

and with a piercing shriek she turned full round, till the shuddering occupants of the gateway could see the glare of her awful black eyes and the ghastly glimmer of her pale face; but, fearful as these things were, there was a sight still more ghastly in hands and arms stained red with blood, a blood-bespattered night dress, and the fact that the terrible creature seemed to carry with her a light which made everything about her distinctly visible, and showed the red stains as bright as if they had been quite fresh.

She stayed but an instant, when, gathering her scanty garment about her and hiding her hands in it as well as possible, she ran swiftly across the yard, mounted a stairway, proceeded a little way along the gallery, and disappeared at a place where there was no apparent opening in the wall.

Meanwhile, the two people in the gateway remained transfixed by varying emotions, in which it must be confessed that fear predominated. For a moment after the creature had vanished both remained silent and almost breathless, looking for it to appear again, but it did not; and Barnard at last broke the silence by saying, "I think, Miss Mordaunt, that we have just been favoured with a visit from the ghostly protectress of Castlewood, and by Heavens! I do not like her looks, and shall not rest until I am rid of her."

"Then you do not believe in the supernatural character of what we have just seen?" asked Miss Mordaunt nervously.

"I will not commit myself yet by giving an opinion," he answered; "but I intend to sift the mystery to the bottom; and then, if tricks are being played— But I must request you in any case to say nothing inside about our adventure for the present."

"You lay a rather heavy load upon a woman's tongue, Mr. Barnard," she said. "I cannot look upon this with the same sang-froid that you appear to do. I confess that I was very much frightened, and all the time I felt, and still feel, a sensation of pity for that dreadful wretch, who carries about with her such revolting evidences of crime and misfortune. For what ages she must have tried to wash them away one may know by the terrible despair which sounds in her cry."

"That may well be," he replied, "if there be any meaning in the vision. But, Miss Mordaunt, you must be tired and shaken. Pray, let me conduct you to the house."

So saying he dismounted, and, turning to his companion, lifted her out of the saddle. He then rang a bell, the rope of which hung close by his hand; and a groom having come to take charge of the horses, he led Miss Mordaunt into the house, where he bade her good-night. A moment or two later the riding party arrived, and Barnard had to receive them and answer the oft-repeated questions as to Miss Mordaunt's safety. So soon as he could separate himself from his guests he sought out Mordaunt, with whom he sat late into the night discussing what had occurred, and maturing a plan for the clearing up of the mystery.

II.

Barnard courted sleep in vain that night, and rose at the first peep of dawn to ride off some of the disagreeable effects of the visions with which he had been haunted. At breakfast time he met his guests with his usual manner, and gave and received the greetings of the season. So soon, however, as he could do so with decency, he excused himself, on the ground of very urgent business, and, with Mordaunt, began to put in operation the scheme of the preceding evening. First, by minute enquiries among the servants, they ascertained that no one else had seen the strange apparition. Their next care was carefully to examine the place at which it had disappeared, but they found no opening in the wall or in the floor of the gallery that would have allowed even a mouse to pass through. The wall was solid and substantial stone, and the stone flags with which the gallery was paved did not seem to have been disturbed for ages. In one of these, however, a bit of iron was found, which looked as if it might have been a portion of a staple, and in that case it was not improbable that it had held a ring and been used as a handle to pull open a trap covering some hidden passage-way like those often found in houses of the same date and character as Castlewood.

This discovery lent a new zest to their search, and as their own efforts would have been utterly unavailing to move the ponderous stone, the necessary appliances for such work were at once procured, together with two strong farm labourers to handle them. Under the vigorous application of an iron bar the flag gradually yielded, and in a little time was so much loosened that it was easily removed. When this had been done, an aperture of about three feet square was revealed, giving admission to a stairway built of narrow blocks of stone. Barnard at once stepped upon the topmost stair, and began to descend, but soon found the darkness so impenetrable and the way so dangerous that, without great risk to life and limb, he could not proceed further. The steps were covered with damp and slime and completely blocked up in many places with loose stones and rubbish. Returning with difficulty, Barnard procured a light, and directing the servants to go away and say nothing about what they had seen, turned again to the strange stairway, followed by Mordaunt.

With infinite trouble and danger they went down and down until Barnard thought they must be on a level with the foundations of the Hall, when the descent ceased, and they found themselves in an arched passage, running at right angles with the stairs. It was too narrow to permit of more than one advancing at a time, and so low that a man of ordinary stature could not stand erect in it. Some difficulty was at first experienced by the explorers in deciding which way to turn, but Barnard, after having

made excursions on either hand, resolved to go to the left, being determined in this course by the fact that the floor was in this direction strewn with loose stones of a similar character to those which had impeded their descent. As they advanced, they were several times obliged to creep over almost insurmountable barriers of the same material. At last a bar was presented to their further progress, in the shape of a loose wall of small stones, built across the path, and reaching to the ceiling. The work had been roughly done, and looked like that of an inexperienced person, who had not the strength to lift stones of a size sufficient to give his structure anything like substantiality. There was nothing for it but to remove this wall, or to turn back, and both men decided at once on going forward. As they proceeded with their work, they found that three courses of stone had been built up, and began to think that they had come to the end of the passage, when Barnard encountered with his hand a wooden door. This discovery imparted a renewed vigour to their labours, and they toiled on until at last a space sufficient to permit of the opening of the door had been cleared. It opened outwards without difficulty, and gave admission to a low vaulted chamber, with ceiling, walls and floor of solid masonry. A dim ray of light stole in through a grating in the wall and fell upon a mouldering skeleton, which was the only object to attract attention. About this place there was none of the dampness met with in the passage and stairway, but its atmosphere was dry and warm compared with that they had just left. Beside the skeleton there was a dark stain upon the floor, with a human foot-print distinctly visible in it, and near the bones of one of the outstretched hands a piece of parchment, the only other object that seemed to have resisted the ravages of time and decay. For a long time the two friends looked at each other without speaking. At last Barnard broke the awful stillness and said:

"Charlie, what in God's name can this mean?"

"Heaven knows," Mordaunt answered; "but let us look about a little; perhaps we may find something that will clear up the mystery."

Nothing further was found, however, save the scrap of parchment, on which the only thing that could be deciphered was the name of Sir William Mordaunt.

They returned with what speed they could to the upper regions, and with the aid of a couple of servants had the bones removed. Meanwhile the long absence of Barnard and Mordaunt had been remarked upon by the guests, and as there was nothing to conceal, everything that had occurred was related to them, and was, in a little time, noised abroad over the whole country side.

A diligent enquiry which Barnard caused to be made left no room to doubt that the remains which he had found were those of Sir William Mordaunt, who had disappeared during the reign of King Henry the Seventh, and shortly after the completion of the new Hall. By his demise his mother, of whom tradition still spoke as the wicked Lady Mordaunt, had found means to secure the succession to the estates in her younger son Robert and his heirs, and partially to disinherit the children of the ill-fated Sir William. From all the circumstances connected with the case, too, it would also appear that this wicked woman had with her own hands taken her son's life, and that her wretched spirit was condemned to hover around the scene of her crime, and perhaps to act it over and over again. However this may be, Castlewood was never again troubled by a ghost; and Barnard, on learning these facts, at once offered to restore Castlewood to Mordaunt, who, as being the only remaining heir of the elder branch of the Mordaunt's, might, perhaps, have laid claim to it. But the latter positively declined to accept this sacrifice on the part of his friend.

Notwithstanding this, a Mordaunt did actually come to reign in Castlewood again, for on the following Christmas Day there was a mistress to preside over the festivities of that hospitable mansion, and Barnard was heard to bless old Lady Mordaunt's ghost for having led him to see in her descendant a woman worthy to be loved, for he vowed that he never could have cared for a simpering miss who would have cried out at anything that frightened her.

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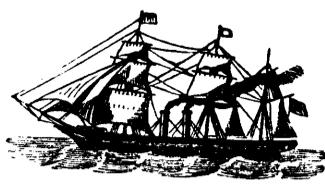
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