



OUR ECLECTIC MAGAZINE

THE CREAM OF FOREIGN EXCHANGES

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A HAUNTED MAN.

A Most Extraordinary Narrative.

BY EMMA HARDINGE BRITTEN.

[NOTE BY THE AUTHOR.—The following history, for which it actually is, is not only well known to the writer and several of her immediate friends, but the circumstances upon which it is founded were communicated in strict confidence to the narrator by the reverend old gentleman referred to in the history under the name of "Dr. Masham." It was in consultation with the present writer on the history in question that those circumstances were fully explained which had been a mystery to many a looker-on, and which are permitted to be published only on condition of reserving the real names and addresses of the parties concerned.]

Some years ago it was remarked that a young, singularly handsome and talented man, a clergyman of the Church of England, was equally noted for the many offers of lucrative appointments that were tendered him, and the strange pertinacity with which he refused to remain long settled in any one place, however desirable or tempting were the opportunities of preferment open to him. His aim seemed to be to supply the post of temporary curate, for one or a few weeks, or to fill up any vacancy that might be offered him, but never to stay in any place more than a month or six weeks. For a long time the restless spirit that seemed to animate this self-condemned wanderer was a problem that his best friends and warmest admirers were unable to solve. His custom of going from place to place to do temporary duty was not his only mode of satisfying the restless spirit that seemed to animate him. His singular conduct and the stern silence which he maintained concerning the causes of his eccentric action were connected with the fact that he had once been a poor, a very poor curate, with little hope of rising in the profession he had chosen, except by his remarkable powers of oratory, when all of a sudden, and before he could have dreamed of it, he was suddenly elevated to the position of public life, and was endowed with those gifts of fortune which marked him out for a man of wealth no less than one favored by nature and organization in a splendid physique, and a resistless power of mental control.

Another peculiarity, and perhaps the most remarkable one which attended the ministry of this fascinating wanderer, was the constant and invariable presence in the place of worship, where he was to be found, of a lady who did not seem to be related to him by any known ties of association. Report alleged that she was an aristocratic lady, traveled, and was always seen alone; yet, whenever the minister appeared, whether for a long or a short season, whenever he did duty for a brother clergyman, temporarily incapacitated by sudden illness, the mysterious visitant was there, how apprised of, by whom none could say. One point alone was widely bruited abroad, which was, that whenever the strange lady's presence was named to Mr. H.—(the clergyman in question), he sternly disavowed all knowledge of the subject, and declined with such marked hauteur to speak upon it, or listen to the inquiries propounded to him, that any further remarks were effectually checked, and curious speculations alone prevailed in the attempt to solve the mystery. Added to this inscrutable problem was another, which the gossips of the day did not fail to comment on; that Mr. H.—never seemed to be his usual self, and the obvious fact that his reckless profusion implied the possession of vast wealth. From whence this was derived was another of the mysteries which surrounded this gentleman's life. The lady who became thus strangely associated with the minister, was, as it were, the shadow of his life, and his reputation of Mr. H.—never seemed to hold the slightest communication with him. She generally entered the place where he was to minister quite late, walked entirely the length of the building, and took her seat as nearly in front of the pulpit as possible, never failing (of course), to attract all eyes of those present to her remarkable, and, at last, well-known and well-anticipated presence.

In person this strange visitor was tall, graceful, and invariably habited in a robe rather than a dress of funeral hue. The garments she wore were plain and unpretending; nevertheless there was in their rusty hue and faded fashion an air of bygone gentility, which, added to the grace and dignity of her manner, were singularly impressive. It was impossible, however, to judge of her appearance or age, seeing that her features were always concealed by a thick white lace veil; whilst her rusty attire and worn gloves spoke all too plainly of fallen fortunes, the singular grace and dignity of her carriage were unmistakable tokens of "birth and breeding." As in summer or winter, snow or sunshine, the same came, and the same enshrouding veil enveloped the stranger's features, she came at last to be distinguished by the sobriquet of "the white lady;" and the vast congregations that assembled to listen to the handsome, and at length renowned, and most eloquent young preacher, were just as sure to behold this strange, phantom-like addition to his

to the altar, his unaccountable conduct, combined with the singular rumors which prevailed about him, broke through all the conventional forms which hedge in such a scene with a wall of strict etiquette, and the whole congregation simultaneously rose to observe his movements. Without paying the least attention to the rustle around him, he proceeded up the aisle with the same downcast look which ever marked his way, until he arrived at the vacant space, when he was observed to draw aside his robe, as his custom had been when he had been compelled to pass in direct proximity to the veiled lady. Some wondered why he drew aside his garments from the viewless air; others pronounced it the force of habit; and some few heard the preacher murmur as he passed the empty space: "For the last time on earth, remember!"

At the close of the service, a venerable old gentleman came up to Mr. H.—announced himself as the rector of the parish whose place he, Mr. H.—, had been called to supply, and requested the favor of his accompanying him back to his own house. The good rector, without mentioning his name, drove his visitor home in silence, but as soon as they entered the hall, he invited Mr. H.—to accompany him into his library, where the two sat down at the open window, as if for serious converse. It was a lovely autumn day; the woods and lawns were glowing in the rich, mellow tints of dying summer; tall forest trees shaded the painted Gothic windows of the still, calm retreat in which they sat; the noble windows open to the floor, looked out upon the silent resting-places of the village dead. The grassy mounds and moss-grown stones, telling the "short and simple annals of the poor," while the deep stillness of the scene was only broken by the cawing of a colony of rooks, the solitude-loving, yet noisy tenants of those spots most consecrated to mystery and repose.

Those who became most interested in watching this mysterious drama at length began to note that its effect upon the preacher was prejudicial alike to body and mind. Many who remembered his brilliant advent, and strikingly handsome appearance, were amazed to observe how rapidly he had aged, and how strikingly the glow of youth and health had faded out from the still young but worn and haggard face. There was an eager, restless light, too, in the troubled eyes, which seemed to be always searching for something they could not find, but never looking in the right direction. In the preacher's voice and manner there grew a deeper cadence, a more pathetic tone, and, though his popularity seemed to deepen with this mystery that surrounded him, it was pitiful to watch his futile, wandering glances as he would enter and leave his place of ministry; to note the strange abstraction which separated him more and more from his congregation, until he seemed at times to be speaking to an invisible church of which the visible was but the shadow, whilst his sudden and unquiet starts of awakened life and sense of present realities were over accompanied by the same strange, wandering glances, reaching away in the distance for something all too near at hand.

It was at a period when the very oil of life seemed to be nearly expended, and the flame now flickering in its socket to be almost on the verge of extinction, that a confusion of ideas seemed to awaken amongst the congregations the preacher visited concerning the appearance of the "white lady," alleged to be his constant attendant. Some of those to whom the reports concerning this mysterious personage had been communicated declared the whole story was false. They had seen no "white lady," not they, though they had watched for her ever so curiously, whilst others affirmed that she had been there, described her dress, gait, mannerisms, and especially remarked upon the sudden and abrupt way in which the preacher turned away his head when he happened to look in the direction in which she had placed herself.

Some of the observers declared they had noticed an even more marked singularity than usual in the preacher's manner. He descended from his pulpit, they said, in greater haste than common, drew aside his surplice as he passed the "white lady," not that they thought he had watched for her ever so curiously, whilst others affirmed that she had been there, described her dress, gait, mannerisms, and especially remarked upon the sudden and abrupt way in which the preacher turned away his head when he happened to look in the direction in which she had placed herself.

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CHAPTER II.

Soon after there had arisen a division of opinion concerning the presence of a mysterious "veiled" lady among Mr. H.—'s congregations, Mr. H.—himself was solicited to visit a distant part of the north of England, supposed to be his birthplace, where, as he was informed by letter, the rector, an aged gentleman, much beloved by his congregations, had been taken suddenly ill, and pending the appointment of a successor, he, the rector himself, had urged one of his friends to entreat Mr. H.—to come there and do temporary duty, if only for a couple of weeks. Mr. H.—manifested at first strong reluctance to visit this place, where he had once served as a poor curate. It was only after much vacillation of purpose that he seemed to be moved by one of his usual sudden impulses to comply with the requisition.

Having postponed his arrival at the place where he was expected until the Sunday morning, he proceeded at once to the church where he was to officiate. There any one that might have been acquainted with his previous habits and manner would have realized his unusual restlessness, and the continued furtive glances he cast towards an empty space directly beneath the pulpit he occupied. The intense anxiety or distress which he manifested was so marked that the congregation began to look as eagerly into the vacancy at last as himself. On passing that spot, to the surprise of all, he suddenly stopped as if some one had addressed him, bent his head slightly, as if in acknowledgment of a communication, and with an aching paleness on his face proceeded to the vestry-room to change his robes. As he returned again

man, who appeared among us as a stranger. She asked me if I would share her splendid equipage on my way home, as she wished to converse with me. Under the excuse of needing spiritual advice, which I alone was qualified to give, she formed my acquaintance, and soon drew from the sinless heart of youth the hitherto unfathomed aspirations of ambition and avarice, which were gradually developing in my heart. I soon learned that this lady was rich, high-born, a widow, and to my utter astonishment, I discovered that she was actually enamored of the humble curate and his insignificant pretensions to village fame. I forbore to trace the process of which this terrible arbitress of my fate gained complete mastery over all my better feelings. The temptations by power, dignity, preferment and wealth, were long held out as but feeble lures in comparison to my devoted attachment to my precious mountain flower; but at length I was weak enough to promise that if she would place her fortunes in my hands as a test of her sincerity, I, in return, would abandon Mary, marry her, and yield up my destiny to her guidance. For the riches I should thus attain, and the quick and lofty church which she assured me of, I was contented then to barter my soul to the fiend. When this woman first placed her enormous wealth at my disposal, I honestly declared it was my firm intention to redeem my pledge and marry her. But alas! alas! who shall stay himself on the swift ocean of crime, when once his bark is launched. The sea of error is shoreless, and death alone can break the spell in its irrevocable pathway. The very hour I found myself in possession of the widow's wealth I eloped with my first love from my native village. Alas, poor Mary! She was as innocent as the slaughtered victim on the altar of the means whereby I had so suddenly acquired wealth, and the reasons which urged me to insure upon a change of name and temporary concealment. Again I planted my foot upon the ground and vowed I would retrieve the past by a life of charity, usefulness and devotion to my unconquered wife, and again the relentless magnetism of strengthening evil goaded me on to fresh crime. Scarcely knowing the use or value of the wealth I had abstracted, I set myself in the pursuit of wild excitement, scarcely manifesting sufficient interest in the communication to turn his head from the open window.

"Yes, sir," rejoined the old gentleman, "the family of the late Mrs. F.—have informed me (their uncle) of their resolution to dispute your title to the large sums you became possessed of in her name." "The late Mrs. F.—," shouted the young man, springing up from his chair, and fixing on his companion a look which almost froze him to stone. "Aye, sir," stammered the other. "Is it possible you can be ignorant of Mrs. F.—'s decease, eight months ago?" "Deceased! Eight months ago," replied Mr. H.—"Old man, you rave." "Now, sir, if I mistake not greatly, it is you who rave," rejoined the rector. "The lady's cousin, which my niece thought proper to pursue in following you all over England, appearing in your presence on every occasion of your ministry, while life lasted, has stamped that life with too unfortunate a notoriety for me to question that you, or even that world in which she has obtained so terrible a notoriety, can be ignorant that she expired eight months ago, and lies not ten feet from the spot on which we stand."

As he spoke he pointed to a slab of white marble, separated from the other graves in the quiet churchyard before them by a row of small rosebushes which were already beginning to form a hedge around the last earthly home of her whose remains they sheltered. The old man again proceeded to speak of the efforts which some one was making to dispossess him of his property; but Mr. H.—, without heeding him, rushed through the window, glanced hastily at the slab, on which was simply traced these words: "Margaret Infelix," and turned wildly to his companion, exclaiming: "You, then, are Mrs. F.—'s uncle, Dr. Masham?" "I am," was the reply. "You knew her by sight?" "As well as I know my own children. She was equally dear to me." "And do you mean to say that you, in calm possession of your senses, will continue to harbor her voice that you saw her to-day—saw her in the very centre of the aisle, standing the whole time, as it has ever been her custom to do, dressed as she has been accustomed to dress for the last eight months, in shining white silk, with a black band of a white veil, and that for the first time since her death she could escape her, the hideous presence by which she seemed able to divine my most secret plots to elude her vigilance and ever present her appalling presence in my path at every turn, the almost supernatural power by which she unfolded me in the death of both?" "O, sir, you never can imagine how fearfully that awful denunciation has been visited upon me. 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