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WHAT HAPPENED AT BEAUVOIR
ON
CHRISTMAS EVE.

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CHAPTER III.

A few days after the death of Yvette, M. de Leoville went off on a visit to an old friend who lived on the St. Lawrence, not far from Montreal. The leaves of the maples were now beginning to assume their deep scarlet tints and wrap the old Manor in a glow of autumnal glory. Marguerite, at this time, looked somewhat pale and anxious, and M. de Leoville proposed to take her with him, under the impression that she required a change of scene and air, but he forgot that only a week or two had elapsed since Charles de Grandville had left for the West Indies, whither the regiment had been ordered.

M. de Leoville had been gone, perhaps, a week, when Marguerite had a strange dream—at least so she considered it, according to a passage in her Diary, which I shall translate somewhat freely, as an introduction to a series of unaccountable incidents which disturbed the inmates of Beauvoir for some time.

"I had such a very strange dream last night—so real did it seem that even now, whilst writing with the soft sunlight coming through the foliage of the plants on the window-ledge, and playing fantastic tricks on this page, I feel all in a tremble. I was a little feverish, I know, when I went to bed last night, and my aunt, ever kind, ever considerate, wanted to coddle me with some musty doses which she considers specifics for colds; but I resisted with success—at least I got a respite by promising that I would take the medicine to-day, if I did not feel better after a night's rest. Tossing for a while in my bed, I fell at last asleep, a little past midnight, for I heard the big clock down stairs strike the hour whilst I was dozing off. I woke once, and then I am sure fell asleep again: for I dreamt that I saw my grandfather, dressed just as he is in his portrait, in a richly embroidered court dress, with rapier by his side, standing close to the screen in the *salon*. His hat was closely bent over his face, and he vanished behind the screen in an instant—faded away as it were in the air. So faithful was the dream, that I could even see in the moonlight the figures on the screen, which is placed before the door leading to the passage to the old tower which no one now ever enters. How startled I was to find the door between my room and the *salon* opened this morning. I must have neglected to lock it last night, and it of course flew open—an old trick of that troublesome door. I walked into the *salon*, as soon as I was dressed, and wondered how accurately I had seen everything in my dream—sometimes I think I must have been half asleep, in a sort of dreamy wakefulness, and looked into the *salon* unconsciously; but then I could only see the screen, and not the portrait, which is hung in a recess hidden by the open door of my room. My grandfather looked down on me, with that peculiar smile which the painter has given him, and I scolded him well for having given me such a fright. I wonder if the dream is intended as a warning—I must ask old Marie Nicolet what it means—I wish very much that my dear father were here, for I am afraid sometimes that his health is rapidly failing him. Of course, my aunt, to whom I told my dream, said that I ought to have taken her advice last night, and that means, I must have the medicine this evening; but if I do, sure am I that I will have a far worse dream before the morning."

However, despite the expectations of our fair heroine, she was not troubled by a recurrence of the vision that night—whether it was owing to the fact that she locked the door, or because she did not really take her aunt's medicine, she naively confessed she could not tell. But two nights later her aunt and herself were startled out of their sleep—their rooms were opposite to each other—by a succession of screams, and Marie and Josephite, the maid servants who slept in an upper flight, literally threw themselves into the former's room.

"The Virgin protect us," said little Marie, a pretty French girl, when she had recovered sufficiently to speak coherently, "but I have had a fearful fright. You must know, Mdlle., that both Josephite and me did not go to bed as early as usual, as we were getting ready for Marie Nicolet, who comes to-morrow to clean up Master's rooms; but hardly had we got upstairs, when we heard a noise as if some one was tumbling over something in the lower hall."

"There's that troublesome dog," said Josephite, "we never locked him up in the room off the kitchen; unless we get him down stairs he will be howling and making a noise at Mademoiselle Marguerite's room."

"So Josephite said she would wait at the head of the stairs whilst I drove him down; but when I got into the hall, and saw nothing of him, I thought he must have gone into the drawing-room, the door of which was open. I called gently to Josephite to come down—for I did not wish to disturb you or Mdlle., and then went into the drawing-room, but just as

I got inside, what a fearful sight I saw. *Mon Dieu*, I saw standing in the room—his head almost reaching to the ceiling—the ghost of M. de Leoville, just as he looks in the large picture—with his sword above his head; and as he moved it towards me, I screamed, and fell into Josephite's arms."

"And it's true what Marie says," added Josephite; "she must have seen something terrible, for she nearly fainted—I had to drag her upstairs with me."

"But you saw nothing yourself, Josephite," asked Mdlle. Letellier, much perplexed.

"Oh, no," replied Josephite, "I was a little way behind with the light."

"Whatever it was," said Marie, "it seemed to fade away in an instant; I shut my eyes for I could not bear to look at it."

"Foolish girls," said Mdlle. Letellier, "you have been talking about *les gobelins* to-night, and must have seen some shadow on the wall, or the moonlight playing with the picture of the Seigneur, and with all kinds of horrible stories which old Marie has told you, in your head, you have been ready to imagine anything. Go to bed now, and instead of talking silly nonsense, go to sleep."

Marie, however, persisted in her story, and both she and Josephite denied that they had been talking about ghosts with Marie Nicolet, for some time; but Mdlle. Letellier was perfectly well aware that the latter, who was a Norman, was very superstitious, and constantly filling the ears of the girls with nonsense. She was, however, a little puzzled when she remembered that the servants had described just what Marguerite had dreamed. Marguerite declared that she had told her version to nobody but her aunt, and began to doubt whether it was a dream after all. Taking everything into account, both the ladies were very much perplexed, though they could not believe in the supernatural interpretation.

Of course, this incident made a great talk in the house all the next day, and the two girls told it with not a few additions—even Josephite worked herself at last into the belief that she had seen the apparition as well as little Marie. In the course of the day, old Marie Nicolet did not help to allay their fears by her narration of old legends and stories current in Normandy—the land of superstitious fancy and legendary lore—how *les gobelins* guarded treasures of gold, diamonds, pearls, and other precious stones, which mortals had sometimes seen but had never been able to touch, because the secret by which the keeper was to be won over, had been lost for ever. She told them, too, how an uncle of her mother had seen one Christmas Eve in the forest of Dreux, *l'homme blanc*, who towered above the tallest trees around him, but before he could reach the cave where the treasure had been concealed for ages, he heard the bells ring a merry peal, and knew that the hour of the mid-night mass was over, and that *l'homme blanc* had returned again to watch over the piles of gold which were only left unguarded for a brief spell at the hallowed season of the year.

Both the girls shuddered when they heard these stories, and little Marie whispered hardly above her breath, as if afraid some spirit was hovering about them.

"They say the old Seigneur buried a lot of treasure before he died."

"It may be so," replied the old woman, with a cunning shake of the head. "We know that it has been often said that the ghosts of those who had died suddenly, with some great secret on their minds, wake up from their graves, from time to time, and walk uneasily about the scene of their former life. If I were M. de Leoville, I would have many masses said for the peace of his father's soul."

Nothing now would satisfy the two girls except the presence every night of Eustache, the old woman's son—a stout, good looking young man, with a somewhat cunning eye—Mdlle. Letellier could not refuse the permission—in fact, she had herself thought more than once of having Eustache about the chateau, all the time of the Seigneur's absence. She seized the opportunity, however, of warning old Marie against stuffing the ears of the two girls with her wild stories; but Marie was a true Norman and rather pitied the ignorance of Mdlle. in such matters.

For several days after this incident nothing occurred to disturb the inmates of the chateau, although Marie, who slept with Josephite in a little room above the *salon*, declared that she had heard strange noises, more than once, apparently from the direction of the tower. When Eustache was appealed to, he replied that he had certainly heard the branches of the maples tossing against the windows when the wind was high at night, an explanation which turned the laugh against poor little Marie, whose silly head was so crammed with ghost stories that she could hardly sleep quietly, and would never approach the tower and the adjoining rooms, except she was accompanied by some one less timid than herself.

But when Eustache himself confessed that he had seen strange lights glimmering from a window of the tower, and heard footsteps within its deserted precincts, the fears of the servants began even to affect Mademoiselle and her niece, and both looked anxiously for the return of the Seigneur. The ruined tower, always an object of awe to the timorous

habitants, was now invested with real terrors. For years no one had ventured within its ruined walls—no joyful birds ever darted through the gaping windows and enlivened its dreary solitude with their thrills of melody. Once, a swallow had built its nest within the rusty, grimy bell, but the fastening had given way before its little ones were fully fledged, and the brazen monitor, so long disused, had fallen to the floor beneath, where it lay with the debris of the ruined walls and roof. The tower was indeed a place about which weirdlike fancy would love to linger. When the storm swept around it at night, the rafters, worm-eaten and festooned with dusty cobwebs, would give forth a dismal creak and rattle, and the wind would shriek so wildly, that the superstitious *habitant* would pass hurriedly by and tell his friends when he reached his home that of a certainty the ghosts of the reckless guests of the gala days of Beauvoir were assembling that night in wild mocking of the festivities that might come no more.

No one, however, again heard or saw the ghost, the apparition of the old lord of the Manor. Perhaps, as old Marie said, his season of wandering was over, and he had again sought the repose of the grave. M. de Leoville was now expected home, and Eustache asked permission to go to Quebec, as he wished to see a man who had offered him steady employment as soon as his master had returned, but he promised to try and get back before the family had retired to rest. Ten o'clock came, but no signs of Eustache, and the inmates went to bed at their usual time. The girls were much disappointed at his failure to keep his promise, but they had the consolation of knowing that M. de Leoville would be home on the following day, and that they could then dispense with Eustache's presence in the chateau.

Eustache was not seen or heard of on the next day when M. de Leoville returned in better health and spirits than he had enjoyed for months. He only laughed at the fright of the family in his absence, and said that it was nothing more than was to be expected of a lot of women left by themselves. No news, however, came from Eustache, and little Marie was quite positive that he had been spirited away by *les gobelins*, and began seriously to think of leaving a house where they had clearly possession. Old Marie appeared to know nothing about her son, and was very much worried after a while. M. de Leoville, however, believed that he had got tired of his dull life with his old mother, and had gone off suddenly to see something of the world, and that there was little doubt that he would turn up as soon as anybody really wanted him. At first, Marie Nicolet shook her head knowingly when her acquaintances sympathized with her for being left all alone in the little cottage, and replied that she knew Eustache would come or send for her before long; but when nearly three months had gone, and she heard nothing from her son, she became very morose and irritable, and at last shut herself up continually at home, and would not see Estelle or others who pitied and wished to console the poor, forlorn creature.

All the while Charles de Grandville was with his regiment in the West Indies, exposed to all the risks that men, nurtured in the north, must run beneath the sun of the tropics. The life of the inmates was, perhaps, more monotonous than ever, for they saw very little society, and even Estelle was indisposed to accept the invitations which she frequently received from many kind friends.

Marguerite's chief pleasure now was derived from the letters of Charles de Grandville, who was becoming more hopeful of receiving his promotion. Faithfully did she perform her duties to her father, who did not feel quite as strong when the cold weather came on—never repining because she had so few opportunities for enjoying the amusements of girls of her own age and station. So faithful a daughter would make a faithful wife, and Charles de Grandville would indeed be a happy man, his friends acknowledged, when he could stand with her at the altar; but that time still seemed very distant. They would write to each other courageously, but there is little doubt that de Grandville's heart was sometimes very weary of waiting. We know what Marguerite's feelings were at this time, for we have her diary before us, to hold up a mirror to her maiden heart. The father and lover were ever present in her thoughts, and it would be very difficult to say which of them she loved the best; but I must remember my resolution of not violating the secrets of that confiding and sincere girl.

CHAPTER IV.

READER, at some time or other in your life, you must have been awakened suddenly from sleep by the cry of "Fire," and heard the bells peal with hurried stroke, and the engines hurrying to the scene in mad emulation of each other. But you who dwell in the large town, with all the contrivances that money can furnish for combating the dreadful element, cannot imagine the terror with which the same cry is heard in a lonely country house within the recesses of the forest. If you have ever been so situated, then you can understand the horror with which the inmates

of Beauvoir heard the cry of "Fire" on the Christmas Eve immediately following the departure of Charles de Grandville—you see I fall unconsciously into Estelle's habit of dating everything, and connecting everything with the young officer.

It was a lovely winter night, the moon was lighting up the pure white snow which lay on the sward before the house, or hung lightly upon the horizontal branches of the firs that clad the bank which sloped gently from the ruined tower to the brink of the river, now firmly held by icy fetters.

The smoke was filling the upper rooms, and the fire could be heard crackling fiercely amid the dry timbers below, while the inmates hurried on with a few clothes and gathered, almost panic-stricken, under the protecting branches of the maples in front of the Manor. Mademoiselle and her niece at that moment, as they stood in the frosty air thought little of themselves or of the destruction of the home that had so long sheltered them and their family before them, but much more of the probable effects of the exposure upon M. de Leoville, who could hardly be persuaded to wrap himself in a large buffalo robe, which one of the women brought from an outhouse by the order of his sister. Feeble as he was he wished to assist those who were endeavouring to save something from the flames, and would more than once have endangered his life had it not been for the expostulations of the ladies of his family.

Beauvoir was doomed by the time assistance arrived from the neighbouring village. So inflammable were the old cedar timbers throughout this aged mansion, that the fire took very little time to complete its work. As it spread with furious impetuosity a trivial incident occurred, of significance, however, to some of the more superstitious spectators who were assembled beneath the maples, unable to do much more than watch the progress of the flames.

An effort had been made to save a few pieces of furniture, but the flames had got such control of the building before assistance came that little could be done in this way. Some pictures, among other things, had been brought down from the drawing-room, which was one of the last rooms to catch fire, but before the venturesome *habitants* could finish the work they were forced to desist, and leave the burning Manor. Among the articles they left behind them in their hurry to escape the fierce heat and the flames, was the portrait of the former Seigneur, which was laid against the window, with its face to the spectators. In the brilliant glare of the surrounding flames, the old man's perpetual smile came out with rare fidelity, and more than one superstitious spectator averred that his eyes sparkled, and his lips parted as if in mockery of the misfortunes of his ruined family. Little Marie, who was in the midst of the throng below, afterwards declared, when she told the story of this memorable night, that she had seen *les gobelins* dancing amid the flames, and disappearing ever and anon up the wide-throated chimneys with wild shrieks. But she was not the only person who related the story of the burning of Beauvoir with many embellishments, derived from mere imagination, for some of the *habitants*, in after days, were wont to tell how the old bell in the tower was tolled, as the fire progressed, by some invisible hand, and this was certainly true to the extent that when the fire had loosened the walls, so that a portion of them gave way, the bell itself fell with a single, prolonged peal, which sounded, indeed, dismal in the ears of the startled spectators.

The fire soon caught the old canvass of the Seigneur's portrait, and curling it up an instant, sent it away into the air with a volume of smoke and flame. For a while, then, when the fire had completed its work of destruction in the *salon*, it sent long forks of flame through the passage connecting the main building with the tower, but they could do little harm in that old ruin, and soon left it for want of fuel to appease their insatiable appetite, but not until they had effectively weakened a portion of the wall, which fell with a terrific crash, carrying away a side of the passage with it.

Christmas was one of those lovely bright days which are characteristic of a Canadian winter. The air was calm and still, the frost lay heavy on the window panes, and the snow had a glassy, crisp look, indicative of the severity of the cold. The church bells of Quebec gave forth a merry peal, which was carried through the clear air to the neighbouring villages, where every little chapel took up the strain and rang a peal in joyful welcoming of the Christmas morn.

M. de Leoville and the members of his family had found shelter in the house of a respectable *habitant* close by, and, happily, the former did not suffer anything except a little fatigue from the exposure of the night before. It was, indeed, a sad Christmas day for them all when they assembled in the principal room of the *habitant*, whose family were most devoted to their attentions to M. de Leoville and the ladies.

"Perhaps," he said to the good old priest who came over to see them in the course of the day, "the old chateau may not have had any great value in the eyes of richer men, but