

The Story Page.

A True Blue.

BY SHAN F. BULLOCK.

Late one November night, came a knocking at the Minister's door. His wife, lying sleepless beside him, fighting the pain which made her life so hard, heard the knocking first, the sound of it rising hollow through the darkness; but she did not wake him, for he had been far in the day and was weary. Let him sleep; the morning will do, she thought; and held her breath, striving, you might think, to hush the sound. But the knocking continued, louder, harsher; and with that she laid a hand upon his shoulder and shook him gently.

"James," she said, "James! James! There's some one calling."

Her voice woke him instantly. Again the knocking sounded in the darkness. Quickly he rose, lit the candle, and dressed himself. "Has it been long, Mary?" he asked.

"No; not very long. Oh, I hope it's nothing serious. It's so cold and dark."

The Minister did not answer. He was wondering who had called. Cold and darkness were nothing; somewhere a soul was waiting.

"Wrap yourself warm, James. Perhaps you need not go tonight. You'll find candles in the hall," she called through the open doorway; then lay quiet and listening. She heard him go down the stairs; heard the bolt clatter back; heard a murmur of voices; heard his footsteps once more on the stairs.

"Who is it?" she said, eagerly watching his face.

He put down his candle and fetched the wraps that always hung ready. "It's poor old Bryan of Gool. He's dying."

"He! And you're going James?"

"Yes, Mary. He wants me."

"But, James—"

"My dear, he wants me. I must go." He came and kissed her; bade her be patient and commended her to the care of God; then, leaving the candle burning, hurried away. And, as he went, her spirit kept him company.

Outside in the darkness and cold, a man stood waiting by the gate; together they went down the avenue and through the wood, and came to a boat that lay by the shore. The Minister stepped in and sat down in the stern; the man pushed off and took the oars; swiftly the boat shot upon the lake and headed for the wilds of Gool.

It was very dark. Great clouds hung low beneath the stars. A sharp wind drove from the north and swept dolefully in among the trees. On this hand stretched the lone blackness of waters, hungering for a life; on that lay the long rampart of the shore echoing back the clank of oars; away in front were miles of water, studded thick with wooded islands; among the trees, on the hillside, a candle shone out. The Minister turned to look at the light; then, whispering a prayer, wrapped closer his cloak and bent his head to face the bitter wind. It was searching cold; but the candle-light warmed him, and in the flow of thought that came he forgot the cold. Always, one remembers, he had that gift of losing himself, of forgetting his body; now, out on the lake, closed in by the night, he sat like one asleep, looking straight before him past that silent figure swaying on the thwart, out into the gloom.

He wondered much, not that Bryan should call, but that Bryan should call him. He was glad; he prayed God that he should be in time; yet the man in him wondered. How often had he tried and failed; been beaten off as with stinging whips! Nothing had availed, no patience, no persistence; always he had failed. The man seemed hopeless, inhumanly wicked; blasphemous, foul-mouthed, unprincipled. Himself he had treated as an enemy and used vilely. In all the parish was none so wicked, in the world could be few that matched him. That evil old face, seamed and lined, brimming with evil; that great loose mouth with its horrible tongue; the leering eyes, the crooked smile, the knotted hands; how the man was burnt into his brain. He saw him now and heard him; remembered all he had said and done. There he stood crouched in the doorway, setting the dogs on "the Papish Minister." There he sat by the hearth, doubled over his knees and spreading his hands to the blaze, leering round sometimes, and speaking horribly with a cackle of laughter. Now he looked up from a pew, scoffing even God's house; now broke into a ribald song or a mockery of prayer. "The Papish Minister!" 'twas Bryan who first had called him that, God knew how cruelly. . . . And now he was dying, and he called him. "Bring me the Minister from Curleck," he had said; and would take no denial. It made joyful hearing. He was very glad. He prayed God that he should be in time. Yet, sometimes on the way, wrapped in by the darkness the man in him wondered.

They came at last to the wilds of Gool; landed, pulled high the boat, and turned up through the dreary fields. The path was deep in mire; right and left ran the gaunt, bare hedges beaten by the wind; nothing alive stirred in

the darkness, and in it burnt a single light, up on the hillside, in a window of Bryan's house. Just a glimmer in the blackness—only that; yet towards it the Minister strode breathlessly, spattered to the beard.

They went through a gap, down a trampled lane, across a noisome yard; without halt or ceremony, it being no time for either, lifted the latch and entered the kitchen. A lamp burnt on the wall; a peat fire blazed on the hearth; here and there upon stools and chairs, about the tiled floor, sat men and women, smoke-dried natives of the wilds, who, at sight of the Minister, shuffled to their feet and silently eyed him. They owed him little; he bade them good-night, then crossed the floor and spoke to a woman who stood with her back to a closed door.

"Am I in time?" asked the Minister.

"Yes, sir." The woman turned to the door; hesitated in turning the handle; looked round. "He's very strange, sir," she whispered. "I don't know what to make of him. He's dyin', but—"

A voice rose beyond the door. "Is that the Minister?" it said. "Bring him to me—bring him to me." And with that the woman opened the door and the Minister passed through.

It was a small, low-celled room, bare of ornament or comfort; stuffy and lighted with a single candle flickering upon a table. Facing the door was a little square window; below it stood a painted chair, and beside the chair, stretching along the whitewashed wall, a narrow bed upon which Bryan was dying.

He was a wizened old man, grizzled and unshaven, with a square face and great loose mouth; a little ancient hunched and broken, propped against a pillow, his hands lying upon the blue and white counterpane, and a woolen nightcap on his head. Death was surely near to him. His face was grey, his breath unsteady. But he was unmastered yet; and he lay arrayed as for a festival. Across his shoulders was a brilliant orange and blue sash with a rosette flaming upon it; around his throat was knotted an orange scarf; facing him and propped against the bed-foot stood a gaudy print of William III on his famous white charger, in a walnut frame. So, a strange and pitiful spectacle, he lay, his eyes fast on the Minister, a grim smile on his face; and, by the bed-foot, the Minister stood looking at him, dumb with amazement. Was it for this he had been called? For this?

In a minute Bryan raised a hand and pointed at the chair.

"Come over an' sit down," he said. "I want to speak to ye."

The Minister put his hat upon the table and sat down. "Ye didn't expect to find me like this," Bryan continued, only his face revealing the presence of death. "Naw. Ye thought to find me cryin' about my sins, an' askin' your pardon, an' ready for your prayers. Ay, Aw, to be sure." He laughed with his eyes on the bed-foot; then plucked at the scarf and looked around. "I suppose ye've brought cross and holy water," he said. "You'd like to confess me, maybe?"

The Minister said nothing, but his lips kept moving.

"The Papish Minister," Bryan continued. "That's the name I gave ye once on a time—an' now you're here to see the end of me. Ay. When they said I was doomed and want advice I sent for ye. 'Bring the Papish Minister,' says I; 'till I show him how a True Blue can die.' An' here I am. Look at me. Here I am."

The Minister sat quiet, his lips moving.

"You're prayin' there," Bryan went on; "but I want no prayin'. I'm sure sir, True Blues are always sure. I fear nothin'. If I'm to die, I'm to die; and the Lord 'll think no worse o' me for dyin' as I've lived. Orange and blue; there's me principles. Queen and country; there's me sentiments. The glorious pious an' immortal memory; there's the words o' me creed, I'll die shoutin' them. Good boy, good boy," cried Bryan, striving to sit upright, and waving a hand towards the bed-foot. "Ye kicked the Pope, boy. Ye freed us o' brass money an' wooden shoes. Good boy, good boy," he cried, then broke into a pitiful quavering of an Orange song:

"July the first, at Oldbridge town
There was a grievous battle
Where many men lay on the ground,
An' cannons they did rattle."

"That's it . . . That's it . . . An' cannons they did—!" His voice trailed out. Cold sweat broke upon his forehead. He sank back upon the pillows, panting for life; and as he sank the picture toppled over on his feet.

Then the Minister rose. Gently he raised the old man's head and wiped his face; brought water and moistened his lips; straightened the pillow and smoothed the bedclothes; then arranged the sash on Bryan's shoulder, and loosened the scarf about his throat, and lifted the fallen picture and stood it against the bed-foot. Silently Bryan lay watching him, a softer light in his eyes, a calmer look upon his face; silently lay listening to the Minister as he sat by the candle reading softly from his pocket Bible.

No sound was in the house, save the sound of the Minister's voice, full and musical, rich with pity and emotion; nothing stirred outside in the big dark world save the wind moaning round the window.

Much and long he read from the Psalms and the Prophets, from the Gospels and the Epistles, choosing passages here and there, and simple verses, and chapters that told of God's love to sinful men. Sometimes he stopped to explain a word; and then Bryan nodded, saying, "Ay, ay." Sometimes before turning a page he looked up and Bryan nodded again, saying, "Give me more. Give me more." At last he laid the Bible by the candle, knelt by the bedside and prayed.

He was not eloquent; words came slowly, but they came from his heart, alive and earnest. Outside in the kitchen the watchers heard him, and sat with bowed heads. By the door Bryan's daughter knelt listening, her face in her hands. Through the darkness the wind mourned and cried, creeping about the window with dreary voice. In the shadow Bryan lay hearkening, hands folded across the orange sash, eyes closed, peace upon his withering face.

In a while the Minister rose, and bending across the bed, smoothed Bryan's pillow and spoke.

"Are you comfortable, Bryan?"

"Ay. Aw, yes."

"How do you feel, Bryan?"

"Better. Ay, I'm better." He lay staring at the bed-foot for a time; then looked round. "I take that back," he said.

"What, Bryan?"

"That about the Papish Minister. Man, I wronged ye. I thought—I thought . . . I wronged ye. Always I've done ye harm. I sent for ye the night, meanin' to give ye defiance an' to shame ye—an' you've done this for me! . . . Mebbe you'll forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Bryan. Ask forgiveness of God only."

"Ay. God only—God only . . ."

"Tell me what I'm to do."

"Read me more; an' pray for me—pray for me."

So the Minister read more, and prayed again; and after awhile Bryan's hand came out, groping for his.

"Hold me," said Bryan. "Grip me tight. Keep me—keep me."

And all through the night the Minister sat gripping Bryan tight and praying silently: held him till death struck with the dawn.—The Leisure Hour.

Three Conundrums.

"Mother, look out of the window and see if Rodman is coming."

"Not yet, Blake," answered the mother; "but he said ten o'clock, and it is not ten, by twelve minutes. You must have something very important to say to him to-day."

"We have a fine game on hand," answered Blake, grinning in pleased anticipation.

"Not a rough game, I hope," said Mrs. Martin, anxiously, looking across at her boy on the couch. Blake had been laid up for weeks with a badly sprained ankle, and it took a world of patience, watching to keep him as still as the doctor meant him to be.

"No, not rough," answered Blake, looking ruefully at his bandaged ankle, and thinking how good it would feel to play rough games once more; "but it's jolly, mother, for all that. We each are to hunt up, or make up, a new conundrum for every day, and the one who guesses the most by the end of the week wins the game."

"What is your conundrum to-day?" asked Mrs. Martin.

"It's one I found on a scrap of old newspaper: 'What is that thing which you can't get until it is taken from you?' Can you guess it, mother?"

"I don't believe I can," she answered, after considering awhile; "but I can ask one very much like it. But here comes Rodman; so my conundrum will keep. Take care, my son; don't pitch yourself about so much."

"Hello, Rod!" cried the boy on the couch; "what's yours? Mine's great, but you have first go."

"This is mine," said Rodman: "What is it that you must give before you can keep?"

"Well, upon my word!" cried Blake.

"How strange!" exclaimed his mother.

"What's the matter? Do you know the answer?" Rodman asked. He looked disappointed.

"No, not that; but yours sounds so much like mine it makes my head swim. Here's my conundrum: 'What is it that you can't get until it is taken from you?' Doesn't that sound like the twin of yours?"

Rodman whistled. "It's first cousin to mine, anyhow," he said.

The two boys exchanged slips of paper on which their conundrums were written, and set their wits to work. Such frowning, such screwing up of lips, such wrinkling