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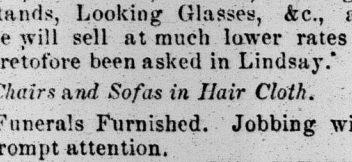
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Literary Selections.
Norah Cushaleen;
THE HAUNTED CASTLE.
(Continued from last week.)
CHAPTER XXI.

A SUSPICION ENTERS THE MIND OF LADY BLANITRE, WHICH CAUSES HER TO VISIT THE RUIN WITH A DARK AND CREEPY PURPOSE.

On the night of Mary Kendall's abduction, Lady Blantire was walking to and fro in her room in a state of proud exultation. She was too excited to sleep, owing to the importance of the event which was that night taking place. The honour and prosperity of the family were being put beyond peril. Malvrin was being married to a lady of equal rank, and her ample fortune would free the estate from the embarrassment which her son's extravagance and dissipation had brought upon it.

To be sure there were circumstances connected with the marriage which were calculated to detract somewhat from Lady Blantire's feeling of triumphant satisfaction. She could not get rid of the thought that the time, the place, and the character of the ceremony were not such as befitted a union between the houses of Kendal and Blantire. A marriage so auspicious ought to have been contracted in some pomp and splendour. There should have been a wedding breakfast and loud and open congratulations; but instead of all this there was secrecy, silence, and concealment. The midnight hour was chosen for the time of the ceremony, the place was a solitary ruin among the mountains, and on the part of the bride the marriage was being performed without her consent, but she was absolutely rendered helpless by violence, and made a wife against her will.

These facts were certainly calculated to moderate Lady Blantire's satisfaction, but she looked upon Mary's opposition as the result of romantic and evanescent feeling, produced by the wild and extravagant behaviour of Hargrave, and she imagined that when the rain and silly dream was over, Mary would be glad and thankful that she had been constrained to her own good.

In spite, then, of the exceptional circumstances attending the union, Lady Blantire was strongly excited by it, for the interests which had been at stake and the dangers which her love and deep meditation produced a great glow at the Blantire family, of whom her son was the representative. If the disgraceful fact had become known, that Malvrin had been secretly married to Norah Cushaleen, a peasant girl, Squire Kendal would have indignantly spurned the idea of a marriage with his daughter, and the publication of the horrible truth would have been equally prejudicial to an alliance with any other suitable Irish family. The consequences therefore, would have been poverty and extinction—two unmitigated and irreparable evils.

But from these awful consequences the ceremony of the night was saved. Lady Blantire, and her ladyship was exceedingly elated, more particularly as the abuse which was that night being effected was her own suggestion and she congratulated herself on the thought that by her prompt and energetic counsel, the threatened danger had been averted.

She could not sleep, and was restlessly pacing her chamber as the dawn of the new day broke silently over the earth.

All is secure now," she muttered, as she approached the window and looked dreamily across the park, the objects of which were every moment becoming more distinct.

"Yes," she continued, "the ceremony must be over by this time, and Mary Kendall is the wife of Malvrin. No more danger to be apprehended from that sneaking English adventurer or from her own absurd romantic notions. She is bound fast and sure, and in a few hours Malvrin will arrive with her here, where all is ready for her reception. Ha! I see the figure of a horseman coming across the park. Surely it is—yes it is Malvrin, and alone. Who can his man be? Slowly the rider approached on his palled horse, and as Lady Blantire thought, with an air of dejection hardly befitting a new-made husband. She stood petrified with astonishment, and a vague feeling of alarm stole through her heart.

"Can he have failed, can the scheme have miscarried?" she murmured through her pallid lips.

"She listened till she heard him enter and ascend the stair, then softly opening her chamber door, she met him on the landing.

"What means this?" she hurriedly asked.

"Why are you here and alone?"

"Her sudden appearance surprised him, and for some moments he stood silent before her.

"Speak?" she eagerly whispered; "you have not failed! Surely you have not come to tell me you have failed?"

"He passed into her chamber, and beckoned her to follow him. Then he told her all that had occurred.

"She heard him in silence, and when he narrated the appearance of the spirit of the murdered Norah she started, and a strangely dark expression came over her countenance. But she did not interrupt him till he had finished the recital, by telling her of the ineffectual search they had made for Mary.

"Coward," she then bitterly exclaimed, "poor, pitiful coward, to be frightened by a shadow a mere freak of the imagination!"

"You are wrong, mother," he replied. "It was no shadow. O'Brady and the priest saw and heard it as well as I."

"They did," said her ladyship, as her eyes suddenly emitted a gleaming flash.

"They did," and were not less moved than myself."

"And you all three fled like a pack of scared deer," she said, scornfully.

"It is no joke to see and to be challenged by a ghost, mother," returned Malvrin gloomily.

"And suppose it was a ghost, what power could it have demanded her ladyship. I would no more be afraid of a ghost than I am of my own lap-dog. It can have no power, for it is but a shadow, after all."

"I could not forget that I had murdered," "Hush!" interrupted his mother, with sudden impetuosity. Speak nothing of that. Had you banished the recollection from your mind, the apparition at the ruin would not have so alarmed you. And she is gone—fled home to her father's castle, no doubt, and the scheme has failed, at the very moment of success. Oh, but you are valiant, and brave, as becomes the house of Blantire."

"Cease your reproaches, mother," cried Malvrin, in an impatient tone. "I have been sufficiently chafed and worried; do not add to my annoyance. Let us rather think how the mischief is to be remedied."

"Ay, that is indeed the point," returned her ladyship. "Fresh scheming is required, and that immediately. Leave me now—leave me to my own thoughts, and seek repose for yourself. At a later hour I will visit you in your own chamber."

"But—"

"Go—go," she imperatively rejoined. "I would be alone."

He departed, and Lady Blantire was once more the sole occupant of the chamber.

With an eager, trembling hand she fastened the door, and tottering across the room, sank heavily into a seat.

"They all say it," she muttered. "A spirit, it is said, can be seen by only one person at once, and it never speaks, or if it does, it can be heard by one person only. Yet I saw, all heard it. Then it is no ghost; it is the girl herself in flesh and blood, and the story of her death is a myth. Great Heaven! if my suspicion be true, if Norah Cushaleen be alive, the danger to the house of Blantire is ten thousand times greater than ever. Her life the law will make her so, and ruin, and disgrace are before us. The girl must be bridled," she added after several minutes of silent and intense thought.

If the girl be indeed alive, her death alone can prevent the terrible catastrophe—that will bridge the gap that nothing else will. Yes—I must do it. To my own hand will I confide the task of saving the family of Blantire from destruction. Neither weakness nor fear will move me from my purpose, and concealment. The midnight hour was chosen for the time of the ceremony, the place was a solitary ruin among the mountains, and on the part of the bride the marriage was being performed without her consent, but she was absolutely rendered helpless by violence, and made a wife against her will.

These facts were certainly calculated to moderate Lady Blantire's satisfaction, but she looked upon Mary's opposition as the result of romantic and evanescent feeling, produced by the wild and extravagant behaviour of Hargrave, and she imagined that when the rain and silly dream was over, Mary would be glad and thankful that she had been constrained to her own good.

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"They did," and were not less moved than myself."

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"It is no joke to see and to be challenged by a ghost, mother," returned Malvrin gloomily.

scheme is a brilliant one. It will be successful, I know it will.

A quiet smile played for an instant round the compressed lips of Lady Blantire.

"And the best of all," added Malvrin, "that Mary will go voluntarily and openly to the altar, and we shall have a marriage worthy of the families who form the alliance." The spirit of Norah will appear on the occasion, for it will take place in a regular consecrated chapel."

As Lady Blantire listened to these words, the quiet smile vanished from her face. The impression of a dark and stern resolution succeeded it. She majestically waved her hand, and glided from the room.

Next day Lady Blantire was not to be seen in the Castle. Malvrin went to her chambers and saw that it had not been tenanted for the night.

"So she has carried out her purpose," he muttered. "She means not to be seen again till I have led Mary Kendall to the altar. Be it so. I will not seek to invade her retirement, and doubtless she will reappear, and be ready to welcome my bride when I bring her home."

But the disappearance of Lady Blantire was connected with something very different from what her son supposed. After she quitted Malvrin's bed room, she spent most of the day in the seclusion of her own apartment, meditating and musing on the deadly purpose of her heart, and in preparing a dress, partly for disguise and partly for protection, in the mountain journey she was about to undertake.

Her preparations being completed, when it drew towards evening she stealthily made her way to a room where lay many old and antique articles, and various kinds of armor, which had been won by the ancient warlike lords of Blantire. Opening a cabinet there, she took out a small dagger, on the blade of which lay red spots of rust, which had been gathered for generations. She looked at it for a moment, felt the point, and a grim fiendish smile disfigured her face. Then she wiped the dagger with her napkin, and deposited it in her bosom.

When the deepening twilight made objects almost indistinguishable, she stole out by a small private door at the rear of the Castle, and plunged into the thick shrubbery which at that place reached almost to the wall and skirted the whole of the north side of the park. As she stepped out, the latter she entered a wood which ran by the side of several fields to the highway, opening which she struck into the mountain path which led by the cliffs to the ruin.

It was the same path taken by Malvrin some time before, and for a similar purpose. The intention of the mother was the same as that of the son, viz.—to murder Norah Cushaleen, should her suspicion prove correct that the latter was still alive, and lurking concealed within the ruin.

As Lady Blantire ascended the solitary steep, amid frowning rocks, black gorges, and the darkness of night she experienced no fear, and hardly felt fatigue. Her stern resolute spirit was not trammelled by the common superstitions of the district; but even had she been a believer in the supernatural, she would not have been deterred from her purpose, and led her way to disregard, or at least to brave the danger. For the honour of her family (she herself was a Blantire) she would dare everything, counting that above all other considerations.

She gained the top of the cliff; and the murmuring sea as it flowed among the rocks far below, came to her ears. The night was very different from that in which Malvrin was decoyed to the boat by her heartless betrayer. There were no clouds on the sky, no storm in the air, and no tempest on the ocean. A faint breeze floated on the heights and stirred the wild flowers and tall grass that grew in the crevices of the rocks, and the rustle of these, with the low murmur of the sea were the only sounds that broke upon the stillness and the calmness of the scene.

Following the path as it turned from the cliff, Lady Blantire, whose figure was closely muffled up, toiled up the rugged and disquieting ascent with undiminished energy, and in less than an hour entered the open level space in front of the ruin. All was dark and perfectly silent. No gleam of light came from any of the loop-holes, no sound of any thing human was heard, either without or within.

Lady Blantire glided across the esplanade and approached the low oaken door. It was closed and unopened.

"Ha! there is some change, at any rate," she mentally muttered. "Malvrin told me that they had left this door open, and now it is shut and secured. This is not the doing of a spirit!"

She pressed against it, and it shook a little but showed no signs of yielding, and her ladyship felt that no strength of hers would prevail against it. She therefore turned her thoughts to finding admission by some other way.

Passing round to the north she entered the enclosure where Mike O'Rafferty and his sons had buried Terry's boxes, but no doorway or other aperture existed in this direction.

After exploring the ruin as far as she could, she returned to the oaken door, and doubts of her ability to penetrate into the interior.

She was about to retire to the low oaken door and had almost emerged from the enclosure, when her quick eyes noticed a dark figure approach from the path that led from the mountains to the valley of Dundarra. She instantly crouched down, and watched as a tiger watching for its prey. The dark figure paused for some moments at the verge of the esplanade, then slowly advanced to the closed door. It was an old man, carrying a large bundle on his back, and he gave three peculiar loud taps on the door, by way of signal.

Lady Blantire noiselessly crept forward by the side of the wall, and stood behind an abutment close to the door.

"Who is there?" asked a female's voice from within.

"It's me, Norah, darling," answered the old man. "Sure you know the sound of your father's voice?"

Immediately there was the sound of stones being removed from behind the door, and presently it was pulled open.

"Oh! father," said Norah, "why have you come up the mountains at this hour all alone?"

"To bring mate to you, alans. I thought that maybe you wouldn't have thought to serve you and the big broth of a boy you have to nurse. Heaven bless him and keep him from harm."

"But I have plenty, father," returned Norah, "as much as will serve for weeks to come. However, I am glad indeed to see you, only it is such a long dreary road."

"Never mind the road, dearth. Sure I'd come back were it ten times as far."

"Wait a moment till I bring a light. You cannot find the way along the passage in the dark, said Norah, her voice dying away as she tripped quickly into the interior.