

A "Mauvais Quart d'Heure."



WAS one evening presiding over a happy party of young people, my guests, who had trooped into my sitting-room to partake of that pleasant and movable feast, a five o'clock tea. We were all thoroughly at home with each other, most of the individuals present being cousins, and all of them near relations to myself. Some had just returned from riding, others from driving or walking, and all seemed bent upon half an hour's unconstrained, unconventional comfort. One damsel had thrown herself at full length upon the sofa, two others sat upon cushions placed for that purpose in front of the fire, while the young men were sprawling about—as young men will—in different attitudes, indicative of each one's peculiar stage of fatigue or laziness. Candles and lamps had been discarded, and the firelight alone illumined the room. Suddenly one of the young girls addressed me in a coaxing tone, thus:—

"Dear Aunt Madge, do tell us a story!"

"A story!" I exclaimed; "and, pray, what about?"

"A ghost story," exclaimed a chorus of young voices.

"Oh, no! I never tell ghost stories, although I know a good many, but——"

"Well," persisted the first speaker, "tell us *something*—something truly dreadful and dreadfully true!"

"Would you like me to tell you something that really happened to myself years ago?"

"Oh, yes; better than anything else."

"Very well. Poke the fire into a blaze—so, and now, if you are all ready I will begin; and remember that what I am going to tell you is really and literally true.

"Some years ago I took to the strange habit of rising early—but very, very early I mean—and taking a solitary country walk. This would not have been such a strange thing to do, had the hour been less unconventionally early, and had I confined my pedestrian feats to the summer time; but this I did not do. Winter and summer were alike to me then, and at both seasons I invariably rose at four o'clock and was out of the house before five; and I need hardly remind you that at that hour, in the winter, it is quite dark, unless, of course, there should be a moon.

"Some of you, no doubt, are saying to yourselves, 'What a foolish old woman to leave her comfortable warm bed at such an unheard-of hour, instead of waiting, like a sensible person, to go out in the daytime!'

"Ah! foolish it may have been, and, as it turned out, it certainly was; but the habit did not originate in my case from caprice. It arose from a wretched restlessness of mind and body, the effects of a great sorrow—the greatest, in my opinion, that can befall any woman, especially a young one, as I was then. Some of you here know to what I allude, so I need not enter into the

circumstances, beyond saying briefly that on one wretched winter's morning, as the clocks were striking five, a blow fell upon me, shattering all my earthly hopes of future happiness.

"For months afterwards I could not sleep, and I used to lie restlessly, feverishly tossing about in my bed, morbidly recalling and living over again each particular incident of the awful night which preceded my trouble, dreading also to hear the ruthless clock chime out the fatal hour; and after it had done so, my agitation and distress would reach such a pitch, that nothing could quiet me.

"At last I conceived the plan of rising early from my weary, sleepless couch, dressing hastily, and being out and far away before the dreaded moment should arrive. God grant that none of you may ever experience the torture I did then, only to find out, too, how impossible it is to run away from oneself.

"My home at that time was in Scotland. I lived in a dear old house which was poised, like a bird, upon a rock, and literally hung over the sea, the silver spray dashing ceaselessly against its windows. On one side of the house there was a good-sized old-fashioned garden, laid out in terraces down to the sea, and not a quarter of a mile distant from the other side was a thick fir-wood. It was into this wood that I generally strayed of a morning, and, sitting upon one of the felled trees—of which there were always a number lying prone upon the ground—I would watch the daylight gradually appearing, and the sun rising grandly out of the sea. After the sun had fairly risen I always hastened homewards, so as to avoid meeting any early risers who might be about the place; and the rest of the day I would shut myself up with my books and music, a prey to harrowing memories. I cannot defend my worse than useless life at this time. My grief was selfish, and, therefore, all the harder to bear, for God has taught me since that there is no such comfort in sorrow as that of seeking to comfort others.

"There were no gentlemen's places near my home; consequently, no neighbours, no visitors ever molested me. But not many miles distant there existed an old melancholy-looking mansion, called Mornington, which had been uninhabited for many years, but latterly, to the great annoyance of the farmers and small gentry around, it had been let to a Dr. Sterndale, who kept an establishment for incurable lunatics.

"Everything, however, seemed to go on quietly enough there; the unhappy patients never, apparently, venturing beyond the park, which was shut in by large iron gates. These were always locked, but now and then passers-by caught glimpses through them of gaunt strangely-attired figures, and sometimes, though rarely, of pale anxious-looking faces peering through the iron-work.

"There was a dilapidated lodge at the entrance gates, surrounded by what years ago had been a garden, but

now it was choked up by overgrown shrubs, evergreens, which seemed vainly straggling and struggling, out of kindly delicacy, to hide their old friend's broken windows and unhinged doors! Certainly this lodge had an uncanny appearance, and the report had once been spread (a ridiculously false one, of course) that it was at times used as a 'dead-house;' for no living person was ever seen to enter the door, no smoke to issue from the chimney, and when Dr. Sterndale drove out in his lumbering coach, which he did now and again, accompanied by some of his most favoured patients, he invariably opened the lodge gates himself and carefully relocked them, thus requiring no aid from a lodge-keeper.

"The doctor's vehicle, just mentioned, rather struck awe, I found, in the simple villager mind; for my gardener related that one day as it was coming towards him, he saw it suddenly shut itself up with a loud snap. 'For all the wor-rld,' said the man timorously, 'like a lar-rge mouth, gulping down the *puir* folk who were inside.' In vain I assured him that this phenomenon was simply the result of some clever inside mechanism; he and the country people became superstitiously alarmed; and this sentiment was by no means lessened when the gardener proceeded to give further details. He stated that at the moment the carriage passed him, one of the blinds, which had been hastily drawn down, was violently pushed aside by a large white hand covered with glittering rings; that then a face was thrust forward, making horrid grimaces and gesticulations; but that both head and hands hastily disappeared with a jerk, as though the individual who claimed them had been forcibly dragged back. The blind was then replaced, but it shook exceedingly, as if some struggle were going on behind it; then the carriage passed by, vanishing in a cloud of dust.

"I laughed at the story to some, and endeavoured to explain it simply to others; but finding it was impossible to stem the torrent of obstinacy or ignorance, or both, I left the matter alone.

"That the lunatics were of a dangerous class I had often heard it said, but such a report would be sure, I thought, to get afloat, were it true or the reverse; and as Mornington was a long way from my house (it was quite a mile the other side of the fir-wood, which itself was nearly a mile broad) I did not trouble myself about such tales. My maid, however, who had lived years with me, constantly implored me to be less venturesome in my morning walks; but I felt no fear—the greatest calamity that could befall me had come, so I was callous about anything else.

"Well, one morning late in the autumn, having been more restless than usual during the previous night, I got up earlier even than was my wont, and after a brisk walk found myself in the very heart of the wood. I knew exactly where I was, for a seat had been placed there to mark the centre-point. It was one of the (then) new-fashioned double seats, upon which people sit back to back, and just as I reached it I heard a village clock strike five, and for the first time in my life (I knew not why) when I realised my distance from home, and the

earliness of the hour, a shudder came over me, and the fact that the place was very lonely, and that I was only a weak woman and utterly defenceless, forced itself unpleasantly upon me. I determined, however, to pooh-pooh my fears, to pull myself together, and to persuade myself that I was not afraid.

"'It is the weather,' I said, 'which has unnerved me;' and certainly it was not reassuring.

"It was a fitful morning; there had been a good deal of rain during the night, accompanied by wild gusts of wind. Heavy black and white clouds were hurrying across the sky, and seemed to chase the terrified and fugitive moon. She was at her full, and at one moment her bright and almost blinding beams would pierce through the waving trees, casting strange unearthly shadows around; and at the next, she and the shuddering wood would be enveloped in a funeral pall of inky blackness. The effect was weird in the extreme, and during one of the moments of sudden obscurity, I sank down on the seat spellbound, looking up at the sky with a beating heart, and longing for the next appearance of the rolling moon. One angry cloud had already released her, but I saw that yet another must pass over her face before her blessed light could reappear, and it was the strangest cloud I ever beheld, being the exact shape of a man's hand, with one long bony finger stretched out (I fancied) in warning. The moon seemed to roll slowly and painfully between the fingers, looking very pale and faint the while; but at last, with a bound, she emerged from the shadows, shining with a wild and happy brightness, as though rejoicing to escape from the clutch of the hand.

"I also was inexpressibly relieved, and rose quickly from my seat, intending to hurry home; but how can I paint the amazement, the horror I felt, when I perceived I was no longer alone! Another human being had silently—with cat-like steps—arrived during the darkness; a MAN was sitting on the seat, on the further end of the other side! His face was turned away, but his appearance was so peculiarly alarming that my heart stood still; for at a glance I 'took in' the situation.

"'An escaped lunatic!' I thought, 'and my only chance of safety is to brave it out!'

"As these thoughts darted through my brain, the man slowly, very slowly, turned his head, and looked deliberately at me. Oh, that look! Never, to my dying day, shall I forget it! I see it now! Everything most terrifying, most sinister, most repulsive was in that look. Audacity, cowardice, insolence, malice—all, all these were there, and above all, and through them all—madness!

"The man was deadly pale, or the struggling dawn (which was just silvering the horizon) made him appear so. His eyes were frightfully bloodshot, his teeth were large and very white, and there was a light froth upon his lips, which had the blue-grey appearance of a corpse! He wore a long 'Ulster' coat, buttoned from his throat to his feet, and a tumbled white collar appeared above it, giving me the impression that he must have escaped from his bed, and in his night-gear. What alarmed me almost more than anything (if anything

could be more alarming than everything was) was the fact that a centre button of the coat, at the waist, was unbuttoned, and in the aperture thus formed, one of the man's hands was thrust, and I kept asking myself—

“What is he hiding there? a pistol, a knife, or what?”

“Feeling my extreme helplessness, and how entirely I was, humanly speaking, at the mercy of a madman, I sent up a silent prayer to the All-Powerful God—a cry for help—for wisdom how to act; and on looking back now, I can see how wonderfully my ejaculatory prayer was instantly answered, for I felt suddenly impelled by a discretion (not my own) not to run, or even walk away; but to re-seat myself with the greatest apparent calmness.

“This act seemed to surprise—to please the man, for he smiled, and, to my unspeakable terror, slid slowly along the seat till he came close to me, although still on the other side. I felt his shoulder touch mine—but I dared not shrink from the contact—then he bent his head back till it rested on my veil; his fœtid breath mingling with mine, while he peered, insolently, mockingly, into my face. After a few moments (which appeared hours to me), during which he intently scanned my features, while I, God helping me, tried to meet his gaze bravely, he said deliberately, and evidently watching the effect of his words:—

“I saw you coming into the wood; I hid behind a tree, and then—I followed you. When the moon shone out I hid again, and touched your gown as you passed; but you didn't know. Ha! ha! funny, isn't it? Then, when it got dark again, I crept up to the seat; and when you sat down, I did so too. Why shouldn't I? I have as much right here as you. I say' (coming a trifle nearer, and putting his horrid mouth close to my ear), 'we are quite alone in the wood—you and I! Nice, isn't it? Are you afraid—eh?’

“No,' I answered boldly; 'why should I be afraid? We are not alone, as you suppose, for—’

“Eh?’ said he, nervously looking round; then, in a whisper, 'Who is here besides us?’

“God!’ I answered clearly and firmly. 'He is here; He is stronger than I—or you; and He takes care of us both.’

“He looked hard at me, and I looked back fearlessly (apparently) at him, resolved that my glance should not be the first to falter. At last—after a deadly but silent battle between his will and mine—his eyes quailed and fell; and I knew instinctively that I had gained a victory, for he fidgeted uneasily on the seat, and turned his head away, while I breathed more freely.

“After a short silence he said in a hoarse whisper, as though afraid of being overheard—

“I say, I can't sleep, that's why I come out so early. My servants' (with a wave of the hand, and the assumption of a 'grand seigneur') 'have their orders always to keep my breakfast hot!’ Then, with a howl of bitter distress, he cried out, 'Oh, oh! If I only could sleep! I would give kingdoms to sleep!’

“It is remarkable that as he gave utterance to this

bitter cry, in spite of the deadly fear I felt, and of the almost certainty that I should never live to tell this tale, a mighty sympathy arose in my heart for the wretched maniac; for did I not know, as well almost as he, the agony of sleeplessness?

“I therefore said, kindly and pityingly—

“How strange! I, too, cannot sleep!’

“Looking at me with a world of despair in his face, he said—

“Is it a curse?’ Then rocking himself to and fro on the seat, he moaned out, 'Oh, what—what shall I do to sleep?’

“There was such a ring of anguish in his tones that my heart bled for him, and I said gently—

“Oh! try what I have tried—that which is after all the only comfort, waking or sleeping!’

“What's that?’ he said eagerly.

“Pray!’ I said.

“Oh!’ he answered wearily, 'I have prayed, but God won't hear me. How can He, when He is up there'—pointing to the sky—'and I am in that hell?’

“But He does hear,' I said solemnly, and as to a child. 'He sees and hears everything, He sees you and me here—now, He knew we should meet this morning, and He it is who teaches me to say to you, pray! Tell Him, when lying on your restless bed—just as you have told me—that you can't sleep, that you suffer, that you are unhappy, that—’ I was going on, when my companion suddenly started up, and looking uneasily around, whispered, 'Hush! hark!’

“He seemed to listen eagerly, and then, with an expression in his face of intense hatred, gradually and cautiously drew the hand, hitherto concealed, out of his breast. A deadly sickness seized me, for my worst fears were realised, when I beheld the light of the dawning day gleam upon the blade of a murderous-looking knife; but a ray of hope was at the same moment vouchsafed to me, for following with my eyes the direction of his—oh, joy! two horsemen were apparent through the trees, trotting slowly along a grassy pathway generally only used by foot-passengers, and each carried a ready-cocked pistol and seemed in eager search.

“Of course I knew they were on the track of the wretched man at my side, and although they were quite within hail, I dared not either call or make them a sign, feeling convinced that had I done either, the knife would have been plunged into my bosom, for I perceived the maniac was watching me narrowly, and he evidently meant to sell his liberty dearly.

“Had the horsemen seen us? I wondered, in an agony of hope and fear; but I dared not move, and words would utterly fail me to express my sensations when I suddenly saw my miserable companion start to his feet, brandishing the knife, and, leaving his side of the seat, come towards mine. I was preparing, as a last resource, to scream and run for my life, when, to my amazement, instead of attacking me, the poor wretch threw himself on his knees at my feet, trembling like a leaf, and, burying his face in my lap (I had never relinquished my seat), said, in a hurried and imploring whisper—

“Save me from those two men! They did not see

me. For the love of God don't give me up to them! You are good and kind, and are sorry for me, and you have told me to pray; so now I pray God and I pray you, don't, don't give me up!

"For an instant he remained motionless, with his face buried in my lap, and I really don't know what folly my womanly impulse of intense sympathy might not have tempted me to commit, had I not at that instant caught sight of the knife which he still grasped tightly in his hand. I shuddered as I saw it, and he must have felt me do so, for, raising his head quickly and putting his awful face close to mine, he muttered fiercely and half to himself, 'She doesn't look true. Oh, if I thought she would betray me!'

"Now, certainly, I thought, my last hour must be come; but, in spite of my desperation, I managed to say calmly and in an authoritative whisper—

"Hush! be quiet, or they will hear you! They will soon have passed, and then you shall come home with me.' ('Oh, God!' I thought, 'did the horsemen see us?')

"He crouched down obediently like a child, hiding his face on my knees; and once more I cried for Divine assistance in my awful need, and again my prayer was answered, for, on looking despairingly across the wood, I saw, within thirty or forty yards of us, and behind the unfortunate man on his knees, the same two men who had passed by on horseback. So they had seen us, and help was at hand at last; they were creeping towards us, and making signs to me not to move, so as to give them time to approach. I leant, therefore, over the wretched maniac, gently stroking his hair, and speaking soothingly to him, telling him 'for his life not to rise or show himself, not to move till the men were gone.' So he knelt on, with his head buried in my lap and trembling with fear. I must confess that at this moment I hated myself

and felt a very Delilah, for the poor fellow began to stammer forth a few disjointed words from the Lord's Prayer. But what—what could I do?

"And the men kept coming on silently and stealthily, nearer, closer, till at last one of them sprang forward and threw some kind of cloth over the madman's head, while his companion placed gyves upon his wrists, and then—then I saw the hideous knife fall harmlessly to the ground! I know not to this day when it happened, but before (I suppose) the cloth had quite blinded the astonished maniac, and in the struggle that followed, he bit my hand nearly to the bone (I have the mark now, and always shall have it), but so excited was I that I never even felt the wound till, on my way home, I saw the blood.

"It is not easy for me to describe what I felt when, after the keepers had uncovered the poor wretch's face, and were leading him away, cowed and manacled (but not subdued), he looked witheringly at me, and said between his teeth—

"God's bitterest curse upon you, for you cheated me with your prayers and lying words, and I trusted you, and you betrayed me!"

"Then came a string of imprecations, in the midst of which the keepers hurried him into a vehicle which was following, and they drove away.

"My story is done. How I got home I know not; I was more dead than alive, and for weeks that awful face, those bitter curses, and the cry—'I trusted you, and you betrayed me!'—haunted me; and on every anniversary of that day I rise at the exact hour, and on my knees pray God to bless, protect, and comfort him (should he still be living), and all wretched beings like him, whose humanity is shattered, and their lives—a living death!"

WILHELMINA MUNSTER.

The Birch-Tree at Loeschwitz.

AT Loeschwitz above the city
The air is sunny and chill;
The birch-trees and the pine-trees
Grow thick upon the hill.

Lone and tall, with silver stem,
A birch-tree stands apart;
The passionate wind of spring-time
Stirs in its leafy heart.

I lean against the birch-tree,
My arms around it twine;
It pulses, and leaps, and quivers
Like a human heart to mine.

One moment I stand, then sudden
Let loose mine arms that cling:
O God! the lonely hillside,
The passionate wind of spring!

AMY LEVY.

