

18/5

THE DOOM  
OF  
COLYN DOLPHYN.

A POEM;

WITH NOTES

ILLUSTRATIVE

OF VARIOUS TRADITIONS

OF

GLAMORGANSHIRE.

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BY TALIESIN WILLIAMS.  
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“Saint Donats I consider almost Sacred Ground.”

*Rev. J. M. Traherne.*

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and, thence, *o* Sion ap Rhys; after whom, no subsequent notice is found of *it*.

Mr. Williams, however, has procured a cup similarly formed, from the Bard's description.

It appears to have been a frequent custom, in former times, to fix some precious stone at the bottoms of cups and bowls. The amethyst, perhaps, was generally selected, from its being deemed a preventive of drunkenness.

Rhys Meurig, of Cottrel, in his account of the Le Soores, of Peterston super Ely, relates an anecdote to the following effect:— Dafydd ab Gwilym, the highly-gifted Bard of Ifor Hael, (Ivor the Liberal, an ancestor of the present Sir Charles Morgan, of Tredegar) in one of his perambulations, called, late at night, at the Castle of Sir Mathew Le Soore (the last of that family) and being a most popular character, was readily admitted. In the course of conversation, it was observed to him, that he could hardly spare time, from his devotion to Ifor Hael, to call at a proper hour, any where else; but, that the *bottom* of one of Sir Mathew Le Soore's cups was worth more than Ifor Hael's cups altogether. I do not know, as to that, replied the Son of Song, for I have never yet seen the *bottom* of Ifor Hael's cup: and, extempore, added—

“Dewr, a digrif, yw Ifor;—  
Sais yw Sir Mathew Le Sôr.”

Bold and cheerful is Ivor;  
But Sir Mathew Le Soore is a Saxon.

*“Whose mind, the tales of magic spell,  
And cross-road ghosts, had treasure’d well.”—p. 16.*

The popular superstitions, relating to Magic, have been noticed, and minutely described, by so many writers on the subject, that any detailed account of them, here, would justly be deemed superfluous. They prevail through all European countries; without any material variations.

The former practice of burying persons, who had committed suicide, in cross-roads, an usage far “more honoured in the breach than in the observance,” has been long known in this country. Whether this custom, from long sufferance, had become recognized as a feature of our Common Law, or that it was one of the many instances of Vulgar Error, that have, for ages, prevailed, is not a topic for present consideration. The recent, and very salutary changes in our Criminal Code, have effectually abolished all such remains of darker ages. A remark may still be allowable.

Were the various laws of the ancient kingdoms of the Saxon Heptarchy carefully collected, and, together with the Welsh Code of Howel Dda,—*Howel the Good* (published in 1730, by Dr. Wotton, in Latin and Welsh columns, collaterally,) studied, with due care; it is highly probable that the result would identify the maxims, now deemed vulgar errors, with principles acknowledged, and enforced, by those remote, and now exploded institutions.

Persons interred in cross-roads were placed face downwards; and *secured* there, by stakes driven through their bodies.

My Father, about 50 years ago, composed an “Elegy on the death, whenever it should happen, of ————,” who had

unjustly withheld a document, placed in his hands, for the recovery of about £700. The monody had no visible effect on the earthly locomotion of its object; for he extended it to some additional thirty years. But the Bard considered the *Lament* a fair set off against his claim, so unblushingly outraged; and, poor as he was, never after sought for redress.

The following stanza, alluding to the obsolete practice mentioned, is a specimen of the Elegy:—

With downward face, now mark him well,  
As if to view his native hell!  
Nail'd fast with knotty stakes:—  
Where cross the roads they dug his grave;  
There howls his ghost!—unlucky knave,  
Till each old woman quakes!

“*Of fairies dance, when found array'd,  
By midnight moon, in gloomy glade.*”—p. 16.

The belief superstitiously entertained respecting fairies, is not limited to particular districts; but prevails, like the common notions about magic, in most countries: and the modes of existence and operation, imputed to these imaginary beings, are not very variously described.

The following, contains the opinion prevalent in many parts of Wales:—

“The Welsh idea of Fairies is,—that they are the souls of departed human beings; not sufficiently depraved to be severely punished; neither are they so divested of evil, as to be admitted into Bliss; but must remain in their present state of existence, till the last day; when they will be received into Heaven. They are considered to be benevolently disposed towards all virtuous

men; but vice, especially lying and sluttishness, they abominably hate; and they are supposed to punish, invisibly, all that are addicted to such habits."—(E. W.)

Fairies are called, in Welsh "Y Tylwyth Teg," (the Fair People, or Household), "Bendith eu Mammau," (their Mothers' Blessings), &c. These names, or epithets, convey no unfavourable characteristics; and when we consider the merry lives of, dance and concert, they are said to lead; in addition to the high privilege, that—"death visits them never" they may be viewed as Beings of an exalted order.

Their existence here, then, seems to furnish a notion of earthly purgatory;—an exclusion from celestial bliss, rather than a state of hopeless suffering;—an idea, however unreal, that imparts a benign conception of punishment.

"*The light that heralds to the tomb.*"—p. 17.

The superstition of "Canwyll Gorph," (*Corpse-candle*) is said to be confined, not only to Wales, but, *exclusively*, to the Diocese of St. Davids. I have, however, heard the peculiar claim of Dimetia to this luminous portend of Death, strenuously contested, in the vale of Glamorgan; where they maintain, in full confidence, that the privilege was *first* conceded to the ancient See of Caerlleon, in Gwent, when St. David presided there; and that it was *not* translated, with the tutelary Saint, to St. Davids. Leaving so *abstruse* a point to the decision of those who have eyes to *see* this light of fatal omen, (for *all* it seems, are not gifted with such extraordinary powers of vision) I shall here introduce a few extracts respecting it.

The Rev. Edmund Jones may justly be styled the champion of this belief. The scornful compassion which he extends to Sceptics and Infidels, on these momentous apparitions, fully attest his own conviction of their reality. This is *his* testimony :—

“They are chiefly women, and men of weak and womanish understandings, who speak against the accounts of spirits and apparitions. In some women, this comes from a certain proud fineness, excessive delicacy, and a superfine disposition, which cannot bear to be disturbed with what is strange or disagreeable to a vain spirit. But why should the daughters of Mother Eve be so severe to hear of their great adversary Satan, with whom she first conversed, and whom she first believed, and was deceived by him.”

The Rev. Advocate seems to be very wroth, indeed, with the Ladies, for their hardened infidelity, as to the existence of “spirits and apparition;” and transgresses all propriety, in his denunciation of their “superfine” dispositions. But our author unflinchingly proceeds with the subject in question; adducing a variety of instances.

“One Walter John, belonging to the people called Quakers, went to live where one Morgan Lewis, a weaver, had lived before him, and after death, had appeared to some, and troubled the house, saw one night, while in bed, a light come up stairs; and expecting to see a spectre, in fear, endeavoured, but in vain, to awake his wife.” The spectre “that came with a candle in his hand, &c.” proved to be no other personage, than the aforesaid turbulent Morgan Lewis, who had come there, *again*, on account of “some bottoms of wool.”

A clergyman's son is next cited in testimony. He saw a candle advancing towards a bridge, as he returned home from "a debauch." After some trouble and dread, this young man discovered that the bridge had been displaced, and that the candle, consequently, could not go over: He replaced the bridge, but when the candle approached, to pass, he courageously "struck it," "but the effect was strong, for he became dead (only *pro tempore*, it afterwards turns out) on the place." Mr. Jones then moralizes thus:— "Such is the power of the spirits of the other world, and it is ill-jesting with them."

The Divine proceeds:—

"Joshua Coslet, a man of sense and knowledge, told me of several Corpse-candles;—that some dark shadow of a man carried the candle, holding it between his three forefingers over against his face. Others have seen the likeness of a candle carried in a skull. One William John, of Llanboydi, going home one night, somewhat drunk, and bold (it seems too bold), saw one of the Corpse-candles. He went out of his way to meet it. It was a burying, and a corpse upon the bier; the perfect resemblance of a woman in the neighbourhood, whom he knew, holding the candle between her forefingers, who dreadfully grinned at him."

The following remark of this narrator, recalls to mind the "scoundrel" who almost periled the veracity of Baron Munchausen's Travels, by *exaggerating* the incidents recorded in them.

"Some have said that they saw the shape of those who were to be at the burying. I am willing to *suspend* my belief of this, as seeming to be too extravagant, though their foreboding knowledge of mortality appears to be very wonderful and undeniable."

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Corpse-candles are always considered as forerunners of funerals. They pursue the exact courses to be taken by the bodies, whose last journeys, and final places of earthly repose, they are supposed to trace and determine.

Various are the limits prescribed to their influence, and periods of accomplishment. Some say that the deaths, thus anticipatively illustrated, must take place before the termination of the year in which the candles occur; others either extend or circumscribe such limits. The colour and size of the candle are, however, considered quite decisive of the age and sex of the doomed. A red candle goes before the funeral of a male, and a pale one before that of a female; a large one before a full-grown person, a small taper before a child, and so in proportion, for intermediate ages. A man cut off in the full vigour of health and strength, is preceded by an immense flambeau.

These candles are said to proceed from the chambers of the persons whose deaths are thus prognosticated, to their graves; and their undulations represent the irregular motions of the biers; for they are subject to all the obstructions the ensuing funerals are to undergo.

Such is the system to which these luminaries have been reduced; and he is an infidel indeed, in the estimation of many, to this very day, particularly in agricultural districts, and in deep mountain ravines, who would have the hopeless hardihood to deny their existence.



“*Full twenty lustrums o'er his head.*”—p. 18.

The Census, or Survey of the Roman Citizens, and their Estates, was introduced by Servius Tullius, the sixth King; who performed the duty of Censor himself. In process of time, it was found necessary to appoint a Magistracy for that employment; and two Censors were created. Their office was to continue five years; because, every fifth year, the General Survey used to be performed. After this survey and inquisition into the manners of the people, the Censors made a solemn *lustration*, or expiatory Sacrifice, in the name of all the people. The sacrifice consisted of a sow, a sheep, and a bull. This ceremony they called *Lustrum condere*; and, upon this account, the space of five years came to be signified by the word *Lustrum*.”—(*Basil Kennett's Roma Antiquæ Notitia. 3d Ed., pp. 112, 113, 114.*)

“*The tale of Colyn Dolphyn's fate.*”—p. 22.

See the Memoirs;—XIII.—pp. 90 91.

“*Distinguished Famagusta gave,*

*In sacred shrine, a pilgrim's grave.*”—p. 23.

See the Memoirs;—XIII.—p. 90.