

ADA DUNMORE;

OR, A MEMORABLE CHRISTMAS EVE.

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY,

BY MRS. LEPROHON,

Authoress of "Antoinette de Mirecourt," "Armand Durand,"
"Ida Beresford," "The Manor House of de Villersac,"
"Eva Huntingdon;" &c., &c.

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER I.—Continued.

"Hoity, toity! Some folks oughtn't carry their heads so high when they think of them that's belongin' to them. Thank God, none of our folks were ever threatened with a hempen collar yet!"

An undisguised general titter followed this speech, and then came an answer from another be-ribboned damsel, in a kindred strain.

Despite my masculine education, my abstract studies, my dippings into metaphysics and mathematics, I was anything but a philosopher at heart, and the laughter and scornful jests just uttered, wounded me to the very quick. I hurried rapidly down the long lane, and when at length I got out of sight of the loitering congregation, I leaned against a tree and found relief in that usual blessed refuge of my sex—a burst of tears. "I will not go to church again!" I passionately said, whilst the hot blood rushed to my cheek. "I will not expose myself to further insult and scorn, friendless, unprotected as I am." Oh, George, George, how desolate your loss has left me!

The remembrance of my brother brought, as it always did, sorrowful not angry thoughts in its train, the indignant flush faded from my cheek, and pale and dispirited, I rose and proceeded on my way. All that week a sharp struggle between wounded pride and sense of duty was going on in my breast, conscience whispering that I had not sufficient reason for abandoning the house of God, whilst human passion maintained the contrary. Saturday night, however, I retired to rest with a dull, miserable consciousness that I must brave the trying ordeal of the past Sunday anew, unless sickness or weather intervened. As if Providence took pity on my weakness, the following morning was ushered in by a snow-storm. Fences, hillocks, gates, had almost disappeared beneath the snowy mantle—the trees were bending under their cold glittering burden, whilst from time to time, sharp gusts of wind whirled large flakes of snow against the windows, which were constantly obscured by the drifting of the storm raging without. Truly thankful felt I for the week's respite, and when another Sabbath dawned clear and bright, I turned my steps with pride chastened and subdued to God's holy house, humbly grateful that I was permitted to seek the Divine consolations it so abundantly offered.

A severe, stormy winter was succeeded by an unusually early spring, and I was in my bed-room one soft balmy morning, watching the flocks of crows circling and cawing round the still leafless branches, when Dorothy entered with a pale troubled countenance.

"You mustn't let it fret you, Miss, but —" and she paused. "But what?" I asked, trembling in every limb. "Speak, Dorothy, for God's sake!"

"Well, poor Master George is found."

"Found!" I repeated in a low, awe-struck tone, visions instantly rising up before me of my unfortunate brother brought back manacled between officers of justice to expiate his terrible fault on the scaffold.

"Yes. He must have been some months in the water, indeed, from the time he disappeared."

"How—when did this happen?" I gasped.

"The body was found in the stream near Clark's Mills, by two men, who have just come in with the news. They say the inquest is already commenced, as the Coroner lives out that way. I cannot imagine what poor Master George can have been doing in that lonely place. To be sure it leads, though in a round-about way, to the place Mr. Dunmore said he was going to, and he may have fancied that road. Any how, we now know, poor boy, why he didn't come back to answer the lying slanders told against him. He's sadly changed, through being in the water so long, but his name is on his linen, and Joe Dodds, the post-boy, who saw him, says he'd know him in a thousand."

"Have you seen my father?" I whispered.

"Yes, and he's given orders for the body to be brought up here as soon as the inquest is over."

Poor fair-haired, light-hearted George! Was it thus he was to be brought back to the house, of which some short months previous, he had been the hope and pride? How fatally had his young life been clouded—how soon and how sadly ended. And yet how much better that it should be so, than as I had at first feared. He was entirely in the hands of God now, and how much more merciful are His judgments than those of man!

A day of terrible anticipation followed, and then towards evening the hall-door was opened and the heavy shuffling tread of men bearing a weighty burden, succeeded. After a time everything was quiet, and Dorothy stole to my room, softly saying:

"All is ready now, dear! Go in with the master, for fear the shock would be too great for him."

My father was standing in the hall, and without interchanging a word, we entered the room to which Dorothy mutely pointed. The body was covered by a sheet, through which its outlines were but faintly visible, but, as it was not drawn up sufficiently far, the dark tangled curls of fair hair in which poor George had once taken such harmless pride, were exposed to view. Standing near the head of the corpse, my father broke the silence by reverently exclaiming:

"I thank Thee, oh God!"

It was the first time I had ever heard the accents of praise or prayer from his lips, and I gazed at him in silent awe.

"Yes, I thank Thee that Thou hast rescued from ignominy the honourable name he bears, even at the expense of his life; I thank Thee for having allotted him a hallowed, honoured grave, instead of a scaffold or a felon's cell!"

I still kept my eyes mechanically fixed on my father, whilst he proceeded to draw down the sheet, when I at once became conscious of a sudden and startling change in his expression. The look of reverend respect gave way to a glance at once hard and defiant. What could—what did it portend? Involuntarily I turned my eyes towards the corpse, but the face was so sadly disfigured by its long immersion in the water, that I hastily averted my glance to the soaked, water-stained habiliments, and the hands crossed so quietly on the tranquil breast. Quick,

vivid as lightning, flashed across my mind the recollection of the unknown lad, to whom I had given poor George's cast-off suit and linen, and with it came the certainty that his was the corpse before me, not that of my ill-fated brother.

"Father!" I tremblingly whispered. "We have been deceived. That is not poor George."

He silently, almost fiercely looked at me, but made no reply, whilst I went on in the same subdued tone:

"If you remember, my brother changed, on that terrible night, the clothes he had on, which were almost similar to these, and I afterwards buried them in the cellar. On leaving, he was dressed in a dark brown suit. Oh, father, I will tell you all!" and I, tremblingly, recounted the episode of the unknown stranger, the assistance I had given him.

Sternly, almost contemptuously, he spoke. "I have discovered the truth before this, without the aid of any feminine analysis of clothing. Where is the small scarlet birth-mark that George Dunmore bore on his neck?"

Abruptly approaching the door, he turned the key in it, and then returned to his former position.

"Ada!" he said, "that poor mortal frame before us belongs to one who is a perfect stranger to our name and race—probably an out-cast, a pauper; yet, as a Dunmore shall he be interred—as a Dunmore must he be mourned."

"Father! father!" I involuntarily exclaimed, recoiling a couple of steps. "How could we act so terrible a lie?"

"Listen! girl!" and he grasped my arm like an iron vice. "It shall be as I say. Will you dare to contradict me when I shall call him—here, he glanced at the motionless body before us—my son? Will you dare to reveal the circumstances of your brother's flight, so that that brother may yet be hunted down and brought to justice? Do you not see that by acting this lie, as you justly term it, we will remove the heavy cloud of disgrace that has hung over us since his flight; clear our name from the direct stain that has ever yet tarnished it, and secure your wretched brother, in the most effectual manner, from a discovery abroad, or at home, if he should ever be rash enough to risk himself on Canadian soil again. Answer! have I not prudence and reason on my side?"

I only sighed in reply. "I see," he quickly, sternly resumed, "that you are not to be trusted. Though to-morrow, you would, perhaps, think it no sin to swear love and fidelity at the altar, as half of your sex do, to a man for whom you entertained neither affection nor respect, you will hesitate, falter at a deviation from truth, which may save, perhaps, your brother from a scaffold—your father from a broken heart. Hark to me now. Out of this room you shall not pass till you have sworn solemnly as you once did before, to never reveal the identity of that poor form of clay before us—to never reveal to mortal, not even to your future husband if you should ever wed, the fact that the George Dunmore, whom men will suppose interred in Danville church-yard, for whom they will see us wear mourning, is in reality a wanderer in other lands, and that it is a stranger who has taken his place. Do you hear me? Swear by your holiest hopes—by your mother's memory, to be silent!"

My father's agitation as he spoke became excessive, his eyes glittered, his voice sounded hoarse and unnatural, and afraid of him, as well as afraid of increasing the terrible emotion under which he laboured, I repeated, with parched trembling lips, the binding oath he exacted from me.

"Go to your room now," he said, "and I will see to everything. All I require from you is passive silence."

CHAPTER II.

Of course the result of the inquest held on the supposed body of George Dunmore was a verdict of death by accidental drowning; and four days after, the stateliest hearse the neighbouring town afforded, issued from our hall door, whilst mourning gloves and crape weepers were displayed in profusion. The funeral was large, for the reaction in the public mind, consequent on the supposed discovery of the innocence of one whom they had unhesitatingly set down as guilty, was accompanied by a species of remorse, which found solace in showing all the honour in their power to his last remains.

Before the coffin was screwed down, Dorothy entered my room, and removing her apron from her eyes, which were red and swollen with excessive weeping, asked if "I would not like to pay a last visit to poor Master George?"

I shuddered and shook my head.

"Well, well," she said, half reproachfully, half sorrowfully. "To think you were brought up together, and loved one another once so dearly! To be sure, he is greatly changed. A dreadful sight for youth to look upon!"

Ah, if that cold clay had been indeed the mortal remains of my poor brother, no disfigurement, no shrinking fears would have kept me from hanging over him, weeping, watching beside him, imprinting a last kiss on his clammy brow.

"Here, Miss Ada," added Dorothy after a pause, extending to me as she spoke, a tress of fair, curly hair, which she had carefully dried and brushed out, "I thought, maybe, you'd like yet to have it, though you never asked me for it. Old love and old feelings will come back on you when the first dull heaviness of the shock is over."

I took the tress, and after the kind-hearted woman had left the chamber, approached the fire she had lighted regularly in my room for some time past, for she insisted I was looking very ill and thin, and threw it into the flames.

Hapless, unfortunate boy! Probably in crossing the plank above the rapid stream he had fallen in, perhaps the very day on which I had seen him and given those garments of poor George's, which seemed to have brought with them such dire misfortune. He had told me he was a friendless run-away, distant from relatives or home, and none were likely to make search for him, so our secret would probably remain for ever undiscovered. He would have a stately funeral, and sleep in an honoured tomb instead of the shallow pauper's grave which of right belonged to him, so he at least, would suffer nothing from this strange deceit.

On his return from the funeral, my father entered the apartment where I sat, tearless and silent, enshrouded in the heavy black garments which he himself had ordered for me. Mechanically removing from his hat the long crape that encircled it, he said: "At last it is over! Another tenant has been placed in our family burial place."

"But not one of ourselves, father," I rejoined in a low, unsteady voice.

"Think you, child, I have forgotten or ever can forget that?" and his tone was expressive of sharp pain. "Why, I suffered more than enough when that coffin was laid in the earth beside your mother and the infant son who died before her, to expiate the deceit I have been guilty of. It seemed to me little short

of sacrilege. But better it should be so than that one of the name should die perhaps on a gibbet. I saw an old acquaintance to-day," he abruptly added, as if anxious to change the subject. "A friend with whom your poor mother and myself were well acquainted when we first came to Canada, but whom I have not seen since her death."

"What is his name?" I listlessly asked.

"The Honourable Rupert Ellerslie, a true-hearted and gentlemanly man. Our meeting to-day was entirely accidental. On leaving the church-yard, I perceived a handsome travelling carriage drawn up before the door of the little inn, and a gentleman standing near it. Though I did not at first recognize him, he immediately came up to me and mentioned his name, expressing his deep sympathy for my late bereavement, of which some of the villagers had informed him. He told me he was travelling with a young married sister of his, and they had stopped at the village for an hour's rest. I am thus particular, Ada, in giving you these details, because if I were called away to-morrow—do not start so, child, I am not immortal—he is the only friend whose name I can recall, likely to assist you. I have lived so long totally separated from the outer world that my memory scarcely furnishes me even with the appellations of any others likely to befriended a child of mine. Now, that to-day's terrible farce has been played out, let it never again be alluded to between us, and I solemnly charge you, that if you survive me, which in the course of nature you will probably do, to see that I am interred at the other side of your mother, not near him who was buried thereto-day." I mutely assented, and he left the room.

The following Sunday I attended church in my sweeping sables, and the loungers at the door respectfully made way for me to pass in, whilst kind and sympathizing glances were bent on me from every side. Even Nellie Carr and her friends cast down their eyes in mingled confusion and regret when I passed them. But not even under the fire of their rude mockery some months previous had my cheeks burned half so painfully, my eyes so steadily sought the ground as they did now. Ah! the part I was compelled to act was one from which my whole nature revolted; but quiet prayer soon calmed the dull, remorseful sort of pain throbbing at my heart, and I returned home more tranquil than when I had left it.

A couple more months glided monotonously over, and then I was aroused by a rude shock from the species of passive indifference to life and to everything around me into which I had of late fallen, by learning one morning from the terrified Dorothy that my poor father had just been struck by paralysis.

"Send off Peter for a physician, immediately!" I breathlessly exclaimed, and then flew to his room, panting with alarm. I found him perfectly calm and tranquil. Though he had lost the use of his limbs, his mental powers and speech were unimpaired, and bidding me be seated, he said: "You must not look so white and terrified, Ada! If my hour has come, no fears or efforts can prolong my stay."

"Oh father!" I gasped, whilst emotion almost suffocated me. "Do not speak thus. If you are taken, how lonely, how helpless I will be!"

"Not more lonely and helpless than you have been with me, I fear, poor child. I have often thought of late that I have not done my duty by you—that the bare food and clothing, with the mechanical instruction I forced you to receive, did not comprise all that you had a right to expect at a father's hands; but these thoughts have come too late in life to be of any service to either of us. You are a good girl, Ada, and have ever been so. I had always thought you would have found, at a later period, a kinder protector and guardian than I have been, in your unfortunate brother; but that dream, like all the other dreams of my useless existence, has proved an illusion. But, child, do not sob so! If you knew what a weary burden life has been to me for many long years past, you would not grieve that I am at last mercifully permitted to lay it down. I have one anxiety, though, that greatly torments me. It is that I leave you not only friendless, but poor. I have debts, some of them of very old standing, I cannot now recall their amount, but they may necessitate the selling of the old homestead here. Do you hear me, Ada?"

"Yes, father."

"With a view to such a casualty," he resumed, lowering his voice to a whisper, "I one day took advantage of my being alone in the house to disinter those clothes—you know what I mean—and burn them."

Even in that hour of dire trouble I felt thankful to learn this, for often in my dreams the thought of them had haunted me. My father went on: "There is no risk now of careless hands, whilst making changes, or fancied improvements, dragging them to light and revealing the mute evidence of guilt they afford. But there is some one at the door. Open it. Ah, it is you, Doctor! Ada, you had better leave us together for a while."

The conference was not very long. Dorothy was called in soon to the physician's assistance, and after a time they reappeared on the threshold.

"Lose no time in sending for a clergyman!" was the whispered injunction of the doctor, who returned to the sick room. The fiat had gone forth. Alas! there was no hope!

The Rev. Mr. Wood soon arrived, and Doctor Jackson took his departure. The former remained a considerable time with my poor father, and at length, when he left, I was permitted to enter. But the patient was now too much exhausted for farther conversation, and he lay back on his pillow, pale and silent. I sat beside him, the simple medicine the doctor had left close at hand. Once he spoke, and his voice was strangely hoarse and altered. "Ada," he said, "if ever you see poor George again, tell him I left him my dying blessing." He soon after fell into a stupor, from which he never awakened on earth. With poor Dorothy wiping the damps from his brow, and I holding his cold hand, he quietly breathed his last about midnight. The gloss was scarcely off the mourning garments I had assumed with such reluctance, when there was really cause for me to mourn anew.

Over the details of the funeral I will not linger. Such things are so common in real life that the recounting of them must prove wearisome to the reader. A few days after the last ceremony, Doctor Jackson called to see me. He briefly recapitulated the conversation which had passed between him and my father, relative to the arrangement of the latter's temporal affairs, as well as the instructions given him regarding myself. In pursuance of these, he had called on the notary with whom my father's papers were deposited, and who had managed his affairs for years previous. After going over them carefully, the sad result arrived at was that the house must be sold to cover old debts, and the