

Literature, &c.

THE SPIRIT OF THE MAGAZINES.

From Harper's American Magazine.

A TERRIBLY STRANGE BED.

I had no power of thinking, no feeling of any kind, but the feeling that I must lie down somewhere, immediately, and fall off into a cool, refreshing, comfortable sleep.

So I agreed eagerly to the proposal about the bed, and took the offered arms of the old soldier and the croupier—the latter having been summoned to show the way. They led me along some passages and up a short flight of stairs into the bedroom which I was to occupy. The ex-brave shook me warmly by the hand; proposed that we should breakfast together the next morning; and then, followed by the croupier, left me for the night.

I ran to the wash hand stand; drank some of the water in my jug; poured the rest out, and plunged my face into it—then sat down in a chair, and tried to compose myself. I soon felt better. The change for my lungs, from the fœtid atmosphere of the gambling room to the cool air of the apartment I now occupied; the almost equally refreshing change for my eyes, from the glaring gas lights of the 'Salon' to the dim, quiet flicker of one bedroom candle; aided wonderfully the restorative effects of cold water. The giddiness left me, and I began to feel a little like a reasonable being again. My first thought was of sleeping all night in a gambling house; my second, of the still greater risk of trying to get out after the house was closed, and of going home alone at night, through the streets of Paris, with a large sum of money about me. I had slept in worse places than this, in the course of my travels; so I determined to lock, bolt and barricade my door.

Accordingly, I secured myself against all intrusion; looked under the bed, and into the cupboard; tried the fastening of the window; and then, satisfied that I had taken every proper precaution, pulled off my upper clothing put my light, which was a dim one, on the hearth among a feathery litter of wood ashes; and got into bed, with the handkerchief full of money under my pillow.

I soon felt, not only that I could not get to sleep, but that I could not even close my eyes. I was wide awake, and in a high fever. Every nerve in my blood trembled—every one of my senses seemed to be preternaturally sharpened. I tossed, and rolled, and tried every kind of position, and perseveringly sought out the cold corners of the bed, and all to no purpose. Now I thrust my arms over the clothes; now, I poked them under the clothes; now, I violently shot my legs straight out, down to the bottom of the bed; now, I convulsively coiled them up as near my chin as they would go; now, I shook out my crumpled pillow, changed it to the cool side, patted it flat, and lay down quietly on my back; now, I fiercely doubled it in two, set it up on end, thrust it against the board of the bed, and tried a sitting posture. Every effort was in vain; I groaned with vexation, as I felt that I was in for a sleepless night.

What could I do? I had no book to read. And yet, unless I found out some method of diverting my mind, I felt certain that I was in the condition to imagine all sorts of horrors; to rack my brains with forebodings of every possible and impossible danger; in short, to pass the night in suffering all conceivable varieties of nervous terror. I raised myself on my elbow, and looked about the room—which was brightened by a lovely moonlight pouring straight through the window—to see if it contained any pictures or ornaments, that I could at all clearly distinguish. While my eyes wandered from wall to wall, a remembrance of Le Maître's delightful little book, 'Voyage autour de ma Chambre,' occurred to me. I resolved to imitate the French author, and find occupation and amusement enough to relieve the tedium of my wakefulness by making a mental inventory of every article of furniture I could see, and by following up to their sources the multitude of associations which even a chair, a table, or a wash hand stand, may be made to call forth.

In the nervous, unsettled state of my mind at that moment, I found it much easier to make my proposed inventory, than to make my proposed reflections, and soon gave up all hope of thinking in Le Maître's fanciful track—or, indeed, thinking at all. I looked about the room at the different articles of furniture, and did nothing more. There was, first the bed I was laying in—a four post bed, of all things in the world to meet with in Paris!—yes, a thorough clumsy British four poster, with the regular top lined with chintz—the regular fringed valance all round—the regular stifling, unwholesome curtains, which I remembered having mechanically drawn back against the posts, without particularly noticing the bed when I first got into the room. Then, there was the marble topped wash hand stand, from which the water I had spilt, in my hurry to pour it out, was still dripping, slowly and more slowly, on the brick floor. Then, two small chairs, with my coat, waistcoat and trousers flung on them. Then a large elbow chair covered with dirty white dimity; with my cravat and shirt collar thrown over the back. Then, a chest of drawers, with two of the brass handles off, and a tawdry, broken china inkstand placed on it by way of ornament for the top. Then the dressing table, adorned by a very small looking glass, and a very large pincushion. Then, the window—an unusually large

window. Then, a dark old picture, which the feeble candle dimly showed me. It was the picture of a fellow in a high Spanish hat, crowned with a plume of towering feathers. A swarthy sinister ruffian, looking upward; shading his eyes with his hand, and looking intently upward—it might be at some tall gallows at which he was going to be hanged. At any rate he had the appearance of thoroughly deserving it.

This picture put a kind of constraint upon me to look upward too—at the top of the bed. It was a gloomy and not an interesting object, and I looked back at the picture. I counted the feathers in the man's hat; they stood out in relief; three, white; two, green. I observed the crown of his hat, which was of a conical form, according to the fashion supposed to have been favored by Guido Fawkes. I wondered what he was looking at. It couldn't be at the stars; such a desperado was neither astrologer nor astronomer. It must be at the high gallows, and he was going to be hanged presently. Would the executioner come in possession of his conical crowned hat, and plume of feathers? I counted the feathers again; three, white; two green.

While I still lingered over this very improving and intellectual employment, my thoughts insensibly began to wander. The moonlight shining into the room reminded me of a certain moonlight night in England—the night after a picnic party in a Welsh valley. Every incident of the drive homeward through lovely scenery, which the moonlight made lovelier than ever, came back to my remembrance, though I had never given the picnic a thought for years; though, if I had tried to recollect it, I could certainly have recalled little or nothing of that scene long past. Of all the wonderful faculties that help to tell us we are immortal, which speaks the sublime truth more eloquently than memory? Here was I, in a strange house of the most suspicious character, in a situation of uncertainty, and even of peril, which might seem to make the cool exercise of my recollection almost out of the question; nevertheless remembering, quite involuntarily, places, people, conversations, minute circumstances of every kind, which I had thought forgotten forever, which I could not possibly have recalled at will, even under the most favorable auspices. And what cause had produced in a moment the whole of this strange, complicated, mysterious effect? Nothing but some rays of moonlight shining in at my bedroom window.

I was still thinking of the picnic; of our merriment on the drive home; of the sentimental young lady, who would quote Childe Harold because it was moonlight. I was absorbed by these past scenes and past amusements, when, in an instant, the thread on which my memories hung, snapped asunder; my attention immediately came back to present things more vividly than ever, and I found myself I neither knew why or wherefore, looking hard at the picture again.

Looking for what? Good God, the man had pulled his hat down on his brows!—No! The hat itself was gone! Where was the conical crown? Where the feathers; three white; two green? Not there! In place of the hat and feathers, what dusky object was it that now hid his forehead—his eyes—his shading hand? Was the bed moving?

I turned on my back, and looked up. Was I mad? drunk? dreaming? giddy again? or, was the top of the bed really moving down—sinking slowly, regularly, silently, horribly, right down throughout the whole of its length and breadth—right down upon me, as I lay underneath.

My blood seemed to stand still; a deadly paralyzing coldness stole over me, as I turned my head round on the pillow, and determined to test whether the bed top was really moving or not, by keeping my eye on the man in the picture. The next look in that direction was enough. The dull, black, frowsy outline of the valance above me was within an inch of being parallel with his waist. I still looked breathlessly. And steadily, and slowly—very slowly—I saw the figure, vanish, as the valance moved down before it.

I am, constitutionally, any thing but timid. I have been, on more than one occasion, in peril of my life, and have not lost my self possession for an instant; but, when the conviction first settled on my mind that the bed top was really moving, was steadily and continuously sinking down upon me, I looked up for one awful minute, or more, shuddering, helpless, panic-stricken, beneath the hideous machinery for murder, which was advancing closer and closer to suffocate me where I lay.

Then the instinct of self preservation came, and nerved me to save my life, while there was yet time. I got out of bed very quietly, and quickly dressed myself again in my upper clothing. The candle, full spent, went out. I sat down in the arm chair that stood near, and watched the bed top slowly descending. I was literally spell bound by it. If I had heard footsteps behind me, I could not have turned round, if a means of escape had been miraculously provided for me, I could not have moved to take advantage of it. The whole life in me, was, at that moment, concentrated in my eyes.

It descended—the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down—down—close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me, from beneath, to be the ordinary light canopy of a four post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress,

the substance of which was concealed by the valance and the fringe. I looked up, and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked it down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the least noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me—in the nineteenth century, in the civilized capital of France—such a machine for secret murder by suffocation, as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely Inns among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move; I could hardly breathe; but I began to recover the power of thinking; and, in a moment, I discovered the murderous conspiracy, framed against me in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged too strongly. I had been saved from being smothered by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep, by the surest and most horrible contrivance for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed; and never seen or heard of more! I shuddered as I thought of it.

But, ere long, all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed—as nearly as I can guess—about ten minutes, it began to move again. The villains, who worked it from above, evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently, as it had descended, that horrible bed top rose toward its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too.

Neither hole nor screw could be seen—the bed became in appearance, an ordinary bed again, the canopy, an ordinary canopy, even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move, to rise from my chair, to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed by the smallest noise, that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking toward the door. No! no footsteps in the passage outside; no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above—absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold, as I thought what its contents might be!) without making some disturbance, was impossible; and, moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me—the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an *entresol*, and looked into the back street, which you had sketched in your view. I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung by the merest hair's breadth, my chance of safety. They kept vigilant watch in a House of Murder—if any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge creaked, I was, perhaps, a lost man! It must have occupied at least five minutes, reckoning by time—five hours, reckoning by suspense—to open that window. I succeeded in doing it silently, in doing it with all the dexterity of a house breaker; and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me, would be almost certain destruction! Next, I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side, ran the thick water pipe which you have drawn—it passed close to the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe, I knew I was saved; my breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me!

To some men the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough—to me, the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed by the practice of gymnastics, to keep up my schoolboy powers as a daring and expert climber; and knew that my head, hands, and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent and descent. I had already got one leg over the window sill, when I remembered the handkerchief, filled with money, under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me; but I was revengefully determined that the miscreants of the gambling house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed, and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat. Just as I had made it tight, and fixed it in a comfortable place, I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. No! dead silence still in the passage, I had only heard silence still in the passage. I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment I was on the window sill, and the next, I had a firm grip on the water pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off at the top of my speed, to a branch 'Prefecture' of Police, which I knew was situated in the immediate neighborhood.

A Sub-Prefect and several picked men among his subordinates, happened to be up, maturing, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder, which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story, in a breathless hurry and in very bad French, I could see that the Sub-Prefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman, who had robbed some body, but he soon altered his opinion, as I went on; and before I had anything like concluded, he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat supplied me with another (for I was bare headed), ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping up brick flooring, and took my arm in the most friendly and familiar manner possible, to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say that when the Sub-Prefect was a little boy, and was taken for the first time to the Play, he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the gambling house.

Away we went through the streets, the Sub-Prefect cross examining and congratulating me in the same breath, as we marched at the head of our formidable *posse comitatus*. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the gambling house the moment we got to it; a tremendous battery of knocks were directed against the door; a light appeared at a window; I waited to conceal myself behind the police—then came more knocks, and a cry of 'Open in the name of the law.' At that terrible summons bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand and the moment after, the Sub-Prefect was in the passage, confronting a waiter, half dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which took place:

'We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in the house?'

'He went away hours ago.'

'He did no such thing. His friend went away; he remained. Show us to his bed room.'

'I swear to you, Monsieur le Sous Prefet, he is not here! he—'

'I swear to you, Monsieur le Garcon, he is. He slept here—he didn't find your bed comfortable—he came to us to complain of it—here he is among my men—and here am I, ready to look for a flea or two in his bedstead. Pickard, (calling to one of the subordinates, and pointing to the waiter) collar that man, and tie his hands behind him. Now gentlemen, let us walk up stairs.'

Every man and woman in the house was secured—the Old Soldier, the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept; and then we went into the room above. No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The Sub Prefect looked round the place, commanded every body to be silent, stamped twice on the floor, called for a candle, looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on and ordered the flooring there to be carefully taken up. This was done in no time. Lights were produced, and we saw a deep raftered cavity between the floor of this room, and the ceiling of the room beneath. Through this cavity there ran perpendicularly a sort of case of iron, thickly greased; and inside the case appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled—levers covered with felt—all the complete upper works of a heavy press, constructed with infernal ingenuity so as to join the fixtures below—and when taken to pieces again, to go into the smallest possible compass, were next discovered and pulled out on the floor. After some little difficulty, the Sub-Prefect succeeded in putting the machinery together, and leaving his men to work it descended with me to the bed room. The smothering canopy was then lowered, but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered. When I mentioned this to the Sub-Prefect, his answer, simple as it was, had a terrible significance. 'My men,' said he, 'are working down the bed top for the first time—the men whose money you won were in better practice.'

We left the house in the sole possession of two police agents—every one of the inmates being removed to prison on the spot. The Sub-Prefect, after taking down my 'procès-verbal' in his office, returned with me to my hotel to get my passport. 'Do you think,' I asked, as I gave it to him, 'that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother me?'

'I have seen dozens of drowned men laid out at the Morgue,' answered the Sub-Prefect, 'in whose pocket books were found letters, stating that they had committed suicide in the Seine, because they had lost everything at the gaming table. Do I know how many of those men entered the same gambling house that you entered? won as you won? took that bed as you took it? slept in it? were smothered in it? and were privately thrown into the river, with a letter of explanation written by the murderers and placed in their pocket books? No man can say how many, or how few, have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling house kept their bedstead machinery a secret from us—even from the police! The dead kept the rest of the secret from them. Good night, or rather good morning, Monsieur Faulkner! Be at my office again at nine o'clock—in the mean time, au revoir!'

The rest of my story is soon told. I was examined, and re-examined; the gambling house was strictly searched all through, from top to bottom; the prisoners were separately interrogated; and two of the less guilty among them made a confession. I discovered that the Old Soldier was the master of