

Literature, &c.

British March Magazines.

From Fraser's Magazine.

THE DEATH CELL.

A TALE OF PARIS.

“WHEN she was once more alone, the lady approached the table, and taking up the letter which lay upon it, she read it through slowly, and like one who weighed every word that it contained with anxious scrutiny.

“I blush for you as well as for myself,” she murmured half audibly. “Aye! she does well to blush for him.” “Do you believe me base enough to wrong an indulgent husband! Aye, there indeed, she has a strong hold. ‘An indulgent husband!’ Could this girl-Marchioness have been so brave had her lord been cold and stern as mine was? Perhaps yes, for she thinks of herself; I only thought of him. ‘You may come to our hotel as usual; it will prevent all suspicion of your folly, and I will endeavor to forget it.’ And he is there now!” she exclaimed passionately, as she once more crushed the letter in her hand. “Now! when my heart is bursting, and my brain is burning with a fire which no tears can quench—Need any whisper to me how her weak forgiveness of such an insult must end at last? And shall I wait to see the drama played out to its closing scene? Never, by all the saints! I have promised to go to rest, and I will fulfil the pledge; but I will think only of her, for if I let my thoughts wander to him, I may shrink from the cold bed that misery has spread for me. This dainty glove, too! It must have been a love-token; her lips had touched it, and so he treasures it as a miser hoards his gold. This, at least, shall perish with me.” And she thrust it into her bosom; and turning away from the table with a dry eye, and cheeks in which burnt two crimson spots, so vivid that they looked as though her heart’s blood had been concentrated there, she passed into an adjoining apartment, whence she again came forth, after a brief interval, enveloped in a wide mantle of black velvet. Giving one long, wild look around, in which she appeared to embrace every object within the saloon, she threw the hood of the cloak over her head, and, gliding down stairs, made the accustomed signal; when the porter, without rising from his bed, pressed upon the cord which raised the bolt of the outer door, and in the next instant she stood alone, an hour after midnight, in the midst of the snow covered Place Vendôme.

“*Pest soit de ces Anglais!*” muttered the angry official; when just as he was about to settle himself to sleep, a new summons was heard from without, and he was again compelled to put forth his arm from beneath the warm coverings in which he was enveloped. “*Peste soit de ces Anglais!* On sort et on rentre toute la nuit comme des rats et des chauve-souris.” He obeyed the signal, however; and a groom, wearing the livery of the young Englishman *au premier*, passed into the court, and rang the bell which communicated with his master’s apartments.

“It was answered by the same domestic who had been previously summoned by the unfortunate Bianca; and to him the messenger delivered a note, with instructions to give it to his mistress, should she not yet have retired to rest; but on no account to disturb her should she have done so, as it was merely to inform her that *milord* would not return home for a day or two, having engaged himself to accompany a party at an early hour on the following morning to the chateau of a friend a short distance from the city.

“Having so done, he departed; and Joachim having reascended with the letter in his hand to the saloon; when, no answer being given to his appeal for admission, he opened the door softly, concluding that his lady had indeed retired, as he had been previously instructed to request, deposited the note on a console; and having extinguished the lights, and scattered the burning brands far asunder over the hearth, in order that they might gradually die out without risk of mischief, he withdrew in his turn to rest.

“All was soon still and dark in that lordly chamber, and the only object within it which could whisper of the hour were two poor fragments of paper; the one closely written over, and the other inscribed hastily and briefly with a few hurried lines, which, however kind they might have seemed, to a casual reader, would have spoken only of coldness and change to the heart of her to whom they were addressed. There lay the two small hinges upon which revolved the destinies—perhaps the eternal destinies—of three human beings!

“The pretty little chateau, or rather farm, of the Marquis de St. C.—was situated only a couple of miles from Paris, and was an expensive plaything which he had recently purchased, in compliance with a caprice of his young bride, as an occasional retreat from the busy dissipations of the capital. During the eventful day just over, it had been announced to the marchioness that the finishing stroke had been put to its luxurious arrangements, and that precautions had been taken to render its immediate occupancy both safe and convenient, should she think proper to pay it an experimental visit.

“Young, lively, and indulged, the fair girl no sooner received this assurance than she determined not to lose a single day in removing to *ce cher petit paradis de maison*, as she instantly decided it must be, and accordingly a messenger was despatched to intimate to the *conciierge* that on the morrow a party would take posses-

sion; and as the young Englishman was present when the arrangement was made, he was requested to join it by the unsuspecting marquis himself. Although he weakly yielded to the invitation, he had not left the Hotel de St. C.—more than a moment, when a full and painful sense of his neglect of the devoted and unfortunate Bianca half induced him to return and retract his promise; but in the next his passion for the marchioness overcame his better principle,—he should live under the same roof with her for days, perhaps for weeks, see her at all hours and in all moods,—he could not forego the prospect for a thousand Biancas!

“It was however, far more easy to make this resolution than to communicate it to his deserted victim: and he had scarcely crossed the river, when he resolved to drive to an hotel in the Rue Richelieu, write from thence a few lines to the Italian, explaining his intention, and remain at the hotel for the night, on the pretext of not disturbing her by returning home at so late an hour.

“Just as he had gained the centre of the bridge, the horse which he was driving started and plunged forward violently; and as he gave his note to the groom, in order that he might immediately deliver it in the Place Vendôme, he inquired of the man if he could account for so unusual an exhibition of vice in an animal ordinarily so gentle.

“Please you, my lord, he heeded the splash, and somehow these brute beasts always smell out death when its a-doing; for I don’t doubt my lord that it was some of these French people a-throwing themselves into the river, they’re always at it!”

“Rebuking the man for not having communicated his suspicion to him at the moment, the young Englishman dismissed him on his errand, and immediately retired to rest, delighted at the expedient by which he had escaped the sight of Bianca’s tears. Had he known what produced the sullen sound which startled his affrighted horse, he would have learned also that he had no longer those tears to dread!

“Morning came, clear, and bright, and frosty; and, ere noon, all the party save one were assembled at the hotel de St. C.—, ready to start; when the venerable Baron de Dumas, the cousin of the marquis, sent a servant to announce that an important affair would detain him at the palace until the evening, but that he would join their circle an hour before supper. There was, consequently, no further reason for delay, and the marchioness, having wrapped herself in her furs, and given strong injunctions to her *bon petit papa* to close the windows of his carriage, and not spoil the whole expedition by taking cold, she was handed to her own equipage by one of her guests. The other followed, and, ere long, the whole train had swept through the barrier.

“The remainder of the day passed rapidly over; there was so much to see, so many questions to ask and to answer, that the twilight was beginning to gather ere Madame de Valerie suggested an improvement in the dressing-room of her friend, which could only be accomplished by the purchase of an expensive article of *vertu*, perhaps not even immediately to be procured in Paris. Be this as it might, however, it was, of course, decided that its acquisition was indispensable; and when the gentlemen were called into council, great was the delight of the young Englishman to find that he was the happy possessor of precisely the description of gem coveted by the marchioness. Having announced the fact, and obtained permission to add this missing grace to the apartment of the lady, he would not delay its transfer even for a night, and desiring his groom to return to Paris and bring it carefully thence, he shortly afterwards joined the rest of the party in presenting a gay welcome to the Baron de Dumas, who had just arrived.

“The old gentleman was chilled by his journey, and had seated himself in a *chaise-longue* before a blazing fire, while the remainder of the group stood around him, laughingly demanding what news he had brought from the city whence they had been absent so many hours; and he indulged their mirth by detailing his proceedings at the palace, and drawing lively, and not always very-good natured, sketches of the sayings and doings of its inmates. But suddenly becoming serious, he exclaimed, ‘But the *merveille du jour*, *mesdames*, is the supposed suicide of a most beautiful young lady, who was found in the Seine this morning, and carried to the *Morgue*.’

“*Trepas de grisette*, without doubt,” said Madame de Valerie, contemptuously.

“By no means, madame; on the contrary, my curiosity was so much excited by what I heard of her excellent beauty and the richness of her attire, that had I been able to permit myself to lose one hour of your charming society, I should decidedly have made a pilgrimage to the Quai Notre Dame, in order to satisfy myself that the accounts were not exaggerated. Poor creature! It must, indeed, have been a bitter sorrow which made her select such a death in this inclement weather; and the old gentleman shivered, as he sat within the influence of the warm blaze, surrounded by luxury and comfort, and the reckless desperation of the wretched suicide.

“It is indeed, most dreadful to reflect upon,” said the young Englishman. “Could it be that it was this wretched girl whose death-plunge scared my horse upon the bridge, as I was leaving the hotel of the marquis?”

“Nothing more probable, if so disagreeable an adventure did occur to you,” was the reply; “for she is at present the only occupant of the *Morgue*. There are few individuals of either sex who would have courage under any circumstance to brave the river in its present state.”

“*Affaire de cœur*, of course, Monsieur le Baron? I slipped the pretty little Countess St. Angel.

‘I will bet any one a thousand francs—’ commenced her husband.

‘Nay, nay, make no bets upon such a subject!’ count, said the Englishman; ‘it is too horrible! But have they obtained no clue to her identity? If she be a gentlewoman, it surely cannot be difficult to trace her connexions or to recognize her person.’

‘All was mere curiosity and conjecture when I was informed of the circumstances,’ said the baron. ‘One or two persons are stated to have said that they knew her well,—and remembered having seen her in Paris for several months; but as none of them could tell who she was, no reliance was placed on their assertions, though the general impression seems to be that she is a foreigner.’

‘Supper being just then announced, the subject was dropped for a time; but it was ultimately resumed by the Englishman, upon whom the vague relation of the baron had made a strong and painful impression.

‘You did not then, yourself, monsieur, see this beautiful suicide?’

‘Time failed me, milord, or I should certainly have done so; but my friend, the Chevalier Flane, gave me a most vivid description both of her person and her costume. That Madame la Comtesse made a shrewd guess at the impulse of her self-destruction is by no means doubtful, as a white kid glove, richly embroidered with silver, and evidently from its size belonging to a rival, was found in her bosom!’

‘The Englishman suddenly fell back in his chair, with an expression of mute and anxious horror, while his eyes, as if instinctively, fastened upon the marchioness. His emotion was, however, unobserved; for the touch of romance which the baron’s last information had given to the subject, rivetted the attention of the whole party upon himself, and he quietly continued his narrative:—

‘*La belle trepasse*, who is now lying stretched under the coarse coverlet of *La Morgue*, *mesdames*, was attired, when drawn from the river, in a dress of black velvet, which was gathered together in heavy folds about her waist, where it was clasped by a large emerald; and wore suspended from her neck a miniature encircled with the same precious gems; a large cloak of a similar material to her robe—

‘But the baron’s description was here interrupted by the emission of a wild, wordless, gurgling sound from the lips of the young Englishman, who rising from his seat with a violence by which it was overset, rushed from the room like a maniac, and disappeared.

‘As he reached the court, he was encountered by the groom whom he had despatched to Paris for the toy coveted by the marchioness, and he no sooner saw him, than seizing the gem he was carefully conveying to the house, he dashed it frantically upon the pavement, where it shivered into fragments; while, with quite and quivering lips he attempted an inquiry to which he could not give utterance. There was, however, no necessity for words; the messenger already knew all that his master sought to ask, though he was still ignorant of what he might have been told; for, beyond the disappearance of the Lady Bianca, every thing was mystery to the man himself; but the violent and uncontrollable emotion upon which he looked, satisfied him that her evasiveness was already no secret at the chateau;—and he, therefore, answered unhesitatingly to the questioning look that was turned upon him:—

“It is indeed, too true, my lord; my lady is—”

‘With a shrill cry, or rather yell, which rang out upon the night air and made it vocal with human agony, the Englishman sprang into the saddle which his groom had just quitted; and, ere the astonished guests in the supper room had time to reach the court yard, he was galloping furiously away in the darkness, on the road which led to the capital.

‘The consternation of the courtly party requires no comment, when they learned from the lips of the affrighted groom the disappearance of a lady to whom his master was devotedly attached, and who had accompanied him from Italy; and then it was that, for the first time, a spasm of horror shook the young marchioness. The glove! was it then *her* glove which had been found resting upon the cold bosom of the suicide? Was it *her* idle and selfish coquetry which had driven a fellow creature to destruction? It was fortunate for the self-convicted woman that the effect produced upon the whole of her guests offered an apology for her own emotion; for, after a few comments and conjectures, conversation flagged, and the different members of the party of pleasure were glad to retire to their several chambers, wearied and harassed by the adventures of the day.

‘On and on, meanwhile, passed the jaded horse and its reckless rider; until the poor brute, already wearied by its previous journey, and urged beyond its speed, slipped over a loose stone, and fell, hurling its load to the ground with a violence which would have caused a bystander to believe that death must have ensued; but it seemed as though the Englishman was beyond physical injury; for, after rising from the earth, and ascertaining by a hasty glance at the prostrate animal, that it was incapable of further exertion, he recommenced with a hurried step his city-ward journey, bare-headed, and in a slight evening costume, ill calculated to protect its wearer against the rigours of the season.

‘The night was far advanced when he reached the barrier, although the moon had greatly accelerated his progress; and here he would inevitably have been stopped had not his person been well known to the guard, who, on ascertaining his identity, said, with a laugh, ‘*Sont-ils franceses, ces Anglais!* Milord is walking for a wager, n’est-il pas vrai?’ An eager affirmative, accompanied by a gold coin which he flung to them as he passed, satisfied the gate keepers; and the lover of Bianca stood within the walls

of the city where she lay dead. She whom he had loved as greatly as he had wronged her—his own Bianca, who had only him left on earth to comfort and protect her, and whom he had abandoned by his neglect to death—the young, the bright, the beautiful, the high-born! And there was no hope—she was dead! And how died she? Not as the happy die—not amid the tears, and prayers, and blessings, of those who loved her; but alone, with madness in her brain, and despair tugging at her heart-strings! In the bleak darkness of a winter midnight she had perished miserably, violently setting the last seal upon a career of sin which cannot know repentance—she had died the death of the suicide!

‘Wild thoughts these with which to wander through the silent streets of a sleeping city! No wonder that, ere he reached the *Morgue*, the conscience-stricken man was in a state of partial madness. Had he never existed, she had been still living, honored and happy. Had he even been true to the victim he had made, she would still have existed, less honored, less happy, perhaps, but yet hoping on, and trusting even where she had been the most deeply wronged: now what was she?

‘As he asked himself the fearful question, he was in the immediate neighbourhood of the death cell.

‘Day was just dawning; for the young Englishman, absorbed in his own agonizing grief, had frequently wandered from the direct path; and the tall houses of the streets before him looked like grim spectres starting from the snow-covered earth, while the sullen and sluggish Seine was half-obscured by the dull vapors that hung about it like a veil. He turned one glance towards the fatal river—and then withdrew his eyes with a cold shudder, such as all his night-wandering under the biting influence of the season had failed to produce. He hurried on; his was no errand on which he could linger: the truth lay before him; and he must learn it all or become a maniac.

‘The *custodier* of the *Morgue* stood upon the threshold smoking a pipe, to protect him from the damps of the dawning, and his portly person filled up the doorway; but he had no sooner cast his eyes upon the advancing figure than he moved aside, for he saw at once that the errand of the scantily clad, bareheaded, and frenzied individual before him could have no other end than death.

‘And he was right; for ere another moment had elapsed, the narrow cell, though tenanted by three individuals, was, for a few seconds, as silent as the grave. Upon the corpse-plank lay the body of Bianca, cold, stiff, and pale; a coarse and scanty coverlet veiling the graceful limbs whose outline could be traced through the unseemly shroud. Her face was bare; and so beautiful in its rigidity that it might have seemed the dream of genius wrought into mimic life by the hand of the statuary, had not the long raven hair streamed over the brow and cheeks, and trailed, dank and heavy with moisture, almost to the floor; while at distant intervals a large drop of water would fall from the tangled masses, and splash heavily upon her stones beneath. Above her head hung her velvet mantle and her sable dress: she appeared to have provided her own pall; and upon the plank beside her, freed for the time of its accustomed ghastly load, were displayed her jewelled clasp, the diamond that she had worn upon her finger, and a gem-encircled miniature. The wretched man saw it all at a glance; and he stood, gasping for breath, and clinging to the grating which separated him from his victim, vivid memories swept over his spirit of the hour in which that picture was painted; and the woe which he was breathing into her ear for whom it was designed; and there it lay, in the *Morgue*, and she lay beside it, DEAD! He turned his languid eyes from the miniature to the corpse, and in the next instant he was stretched insensible upon the pavement.

‘Aye, aye, I thought how it would be,’ exclaimed the *custodier*, as he saw him fall; ‘I thought the jewels would soon find an owner. Here, Lisette—Lisette, *depechez-vous*,—here’s one come to claim the dead lady, who’s as senseless, and well nigh as cold, as she is. Be gentle with him,’ he added, with more feeling than might have been expected from an individual inured from habit to scenes of misery; when, in obedience to his summons, his wife descended from an upper apartment, and began to assist him in raising the stranger. ‘Poor gentleman! he cannot have been in his right senses to brave the weather in such a dress as this! Call Jacques, *bonne femme*, to watch the door; and I’ll carry him up stairs, and see what I can do with him, while you run for a surgeon.’

‘The few acquaintances whom the young Englishman had made in Paris never saw him again. The body of Bianca was privately interred in *Pere-la-Chaise*, permission having been purchased of the authorities at a heavy price; and a plain stone, simply inscribed with her initials E. S., was placed upon her grave. But hours before she was laid at rest in the solemn cemetery, he who should have wept beside her dust was many leagues distant from the city.

‘Two years after she perished, a handsome monument was erected over her remains, but still no clue was given to her identity; the initials were repeated, and in a line with these were added C. L., while beneath both was wrought the semblance of a withered tree struck by lightning, with the affecting motto—

“TUTTO È PERDUTO!”

‘About that time a young Englishman of rank died of rapid consumption at Madeira.’