

Poetry

What I Live For.

I live for those who love me,
For those I know are true;
For the heaven that smiles above me,
And awaits my spirit too.

Literature

RETRIBUTION.

CHAPTER XXII.

The town of Leamington, or Leamington Priory, as it is called, is a beautiful town in Warwickshire, England.

It is noted for its lovely scenery, and for its many surrounding points of historical interest, among which "The Towers" itself is prominent, while not far distant are the Castle of Warwick, Kenilworth, and Stratford-upon-Avon.

It is also renowned as a watering-place, and its location regarded as exceedingly healthful.

The earl and countess, therefore, hoped much for Caroline in this change, and six months after the events related in the preceding chapter, found them once more established in their old home.

But the earl after the first few weeks of excitement and interest occasioned by their removal had passed, became more restless than before.

The familiar scene of his old home seemed to arouse memories which troubled him.

He began to grow gloomy and sullen, shunning all company, and wandering off for hours by himself in the park during the day, while as evening came he would shut himself up alone in the library, where he would remain often until midnight.

When he retired to his couch at night, he was haunted by weird and troubled dreams, so that time after time he would be obliged to rise and go out upon the balcony, which opened from his room, into the fresh air, to calm his excited nerves and forget his visions.

The change in him was so marked that the servants began to whisper among themselves, and say that the ghost of his dead wife, whom he had so ill treated, had come back to haunt him since his removal to the home where had made her so miserable.

The old butler seemed to be especially impressed with this idea. With a mysterious shake of his gray head, he was often heard to whisper:

"Holy Mother, rest the poor lady's soul! But 'tis no more than right that her wrath should haunt him now, for it were a shame the way his lordship used to carry a hand with her, and she the sweet lady that ever trod old England's soil."

When his appetite began to fail, and every night made him start and tremble with nervous dread, he began to be alarmed about himself, and at his wife's earnest desire, he called in good old Dr. Crawford, who, although in his seventy-fifth year, was as hale and hearty, and as keen in judgment, as when, nearly twenty years ago, he had attended the beautiful and suffering Madeline.

He pronounced the earl's trouble to be nervous prostration, brought on by too close application to business and politics for a protracted period.

By way of caution upon leaving, he remarked, somewhat carelessly:

"You must look out, my lord, or we shall have you where the first Lady Durward was some eighteen or twenty years ago."

"What!" he cried, his face growing ashen with a terrible fear; "you do not mean that my brain is affected?"

"Not seriously so at present, but you will have to be very careful or it will be the grave reply."

"What can I do?" he will do anything—such a fate would be to horrify!" he cried, with a shudder.

His mind went back to that day when, in that very room, he had planned with those two strange physicians to doom his wife to a life of misery within the walls of a Maison de Santé.

Could it be possible that his sin was to be visited upon him thus—that he would become what he had pretended she was, and his own the doom that he had planned for her?

The very thought made him feel as if his senses were slipping away from him even now.

"You must be free from all excitement," the physician said; then asked, with a searching look into his patient's horror-stricken face:

"Have you any trouble on your mind at present?"

"No, nothing; unless it is the fearful dream I have had last night, and which seems to haunt me through the day."

"Of what do you dream?"

"Of that dreadful wreck in the English Channel mostly, in which I see Madeline drowning again. I put forth my hand to save her, and she is borne by my rescuer. Again and again her white, dead face comes to the surface, and sometimes taking on a mocking, life-like look, as if to taunt me with my misery. I tell you doctor, it is horrible! And then something will seem to clutch me, and drag me down, down into the depths, while weird voices shriek in my ears, 'down at last! down at last! encompassed by ruin and despair.'"

The strong man looked as if he heard those voices even then. His eyes had a wild, frightened expression in them, the perspiration stood out in great drops on his forehead, and his fingers worked convulsively.

Dr. Crawford regarded him with deep concern.

"I should say you are troubled also by indigestion, which gives you nightmare. You must live lighter," he said.

"Live lighter? Why, I do not eat the

value of a slice of bread a day!" the earl exclaimed.

"Ah! do you use stimulants at all?"

"Some what," Lord Dudley said, flushing. "I must do something to drown these fancies, if fancies you can call them. Why, doctor," he added, dropping his voice almost to a whisper and glancing nervously around, "I have almost grown to think that Madeline's ghost haunts this house. You may smile, but I cannot enter a room alone, I cannot walk in my grounds, I cannot lie down upon my bed at night, without feeling that her presence is near."

"My lord, you are very foolish to dwell upon these things. I do not say that you can help their coming to your mind, but you must not allow them to remain. You and I know that there are no such things as ghosts—Madeline is dead; let her rest in peace. Poor child! hers was a sad fate," sighed the doctor, then added, thoughtfully: "She was always a favorite with me, you know; she was so gentle, so gracious and kind. She would have made a noble woman had she lived. There was a hidden force within her that would have come out grandly with time."

The earl sat silent and gloomy; he had reason to remember something of the hidden force of her character.

"Hers was a very singular case; that severe sickness of hers was very strange. Had I not known better, I should say that she had—"

"Had what?" said Lord Dudley, eagerly, as he stooped short.

"Nothing," replied the doctor, recovering from his musings. "It can do no good to regret or harbor doubts at this late day. Do not allow your mind to dwell upon these things, my lord. Take plenty of exercise and a bath every day, live light, drink nothing, and we'll pull you through all right yet, I hope."

The good doctor left him a quieting powder in case he could not sleep, and then went away.

But his visit, instead of re-assuring his patient, only tended to make him more miserable than before.

Madeline had hitherto been but a spectre of his dreams; now she haunted his waking hours as well.

He could not rid his mind of her; again and again she would rise before him in all her beauty, as she had appeared on that evening when he had treated her with such heartless cruelty. He saw her sad reproachful eyes, in which were mingled wounded love and despair. He recalled her gentleness and patience as she stood before him pleading for the restoration of his love; he heard her moan of anguish at his scorn, and her stern tones of denunciation when her woman's heart had been outraged beyond all power of human endurance.

He recalled her last words that night of the reception with a thrill of terror.

"May the wall of this, my breaking heart—your cruel word—ever sound in your ears and haunt your dying pillow!"

Could it be possible that he was soon to die, that these words should thus constantly ring in his ears? Was retribution about to overtake him?

Then again he saw her as she stood in the state-room of that ill-fated vessel; he heard her prophetic words.

"In the midst of your greatest glory," she had said, "the ghost of a blighted life will haunt you like an avenging angel; and—mark my words—when you have reached the topmost round of distinction, there will come a day when you will be hurled from that pinnacle to the very depths of degradation."

"That can never be," he muttered, with a frown. "I have reached the topmost round of distinction; but disgrace can never come near me; it is impossible that disgrace can ever even so much as touch my fair fame."

"I may be going to die," he added, but I shall leave a stainless name to my children."

He looked at his hands; they had grown thin and bloodless. His flesh had a loose clammy feeling; his strength was forsaking him so that his limbs trembled as he walked; his lips were pale, his eyes dull and sunken.

He started up wildly, crying, as he remarked these changes in him:

"Pshaw! where are my senses? It cannot be that I am going to die. Why, I am but just in the prime of life—have just reached a position where I can take my ease and enjoy myself. I will not die. I will live to laugh to scorn these sickly fancies. I have not risen above all the difficulties of my early life—I have not reached by sheer force of will the pinnacle on which I stand, only to be hurled from it by the foolish insinuations of my brain?"

Thus he reasoned day after day.

His wife, he walked, he worked—he did everything he could think of to occupy his mind, to ease the gnawings of remorse, and still the voice of his troubled conscience.

But he grew no better.

One day he sat down and wrote for Kenneth to come home. He felt that if he could have his strong, buoyant, self-sustained nature to lean upon for a while, and throw off all care, he would get relief.

He told him he was ill—too ill to attend to either his business or his own—and he desired to yield up his trust, and also wished advice upon matters of importance concerning his own property.

He wrote that he was willing to retain his guardianship nominally to fulfill the conditions of the will, but he was no longer able to attend to the details of business.

This letter he sealed and addressed one evening, and left it lying upon the table in the library with other mail matter, to be carried to the office in the morning before he should rise.

It was midnight as usual before he sought his chamber, and he was more than commonly nervous and depressed.

Though wearied beyond measure, yet he knew he could not sleep if he should retire.

Accordingly he opened the glass doors which led from his room upon the balcony and went out to cool the fever which burned in his veins.

It was a glorious night, and almost as bright as day. The broad, full moon was riding like a luminous chariot high in the heavens, and shed a golden radiance over the whole earth. Objects were visible for miles around; while, nearer, his own broad domains—his magnificent park, with its long white gravelled walks, overreached with the branches of luxuriant trees, and interspersed with choice statuary and musical fountains, beds of brilliant flowers and picturesque arbors—were spread out like a beautiful picture before him.

A suppressed groan of agony escaped him as he gazed upon this, the very perfection of beauty, and realized the wreck he was becoming—as he beheld the fair earth teeming with life and vigorous, healthy growth, and felt that disease and decay were preying upon his own vitals.

Suddenly he detected a slight stir among the shrubbery near the building. A white hand parted it, and in another moment the figure of a woman stole noiselessly into view.

She was tall and commanding in appearance, and was dressed in a gray stuff gown

which in the bright light of the moon appeared almost white.

She wore a large bonnet, something after the Quaker style, and she kept her head down as she approached.

Somewhat startled by this apparition, and very curious as to the object of her nocturnal visit, the earl drew back into the shadow of the awning which shaded the balcony, and watched her with almost breathless interest.

She glided noiselessly forward until she stood directly in front of the balcony.

Here she stopped and began to look around her.

She scanned every window and door upon the first floor, then lifted her head to examine those above.

As she did so her bonnet slipped from it, falling upon her shoulders behind, and the moonlight struck full upon her face.

It revealed a head covered with hair as white as snow.

And the face.

The earl caught his breath with a gasp. "Madeline! Madeline!" he whispered hoarsely. "My God! I believe I am haunted, or else I too am surely going mad."

He laid noiselessly to his knees, every particle of strength gone out of him, and peered through the lattice-work, straining his eyes to catch one more glimpse of the face which seemed so familiar.

But the figure, with its snowy hair and startlingly familiar countenance, had vanished, and with a moan of horror, the wretched man fell prone upon his face in a dead faint.

But you and I, my reader, do not believe in ghosts.

We know that figure must have been veritable flesh and blood.

We have no guilt on our conscience to make us fear encountering spirits from another sphere, therefore we will follow this strange apparition as she proceeds around the massive building to one of the towers upon the eastern side.

Here she stopped before a small iron door set in solid masonry.

There was no latch upon it, no knob or bolt—nothing but a keyhole, and no key visible.

The strange woman produced one from her pocket, inserted it in the lock, turned it, and behold! the door swung open with a slight grating noise, and she passed into a short, narrow passage-way.

Once within, she produced a candle and some matches, with which she struck a light, and then crossed the passage.

Here two huge steps led up to another door, which she also opened with the same key, and stepped into a carpeted gallery beyond. Traversing this with noiseless tread, she emerged into the grand entrance hall of the "Towers," which she crossed, and, opening still another door, entered the earl's private room or library.

As if perfectly familiar with everything around her, she went directly to his desk, which she found unlocked, and began examining the numerous papers within.

It was evident, however, that she did not find what she was searching for, for she at length replaced everything as she had found it, and then turned away with an air of disappointment.

A case of drawers stood near.

These she also examined, but apparently with the same result. She stood a moment in deep thought, when her restless eyes rested upon the numerous papers and letters scattered upon the table.

She approached and turned them carefully over, replacing each one just as she had found it.

Suddenly she stopped, holding a sealed letter in her hand.

The next moment she seized pen and paper, hurriedly wrote a few words upon it, and concealing it in her bosom, turned and left the room.

She hastened as before, across the grand entrance hall, down through the carpeted gallery, and through the door by which she had entered.

Closing and locking this, she passed out at the little iron door, which she also carefully shut and fastened, taking the key with her, then glided away into the shadow of the dense foliage and was lost to view.

Who was she, with her strange knowledge of the key to the secret passages of Leamington Towers? and what was her errand among his lordship's private papers at the weird hour of midnight?

"Nix,"

"Nix,"

The letter, simple and touching though it was, aroused at once all the lion in his nature.

"How dare she sign herself in that way!" he cried. "Does she think to cheat me out of the evidence of my own senses? If she is pure and true, why need she fear to have any one know it, even though this letter had never reached me?"

He was trembling like a reed shaken by the wind, as he read on his wedding-day, when he was blinded by his excessive pain.

"Does she think," he continued, "to win me back with her smooth words and artful words, that she may exult over me, and take her position in the world as my honored countess? Explain it all in five minutes; clear herself from all blame in my sight!—she never can do that! Why did she not speak then when I commanded her?"

He forgot that she had not five seconds then, and that Caroline stood by eager to drink in every word.

"Never! I will never go back to her—did she not confess that she was her lover? She can never clear herself in my sight, for I saw her in her arms, and she will never look upon her face again—will not trust myself under the spell of her voice again, and she shall go free if she desires. She may regret that she ever yielded him that interview, she may sorrow on account of the wrong done me; but it was an act of treachery which I will never forgive—though, heaven knows, I love her madly still. Oh, my love—my love! my fallen love—why could you not have been true at least to one of us?"

He wiped the sweat from his death-like face, groaning aloud.

The letter had completely unmanned him, and he saw that he never could return to England until he could see her once more.

His heart was filled with the most passionate love and longing for her, but his pride and reason told him that she was cunning, false, and unworthy.

He resolved to end it all at once—annual, for her sake, if she would consent, all ties which united them, and he would never look upon her face again, and never act for her in the matter, and when all was over, he trusted that he should be some way obtained relief.

When he could calm himself sufficiently, he sat down and answered her, crowding all tenderness back into his heart, and exercising only his stern sense of justice.

"MADAM—I have just received your letter, and I will never look upon her face again—will not trust myself under the spell of her voice again, and she shall go free if she desires. She may regret that she ever yielded him that interview, she may sorrow on account of the wrong done me; but it was an act of treachery which I will never forgive—though, heaven knows, I love her madly still. Oh, my love—my love! my fallen love—why could you not have been true at least to one of us?"

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This proposal should meet your approval, will you please let me know at once, and all things shall be done with as little publicity and violence to your feelings as possible. I shall, however, continue the same anxiety to you as you are receiving at present, or whatever you may designate as right. I shall await your reply here.

"Most obediently,"

It was a cruel letter, though he did not realize how cruel at the time; his own suffering and sense of injury made him heedless as to his reply.

A week or two later he received this answer:

"KENNETH MALCOLM, EARL OF MALROSE:—Your degree regarding the future I am forced to accept, and I yield assent to whatever measure you may think it advisable to adopt. I may care all with you—and God; and that He may care for you as ever, will be the constant prayer of

"N."

P. S.—Allow me to add that I most emphatically refuse to know the future, and I have in the past, to receive any pecuniary benefit whatever from you."

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