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# The SPECTER PRIESTESS OF WRIGHTSTONE

by Herman F. Wright



**T**HE ruins of historic old Wrightstone Castle still rear their crumbling towers above the dreary Hampton Bog, near Manchester, a fast decaying but fitting memorial to the foul deeds and fiendish proceedings that have taken place within its bleak walls. The counts of Wrightstone and their families have long since removed to more favorable London, abandoning the old ancestral home to gloomy memories.

The following tale was told me by old Sir Mandeville Wright, forty-seventh count of Wrightstone, as it was related to him by his father, and thus came the legend down through the centuries from early days in England's history.

Previous to, and in the early reign of James I, many strange and weird stories were told among the peasants of the castle and its aristocratic owners, then residing at the court. The villagers told of how a specter horse bearing a figure in flashing armor pranced before the raised drawbridge. Then came the news of Count Charles' death at the court by an emissary of the king. Then the priestess—the Specter Priestess of Wrightstone, as the apparition was termed—appeared, claiming as her victim a poor peasant found wandering near the edge of the bog after dark.

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After the death of his father, the late Count Charles, the eldest son, young Count Richard of Wrightstone, decided to leave the fashionable court and pay a visit to his ancestral home, which he had never seen. After making his intentions known, the young nobleman was astonished by the peculiar actions of his father's old and trusted servants. Young Richard, on several occasions, had found them conversing together in low tones and caught his name mingled with that of a "priestess" in their mysterious conversations. They tried in various ways to dissuade him from going, and when questioned as to their peculiar actions they became quite sullen and silent.

Richard, not to be dictated to by the servants, determined to see Castle Wrightstone. Finally the day arrived when he was to leave for the home of his ancestors. Seated inside the coach with Scrooge, the old family butler, while the other servants perched on the front and rear outer seats, the young man started for the castle.

**A**FTER several hours of weary travel in silence, old Scrooge suddenly demanded, "Master Robert, have you by any chance ever heard of the druid priestess of Wrightstone castle?"

Upon the young man's negative answer, Scrooge cleared his throat, as was his custom when preparing for a lengthy oration, and began: "It was always the wish of Count Charles, your father, to keep from you the gloomy secret of his old home. He made me promise never to let you hear of the priestess, but since you have decided to visit Wrightstone I will tell you for your own welfare. You have been told that your grandfather, Sir William, was murdered in the castle, but how or why he was murdered you never knew. Did you ever reflect upon that? The secret is, Master Richard, and I like not to tell you, but there is a curse upon Wrightstone.

"Sir William was found lying on the floor of his study, his heart torn from his body—the work of the priestess. The apparition is evidently a druid priestess, for she carried a druidical sacrificial knife in her hand, with which she pierces her victims and tears out their living hearts. The fiend has haunted the castle for generations, and an old legend tells that the specter can never be laid until two of the heads of the ruling family of Wrightstone have sacrificed their throbbing hearts to her gleaming scalpel. When or how the legend originated none can tell; suffice it to say that in my time your grandfather and three peasants have died by her fiendish hand.

"It is for this reason, Master Richard, that I and the servants implored you to forbear from visiting the haunted castle. I am old, and age brings queer prognostications; I fear I may live to see a second lord of Wrightstone meet his end thus. God forbid!"

With these words Scrooge lapsed into silence, and no amount of questioning from Richard could make the old man speak further. By the time the party arrived at the castle Richard fully decided to investigate the

hauntings of the druid priestess. True, he had heard a few strange tales of his father's castle, but of the priestess he had never been told.

Though its crude, gray exterior betokened gloom, the bleak walls of Wrightstone hid richly furnished rooms, crackling fires on the large hearths, and cozy corners hidden by velvet tapestries. The first few weeks were devoted to making the great rooms habitable for the reception of the guests, and the incident of the specter and her weird slayings were forgotten by the young count for the while.

LATE one evening several weeks after his arrival at the castle, Richard was reading over several old and musty manuscripts in the study, in which room the dead body of old Sir William had been found. The blazing logs on the hearth had dwindled to mere glowing embers, and the candles in the massive bronze candelabra were sputtering and burning low.

A strange silence brooded over the aged structure, and a choking stuffiness seemed to pervade the room. Richard, annoyed by the choking atmosphere, laid aside the manuscript he was perusing and prepared to rise, when his eye caught the flashing reflection of the candle light on a polished surface before him. Looking up, he was horrified to behold the specter priestess of the castle standing before him.

His horror gave way to wonder as he gazed upon the beautiful figure that smiled down upon him. A young girl was the priestess, her golden tresses falling over her shoulders, which were draped in a long, flowing, white robe. Her lips were slightly parted in a smile, and her blue eyes seemed to convey a message of fiendish triumph: nevertheless they were entrancing and held the young man spellbound. In her right hand was grasped a gleaming, crescent-shaped

knife, while the other hand was concealed in the folds of her robe.

The young count's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he sank back in the chair exhausted and helpless. Unconsciousness began to numb his senses. He heard a clear, bell-like voice that seemed to come from far away: "Death comes; prepare!"

Richard awoke just as the first rays of the rising sun streamed across the floor of the study. The fire had gone out, and despite the sunny cheerfulness, the peculiar coldness that reminds one of death hung about the room.

The young man recalled vividly the dreadful experience of the night before—but was it a reality, or merely a dream caused by a creative and wandering imagination? Which was the truth the count could not say, for it seemed so vivid, yet so fantastic. He would tell Serooge and get the old butler's advice on the matter.

There came a gentle tap on the door and Serooge entered, bearing a breakfast tray.

"Good morning, Master Richard," began the butler. "How—why, what is the matter? Are you ill?" he asked in a startled tone when he beheld the count's features.

"I merely had a rather peculiar dream, Serooge. I shall be all right in a few minutes."

"A dream? Not the—the priestess, Master Richard?" demanded the old man in a startled tone, his ruddy face becoming suddenly white.

"Yes, Serooge, the priestess," replied the count with a peculiar absent look in his eyes. "I dreamed—or she really told me, I don't know which—to prepare for death."

"My God!" gasped the terrified Serooge, dropping the tray. "You are marked for death within twenty-four hours. Come, we shall leave for the palace at once. Leave this accursed place, Master Richard!"

"No," answered the nobleman, slowly shaking his head. "I *must* stay here—to see her again. Her eyes—they have charmed me, so filled with passion. Serooge, I love the priestess and I would die to see her again."

"You are bewitched by the fiend!" declared the butler, begging the count to leave the castle.

After vainly pleading with him, the old man finally left Richard.

Gathering the other servants, Serooge told them of the apparition's appearance (for he knew it to be no dream) to their young master and stationed them near the study in a vain attempt to thwart the curse of impending death he believed must come.

Richard finally consented to Serooge's staying in the study with him that evening, although he knew nothing of the platoon of armed servants without the doors.

As the night gradually wore on, both men began to doze. Once Serooge awakened to find Count Richard softly snoring in the great leather chair by the table. Then Serooge, too, began to snore.

The old butler was awakened by the rays of the sun shining in his face. Yawning and stretching, he arose from his cramped position and walked toward the window. Suddenly he stopped, his arms outstretched in astonished fear and horror. At his feet lay the cold body of Count Richard, his heart torn from his breast. The butler gave a cry and fainted beside his dead master. The frightened servants, hearing the cry, rushed into the room and stood horrified about the pair.

The next day the body of Count Richard was interred in the family vault of the counts of Wrightstone by the village priest. The servants with Serooge closed up the haunted castle and departed for London.

The curse of Castle Wrightstone was ended. The specter priestess was seen no more, but the descendants of

Count Richard's brother, into whose hands the castle passed, never dared take up their abode within its dreary walls.

**F**INISHING his story, Sir Mandeville drew from his pocket a clipping of the *Times* of March 24, 1878, and handed it to me. It was a short article and the paper was yellow with age. To the living heir of Wrightstone it conveyed the proof of the curse of his ancient ancestors:

Manchester, March 24.—While removing stones from the ancient ruined structure known as Wrightstone Castle, near here, to be used for building purposes in this city, several workmen found the skeleton of a young woman.

The skeleton was draped in a few strands of a decayed white robe. Clutched in the bony fingers of one hand was an ancient druidical sacrificial knife. The body was

turned over to Sir Ernest Grey-stoke, of the British Museum, who is of the opinion that the skeleton is that of a druid priestess, no doubt interred alive in the old castle walls.

Strewed around the body and grasped in one hand were found several bits of dried flesh, claimed by several physicians of this city, who examined them, to be human hearts. Dried blood was also spattered about near the body.

There has been a revival of the old superstition of the "Specter Priestess of Wrightstone" among the villagers of this vicinity, and many are of the opinion that the skeleton recently unearthed is that of the specter priestess, who murdered her victims by tearing out their hearts. Two of the Counts of Wrightstone were supposed to have met their deaths at the hands of the apparition early in the reign of James I. The present Count Wrightstone, Sir Mandeville Wright, is now residing at London.