

Steepside

A Ghost Story

By Anna (Bonus) Kingsford

The strange things I am going to tell you, dear reader, did not occur, as such things generally do, to my great-uncle, or to my second cousin, or even to my grandfather, but to myself. It happened that a few years ago I received an invitation from an old schoolfellow to spend Christmas week with him in his country house on the borders of North Wales, and, as I was then a happy bachelor, and had not seen my friend for a considerable time, I accepted the invitation, and turned my back upon London on the appointed day with a light heart and anticipations of the pleasantest description.

Leaving my City haunts by a morning train, I was landed early in the afternoon at the nearest station to my friend's house, although in this case "nearest" "as indeed, as it proved, by no means near. When I reached the inn where I had fondly expected to find "flies, omnibuses, and other vehicles obtainable on the shortest notice," I was met by the landlady of the establishment, who, with an apologetic curtsy and a deprecating smile, informed me that she was extremely sorry to say her last conveyance had just started with a party, and would not return until late at night. I looked at my watch; it was nearing four. Seven miles, and I had a large travelling-bag to carry.

"Is it a good road from here to—?" I asked the landlady.

"Oh yes, sir; very fair."

"Well," I said, "I think I'll walk it. The railway journey has rather numbed my feet, and a sharp walk will certainly improve their temperature."

So I courageously lifted my bag and set out on the journey to my friend's house. Ah, how little I guessed what was destined to befall me before I reached that desired haven! I had gone, I suppose, about two miles when I descried behind me a vast mass of dark, surging cloud driving up rapidly with the wind. I was in open country, and there was evidently going to be a very heavy snowstorm. Presently it began. At first I made up my mind not to heed it; but in about twenty minutes after the commencement of the fall the snow became so thick and so blinding, that it was absolutely impossible for me to find my way along a road which was utterly new to me. Moreover, with the cloud came the twilight, and a most disagreeably keen wind. The travelling-bag became unbearably heavy. I shifted it from one hand to the other; I hung it over my shoulder; I put it under my arm; I carried it in all sorts of ways, but none afforded me any permanent relief. To add to my misfortune, I strongly suspected that I had mistaken my way, for by this time the snow was so deep that the footpath was altogether obliterated. In this predicament I looked out wistfully across the whitened landscape for signs of an inn or habitation of some description where I might "put up" for the night, and by good fortune (or was it bad?) I at last espied through the gathering gloom a solitary and not very distant light twinkling from a lodge at the entrance of a private road. I fought my way through the snow as quickly as possible, and, presenting myself at the gate of the little cottage, rang the bell complacently, and flattered myself that I had at length discovered a resting-place. An old man with grey hair answered my summons. Him I acquainted with my misfortune, and to him I preferred my request that I might be allowed a night's shelter in

the lodge, or at least the temporary privilege of drying myself and my habiliments at his fireside. The old fellow admitted me cheerfully enough; but he seemed more than doubtful as to the possibility of my passing the night beneath his roof.

"Ye see, sir," he said, "we've only one small rooma—me and the missis; and I don't well see how we're to manage about you. All the same, sir, I wouldn't advise ye to go on to-night, for if ye're bound for Mr —'s, ye've come a deal out of your way, and the storm's getting worse and worse every minute. We shall have a nasty night of it, sir, and it'll be a deal too stiff for travelling on foot."

Here the wife, a hospitable-looking old woman, interposed.

"Willum, don't ye think as the gentleman might be put to sleep in the mom up at the House, where George slept last time he was here to see us? His bed's there still, ye know. It's a very good room, sir," she argued, addressing me; "and I can give ye a pair of blankets in no time."

"But," said I, "the master of the house doesn't know me. I am a stranger here altogether."

"Lor' bless ye, sir!" answered my host, "there ain't nobody in the place. The house has been to let these ten years at least to my knowledge; for I've been here eight, and the house and the lodge had both been empty no one knows how long when I come. I rents this cottage of Mr Houghton, out yonder."

"Oh well," I rejoined, "if that is the case, and there is nobody's leave save yours to ask, I'm willing enough to sleep at the house, and thank you too for your kindness."

So it was arranged that I should pass the coming night within the walls of the empty mansion; and, until it was time to retire thither, I amused and edified myself by a friendly chat with the old man and his spouse, both of whom were vastly communicative. At ten o'clock I and my host adjourned to the house, which stood at a very short distance from the lodge. I carried my bag, and my companion bore the blankets already referred to, a candle, and some firewood and matches. The chamber to which he conducted me was comfortable enough, but by no means profusely furnished. It contained a small truckle bedstead, two chairs, and a washstand, but no attempt at pictures or ornaments of any description. Evidently it was an impromptu bedroom.

My entertainer in a few minutes kindled a cheerful fire upon the old-fashioned stone hearth. Then, after arranging my bed and placing my candle on the mantelpiece, he wished me a respectful good-night and withdrew. When he was gone I dragged one of the chairs towards the fireplace, and sat down to enjoy the pleasant flicker of the blaze. I ruminated upon the occurrences of the day, and the possible history of the old house, whose sole occupant I had thus strangely become. Now, I am of an inquisitive turn of mind, and perhaps less apt than most men to be troubled with that uncomfortable sensation which those people who are its victims describe as nervousness, and those who are not, as cowardice. Another in my place might have shrunk from doing what I presently resolved to do, and that was to explore, before going to rest, at least some part of this empty old house. Accordingly, I took up my candle and walked out into the passage, leaving the door of my room widely open, so that the fire-light streamed full into the entrance of the dark gallery, and served to guide me on my way along it. When I had thus progressed for some twenty yards, I was brought to a standstill by encountering a large red baize door, which evidently shunt off the wing in which my room was situated from the rest of the mansion, and completely closed all egress from the corridor where I then

stood. I paused a moment or two in uncertainty, for the door was locked; but presently my glance fell on an old rusty key hanging from a nail, likewise rusty, in a niche of the wall. I abstracted this key from its resting-place, destroying as I did so the residences of a dozen spiders, which, to judge from appearances, seemed to have thrived excellently in the atmosphere of desolation which surrounded them. It was some time before I could get the clumsy old lock to act properly, or summon sufficient strength to turn the key; but at length perseverance met with its proverbial reward, and the door moved slowly and noisily on its hinges. Still bearing my candle, I went on my way into a second corridor, which was literally carpeted with dust, the accumulation probably of the ten years to which my host had referred.

All round was gloomy and silent as a sepulchre, save that every now and then the loosened boards creaked beneath my tread, or some little misanthropical animal, startled from his hermitage by the unwonted sound of nay steps, hurried across the passage, making as he went a tiny trail in the thick furry dust. Several galleries branched off from the mainway like tributary streams, but I preferred to steer my course down the central corridor, which finally conducted me to a large antique-looking apartment with carved wainscot and curious old paintings on the panelled walls. I put the candle upon a table which stood in the centre of the room, and standing beside it, took a general survey. There was an old mouldy-looking bookcase in one corner of the chamber, with some old mouldy books packed closely together on a few of its shelves. This piece of furniture was hollowed out, crescentwise, at the base, and partially concealed a carved oaken door, which had evidently in former times been the means of communication with an adjoining apartment. Prompted by curiosity, I took down and opened a few of the nearest books on the shelves before me. They proved to be some of the very earliest volumes of the "Spectator"—books of considerable interest to me,—and in ten minutes I was quite absorbed in an article by one of our most noted masters of literature. I drew one of the queer high-backed chairs scattered about the room, towards the table, and sat down to enjoy a "feast of reason and a flow of soul." As I turned the mildewed page, something suddenly fell with a dull "flop" upon the paper. *It was a drop of blood!* I stared at it with a strange sensation of mingled horror and astonishment. Could it have been upon the page *before* I turned it? No; it was wet and bright, and presented the uneven, broken disc which drops of liquid always possess when they fall from a considerable height. Besides I had heard and seen it fall. I put the book down on the table and looked upward at the ceiling. There was nothing visible there save the grey dirt of years. I looked closely at the hideous blotch, and saw it rapidly soaking and widening its way into the paper, already softened with age. As, of course, after this incident I was not inclined to continue nay studies of Addison and Steele, I shut the volume and replaced it on the shelves. Turning back towards the table to take up my candle, my eyes rested upon a full-length portrait immediately facing the bookcase. It was that of a young and handsome woman with glossy black hair coiled round her head, but, I thought, with something repulsive in the proud, stony face and shadowed eyes. I raised the light above my head to get a better view of the painting. As I did this, it seemed to me that the countenance of the figure changed, or rather that a Thing came between me and it. It was a momentary distortion, as though a gust of wind had passed across the portrait and disturbed the outline of the features; the how and the why I know not, but the face changed; nor shall I ever forget the sudden horror of the look it assumed. It was like that face of phantom ghastliness that

we see sometimes in the delirium of fever,—the face that meets us and turns upon us in the mazes of nightmare, with a look that wakes us in the darkness, and drives the cold sweat out upon our forehead while we lie still and hold our breath for fear. Man as I was, I shuddered convulsively from head to foot, and fixed my eyes earnestly on the terrible portrait. In a minute it was a mere picture again—an inanimate coloured canvas—wearing no expression upon its painted features save that which the artist had given to it nearly a century ago. I thought *then* that the strange appearance I had witnessed was probably the effect of the fitful candle-light, or an illusion of my own vision; but now I believe otherwise. Seeing nothing further unusual in the picture, I turned my back upon it, and made a few steps towards the door, intending to quit this mysterious chamber of horrors, when a third and more hideous phenomenon riveted me to the spot where I stood; for, as I looked towards the oaken door in the corner, I became aware of something slowly filtering from beneath it, and creeping towards me. O heaven! I had not long to look to know what that something was:—it was blood,—red, thick, stealthy! On it came, winding its way in a frightful stream into the room, soddening the rich carpet, and lying presently in a black pool at my feet. It had trickled in from the adjoining chamber, that chamber the entrance to which was closed by the bookcase. There were some great volumes on the ground before the door,—volumes which I had noticed when I entered the room, on account of the thick dust with which they were surrounded. They were lying now in a pool of stagnant blood. It would be utterly impossible for me to attempt to describe my sensations at that minute. I was not capable of feeling any distinct emotion. My brain seemed oppressed, I could scarcely breathe—scarcely move. I watched the dreadful stream oozing drowsily through the crevices of the mouldy, rotting woodwork—bulging out in great beads like raindrops on the sides of the door—trickling noiselessly down the knots of the carved oak. Still I stood and watched it, and it crept on slowly, slowly, like a living thing, and growing as it came, to my very feet. I cannot say how long I might have stood there, fascinated by it, had not something suddenly occurred to startle me into my senses again; for full upon the back of my right hand fell, with a sullen, heavy sound, a second drop of blood. It stung and burnt my flesh like molten lead, and the sharp, sudden pain it gave me shot up my arm and shoulder, and seemed in an instant to mount into my brain and pervade my whole being. I turned and fled from the terrible place with a shrill cry that rang through the empty corridors and ghostly rooms like nothing human. I did not recognise it for my own voice, so strange it was,—so totally unlike its accustomed sound; and now, when I recall it, I am disposed to think it was surely not the cry of living mortal, but of that unknown Thing that passed before the portrait, and that stood beside me even then in the lonely room. Certain I am that the echoes of that cry had in them something inexpressibly fiendish, and through the deathly gloom of the mansion they came back, reverberated and repeated from a hundred invisible corners and galleries. Now, I had to pass, on my return, a long, broad window that lighted the principal staircase. This window had neither shutters nor blind, and was composed of those small square panes that were in vogue a century ago. As I went by it, I threw a hasty, appalled glance behind me, and distinctly saw, even through the blurred and dirty glass, the figures of two women, one pursuing the other over the thick white snow outside. In the rapid view I had of them, I observed only that the first carried something in her hand that looked like a pistol, and her long black hair streamed behind her, showing darkly against the dead whiteness of the landscape. The arms of her pursuer

were outstretched, as though she were calling to her companion to stop; but perfect as was the silence of the night, and close as time figures seemed to be, I heard no sound of a voice. Next I came to a second and smaller window which had been once boarded up, but with lapse of time the plank had loosened and partly fallen, and here I paused a moment to look out. It still snowed slightly, but there was a clear moon, sufficient to throw a ghastly light upon the outside objects nearest to me. With the sleeve of my coat I rubbed away the dust and cobwebs which overhung the glass, and peered out. The two women were still hurrying onward, but the distance between them was considerably lessened. And now for the first time a peculiarity about them struck me. It was this, that the figures were not substantial; they flickered and waved precisely like flames, as they ran. As I gazed at them the foremost turned her head to look at the woman behind her, and as she did so, stumbled, fell, and disappeared. She seemed to have suddenly dropped down a precipice, so quickly and so completely she vanished. The other figure stopped, wrung its hands wildly, and presently turned and fled in the direction of the park-gates, and was soon lost in the obscurity of the distance. The sights I had just witnessed in the panelled chamber had not been of a nature to inspire courage in any one, and I must candidly confess that my knees actually shook and my teeth rattled as I left the window and darted up the solitary passage to the baize door at the top of it. Would I had never unlocked that door! Would that the key had been lost, or that I had never set foot in this abominable house! Hastily I refastened the door, hung up the rusty key in its niche, and rushed into my own room, where I dropped into a chair with a deadly faintness creeping over me. I looked at my hand, where the clot of blood had fallen. It seemed to have burnt its way into my flesh, for it no longer appeared on the surface, but, where it had been was a round, purple mark, with an outer ring, like the scar of a burn. That scar is on my hand now, and I suppose will be there all my life. I looked at my watch, which I had left behind on the mantelpiece. It was five minutes past twelve. Should I go to bed? I stirred the sinking fire into a blaze, and looked anxiously at my candle. Neither fire nor candles, I perceived, would last much longer. Before long both would be expended, and I should be in darkness. In darkness, and alone in that house. The bare idea of a night passed in such solitude was terrible to me. I tried to laugh at my fears, and reproached myself with weakness and cowardice. I reverted to the stereotyped method of consolation under circumstances of this description, and strove to persuade myself that, being guiltless, I had no cause to fear the powers of evil. But in vain. Trembling from head to foot, I raked together the smouldering embers in the stove for the last time, wrapped my railway rug around me—for I dared not undress—and threw myself on the bed, where I lay sleepless until the dawn. But oh, what I endured all those weary hours no human creature can imagine. I watched the last sparks of the fire die out, one by one, and heard the ashes slide and drop slowly upon the hearth. I watched the flame of the candle flare up and sink again a dozen times, and then at last expire, leaving me in utter darkness and silence. I fancied, ever and anon, that I could distinguish the sound of phantom feet coming down the corridor towards my room, and that the mysterious Presence I had encountered in the panelled chamber stood at my bedside looking at me, or that a stealthy hand touched mine. I felt the sweat upon my forehead, but I dared not move to wipe it away. I thought of people whose hair had turned white through terror in a few brief hours, and wondered what colour mine would be in the morning. And when at last—at last—the first grey glimmer of that morning peered through the window-blind, I hailed its

appearance with much the same emotions as, no doubt, a traveller fainting with thirst in a desert would experience upon descrying a watery oasis in the midst of the burning sands. Long before the sun arose, I leapt from my couch, and having made a hasty toilette, I sallied out into the bleak, frosty air. It revived me at once, and brought new courage into my heart. Looking at the whitened expanse of lawn where last night I had seen the two women running, I could detect no sign of footmarks in the snow. The whole lawn presented an unbroken surface of sparkling crystals. I walked down the drive to the lodge. The old man, evidently an early bird, was in the act of unbarring his door as I appeared.

"Halloa, sir, you're up betimes!" he exclaimed.

"Will ye just step in now and take somethin'? My ole wonaan's agoin' to get out the breakfast. Slept well last night, sir?" he continued, as I entered the little parlour; "the bed *is* rayther hard, I know; but, ye see, it does well enow for nay son George when he's up here, which isna often. Ye look tired like, this morning; didna get much rest p'raps? Ah! now then, Bess, gi' us another plate here, ole gal."

I ate my breakfast in comparative silence, wondering to myself whether it would be well to say anything to my host of my recent experiences, since he had clearly no suspicions on the subject; and, anon, wishing I had comported myself in that terrible house with as little curiosity as the "son George," who no doubt was content to stay where he was put at night, and was not given to nocturnal excursions in empty mansions.

"Have you any idea," said I, at last, "whether there's any story connected with that place where I slept last night? I only ask," added I, with a feeble grin, like the ghost of a smile that had been able-bodied once, "because I'm fond of hearing stories, and because, as you know, there generally is a legend, or something of that sort, related about old family mansions."

"Well, sir," answered the old man slowly, "I never laeard nothin'; but then, you see, I never asked no questions. We came here eight years ago, and *then* no one round remembered a tenant at the big house. It's been empty somewhere nigh twenty years, I should say,—to my own knowledge more than ten,—and what's more, nobody knows exactly who it belongs to: and there's been lawsuits about it and all manner o' things, but nothin' ever came of them."

"Did no one ever tell you anything about its history," I asked, "or were you never asked any questions about it until now?"

"Not particularly as I remember," replied he musingly.

Then, after a moment's pause, he added more briskly, "Ay, ay, though, now I come to think of it, there was a man up here more'n five months back, a Frenchman, who came on purpose to see it and ask me one or two questions, but I on'y jest told him nothin' as I've told you. He was a popish priest, and seemed to take a sight of interest in the place somehow. I think if you want to know about it, sir, you'd better go and see him; he's staying down here in the village, about a mile and a half off, at the Crown Inn."

"And a queer old fellow he is," broke in my host's wife, who was clearing away the breakfast; "no one knows where he conies from, 'cept as he's a Frenchman. I see him about often, prowlin' along with his stick and his snuff-box, always alone, and sometimes he nods at me and says 'good-morning' as I go by."

In consequence of this information I resolved to make my way immediately to the old priest's dwelling, and having acquainted myself with the direction in which the house lay, I took leave of my host, shouldered my bag once more, and set out *en route*. The air was

clear and sharp, and the crisp snow crackled pleasantly under my Hessian boots as I strode along time country lanes. All traces of cloud had totally disappeared from the sky, the sun looked cheerfully down on nm, and nay morning's walk thoroughly refreshed and invigorated me. In due time I arrived at the inn which had been named to me as the abode of the Rev. M. Pierre,—a pretty homely little nest, with an antique gable and portico. Addressing myself to the elderly woman who answered my summons at the house-door, I inquired if I could see M. Pierre, and, in reply, received a civil invitation to “step inside and wait.’ My suspense did not last long, for M. Pierre made his appearance very promptly. He was a tall, thin individual with a fried-looking complexion, keen sunken eyes, and sparse hair streaked with grey. He entered the room with a courteous bow and inquiring look. Rising from the chair in which I had rested myself by the fire, I advanced towards him and addressed him by name in my suavest tones. He inclined his head and looked at me more inquiringly than before. “I have taken the liberty to request an interview with you this morning,” continued I, “because I have been told that you may probably be able to give me some information of which I am in search, with regard to an old mansion in this part of the county, called ‘Steepside,’ and in which I spent last night.”

Scarcely had I uttered these last words when the expression of the old priest's face changed from one of courteous indifference to earnest interest.

“Do I understand you rightly, monsieur?” he said. “You say you slept last night in Steepside mansion?”

“I did not say I *slept* there,” I rejoined, with an emphasis; “I said I passed the night there.”

“Bien,” said he dryly, “I comprehend. And you were not pleased with your night's lodging. That is so, is it not, monsieur,—is it not?” he repeated, eying my face curiously, as though he were seeking to read the expression of my thoughts there.

“You may be sure,” said I, “that if something very peculiar had not occurred to me in that house, I should not thus have troubled a gentleman to whom I am, unhappily, a stranger.”

He bowed slightly and then stood silent, contemplating me, and, as I think, considering whether or not lie should afford me the information I desired. Presently, his scrutiny having apparently proved satisfactory, he withdrew his eyes from my face, and seated himself beside inc.

“Monsieur,” said he, “before I begin to answer your inquiry, I will ask you to tell me what you saw last night at Steepside.”

He drew from his pocket a small, old-fashioned snuff-box and refreshed his little yellow nose with a pinch of rappee, after which ceremonial he leaned back at his ease, resting his chin in his hand and regarding me fixedly during the whole of nay strange recital. When I had finished speaking he sat silent a few minutes, and then resumed, in his queer broken manner:

“What I am going to tell you I would not tell to any man who had not done what you have done, and seen what you saw last night. Mon Dieu! it is strange you should have been at that house last night of all nights in the year,—the 22nd of December!”

He seemed to make this reflection rather to himself than to me, and presently continued, taking a small key from a pocket in his vest as he spoke:

“Do you understand French well, monsieur?”

“Excellently well,” returned I with alacrity; “a great part of my business correspondence is conducted in French, and I speak and hear it every day of my life.”

He smiled pleasantly in reply, rose from his seat, and, unlocking with the key he held a small drawer in a chest that stood beside the chimney-piece, took out of it a roll of manuscript and a cigar.

“Monsieur,” said he, offering me the latter, “let me recommend this, if you care to smoke so early in the day. I always prefer rappee, but you, doubtless, have younger tastes.”

Having thus provided for my comfort, the old priest reseated himself, unfolded the manuscript, and, without further apology, read the following story in the French language:—

Towards the latter part of the last century Steepside became the property of a certain Sir Julian Lorrington. His family consisted only of his wife, Lady Sarah, and their daughter Julia, a girl remarkable alike for her beauty and her expectations.

For a long time Sir Julian had retained in his establishment an old French maitre d’hôtel and his wife, who both died in the baronet’s service, leaving one child, Virginie, whom Lady Sarah, out of regard for the fidelity of her parents, engaged to educate and protect.

In due time this orphan, brought up in the household of Sir Julian, became the chosen companion of his heiress; and when the family took up their residence at Steep-side, Virginie Giraud, who had been associated in Julia’s studies and recreations from early childhood, was installed there as maid and confidant to the hope of the house.

Not long after the settlement at Steepside, Sir Julian, in the summary fashion of those days with regard to matrimonial affairs, announced his intention of bestowing his daughter upon a certain Welsh squire of old ancestry and broad acres. Sir Julian was a practical man, thoroughly incapable of regarding wedlock in any other light than as a mere union of wealth and property, the owners of which joined hands and lived together. This was the way in which he had married, and it was the way in which he intended his daughter to marry; love and passion were meaningless, if not vulgar words in his ears, and he conceived it impossible they should be otherwise to his only child. As for Lady Sarah, she was an unsympathetic creature, whose thoughts ran only on the ambition of seeing Julia married to some gentleman of high position, and heading a fine establishment with social success and distinction.

So it was not until all things relative to the contract had been duly arranged between these amiable parents and their intended son-in-law, that the bride elect was informed of the fortune in store for her.

But all the time that the lawyers had been preparing the marriage settlements, a young penniless gentleman named Philip Brian had been finding out for himself the way to Julia’s heart, and these two had pledged their faith to each other only a few days before Sir Julian and Lady Lorrington formally announced their plans to their daughter. In consequence of her engagement with Philip, Julia received their intelligence with indignation, and protested that no power on earth should force her to act falsely to the young man whose promised wife she had become. The expression of this determination was received by both parents with high displeasure. Sir Julian indulged in a few angry oaths, and Lady Sarah in a little select satire; Philip Brian was, of course, forbidden the

house, all letters and messages between the lovers were interdicted, and Julia was commanded to comport herself like a dutiful and obedient heiress.

Now Virginie Giraud was the friend as well as the attendant of Sir Julian's daughter, and it was Virginie therefore who, after the occurrence of this outbreak, was despatched to Philip with a note of warning from his mistress. Naturally the lover returned an answer by the same means, and from that hour Virginie continued to act as agent between the two, carrying letters to and fro, giving counsel and arranging meetings. Meanwhile the bridal day was fixed by the parent Lorringtons, and elaborate preparations were made for a wedding festival which should be the wonderment and admiration of the county. The breakfast room was decorated with lavish splendour, the richest apparel bespoke for the bride, and all the wealthy and titled relatives of both contracting families were invited to the pageant. Nor were Philip and Julia idle. It was arranged between them that, at eleven o'clock on the night of the day preceding the intended wedding, the young man should present himself beneath Julia's window, Virginie being on the watch and in readiness to accompany the flight of the lovers. All three, under cover of the darkness, should then steal down the avenue of the coach-drive and make their exit by the shrubbery gate, the key of which Virginie already had in keeping. The appointed evening came,—the 22nd of December. Snow lay deep upon the ground, and more threatened to fall before dawn, but Philip had engaged to provide horses equal to any emergency of weather, and the darkness of the night lent favour to the enterprise. Virginie's behaviour all that day had somehow seemed unaccountable to her mistress. The maid's face was pallid and wore a strange expression of anxiety and apprehension. She winced and trembled when Julia's glance rested upon her, and her hands quivered violently while she helped the latter to adjust her hood and mantle as the hour of assignation approached. Endeavouring, however, to persuade herself that this strange conduct arose from a feeling of excitement or nervousness natural under the circumstances, Julia used a hundred kind words and tender gestures to reassure and support her companion. But the more she consoled or admonished, the more agitated Virginie became, and matters stood in this condition when eleven o'clock arrived.

Julia waited at her chamber window, which was not above three feet from the ground without, her hood and mantle donned, listening eagerly for the sound of her lover's voice and the French girl leant behind her against the closed door, nervously tearing to fragments a piece of paper she had taken from her pocket a minute ago. These torn atoms she flung upon the hearth, where a bright fire was blazing, not observing that, meanwhile, Julia had opened the window-casement. A gust of wind darting into the room from outside caught up a fragment of the yet unconsumed paper and whirled it back from the flames to Julia's feet. She glanced at it indifferently, but the sight of some characters on it suddenly attracting her, she stooped and picked it up.

It bore her name written over and over several times, first in rather laboured imitation of her own handwriting, then more successfully, and, lastly, in so perfect a manner that even Julia herself was almost deceived into believing it her genuine signature. Then followed several L's and J's, as though the copyist had not considered those initials satisfactory counterparts of the original.

Julia wondered, but did not doubt; and as she tossed the fragment from her hand, Virginie turned and perceived the action. Instantly a deep flush of crimson overspread the maid's face; she darted suddenly forward, and uttered an exclamation of alarm. Her cry

was immediately succeeded by the sharp noise of a pistol report beneath the window, and a heavy, muffled sound, as of the fall of a body upon the snow-covered earth. Julia looked out in fear and surprise. The leaping firelight from within the room streamed through the window, and, in the heart of its vivid brightness, revealed the figure of a man lying motionless upon the whitened ground, his face buried in the scattered snow, and his outstretched hand grasping a pistol.

Julia leaped through the open casement with a wild shriek, and flung herself on her knees beside him.

"Phil! Phil!" she said, "what have you done? what has happened? Speak to me!"

But the only response was a faint, low moan.

Philip Brian had shot himself!

In an agony of grief and horror Julia lifted his head upon her arm, and pressed her hand to his heart. The movement recalled him to life for a few moments; he opened his eyes, looked at her, and uttered a few broken words. She stooped and listened eagerly.

"The letter!" he gasped; "the letter you sent me! O Julia, you have broken my heart! How could you be false to me, and I loving you—trusting you—so wholly! But at least I shall not live to see you wed the man you have chosen; I came here to-night to die, since without you life would be intolerable. See what you have done!"

Desperate and silent, she wound her arms around him, and pressed her lips to his. A convulsive shudder seized him; his eyes rolled back, and with a sigh he resigned himself to the death he had courted so madly. Death in the passion of a last kiss!

Julia sat still, the corpse of her lover supported on her arm, and her hand clasped in his, tearless and frigid as though she had been turned into stone by some fearful spell. Half hidden in the bosom of his vest was a letter; the broken seal of which bore her own monogram. She plucked it out of its resting-place, and read it hastily by the flicker of the firelight. It was in Lady Sarah's handwriting, and ran thus

"MY DEAR MR BRIAN,—Although, when last we parted, it was with the usual understanding that to-night we should meet again; yet subsequent reflection, and the positive injunctions of my parents, have obliged me to decide otherwise. You are to know, therefore, that, in obedience to the wishes of my father and mother, I have promised to become the wife of the gentleman they have chosen for me. All correspondence between us must therefore wholly cease, nor n-inst you longer suffer yourself to entertain a thought of me. It is hardly necessary to add that I shall not expect to see you this evening; your own sense of honour will, I am persuaded, be sufficient to restrain you from keeping an appointment against my wishes. In concluding, I beg you will not attempt to obtain any further explanation of my conduct; but rest assured that it is the unalterable resolve of cool and earnest deliberation.

"For the last time I subscribe myself

"JULIA LORRINGTON.

"*Postscript.*—In order to save you any doubt of my entire concurrence in my mother's wishes, I sign and address this with my own hand, and Virginie, who undertakes to deliver it, will add her personal testimony to the truth of these statements, since she has witnessed the writing of the letter, and knows how fully my consent has been given to all its expressions.

“With my own hand!” Yes, surely; both signature and address were perfect facsimiles of Julia’s writing! What wonder that Philip had been deceived into believing her false? Twice she read the letter from beginning to end; then she laid her lover’s corpse gently down on the snow, and stood up erect and silent, her face more ghastly and death-like than the face of the dead beside her.

In a moment the whole shameful scheme had flashed upon her mind;—Virginie’s treachery and clever fraud; its connection with the torn fragment of paper which Julia had seen only a few minutes before; the deliberate falsehood of which Lady Sarah had been guilty; the bribery, by means of which she had probably corrupted Virginie’s fidelity; the cruel disappointment and suffering of her lover; all these things pressed themselves upon her reeling brain, and gave birth to the suggestions of madness.

Stooping down, she put her lithe hand upon the belt of the dead man. There was, as she expected, a second pistol in it, the fellow of that with which he had shot himself. It was loaded. Julia drew it out, wrapped her mantle round it, and climbed noiselessly into her chamber through the still open window. Crossing the room, she passed out into the corridor beyond, and went like a shadow, swift and silent of foot, to the door of her father’s study,—an apartment communicating, by means of an oaken door, with the panelled chamber.

Virginie, from a dark recess in the wall of the house, had heard and noted all that passed in the garden. She saw Julia open and read the letter; she caught the expression of her face as she stooped for the pistol, and apprehending something of what might follow, she crept through the window after her mistress and pursued her up the dark passages. Here, crouching again into a recess in the gallery outside the panelled moon, she waited in terror for the next scene of the tragedy.

Julia flung open the door of the study where her father sat writing at his table, and, standing on the threshold in the full glare of the lamplight which illumined the apartment, raised the pistol, cocked and aimed it. Sir Julian had barely time to leap from his chair with a cry when she fired, and the next instant he fell, struck by the bullet on the left temple, and expired at his daughter’s feet. At the report of the pistol and the sound of his fall, Lady Sarah quitted her dressing-room and ran in disordered attire into the study, where she beheld her husband lying dead and bloody upon the floor, and Julia standing at the entrance of the panelled chamber, with the light of madness and murder in her eyes. Not long she stood there, however, for, seeing Lady Sarah enter, the distracted girl threw down the empty weapon, and flinging herself upon her mother, grasped her throat with all the might of her frenzied being. Up and down the room they wrestled together, two desperate women, one bent upon murder, the other battling for her life, and neither uttered cry or groan, so terribly earnest was the struggle. At length Lady Sarah’s strength gave way; she fell under her assailant’s weight, her face black with suffocation, and her eyes protruding from their swelling sockets. Julia redoubled her grip. She knelt upon Lady Sarah’s breast, and held her down with the force and resolution of a fiend, though the blood burst from the ears of her victim and filmed her staring eyes; nor did the pitiless fingers relax until the murderess knew her vengeance was complete. Then she leapt to her feet, seized Philip’s pistol from the floor, and, with a wild, pealing shriek, fled forth along the gallery, down the staircase, and out into the park,—out into the wind, and the driving snow, and the cold, her uncoiled hair streaming in dishevelled masses

down her shoulders, and her dress of trailing satin daubed with stains of blood. Behind her ran Virginie, well-nigh maddened herself with horror, vainly endeavouring to catch or to stop the unhappy fugitive. But just as the latter reached the brink of a high precipice at the boundary of the terraced lawn, from which the mansion took its name of “Steepside,” she turned to look at her pursuer, missed her footing, and fell headlong over the low stone coping that bordered the slope into the snow-drift at the bottom of the chasm.

Virginie ran to the spot and looked over. The “steep” was exceedingly high and sudden; not a trace of Julia could be seen in the darkness below. Doubtless the miserable heiress of the Lorringtons had found a grave in the bed of soft, deep snow which surrounded its base.

Then, stricken through heart and brain with the curse of madness which had already sent her mistress red-handed to death, Virginie Giraud fled across the lawn—through the park-gates—out upon the bleak common beyond, and was gone.

The old priest laid aside the manuscript and took a fresh pinch of rappee from the silver snuff-box.

“Monsieur,” said he, with a polite inclination of his grey head, “I have had time honour to read you the history you wished to hear.”

“And I thank you most heartily for your kindness,” returned I. “But may I, without danger of seeming too inquisitive, ask you one question more?”

Seeing assent in his face, and a smile that anticipated my inquiry wrinkling the corners of his mouth, I continued boldly, “Will you tell me, then, M. Pierre, by what means you became possessed of this manuscript, and who wrote it?”

“It is a natural question, monsieur,” he answered after a short pause, “and I have no good reason for withholding the reply, since every one who was personally concerned in this tragedy has long been dead. You must know, then, that in my younger day’s I was *curé* to a little parish of about two hundred souls in the province of Berry. Many years ago there came to this village a strange old woman of whom nobody in the place had the least knowledge. She took and rented a small hovel on the borders of a wood about two miles from our church, and, except on market days, when she came to the village for her weekly provisions, none of my parishioners ever held any intercourse with her. She was evidently insane, and although she did harm to nobody, yet she often caused considerable alarm and wonderment by her eccentric behaviour. It is, as you must know, often the case in intermittent mania that its victims are insane upon some particular subject, some point upon which their frenzy always betrays itself—even when, with regard to other matters, they conduct themselves like ordinary people. Now this old woman’s weakness manifested itself in a wild and continual desire to copy every written document she saw. If, on her market-day visits to the village, any written notice upon the church-doors chanced to catch her eye as she passed, she would immediately pause, draw out pencil and paper from her pocket, and stand muttering to herself until she had closely transcribed the whole of the placard, when she would quietly return the copy to her pocket and go on her way.

“Thinking it my duty, as pastor of the village, to make myself acquainted with this poor creature, who had thus become one of my flock, I went occasionally to visit her, in the hope that I might possibly discover the cause of her strange disorder (which I suspected had its origin in some calamity of her earlier days), and so qualify myself to afford her

the advice and comfort she might need. During the first two or three visits I paid her I could elicit nothing. She sat still as a statue, and watched me sullenly while I spoke to her of the mysteries and consolations of our faith, exhorting her vainly to make confession and obtain that peace of heart and mind which the sacrament of penance could alone bestow. Well, it chanced that on the occasion of one of these visits I took with me, besides my prayer-book, a small sheet of paper, on which I had written a few passages of Scripture, such as I conjectured to be most suited to her soul's necessity. I found her, as usual, moody and reserved, until I drew from my missal the sheet of transcribed texts and put it into her hand. In an instant her manner changed. The madness gleamed in her eyes, and she began searching nervously for a pencil. 'I can do it!' she cried. 'My writing was always like hers, for we learnt together when we were children. He will never know I wrote it; we shall dupe him easily. Already I have practised her signature many times—soon I shall be able to make it exactly like her own hand. And I shall tell her, my lady, that he would have deceived her, that I overheard him love-making to another girl—that I discovered his falsehood—his baseness—and that he fled in his shame from the county. Yes, yes, we will dupe them both.'

"In this fashion she chattered and muttered feverishly for some minutes, till I grew alarmed, and taking her by the shoulders, tried to shake back the senses into her distracted brain. 'What ails you, foolish old woman?' cried I. 'I am not mad' I am your parish pastor. Say your Pater Noster, or your Ave, and drive Satan away.'

"I am not sure whether my words or the removal of the unlucky manuscript recalled her wandering wits. At any rate, she speedily recovered, and, after doing my best to soothe and calm her by leading her to speak on other topics, I quitted the cottage reassured.

"Not long after this episode a neighbour called at my house one morning, and told me that, having missed the old woman from the weekly market, and knowing how regular she had always been in her attendance, he had gone to her dwelling and found her lying sick and desiring to see me. Of course I immediately prepared to comply with her request, providing myself in case I should find her anxious for absolution and the viaticum. Directly I entered her hut, she beckoned me to the bedside, and said in a low, hurried voice

" 'Father, I wish to confess to you at once, for I know I am going to die.'

"Perceiving that, for the present at least, she was perfectly sane, I willingly complied with her request, and heard her slowly and painfully unburden her miserable soul.

"Monsieur, if the story with which Virginie Giraud intrusted me had been told only in her sacramental confession, I should not have been able to repeat it to you. But, when the final words of peace had been spoken, she took a packet of papers from beneath her pillow and placed it in my hands. 'Here, father,' she said, 'is the substance of my history. When I am dead, you are free to make what use of it you please. It may warn some, perhaps, from yielding to the great temptation which overcame me.

" 'The temptation of a bribe?' said I, inquiringly. She turned her failing sight towards my face and shook her head feebly.

" 'No bribe, father,' she answered. 'Do you believe I would have done what I did for mere coin?'

"I gave no reply, for her words were enigmatical to me, and I was loath to harass with my curiosity a soul so near its departure as hers. So I leaned back in my chair and sat silent, in the hope that, being wearied with her religious exercises, she might be able to

sleep a little. But, no doubt, my last question, working in her disordered mind, awoke again the madness that had only slumbered for a time. Suddenly she raised herself on her pillow, pressed her withered hands to her head, and cried out wildly

“ ‘Money!—money to *me*, who would have sold my own soul for one day of his love! Ah! I could have flung it back in their faces—fools that they were to believe I cared for gold! Philip! Philip you were mad to think of the heiress as a wife; it had been better for you had you cared to look on ne—on me who loved you so! Then I should never have ruined you—never betrayed you to Lady Sarah! But I could not forgive the hard words you gave me; I could not forgive your love for Julia! Shall I ever go to paradise—to paradise where the saints are? Will they let me in there?—will they suffer my soul among them? Or shall I never leave purgatory, but burn, and burn, and burn there always uncleansed? For, oh! if all the past should come back to me a thousand years hence, I should do the same thing again, Phil Brian, for love of you!’

“She started from the bed in her delirium; there came a rattling sound in her throat—a sudden choking cry—and in a moment her breast and pillow and quilt were deluged with a crimson stream! In her paroxysm she had burst a blood-vessel. I sprang forward to catch her as she fell prone upon the brick floor; raised her in my arms, and gazed at her distorted features. There was no breath from the reddened lips. Virginie Giraud was a corpse.

“Thus in her madness was told the secret of her life and her crime; a secret she would not confess even to me in her sane moments. It was no greed of gold, but despised and vindictive love that lay behind all the horrors she had related. From my soul I pitied the poor dead wretch, for I dimly comprehended what a hell her existence on earth had been.

“The written account of the Steepside tragedy with which she had intrusted me furnished, in somewhat briefer language, the story I have just read to you, and many of its more important details have subsequently been verified by me on application to other sources, so that in that paper you have the testimony of an eyewitness to the facts, as well as the support of legal evidence.

“Some forty years after Virginie’s death, monsieur, family reasons obliged me to seek temporary release from duty and come to England; and, finding that circumstances would keep me in the country for some time, I came here and went to see that house. But the tenant at the lodge could only tell me that Steepside was empty then, and had been empty for years past; and I have discovered that, since that horrible 22nd of December, it never had an occupant. Sir Julian, to whom it belonged by purchase, left no immediate heirs, and his relatives squabbled between themselves over the property, till one by one the disputing parties died off, and now there is no one enterprising enough to resuscitate the lawsuit.”

Rising to take my leave of the genial old man, it occurred to me as extremely probable that he might have been led to form some opinion worth hearing with regard to the nature of the strange appearances at Steepside, and I ventured accordingly to make the inquiry.

“If my views on the subject have any value or interest for you,” said he, “you are very welcome to know them. As a priest of the Catholic Church, I cannot accept the popular notions about ghostly visitations. Such experiences as yours in that ill-fated mansion are explicable to me only on the following hypothesis. There is a Power greater than the powers of evil; a Will to which even demons must submit. It is not inconsistent with Christian doctrine to suppose that, in cases of such terrible crimes as that we have been

discussing, the evil spirits who prompted these crimes may, for a period more or less lengthy, be forced to haunt the scene of their machinations, and re-enact there, in phantom show, the horrors they once caused in reality. Naturally—or perhaps,” said he, breaking off with a little smile, “I ought rather to say super-naturally—these demons, in order to manifest themselves, would be forced to resume some shape that would identify them with the crime they had suggested; and, in such a case, what more likely than that they should adopt the spectral forms of their human victims—murdered and murderer, or otherwise—according to the nature of the wickedness perpetrated? This is but an amateur opinion, monsieur; I offer it as an individual, not as a priest speaking on the part of the Church. But it may serve to account for a real difficulty, and may be held without impiety. Of one thing at least we may rest assured as Christian men; that the souls of the dead, whether of saints or sinners, are in God’s safe keeping, and walk the earth no more.”

Then I shook hands with M. Pierre, and we parted. And after that, reader, I went to my friend’s house, and spent my Christmas week right merrily.