

THE SEXTON
BY
WILLIAM
HARRISON
AINSWORTH

The Sexton by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER I THE STORM

Come, list, and hark! the bell doth towle,
For some but now departing sowle;
And was not that some ominous fowle?
The bat, the night-crow, or screech-owle?
To these I hear the wild wolf howle,
In this dark night that seems to scowle;—
All these my blacke-booke shall enrowle,
For hark! still hark! the bell doth towle
For some but new-departed sowle!
Haywood: Rape of Lucrece.

The night was wild and stormy. The day had been sultry, with a lurid, metallic-looking sky, hanging like a vast galvanic plate over the face of nature. As evening drew on, everything betokened the coming tempest. Unerring indications of its approach were noted by the weatherwise at the hall. The swallow was seen to skim the surface of the pool so closely that he ruffled its placid mirror as he passed; and then, sharply darting round and round, with twittering scream, he winged his rapid flight to his clay-built home, beneath the barn eaves. The kine that had herded to the margin of the water, and sought, by splashing, to relieve themselves from the keen persecution of their myriad insect tormentors, wended stallwards, undriven, and deeply lowing. The deer, that at twilight had trooped thither also for refreshment, suddenly, "with expanded nostrils, snuffed the air," and bounded off to their coverts, amidst the sheltering fernbrake. The rooks "obstreperous of wing, in crowds combined," cawed in a way that, as plainly as words could have done, bespoke their apprehension; and were seen, some hovering and beating the air with flapping pinion, others shooting upwards in mid space, as if to reconnoitre the weather; while others, again, were croaking to their mates, in loud discordant tone, from the highest branches of the lime-trees; all, seemingly, as anxious and as busy as mariners before a gale of wind. At sunset, the hazy vapors, which had obscured the horizon throughout the day, rose up in spiral volumes, like smoke from a burning forest, and, becoming gradually condensed, assumed the form of huge, billowy masses, which, reflecting the sun's light, changed, as the sinking orb declined, from purple to flame-color, and thence to ashy, angry gray. Night rushed onwards, like a sable steed. There was a dead calm. The stillness was undisturbed, save by an intermittent, sighing wind, which, hollow as a murmur from the grave, died as it rose. At once the gray clouds turned to an inky blackness. A single, sharp, intensely vivid flash, shot from

the bosom of the rack, sheer downwards, and struck the earth with a report like that of a piece of ordnance. In ten minutes it was dunnest night, and a rattling thunder-storm.

The progress of the storm was watched with infinite apprehension by the crowd of tenantry assembled in the great hall; and loud and frequent were the ejaculations uttered, as each succeeding peal burst over their heads. There was, however, one amongst the assemblage who seemed to enjoy the uproar. A kindred excitement appeared to blaze in his glances, as he looked upon the storm without. This was Peter Bradley. He stood close by the window, and shaded not his eyes, even before the fiercest flashes. A grin of unnatural exhilaration played upon his features, and he seemed to exult in, and to court, the tempestuous horrors, which affected the most hardy amongst his companions with consternation, and made all shrink, trembling, into the recesses of the room. Peter's conduct was not unobserved, nor his reputation for unholy dealing forgotten. To some he was almost as much an object of dread as the storm itself.

"Didst ever see the like o' that?" said Farmer Burtenshaw—one of the guests, whose round, honest face good wine had recently empurpled, but fear had now mottled white,—addressing a neighbor. "Didst ever hear of any man that were a Christian laughing in the very face o' a thunder-storm, with the lightnin' fit to put out his eyes, and the rattle above ready to break the drums o' his ears? I always thought Peter Bradley was not exactly what he ought to be, and now I am sure on it."

"For my part, I think, Neighbor Burtenshaw," returned the other, "that this great burst of weather's all of his raising, for in all my born days I never see'd such a hurly-burly, and hope never to see the like of it again. I've heard my grandfather tell of folk as could command wind and rain; and, mayhap, Peter may have the power—we all know he can do more nor any other man."

"We know, at all events," replied Burtenshaw, "that he lives like no other man; that he spends night after night by himself in that dreary churchyard; that he keeps no living thing, except an old terrier dog, in his crazy cottage; and that he never asks a body into his house from one year's end to another. I've never crossed his threshold these twenty years. But," continued he mysteriously, "I happened to pass the house one dark, dismal night, and there what dost think I see'd through the window?"

"What—what didst see?"

"Peter Bradley sitting with a great book open on his knees; it were a Bible, I think, and he crying like a child."

"Art sure o' that?"

"The tears were falling fast upon the leaves," returned Burtenshaw; "but when I knocked at the door, he hastily shut up the book, and ordered me to be gone, in a surly tone, as if he were ashamed of being caught in the fact."

"I thought no tear had ever dropped from his eye," said the other. "Why, he laughed when his daughter Susan went off at the hall; and, when she died, folks said he received hush-money to say nought about it. That were a bad business, anyhow; and now that his grandson Luke be taken in the fact of housebreaking, he minds it no more, not he, than if nothing had happened."

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Burtenshaw; "he may be scheming summat all this time. Well, I've known Peter Bradley now these two-and-fifty years, and, excepting that one night, I never saw any good about him, and never heard of nobody who could tell who he be, or where he do come from."

"One thing's certain, at least," replied the other farmer—"he were never born at Rookwood. How he came here the devil only knows. Save us! what a crash!—this storm be all of his raising, I tell 'ee."

"He be—what he certainly will be," interposed another speaker, in a louder tone, and with less of apprehension in his manner than his comrade, probably from his nerves being better fortified with strong liquor. "Dost thou think, Samuel Plant, as how Providence would entrust the like o' him with the command of the elements? No—no, it's rank blasphemy to suppose such a thing, and I've too much of the true Catholic and apostate church about me, to stand by and hear that said."

"Maybe, then, he gets his power from the Prince of Darkness," replied Plant; "no man else could go on as he does—only look at him. He seems to be watching for the thunderbowt."

"I wish he may catch it, then," returned the other.

"That's an evil wish, Simon Toft, and thou mayst repent it."

"Not I," replied Toft; "it would be a good clearance to the neighborhood to get rid o' th' old croaking curmudgeon."

Whether or not Peter overheard the conversation, we pretend not to say, but at that moment a blaze of lightning showed him staring fiercely at the group.

"As I live, he's overheard you, Simon," exclaimed Plant. "I wouldn't be in your skin for a trifle."

"Nor I," added Burtenshaw.

"Let him overhear me," answered Toft; "who cares? he shall hear summat worth listening to. I'm not afraid o' him or his arts, were they as black as Beelzebuth's own; and to show you I'm not, I'll go and have a crack with him on the spot."

"Thou'rt a fool for thy pains, if thou dost, Friend Toft," returned Plant, "that's all I can say."

"Be advised by me, and stay here," seconded Burtenshaw, endeavoring to hold him back.

But Toft would not be advised—

Kings may be blest, but he was glorious,
O'er all the ills of life victorious.

Staggering up to Peter, he laid a hard grasp upon his shoulder, and, thus forcibly soliciting his attention, burst into a loud horse-laugh.

But Peter was, or affected to be, too much occupied to look at him.

"What dost see, man, that thou starest so?"

"It comes, it comes—the rain—the rain—a torrent—a deluge—ha, ha! Blessed is the corpse the rain rains on. Sir Piers may be drenched through his leaden covering by such a downfall as that—splash, splash—fire and water and thunder, all together—is not that fine?—ha, ha! The heavens will weep for him, though friends shed not a tear. When did a great man's heir feel sympathy for his sire's decease? When did his widow mourn? When doth any man regret his fellow? Never! He rejoiceth—he maketh glad in his inmost heart—he cannot help it—it is nature. We all pray for—we all delight in each other's destruction. We were created to do so; or why else should we act thus? I never wept for any man's death, but I have often laughed. Natural sympathy!—out on the phrase! The distant heavens—the senseless trees—the impenetrable stones—shall regret you more than man shall bewail your death with more sincerity. Ay, 'tis well—rain on—splash, splash: it will cool the hell-fever. Down, down—buckets and pails, ha, ha!"

There was a pause, during which the sexton, almost exhausted by the frenzy in which he had suffered himself to be involved, seemed insensible to all around him.

"I tell you what," said Burtenshaw to Plant, "I have always thought there was more in Peter Bradley nor appears on the outside. He is not what he seems to be, take my word on it. Lord love you! do you think a man such as he pretends to be could talk in that sort of way—about nat'ral simpering?—no such thing."

When Peter recovered, his insane merriment broke out afresh, having only acquired fury by the pause.

"Look out, look out!" cried he; "hark to the thunder—list to the rain! Marked ye that flash—marked ye the clock-house—and the bird upon the roof? 'tis the rook—the great bird of the house, that hath borne away the soul of the departed. There, there—can you not see it? it sits and croaks through storm and rain, and never heeds at all—and wherefore should it heed? See, it flaps its broad black wings—it croaks—ha, ha! It comes—it comes."

And driven, it might be by the terror of the storm, from more secure quarters, a bird, at this instant, was dashed against the window, and fell to the ground.

"That's a call," continued Peter; "it will be over soon, and we must set out. The dead will not need to tarry. Look at that trail of fire along the avenue; dost see yon line of sparkles, like a rocket's tail? That's the path the corpse will take. St. Hermes's flickering fire, Robin Goodfellow's dancing light, or the blue flame of the corpse-candle, which I saw flitting to the churchyard last week, was not so pretty a sight—ha, ha! You asked me for a song a moment ago—you shall have one now without asking."

And without waiting to consult the inclinations of his comrades, Peter broke into the following wild strain with all the fervor of a half-crazed improvisatore:

THE CORPSE-CANDLE

Lambere flamma τάρως et circum funera pasci.

Through the midnight gloom did a pale blue light
To the churchyard mirk wing its lonesome flight:—
Thrice it floated those old walls round—
Thrice it paused—till the grave it found.
Over the grass-green sod it glanced,
Over the fresh-turned earth it danced,
Like a torch in the night-breeze quivering—
Never was seen so gay a thing!
Never was seen so blithe a sight

As the midnight dance of that blue light!
Now what of that pale blue flame dost know?
Canst tell where it comes from, or where it will go?
Is it the soul, released from clay,
Over the earth that takes its way,
And tarries a moment in mirth and glee
Where the corse it hath quitted interred shall be?
Or is it the trick of some fanciful sprite,
That taketh in mortal mischance delight,
And marketh the road the coffin shall go,
And the spot where the dead shall be soon laid low?
Ask him who can answer these questions aright;
I know not the cause of that pale blue light!

"I can't say I like thy song, Master Peter," said Toft, as the sexton finished his stave, "but if thou didst see a corpse-candle, as thou call'st thy pale blue flame, whose death doth it betoken?—eh!"

"Thine own," returned Peter, sharply.

"Mine! thou lying old cheat—dost dare to say that to my face? Why, I'm as hale and hearty as ever a man in the house. Dost think there's no life and vigor in this arm, thou drivelling old dotard?"

Upon which, Toft seized Peter by the throat with an energy that, but for the timely intervention of the company, who rushed to his assistance, the prophet might himself have anticipated the doom he prognosticated.

Released from the grasp of Toft, who was held back by the bystanders, Peter again broke forth into his eldritch laugh; and staring right into the face of his adversary, with eyes glistening, and hands uplifted, as if in the act of calling down an imprecation on his head, he screamed, in a shrill and discordant voice, "Soh! you will not take my warning? you revile me—you flout me! 'Tis well! your fate shall prove a warning to all unbelievers—they shall remember this night, though you will not. Fool! fool!—your doom has long been sealed! I saw your wraith choose out its last lodgment on Halloween; I know the spot. Your grave is dug already—ha, ha!" And, with renewed laughter, Peter rushed out of the room.

"Did I not caution thee not to provoke him, friend Toft?" said Plant; "it's ill playing with edge-tools; but don't let him fly off in that tantrum—one of ye go after him."

"That will I," replied Burtenshaw; and he departed in search of the sexton.

"I'd advise thee to make it up with Peter so soon as thou canst, neighbor," continued Plant; "he's a bad friend, but a worse enemy."

"Why, what harm can he do me?" returned Toft, who, however, was not without some misgivings. "If I must die, I can't help it—I shall go none the sooner for him, even if he speak the truth, which I don't think he do; and if I must, I sha'n't go unprepared—only I think as how, if it pleased Providence, I could have wished to keep my old missus company some few years longer, and see those bits of lasses of mine grow up into women, and respectably provided for. But His will be done. I sha'n't leave 'em quite penniless, and there's one eye at least, I'm sure, won't be dry at my departure." Here the stout heart of Toft gave way, and he shed some few "natural tears," which, however, he speedily brushed away. "I'll tell you what, neighbors," continued he, "I think we may all as well be thinking of going to our own homes, for, to my mind, we shall never reach the churchyard to-night."

"That you never will," exclaimed a voice behind him; and Toft, turning round, again met the glance of Peter.

"Come, come, Master Peter," cried the good-natured farmer, "this be ugly jesting—ax pardon for my share of it—sorry for what I did—so give us thy hand, man, and think no more about it."

Peter extended his claw, and the parties were, apparently, once more upon terms of friendship.

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CHAPTER II

THE FUNERAL ORATION

In northern customs duty was exprest
To friends departed by their funeral feast;
Though I've consulted Hollingshed and Stow,
I find it very difficult to know,
Who, to refresh the attendants to the grave,
Burnt claret first, or Naples' biscuit gave.
King: Art of Cookery.

Ceterum priusquam corpus humo injectâ contegatur, defunctus oratione funebri laudabatur.—Durand.

A supply of spirits was here introduced; lights were brought at the same time, and placed upon a long oak table. The party gathering round it, ill-humor was speedily dissipated, and even the storm disregarded, in the copious libations that ensued. At this juncture, a loiterer appeared in the hall. His movements were unnoticed by all excepting the sexton, who watched his proceedings with some curiosity. The person walked to the window, appearing, so far as could be discovered, to eye the storm with great impatience. He then paced the hall rapidly backwards and forwards, and Peter fancied he could detect sounds of disappointment in his muttered exclamations. Again he returned to the window, as if to ascertain the probable duration of the shower. It was a hopeless endeavor; all was pitch-dark without; the lightning was now only seen at long intervals, but the rain still audibly descended in torrents. Apparently seeing the impossibility of controlling the elements, the person approached the table.

"What think you of the night, Mr. Palmer?" asked the sexton of Jack, for he was the anxious investigator of the weather.

"Don't know—can't say—set in, I think—cursed unlucky—for the funeral, I mean—we shall be drowned if we go."

"And drunk if we stay," rejoined Peter. "But never fear, it will hold up, depend upon it, long before we can start. Where have they put the prisoner?" asked he, with a sudden change of manner.

"I know the room, but can't describe it; it's two or three doors down the lower corridor of the eastern gallery."

"Good. Who are on guard?"

"Titus Tyrconnel and that swivel-eyed quill-driver, Coates."

"Enough."

"Come, come, Master Peter," roared Toft, "let's have another stave. Give us one of your odd snatches. No more corpse-candles, or that sort of thing. Something lively—something jolly—ha, ha!"

"A good move," shouted Jack. "A lively song from you—lillibullero from a death's-head—ha, ha!"

"My songs are all of a sort," returned Peter; "I am seldom asked to sing a second time. However, you are welcome to the merriest I have." And preparing himself, like certain other accomplished vocalists, with a few preliminary hems and haws, he struck forth the following doleful ditty:

THE OLD OAK COFFIN

Sic ego componi versus in ossa velim.—Tibullus.

In a churchyard, upon the sward, a coffin there was laid,
And leaning stood, beside the wood, a sexton on his spade.
A coffin old and black it was, and fashioned curiously,
With quaint device of carved oak, in hideous fantasie.
For here was wrought the sculptured thought of a tormented face,
With serpents lithe that round it writhe, in folded strict embrace.
Grim visages of grinning fiends were at each corner set,
And emblematic scrolls, mort-heads, and bones together met.
"Ah, welladay!" that sexton gray unto himself did cry,
"Beneath that lid much lieth hid—much awful mysterie.
It is an ancient coffin from the abbey that stood here;
Perchance it holds an abbot's bones, perchance those of a frere.
"In digging deep, where monks do sleep, beneath yon cloister shrined,
That coffin old, within the mould, it was my chance to find;
The costly carvings of the lid I scraped full carefully,

In hope to get at name or date, yet nothing could I see.
"With pick and spade I've plied my trade for sixty years and more,
Yet never found, beneath the ground, shell strange as that before;
Full many coffins have I seen—have seen them deep or flat,
Fantastical in fashion—none fantastical as that."
And saying so, with heavy blow, the lid he shattered wide,
And, pale with fright, a ghastly sight that sexton gray espied;
A miserable sight it was, that loathsome corpse to see,
The last, last, dreary, darksome stage of fall'n humanity.
Though all was gone, save reeky bone, a green and grisly heap,
With scarce a trace of fleshly face, strange posture did it keep.
The hands were clenched, the teeth were wrenched, as if the wretch had risen,
E'en after death had ta'en his breath, to strive and burst his prison.
The neck was bent, the nails were rent, no limb or joint was straight;
Together glued, with blood imbued, black and coagulate.
And, as the sexton stooped him down to lift the coffin plank,
His fingers were defiled all o'er with slimy substance dank.
"Ah, welladay!" that sexton gray unto himself did cry,
"Full well I see how Fate's decree foredoomed this wretch to die;
A living man, a breathing man, within the coffin thrust,
Alack! alack! the agony ere he returned to dust!"
A vision drear did then appear unto that sexton's eyes;
Like that poor wight before him straight he in a coffin lies.
He lieth in a trance within that coffin close and fast;
Yet though he sleepeth now, he feels he shall awake at last.
The coffin, then, by reverend men, is borne with footsteps slow,
Where tapers shine before the shrine, where breathes the requiem low;
And for the dead the prayer is said, for the soul that is not flown—
Then all is drowned in hollow sound, the earth is o'er him thrown!
He draweth breath—he wakes from death to life more horrible;
To agony! such agony! no living tongue may tell.
Die! die he must, that wretched one! he struggles—strives in vain;
No more Heaven's light, nor sunshine bright, shall he behold again.
"Gramercy, Lord!" the sexton roared, awakening suddenly,
"If this be dream, yet doth it seem most dreadful so to die.
Oh, cast my body in the sea! or hurl it on the shore!
But nail me not in coffin fast—no grave will I dig more."
It was not difficult to discover the effect produced by this song, in the lengthened faces
of the greater part of the audience. Jack Palmer, however, laughed loud and long.

"Bravo, bravo!" cried he; "that suits my humor exactly. I can't abide the thoughts of a coffin. No deal box for me."

"A gibbet might, perhaps, serve your turn as well," muttered the sexton; adding aloud, "I am now entitled to call upon you;—a song!—a song!"

"Ay, a song, Mr. Palmer, a song!" reiterated the hinds. "Yours will be the right kind of thing."

"Say no more," replied Jack. "I'll give you a chant composed upon Dick Turpin, the highwayman. It's no great shakes, to be sure, but it's the best I have." And, with a knowing wink at the sexton, he commenced, in the true nasal whine, the following strain:

ONE FOOT IN THE STIRRUP

OR TURPIN'S FIRST FLING

Cum esset proposita fuga Turpi(n)s.—Cicero.

"One foot in the stirrup, one hand in the rein,
And the noose be my portion, or freedom I'll gain!
Oh! give me a seat in my saddle once more,
And these bloodhounds shall find that the chase is not o'er!"
Thus muttered Dick Turpin, who found, while he slept,
That the Philistines old on his slumbers had crept;
Had entrapped him as puss on her form you'd ensnare,
And that gone were his snappers—and gone was his mare.
Hilloah!

How Dick had been captured is readily told,
The pursuit had been hot, though the night had been cold,
So at daybreak, exhausted, he sought brief repose
Mid the thick of a corn-field, away from his foes.
But in vain was his caution—in vain did his steed,
Ever watchful and wakeful in moments of need,
With lip and with hoof on her master's cheek press—
He slept on, nor heeded the warning of Bess.
Hilloah!

"Zounds! gem'men!" cried Turpin, "you've found me at fault,
And the highflying highwayman's come to a halt;
You have turned up a trump—for I weigh well my weight,—

And the forty is yours, though the halter's my fate.
Well, come on't what will, you shall own when all's past,
That Dick Turpin, the Dauntless, was game to the last.
But, before we go further, I'll hold you a bet,
That one foot in my stirrup you won't let me set.
Hilloah!

"A hundred to one is the odds I will stand,
A hundred to one is the odds you command;
Here's a handful of goldfinches ready to fly!
May I venture a foot in my stirrup to try?"
As he carelessly spoke, Dick directed a glance
At his courser, and motioned her slyly askance:—
You might tell by the singular toss of her head,
And the prick of her ears, that his meaning she read.
Hilloah!

With derision at first was Dick's wager received,
And his error at starting as yet unretrieved;
But when from his pocket the shiners he drew,
And offered to "make up the hundred to two,"
There were havers in plenty, and each whispered each,
The same thing, though varied in figure of speech,
"Let the fool act his folly—the stirrup of Bess!
He has put his foot in it already, we guess!"
Hilloah!

Bess was brought to her master—Dick steadfastly gazed
At the eye of his mare, then his foot quick upraised;
His toe touched the stirrup, his hand grasped the rein—
He was safe on the back of his courser again!
As the clarion, fray-sounding and shrill, was the neigh
Of Black Bess, as she answered his cry "Hark-away!"
"Beset me, ye bloodhounds! in rear and in van;
My foot's in the stirrup and catch me who can!"
Hilloah!

There was riding and gibing mid rabble and rout,
And the old woods re-echoed the Philistines' shout!
There was hurling and whirling o'er brake and o'er brier,
But the course of Dick Turpin was swift as Heaven's fire.
Whipping, spurring, and straining would nothing avail,
Dick laughed at their curses, and scoffed at their wail;
"My foot's in the stirrup!"—thus rang his last cry;
"Bess has answered my call; now her mettle we'll try!"

Hilloah!

Uproarious applause followed Jack's song, when the joviality of the mourners was interrupted by a summons to attend in the state-room. Silence was at once completely restored; and, in the best order they could assume, they followed their leader, Peter Bradley. Jack Palmer was amongst the last to enter, and remained a not incurious spectator of a by no means common scene.

Preparations had been made to give due solemnity to the ceremonial. The leaden coffin was fastened down, and enclosed in an outer case of oak, upon the lid of which stood a richly-chased massive silver flagon, filled with burnt claret, called the grace-cup. All the lights were removed, save two lofty wax flambeaux, which were placed to the back, and threw a lurid glare upon the group immediately about the body, consisting of Ranulph Rookwood and some other friends of the deceased. Dr. Small stood in front of the bier; and, under the directions of Peter Bradley, the tenantry and household were formed into a wide half-moon across the chamber. There was a hush of expectation, as Dr. Small looked gravely round; and even Jack Palmer, who was as little likely as any man to yield to an impression of the kind, felt himself moved by the scene.

The very orthodox Small, as is well known to our readers, held everything savoring of the superstitions of the Scarlet Woman in supreme abomination; and, entertaining such opinions, it can scarcely be supposed that a funeral oration would find much favor in his eyes, accompanied, as it was, with the accessories of censer, candle, and cup; all evidently derived from that period when, under the three-crowned pontiff's sway, the shaven priest pronounced his benediction o'er the dead, and released the penitent's soul from purgatorial flames, while he heavily mulcted the price of his redemption from the possessions of his successor. Small resented the idea of treading in such steps, as an insult to himself and his cloth. Was he, the intolerant of Papistry, to tolerate this? Was he, who could not endure the odor of Catholicism, to have his nostrils thus polluted—his garments thus defiled by actual contact with it? It was not to be thought of: and he had formally signified his declination to Mr. Coates, when a little conversation with that gentleman, and certain weighty considerations therein held forth—the advowson of the church of Rookwood residing with the family—and represented by him, as well as the placing in juxtaposition of penalties to be incurred by refusal, that the scruples of Small gave way; and, with the best grace he could muster, very reluctantly promised compliance.

With these feelings, it will be readily conceived that the doctor was not in the best possible frame of mind for the delivery of his exhortation. His spirit had been ruffled by a variety of petty annoyances, amongst the greatest of which was the condition to which the good cheer had reduced his clerk, Zachariah Trundletext, whose reeling eye, pendulous position, and open mouth proclaimed him absolutely incapable of office.

Zachariah was, in consequence, dismissed, and Small commenced his discourse unsupported. But as our recording it would not probably conduce to the amusement of our readers, whatever it might to their edification, we shall pass it over with very brief mention. Suffice it to say, that the oration was so thickly interstrewn with lengthy quotations from the fathers,—Chrysostomus, Hieronymus, Ambrosius, Basilius, Bernardus, and the rest, with whose recondite Latinity, notwithstanding the clashing of their opinions with his own, the doctor was intimately acquainted, and which he moreover delighted to quote,—that his auditors were absolutely mystified and perplexed, and probably not without design. Countenances of such amazement were turned towards him, that Small, who had a keen sense of the ludicrous, could scarcely forbear smiling as he proceeded; and if we could suspect so grave a personage of waggery, we should almost think that, by way of retaliation, he had palmed some abstruse, monkish epicedium upon his astounded auditors.

The oration concluded, biscuits and confectionery were, according to old observance, handed to such of the tenantry as chose to partake of them. The serving of the grace-cup, which ought to have formed part of the duties of Zachariah, had he been capable of office, fell to the share of the sexton. The bowl was kissed, first by Ranulph, with lips that trembled with emotion, and afterward by his surrounding friends; but no drop was tasted—a circumstance which did not escape Peter's observation. Proceeding to the tenantry, the first in order happened to be Farmer Toft. Peter presented the cup, and as Toft was about to drain a deep draught of the wine, Peter whispered in his ear, "Take my advice for once, Friend Toft, and don't let a bubble of the liquid pass your lips. For every drop of the wine you drain, Sir Piers will have one sin the less, and you a load the heavier on your conscience. Didst never hear of sin-swallowing? For what else was this custom adopted? Seest thou not the cup's brim hath not yet been moistened? Well, as you will—ha, ha!" And the sexton passed onwards.

His work being nearly completed, he looked around for Jack Palmer, whom he had remarked during the oration, but could nowhere discover him. Peter was about to place the flagon, now almost drained of its contents, upon its former resting-place, when Small took it from his hands.

"In poculi fundo residuum non relinque, admonisheth Pythagoras," said he, returning the empty cup to the sexton.

"My task here is ended," muttered Peter, "but not elsewhere. Foul weather or fine, thunder or rain, I must to the church."

Bequeathing his final instructions to certain of the household who were to form part of the procession, in case it set out, he opened the hall door, and, the pelting shower

dashing heavily in his face, took his way up the avenue, screaming, as he strode along, the following congenial rhymes:

EPHIALTES

I ride alone—I ride by night
Through the moonless air on a courser white!
Over the dreaming earth I fly,
Here and there—at my fantasy!
My frame is withered, my visage old,
My locks are frore, and my bones ice cold.
The wolf will howl as I pass his lair,
The ban-dog moan, and the screech-owl stare.
For breath, at my coming, the sleeper strains,
And the freezing current forsakes his veins!
Vainly for pity the wretch may sue—
Merciless Mara no prayers subdue!
To his couch I flit—
On his breast I sit!
Astride! astride! astride!
And one charm alone
—A hollow stone!—
Can scare me from his side!
A thousand antic shapes I take;
The stoutest heart at my touch will quake.
The miser dreams of a bag of gold,
Or a ponderous chest on his bosom rolled.
The drunkard groans 'neath a cask of wine;
The reveller swelts 'neath a weighty chine.
The recreant turns, by his foes assailed,
To flee!—but his feet to the ground are nailed.
The goatherd dreams of his mountain-tops,
And, dizzily reeling, downward drops.
The murderer feels at his throat a knife,
And gasps, as his victim gasped, for life!
The thief recoils from the scorching brand;
The mariner drowns in sight of land!
Thus sinful man have I power to fray,
Torture, and rack, but not to slay!
But ever the couch of purity,
With shuddering glance, I hurry by.

Then mount! away!
To horse! I say,
To horse! astride! astride!
The fire-drake shoots—
The screech-owl hoots—
As through the air I glide!

The Sexton by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER III

THE CHURCHYARD

Methought I walked, about the mid of night,
Into a churchyard.
Webster: The White Devil.

Lights streamed through the chancel window as the sexton entered the churchyard, darkly defining all the ramified tracery of the noble Gothic arch, and illumining the gorgeous dyes of its richly-stained glass, profusely decorated with the armorial bearings of the founder of the fane, and the many alliances of his descendants. The sheen of their blazonry gleamed bright in the darkness, as if to herald to his last home another of the line whose achievements it displayed. Glowing colorings, checkered like rainbow tints, were shed upon the broken leaves of the adjoining yew-trees, and upon the rounded grassy tombs.

Opening the gate, as he looked in that direction, Peter became aware of a dark figure, enveloped in a large black cloak, and covered with a slouched hat, standing at some distance, between the window and the tree, and so intervening as to receive the full influence of the stream of radiance which served to dilate its almost superhuman stature. The sexton stopped. The figure remained stationary. There was something singular both in the costume and situation of the person. Peter's curiosity was speedily aroused, and, familiar with every inch of the churchyard, he determined to take the nearest cut, and to ascertain to whom the mysterious cloak and hat belonged. Making his way over the undulating graves, and instinctively rounding the headstones that intercepted his path, he quickly drew near the object of his inquiry. From the moveless posture it maintained, the figure appeared to be unconscious of Peter's approach. To his eyes it seemed to expand as he advanced. He was now almost close upon it, when his progress was arrested by a violent grasp laid on his shoulder. He started, and uttered an exclamation of alarm. At this moment a vivid flash of lightning illumined the whole churchyard, and Peter then thought he beheld, at some distance from him, two other figures, bearing upon their shoulders a huge chest, or, it might be, a coffin. The garb of these figures, so far as it could be discerned through the drenching rain, was fantastical in the extreme. The foremost seemed to have a long white beard descending to his girdle. Little leisure, however, was allowed Peter for observation. The vision no sooner met his glance than it disappeared, and nothing was seen but the glimmering

tombstones—nothing heard but the whistling wind and the heavily-descending shower. He rubbed his eyes. The muffled figure had vanished, and not a trace could be discovered of the mysterious coffin-bearers, if such they were.

"What have I seen?" mentally ejaculated Peter: "is this sorcery or treachery, or both? No body-snatchers would visit this place on a night like this, when the whole neighborhood is aroused. Can it be a vision I have seen? Pshaw! shall I juggle myself as I deceive these hinds? It was no bearded demon that I beheld, but the gipsy patrico, Balthazar. I knew him at once. But what meant that muffled figure; and whose arm could it have been that griped my shoulder? Ha! what if Lady Rookwood should have given orders for the removal of Susan's body? No, no; that cannot be. Besides, I have the keys of the vault; and there are hundreds now in the church who would permit no such desecration. I am perplexed to think what it can mean. But I will to the vault." Saying which, he hastened to the church porch, and after wringing the wet from his clothes, as a water-dog might shake the moisture from his curly hide, and doffing his broad felt hat, he entered the holy edifice. The interior seemed one blaze of light to the sexton, in his sudden transition from outer darkness. Some few persons were assembled, probably such as were engaged in the preparations; but there was one group which immediately caught his attention.

Near the communion-table stood three persons, habited in deep mourning, apparently occupied in examining the various monumental carvings that enriched the walls. Peter's office led him to that part of the church. About to descend into the vaults, to make the last preparations for the reception of the dead, with lantern in hand, keys, and a crowbar, he approached the party. Little attention was paid to the sexton's proceedings, till the harsh grating of the lock attracted their notice.

Peter started as he beheld the face of one of the three, and relaxing his hold upon the key, the strong bolt shot back in the lock. There was a whisper amongst the party. A light step was heard advancing towards him; and ere the sexton could sufficiently recover his surprise, or force open the door, a female figure stood by his side.

The keen, inquiring stare which Peter bestowed upon the countenance of the young lady so much abashed her, that she hesitated in her purpose of addressing him, and hastily retired.

"She here!" muttered Peter; "nay, then, I must no longer withhold the dreaded secret from Luke, or Ranulph may, indeed, wrest his possessions from him."

Reinforced by her companions, an elderly lady and a tall, handsome man, whose bearing and deportment bespoke him to be a soldier, the fair stranger again ventured towards Peter.

"You are the sexton," said she, addressing him in a voice sweet and musical.

"I am," returned Peter. It was harmony succeeded by dissonance.

"You, perhaps, can tell us, then," said the elderly lady, "whether the funeral is likely to take place to-night? We thought it possible that the storm might altogether prevent it."

"The storm is over, as nearly as maybe," replied Peter. "The body will soon be on its way. I am but now arrived from the hall."

"Indeed!" exclaimed the lady. "None of the family will be present, I suppose. Who is the chief mourner?"

"Young Sir Ranulph," answered the sexton. "There will be more of the family than were expected."

"Is Sir Ranulph returned?" asked the young lady, with great agitation of manner. "I thought he was abroad—that he was not expected. Are you sure you are rightly informed?"

"I parted with him at the hall not ten minutes since," replied Peter. "He returned from France to-night most unexpectedly."

"Oh, mother!" exclaimed the younger lady, "that this should be—that I should meet him here. Why did we come?—let us depart."

"Impossible!" replied her mother; "the storm forbids it. This man's information is so strange, I scarce can credit it. Are you sure you have asserted the truth?" said she, addressing Peter.

"I am not accustomed to be doubted," answered he. "Other things as strange have happened at the hall."

"What mean you?" asked the gentleman, noticing this last remark.

"You would not need to ask the question of me, had you been there, amongst the other guests," retorted Peter. "Odd things, I tell you, have been done there this night, and stranger things may occur before the morning."

"You are insolent, sirrah! I comprehend you not."

"Enough! I can comprehend you," replied Peter, significantly; "I know the count of the mourners invited to this ceremonial, and I am aware that there are three too many."

"Know you this saucy knave, mother?"

"I cannot call him to mind, though I fancy I have seen him before."

"My recollection serves me better, lady," interposed Peter. "I remember one who was once the proud heiress of Rookwood—ay, proud and beautiful. Then the house was filled with her gallant suitors. Swords were crossed for her. Hearts bled for her. Yet she favored none, until one hapless hour. Sir Reginald Rookwood had a daughter; Sir Reginald lost a daughter. Ha!—I see I am right. Well, he is dead and buried; and Reginald, his son, is dead likewise; and Piers is on his road hither; and you are the last, as in the course of nature you might have been the first. And, now that they are all gone, you do rightly to bury your grievances with them."

"Silence, sirrah!" exclaimed the gentleman, "or I will beat your brains out with your own spade."

"No; let him speak, Vavasour," said the lady, with an expression of anguish—"he has awakened thoughts of other days."

"I have done," said Peter, "and must to work. Will you descend with me, madam, into the sepulchre of your ancestry? All your family lie within—ay, and the Lady Eleanor, your mother, amongst the number."

Mrs. Mowbray signified her assent, and the party prepared to follow him.

The sexton held the lantern so as to throw its light upon the steps as they entered the gloomy receptacle of the departed. Eleanor half repented having ventured within its dreary limits, so much did the appearance of the yawning catacombs, surcharged with mortality, and, above all, the ghostly figure of the grim knight, affect her with dread, as she looked wistfully around. She required all the support her brother's arm could afford her; nor was Mrs. Mowbray altogether unmoved.

"And all the family are here interred, you say?" inquired the latter.

"All," replied the sexton.

"Where, then, lies Sir Reginald's younger brother?"

"Who?" exclaimed Peter, starting.

"Alan Rookwood."

"What of him?"

"Nothing of moment. But I thought you could, perhaps, inform me. He died young."

"He did," replied Peter, in an altered tone—"very young; but not before he had lived to an old age of wretchedness. Do you know his story, madam?"

"I have heard it."

"From your father's lips?"

"From Sir Reginald Rookwood's—never. Call him not my father, sirrah; even here I will not have him named so to me."

"Your pardon, madam," returned the sexton. "Great cruelty was shown to the Lady Eleanor, and may well call forth implacable resentment in her child; yet methinks the wrong he did his brother Alan was the foulest stain with which Sir Reginald's black soul was dyed."

"With what particular wrong dost thou charge Sir Reginald?" demanded Major Mowbray. "What injury did he inflict upon his brother Alan?"

"He wronged his brother's honor," replied the sexton; "he robbed him of his wife, poisoned his existence, and hurried him to an untimely grave."

Eleanor shudderingly held back during this horrible narration, the hearing of which she would willingly have shunned, had it been possible.

"Can this be true?" asked the major.

"Too true, my son," replied Mrs. Mowbray, sorrowfully.

"And where lies the unfortunate Alan?" asked Major Mowbray.

"'Twixt two cross roads. Where else should the suicide lie?"

Evading any further question, Peter hastily traversed the vault, elevating the light so as to reveal the contents of each cell. One circumstance filled him with surprise and dismay—he could nowhere perceive the coffin of his daughter. In vain he peered into every catacomb—they were apparently undisturbed; and, with much internal marvelling and misgiving, Peter gave up the search. "That vision is now explained," muttered he; "the body is removed, but by whom? Death! can I doubt? It must be Lady Rookwood—who else can have any interest in its removal. She has acted boldly. But she shall yet have reason to repent her temerity." As he continued his search, his companions silently followed. Suddenly he stopped, and, signifying that all was finished, they not unwillingly quitted this abode of horror, leaving him behind them.

"It is a dreadful place," whispered Eleanor to her mother; "nor would I have visited it, had I conceived anything of its horrors. And that strange man! who or what is he?"

"Ay, who is he?" repeated Major Mowbray.

"I recollect him now," replied Mrs. Mowbray; "he is one who has ever been connected with the family. He had a daughter, whose beauty was her ruin: it is a sad tale; I cannot tell it now: you have heard enough of misery and guilt: but that may account for his bitterness of speech. He was a dependent upon my poor brother."

"Poor man!" replied Eleanor; "if he has been unfortunate, I pity him. I am sorry we have been into that dreadful place. I am very faint: and I tremble more than ever at the thought of meeting Ranulph Rookwood again. I can scarcely support myself—I am sure I shall not venture to look upon him."

"Had I dreamed of the likelihood of his attending the ceremony, rest assured, dear Eleanor, we should not have been here: but I was informed there was no possibility of his return. Compose yourself, my child. It will be a trying time to both of us; but it is now inevitable."

At this moment the bell began to toll. "The procession has started," said Peter, as he passed the Mowbrays. "That bell announces the setting out."

"See yonder persons hurrying to the door," exclaimed Eleanor, with eagerness, and trembling violently. "They are coming. Oh! I shall never be able to go through with it, dear mother."

Peter hastened to the church door, where he stationed himself, in company with a host of others, equally curious. Flickering lights in the distance, shining like stars through the trees, showed them that the procession was collecting in front of the hall. The rain had now entirely ceased; the thunder muttered from afar, and the lightning seemed only to lick the moisture from the trees. The bell continued to toll, and its loud booming awoke the drowsy echoes of the valley. On the sudden, a solitary, startling concussion of thunder was heard; and presently a man rushed down from the belfry, with the tidings that he had seen a ball of fire fall from a cloud right over the hall. Every ear was on the alert for the next sound; none was heard. It was the crisis of the storm. Still the funeral procession advanced not. The strong sheen of the torchlight was still visible from the bottom of the avenue, now disappearing, now brightly glimmering, as if the bearers were hurrying to and fro amongst the trees. It was evident that much confusion prevailed, and that some misadventure had occurred. Each man muttered to his neighbor, and few were there who had not in a measure surmised the cause of the delay. At this juncture, a person without his hat, breathless with haste and almost palsied with fright, rushed through the midst of them and, stumbling over the threshold, fell headlong into the church.

"What's the matter, Master Plant? What has happened? Tell us! Tell us!" exclaimed several voices simultaneously.

"Lord have mercy upon us!" cried Plant, gasping for utterance, and not attempting to raise himself. "It's horrible! dreadful! oh!—oh!"

"What has happened?" inquired Peter, approaching the fallen man.

"And dost thou need to ask, Peter Bradley? thou, who foretold it all? but I will not say what I think, though my tongue itches to tell thee the truth. Be satisfied, thy wizard's lore has served thee right—he is dead."

"Who? Ranulph Rookwood? Has anything befallen him, or the prisoner, Luke Bradley?" asked the sexton, with eagerness.

A scream here burst forth from one who was standing behind the group; and, in spite of the efforts of her mother to withhold her, Eleanor Mowbray rushed forward.

"Has aught happened to Sir Ranulph?" asked she.

"Noa—noa—not to Sir Ranulph—he be with the body."

"Heaven be thanked for that!" exclaimed Eleanor. And then, as if ashamed of her own vehemence, and, it might seem, apparent indifference to another's fate, she inquired who was hurt.

"It be poor neighbor Toft, that be killed by a thunderbolt, ma'am," replied Plant.

Exclamations of horror burst from all around.

No one was more surprised at this intelligence than the sexton. Like many other seers, he had not, in all probability, calculated upon the fulfilment of his predictions, and he now stared aghast at the extent of his own foreknowledge.

"I tell 'ee what, Master Peter," said Plant, shaking his bullet-head, "it be well for thee thou didn't live in my grandfather's time, or thou'dst ha' been ducked in a blanket; or may be burnt at the stake, like Ridley and Latimer, as we read on—but however that may be, ye shall hear how poor Toft's death came to pass, and nobody can tell 'ee better nor I, seeing I were near to him, poor fellow, at the time. Well, we thought as how the storm were all over—and had all got into order of march, and were just beginning to step up the avenue, the coffin-bearers pushing lustily along, and the torches shining grandly, when poor Simon Toft, who could never travel well in liquor in his life, reeled to one side, and staggering against the first huge lime-tree, sat himself down beneath it—thou knowest the tree I mean."

"The tree of fate," returned Peter. "I ought, methinks, to know it."

"Well, I were just stepping aside to pick him up, when all at once there comes such a crack of thunder, and, whizzing through the trees, flashed a great globe of red fire, so bright and dazzlin', it nearly blinded me; and when I opened my eyes, winkin' and waterin', I see'd that which blinded me more even than the flash—that which had just afore been poor Simon, but which was now a mass o' black smouldering ashes, clean consumed and destroyed—his clothes rent to a thousand tatters—the earth and stones tossed up, and scattered all about, and a great splinter of the tree lying beside him."

"Heaven's will be done!" said the sexton; "this is an awful judgment."

"And Sathan cast down; for this is a spice o' his handiwork," muttered Plant; adding, as he slunk away, "If ever Peter Bradley do come to the blanket, dang me if I don't lend a helpin' hand."

The Sexton by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER IV

THE FUNERAL

How like a silent stream, shaded by night,
And gliding softly with our windy sighs,
Moves the whole frame of this solemnity!
Tears, sighs, and blacks, filling the simile!
Whilst I, the only murmur in this grove
Of death, thus hollowly break forth.
The Fatal Dowry.

Word being given that the funeral train was fast approaching, the church door was thrown open, and the assemblage divided in two lines, to allow it admission.

Meanwhile, a striking change had taken place, even in this brief period, in the appearance of the night. The sky, heretofore curtained with darkness, was now illumined by a serene, soft moon, which, floating in a watery halo, tinged with silvery radiance the edges of a few ghostly clouds that hurried along the deep and starlit skies. The suddenness of the change could not fail to excite surprise and admiration, mingled with regret that the procession had not been delayed until the present time.

Slowly and mournfully the train was seen to approach the churchyard, winding, two by two, with melancholy step, around the corner of the road. First came Dr. Small; then the mutes, with their sable panoply; next, the torch-bearers; next, those who sustained the coffin, bending beneath their ponderous burden, followed by Sir Ranulph and a long line of attendants, all plainly to be distinguished by the flashing torchlight. There was a slight halt at the gate, and the coffin changed supporters.

"Ill luck betide them!" ejaculated Peter; "could they find no other place except that to halt at? Must Sir Piers be gatekeeper till next Yule! No," added he, seeing what followed; "it will be poor Toft, after all."

Following close upon the coffin came a rude shell, containing, as Peter rightly conjectured, the miserable remains of Simon Toft, who had met his fate in the manner described by Plant. The bolt of death glanced from the tree which it first struck, and reduced the unfortunate farmer to a heap of dust. Universal consternation prevailed, and doubts were entertained as to what course should be pursued. It was judged best by

Dr. Small to remove the remains at once to the charnel-house. Thus "unanointed, unaneled, with all his imperfections on his head," was poor Simon Toft, in one brief second, in the twinkling of an eye, plunged from the height of festivity to the darkness of the grave, and so horribly disfigured, that scarce a vestige of humanity was discernible in the mutilated mass that remained of him. Truly may we be said to walk in blindness, and amidst deep pitfalls.

The churchyard was thronged by the mournful train. The long array of dusky figures—the waving torchlight gleaming ruddily in the white moonshine—now glistening upon the sombre habiliments of the bearers, and on their shrouded load, now reflected upon the jagged branches of the yew-trees, or falling upon the ivied buttresses of the ancient church, constituted no unimpressive picture. Over all, like a lamp hung in the still sky, shone the moon, shedding a soothing, spiritual lustre over the scene.

The organ broke into a solemn strain as the coffin was borne along the mid-aisle—the mourners following, with reverent step, and slow. It was deposited near the mouth of the vault, the whole assemblage circling around it. Dr. Small proceeded with the performance of that magnificent service appointed for the burial of the dead, in a tone as remarkable for its sadness as for its force and fervor. There was a tear in every eye—a cloud on every brow.

Brightly illumined as was the whole building, there were still some recesses which, owing to the intervention of heavy pillars, were thrown into shade; and in one of these, supported by her mother and brother, stood Eleanor, a weeping witness of the scene. She beheld the coffin silently borne along; she saw one dark figure slowly following; she knew those pale features—oh, how pale they were! A year had wrought a fearful alteration; she could scarce credit what she beheld. He must, indeed, have suffered—deeply suffered; and her heart told her that his sorrows had been for her.

Many a wistful look, besides, was directed to the principal figure in this ceremonial, Ranulph Rookwood. He was a prey to unutterable anguish of soul; his heart bled inwardly for the father he had lost. Mechanically following the body down the aisle, he had taken his station near it, gazing with confused vision upon the bystanders; had listened, with a sad composure, to the expressive delivery of Small, until he read—"For man walketh in a vain shadow, and disquieteth himself in vain; he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them."

"Verily!" exclaimed a deep voice; and Ranulph, looking round, met the eyes of Peter Bradley fixed full upon him. But it was evidently not the sexton who had spoken.

Small continued the service. He arrived at this verse: "Thou hast set our misdeeds before thee; and our secret sins in the light of thy countenance."

"Even so!" exclaimed the voice; and as Ranulph raised his eyes in the direction of the sound, he thought he saw a dark figure, muffled in a cloak, disappear behind one of the pillars. He bestowed, however, at the moment, little thought upon this incident. His heart melted within him; and leaning his face upon his hand, he wept aloud.

"Command yourself, I entreat of you, my dear Sir Ranulph," said Dr. Small, as soon as the service was finished, "and suffer this melancholy ceremonial to be completed." Saying which, he gently withdrew Ranulph from his support, and the coffin was lowered into the vault.

Ranulph remained for some time in the extremity of sorrow. When he in part recovered, the crowd had dispersed, and few persons were remaining within the church; yet near him stood three apparent loiterers. They advanced towards him. An exclamation of surprise and joy burst from his lips.

"Eleanor!"

"Ranulph!"

"Is it possible? Do I indeed behold you, Eleanor?"

No other word was spoken. They rushed into each other's arms. Oh! sad—sad is the lover's parting—no pang so keen; but if life hath a zest more exquisite than others—if felicity hath one drop more racy than the rest in her honeyed cup, it is the happiness enjoyed in such a union as the present. To say that he was as one raised from the depths of misery by some angel comforter, were a feeble comparison of the transport of Ranulph. To paint the thrilling delight of Eleanor—the trembling tenderness—the fond abandonment which vanquished all her maiden scruples, would be impossible. Reluctantly yielding—fearing, yet complying, her lips were sealed in one long, loving kiss, the sanctifying pledge of their tried affection.

"Eleanor, dear Eleanor," exclaimed Ranulph, "though I hold you within my arms—though each nerve within my frame assures me of your presence—though I look into those eyes, which seem fraught with greater endearment than ever I have known them wear—though I see and feel and know all this, so sudden, so unlooked for is the happiness, that I could almost doubt its reality. Say to what blessed circumstance I am indebted for this unlooked-for happiness."

"We are staying not far hence, with friends, dear Ranulph; and my mother, hearing of Sir Piers Rookwood's death, and wishing to bury all animosity with him, resolved to be present at the sad ceremony. We were told you could not be here."

"And would my presence have prevented your attendance, Eleanor?"

"Not that, dear Ranulph; but——"

"But what?"

At this moment the advance of Mrs. Mowbray offered an interruption to their further discourse.

"My son and I appear to be secondary in your regards, Sir Ranulph," said she, gravely.

"Sir Ranulph!" mentally echoed the young man. "What will she think when she knows that that title is not mine? I dread to tell her." He then added aloud, with a melancholy smile, "I crave your pardon, madam; the delight of a meeting so unexpected with your daughter must plead my apology."

"None is wanting, Sir Ranulph," said Major Mowbray. "I who have known what separation from my sister is, can readily excuse your feelings. But you look ill."

"I have, indeed, experienced much mental anxiety," said Ranulph, looking at Eleanor; "it is now past, and I would fain hope that a brighter day is dawning." His heart answered, 'twas but a hope.

"You were unlooked for here to-night, Sir Ranulph," said Mrs. Mowbray; "by us, at least: we were told you were abroad."

"You were rightly informed, madam," replied Ranulph. "I only arrived this evening from Bordeaux."

"I am glad you are returned. We are at present on a visit with your neighbors, the Davenhams, at Braybrook, and trust we shall see you there."

"I will ride over to-morrow," replied Ranulph; "there is much on which I would consult you all. I would have ventured to request the favor of your company at Rookwood, had the occasion been other than the present."

"And I would willingly have accepted your invitation," returned Mrs. Mowbray; "I should like to see the old house once more. During your father's lifetime I could not approach it. You are lord of broad lands, Sir Ranulph—a goodly inheritance."

"Madam!"

"And a proud title, which you will grace well, I doubt not. The first, the noblest of our house, was he from whom you derive your name. You are the third Sir Ranulph; the first founded the house of Rookwood; the next advanced it; 'tis for you to raise its glory to its height."

"Alas! madam, I have no such thought."

"Wherefore not? you are young, wealthy, powerful. With such domains as those of Rookwood—with such a title as its lord can claim, naught should be too high for your aspirations."

"I aspire to nothing, madam, but your daughter's hand; and even that I will not venture to solicit until you are acquainted with——" And he hesitated.

"With what?" asked Mrs. Mowbray, in surprise.

"A singular, and to me most perplexing event has occurred to-night," replied Ranulph, "which may materially affect my future fortunes."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Mowbray. "Does it relate to your mother?"

"Excuse my answering the question now, madam," replied Ranulph; "you shall know all to-morrow."

"Ay, to-morrow, dear Ranulph," said Eleanor; "and whatever that morrow may bring forth, it will bring happiness to me, if you are bearer of the tidings."

"I shall expect your coming with impatience," said Mrs. Mowbray.

"And I," added Major Mowbray, who had listened thus far in silence, "would offer you my services in any way you think they would be useful. Command me as you think fitting."

"I thank you heartily," returned Ranulph. "To-morrow you shall learn all. Meanwhile, it shall be my business to investigate the truth or falsehood of the statement I have heard, ere I report it to you. Till then, farewell."

As they issued from the church it was gray dawn. Mrs. Mowbray's carriage stood at the door. The party entered it; and accompanied by Dr. Small, whom he found within in the vestry, Ranulph walked towards the hall, where a fresh surprise awaited him.

The Sexton by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER V

THE CAPTIVE

Black Will. Which is the place where we're to be concealed?

Green. This inner room.

Black Will. 'Tis well. The word is, "Now I take you."

Arden of Feversham.

Guarded by the two young farmers who had displayed so much address in seizing him, Luke, meanwhile, had been conveyed in safety to the small chamber in the eastern wing, destined by Mr. Coates to be his place of confinement for the night. The room, or rather closet, opening from another room, was extremely well adapted for the purpose, having no perceptible outlet; being defended, on either side, by thick partition walls of the hardest oak, and at the extremity by the solid masonry of the mansion. It was, in fact, a remnant of the building anterior to the first Sir Ranulph's day; and the narrow limits of Luke's cell had been erected long before the date of his earliest progenitor. Having seen their prisoner safely bestowed, the room was carefully examined, every board sounded, every crevice and corner peered into by the curious eye of the little lawyer; and nothing being found insecure, the light was removed, the door locked, the rustic constables dismissed, and a brace of pistols having been loaded and laid on the table, Mr. Coates pronounced himself thoroughly satisfied and quite comfortable.

Comfortable! Titus heaved a sigh as he echoed the word. He felt anything but comfortable. His heart was with the body all the while. He thought of the splendor of the funeral, the torches, the illumined church, his own dignified march down the aisle, and the effect he expected to produce amongst the bewildered rustics. He thought of all these things, and cursed Luke by all the saints in the calendar. The sight of the musty old apartment, hung round with faded arras, which, as he said, "smelt of nothing but rats and ghosts, and suchlike varmint," did not serve to inspirit him; and the proper equilibrium of his temper was not completely restored until the appearance of the butler, with all the requisites for the manufacture of punch, afforded him some prospective solace.

"And what are they about now, Tim?" asked Titus.

"All as jolly as can be," answered the domestic; "Dr. Small is just about to pronounce the funeral 'ration."

"Devil take it," ejaculated Titus, "there's another miss! Couldn't I just slip out, and hear that?"

"On no account," said Coates. "Consider, Sir Ranulph is there."

"Well, well," rejoined Titus, heaving a deep sigh, and squeezing a lemon; "are you sure this is biling water, Tim? You know, I'm mighty particular."

"Perfectly aware of it, sir."

"Ah, Tim, do you recollect the way I used to brew for poor Sir Piers, with a bunch of red currants at the bottom of the glass? And then to think that, after all, I should be left out of his funeral—it's the height of barbarity. Tim, this rum of yours is poor stuff—there's no punch worth the trouble of drinking, except whisky-punch. A glass of right potheen, straw-color, peat-flavor, ten degrees over proof, would be the only thing to drown my cares. Any such thing in the cellar? There used to be an odd bottle or so, Tim—in the left bin, near the door."

"I've a notion there be," returned Timothy. "I'll try the bin your honor mentions, and if I can lay hands upon a bottle you shall have it, you may depend."

The butler departed, and Titus, emulating Mr. Coates, who had already enveloped himself, like Juno at the approach of Ixion, in a cloud, proceeded to light his pipe.

Luke, meanwhile, had been left alone, without light. He had much to meditate upon, and with naught to check the current of his thoughts, he pensively revolved his present situation and future prospects. The future was gloomy enough—the present fraught with danger. And now that the fever of excitement was passed, he severely reproached himself for his precipitancy.

His mind, by degrees, assumed a more tranquil state; and, exhausted with his great previous fatigue, he threw himself upon the floor of his prison-house, and addressed himself to slumber. The noise he made induced Coates to enter the room, which he did with a pistol in each hand, followed by Titus with a pipe and candle; but finding all safe the sentinels retired.

"One may see, with half an eye, that you're not used to a feather-bed, my friend," said Titus, as the door was locked. "By the powers, he's a tall chap, anyhow—why his feet almost touch the door. I should say that room was a matter of six feet long, Mr. Coates."

"Exactly six feet, sir."

"Well, that's a good guess. Hang that ugly rascal, Tim; he's never brought the whisky. But I'll be even with him to-morrow. Couldn't you just see to the prisoner for ten minutes, Mr. Coates?"

"Not ten seconds. I shall report you, if you stir from your post."

Here the door was opened, and Tim entered with the whisky.

"Arrah! by my soul, Tim, and here you are at last—uncork it, man, and give us a thimbleful—blob! there goes the stopper—here's a glass"—smacking his lips—"whist, Tim, another drop—stuff like this will never hurt a body. Mr. Coates, try it—no—I thought you'd be a man of more taste."

"I must limit you to a certain quantity," replied Coates, "or you will not be fit to keep guard—another glass must be the extent of your allowance."

"Another glass! and do you think I'll submit to any such iniquitous proposition?"

"Beg pardon, gentlemen," said Tim, "but her ladyship desires me to tell you both, that she trusts you will keep the strictest watch upon the prisoner. I have the same message also from Sir Ranulph."

"Do you hear that?" said Coates.

"And what are they all about now, Tim?" groaned Titus.

"Just starting, sir," returned Tim; "and, indeed, I must not lose my time gossiping here, for I be wanted below. You must be pleased to take care of yourselves, gentlemen, for an hour or so, for there will be only a few women-kind left in the house. The storm's just over, and the men are all lighting their torches. Oh, it's a grand sight!" And off set Tim.

"Bad luck to myself, anyhow," ejaculated Titus; "this is more than I can bear—I've had enough of this watch and ward business—if the prisoner stirs, shoot him, if you think proper—I'll be back in an hour."

"I tell you what, Mr. Tyrconnel," said Coates, coolly taking up the pistol from the table, "I'm a man of few words, but those few are, I hope, to the purpose, and I'd have you to know if you stir from that chair, or attempt to leave the room, damme but I'll send a brace of bullets after you. I'm serious, I assure you." And he cocked the pistol.

By way of reply to this menace, Titus deliberately filled a stiff glass of whisky-and-water.

"That's your last glass," said the inexorable Coates.

To return once more to Luke. He slept uneasily for some short space, and was awakened by a sound which reached his dreaming ears and connected itself with the visions that slumber was weaving around him. It was some moments before he could distinctly remember where he was. He would not venture to sleep again, though he felt overwhelmed by drowsiness—there was a fixed pain at his heart, as if circulation were suspended. Changing his posture, he raised himself upon one arm; he then became aware of a scratching noise, somewhat similar to the sound he had heard in his dream, and perceived a light gleaming through a crevice in the oaken partition. His attention was immediately arrested, and placing his eye close to the chink, he distinctly saw a dark lantern burning, and by its light a man filing some implement of housebreaking. The light fell before the hard features of the man, with whose countenance Luke was familiar; and although only one person came within the scope of his view, Luke could make out, from a muttered conversation that was carried on, that he had a companion. The parties were near to him, and though speaking in a low tone, Luke's quick ear caught the following:

"What keeps Jack Palmer, I wonder?" said he of the file. "We're all ready for the fakement—pops primed—and I tell you what, Rob Rust, I've made my clasp-knife as sharp as a razor, and damme, if Lady Rookwood offers any resistance, I'll spoil her talking in future, I promise you."

Suppressed laughter from Rust followed this speech. That laugh made Luke's blood run cold within his veins.

"Harkee, Dick Wilder, you're a reg'lar out-and-outer, and stops at nothing, and curse me if I'd think any more of it than yourself. But Jack's as squeamish of bloodshed as young Miss that cries at her cut finger. It's the safer plan. Say what you will, nothing but that will stop a woman's tongue."

"I shall make short work with her ladyship to-night, anyhow. Hist! here Jack comes."

A footstep crossed in the room, and, presently afterwards, exclamations of surprise and smothered laughter were heard from the parties.

"Bravo, Jack! famous! that disguise would deceive the devil himself."

"And now, my lads," said the newcomer, "is all right?"

"Right and tight."

"Nothing forgotten?"

"Nothing."

"Then off with your stamps, and on with your list slippers; not a word. Follow me, and, for your lives, don't move a step but as I direct you. The word must be, 'Sir Piers Rookwood calls.' We'll overhaul the swag here. This crack may make us all for life; and if you'll follow my directions implicitly, we'll do the trick in style. This slum must be our rendezvous when all's over; for hark ye, my lads, I'll not budge an inch till Luke Bradley be set free. He's an old friend, and I always stick by old friends. I'd do the same for one of you if you were in the same scrape, so, damn you, no flinching; besides, I owe that spider-shanked, snivelling split-cause Coates, who stands sentry, a grudge, and I'll pay him off, as Paul did the Ephesians. You may crop his ears, or slit his tongue as you would a magpie's, or any other chattering varmint; make him sign his own testament, or treat him with a touch of your Habeas Corpus Act, if you think proper, or give him a taste of blue plumb. One thing only I stipulate, that you don't hurt that fat, mutton-headed Broganee, whatever he may say or do; he's a devilish good fellow. And now to business."

Saying which, they noiselessly departed. But carefully as the door was closed, Luke's ear could detect the sound. His blood boiled with indignation; and he experienced what all must have felt who have been similarly situated, with the will, but not the power, to assist another—a sensation almost approaching to torture. At this moment a distant scream burst upon his ears—another—he hesitated no longer. With all his force he thundered at the door.

"What do you want, rascal?" cried Coates, from without.

"There are robbers in the house."

"Thank you for the information. There is one I know of already."

"Fool, they are in Lady Rookwood's room. Run to her assistance."

"A likely story, and leave you here."

"Do you hear that scream?"

"Eh, what—what's that? I do hear something." Here Luke dashed with all his force against the door. It yielded to the blow, and he stood before the astonished attorney.

"Advance a footstep, villain," exclaimed Coates, presenting both his pistols, "and I lodge a brace of balls in your head."

"Listen to me," said Luke; "the robbers are in Lady Rookwood's chamber—they will plunder the place of everything—perhaps murder her. Fly to her assistance, I will accompany you—assist you—it is your only chance."

"My only chance—your only chance. Do you take me for a greenhorn? This is a poor subterfuge; could you not have vamped up something better? Get back to your own room, or I shall make no more of shooting you than I would of snuffing that candle."

"Be advised, sir," continued Luke. "There are three of them—give me a pistol, and fear nothing."

"Give you a pistol! Ha, ha!—to be its mark myself. You are an amusing rascal, I will say."

"Sir, I tell you not a moment is to be lost. Is life nothing? Lady Rookwood may be murdered."

"I tell you, once for all, it won't do. Go back to your room, or take the consequences."

"By the powers! but it shall do, anyhow," exclaimed Titus, flinging himself upon the attorney, and holding both his arms; "you've bullied me long enough. I'm sure the lad's in the right."

Luke snatched the pistols from the hands of Coates.

"Very well, Mr. Tyrconnel; very well, sir," cried the attorney, boiling with wrath, and spluttering out his words. "Extremely well, sir. You are not perhaps aware, sir, what you have done; but you will repent this, sir—repent, I say—repent was my word, Mr. Tyrconnel."

"Poh!—poh!" replied Titus. "I shall never repent a good-natured action."

"Follow me," cried Luke; "settle your disputes hereafter. Quick, or we shall be too late."

Coates bustled after him, and Titus, putting the neck of the forbidden whisky bottle to his lips, and gulping down a hasty mouthful, snatched up a rusty poker, and followed the party with more alacrity than might have been expected from so portly a personage.

The Sexton by William Harrison Ainsworth

CHAPTER VI

THE APPARITION

Gibbet. Well, gentlemen, 'tis a fine night for our enterprise.

Hounslow. Dark as hell.

Bagshot. And blows like the devil.

Boniface. You'll have no creature to deal with but the ladies.

Gibbet. And I can assure you, friend, there's a great deal of address, and good manners, in robbing a lady. I am the most of a gentleman, that way, that ever travelled the road.

Beaux Stratagem.

Accompanied by her son, Lady Rookwood, on quitting the chamber of the dead, returned to her own room. She then renewed all her arguments; had recourse to passionate supplications—to violent threats, but without effect. Ranulph maintained profound silence. Passion, as it ever doth, defeated its own ends; and Lady Rookwood, seeing the ill effect her anger would probably produce, gradually softened the asperity of her manner, and suffered him to depart.

Left to herself, and to the communings of her own troubled spirit, her fortitude, in a measure, forsook her, under the pressure of the difficulties by which she was environed. There was no plan she could devise—no scheme adopt, unattended with peril. She must act alone—with promptitude and secrecy. To win her son over was her chief desire, and that, at all hazards, she was resolved to do. But how? She knew of only one point on which he was vulnerable—his love for Eleanor Mowbray. By raising doubts in his mind, and placing fresh difficulties in his path, she might compel him to acquiesce in her machinations, as a necessary means of accomplishing his own object. This she hoped to effect. Still there was a depth of resolution in the placid stream of Ranulph's character which she had often noticed with apprehension. Aware of his firmness, she dreaded lest his sense of justice should be stronger than his passion.

As she wove these webs of darkness, fear, hitherto unknown, took possession of her soul. She listened to the howling of the wind—to the vibration of the rafters—to the thunder's roar, and to the hissing rain—till she, who never trembled at the thought of danger, became filled with vague uneasiness. Lights were ordered; and when her old attendant returned. Lady Rookwood fixed a look so wistful upon her, that Agnes ventured to address her.

"Bless you, my lady," said the ancient handmaiden, trembling, "you look very pale, and no wonder. I feel sick at heart, too. Oh! I shall be glad when they return from the church, and happier still when the morning dawns. I can't sleep a wink—can't close my eyes, but I think of him."

"Of him?"

"Of Sir Piers, my lady; for though he's dead, I don't think he's gone."

"How?"

"Why, my lady, the corruptible part of him's gone, sure enough. But the incorruptible, as Dr. Small calls it—the sperrit, my lady. It might be my fancy, your ladyship; but as I'm standing here, when I went back into the room just now for the lights, as I hope to live, I thought I saw Sir Piers in the room."

"You are crazed, Agnes."

"No, my lady, I'm not crazed; it was mere fancy, no doubt. Oh, it's a blessed thing to live with an easy conscience—a thrice blessed thing to die with an easy one, and that's what I never shall, I'm afeard. Poor Sir Piers! I'd mumble a prayer for him, if I durst."

"Leave me," said Lady Rookwood, impatiently.

And Agnes quitted the room.

"What if the dead can return?" thought Lady Rookwood. "All men doubt it, yet all men believe it. I would not believe it, were there not a creeping horror that overmasters me, when I think of the state beyond the grave—that intermediate state, for such it must be, when the body lieth mouldering in the ground, and the soul survives, to wander, unconfined, until the hour of doom. And doth the soul survive when disenthralled? Is it dependent on the body? Does it perish with the body? These are doubts I cannot resolve. But if I deemed there was no future state, this hand should at once liberate me from my own weaknesses—my fears—my life. There is but one path to acquire that knowledge,

which, once taken, can never be retraced. I am content to live—while living, to be feared—it may be, hated; when dead, to be contemned—yet still remembered. Ha! what sound was that? A stifled scream! Agnes!—without there! She is full of fears. I am not free from them myself, but I will shake them off. This will divert their channel," continued she, drawing from her bosom the marriage certificate. "This will arouse the torpid current of my blood—'Piers Rookwood to Susan Bradley.' And by whom was it solemnized? The name is Checkley—Richard Checkley. Ha! I bethink me—a Papist priest—a recusant—who was for some time an inmate of the hall. I have heard of this man—he was afterwards imprisoned, but escaped—he is either dead or in a foreign land. No witnesses—'tis well! Methinks Sir Piers Rookwood did well to preserve this. It shall light his funeral pyre. Would he could now behold me, as I consume it!"

She held the paper in the direction of the candle; but, ere it could touch the flame, it dropped from her hand. As if her horrible wish had been granted, before her stood the figure of her husband! Lady Rookwood started not. No sign of trepidation or alarm, save the sudden stiffening of her form, was betrayed. Her bosom ceased to palpitate—her respiration stopped—her eyes were fixed upon the apparition.

The figure appeared to regard her sternly. It was at some little distance, within the shade cast by the lofty bedstead. Still she could distinctly discern it. There was no ocular deception; it was attired in the costume Sir Piers was wont to wear—a hunting dress. All that her son had told her rushed to her recollection. The phantom advanced. Its countenance was pale, and wore a gloomy frown.

"What would you destroy?" demanded the apparition, in a hollow tone.

"The evidence of——"

"What?"

"Your marriage."

"With yourself, accursed woman?"

"With Susan Bradley."

"What's that I hear?" shouted the figure, in an altered tone. "Married to her! then Luke is legitimate, and heir to this estate!" Whereupon the apparition rushed to the table, and laid a very substantial grasp upon the document. "A marriage certificate!" ejaculated the spectre; "here's a piece of luck! It ain't often in our lottery life we draw a prize like this. One way or the other, it must turn up a few cool thousands."

"Restore that paper, villain," exclaimed Lady Rookwood, recovering all the audacity natural to her character the instant she discovered the earthly nature of the intruder—"restore it, or, by Heaven, you shall rue your temerity."

"Softly, softly," replied the pseudo-phantom, with one hand pushing back the lady, while the other conveyed the precious document to the custody of his nether man—"softly," said he, giving the buckskin pocket a slap—"two words to that, my lady. I know its value as well as yourself, and must make my market. The highest offer has me, your ladyship; he's but a poor auctioneer that knocks down his ware when only one bidder is present. Luke Bradley, or, as I find he now is, Sir Luke Rookwood, may come down more handsomely."

"Who are you, ruffian, and to what end is this masquerade assumed? If for the purpose of terrifying me into compliance with the schemes of that madman, Luke Bradley, whom I presume to be your confederate, your labor is misspent—your stolen disguise has no more weight with me than his forged claims."

"Forged claims! Egad, he must be a clever hand to have forged that certificate. Your ladyship, however, is in error. Sir Luke Rookwood is no associate of mine; I am his late father's friend. But I have no time to bandy talk. What money have you in the house? Be alive."

"You are a robber, then?"

"Not I. I'm a tax-gatherer—a collector of Rich-Rates—ha, ha! What plate have you got? Nay, don't be alarmed—take it quietly—these things can't be helped—better make up your mind to do it without more ado—much the best plan—no screaming, it may injure your lungs, and can alarm nobody. Your maids have done as much before—it's beneath your dignity to make so much noise. So, you will not heed me? As you will." Saying which, he deliberately cut the bell-cord, and drew out a brace of pistols at the same time.

"Agnes!" shrieked Lady Rookwood, now seriously alarmed.

"I must caution your ladyship to be silent," said the robber, who, as our readers will no doubt have already conjectured, was no other than the redoubted Jack Palmer. "Agnes is already disposed of," said he, cocking a pistol. "However like your deceased 'lord and master' I may appear, you will find you have got a very different spirit from that of Sir Piers to deal with. I am naturally the politest man breathing—have been accounted the best-bred man on the road by every lady whom I have had the honor of addressing; and I should be sorry to sully my well-earned reputation by anything like rudeness. I must

use a little force, of the gentlest kind. Perhaps you will permit me to hand you to a chair. Bless me! what a wrist your ladyship has got. Excuse me if I hurt you, but you are so devilish strong. What ho! 'Sir Piers Rookwood calls—"

"Ready," cried a voice.

"That's the word," rejoined another; "ready;" and immediately two men, their features entirely hidden by a shroud of black crape, accoutred in rough attire, and each armed with pistols, rushed into the room.

"Lend a hand," said Jack.

Even in this perilous extremity Lady Rookwood's courage did not desert her. Anticipating their purpose, ere her assailants could reach her she extricated herself from Palmer's grasp, and rushed upon the foremost so unexpectedly, that, before the man could seize her, she snatched a pistol from his hand, and presented it at the group with an aspect like that of a tigress at bay—her eye wandering from one to the other, as if selecting a mark.

There was a pause of a few seconds, in which the men glanced at the lady, and then at their leader. Jack looked blank.

"Hem!" said he, coolly; "this is something new—disarmed—defied by a petticoat. Hark ye, Rob Rust, the disgrace rests with you. Clear your character, by securing her at once. What! afraid of a woman?"

"A woman!" repeated Rust, in a surly tone; "devilish like a woman, indeed. Few men could do what she has done. Give the word, and I fire. As to seizing her, that's more than I'll engage to do."

"You are a coward," cried Jack. "I will steer clear of blood—if I can help it. Come, madam, surrender, like the more sensible part of your sex, at discretion. You will find resistance of no avail." And he stepped boldly towards her.

Lady Rookwood pulled the trigger. The pistol flashed in the pan. She flung away the useless weapon without a word.

"Ha, ha!" said Jack, as he leisurely stooped to pick up the pistol, and approached her ladyship; "the bullet is not yet cast that is to be my billet. Here," said he, dealing Rust a heavy thump upon the shoulder with the butt-end of the piece, "take back your snapper, and look you prick the touchhole, or your barking-iron will never bite for you. And now,

madam, I must take the liberty of again handing you to a seat. Dick Wilder, the cord—quick. It distresses me to proceed to such lengths with your ladyship—but safe bind, safe find, as Mr. Coates would say."

"You will not bind me, ruffian."

"Your ladyship is very much mistaken—I have no alternative—your ladyship's wrist is far too dexterous to be at liberty. I must furthermore request of your ladyship to be less vociferous—you interrupt business, which should be transacted with silence and deliberation."

Lady Rookwood's rage and vexation at this indignity were beyond all bounds. Resistance, however, was useless, and she submitted in silence. The cord was passed tightly round her arms, when it flashed upon her recollection for the first time that Coates and Tyrconnel, who were in charge of her captive in the lower corridor, might be summoned to her assistance. This idea no sooner crossed her mind than she uttered a loud and prolonged scream.

"Sdeath!" cried Jack; "civility is wasted here. Give me the gag, Rob."

"Better slit her squeaking-pipe at once," replied Rust, drawing his clasped knife; "she'll thwart everything."

"The gag, I say, not that."

"I can't find the gag," exclaimed Wilder, savagely. "Leave Rob Rust to manage her—he'll silence her, I warrant you, while you and I rummage the room."

"Ay, leave her to me," said the other miscreant. "Go about your business, and take no heed. Her hands are fast—she can't scratch. I'll do it with a single gash—send her to join her lord, whom she loved so well, before he's under ground. They'll have something to see when they come home from the master's funeral—their mistress cut and dry for another. Ho, ho!"

"Mercy, mercy!" shrieked Lady Rookwood.

"Ay, ay, I'll be merciful," said Rust, brandishing his knife before her eyes. "I'll not be long about it. Leave her to me—I'll give her a taste of Sir Sydney."

"No, no, Rust; no bloodshed," said Jack, authoritatively; "I'll find some other way to gag the jade."

At this moment a noise of rapid footsteps was heard within the passage.

"Assistance comes," screamed Lady Rookwood. "Help! help!"

"To the door!" cried Jack. The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Luke dashed into the room, followed by Coates and Tyrconnel.

Palmer and his companions levelled their pistols at the intruders, and the latter would have fired, but Jack's keen eye having discerned Luke amongst the foremost, checked further hostilities for the present. Lady Rookwood, meanwhile, finding herself free from restraint, rushed towards her deliverers, and crouched beneath Luke's protecting arms, which were extended, pistol in hand, over her head. Behind them stood Titus Tyrconnel, flourishing the poker, and Mr. Coates, who, upon the sight of so much warlike preparation, began somewhat to repent having rushed so precipitately into the lion's den.

"Luke Bradley!" exclaimed Palmer, stepping forward.

"Luke Bradley!" echoed Lady Rookwood, recoiling and staring into his face.

"Fear nothing, madam," cried Luke. "I am here to assist you—I will defend you with my life."

"You defend me!" exclaimed Lady Rookwood, doubtfully.

"Even I," cried Luke, "strange as it may sound."

"Holy powers protect me!" ejaculated Titus. "As I live, it is Sir Piers himself."

"Sir Piers!" echoed Coates, catching the infection of terror, as he perceived Palmer more distinctly. "What! is the dead come to life again? A ghost, a ghost!"

"By my soul," cried Titus, "it's the first ghost I ever heard of that committed a burglary in its own house, and on the night of the body's burial, too. But who the devil are these? maybe they're ghosts likewise."

"They are," said Palmer, in a hollow tone, mimicking the voice of Sir Piers, "attendant spirits. We are come for this woman; her time is out; so no more palavering, Titus. Lend a hand to take her to the churchyard, and be hanged to you."

"Upon my conscience, Mr. Coates," cried Titus, "it's either the devil, or Sir Piers. We'll be only in the way here. He's only just settling his old scores with his lady. I thought it would come to this long ago. We'd best beat a retreat."

Jack took advantage of the momentary confusion created by this incidental alarm at his disguise to direct Rust towards the door by which the new comers had entered; and, this being accomplished, he burst into a loud laugh.

"What! not know me?" cried he—"not know your old friend with a new face, Luke? Nor you, Titus? Nor you, who can see through a millstone, lawyer Coates, don't you recognize——"

"Jack Palmer, as I'm a sinner!" cried Titus. "Why, this beats Banaghan. Arrah! Jack, honey, what does this mean? Is it yourself I see in such company? You're not robbing in earnest?"

"Indeed but I am, friend Titus," exclaimed Jack; "and it is my own self you see. I just took the liberty of borrowing Sir Piers's old hunting-coat from the justice-room. You said my toggery wouldn't do for the funeral. I'm no other than plain Jack Palmer, after all."

"With half a dozen aliases at your back, I dare say," cried Coates. "I suspected you all along. All your praise of highwaymen was not lost upon me. No, no; I can see into a millstone, be it ever so thick."

"Well," replied Jack, "I'm sorry to see you here, friend Titus. Keep quiet, and you shall come to no harm. As to you, Luke Bradley, you have anticipated my intention by half an hour; I meant to set you free. For you, Mr. Coates, you may commit all future care of your affairs to your executors, administrators, and assigns. You will have no further need to trouble yourself with worldly concerns," added he, levelling a pistol at the attorney, who, however, shielded himself, in an agony of apprehension, behind Luke's person. "Stand aside, Luke."

"I stir not," replied Luke. "I thank you for your good intention, and will not injure you—that is, if you do not force me to do so. I am here to defend her ladyship."

"What's that you say?" returned Jack, in surprise—"defend her ladyship?"

"With my life," replied Luke. "Let me counsel you to depart."

"Are you mad? Defend her—Lady Rookwood—your enemy—who would hang you? Tut, tut! Stand aside, I say, Luke Bradley, or look to yourself."

"You had better consider well ere you proceed," said Luke. "You know me of old. I have taken odds as great, and not come off the vanquished."

"The odds are even," cried Titus, "if Mr. Coates will but show fight. I'll stand by you to the last, my dear boy. You're the right son of your father, though on the wrong side. Och! Jack Palmer, my jewel, no wonder you resemble Dick Turpin."

"You hear this?" cried Luke.

"Hot-headed fool!" muttered Jack.

"Why don't you shoot him on the spot?" said Wilder.

"And mar my own chance," thought Jack. "No, that will never do; his life is not to be thrown away. Be quiet," said he, in a whisper to Wilder; "I've another card to play, which shall serve us better than all the plunder here. No harm must come to that youngster; his life is worth thousands to us." Then, turning to Luke, he continued, "I'm loth to hurt you; yet what can I do? You must have the worst of it if we come to a pitched battle. I therefore advise you, as a friend, to draw off your forces. We are three to three, it is true; but two of your party are unarmed."

"Unarmed!" interrupted Titus. "Devil burn me! this iron shillelah shall convince you to the contrary, Jack, or any of your friends."

"Make ready then, my lads," cried Palmer.

"Stop a minute," exclaimed Coates. "This gets serious; it will end in homicide—in murder. We shall all have our throats cut to a certainty; and though these rascals will as certainly be hanged for it, that will be poor satisfaction to the sufferers. Had we not better refer the matter to arbitration?"

"I'm for fighting it out," said Titus, whisking the poker round his head like a flail in action. "My blood's up. Come on, Jack Palmer, I'm for you."

"I should vote for retreating," chattered the attorney, "if that cursed fellow had not placed a ne exeat at the door."

"Give the word, captain," cried Rust, impatiently.

"Ay, ay," echoed Wilder.

"A skilful general always parleys," said Jack. "A word in your ear, Luke, ere that be done which cannot be undone."

"You mean me no treachery?" returned Luke.

Jack made no answer, but uncocking his pistols, deposited them within his pockets.

"Shoot him as he advances," whispered Coates; "he is in your power now."

"Scoundrel!" replied Luke, "do you think me as base as yourself?"

"Hush, hush! for God's sake don't expose me," said Coates.

Lady Rookwood had apparently listened to this singular conference with sullen composure, though in reality she was racked with anxiety as to its results; and, now apprehending that Palmer was about to make an immediate disclosure to Luke, she accosted him as he passed her.

"Unbind me!" cried she, "and what you wish shall be yours—money—jewels——"

"Ha! may I depend?"

"I pledge my word."

Palmer untied the cord, and Lady Rookwood, approaching a table whereon stood the escritoire, touched a spring, and a secret drawer flew open.

"You do this of your own free will?" asked Luke. "Speak, if it be otherwise."

"I do," returned the lady, hastily.

Palmer's eyes glistened at the treasures exposed to his view.

"They are jewels of countless price. Take them, and rid me," she added in a whisper, "of him."

"Luke Bradley?"

"Ay."

"Give them to me."

"They are yours freely on those terms."

"You hear that, Luke," cried he, aloud; "you hear it, Titus; this is no robbery. Mr. Coates—'Know all men by these presents'—I call you to witness, Lady Rookwood gives me these pretty things."

"I do," returned she; adding, in a whisper, "on the terms which I proposed."

"Must it be done at once?"

"Without an instant's delay."

"Before your own eyes?"

"I fear not to look on. Each moment is precious. He is off his guard now. You do it, you know, in self-defence."

"And you?"

"For the same cause."

"Yet he came here to aid you?"

"What of that?"

"He would have risked his life for yours?"

"I cannot pay back the obligation. He must die!"

"The document?"

"Will be useless then."

"Will not that suffice; why aim at life?"

"You trifle with me. You fear to do it."

"Fear!"

"About it, then; you shall have more gold."

"I will about it," cried Jack, throwing the casket to Wilder, and seizing Lady Rookwood's hands. "I am no Italian bravo, madam—no assassin—no remorseless cut-throat. What are you—devil or woman—who ask me to do this? Luke Bradley, I say."

"Would you betray me?" cried Lady Rookwood.

"You have betrayed yourself, madam. Nay, nay, Luke, hands off. See, Lady Rookwood, how you would treat a friend. This strange fellow would blow out my brains for laying a finger upon your ladyship."

"I will suffer no injury to be done to her," said Luke; "release her."

"Your ladyship hears him," said Jack. "And you, Luke, shall learn the value set upon your generosity. You will not have her injured. This instant she has proposed, nay, paid for your assassination."

"How?" exclaimed Luke, recoiling.

"A lie, as black as hell," cried Lady Rookwood.

"A truth, as clear as heaven," retained Jack. "I will speedily convince you of the fact." Then, turning to Lady Rookwood, he whispered, "Shall I give him the marriage document?"

"Beware!" said Lady Rookwood.

"Do I avouch the truth, then?"

She was silent.

"I am answered," said Luke.

"Then leave her to her fate," cried Jack.

"No," replied Luke; "she is still a woman, and I will not abandon her to ruffianly violence. Set her free."

"You are a fool," said Jack.

"Hurrah, hurrah!" vociferated Coates, who had rushed to the window. "Rescue, rescue! they are returning from the church; I see the torchlight in the avenue; we are saved!"

"Hell and the devil!" cried Jack; "not an instant is to be lost. Alive, lads; bring off all the plunder you can; be handy!"

"Lady Rookwood, I bid you farewell," said Luke, in a tone in which scorn and sorrow were blended. "We shall meet again."

"We have not parted yet," returned she; "will you let this man pass? A thousand pounds for his life."

"Upon the nail?" asked Rust.

"By the living God, if any of you attempt to touch him, I will blow his brains out upon the spot, be he friend or foe," cried Jack. "Luke Bradley, we shall meet again. You shall hear from me."

"Lady Rookwood," said Luke, as he departed, "I shall not forget this night."

"Is all ready?" asked Palmer of his comrades.

"All."

"Then budge."

"Stay!" cried Lady Rookwood, in a whisper to him. "What will purchase that document?"

"Hem!"

"A thousand pounds?"

"Double it."

"It shall be doubled."

"I will turn it over."

"Resolve me now."

"You shall hear from me."

"In what manner?"

"I will find speedy means."

"Your name is Palmer?"

"Palmer is the name he goes by, your ladyship," replied Coates, "but it is the fashion with these rascals to have an alias."

"Ha! ha!" said Jack, thrusting the ramrod into his pistol-barrel, "are you there, Mr. Coates? Pay your wager, sir."

"What wager?"

"The hundred we bet that you would take me if ever you had the chance."

"Take you!—it was Dick Turpin I betted to take."

"I am Dick Turpin—that's my alias!" replied Jack.

"Dick Turpin! then I'll have a snap at you at all hazards," cried Coates, springing suddenly towards him.

"And I at you," said Turpin, discharging his pistol right in the face of the rash attorney; "there's a quittance in full."

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