

The Long Night of Keragh Caiside

By Lee Russell

Something is wrong here.

It is unusually hot in the little village of Ashby this summer. The sun's glare is relentless during daylight hours. At night its heat covers us in a suffocating shroud.

The people are wary of the most unexpected things. Sometimes I see them peering at shadows when there is nothing there, or listening attentively for a sound that I haven't heard. They have an aura of false bravado that disappears when they think I'm not watching. That's when I see them checking over their shoulders as they walk the streets at dusk, or talking with hushed earnestness in little groups and pointing across the fields. Nobody has said anything directly to me, but small villages are like that, of course.

In the year I have been here, hiding under the disguise of researching a book on early civilisations, I have seen all the normal small village institutions: church, post office, Women's Institute, fetes. It was at the May Day fair that the vicar introduced me to Miss Appleby, saying that her family had lived in Hardwick Hall for centuries and she was something of an expert on local history. She had seemed distracted as he spoke and absently waved away his praise for the healthy glow that she had acquired during her recent holidays.

I felt true fear when she turned her full attention onto me: "Come to see me any time at Hardwicke Hall, Mr. Cairns. I rarely get visitors and it will be interesting to talk with you," she had said. Since then she has twice received me graciously and shared books from her family's library. Nothing seems unusual or unnatural and yet my stomach churns in fright of *her*.

For six years I had followed the subtle trail of clues that finally led to this little place in England. While moving from Slovenia, across the Alps and onwards into Salzburg, I was very close, just weeks behind it, I think. It must have stayed there in Austria for a few months before suddenly blazing across southern Germany and into Belgium. All the time it was heading westwards, perhaps towards its home.

'Bidh cron duine cho mòr ri beinn mun lèir dha fhèin e,' my father had told me.

'A man's fault will be as big as a mountain before he sees it.'

But *we* know the fault and, whatever happens I must complete the search and finally make things better.

I would have lost track of it in Ostend but for a conversation that I overheard as I dined one evening. Two men were talking about the barely reported story of a murder on board the Dover ferry. The body of the young man had been found hidden in a lifeboat, his throat crudely ripped out.

The clues had finally dried up here in Ashby, on the Isle of Thanet. An ancient place; early man walked here over four thousand years ago. The Romans invaded it, Vikings owned it for a while, French knights stared eagerly at it across the Channel, as did the Nazis hundreds of years later... a long history with deep roots; just the kind of place to find *it*.

I am finally sure that it is her. Now I have to do something about it.

The sun is still merciless in the late afternoon. Tight boughs of trees close over my head as I step off the narrow roadway and onto the driveway leading to Hardwick Hall. Despite the heat, a sudden coldness slips over me in the solitude of this place.

The house watches from the end of the shingle path. Twin columns guard the entrance and funnel my eyes towards the massive oak door. It is very old and wears a coat of enduring weathering. Unexpectedly, it starts to open with an accusing groan at the lightest touch as I knock.

Stepping inside, my eyes take a brief moment to adapt to the subdued lighting. *Something* seems to rush past me but when I blink all I can see is Miss Appleby standing in the hallway, illuminated by the faint light passing through the dirty skylight. Her heavy linen dress hangs in still folds against the cloud of hot air that billows in behind me. A slight smile curves the corners of her mouth, tickling the meagre grey hair that curls around her head and bringing some embers of life to the wrinkles in her otherwise morbid face. A seemingly old lady but of indeterminate years, some people reckon her to be at least ninety. When we first met she declined to confirm her age, laughing that having seen so much what did the counting of it matter? Her pose indicates that she had been moving from one room to another, but an overwhelming *stillness* impossibly suggests that she had always been standing there.

A heavy grandfather clock ponderously *tocks* in the corner, marking a timeless moment until it is abruptly broken by the dull thud of the door closing behind me.

Miss Appleby moves forwards, leaning on her cane. She seems to almost glide as the hem of her dress brushes the floor. "Back so soon, Jason?"

"Hello, Miss Appleby," I reply. "I hope I am not disturbing you, but you said to come back whenever I wanted to learn more about the village's history."

She inclines her head with the barest of nods: "Yes, of course."

I reach into my corner-store bag and hold out a raspberry ice-lolly for her: “It has been so hot; I thought you might like this ...”

The annoyance in her expression is abruptly replaced with surprise, and then a stunningly unguarded smile. “Why, thank you; that is a very kind thought!” Taking the slim packet of frozen fruit juice, she effortlessly tears the top off with sharp nails and sucks greedily on the exposed ice, murmuring “Hmmm, nice.”

My eyes track a small rivulet of raspberry water slipping down the corner of her mouth towards her chin. A thin red line, silky, captivating.

“Oh, dear! What a mess I’m making!” she laughs and wipes it away with a stiletto fingertip.

I had not previously noticed the unusually long taper of her fingers, or the strength suggested by their peculiarly bulging knuckles. I smile and laugh politely.

“Let’s go into the study,” she says and enters the small room tucked under the stairs.

I pause for a moment, trying to control my fear. I have been in there twice before. On both occasions I had left with a feeling of dread cold that had penetrated into my very bones. This time I expect to die in there, in one way or another.

Setting my shoulders square, I follow her in.

Miss Appleby is already sitting in her chair by the desk in the far corner when I enter. She must have put her cane away; I can’t see it anywhere. A small window is set high in the wall behind her desk. Such warm light as it permits to pass seems to take years off her appearance and I have a vision of how beautiful she must have looked as a young woman. As I watch, she places her bare feet on the rim of her grey metal wastepaper basket with deliberate precision.

“Take a seat,” she says, gesturing to the high-backed chair in the corner.

Placing my bag on the floor, I tug the heavy chair so it faces her more directly and sit down.

Her toes are flexing and curling in a captivating, mesmerising dance. I drag my attention away from them, only to be embarrassed by the feeling of my face betraying my musings about her younger self as she watches me carefully, like a scientist studying a curious sample.

“Why are you here, Jason?”

That is the question.

I am not ready to confront the answer so I stall for time: “I’ve finished the books you selected

for me,” I answer simply.

“Which one interested you the most?” The directness of the question matches the way her eyes are sizing me up.

“The two books on the village's earliest history, actually,” I reply.

“Yes?”

It is time to play my first gambit. “Indeed. It was very interesting reading about how the people built this place up and defended it from all the dangers of the surrounding forests.”

“What dangers did they face? Can you show me?”

Is that a first note of caution in her voice?

“Sure,” I say, bending over to pick up my book bag. As I straighten I am shocked to find her standing beside me. I recoil, my heart pounding.

Miss Appleby's hand is dry, lightly rasping as she places it on my forearm. Her fingertips easily slip down the light sheen of perspiration towards the back of my hand. A bead of sweat opens on my upper lip, saltily moistening it.

“I didn't mean to make you jump,” she says, her voice now soft, yet with deeper undertones. Are her cheeks a bit flushed? It *is* hot in here. How did she move so quickly?

I swallow nervously. “Uh, no, that's alright. I didn't hear you walk over, that's all; you made me jump.”

“I'd made a good assassin,” she jokes, her eyes mirroring the humour. Or are they mocking me? “Now then, which pieces interested you?”

I pull out her copy of Brady's *Celtic Myths* and open it at the section on Irish monsters. “This one, the story of the Dearg Due.” I watch from the corner of my eye but her expression does not change. “Although she is an Irish mythological monster, there is a parallel with a story I have read in one of the oldest scrolls held in the Canterbury diocese records.”

“Yes?” Her voice is hard yet inviting me to continue.

“According to the myth the Dearg Due was a vampire, the risen yet undead form of a beautiful Irish girl who killed herself after her father forced her into marriage with a man who then treated her terribly. Every year she would rise from her grave and use her beauty to lure men to their deaths.

“That legend predates the arrival of the Romans in Britain... and yet, there is an account in the records of Brother John, a Franciscan monk who travelled through Thanet in the fifteenth century, of a witch who was pursued across the fields and woods near the hamlet of Ashenham. Her intense beauty had lured men to her den, where their throats were torn and their blood spilled on the ground.

“The witch herself escaped the chase, but a secret scroll records the discovery of three maidens buried nearby in shallow graves. When they were uncovered they apparently attacked the men, tearing at their necks. Brother John records his anguish at the rushed burning of these creatures before he had the chance to try and redeem their souls.

“Ashby is the modern day site of Ashenham, so according to that account the witch was living nearby. If that is right, the witch’s den could have been near where Hardwick Hall stands today. If the myths and Brother John’s account are true, then maybe she wasn’t a witch. Maybe she was a vampire like the Dearg Due, or something similar.”

My voice trails away under the pressure of Miss Appleby’s silent contemplation.

She suddenly spins on her heels and sits back down, folding her long fingers on her lap. “So, you are a vampire hunter now are you, Jason?”

“No; well, not exactly. I am tracking myths, of course.” My laugh sounds hollow in the tight confines of her small study.

“What if you discovered a real vampire? What would you do then?”

“Hypothetically? It would depend on who the vampire was.”

Without moving she seems to lean towards me. A sense of constrained energy hangs in the air. Her head seems larger, her face younger, her eyes more piercing. Her mouth opens wide and her muscular tongue toys with the tips of over-large teeth.

Then she leaps from her seat screaming “Grrrrr ahhhhh aieeee!”

Reflex thrusts me back in the chair, my animal instincts hopelessly looking for a way out, but its high back and heavy base hold me in place.

Miss Appleby... vampire Appleby bounces off the wall and scampers across the ceiling. The claws on her fingers and toes rip out chunks of plaster that fall as a cloud of rubble in her wake.

She drops into a catlike crouch by the door as I am just managing to stand. ‘Trapped!’ The thought shoots through my mind, chasing the fear surging through my guts.

She... it, screams again, its mouth wide open in a snarl: “Grrrr ahhhhh aieeee!”

Then it speaks to me, its eyes burning with hate, “Time to die!” Its lips are lacerated by those terribly serrated teeth, but there is no bleeding.

“Wait!” I manage to shout, holding a hand in front of my chest as it pounces. It lands heavily on my chest, pinning me down on the floor.

It is smiling now. “I am hungry!” it hisses into my face. Its breath smells like rotting meat.

Pinning me down with impossibly strong hands, she opens her mouth around the soft jugular tissue of my neck. Her tongue scratches my skin as she slowly rolls it around that pulsing vein.

“Stop! Keragh, stop!” I shout.

The creature snarls, plunges outstretched fingers into my pectorals and thrusts me towards the ceiling: “How do you know my name, human?” it demands.

“I’ve been following you for all of my adult life,” I tell her, trying not to whimper. “I took over from my father when he was too old to keep on searching, and he from his father, and back throughout hundreds of years... my name is Jason Cairns, but long ago our family were called Caiside. I think you knew my ancestor, Ánrothán Caiside...”

The creature shudders at the mention of that name. Its arms waver and then it slams me back onto the floor.

“You lie! They are all dead, I killed them!” it cries.

I cough, spitting blood and dust from my mouth. I can feel my life flowing from the wounds in my chest as I start to shake.

I force myself to speak before it makes the final choice for us both: “One of his sons survived, a young man called Aeron. You never heard about him; they’d had a big argument about a girl that Aeron loved. Ánrothán disowned his son before you were even born. It was thirty years later that Aeron heard that he had died... before he heard how you had torn his father’s throat out.

“When Aeron heard why you had killed yourself he was ashamed. You were family, you were his sister. He was scared of what you had become, the Dearg Due, but he wanted to try and find you to say sorry.

“Every generation since, for over two thousand years, the male descendants of the line of Caiside have tried to find you... and here I am...”

Keragh, the Dearg Due, vampire... death...

It slips one hand out of my chest and punches me in the face. My head bounces off the floor and my vision blurs.

“Caiside... I am going to take you apart very slowly,” it hisses in my ear, “... and when there is only your life left in the bits of you that remain, then I will take that as well!”

My eyes won't focus until the pain of her ripping into my abdomen forces everything into sharp relief.

“Aaaagh.... Keragh, stop!” I scream. “I have come here to help you; please, let me help you!” I start to cry, knowing that in moments I may have failed to keep the promise that Aeron made all those thousands of years ago.

My tears seem to confuse it for a moment. It pulls its other hand out of my body and then back-flips onto the desk, landing in a crouch.

Outside the day is fading into night. The red-hued light of dusk falls softly through the window, casting a soft glow over Keragh. She is fully changed and her female form is now young, vivacious, beautiful, beguiling... tempting, terrifying. Her taut muscles are straining, barely held in check.

In seconds she will decide whether to kill me, or let me kill her. She does not know that in either case I will die, but that doesn't matter anymore.

“Why would you help me, Caiside? And what could you possibly do for me anyway?”

I struggle to raise myself up, feeling my resolve waning under the withering contempt of her glare.

“My family has followed you for more than two thousand years. Every year you have killed more men, ripped out their lives and drunk their blood. You've punished thousands of men over the centuries for the actions of just two.

“The life force in their hot blood has sustained your undead form and allowed you to walk the Earth in the name of your vengeance. Keragh, you have had your revenge and your legend will sustain for thousands of years to come, as a warning to all men about the true cost of scorning a woman.

“But for all of those centuries, year after year, week after week, night after night, you have slept in the ground, where the spirit of the Earth has maintained your body in this limbo. Isn't it time to rest now?”

My final question hovers in the air between us for a moment. Then she falls to the floor and covers her face with her hands: “I cannot cry, Caiside,” she says.

“I know,” I reply simply.

I wait for her undead grief to abate and eventually she looks up. “You did not answer my question. Why and how would you help me now?”

This is the moment that all those generations of my suffering ancestors strained in vain to reach.

“I have to help you if I can. I have no choice; like my ancestors before me also had no choice,” I tell her. “When Aeron heard what Ánrothán had done he visited your grave. He came to plant beautiful flowers that would have proclaimed to the world the natural gift of life that you had been so cruelly denied. Instead he found a crude gash in the ground beneath the oak tree where you had been buried.

“Aeron cried for you then, and a little for himself perhaps. His tears stirred an Earth Spirit that shared a home with that mighty tree. The Spirit told him that you had risen from the grave, burning with a vengeance that could only ever be salved for moments by drinking the warm blood of men.

“Aeron told the Spirit he wanted to atone for the terrible things that men had done to you. It offered him a single chance: if he would accept the curse of his family being compelled to find you, no matter how long that took, then the tree would provide the means to end both of our sufferings.”

Keragh shifts onto her feet; that look of animal cunning returning to her face: “I smell your blood, Caiside. You are wasting my time with these stories. I think it is time for you to die!” She kneels beside me in a crouch, runs a finger through the blood pulsing stickily from my wounds and lifts it to her tongue: “Aaaah, lovely!” she hisses.

“I’m getting cold, Keragh. Please listen to me. I am your last chance; I am the last of the Caisides. If you want this to end it must be now!”

She cocks her head to one side and pokes a hand into my guts. “Still warm here,” she laughs.

“Look in my bag!” I shout, hoping that the harsh tone of command might jolt her into paying attention.

She punches me in the face again. “NOBODY tells me what to do!” she screams.

“LOOK IN THE BAG!”

She shrugs and pulls the bag across the floor into the spreading pool of my blood.

I cough and strain to stay awake. “I really am getting cold,” I say softly. “Whatever happens, I’m going to die. But in the bag you will find a small wooden stake and a small glass bottle.

“The stake comes from the heart of the tree that you were buried under. The Earth Spirit blessed the stake and cursed my family: there had to be a balance, you see. If I sink the stake into your heart it will soak up the undead curse that you have lived with for thousands of years... and you will be able to sleep at last.”

She lifts them out and places them on the floor before me.

“What’s in the bottle?” she asks, curious now.

“Sap from the same tree. In order to end your curse and mine, I must drink it. It is a poison that will end the Caiside line, forever. Now you’ve got to choose. I’m nearly finished. It’s up to you. What do you want?”

Keragh did nothing for a moment and then hesitantly picked up the stake. “Life was long. Death has been longer,” she says. “Do it, before I change my mind!”

She puts the stake into my hand and lays down on her back.

With the last few ounces of energy remaining to me, I struggle onto my knees and place the stake’s hard point over her heart.

Her eyes lock onto mine as her hands grasp the stake, steadying my aim. “Now!” she implores me.

I lift my head back and suddenly jerk down, letting my body fall over hers to add to the force of the blow: “Yaaaaaaaagggghhhhhh!”

The point easily slips into her flesh, jerks past the ribs and slips into the long dead organ of her heart.

My scream joins her scream of dying; screams born from the release of thousands of little deaths: “GRRRRRR AAAAAHHHHhh aai eeee!”

The last sounds are almost a sigh. I lift myself up and see the animation slipping out of her eyes. “Thank you, Jason,” she says. And then she dies.

I kiss her gently: “Goodnight, Keragh. Goodnight, sister.”

Then I break the seal on the bottle.

“Bidh cron duine cho mòr ri beinn mun lèir dha fhèin e,” I tell her.

And then I drink...

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