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THE DOOM OF WARNHAM.

CHAPTER I.

Eighty years ago there was many a demesne in Ireland that, circled around with glade, with woodland, with lake and grassy sweeps, with mansions and princely halls, belonged to men whose very names have passed away from the land where they were once a power. One of these is yet to be seen in the heart of a north-western county—a land of lakes and hills! It now belongs to a noble absentee, and has been saved, by the wealth of its great proprietor, from the civilization of the Landed Estates Court.—It is still in the same state of nature as in the days when the Irish parliament sat in College Green, and the bugles of the volunteers rang out with martial music in the airs of Ireland. Great herds of cattle fatten in summertime upon the heavy rolls of grass that lie as gross upon its sod as though they were swathes cut by the mower.—A lofty wall, kept in perfect repair, surrounds the vast extent of a land which is comprised within its bounds. Every imaginable beauty that nature could give to a fertile spot lies within that wall. Gentle undulations, that rise here and there into bold hills; fair streams, born of one birth, but severed by the chances of their progress, wend and watch each other until they bound at last into union, and swell lake-like in their gathered wealth of waters; meadow downs and breadths of forest land,—all are there. There too is a mansion first founded by one of the fierce barons of the Norman invasion, who made his settlement more by fraud than force, but yet who never scrupled to use force when fraud failed him in his objects. Ruin dwells around that mansion now. When the conquest of Ireland was done and over it fell into peaceful guise and stood dismantled, like a warrior who has put off his mail and laid down sword and spear. The fierce and frowning look of war had lapsed from its gray stones. Where the man-at-arms kept watch flowers grew up, and the ivy stood for warder and calverin on its ramparts. So it changed. New owners had altered it, as one part or another decayed. Fair ladies, who died old and wrinkled grandmothers hundreds of years ago, as they came thither young brides with one lord of the house or another, had changed it to their fancy too; and eighty years since it bore the aspect it bears to-day, save that ruin had not marked it so deeply as now.

No one resides in that princely mansion, although its halls and dormitories, its offices and stables, could well accommodate a royal retinue, and house man and beast of a gallant train. The steward, who looks after the interests of its owner upon the lands, lives at what was once the gate lodge, but which, enlarged and elevated, forms now a Gothic mansion of no little pretensions. Beyond the precincts of that mansion no laborer or servant would like to pass after dusk or before cockcrow along the wide carriage-way that leads to the 'castle,' which is a long mile distant. Tall oaks shadow it over, making an arcade of their branches in the summer time, through which the sun's rays never pierce, and in the winter wave their ghost-like arms, as if to scare them off its gloomy breadth.

Yet it was to the gate-lodge at the entrance of this lonely carriage-drive that, late in an October night eight years ago, there came a man leading a horse by the bridle. He shook the iron gate furiously which separated the road from the demesne; but it was a night when sounds like that were not to be heard a yard away. The storm screamed through the huge trees that towered above its walls on each side of the gate and above the lodge, and tore through its stacked chimneys with a very diapason of fury. The lodge was situated about ten paces beyond and to the right of the gate. The applicant for entrance halloed and shouted with might and main; but the great winds lifted their voices still higher, and the rains that they bore upon their breadth fell in plashing torrents, enough to drown all other sounds which was not nearer than their own.

'I'll not get in to-night,' he muttered between his teeth.

He looked around him, as if thinking what to do. His eye fell upon the horse, whose head was drooping, and which he could feel shivering with the cold and rain. The sight roused him to adopt a new expedient. 'Hould up your head, Rattler,' said he; 'whatever I might stand myself, I'm not going to see the best hunter that ever crossed a fence, though he's stiff and old now, murdered be a winther's night. I'll bring them out.'

The man stooped and lifting up a splinter of stone, stood a little distance from the gate, and flung it, endeavoring to reach the window with the blow. After it had left his hand he stood listening, and heard it strike against the wall and drop to the ground below the house. 'A bad aim,' said he, 'the next 'll be better.' Again he tried the experiment, and a loud crash was the response of success. He had broken the glass. The door of the lodge was quickly opened, and a low thick-set man appeared at the threshold, in the light that streamed from within into the darkness. 'Who's there?' he shouted, 'friend or foe?'

'Open the gate!' yelled the waiter outside.

'It's Jemmy the huntsman!' said he, as if in reply to some observation from some one in the lodge. 'Give me the keys.'

'Why didn't ye come home earlier, Jemmy?' said he, as he proceeded leisurely to unlock the gate; 'an' you mightn't brake the window.'

'Why didn't ye open the gate, an' I wouldn't?' was the fierce reply of the other; 'but I don't want to be losing my time talking to you now. Give me a lantern an' a light in it, till I get up to the house at wanst. I have the key iv the stables, and don't want to be delaying this poor animal while I wake up Katty Flaherty to let me in there, as I had to wake up you. Give me the light at wanst.'

'Don't be in such a hurry, man; you've time enough,' answered the other, walking into the lodge leisurely, from whence he seemed to have no great desire to emerge.

'G' me the light, man, an' don't keep me here all night!' roared the man whom we see addressed as Jemmy the huntsman.

'Here it is, Jemmy M'Cabe; here it is,' said the other; 'fair an' aisy goes far in a day, where foul an' saucy never makes a step. Here's your light now, and take care o' yourself going up to that pleasant place above. Throth, I'd rather not be goin' up wid ye.'

'Hugh Dalton, mind you your business, and I'll take care of mine,' said the huntsman, taking the lantern from the lodge-keeper, and turning away under the dark arches of the trees, that now bent and swayed and writhed to the will of the wind above the lonely avenue.

As the man and his horse went onward the darkness became yet more dense, and the storm blew so strong against them, that their steps became slower. Crashing branches from time to time dropped down from amidst the tossing boughs, and tripped the wayfarer and his steed. 'Cross o' Christ about us!' he muttered.—'Rattler, agrab, we've been out many a time, but a time like this I never remember afore: I pray the saints we may get home safe an' together.'

Struggling along, they had passed for some time, when a faint and distant sound, like a bugle note afar off, swept by on the wind. 'No, Rattler!' exclaimed the huntsman; and he listened in excited breathlessness to try to catch the tone as it fluted away. The pause apparently satisfied him. 'Well, well,' said he, resuming his journey, and talking aloud, like a man who wished to hear his own voice, 'what an old fool I am, and my heart batn' like a child's, that hears a noise that frightens it; me that was out daylight and darkness, about this place for a matter of forty years; me that looked many a time at death himself, and dar'd him, when a ditch yawned like the grave to kill horse and rider! A whistlin' win' and a dark night makes a gom o' me in my old days, when I ought to have more sense. Come on, Rattler boy!' said he, patting the horse affectionately.

A flash of lightning at this moment—and in this unusual season of the year for its appearance

—for a brief interval brightened up all the vista; and so intense was its brightness, that the shadows of the trees fell across the avenue as though the noonday sun had cast them upon it. This was succeeded by a thunder-peal, stunning in its report, which was caught up amongst the neighboring hills, and reverberated from height to height like a giant's laughter, with hoarse imitation. Flash after flash spread across the skies now; and as if the wind were worsted in this terrible battle of nature, it grew less fierce in its sweep. Again there rose in the succeeding hush the bugle note, still faint and distant, but preternaturally clear. The horse lifted his head; and with ear cocked and eye staring in the dull light from the lantern, neighed shrilly, as if in response to the sounds.

'May the Lord keep us!' exclaimed the huntsman, in accents that betrayed agitation. 'Rattler, them is no earthly bounds called by that bugle; the Ghost's Hunt is out now. I'm not the fool I thought I was, after all.' His breath came thick and fast as he said, 'The baste hard it now as well as me; an' there's Death over the house iv Warnham! Here!' said he, 'I'm to meet horror, let it be where I often met it afore. They're well kep' that God keeps.' He steadied the horse, put his foot in the stirrup, and mounting him, pursued his way: while the animal lifted his head restlessly and quickly from time to time, as he walked rapidly along, and from side to side peered into the darkness.

CHAPTER II.

It was on this same night, but earlier than the occurrence of the incidents we have related, that a caleche, travel-stained and dripping, drove up to the door of the Warnham Arms tavern, in the prosperous town of Warnham. A tall man stepped from it, and walked with long though rapid strides into the large room that, in those days, served for bar-room and sitting-room. As he came into the light he was scanned by the loungers about the place, as loungers about country hotels, even to this day, look at a new comer. He was above the middle height, with great breadth of shoulder and density of limb: but his strength was the strength that grows not so much from conformation as from use, and was, too, of that class that seems more the power of agility than the force of thews and sinews. He wore a large coat, made of bear-skin; and it was of a peculiar shape, having no collar, in those days of collars, but fitting closely around the neck. He took off the broad and straggly-leaved hat he wore, and shook it, to cast of the damp that lay copiously on it. His face was bearded 'like a pard;' and this alone, in times when beards were not worn, gave him a strange and foreign appearance. The profusion of this appendage, black as a raven's wing, concealed all the lower part of his face; but the upper revealed a majestic and handsome countenance.—A brow that the Greek Adonis could not rival, whereon the hair lay in the classic curls of antique taste; an eye dark and brilliant, that flashed from arches that well beseemed a palace for thought in the face they adorned, with their long, light, and slightly-curved sweep: the skin was sallow, but sallow as if with the burning ardor of foreign suns; and there was something in the glance that told of unrest. It settled for a moment nowhere, but quick and watchful scanned, and set itself upon point after point, and person after person around, like the look of a man who has kept many a dangerous vigil, and did not dare to sleep on them.

'Wet night, sir,' said the Boniface of the Warnham Arms, 'and stormy, too.'

'Give me some brandy,' was the reply of the new comer. 'Here, postillion,' he said, calling to the man who had driven him; 'here's your fare. I shall not want you any further.'

The dismissed postillion, though the rain was coming faster and the storm beginning, remounted his horse and drove away.

The stranger turned from the door where he held this brief colloquy, and approached the bar. He took up the tumbler in which the host had poured out a glassful of brandy, and said, 'Half fill it, man!—you will be paid for it.'

'I don't fear that, sir,' said the host, comply-

ing with the directions given him. 'Shall we prepare a bed for you, sir, and get in your luggage?'

'No, sir! I have no luggage, and I will not sleep here,' was the curt reply, as the stranger put the glass to his lips, and drained it at a draught.

'Is there a new road to Warnham Castle,' he asked; 'or is there any change in the old one?'

'There is no change,' was the answer.

'That is a mercy,' said the stranger, buttoning his coat around him, and walking out amidst the darkness into the gloom of the rising storm. The departure of the stranger was the signal for a general loosening of the tongues of the groups that were scattered here and there through the room.

'Well, said the host, after a gaze of wonderment toward the open door, and in answer to the general inquiries as to who the stranger might be, 'guests of that sort were not usually received at Warnham Castle when I was house-steward there, before Lord Charles went away. I was in it since I was a boy, and ought to know something about it; but surely if he's going there, he will have company good enough for him in Jemmy the huntsman.'

'What a change there is over that place!' chimed-in a voice from the group around the fire. 'Where is the young lord, or is he alive at all?'

'I know no more about his lordship,' said the host; 'than you do. And it hurts me sometimes to think that; for I loved the boy, and a fine open-hearted boy he was. It's now twelve years gone since my eyes beheld him. He galloped down from the castle that day as if he was mad, to this house, which I was after getting. He rode his favorite hunter, Rattler, and though it's only three miles to the castle from this spot, if the horse was after going forty, he could not be worse. The sweat was rolling off him like rain, and he blew as the hardest run ever he went with the dogs never made him blow before. 'Get me a carriage, Jones,' he shouted at me, 'and put your best horses to it! Quick, man,' said he, 'quick! I'm mad!'

'What did you say?' asked one of the listeners.

'Say! nothing; I could say nothing. He wasn't a man to be trifled with when he wanted any thing done. I got the carriage ready for his lordship, and he went into it, and my eyes I never laid on him since. The next news I heard was that all the establishment was to be broken up. The horses were sold—all but Rattler, which it seems he ordered to be kept whilst he lives; the dogs and carriages and furniture, except in the old rooms, were all auctioned off too; the servants were all dismissed, and no one kept but three,—Jemmy M'Cabe the huntsman, the housekeeper, an' Hugh Dalton, the son of the head gamekeeper. A bad sort, that same Hugh was.'

'There was a cause for the baste of the lord that day,' said the former speaker from the fire-side.

'Oh, there was,' answered the host, shaking his head; 'but the dead ought to be let rest, and especially when the absent can't defend themselves.'

'That's a strange story,' said his interrogator, 'about the Ghost's Hunt.'

'Oh, yes,' replied the host; 'all great families have some legend following their name; and,' he said, with a touch of pride, 'why not the Warnhams, who are amongst the oldest families of this or any other country?'

'I never heard that legend rightly,' pursued the interrogator; 'what is it?'

'Well, it does not want many words to tell it,' said the host of the Warnham Arms; 'for it is all printed in a book in the library of the castle. I often read it. In the time of the invasion of Ireland by King Henry the Seventh—'

'Second, you mean,' said the speaker who had forced the tale from the host.

'Well, Second—yes, to be sure, Henry the Second. One of the barons that came to Ireland was Ralph, Baron de Warnham. His father had come from Normandy with the Conqueror, and when the Normans settled in Eng-

land, he received vast estates there. He was a fierce fighter in war, and a grasping man in peace, and profited by both. He died at last with many a manor and castle in his possession; and died suddenly too; and his son Ralph de Warnham succeeded him before he was of age. He had all the bad qualities of his father, and united to them a reckless disposition, and utter want of fear of God or man. In the society of the coarse uneducated chivalry of the time—for it was even a wonder for kings to be able to write and read—Ralph de Warnham was first in all manner of devilry: possessed of immense resources from his lands, his life was a round of profligacy and waste. He staked fair estates on a single cast of dice, and won with incredible luck; often he fought duels with defeated gamblers as readily as he made a wager, and in play and combat was equally fortunate. For a long time this was his fate; but it had a turn, and he lost. He lost all his ill gotten gains first, and then he staked what his father, the first baron, had left him.

'Fortune wavered for a while, but like a jade she deserted him at last. Mauor after manor, lordship after lordship, fled with her, and 'wicked Ralph' found himself at last with only his sword as his seignory. He lived for some time as best he could, but he found the pain of dependence a hard pain to bear, and got cold looks and cold welcome from those with whom he had revelled wildest. It was about this time the expedition to Ireland was projected, and the invaders, by all accounts, could have no readier swordsman or more desperate leader than Ralph de Warnham amongst them. Ralph de Warnham had no better choice. He joined their troops; and every one else having been provided for, Ralph got leave to provide for himself wherever he could; and when he had chosen his ground, he was to have all the land his horse could go round in a day. This is the story. He was keen now; the experiences of his changes from a rich lord to a poor adventurer taught him wit, and Ralph chose a summer day to take his ride for fortune. With the proper witness he set out at sunrise, and rode round a circuit of fifty miles before night. He ended his journey at the house of an Irish chief, which stood where Warnham Castle stands now; and fierce Ralph, in his most gentle manner, for he was used to courts and nobles, and could be gentle, craved hospitality and rest. He got it freely, and in the morning dawn rode away to Dublin. There arrived, he described the principality he possessed by virtue of the king's privilege and the fleetness of his horse, and promised booty and wealth to all who would aid him to take and keep it by the sword. Many a man-at-arms he got, and not a few of better rank to join him; and before the summer was gone in its glory from the hills, Ralph de Warnham was one evening at the gate of the fortalice of the Irish chieftain. The gate was open, as it was the custom of those ancient people, and that armed train entered it. The Irish chief questioned Ralph what he and his retinue wanted, and he answered, juggling with him, 'The shelter of your roof.' That was cheerfully given. And with generosity such as they always exercised, the board was spread with all that the hospitality of the time could give, and the strangers made merry and welcome. Liquors were served of all descriptions, and the guests enjoyed themselves well, but sparingly. In the midst of the merry-making the Irish chief said, as his guests must be wearied, and as they might be travelling on the morrow, they might wish to retire.

'Pardon, sir chief,' said the wicked Ralph; 'there is yet a mssive I must notice you with. Guard the door,' he exclaimed to his esquire.

'In a moment all the Normans stood up, forming in two bodies, the one beside Ralph, and the other at the door.

'Your liege and mine,' he exclaimed, 'has granted to me, Ralph de Warnham, all those lands around in a circuit which I have described and marked. Willt be his vassal?'

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