

A WEIRD EXPERIENCE.

KENNETH MURICAN was one of the strangest characters possible to conceive. He had read almost everything worth reading, and had been an adherent of the strangest creeds — the more weird the better he appreciated them. It was doubted amongst his colleagues, long before he left the Service, if he were sane. What fancies he had, to be sure; what strange experiences, if his own unconfirmed word was to be taken! One adventure in his unconventional life, in his own telling, ran as follows:—

My health was failing. Confinement in the city, close application to literary work during my spare hours in the evenings, and the recent loss of my only and beloved sister told severely on an overstrung, excitable disposition and constitutionally delicate frame. Fearful visions, too, of late had crept into my life—a nameless vague fear obsessed my more cheerful inclination. I became a trembling shadowy thing of unhealthy morbidities. I determined to go away for a time and eschew my pet hobbies. I glanced over the list of country and seaside houses “to let” that usually occupied a large space in the “Morning Record.” One alone took my fancy and the advertisement ran:—“Furnished house to let at Craigarriv. Magnificent mountain scenery. Fishing and shooting. Apply by letter only, giving references, &c. Address 907 office of this paper.” The reply came by next morning’s post that Messrs. Locke & Boulte, House Agents, of St. Mary’s Green, would be glad if Mr. Kenneth Murican could call at their office about the hour of noon of that day. I turned up as requested, and was given the fullest particulars regarding Craigarriv House, as it was called. It contained, if I remember rightly, seven rooms, and was well, though not expensively, furnished. There was a caretaker living in the house who would act as my housekeeper, if I desired, on payment of a fixed wage. “However,” added the agents’ clerk, “if you mention what day is most suit-

able to you to pay the place a visit, one of our men will accompany you.” I said that next day would do admirably, and turned to leave. As I did so my attention was sharply awakened by the presence of a young woman of extraordinary beauty, who looked me full in the face. I had observed her on my entry, but then her back was towards me. She had evidently listened to every word that was said between the clerk and myself. That look rivetted me to the spot; it was such a look as I had never before encountered; it uttered the agony of countless generations, and held within its compass a lure that was irresistible. The lips were crimson red, full and rounded; the eyes dark, shining, impenetrable; but, oh, the ashy paleness of the cheek! I would have turned aside were I a free agent; as it was I simply absorbed the intoxication of her ethereality so long as her eyes looked into mine. Then, like one semi-drunk and the possessor of an unutterable tremendous thought that inflamed the mind, I hurried away.

At ten next morning I set out with one of Messrs. Locke & Boulte’s assistants. He was a chatty young fellow, and I determined to find out if he knew anything of the strange lady I had met the day before. No; although he informed me that she was, he surmised, well known to the partners and their managing clerk. She was always treated by them with great respect.

I found “Craigarriv House” everything that could be desired, and within a week took up my residence there. But for taciturnity and inscrutability the old caretaker, who became my housekeeper, equalled the Sphinx. She always evaded my enquiries respecting the history of the place and of the family that last tenanted Craigarriv House. Such evasion only whetted my curiosity; I would yet unearth its mysteries if it had any; and strange that after my first night’s sleep within its walls I should be

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haunted by the idea that there was something uncanny connected with it. It was a bad beginning for one suffering from mental over-strain; but what did it matter—what does anything matter, said I, petulantly.

The house contained a fine study on the second floor, and here I spent the most of my time when indoors. It was beautifully situated, commanding a view of the valley below and the turbulent tortuous river called the Gloraun. So enamoured did I become of the room that I decided to make it both study and sleeping apartment, following, no doubt, a slovenly habit I had acquired in the city. I fancied how delightful it would be to sit there at twilight or dawn looking out over the vast stretch of brown moor. I might read and write a little, and when tired out throw myself on the bed.

How small are the beginnings of great things! How imperceptibly an idea creeps into the mind to become eventually an epoch-making potentiality! I was tired—there was a splendid sunset that ravished my gaze—and I pictured many things. I was, I think, happy. But even the sun, like our little lives, must set. Darkness fell like a pall. I shivered, for a cold damp hand rested on mine as it lay on the window-sill. Starting up, I lighted the lamp which stood on the table close by, but no one was present. It was strange. I sat down again and began to wonder if it were merely fancy. I scrutinised the room keenly, and it was then that I noticed some scribbled words on the wall at my elbow. They were—"Conrad to-morrow. Rosa to follow. Finis." I asked myself a thousand times who were Conrad and Rosa, and what could the words mean. Mystified, angry, speculating, and repeating that sinister word "Finis," I at last tumbled into bed.

For days I travelled far and wide across the country and visited the main-

land—wild, rocky, forbidding—some nine miles off. But no sooner did I seat myself in my favourite room than eerie morbid inexplicable thoughts rushed upon me like so many hungry wolves. I began to realise that there was a sort of sequence and cohesion in my thoughts after all. The outline of a work of fiction was revealed; a story of appalling tragedy was to be given to the world. I took up my pen and in broad outlines set down the framework of the drama. I attempted to write an opening chapter but failed. I tried again and still more ignominiously failed. The same thing happened again next day and the day following. How was it that the ideas could not be transmitted to paper?

Fatigued, on the third night of vain endeavour I retired. For two or three hours I must have slept heavily. I awoke to hear the great hall clock strike two. I rubbed my eyes. *There was light in my room*; surely I extinguished the reading lamp before going to bed. I was about to go out to do so now however, when the door opened and in walked a tall, slight, grey-whiskered man. He sighed audibly and took my arm-chair by the writing desk. He not once looked in my direction, but taking up my pen began writing on the sheets of paper I had just been using. He hurriedly scribbled a word or two, stopped, and then looking at the pen, with a horrible frown flung it fiercely against the wall. He picked up the ink—which was a black ink, to be sure—and shot it through the window with that same awful frown upon his face. Then going towards the lighted lamp he extinguished it. I was not afraid; I well realise how curious I felt as to his next proceeding. A match was cracked, an old lamp, that I had observed standing on a small table by the wall from the first day of my taking up house at Craigarriv, was lighted, and the stranger went towards a small press that occupied a hidden corner behind the door. From this he took out a bottle of red ink and quaint-looking pen, with which he recommenced writing. What seemed to me most terrible, most gruesome, was the sickly yellow light cast by the wretched old lamp which gradually I

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fancied moved off the table and hung by an invisible cord just above the head of my unbidden visitor.

How long he wrote it is not easy to say. At last he made a movement of impatience, flung down the pen, thumped the desk, and next moment was writhing on the floor with foam upon his lips. What next I saw I shudder to record. I must have closed my eyes, for on looking again towards the prostrate form, the white foam on the mouth had changed to blood!

Violently the door, which had been re-closed by my visitor on his entry, was flung open, and there before me stood the eerie creature of ravishment whom I had met at the house agents!

She uttered a piercing scream and flung herself on the now still body of the strange man. There was an appalling silence of a few minutes—I felt big drops of cold sweat run down my face. What was I to do? Were both dead? Outside I could hear the wind moaning in the tall yew trees. Big drops of rain beat against the window pane. What! was that the patter of rain? Not so, but a gentle tapping—a tapping that sent my heart beating wildly. The girl evidently heard it, for looking towards the window she stood up. Next moment she caught up the two outstretched arms of the lifeless man and commenced dragging the gruesome load towards the door. She succeeded in getting clear of the study and closing the ponderous door with a bang. I was now in utter darkness again.

Morning's dawn brought with it a renewal of the horrors of the night. I opened my eyes furtively, fearing that something would meet my gaze to confirm the scenes of a few hours previously. I glanced at the yellow-shaded lamp; it was in its old position. My papers, ink and pens were undisturbed.

I dressed, and going towards the small press opened it—which I had never done before—and there sure enough beheld the identical bottle of ink and pen used by my strange visitor!

With greater persistency I attacked the weird story again, but dissatisfaction with my efforts caused me in an angry moment to fling the pen with which I

had been writing against the floor. A somewhat similar action by the midnight intruder set me thinking. I would use that red ink, that pen he had used! I did so, yet there was a hesitancy in my style, my thoughts were confused. Putting on the shabby grey coat that hung there—and that had been worn by the apparition of the night—and lighting that accursed lamp I sat down again to attempt to express my thoughts lucidly. Ah! Now were no lapses! How smoothly and quickly one idea pursued another! The plot unfolding itself naturally and vividly soon controlled me; I was furiously driven headlong by its enthralling daring and originality. At daybreak by an almost superhuman effort I cried halt, and, throwing myself heavily on my bed, was soon asleep. It was nearing dusk before I awoke, and, having eaten a tiny morsel, went abroad on the moors. I tramped up and down impatiently wrestling with all these ugly phenomena. I had almost resolved to quit the unholy place, still something stronger than my will held me—*was it the hope of seeing the exquisite woman of the sparkling black eyes, pale cheeks and rounded ruby lips?* Here alone, I felt assured, would I meet her. And, oh, was such an occasion to be thrown away! Never again would my heart respond to woman's charms; who would not dare Hades for such a prize?

My literary work was continued with unabated energy, and on the fourteenth night from the commencement of the story I laid down the borrowed pen with a shudder, for unconsciously I had added the word "Finis," contrary to my general custom! I looked at the word with a feeling of disgust; I looked at the pen and the wet red ink upon it. Ink! "Surely that is not ink," said I. "Ink! No more ink than is the red pulsing blood in my veins!" I put the bottle to my nose. Was it a demon tempted me to taste it! My suspicion was confirmed—it was not ink, it was blood! And yet how could it be? Who knows!

My fire burned pleasantly; it was the only pleasant thing in the room. I drew over my chair to it, about to meditate before retiring for the night. Yes, there was surely now no necessity to have that ugly sickly lamp alight. I hitched back my chair preparatory to

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rising to extinguish it and lighting instead my own cheerful reading lamp, when the door was delicately tapped upon. At first I thought I was dreaming, but on the tapping being heard a second time I shouted "Come in!"

"Oh, excuse me, Mr. Murican," piped a low musical voice that thrilled me through and through, "I fear I am intruding too much."

"Not at all," said I, rising and going towards my caller.

"I am Rosa Milga," said she.

"Rosa!" I repeated.

She smiled and answered "Yes." She was the girl I had met at the offices of Messrs. Locke and Boulte! She was the girl of that strange midnight tragedy—it was she who pulled away the dead body of the man. What was he to her, I asked. It was her name that was written on the wall with the tremendous word "Finis!" after it! Where was I? What a dream, what reality? Why had she come now? Who shall answer?

(To be continued.)

AN OLD MAN'S REVERIE.

'Tis a dreary night as I sit alone
By the turf-fire burning low;
Outside the wind, with sigh and moan,
Blows o'er the glist'ning snow.

My children three are far away,
'Tis said they're doing well—
For I've not heard this many a day
From Tim and Bee and Nell.

My own sweet Bee was a gentle child,
And Nell the soul of cheer;
But, ah! poor Tim was ever wild,
I should have kept him here.

Herself (God give her rest this night!)
Sleeps up in Kilmackeon;
Her eye lost all its joy and light
When we were left alone.

'Tis a sad, drear night as I sit and sigh,
With life's rough course nigh run;
The turf-fire's glow will shortly die,
The sparks quench one by one.

D. MAC EGIN.

II.

"Take a chair, please, Miss Milga," said I, making at the same time a desperate effort to appear at ease. She glided gracefully into a large easy-chair that stood opposite my own on the other side of the fire, saying sweetly with those parted red lips—red and full almost to bursting—"you are very kind, Mr. Murican."

"Oh, please don't," said I, attempting a pleasantry and trying to look severe at the same time. "Surely the offer of a seat at my fireside is not an extreme act of gallantry to such as you, my dear madam. The moors are wild—I know how easy it is to lose one's way. This is, too, the only habitation on these desolate hills."

I was assuming a complete innocence of the identity of my unbidden guest. She was not, however, to be so easily deceived.

"Ah!" said she a little languidly as she pushed her dainty feet towards the fire, revealing an ankle of exquisite chiselling, "you surely remember our meeting at Messrs. Locke & Boulte's. I am the owner of this house—you are my tenant." Changing her languid attitude to one of vivacity she sent a musical peal of rich tingling laughter reverberating through that silent house.

"I remember," said I a little shamefacedly, "yes, I remember having seen you at the agents!" I looked her full in the face which has been uniformly my habit when speaking to anyone. Again I encountered those divine unfathomable eyes. She seemed pleased with my infatuation: a smile played on her lips.

"I thought you would remember—I remember that meeting, too." And a sigh heaved the breast of the beautiful visitor.

I went to the door and called the housekeeper by name, but no response.

"Excuse me, Miss Milga," said I, "my housekeeper must have gone out or fallen asleep. I myself will fetch you a little refreshment."

I went out and down to the dining-room. I was not a little surprised to find

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everything at my hand. On the table were tray, glasses and decanter. It would seem as though my visitor was expected by the old lady who ruled over the affairs of the house. But where was she herself? However, Rosa Milga was in possession of my thoughts and I hurriedly went back to her, bearing the tray and its contents. During my absence she had divested herself of a wrap that covered her shoulders, and now stood on the middle of the floor as I entered a thing of indescribable loveliness. The slender tapering neck, rising gracefully from the partially-exposed breast, was white as snow. The delicate dress she wore of easy-fitting folds revealed her lissome form, close-knit, sensitive.

On my entry she became re-seated—a picture of ease and indolence.

"I do not like the glow of that lamp," said she, "it makes everything death-like." She turned her eyes towards me and attempted a smile; but oh, what a change had passed over her countenance! And what was that shiftiness, that strange light that now held a place in those eyes? I felt a deep pity eat at my heart. Ah, that a canker should lurk in such a rich-tinted unparalleled flower!

We sat one on each side of the fire and drank our wine and eat our biscuits. We looked eyes of love at each other. The night was growing late. There was a rustling of leaves against the window; then methought a tap, tap, tap! Rosa produced what seemed to me to be a cigarette and lighted it. She held it in her fingers till it was consumed; it filled the place with a delightful aroma.

"That lamp," said she, "annoys me; please light the crimson-shaded one that I see on your writing table."

I did as desired, and re-seating myself replenished our glasses. Rosa drank hers off greedily, and extending the empty glass, said half-apologetically, "a little more, Kenneth!" I blushed: why exactly I cannot say. I again refilled her glass and pulled my chair over against hers. I had to drink from her glass, she from mine.

"Rosa!" I cried. "O Rosa, can I

help you? Ask me to do anything for you—even to give my life—and it shall be done!"

"Then, Kenneth—you will permit me to call you so?—you know all as I thought you would: you have seen an act in a drama of almost unutterable tragedy. You have read the scribbling on the wall!"

"O Rosa, cannot anything be done? I love you and —"

She put her hand to my mouth as if to stop my further speech. I seized it, kissed it; then drawing her head towards me kissed those red red lips, those splendid dark eyes, that white broad alabaster forehead! I uttered all my love in her ears: I repeated it, I protested. Regaining her composure somewhat she unloosed my entwining arms, crying "All is lost now! all is lost! oh, but I would not have you speak otherwise!"

I saw all. Was it not the very idea of that fearful story that lay there just completed, that love would be the undoing of the heroine?

"It has been foretold," said she sadly. "It was the poison that entered my father's blood. You have it all there," said she, waving her hand towards the writing-desk. "You have completed the family history of the ill-starred Milga race. There has been this insanity in our blood for generations and generations. That awful heritage—more bitter than death—has been transmitted from parent to child—has been transmitted in each succeeding generation with increased violence, owing to close intermarriage between cousins, all of whom contained the germ of insanity. How many of those affected died of self-inflicted wounds and self-administered poison it would not be easy to say; perhaps all—ha! ha! ha!" Her laugh was terrible; I did not speak—could not. She resumed—"My father died by his own hand; my grandfather took poison two days after his marriage, and so on back beyond my knowledge. Have you not written it; if not, then the prophecy concerning us is false." She rose up and going towards the large pile of MSS. quickly scanned over the pages.

"I have written it," said I.

Again she requested wine, which I had not the power to refuse. There was the

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repetition of the tapping at the window. The breast of the doomed girl heaved, a moan escaped her lips.

"I am the last of our accursed race—you have read it scrawled there by my father who had, as all his ancestors had, and as I have, a premonition of the end."

I drank my wine in a gulp and said not a word. She did likewise, adding "I feel dizzy. Ah! how thoughtful of me to have brought my restorer. How thoughtful, ah, how thoughtful! Beloved! lay your head against my breast, I will smooth your brown curls."

I complied, and she, producing a tiny bottle from a secret pocket above her heart, dropped from it three drops into her glass. Into mine she put a similar quantity, and then a little wine.

"This will bring sleep and dreams; it is a distillation unknown to all save the family of Milga. Kiss me now and drink; to-morrow we go and join hands in marriage. Hush! hush!" and laughing a mocking laugh she lifted the glass to her lips and emptied it. Raising mine to honour the toast, I hesitated for the smell surprised me: "Drink! drink!" said she "drink!" I flung glass and contents into the fire. Lifeless she fell into my arms. Outside I heard a strange noise—a hissing, crackling noise. *The house was on fire!* I tenderly laid the limp body of Rosa on the hearth-rug and opened the door. Fire and smoke rushed into my face. I reclosed it and flinging up the window looked out. The sky was lurid. I had only a few minutes to escape. Should I carry the body of Rosa with me. Was she dead beyond recall? I put my ear to her heart: it was still—yes, forever, still. Even had I desired it, it would be impossible to escape by the rain-pipe and bring the dead body with me. Hurriedly I took my exit, but losing my hold fell heavily to the ground, breaking my arm and spraining my right foot. I managed to scramble a short distance away from the burning house and saw it consumed to a blackened mass. And then the pitiless drenching rain came down. Next morning investigations were made by some neighbours, but no trace of Rosa's remains could be found. The MSS. of my story, and which I have since vainly tried to re-write, were lost. Ah! . . .