

A Stammering Wife.

When deeply in love with Miss Emily Pryne, I vowed if the lady would only be mine;

I would always be ready to please her;
She blushed her consent, though the stammering lass
Said never a word except "You're an ass—
An ass—an ass—idiotous teazer!"

But when we were married, I found to my rath
The stammering lady had spoken the truth;

For often, in obvious dudgeon,
She'd say—if I ventured to give her a jog
In the way of reproof—"You're a dog—dog—dog—
A dog—a dog—matic curmudgeon!"

And once, when I said, "We can hardly afford
This immoderate style with our moderate board,"

And hinted we ought to be wiser,
She looked, I assure you, exceedingly blue,
And fretfully cried, "You're a Jew—Jew—Jew—
A very judicious adviser!"

Again, when it happened that, wishing to shirk
Some rather unpleasant and arduous work,

I begged her to go to a neighbor,
She wanted to know why I made such a fuss,
And saucily said, "You're a cuss—cuss—cuss—
You were always ac—cuss—toned to labor!"

Out of temper at last with the insolent dame,
And feeling the woman was greatly to blame,
To scold me instead of caressing,

I mimicked her speech, like a churl as I am,
And angrily said, "You're a dam—dam—dam—
A dam age instead of a blessing."

The Grave . . Digger's Daughter.

A RATTLE of musketry came from the direction of the village. The old grave-digger, Boloski, wakened by the noise, listened a moment to the sharp reports, then called aloud—"Milena! Milena!"

"Coming, father, coming!" she answered, and already the little naked feet showed themselves upon the rounds of the ladder which led from the loft.

"Did you hear them, Milena?" he cried; "the sounds of the gun-boats? They are fighting in the village?"—a violent attack of coughing interrupted his words, and another rattling volley.

Milena had descended just as she quitted her couch of straw—a young girl, tall, vigorous, and dressed only in a night robe.

"It is true, then!" said she, leaping the last steps—"it has come at last!"

"What, my child?" demanded the sick one.

"The Revolution has broken out to-night, which has been expected so long."

"Yes, and a great misfortune it is, too," mumbled Boloski, and he crouched again upon his couch. Milena, meanwhile, hurriedly arrayed herself in a wadded petticoat and her father's long boots. Binding a scarlet handkerchief about her abundant locks, she went out to learn what was passing.

The cemetery was situated on a hill surrounded by a low earthen wall, with the hut of the grave-digger standing at its gate. It was an excellent post of observation, yet Melina did not stop there, but passed on into the darkness, beneath the bare branches of the willows, upon which the ravens were already croaking, and with a single, careless glance upon the files of tombs, with their leaning crosses. Everything was mournful and desolate, everything covered by the melancholy shroud of winter. She herself walked in snow so deep and thick that it mounted almost to her knees. The cold was terrible,—the frozen breath of the night whipped and stung the skin like red-hot needles; but Milena only rubbed her face with a handful of snow, and buttoned her pelisse closer.

Below, in the heart of the valley, the village had delivered itself up to strife and bloodshed, yet here, upon this sacred ground, all was peace. A large cross rose in the middle of the inclosure, to which was attached the figure of the dying Saviour,—iceless pendant from the thorns which crowned his brow

and from the nails which pierced his hands and feet.

Milena listened intently; not a murmur for the moment broke the stillness. She stopped and gazed up at the heavens, the vast blue vault which seemed to her a satin canopy, retained in place by the golden nails which sparkled and scintillated above her, while beyond them, on the other side of the forest, rode the red disk of the rising moon.

All at once a gliding, crouching form passed her like a flash, a pair of glowing eyeballs glared into her own.

"A wolf!" she murmured, and, with an energetic movement, wherein shone all the savage strength of this child of nature, she seized a stone from a neighboring wall, and threw herself forward. A low howl responded to the stroke of her arm, and the hungry beast was gone as it had come—a shadow—through those files of tombs and spectral crosses.

A fresh crash of musketry sounded in the distance, another, and still another. Milena traversed at a run the slope of the road which led to the village, and, at the beginning of the first houses, met a neighbor and a wounded man, the wife, whom she knew well, supporting the husband, whose blood dyed the snow at every step.

"What is the matter?" demanded Milena.

"The peasants of our village," replied the man, "and of Mikonloff are struggling with the insurgents down by the cafe and the little wood. All goes well, however; the scythes are sharp and do their bloody mowing; the heads fall like grain!"

"So!" said Milena; and she aided the peasant woman to place her husband in his bed and to bind his wounds. Then she retraced her steps to tranquilize her father.

An hour later a loud knocking sounded upon the gate of the cemetery.

"See what it is, Milena," said the grave-digger again; and Milena, obeying the command, opened the wicket obstructed by frost, to find before it a row of sledges encompassed by horsemen, the barrels of their muskets and the blades of their sickles sparkling in the rays of the moon.

"Come, open the gate, old mole!" shouted a voice from the crowd—"open the gate, and open quickly. We bring you a score of distinguished guests!"

"But I want no guests!" replied Boloski from the interior. "I am ill, as you know well—I dare not go out in a night like this."

"Ill or no," cried the voice again, "the work must be done."

"Well, bury them yourselves, then."

"We cannot—we have not time."

"In that case," said Milena, brusquely, shutting the wicket to end the discussion, "tis I who will bury them for you." And she went out to open the gate to the four loaded sledges, bearing the dead bodies of the insurgents, and to the conquerors, armed with their bloody sickles and gleaming scythes.

"Throw them there upon the snow," said she to the mayor of the village, who greeted her as she appeared, with a friendly nod—"I'll start the business for you at the rising of the sun."

"No," said the mayor, "that would not be Christian—the wolves and ravens are already waiting to do their work—they must be buried now. You will receive for the job the usual sum; in addition to that two quarts of brandy, and, for your back, a new pelisse. Is it a bargain?"

"A bargain," she answered. "I'll begin when you say"—and with arms akimbo and robust fists upon her hips, she regarded the defile of peasants and sledges rapidly discharging their score of dead. Her beautiful face remained impassive; pity seemed a stranger to those hard features, and yet what charm, what passion in those great black eyes, in that sensitive nose, in that firm, severe mouth!

The mayor counted the money into her hand, put the bottle of brandy on the snow beside her, and the sledges slowly drew on again, the peasants following in their wake as silently as they had come.

"But the pelisse?" demanded Milena.

"To-morrow, when the work is done."

And the mayor also quitted the cemetery, and Milena took up her spade, and with a great swallow of brandy commenced to dig the first trench, crooning as she worked, the words of an ancient grave-digger's song.

The sad melody, monotonous and slow as befitted the song of the dead, was accompanied by the dull ringing of the iron upon the frozen ground and the distant howling of the hungry wolves.

Another swallow of brandy, another swing of her muscular arms, and so it went till the trench was done, and Milena, waiting a moment to regain her breath, gazed on the corpses.

"'Twas doubtless you," said she to an old man, with long, white curls, clad in a rich cloak, trimmed with zibeline, and in whose girdle sparkled a superb yataghan, "'twas doubtless you who led the band. Well, this time, too, you shall go before!"

And she took him in her arms like a little child, descended into the trench herself and gently laid him on the ground. With the others she was not so ceremonious, an arm, a leg, a shoulder—anything, in short, that served to lift and toss them to their bed in the ditch, helped her purpose.

"But God help me," she cried, suddenly, as before her in the snow lay stretched a bleeding trunk. "God help me, if it isn't the lord of Kamlet, that cursed Turk and oppressor of the poor!"

And she struck the face of the head that lay beside the trunk a blow which sent it rolling like a ball to the depths below.

Another swallow of brandy, a new body in the hole, then the tomb securely closed, Melina was ready to begin a second.

In the meantime, the moon rising higher and higher in the heavens, wrapped in its wan light the silent graves, the crucifix, the roofs of the now sleeping village and the vast and soundless plain.

And again the second trench ready, the grave-digger's daughter approached another group of dead, the face of the first one was covered with blood which had run from a cut in the head. At the same instant she heard a sigh—a long, shuddering breath that came from this body. Milena drew back hastily; courageous as she was, she felt her hair rise upon her head; and soon she saw that rigid body begin to stir.

He stilled, then. There was no longer a doubt of it! She caught him in her arms in order to succor him, rubbing with snow that face begrimed with blood and powder, and chafing his frozen hands. In a moment his eyes unclosed.

"Valerian!" his name upon Milena's lips was half a scream and half a cry of menacing anger.

She shook her head brusquely, thrust him from her and rose to her feet.

"Save you!" said she, with a calm more terrible than either rage or the joy of a glutted vengeance—"when it is God that has delivered you into my hands! You betrayed me—you now belong to me! Pray to your God, Valerian, perhaps he will be merciful, but from me expect no pardon!"

"You have forgotten, then, Milena, forgotten how I loved you!"

"No, I have forgotten nothing; but you, what have you done with all those vows? You! who ruined me—who, then, in spite of everything, left me for another! I shall not spare you—be sure of that!"

"You will not kill me?" groaned the unhappy one.

"Kill you? No!" She smiled with a glacial irony which made him shudder. "I shall only do my duty—I shall bury you, as I have received orders!"

"Bury me?" cried Valerian. "Bury me, living?"

"Why not?" responded Milena, with a burst of cruel laughter. "I must earn the sheepskin for my lack which the mayor promised me!"

"Have pity, Milena; for God's sake, do have pity!"

"Did you have pity upon me?" she answered sternly. "You, who have vowed me to sorrow and to shame! This for your beautiful love—behold it."

And she seized him by the shoulders and sought to thrust him in; but he, with that frightful death before him, had risen to his feet, and a furious struggle began between them—a hopeless struggle, too, for soon Valerian renounced all thought of wresting himself from the embrace of this savage creature. From loss of blood his strength was gone from him—he was but a child in her cruel hands!

"Mercy, Milena. I beseech you—mercy!"

She responded with a disdainful foot-thrust which sent him rolling into the gaping hole. A last time he struggled to his feet, his arms outstretched, and clasping her knees with supplicating gesture.

But his prayers only rendered her more ferocious still. She caught up her spade and struck his hands—their grasp relaxed, she struck again, a second, a third blow—he fell!

And Milena?

Milena, with one hand clenched upon her spade, the other doubled upon her hip, stood there and contemplated him with cold, fierce eyes and savage pleasure.

"Now," said she, "now, Valerian, are you mine?"

Then she began to crumble the earth between her fingers and to fill in the ditch, to fill it in and stamp it down, as she had filled and stamped the first, her voice firm and clear as ever, rising always in the chorus of her sinister song, and always accompanied by the sound of the clods falling one upon the other, by the ring of the spade, by the cawing crows circling hungrily above the heap of the unburied dead.

And, in the east, the first gray lights of the coming morning slowly spread themselves across the heavens, pale and cold as the smile upon the faces of the frozen clay.