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PASSAGE IN THE SECRET HISTORY OF AN
IRISH COUNTESS.

(Concluded.)

I joined my cousin Emily quite out of breath. I need not say that my head was too full of other things to think much of drawing for that day. I imparted to her frankly the cause of my alarm, but, at the same time, as gently as I could; and with tears she promised vigilance, and devotion, and love. I never had reason for a moment to repent the unreserved confidence which I then reposed in her. She was not less surprised than I at the unexpected appearance of Edward, whose departure for France neither of us had for a moment doubted, but which was now proved by his actual presence to be nothing more than an imposture, practised, I feared, for no good end. The situation in which I had found my uncle had removed completely all my doubts as to his design. I magnified suspicions into certainties, and dreaded night after night that I should be murdered in my bed. The nervousness produced by sleepless nights and days of anxious fears increased the horrors of my situation to such a degree, that I at length wrote a letter to a Mr. Jefferies, an old and faithful friend of my father's, and perfectly acquainted with all his affairs, praying him, for God's sake, to relieve me from my present terrible situation, and communicating without reserve the nature and grounds of my suspicions. This letter I kept sealed and directed, for two or three days, always about my person, for its discovery would have been ruinous, in expectation of any opportunity which might be safely trusted, to have it placed in the post-office; as neither Emily nor I was permitted to pass beyond the precincts of the demesne itself, which was surrounded by high walls, formed of dry stone, the difficulty of procuring such an opportunity was enhanced. At this time Emily had a short conversation with her father, which she reported to me instantly. After some indifferent matter, he had asked her whether she and I were upon good terms, and whether I was unreserved in my disposition. She answered in the affirmative; and he then inquired whether I had been much surprised to find him in my chamber the other day. She answered, that I had been both surprised and amused. "And what did she think of George Wilkin's appearance?" "Who?" inquired she. "Oh the architect," he answered, "who is to contract for the repairs of the house, he is accounted a handsome fellow." "She could not see his face," said Emily, "and she was in such a hurry to escape that she scarcely noticed him." Sir Arthur appeared satisfied, and the conversation ended.

This slight conversation, repeated accurately to me by Emily, had the effect of confirming, if indeed anything was required to do so, all that I had before believed as to Edward's actual presence; and I naturally became, if possible, more anxious than ever to dispatch the letter to Mr. Jefferies. An opportunity at length occurred. As Emily and I were walking one day near the gate of the demesne, a lad from the village happened to be passing down the avenue from the house; the spot was secluded, and as this person was not connected by service with those whose observation I dreaded, I committed the letter to his keeping, with strict injunctions that he should put it without delay into the receiver of the town post-office; at the same time I added a suitable gratuity, and the man having made many protestations of punctuality, was soon out of sight. He had hardly gone when I began to doubt my discretion in having trusted this person; but I had no better or safer means of dispatching the letter, and I was not warranted in suspecting him of such wanton dishonesty as an inclination to tamper with it; but I could not be quite satisfied of its safety until I had received an answer, which could not arrive for a few days. Before I did, however, an event occurred which a little surprised me. I was sitting in my bed-room early in the day, reading by myself, when I heard a knock at the door. "Come in," said I, and my uncle entered the room. "Will you excuse me," said he; "I sought you in the parlour, and thence I have come here. I desire to say a word with you.—I trust that you have hitherto found my conduct to you such as that of a guardian towards his ward should be." I dared not withhold my assent. "And," he continued, "I trust that you have not found me harsh or unjust, and that you have perceived, my dear niece, that I have sought to make this poor place as agreeable to you as may be?" I assented again; and he put his hand in his pocket, whence he drew a folded paper, and dashing it upon the table with startling emphasis, he said, "Did you write that letter?" The sudden and fearful alteration of his voice, manner and face, but, more than all, the unexpected production of my letter to Mr. Jefferies, which I at once recognised, so confounded and terrified me, that I felt almost choking. I could not utter a word. "Did you write that letter?" he repeated, with slow and intense emphasis. "You did, liar and hypocrite. You dared to write this foul and infamous libel; but it shall be your last. Men will uni-

versally believe you mad, if I choose to call for an inquiry. I could make you appear so. The suspicions expressed in this letter are the hallucinations and alarms of moping lunacy. I have defeated your first attempt, madam; and if ever you make another, chains, straw, darkness and the keeper's whip shall be your lasting portion." With these astounding words he left the room, leaving me almost fainting.

I was now almost reduced to despair—my last cast had failed—I had no course left, but that of eloping secretly from the castle, and placing myself under the protection of the nearest magistrate. I felt if this were not done, and speedily, that I should be murdered. No one, from mere description, can have an idea of the unmitigated horror of my situation—a helpless, weak, inexperienced girl, placed under the power, and wholly at the mercy of evil men, and feeling that she had it not in her power to escape for a moment from the malignant influence under which she was probably fated to fall—and with a consciousness that if violence, if murder, were designed, her dying shriek would be lost in vain space—no human being would be near to aid her—no human interposition could deliver her.

I had seen Edward but once during his visit, and as I did not meet with him again, I began to think that he must have taken his departure—a conviction which was to a degree satisfactory, and I regarded his absence as indicating the removal of immediate danger.

Emily arrived circuitously at the same conclusion, and not without good grounds, for she managed indirectly to learn that Edward's black horse had actually been for a day and a part of a night in the castle stables, just at the time of her brother's supposed visit. The horse had gone, and, as she argued, the rider must have departed with it. This point being so far settled, I felt a little less uncomfortable; when, being one day alone in my bed-room, I happened to look out from the window, and, to my unutterable horror, I beheld, peering through an opposite casement, my cousin Edward's face.—Had I seen the evil one himself in bodily shape, I could not have experienced a more sickening revulsion. I was too much appalled to move at once from the window, but I did so soon enough to avoid his eye. He was looking fixedly into the narrow quadrangle upon which the window opened. I shrunk back unperceived, to pass the rest of the day in terror and despair. I went to my room early that night, but I was too miserable to sleep. At about twelve o'clock, feeling very nervous, I determined to call my cousin Emily, who slept, you will remember, in the next room, which communicated with mine by a second door. By this private entrance I found my way into her chamber, and without difficulty persuaded her to return to my room and sleep with me. We accordingly lay down together, she undressed, and I with my clothes on, for I was every moment walking up and down the room, and felt too nervous and miserable to think of rest and comfort. Emily was soon fast asleep, and I lay awake, fervently longing for the first pale gleam of morning, reckoning every stroke of the old clock with an impatience which made every hour appear like six. It must have been about one o'clock when I thought I heard a slight noise at the partition door between Emily's room and mine, as if caused by somebody's turning the key in the lock. I held my breath, and the same sound was repeated at the second door of my room—that which opened upon the lobby—the sound was here distinctly caused by the revolution of the bolt in the lock, and it was followed by a slight pressure upon the door itself, as if to ascertain the security of the lock. The person, whoever it might be, was probably satisfied, for I heard the old boards of the lobby creak and strain, as if under the weight of somebody moving cautiously over them. My sense of hearing became unnaturally, almost painfully, acute. I suppose the imagination added distinctness to sounds vague in themselves. I thought that I could actually hear the breathing of the person who was slowly returning down the lobby; at the head of the stair-case there appeared to occur a pause; and I could distinctly hear two or three sentences hastily whispered; the steps then descended the stair with apparently less caution. I now ventured to walk quickly and lightly to the lobby door, and attempted to open it; it was indeed fast locked upon the outside, as was also the other. I now felt that the dreadful hour was come; but one desperate expedient remained—it was to awake Emily, and by our united strength, to attempt to force the partition door, which was slighter than the other, and through this to pass to the lower part of the house, whence it might be possible to escape to the grounds, and then to the village. I returned to the bed side and shook Emily, but in vain; nothing that I could do availed to produce from her more than a few incoherent words—it was a death-like sleep. She had certainly drunk of some narcotic, as had I probably also, spite of all the caution with which I had examined every thing presented to us to eat or drink. I now attempted, with as little noise as possible, to force first one door, and then the other—but all in vain. I believe no strength could have effected my object, for both doors

opened inwards.—I therefore collected what moveables I could carry thither, and piled them against the doors, so as to assist me in whatever attempts I should make to resist the entrance of those without.—I then returned to the bed, and endeavoured again, but fruitlessly, to awaken my cousin. It was not sleep, it was torpor, lethargy, death. I knelt down and prayed with an agony of earnestness; and then seating myself upon the bed, I awaited my fate with a kind of terrible tranquillity.

I heard a faint clanking sound from the narrow court which I have already mentioned, as if caused by the scraping of some iron instrument against stones or rubbish. I at first determined not to disturb the calmness which I now felt, by uselessly watching the proceedings of those who sought my life; but as the sounds continued, the horrible curiosity which I felt overcame every other emotion, and I determined at all hazards to gratify it. I therefore crawled upon my knees to the window, so as to let the smallest portion of my head appear above the sill. The moon was shining with an uncertain radiance upon the antique gray buildings, and obliquely upon the narrow court beneath, one side of which was therefore clearly illuminated, while the other was lost in obscurity, the sharp outlines of the old gables, with their nodding clusters of ivy, being at first visible.—Whoever or whatever occasioned the noise that had excited my curiosity, was concealed under the shadow of the dark side of the quadrangle. I placed my hands over my eyes to shade them from the moonlight, which was so bright as to be almost dazzling, and peeping into the darkness, I first dimly, but afterwards gradually, almost with full distinctness, beheld the form of a man, engaged in digging what appeared to be a rude hole, close under the wall. Some implements, probably a shovel or pickaxe, lay beside him, and to these he every now and then applied himself as the nature of the ground required. He pursued his task rapidly and with as little noise as possible. "So," thought I, as shovelful after shovelful of the dislodged rubbish mounted into a heap, "they are digging the grave in which, before two hours are past, I must lie, a cold mangled corpse; I am theirs—I cannot escape." I felt as if my reason was leaving me. I started to my feet, and in mere despair I applied myself again to each of the two doors alternately. I strained every nerve and sinew, but I might as well have attempted, with my strength, to force the building itself from its foundation. I threw myself madly upon the ground, and clasped my hands over my eyes as if to shut out the horrible images which crowded upon me. The paroxysm passed away. I prayed once more with the bitter, agonised fervour of one who feels that the hour of death is present and inevitable. When I arose I went once more to the window and looked out, just in time to see a shadowy figure glide stealthily along the wall. The task was finished. The catastrophe of the tragedy must soon be accomplished. I determined now to defend my life to the last; and that I might be able to do so with some effect, I searched the room for something which might serve as a weapon; but either through accident, or from an anticipation of such a possibility, every thing which might have been made available for such a purpose had been carefully removed. I must then die tamely, and without an effort to defend myself.

A thought suddenly struck me—might it not be possible to escape through the door, which the assassin must enter? I resolved to make the attempt. I felt assured that the door through which ingress to the room would be effected was that which opened upon the lobby. It was the more direct way, besides being, for obvious reasons, less liable to interruption than the other.—I resolved, then, to place myself behind a projection of the wall, whose shadow would serve fully to conceal me, and when the door should be opened, before they could have discovered the identity of the occupant of the bed, to creep noiselessly from the room, and then to trust to Providence for escape. In order to facilitate this scheme, I removed all the lumber which I had heaped against the door; and I had nearly completed my arrangements, when I perceived the room suddenly darkened, by the close approach of some shadowy object to the window. On turning my eyes in that direction, I observed, at the top of the casement, as if suspended from above, first the feet, then the legs, then the body, and at length the whole figure of a man presented itself. It was Edward T.—n. He appeared to be guiding his descent so as to bring his feet upon the centre of the stone block which occupied the lower part of the window; and having secured his footing upon this, he knelt down and began to gaze into the room. As the moon was gleaming into the chamber, and the bed curtains were drawn, he was able to distinguish the bed itself and its contents. He appeared satisfied with his scrutiny, for he looked up and made a sign with his hand, upon which a rope by which his descent had been effected was slackened, and he proceeded to disengage it from his waist; this accomplished, he applied his hands to the window frame, which must have been ingeniously contrived for the purpose, for,

with apparently no resistance, the whole frame containing casement and all, slipped from its position in the wall, and was by him lowered into the room. The cold night wind waved the bed curtains, and he paused for a moment—all was still again—and he stepped in upon the floor of the room. He held in his hand what appeared to be a steel instrument, shaped something like a hammer, but larger and sharper at the extremities. This he held rather behind him, while with three long tip toe strides, he brought himself to the bed-side. I felt that the discovery must now be made, and held my breath in momentary expectation of the execration which would betray his surprise and disappointment. I closed my eyes—there was a pause—but it was a short one. I heard two dull blows, given in rapid succession; a quivering sigh, and the long-drawn, heavy breathing of the sleeper was for ever suspended. I unclosed my eyes, and saw the murderer fling the quilt across the head of the victim; he then, with the instrument of death still in his hand, proceeded to the lobby door—a quick step was then heard approaching, and a voice whispered something from without—Edward answered, with a kind of chuckle, "her ladyship is past complaining; unlock the door in the — name, unless you're afraid to come in, and help me to lift the body out of the window." The key was turned in the lock—the door opened—and my uncle entered the room. I have told you already that I had placed myself under the shade of the projection of a wall, close to the door. I had instinctively shrunk down, cowering towards the ground, on the entrance of Edward through the window. When my uncle entered the room, he and his son both stood so very close to me that his hand was every moment upon the point of touching my face. I held my breath, and remained motionless as death.

"You had no interruption from the next room?" said my uncle.

"No," was the brief reply.

"Secure the jewels, Ned; the French harpy must not lay her claws upon them. You're a steady hand, by —; not much blood, eh?"

"Not twenty drops," replied his son, "and those on the quilt."

"I'm glad its over," whispered my uncle again—we must lift the—the thing through the window, and lay the rubbish over it."

They then turned to the bedside, and, winding the bed clothes round the body, carried it between them slowly to the window, and exchanging a few brief words with some one below, they shoved it over the window sill, and I heard it fall heavily on the ground underneath.

"I'll take the jewels," said my uncle; "there are two caskets in the lower drawer."

He proceeded, with an accuracy which, had I been more at ease, would have furnished me with matter of astonishment, to lay his hand upon the spot where my jewels lay; and having possessed himself of them, he called to his son—

"Is the rope made fast?"

"I'm not a fool—to be sure it is," replied he.

They then lowered themselves from the window. I now rose lightly and cautiously, scarcely daring to breathe, from my place of concealment, and was creeping towards the door, when I heard my cousin's voice, in a sharp whisper, exclaim, "scramble up again; — you, you've forgot to lock the room door;" and I perceived, by the straining of the rope which hung from above that the mandate was instantly obeyed. Not a second was to be lost, I passed through the door, which was only closed, and moved as rapidly as I could, consistently with stillness, along the lobby. Before I had gone many yards I heard the door through which I had just passed, double locked on the inside. I glided down the stairs in terror, lest, at every corner, I should meet the murderer, or one of his accomplices. I reached the hall, and listened for a moment, to ascertain whether all was silent around; no sound was audible; the parlour windows opened on the park, and through one of them I might, I thought, easily effect my escape. Accordingly, I hastily entered; but to my consternation, a candle was burning in the room, and by its light I saw a figure seated at the dinner table, upon which lay glasses, bottles, and other accompaniments of a drinking party. Two or three chairs were placed about the table, irregularly, as if hastily abandoned by their occupants. A single glance satisfied me that the figure was that of my French attendant. She was fast asleep, having probably drunk deeply. There was something malignant and ghastly in the calmness of this bad woman's features, dimly illuminated as they were by the flickering blaze of the candle. A knife lay upon the table, and the terrible thought struck me—"Should I kill this sleeping accomplice in the guilt of the murderer, and thus secure my retreat?" Nothing could be easier—it was but to draw the blade across her throat—the work of a second. An instant's pause, however, corrected me.—"No" thought I, "the God who has conducted me thus far through the valley of the shadow of death, will not abandon me now. I will fall into their hands, or I will escape hence, but it shall be free from the stain of blood—His will be done." I felt a confidence arising from this reflection,