

The Storyteller

UNFORGOTTEN.

Chance caused me once to pass a few weeks in a little village in the South of Ireland. Not far from the village is a fine old mansion, or, as it is termed, castle, in the middle of a magnificent demesne, enclosing picturesque ruins of an ancient edifice, which appears to have bequeathed the epithet of castle to the more modern though old dwelling house, built at some distance from the site of the fortress habitation of the ancient barons who took the title from its name. It was a pleasant occupation to wander through these ruins—covering still a vast extent of ground, and with much of the old building but little impaired by the ravages of time. The arched gateway at the entrance is still perfect; the tall grass has grown up in rank luxuriance about the base of the pillars of the arch; and the ivy is clasping their summit in its deadly embrace, but the arch itself is perfect; the keep over it still remains as when the watchful guard were pacing it to and fro except that the moss has spread upon it now a more luxurious carpet than the chieftain of old allowed his retainers. The winding staircase of stone leads you still from the inside to the summit of the wall, and higher yet to the ivy-covered turret from which once the banner floated or the signal-fire gleamed. You may now make your way to the top of this turret and look down on the mass of broken walls that are strewn beneath. You may look over the chambers that once were the scenes of feudal revelry, and the courts that once saw the gathering of feudal war—but that now glare no more with the festal lamp, or ring with the sound of warlike preparations—or you may cast your eye to where there rise at some little distance the ruins of what once was the chapel of the castle—the chancel is nearly perfect; a few of the stone sashes of the great eastern window are broken away, and there is no roof but the canopy of heaven; but with these exceptions, and that here again Nature has carpeted the floor with the leaves of many autumns, there is but little change since the barons, or more likely their ladies, used to come and hear the family confessor chant the Vespers at the stone altar, which is still unremoved. Just outside the chancel, under the arch of a belfry, whence probably a bell once chimed to the domestics of the castle the hour of prayer, a long flagged corridor runs down a dark passage to a large iron door. The corridor is still kept in repair.

I was not long in the village before I learned from some communicative persons the history of this family. They were lineal descendants of the ancient barons. The title and a great portion of the estates had been forfeited in some of those many rebellions which have so often proved in Ireland either the cause or the pretext of confiscation; and to the present inheritors of their patrimony but little of the ancient glories of the house remained; they were, however, still wealthy and respected, and cherished with all the fondness of hereditary pride the old ruins of their baronial residence and the vault to which for ages had been consigned the remains of the members of the house.

I also learned that the present proprietor had not been more than two years in possession of the estate. He had obtained it on the death of a distant relative. I was told that the last owner had an only daughter, exceedingly beautiful and amiable—that it had been arranged that she was to be married to her relative, who, by the law of entail, was heir to the estate. Just as the marriage was about to take place, the lady had died. Both her father and lover were represented as being disconsolate. The former proved his sincerity by dying in a few months of a broken heart, and the latter succeeded to the estate. During my stay in the neighborhood I had become acquainted with him. He did not appear particularly broken-hearted. I heard it said that he had never got over the loss of his betrothed, but I confess that when I sat in his society and found him the soul and life of conversation, in which he was particularly animated and intelligent, I could not help feeling sceptical as to the permanence of his sorrow, and supposing that an estate of two thousand a year might be capable, in due time, of administering consolation even to a bereaved lover.

Among the points upon which I acquired information, I was told that ever since the old gentleman's death his ghost was haunting the demesne, that he had been seen coming out of the vault at midnight, with a lighted candle in his hand, and it was further whispered that the new lord of the mansion was conscious of the unseasonable remembrances of his predecessor, and felt ashamed of them, as latterly strict orders had been issued that no one should, under any circumstances, be admitted into the demesne after nightfall—a peremptory order which put a stop to moonlight excursions to visit the ruins, which had previously been frequently planned and executed. Different causes were assigned for the peremptory directions which closed the gates against all nocturnal visitors—many attributed it to the pious unwillingness of the owner to let the pranks of his relative's ghost be generally known—some saw a sufficient reason in the fact that a young lady in the neighborhood had found in one of these moonlight excursions an opportunity to elope—and the prudence and propriety of the owner were the theme of applause from all the matrons of the country around.

I had been all my life a perfect and utter disbeliever in all tales of supernatural appearances; and yet, strange to say, I united with this scepticism a most earnest and passionate desire to see a ghost. I do not know why, but the story of the ghost made a deep impression on my imagination. I felt an insuperable desire to test the reality of the apparition by a personal visit to the vault, and I fancied that a silver passport might be sufficient to admit me within the precincts of the demesne, even at the forbidden hour.

In this, however, I was disappointed. No bribe—at least none that I offered—was sufficient to overcome the fidelity or the caution of the warden at the gate. It was in vain that I pleaded my desire to see the ruins by moonlight; it was in vain that I urged my plea by the most cogent reasons my purse or my eloquence could supply; the old gatekeeper sternly replied to all my offers and solicitations that he dared not disobey his master's orders; and I was forced to abandon my project, or seek some less legitimate mode of accomplishing it than by entering through the gate.

It was not until the night before I was to leave that I effected my purpose of paying a midnight visit to the vault. I had walked all round the demesne in daylight; but it was enclosed by a nine-feet wall, and a wall so perfect as to baffle all my attempts at climbing. At last I bethought me of another expedient for gaining admission.

I should have mentioned that close by the old ruins ran a considerable stream, which divided the demesne into two parts. Just where it emerged from the demesne there was a bridge, and it struck me that I might possibly make my way under one of the arches. I reconnoitred the passage in the daytime. The stream was not, I knew, very deep, but still it was far too deep to be comfortable, perhaps even safe, to wade; but I remarked that along the bottom of the arch there was here and there a few projecting stones, and a few indentations in the masonry, which left an adventurous passenger an opportunity, by a judicious disposition of his steps, of passing along the entire length of the arch. To these perilous stepping-stones my curiosity to see a ghost induced me to trust myself.

I accomplished my entrance with some difficulty. The bright moon shone full upon the side of the arch where my stepping-stones lay, and guided me to place my feet. I could not help thinking that if I was superstitious I might look on her as a lamp held in the heavens to guide me to a destined interview with a being of another world; but when I saw that she was rapidly veering round and lowering in the heavens, so that long before my return, even if she were not set, my stepping-stones would be completely in the shadow, I thought it more convenient to interpret the withdrawal of the lamp as an omen that I should never return. With all my efforts to shake it off, I confess the superstition for an instant gathered gloomy at my heart.

When I found myself safe on firm ground I felt inclined to laugh at the wild and foolish errand upon which I had come; but there was an awe about me that prevented me from giving way to my inclinations. The shadows of the great old trees were projected upon the silvery hoariness of the meadow; and I could of those near me trace the minutest outlines against the sky, as their flinnest foliage vibrated gently and distinctly in the night breeze. The ripple of the river was sparkling in the moonbeam, and its indistinct murmurs hardly broke upon the stillness of the scene; silence—if I may so speak—was undisturbed by the few sounds that came softly upon the midnight air—now and then the far-off howl of some dog, true to the reproach which the dramatist has cast upon his tribe, senselessly 'baying the moon,' or the heavy whirring of the wing of the night bird. I looked across the meadow to the eminence where the old ruins stood in their antique solemnity—the tall turrets rose like giants, their mantles of ivy thrown carelessly round their shoulders, motionless in the repose of the scene. I felt half-unwilling to disturb their tranquility by a nearer approach. The truth was I would have given something to recede, but it would have compromised my honor in my own eyes. I never was so much afraid of anything as of being obliged to own to myself that I was a coward.

On, then, I went towards the awful-looking pile, with a nervous apprehension such as I had never felt before. A low mist seemed to flit along the banks of the stream; and I could not help feeling as if its vapory forms were really the dim shapes of spirits. At last I reached the rising ground on which stood the old castle. I was startled as my step sounded loud on the worn stone flag that was the threshold of the gateway. Inside all was dark and gloomy from the contrast. Here and there the light tinged some object where the moonbeams poured in through the old windows or some loophole in the walls. I went on through the ruins until I reached the church. I stood in the deserted chancel, and my thoughts rose to Him to Whom once from that lonely spot ascended the solemn hymns of praise. I leaned back against the wall, and I could almost see before me the altar and the dim taper gleaming indistinctly. My spirit was solemnised. I wondered how the fears of superstition could have peopled with restless or wicked spirits a place so still and so holy. In the sacredness of the place—in everything around me, I felt as it were the presence of the Father of Spirits, and from that presence everything that was unholy was bid away. If ever I felt the purity of devotion, it was for the time I stood there.

I was startled by the light sound of footsteps—they seemed lighter than human. I listened, but all again was still. I thought it might be the wind that moved some