

## 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 Villercac," "Eva Huntingdon," &c., &c.

## CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

"Have you no home—no relatives?" I asked.  
"If I have, they are miles and miles away, in the little Scotch seaport town in which I was born."

"Have you no friends or acquaintances in this country?"  
"No, Miss, for I cannot give the name of either, to the hard, grasping farmer near Montreal city from whom I've run away. But, good-bye. May God reward you in your hour of need!"

Did any warning voice whisper that that dread time was close at hand—that the dark cloud was already over-shadowing us all? No, there was neither presentiment nor internal warning; and I re-entered the house, my only feeling one of self-gratulation that I had escaped detection at the hands of Dorothy, and at the same time helped, even in a slight degree, one who seemed so sorely in need.

"How George will laugh when I confess to him the 'raid' I have just made on his poor wardrobe," I said to myself as I sought the dining-room and replenished the grate-fire, in expectation of his speedy return. But the fire burned low, was replenished again, and still he did not make his appearance.

"Tis lucky the master asked for his supper in his own room to-night," significantly remarked Dorothy, as she prepared the tray for my father's evening meal, glancing at the same time indignantly towards our own supper table, on which the presence of a plate of delicate rolls, and a cranberry tart, betokened the care she had bestowed on it. "Tis too bad to make feasts and have no one to eat them."

"Mr. George will be soon home, Dorothy, and will do full justice to your dainties. See, I will cover up the rolls, and place them in this little corner near the fire, where they will keep warm. The delay will only give us better appetites."

The hours dragged slowly on, but without bringing any signs of our truant. Finding the continued interruptions into the room of our faithful old servant, coupled with her wondering commentaries and suppositions as to the cause of my brother's absence, perfectly unendurable, I succeeded in persuading her at last to retire to rest, assuring her at the same time with a careless, even smiling air, which strangely belied my heavy aching heart, that I felt in no manner anxious, as he had probably called on Doctor Jackson and had been detained by him, or perhaps by some other acquaintance.

Murmuring that "it was very wrong, very flighty of Master George," she at length, to my intense relief, withdrew to bed, and I was left to enter on my solitary watch. After a few moments I walked to the window, but I could not see any great distance, for the star-light was faint and dim, and thick, dark clouds were frequently driven across the sky by the high wind that had set in about sundown. I was beginning to feel uncomfortably, provokingly nervous, and the shrill shrieks and sudden meanings of the blast, as at intervals it swept sharply round our bleak, exposed abode, made me start as perhaps no blast of wind or storm had ever done before. Then I strove to find comfort in the very cause which thus increased my terrors. George had probably been detained in the village by some unforeseen reason, and then, foreseeing the coming storm, had decided on remaining at the little inn of the place. All this would have been strangely out of keeping with my brother's usual brave, carelessness of character, but I was in a mood of mind requiring all the comfort that could possibly be granted it, even at the risk of self-delusion.

Once I remembered that my father having no silver change to pay for the postage, had given George a bank note, and the supposition flashed across my mind that he might perhaps have met some acquaintance, and been tempted into ordering at the King's Arms, a dainty supper with good wine. I had heard of students committing such follies, and, having partaken too freely of the latter, have been incapacitated from returning home. At first I shrank from the thought as I did from the idea of seeing him reeling into the room, flushed and heated, addressing me with incoherent speech and meaningless smiles! but, as time wore on, and my alarm increased, I felt the realization of those first fears would be relief—almost happiness. Yes, I could soothe, coax him on his entrance, get him up quietly to bed, and stay outside his door till he should fall asleep; and so guard against all accidents of fire or discovery. Whilst revolving these thoughts, eleven o'clock struck, filling me with fresh dismay. In our primitive household, where we rose and retired early, it was an unseemly late hour for a member of it to be abroad; besides, George had been absent from an early hour in the afternoon, and had promised, on leaving, that he would speedily return, so there was enough, alas! to fully justify alarm. What if my father, restless from indisposition, should come down to enquire the cause of our late vigil, and discover George's absence! Sad results, indeed, might arise from such an event, for the one was as stern and unforgiving as the other was hot-blooded and impetuous.

Suddenly I started in mingled terror and delight. Was not that a footstep outside? Yes—surely—yes, and that was a slight, soft tap at the window-pane. Quickly I approached the door, and as I drew back the bolt, softly asked: "George, is it you?"

"Hush!" was the reply. "Put out the light!"

The voice was my brother's, but strangely changed and hoarse, strangely unlike his usual clear ringing accents. I extinguished the candle, and approaching him where he still stood in deep shadow outside the door, threw my arm around his neck, whispering: "I thank God, you are back!"

"Do not mention that holy name now!" he panted in short thick accents. "And, Ada, take your innocent arms from my neck."

What did he mean? Ah, his mind was not clouded by intoxication, for his cheek and hands were cold as marble.

"Look, child, what is that dark, wet stain on your hand?" he went on in the same appalling, though whispered tone. As I have said, the candle had been extinguished, but light shone out from the embers of the grate, enough to let me see that the stain on my hand, oh God! was one of blood. A strange awful fear crept over me—a fear so terrible in its physical as well as mental anguish, that the approach of death could not have been worse. He went on: "Tis the blood of a murdered fellow-creature, and it is I, Ada, who have shed it."

But listen. I must say my say in a few words, for I dare not linger here. Still happen what will, I must tell you all before I part from you for ever. On leaving here with my father's letter, I took the little path through the wood, not so much for its shortness as in the secret hope of meeting Nellie Carr. I was not disappointed, for I soon came upon her. She told me she had only arrived that morning in Danville from her aunt's, and that she had been watching there in the hope of seeing me, having heard that I was at home. Then she mentioned her betrothal to Warner, said that it was entirely a match of her family's making, that she hated him, and finally threw herself on my breast in a passion of tears, imploring me to save her from such a fate. I gently represented that I—a poor college student—could do nothing; that report said Warner, though a rough looking brute, was the best match in the village; but, if she disliked the intended marriage so much, she had the power of putting it off. Much more we said, but beyond that I kissed her pretty face a couple of times as it rested on my shoulder, I did her no wrong in thought or deed, so help me Heaven! At last we parted. I hurried on to the village, for I had lost nearly an hour with her, gave my letter, and anxious to rejoin yourself as soon as possible, returned again by the short route through the wood. Arrived at the deep black pool they call Robb's Water, I was startled by feeling from behind a hand laid heavily on my shoulder. I sprang round, and found myself confronting a rough-looking man carrying his gun on his shoulder. Do you want to know who I am, he asked with a look of inexpressible malignity. I am Jim Warner, promised to that light jaded you were kissin' in this very wood so lovin' an hour or two ago."

"Take off your hand, man!" I angrily rejoined, "and stop slandering your neighbours." Slandering you call it! he sneered. I be no young college-bred ruffian, crammed with lies and larnin', but, I'm no fool either. I know now what that fair-faced little devil meant by saying that she was very simple to take the likes of me when she could any day get a gentleman for a husband. Husband! ha! ha! she made a slight mistake there—but enough, Ada, of this coarse mockery. Quietly, but in the most earnest solemn manner, I assured him that he was mistaken, and that he did both myself and the girl injustice. He became more insolent as he found me forbearing, and ended by applying some opprobrious epithet, accompanied by a threat to myself. Suddenly losing my self-control, which up to that moment I had wonderfully retained, I snatched the rifle from his careless grasp and struck him violently with it. Alas! it was loaded and went off, the contents lodging in his breast and causing a stream of blood to get out which dyed me all over with the evidence of my guilt. Spell-bound—paralyzed—I stood staring at him, when suddenly he reeled and fell heavily backwards into the pool, crashing through the thin coating of ice covering its waters. Whether Providence reserves a prison or a scaffold for my punishment, I do not think either can prove worse than the memory of that awful moment! For a second I thought of leaping in after him, but, alas! I cannot swim. I anxiously watched to see if he would re-appear at the water's surface, but he did not. Knowing that any effort to save him, mortally wounded as he was, would avail him nothing and entail destruction on myself, I threw down the gun—I think it must have fallen into the water, for I remember hearing something like a dull splash as I hastily turned and fled here. I have been watching outside for some time past, I do not know how long, unable to gather courage enough to enter; but time, every moment of which may be of golden value to me in my flight, is rapidly passing—"

"Your flight!" I interrupted, almost mechanically.

"Yes. You would not have me remain calmly here to be arrested, condemned, and executed, almost within view of the old house in which I was born—the house which shelters a father and sister."

"But it would not come to that. There is no evidence against you."

"There would be evidence enough in my own accusing conscience which would betray itself in every shade of my changing colour, and tell-tale face. If I were in the wilds of Australia to-morrow, and heard his name mentioned, I would turn pale and start in terror. Besides, others may have seen us together; or, have remarked our going into the wood, probably about the same time."

"It was a moment's passion, George. You did not know the rifle was loaded."

"Ah! had I even known it, I would neither have minded nor cared in the mad, blind rage of the moment. But, I have spoken of the past—now for the present. I must start from here at once, and make my way by unfrequented roads, as best I can, to the States. Fortunately, I have the change of the five-pound note my father gave me, entire, beyond the price of a letter's postage. Once in New York, I can embark at once as deck-hand in some vessel on the point of sailing for Australia or California,—it matters not which."

I resolutely repressed all meanings or lamentations at this announcement of what I felt would probably be our eternal separation, for my brother's safety had to be thought of first. I would have time enough for grieving afterwards.

"Thank God! your plans are formed!" I said. "I will steal up-stairs now and bring down your old over-coat and a change of clothing. Those stained garments would at once expose you to remark and suspicion."

Tremblingly I glided up-stairs past my father's door, which was happily closed. In passing through the chill, echoing corridor, then in impenetrable darkness, I suddenly fancied I heard or rather felt a suppressed breathing close beside me. But, I knew my nerves, in the excited state in which they were in, were not to be trusted, and a matter of life and death was in my hands, so I hurried on, feeling inexpressibly thankful when I reached George's room. The remains of a fire still smouldered in the grate, a fortunate circumstance, for I had not dared to light a candle lest its rays shining underneath the ill-fitting doors, should disturb my father, who was a light sleeper.

I speedily selected a change of linen and clothing, making up part of the remainder of his wardrobe into a parcel of portable size, and stole down again as safely and as noiselessly as I had ascended. I must acknowledge though, that in approaching the spot where I had heard, or imagined I had heard the mysterious breathing, a feeling of sickening fear crept over me, and cold perspiration burst out on my forehead. My fears were groundless, however, and I passed without receiving any new impression of terror.

"How quick you have been, poor Ada!" whispered my brother, as he took the clothes destined for his immediate use.

Drawing back into the shadow of the porch he was soon arrayed in them. As I saw him rolling up into a small tight bundle the blood-stained garments he had just taken off, I enquired what he meant to do with them.

"Take them with me to the first deep hole or pool of water I come to, and sink them with a heavy stone inside."

"They might be found again," I said, with those dreadful stains as well as your name on them, and stamping you at once as guilty, be the cause that a search for you should be instituted all over the country before you would have time, perhaps, to get away from it. You know that when Warner and yourself will be both missed, every pond and stream in the whole neighbourhood will be carefully examined and dragged. You will leave the bundle with me and I will hide or burn it. Instead, you will take this change of clothing which I have put up for you. It will spare your scanty stock of money. And now, George, I must hurry you away, for you have a long and dreary journey before you."

"One last request, Ada!" he faltered. "A lock of your hair to lay next my heart in life—to be buried with me in death!"

I caught up my scissors from a table near, and severed a long thick tress, careless in my agitation that it was from the most conspicuous part of my head, just above the forehead, and gave it to him. How little I dreamed then what a strange necessary link, or rather convincing proof in a chain of evidence that lock of hair was destined to become. How little I foresaw of what mighty import its mute testimony would hereafter prove to myself!

As poor George took it and pressed it to his lips, my long-sustained fortitude suddenly gave way. Twining my arms closely around him, I sobbed passionately on his shoulder.

"Ada! Ada!" he gasped. "How can you embrace, how can you clasp me thus? Do you forget what I am?"

"I cannot forget," I wailed, "that you are my brother, my friend, my all. Oh, George, George, in my very heart I would shield you, if I had the power, even though your sin were ten times greater than it is. I never loved you half as well as I do now, that you are about to go forth in darkness and sorrow, with remorse and ruin brooding over you."

"God bless you, my darling!" he faltered, drawing me, for the first time since his entrance, close to his bosom. "Remember me in your prayers, for surely Heaven will listen to the petitions of one so good as you are! I dare not leave any message for poor father. Tell him of this interview or not, as you think best. And now, one parting word of warning, oh, my sister! Study carefully the man to whom you will give the treasure of your heart, for to-night shows me your love will surpass that of most women, as far this morning's sun-light outshone to-night's pale star-light."

## CHAPTER V.

ANOTHER embrace and he was gone, leaving me with a feeling of desolation in my young bosom which, I wondered at the moment, did not bring death or annihilation with it. But I was not at liberty yet to sit down and indulge my grief. The mute evidences of sin and sorrow lying before me in the shape of poor George's blood-stained garments, had to be disposed of before morning. Should I burn them? There were live cinders in the grate, and they might soon be got rid of thus. But then, I remembered that some of them were woollen and their burning would necessarily be accompanied by a strong odour and smoke, which might penetrate to the upper rooms, and bring down my father or Dorothy. They were damp too and would burn very slowly. Then, I thought of locking them up in my own trunk or wardrobe, till I should have time to dispose of them more safely, but how did I know that the officers of justice, put on the right track by some circumstance that had escaped George's knowledge, might not be down next morning and examine every nook and cranny in the house.

Or, I might fall suddenly ill, and Dorothy, or, worse still, some hired nurse, might go to my trunk for some article of clothing and discover all. No, the best means would be to hide, or rather bury them in the cellar. Lighting the candle, I lifted up the fatal bundle and softly proceeded to the kitchen, closing all the doors behind me. But a new obstacle presented itself. How was I to raise the ponderous trap-door leading to the cellar, which Dorothy had never been able to lift unassisted? I would make the effort, however. Once—twice—notwithstanding that every fibre and nerve in my frame were strained to the utmost, I was unsuccessful. Another effort, this time aided by despair, and the trap-door slowly, sullenly rose as if unwilling to assist in the purpose for which I was opening it. As I descended the steep stairs, the close, earthy smell of the cellar—the deep pitchy darkness which the feeble ray of the candle I carried, wholly failed to dispel—the scuffling and squeaking of the rats so suddenly disturbed in their midnight meetings, filled me with a terror which partook in some degree of faintness. I sat down a moment on the stairs to recover myself, but the sight of a hideous earth beetle running across the step beneath me, brought me quickly to my feet. An inveterate antipathy to all sorts of insects as well as a perfect horror of rats were among the unconquerable weaknesses out of which poor George had never been able to either laugh or reason me. Now, I had to surmount, without sympathy or encouragement, both. Earnestly, steadily, as a miser would have sought the surest spot for depositing his gold, I looked round to select a place for concealing my burden. The first cellar, in which Dorothy kept a miscellaneous collection of tubs, brooms and other household implements, I at once rejected. Next came the root cellar, in one corner of which, on a bed of sand, were piled up our vegetable stores, whilst the other was filled with Peter's garden tools. From one of these I selected a small iron spade, and passed into the wine cellar, whose bins had stood entirely empty for long years past. Here I hesitated a moment, for the place seemed dark and desolate enough for my purpose, but my eyes falling on a small door opposite, fastened by a rusty padlock, I approached it. It was unlocked, and entering, I found myself in a small lumber cellar, partly filled with invalid chairs, broken stools, and the varied useless articles which accumulate in the course of time in a household, where such things are never given away or otherwise disposed of.

An old packing case co-eval probably with the arrival of my parents in the house, for it bore on one end in time-stained lettering, the names of Mr. and Mrs. Noel Dunmore, Bridgeport, England, stood in one corner, and after a considerable exertion of strength, I succeeded in dragging it from its place. In the damp dark space of earth thus left vacant, I entered on my task, and as my spade turned up shovel-ful of black clay, and the cavity at which I was toiling,