunseverick, in Antrim, is believed to be still inhabited by the spirit of a chief, who there atones for a horrid crime, while the castles of Dunluce, of Magrath, and many others are similarly peopled by the wicked dead. In the Abbey of Clare, the ghost of a sinful abbot walks and will continue to do so until his sin has been atoned for by the prayers he unceasingly mutters in his tireless march up and down the aisles of the ruined nave.

The Banshee is of the spirits who look with interested eyes on earthly doings; and, deeply attached to the old families, or, on the contrary, regarding all their members with a hatred beyond that known to mortals, lingers about their dwellings to soften or to aggravate the sorrow of the approaching death. The Banshee attends only the old families, and though their descendants, through misfortune, may be brought down from high estate to the ranks of peasant-tenants, she never leaves nor forgets them till the last member has been gathered to his fathers in the churchyard. The MacCarthys, Magraths, O'Neills, O'Rileys, O'Sullivans, O'Reardons, O'Flahertys, and almost all other old families of Ireland, have Banshees, though many representatives of these names are in abject poverty.

The song of the Banshee is commonly heard a day or two before the death of which it gives notice, though instances are cited of the song at the beginning of a course of conduct or line of undertaking that resulted fatally. Thus, in Kerry, a young girl engaged herself to a youth, and at the moment her promise of marriage was given, both heard the low, sad wail above their heads. The young man deserted her, she died of a broken heart, and the night before her death, the Banshee's song, loud and clear, was heard outside the window of her mother's cottage. One of the O'Flahertys, of Galway, marched out of his castle with his men on a foray, and, as his troops filed through the gateway, the Banshee was heard high above the towers of the fortress. The next night she sang again, and was heard no more for a month, when his wife heard the wail under her window, and on the following day his followers brought back his corpse. One of the O'Neills of Shane Castle, in Antrim, heard the Banshee as he started on a journey before daybreak, and was accidentally killed some time after, but while on the same journey.

The wail most frequently comes at night, although cases are cited of Banshees singing during the daytime, and the song is often inaudible to all save the one for whom the warning is intended. This, however, is not general, the death notice being for the family rather than for the doomed individual. The spirit is generally alone, though rarely several are heard singing in chorus. A lady of the O'Flaherty family, greatly beloved for her social qualities, benevolence, and piety, was, some years ago, taken ill at the family mansion near Galway, though no uneasiness was felt on her account, as her ailment seemed nothing more than a slight cold. After she had remained in-doors for a day or two several of her acquaintances came to her room to enliven her imprisonment, and while the little party were merrily chatting, strange sounds were heard, and all trembled and turned pale as they recognized the singing of a chorus of Banshees. The lady's ailment developed into pleurisy, and she died in a few days, the chorus being again heard in a sweet, plaintive requiem as the spirit was leaving her body. The honor of being warned by more than one Banshee is, however, very great, and comes only to the purest of the pure.

The "hateful Banshee" is much dreaded by members of a family against which she has enmity. A noble Irish family, whose name is still familiar in Mayo, is attended by a Banshee of this description. This Banshee is the spirit of a young girl deceived and afterwards murdered by a former head of the family. With her dying breath she cursed her murderer, and promised she would attend him and his forever. Many years passed, the chieftain reformed his ways, and his youthful crime was almost forgotten even by himself, when, one night, he and his family were seated by the fire, and suddenly the most horrid shrieks were heard outside the castle walls. All ran out, but saw nothing. During the night the screams continued as though the castle were besieged by demons, and the unhappy man recognized, in the cry of the Banshee, the voice of the young girl he had murdered. The next night he was assassinated by one of his followers, when again the wild, unearthly screams of the spirit were heard, exulting over his fate. Since that night, the "hateful Banshee" has never failed to notify the family, with shrill cries of revengeful gladness, when the time of one of their number had arrived.

Banshees are not often seen, but those that have made themselves visible differ as much in personal appearance as in the character of their cries. The "friendly Banshee" is a young and beautiful female spirit, with pale face, regular, well-formed features, hair sometimes coal-black, sometimes golden; eyes blue, brown, or black. Her long, white drapery falls below her feet as she floats in the air, chanting her weird warning, lifting her hands as if in pitying tenderness bestowing a benediction on the soul she summons to the invisible world. The "hateful Banshee" is a horrible hag, with angry, distorted features; maledictions are written in every line of her wrinkled face, and her outstretched arms call down curses on the doomed member of the hated race. Though generally the only intimation of the presence of the Banshee is her cry, a notable instance of the contrary exists in the family of the O'Reardons, to the doomed member of which the Banshee always appears in the shape of an exceedingly beautiful woman, who sings a song so sweetly solemn as to reconcile him to his approaching fate.

The prophetic spirit does not follow members of a family who go to a foreign land, but should death overtake them abroad, she gives notice of the misfortune to those at home. When the Duke of Wellington died, the Banshee was heard wailing round the house of his ancestors, and during the Napoleonic campaigns, she frequently notified Irish families of the death in battle of Irish officers and soldiers. The night before the battle of the Boyne several Banshees were heard singing in the air over the Irish camp, the truth of their prophecy being verified by the death-roll of the next day.

How the Banshee is able to obtain early and accurate information from foreign parts of the death in battle of Irish soldiers is yet undecided in Hibernian mystical circles. Some believe that there are, in addition to the two kinds already mentioned, "silent Banshees," who act as attendants to the members of old families, one to each member; that these silent spirits follow and observe, bringing back intelligence to the family Banshee at home, who then, at the proper seasons, sings her dolorous strain. A partial confirmation of this theory is seen in the fact that the Banshee has given notice at the family seat in Ireland of deaths in battles fought in every part of the world. From North America, the West Indies, Africa, Australia, India, China; from every point to which Irish regiments have followed the roll of the British drums, news of the prospective shedding of Irish blood has been brought home, and the slaughter preceded by a Banshee wail outside the ancestral windows. But it is due to the reader to state, that this silent Banshee theory is by no means well or generally received, the burden of evidence going to show that there are only two kinds of Banshees, and that, in a supernatural way, they know the immediate future of those in whom they are interested, not being obliged to leave Ireland for the purpose of obtaining their information.

Such is the wild Banshee, once to be heard in every part of Ireland, and formerly believed in so devoutly that to express a doubt of her existence was little less than blasphemy. Now, however, as she attends only the old families and does not change to the new, with the disappearance of many noble Irish names during the last half century have gone also their Banshees, until in only a few retired districts of the west coast is the dreaded spirit still found, while in most parts of the island she has become only a superstition, and from the majesty of a death-boding angel, is rapidly sinking to a level with the Fairy, the Leprechawn and the Pooka; the subject for tales to amuse the idle and terrify the young.

Source:

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