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The DEMONS of CASTLE ROMNARE

by Elizabeth Adt Wenzler



"Eugene, seeing in the eery light shed by the shade that the door was held open, stumbled out. He looked fearfully at his surroundings, and tremblingly murmured a prayer of deliverance."

A HUSH of horrified amazement fell upon the village of Savinnes in Lorraine, when it was learned that the demon-haunted Castle Romnare was to have human inmates: Countess Adrienne of Paris had announced that she would give a ball there.

She had been told of the sinister history of the feudal stronghold and the legends, but laughed at everything as idle superstition, and declared in a spirit of sheer bravado that she and her guests would banish the demons.

We shuddered at her daring, and crossed ourselves; for none had yet entered Romnare and come away unscathed.

"None but Romnare blood shall be tolerated within these walls!" the last lord of the domain had sworn—

at least, so ran the legend. Near his end and sorely beset by his mortal enemy, he had himself carried to the battlements, to have a last glance at his domain; but here also he had beheld his foe's overwhelming numbers, clamoring at the very gates with shouts of seeming victory.

At this sight, and realizing the plight he was in, his brow grew dark with wrath—this fierce lord who dealt with devils through his knowledge of black magic; and the stubborn pride of Romnare asserted itself. Romnare, which had never asked quarter and never known defeat—Romnare was about to fall. Then had the dying man rallied his ebbing life-forces and sworn a great oath; and by means known only to himself, summoned Lucifer to his aid. Committing his soul to him, he was enabled to evoke

from the earth beneath, the former lords of Romnare, to rise and defend their ancient stronghold. They, forgetting that they had lain mouldering for centuries, rose in a vast throng, and were so fierce in their desire for revenge against stranger trespass that their earthly passions were reawakened, and after routing the enemy, they nevermore returned to lasting rest. Nightly they rise, to enact scenes and deeds—part of their earthly life—and their vigil is everlasting.

So ran the legend, and we were shocked at the countess' daring; and when my own brother announced that he had accepted her invitation to assist in the orchestra at the ball, we were stunned with terror.

My mother fell weakly to her knees in her fright; and with ashen face, her voice full of anguish, implored him to cancel his rash promise. "Eugene," she cried. "I pray—reconsider! Give up this mad venture—you can not defy those that reign up there. Remember the drummer of Sarregemüines—his punishment! Think, my boy—they found him wedged in the great porte—neck broken, his eyes showing yet in death the fright of what he had seen. And the other, who came back after two hours up there babbling of things too eery to believe—headless shapes dancing about him! Stay away from that haunt of demons——"

"Demons—pah!" he chided. "Who believes in them, but old ladies and silly girls? There are no such things—they never existed. They are products of disordered minds. Those that went to the castle had their heads filled with tales—and wine spirits. They fell asleep, had dreams, and then came to harm, prompted by their fears. Would you keep me from advancement? The countess will help me to further engagements——"

"Advancement? Will you ever come away?—will you live to be ad-

vanced?" my mother pleaded tearfully.

I added my own prayers to hers—for I was his only sister and I loved him deeply; but my prayers had no more effect than my mother's. He was more determined to go than before, and remained by his resolve.

Papa Gaudier of the tavern came expressly on the morning of the ball, to warn him. "Come away before the mists begin to rise," he said. "Be advised by one who has——"

"Ah, Papa Gaudier! *Vin l'Moselle* is heavy—it is that which makes ghosts rise. Papa Gaudier must change to the watery juice of the Rhine."

"Ha! Does Mother Tousante drink heavy l'Moselle too—eh, my fledgling? For she says with Gustave Gaudier: remain not when the night-mists rise. Best stay home, little minstrel!" spoke a voice from the doorway.

We turned to behold one whom I will have cause to remember.

"*Bonjour, Madame.*" This to my mother, who had invited her to enter. "*Oui*, it is as Gaudier says. But I, Mother Tousante, have come to say it is not well that your son enter the castle. Beware! Those up there"—she pointed a gnarled hand to where the castle rose on sheer cliffs—"leave them alone. They will not brook trespass." She stopped abruptly and went out.

Eugene had given her a smile of tolerant pity; but I, his sister—I shuddered at her words. For it was whispered that Mother Tousante had strange gifts. She healed old wounds by a few words, murmured low. She told surely if a sufferer would recover, or when the death-bell would toll. Against these remonstrances and our own final warnings, Eugene set off on his errand—untroubled.

We consoled ourselves as best we could with the thought that there was a large body of people gathered at the castle, and vainly awaited his return.

EVENING merged into night, night into day again, but he came not. And all that day we waited and looked from our gable windows, facing the west, from where he must come. But the road stretched toward the hills, empty.

Another evening—night—bringing nothing but despair.

I kept my fears hidden as well as I could from my mother's searching eye. But her restlessness increased every moment. She rushed to the door at the slightest noise, thinking it might be Eugene, that he had returned and was coming in on tiptoe to surprize us, but always she came back and began her torturous watch again.

Friends had come to sit with us, and they said all they could to uphold hope. He might have gone to the inn—he might even now be near home—

Suddenly, a quick footfall was heard in the stillness, coming toward the house. I saw my mother tense visibly as it approached—it was Eugene's! Quick, eager it came, stopping at our house door.

My mother ran out, glad greetings on her lips. The next moment she tottered toward me with a terrible cry, for no living soul was there.

"Oh, God! It is a warning!" she cried wildly. "My son is lost—among the demons! Eugene! Come back, come—"

Her voice went out. She had mercifully fallen into a deep faint. Kind hands took her from my trembling arms, to minister to her comfort.

I stood stunned, unable to move; an eery sensation creeping over me. In a moment I felt withdrawn from my surroundings—projected into space, and saw Eugene playing his violin madly—heard the wail of the last string—saw it snap. I heard his cry of despair as he flung himself against the door of his prison—the castle tower! I heard his call for

help, flung into space: "Mignon! Come, help me! Mignon—come—come!" Then silence.

With a shock I came to. Summoned in this manner, I must go to my brother. He was at least alive—waiting to be released. It was for me to find a way.

A way! I thought of Mother Toussante! She, with her strange gifts—she would find a way. If I could only persuade her!

Berthe, our old servant, came to tell me that my mother was better—and weeping quietly.

"Berthe," I spoke as calmly as I could, "now that she is herself, take care of her. I feel as if Eugene was coming, so I will go along the road to meet him. Tell Mother so."

I went out, so that they might not delay me by asking questions. Taking a back road, little used, I reached the outskirts of the village unseen, as was my desire. I had no time to listen to questions and shocked outcries. Instead of taking the chaussee, leading through the valley toward Romnare in a roundabout manner, I ascended to the hills by a primitive footpath, that rises through a narrow gorge to the upper heights.

Boulders and wiry creepers tripped me—hawthorns tore at me with prickly fingers. I stumbled and fell many times, because of these obstacles and the darkness of the gorge; but pressed on again, and at last emerged atop the hills.

Stopping a moment to take breath, I saw Saviennes lying far below, sleepily silent, as lay the farther heights of Romnare. I, with my task, too vast to share with another, seemed the only agitated being in the whole peaceful night. I felt isolated, alien, as I stood there; alien I was to be, indeed, before another day broke. . . .

I flew on again, now on level ground, through a stretch of waving rye fields and open meadows toward Mount Romnare, which loomed for-

biddingly in the distance. My feet faltered as I glanced upward, where the blackened battlements were sharply etched against a dusky summer night; for they seemed to have a peculiarly menacing aspect this night.

Impatiently I recalled myself. Was I to turn coward and leave my Eugene to his fate? Never! I would get to him despite all the demons of Castle Romnare. His life hung in the balance—his sanity. The thought fired me on. I sped over the remaining ground with renewed vigor, to the tiny hamlet at the foot of the cliffs. They would naturally suppose that we of Saviennes craved news.

At the inn I asked about the gay castle affair. Luckily, they knew nothing of my brother's attendance, and the good mistress was ready to impart all she knew. Excitedly she cried:

"Ah, there is no ball at Romnare this night! You saw the castle dark? No music—no laughter—no lights, eh? No indeed! They are all back here—they came screaming last night, begging for shelter. No talk of village louts now—no laughing at superstition. Every cottage has a guest tonight."

I spoke of the countess, hoping to get a clue to the riddle of my brother's trouble.

"Treste! How does *Madame la Comtesse* bear her disappointment?"

"*Horreurs!* You should see her!" Her tone was contemptuous now. "*La belle Adrienne—Comtesse piquante*, eh? Faugh—a wretched child, with nerves shattered—she, that laughed! She suffered a shock and the doctor ordered rest for her. La, these Parisians—bah!"

Running on excitedly, she related what the guests had told:

There was a pause in the dancing, while they took refreshments and the servants were lighting the many hundreds of candles that were to illuminate the grand salons and ballroom

for the evening. Some stood in groups chatting; when without warning the candles were extinguished by unseen hands. Great shouts were heard to come from the vaults beneath their feet. These became unsteady, from a movement of the parquette, which seemed to heave and buckle upward, as if driven by a terrific subterranean force. Stumbling about in the darkness, unable to escape, all felt a strong wind enter, though the heavy doors remained closed; yet different from wind such as we know, in that it was much colder, and clammy. And it shrieked as with a thousand throats. Suddenly, some were propelled from the room, with the speed of lightning, not knowing how. Others told of being gripped by the throat with icy claws that went deep into their flesh—then felt themselves hurtling through the air, landing upon the flagstones of the courtyard. All received heavy blows over head and shoulders, were slashed about the face, and still showed these marks of bodily chastisement. A woman had gone insane from her fright. She screamed that the evil one himself had carried her through the air—she had seen his claws and wicked fiery eyes; and he dropped her only when she cried a prayer. Some of the guests had already left for Paris.

All this was told in a few minutes. I felt sure now that my brother was the only human being up there. I bade the good woman a pleasant night and made as if to go back to Saviennes, for she stood looking after me. But out of her vision, I turned and ran along the thick shadows of the wild rose hedges, toward a tiny cottage in the fields.

Once more fear assailed me, bringing cold moisture to my brow, as I contemplated the step I meant to take and its consequences. But fiercely I told my coward heart that there was no other way—and Eugene alone up there. . .

PANTING and gasping for breath I reached the little dwelling, crying as I entered, "Mother Tousante! Help me—Eugene—he is among the demons—tell me—what must I do to help—"

I could go no farther. Weakly I fell to a seat.

She sat by the hearth, looking into the flames and crooning to herself. Now she turned quickly and asked, "Ha, child, do you think he lives? Have you seen him—heard—?"

"It is so! I was made to see. He is in the castle tower. I saw him fall against the door of his chamber. Help me pray! How shall I save him!"

"Ah," she muttered, as if to herself; "he, too, is a Romnare. Eugene Romnare—how comes he by that name unless, in bygone times, some ancestor—? But no one tells of that now—he is not of the direct strain. Proof enough that he bears the Romnare name."

Then, as if the firelight had been absorbed into her dark eyes, a reddish gleam came from them as she said slowly, looking into mine: "Child, wilt make a promise? Wilt do as I require? And—wilt keep silence? It is little that I ask. You have two pets—a white pigeon, a black cat. I want them. My raven—my good Jacques—is gone. Dead of old age. I am alone—but for—"

Oohooo! came a scream from the darkness at the window. My heart contracted. Mother Tousante raised her hand and made a sign against the blackness. The scream was not repeated. Then she turned to me and said, "How, little one? Your promise."

"I promise," I said. I loved my little friends and inwardly mourned their loss, but for the help she alone could give me with her arts, I must sacrifice whatever she asked.

"The pretty trinket, yon broche—

wilt part with that? I am but a poor woman—eh?"

The greed in her eyes must be appeased. I gave her the broche.

"A last plea, *cherie*. I know many things. All that I know will you learn this night. But to gain knowledge, we must serve. So you must come when I call of nights—to serve. You shall be like me—have power—see hidden things—mingle at Romnare without harm. You shall free your brother, and those up there may not hinder you. You will come—heed the call, *hein?* To serve!" She knew full well that I must—after this night.

"I will do as you ask. Mother Tousante."

"And you will not tell—never speak of what you will see this night. You have heard—moans—from misshapen ones, that wander in the dark? That is the punishment. Silence is golden—wilt keep it?"

"I will never speak."

She nodded approval. Going to the cupboard, she brought a three-legged pot, containing a dark liquid, which she set into the fire. From the low, beamed ceiling she took sprigs of myrrh, box, and yarrow, adding them to the contents of the pot. On the fire itself she sprinkled frankincense.

Turning to me again she said, "I will now make the chain, to link you with the hidden world. For that I must have your hair. This I take from the center of your head; and as I weave you must repeat the words I speak. Bow!" She bent my head forward and unloosed my hair.

In a few minutes this task was done. She snipped the chain from my head, to tie it about her left wrist, while she continued to chant strange words. A white steam rose from the pot and began to swirl toward me. At this, Mother Tousante dipped a fresh sprig of box into the liquid and began to sprinkle the room. Raising

her voice, she called a name and invocation.

"Come—thou art near! Give sight to this blind one—true sight. Another would enter the silence. Give knowledge, power, friendship. Come—open the circle, for another would serve—"

More quickly swirled the white vapors, enveloping me. There came a muffled roar, and the door flew open. I heard a swish, but saw no one; yet I sensed a Presence close to me. I sat as in a trance.

Suddenly I felt the Presence bend over me and a voice spoke. "By thy will thou enterest the hidden world. One of the silent clan art thou henceforth. I give thee power to summon help from the infinite. For that, I claim thee as my own. I am the Master—thou art mine!"

Away fell the scales from my blind eyes. I beheld him, that had given aid to the last Romnare. . . I sank to my knees—but not with fear. . . He was kind! He raised me!

"Speed on thy way. By yon crossroads, gifts await thee. Will! Thy desire shall be fulfilled."

Swiftly I sped on—not on man-made roads. My feet barely touched the ground; hedges, creepers in the ditches did not hinder me now. Power—I had it, felt it. As by a very whirlwind I was carried toward the mountain.

Suddenly the crossroads—marked by a large stone cross, were before me. I stopped, for here I must prepare for my entrance into the castle, among its inmates.

Summoning all my will-power, I spoke a wish. It was granted—the gift of double sight. Looking about me I saw green flames shoot up by the roadside. Picking the herbs, so marked for me, I stood in the middle of the crossroads and ate them. Facing the mountain, I made my final plea. Oh, my brother! . . .

I bent to the ground as I felt compelled, and the transformation took place.

Fierce exultation filled me, and a raucous cry of triumph broke from my throat. I had become, for the time being, the thing feared and shunned by men, which may walk in both worlds—the seen and unseen—yet be of neither.

Eager to set my brother free, I sped on. Again, not on man-made ways, I ascended the mountain through brush, over boulders and narrow ledges; where human foot could not find a hold. Up—straight up—to where my Eugene waited. No fear, no hesitation now. And night was not a time to be afraid in, nor lonely. For it is peopled far more densely than day.

At last I reached the plateau of the mountain. My task was near fulfillment.

DARK and silent lay the castle. But not for long. The great portal was flung wide as I approached, and from the interior streamed the light of many torches.

Boisterous shouts, ribald laughter, sounded from there. Gross shapes, yet human in form, lounged about the heavy board. Heads and tongues lolling, they clamored for more wine, lifting their empty tankards with curses to the scurrying retainers. Women, dressed in costly splendor, swayed laughingly to arms drunkenly held out for them, or skipped away coquetishly, in mock prudery. Debauchery, wantonness, shameless display.

Of the preparations that human hands had made to make Romnare a dwelling place for light hearts, not a trace remained, except a few shreds from flags and garlands, fluttering forlornly on the ground.

Truth spoke the ancient legends of Romnare. Scenes of crimes and executions, forgotten tortures, were enacted before my gaze as I passed

through the courtyard. The death of the minstrel; his murderer, the Black Knight, listening to the black curse spoken by paling lips, and the fulfilment of that curse; the monster, immuring Leonie; again, the rope dangling from his neck, fleeing in mad terror from pursuing specters, red flames of hate breaking from cavernous eyesockets. The block, the ax flashing down on the victim's neck; blood, dried centuries before, spouting again from headless trunks; heads rolling away in the dust, yet uttering vile imprecations against the stronghold and the lords of Romnare.

How truly have they been fulfilled! Forgotten is the glorious past of proud Romnare—gone the days of conquest and victorious tourney. . .

I was led to my brother by a tall, beautiful girl. She, condemned to the tower by her husband whom she had betrayed, had starved to death there. In life she had been far-famed for her grace, and for luring men to destruction. She still works her spells.

As she opened the door to slip in to him, I braced myself against it and so forestalled her attempt to close it. Her eyes glowed redly with baffled rage when she divined my errand, but she had no power to oppose me. Nor could she hold my brother against the wish of him that had sent me. Eugene, seeing in the eery light shed by the shade that the door was held open, stumbled out. I saw him glance fearfully at me and his surroundings, and tremblingly murmur a prayer of deliverance.

My heart ached at his terror; so, to reassure him, I brushed lightly against his hand. But he shrank away in such dread, that I kept from him then. I led him through the courtyard and the throng surrounding us.

Many hands, tapering to sharp points, were stretched forth to crush the life-spark from his body, to be withdrawn because of the shape be-

side him. So we walked away, united—yet how far apart! . . .

At a safe distance from the castle, where the road begins to slope downward, I left my brother, as in his nervous dread he would be better if I were away.

Standing alone, looking at the peaceful valley below, I heard Eugene cry a loud prayer of thanks at his deliverance; and a charm—against me!

I went down speedily where I had come up.

By the crossroads, myself once more, I awaited him. When he came around the bend and saw a form move toward him from the shadow of the cross, he stopped.

I called as I ran to him, "Eugene, beloved! It is I, Mignon, who have waited here for you—"

He came, throwing his arms about me, with a glad cry.

We made our way home as quickly as his weak state allowed. Many were the calls of welcome that greeted us. My mother cried, with joy—Eugene back—sane, unharmed!

But at the wondering questions as to his rescue, he shook his head silently. He ate and retired to much needed rest.

MANY days elapsed before he would speak of his adventure. At last, after much coaxing, he told as follows:

"A pause was called in playing and dancing while refreshments were offered and the candles lit. I went, my violin under my arm, to take a stroll in the courtyard. Suddenly a lady came before me and beckoned, as if she wanted me to accompany her. She led the way to the tower. I followed, thinking her one of the guests, who wished to go to the roof to enjoy the view—but timid of the strange surroundings. Her dress was of a by-gone fashion; but as the ladies had donned like costumes for the ball, I

saw nothing amiss. She looked as much a living being as I. We ascended the stairway of the tower, and she, going before me, opened the door and motioned to me to enter with her. I did so and the heavy door clanged shut. I looked for the farther stairway to the roof, but saw to my surprize that we had entered a small chamber with no means of egress except the door by which we had entered. In glancing about, my eyes fell to a pile of white, bleached bones, lying at my feet. Looking at the girl for explanation (we had not spoken yet) I beheld her fading away to nothingness. Too late I realized my mistake. I called loudly for attention, but no one came near me. To keep my reason and hope, I played my violin. I played all night, all day, night again, till the last string broke. I should have gone mad but for that. Many times I called to you. Mother, and Mignon.

"When I had resigned myself to a living grave, the door opened once more. The shade entered and would have closed it again, but for another shape—a terrible thing to see!—that stood holding it open for me to escape. I ran out quickly. I felt sure that the thing that led me away from the castle was friendly. Once it brushed against me, much as if to give me comfort; but I could not bring myself to touch it or speak to it in my aversion. I was glad when it left me by the roadside, to disappear into the night.

"Gladder yet was I when I found Mignon waiting for me by the cross. But I wish to forget—"

Forget he could not. Not ill in body was Eugene. But I saw what none did, not even he; his heart with-

ered away. I, too, had seen the beautiful, evil shade.

Fallen under the spell of the phantom woman, my brother sought and welcomed death. My mother, heart-broken, followed soon. . .

MANY times have I gone, once I knew my power and impunity, to linger with those that rise with the night mists. Much have I learned. All the secrets of feudal Romnare are known to me—all its crimes. I have tarried with the ladies dwelling there in the days when Romnare blood flowed hot and flared quickly; the days when the throw of jeweled dice was life or death. I have heard their life-stories, told in faint, tinkling voices, waited to me across the span of many centuries. Fierce loves, abysmal hates have they shown me; and why they can not rest. Beautiful goblets of carved gold are borne about by slender hands up there. Thirsty homecomers, taking deep drafts of the sparkling contents, "To Life and Love," would sink to eternal sleep; so making room for beloved rivals. Finely wrought daggers have I seen, carried in the wide sleeves of brocaded gowns, against moments of opportunity. Hidden doors that keep ghastly secrets well. . .

I have gone far to overcome the lure of Romnare; of nights, when my unrest was too great I have written this—for relief.

In Lorraine they speak of the castle as formerly, with this added: how the gay Countess Adrienne became a silent inmate of the Carmelite convent near Saviennes; and how Eugene Romnare was rescued from the demons of Castle Romnare by a large black werewolf.

