# LESLIE'S FATE

AND

# HILDA

*by*

*Andrew Haggard*



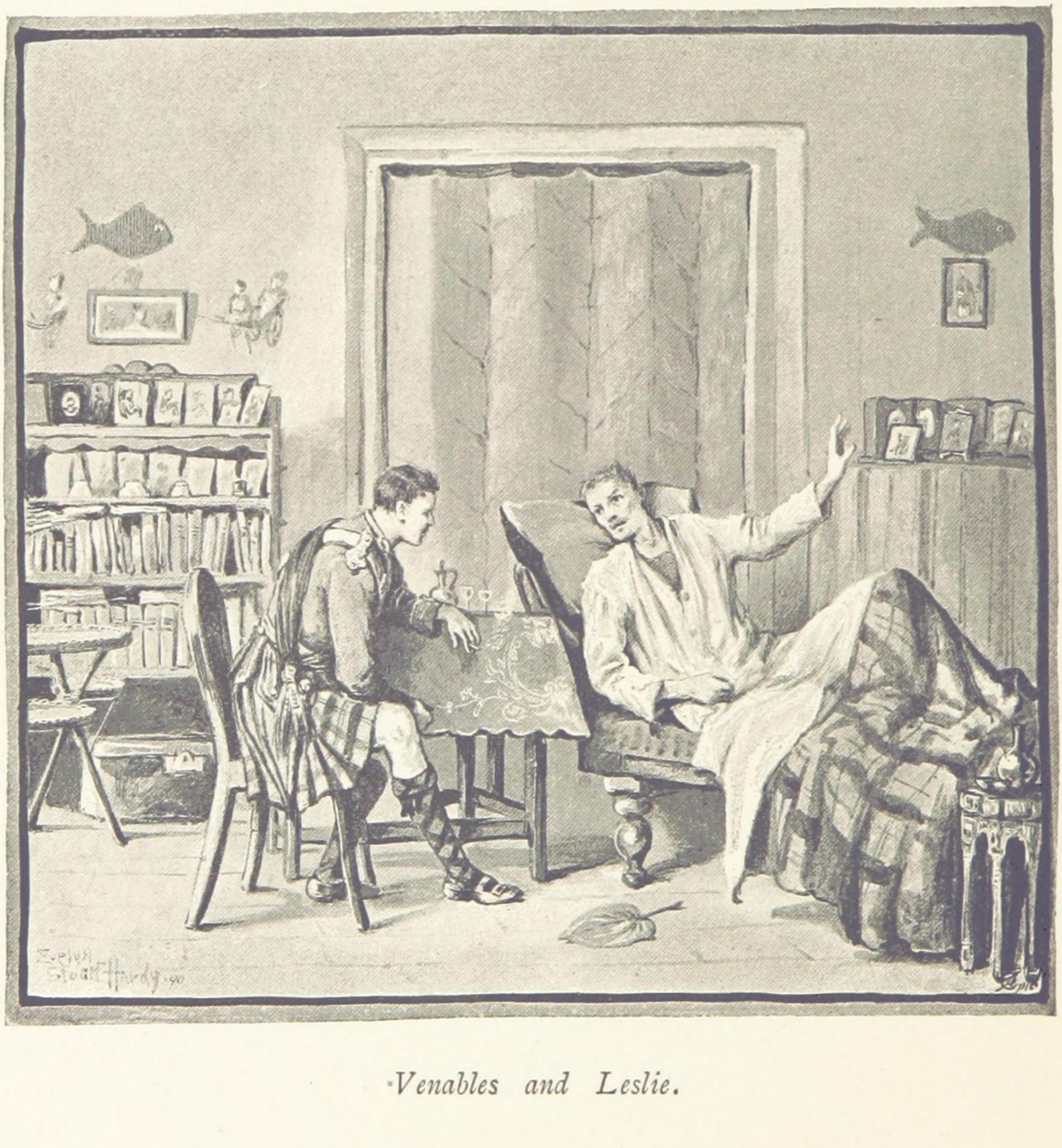
# LESLIE'S FATE

AND

# HILDA.

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# LESLIE'S FATE

AND

# HILDA

OR

## THE GHOST OF ERMINSTEIN

BY

CAPT. ANDREW HAGGARD, D.S.O.

AUTHOR OF

"DODO AND I," "ADA TRISCOTT," "A STRANGE TALE OF A SCARABŒUS"

ETC.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

This Volume

IS DEDICATED TO MY BROTHER

# WILLIAM HENRY DOVETON HAGGARD,

HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S MINISTER AT QUITO,

IN RECOLLECTION

OF MANY GOOD TIMES WE HAVE HAD TOGETHER

IN DAYS GONE BY,

AND OF MANY GOOD TURNS FOR WHICH I AM INDEBTED

TO HIM.

A. C. P. H.

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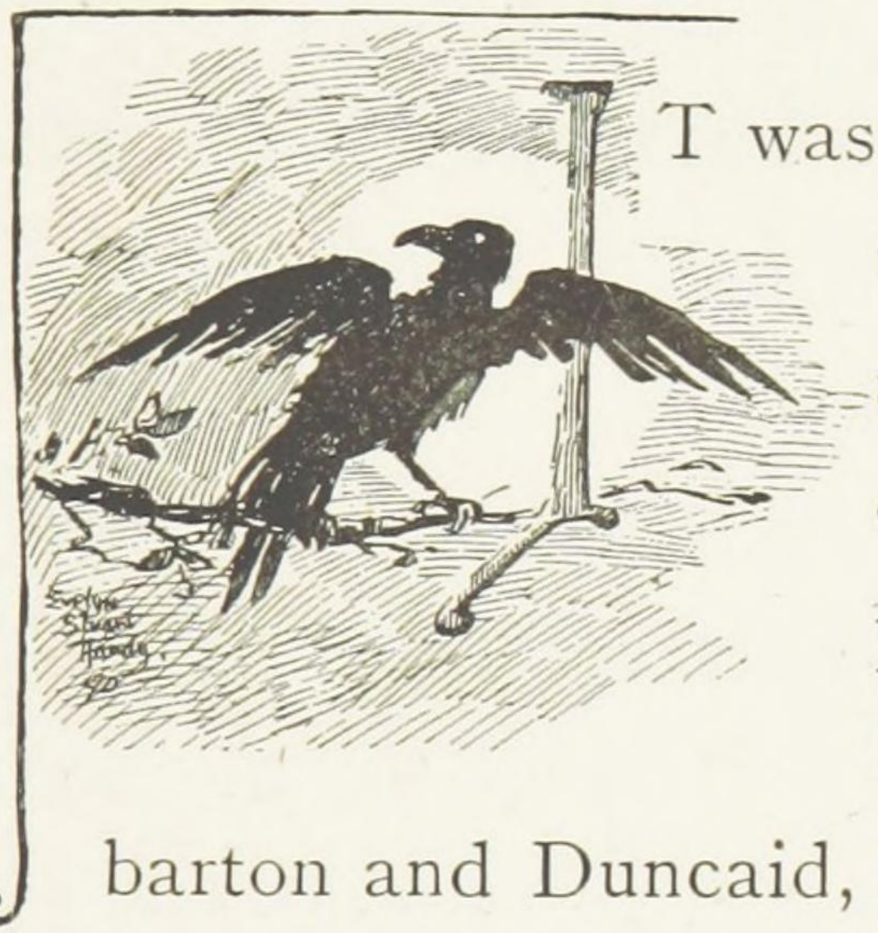
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# LESLIE'S FATE.

# Leslie's Fate.



IT was when we were at Delhi together, one December, and during the last few days of his life, that my poor friend Charlie Leslie, Earl of Dumbarton and Duncaid, told me the story of his life. He told me that should I choose or think fit, when he was gone, to publish his story to the world, that I had his free permission to do so. It is now, alas! some time since poor Charlie went over to join the great majority, and I think his history is sufficiently strange and eventful to take advantage of this permission. I will, therefore, without

any further preface, give my friend's story to the world, in as nearly as possible the same language that he gave it to me, while suppressing my own interruption and any breaks he himself made.

## "Just my Fate."

I daresay, Venables, you have often noticed my habit of saying, "Oh, it's just my fate!" or, "It is only Leslie's fate!" whenever any little thing has gone contrary to my wishes. In fact, I remember your laughing at me about it, once or twice, when we first became acquainted. Since then, I suppose you have got so accustomed to me, my ways and sayings, that you have quite ceased to notice if I was talking about my own or anybody else's luck.

Well, I must own I have had, like the rest of humanity, both good and bad luck in my time; but now my days are visibly draw-

ing to an end, and as I think over the past it seems to me that most distinctly the latter has predominated. But you will judge for yourself.

I suppose that, to start with, it was good luck which sent me into the world the eldest son of an earl. But it certainly is about as bad luck as a fellow can have which is now sending me out of the world with Delhi fever, just as I have succeeded to my father's title and the old family estates. What good has it done me to have become Lord of Dumbarton and Duncaid, when I know that my cousin George is writing out here mail by mail to know how I am, only because he is counting the days until he can step into my shoes? But it is no good moralising.

"I have lived my life,
I 've had my time,
I 've played the game all round,"

as the song says; and now, I suppose, in a

few days more you will follow me to the cemetery, whither I shall go with the dear old pipe-major and all the pipers skreeling away that ghastly old tune, which yet I love so well, "The Flowers of the Forest," around my coffin as hard as they can blow. And I almost think that I shall hear the tune myself too, just as many a time I have heard it when following some poor comrade to his last resting-place.

But, old fellow, I have a request to make: only let them play "The Flowers of the Forest" around me on that last parade. I only wish to have the pipers. Highly as I appreciate our bandmaster, and much as I appreciate his efforts in the cause of harmony, let me have no band at my burial. No muffled drum to beat, with its deadly tones over me, with a reverberation that will shake my coffin almost off its gun-carriage, on next Christmas Day; for I shall be buried,

you will see, on Christmas Day. No "Dead March in Saul," with its gruesome tum-tum-tum, tidy-tum-tidy-tum-tidy-tum-tum—thump! No, old fellow, don't let them, on any account, have the band at my funeral. So promise me that solemnly, will you?

But I am not dead yet, and shall not die, I know, until Christmas Eve, which is, by-the-by, my birthday. I shall be thirty-five years old that day, and only have accomplished half the allotted span of human life as settled for us by the Psalmist; but I think on the whole I have had enough of it, and am not sorry to go.

You have never seen Duncaid Castle, my dear Venables, so do not know the most beautiful place in Scotland; but that painting over there of the old place, with the moon behind it, drawn by my sister—my dear sister Flora—gives a very good idea of the place. Do you see how weirdly the moon is shining

through those leafless branches? Can you not almost hear the soughing and whistling of the wind through the trees bending to the gale? Look at the storm clouds approaching the moon, so soon to hide, for a space, the silvery light which now falls so clearly on the escutcheon of the Leslies, carved in stone over the castle gate. And look, too, at the dark river "Arrow" dashing beneath. How well she has portrayed the dashing of the foam over the rocks just below the cliff there on the right-hand side of the picture, where the north side of the castle rises sheer up from the river. Oh, it is a lovely place in summer! But to view it from the river-side and below, it is an awesome-looking place in the depths of winter, when the storm clouds are brooding over all frightened nature.

Many are the tales of dreadful things done in the castle in days of old, when every man's hand was turned against his neighbour. And

especially awful are the stories told of deeds of darkness done in that wing of the castle overlooking the river. Nor are those tales unfounded, for they are recorded in history in the plainest terms; and yet, I grieve to say it, we, the descendants of the old Barons of Duncaid, never have felt any sensation of shame at reading, or hearing traditions of, the lawless deeds of our turbulent ancestors. And now I must tell you something about the tradition belonging to the north wing of the castle, which has been proved to be true in my own person, for I have exemplified it.

There is a tradition that any member of the house of Duncaid born in that north wing will, from the time of approaching either to man's or woman's estate, not only have the power to view beings from another world, but be absolutely unable to avoid doing so from time to time; and no matter how painful or awful such manifestations of the hidden world

might be to a sensitive mind, they will have to be endured. Naturally the vulgar folks round the castle, who believe, and rightly, in this strange ordinance, imagine that the spiritual beings to be seen by one so gifted, or, I would rather say, so afflicted, will be the ghosts of the family of Duncaid or that of Dumbarton, of which the earldom descended to us through the female line some generations ago. Naturally too, therefore, although some of the apartments of the right, or rather northern, wing of the house are usually inhabited at ordinary times, on account of the glorious view of moor and mountain they afford, yet, when an heir or any other child is expected to be born to the house, the greatest care is taken that the countess, for the time being, should establish her apartments in another part of the castle for some time before the interesting event is expected to take place. This had been done in the case

of my mother, whose room was established in the south side of the castle some weeks before my appearance was looked for in this world of woe.

But no matter what arrangements men may make, Fate has a very pretty little habit of upsetting all their well-made plans; for what is it says our national poet Burns?

"The best laid schemes o' mice and men
Gang aft agley!"

And so it was in my mother's case. Having occasion to visit the north wing of the castle in search of some trivial object she met with an accident. Catching her foot in a roll of carpet she tripped and fell, the result of which accident was to bring on an immediate accouchement. And thus, before she could be moved back to her own apartments, I, Charles Leslie, had come into the world in the north wing of the house. Thus with my very birth came my first stroke of bad luck; for I sup-

pose that no one will deny that it is an unlucky thing for a man to be gifted with the power of seeing beings from another world to that in which he, and all human beings around him, have their being.

My sister Flora followed me into the world three years after this, so as I became a big boy she made a pleasant little playfellow for me to tease and patronise, scold or make much of, as long as we both remained children. As we grew older though, I found that she it was who began to take the command, and by the time that she was sixteen years old, and I was a young man of nineteen, I had been for two years at least her veriest slave. And what a sweet bondage has ever been my bondage to my sister Flora! Ah! would to God that I had never known worse slavery than that. To her I could confide all my youthful troubles, either at school or college, at home or abroad, my youthful love-

makings and disappointments, ever sure of finding a word of ready sympathy or sound advice; and, to tell the honest truth, sure too of being soundly rated in plain terms when she thought I had done wrong. Dear, dear Flora, she was my good angel, indeed! Thank goodness that she was not born in the north wing of the castle like myself; for she might not have been able to have withstood all the attacks that my ancestors and their friends commenced making on my peace from the time I reached my fifteenth year. However, perhaps like me, she would have got quite accustomed in time to the purely family ghosts, who, however malignant they may some of them appear to be, to judge from their personal appearance, yet seem, if only from a pride of race, to carefully abstain from doing any kind of harm to either their direct or collateral descendants. At least, so I judge from my own personal experience.

The ghosts of the dead and gone barons, knights, and ladies of Duncaid, also the ghosts of other knights and ladies who had apparently been their victims, seemed, strange to say, only desirous of attracting my personal attention to themselves, not of annoying me in any way. But they succeeded, and most effectually, in doing both—at any rate, during the first two years of their visitations, for their vanity was excessive.

Do not think, my dear Venables, that I am talking nonsense in speaking like this. If, after my death, you go, as I hope you will, to Duncaid, where my sister Flora, now a beautiful but childless widow, is living alone, and will live, for I have been able to leave her the castle and some unentailed property, she will corroborate my story about the annoyances I had to undergo in my youth from these family ghosts. Although, as I said before, she herself was fortunately unable to




*One of the Ancestral Ghosts at Duncaid Castle.*

see them, yet did she often, while sitting in my room of an evening, hear the rattling of their spear butts on the ground, the jingling of their spurs, the rustling of the hoops and farthingales of the ladies as, plainly visible to me, they filled the room where I sat, lounging about in arm-chairs or parading up and down like peacocks showing themselves off. But she has never heard the slightest sound when alone. Indeed, she only heard them with me after the ghosts had got so accustomed to me, and I to them, that they had quite given up going through for my benefit what I might call their ghostly dramatic performances—of cutting each other's throats, or throwing each other out of the window, down the cliff, into the rushing Arrow. Or, say for a variety, dragging ladies round the room by the hair of the head, not forgetting a charming panto-mime of putting each other in a ghostly rack, which, when they first used to visit me, was a

"stage property" they used to bring for the purpose of just showing me what they could do if they tried.

However, as I said, my sister Flora knew all about these visitations to which I was subjected from the time I was fifteen, and it was chiefly in the first instance by her sound advice, and also by her reminding me with pride that no one but a Leslie was ever thus honoured, that I soon learnt to receive the spectral visits of my forefathers with the greatest equanimity.

There is, however, no doubt about it, that a boy who grows up thus as I did, leading a double life—one of actualities by day, one of spiritual visitations by night—does not have the same frivolous boyish character as other youths. I was thus, rightly speaking, never a boy after I had reached the age of fifteen. I never laughed and played about with other boys of my own age if I could avoid doing so,

but would wander for long miles by myself, or alone with my sister Flora, across the moor with a gun or a fishing rod. I needed no other companions. If the gamekeeper or gillies offered to accompany me I would send them away, and at times I scarcely would allow even a dog to follow at my heels. The days I felt, were at any rate my own. I was not forced to have companions by day, and I would not do so; the night certainly did not belong to me while at Duncaid, but the day did and should.

My education was completed earlier than that of most young fellows, for I was naturally very quick to learn. Before I was eighteen, therefore, I had done with school and college; and then, beyond having obtained a commission in a militia regiment, which only required my attendance for a training of thirty days in the spring, I was left with nothing to do throughout the year. I had, the year I left

college, been abroad with my father, mother, and sister, when the latter, showing signs of being delicate, was ordered a course of baths at Schwalbach. My father, however, thought fit, as August approached, to send me back to Scotland for the grouse shooting, intending to follow me himself later. He objected strongly to my solitary habits, and urged me before leaving to get up some shooting parties, and not to keep so much by myself as I habitually did. I answered him plainly, but to the point:

"Father, I will shoot with strangers, ride, fish, and talk with strangers, as much as you like when you come. Until then I shall have no other society but that of the ghosts at Duncaid."

"Curse the ghosts!" said my father.

"You must not curse the ghosts, father," said I, smiling. "You forget they are my natural companions. Am I not a Leslie of

Duncaid, and was I not born in the north wing? Leslie's fate, my dear father; only Leslie's fate!"

So I went alone to Duncaid; shot alone, and fished alone; for my father came not, and so the weeks passed by.

One day I roamed away over the moor without either gun or fishing rod. I was anxious to trace to its source the head waters of a considerable affluent of the Arrow. I knew that it rose somewhere far away high up in the mountains, behind the moors where I had been wont to go grouse shooting—rose, so tradition said, in some deep recess of the rocks seldom or never visited by the foot of man, where alone the red deer trod and the eagle soared.

No gamekeeper or gillie had ever explored it to its source in my time, or in my father's time. For it was known as the "Fairy Burn," and there was a popular tradition that the

place whence it sprung was bewitched, and strange rumours had been handed down concerning it from generation to generation among the crofters. But little cared I whether it was bewitched or no. I had made up my mind to reach the source, even if it took me two days to get there, unless I found the rocks and precipices absolutely impassable as I got higher up the mountain.

Therefore, taking with me only a game bag with some provisions, and a flask of whiskey, I started without informing anyone of my intention. I simply warned them at the castle not to expect me until they saw me, then wandered away alone across the purple heath-clad moor.

Mile after mile I wandered on, following up the general course of the burn, but jumping it or wading through it, from time to time, where by doing so I could cut off a corner.

Nothing but nature was around me, and I

drank in of nature to the fill. From time to time a covey of grouse would rise, with a whirr of wings and a cackle from the cock, and speed away. Again, here and there two or three black-faced sheep would come and peer at me over the crest of a knoll, when suddenly becoming frightened, they too would in turn wildly dash away from the unusual presence of a human being, flying helter-skelter over the rocks and heather like antelopes.

At last I reached the higher slopes of the hills. This was now part of the deer forest, no sheep were allowed there. The red deer had it all to himself, and many a lovely stag and graceful hind did I disturb in my ever onward course. With very great difficulty now could I keep near the bed of the stream at all, for it ran either through deep ravines, or trickled in small cascades over high and steep rocks, in places where the sides rose perpendicular for hundreds of feet, falling into

dark round deep holes, where never yet had the rod of angler cast the fly over the golden trout which I could see here abounded, for they were rising merrily at the midges and other moorland insects which fell into the water.

At last, finding myself getting higher and higher up the slope, and so further and further away from the bed of the burn, as I got deeper into the mountains, I came to a resolution. I would scramble down the precipice to the bed of the stream, here grown very small, and would leave it no more. If there were dark holes over my head in depth, I would swim them; one stroke would probably take me across. If there were any more cascades, I would climb up their face; but leave the stream again I would not. There is nothing like taking a good resolution and sticking to it.

I found it easier to follow the burn thus

than I had imagined; and at last, having attained to a considerable height in the mountains, reached a point where it was very very narrow indeed. I managed to get round the edge of a small but very deep black hole, and had surmounted one more little cascade, when what was my dismay, on having attained its summit, to find that, after a few yards, over which the water ran very shallow in the open, there was nothing in front but sheer rocky moss-clad mountain! the stream here issuing from a hole in the side of the hill.

For a moment or two I was dismayed, I will own. I sat down on the narrow bank and gazed up at the blue sky which shone through the crevice in the rocks far above me, vainly seeking for an inspiration. For I was sure I was not yet at the source of the stream.

As I had gained the top of the cataract, I had observed several trout dash up in the shallow water into the recesses of the mountain. An idea

struck me. If the trout could go up, why should not I? The water was shallow here, the bed of the burn sandy: the stream issued from a hole in the mountain side; certainly this hole was quite large enough to admit me, if I chose to go on my hands and knees. Getting down therefore on my hands and knees into the stream, I introduced my head and shoulders into the hole. Nothing could I see, but the wet ferns hanging from the opening wetted unpleasantly the back of my neck. I crept forward a little, and soon was completely in the bowels of the mountain; and once inside, I found the roof a little higher than it had been at the entrance. By looking back I could now see a little, and I knew I could always get out again if I liked. This gave me confidence. Presently I reached a corner. As I turned it I lost sight of the light from the hole I had gone in at; but I could see another faint light ahead, at what seemed to me not more than forty or fifty yards distance. I

scrambled along, still on my hands and knees, as fast as I could, until I found, when quite near the light, that I could rise and walk easily and without bending in the bed of the shallow stream; and I could see that the light was caused by a wide opening or archway.

On approaching this archway I found the water got deeper and deeper. At last, just at its very brink, I found myself standing on a level ledge of rock where the water was up to my middle. In front of me was a little mountain tarn covered by strange-looking water lilies floating in depths of the most pellucid water—so clear that, I could see, one more step and I should be out of my depth. The tarn formed the centre of what appeared to me to be the crater of some extinct volcano. It was surrounded by a grassy sward and clothed with strange vegetation. I saw that at the end where I now was it was very narrow, and



*The Water became deeper and deeper.*

only four or five strokes would land me on the shore on the left hand side of the archlike entrance.

Without pausing to think, first fastening my game bag above my head, I plunged in. The water felt quite warm, the temperature being altogether different to that of the surface water which flowed out through the under-ground channel by which I had entered. The warmth of the water astonished and frightened me. I did not know what to make of it. But if I was astonished at the warmth of the water, imagine my horror when, still being within a yard or two of the shore, I saw slowly rising up below me in the lake two or three enormous creatures, which I for a second imagined to be some gigantic fish of an antediluvian period. By a desperate effort, I reached the shore just as they gained the surface a yard or two behind me.

And now, Venables, try and believe me, for



"One of them made a desperate effort to get to me"

I speak the truth. By Heaven, they were crocodiles!

One of them made a desperate effort to get at me just as I left the water, and closed his jaws within a foot of my heel with such a snap that I was out of the water and a hundred yards away before I stopped to see if the brutes were following me or not. But they were not doing anything of the kind. They simply lay there waiting peacefully, with their enormous heads upon the shore and serrated backbones visible, as if they had made up their minds to keep sentry-go until such time as I should return. There they were, three of them; they were enormous and most savage looking beasts, and it is not to be wondered at if they frightened me far more than any of the ancestral ghosts of Duncaid Castle.

However, seeing that they did not pursue me, and noticing also that there was a sloping hill behind me which rose at such an angle

that I felt sure these devils could not follow if I chose to climb it, by degrees I regained my courage and my wits enough to have a good look around. Then, for the first time, I saw what I had not been able to see before. On the opposite bank, hidden by a projecting rock from the cavern-like entrance to the little trout stream from where I had plunged into the lake, was a strange edifice of white and painted marble, of a form quite unknown to me, standing above steps leading down to the water's edge. These steps also looked to me like marble.

I knew not what to make of it; but since I do not wish to mystify you, I will tell you, old fellow, without beating about the bush, exactly what it was, as I discovered later. It was an Indian temple; the steps were an Indian ghaut or bathing place, and the strange lilies growing on the lake were simply lotus flowers! After telling you this, even at the risk of your consider-

ing me a madman for describing such things as existing, or, at any rate, appearing to me in the Highlands of Scotland, I suppose I need hardly tell you, who have been so long in India, that the crocodiles were simply three bloated and over-fed crocodiles kept in what I can no longer call a mountain lake or tarn, but what was simply a sacred Hindoo tank!!

However, I knew this not at the time, and gazed at the scene before me until I began to notice that the sun seemed unpleasantly hot, for my wet clothes were steaming with its warmth. After carefully looking in all directions on the land around me, to see if there were any hidden dangers, and finding none; observing, too, that the crocodiles were now floating in the middle of the little lake, I recovered my courage sufficiently to advance to the shade of some two or three low palm-trees standing near the water's edge, from which they were divided by some bushes. Here I

divested myself of my upper clothing, and spreading it out in the sun to dry, was now for the first time able to take a dispassionate view of the place in which I stood.

I will not go through for your benefit, my dear friend, all the various stages of wonderment or delight through which I passed, but will simply describe to you what I saw and what I found. You can imagine the wonder and astonishment that all this must have caused me, without my pausing to dwell upon it. Well, I saw that I was in a small circular valley, which was clothed more or less with vegetation like that of the slopes of the Himalayah. There were a few small palms scattered about round by the water's edge, plenty of oleander bushes, and also a fair sprinkling of maiden-hair ferns in the crevices of the rocks and boulders on the slope of the hill, while the Himalayan pine crowned the upper heights. Thinking of the place again now, to my mind I might say it

conveys a representation of a very small edition of Naini Tal. You, who have been at that Hill station, will therefore understand how the presence of the lake would carry out the resemblance. But it was indeed a very small Naini Tal in which I found myself; for the tank at the spot where I was standing, which was though much the narrowest end, was not more than thirty yards across.

While my garments were drying I stood and gazed across the streak of limpid water, which alone separated me from the temple, taking in its every detail and wishing to visit it. Divested as I was of all my upper clothing, and observing that the place seemed quite deserted, had it not been for those confounded crocodiles, I should certainly have instantly taken the shortest route and swam across; for it seemed a long way round the lake, small though it was, and I saw also that a ravine would have to be crossed to go round it.

Not a sound seemed to disturb the stillness and solitude of the place, until some birds of the crane species, which had been standing sleeping motionless upon the broad leaves of the lotus plants, suddenly awoke and commenced uttering harsh cries, which seemed somehow to have in their note a tone of expectancy. Nor was their expectancy misplaced, for now appeared a new factor on the scene; now appeared that which to think of, even after all these years, sends a thrill of passion and emotion through my breast. Now appeared the fairy of the place! Watching from behind my leafy screen, I noticed suddenly emerge from the door of the temple the figure of a young and beautiful woman!

Slowly she came forth and advanced to the top of the marble steps. Her head was uncovered. On one beautiful upturned arm was poised a round jar of pottery, in the other hand she carried a basket. She was clothed

apparently with one long piece of silk, crimson in hue, which covered her shoulders and body, and which, while falling in graceful folds on the outside of her hips, yet left her beautiful leg bare from thigh to ankle. We see the women dressed in the same fashion here every day of our lives, but never, never have I seen one like her. Never one yet could wear the "saree" so gracefully. Her figure was beautifully rounded and her carriage stately. Her complexion—slightly dark, with lips and cheeks tinged with carmine—was that which we see in the most beautiful Cashmeri girls, her eyes were like the sloe, her hair was jetty black. Spell-bound I watched, feeling indeed that I was bewitched, and fearing—oh, how I feared!—that all was but a dream of my disordered brain, and that the beautiful vision would soon fade from my sight.

But I must not enter into my own feelings now. To continue: Presently I heard a low

trilling cry, slowly but musically repeated, as, having placed the bowl and basket at her feet, she stood on the steps on the water's brink and called and called again, and waited. The cranes I had noticed at once flew to her feet, the three crocodiles that had caused me so much alarm, too, swam straight to the marble steps. Nor did she shrink from their unholy jaws as they raised themselves on their fore paws on the steps quite close to this divinity. She fed the cranes from the bowl. The contents of the basket, which I now perceived to be fish, were given to the crocodiles, each one sharing in turn. There was no fighting or jostling of one another by these huge brutes; they appeared to be in perfect discipline. To my horror she even stooped down and patted the largest one, the one which had made such a snap at me, affectionately on the head. It made me shudder to see her do it.

At last the meal of the birds and beasts was concluded. Uttering some new musical cry and clapping her hands, these members of the brute creation seemed to understand her meaning; for the cranes flew off to the other side of the lake, while the three crocodiles followed in the same direction, and soon emerged upon a rock where they apparently disposed themselves for slumber. And now—and now what followed? The divinity, as I imagined she was, turned away from the marble steps to the door of the temple. I feared she was gone; but no, she reappeared, bearing some objects of wearing apparel in her hand which she placed beside her on the steps. And then, slowly and deliberately, and perfectly unconscious that human eye was there to watch her beauty, she partially divested herself of the sole garment she wore, and thus I beheld that lovely creature, in all her glory of budding womanhood, as slowly she de-

scended the steps into the waters of the lotus-covered lake. I watched her as Diana was watched by Actæon ; to do otherwise was impossible. When she had descended the steps until a little more than waist-deep, she commenced undoing the tresses of her jetty hair, which soon was trailing in the water all around, and which in its luxuriance served as a partial screen to those beauties of form and figure on which I had been fixing my impassioned gaze.

Leslie's fate, indeed! No such fate ever came to member of the house of Leslie before ; no Leslie yet had ever reached this enchanted lake, to find such a siren bathing in its wave! And should I not then take fortune at the flood and back my luck? That lovely, that divine goddess! Should she not be mine, whether human or superhuman? Her whole presence seemed calling to me ; at any rate I would have speech of her, and find out who or what she was.

I paused no longer. I issued from my shelter, and rushing to the edge of the tank I cried:

"Who are you? who are you, O beautiful goddess? I worship in you at once the spirit of the mountain and all that is holy and beautiful in woman!"

The lovely creature uttered a cry of terror, ascended a step or two as if to fly to the temple, then, remembering that she was not alone, plunged once more into the tank. Turning to look up the tank, I saw that the crocodiles had been awakened by her screams, and were entering the water. A frenzy seized me. It seemed to me that should she escape me now, this beautiful being would escape me for ever. I would join her at once, ay that would I, though fifty crocodiles should bar the way. I took a run at the water, leaped in as far as I could, and with a dozen vigorous strokes was at her side and had seized one of her hands, which she had placed before her

eyes apparently bewildered with amazement. I did more. I kissed her lips madly, once, twice; then seeing the crocodiles advancing to the steps, I flew up them, picked up some of the garments lying there and forced them into her hands. At the same time I myself retired towards the temple door, endeavouring to show by signs that I would not in any way observe her movements until she was clothed.

Oh, how those two kisses had sent the pulses whirling, flying through my veins! The two warm lips, upon which I had pressed my sacrilegious embrace, were perfectly human and perfectly lovely. I myself was in those days a very handsome young fellow, and excuse my vanity if I say that just as I was retiring up the steps I saw my divinity uncover her lovely eyes just a little, and from the little I saw came a lustrous glance which, despite the fear that still overspread her face, yet

seemed to me to tell me that she was not wholly displeased, if very astonished at what had occurred. Meanwhile I left her to make her toilet alone, as I plunged into the mystic recesses of the temple. I will not attempt to describe the interior beyond saying that it contained, beautifully carved in marble, the triple images of the Hindoo trinity, and carvings beautifully executed of the elephant-headed god Gunputti, and other wonderful work. The whole place was magnificently carved.

From a door on the right was discovered a courtyard; beyond this, a flat-roofed house. I looked in. It contained several rooms, but only one couch or bed. There were no traces of any other human beings about the place but of her I had seen, if indeed she was a human being at all. It was wonderful, indeed too wonderful for my mind to grasp. I went back and sank upon a stone bench just within the

temple porch, and waited in deep thought, my head resting upon my hand. Presently I felt a light touch upon my cheek. She, the goddess of the place, had touched me with her taper fingers, having approached noiselessly with bare feet, and was now standing gazing wonderingly upon me. She then, as I rose to my feet, gently addressed me in the same musical tones as I had heard her use before.

How divine she looked, how regal, how worthy to beloved! But alas! I could not understand her. Still, she evidently was not angry with me. I thanked heaven for that. I answered her in my own Scotch tongue, employing all the tenderest, most imploring and most caressing words in the language. Finding that she too was completely unable to comprehend me, I gently took her hand and caused her to be seated at my side. The shades of evening were commencing to fall. In the temple, long and solemn shadows fell from the weird statues




*In the Temple at Feliciana.*

of the Gods. In that solemn silence we sat side by side, finding speech useless, each at first gazing with wonderment into the other's eyes. I had never relinquished her hands, and as the shadows grew longer, as the twilight grew more and more into night, closer she nestled up to my side. A mesmeric wave seemed to act upon our hearts and brain. The poetry of touch, the sensation that we were near each other, replaced the poetry of speech. Gradually our arms stole round each other; closer and closer were laid our cheeks together until, each unknowing who or what the other was, our lips joined in one long and deep embrace. For this we knew—and it was enough for us—we knew we loved, and madly loved, each other!

## CHAPTER II.

### Love and Lutchmee.



LITTLE we know what a day may bring forth; but day succeeded day, and week followed week, and still I left not the enchanted vale. I found that the beautiful Lutchmee, for that was her name, was actually and positively alone, and sole queen and mistress of hill and valley, lake and temple. Was she, I often asked myself, actually a human being? or was she not, as I had at first imagined, really a goddess, or a being of some kind forming a link between those who live in this and those who live in another sphere?

We soon learned to understand each other, for I was, as I said, ever quick at learning; while to her, knowledge seemed to come with scarcely an effort. And we loved each other, oh! so truly, and more and more every day. However, although I did not think of returning to Duncaid, after I had been absent for a day or two, basking alike in Lutchmee's smile and in the warm sun of the enchanted vale, I remembered that there were those to whom my absence would give great anxiety. Therefore I determined to let them know of my safety, if not of my exact whereabouts.

Taking some leaves of paper from my pocket-book, I wrote on several slips: "I am safe, you will see me again some day. In the meantime let no one, who values either his own life, or who would preserve mine, attempt to follow me up the Fairy River."

I thought the last paragraph about preserving my life would act as a detriment, if the



*Despatching the boats with messages.*

rest of my letter was not sufficient in itself to prevent people from following me. Anyhow, having written these letters, I fashioned several little wooden boats with my pocket-knife from some rotten pinewood. In the centre of these boats I stuck a solid mast, cleft at the top. In the cleft I placed my letters, firmly fixed, and started them off on their journey through the tunnel, hoping they would get safely down the Fairy River and be picked up at, or near, Duncaid. The first two or three of these boats I sent off, however, never even reached the archway, for the crocodiles thought they were something to eat and swallowed them whole; and some fish too, apparently of the mahseer tribe, appeared to take some of them for noxious creatures, for they flapped at them with their tails and smashed them, just in the way we sometimes, when fishing, see a salmon or trout try to drown the fly. But some got safely down at last, and were picked up in due

course below, where they created not a little astonishment.

And now, I suppose you would like to know something about Lutchmee! And how she, and the Indian Temple with its accessories of tank, cranes and crocodiles, all happened to be so extraordinarily situated where they were, in the heart of the Highlands? You would too, doubtless, like to know how she lived before I came? How we both lived after my sudden appearance, and many other things bearing on this true history of my life? Well, my dear Venables, you shall know some day all these details; but my time is short, and I cannot go into them now. When you go home and go to see my sister Flora at Duncaid,you shall see the complete history written in Sanskrit by Lutch-mee herself, of not only this, but many other incidents which I shall not even touch upon now, for I have not the time. I will only tell you this, that the valley, which I christened

Feliciana, was in reality a vale of enchantment which had been set down where it was, long years before, by Lutchmee's father, who had died a year or so previous to my arrival. After he had died, and had been duly cremated by his heart-broken daughter, she had determined to remain where she was, and to lead a solitary life, devoted entirely to his memory, until she too should pass the Rubicon, and go into some other stage of transmigration. But long before I had come she had commenced to find that a life passed entirely alone, or simply in the society of cranes and crocodiles, was a vain thing, and had had serious thoughts of moving back, by ways her father had taught her, to some more populous part of the globe.

When I arrived all was changed; the homeless bird had found her mate. The heart that was longing for a kindred heart on which to beat, at last had found that longing realised. And as for me myself, I lived then in one

continual dream. Never had I dreamt of such a wealth of love as I found poured out upon me by that devoted, by that wonderful and passionate soul. Soon we exchanged mutual sacred vows and became man and wife.

A year passed by. Lutchmee was expecting to become a mother. My anxiety was excessive. She herself was cheerful, for never having seen any other woman that she could remember, her mother even having died in her infancy, she knew nothing of the trials a mother has to go through. I was very anxious that we should both quit Feliciana before the time should come, for I knew that she had ways, the secret of which had been left her by her parent, of leaving the valley should she chose, and of reducing it to its primeval state of wild and barren mountain, while herself seeking a home where else in whatever spot might please her fancy. But my wife, for so I must now call her, would not hear of moving.




*She taught me the secret.*

"No," she said, "I have never, that I can remember, been elsewhere. Here do I remember my father first teaching me to spell the Vedas and Shastras at his knee. This is the spot which has witnessed our own blessed union, a union of soul even more than of body. Here will I stay with thee until our son is born, for son he will be, of that I am assured. But since thou tellest me there is possible danger, I will now teach thee the secret, so that should the great Brahma not will that I survive, thou shalt be able to destroy and leave this spot, after first scattering my burned ashes on the borders of the lake. Promise me that thou wilt do that, oh! my own own beloved one."

She taught me the secret. When she had done so, she asked me to make her a promise. I would have made her a thousand. She said: "My husband, wilt thou promise me this, that should I die thou wilt never unite thyself to another woman?"

Readily I gave the required pledge.

Kissing me tenderly she said that she had hardly thought it necessary to exact such a promise from me, "and yet," she added fiercely, "should'st thou ever break that promise, and take another woman here to thy bosom, where now is my place and mine alone, then will I, no matter in what body I have passed in re-incarnation, let it be that of man or beast, yet will I most surely come between thee and her; so remember these my words!"

I smiled at her earnestness, and told her she need have no fear that should I survive her she could ever be replaced in my heart or home by another. But I remembered her words none the less, for there had been an earnestness about them which made them seem almost prophetic.

The dreaded time came and passed. A son was born to us; unattended by any doctors, yet the ordeal was successfully undergone.

And oh! how doubly happy now were Lutchmee and I, in the possession of each other's love, when our union, which although unblessed in any Christian church, was none the less sacred, had thus been crowned with a pledge of our mutual love.

But when the boy was some six months old alas! Lutchmee fell sick, with a sudden sickness which she felt from the first must be mortal. Oh, my dear friend! You have never seen in me, I fear, a very religious man, but with what fervour I prayed that she might be spared to me I can never tell.

I will not dwell on the agony we both felt or how she too implored Brahma that, for my sake and for our son's sake, she might be spared to life. But after three days it was evident to both of us that she was sinking.

I had, almost naturally, adopted some of the tenets of her faith, so when she spoke to me hopefully of our meeting again in some

new incarnation, although it might be only after the lapse of œons of time, it yet conveyed some slight, some very slight balm to my distracted heart.

On the morning of the fourth day my darling, my beautiful Lutchmee, died in my arms.

There, on the very marble steps in front of the temple door, where I had first beheld her, she breathed her last.

She had felt that the supreme moment was come, and begged me to let her come out for the last time to the spot where we had first met. A fictitious strength seemed to give her power to walk, as rising suddenly from her resting place, and taking her child tight clasped to her breast with one arm, and with the other arm round my neck, she advanced to the head of the Ghaut. She kissed the child passionately, then waving her hand with a circular motion over the lake, the valley and

the temple, she said: "Let never foot of human being again visit this spot, oh, my beloved! Destroy it all, but try and save our child, and love him ever dearly for your poor Lutchmee's sake."

I took the child from her, and swore an oath that I would be a good father. She gave her infant a last kiss as I placed the boy on a couch that was on the steps where we were standing, and then she turned to me.

Throwing her arms around me, her lips sought mine in one last passionate embrace; an embrace which, although her last minute had come, had yet in it all the old fire. The tears fell like rain down my face, as for a few seconds we remained standing thus clasped in each others' arms, with all the agony, all the bitterness of an eternal parting. Then suddenly she exclaimed: "Farewell, my ever beloved—be faithful—and remember—your Lutchmee!"

And then she sighed, and her hold around



" Death of Lutchmee "

*" She sighed, and her hold around my neck relaxed."*

my neck relaxed; and I laid her gently down on the couch beside the infant: for she was dead!

Great grief like great joys are things best passed over in silence. You can understand what would be the terrible grief of a young man losing his first, his only love. A love so strangely formed, so terribly lost. But I had sad duties to perform which must not be shrunk from. The cremation of the dead, the destroying of the lake, and valley of Feliciana. For although I have not dwelt on the fact before, there were Indian sheep, goats and other domestic animals in the valley, and even a sacred Brahmini bull roamed about unmolested and happy in that enchanted vale. All these would have to die! Die too must the crocodiles and fish in the lake, and perish likewise all the beautiful vegetation. She had been kind to all these animals of the brute creation, they had all recognised in her their mistress.

She had tended all those shrubs and plants. How could I destroy them? But I must, alas! I must.

All that day and night I sat by the side of my lost darling, and gave way to my grief; nor did I neglect the child. There was a she-goat, whose milk he had already learned to take before Lutchmee became ill, so I had no present anxiety for him. The next morning early I placed my loved one on her funeral pyre, underneath the temple porch. Then I read the first of three incantations she herself had taught me. The summer's sun immediately became clouded; the mountains trembled; the large leaves began dropping from the palm trees. I kissed my dead darling's face reverently. I took up my child and some little relics of her, and placed them in a spot she herself had indicated as being the place of safety by which I must escape. Then I put the lighted brand to the funeral

pyre, and read the second incantation. The sun became still darker, a chilly blast swept through the valley; the smoke whirled hither and thither; the affrighted animals rushed wildly about; the waters of the lake rushed up into a central heap, tossing the crocodiles like twigs, high into the air. Then the waters again subsided, but as they did so the greater part of the temple, especially all that part we had occupied as our dwelling-house, fell in with a terrible crash. The birds flew screaming away. I advanced to the burning pile, and threw upon it a quantity of sweet-scented and highly-inflammable gum; then sorrowfully I turned away, knowing by the leaping flames that my darling would in a few minutes be nothing but ashes and dust. And having allowed these few minutes to pass, and having regained my child, slowly and solemnly I read the third and last dread incantation.

Forth leaped the fire from the porch of the



*Destruction of Feliciana.*

temple, lapping round its base, and licking up in its fury images and statues, pillars and columns. A dense mist as of steam then filled the valley; for, lo! an awful thing was happening. The little lake was falling through the surface of the earth into the subterranean fires below; crocodiles, fish, and all were swallowed up; and then the mountains on all sides, the temple and every living thing in that valley, all fell into the cavity amidst the hissing steam—fell with such a deafening awful din that description is simply impossible. Only the part upon which I myself stood remained unmoved, though shaken with terrible shocks of earthquake. And presently, where the lake had been and the sunny valley was, there was nothing to be seen but barren and rocky mountains, and dreary, solemn, snow-clad moor!

That evening, just at sunset, more dead than alive, and bearing my infant in my arms,

I staggered into the hall door at Duncaid Castle. The servants did not know me, and would have barred the way; but brushing past them, I forced my way into the drawing-room, where were sitting my father, mother, and Flora. I had only time to lay the child down in my mother's lap before I fell down insensible, to remain so for many days; for I was attacked with brain fever.

Leslie's luck again! Miserable luck, indeed, was that which had been my share latterly.

I will pass over the six years which followed my return home until the subsequent important occurences in India; suffice it to say that on my child's death, which occurred, to my very great grief, shortly after my own complete restoration to health, I determined to enter the army. Although nearly twenty-one years of age, which is older than most men could then do so by

the ordinary methods of Sandhurst, or direct commission, I was as a militia officer enabled to do this. So I will pass direct to the time when, after having done a year or two's service respectively in Gibraltar and Malta, I found myself very comfortably settled down with my sister Flora at Jubbulpore, in the central provinces; for my sister had come out to pass a year or two with me in India.

And now, as I am myself a dying man, and voluntarily telling you this story of my life, I may as well tell you that the sorrow, which I thought would prove everlasting, had not by any means proved to continue in the poignancy I had imagined it would. For youth is buoyant, and Providence has so ordained the rules of existence that grief ever is and ever will be softened by time. I therefore had long ago given up wearing the willow. No one knew of the strange, the almost supernatural adventures I had gone through, and I

was not going to enlighten anyone with this terribly sad and terribly strange episode in my past life.

Being young, rich, good-looking, and heir to an earldom, I naturally had not found myself neglected by the ladies since I joined the service; but although I had indulged in a few harmless flirtations with married ladies, usually older than myself, I never had had anything approaching to a serious flirtation of any kind with any unmarried girl. For I had a holy horror of the idea of matrimony; and, indeed, though my grief might be deadened, it was not dead, and whether from love of my lost Lutchmee, from superstition at her words, or from my recollection of my promise to her—never to marry again—I had with the greatest care avoided all possibility of entering the wedded state, and this, too, in spite of all the pleading letters my old father wrote me, pointing out to me the extreme necessity there

was that an heir in the direct line should be provided for Duncaid, and that too at the shortest possible notice.

But circumstances are sometimes too much for a man, and for a woman too for that matter, as you shall see by what follows. There was a very good fellow in my regiment called Gordon. He was a kinsman of mine, and he was going to be married to a beautiful girl, a Miss Stapleton, who was a friend of Flora's. She was to come out to India to be married, for he had only made her acquaintance while recently at home on leave; and Flora had decided she was to come and stay with us, and be married from our house. What a handsome woman she was! From the day she arrived in our bungalow at Jubbulpore, which house is by-the-by now occupied by the Gunners as their mess, I wished her out of it most thoroughly; for she was the first woman since Lutchmee whom I

had seen by whom any pulse, sensation, or feeling was stirred within me.

She was a superb creature! Oh! but why dwell upon it all. I will not rhapsodise, for it only maddens me to think of it. I will only relate. The girl stayed with us for a fortnight, and as she was not a fool, of course she knew intuitively how much I adored her. But she did not know how much I longed to get her out of the house.

At last the morning of the wedding came. It was in April, and the happy pair were—it being now the commencement of the hot season—to start for the hills at once after the ceremony and a breakfast at our house. Flora and I drove the bride to church, for I was to do the heavy parent, and give her away. But when not only we, but everybody else in the station had arrived, and had been kept waiting for some time, neither bridegroom nor best man having come, an awful thing happened. The

best man came galloping up to the church, and asked to see me. I went out to meet him.

"No wedding to-day, I fear old fellow," said he. "Gordon was seized with cholera half-an-hour ago, just as he was dressed to start for church. You must do the best you can for everybody. I must go back straight and look after him."

And he galloped away as fast as he had come. An hour or two afterwards poor Gordon was dead, and Gertrude Stapleton remained in my house to mourn her loss.

Gertrude was a very tall queenly-looking woman, with a very beautifully clear and English complexion, fine grey eyes, and dark hair. Any man would have fallen in love with her, as the very imperiousness of her character gave an additional charm to her aristocratic and well-bred bearing and manners. She was not a woman though to be won easily, but a

woman whom, once won, could never have been either neglected or set aside for another. The very fact of the great grief which had fallen upon her seemed to draw us three all closer together, and I may truly say that in the early days of her bereavement I was all to her that a brother could have been, and nothing more. And as such she undoubtedly regarded me, until—Flora having insisted that she should remain with us during the hot weather—I obtained four months leave of absence, and took Gertrude Stapleton and my sister up to that pretty hill-station Simla. There we stayed in a charming little bungalow overlooking Anandale, and shortly, not only did Gertrude's spirits seem to revive, but it appeared to me that some of the wealth of affection which had been so suddenly crushed back into her soul, not only seemed to be seeking an outlet, but to have found one, and to have found it in me. For in the looks that she

now gave me there commenced to be more than glances of sisterly love. In the pressure of her hand upon my arm, as together we strayed along the mountain footpaths in the pleasant shade of the mighty rhododendron trees, there was a gentle warmth, and at the same time a mutely-expressed feeling of reliance and intimacy which nothing but love seemed to justify.

It was not long, indeed, ere to us both the dead were forgotten, the past was buried. We spoke no words of love, but we surely lived solely for love and for each other. And thus the days passed up in that beautiful Himalayan scenery—drifting with the stream, drifting and dreaming.

To every dreamer comes a time to wake. My awakening came suddenly, and in a way I little expected. Cholera happened to be hanging about at Jubbulpore a good deal that year, so I was not very surprised, though

exceedingly disgusted, when after three happy weeks at Simla I was suddenly recalled by telegram, it having got among the men, and there being all probability of the regiment having to go out at once into cholera camp. Accordingly, leaving the two ladies all alone in the pleasant mountain weather, I returned to the awful heat of the plains in the middle of June. The monsoon was late that year, so the prospect of going out under canvas—whether to face the still raging heat, or all the dreadful discomfort of the rains when the monsoon should burst—was not a very pleasant one. Truly, a soldiers' life in India is not always by any means a bed of roses; but you know all about that. Well, it happened that no cases had occurred in my own company, so, although two or three of the other companies did move out, we were left in barracks, and I had consequently unlimited time on my hands.

I wrote both to Flora and Gertrude, then took a ride in the evening through the deserted station; that was all. Next day I rode out to a place called Gwarry Ghaut, on the Nerbudda, where I used to get some excellent mahseer fishing, to try and kill a morning at all events. At the Ghaut are several temples, and a whole colony of Brahmins, who live by extracting what they can from the devotees who visit the holy stream. In front of one of these temples was a spot where I used to fish off the steps. I often saw Brahmini women and girls bathing, or washing rice in the stream there; but, as you know, the Indian woman is not at all particular who sees her bathing, as she never, where by any possibility she can be observed, entirely quits her clothing while in the water. Consequently they took, beyond a languid interest in my fishing operations, no more notice of me than I of them. But on this particular morning, after putting my rod

together in the shade of the "tope" of mango trees behind the shrine, something very unusual happened.

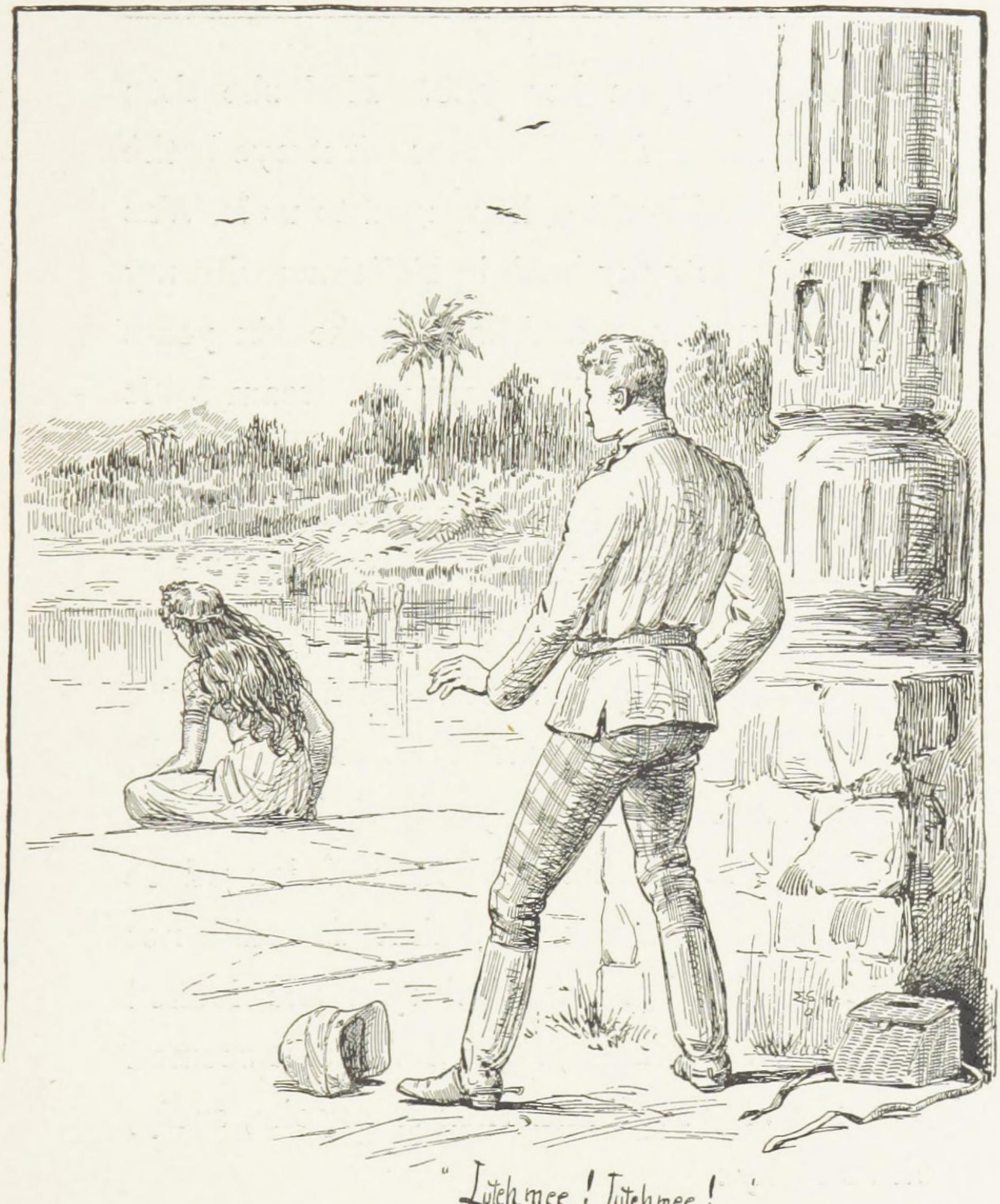
As I advanced towards the water from the side of the temple, I noticed that it had entirely changed in appearance since I was there last. I rubbed my eyes and looked; but yes, there was no doubt about it, the front of the temple was now exactly similar in appearance to that of the temple in Feliciana. I was lost in wonder, for I could not understand it at all. I had been there recently, how could it all have been changed so soon? I took a step or two towards the river, intending to survey the temple more closely from a little distance, when the figure of a woman sitting on the top steps of the Ghaut attracted my attention. She was sitting with her back to me and with her feet in the stream, but both the dress and the attitude were perfectly familiar to me. Even as I looked, another

change seemed suddenly to have taken place before my eyes. There was now no swift flowing river, no holy Nerbudda stretched itself out before my eyes. What I did now see, and see in every detail, was the lotus covered tank of Feliciana. Ay, and there were even the three crocodiles, and the cranes standing in their usual attitudes of despondency on the lotus leaves. I could not move for a minute, but stood gazing and gazing. You who have read the old sacred works of the Hindoos, know how much they dwell on the effects on mankind of "Maya," or delusion. I said to myself this is Maya! Surely this is Maya! But Maya or no I determined to see that woman's face.

I advanced and cried:

"Lutchmee, Lutchmee!"

Slowly the woman rose and approached me. My God! it was Lutchmee herself, young and beautiful as ever, but with a sad




*The Ghaut on the Nerbudda.*

serious look upon her face. Had she then never died? Had I never destroyed the valley? Had nothing happened to us? Was I still then actually back in Feliciana with my beloved Lutchmee, and had all the six years which had passed been only a dream? It must have been.

"So," I cried; "It has been a dream, only a dream. Lutchmee! Lutchmee!!" and I sprung towards her, with outstretched hands to embrace her. But with the same sad solemn face she waved me back. I felt, although within only a yard of her, that I could not touch her, although I longed to embrace her once more, that I could not move. With her beautiful eyes she looked deep down into mine, right down as it seemed into my very soul, and then she spoke, sadly, oh so sadly:

"Cans't thou not remember thy Lutchmee and be faithful, oh! my beloved? Alas! alas!

my beloved, my love has endured beyond even death, and I come now to warn thee. The words I spake to thee once I cannot, may not, now recall. Whether I will or no I must keep the oath I swore, that no matter into what form I might pass on transmigration I would then come between thee and any other woman. This form thou seest of me now is but maya. Never again, in all the ages, may I assume it to speak to thee, but for my exceeding love this once have I been permitted. But beware, my beloved! beware how thou lovest the fair woman, for shoulds't thou take her to thy bosom, I must then in my own terrible transmigration wreak on thee or her some deadly injury. It is the law; alas! it is the law! Words as solemn as were mine can never be recalled!"

With an effort I burst the spell which held me. I bounded forward. I seized her in my arms. I kissed her on the lips, they were

warm and full of life. "I love thee still. I love thee still, my Lutchmee! Only stay with me here in our own Feliciana; ay? stay, stay with me here for ever." I felt one sweet kiss returned, and then my arms were empty! No, not empty, for sliding slowly down from them on to the ground was a loathsome cobra! It slid rapidly away from me towards the tank. No, not the tank. Good God, there was now no tank at all, but only the river Nerbudda flowing calmly on! Wild and half-maddened, I turned to look at the temple. This was not now the temple of Feliciana that I saw. It was simply the Hindoo temple just as I had seen it many a time previously at Gwarry Ghaut. "Heavens! heavens!" I cried, throwing my hands to the skies, "then it *was* maya, all maya. And that cobra, that cobra!" I fell to the ground insensible. I heard that the natives picked me up and sent me home in a palanquin. And everyone

said I had had a touch of the sun. But I knew better! Oh! why could not my Lutchmee have come back to me then altogether? But alas! that was not written in Leslie's Fate.

After about a fortnight I returned from Jubbulpore to the hills, as the cholera had ceased. I had revisited the temple at Gwarry Ghaut before leaving, but as I found it in its usual condition I almost felt inclined to doubt my own senses. But I could not do so, for although it might be against everything in reason, yet I knew positively that I had seen, yes, seen, spoken to, and embraced my poor lost Lutchmee.

On my return to Simla, however, I did not by any means fall back at once into the same relationship with Gertrude that had existed when I left, but I resumed the fraternal tone that I had observed towards her formerly. I saw that she appeared pained and surprised,

but hers was too haughty a disposition to show by any remark what she felt. But by degrees, as the image of what I had seen and heard from Lutchmee's lips at Gwarry Ghaut faded away from my mind, so did the love for Gertrude Stapleton which had been temporarily crushed out of my heart return. And gradually, without a word having issued on either side as to the cause of the temporary estrangement, we glided back into our old relations.

And so things went smoothly on until the end of September, for Gertrude continued to be happy with us, and Flora and I both loved her, although in different ways. It was now six months since the sad death of her lover on her wedding day, and she had ceased to wear mourning for him before our returning to the plains. And here my dear Venables, lest you might be inclined to judge somewhat harshly of her for having so soon transferred her

affections from the dead to the living, let me tell you something.

The engagement with poor Gordon had been entered into on her part, not from any great feeling of affection. She had accepted him, after but a short acquaintance, chiefly to escape the discomforts of a home made unhappy by the presence of an uncongenial stepmother. She had told Gordon this at the time that he, being passionately and wildly attracted by her beauty, had madly urged his suit for the second or third time. He had been content to take her on any terms, hoping that the love he craved might come, but satisfied even if it could not, in having obtained the woman. And I daresay that had he lived the love would have come; but as, poor fellow, he died before he had a fair opportunity of winning it, I do not myself think that Gertrude Stapleton was to blame in any way, if insensibly she came to love the man in whose house she

lived, and who had been her prop and main-stay in the days of her bereavement. Shortly before returning to the plains from Simla we went for a picnic down to the quaint wooden Buddhist temple overlooking the stream. We were a "partie carrée," as the poor fellow who afterwards married Flora made the fourth.

And a very jolly little party it was we had that day. After luncheon the two pairs separated, strolling off in different directions. Gertrude and I climbed up the hillside overlooking the glen, and installed ourselves in a mossy nook in the shadow of a big rock. I felt the time had come to tell Gertrude all my past. I did so, every word, not even omitting the recent awful occurrence at Gwarry Ghaut. When at last I had done, and remained silent, I felt her long and shapely hand creep into mine. I turned towards her; her eyes were swimming with tears. What could I do but

kiss away the tears from that beautiful face? I will spare you the mutual declarations of love that ensued. Suffice it to say that in spite of all that she had heard, Gertrude Stapleton declared that not only had she no fear for herself, but that she would never be happy again unless I could put away all supersititious fears and make her my wife. Laughingly, she added: "You see, Charlie, it is I who have to propose to you! now say, will you accept me?" for I had carefully avoided asking her to be my wife, although I had told her how I loved her. But now I saw that either she must become my wife, or she must quit us for ever; and I felt indeed that life would be too dreary for me so; and the more so as Flora had just become engaged to be married. "Yes, Gertrude," I replied, solemnly, "if knowing all as you do now, you still declare that you are noble enough to sacrifice your future to me, not knowing what

risks may lie before you in that future, how then can I, loving you as I do, refuse to accept that sacrifice."

"Oh, nonsense about sacrifice," replied she, smiling sweetly. "I am sure Lutchmee was far too good a woman to intend ever to do either of us any harm. On the contrary, if she loved you as you say she did, she would wish you to be happy now, she could not have loved you truly else. In any case, I am not going to allow you to make a hermit of yourself all your life merely for the sake of an idea, and thus as you have told me, what I have long ago known to be the truth, that you love me, and since I also adore you I intend to marry you and take all the responsibility upon myself. So you will have to take me as you find me, and see if I can do anything towards improving Leslie's fate.

And so Gertrude settled it in her own way, and as it was settled, we determined at any

rate to do everything within our own power to avert any misfortune intervening to prevent our union taking place, by getting married at once. Gertrude did not wish to be married in a church after her previous sad experience, so being both of us Presbyterians we arranged with the minister of that faith who was then present in Simla, to come up to my bungalow and marry us on the third day from then. That would leave us a clear week together as man and wife in the hills, before returning to the plains for the cold weather. Gertrude's cheerfulness almost made me forget the fears I felt of a catastrophe of some kind occurring to prevent the wedding. But I could not forget entirely Lutchmee's warning.

At last came the day of our marriage. The minister came, the knot was duly tied. My sister went off to stay with some friends in a bungalow a mile or two away, and, bliss unspeakable, we two were left alone. Nothing

dreadful happened, and for the next few days we were enabled, in the greatest happiness, to enjoy unchecked all the sweets of connubial bliss. In our mutual love I forgot all our fears; and when at the end of the week we returned together to the plains, it was, on my part and on hers, with a happy and contented mind, full of bright hopes for a joyful future. As for the first few days after our return all continued to go well, we became the more and more confirmed in these hopes. I was so happy in Gertrude's society that I grudged even the time she had to bestow on the numerous visitors who came to call upon her as a bride, with all due ceremony, between the sacred hours of twelve and two. What rational being, by-the-by, can ever have instituted such a time of day as that for the Indian calling time? But so it was, and is, and so I suppose it will remain.

But our happiness was not to last. One

day, about a week after our return to Jubbulpore, I found the house in a considerable state of excitement on my return from morning parade at about ten o'clock. I saw several of the servants standing about with large "lathies" or bamboo sticks in their hands, all chattering very volubly, and all doing nothing. Without waiting for me to enquire the cause of all the disturbance, they rushed instantly up to me. "Sāmp, sahib! sāmp," they cried. "A great big snake in mem-sahib's bath-room. Mem-sahib very frightened, very ill." I rushed into the house without listening to any more of their chatter, fearing I knew not what. I found Gertrude in her bedroom looking very pale. She sprang to me, threw her arms round my neck, and said:

"Charlie, dear, there is a large snake in my bath-room, a cobra. I went in just now, and had closed the door to behind me, when it raised itself up from behind the bath. Ex-

panding its hood it hissed at me, but it did not attempt to strike me in any way; nor when I returned did it try to follow me, but it seemed to fascinate me with its eyes in a horrible manner. Charlie, my own husband! they seemed to have *something human* in their glance."

I seized a gun and rushed to the bath-room. Sure enough there was the cobra. It raised itself, and looked at me. I raised the gun to fire, but I could not; there was, as Gertrude had said, something human, something almost appealing in its glance. I could not fire, for I remembered Gwarry Ghaut. I opened the other door of the bath-room which gave exit into the garden. "Go," I said in a commanding tone, addressing the dreadful reptile; "go, and molest us no more!" Slowly, almost sadly, the cobra lowered its crest and contracted its hood, then it swiftly glided past me out into the compound, scattering the

assembled servants like chaff before the wind. "Māro, sahib, māro! Shoot, sahib, shoot!" they shouted; but my arm was powerless, and I let the cobra escape into the long grass unharmed.

This was but the beginning. The cobra came again and again. By day it would be seen in the dining-room or drawing-room; by night even the sanctity of our bedroom was not secure from its intrusion, but frequently, when least expecting to see it, there would be the brute lying coiled up on the rug which, in the Indian fashion, separated my bed from that of my wife. But all this time it never attempted to molest us. It simply seemed determined to wear us out with its continual presence, and would look at me with sad appealing eyes which nearly drove me mad from their wistfulness. After the first occasion, when it appeared in the bath-room, we never saw where it came from, nor how it

went away. We used simply to be aware of its presence; and that presence was wearing us both out. And I could not kill the beast, for I knew, yes, I well knew, that reptile form contained the spirit of Lutchmee. Ay! the spirit of the beautiful girl upon whose breast I had slept, and whose head had, when her last moment had come, been pillowed upon my shoulder. Ay! in that cobra's form was now contained the spirit of the woman who had been the mother of my child. Could anything have been more awful than to be thus haunted day and night? But poor Gertrude was getting exhausted; she could not stand it, and after a time she urged me to slay the beast, if I loved her as a husband should love his wife.

At last one day, after we had been married about a month, and when the snake was present in the bedroom, she began to upbraid me for letting it live. The animal clearly under-

stood her, for it too appeared to get exasperated, and raising itself up commenced to sway its body about, as cobras do, hissing with an awful hiss. My wife looked at the snake with an expression of scorn, and saying, "Oh! I am not afraid of you," left the room. The instant she was gone the snake, leaving off hissing, approached me and fawned upon me, looking at me longingly with those terribly-human eyes, and licking my hand with its forked tongue. Gertrude returned to the room as the beast was thus most palpably showing its affection to me, and she was in consequence still more exasperated even than when she had left. She had brought my gun in her hand, and as she entered the room placed two cartridges in the breech, closing it with a snap.

"Now," said she, addressing the reptile in her bitterest tones—tones she had never used before—"since you are not satisfied with

having been my husband's paramour (laying a scornful emphasis upon the words) in your lifetime, but must make in your present hideous form the life of me, his lawful wife, miserable, day by day and night by night, without mercy; therefore, oh snake! am I going to do that which I excuse my husband for not doing—that is, to kill you myself."

Swift as thought the creature left its position by me, and sprang towards her. She raised the gun and fired. She missed. Then I heard a dreadful scream, and, oh God! I saw a dreadful sight. Poor Gertrude was in her night-dress, and in raising the gun it had come open in front, leaving all her fair young bosom to the mercy of the cobra. Alas! alas! the beast had sprung upon her, and had plunged its slimy white poison fangs deep into her lovely breast.

Too late, I flew vainly to the rescue. I seized the cobra by the back of the neck, tore

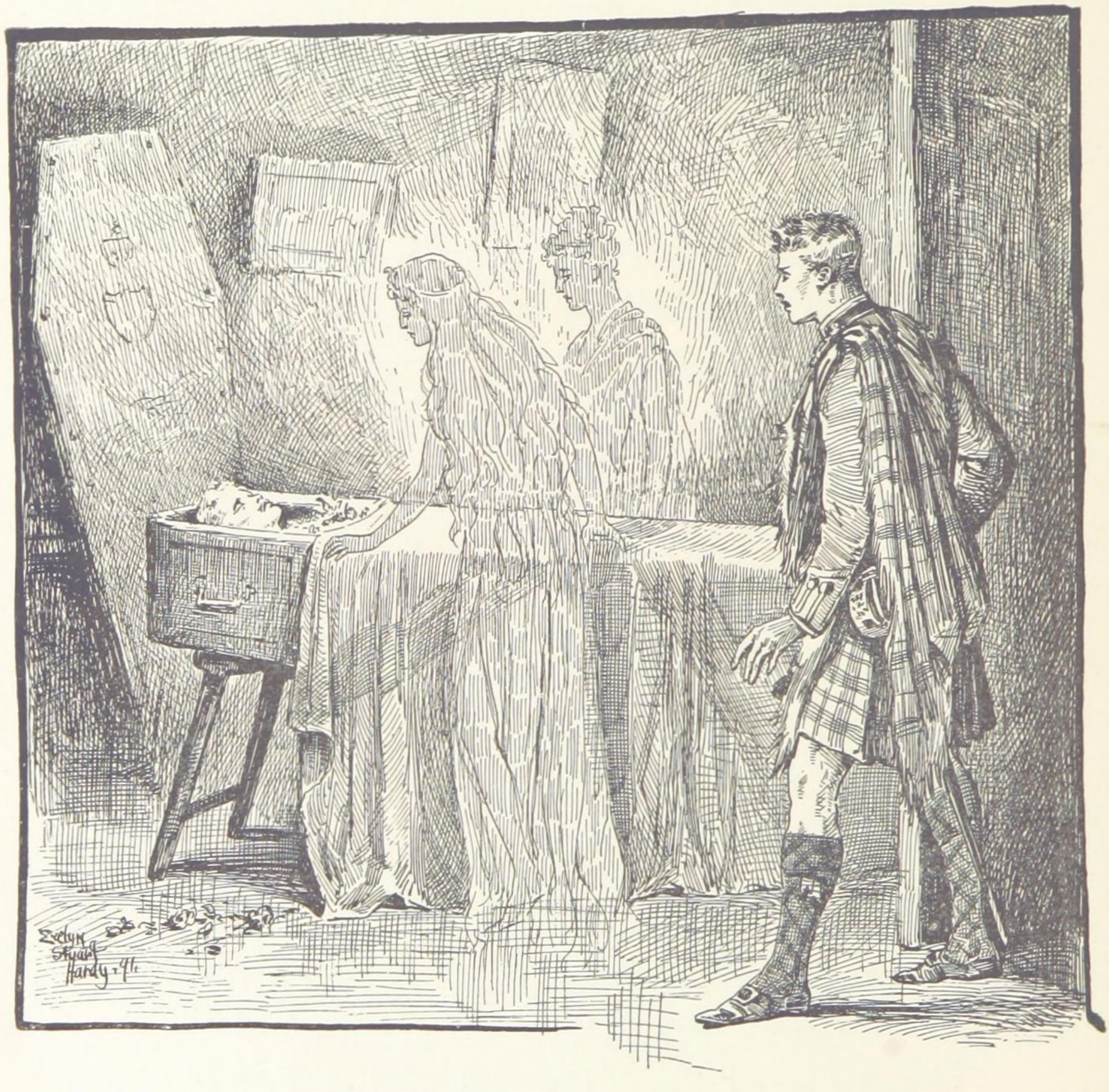
it away from my poor darling's bosom, and dashed its brains out against the wall. Flinging its writhing carcass to the ground beside the fallen gun, I turned to tend poor Gertrude. She was in the greatest agony, but just ere she died she looked at me with a loving glance, and whispered:

"Charlie, I would die for you over again; for though it has brought me my death, I do not regret having married you. Always remember that, and how much I loved you, my husband. Oh, my husband!"

"That is all, my dear Venables; but say! are you not sorry for me, old fellow?"

* * *

As he had predicted, for he had been forewarned in some way by visions, Charlie Leslie died on the ensuing Christmas Eve, and the pipers played the "Flowers of the Forest" over him on the following day, as he had desired might be done, and sadly to his last




*The last scene in this eventful history.*

resting-place we followed him to the strains of that sweet and mournful music.

Well, there is only one more phase to relate in the story, but that was a remarkable one which occurred to me. On the night of my poor friend's death I went to take a last sad farewell of his mortal remains. It was dusk, and rapidly fading into night. As I advanced into the room where poor Charlie was lying in his coffin, I was astonished to see I had already been preceded into the Chamber of Death. There was already someone there. Nay, two figures, misty and indistinct, were leaning over the bier, one figure on either side. As I advanced they silently receded, and faded gradually away into the dark, but not until I had recognised in one the features of a noble sad-looking English girl, and in the other the somewhat swarthy lineaments of a beautiful Indian woman. Moreover, the eyes of the

latter seemed to me—it may, of course, only have been fancy—to glow with a mingled glance of love and triumph, which shone weirdly through the ever darkening gloom. And thus with this awe-inspiring incident terminates the eventful history of "Leslie's Fate."

# HILDA.

# Hilda;

OR,

*THE GHOST OF ERMINSTEIN.*

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## INTRODUCTION.



IN the heart of Hungary, and in one of the out-of-the-way districts but rarely visited by the English tourist, wanderer as he is, there stands a castle. Of all the castles in Hungary, it is one of the noblest in point of size and age, and celebrated for the sieges it has

resisted, and for the strange and varied deeds of daring and oppression done by its baronial owners in former days. It is situated on the slope of a steep and thickly-wooded mountain, and surrounded on three sides by a dense forest of ancient beeches and oaks that almost vie in antiquity with the castle itself. The effect of these woods is to cast an air of gloom over several of the massive windows that seem to have been added at different times, and, with the shade of the trees and the clustering ivy round the windows, to exclude as much of the light of the day as possible from the innumerable rooms, many of which have been long untenanted in those parts of the castle. The fourth and front side of the place, however, has the advantage of being less gloomy. Here the trees have for the last hundred years or so been cleared away, and beyond the moat lies a large garden sloping down to a little lake, some half-a-mile broad, which,

although supposed to be unfathomable, is as clear as crystal. Beyond the lake again is forest, which, with the exception of a few charcoal-burners' huts and gamekeepers' lodges, is only tenanted by wild boars, deer, and smaller game; also by wolves in the winter season. The reeds round the lake, which is about a mile and a-half in length, form a magnificent covert for wild duck and teal; and its waters teem with char and trout of an enormous size. The nearest village to the castle lies about three miles off the road, which winding through the forest skirts the lake for a short distance, and then winds up through the large yew-hedged garden over the drawbridge into the courtyard, where the entrance is. This, as the battlements that formerly skirted the moat have been cleared away, is light and airy; and when the large doors are thrown open, and the sun glints in upon the old armour in the softly-carpeted hall, the effect is much more cheering

and comfortable than the first impressions on viewing the massive edifice from the lake would have led one to believe.

The events that I am about to relate took place rather more than fifteen years ago; and as I was nominally studying German at that time with the good pastor of the neighbouring village, an Austrian by birth, and a man of highly-educated tastes and manners, I was frequently thrown in contact with the noble proprietor and the visitors at the castle, many of whom I had met before in society at Vienna.

It was only on hearing recently from my old friend the pastor that the two last of the principal actors in the dramatic and fearful events that I am about to narrate had been carried off by a recent epidemic, that I determined to put the facts of this extraordinary story before the world.

# CHAPTER I.

THE Graf von Erminstein, who was proprietor of Schloss Erminstein at the time I write, was a man of about fifty years of age. Having lost his wife and both the two sons she had borne him many years previously, he had expressed his intention of never marrying again, and he had kept his word. His wife had been one of the Court beauties at Vienna, and came of a family as highly born as his own, with the members of which, more than with his own blood relations, the Graf had always kept up the closest terms of intimacy. After a few years of foreign travel, and when time had softened the blow his losses had occasioned

him, he had returned to Austria, and thence-forward used to divide his time between the capital and the pursuit of field sports of every description. For this purpose he used to repair to his castle at Erminstein, taking at such times a large party of friends and relatives to stay with him, and join in his shooting, fishing, and hunting parties. There were generally a few ladies among them, some of whom were bold riders and sportswomen, and fitted to shine either in the field or the drawing-room. Others there were, cast in frailer mould, who were content with such pleasures as the garden or the library could afford, or with a sail upon the lake when there was not too much breeze, or with the charms of music. Among these latter was the Graf's niece, or rather his late wife's niece, Hilda von Schrieden.

Hilda was at the time of my story just nineteen years of age, and this was her first visit to Schloss Erminstein. She was as pretty

and lively a girl as you could wish to see. Thoroughly unaffected and natural, she would laugh merrily at her own cowardice when twitted by her uncle on her disinclination to ride, saying she knew she was a little coward about horses, but she did not like seeing the poor stags killed; and he was so much braver than she was, it was much more becoming he should hunt the poor things to death without her being there to see them die. And so, as Hilda was everybody's pet, and you could not help smiling to see her smile in her saucy way, showing her pretty little white teeth, she of course gained her point. She would not ride, and she would not see the gentlemen shoot, giving as her excuse her cowardice, as usual, saying she could not bear a gun going off; which was only partly believed, for everyone knew her kindness of heart, and that she could not really bear the idea of any living creature being in pain.

Hilda's opposite in many respects was her

cousin, Frederica von Erminstein, the Graf's brother's child, who was staying in the castle with her mother. The latter was a plain, inoffensive little woman, who was never in anybody's way, and who let her daughter, who had been brought up in the country, do pretty well as she pleased. Whereas Hilda was fond of books, Frederica was fond of horses and dogs; while Hilda was of a most inquiring turn of mind, and never tired of exploring every nook of the castle, its pictures, its library, its old arms, finding at every turn some new object of interest; Frederica cared for none of these things, and only enjoyed being there on account of the excellent field sports. In these she participated with a zest which fully equalled that of many of our own English ladies born in the shires, and brought up to enjoy a fast thing with the Pytchley or the Quorn more than anything else on earth.

Fair, tall, handsome, and dashing, Frederica was a couple of years older than her cousin, and from her country training, although bold in the field, she lacked much of the finish of manner and education that Hilda possessed. She was also excessively superstitious, having learned from the old Slav servants at home numerous stories of fairies and goblins, in which she devoutly believed; and she used vainly to try and persuade Hilda's calmer nature to believe in them likewise. Frederica was also excessively fond of admiration, and a little jealous of her cousin's soft hazel eyes and long dark eyelashes; although she flattered herself that when once the gentlemen saw her on horseback they could not hesitate for a moment in deciding in her favour. Indeed many of the gentlemen at the castle were of the same way of thinking, for she sat her horse with an easy grace that does not come to one woman among a thousand.

Among the party assembled at Erminstein in the autumn of 1876, was a young lieutenant in the Austrian Hussars, the Baron de Fontenach. A Swiss by birth, he had entered the Austrian service when quite a boy, and although since that time he had, by the death of his elder brother, become possessed of considerable estates in the land of his birth, he preferred to soldier on in the crack corps to which he belonged, to returning to look after his property; and although also very fond of talking about sunny Switzerland and her lovely scenery, he never seemed to be particularly anxious to revisit the country that he praised so much.

Louis de Fontenach was then twenty-seven years of age. His elder brother, to whom he had been devotedly attached, had died just five years ago; and for the first three years after his death, repugnance at returning to the home where he and his brother had played

together as children, and finding his dear brother no longer there, had been a sufficient reason to prevent Louis, with his sensitive nature, from revisiting his native soil. For the last two years his regiment had been quartered in Vienna, and there had been an even stronger reason to retain him: Louis de Fontenach was in love.

## CHAPTER II.

THE Graf von Erminstein had first been attracted to Louis when the latter was quite a lad, by noticing the plucky way in which he had, by sheer force of good riding, won for a brother officer the most important military steeple-chase of the year. They were soon good friends; and apart from his love of horses, Louis' endearing disposition and good-humour soon caused Von Erminstein to look upon him almost as a son.

It was thus that Louis had early become acquainted with the Von Schriedens, and had been a great favourite with Hilda when the

latter was but just entering her teens. On the return of his regiment to Vienna, after an absence of nearly five years, one of the first to greet him was Von Erminstein, who if he himself was agreeably pleased at the progress his *protégé* had made in manly bearing and good looks, told him he flattered himself he had a surprise in store for him as well. Louis was indeed assailed with a variety of sensations when he again stood before the little Hilda, from whom he had parted with a kiss, and who had been so sorry for him when his brother died.

She had now developed into a charming young lady of seventeen, in all the pride of budding womanhood; and ere long he found that the affection with which he had regarded Hilda, the little girl, had given place to a very different kind of affection for Hilda the young lady. Hilda, however, did not regard the young lieutenant in the same light. She looked


Evelyn Stuart Hardy

upon him, for a year and a-half, at least, after his return, as an elder brother, whom she could tease, or make, fetch and carry for her, and as nothing more; nor did Louis do anything in any way to undeceive her, fearing to be too brusque with her, and perhaps thereby to imperil the intimacy that existed between them. He used to repeat to himself the old French proverb, "*Tout vient a qui sait attendre*," and contented himself with a waiting game, although sometimes, when he would see her laughing and chattering gaily with other young fellows, he felt a strong inclination, which he could with difficulty repress, to kick them out of the room, or otherwise lay violent hands on them.

It must be confessed that Hilda was a little bit of a coquette, as what woman is not who is excessively young, vivacious, and pretty? She also had an idea that somehow it was not exactly pleasant to Louis to see her too

friendly with the other officers, and would, out of sheer desire to tease him, sometimes indulge in a friendly flirtation when she knew he was observing her. However, at last an incident occurred that not only opened her eyes to his affection for her, but also awakened in her mind the sudden knowledge that he was something more to her than an elder brother.

Among the gentlemen who visited a good deal at her mother's house was a certain Count Von Oppenfels, a friend of the Graf's, and one of those who regularly visited Erminstein every shooting season. Some forty years of age, he was a man of very agreeable manners, and being extremely wealthy, had long been an object of enterprise to the Vienna matrons with marriageable daughters, but had so far resisted all their successive attacks. Among the bachelorhood of the gay town he was voted one of the best of fellows, and had it been rumoured that he was going to be married, they

would have declared to a man that there was "another good man gone wrong."

Matrimony was, however, the step he contemplated, and although not absolutely in love with Hilda, he had learned to appreciate her amiable character, and regarded her generally as an eligible partner. She was young, good-looking, and well-born, and would have a good portion. What more could he desire? She was also the Graf's niece, and as the castle and lands of Erminstein were entirely at his disposal, it is not improbable that the knowledge of that fact may have influenced his choice. Whatever his reasons, he broached his views to the Graf, who was not at all averse to the idea of seeing him his son-in-law, although, as he had not been as blind as others to Louis de Fontenach's secret attachment to his niece, he privately determined to leave the matter in her hands. He told Von Oppenfels he thought his niece might perhaps wish to

enjoy her liberty a little longer; and if so, he knew his friend would not wish him to control her inclinations, to which Von Oppenfels politely acceded.

The Graf informed Hilda privately that afternoon of what had taken place, and she was both flattered and surprised that a man so much her senior, and so highly spoken of, should do her the honour of asking her in marriage. She, however, said gaily that she had no wish to get married just yet, and would like to have time to consider the matter privately before her mother was informed of the Count's offer.

Shortly after, when she was alone, Louis came in. He found her looking serious for once in a way, and was surprised at the grave and almost affectionate way in which she greeted him, holding out both her little hands and pressing his in silence. In reply to his inquiring glance, and "Why, Hilda, what is the

matter ?" she said, with a smile struggling with a tear, for she felt serious indeed :

"Louis, how would you like me to be married ?"

"Married !" said Louis, turning a deadly pale, and dropping her hands, "married !"

"Yes," said she, "the Count Von Oppenfels has asked—but heavens, what is the matter ? Louis, are you ill ?"—for he had sunk back into an arm-chair, and was covering his face with both hands. But he did not answer her. She ran over to him and seized his hand. It was cold as ice.

"Married !" he said, apparently not seeing her. "My Hilda, whom I have loved so tenderly, married ! Oh, it is too much !"

She had dropped his hand, and stood in front of him bewildered. Suddenly all the colour that had left her cheek returned, and a rich crimson blush mounted up to her temples.

"Ah ! Gott in Himmel !" she muttered to

herself, "is it possible? Does Louis, whom I have teased so—Louis, whom I have looked on as a brother—love me, and I never knew it?" And she felt as she looked at him there, so pale, so overcome, that rather than give him one moment's pain she would walk through fire. She felt that to lose him, whom she had regarded till now only as a brother, would be to lose everything on earth. She felt for the first time that she loved him. "Louis," said she, "dear Louis, I will decline the Count's offer."

She took his hand, and ere he knew what she was doing, had kissed it and left the room.

## CHAPTER III.

THE events detailed in the last chapter had taken place some six months before all those whom I have mentioned had assembled in the autumn at Erminstein. In the interim, Hilda and Louis had not seen each other so frequently as formerly, for the latter's military duties had kept him much away, and as yet nothing more had transpired between them. There was, however, a kind of secret understanding between them. They appeared to understand each other without words, and Hilda could not but confess to herself that her heart beat stronger when de Fontenach's light step was heard on the stair; nor could she help

it, if a delightful blush told its own tale when he appeared, and made her more bewitching than ever.

Count Von Oppenfels had taken his refusal like a gentleman. He was rather chagrined at first, but as his affections were not really at stake, he did not let it make any difference in his manner to Hilda, but calmly resigned himself to remaining somewhat longer a bachelor. There were many amusements for Hilda in the castle and its grounds, so she never found the time hang heavy on her hands when the others were out shooting or hunting. Besides sketching and painting flowers in oil-colours, she had a decided taste for modelling in terra-cotta and plaster-of-Paris; and used to reproduce for her delectation any bronze figures or curious old coins that she found in the numerous collections of curiosities that had been made by the Grat's father, who had been essentially a man of taste in the matter of antiques.

Frederica used to laugh at this amusement of her cousin's, and call it a strange taste to be dabbling so frequently in mud; but this was because she was slightly annoyed at the admiration Hilda's models elicited from the gentlemen, and at the way in which they would put themselves *en quatre* to hunt up articles of interest for her, or arrange her chairs and implements for her to begin. Louis once or twice offered to stay at home and help her, but when he did stay with her one wet afternoon, and even went so far as to take a lesson in modelling, she made such fun of him afterwards, by producing the extraordinary figure he had made, and considered as a *chef d'œuvre*, to the rest of the party, that he vowed he would never have anything more to do with modelling.

Although there were several other men staying this year at Erminstein, all more or less good-looking and agreeable, especially

Von Oppenfels, yet Louis was by far the handsomest man of the party. This fact was by no means lost on the fair Frederica, who lost no opportunity of calling him to her side when out riding, and of displaying for his benefit all her natural grace and skill in horsemanship, and thus she generally contrived on these occasions to have Louis near her.

Handsome as she was, she looked at her best when flushed with the excitement of the chase, her supple form tightly clad in a dark-blue riding-habit that set off beautifully her splendid figure; and with a few flaxen locks that negligently escaped, waving with every motion of the breeze, she seemed as she galloped along on her favourite chestnut, her face glowing with pleasure and excitement, to realise the ideas one might form of Diana, the sylvan huntress of old. So at least thought Von Oppenfels and the others, but on Louis these charms had but little effect. He was

polite in the extreme, ever ready to assist her in any emergency, but nothing more.

Frederica was piqued at this indifference. With a woman's ready wit, she soon discovered its cause in Hilda's *beau yeux;* and, like a spoiled child who resented the possession by another of that which she coveted herself, having discovered the idol that Louis worshipped, she determined to shatter it, thinking thereby to transfer the admiration of the gallant young Hussar to herself. The means she took, and whether she succeeded or not, the sequel will show.

## CHAPTER IV.

ONE day when Hilda had been left at home alone, with the exception of the old Baroness, Frederica's mother, and when the old lady had gone comfortably to sleep after a substantial mid-day meal, Hilda determined to continue her explorations of the castle, which she had not as yet half examined. It was so large, and there were so many staircases and turrets, with passages in out-of-the-way places, that hitherto she had usually taken the old housekeeper with her on these occasions, and had derived much information concerning both the family and the pictures from her garrulous communications. To-day, however, when she went to

seek old Gretchen she found her suffering from an acute attack of rheumatism, so she determined to pursue her wanderings alone. Moreover, she was not at all unwilling to be for once free from the old woman's tongue, and to examine the different rooms and their old carvings and tapestries in her own way and her own time.

There was one tapestried and sombre gallery which it had always seemed to her that the old lady had led her through very quickly, telling her there were better things beyond. But although on the first and second occasions of her so doing Hilda had put this down to a natural avidity on Gretchen's part to show the chief wonders of the castle, she had on its happening a third time made up her mind that there was some other reason for this unnecessary haste on the housekeeper's part, and mentally determined, when once her curiosity had been aroused, that she would

examine it thoroughly by herself. This particular afternoon being bright and sunny, so that the gallery would be better lighted than usual from the large but ivy-overgrown window that faced south, exactly suited her purpose. The tapestries would be lighted up, and if there was anything else curious to see, she would discover it.

Hilda was not long in reaching the gallery, which lay rather towards the back of the castle, and was reached by an old and steep oak staircase from a landing below. It had apparently only one exit, which led through the wall at the far end into what were known as the state bedrooms; and as they were unoccupied, she felt sure of an uninterrupted study of the surroundings.

She was soon oblivious of everything else in her pleasure at the beauty of the tapestries she now for the first time had an opportunity of examining.

Chiefly consisting of battle scenes, they had withstood wonderfully the attacks of moth and age, some of the figures appearing in the dimly-lighted gallery wonderfully life-like. It was marvellous to think that such pictures had been worked hundreds of years ago by the hands of how many generations of the fair inhabitants of Schloss Erminstein!

Hilda had fallen into a reverie, thinking over those old times, and of ladies wearily working and waiting for their husbands and brothers, absent it might be on the crusades, and who maybe never returned to gladden the eyes weary with watching.

Suddenly she started with an exclamation.

The sinking sun, slanting in, had cast a gleam of light directly on a picture in the tapestry about half-way down the gallery, which gleam lighted it up in clear relief, leaving the remainder in deep shadow.

She moved down towards it, and was entranced. It was a representation of the Crucifixion, with the Virgin Mother kneeling at the foot of the cross. Everything was carefully depicted, even to the blood gushing from the wound in the Saviour's side. Though not one whit superstitious, Hilda crossed herself as a good Catholic should; and then remained marvelling at the beauty of the picture, lighted up as it was by the ray of sunlight. It was but a narrow strip, but as she watched the peaceful face of the Saviour, the contrast appeared to her the more marked from the gloomy battle scenes on either side. The thought suddenly struck her that it was very strange that this narrow picture should be placed between others of such a different nature.

She advanced and touched the tapestry. It yielded. Hilda now perceived it but served as a curtain to a recess in the solid wall. Into



this recess she penetrated; but after advancing a few steps, feeling her way, she found herself stopped by a door. She pushed in vain. She could feel a large lock of wrought iron, and knew it was useless to attempt to enter, but out of curiosity she knocked at the door. It gave forth a hollow reverberating sound, which seemed to echo far away beyond, and died away into something so like a groan that it made her start. However, as she had no fear of the supernatural, although dreadfully afraid of horses and guns, she laughed at herself, and made up her mind she would go to the old housekeeper, find out what was behind the door, and get its key; for her curiosity was aroused, and curiosity in Hilda was a passion.

## CHAPTER V.

THE year of my story some wolves had come down earlier than usual from the mountains, and complaints were being made in all the villages round by the farmers, whose unprotected sheep-folds were nightly devastated. The wolves seemed to grow bolder the longer they were unmolested; and a pair of enormous size that had already done much damage, and had several times been seen together, actually carried off a little boy of three years old in broad daylight before the eyes of its affrighted mother, who was working in the fields near the borders of the forest. She had left her

child peacefully asleep under a hedge, when its agonising screams breaking on her ears, she saw the wolves carrying it off. She, with many others, came up to the castle to beg the Graf to destroy the wolves that had robbed her of her darling; and a wolf hunt was decided on, and took place the very day that Hilda discovered the door under the tapestry.

Among the numerous hounds in the kennels there were four couple of the real old wolf hounds that are now so rare. There had been more, but disease had carried them off; and with the exception of puppies, these were all there were left of what had been a celebrated pack. However, they were all tried and staunch hounds, and the Graf said that they were sufficient for the purpose when the hunt started.

The Graf had wished to leave Frederica at home, but she begged so hard to come that

the Graf, who was a kind-hearted man, allowed her to do so, putting her under the express charge of Von Oppenfels. Several other ladies also attended; for, not being of such venturesome, or I might say reckless, dispositions in the hunting field as Frederica, there was not much fear of their endangering themselves, especially as there were several of the huntsmen told off particularly to look after the ladies.

It was a bright, crisp autumn morning when the cavalcade started from the castle, and the scene was most picturesque as it wound down the steep slope and along the borders of the little lake. The large horns slung over the green uniforms of the huntsmen, the gay hunting dresses of all members of the party, the hounds baying for joy and in anticipation jumping up round their master, the horses curvetting, impatient of restraint, the merry laughter of the riders—all made up a joyous hunting picture that can only be

realised by fancying oneself on the slope of a hill in Hungary, with an old castle surrounded by forest trees red with many autumnal tints in the background, and the bright-blue waters of a lake sparkling below.

The harbourer had been out by dawn, and reported that the two wolves that were the immediate object of the hunt had laid up in a craggy wooded knoll some two miles beyond the outer pale of the forest. This was good news, for it gave hope of a good run in the open country should they only, when driven from their haunts, be kept from breaking back into the forest. In strict silence the arrangements were made, and all the members of the hunt placed themselves at intervals of a few yards, in line, half-way between the wooded knoll aforesaid and the forest. The hounds were then put in, and with them a few men with guns and blank cartridge to keep the wolves from breaking back.

No sooner were the hounds in cover than a deep baying from old Rollo announced that he was on the scent, and each one felt his pulse beat stronger as he silently listened, waiting for the wolves to break. Ere they did this, however, old Rollo's note assumed a fiercer tone, and he was evidently engaged by himself in a severe contest with the savage beasts, whose growlings could be distinctly heard on the left of the thicket, where they presently emerged with bristles erect, and eyes flaming, driving the brave old hound before them. One of his forelegs was broken, and the two wolves dashing past him, and by this time closely followed by the remaining hounds, made straight for the assembled line of horsemen. Shots, however, and loud cries checked them, and they made off to the left together across the cultivated country, apparently not exerting themselves much to escape from their pursuers.

Now the chief huntsman sounded his horn, and made the hills and woods resound with its merry echoes; and now began the chase in full earnest. Close behind the hounds, whose deep music sent a thrill of pleasure through the veins, came the Graf and the chief huntsman. Slightly more to the right rode Frederica and Von Oppenfels, while Louis and the remainder of the party were a little in the rear. It was evident that the wolves had the legs of their pursuers, for they gradually drew ahead, although running abreast they seemed to disdain to exert their great speed to the uttermost, but held steadily on their course. Their object was plain: a craggy mountain densely wooded, which appeared blue in the distance, some eight or nine miles off. Should they once reach this, they would be safe in its fastnesses and caves; but could they hold out so long? The country, which had been open, was now becoming more

enclosed, and several stiff fences and wide ditches, which had to be negotiated, caused a considerable amount of tailing on the part of the hounds and the field. It was now that the superiority of Frederica's splendid chestnut began to assert itself. No obstacle seemed too large for the horse or its rider, and she gradually drew away from Von Oppenfels, whose horse, though a splendid hunter, was no match for hers. Louis, who had been saving his horse in the first part of the run, rapidly also began to assume a more forward position.

The huntsman, who was well up to his foremost hounds, knew his ground well. He knew that ere they could reach the mountain the wolves must cross the sandy bed of a stream, at this season nearly dry. The ascent on the far side was extremely precipitous and rocky, and the wolves, although apparently showing but small signs of distress, would

probably, if pressed, come to bay there. He sounded his horn and cheered his hounds on cap in hand. Bravely they responded to the call, and the pace became almost racing speed as, descending a long grass slope, they visibly gained on their quarry. Frederica, wild with excitement, had drawn up level with her uncle, who vainly signed to her to hold back. She, however, pretended not to notice his admonitions, and had soon left him behind in her determination to be foremost in the chase. They were now nearing the bed of the stream. Frederica's eyes sparkled with pleasure as, turning slightly, she perceived Louis almost at her side, and urging her chestnut, laughingly challenged him to catch her.

The wolves, scarcely fifty yards ahead of the hounds, plunged into the river bed. Frederica, perceiving a broken place to the right in the high wall of the opposite bank, headed her steed that way, and, checking him

a little, jumped him down into the shallow stream.

In a second she perceived the imminent danger to which she was exposed, for she had unwittingly placed herself right in the path of the wolves. They had turned sharp to the right, and were evidently making for the same opening as Frederica. Ere she could grasp her silver-handled hunting knife, they, with a horrible growl, sprang simultaneously upon her horse, and one seizing him by the throat they overturned him in the stream. Ere the other wolf, which had fallen with the horse, could recover itself, and complete the spring it was contemplating on Frederica, Louis had joined her and was on his feet, and had interposed himself between her and the infuriated beast with hunting knife in hand.

Rushing on him it seized him fiercely by the left shoulder, and bore him down, but at the same instant he plunged his weapon up to

the hilt into the wolf's vitals. Still keeping its dreadful grip, it fell dying upon him, covering him with gore and preventing the withdrawal of the blade. Several of the hounds had now come up, and were engaged with the other wolf, which quitting the half-throttled horse had turned to bay. Frederica was not hurt by her fall, and had regained her feet instantly.

Naturally fearless, her blood was now up, and before Von Oppenfels or the others had reached her, she had, with a scream of mingled rage and horror, rushed to assist Louis where he lay pinned beneath his dying foe.

Her hunting knife, although made chiefly for show, was a serviceable tool in the hands of a brave woman, and well she used it. Twice she stabbed the monster wolf with all her force. The first blow behind the shoulder caused it to relax its terrible grip, to struggle to its feet, and face its new assailant; the second blow she gave it was in the neck. It

fell back sobbing out its life-blood clear of Louis' prostrate form. She then helped Louis to rise, which he did with some difficulty, for his left arm hung powerless by his side.

As the others came up—for all this had happened in less than a minute, and the other wolf was still being worried by the hounds within a few yards of where they lay—Louis and Frederica presented to their eyes a melancholy spectacle. They seemed, indeed, in a sorry plight. Louis, his arm apparently broken, was all covered with blood; Frederica, her gory knife still in her hand, and dripping wet, had her riding habit almost torn in two by the paws of the wolf, and it was hanging in rags. In spite of their condition there was nothing grotesque in the appearance of either, as Frederica, the tears in her eyes, took his hand, and in the presence of all embraced him tenderly, calling him impulsively her preserver, and Louis saying, "No, Fraulein

Frederica, by God's Providence it is you who have saved me," returned her salute.

The other wolf was soon disposed of, and when Frederica was discovered to be unhurt and Louis' wound, which he declared to be nothing, was found not to be dangerous, the hunting party returned at a slow pace, carrying the wolves' heads with them triumphantly to the castle. As may be imagined, the bravery of Louis and Frederica was the sole theme of conversation on the homeward road.

## CHAPTER VI.

A FEW days after these events Hilda, who had been too much upset at hearing of the danger Louis and her cousin had been in to prosecute her enquiries concerning the hidden doorway, resolved to try and find out something about it. Both the heroes of the wolf hunt had been confined to the castle ever since it took place—the young lieutenant with his wounded shoulder, which, although no bones were broken, was troublesome; and Frederica with the severe shaking, unfelt at first, which was the only ill effect of her adventure.

Hilda looked carefully after them both, and Louis felt he loved her more than ever for her gentle sympathy and nursing; nor was her tender solicitude thrown away upon her cousin, who, in spite of her jealousy of Hilda's attractions, could not but feel the influence of her tender affectionate manner towards her when an invalid. Her own had consequently softened in return. On the day I speak of, Hilda, after taking up her cousin a cup of tea, was sitting chatting with her in her boudoir, when she mentioned the hidden door in the gallery, and her intention to try and get the key and to see what there was beyond.

Frederica, who had been listening somewhat carelessly, suddenly paled and exclaimed:

"Oh, for heaven's sake, be careful; perhaps it is the Ghost Gallery!"

"Ghost Gallery!"

"Yes; my old nurse has often told me

there is a part of the castle that is dreadfully haunted. Pray take care."

"Pooh! you silly girl!" said Hilda with a merry laugh; "you know perfectly well I don't believe in bogies. I'm off to Gretchen; farewell!"

Hilda found old Gretchen in one of her most amiable moods; and after diplomatically paying the old lady a few compliments to pave the way, she broached the object of her visit. The housekeeper was instantly very much perturbed, and apparently frightened.

"My dear Fraulein Hilda," she exclaimed, "the thing is impossible! You ought never to have seen that door, and never would have, had I been with you. Besides, the great crucifix key that opens it is kept in the Graf's bed-chamber. Even he would never dare to open that door except in the broad daylight and well attended. I marvel at your having had the courage to knock at it. And the echo,

you say, sounded like a groan? Dear me, I should have died with fright. Wild horses should not tear me down that dreadful corridor. The whole wing it leads to is full of ghosts, and yet *you want to enter it*. Well, I never!"

She would have continued much longer had not Hilda interrupted her.

"Crucifix key! What do you mean?"

"Why the key, which is made of bronze, has a handle in the form of a cross, with an image of our blessed Saviour to keep off the evil spirits. It is very old, and engraven with the date 1313, the year after the wicked Baron Rudolph stormed the castle, although I am sure he can never have been the author of such a holy design. Probably his father confessor made it for him, and I am sure the ghosts are either his or those of some of his victims, who have never had a decent burial."

Hilda was now more than ever determined to see the key; so dropping the subject of the ghosts, which she utterly disbelieved in, she answered:

"I should like to see it so much. What a curiosity! I really must have an impression of such a remarkable antique to place in my collection."

And as Hilda remained a long time with her, and let the old lady talk as long as she liked, she at last got her way with her as she did with every one else. Making her promise not to tell her uncle she had given it her, the housekeeper lent her the key for half-an-hour, and by that time Hilda had taken a couple of excellent impressions of it.

Nor was the handle the only part of which she took the impress.

One of these impressions she managed to send with a letter by one of the party who was leaving, to a workman in Vienna, who

often executed designs for her from her models; and in a very short time Hilda von Schrieden was in possession of a duplicate key to the hidden doors that led to the haunted wing of the Castle of Erminstein. Nor was she long in trying it; but although it fitted the lock perfectly, this being grown rusty with age, it was beyond her strength to turn it. Nothing daunted, she returned with a candle, and spent half-an-hour in oiling the lock. Still her efforts were unavailing.

It was now evident to her that if she would view the curiosities, which she firmly believed this untenanted part of the castle to contain, she must have a man to help her. Who should he be—the Count von Oppenfels? No. Louis? Yes. Louis de Fontenach should be the one to help her to explore the unknown mysteries of the haunted wing.

## CHAPTER VII.

LOUIS had noticed lately that Hilda's manner towards him, when enquiring about his progress towards recovery, was more without constraint, and in fact he now felt convinced that his love was returned, if indeed he had not done so for some time past. He, therefore, determined to have an explanation with his lady love on the first opportunity.

Consequently when Hilda, approaching him, told him she wished to have a little private conversation with him, he willingly acceded, and suggested they should take a stroll in the garden.

It was a lovely afternoon, and they passed up the sunny garden-walk to where a little summer-house gave a charming view of the lake, which seemed to reflect, like a mirror, the fleecy white clouds that flecked the azure sky.

Seated in this romantic spot with such a lovely scene before his eyes, and with a beautiful girl by his side, Louis when he heard of her project certainly did not feel afflicted with superstitious fears. Nevertheless for many reasons he strongly disapproved of her intention, and vainly endeavoured to dissuade Hilda from visiting the haunted wing, but she was not to be turned from her purpose, and laughingly said:

"I see it is not for nothing you have been so much in my fair cousin's society lately. You have evidently had plenty to do besides rescuing each other from wolves; and she evidently makes such an impression on you

that you even believe in her ghost stories! Ah! well, if such is the way the land lies, I see I can get no assistance from you, so I shall apply to the Count von Oppenfels; I dare say he will not refuse me as you do."

There was a shade of pique in her voice as she said this, and Louis' scruples fled like the wind.

"Hilda," he said, "you must know that I care nothing for the Fraulein Frederica!" He continued in an impassioned tone: "You must know that I would do anything in the world for you; that I love you to madness; that there is no such bliss for me as to be in your presence, to feel you near me. Dearest Hilda! life without you is utter darkness. I adore you: oh, say that you, too, love me a little! I have dared to hope that it might be so; do not tell me that I am mistaken, or my heart will break!"

His arm had encircled her waist, she did not

recede; but as he leant over her till his curly locks were touching her own luxuriant tresses, she drank in the magic of those pleading tones, and Louis gradually felt a little hand creep into his. Too happy for words, she shyly looked up into his truthful earnest eyes, and ere she had hidden her blushing face in his bosom Louis had read the reflection of his own great love in her inexpressibly tender glance, and he knew that with her whole soul she was his and his alone.

* * * *

Is it chance, or is it fate, or is it the devil, that causes the words that are sweet as honey to one, to be bitter as gall to another? Surely it was a cruel fate that caused Frederica to be accidentally passing behind the arbour where these happy lovers were seated, when she was arrested by hearing her own name fall from Louis' lips. And to her how cruel were his words! Surely it was the


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devil led her that way that sunny afternoon, when all looked so peaceful and bright. Better for her, better for those unconscious lovers, had she never heard those words of his, that he cared nothing for her! All her kind feeling towards Hilda was changed to bitter jealousy, and the real affection which she had felt for Louis since the wolf hunt was changed to hatred, or rather to a desire in some shape or other to be revenged upon him for preferring Hilda who had done nothing for him, to her who had risked her life for his sake.

But how should she be revenged? A thought suddenly struck her. She knew of Hilda's intention to visit the haunted wing of the castle. Oh! if she could only get them both in there together, and lock them in, then would they certainly be torn to pieces by the malicious ghosts that old Gretchen said were its sole residents; and then would she be revenged!

It was now an understood thing between the lovers that the haunted wing was to be visited; but they were so occupied with each other that it was twilight ere they left the summer-house. The visit was thereupon deferred until next day. Louis being still sufficiently an invalid not to be able to accompany the others on a proposed hunting party, therefore stayed at home. But the events of the morrow must be reserved for another chapter. Suffice it to say here that Frederica, pleading a headache as an excuse, also stayed at home.

## CHAPTER VIII.

FREDERICA asked her cousin in the morning if she intended to visit the unknown wing that day, and on receiving a reply in the affirmative, remarked:

"Oh! I have no doubt you will find much to interest you in its recesses; if I had a taste for curiosities, I should like above all things to rummage a place of that sort."

Hilda was rather surprised at the change in her tone, but thought she must be getting more sensible and less superstitious; and no more passed between them on the subject.

Although Louis had only one hand with

which to use any force, still that hand was the right one; and as the oil Hilda had applied to the lock had by this time worked in, he managed, after several ineffectual attempts, to get the large key to turn. The rusty bolt shot back with a clang that frightened Frederica, who was concealed at the other end of the tapestry gallery, almost into betraying herself.

Hilda clapped her hands in glee, and laughingly cried: "Hurra! now for the musty old ghosts!" However it took a good deal of pushing on both their parts, before the massive iron-bound door could be made to move from the place in which it had remained so many years; but eventually yielding to their combined efforts, it opened outwards, creaking painfully as it moved on its heavy hinges. As the door opened slowly, the first thing that struck the explorers was the peculiarly musty smell that seemed to pervade the corridor. This was dimly lighted by a few struggling

beams of daylight through the ivy-covered loop-holes placed high up upon the right hand side, but so faint were these rays that it was necessary to take a lighted lamp to plunge into its depths with any chance of seeing anything. Before entering, however, Louis turned the lock backwards and forwards once or twice in order to make it work easier. He also, with a soldier's eye to preserving a safe line of retreat, shot the bolt and removed the key before entering, so that there was no chance of the heavy door getting closed, and perhaps jammed so that they could not readily find an exit. Thus when, with a palpitating heart, but a mind filled with the murderous intention of shutting the lovers up together, Frederica advanced stealthily a few minutes afterwards, she felt maddened with rage at finding that Louis' military precautions had frustrated her cruel designs. She resolved, however, to bide her time.

Meanwhile the two were examining, foot by foot, the strange place into which they had penetrated. The corridor, which seemed of very great length, was paved with stone. Its vaulted roof was covered with cobwebs and streaked with the damp stains of generations. The right-hand wall, which was evidently the outside wall and of immense thickness, was discovered to be covered with frescoes, now almost utterly destroyed by the ravages of time, but here and there the figures of a knight or a lady could still be made out in comparatively good preservation. In this wall there were at intervals small recesses, which seemed to have been used as repositories for arms. The first one they came to apparently contained a whole suit of knight's armour, including his gold spurs, all lying pell-mell on the floor together. The sword, which was of great size, Louis with some difficulty extracted from its scabbard, and found to be little damaged

by either rust or age. The edge was still keen, and the blade still bright, with the exception of a few stains about half-way down, which looked suspiciously like the stains of blood. To Louis' and Hilda's great surprise, these stains seemed to be still wet, for on touching them with their fingers a red mark similar to that of blood came off on their hands. However, they put this down to rust. The handle of this sword was formed in a very peculiar manner: the guard of the hilt being formed of a skull and cross bones worked in brass. They then observed that the helmet was surmounted by the same crest, and that the breastplate and buckler had the same design engraved upon them in good filigree work upon a black ground. It was altogether a very curious suit of armour, and it had apparently suffered but little from age. From the way different pieces lay, the idea was given that they remained exactly as they had




"In the Ghost Gallery"

been carelessly placed, say by the Knight's page, after they had last been used, several hundreds of years ago.

The left wall was hung with moth-eaten tapestry, which crumbled at a touch. There were several doors at intervals on this side, the entrances to which were by small stone arch-ways. Louis and Hilda managed to penetrate into some of the rooms these led to; but the air within was so stifling, that they were glad to get back again as soon as possible to the corridor, in which, musty as it was, there was yet a little ventilation from the unglazed loop-holes. They were chiefly bare and uninterest-ing, though here and there was a picture, or some object of interest which Hilda determined to examine more closely another time when the place should be more ventilated. To effect the ventilation they knocked out a few of the diamond-shaped panes of glass here and there, and cut away some of the ivy from the narrow

windows, using the old Knight's sword for the purpose.

At the far end of the corridor there was a large oak chamber which required a more careful examination; although there was a small iron-clamped door leading into it by descending a few steps at the very end of the corridor itself, this was found to be immovable. It was, however, on ascending a flight of stone stairs, which wound up to a turret, that a narrow passage in the stone wall was discovered winding downwards on an inclined plane, until the end was apparently blocked by a large stone.

On examination a bolt was found in this stone; when this was drawn back the stone swung round of its own weight, and the adventurous couple found themselves in a large room to which this strange passage from the turret stairs led. This was evidently the same room mentioned above, and indeed they

found the key in the lock, and were able soon to verify this fact for themselves by opening the door which led into the corridor. To their surprise, the key turned easily.

This apartment differed from the others in being not only much larger, but in being both better lighted and furnished.

It was a square room with four windows; small certainly, but still sufficient to allow a certain amount of light to penetrate when the heavy shutters were unfastened. With difficulty they unfastened one of them which faced the west, when, in spite of the forest trees completely over-shadowing the room from beyond the moat, they were able to see by daylight what kind of a place they stood in. There was furniture in the room, but everything seemed in disorder, and everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. A large four-post bed was the chief object to attract attention; in spite of the dust which covered it and its

ancient damask hanging, the beautiful oak carving of the supports could but attract admiration. There were two oak settees overthrown on the floor, carved in the same style, one of which was broken. The room was surrounded with oak panelling, plain, and black with age. On the wall opposite the window hung an oval metal mirror, which Hilda carefully dusted. Having finished dusting it, she naturally took a glance at herself in it.

She had no sooner done so than she started back: she saw reflected in its crystal depths, not one face but two. Looking over her shoulder appeared the reflection of a woman's face, young but ghastly pale; a woman indeed, clad in the habiliments of long ago, was looking into the mirror with her!!

On glancing round, there was no one but Louis in the room; but she now noticed, for the first time, female garments hanging in shreds from a peg on the opposite wall. Her exclama-

tion attracted Louis' attention. She pointed to the mirror. It was his turn to start; looking over his shoulder and scowling horribly, he saw the ill-favoured image of a Knight clad in the very suit of armour they had been recently examining. His hands Louis observed were bloody; sword he had none, but Louis himself held the sword which seemed to belong to him, for his eyes were fixed upon it.

Louis was a brave man, and one who had always looked upon tales of the supernatural with the greatest suspicion. He therefore instantly suspected some deceit; but on turning round and seeing no one but Hilda, who had retreated to the window, he could see no means of trickery of any kind, nor when he remembered their difficulty in entering the haunted wing, could he consider it possible that any such could exist.

He rejoined Hilda by the window, and to his surprise on hearing what she had seen

found her more astonished than frightened. She said:

"There is evidently some extraordinary mystery about that mirror; but it stands to reason that the mere reflection of two figures such as we have seen can be only some strange illusion, or some trick of the ancient artificer who made the mirror. Let us together advance and look in it again."

They did so, and saw nothing but their own reflection. On advancing singly to the mirror they also saw no more of the strange and weird figures that had at first appeared in such an unaccountable manner. They almost felt inclined to doubt they had seen anything at all, but the images had been too recent and too real for them to entirely divest themselves of the idea that it was something more than imagination that had so astonished them. They however left the room by the door into the corridor, having first pushed to the re-

volving stone, the bolt of which (acting on a spring) closed with a snap.

Hilda would have removed the mirror with her if possible, but it was too firmly fixed for the united efforts of the couple to detach it. They passed along the corridor; everything was the same as when they entered. They regarded with especial interest the suit of armour that had so much attracted their attention, and in which the Knight's figure had appeared to be clad.

It was unmoved; every article was in the same position, and as much covered with dust as when they first observed it.

Louis returned the sword to its scabbard after wiping the blade to see if he could not remove the apparent rust. This attempt was useless; although the stains dyed his handkerchief red, they would not leave the blade. The curiosity of Louis as much as Hilda was now excited to the highest pitch. They de-

termined to return on another occasion and see if they had not been labouring under some extraordinary hallucination. They left the corridor and locked the door, and in spite of their intention to return to the corridor, they breathed with greater freedom when again outside its massive gate.

## CHAPTER IX.

WHEN once outside, Hilda's natural gaiety at once re-asserted itself. The pair rejoined the treacherous Frederica, to whom Hilda detailed her adventures, and observing her frightened looks, told her there was nothing to be afraid of. She would rather see a ghost than hear a gun go off; as long as they did not make any noise, she was sure they could do no harm.

Frederica's feelings were twofold: she felt glad and yet sorry that she had not succeeded in her wicked intentions. She felt as vengeful as ever, but her intense dread of ghosts was

so great that she now feared even approaching the door of the corridor, should the pair she wished to destroy ever enter it again.

An idea, however, came into her head. She could yet be revenged upon them.

She determined to bide her time for the present, and to be more than usually amiable with Hilda, so as to dissimulate her feelings. With Louis she resolved to drop her seeming wish for excessive intimacy, and to assume a more platonic manner, the more thoroughly to put him off his guard. Nor was this demeanour on Frederica's part ineffectual. The unconscious couple were quite deceived by her seeming frankness and friendliness, and never dreaming she could have any *arrière pensée*, let her into all their counsels. The next day they again visited the haunted gallery, but with one slight exception saw nothing unusual. This was that when walking about in the square chamber in which was the mirror, they

noticed that, although the dust lay thick on the floor and the impress of their footsteps could be easily seen at the moment, yet a second or two afterwards there would be no sign of a footprint where they had been. The mirror also, which Hilda had carefully dusted the day before, was covered as before with a thick coating of dust, and discoloured with damp as if it had never been touched. However, she cleaned it again, and no reflection but their own now appeared in its depths to trouble them.

For several days they visited the corridor, but seeing nothing unusual, almost began to imagine that they had both been the victims of some strange hallucination. Still, the mirror had to be cleaned every day ,and still their footsteps mysteriously left no traces.

Even Frederica, tempted by curiosity, and hearing how they were unmolested, at length ventured one day into the corridor with them;

but the strange and weird fact that her footsteps left no trace was too much for her superstitious mind, and she beat a precipitate retreat.

By this time the fact of the engagement between Hilda and Louis had been made public, and it was resolved to celebrate the event by a ball. Great preparations were made. The castle was filled to overflowing with guests; even the seldom-used state chambers were filled. The whole place was turned topsy-turvy, and the adventurous pair were prevented from continuing their researches. In addition to the fact of there being people perpetually moving about the house, Louis, whose arm had totally recovered, could no longer plead that excuse to omit attending the hunting and shooting parties which were now carried on with redoubled vigour, and which, interested as he might feel in the mysterious mirror, occupied the greater

part of his time. He was careful to make Hilda promise not to enter the haunted corridor alone.

Up to the present all the explorations had taken place by daylight, but Frederica lost no opportunity of impressing upon Hilda and Louis that if they really wished to solve the mysteries of the haunted corridor the night would be the proper time to prosecute their enquiries. They thought so too, but as it would have seemed very strange had the affianced pair been discovered roaming about together in the middle of the night, no opportunity presented itself. One morning, however, when Hilda and Frederica were together, the latter remarked as if a thought had just struck her, although it had been in reality carefully elaborated:

"Why, Hilda, I have it, the very opportunity you have been wishing for! What is to prevent your going down the corridor

with Louis the night of the ball? You will easily get an opportunity about supper time. I am sure nobody will miss you; or if they do, they will only conclude you are sitting somewhere about the staircases together as a pair of lovers are expected to do."

Hilda rather demurred. She had ordered a most exceptional ball dress, and she did not care to run the risk of spoiling either that or her dainty little satin shoes in the mouldy old gallery.

When it came to the point, also the possible danger of a nocturnal expedition presented itself to her mind; for if they saw such strange things in the daytime, what might they not see at night?

Curiosity was, as I have said, Hilda's passion, and Frederica knowing this, easily managed to overrule her objections.

"Pooh," she said; "as for spoiling your dress, you can easily put on a shawl and a pair

of goloshes; and as for danger, will you not have Louis with you? He will protect you."

The night of the ball came at last. The old castle was lighted up brilliantly; the suits of armour in the entrance-hall and all the old arms had been polished until they shone again, and reflected back the brilliant rays from cresset and chandelier upon the grim old heads of boars and wolves that adorned the walls until these trophies of the chase actually seemed to smile amidst the evergreens with which they were decorated.

The guests came from great distances, for it was quite an event for a ball on such a scale to take place in that out-of-the-way region. The Graf himself received them with a hearty welcome; and Louis and Hilda had to undergo endless introductions and congratulations. They were a handsome couple as they stood there by the Graf's side; Louis in his full-dress Hussar uniform, and Hilda attired in a

lovely ball dress of white satin trimmed with old lace, while for ornaments she wore a magnificent pearl necklace and earrings to match, with which the chivalrous Von Oppenfels had presented her. The pearl bracelets clasped with diamonds that graced her lovely rounded arms, aided to form an appropriate setting to a lovely picture.

But if Hilda looked charming, her cousin had nothing to fear from comparison with her on this occasion either on the score of toilette or of beauty. If ever she had looked handsome in her life—as when had she not?—to-night she looked simply regal. As she swept by on the arm of her cavalier, Louis could not help, in common with many others, following her with his eyes.

Louis sought Frederica early for a dance; and whether it was that she felt compunction for her past and present conduct, or that she felt that she as well as her cousin had a

right to love him, whether he returned her love or not, still her manner towards him was so gentle, so sweet and womanly, that Louis could not but be touched, and a kind of pang of half-regret smote him as he thought, "Can I have done anything to wound one who, however haughty to others, has been so apparently attached to me, and who has earned the right to be termed my preserver?" This feeling overcame him. He remembered many instances when he had returned Frederica's evident attachment for him with but cold civility, and he tried to make up for his seeming and real former neglect by kindness on the present occasion.

Frederica's feelings are difficult to describe: she felt no longer any rancour against Louis; but although she experienced the deepest anguish of spirit and bitterness against her cousin which she could not repress, she thought she would as soon, if not sooner, die

herself as be the cause of any ill to her. She felt it was Fate that was against her—Fate that had caused her to love the man her cousin loved, for since the wolf hunt she had loved him passionately. If she had done ill, if she hated her cousin in spite of herself, she would yet do her no harm. She told Louis she hoped neither he nor Hilda would venture to penetrate into the corridor that night. He laughed at her, told her it was a settled thing, and that Hilda desired it. It must be done.

"Hilda is a child!" she cried. "If she wishes to go, it is owing to my wicked suggestions. I pray you not to go to-night!"

Louis was struck with the impressiveness of her manner, and took an early opportunity of gently attempting to dissuade his fiancée from the visit, but shortly after rejoining Frederica he told her that her cousin once having made up her mind to go was not to be shaken.

"Then I accompany you!" cried Frederica.

"Terrified as I am even at the name of anything supernatural, what dangers you have made up your minds to brave I will brave also! If through me this idea has come into my cousin's head, I will at any rate share her perils."

She would take no denial. All the good points in her character re-asserted themselves. Hers she felt was the wrong, and she would share whatever misfortunes that wrong might entail, if she could not prevent the visit.

On various pretexts the three got away separately from the ball-room at supper time, and meeting in the tapestried gallery, entered the corridor. They each took candles and matches in case of accident. Hilda, who was cloaked, remonstrated with her cousin for having taken no such precautions, but she coldly replied that it was not dust they had to fear, and bade them proceed. Having taken the usual precautions with regard to the door, they advanced cautiously along the corridor.

## CHAPTER X.

THEY had reached and passed the old Knight's armour. Louis had attempted to remove the sword, but it appeared to stick in the scabbard, so he desisted.

Then an alarming event occurred; they heard a most terrific clang behind them. On turning they perceived no longer a heap of armour, but the figure of the Knight Louis had seen in the mirror. In a second he had advanced towards them, and apparently passing through them, noiselessly glided down the corridor in front towards the panelled chamber, where he was lost to sight. Instantly the most

appalling and heartrending screams, apparently those of a woman in the greatest agony, were heard from the end of the corridor. Their blood curdled with horror in their veins, and for a few minutes they were unable to speak, and powerless to move.

Hilda and Louis would have instantly returned, with their recovered strength, for fear something worse might happen, but Frederica's looks and voice arrested them. She was pale as death, and her eyes were preternaturally bright.

"Return," she said: "I alone will see the meaning of these agonising cries. I care not should I not survive the horrors of this dreadful night. You, Louis, I love; and you, Hilda, I hate, for being between me and the man I love, but yet I would not harm you. Return, and be happy! What is life to me?"

The excited woman snatched a dagger from a pile of arms and walked swiftly down

the corridor. Louis and Hilda followed rapidly. They overtook her by the door at the end of the corridor, which Louis unlocked. All now in the corridor was as still as death. As Louis opened the door a chilly blast swept over them that felt like ice. The flames of their candles burnt blue. They entered the room, Louis leading. With unconcealed horror, both himself and his companions noticed at each step they took a footstep in the dust appeared alongside their own.

The phantom footstep was wet and glistening. It was wet with blood! As this awful fact burst upon their minds a shapeless form seemed to flit past them, the door closed behind them with a bang, and the candles were extinguished. They strove ineffectually to re-light them. Then the moonlight shone brightly through the windows, and lighted up the room, and especially the mirror, with a clear but weird and unholy light. In the

mirror they could perceive the reflection of the bed, and apparently of a woman in it, with an agonised expression on her face, and with her hands clasped. They turned to look. The moon lighted up the bed, and by its pale rays Hilda recognised in its terrified occupant the owner of the face she had seen looking over her shoulder. By the bedside, in the gloom, stood a figure. It was the Knight's, and slowly he lifted his sword in menace above its occupant, who gave vent to one of those terrible cries of entreaty the explorers had previously heard. Some dreadful deed of blood was about to be re-enacted in that awful chamber!

## CHAPTER XI.

THE wailing and piteous cry was too life-like and human even in its unearthly tones for Louis to hesitate for a moment. He bounded forward, every nerve quivering with mingled terror and rage, and attempted to seize the phantom Knight and stay his hand.

There was no resistance! Where he expected to grasp at a gauntleted wrist, he felt nothing. Even as he grasped the sword descended, and in the moonlight Louis and his companions could see the purple blood gush out from the half-severed wrist that had been raised in entreaty. The occupant of the bed

with a terrible effort noiselessly rose and fled across the room; but as she left it, again the awful sword descended—this time upon her bare little feet, that glistened in the pale moonlight as she fled. Hilda had fallen to the ground in a dead faint, and as the spectral figure strove to reach the door she stepped apparently upon her prostrate form, dyeing it with her blood. She gained the door, but her poor wounded hands were apparently unable to move the lock. With a piteous expression she turned a face towards Louis that, though young and fair, was evidently the face of no one living. The agony depicted on that deathly face haunted Louis the rest of his life. He was powerless to save—he could not move!

Frederica, who had remained since entering the haunted chamber near the door, spasmodically seized the handle, and as she did so touched something quite palpable,



which, however, melted under her touch. She then felt her hand was wet. It was covered with blood. She shrieked aloud, and as she did so the form of the Knight gliding across the chamber seized the unhappy fugitive, who, with a heart-rending moan, allowed herself to be dragged towards the turret stair. The pivot stone which gave ingress to it stood open. Casting a ferocious and malignant glance which contained both deep scorn and diabolical hatred upon Louis, the Knight of the skull and cross-bones passed through with his captive up the stairs. Although hitherto his step had been noiseless, its martial clanking could now be plainly heard ascending; a door opened at the top; a faint struggle and scuffling were heard, and then, for a second, some white opaque object obscured the moonbeams shining through the window. A faint cry, and a heavy splash in the moat far below, then all was quiet.

All was still as the grave. Were the horrors that had with such rapidity succeeded each other then completed? Louis, scarcely daring or able to breathe, glanced around. What a scene met his eyes! All reminded him, in that pale moonlight, of the fearful beings whose awful presence had been so recent.

There might, for all he knew, be other supernatural shapes and forms around, lurking in the gloomy corners or waiting for them in the damp corridor. He was quite unmanned and helpless. At that moment a distant strain of music from the ball-room came faintly on his ears, and served to recall his scattered senses. Now was the time to act. Frederica, he saw, had sunk down on her knees beside Hilda, and, with fixed eyes and clasped hands, looked in the silvery light more like a beautiful statue of marble than a human being. He approached her and grasped her shoulder. At first she heeded him not,

but looked at him with strange unmeaning gaze. Eventually he succeeded in arousing her from her lethargy, and without a word on either side—for indeed their tongues were too parched for utterance—she understood him, and together they turned their attention to the prostrate form of Hilda. She was to all appearance dead, her hands and face icy cold, and no motion of her bosom betokened any lingering remains of life in the lovely girl who had so recently been full of life and glee.

Oh! the agony of that moment for Louis! Vainly they endeavoured to raise her. They had no strength left in them.

Louis de Fontenach again attempted to obtain a light, and this time he was successful. He opened the door, although to touch the bloodstained handle made him shudder. He could not leave her here alone, perhaps to be the prey of some dreadful ghoul or vampire. He gave Frederica the light and pointed down

the corridor. Mechanically she obeyed, and silently she left him in search of aid.

A thrill of horror seized the gay throng in the ball-room when Frederica appeared among them, looking more like a ghost herself than a living being. Her beautiful hair was dishevelled, her dress disfigured with dust, and crumpled. Her right hand, which held the lamp, was red with blood; in her left she held still the rusty dagger she had taken up ere entering the fatal chamber. The absence of the three had been noticed by the Graf, who wildly rushed forward when he saw Frederica, presenting such a stricken appearance, in the midst of the dancers. The dancing stopped and the women shrank back, gazing upon her with fear.

"Where is Hilda? where is Louis?" cried her uncle.

She was powerless to reply; she beckoned him to follow, and rapidly led the way.

## CHAPTER XII.

THE Graf and several of his intimate friends followed her closely. The remainder of the guests collected in knots in the ball-room and on the staircase, where those who had seen Frederica described her strange appearance to those who had not, and all was fear, surmise, and conjecture, as the news spread that something had happened, but what, no one knew.

The Graf and his companions followed Frederica rapidly to the tapestried gallery. She pulled back the curtain of tapestry that concealed the entrance to the corridor.

"The Haunted Gallery!" he exclaimed, turning pale and starting back. His companions glanced uneasily at each other and repeated his observation, and the news speedily spread to the affrighted groups on the stairs that something awful had taken place in some haunted gallery which they knew nothing of.

But the Graf and his friends found they had no time for hesitation, for Frederica went straight on; and as none of the others had time to think of a light, or, indeed, knew that one was required, Frederica's solitary candle was the sole guide to lighten the gloom of the ghostly corridor. Whatever their respective feelings may have been, they plunged boldly into its recesses after her; for she, apparently utterly denuded of all sense of fear, walked rapidly on through the darkness, which her solitary candle seemed to make more palpable by its transient and flickering rays.

On reaching the panelled chamber, an awesome sight met the eyes of the affrighted party. Hilda lay as Frederica had left her, but not so Louis. He lay all huddled up by her side, perfectly insensible; his fists were clenched as though he had been trying to protect the inanimate form of his betrothed, but had been beaten down and overcome. The mirror, too, had fallen from the wall. What had taken place between the departure of Frederica for help and the arrival of the rescuers, he never was clearly able to tell. All he knew was, that as he was leaning over his fiancée he suddenly saw in the moonlight the dreadful figure of the phantom Knight standing over her, and that, with a diabolical expression on his face, he raised his sword as though about to plunge it to her heart. Then Louis rose and confronted the spectre, but instantly felt a tremendous blow or shock, and he knew no more.

When Frederica perceived the prostrate condition of Louis, she knelt down beside him with a wailing sob and felt his heart. It yet beat. There was then hope for him—for him, her beloved—whom, although the affianced of another, she felt she loved with her whole soul, never more than now when she, the weakest of the three who had gone forth in a quest of supernatural secrets, and the one most prone to fear of ghosts and visions, was the only one who had not been utterly stricken by the fearful occurrences of the evening. If Hilda still breathed, she might be saved. Louis lived, anyhow. The thought gave her strength. The power of speech returned, and she directed the gentlemen, who stood irresolute and scared, in a few words, to remove Louis and Hilda out of the accursed place. She would answer no questions, for she was too unnerved. When once she had seen her cousin removed to her room, and in vain done

her utmost to restore her, she herself became ill and hysterical, and retired.

The house of gladness was changed to a house of fear and sadness; for no one knew what had taken place, nor what might be about to happen. Silently the guests departed, not without many a backward glance thrown over their shoulders for fear that something, they knew not what, might be behind them. Soon, with the exception of the lights in the rooms of the invalids, and those of the doctors and women moving about, all was still and dark in the Castle of Erminstein.

What a change from the gay and brilliant scene of an hour since! The strong constitution of Louis soon enabled him to recover sufficiently to inquire for his betrothed. Hilda remained many hours totally insensible. At last a slight sigh showed she was returning to consciousness. Presently she opened her beautiful hazel eyes and looked wonderingly

around her, but as the remembrance of what had taken place dawned upon her, with a wild shriek of terror she relapsed into a state of delirium.

Many days elapsed, and poor Hilda grew worse and worse. Her cousin, whose stronger built frame had enabled her to shake off the blow to her own nervous system, never left her side. Louis, who seemed to have aged ten years in that one night, was also always near her. At last her senses returned, but she was so weak that she felt, what all around her knew, that she could not be long for this world. At her express desire, a priest was brought to administer to her the last sacraments; after which she desired to see Louis and Frederica together. She had already seen them each separately. The once proud Frederica, now nearly as pale from care and watching as Hilda herself, had, with bitter tears in her eyes, humbly confessed her former wicked

wishes, and had craved her cousin's forgiveness. This, with many kind and consoling words, that fell as balm upon a repentant heart, was granted.

"I can forgive you," said Hilda, "for loving him so much—even to the brink of crime,—for he is so dear to me. I, timid as I was," she said, with a faint reflection of one of her old smiles, "would, I believe, actually have fired off a gun to please him!"

When the two appeared before her bed, they were moved to tears. There was such a change since the night of the ball, that Hilda, though still retaining the sweet, soft expression in her hazel eyes, could scarcely be recognised; especially now that her shapely, rounded form had shrunk almost to a shadow.

"Come near me," she said, in a faint voice; "I shall not long have strength to speak, but would ask you to pay attention to my latest wishes. Take my hands," she said.


Evelyn Stuart Hardy

They did so. Then she continued, joining together the two hands she held: "Louis, I have loved you very dearly. Frederica, though circumstances seemed at one time partly to estrange us, I have loved you as a sister. Latterly I know you have watched over me like a mother, and deeply I thank you. Now, Louis, through my own folly and curiosity, I have been stricken down. It is a mercy that you have not shared the fate that my folly might have entailed upon you, as well as myself."

Here her strength began to fail, and her voice grew weaker, though still clear and distinct. After a few minutes, she resumed, in broken sentences:

"Louis, had I lived, I would have made you a good wife. But it was not to be. I therefore beg of you, dear Louis, to accept from me, your betrothed, the hand of one who has, like me, loved you dearly, and who

once saved your life, and once again brought rescue to you and me in that dreadful corridor. If I could know that you two were united, I should die in peace. Frederica, I know you will never forget me. Louis, for my sake, love Frederica !"

They both wept. Hilda was overcome; she gasped for breath. She strove to speak again. Louis and the good old Graf, who had crept in unnoticed, bent over her. She smiled a sweet, tender smile on seeing her uncle.

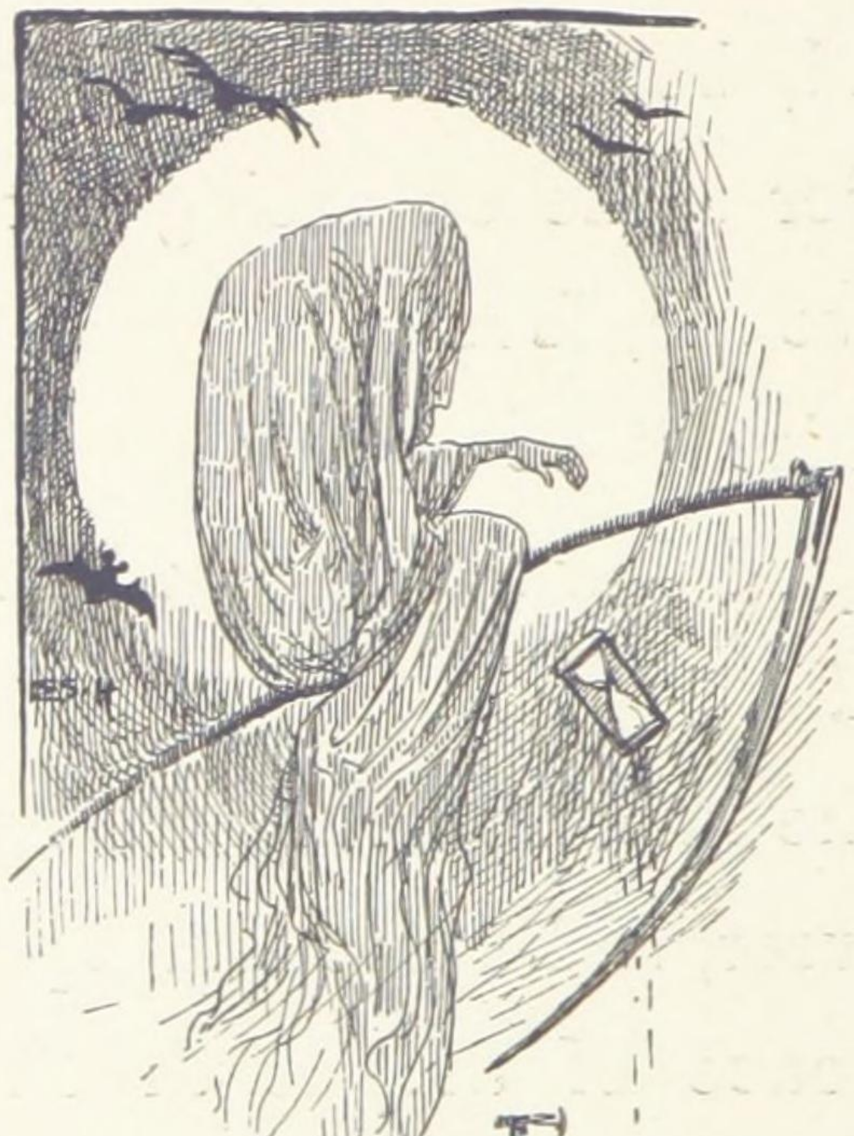
"Promise me, Louis !"

"I promise !" he replied.

He stooped down and kissed her pale face. So did Frederica and her uncle.

When the latter rose Hilda had expired, with that sweet, sad smile still upon her lips; and the silence of the death chamber was broken by the sobs of those who had never loved her more than at the moment she was taken from them.

Louis and Frederica were married, but there were no festivities to celebrate the ceremonial; and never in the present generation will the Graf's lordly halls see such a brilliant gathering as that which assembled on the fatal night when the castle's loveliest flower was stricken down by the "Ghost of Erminstein."



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