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Twain Walther von der Vogelweide Fouqué Friedrich II. von Preußen  
Weber Freiligrath Frey  
Fechner Fichte Weiße Rose von Fallersleben Kant Ernst Richthofen Frommel  
Engels Fielding Hölderlin Eichendorff Tacitus Dumas  
Fehrs Faber Flaubert Eliasberg Eliot Zweig Ebner Eschenbach  
Feuerbach Maximilian I. von Habsburg Fock Ewald Vergil  
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Strachwitz Bellamy Schilling Raabe Gibbon Tschchow  
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Löns Hesse Hoffmann Gogol Wilde Gleim Vulpius  
Luther Heym Hofmannsthal Klee Hölty Morgenstern Goedicke  
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# **Stories of the Border Marches**

John Lang

# Imprint

This book is part of the TREDITION CLASSICS series.

Author: John Lang

Cover design: toepferschumann, Berlin (Germany)

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg (Germany)

ISBN: 978-3-8491-5406-6

[www.tredition.com](http://www.tredition.com)

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## PREFACE

The quotation that speaks of "Old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago," has grown now to be hackneyed. Yet, are not they those "old, unhappy, far-off things" that lure us back from a very commonplace and utilitarian present, and cause us to cling to the romance of stories that are well-nigh forgotten?

In these days of rushing railway journeys, of motor cars, telegrams, telephones, and aeroplanes, we are apt to lose sight of the tales of more leisurely times, when lumbering stage-coaches and relays of willing horses were our only means of transit from one kingdom to the other.

Because the "long ago" means to us so infinitely valuable a possession, we have striven to preserve in print a few of the stories that still remain—flotsam and jetsam saved from the cruel rush of an overwhelming tide.

One or two of the tales in this volume are perhaps not quite so familiar as is the average Border story, and some may contain less of violence and of bloodshed than is common. Yet it must be owned that it is no easy task to divorce the Border from its wedded mate, violence.

**JOHN LANG. JEAN LANG.**



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## STORIES OF THE BORDER MARCHES

### THE WHITE LADY OF BLENKINSOPP

Among the old castles and peel towers of the Border, there are few to which some tale or other of the supernatural does not attach itself. It may be a legend of buried treasure, watched over by a weeping figure, that wrings its hands; folk may tell of the apparition of an ancient dame, whose corpse-like features yet show traces of passions unspent; of solemn, hooded monk, with face concealed by his cowl, who passes down the castle's winding stair, telling his beads; they whisper, it may be, of a lady in white raiment, whose silken gown rustles as she walks. Or the tale, perhaps, is one of pitiful moans that on the still night air echo through some old building; or of the clank of chains, that comes ringing from the damp and noisome dungeons, causing the flesh of the listener to creep.

They are all to be found, or at least they *used* all to be found, somewhere or other in the Border, by those who love such legends. And, perhaps, nowhere are they more common than amongst the crumbling, grass-grown ruins of Northumberland.

Away, far up the South Tyne, and up its tributary the Tipalt Burn, close to the boundary of Cumberland, there stands all that is left of an ancient castle, centuries ago the home of an old and once powerful family. The building dates probably from early in the fourteenth century. In the year 1339 "Thomas de Blencansopp" received licence to fortify his house on the Scottish Border, and it is supposed that he then built this castle.

Truly that was a part of England where a man had need be careful in his building if he desired to sleep securely and with a whole skin, for on all sides of him were wild and turbulent neighbours. From the strenuous day of the old Romans, who built across those hills that long line of wall, which stands yet in parts solid and strong, for centuries the countryside was lawless and unruly, the

inhabitants "ill to tame," and every man a freebooter. The Thirlwalls, the Riddleys, the Howards of Naworth, the wild men of Bewcastle; the Armstrongs, Elliots, Scotts, and others across the Border, they were all of them—they and their forebears to the earliest times—of the stuff that prefers action, however stormy, to inglorious peace and quiet, and the man who "kept up his end" in their neighbourhood could be no weakling.

Whether the Blenkinsopps were strong enough permanently to hold their property intact among such neighbours one does not know, but at any rate, in 1488 John de Blenkinsopp and his son Gerard committed the castle to the custody of Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, Warden of the East and Middle Marches. Percy's care of the building, however, does not seem to have been particularly zealous, or else "the false Scottes" had again, as was their wont, proved themselves to be unpleasant neighbours, for in 1542 the place is described as "decayed in the Roof, and not in good reparation."

Before this date, however, there had been at least one of the Blenkinsopp family on whose reputation for daring and strength no man might cast doubt. Far and wide, Bryan de Blenkinsopp was known for his deeds in war; he was counted gallant and brave even amongst the bravest and most gallant, and his place in battle was ever where blows fell thickest. But it is said that he had one failing, which eventually wrecked his life—he was grasping as any Shylock. Love of money was his undoing.

In spite of many chances to do so, in spite of the admiration in which he was universally held, Bryan de Blenkinsopp had never married. He was greatly admired, and yet, for a certain roughness and brutality in him, greatly feared, by many women, and he had been heard many a time scoffingly to say that only would he bring home a wife when he had found a woman possessed of gold sufficient to fill a chest so large that ten of his men might not be able to carry it into his castle. Brides of this calibre did not then grow in profusion on either side of the Border, and had he continued to live uninterruptedly in his own country, no doubt Bryan de Blenkinsopp might have remained to the end unmarried. But: "When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I was

married." In that, Bryan might have anticipated *Benedick*, as well as in the resolution. "Rich she shall be, that's certain." He went abroad to the wars. Perhaps he was with Henry V at Agincourt, and thenceforward, till the king's death in 1422, saw more of France than of England. In any case, to the unbounded wonder of the countryside, when at length he did return, Bryan brought back with him a foreign bride to Blenkinsopp. And what added to the wonder, the bride brought with her a chest of treasure so heavy that twelve of Bryan's retainers could with difficulty bear it into the castle.

Naturally, all this gave rise to endless talk; what prattling little busybody but would relish so succulent a morsel! Ere long the local gossip-mongers revelled in a perfect feast of petty scandal. Stories in minute detail spread quickly from mouth to mouth. The eccentricities and shortcomings of the foreign bride were a priceless boon to the scanty population of the district; in castle and in peel tower little else for a time was talked of. To begin with, the mere fact that she was a foreigner, and that neither she nor any of her immediate followers could speak English, told heavily against the lady in the estimation of the countryside. Then, hardly anyone ever saw her (which in itself was an offence, and the cause of still further tattle). She was very little, folk said who professed to be well informed, and her face and hands showed strangely brown against the white robes that she habitually wore; her eyes were like stars; her temper quick to blaze up without due cause. Backstairs gossip, no doubt; but there were even pious souls who, in strictest confidence, went so far as to hazard the opinion that the lady was not quite "canny"; she might, they thought, quite possibly turn out to be an imp of the Evil One sent with her gold to wile Bryan's soul to perdition. The belief was not more fantastic than many another that prevailed at that day, and later; and the fact that she was never known to go to mass, nor had been seen to cross the threshold of a sacred building, lent some weight to it. This was the kind of "clash" that floated about the countryside.

But assuredly there was this much foundation for talk: Bryan and his foreign bride were far from happy together. As time went on, their quarrels, indeed, became notorious. It was whispered that the fount from which flowed all the trouble was nothing more nor less than that chest of gold which the bride had brought for dowry. The

lady, folk said, would not surrender it to her husband; no matter how he stormed. *She* was not of the kind that tamely submits, or cringes before a bully; on the contrary, she ever gave back as good as she received. Finally, things came at length to such a pitch, that the lady and her foreign servants, it was said, at dead of night had secretly dug a great hole somewhere in the huge vaulted dungeons of the castle, and had there buried her gold and the rich jewels which now she hated as the cause of her troubles.

Then, a little later, followed the climax—after violent scenes, Bryan himself disappeared, as if to show that, the treasure being somewhere beyond his ken, or out of his reach, he had no further use for the wife. He might, no doubt, have resorted to poison, or to the knife, in order to revenge himself; or he might have so made life a burden to her—as is done sometimes, one is told, even by modern husbands—that she would have been glad to lick his hand like a whipped spaniel, and to have owned up, perhaps, to the place where she had hid the gold. But if he killed her, her secret might die with her, or the servants who were in her confidence might themselves secure the treasure. Again, she had plenty of spirit, and, indeed, rather seemed to enjoy a fight, and it was possible that bullying might not cause her to try to conciliate him by revealing the whereabouts of the hidden treasure. So Bryan took the course that he judged would make things the most unpleasant for his wife, and which would at the same time rid him of her. He simply disappeared.

And now the poor little lady, fierce enough in quarrel, and bitter enough in tongue, was inconsolable. In spite of all—it is one of the most inscrutable of the many inscrutable points in the nature of some women—in spite of all, she had loved her great, strong, brutal, bullying husband, and probably was only jealous of the gold because he had showed too plainly that in his estimation it, and not she, came first. Her days, unhappy enough before, were now spent in fruitless misery, waiting for him who returned never again. A year and a day passed, and still no tidings came to her of Bryan de Blenkinsopp. The deserted wife could bear no longer her life in this alien country, and she, too, with all her servants, went away. Folk, especially those who had always in their hearts suspected her of being an imp of Satan, said that no man saw them go. Probably she

went in search of her husband; but whether or not she ever found him, or whether she made her way back to the land from which she had come, none can say, for from that day to this all trace is lost of husband and of wife. Only the tale remained in the country people's minds; and probably it lost nothing in the telling as the years rolled on.

The story of the White Lady of Blenkinsopp became one to which the dwellers by Tyneside loved to listen of a winter's evening round the fire, and it even began to be whispered that she "walked." More than one dweller in the castle claimed to have seen her white-robed figure wandering forlorn through the rooms in which she had spent her short, unhappy wedded life. Perhaps it may have been due to her influence that by 1542 the roof and interior had been neglected and allowed to fall into decay.

Yet though shorn of all its former grandeur, for some centuries the castle continued to be partly occupied, and as late as the first quarter of last century, in spite of the dread in which the White Lady had come to be held, there were families occasionally living in the less ruined parts of the building.

About the year 1820 two of the more habitable rooms were occupied by a labouring man with his wife and their two children, the youngest a boy of eight. They had gone there, the parents at least well knowing the reputation of the place; but weeks had passed, their rest had never in any way been disturbed, and they had ceased to think of what they now considered to be merely a silly old story. All too soon, however, there came a night when shriek upon shriek of ghastly terror rang in the ears of the sleeping husband and wife, and brought them, with sick dread in their hearts, hurrying to the room where their children lay.

"Mither! mither! oh mither! A lady! a lady!" gasped the sobbing youngest boy, clinging convulsively to his mother.

"What is't, my bairn? There's never a lady here, my bonny boy. There's nobody will harm ye."

But the terrified child would not be comforted. He had seen a lady, "a braw lady, a' in white," who had come to his bedside and, sitting down, had bent and kissed him; she "cried sore," the child

said, and wrung her hands, and told him that if he would but come with her she would make him a rich man, she would show him where gold was buried in the castle; and when the boy answered that he dare not go with her, she had stooped to lift and carry him. Then he had cried out, and she had slipped from the room just as his father and mother hurried in.

"Ye were dreamin', my bonny lamb," cried the mother; and the parents, after a time, succeeded in calming the child and in getting him again to fall asleep. Night after night, however, as long as the boy remained in that room, this scene was re-enacted; the same terror-stricken screams, the same hurried rush of the parents, the same frightened tale from the quivering lips of the child. Dreams, no doubt, induced by some childish malady; a common enough form of nightmare, suggested by previous knowledge of a story likely to impress children. But to the day of his death—and he died an old man, a successful colonist, prosperous and respected, a man in no way prone to superstitious weakness—the dreamer ever maintained that it was something more than a dream that had come to him those nights in Blenkinsopp Castle. He could feel yet, he said, and shuddered to feel, the clasp of her arms and the kiss on his cheek from the cold lips of the White Lady; and the dream, if dream it were, was not due to suggestion, for he was conscious of no previous knowledge of the legend.

The White Lady of Blenkinsopp has fled now, scared from her haunt by the black smoke of tall chimneys and the deep-throated blare of steam hooters; coal dust might well lay a more formidable spectre than that of a Lady in White. But no man has ever yet discovered the whereabouts of her hidden treasure, though many have sought.

Seventy or eighty years ago, there came to the inn of a neighbouring village a lady, who confided to the hostess of the inn that in a dream she had seen herself find, under a certain stone, deep in the dungeon of a ruined castle, a chest of gold; and Blenkinsopp, she said, answered in every detail to the castle of her dream. Assuredly, she thought, to her now was to be revealed the long-sought burial-place of the White Lady's treasure. But patiently though the dreamer waited on and importuned the castle's owner, permission to

make a systematic search among the ruins was too hard to obtain, and the disheartened seer of visions departed, and returned no more. And so the hidden treasure to this day remains hidden; no prospector has yet lit on that rich "claim," no "dowser" has poised his magic hazel twig above its bed, nor has clairvoyant revealed its whereabouts.

But rumour had it once that the long-sought hiding-place was found. Orders had been given that the vaults of the castle should be cleared of rubbish, and fitted up as winter quarters for cattle, and as the workmen proceeded with their task they came on a low doorway, hitherto unknown, on a level with the bottom of the keep. This doorway gave on a narrow passage, leading no man knew whither. The report flew abroad that here at last was the Lady's vault, and people flocked to see what might be seen. None dared venture far along this passage, till one, bolder than the rest, taking his courage in both hands, went gingerly down the way so long untrod by human foot. The passage was narrow and low, too low for a man to walk in erect; after a few yards it descended a short flight of steps, and then again went straight forward to a door so decayed that only a rusted bolt, and one rust-eaten hinge, held it in place. Beyond this door, an abrupt turn in the passage, and then a flight of steps so precipitous that the feeble beam of his lantern could give the explorer no help in fathoming their depth; and when this lantern was lowered as far as it was in his power to do so, the flame burned blue and went out, killed by the noxious gases that stagnant centuries had breathed. Dizzy and frightened, the explorer with difficulty groped his way back to the fresher air of the vault, and no persuasion could induce him, or any of his fellows, to venture again so far as to that long flight of steps. The employer of those labourers was a man entirely devoid of curiosity or of imagination, possessed of no interest whatsoever in archaeology; so it fell out that the passage was closed, without any further effort being made to discover to what mysteries it might lead.

About the year 1845, one who then wrote about the castle visited the place, and found that boys had broken a small hole in the wall where the passage had been built up. Through this hole they were wont to amuse themselves by chucking stones, listening, fascinated, to the strange sounds that went echoing, echoing through the mys-

terious depths far below. Here, say some, lies the buried treasure of the White Lady of Blenkinsopp. But there are not wanting unsympathetic souls, who pride themselves on being nothing if not practical, who pretend to think that this hidden depth is nothing more mysterious than the old draw-well of the castle.

This story of the White Lady is not the only legend of the supernatural with which the old family of Blenkinsopp is connected.

Where Tipalt Burn falls into Tyne, stand on the opposite bank the ruins of Bellister Castle. There, many hundred years ago, dwelt a branch of the Blenkinsopps. To Bellister there came one night at the gloaming a wandering harper, begging for shelter from the bitter northerly blast that gripped his rheumatic old joints, and sported with his failing strength. He was a man past middle age, with hair thin and grey, and a face worn and lined; his tattered clothes gave scant protection from inclement weather. As was the custom in those times, the minstrel's welcome was hearty. Food and drink, and a seat near the fire, were his, and soon his blood thawed, the bent form of the man seemed to straighten, and his eye kindled as, later in the evening, "high placed in hall, a welcome guest," he touched his harp and sang to the company. You could scarcely now recognise the weary, bent, old scarecrow that but two hours back had trailed, footsore and tired, across the castle drawbridge. The change was astonishing, and many jested with the harper on the subject.

But one there was who noticed, and who did not jest. They were increasingly uneasy looks that the lord of the castle from time to time threw towards the minstrel. What, he pondered unquietly, caused this amazing change in the appearance of one who so lately had seemed to be almost on the verge of the grave? Was he in truth the frail old man he had pretended to be, or had he overacted his part, and was he no minstrel, but an enemy in disguise? The lord's looks grew blacker and more black, and ever more uneasy as the evening proceeded; and the more he suspected, the more he drank to drown the disquiet of his mind. At length his unease became so marked that unavoidably it communicated itself to the rest of the company. Even the rough men-at-arms desisted from their boisterous jests, and spoke beneath their breath. The harper glancing

around as the silence grew, and finding the lord's black looks ever upon him, trailed off at last in his song and sat mute, with uncertain fingers plucking at the strings of his instrument. The company broke up, glad to escape from the gloom of their lord's glances, and somebody showed the old man to a rude chamber, where a bundle of pease straw was to serve him for bed.

But the lord of Bellister sat on, "glooming" morbidly to himself. Bitter feud existed between him and a neighbouring baron. Had he not cause to distrust that baron, and to believe that means neither fair nor honourable might be employed by his enemy to wipe out the feud? What if this self-styled harper should turn out to be no minstrel after all, but a hired assassin, a follower of that base churl, his hated foe! To suspect was to believe. In his excited, drink-clouded brain wrath sprang up, fully armed. He would speedily put an end to that treacherous scheme; his enemies should learn that if one can plot, another may have cunning to bring to naught such treachery. And little mercy should be shown to the base tool of a baser employer.

"Bring hither quickly to me that minstrel," he called. "And it will be the better for some of you that there be no delay," he muttered beneath his breath, with a threatening blow of his fist on the table.

Of old his servants and dependants had learned the lesson that it was well not to linger over the carrying out of their passionate lord's orders. But in this instance, speed was of no avail; they were obliged to return, to report to a wrathful master that the bird had flown; the place was empty, the old man gone. Threatening glances and black looks had scared him; without waiting for rest, he had fled while yet there was time, less afraid of exposure to a wild and stormy night than to find himself in the clutches of a petty tyrant.

That the man had fled was to Blenkinsopp quite convincing proof that his suspicions were justified. Immediate pursuit was ordered. "Lay the sleuth hounds on his trail without an instant's delay. Let *them* deal with him!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Less than a mile away, by some willows that once marked a ford in the river, men hurrying after the baying hounds came up too late.

Echoing across the heath, an agonised shriek rang on their ears, drowned by the snarling as of wild beasts. Lying on its back on the river bank, head and shoulders in the shallow stream, the man-hunters found but a frail, mutilated body that had once been the wandering old minstrel.

This was what gave rise to the legend of the Grey Man of Bel-lister. Ever since that hideous night, at intervals the "Grey Man" has been wont to appear to belated travellers along that road. Near the clump of willows he might first be seen, hurrying, hurrying, his long grey cloak flying in the wind. And woe to him on whom he chanced to turn and look; his wild eye and torn face, his blood-clotted beard, would freeze with horror those who gazed, and disaster or death followed hard on the track of the vision.

It is a hundred years now, and more, since last the "Grey Man" was seen. Perhaps his penance for sins committed on earth is ended; or perhaps it is that against railways, and drainage, and modern scoffings, he and his like cannot stand. He is gone; but even yet, about the scene where once as a man the old minstrel fled for dear life, there hangs at the dead time of night a sense of mystery and awe. As the chilly wind comes wailing across the everlasting hills, blending its voice with the melancholy dirge of the river, one may almost believe that through the gloom there passes swiftly a bent, hurrying figure. Perhaps it is but the swaying of a branch near by, that so startlingly suggests the waving in the wind of a threadbare cloak.