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## THE BANQUET-HALL OF DEATH.

GHOST GOSSIPS AT BLAKESLEY HOUSE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "STEPHEN DUGARD."

WHEN the party at Blakesley House re-assembled in the evening, Mrs. Dagleish had got such a violent toothache, that she could not tell her story of the "BLACK RIBAND," to the great disappointment of the little circle, especially of Mary Falconer, who said "they never were to have it," and seemed to think the toothache had been suborned on purpose to prevent its being told.

"I wish you had it," said Mrs. Dagleish, drawing up her leg; "you would see whether *you* could talk."

"I warrant her," observed Hugh Buckner; "she would talk any toothache away in half an hour."

"Do you think so?" replied Mary, briskly. "What a pity *you* are not a toothache,—I'm sure I'd try."

Hugh looked a little disconcerted, and Mr. Carliel, fearing a waspish answer might produce discord, interposed with an offer to supply Mrs. Dagleish's place, by telling them a "very nice ghost story." At these words they all settled themselves for listening, and Mrs. Dagleish put another piece of ginger into her mouth.

"Once upon a time," said Mr. Carliel,—"that's the orthodox way of beginning a *nice* ghost story, — once upon a time, when knights and their squires used to roam in search of adventures, there was a chivalrous person called Sir Lindsay de Breton, who, accompanied by a faithful follower named Jasper, had his courage put to a test such as few men except himself could have sustained. They were returning home from the Holy Land, (where he had, of course, performed prodigies of valour under the banner of the Cross,) and took for their route the centre of Germany, at that time covered with immense forests, the scene then, as now, of many a fearful deed of necromancy. Coming to the entrance of one of these forests just at night-fall, which took away Jasper's stomach for going on,

"'Master mine,' said he, 'hadn't we better remain on the outside of danger? It's better than getting into the middle of it. Suppose we stay where we are till morning; we shall then have day-light for our work.'

"'You may,' quoth Sir Lindsay, 'but *I* shall not; for I see a light yonder, twinkling like a tiny star between the trees, and doubt not it will conduct me to some hospitable roof, where I shall find a courteous reception.' So saying, he put spurs to his horse, and plunged into the thickest of the forest.

"'A plague on those lights! say I,' muttered Jasper, following his master, because he was afraid to remain behind; 'we paid dearly for trusting to one of them the last Sabbath evening: moreover, *I* see no light.'

"'Look!' replied Sir Lindsay, pointing in the direction of it.

"'I *do* look,' quoth Jasper, shutting both his eyes, 'but protest I can see nothing.'

"They rode on in silence for about half an hour, and Jasper, who had recovered his eye-sight, saw more plainly than he wished the little luminous speck glittering before them, which seemed, however, to keep

the same distance, notwithstanding the speed at which they were now advancing.

“‘Truly,’ said he, ‘you might well say it *looks* like a star, for it is one; and we shall ride long enough before we get to it.’

“‘Silence!’ exclaimed Sir Lindsay, angrily; ‘what’s that?’

“‘What’s what?’ replied Jasper, pulling up his horse, and holding his breath.

“‘Did you hear nothing?’—‘Nothing.’

“‘Methinks you have neither eyes nor ears to-night,’ replied Sir Lindsay.—‘I wish I hadn’t,’ quoth Jasper, his teeth chattering as he spoke; ‘for then—O Lord! what’s that?’

“‘What?’ inquired his master, eagerly.

“‘O Lord! it’s nothing. A great green bough flapped in my face, and I declare I thought it was a great cold hand giving me a slap.’

“‘Peace, knave! this is no time for foolery.’

“‘No, nor for anything but to go to bed, if a beautiful truss of clean straw, now, would but show itself.’

“‘Again they pursued their journey in silence, and still the sparkling light danced and flickered before them. They had now ridden several miles. ‘I’ll see the end of this, come what may,’ said Sir Lindsay, urging his jaded steed into a quicker pace.

“‘It will see the end of us, I guess,’ muttered Jasper, trying to keep up with his master, and silently commending himself to all the tutelary saints whose names he could remember.

“‘Sir Lindsay continued to ride on, his eye steadily fixed upon the light, and wondering wherefore he approached no nearer to it, when his horse suddenly stopped. He now saw their further progress was obstructed by two huge stone doors, on each side of which stretched lofty walls of the same material.

“‘Aha!’ said he, ‘here we are at last. Dismount, and give some signal of our presence.’

“‘Yes, here we are at last,’ quoth Jasper, doing as he was bid; ‘and now for the beginning of Heaven knows what.’

“‘He groped about for a bell to pull, or a horn to blow, but could find neither; so with the pommel of his sword he struck three heavy blows.

“‘They waited a few minutes, and then heard the slow, heavy tread of footsteps approaching.

“‘Who is without?’ growled a voice, that hardly seemed to issue from human lungs.

“‘A Christian knight, bewildered in the tangled mazes of this forest, who craves shelter till the dawn,’ replied Sir Lindsay.

“‘That is, provided it will put you to no particular inconvenience,’ added Jasper, who was most anxious to bespeak a good reception by his politeness, and at the same time suggest an excuse for not opening the door.

“‘If you be a true knight,’ replied the voice, ‘the portals will fly back at your bidding; if you be not, go your ways.’

“‘Worthy master,’ quoth Jasper, ‘I know I am but a fool, with reverence be it spoken to the father that begot me; but for once take a fool’s advice. Stone doors that open of themselves can lead to no good: let us show them our backs; there’s witchcraft in them.’

“‘That we shall see anon,’ said Sir Lindsay, as he alighted; and advancing towards the ponderous gates, he struck them three times

with the silver cross that surmounted his trusty falchion, repeating at each blow, 'A true knight, who has knelt at the Holy Sepulchre, and fought against the Infidel, bids thee open.'

"At the first stroke, heavy bars and chains were heard to fall; at the second, enormous bolts were withdrawn; at the third, the doors slowly rolled themselves back, and disclosed a flight of four-and-twenty marble steps, on each of which stood a slave, covered from head to foot with black crape, and holding in his hand a blazing torch. At the top, on a kind of throne, which was of ebony, sat DEATH. His outstretched bony arms and ghastly smile seemed to welcome his two adventurous guests.

"'Didn't I tell you what would come of it?' said Jasper, shaking like a reed, and making preparations to remount his horse and be off. 'Hitherto, master mine, I've followed *you*—now follow *me*.'

"'Hold!' exclaimed Sir Lindsay, sternly. 'Move not at your peril, except it be to advance, as I mean to do.'

"Jasper crossed himself, but he could not help moving, for not a limb of him would stand still. Sir Lindsay paused a moment to survey the scene before him. Even he was somewhat dismayed. A profound stillness prevailed. He looked at the crape-covered slaves: he could not perceive that they breathed; and they were perfectly motionless. Were they living beings, or but the mockery of life, ranged there as fit attendants upon the grim semblance above? Where, too, was he whose voice had answered them? He advanced a few steps—there was a loud groan—it came from Jasper, who now concluded it was his master's determination to go on, and that he must either do the same or remain by himself, a choice of dangers which made his heart sink within him; so for each step that Sir Lindsay took, he took half a one. This, however, gradually brought them within the stone doors, when they suddenly closed, the lights were extinguished, and they found themselves in utter darkness.

"'Very pleasant!' quoth Jasper, in a voice which singing-masters call a natural shake.

"'We are in the power of evil,' said Sir Lindsay, 'and must invoke the protection of Heaven.'

"'Lord have mercy upon me!' quoth Jasper, dropping on his knees, 'and forgive me for having come into this infernal place! Holy St. Nicholas be my speed! The blessed Virgin take care of me! The glorious—'

"'Peace!' cried Sir Lindsay, cutting short the pious aspirations of his faithful but terrified follower. 'Seest thou nothing yonder?'

"'Where?' inquired Jasper, turning his eyes slowly in every direction.

"'Yonder, as nearly as I can judge in this profound gloom, exactly over the spot where the grisly image of Death sat enthroned.'

"Jasper looked again, and then saw a faint streak of silver light, like a silken thread, which gradually assumed the form of an arch. They watched it in silence; and presently beheld a scroll behind the light, bearing this inscription, 'COME TO THE BANQUET OF THE DEAD.'

"'A sorry feast that for the living, I trow,' quoth Jasper.

"'What may this mean?' said Sir Lindsay.

"'It means, I fear, that we shall shortly be a supper for the worms. Ah, master mine! had you taken my advice, we, who have escaped so many perils by field and flood, by fire and tempest, should not have met with this scurvy fate, juggled out of one's life by the foul fiend.'

The light had now increased sufficiently to render the marble steps once more dimly visible, when Sir Lindsay perceived that the crape-covered torch-bearers had all disappeared.

“‘I will ascend them,’ said he, ‘and see whither they lead.’

“‘And I,’ said Jasper, ‘with your leave, will remain here, till you see whether you want me.’

“‘On, slave!’ exclaimed the identical voice which had answered them from within. At the same time he received a hearty thwack, as from a stout cudgel, upon his shoulders.

“‘This is most marvellous!’ said Sir Lindsay, looking round, and perceiving no one.

“‘It is most barbarous,’ rejoined Jasper, who also looked round, to return the blow with interest; for his blood was up at the affront.

“‘Come what may, I can bear this no longer!’ exclaimed Sir Lindsay, and he began to ascend the marble steps, followed by Jasper at a respectful distance, who considered he had no alternative but to advance, or be buffeted by his invisible assailant.

“‘They reached the top, and the next moment felt it sinking beneath their feet. Their first impulse was to rush down again; but, to their infinite dismay, they discovered that the whole flight had vanished, and they were standing, in mid-air, upon that portion where they had seen the grim phantom of Death.

As they descended, they saw gradually open before them a spacious hall, or chamber, hung round with black, and intersected with innumerable doors. Along the centre of this chamber, and extending nearly the whole length, ran a table, also covered with black drapery. At the head sat DEATH. Around were shadowy forms continually appearing and fading away, and which seemed to enter through one or other of the many doors that opened from the sides. As they arrived, a venerable-looking man, with a beard that descended to his middle, led them to the head of the table, where DEATH received them with a smile of horrible delight.

“‘I should know that old gentleman,’ said Jasper, in a whisper to his master, who stood surveying the scene with a perplexed but fearless spirit; ‘I have seen his picture many a time in my grandmother’s missal.’

“‘At this moment, a shadow glided past Sir Lindsay which filled him with grief and amazement. It was the semblance of his own father, but so pale and wo-begone, that it made his heart ache to look upon him. He was about to address it, when the phantom spoke.

“‘Why art thou here, my son, before thou hast put off mortality? This is the BANQUET HALL OF DEATH. Here the universal monarch holds his revels, and receives each moment from the hand of Time his countless victims.’

“‘Hast thou, then, put off mortality?’ exclaimed Sir Lindsay.

“‘Within this hour a wasting fever dried up the current of my life.’—‘Ah, me! then I shall never see thee more.’

“‘But thou shalt see what no mortal eye, save thine, hath ever seen,—mysteries which I have power to show thee. When we are of the world,—when we walk among the living, we startle at a single death. Behold here the TIDE OF DEATH, that never ceases, fed by battles, shipwrecks, plague, famine, old age, murder, suicides, disease, accidents. Space and time are here annihilated. There, enters one

who, while I speak, has been drowned in the Euphrates; there, another, who has just expired on the frozen summit of Mount Caucasus: there, a troop of brave spirits, from a field of slaughter beyond the Apennines, where the strife of war still rages; there, the crew of a stately ship that foundered this instant off the coast of Sicily; and there, the babe of a minute old, which but breathed one breath of life, and took its flight. But who can number them? Every spot of the green earth, every valley, every hill, the crowded city, and the sequestered village, the desert, and the ocean flood, are each moment paying tribute. To look on *this* scene, you would think there was nothing but death: but when we look upon the *world*, Death is so great a stranger that we are never prepared for him.

“Now mark a mystery of the world. There is but one entrance into life. We quit it by a thousand. Observe those gloomy portals; note the names over each:—War, Self-Slaughter, Broken Hearts, Intemperance, Madness, Melancholy, Love, Jealousy, Age, Ambition, Pride, Grief, Want, Pestilence, Disease, Gluttony, Fire, Water, Air, Earth, with all the numerous ills and countless disasters that suffice to rob us of that fragile thing called life. As bubbles rise to the surface and vanish, even so man appears and is gone. The world itself is nothing but one huge charnel-house; for, for every created being that moves upon its bosom, a million lie beneath.

“I read your thoughts, my son. Your eye is wandering from door to door to observe which yields the greatest quarry. Have you remarked which yields the least? The door of Broken Hearts has opened only once, and then to give entrance to only a solitary victim. The whole world has had but one broken heart within the period which has given Death his thousands. And who was that one? An ill-starred lover? A wronged and forsaken maid? A childless widow? A father, too proud of a darling son, whose name was stained with infamy? No. A usurious Jew, cheated by a spendthrift heir, who gave him false bonds for true gold, and the muck-worm laid him down and died for very grief amid his piled-up money-bags.

“But, see how War fattens the lean ribs of Death!—how they come thronging in from each quarter of the globe! Self-Slaughter, too, whose purveyors are Love, Pride, Ambition, Madness, Jealousy, and Want, sends a goodly store. Gluttony and Intemperance despatch their bloated offerings every moment; and Age supplies a constant stream. All the things that be are Death’s workmen. A loose stone, a rotten plank, a rusty nail, a little venomous worm, a few drops sucked from the green leaf of a wild plant, the dank midnight air, the rays of the glorious sun himself, shall filch from man that subtle unseen part of him, whose loss is loss of all; for then, what is he?—A loathsome carcass, which the living huddle out of sight, lest it offend their nostrils.’

“I have been watching that centre door,’ said Sir Lindsay. ‘It is larger than any of the rest; and yet it seems too narrow for the multitudes that pass through it.’

“That,’ replied the phantom, ‘is set apart for the exclusive use of those who are sick of being well, and employ physicians to cure them. *They* are a countless host. Death has no friend like the physician. His pen slays more than the sword.’

“Master mine,’ said Jasper, ‘the sun is up, the birds are singing;

and if we would have the first of the morning for our journey, it is time we were jogging.'

"Sir Lindsay opened his eyes, and saw his faithful squire standing by his side, with the steeds pawing the ground, and impatient to be gone.

"'Have we really escaped from that horrible place?' said he.

"'What horrible place?' quoth Jasper.

"'The BANQUET HALL OF DEATH, where I saw and conversed with my father's spirit, and where——'

"'Who would have thought now,' interrupted Jasper, 'that the beautiful bed of moss and green leaves which I prepared for you under this tree at sundown last night would have put such an ugly dream as that into your head.'"

"Why, I declare," exclaimed Mary Falconer, addressing Mr. Carliel, "you have been inventing it all yourself; and it is nothing but a dream of your own making."

"But is it not what I promised you," replied Mr. Carliel, laughing, "a very *nice* ghost story?"

"That it is," said Mrs. Dagleish; "and *I* thought it was a real one, and was wondering how the poor things would ever get out of the castle."

"I must say," remarked the Major, "you managed it uncommonly well, if there is really no truth in it."

"Nay," said Mr. Carliel, "as to the truth of it, you must settle that among yourselves."

"I see, cousin," said the Major, addressing Mrs. Dagleish, "your toothache is no better."

"No; hang the tooth! it was tolerably easy all the while I was listening to Mr. Carliel; but now it is coming on as bad as ever. I must go to bed, and wrap my head up in a yard of new flannel."

This caused the party to separate somewhat earlier than usual; but not before the Major promised them a capital story next morning, "founded on fact," in case his cousin should still be unable to tell hers of the "BLACK RIBAND."

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TO MYRA.

WHILE on that sylph-like form my sight,  
 So riveted with fond delight;  
 Those eyes at once so soft and bright;  
 Those locks of silkiest brown;  
 No festering cares my heart annoy,  
 Nor false delights my senses cloy,  
 But all is peace and all is joy,—  
 An earthly paradise.  
 If thou art indeed of mortal birth,  
 A creature of this lower earth,  
 That form was surely given  
 To elevate man's low desires,  
 Quick'ning his soul with love's own fires,  
 And draw him near to Heaven.