

THE TRAGEDY OF THE VALE OF TOWY.

Whenever the reader travels by the London and North-Western Railway from the pleasantly-situated townlet of Llandilofawr, northwards along the right bank of the Towy, as soon as the train leaves the station let him look across the stream, and he will see a house about two miles above the railway, wherein was committed in the last century a murder that caused intense excitement in the Principality. The oral tradition of it has come down after the lapse of three generations to the present day, and the older inhabitants are ever ready to entertain inquisitive visitors with a fairly full and correct narration of its leading incidents.

The time and the locality of the tragedy deserve a few remarks before we proceed to place before the reader the particulars of the crime. The Vale of Towy lies nearly east and west in the middle of Caermarthenshire. The traveller to South Wales by the Great Western Railway first gets a glimpse of it when he rounds the curve just below Ferryside Station, when he is opposite the grey ruins of the historic castle of Llanstephan, overhanging the further bank of the broad mouth of the Towy, which there loses itself in the ocean. This river has its origin in the hills of the upper part of Cardiganshire, its source being contiguous to those of the Teivy and the Severn. The latter at first takes an eastern course, then diverts to the south. But both the Teivy and the Towy run at first almost in a parallel direction to the south, and then they turn westward. In Welsh legendary lore it is said that these two rivers in their infancy challenged each other which would first get to the sea. The graceful and sedate Towy chose to make its channel through the charming central meadow-land of Caermarthenshire, thinking thereby it would find no obstruction in its race for the coast; but the sprightly and swift-footed Teivy chose the hilly and sloping boundary land of Cardiganshire and Caermarthenshire, and, by sliding over the low-lying rocks, and gliding over the gentle cascades, and leaping small falls, she reached the Atlantic several hours before her meandering sister.

The Vale of Towy assumes that designation at the town of Llandovery, which is nearly thirty-five miles from the sea, and

where the river finally clears itself from the hilly land in the early part of its course. Llandilofawr is twelve miles below Llandovery, and stands in the most charming part of the vale. The scenery that surrounds it is certainly unsurpassed, if not unrivalled, by any other in the island. Dynevor Park, to the west of it, and lying close to it, is second only to Windsor Park. Just beyond it is the gem of the vale, Grangar Hill, the theme of a few tender lines by the poet Dyer, who at one time lived at the adjacent house of Aberglasney. Below that is Dryslwyn Castle, on an isolated, grassy, and rocky mound, and in ruins, grimly overlooking the silvery stream lazily wending on its way to the sea, and as if meditating a plunge from its precipitous seat to the deep waters below. On the other side of the river, and on a hill, stands what is commonly called Paxton's Tower, wondering why it was built, and why it is now so much neglected. Higher up, and in the direction of Llandilo, stands on a proud and commanding elevation Golden Grove, a noble palatial residence belonging to Earl Cawdor, near which nestles the parish village of Llanvihangel Aber Bythych, where the highly gifted Church divine, Jeremy Taylor, found a quiet retreat during the troublesome time of the Great Rebellion: To the east of Llandilo, and also on the left bank of the Towy, are the magnificent ruins of the castellated tower of Careg Cenen, with its mysterious underground passage; this is prominently situated on a large hill of lime rock, which apparently was separated during a volcanic throee in a distant geological epoch from the lime mountain on the other side of a weird dingle, through which the limpid brooklet, Llwchwr, runs.

Altogether, physical objects alone offer sufficient inducement to the antiquarian, the geologist, and the lover of Nature to visit this enchanting locality, and to linger in the enjoyment of its diversified charms. A local bard, a native of the townlet, composed the following alliterative Welsh stanza in praise of it. We shall not attempt to translate it, as we feel ourselves utterly unable to do anything like justice to it. The English reader had better hasten to master the vernacular of the country, that he may be able to judge for himself of the beauty of such artistic composition :—

O ! Hudoles Landilo !—wyf unwaith
Yn dy fonwes eto !
Mangre fy medd oerwedd, O !
Dy fonwes di fo hono !

The charming country surrounding Llandilo is studded with the seats of the land-owning squirearchy. The proprietors of the soil in the Principality very generally reside amidst their tenantry. The Cambrian subjects of the British throne, since the accession of the House of Tudor, have shown complete loyalty to the ruling Sovereign. They are also remarkable for

their respectful deference and love to their landowners. A genuine British tenant always calls his landowner "Master," and never presumes to think that he would be right were he to oppose or disobey him. In the good days of old they were guided in all political contests by the expressed opinions of their "Masters," and always voted at all elections, parochial as well as Parliamentary, as they were expected to do in the "Great House." The spread of education and the circulation of cheap newspapers have considerably altered matters of late, and under the ægis of the Ballot the tenants have cast their bonds asunder. But when a few determined, and more than ordinarily opinionative, voters were recently evicted for presuming to follow their convictions in politics, they could not but continue to express their old feeling of respect and attachment towards their masters. This was especially noticed in the case of the chief evictor in Cardiganshire. He, in the succeeding summer, attended a Welsh Spa, and there met some of the ruined evicted persons and their sympathisers, who treated him with the utmost courtesy, and he walked about early and late in perfect security. This respectful behaviour has undoubtedly originated and become so prevalent by their thorough acquaintance with the Word of God, in which obedience to the higher authorities is specially enjoined, and a blessing is pronounced upon those that are reviled, persecuted, and spoken evil against falsely.

In the middle of the Eighteenth Century there lived one of such country squires, William Powell by name, in a hamlet called Dyffryn Ceidrych, on the left bank of the Towy, about three miles above Llandilo. He frequently shifted his abode. His chief place was called Glantowy, immediately on the bank of the river. This ancient place still remains in the same state as it was in the last century, and is now a very respectable and substantial farm homestead, and in the time we refer to it must have been considered a superior gentleman's residence. Before the year 1770, Mr. Powell removed from Glantowy to Glanareth, a much less pretentious residence, by the roadside, about a mile nearer Llandilo. He was the owner of considerable landed property in the neighbourhood, and of very respectable connections. From his boyhood he had been of ungovernable temper, and his conduct had been reckless and immoral, a great source of grief to his parents and vexation and terror to the neighbours. Tradition has handed down instances of ungainly traits in his youthful days. When he was short of money he would not hesitate to help himself from his father's store whenever opportunity offered. Banking establishments were rare and inconvenient in those remote days; therefore, each possessor of wealth in country districts was compelled to keep his money on his own premises as well as he could. Powell's father kept his coin, which consisted chiefly of guineas,

in an open cask in the cellar under the parlour. He then lived at Brynwhyth, at present a fine farmhouse in the neighbourhood of Gwynfan. His unruly son William contrived to make a small hole immediately above the treasure, and, by inserting through it a long rod with soft pitch attached to its end, managed to deliver many a guinea from its subterranean prison and speedily add it to the deficient currency of the time. At a public meeting of the parishioners he took offence at some remarks made to him or about him by an influential neighbour, and, seizing a massive candlestick on the table, he hurled it with all his force at the offender's head. Fortunately his aim was as mistaken as his intention was criminal. When he resided at Glantowy he caused the ruin of the character of one of his servant girls. In order to endeavour to hide his guilt he murdered her in an upper room at Glantowy, and afterwards threw her body out of the window, purposing to prove that she had committed suicide. The mark of her blood is still shown, and, as usual in such cases, said to be indelible, on the boarding of the room. For this murderous outrage he was tried at the assizes in the town of Caermarthen. But he managed to secure his acquittal by liberal bribes to the jurors and others.

In the "Eurgrawn Cymraeg," published in 1770, the first Welsh periodical, which began and ended its life in one year, a correspondent informs the Editor that on a public occasion an honest Methodist referred to the disgraceful conduct of all concerned in the trial, excepting the unsuspecting judge, in the following plain words:—"I have heard or read somewhere of a person charged with having committed a murder, and there were witnesses enough to prove him guilty; but gold-dust blinded the witnesses, corrupted the counsel, disappointed the judge, and deceived the jury, so that a verdict of not guilty was returned, and the evil-doer was acquitted. But the vengeance of God followed the wily wretch, and marked him, it seems, with the mark of Cain; because ever after he was hated by all, and he tried to find delight in building and planting, but he found no pleasure in anything but in mischief and oppression; and when conversing with others he could never look straight in the face of an honest man."

Driven by his unbridled passions, young Powell committed other deeds that showed he felt neither respect for God nor love for man. When he lived at Brynwhyth one of his manservants offended him. In some secluded spot he attacked the offender, and succeeded in killing him. He afterwards cut up the body and concealed it all but one of the hands, which was found in the place where the murder was committed. But owing to his wealth and position in society no investigation was made into the affair. Another instance of his

evil disposition is recorded. Upon returning home one dark night he passed the homestead of a farmer, who was the grandfather of the late Rev. D. Griffiths, one of the first batch of missionaries sent out by the London Missionary Society to Madagascar. He had some cause, real or imaginary, of enmity towards this farmer. He asked him to accompany him part of the way home, pretending that he was afraid some persons evil-disposed towards him were lying in wait for him. But the farmer suspected he had some other motive in making the unusual request, and, therefore, he took care to be on his guard. As they were going through a deep glen he observed Powell, who was on horseback, raising his heavy stick, apparently to strike him. But the farmer anticipated the treacherous aggressor, and with his own stick thrashed him until he fell off his horse; he then returned, glad of his escape, and, probably, with little regret at his enemy's fall or care what became of him. Powell was not satisfied with his own personal efforts to remove objectionable persons from his path; he also endeavoured to employ judicial means to attain the same end. He attempted the latter method in the case of a neighbouring farmer he had a grudge against. He went in the early dusk of a winter evening and placed his own plough in the straw-shed of the farmer. Before retiring for the night the farmer and his manservant went out with a light to see and feed the cattle, when they discovered the strange plough. The servant said it was not there early in the evening; it had been placed there since the cattle had been housed that day, and had their first feed. Upon close inspection the servant found it was Powell's plough, which he had often seen at the smithy of the hamlet. The object in bringing the plough there was at once apparent to them; if the plough were found on the farmer's premises he would be charged with stealing it, and, if convicted, sentenced to death, which was at that time the punishment for petty theft. Therefore, the plough must at once be disposed of. Being mostly made of wood, it was cut to pieces and burnt in the kitchen fire, and the iron portions of it were concealed. Next day Mr. Powell appeared, accompanied by a constable, and, with the authority of a search warrant, in vain looked for his plough, and, to his great surprise and vexation, was disappointed.

A person of such detestable character was a pest. He was dreaded by all except a few intimate people who were either in his employment or possessed with a kindred spirit of immorality. He was well aware that his life had for some time been in danger; in fact, it had often been attempted. Murderous emissaries had been hired to waylay and shoot him, but all attempts had hitherto failed. For some time before the end came he had been in the habit of keeping persons about him

for protection, and never spent a night at home without company. His chief enemy was William Williams, a tradesman in the town of Llandovery. There had been some litigious disputes between them. But the most bitter cause of enmity between them was the fact that Williams had disturbed Powell's domestic peace. In August, 1768, Williams ran away with Powell's wife, and took her, and her children from the boarding school, to London. Mr. Powell was obliged to apply to the Court of the King's Bench for a Habeas Corpus to get at his children, and, by the recommendation of the Court, he allowed his wife £100 a year for a separate maintenance.

Soon after Williams set about accomplishing Powell's death. He hired a person to murder him when returning from Swansea, but this assassin returned without doing so, having failed to meet Powell. Then Williams formed a conspiracy to take away Powell's life. Two motives instigated him to commit this heinous act; he wished to revenge himself for some unsuccessful lawsuits he had brought against Powell, and he also desired to remove every obstacle to make Mrs. Powell his own lawful wife. Such was the excess of immorality and irreligion in those days, that he found many desperate characters willing to join in the conspiracy. Five of his accomplices were his fellow townsmen at Llandovery—William Thomas, a constable; William Morris, a saddler; David Morgan, and Walter Evan, tinkers; and David Llewelyn, of the adjacent village of Mothvey, farmer, and a tenant of Williams. These five made their way on Sunday evening, the 7th of January, 1770, to a small public-house called Cwmdu, near a farmhouse still existing, and called Glwyndu. This public-house has since disappeared. When it existed it was about a mile and a half distant from Glanareth, where Powell was then living. It was kept by a person called Charles David Morgan, who was one of the conspirators. In the course of that night others joined those who had already arrived—John Isaac, William Spiggot, William Charles, and some whose names have not been preserved. They all remained there throughout that night, and the following Monday evening, after carefully disguising themselves, started for Glanareth about six o'clock armed with guns, swords, and daggers. On their way they met John Spiggot, the servant of Glantowy Farm, whom they compelled, so he stated afterwards, to accompany them. There was a crisp snow on the ground, which enabled their footsteps to be followed, both going and returning, and some of their footprints to be sworn to. When they reached the house William Powell was sitting in the parlour, and three men with him for the sake of company and protection. In the kitchen there were some half a dozen persons, including two servants of the house—John Morgan and Margaret Jones. The conspirators approached the house

through the back entrance in the garden. A knock was heard at that door, and a little girl opened it, when a rush was made into the house; two persons stopped at the door leading from the passage to the kitchen with a sword and a gun, to prevent anyone from coming out to give assistance or raise an alarm. Some of the others forced their way to the parlour. The three persons that sat with Mr. Powell were not assaulted, but allowed to escape, which they did as quickly as they could. Powell was struck and stabbed by more than one of his assassins, his chief enemy running him through with his sword. He fell, covered with wounds, seven of which were afterwards pronounced to be of a fatal character.

The deed was done! Now the authors must flee from the Nemesis that would soon be on their heels. But it was very loth to move after them, and unusually slow to overtake them. They returned to the small inn on the hillside, and, having changed their disguising dress, and removed every trace of disfigurement, they left the house, and each went his own way, never all to meet again, or to derive the benefit they had promised themselves from the commission of such an atrocious deed. Williams had promised £100 to each of them if they succeeded in accomplishing his purpose. The promise was never fulfilled, nor did any of his accomplices claim the reward, and but few of them lived to require it.

There was a mixed feeling in the country when the crime became known. There was a feeling of gladness that such a desperate character was removed from the world, and of conviction that he had undoubtedly merited his fate, inasmuch as he had frequently committed deeds deserving death, but on each occasion he had wrested himself from the clutches of the law and disappointed the public executioner. His own brother-in-law, Marmaduke Bowen, of Cefentrenfa, when he heard of his murder, said "Praise be to God! The villain is gone at last. He troubled many people in his lifetime." Yet a great horror spread over the Principality when it was seen that it was possible to secure the services of such a gang of desperadoes to do the bidding of a malicious person. The authorities were very slow in endeavouring to bring the criminals to justice. The night the murder was committed nothing was done. All seemed paralysed. The neighbours fled from the house, and left the servants in charge of it with their master's corpse weltering in blood on the parlour floor. There is strong authority to the oral tradition that the two chief servants already named took advantage of that awful lonely night to take quiet possession of a good sum of money hoarded by their master in the house. It was missed afterwards, and never discovered by its rightful owners. But John Morgan and Margaret Jones became soon afterwards man and wife, and re-

moved to a distant part in an adjoining county, and took a large farm there beyond the capability of ordinary farm labourers to stock, and brought with them to their new neighbourhood a firkinful of guineas.

When the magistrates did bestir themselves in the affair several of the conspirators had disappeared from their homes. It was reported that one of them had gone to North Wales. Two constables were sent after him. They discovered his hiding place, but failed to take him into custody. He had once a very narrow escape. He was going along a road on foot, and they were riding after him. It seemed all over with him, when there happened to be near him a person driving a cart laden with brushwood. He asked the driver to throw the load upon him by the roadside, to hide him from the two persons riding after him. He said that they were constables coming after him to take him to prison for some debt he owed in South Wales. The kind North Walian at once complied. The fugitive lay down in the ditch and the brushwood was thrown upon him. Soon the mounted constables overtook the empty cart and asked the driver if he had seen a person pass that way. He said that he had gone just a few minutes before them. They followed his direction with all speed. They soon disappeared, and the driver then removed the brushwood and liberated the quickwitted fugitive, who rose unhurt from the ditch and finally escaped. William Williams also went to North Wales; his horse was found near Newtown, in Montgomeryshire, but he himself managed to escape out of the country. A reward of £100 was offered for his apprehension, and he was described as "slender, straight, and well-made, and about five feet nine and a half inches high, and 28 years of age; a small scar upon his upper lip, a long visage, and pale complexion; large and hard hands, and 'tis supposed one hand is larger than the other, as he was a great ball player." It was said that he made good his escape over the sea to the Continent. When the French soldiers that landed at Fishguard in February, 1797, passed in custody through Llandovery, some said that Williams was among them, and that some of his fellow-townsmen recognised him. This is hardly credible, as his age would then be at least fifty-five, much too great an age for him to be in the ranks; and it is highly improbable that he should have been made an officer, or would have volunteered to act as guide to a hostile force invading his native country. Besides, it is not likely he would have risked the chance of being known and captured. Those of his accomplices that fell into the hands of the authorities were tried in the ensuing Spring Assizes at Hereford. The trial, according to an old Act made in the reign of Henry VIII., relating to the Counties of the Lordships' Marchers of Wales, moved to that town. For the prosecution was fully aware that

no Caermarthenshire jury would convict the murderers of the notorious Squire of Glanareth ; they would have much preferred to acquit them, and given them a grand ovation for ridding society of such a pest. Three of the accused were acquitted, and six found guilty, and executed on March the 30th. Two bodies were hung in chains on Hardwick Common, near Hay, and the four others were delivered to the surgeons. An account of the trial, with a verbatim report of the evidence, was published in a pamphlet in that year. A short history of the tragedy appears in the "Gentleman's Magazine" for the same year. Of course contemporaneous personal evidence has long since disappeared ; the last survivor of that age was probably one Jemima, a centenarian, who died in 1858 at a farm house, in the parish of Llandilofawr, called Craig y Moch. She was eleven years of age when the murder was committed, and a nurse at Glantowy in 1770, and, therefore, a fellow-servant of John Spiggot, who was forced to be present at the murder, though he was acquitted at the trial of being accessory to it. Old Jemima's eyesight had long failed her before her decease, but her memory was clear to the end, and she was fond of giving the details of the great murder to the close of her long life. Several particulars in the foregoing narrative are due to her relation of them when she was in her hundredth year.

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