



CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XVII.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, MARCH 15, 1867.

No. 32.

THE TWO SISTERS OF COLOGNE. (Concluded.)

We stopped before a small, single-storied house, having a wall on either side of it, and no other habitation near. So much I saw, while Gretchen (the younger one) drew out a key, and opened the house door. The carriage drove off. I followed the sisters into a narrow passage.— Upon the right was the kitchen; on the left, the staircase; at the back a door, leading by a flight of steps, into a garden.

'Come with me, young man,' said Gretchen. 'Lori will get supper ready meanwhile.'

The elder sister turned into the kitchen. Gretchen led the way up stairs.

'We have but two rooms. . . . Lori will prepare your bed in the parlor, after supper. Will you wash your hands?'

She struck a light, and opened a door to the left, at the top of the stairs. It was the bedroom of the two sisters—small, yet containing two beds, and several great chests.

'And you two are here, alone?' I asked. 'No servant? Are you not afraid sometimes?'

She shook her head. 'No, we are not afraid. Lori is afraid of nothing—not even of ghosts.— Do you believe in ghosts?'

I laughed.

'Do not laugh,' she whispered. 'Ghosts are the only things I fear. Sometimes I fancy I see them in the garden there.' She shuddered.— 'See what a fine garden we have. . . . Plenty of space, is there not?'

She was pouring water into a basin from an earthenware ewer, I remember, as she said this. She set the vessel down, and turned to the window, through which the moon, which was now rising behind a solitary sycamore, shone into the room.

A square space enclosed by high walls, where the grass grew rank, and a moss grown walk led to a little door in the wall at the farther end.— 'This was what she was pleased to term the garden.

'The violets grow rarely there in the spring,' she said, with a strange smile, as if interpreting my thought.

When I had washed my hands, Gretchen conducted me into the next room, where Lori had now laid the supper. It was a chamber, with an alcove, or closet, at one end, a great earthenware stove, and a number of gaudy prints around the walls. In the midst was the table, where three covers were laid. It was decked with a bunch of China-asters in a jar, and was substantially furnished, I was glad to see, with a pie, a dish of raw ham, a loaf of black bread, and some grapes. As for drinkables, there was a small jug of Bavarian beer, and there was a bottle of water. Lori bustled to and fro; Gretchen lighted another candle, and set both on the stove, behind the table. As she did so, my eye was attracted to the floor, on which the light streamed. It was uncarpeted; and a number of black beetles were running across it, alarmed by the illumination, no doubt. Now, I have always had an irrational repugnance to this insect; I am afraid my face showed it.

'We cannot get rid of the nasty creatures,' said Gretchen. They come out in myriads from crevices near the stove; but the light always frightens them away.'

We sat down. I was very hungry, and fell to with right good will. Lori kept me company. She sat opposite; and whenever I raised my eyes, I saw the movement of her massive jaws defined against the candles behind her. Gretchen sat on my right hand; thus the light fell sideways on her face, while that of her sister was in shadow; and the table being small, Gretchen's hand and mine came frequently in contact. She ate very little; she crumbled and played with a piece of bread, and seldom allowed those strange piercing eyes of hers to leave my face. As supper went on, Lori talked and laughed a good deal; Gretchen said nothing. She seemed to grow more and more absorbed in her own thoughts; and once, when her hand touched mine, I observed that it shook. She filled up a tumbler of water and drank it. Lori pushed the beer towards me.

'Fill up for yourself—' I drained the jug into my glass. I raised it to my lips and began to drink. Suddenly Gretchen uttered a sharp cry, and started up. In doing so, she nearly upset the table; and her elbow somehow came in contact with the glass in my hand. Its contents were spilt upon the floor.

'Ach! the beetle—the horrid thing!' she cried. 'It has gone down my back, I believe.' She rushed from the room, as white as a sheet.

'Fool!' murmured Lori, setting her jaws tight. 'What waste of good liquor! And there is no more in the house! I will send her, for her pains, to go fetch another schoppen.'

'Not on my account, I pray. I like water quite as well. Nay, your 'Bayerische Bier' sometimes disagrees with me.'

She looked up sharply into my face.

'Why, what manner of man are you, that drink water?' she demanded.

'I seldom afford myself anything else,' I replied.

The beer had streamed from the table to the floor, where it had formed itself into a long diagonal channel towards the stove. It was still dripping, which drew my attention, I suppose, to the boards. The beer had encountered one or two black beetles in its course. I had heard of their fondness for fermented liquors; it had taken effect very quickly in this case. I saw them struggle, feebly and more feebly, to crawl away from the intoxicating flood. Lori's quick eye discerned what I was looking at.

'The nasty creatures! They soon make themselves tipsy,' she said, as she ran and fetched a broom. Then she swept them up into a plate, and carefully wiped the floor.

Gretchen now returned to the room and helped her sister to clear away the supper. As she moved about, I, my hunger being appeased, noted with a quickened perception what a supple, grandly formed creature this Gretchen was.— The fancy came into my head that the White Cat, when transformed, must have resembled her; fair and lissom, with delicate pink nostrils and straight bright eyes. In the elder sister I thought the cat grew akin to the tigress; her sharp, narrow teeth, heavy jaw, and stealthy, cruel eyes, filled me more and more with an indefinable repulsion. I was glad when she said,—

'I will go and see after your bed, young man. Gretchen will keep you company meanwhile.'

I was sitting in the moonlight, near the window. Gretchen stood beside me.

'You are unlike all the men I have known,' she said, after she had looked at me in the strange way for some minutes. 'Are all Englishmen like you?'

'Happily for them, I suppose, very few.'

'But Englishmen are faithful, she said eagerly. They never deceive, never betray. I have read about one Englishman in a book. Could you be true to a woman, without changing, all your life?'

'I should hope so!' I cried, with the impetuosity of youth. 'A man's love is not worth much otherwise.'

She stretched forth her long white hands and laid them on my shoulders.

'Will you be my love, young Englishman?' she murmured, in a hoarse, tremulous voice. 'I can make you rich. You need toil no more. I can save you from great dangers, too. I like you face.'

I started up, blushing, for the thing came upon me suddenly after all; but I replied without hesitation—

'Were I to say I could love you, Fraulein, I should be false. I have left behind me in England one whom I have long loved, and to whom my word is pledged. I—'

'Listen,' she interrupted, vehemently, but in a whisper, as though dreading to be overheard.— 'I have more in my power than you know of. Do not reject the love I offer; it may be the worse for you if you do. I would save you, young man.'

I understood her to refer to my poverty and her own wealth, as I replied, with a little flourish of gallantry—

'If my love for another makes me proof against your charms, Fraulein, I am not likely to yield to the temptation of riches. Poverty and I are well acquainted already. Its dangers and hardships cannot scare me, for I have experienced them all.'

'There are some dangers you have not experienced. A comely young fellow may run risks sometimes that he knows not of.'

There was a wild look in her eyes as she spoke, and her words left a vague, uncomfortable impression on me. But Lori entered the room at this moment, carrying my bedding in her arms; and further conversation with Gretchen was impossible. She helped her sister to spread the bed upon a trestle in the corner of the room;— then she fetched sheets and a patchwork counterpane, the design of which I can distinctly recall even now. There were triangular bits of red cloth inserted here and there, which looked to me like so many small tongues of fire; I have good reason to remember them.

When her task was done, Lori stood before me, with her arms akimbo.

'You feel sleepy, young man, no doubt, after your long day. We keep early hours, for we are up betimes. You shall have a cup of coffee and a slice of black bread at five, before we bid you Godspeed. No, no excuses. It is in our vow. Schlafen Sie wohl.'

Had I spoken the truth, I should have said that, far from being sleepy, I had never felt more wide awake than I did then. Ever since supper a strange restlessness of mind had taken the place of the languor which had oppressed me.— Gretchen made as if she would have spoken when Lori ceased. She turned towards me.— I saw her fingers working nervously at the black

apron. I believe it was her sister's silent ascendancy over her which restrained her, for I intercepted a sideways glance from Lori's stealthy eyes which she shot towards Gretchen. With a face in which fierceness and terror and anguish seemed to be conflicting, the latter looked at me, as she followed her sister from the room, without even wishing me the customary 'good night.'

What did it all mean? Now, for the first time, I think, I began revolving in my mind all that I had seen and heard since I entered that house, and a disagreeable sense of something strange and mysterious gradually took possession of me. What was there about these sisters to inspire mistrust? With the elder, indeed, I could understand it. There was a physical repulsion which made the blood curdle in my veins when I thought of her. But the younger was beautiful to look upon. She had shown herself tenderly inclined towards me. Why should I find myself thinking of her with a feeling akin to dread?— Her words recurred to me. At what danger had she hinted? There had been something wild about her eyes, about her talk, at times.— Then there was her extraordinary proposal.— Was she mad? I remembered her strange conduct at supper, the fierce authoritative look wherewith her sister overawed her. It seemed a likely solution to much that was otherwise inexplicable about them both. But, if so, how unaccountable that Lori, knowing her sister to be subject to fits and fancies like these, should offer hospitality to a stranger. There was nothing immodest about the demeanor of either of them; there was nothing that could suggest the suspicion that this was a guet-apens of any sort.— The idea of robbery was ridiculous. Was not my poverty, so apparent in the threadbare student's blouse I wore, a sufficient safeguard?— Why, I had not even my knapsack with me, as they knew; and I was young and muscular—not an easy victim for open violence, had any been intended.

I racked my brain with endeavors to arrive at some definite conclusion; for as to trying to sleep, I found it useless. My brain seemed on fire by this time. Every moment I felt myself growing more excited, more keenly alive to every sound, and all my mental perceptions quickened. The single candle they had left me, burned dim; it seemed to fill the room with all sorts of grim shapes and shadows. After a long interval, during which everything in the little house was absolutely still, I got up, in my restlessness, feeling that anything was better than to lie tossing there, a prey to feverish fancies. I walked about the room, with the candle, examining every article in it. First, there were the colored prints upon the walls—among others, one of the Lorelei, I remember, and one, a scene from Schiller's Robbers, which made my blood run cold as I looked at it. There was a cupboard, which I opened; nothing but a few plates and one old knife. I sat down again upon the bed, and my eye was attracted once more to the red tongues of the patch-work quilt. It was a very ingenious piece of work. I tried to follow the kaleidoscope pattern into which the various shreds had been wrought with that strange device of crimson cloth at regular intervals. Regular? No. At one place in the corner, I perceived now that three or four tongues seemed to have been sown together. I held down the candle to examine them, and started back.— What I had taken for crimson cloth was a stain of coagulated blood.

I shuddered. 'Perhaps some one cut his finger here,' I said; but I didn't believe my own words; and then I tried to laugh at myself, and said my brain was giving way. I started up.— I saw nothing clearly. The Robbers and Lorelei were dancing bobgoblin dances on the wall. The moonlight through the sycamore branches played in a shivering shadow in one spot of the floor. I knelt down, and crept along upon my hands and knees, examining the boards. But there was no stain there; only the smell of the beer in one place, and an army of those horrid beetles, who ran away from the light as I lowered it, to the back of the stove. I pursued them with a sudden savage impetus towards destruction. They all disappeared between two chinks in the floor. I sat my foot on the boards. I thought one moved. I stooped, and saw at once that the two boards immediately behind the stove, though fitting closely, were not nailed down—might be removed, no doubt, with some little trouble. I dug my nails into the chink and tried to lift one. In vain. I only tore my finger with a splinter. Then I thought me of the old knife I had seen in the cupboard. With its help, I presently raised the end of one of the boards, and so drew it out. A square deal box lay concealed beneath. It had no lock or fastening of any kind.

Although my excitement was so strong that I remember my two hands trembling as they laid hold of the lid, yet I paused for a moment before raising it. Was it a dishonorable action. My conscience told me that I was justified, and I

to the box open. I nearly dropped the candle as my eyes beheld the contents.

First, there was a great bundle of coarse, black hair; then one of curly-flaxen, like a child's; then another of very long and silky brown—a woman's evidently. Along with these were four—six—eight—rows of teeth, some large and strong, some fine and white. A common ring or two, a silver watch-chain, a poor cloth cap, filled the remaining space in the box.

The horrible truth flashed upon me. I had been brought here, not to be robbed of my poor clothes, nor of what little coin I might have about me. These were only to be thrown into the bargain. They were seeking to compass my life, as they had done the lives of others, for the sake of such possessions as these before me—possessions independent of poverty or wealth. I remembered the tales that had been rife in my own country, not long before that time, touching Burke and Mare. And I now remembered, too, the look that Lori had given her sister, when, in my idiotic vanity, I had smiled and showed my teeth.

Now, I knew what was the danger, to which Gretchen, in a sudden compunction and softening of heart towards me, had referred. Now, I could see clearly whither every incident of the evening tended. The beer at supper was drugged with some strong narcotic. Gretchen had tried to save me. Had she really done so? I had tasted the drink, and though I never felt wider awake in my life than I did at that horrible moment when the sweat started out upon my brow, in the consciousness that my life might not be worth an hour's purchase, might not the effect of the drug be only weakened and retarded for a while? The small quantity I had imbibed had excited my brain into an abnormal condition for the time. I had little doubt of this. Might it not be succeeded by a reaction? I was seized with a horrible dread of succumbing sooner or later, to sleep. I should then be powerless. I cared for nothing, comparatively, if I could only keep awake. I started up. It was dangerous to sit still. I traversed the room with hasty strides. I tried to turn the handle of the door; it did not yield; it was locked on the outside. There could be no longer a doubt of the design against me.

The many church-clocks through the old city struck two. I listened for any movement in the house, and once I fancied I heard some one breathing outside my door. But I waited a long time and it was followed by no other sound.— Then I began to drag the bed, the table, and the chairs, and to pile them up into a barricade against the door. This occupied some little time, and, work as quietly as I might, the necessary noise prevented my hearing anything else. It was not until my work was done that I became conscious of something moving in the garden, just below my window.

There was a dull, low thud, as of some hard substance striking the earth at regular intervals. I crept to the window and looked out into the moonlight, which was now fast disappearing behind a gabled roof. Instead of illuminating the entire plot of ground, the rays now fell slantwise into the garden, of which more than one-half was swallowed in black shadow. But I clearly distinguished two figures. Do you remember Milton's Vale of Rest? When I saw that picture, years afterwards, I could not help shuddering. It recalled so vividly the attitude of the two sisters in that terrible moment. The women were digging a grave; the elder one with all her masculine energy; the younger, reluctantly, as it seemed, removing, with slow strokes of the spade, the black earth, and pausing long between each. Once she looked up, and the moonlight fell upon her wan, haggard face. She put back the long silver-lighted hair from her brow; she leaned upon her spade; and then a whisper, like a serpent's, in her ear, urged her to her task again.

Should I fall asleep now, I was a dead man. I knew it. No strength, no agility, could save me. The dread of this became so acute, that it worked upon my imagination. I began to think I felt drowsy. A numbness seemed creeping over my limbs. A weight was falling gradually on my stiffened eyelids. I prayed, in an agony of terror, that I might not be killed asleep—that I might, at least, have a fight for my life.

Suddenly Lori raised her head and listened.— The sound to which she listened—a whistle, so low that I could scarcely hear it—was repeated. She crept stealthily across the garden, and raised the latch of the postern, which evidently did not open from the outside. A man came in, a burly, thick-set fellow, and the door was closed again. The three stood together for a moment in the moonlight. Lori and the man looked up at my window (I took care they should not see me), while Gretchen turned her head away and wrung her hands. Then all three came slowly and noiselessly towards the house.

Now or never was my moment for escape!—

There was one chance for me. I had seen how the door opened. . . . If I could manage to reach it! . . . But if I hesitated, a few minutes hence the drugged beer might complete its work, and I be unable to move hand or foot. I opened the window softly, and looked out. There was a drop of about twenty feet into the garden (which, it will be remembered, was some feet below the kitchen again). If I jumped this, the noise must attract attention; and I might sprain or break my leg into the bargain. An expedient occurred to me. I had not replaced the flooring which I had removed. The board, which ran the full length of the room measured nearly sixteen feet. Leaning, as far as I could out of the window, I managed to rest one end of this board upon the ground, the other against the house-wall some four or five feet below me.

I had scarcely accomplished this, when I heard the sound of feet outside my door, a bolt withdrawn, the handle turned. My barricade would obstruct the doorway for some few minutes—but for some few minutes only. I had just time to swing myself from the window-sill by my hands, to get both feet round the plank, to slide to the ground, to fly like the wind, to raise the postern latch, when the crash of falling table and chairs reached my ears. I ran—I know not in which direction—up one street, and down another, on, on, fancying I heard the sound of feet behind me; no soul visible to right or left. At last, breathless and exhausted, down by the river's side, I came to a soldier's guard-house. A sentry was at the door; there was the ruddy light of the men's pipes and of a lantern within. No haven was ever more grateful to shipwrecked mariner. I fell down upon the step; the sergeant and his men came and stared, demanded with oath what I wanted, and, as I could not speak at first, declared I was drunk. Then, as in half-articulate phrase I poured out my strange tale, they changed their minds, and declared I was mad. But as I was an amusing rather than a dangerous lunatic, and served to beguile the tedious hours of the night, they let me remain among them; asked the same stupid questions over and over again; laughed their horse-laughs; and spat all around me, until day-break. Then they directed me to the cathedral, and I left them. One of the sacristans was unlocking the doors as I got there. I found my knapsack untouched, in the dusky corner of the confessional; there, utterly worn out, at last, with the excitement of that eventful night, I leaned back, in the gray morning light, and fell asleep.

The sun was high when I woke; the feet of the devout were shuffling in to their morning orisons. I shouldered my knapsack and crept away. My head ached; my limbs felt chill and numb. Had I been dreaming? Were they no more than mere shadows of the brain which had left behind them so deep and terrible an impression? I met a sacristan—not the one whom I remembered the night before—as I was going out. I stopped to question him. Did he know anything of two fair-haired women who had been at vespers last evening? I described them.— He stared at me and shook his head. In the crowds who came there daily how could he tell whom I meant? I left him and entered a humble little gastehaus hard by, where, for a few groschen, I broke my fast. Here I made the same inquiries. I even essayed to tell my story; but I saw that, like the soldiers, the people thought me wandering in my wits. They told me rather derisively that I had better tell my story to the police. But how could I hope to be believed, unsupported as my extraordinary statement was by any proof whatsoever? If I could not test the reality of these events to my own absolute satisfaction, was it likely that others would regard them as anything but the creations of an excited imagination.

I wandered for a couple of hours through the city, trying to find my way to the house, the exterior of which I felt certain I should recognize. I could not even trace the road I taken, and at last I gave it up. The conviction slowly and reluctantly grew up in me that I was suffering from the effects of a violent nightmare. Its impression remained painfully strong on my mind for many days (I left Cologne the same afternoon); and, indeed, for several weeks I never went to sleep without living over again those terrible hours. But no ill dreams disturbed my rest; and since the effect of all things must wear out in time, as months rolled on the memory of my night in Cologne became to me no more than a remarkable experience of the strange phantasmagoria which the mind may conjure up, and invest with every appearance of reality, when volition is removed. I drew over and over again in my sketch book, the heads of these two sisters as they had appeared to me; and I wrote down with extreme particularity, every word they had said, and every small circumstance of my dream.

One winter's evening in the following year I again passed through Cologne, on my road home.