

‘A Legend of Grandier’

The incident of this legend belongs to the twelfth century. At that period the mansion of Grandier of the present day did not exist, save in respect of the foundations, and the two extreme parts of the building, which may be termed the wings. The intermediate structure, which is now a goodly dwelling, and ornamented with cloisters and corridors, was then a low dark edifice, defended by parapets, with loop-holes through which the arblast-men, or cross-bowyers, might discharge their arrows upon assailants.

Count Poniers de Mortimerre was the lord of those castellated halls, and their dependent estate. He was not wealthy; but he numbered fifty stalwart archers upon his land, and these were ever ready to fight in defence of their king and country. The count, however, possessed a treasure which he valued far more than all the fine gold in the world; and this was the lovely girl whom an old friend in the hour of his death, on the field of battle, had bestowed on him. The beautiful Herminie was some years younger than her husband; but no one would have noticed the disparity of age existing between the noble warrior and his lovely wife, because he was as fine of form and as handsome in face as she was herself symmetrically shaped and beautiful to behold. Count Poniers de Mortimerre was nearly forty when he espoused Herminie de Gaston. Their union was blessed by a son and heir, and they had been married for upwards of two years, when an incident occurred which produced a change in the somewhat retired and solitary life hitherto led by the lord and lady of the Castle of Grandier.

One day the count informed his wife that he had a matter of deep import to communicate to her; and without further preface, he addressed her thus: – ‘My dear Herminie, thou knowest full well that my late respected and revered sire took unto him, in second espousals, the daughter of a neighbouring chieftain, to wife. From this marriage sprung a daughter; and, at my father’s death, I swore to behave to my infant sister with all the kindness that it was possible for my rough nature to manifest unto her. And well, I ween, did I acquit myself of my vow. Ermenonde is nearly twenty years younger than I; and since I became her guardian – her parent as well as her brother, – has my solicitude ever been of the most tender description in her behalf. You also know that she has lately filled the most honourable post of first lady to a right noble duchess about the court of our Sovereign; and there might she have found some favour in the sight of some goodly cavalier, who would have formed a match for her worthy of her birth and beauty.

‘But alas ! my dear Herminie, she has fixed her affections upon a page – a low-born caitiff, who is not fit to hold the stirrup of the sister of the Lord of Grandier. I am advised of this fatal attachment through the kindness of her noble patroness, who has despatched me a courier with a letter to that effect, and who counsels me to remove my sister from the vicinity of the court. It is therefore my intention, Herminie, to take horse tomorrow morning, and hasten to Paris with all befitting speed, to interpose my authority between my sister and this base attachment. I shall

bring her back with me: in fifteen days we shall be here; – see that all is prepared for her reception.’

Herminie expressed her readiness to fulfil her kind lord’s wishes; and on the following morning, Count Poniers de Mortimerre set out for the metropolis of France.

Fifteen days passed away, and in the evening of the sixteenth the count made his appearance at the gate of Grandier. He was seated upon his white charger; on the croupe was a young damsel, beautiful as the dawn of morning. And very like the goddess Aurora might she have been deemed, for her cheeks wore all the freshness of youth and beauty, although her heart was sad. Her eyes were of the most lovely blue; her hair was of a sunny auburn; and her tall form was cast in a mould of the most perfect symmetry. Her beautiful teeth, seen between the opening roses of the lips, were white and even; her curiously worked stomacher only half concealed two budding globes of snow. Such was the lovely young creature whom the countess hastened to receive with the most unfeigned kindness.

Some months passed away; and in spite of the endeavours of the Count and Countess de Mortimerre to soothe the grief of the young damsel for her separation from her lover, Ermenonde’s sorrow did not abate. One day, while the count was at the chase with some of the feudal chieftains of the vicinity, and the child was with its nurse in the garden, the two ladies were seated at one of the windows of the large apartment which served as the dining-hall of the castle of Grandier.

‘How is it, fair sister,’ said the countess, ‘that I often surprise the deep sigh issuing from your bosom, and notice the briny drops trickling down your fair face?’

‘Alas!’ returned the damsel, with a melancholy accent, ‘I have placed my affections upon a worthy youth, who has not found favour in the sight of my brother; and I cannot quench the flame of love which burns in my bosom.’

‘The count objects to a union, Ermenonde, which is beneath your birth and merits,’ said the countess, mildly; ‘and a base-born page is not a becoming mate for a scion of the house of Mortimerre.’

‘A base-born page!’ cried Ermenonde. ‘Oh! he is indeed a page – and he lacks the quality of high birth; but he is not to be contemned on that account. There breathes not a more daring, a more comely, or a more generous youth, than Hubert!’

‘Did he seek to ingratiate himself in the favour of my husband?’ enquired Herminie.

‘Alas – no; he had not an opportunity,’ said Ermenonde. ‘My brother stayed but two hours in the capital; and during that period, Hubert was not near the mansion of the duchess. But – Ah! Is it possible? No – it cannot be!’

Ermenonde had glanced towards the window as she was thus conversing with her sister-in-law; and she suddenly uttered an exclamation of joy, starting at the same time, as if something had materially agitated her whole frame. The countess looked towards the same direction, and there, at a little distance from the gate, she perceived a tall and handsome youth, in homely guise, standing in a respectful attitude, and gazing wistfully up towards the window. The moment that he saw he was observed by the ladies he doffed his cap, and made a low salutation, placing his hand upon his heart at the same time, to convey to Ermenonde his appreciation of the pleasure he experienced at being recognised by her.

‘Tis he ! tis he !’ cried Ermenonde. ‘It is my own Hubert !’

‘Alas ! it is very thoughtless of that gallant thus to dare the rage and vengeance of my husband,’ said the countess, with a sigh; for she sincerely pitied the fate of the two hapless lovers, in whose behalf she did not, however, dare interfere.

Suddenly Ermenonde fell upon her knees, at the feet of her sister-in-law, and bathed her hands with tears.

‘My dearest Herminie,’ said the weeping girl, in a voice almost inaudible through deep emotions, ‘I implore thee to take compassion upon me, or I shall die ! The presence of that young man here has renewed all my grief, and all my affection. Grant us the pleasure of a few moments’ interview !’

‘The count may return at any moment,’ said Herminie, in a voice peculiarly agitated, ‘and moreover, the dependents and serfs would notice your egress from the mansion, and your converse with a stranger.’

‘Then allow that youth to enter these walls, if only to bid me farewell for ever !’ cried Ermenonde, in so mournful a tone that it melted the heart of the countess.

‘Your wish would involve us in exceeding danger,’ said she; ‘and yet I know not how I can refuse to gratify it. To accede to it, would be perilous – to reject it, would be cruel.’

‘Never, lady, will I rise from your feet until my desire be granted!’ exclaimed Ermenonde.

‘Have, then, your wish,’ returned Herminie; and a signal from the now-enchanted Ermenonde soon brought the gallant Hubert to the apartment where the ladies were prepared to receive him.

It would be useless to attempt to describe the particulars of this interview between the two fond lovers. The pen of the romancist has full often depicted these scenes of tenderness, of sighs, of tears, of hopes, of consolations, and of despair, – those minutes of enraptured suspense – those fleeting instants of ‘pleasing pain’ – those times of mingled joy and dread ! It will not therefore be expedient to narrate all that was said by the lovers on this occasion; – suffice it to observe that

they endeavoured to console each other with the mutual vow of eternal constancy. Suddenly the countess, who had never left the apartment during the tender meeting, uttered a faint scream; – the lovers started — the heavy tread of a warrior’s barbed heel was heard in the great stone hall leading to the dining-room; and they all knew that the count was near. He had returned home without being perceived by either of the three inmates of that apartment.

In half a minute all would have been lost; but a sudden idea flashed through the brain of the countess. The dining-hall communicated, at one end, with a private sitting apartment; and beyond that room was the bed-chamber of the lord and the lady of the mansion. This bed-chamber was at one extremity of the whole building – the extremity forming the left wing of the edifice.

‘In the name of the Holy Virgin, follow me !’ said Herminie to Hubert, ‘and do you, dear girl, compose yourself to receive my husband with tranquillity.’

Just as the door of the private sitting apartment closed upon Herminie and Hubert, the count entered the dining-hall, where he threw himself upon a chair to rest his limbs, called for a cup of wine, and entered into conversation with his sister, to whom he detailed the particulars of the chase.

In the meantime the countess conducted Hubert into the sacred precincts of her sleeping apartment, which was spacious, and the windows of which looked upon the premises at the back of the dwelling. There was a large cupboard, or rather closet, in one corner of this room; and to that recess did the countess immediately hasten. She stooped down, and raised a trap-door, which was let into the floor of this closet. The trap-door revealed a flight of steps, leading to a subterranean passage; and Herminie desired the youth to hasten and descend into that hiding-place.

‘That passage’, says she, ‘communicates with the apartment corresponding with this one at the other end of the building. It has also an avenue of communication with the stone-hall of the mansion; and by the latter means shall you effect your escape to-night. I will procure the pass-key which opens the door leading into the hall; and, when the count is locked in the arms of slumber, I will come to you succour. Have patience, Hubert – for the sake of Ermenonde – for the sake of myself.’

Scarcely were these words uttered in a hurried tone, when Herminie pushed the young man gently down the steps, closed the trap-door upon him, and returned to the banqueting-room, where her husband was conversing with Ermenonde. A sign of intelligence convinced the latter that her lover was safe.

No opportunity occurred for Herminie to communicate to her sister-in-law the manner in which she had disposed of Hubert; and as the young damsel was not acquainted with the secret of the

subterranean passage, she could not divine how the countess had ensured his safety. She did not however labour under any apprehension of Hubert's account, because the unembarrassed manners of the countess precluded the idea of danger on his behalf. Herminie, although she could not obtain a few minutes' conversation with her sister-in-law nevertheless contrived to secrete the pass-key of the subterranean floor about her person in the course of the evening.

As he was fatigued with the sport of the morning, Count Poniers de Mortimerre retired to his couch at a particularly early hour; and Herminie anxiously awaited the moment when he should be fast locked in the embrace of sleep. The worthy lord of Grandier soon wooed with success the presence of Morpheus; and Herminie, with a beating heart, rose gently from his side. She hastily donned her garments, took a light in her hand, left another burning in the room for fear the absence of it altogether might suddenly wake her husband, and proceeded with cautious steps towards the mysterious closet. She raised the trap-door – she descended the steps – and the noisome air produced upon her a strange effect. Her head felt dizzy – her brain seemed to whirl – and the lamp burnt dim and feebly. Still did she proceed for several yards along the narrow subterranean passage, which she had reached by a flight of about thirty steps; and she was pursuing her way gently, and with a beating heart, when she suddenly stumbled over an object on the ground. She uttered a faint scream – the lamp dropped from her hands – and she fell upon a human form. That human form was still – motionless – and breathless; and the horrible truth in a moment flashed across the brain of the wretched woman. The loop-holes at the back of the house, which, by means of embrasures cut deep into the earth, had formerly admitted air and light into that subterranean abode, she remembered had been lately closed up !

Just as this conviction entered her mind, a sudden light illuminated the passage, and Count Poniers de Mortimerre met the haggard eyes of his wife as she glanced rapidly towards the flight of stairs. Yielding to the first impulse of her fears, Herminie uttered a loud and long shriek, which awoke every echo on that subterranean abode – those echoes that had probably slept for years before !

Maddened with the idea that he had now discovered unequivocal proofs of his dishonour, the count rushed forward, caught his unhappy wife by the hair of her head, and dashed her violently against the stone-wall of the passage. The guiltless woman fell heavily upon the ground; – there was a low moan, followed by a gurgling in the throat, – then a sob – a sigh – and all was over ! The spirit of Herminie had fled for ever !

It matters not how Count Poniers de Mortimerre passed the remainder of that fearful night. Suffice it to say, that, early in the morning, he summoned his favourite domestic, and said to him, 'Jules, your mistress is no more: she has received at my hands the punishment due to her frailty. Hie thou to the garden – dig a deep, deep, grave, – and let there be room for *two* ! You understand me ?'

‘My lord, I comprehend but too well,’ answered Jules, and he hastened to accomplish his sorrowful task.

When he had hollowed out the lowly tomb, he returned to his master; and they conveyed the corpse of the once beautiful Herminie to its last home. They deposited it in the grave, and threw some earth upon it.

‘There shall be a separation between them – even in death !’ cried the count, with a ferocious smile, as he cast the soil upon the shroudless corpse.

The count and Jules then returned to the subterranean passage and carried the body of the unfortunate Hubert to the garden. They were about to commit it to the earth, when a female form rushed hastily from the back gate of the mansion – bounded along the path in the garden with the agility of a fawn – and hastened up to the spot where these dread obsequies were taking place. The count started, and knew not how to act.

‘In the name of the Virgin, what sad ceremony is this ?’ demanded Ermenonde, not daring to glance towards the corpse which lay at the side of the grave.

‘Sister’, said the count, ‘this is a narrative which could not have been concealed from you, and which you may as well know now as hereafter. Listen, then, to the dread tale ! The wife, in whom I put every confidence – whom I loved – whom I adored – has betrayed me, dishonoured me, disgraced me ! She rose from her bed to meet her paramour, whom the noxious air of a subterranean passage had killed – probably some time before she joined him there ! I know not what awoke me – but I *did awake*, and I missed Herminie from her place. I rose – I saw a certain cupboard open – I found a trap-door raised –’

At that instant, Ermenonde, yielding to an indescribable emotion of apprehension and alarm, ventured to cast a glance towards the corpse, which was not as yet committed to the ground. A fearful scream issued from her lips, – she immediately recognised the features, the cold, marble features, of her lover – and she flung herself upon the body, ejaculating at the same time, ‘Oh ! now I understand it all ! she was innocent ! she was innocent.’

‘Innocent !’ exclaimed the count; ‘how say you, girl ? Speak!’

‘I say that she was innocent !’ cried Ermenonde, clasping her arms around the corpse of her well-beloved Hubert; ‘and I am the cause of her untimely end ! Moved by my prayers, she this day admitted Hubert to the castle –’

‘Hubert !’ ejaculated the count, now trembling violently from head to foot, and turning ghastly pale, for he knew that this was the name of the young page on whom his sister had bestowed her affections.

‘Yes – Hubert, whom your wife concealed in the castle, at the moment when –’

‘O God ! O horror ! I have then assassinated my wife –and she was innocent !’ cried the count, throwing himself upon his knees, and clasping his hands together in an agony of woe.

It was with the utmost difficulty that Jules could persuade these two unhappy beings to leave the vicinity of the grave which was to contain all they held most dear. At length they withdrew to the mansion; and the faithful domestic terminated the funeral obsequies of Herminie and Hubert with all possible speed.

As soon as Ermenonde and the count had sufficiently recovered their equanimity of mind to converse upon the melancholy event, a full explanation of the particulars of Hubert’s visit were given by the unhappy girl. The count did not reproach his sister; – it was too late to blame; and he knew full well that if Ermenonde had been too enthusiastic in her love, he himself had been too violent in his rage !

The count, as soon as the acute bitterness of his grief had worn away and yielded to a sombre melancholy which never left him, sent for a number of workmen, and ordered them to demolish all the main structure of the castle, and leave the two wings alone standing. His object was to convert the entire edifice into a convent, as an atonement to heaven for his crime; and in order to accomplish this pious aim it was only necessary to destroy the castellated and fortified portion of the building. The two wings were therefore preserved; and the subterranean passage exists to this day.

The central avenue of communication with this subterranean passages was made to lead into the hall of the new building, as it did into that of the old, because in those troublous times such means as concealment for treasure, and of personal escape or safety, were but too generally necessary. The extremities of that subterranean passage still exist in closets attached to the two ground-floor apartments at the ends of the entire building.

Thus it was that the Count Poniers de Mortimerre converted the castellated halls of Grandier into a convent, of which his unhappy sister became the Abbess. He endowed it with nearly all his possessions, retaining for himself only a small pittance, with which he retired to England. In the process of time his child grew up, and married an English woman of humble birth and rank, for the means of his father did not permit him to aspire to a noble or even a wealthy alliance. The Count never revealed his real rank, nor the secret connected with his exile, to his son: the lapse of years soon Anglicised the name of Mortimerre; and the founder of the wealthy and potent family to which the boons of Master Timothy are bequeathed was a lineal descendant of Count Poniers, who assassinated his wife, and converted Grandier into a convent.

The lapse of time, which achieves so much, and to which civilization is indebted for its progressive reform, eventually scattered the recluses who succeeded each other at Grandier; and

at the commencement of the eighteenth century, the convent, with the adjacent lands, passed into the possession of a wealthy individual of the name of Lacarge. It then ceased to be a religious asylum; and has since been tenanted by the descendants of its new proprietor.