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GOTHIC BOURNES

**THE STORY OF THE WEIRD SISTERS.
A SCOTTISH TALE.**

by Agnes Musgrave

(1800)

TRANSCRIPTION BY

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EDITING GOTHIC TEXTS

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Nº 1

GOTHIC STORIES.
SIR BERTRAND'S
ADVENTURES IN A RUINOUS CASTLE:

THE STORY OF
FITZALAN:

THE ADVENTURE
JAMES III. OF SCOTLAND
HAD WITH THE
WEIRD SISTERS,
IN THE DREADFUL
WOOD OF BIRNAN:¹

THE STORY OF
RAYMOND CASTLE:

THE
RUIN OF THE HOUSE OF ALBERT:

AND
MARY, A FRAGMENT

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¹ This short story is a chapter of the novel *Edmund of the Forest*, written by Agnes Musgrave.

² Although this collection of Gothic stories is dated to 1800, the original novel to which *The story of the weird sisters* belongs is dated to 1797, although it seems that a translated version in French appeared in 1798 or 1799.

The Adventure James III. of Scotland Had with the Weird Sisters, in the Dreadful Wood of Birnan

JAMES III. of Scotland,³ having conferred the honour of knighthood on Edmund, for his gallantry in saving his sister from being thrown by her horse at a stag-hunt, ever after made him his favourite companion. Having proposed a hunting match in the Caledonian woods, where a wild boar, the terror of those parts, then ranged, he was attended by a number of his nobles, and his favourite, Edmund.

The boar was quickly roused, and the first wound given by James. Furious with pain, the beast turned on his royal foe, who received him with his spear, which was shivered to pieces by the shock.⁴ Already were the tusks of the savage fastened on the noble steed the king rode, when a well-directed blow from Edmund [21] almost severed the chine of the fierce animal, who was quickly dispatched by the spectators of the combat.

James mounted a fresh horse, and ere long another boar was raised, who taking his course to the north, seemed by his speed to set his pursuers at defiance. Eagerly the monarch and his friend followed the flying animal, unheeding that their company decreased, till they lost toward evening the boar, and found they were deserted even by the domestics, and that the dogs, wearied with the chace, had quitted them.

The country round was wild and desolate; no house appeared where they could inquire their road, or be sheltered from the night.

A reedy lake bounded their sight to the north; to the west lay high hills, whose tops were gilt by the declining sun; eastward, the high, barren, and desolate heath, on which they were, stretching beyond their farthest view; whilst to the south was seen an antient wood, near which they had passed about the time the boar had disappeared. Concluding that some of the attendants, supposing they had entered the woods, were there searching for them, the king proposed to Edmund they should return thither.

As the sun declined, a mist arose from the lake; but so sooner was it set than the heath was enveloped in a fog, which gave to those objects it did not entirely conceal, strange and false appearances. It was nearly dark when they reached the wood.

“ Surely,” said Edmund, “ no person of your suite can be here; doubtless ere now, if they were, they would have followed and found you.”

³ James III ruled Scotland from 1460 (though it is said that he assumed full control in 1468) to 1488. Nowadays he is known for the unpopularity that surrounded him during his reign and for his marriage to Margaret of Denmark, as the islands of Orkney and Shetland became Scottish as a result of this alliance.

⁴ In order to provide more formal coherence to the text, I have omitted several phenomena concerning punctuation in the original text, such as a double space between a stop and a word or a space between a word and a semicolon.

As Edmund looked on the king, he saw his countenance pale, and exhibiting marks of unusual fear.

“ Turn,” he cried, “ my friend, your steps from this blasted wood, which shelters, I well know, no domestic of mine; for, if I mistake not, this must be the place I have heard such horrid tales concerning.”

“ My life I shall sell dearly in your defence. Say, my liege, is this gloomy wood the retreat of robbers and murderers?”⁵ or what is it you fear?”

[22]“ No human creature, if report says true, Edmund, returns from this fatal wood, to tell the deeds of darkness acted in it. My attendants, I guess, would quit us ere we passed a spot whose fame is widely diffused.”

“ What is it of which fame speaks so loudly?”

“ Know then,” said the king, “ long after the light of christianity was spread over Scotland, that the Danes, who possessed the Orcades, practised the horrid rites of paganism, and reared here also their idols, before whom barbarous and bloody rites were practised. To those false deities, if tradition says true, which transmits the tale to these later days, was this wood consecrated; and in its inmost gloomy recess, it is still believed, stand the remains of a palace of those pagan kings, where still it is told dwell women who mock at our holy religion, and secretly pay homage to an accursed idol, which is hid by them during the day, obedient to whose potent spells the unblest spirits, who it is said walk here their nightly rounds, fly on their mischievous errands, assuming such shapes as best fit their purpose.”

They had left the wood for a considerable space behind them, when a light appearing through the fog, which they hoped proceeded from some cottage which they had not observed, they rode forward in that direction with all the speed their overwearied steeds would permit.

The light seemed to retreat, and glimmered from the same distance, as when they first remarked it, though now in a different place, for it appeared to the west. They stood—it vanished, and a low indistinct murmur was heard. Again a brighter light shot in another direction, through the dusky air.

“ Let us,” said Edmund, “ proceed.” Which with their eyes fixed on the light that now appeared stationary, they did some way; but when they imagined it within a stone’s throw of them, their horses, as if obedient to the mandate, refused to proceed, though urged by the spur, as a voice distinctly cried, “ Stop.” At the same moment the deceitful glimmering vanished. Dazzled by so long beholding it through the thick and [23] almost palpable fog, strange and unusual forms seemed to swim before their sight. No sound was heard; all was still for a few seconds; when a kind of rustling noise smote on their ears, and the dun vapour which

⁵ These inverted commas are redundant, as the sentence is not yet over, so they should not be there. We can see that this is a phenomenon that occasionally happens in the original text.

surrounded them was violently agitated—again all was still, which was broke by a voice at a distance, harsh and grating, crying,

“ Whither go you, sisters, thus in gloom?”—

“ With Scotland’s king, to learn his doom,”

was the answer given by a loud and dissonant voice near them.

“ And Scotland’s king, and England’s heir,

Shall equal be our choicest care;”

screamed another voice still more discordant.

Amazed and terrified, Edmund exclaimed, “ Who are you, who, thus wrapt in gloomy darkness, pierce with loud and strange outcries our wonder-struck ears?”

A peal of laughter shook the misty air; the horses trembled in every joint; and to the flowing mane of the king’s beautiful steed a lambent kind of fire affixed itself, who, no longer obeying the curbing rein, flew forward with amazing speed, followed by Edmund with equal velocity. In vain did they endeavour to stop their rapid career—they seemed impelled by some powerful impulse, and entered the wood, of which traditionary tales had told wonders.

Down the broad avenue, up which they were borne, streamed a blaze of light that illumined the night, and showed them a building of an odd and antique form; but showed it only momentarily; for as they reached the gate it vanished, and all was total darkness, whilst, exhausted by fatigue, the swift coursers of the king and Edmund fell beneath them.

The gate stood open; and whilst disengaging themselves from their dying horses, they spied a pale light proceeding from a door at the extreme end of a wide hall, whose dark side received not the faintest ray.

“ Too sure are we,” said James, “ in the fatal wood of which I spoke; nor shall we escape from its dreaded inclosure.”

[24]“ Let us, however,” exclaimed Edmund, “ learn why we are brought hither; let us follow the light, which seems to direct our steps across the gloomy hall.”

“ Lead on,” replied the king.

A chill damp struck them as they passed through the spacious hall, whose roof echoed to their steps. A narrow passage led from it to another apartment, in the midst of which blazed a fire composed of the prodigious root of a tree, round which lay three blocks of unhewn stone.

At the upper end of this hall stood a rude kind of table, on which were placed cakes of flour, salt, and honey; and horns filled with an unknown liquor.

“ Whither,” exclaimed the king, “ does our destiny lead us? To what end are we tempted by the sight of provision, which, however urgent are our wants, we will not eat of? Already, doubtless, have they been offered to those accursed idols of which tradition speaks, I fear, but too truly. Let us rather perish with hunger, than taste such poisonous viands.”

The walls of this apartment were composed of black stone, against which, immediately above the table, hung a suit of iron armour, of a size so prodigious, that it seemed formed when a race of giants inhabited the earth; on the helmet sat a raven, which, as Edmund approached, seemed as though going to dart down upon them.

“ Let us,” said he, snatching up a flaming brand, “ explore the wonders of this place.”

Three doors appeared beside the one they had passed through, which alone was open; the others were too securely fastened to be speedily loosened; and entering the passage, they were again in the hall, on whose walls were traced characters of odd, and to them, unknown form; on each side the gate rose a pillar, which, dreadful to every feeling of piety and humanity, was composed of human skulls. From the top was suspended a shield, a javelin, and other weapons, whose size seemed suited to the gigantic armour.

A deep and deadly horror seized the king of Scot[25]land and his friend, as without speaking they returned to the outer apartment with countenances pale through fear.

“ Shortly,⁶ said Edmund, tossing from him the brand, and seating himself on one of the stones, “ we shall heighten those dreadful pillars. Death here bears a terrible appearance to my soul. It shrinks at the idea; though oft ere now have I faced it, without fearing its terrors, in the field of battle.”

“ Those sad mementos of mortality,” rejoined James, “ we have seen, as I recall my thoughts from the first impression they made, I dread not as warnings of our own danger; as they have, I conjecture, been placed there in remote ages by those pagans who reared this strange hall, in memory of some bloody victory they have obtained over the natives, and here yet remain, a disgrace to christianity⁷ [sic], my predecessors, and myself.

The three doors, which had been closed, at one instant flew back, and three hags entered, whose faces, the colour of an autumn leaf, were deeply furrowed with wrinkles; yet their gait was strait and erect, and betrayed no tokens of age. Tall and robust, their persons appeared masculine and strong; their foreheads were bald, but from the back of their heads hung thick tresses, dark as the raven’s wing, which fell over their shoulders, and mingled with their garments, which were of the same hue, and loosely floated behind them, but fastened up before, showing their naked feet and midway to the knee; bare also to the shoulders were

⁶ In the original text there is no inverted comma closing this intervention, so I have decided to leave it like that in my transcription.

⁷ No capital C in the original text.

their arms. Their dusky robes were girded round them with the speckled skin of a snake; in this girdle were stuck sprigs of yew, mixed with the deadly berries of the nightshade; in one hand they held a wand, on which were painted uncouth characters; to the top of this were affixed the wings, outspread, of a bat; their other hands bore a horn, filled with some kind of liquor.

Three animals followed, whose forms declared them of the species of tigers, for they seemed much larger and fiercer than cats; their eyes glared on the strangers, as if ready to devour them; the colour of those fright[26]ful savages was also black; they seated themselves on the blocks of the stone, from which their entrance had drove the king and Edmund.

Slowly, in a kind of measured step, the three hags advanced backward to the fire, which when they reached, they bent three times each knee to the ground; nine times, with solemn and slow pace, hand in hand, they went round the fire, repeating, in measured cadences, words which neither James or his friend understood, except that their own names were oft repeated; three times they severally poured some of the liquid their horns contained into the fire, which blazed fiercely, diffusing a strong aromatic perfume.

Silently had the wondering mortals beheld these strange figures perform their odd devotions, if such they might be deemed; nor had they as yet appeared to have attracted their attention; but Edmund could no longer contain himself; and drawing his dagger, advanced, and stood before them.

The three women, if such they were, turned toward him; one touched the arm of the intrepid youth with her wand, and the dagger dropped from his hand, which was suddenly benumbed.

The imperfect accent died on his tongue.

“What wouldst thou attempt, rash youth?” she cried; “know, no human hearts are lodged in our breasts; thou wishest to understand what is our nature; speak, dost thou not? Take up thy useless weapon; whet it here on my side, if thou likest; that may suffice thee to learn our substance is not, like thine, subject to wounds or disease.”

Edmund retreated some paces; then cried, “I am answered; thou divinest truly, I wished to learn who or what ye are, who thus, dwelling in this place, replete with wonders, practise ceremonies, of which I am now satisfied I had better remain ignorant; all I ask, is liberty for my friend and self; for that we depart not hence without your leave, I feel now most thoroughly convinced.”

“Ere the sun rises on this middle world, your re[27]quest,” said one of the hags, “shall be granted; yet, perhaps for ever shall you and him you call friend be parted. Listen then to what we tell.”

“King of men,” said, with a voice deeply toned, the first, “what this night meets thy wondering sight, if ever by thee revealed, shall work thy overthrow; but what thou hear, believe, ‘tis caution good.”

The second spoke.—“ Thy foes are friends; thy friends are foes; and those thou trust will thee deceive; plots surround, and some shall stand, and some shall fall; ere to-morrow’s sun is set, wonderous tales shall meet thine ears.”

“ Care and trouble cloud thy days,” cried in hollow accents the third; “ wild dispute and bloody treason mark thy reign; and, strange to tell, ere Scotia’s crown thy son adorns, a lion by its whelps shall be devoured.”

The first, then turning to Edmund, began:

“ Much love, Sir Knight, is turned to hate,
And toil and terror round thee wait”—
“ Then haste, Sir Knight, and quickly go,
Or Scottish bands shall work thy woe,”

cried the second and ceased.

The third took up the tale,

“ Thy fate does lead to southern land;
Then haste, Sir Knight, nor fate withstand.”

All three then loudly, in hoarse accents, cried,

“ King of men, thou know’st thy doom;
Thy fate, Sir Knight, is wrapt in gloom
Yet Scotland’s king, and England’s heir,
Shall equal be our dearest care.”

The liquid contained in one horn was thrown on the king; a second was poured over Edmund: and the third into the fire; when the hags joining their hands, wheeled round it with a flying motion—the flame forsook the wood. Borne upward in a chariot of fire, the three figures ascended through the outlet in the roof, formed for the smoke, which filled the hall with a suffocating and offensive smell.

The animals set up the most horrid cries; and surrounded by darkness, our adventurers knew not which [28] way to escape their fury, imagining they were on the point of being devoured by them.

Crossing themselves, they betook them to their prayers, wondering how in so perilous a situation they could have neglected ere then to pray for assistance from whom alone they could hope to receive it.

The building shook to its foundation; the massy gate was heard flapping to and fro; the beasts howled; the iron armour fell with a horrid noise; the raven flapped his heavy wing, and his screams echoed through the wide hall. Suddenly all was still; nor light, nor sound met their eyes or ear. They listened, but in vain; at length Edmund broke the fearful silence, by proposing, as nought appeared to oppose their progress, they should quit the frightful abode they were in.

But though the king agreed to the proposition, it was not in their power to put it in practice; for the doors, which distinctly had been heard to open, were now shut.

A kind of stupor invaded every sense, and they sunk on the pavement, insensible to the horrors of the place, and wrapt in sleep which resembled that of death.

When they awoke (after having remained some time in the utmost insensibility) they found themselves safe in the court of Scotland.

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