

ONLY.

Only a poisonous drop from the cup
That gave a tinge for more,
And awoke a craving that wrecked a life
On a barren, desert shore.

A Night in the Scottish Highlands.

BY FRANK VAUGHAN.

It was late in the Summer, or rather early in the Autumn of 1835 (said my dear old friend Mrs. Atherton, in answer to my earnest entreaty to relate to me herself the great incident of her life) that the events I am about to relate to you occurred.

The two hours in the row-boat that carried us across Loch Katrine was a dream of ecstasy. Never shall I forget my feelings as seated in the stern of the boat, I watched the unfolding of scene after scene in that wonderful panorama, and listened to the wild songs of our Highland boatmen, repeated as they were by a thousand echoes from the giant hills, that seemed from time to time to shut us completely in.

There was but little accommodation for visitors at any time, and this being the crowded season, we found, upon inquiry, that only two sleeping-rooms were to be had, the one a sufficiently spacious apartment with two beds, and the other a small single room opening out of it.

An appealing glance from Chester, as the landlady took up the candle to conduct us to the remote quarters referred to, induced me to ask Lady Hervey's permission to go with her to inspect the apartment. It was granted at once, and we followed our hostess through several long passages, up two or three steps here, and down three or four there, until the door of a large, bleak, desolate chamber was thrown open, which I perceived at once was located at the extreme end of the unoccupied wing of the house.

one sleeps in the lofts above." "And there's no fastening to the door," said the terrified Chester, "and the wind whistles that loud, fit to make every air on one's head stand on end. I couldn't never spend the night in such a place, miss."

I saw at once that a fit of the sulks, and at least three days of the worst kind of despondism, would be in reserve for Lady Hervey and myself should we insist upon Chester's doing violence to her feelings and occupying this room; so, swallowing down my indignation at the serving-woman's selfish stupidity, I replied cheerfully, "Never mind, Chester, I am not a bit afraid; indeed, I rather like the look of this weird old place. I will sleep here, and you can have the room adjoining her ladyship's, where you will be within call, should she or the young ladies need you."

Supper followed; served for our party in a private room, where we were waited upon by the daughter of our hostess, a fresh and very pretty Scotch girl, about eighteen years of age. I can see her now, in her short skirt, bright plaid stockings, neat white apron, and the traditional blue ribbon bound round her "bonnie brown hair." She looked the very impersonation of innocence, and my eyes often wandered from the hot scenes and delicate trout that awaited before us, to watch her light and active motions, to meet my open glance of her clear blue eyes.

With spirits a little depressed, and an inward feeling of disgust with my own folly, in having thus for the hundredth time done a good-natured action, at the expense of my own comfort and peace of mind, I again followed our hostess, who held a short, flickering candle in her hand, through the lonely passages, and up and down the rotten, rickety steps away towards the eastern end of the house, outside of which I knew that the giant mountain was frowning down, and where the rushing of the stream and the fury of the storm made it almost impossible for us to hear our own voices.

"It's nae a bonny place for a leddy like yourself to sleep in," said the landlady, glancing timidly around, "but the young can see sleep any place, and that night, I'm no longer the noo. I'll send Margie to wake ye with the dawn o' day. The bairn's no well the night, and ganged early to bed, or she might ha'e coom to keep ye company a bit." Very sincerely did I regret Margie's illness, and very thick and fast did my heart beat, as I glanced round the gloomy chamber, and asked whether any one ever slept there now.

Then, carefully closing the door, I proceeded to examine my new quarters. The room was large and uncarpeted, with two curtainless windows looking towards the mountain, and a second door directly opposite to the one by which we had entered, and which I found, upon examination, was fastened in the same way—by only a simple latch. This latch I raised, and pushed the door partly open, but was met by such a rush of cold wind, and such a damp, unearthly smell, that, fearing my candle might be extinguished, I closed it again instantly, and concluding that it only led to the old wood-house or carpenter's shop, of which the good woman had spoken, I decided to pursue my investigations no further in that quarter, but to shut my eyes to all unusual sights, and my ears to all unfamiliar sounds, and to lose myself in sleep as soon as possible.

Of furniture the room contained but little—two beds, one a large four-poster, round which dark, gloomy-looking curtains were closely drawn, and the other a small, low bedstead, on which a straw bed and an old moth-eaten blanket were thrown, with two chairs and a deal table comprising the whole. Well do I remember the thump that my heart gave as I drew aside the curtains and glanced in upon the interior of my four-poster. What I expected to see I am sure I could not tell. What I found was a perfectly well-made and well-appointed resting-place, in which a prince might have slumbered contentedly. It looked comfortable and inviting enough, and taking heart of grace from this conclusive evidence that I was not cut off from all communication with humanity and civilization, I proceeded to make my simple toilet for the night. In spite of the lapse of years, I can perfectly recall the nervous trepidation with which I removed my upper garments, and placed them carefully on the shelves of

a cupboard, which opened just at the foot of my bed, and how I started and shook when a gust of wind, shrieking more wildly than usual round the corner of the house, caused me to drop the brush from my hand, and it fell with a hollow, reverberating sound upon the stone floor. The perspiration stood in great drops upon my face as I stooped to pick it up, and it kept myself from rushing frantically through the passages to Lady Hervey's room. I was disgusted with myself for my want of strength and self-command, and yet, for my life, I could not calm the nervous agitation which was causing my heart to beat and my brain to throb, as if ten thousand sledge-hammers had been at work within. Finding at last that my cold and trembling fingers were totally incapable of doing their duty in the matter of unfastening and removing my garments, I yielded to the temptation which was gaining ground every moment within me, that my slippers and nightgown were not to be peaceful, and slipping on my dressing-gown, wrapped my railway rug around me, and threw myself on the outside of the bed, having first taken the precaution of putting my *sac de nuit* and all my toilet articles carefully out of sight in the cupboard. I lay for it seemed to me an interminable time in the darkness and silence, with head hidden under the bed-clothes, taking myself very seriously to task for my unreasonable fears, and striving to persuade myself that I was as tenderly guarded and cared for in that lonely chamber as I ever had been in my own beloved home, or in Sir Andrew's well-appointed mansion. And having from my childhood been trained to self-control and self-reliance, and possessing, for my age, a very fair proportion of physical and moral courage, I did succeed in calming the wild throbbings of my heart, and bringing myself to a condition of forced composure. I was weary, too, and as my ear became accustomed to the monotonous music of the rushing stream, and the howling of the wind subsided into a dull, moaning sigh, my excitement gradually quieted down, and for a short time I must have slept.

I was awakened by a light flashing through the closed curtains of my bed, and the consciousness that some one besides myself was in the room. In an instant I was thoroughly aroused, and every nerve vibrating to the sense of some frightful danger that was hanging over me. It had occurred, then, this "something" which I had so feared and dreaded—and which I had been so certain would come during this fearful night. What was it? and how should I escape it? I tried to be calm—tried to summon reason and religion to my aid, tried to fix upon some plan of action, and determined to make a good fight, whatever happened. To get up, throw aside the curtains, and face the danger, whatever it might be, was my first impulse—but I restrained it. The recollection of my remote and unprotected position, the impossibility of making myself heard by any one in the house, the fearful risk I ran—a weak and helpless girl alone with a ruffian, or perhaps a gang of ruffians—surged madly through my brain, and set my poor heart throbbing, until every fibre of my body seemed to respond to its pulsations. As soon as I was able to reason calmly again I decided that my only plan was to remain perfectly still and take my chance—a forlorn one, it is true, but still a chance—of the room being vacated as unexpectedly as I had been entered. I knew that I had, by this means, every article belonging to me—so that no trace of my presence could be perceived—and, straining my ears for every sound that could give me an idea of the character and purpose of my visitor, I lay motionless in my uncertain fortress. A heavy tread and a few muttered words were all that met my ear for several moments, and then, as he ceased his restless pacing up and down the room, a small opening in the curtain, which I had vacated as expected, showed a man in a dark, heavy coat, and a Highland robber—but with pistols sticking out of his large coat-pockets, and an immense club of wood seemed to be the stoutest English oak in his hand. He stood with his back to me, and I could not therefore see his face, but he showed the outlaw and the ruffian in every turn of his head and movement of his huge body. I never could describe to you, my dear, the agony of terror that paralyzed me, as I lay gazing at this man, and thought of what my fate would probably be in his hands. Then, with the instinct of self-preservation so strong in every human breast, I passed in review every possible chance or means of escape that my imagination could suggest; and as, one by one, their utter impracticability forced me to dismiss them from my mind, a feeling of such despair as I trust, my love, you may never be able to understand, settled down upon my soul, and for a few moments my senses left me.

When I recovered, the villain had ceased his rapid strides about the room, and raising myself noiselessly on my elbow, so as to have a better view of what was passing, I perceived that he was standing before the table with a huge gold watch in his hand, and muttering expectedly as I had been entered. I knew stretching his huge frame, with a loud yawn and another fearful impression he threw himself upon the flock-bed in the corner, and in another moment his heavy breathing told me that he had not selected my bed for his place of repose! The hope of escape now grew stronger and stronger within me, and I decided that the effort must be made, and that without an instant's delay. This man would probably spend the night there—it was no doubt the place of rendezvous for his whole gang—he was evidently expecting some one, and might fill with a score of ruffians at the same stamp as the one before me. My brain reeled when I thought of what might befall me then. Better failure—better even death than such a risk as that; so, without waiting for any further deliberation, I pushed myself noiselessly to the very edge of the bed, and then slipped down upon the floor, where I stood wedged between the wall and the great four-poster, which rose up like a rampart of defence before my shrinking, crouching figure. My plan was to creep under the bed—and then, still on hands and knees, to crawl stealthily over the floor, and the door once reached, to trust to my swiftness of foot, or the wings with which I hope and fear were sure to furnish me, to carry me beyond the reach of my pursuer, should he wake and attempt to follow me. I knew the risks I ran—a rustle of the bed-clothes, the slightest creaking of the bed, and I was lost, but terror seemed to endow me with the power of moving with almost supernatural noiselessness, and I had made my way safely to the opening from whence I was to commence my perilous journey towards the door, when, to my horror and astonishment, the door softly opened, and, instead of the ruffian whom I expected to see enter, the landlady's pretty daughter stood before me.

and shoulders, and her face was almost ghastly in its excessive pallor. I drew back instantly into my place of concealment against the wall—fearing that her woman's eyes would detect what the man's less rapid vision had failed to see. She sat down in a weary way by the deal table, and leaned her head upon her hand for a few moments, then rousing herself with what seemed to be an effort, she crossed the room and laid her hand upon the sleeper's shoulder. He woke with a start and an oath, and levelled his pistol at the girl's head before he seemed rightly to understand who she was. Then, in reply to her half-smothered "Jamie, Jamie, don't you know me?" he threw down the weapon and asked, in a surly tone, "Why the—she didn't speak out, or she'd get some cold lead into her before she knew it."

"I didn't like to wake you, Jamie, you were so sound asleep; but I haven't a minute to lose. Mother's wakeful to-night and sure to miss me, so tell me quick what it is you wished to say, and promise me that you'll go away to-night and not come back again until you can come like an honest lad and ask me at my mother's hands." A sneering laugh broke from the villain as Margie uttered these simple words.

"I'll go, Margie, fast enough," he said, "but not till you've done a tidy bit of work for me, my girl. It's all out and dried for you, my pretty, and if you'll only be good and mind what I say, I'll carry you off to Glasgow this very night, and we'll be on board ship and away to the bonny South before any one here knows that we're gone." But Margie shook her head and her blue eyes filled with tears.

"I couldn't go that way, Jamie," she said, "and leave mother, so it's no use talking nonsense. Tell me what you want of me and let me go back again."

The ruffian brought his scowling face down upon a level with hers and whispered a few words into her ear. The girl started as if a serpent had stung her, and exclaimed in an excited tone:

"Oh! no, no, no, for God's sake, Jamie, don't think of doing such a wicked, wicked thing. You'll ruin us both, Jamie, if you don't give up your wicked courses. I'll never help you to such a crime as that."

The expression of the man's face was frightful to behold, as Margie uttered this wild remonstrance, and shaking her fiercely by the arm, he hissed out:

"Then you'll suffer for it, my beauty. I'll break every bone in that pretty face of yours if you set yourself up against me. You're too dainty for the wife of a bold lad like me, but I'll break you in, I promise you."

I trembled now for the poor girl more than for myself, and was half inclined to come forward and support her in her protest against her lover's villainy, but uncertainty as to how my advance might be received by both of them, and a sickening suspicion of the nature of the crime that he was urging her to, kept me fastened to the spot where I stood, or rather crouched, behind the bed. The robber remained quiet for a moment after speaking the last words, swinging his huge club in his hand, and then feeling, perhaps, that the success of his scheme depended in a great measure upon the girl's assistance, and knowing that gentleness and persuasion will often prevail with a woman where harshness and violence fail, he laid his club upon the table, and, passing his arm round Margie's waist, he drew her closely up to him and whispered:

"For my sake, Margie; just this once, my girl, and I swear I'll never ask you to do the like again. It's a pity to lose the chance, little one, and these rich English swells will never miss what I take. It's a chance, girl—a chance that may never come again, and a chance that I can't and won't lose. So, come now, don't stop to think, the night's going and to-morrow will be farther off, and worse words may come of it. For I'm bound to have that bag of gold, Margie, by fair means or foul; and I'll buy you everything you ever wished for with the money, Margie. So, up, girl, show me the room, and give what help you can, for it's for your good as much as for my own I'm doing it."

It was true, then; my worst suspicions were confirmed by these words. His purpose was to rob my kind protectress—perhaps to murder her. If she woke and called for help, as she most undoubtedly would do. What might not happen to her, and to my little pupils, in the hands of that dreadful man? And what could I do to help her, alone and unprotected, in that remote place. All this, and a hundred different plans of action, rushed through my brain with the rapidity of lightning, but I put them all aside with a strong effort, feeling that the most important thing for all of us was that Margie should remain firm in her refusal to assist him. I looked at her with eyes almost starting from my head, and was comforted to see no signs of relenting in her pale, sad face.

"I will never, never do it, Jamie," she said at last, "never help you to such a wicked crime. Suppose they wake, perhaps murder will come of it—murder for that gentle English lady and those pretty bairns. Oh! Jamie, Jamie, be persuaded; give it up, give it up, and I will go anywhere, do anything for you. It's the devil working in you, Jamie; put him back; don't listen to him; don't do this awful deed."

The tears poured down her face as she sobbed out these words, and probably obscured her sight, so that she did not see the horrible change that was coming over her lover's face—a change so dark, so terrible, so eloquent of the worst passions and most deadly impulses, that it seemed to freeze the very marrow in my bones. He took no notice of her piteous entreaties, save to say in a tone of deep, concentrated rage:

"I give you three chances, girl, to say yes or no—and, by —, I'll blow your brains out if you refuse once. Will you do it? Speak, girl," he added, shaking her more roughly than before, as she knelt before him.

"No, James, never," was the faint reply.

"Twice—will you do it?" he roared in a voice of thunder, infuriated, apparently, by her determined resistance to his will. Margie hesitated a moment, and seemed to shrink back and cover under his uplifted arm, but the answer when it came was still firm, though faint and low, and when the third time came, and his voice shook and trembled with the fearful passion that possessed him, she raised herself by a mighty effort, and looking straight into his fierce and angry eyes, said in loftier and firmer tones than she had yet been able to use,

"Never, Jamie, so help me God in heaven, never!"

"Then take that, and that, and that," roared the monster, raising his heavy club, and bringing it down with his utmost force upon the girl's upturned head.

light, and in spite of the confusion of my faculties, my eye caught the brilliant crest of Ben Lomond, which the rising sun was just crowning with its golden rays.

I tried to sit up and look about me, but a sickening pain in my right arm and a dull aching in my head overpowered me, and I sank back upon the floor again. As I lay there for a few moments with my eyes closed, my mind regained its force and clearness, and every occurrence of the past night came slowly back and stamped themselves for life upon my brain.

Where was Margie? and where was the wretch who had, I feared, done her so brutally to death? Again I opened my eyes and looked timidly around. There was not a trace to be seen of the fearful struggle that had taken place in the darkness and silence of the night, and, but for my shattered arm, I should almost have thought that the whole thing had been the creation of my own overwrought imagination. With great pain and difficulty I raised myself and staggered towards the door, with the intention of making my way as fast as my shaking limbs would carry me to Lady Hervey's room. You can imagine better than I can describe, dear, my utter despair, when, on reaching the door, I found it securely fastened on the outside.

After all the horror and agony of the night, I was doomed to a still longer imprisonment in that dreadful room. The disappointment was so intense, and the pain of my broken arm so sickening, that a deadly faintness again overcame me, and I staggered back and fell prostrate across the bed where the brutal ruffian of the night had slept. Again there must have been an interval of unconsciousness, as when I opened my eyes, I could perceive that the day had advanced, and distant sounds of life indicated that the household was astir. I rose and moved towards the window with the intention of sitting there, until I should see some member of the family pass, whom I could summon to my aid. As I dragged my shaking limbs across the floor, my eye rested for a moment upon the door which opened into the wood-house, and I perceived that it was unlatched, and open on a crack. An impulse which I could never explain induced me, without an instant's reflection, to move towards it, and with my left arm push it partly open. The place was dark, being lighted only from the outer room, but I saw distinctly Margie's plaid spread over something, which I knew well enough was Margie's body.

For an instant I stood with a feeling of death creeping over me, then, flying to the window, I threw it up, and shrieked long and loud for help. When I paused, from sheer exhaustion, I expected to hear human voices responding to my call, but not a sound broke the deathlike stillness, and, as I glanced up at the rugged face of the mountain, it seemed to frown down upon me for my boldness in thus rending the sacred veil of silence that hung over the early morning, by his hideous cries.

Then it occurred to me that perhaps, after all, Margie might not be dead. There might be a spark of life remaining, which, with instant help, might be fanned into a flame. How could I get this help? How could I get away—how make myself heard, from this devil's hole of solitude and desolation? I looked out, and for an instant indulged the idea of jumping from the window, but a glance at the distance, at least twenty feet from the ground, and the roaring torrent below, convinced me that such a leap would be a hasty death. Then I rushed back to the door, and with my one serviceable arm pulled at it with the energy of despair. But it was as fixed and immovable as Mrs. Chester herself could have desired, had the fastening been on the inside, and a legion of devils without. Back to the window again, where I sent forth a cry after cry, which seemed to my quivering nerves to pierce the very heavens with their shrillness. I have often wondered since how it came to pass that no one heard me.

But as the minutes slipped by, and no help seemed near, a doubt came over me whether I ought not to go into that dark chamber, and satisfy myself whether life still lingered in the poor girl's body. In my heart I believed that all was over, for when I recalled the fearful blows that had rained down upon the fair young head, I felt sure that life had departed with the very first of them, and as I glanced furtively towards the half-open door, the glimpse that I got of the rigid outline, which the clinging plaid too well defined, convinced me that a closer examination would be as useless as it would be harrowing and distressing. Besides, under the pressure of what I had gone through, and the pain of my broken arm, I felt that my bodily strength was giving out so fast that further effort would soon be impossible. So I bent all my energies to the one effort of bringing human succor to my relief, and sent out another long, wild, despairing cry for "help," and this time, even as I uttered it, my eye caught sight of a farm-laborer with axe and spade across his shoulder, crossing a distant meadow. He stopped and seemed to listen, and when I sent forth a still longer, louder shriek, he sent, directed by the ear, became fixed upon me. He told me afterwards that for a moment he could not believe that anything human had uttered those cries, or that the white figure that, with ghastly face and outstretched arm, seemed making such unearthly efforts to arrest his attention, could belong to a creature of this lower world. The agony with which I watched him, the fear that he might go his way without calling any one to my assistance, can only be compared to the feelings of the shipwrecked sailor, when he signals a distant land and doubts whether or not it will come to his relief. Tears of thankfulness poured down my cheeks when I saw the man turn and run hurriedly towards the other end of the house. Very soon footsteps came hurrying along the passage, and I had just sense and strength left to run across the room and close the wood-house door, when the rope was cut on the outside, and I fell fainting into the good landlady's arms.

I can tell you very little more, my dear, for I did not recover sense or consciousness for many days. Fever and delirium supervened upon the fractured limb, and it was only from my wild ravings, and the disjointed sentences that fell from my lips during my delirium, that those about me were able to gather even the vaguest idea of the events of that awful night.

When the fever left me I found Sir Andrew with a retinue of servants established at the inn, as the authorities had refused to allow me to be removed until I could give some intelligent account of what had taken place, and Lady Hervey, of course, would not leave me.

Poor Margie's body had been found, and, as I feared, the medical verdict was that life had been many hours extinct. It has always been a comfort to me to believe that she did not feel those frightful blows. The first one probably stunned, if it did not kill her.

When I was able to give my testimony, which I did with clearness and precision, at