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THE "WITCH-BURNING" AT CLONMEL.

THE interest of many of the details disclosed in the recent trial, and the preliminary proceedings before the magistrates of Clonmel, has moved the Council of the Society to direct that the following analysis of the evidence shall be printed, so as to preserve the relevant facts in a form accessible to scientific students.

In the month of March last rumours were afloat in the neighbourhood concerning the mysterious disappearance of Bridget Cleary, aged about twenty-six years, the wife of Michael Cleary, residing at Ballyvadlea, a remote and isolated district a short distance from Cloneen, between that village and Mullinahone, in the county of Tipperary. Ultimately Michael Cleary, Patrick Boland (father of Bridget Cleary), John Dunne, Patrick, James, Michael, and Mary Kennedy, and William Ahearne were brought before the magistrates, charged with assaulting and illtreating Bridget Cleary on the 14th March, and causing her actual bodily harm. Her body had not then been found. The prisoners were remanded, and search was made for the missing woman. On Friday, the 22nd March, the body was discovered, buried in a cramped position, in a piece of swampy land about a quarter of a mile from Cleary's house. An inquest was held and the jury returned a verdict of death caused by extensive burns. These burns, as the evidence showed, were on the abdomen, the lower part of the back, and the left hand.

On the resumption of the magisterial inquiry, in addition to the prisoners already named, William Kennedy and Denis Ganey, a herb-doctor, were also included in the charge. All the Kennedys were cousins of the deceased, except Mary Kennedy, who was her aunt. The report of the proceedings in *The Irish Times* of the 26th, 27th, 28th March, and the 2nd, 3rd, 6th and 8th April last, is here followed.

The most important witness for the Crown was Mrs. Johannah Burke, wife of a labourer residing at Rath Kenney near the Clearys. She stated that on the night of Thursday, the 14th March, she went up to see Mrs. Cleary, who was ill, and met William Simpson and his wife outside the door of the house, which was locked. "Witness asked for admittance, but Michael Cleary said they would not open the door. While they remained outside they stood at the window. They heard someone inside saying: 'Take it, you ——,' or 'witch.' When the door was opened, witness went in and saw Dunne and three of the Kennedys holding Mrs. Cleary down on her bed by her hands and feet, and her husband was giving her herbs and milk in a spoon out of a saucepan. They forced her to take the herbs, and Cleary asked her: 'Are you Mary Boland, the wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of God?' She answered it once or twice, and her father asked a similar question. Michael Cleary [witness thought] then threw a certain liquid on his wife. They put the question to her again, and she used to repeat the words after them. John Dunne then said: 'Hold her over the fire, and she will soon answer.' Dunne, Cleary and P. Kennedy then lifted Mrs. Cleary off the bed, and placed her in a kind of sitting position over the kitchen fire, which was a slow one. Mrs. Cleary's appearance had greatly changed. She seemed to be wild and deranged, especially while they were so treating her. While they held her over the fire, she had only her nightdress and chemise on. They repeated the question, and she answered: 'I am Bridget Boland, daughter of Pat Boland, in the name of God.' She screamed and cried out to me: 'Oh Han, Han!' They put her back to bed . . . Nothing more happened when they put her back to bed about 11 o'clock. They all stayed in the house till next morning at 6 o'clock, except Dunne and Ahearne, who went after two o'clock. Mrs. Cleary never went to sleep. She was nervous and not

sensible. At one time she said: 'The police are at the window; let you mind me now.'

The following evening the witness went with her daughter Katty to Cleary's house, and found Bridget Cleary in bed. The witness prepared some milk for her. Later on, "Mrs. Cleary asked her husband if I was paid for the milk. I said 'Yes,' and showed her the shilling, which she took and put under the blankets, and gave it back again in a minute. Subsequently, when Mrs. Cleary was sitting at the fire with her husband, he said she had rubbed the shilling to her leg. She got angry at that, and said she did not rub it to her leg—that there were no 'pishrogues' about her." Other persons came into the house, among them several of the accused; and Bridget Cleary was dressed and brought down to the kitchen. "Her father, my brother and myself, and deceased and her husband sat at the fire. They were talking about the fairies, and Mrs. Cleary said to her husband, 'Your mother used to go with the fairies, and that is why you think I am going with them.' He asked her, 'Did my mother tell you that?' She said, 'She did; that she gave two nights with them.' I made tea, and offered Bridget Cleary a cup of it. Her husband got three bits of bread and jam, and said she should eat them before she should take a sup. He asked her three times: 'Are you Bridget Cleary, my wife, in the name of God?' She answered twice, and ate two pieces of bread and jam. When she did not answer the third time he forced her to eat the third bit, saying, 'If you won't take it, down you will go.' He flung her on the ground, put his knee on her chest, one hand on her throat, and forced the bit of bread and jam down her throat, saying 'Swallow it. Is it down? Is it down?' . . . I said, 'Mike, let her alone, don't you see it is Bridget that is in it?' meaning that it was Bridget his wife, and not the fairy, for he suspected that it was a fairy and not his wife that was there. Michael Cleary then stripped his wife's clothes off, except her chemise, and got

a lighting stick out of the fire. She was lying on the floor, and he held it near her mouth. My mother and brothers and myself wanted to leave the house when he flung her on the floor, but Michael Cleary had the key of the door in his pocket, and said the door would not be opened until he got his wife back." According to the report, District Inspector Wansborough, who was prosecuting, then asked a shamefully leading question, which would not have been tolerated in an English court of justice; but different principles prevail in Irish courts: "'Did you see him throw the lamp-oil on her?'—I did. . . . 'Did she say anything when she was burning?'—She did. She turned and called out to me, in a mournful tone, 'Oh Han, Han!'—'What did you reply?'—I endeavoured to get out for the peelers. My brother, when he could not get the key, went up into the other room, and fell in a weakness. My mother threw Easter water on him.—'Where was Bridget Cleary all this time?'—She was burning on the hearth. The house was full of smoke and smell. I had to go up to the room. I could not stand. When I looked down to the kitchen I saw the remains of Bridget Cleary on the floor, lying on a sheet. She was lying on her face, and her legs turned upwards as if they had contracted in the burning." The unfortunate woman was then dead. Michael Cleary came up into the room where the witness was and fetched a large sack. "He said, 'Hold your tongue, Hannah. It is not Bridget I am burning. You will soon see her go up in the chimney.' He went down to the kitchen with the sack, and when I looked down again the body had been burned. When she was burning, Michael Cleary screamed out, 'She is burned now, but God knows I did not mean to do it. I may thank Jack Dunne for all of it.'" Cleary and witness's brother Patrick then took the body away to bury it.

Some additional particulars were given by other witnesses who were called to corroborate this hideous story. Katie Burke, a little girl, daughter of the previous witness,

said that Michael Cleary knocked his wife down when she would not eat the third bit of bread. "Then he got a red stump and told her he would put it down her mouth if she would not eat the bit. She did not eat it. Then he caught her and laid her on the fire. Then she took fire. He got lamp-oil and put it on her and she blazed up. When she was burning James and William Kennedy roared for the key, and they did not get it. William Kennedy and Mrs. Burke tried to get the key. . . . Then they went in the room and witness heard Michael Cleary say: 'Go up the chimney!' but did not know what name he called her. Mrs. Cleary was burning, and witness saw a sheet on the floor."

William Simpson of Ballyvadlea, caretaker, who, it will be remembered, met Mrs. Burke outside the door of Cleary's cottage on Thursday evening, was examined on 1st April and said, among other things: "He could not say who opened the door. As he went in he heard loud shouts of 'Away she go, away she go!' He could not say who said that. The men who were holding the deceased were saying it. . . . John Dunne was holding her by the head; Pat Kennedy was holding her arm on the right side; James was holding her on the left side; William Kennedy was holding her by the legs. . . . Deceased was lying upon her back. . . . She appeared to be in pain. She shouted and screamed a little at that time. She screamed more afterwards than she did then. . . . Mrs. Cleary's husband was standing by the bed. He was holding a saucepan in both hands. He asked deceased: 'Are you Bridget Boland, the wife of Michael Cleary, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost?' She made some reply to the effect 'Yes, I am.' . . . The questions were repeated several times: she only answered a few times. Witness saw Michael Cleary afterwards giving his wife some liquids in a spoon out of the saucepan." Asked what was in the saucepan, witness said: "I don't know, but I heard that it

was herbs. I did not hear that anything else was in it. I heard Michael Cleary say that he got some herbs from Ganey. . . . Cleary was forcing the herbs into the mouth of the deceased. She resisted by keeping her mouth closed. The liquid was forced in. Besides this, water¹ was thrown on her. This was called for by Michael Cleary, and was fetched by Mary Kennedy from an adjoining room. This was brought three or four times, and the process of throwing it on her lasted at intervals over a period of ten or twenty minutes. The father and husband were both asking her questions in the meantime." They apparently repeated again and again the question above-mentioned. There were now thirteen persons in the room, including the witness. Colonel Evanson, the presiding magistrate, asked: "'What were they there for, in your opinion?'—To hunt away the witches and fairies. The door was open for that purpose. I don't know that they came for that purpose, but when they were there they were at that work. I went to see Mrs. Cleary." The witness was asked: "'Did not Mrs. Cleary at all reply to the questions put to her?'—She did when she was on the fire. Her father asked her: 'Are you the daughter of Patrick Boland, wife of Michael Cleary? Answer in the name of God.' She answered: 'I am, dada.' Her husband asked her a similar question then, and she said: 'Yes, I am.' Those questions were answered repeatedly by her. They were then satisfied that they had their own.—'What do you mean by that?'—That they had Mrs. Cleary, and not a witch.—'Then what had they got before?'—They believed that they had a witch. About

¹ According to the *Cork Examiner* and other reports, this is called "a certain noxious fluid." Mr. Leland L. Duncan writes: "I specially noted the phrase for enquiry this summer. I found the good folk of Leitrim full of the case, and they told me several little similar tales. From these it appears that the great charm for getting people back from 'the good people' is to throw over them a concoction of strong urine and hen's excrement. This choice compound, or at any rate part of it, is evidently here the 'certain noxious fluid.'"

twenty minutes before she was taken off the bed she screamed terribly. That was when the medicine went down. They also shook her then, and slapped her hands. The same men held her from start to finish. When they were shaking her they all said: 'Away with you! Come home, Bridget Boland, in the name of God!'"¹ After deceased was removed from the fire and fresh clothing put on her, "she was then asked by her husband did she know the persons standing around her, and she said 'Yes.' He showed her one of the Kennedys in particular and asked her what relation was he to her, and she said her first cousin. And he asked her in turn did she know each person in the room, and she said she did. They were all satisfied then that they had her. They were all speaking and saying: 'Do you think it is her that is here?' And the answer would be 'Yes'; and they were all delighted at it." All this took place on Thursday, the 14th March, the first of the two days spoken of by Mrs. Burke. Simpson gave further important evidence. "Witness saw Michael Cleary on the road on the same day that he heard Mrs. Cleary was missing [apparently Saturday, the 16th March], and again on the Sunday following. Cleary said that his wife left the house at 12 o'clock on Friday night. Witness believed him. He saw Cleary again about 7 or 8 o'clock that evening. He asked witness for the loan of a revolver. He said that those parties who had convinced him about his wife would not go with him to the fort." Asked what was meant by that, the witness said: "It appeared to me that they had convinced him that his wife had gone to the fort.

¹ According to some of the reports "a man at each side of the bed kept the body swinging about the whole time." Mr. Duncan says: "There is evidently some virtue in the swinging business. I was told that one way of getting a child back was to seat it on a shovel and swing it out of the door back and forward, saying: 'If you're a fairy, away with you!' You should also, previous to this little ceremony, give it lusmore (foxglove), three drops on the tongue and three in each ear. This explains the herb so frequently mentioned."

—'What was the fort?'—The fort at Kilenagranagh Hill. It appeared to me that they had convinced him that his wife had gone with fairies, and as they had convinced him so far he should see it out with them.—'He wanted a revolver to force them to go?'—Yes. The fort was reported to be a fairies' habitation. Cleary said he expected to meet her at the fort.—'Did he say how he expected her to appear?'—He said she would be riding a grey horse, and she had told him so. And he said that they should cut the ropes that were tying her on the saddle, and she would then stay with him if he was able to keep her. Witness did not lend him a revolver, but afterwards saw Cleary with a big table-knife in his pocket to go to the fort with."

Mary Simpson, wife of William Simpson, corroborated these statements. She also said that when the door was opened, on the Thursday evening, and she and her husband went in with Mrs. Burke and her daughter, "she heard the men inside then say: 'Away she goes, away she goes!' as though they were driving something out of the house. It appeared to her that they did not believe Mrs. Cleary was there, and that they wanted to drive away what was in the bed. . . . They thought it was a witch, but I did not." She further stated that when Cleary was giving his wife the herbs he said: "Take that, in the name of God," and "Bridget Cleary come back to me in the name of God!"

The Rev. Cornelius F. Ryan "deposed that he was curate of the parish of Drangan. The Clearys were members of his congregation, and under his spiritual charge. He had known them for about a year and a half, and never observed any signs of mental derangement in Mrs. Cleary until he attended her almost immediately before her death, on the 13th March. As far as he could say, she and her husband were living on good terms with each other. When he visited her on the afternoon of the 13th she was in bed. She appeared to be in a very nervous state, and, as he thought possibly hysterical, he came to the conclusion that

it might be the beginning of mental derangement. She did not converse with him except as a priest; and her conversation was quite coherent and intelligible." Mr. Ryan administered the last rites of the church to her on that occasion; and on Friday morning, the 15th, he came again, being summoned by Cleary, and celebrated Mass in her room. A piece of evidence follows which ought to be carefully borne in mind, especially in reference to denials by ministers of religion of the existence of superstitious practices and beliefs in their neighbourhood. The witness was asked by the District Inspector: "Is it possible that you heard nothing of these proceeding about witchcraft?" And he replied: "Up to the time [*sic*] I heard nothing—absolutely nothing!" "Don't you think that very extraordinary?" enquired the Inspector. "No," he replied, "I do not. The priest is very often the last to hear of things like that—generally, I should say. I heard a rumour on the Saturday after, that Mrs. Cleary had disappeared mysteriously. I had no suspicion of foul play or witchcraft, and if I had I should have at once absolutely refused to say Mass in the house, and have given information to the police at once."

Dr. Crean gave evidence that he attended the deceased on the 13th March and found her suffering from a slight bronchial catarrh and nervous excitement.

Ultimately, all the prisoners except Ganey (who was discharged) were committed for trial on the charge of wilful murder.

A few extracts may be added from the statements made by the prisoners on their committal. Boland, among other things, said: "Said Cleary to me: 'Have you any faith? Don't you know it is with an old witch I am sleeping?' I said: 'You are not. You are sleeping with my daughter.'" Mary Kennedy "said that on Wednesday she was sent for by Michael Cleary to go down and see his wife. She went down and saw her, and she complained of suffering from a

pain in her head. She said that Michael Cleary was making a fairy of her, and that he had tried to burn her three months ago." John Dunne stated that after the murder Cleary told him: "She was not my wife. She was too fine to be my wife. She was two inches taller than my wife." After going to the priest on Sunday, Cleary "asked him (Dunne) would he go look for her to the fort that evening. He replied that he would not; that that was only moonshine. Cleary said that he was sure that the woman was there; that it was not his wife that he burned." James Kennedy stated that "they," meaning apparently his brother William, Cleary and himself, "went three nights to the fort at Kylenagranagh, but did not see anything."

The trial took place at Clonmel on the 4th and 5th July last, before Mr. Justice O'Brien and a jury. No further illustration of the superstition was elicited save what follows, taken from the evidence of Mrs. Burke, reported in *The Irish Times* of the 6th July. "On cross-examination by Dr. Falconer, witness said she was in Cleary's house when Cleary said to William Simpson that the house was full of fairies. That was on Thursday. He said that not one fairy was going out of the door, but several. 'At the time the body was burned was the Rosary said?'—Yes. At the time the body was laid on the sheet my mother said: 'In the name of God, let you go anywhere and say the Rosary. It was the devil that whispered it into his ears.' Cleary then said to Dunne: 'I have something here that will make her all right.' Dunne said: 'It is not to-day you have a right to get anything for her; it is not in Fethard you had a right to be for a doctor. Three days ago you had a right to be beyond with Ganey, for the doctor had nothing to do with her. It is not your wife is there. You will have enough to do to bring her back. This is the eighth day, and you had a right to have gone to Ganey on the fifth day.' He added that the herbs should be given to her on the fifth day.—'Did he mention the name of the herb? Did he say

it was lusmore?'—No; he said it was the seventh brother of the seventh sister, or the seventh sister of the seventh brother, or something like that. He said that was the last herb that could be given to her; and he said it would either kill or cure. He had herbs in his hand; and he gave instructions to Michael Cleary to boil them, and make the sign of the cross, and go round the house making pishrogues. Cleary asked Dunne was he doing it right, and Dunne said he was. Then Cleary went round the house making pishrogues and charms. Dunne whispered to Cleary, so that I should not hear what the charm was. Cleary made no fairy of her; it was all Dunne's fault. Cleary was fond of his wife and had the priest to attend her." ¹

The result of the trial was that all the prisoners were found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to various terms of penal servitude and imprisonment, the sentence on Cleary being that of twenty years' penal servitude.

It is not intended here to discuss the details of the superstitions alluded to by the witnesses, as to which many interesting questions arise. Be it sufficient to point out that though the word *witch* is frequently used, it is abundantly clear that, whether Cleary was or was not himself a dupe (as to which a careful reading of the evidence may suggest a doubt), the majority of the prisoners were at first under the impression that Bridget Cleary had been taken away by the fairies and a changeling substituted, though this impression seems to have been removed from the minds of most of them after she was placed on the fire on the Thursday evening.

It would only seem necessary to add a protest, in the interest of the due administration of the law, against the article by Mr. E. F. Benson in the *Nineteenth Century* for June last. Some of Mr. Benson's interpretations of the

¹ Here it was obvious, as the judge pointed out to the jury, that the witness was trying to screen her relative Cleary at the expense of Dunne.

evidence before the magistrates are disputable; but whether they are right or wrong is not the point. The article in question was published before the trial. It was an attempt to influence public opinion upon a case that was still *sub judice*. And, however unlikely to reach the jurymen who would have to try the guilt of the prisoners, it ought not to have been published at that time.
