

## THE MYSTERIOUS LADY OF THE HAYSTACK.

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IN the year 1776 a young woman knocked at a cottage door in the village of Bourton, near Bristol, and begged for a draught of milk. There was that in her appearance calculated to excite interest and extract sympathy. She was a stranger, and quite alone. Her worn and weather-stained garments, her wan face and emaciated frame, betokened distress; but she uttered no complaint, and asked no alms. Notwithstanding the wretchedness of her garb, her carriage and deportment bore visible marks of good-breeding; but there was a wildness in her manner and an incoherency in her speech which betrayed an unsettled mind. As she could not be induced even to make known her name, she was distinguished by that of Louisa.

After wandering about all day, she at night took up her lodging under a haystack. The ladies of the neighbourhood pointed out the danger of such an exposed situation, but in vain. Their bounty supplied her with the necessaries of life, but neither threats nor entreaties could induce her to sleep in a house.

Such being her extraordinary choice, it was considered more humane to leave her undisturbed than to force her into an asylum. For four years, therefore, did this forlorn creature make the foot of the haystack her abiding place, never knowing during that time the comfort of a bed or the protection of a roof. Her way of life was most harmless and inoffensive. Every fine morning she walked round the village, conversed with the children, made them presents of such things as were given her, and received others in return, but would take no food but milk, tea, and the most simple diet.

From a certain peculiarity of expression and a slight foreign accent, it was conjectured that she was not a native of England; and various attempts were made, but in vain, to draw from this circumstance some knowledge of her origin. In the meantime, as it had been concluded that she was a native of Germany, all the particulars that could be collected concerning her were translated into that language, and transmitted to the newspapers of Vienna and other large German cities, in the hope that they might lead to some discovery. The effect of this was, that, shortly afterwards, a pamphlet was published in some part of the Austrian dominions, entitled *The Stranger: a true History*. The author of this pamphlet, after giving an affecting recital of the sufferings of the poor female stranger in the neighbourhood of Bristol, proceeds to relate the history of her life, and declares that he is furnished with indisputable evidence to prove the correctness of his statements. The narrative is as follows:

In the summer of the year 1768, Count Cobenzel, the Austrian minister at Brussels, received a letter from a lady at Bordeaux. The writer requested him not to think it strange if his friendship and advice were eagerly sought, adding that the universal respect which his talents and his interest at court commanded induced her to address herself to him; that he should soon know who it was that had presumed to solicit his good offices; and that he would, perhaps, not repent of having attended to her. This letter was written in French, and was signed La Frülen, at Bordeaux.

Shortly afterwards he received a letter from Prague, signed Count I. von Weisendorf, and entreating that the best advice might be given to Mademoiselle la Frülen; that all interest might be made in her favour; and even that a thousand

ducats might be advanced her, should she require them. The letter concluded in these words :

“When you shall know, sir, who this stranger is, you will be delighted to think you have served her, and grateful to those who have given you an opportunity of doing it.”

In his reply to the lady, his Excellency assured her that he was highly sensible of her good opinion ; that he should be proud of assisting her with his advice, and of serving her to the utmost of his power ; but that it was absolutely necessary he should, in the first instance, be informed of her real name.

Several letters passed between the Count and the young lady, without, however, his becoming acquainted with the real name of his correspondent. Towards the end of the year, the wife of a tradesman at Bordeaux having to transact business at Brussels, which introduced her to Count Cobenzel ; she, in answer to his inquiries, said she knew the young lady very well. She extolled her beauty, her elegance, and, above all, the prudence and propriety of her conduct. She added, that the young lady had a house of her own ; that she was generous to a fault, and lavish in her expenditure ; that she had been three years at Bordeaux ; that the distinguished attention with which she was treated by the Marshal de Richelieu, the great resemblance of her features to those of the late Emperor Francis, and the entire ignorance of the world concerning her birth, had given rise to strange conjectures ; and that though the young lady had often been questioned on the subject of her family, she maintained the most scrupulous silence.

In one of her letters to Count Cobenzel, Mademoiselle la Frülen declared her willingness to inform the Count of every particular of her history ; but as the secret was too important to be intrusted to chance, she intended to visit him with the special purpose of revealing herself. Meanwhile she sent him her picture, which she desired him attentively to examine, and which she imagined would lead to some conjectures as to what she had to relate. The Count, on examining the portrait sent, could not disguise from himself that it bore strong resemblance to the Emperor ; but he said nothing.

In the beginning of the year 1769, Count Cobenzel received some despatches from Vienna, containing several extraordinary circumstances relative to the stranger ; and he was instructed to have her apprehended and to examine her. While Count Cobenzel was debating within himself how he should act, she was, at the instance of a messenger from the court of Vienna, arrested in her own house, and carried to Brussels, to Count Cobenzel's residence.

On her first appearing before the Count, she was, as may be imagined, much confused ; but he reassured her, telling her that she should experience the greatest kindness, provided she would adhere to the truth.

Upon being asked where she was born, she answered that she knew not ; but had been told the place where she was brought up was called Bohemia. She said that the place in which she had lived was a small sequestered house in the country, with neither a town nor a village near it. In her infancy she had been under the care of two women, one of whom she called mamma, and the other Catharine. An ecclesiastic came from time to time to teach her catechism and to instruct her in reading and writing ; and he always treated her with great respect. She said that about a year afterwards a handsome man in a hunting suit came to the house where she resided. The stranger placed her on his knee, caressed her, and told her to be good and obedient. She did not remember ever having seen this stranger before. In about two years he returned ; and at this second interview his features made such an indelible impression upon her, that, had she never seen them more, she should never have forgotten them. At this second visit she remarked something red about the stranger's neck under his riding

coat : she inquired what it was ; on which he replied that it was a mark of distinction worn by officers. She added, that at this visit she felt a strong attachment to the stranger ; and when he took leave she burst into tears, at which he appeared much affected, and promised to return soon. He did not, however, keep his word, for it was not till two years afterwards that he returned ; and when she reproached him with his long absence, he told her that at the time he had fixed for coming to see her he was very ill, in consequence of overheating himself in the chase. It is remarkable that at a time corresponding with that above mentioned the emperor, as was well known, was taken ill on his return from hunting. At the third interview the stranger desired to be left alone with her. He then declared that he loved her as his daughter ; that he would take care of her ; that he would make her rich and happy ; and give her a palace, money, and attendants. He then gave her his portrait set in diamonds, bidding her keep it as long as she lived. The portrait given proved to be that of the emperor.

She then related the story of her departure from the place of her education, stating that, soon after the stranger's last visit, the ecclesiastic who had attended her from her infancy came to inform her that her protector was no more, and that, before he expired, he ordered that she should be taken to the house of a merchant at Bourdeaux, there to reside until she arrived at woman's estate. Under the care of the merchant's wife she thus continued for several years. At length, one day, a gentleman called upon her, placing in her hands a purse of a thousand louis d'or, for the purchase of furniture ; at the same time telling her that she might now seek a house, and establish a home of her own.

Soon after she had taken her house she received an anonymous letter, in which she was directed to go to the Duke de Richelieu, and ask that protection of which she now stood in need. She accordingly repaired to that nobleman, who informed her that he had received a letter from the Princess of Auersberg, recommending Mademoiselle de Schönau to his protection. He promised that he would have a watchful care over her, and he afterwards made her a constant guest at all his entertainments ; when questions were asked, he invariably replied, "She is a lady of great distinction."

During her residence at Bourdeaux she was regularly supplied with money, receiving in all upwards of 6000*l.*, and yet was not able to discover to whom she was indebted for this allowance. This corroborated her supposition that she belonged to a wealthy family, and she spent the money as fast as she got it. Her remittances, however, suddenly stopped ; and as she made no alteration in her style of living, she soon contracted debts to a large amount. In her distress, she had taken the resolution of writing to Count Cobenzel, with the hope that his interference would procure her relief.

She then proceeded to give some information of considerable importance in connection with the Duke of York. On his arrival at Bourdeaux, the duke sent to inform her that he had something of great consequence to communicate to her, and requested her to appoint some time when he might see her without the knowledge of any other person. She replied that, as he wished for secrecy, she thought the most suitable hour would be at six in the morning, after a ball that was to be given by the Duke de Richelieu. His royal highness came at the appointed time, when he told her that the object of his visit was to learn the amount of her debts, as he was commanded by a lady of distinction to give her a sum of money. She acknowledged that her creditors importuned her greatly for sixty thousand livres. He desired her to make herself easy, and the same day sent her seven hundred louis d'ors, informing her that he would soon furnish her with a sum sufficient to pay all her debts. The next day the duke left Bourdeaux.

Soon after this she fell ill. One morning, while her attendant was at her bedside, the following letter was brought from the Duke of York, dated Monaco : "I was about to send you the remainder of the money, but after I left your house, I received a letter which strictly enjoined me to give you but a portion of it. I have written to

the Princess of Auersberg, and have requested permission to remit you at least the sum you want, to release you from the importunities of your creditors, but—”

Here the letter abruptly terminated. A few days after she received it, she was informed of the duke's death.

Such was the substance of the information obtained in the twenty-four sittings occupied by the examination. The Count Cobenzel now seriously considered what steps were proper to be taken, and he thought it would be most prudent to place the unfortunate girl in some convent, where she might be kept till time should throw some light upon her mysterious existence.

But before the Count had time to carry out this project, he was attacked by an illness that proved fatal. The day before his death he told a friend, who had been made acquainted with all the circumstances connected with the stranger, that he had just received despatches from Vienna, charging him to acquaint the Court with the stranger's history, by no means to dismiss her, nor to take any steps without fresh orders.

On the following day the Count expired, and about a week afterwards the stranger was taken out of the prison in which she had been confined and conducted by a sub-lieutenant of the Mare-Chaussée of Brabant to Quievrain, a small town between Mons and Valenciennes. Here fifty louis d'ors were put into her hands, and she was abandoned to her destiny. For seven or eight years she seems to have wandered from place to place, until she appeared in the neighbourhood of Bristol, as narrated at the commencement of this memoir.

In her new-found retreat beside the haystack the unfortunate creature was now permitted to settle down. She seldom rose from her bed, on which she lay very quietly, apparently half unconscious of what was passing around. She often amused herself with shaping her blanket into the semblance of a royal robe.

Her manner of speaking English, though imperfect, could not absolutely be pronounced to be that of a foreigner, but was rather that of an infant, as she frequently omitted the connecting particles, and used childish epithets. When a question was put to her, it was found necessary to repeat it; not because she did not comprehend it, but either from indifference, which gradually disappeared, or from caution to avoid being ensnared, against which it was evident, in spite of her insanity, she was constantly endeavouring to guard. Instead of giving a direct answer to the questions that were asked her, she more usually talked of mamma coming to take her away, and used other expressions as though she hourly expected some one to come to her aid.

She frequently talked of dress, and by her action expressed a desire for fine clothes; but she concluded all her broken sentences on the subject with saying, “They must be like this, and the colour of this;” pointing sometimes to the straw, and sometimes to the blanket which lay loosely over her. She had a particular passion for bracelets, especially for miniatures, but displayed the most sovereign contempt for every other ornament. Of a Queen Anne's half-crown she was extremely fond; she sometimes desired to have one sewn on to a black ribbon, and, saying that it much resembled her mamma, would wear it on her arm, and kiss it with great delight.

Her state having at length become worse, she was conveyed to a hospital for lunatics at Bristol. From Bristol she was removed to Guy's Hospital, London; where the contraction of her limbs, owing to exposure to cold, combined with her constant propensity to remain inactive, rendered her an object of the strongest compassion; and her case having been made known to the talented Hannah More, that lady settled a small annual allowance upon her for the purchase of such comforts and luxuries as would serve to soothe and please our poor lady of the haystack.