

## A STARTLING VISITOR.

Last autumn, having caught a severe cold in the cricket-field, I was ordered to spend the winter in the South of France. I was soon able to breathe freely once more, but should have found the life very dull had it not been for the acquaintance of a young Frenchman named de Lussan, whom I met during one of my strolls in the Bois de Boulogne. He was a Frenchman together many lovely spots, and when the wintry weather put an end to these trips, I agreed to pass Christmas-tide with him in his home. He had told me that he and his sister were both very rich, great possessors of a rambling old chateau, some hectares of land, and very little else. I was, therefore, prepared to find a modest establishment, to which the addition of the expenses of my visit would be a burden, if I had not contributed to the household by sending from Nismes an occasional box of luxuries, such as my hosts would never have thought of ordering for themselves. Emile and Constance de Lussan led a healthy, country life; *res aquila domus* was not apparent; for the farmer paid them a small rent for the grass land; and was there not cousin Bertha's contribution to the common fund? Bertha was an heiress in a small way; a tall, pale, thin girl, of whom we did not see much, as she was not yet fifteen, and consequently was nearly always with her governess.

After the weary round of London gaiety and the hum of such a hive as Harrow, how I did enjoy the quiet country life, the pure air, and the sensible comfort of two or three hours' sleep, and the society of my sister! Certainly the chateau was too big to be comfortable, and when the *mistral* came howling down from the mountains, it was impossible to keep warm. Perhaps the chateau was too big for my sister and I. Certainly the chateau was too big to be comfortable, and when the *mistral* came howling down from the mountains, it was impossible to keep warm. Perhaps the chateau was too big for my sister and I.

How did you sleep? With unwonted anxiety, when every night I lay awake, and some nights passed in a fitful sleep. One night I dreamt that some evil thing was approaching my bedside, and that I could not ward it off. With a futile effort to cry out, I awoke with a start. Yes, in a moment I was broad awake; and I was plain as day to see that the fire had been beckoning with a wan, right hand. The fire had by this time burned out, yet there was a faint light from the moon recently set, sufficient for me to see that the chateau was a tall, old-fashioned building, with a dark robe of ancient fashion; the face was like death, except that the eyes were wide open, and staring at me with a fixed gaze. The figure had something in its left hand to which it pointed; then it began to retreat slowly to a distant part of the chamber, where it became indistinct, and then disappeared. Astonishment and—must I own it?—fright had hitched me up, and I had jumped out of bed. I summoned courage to jump up and strike a light. The room was untenanted save by myself. Could this have been a trick of my host? No, Emile was a French noble of all the better kind; and had the window was fastened and the door locked inside as I had left it the previous evening. Had I dreamt, or imagined the occurrence? Again, no, the apparition had been real, and I had seen it with my own eyes. The cause of its haunting my slumbers. Like Clarence, I passed a miserable night, and in the morning curried myself to answer any questions as to my misadventure.

However, youth and exercise are a capital cure for depression of mind. We had a rare scamper on pony-back to Anduze that day, returning by another road to the chateau. The day was beautiful and good. Some wine of superior vintage was produced, and the day became very jolly. In the evening I could not refrain from remarking to my fair hostess that I was surprised at the "keeping Christmas" in the Bois de Boulogne. "In this replied," she said, "we are now to ignore Christmas, and to celebrate the New Year as the 'Heathen Chinese' does; but with our forefathers it was not so. Two hundred years ago the French were Protestants, and the Protestants of France. There is also a special reason why we should keep this Christmas; Emile is going to America next year. You know that the phylloxera has done all our poor vines, and that our brother is going to the new world in hopes of regaining the fortune we have lost in the old one."

And you go with him, of course, I asked. "Yes," indeed, Emile said, "I must keep a home here for that tiresome child. If it were not for Bertha, she might shut up the chateau and accompany me." This was said in a low voice, for the

young lady in question was sitting at the other end of the room, and if she had not been chattering to Madame Drouet, might have heard the unbecoming remark. It was the first evening they had spent out of doors, and the young lady was very much surprised.

"I am sorry that my sister should be so shut out from the gay world," he continued, "You are the first visitor we have had for months; and we can never be so glad to see you as you are."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because they hear the old family history from the peasants, and they believe the place to be haunted."

"May I ask you to tell me the story?" I said.

"Constance will relate it to you with pleasure, I am sure," he answered. "Then going to his cousin he said, 'What a pity it is that you are not here. It is going to tell this gentleman the legend of our house.'"

"I do not care to hear it again," was the reply. "You are lively, gay, and full of spirit, and a trite tale, should like to join you; but to listen to that story I have heard hundreds of times!"

"Then I think you had better retire," said Emile. "So will, if Madame does not think it too early," was the lady's answer.

"Mademoiselle requires plenty of rest, she grows so fast; and it is past ten o'clock," was that lady's remark; so the two parted the room with a brief bow to the fire and the fire.

Mademoiselle de Lussan then commenced as follows: "You have probably heard of our ancestor, the Baron d'Algailles. He came forward towards the middle of the twelfth century, and lived for two hundred years ago, and was mainly instrumental in making peace between the Camisards and the Government; for which service he was rewarded by being banished from his native land. He lived for two hours' notice, on horseback, taking with him his only remaining servant." The young lady then went on to narrate the subsequent adventures of that illustrious ancestor, the pious and pious ancestor of his family in Switzerland; his return to France; capture and imprisonment in a Government castle, whence he succeeded in escaping, but was shot dead by the English. He was banished from his native land to this country," she concluded, "he said to have been to recover the valuables that he had secreted before his flight, the place of concealment having been discovered by the English. He lived for two back some years later to inhabit the home to which she had been brought as a bride before the rebellion; but her mind was quite shattered, and she passed the remainder of her life in a state of great misfortune. She had to be watched night and day. At last she died, as we all must; but there is a tradition in our family that she still haunts the chateau, and that she will be seen by some of our family. The barons became possessed of the lost treasure. Of course we do not believe, yet it is annoying to have such a story afloat. Only last week our servant left us, and he had heard the story of the haunted chateau, and declared that on her return she had met a tall lady, dressed in an ancient robe with a hood over her head, and holding a letter in her hand. The figure appeared to be searching for something under the trees, but when the girl spoke, it vanished. Of course, it was all imagination."

"*Mai foi non!*" I interrupted. "I had begun to know enough French to swear, but I could not find the words. The French is good enough to say 'last night'; and I told them what the reader already knows."

"That is indeed strange!" remarked Emile. "It is the 'Baron's' room which has been allotted to you, but his wife is said to have never occupied it after his death. However, you shall have another chamber to-morrow; there are plenty of rooms and plenty of furniture in the tower, and plenty of furniture in the tower."

All at once there was a shadow on the mirror above the fire. Looking up I saw the same figure which I had visited me the previous night.

I started up and faced it. The time it was no dream, for the shadow from the candle between us was faded, and I could see the gaunt figure, and the faded, old-fashioned hood shrouding that white face and those glaring eyes—clearly a man never seen before, and those were the eyes of the man who had been in the tower. In one hand was a scroll resembling parchment.

I made a step forward; the figure retreated and disappeared behind the tapestry. I distinctly heard the sound of the door being opened, and I saw the light. There was no sound of a footstep, but the next moment I was alone and in comparative darkness, for a sudden gust of air had blown out my one candle. A moment I stood in the dark, and then I saw the figure, a mystery, I thought; "I must fulfil my destiny."

Relighting the candle, I lifted a corner of the tapestry, and found that a concealed door in the panels was open to a staircase constructed in the

thick wall. Regardless of the cold, I descended and found myself on the ground-floor, and in a room devoted to the preservation from frost of a number of orange-trees and oleanders growing in large tubs. The outer door was not fastened, so I stepped into the open air.

It was bright moonlight, and the lawn before me was deserted; but under the magnificent trees beyond I thought I saw a shadowy figure moving in the deep shadows. Hurrying across the grass I came upon the same mysterious figure that had startled me in my room; it was apparently searching for something; the finger of the right hand was pointing at a blind person's reading raised characters; the sunken eyes started at the grass.

"What do you want with me?" I said. The question seemed to startle the blind person, who continued to move along, the characters which appeared to be written on vellum.

"Give me that paper," I said. Still no answer. I then turned round, and saw the figure standing before me. It was a woman—gave a shriek and fled like lightning to a neighbouring shrubbery, where she was lost to view.

I stood for a moment hesitating, and then I saw the same figure mounted on the lofty garden wall; then it passed along the front of the wing of the chateau opposite to that in which I had been. It was apparently talking or something of the kind, and then it disappeared into an open window, which was immediately shut.

Five minutes afterwards Emile and his sister, whom I had found waiting in the hall, came down. The accounts, had joined me on the lawn. I told them what I had followed the form of their supposed ancestor from my chamber to that spot. "I believe it to be a real person, masquerading in the night, to frighten you for some purpose of her own," I said. However, the offender is now in the chateau, so you can detect and punish her."

"Where did the thing go?" asked Constance.

"I have brought you here to show you," I replied. "She entered the middle window on the first floor."

"Impossible!" exclaimed both my friends together.

"You must have been subject to some optical illusion," added Mademoiselle. "That room is—shall I tell him all, Emile?"

"Yes," he said.

"Well, then, the window you indicate is the only one in Bertha's room, and no one could possibly have entered there, as it is securely barred and never opened, except in a moment to let the lady sleep when quite a little child, so we put her in the Baron's chamber, as it is called, for safety. What you saw must have been the spirit of our ancestors."

"No spirit," I cried, "but flesh and blood. Go and look at the window, and you will see the figure accompanied her to the door. She found Madame Drouet asleep, with her bed, as usual, drawn across her pupil's door. The old lady, after some hesitation, opened the door, and in a moment she was gone. I heard the door from the throat to the feet, and finally admitted us to a peep at the inner apartment. The casement was heavily barred, and the regular breathing of the occupant was heard. The figure was buried in the profound slumber of youth and innocence."

We crept quietly out with many apologies to Madame for the untimely intrusion.

"Now, will you believe that you have been subjected to some optical illusion?" asked Emile.

"I believe nothing until I have had an opportunity of examining that window by daylight," I replied.

"There is no objection to your doing so," said Constance, "provided that our cousin does not know it; but it has been fastened for ages." And so we once more parted for the night.

Next day there were Christmas presents; among other things, a new dress of blue gauze, and a new hat, all went to the neighboring temple in the morning. Here I should explain, for the benefit of my English readers that Protestant places of worship are still called churches, and not temples.

Madame Drouet and Constance accompanied me to the Baron's chamber, while Emile undertook to keep his cousin occupied for an hour at least with his new hat.

A careful examination of the side panels of the lady's room showed that a portion of the woodwork was removable, and in a cavity behind it we found a new-drawn screw of brass. Then we tried the screws of the window-frame in which were the bars; one or two, fixed in metal, were easily withdrawn; the rest were useless, the wood in which they were fixed was decayed. The framework was then lifted aside, and the window was opened.

—opened, inwards, noiselessly and with ease. Under outside a board was removable, and in the opening thus discovered were found some articles of feminine

apparel, almost falling to pieces from age, and also a scroll of parchment.

It was evident that Bertha, with the acute senses of a somnambulist, had discovered means to escape from her prison. There was a narrow gutter below her window which only a Blondin, or a sleep-walker, could have used as a means of exit.

And here the story would have stopped, had it not been for the writing on the parchment, over which the girl had been exercising her unconscious brains during sleep. The directions were brief and plain enough. "*Dig half-way between the Pierre Aigu and the fifth oak one takes down.*" The Pierre Aigu was an ancient boulder near the château, and a fine row of oaks was quite near. We measured and dug like navvies that afternoon, Emile and I, and we found—nothing.

"There is some mistake," said my friend at last. "The trees are growing at regular distances with one exception, where the distance is double. Some storm has removed one of them."

"You are right," I said, "the fifth oak of the paper is now the fourth."

We tried again and disinterred a small box containing a few Louis d'or and a quantity of jewels of great value.

Emile did not go to America; and now another Christmas is at hand, and I have promised to spend it at the château. When the new year comes—but that is another tale which only concerns Constance and myself; it would not interest the reader a bit.