

A Curious Tale

By W.Q. Judge
Under the pen name of Bryan Kinnavan

Some years ago I ran down to the Lakes of Killarney, but not for the purpose merely of seeing them as any other traveller. During my boyhood the idea of going there had always been before me, and, in dreams I would often find myself on the water or wandering near by. After this had occurred many times, I procured photographs of the scenery and was quite surprised to find that the dreams were accurate enough to seem like recollections. But various vicissitudes took me to other parts of the world, so that I had passed my majority without having visited the place, and, indeed, the decision to go there at last was not made until one day, while looking into a shop window in Dublin, my eye fell upon a picture of Killarney, and in an instant I was filled with a strong desire to see them. So I went on the first train and was very soon there, quartered with an old man who from the first seemed like an old friend.

The next day or two were devoted to wandering about with no purpose nor with very great satisfaction, for the place as a bit of country did not interest me after all my wanderings in many different climes. But on the third day I went off into a field not far from the shores of one of the sheets of water, and sat down near an old well. It was still early in the afternoon, and unusually pleasant. My mind had no particular object before it, and I noticed an inability, quite unusual, to follow long a definite train of thought. As I sat thus, drowsiness came over my senses, the field and the well grew grey but still remained in sight, yet I seemed to be changing into another man, and, as the minutes flew by, I saw the shadowy form or picture of a tall round tower rising, some fifty feet high, just beyond the well. Shaking myself, this disappeared and I thought I had fought off the sleepy feeling, but only for a moment. It returned with new intensity.

The well had disappeared and a building occupied its place, while the tall tower had grown solid; and then all desire to remain myself disappeared. I rose with a mechanical feeling that my duty, somehow or other, called me to the tower, and walked over into the building through which I knew it was necessary to go in order to reach the tower. As I passed inside the wall, there was the old well I had seen upon first coming into the field, but the strange incident did not attract my attention, for I knew the well as an old landmark. Reaching the tower, the steps wound up before me to the top, and as I mounted them a voice quite familiar called my name -- a name not the same that I owned to upon sitting down near the well, but that did not attract my attention any more than the old well inside the wall. At last I emerged upon the top of the tower, and there was an old man keeping up a fire. It was the eternal fire never yet known to have gone out, and I out of all the other young disciples alone was permitted to help the old man.

As my head rose above the level of the low rim of the tower, I saw a calm and beautiful mountain not far away, and other towers nearer to it than mine.

"You are late," said the old man. I made no reply, as there was none to make; but I approached and showed by my attitude that I was ready to go on watching in his place. As I did this it flashed across me that the sun was nearing the horizon, and for an instant the memory of the old man with whom I had lodged came before me, as well as the express train to be reached by cart, but that faded out as the old watcher looked into my brain with his piercing eyes.

"I fear to leave you in charge," was his first remark. "There is a shadow, dark and silent, near you."

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"Do not fear, father," said I; "I will not leave the fire nor permit it to go out."

"If you do, then our doom is sealed and the destiny of Innisfallen delayed."

With those words he turned and left me, and soon I heard his foot-fall no more on the winding stairs that led below.

The fire seemed bewitched. It would hardly burn, and once or twice it almost paralyzed me with fear, so nearly did it expire. When the old man left me, it was burning brightly. At last it seemed that my efforts and prayers were successful; the blaze sprang up and all looked well. Just then a noise on the stairs caused me to turn round, and to my surprise a complete stranger came upon the platform where none but the guardians were allowed.

"Look," said he; "those fires beyond are dying out."

I looked and was filled with fear to see that the smoke from the towers near the mountain had died out, and in my sudden amazement rushed to the parapet to get a nearer view. Satisfied that what the stranger said was true, I turned to resume my watch, and there, O horror! my own fire was just expiring. No lights or tinder were permitted there; the watcher had to renew the fire by means of the fire. In a frenzy of fear I leaped to new fuel and put it on the fire, fanned it, laid my face to it and strove with maddened gasps to blow the flame up, but all my efforts were vain, -- it was dead.

A sickening dread seized me, succeeded by a paralysis of every nerve except those that aid the hearing. I heard the stranger move toward me, and then I recognized his voice as he spoke. No other noises were about, all was dead and cold, and I seemed to know that the ancient guardian of the fire would return no more, that no one would return, that some calamity had fallen.

"It is the past," the stranger began. "You have just reached a point where you failed to feed the fire ages ago. It is done. Do you want to hear of these things? The old man has gone long ago, and can trouble you no more. Very soon you will be again in the whirl of the nineteenth century."

Speech then returned to me and I said, "Yes, tell me what this is, or has been."

"This is an old tower used by the immediate descendants of the white Magicians who settled on Ireland when England's Isle had not arisen from the sea. When the great Masters had to go away, strict injunctions were left that no fires on these towers were to go out, and the warning was also given that, if the duties of life were neglected, if charity, duty, and virtue were forgotten, the power to keep these fires alive would gradually disappear. The decadence of the virtues would coincide with the failure of the fires, and this, the last tower, guarded by an old and young man, would be the last to fail, and that even it could save the rest if its watchers were faithful.

"Many years elapsed, and the brilliant gem placed upon the mount of Innisfallen blazed both by day and night until at last it seemed to fade a little. The curious sounding-stones, now

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found in Ireland, were not so easily blown; only when a pure and faithful servant came down from the White Tower did the long, strange, and moving sounds float over the mountains from the stone placed near the mount on which was the gem. Those stones had been used by the great magicians, and when the largest of them all, lying near the great White Tower, was sounded, the fairies of the lakes appeared; when the stone of the mount was blown together with that at the White Tower, the spirits of the air and the water ranged themselves obediently around.

"But all this altered, and unbelief crept in while the fires were kept up as a form.

"You were relied on with the old man. But vain dreams detained you *one* hour beyond your appointed time on this fatal day, now in the past but shown you by my special favour. You came, but late. The old man was compelled to wait, but still feared to leave you, for he saw with prescient eye the dark finger of fate. He descended the stairs, and at its foot fell down and died. Your curiosity then drew you at the exact fatal moment to look at yonder tower, although you knew the prophecy and believed it. That moment decided all -- and, poor boy, you could not hold back the iron hand of destiny.

"The fire has gone out. You returned to the floors below; at the foot of the stairs you saw them carrying off the old man and ---- ** "

At this point I saw the shadowy, waving shape of the tower the building had disappeared, the well was beside me, and I was in the field again. Oh!