

Literature, &c.

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From Hogg's Instructor.

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It may be proper to acquaint our readers that the events recorded in the subsequent narrative are well authenticated. The principal facts, though little known, are nevertheless recounted and affirmed by several writers, usually cited as unimpeachable authorities. Among these we may refer to the Prince Alexander Labanoff, in his 'Collection of Mary Stuart's Letters,' edited in 1839 by the Librarian Merlin. Mr Merlin would consider himself dishonoured if he suffered the name of a volume to be inscribed on his catalogue which had any link in common with romances. To this modern authority may be added the 'Correspondence of Throckmorton,' written in 1576, Cottonian Manuscript, Caligula C. J., folios 11 to 35; Doctor Lingard; and Laboureur, in his 'Addition to the Memoirs of Castelnau,' book the first, page 618 of the edition of 1731. Lingard, who was counsellor and almoner to Louis XV., owed to his confidential post the knowledge of several particulars kept for a long time secret. Besides, when he published his work, it was easy for him to consult the registers of the Convent of Soissons, and to obtain assurance of the reality of the facts which he, priest and historian as he was, has not hesitated to attest as authentic. A single voice is raised against their verity; it is that of Gilbert Stuart in his book published in London 1782. But, as Prince Labanoff judiciously observes, the testimony of Throckmorton, a contemporary; of Lingard, and of Laboureur, in positions which gave them every facility for knowing the truth, merit as much credit as an isolated protestation, written two hundred and fourteen years after the occurrence of the principal circumstance of the history we are about to detail.

In 1568, towards the end of the month of January or February, for the learned authors we have just mentioned do not agree on this point, two men, enveloped in large cloaks, descended from a carriage that had stopped about midnight at the gate of the Abbey of our Lady of Soissons. One of these travellers seized the knocker so violently, that the whole community started from their sleep at the noise caused by the heavy mass of iron as it rose and fell. While the novices leaning toward each other's beds, asked in a low voice what a visit at such an hour could mean, and the noble and venerable Mary Mowbray, the lady abbess, started up in bed, the knocker renewed once or twice its appeal. The portress, altogether bewildered, without waiting for the call of the silver whistle of the superior, entered precipitately into her cell.

'My beloved mother,' cried she, 'the gate of the convent will be broken in. What misfortune menaces us.'

'There can be none,' said the abbess. 'For a whole year has not the town of Soissons belonged to the king of France, who is to guard and protect it?'

She then got up hastily, threw on her robe, covered with the sacred veil her venerable head, and quickly descended the stairs, accompanied by the portress, for now the knocker was agitated furiously.

'Who knocks thus, and at such an hour?' demanded the abbess.

'They are going to answer us at last,' replied a rough voice. 'I must immediately speak with the superior of the abbey of Notre Dame.'

'The lady abbess is here with me,' said the tremulous voice of the portress.

The rude tones of him who vociferated outside the gate, softened a little, and he pronounced a few words in a foreign language.

The abbess, in extreme agitation, exclaimed, 'Open, sister, be quick!' and still more to hasten the nun's efforts, who was withdrawing the bolts and turning the key, she repeated, 'Open, open!' The gate, freed from its many iron bolts, at length unclosed and admitted the two strangers.

'This is the charge I am bound to commit to you,' said one of them.

'And these are the instructions which accompany the charge,' added the other.

'A charge confided to me! Whence comes it?' enquired the stupefied mother.

'A nobleman bade us perform this duty upon our honour and our life,' replied the least rude of the men. Then placing at the feet of the abbess, while she took the letter, a middle-sized package, they bowed deeply, departed, and shut the gate behind them. In a minute the gallop of the horses announced their departure.

The women turned to each other greatly astonished, though unable to see, for the current of air occasioned by the gate being suddenly shut had extinguished the lantern of the portress; nevertheless the superior began to open the letter brought under such mysterious circumstances.

'Shut the gate, sister,' said the abbess, 'then take the package the strangers brought and place it in my cell.'

While the ancient lady groped to find the staircase leading to her apartment, the portress stooped to obey the orders she had just received, and her hands sought the package placed on the flagstones of the cloister. In the deep obscurity, her foot accidentally moved it, and thence issued the cry of a new-born child. At this sound the abbess uttered a shriek of mingled surprise and terror. As for the portress, she was ready to faint. 'Madam,' stammered

she, for her lips could hardly move; 'madam, what is to be done? What will become of us?'

'Follow me and be silent,' interrupted the abbess in an imperious tone, taking up the package, wrapped in linen, which had such an innocent appearance. The superior placed her hand on the infant's mouth; and rapidly traversed the cloister. Once more in her cell, she hastened to obtain a light, and opened the letter she had received from the travellers. Scarcely had her eyes fixed on the writing than they overflowed with tears, and she was obliged to wipe them away before she could proceed.

'Sister,' said she to the portress, 'this child is a precious charge and a sacred one confided to us. We may praise God for being the chosen instruments in a work of his mercy. That is all I may tell you of one of the most solemn secrets ever committed to my venerable experience. Now, procure for the stable some milk, and as soon as it is day we will seek a nurse for the infant, for she must not leave the enclosure of the cloister of Notre-Dame. Here she must grow, and, perhaps, sheltered by our holy walls, here she must live and die.'

All the ideas of the portress were confused, and in spite of her great desire to penetrate the mystery, she understood neither what she heard, what she saw, nor what she was doing. While she was hastening to the stables to obtain the milk for the child, she asked herself whether she was awake, or if some strange dream had not disturbed her reason. When she had aroused the keepers of the stable, as much astonished as herself at her appearance at such an hour, and that their slumber was to be interrupted by an order from the abbess to milk one of the cows, she returned with the warm milk to the cell. The superior had cradled the infant on her knees, like the most tender mother, and murmured a hymn, by way of lullaby, to still it cries. The warm milk, however, had a better effect than the sacred song; the child drank eagerly, and soon fell asleep upon the abbess's knees, who dared not move for fear of awaking her, and thus she remained immovable till the bell rang for matins. She then placed the little creature on her couch, and not stopping to observe the contrast offered by the appearance of the sleeping babe on the virgin bed of a recluse, she hastened to the choir, where she was much less marked by the fervency of her prayers than the diligence with which she directed the morning ceremony. That office concluded, she regained her cell with a promptitude that had something of the vivacity of youth. The infant still slept soundly, her rosy lips were slightly moved as though she was yet drinking the milk that had appeased her hunger, and there was a grace in the deep closed eyelids that moved the recluse, and awoke a maternal feeling in her heart, so long imbued with the austere spirit of asceticism. Far from seeking to overcome this new and sweet sentiment, she gave way to it entirely, and tasted an indescribable joy at finding herself the protectress of this poor little creature, so completely abandoned on the earth.

She would not permit a nurse to suckle the infant, and having determined she should be nourished on goat's milk, she went herself to choose the youngest, whitest, and prettiest of the horned flock, and had it placed in a stable as close as possible to her own cell. A mother could not have surpassed her in her attentions.

While the abbess was occupied with these various cares, it may be easily supposed the alarm of the night and the adventures of the day completely occupied the attention of the whole convent. The superior did not take, and had not taken, the least precaution to dissimulate the child's arrival amongst the community of which she was the head. The only thing she kept secret was her origin; there were, therefore, only the suppositions and questions which could be addressed without ceasing to the portress relative to the matter. And it was necessary to pursue these inquiries with caution, for the abbess, it was known, confided to no one her secrets, and did not approve of their being made a subject of conversation. The portress, proud of the importance the adventure gave her, and delighted to be an object of general attention, repeated to all who desired the details, and even more than the details, of the arrival of the strangers, the mysterious letter, and the strange manner in which the child had been presented to the abbess. While, however, surrounded by a group of novices, she recommenced for the seventh or eighth time her inexhaustible narrative, the Lady Mowbray suddenly appeared and singularly troubled the audience and the orator.

'Sister portress,' said the superior, with that cold intonation which permitted no reply, 'and which she was accustomed to employ with her flock; retire to your cell, there recite the *Miserere mei Deus* twenty times, kneeling, with extended arms, using your discipline between each psalm. Sister novices, the same penance is imposed on you; go and pray to God to moderate for the future the intemperance of your tongues and also the fervour of your curiosity.'

The portress and the novices retired confused and in consternation to their cells, where they accomplished on themselves the severe chastisement the abbess had inflicted for the punishment of their curiosity. The news of it soon spread through the cloister, and rendered the conversations on that subject sower and more reserved.

If the abbess permitted no one to occupy themselves with the origin of her little protégée, in return she permitted the sisters to lavish their caresses and their attentions as much as

they desired on the little child, who was solemnly baptized by the Bishop of Laon in person. The abbess answered for the child at the font with Don Jerome M'Mahan, an ancient Benedictine, her confessor. These three personages alone were acquainted with the compiling of the act of baptism, written in the prelate's own hand, who deposited it with other papers in a golden box, sealed by him, and took charge of it himself. The little girl was placed by her godfather and godmother under our lady's invocation, protectress of the abbey; she bore the name of Mary henceforth.

Nineteen years had passed, at the end of which time the abbess remained the sole possessor of her secret, for the Bishop as well as the ancient Benedictine were dead; and throughout this long interval she had watched over her with the solicitude of a mother. She desired that her education might be more extended; and superior to that usually given to ladies in those days, and never appeared to consider her god-daughter as destined to take the veil in the abbey of Notre Dame. Far from that, she gave her instructions fitted to regulate her conduct one day in the world; she sometimes hinted that important and high prospects were in store for the child. Whatever these might be, Mary wore, from the day of her baptism, the costume of the novices of the abbey of Notre Dame. Her beauty was extreme, as the following words of Brantome testify:—'The fairness of her countenance contended with the whiteness of her veil; the one seemed to efface the other, and yet they harmonised well. Still more, she had the perfection of a soft and eloquent voice.' Hence, with the exception of a few sisters, enemies of the superior, every one in the abbey loved and adored her, and none felt any jealousy on account of the large share of favour the abbess showed her. Without exactly knowing why, they were accustomed to look upon Mary as a person whose rank was higher than that of all the other members of the community, to whom attention and almost homage belonged. Mary thus passed a tranquil and serene life. Sometimes she would interrogate the abbess on the secret of her birth; who mildly bade her not seek to penetrate a mystery which circumstances did not yet permit her to reveal.

Towards the end of the year 1587 the abbess of Notre-Dame of Soissons fell into a deep melancholy. She received frequent letters, and these letters appeared to increase her grief. Finally, in spite of her advanced age, she undertook a journey which lasted three months; her sorrow, far from being allayed at her return, appeared to have become more bitter and deep. She passed days and nights before the altars, subjected herself to the severest penances, and seemed a prey to the most terrible despair; at the same time desiring to have Mary always with her to mingle their prayer together. 'Pray,' she said to her, 'pray, my child; for God to turn away his wrath, requires the pure and fervent supplications of an angel such as you. Pray, Mary, pray, for a great misfortune menaces one of the most holy and noblest of women. If the divine displeasure is not appeased, an unexampled crime will be committed.'

Towards the end of February, another letter arrived for the abbess. The news contained in this missive produced such a fatal impression on the ancient recluse that she fell into a fainting fit on reading them. When sensibility was restored, her reason seemed distracted. She muttered words without connexion, and the lips which for eighty years had never offered but praises to God, were compressed with force that they might not permit complaints against the divine will to escape them. A flood of tears succeeded this crisis, brought on by the appearance of Mary in her godmother's chamber. The sight of the maiden gave it a new turn; the abbess threw herself into her arms and pressed her strongly to her bosom. 'My child,' said she, 'weep, for the crime is accomplished! Weep, for the Queen Elizabeth has just caused the assassination of her cousin, the Queen Mary Stuart!'

'Who are then the Queen Mary Stuart and the Queen Elizabeth?' inquired Mary, surprised, for it was the first time, in the seclusion of the cloister, which she had never left, that these names had reached her ears.

'One is a victim, the other is a murderess,' replied the abbess. 'One is a martyr, the other a heretic. Pray to God, my child, that his divine mercy may admit the one to his rest and that he may pardon the other and grant her repentance for her unheard-of crime. Pray, my child, for the days of misfortune and mourning are come! Pray, for the hand of the Lord is extended on Scotland, my country! Pray, blood flows, civil war is aroused, and the sons suffer their mother to be slain and draw no sword to defend her! Pray, for there are orphans abandoned and alone upon the earth without protection and without succour.'

The morrow was celebrated in the abbey of Notre Dame of Soissons, as in all the convents of France, by a funeral service for the repose of the soul of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland. Mary prayed with even greater fervour than ordinary, for she remembered that her godmother was from Scotland, and she had seen the grief the news of the death of the royal martyr had caused her.

Since the journey she had undertaken, and, above all, since she had learned the violent death of the Scottish Queen, the abbess withered rapidly beneath the pressure of old age, which till then appeared to have respected her eighty years. Still she governed the convent as heretofore, with a firm hand, and perhaps showed greater energy in resisting every attempt, however slight, that threatened to invade

her absolute authority. A sister of great influence in the community, united by birth to the royal family, thought she might release herself in some insignificant points from strict observance of the usual rule, but was reprimanded by the abbess, who addressed to her a public and severe warning.

Mary, meanwhile, watched over her day and night, and lavished on her the attentive cares of filial tenderness. Alas! these cares could not overcome the malady nor calm the deep grief which overwhelmed her benefactress; and often, without apparent motive, the ancient recluse would gaze at her god-daughter, burst into tears, and seem a prey to despair. She drew her to her bosom, covered her forehead with kisses, and invoked the mercy of God for her. But such violent emotion soon exhausted the little strength her eighty years had left her, and one day the physician of the abbey, after half-an-hour's examination of the symptoms of her illness, thus addressed her:—

'My lady abbess, on earth I have always entreated to be remembered in your prayers; to-morrow, before the throne of God, I hope you will not forget me, and that you will continue your intercession.'

The abbess looked at him with deep anxiety. 'Thus,' said she, 'I did not deceive myself. Alas! must I quit the orphan who, except me, has no aid upon earth. Mary! Let Mary come to me! I must speak to her immediately.' The maiden, who as usual was in the adjoining apartment, at this hastened to her. 'My child,' said the superior, with the utmost agitation; 'my child, thou must take the veil to-day; this hour thou must pronounce thy vows! I have often told thee thy life was not destined to be passed in a cloister, and I have refused to yield to thy prayers when thou didst ask me to let thee engage in a religious life. Now it is myself who beseeches thee to do so; who commands thee in urgent necessity. Oh God, permit me to live till this ceremony is accomplished, till this orphan has an assured asylum! Let the bishop be sent for, implore him to come this moment in Christ's name and in that of his own salvation.' While this order was executed, her emotion continued to increase and inflame. The prelate hastened to her presence, and found her on the verge of delirium.

'My Lord,' cried she, as soon as she perceived him; 'my lord, bestow the veil on sister Mary. Let her become a votary in Notre Dame of Soissons before I die. If I appear in the presence of God ere this is done, I shall have to answer for having listened to foolish hopes, and not sheltered this poor orphan in this house.'

'I promise you, my sister, to attend to the execution of the last wish you express, but a vocation cannot be thus hurried.'

'For the sake of a Christian soul in peril; yes, my lord, for my salvation, do what I ask, else you will share the terrible responsibility of my fault.' Saying this, she raised her hands towards heaven with despair; her cheeks were burning, her eyes glared with a strange brilliancy.

'Does the young lady,' enquired the bishop, 'unite all the qualifications necessary, to be admitted among the sisters of the abbey of Notre-Dame of Soissons? Is she of legitimate birth? Of a noble family? Has she a dowry of twelve thousand crowns?'

'The dowry is there,' replied the abbess, pointing to the treasure of the community, deposited in her cell; 'and for legitimacy and nobility of birth there is none so pure or so illustrious.'

'Give me then the proofs, my dear sister.'

'The proofs!' said the abbess, passing her thin hands across her burning forehead. 'The proofs! Where are they? Who is the possessor?' She thus searched a long time in her memory. She struggled with death, which already obliterated the past; she could not, however, recall what she desired, she was in despair; when with a sudden cry she exclaimed—'Thanks, my God! Thanks for the return of my reason! The bishop—my lord—my predecessor—I confided them to him. Let every one leave the room, that Mary and you alone may learn the secret of her birth. Approach, I will tell it to you, but in your ear, for it is a secret of death and life. Penitence and poison would be used against her if it was known. She is the daughter of—she is the daughter of—'

The bishop and Mary bent down to listen; she was at length to know her mother's name. Alas! the lips of the dying woman could no longer utter intelligible sounds. Her head sank slowly back on the bed; a slight rattle was heard, and her eyes closed in death. Mary fell on her knees, while the bishop recited the prayers for the dead.

'Do not fear, my child,' said the Bishop, 'I shall not forget the interest she who is just departed felt for you, and the latest wish she expressed with regard to you. I will cause search to be made among the papers of the bishop who preceded me in the diocese of Soissons; and I hope nothing will prevent your recognition. The proofs of your legitimate birth are most especially necessary, because without them you could not take the veil in any religious house, unless our holy father the Pope grants a dispensation. But the pontiff very rarely gives that favour, and only when it is necessary for a royal person.'

Mary scarcely heard him. She was weeping and praying at the foot of her benefactress's bed.

[To be continued.]