

The Abbey of Clunedale

By Dr Nathan Drake

The last rays of the setting sun yet lingered on the mountains which surrounded the district of —; when Edward de Courtenay, after two fatiguing campaigns on the plains of Flanders, in one of which the gallant Sidney fell, re-entered his native village towards the end of August, 1587. He had lost his father a few months before his departure for the Continent, a loss which had occasioned him the most severe affliction, and had induced him thus early in life to seek, amid the din of arms, and the splendour of military parade, a pause from painful recollection. Time, however, though it had mitigated the first poignant emotions of grief, had not subdued the tender feelings of regret and sorrow, and the well-known objects of his early childhood and his opening youth, associated as they were with the salutary precepts and fond affection of the best of parents, awakened in his mind a train of melancholy yet soothing thoughts, as with slow and pausing steps he moved along the venerable avenue of trees, which led to his paternal mansion. Twilight had by this time wrapt every object in a veil of pleasing obscurity; all was hushed in the softest repose, and the massiness of the foliage under which he passed, and the magnitude and solitary grandeur of his Gothic halls impressed the imagination of Edward with deep sensations of solemnity and awe. Two grey-headed servants, who had lived for near half a century in the family, received their young master at the gate, and whilst the tears trickled down their withered cheeks, expressed with artless simplicity their joy, and blessed the return of the son of their ancient benefactor.

After some affectionate inquiries concerning the neighbouring villagers, and the families of these old men, Edward expressed his intention of walking to the Abbey of Clunedale, which lay about a mile distant from the house; his filial affection, the pensive retrospect of events endeared to memory, the sweetness and tranquillity of the evening, and that enthusiasm so congenial to the best emotions of the heart, gave birth to the wish of lingering a few moments over the turf which covered the remains of his beloved parent. Scarce however, had he intimated this resolution, when the ghastly paleness which overspread the countenances of his domestics, and the dismay that sat upon their features, assured him that something extraordinary was connected with the determination he had adopted, and, upon inquiry, his terrified servants informed him, though with some confusion and reluctance, that, for some months past, they and the country round had been alarmed by strange sights and noises at the Abbey, and that no one durst approach the place after sunset. Edward, smiling at the superstitious fears of his attendants, which he attributed solely to their ignorance and their love for the marvellous, assured them he entertained no apprehension for the event, and that he hoped shortly to convince them that their alarm was altogether unfounded. Saying this, he turned into the great avenue, and striking off to the left, soon reached the river, on whose winding banks a pathway led to the Abbey.

This venerable structure had been surrendered to the rapacity of Henry the Eighth in 1540, and having been partly unroofed during the same year, had experienced a rapid decay. It continued, however, along with the sacred ground adjoining to it, to be a depository of the dead, and part of the family of the Courtenays had for some centuries reposed in vaults built on the outside of the great west entrance of the church. In a spot adjacent to this ancient cemetery lay also the remains of the father of Edward, and hither filial piety was now conducting the young warrior as the gathering shades of evening dropped their deep grey tints on all around.

The solemn stillness of the air, the tremulous and uncertain light through which every object appeared, the soothing murmur of the water, whose distant track could be discovered only by the white vapour which hovered on its surface, together with the sedate and sweeping movement of the melancholy owl as it sailed slowly and conspicuously down the valley, had all a natural tendency to induce a state of mind more than usually susceptible of awful impressions. Over Edward, predisposed to serious reflection by the sacred purport of his visit, they exerted a powerful dominion, and he entered the precincts of the Abbey in deep meditation on the possibility of the reappearance of the departed.

The view of the Abbey, too, dismantled and falling fast to decay, presented an image of departed greatness admirably calculated to awaken recollections of the mutability and transient nature of all human possessions. Its fine Gothic windows and arches streaming with ivy, were only just perceptible through the dusk, as Edward reached the consecrated ground; where, kneeling down at the tomb of his father, he remained for some time absorbed in the tender indulgence of sorrow. Having dosed, however, his pious petitions for the soul of the deceased, he was rising from the hallowed mould, and about to retrace his pathway homewards, when a dim light glimmering from amidst the ruins arrested his attention. Greatly astonished at a phenomenon so singular, and suddenly calling to remembrance the ghastly appearance and fearful reports made by his servants, he stood for some moments riveted to the spot, with his eyes fixed on the light, which still continued to gleam steadily though faintly from the same quarter. Determined however to ascertain from what cause it proceeded, and almost ashamed of the childish apprehensions he had betrayed, he cautiously, and without making the least noise, approached the west entrance of the church; here the light however appeared to issue from the choir, which being at a considerable distance, and towards the other end of the building, he glided along its exterior, and passing the refectory and chapter-house, re-entered the church by the south portal near the choir. With footsteps light as air he moved along the damp and mouldering pavement, whilst pale rays gleaming from afar faintly glanced on the shafts of some pillars seen in distant perspective down the great aisle. Having now entered the choir, he could distinctly perceive the place from whence the light proceeded, and, on approaching still nearer, dimly distinguished a human form kneeling opposite to it. Not an accent, however, reached his ear, and, except the rustling noise occasioned by the flight of some night-birds along remote parts of the ruin, a deep and awful silence prevailed.

The curiosity of Courtenay being now strongly excited, though mingled with some degree of apprehension and wonder, he determined to ascertain, if possible, who the stranger was, and from what motives he visited, at so unusual an hour, a place so solitary and deserted; passing therefore noiseless along one of the side aisles separated from the choir by a kind of elegant latticework, he at length stood parallel with the spot where the figure was situated, and had a perfect side view of the object of his search. It appeared to be a middle-aged man, who was kneeling on a white-marble slab, near the great altar, and before a small niche in the screen which divides the choir from the east end of the church; in the niche were placed a lamp and a crucifix; and he had round him a coarse black garment bound with a leathern girdle, but no covering on his head; and, as the light gleamed upon his features, Edward was shocked at the despair that seemed fixed in their expression: his hands were clasped together, his eyes turned towards heaven, and heavy and convulsive sighs at intervals escaped from his bosom, whilst the breeze of night, lifting at times his disordered hair, added peculiar wildness to a countenance which, though elegantly moulded, was of ghastly paleness, and had a sternness and severity in its aspect, and every now and then displayed such an acute sense of conscious guilt, as chilled the

beholder, and almost suppressed the rising emotions of pity. Edward, who had impatiently witnessed this extraordinary scene, was about to address the unhappy man, when groans as from a spirit in torture, and which seemed to rend the very bosom from which they issued, prevented his intention, and he beheld the miserable stranger prostrate in agony on the marble. In a few minutes, however, he arose, and drawing from beneath his garment an unsheathed sword, held it stretched in his hands towards heaven, whilst his countenance assumed still deeper marks of horror, and his eyes glared with the lightning of frenzy. At this instant, when, apprehensive for the event, Edward deemed it highly necessary to interfere, and was stepping forward with that view, his purpose was suddenly arrested by the sound of distant music, which stealing along the remote parts of the Abbey in notes that breathed a soothing and delicious harmony, seemed the work of enchantment, or to arise from the viewless harps of spirits of the blest. Over the agitated soul of the stranger it appeared to diffuse the balm of peace; his features became less rigid and stern, his eyes assumed a milder expression, he crossed his arms in meek submission on his bosom, and as the tones, now swelling with the richest melody of heaven, now tremulously dying away in accents of the most ravishing sweetness, approached still nearer, the tears started in his eyes, and coursing down his cheeks bathed the deadly instrument yet gleaming in his grasp; this, however, with a heavy sigh he now placed in the niche, and bowing gently forward seemed to pray devoutly: the convulsions which had shaken his frame ceased; tranquillity sat upon his brow, whilst, in strains that melted into holy rapture every harsh emotion, the same celestial music still passed along the air, and filled the compass of the Abbey.

Courtenay, whose every faculty had been nearly absorbed through the influence of this unseen minstrelsy, had yet witnessed, with sincere pleasure, the favourable change in the mind and countenance of the stranger, who still knelt before the lamp, by whose pale light he beheld a perfect resignation tranquillize those features which a few minutes before had been distorted by the struggles of remorse; for such had been the soothing and salutary effects of harmony in allaying the perturbations of a wounded and self-accusing spirit, that hope now cheered the bosom so recently the mansion of despair.

Whilst Edward, in sacred regard to the noblest feelings of humanity, forbore to interrupt the progress of emotions so friendly to virtue and contrition, the music, which had gradually, and with many a dying close, breathed fainter and fainter on the ear, now, in tones that whispered peace and mercy, and which sounded sweet as the accents of departed saints, melted into air, and deep silence again pervaded the Abbey. This, however, continued not long, for in a few moments was heard the echo of light footsteps, and presently Courtenay, by the glimmering of the lamp, indistinctly beheld some object which, gliding rapidly up the choir, moved towards the spot where the stranger was yet kneeling. His astonishment was increased when, on its approaching nearer, he could perceive the form of a young and elegant woman. She was clothed perfectly in white, except where the vest was bound by a black zone, and over her shoulders flowed negligently a profusion of light brown hair. A smile of the most winning sweetness played upon her features, though the dewy lustre of her eye, and the tears that lingered on her cheek, revealed the struggles of the heart. The stranger, who had risen at her approach, embraced her with the most affectionate emotion; they were both silent, however, and both now kneeling on the marble slab employed some time in prayer. Nothing ever appeared to Courtenay more interesting than the countenance of this beautiful young woman, thus lighted up by all the sensibility of acute feeling; her eyes bathed in tears, and lifted towards heaven, beamed forth an expression truly angelic, whilst the exquisite delicacy of her complexion and features, over which the expensive graces had diffused their most fascinating charms, together with the simplicity and energy of her

devotion as with clasped hands and trembling lips she implored the assistance of the Divine Spirit, formed a picture worthy of the canvas of Raphael.

Edward now saw before him the cause of those rumours and fears which had been circulated with so much industry in the neighbourhood, for, since the appearance of this amiable young woman, he had been perfectly convinced that the music to which he had lately listened with so much rapture, had its origin with her. In a still night these sounds might be heard to some distance, and, together with the glimmering of the light, would occasion no small alarm to the peasant who should happen at that time to be passing near the Abbey, and whose apprehensions, thus excited, might easily create some imaginary being, the offspring of ignorance and terror; or perhaps some pilgrim, more daring than the rest, had penetrated the interior of the ruin, and had probably beheld one of the very striking figures now present to his eyes. This, without further inquiry, he had deemed, what indeed would, at first, be the surmise of any spectator, some vision of another world, and had thus strengthened the superstition of the country, and protected the seclusion of the strangers.

As these reflections were passing through his mind, the interesting objects which had given them birth had risen from their kneeling posture, and after interchanging looks of mingled gratitude and delight, were arm in arm retiring from the sacred marble, when Edward, whose eagerness to discover the motives of the elder stranger's conduct had been greatly augmented since the appearance of his fair companion, determined, if possible to trace them to the place of their abode. Entering the choir, therefore, by one of the lateral doors, he followed them with slow and silent footsteps, preserving such a distance as, he thought, might prevent the lamp from revealing his person. He had pursued them in this manner unobserved through the choir, but upon their suddenly turning at an acute angle to enter the cloisters, the light streaming faintly on his figure discovered him to the younger stranger, who, uttering a loud shriek, leaned trembling on the arm of her friend.

Courtenay now immediately rushing forward endeavoured to allay their apprehensions, by informing them of his name and place of residence, and the motives which had, at this time of night, led him to visit the Abbey: he told them that, filial piety having drawn him to the tomb of his father, he had very unexpectedly perceived a light in the interior of the building; which strongly exciting his curiosity, and corroborating the reports of the country, he had endeavoured to ascertain its cause, and in so doing had discovered the attitude and employment of the elder stranger, who, together with his fair attendant, rather increasing than mitigating his astonishment, he had attempted, by following them at a distance, to ascertain their abode, it being his intention, at some future period to solicit an explanation of what he had now witnessed.

Whilst Edward was yet speaking, a ghastly paleness overspread the countenance of the elder stranger; it was momentary, however; for soon resuming his tranquility, he addressed Courtenay in a low but firm tone of voice. 'I am sorry, Sir,' said he, 'to have occasioned, by my partial residence here, so much apprehension among the inhabitants of your village; but as I have reasons for wishing concealment, at least for a time, I have thought it necessary, though acquainted with their fears, not to undeceive them. But with you I know already I can have no motives for disguise; for, though from great change of feature, brought on by deep sorrow, and great change of apparel, I have hitherto escaped your recognition, you will find by-and-by that we were formerly better acquainted. In the mean time I will conduct you to the spot we inhabit, where, should you wish for an explanation of the extraordinary scenes you have been a spectator of this night, the recital, though it will cost me many struggles, shall be given you, and I do this, strange as it may now sound to you, actuated by the recollection of past friendship.' Having said

thus, he and his beautiful partner, who had listened with almost as much surprise as Edward to an address so unexpected, moved slowly on, and Courtenay, occupied in fruitless conjecture, followed in silence.

They passed along a large portion of the cloisters, whose perspective, as seen by the dreary light of the lamp, had a singularly awful effect, and then, ascending some steps, entered what is termed the Dormitory, and which was carried over this part of the Abbey to a considerable distance. Here, in two small chambers, where the roof remained sufficiently entire, were a couple of beds, and a small quantity of neat furniture, and here the stranger pausing, invited Edward to enter. 'These rooms,' observed he, 'are my occasional habitation for at least twice-a-week during the night: but before I commence the melancholy narrative of my crimes and sufferings, I will endeavour to recall your recollection to your companion in arms upon the Continent; for this purpose I will retire for a few minutes and put on the dress I usually come hither in, the habit you now see upon me being merely assumed after reaching this place as best suited to the situation of my mind, to the penitence and humiliation that await me here.' His tone of speaking, as he thus addressed Courtenay, was perceivably altered, being much more open and full than before, and brought to Edward's ear a voice he had been accustomed to, though he could not at the moment appropriate it to any individual of his acquaintance. During his absence, his amiable companion, who had not perfectly recovered from the alarm into which she had been thrown by Courtenay's intrusion, sat silent and reserved, until Edward, observing some manuscript-music in the room, ventured to inquire if the exquisite performance he had listened to with so much delight in the Abbey had not originated with her. A deep sigh at this question escaped her bosom, and her eyes filled with tears, whilst in tremulous accents she replied, that, owing to the great relief and support her brother experienced from music, she always accompanied him to this place, and that it was a source of the purest happiness to her to be thus able, through the medium of her harp and voice, to alleviate and soothe his sorrows. For this purpose the instrument was left at the Abbey, and was placed in that part of the ruin where its tones were best heard, and produced the most pleasing effect. At this instant the door opening, the stranger entered clothed in a mourning military undress, and bearing a taper in his hand; he placed himself, the light gleaming steadily on his countenance, opposite Courtenay, who involuntarily started at his appearance. 'Do you not remember,' he exclaimed, 'the officer who was wounded by your side at the battle of Zutphen'—'My God!' cried Edward, 'can it be Clifford?'—'The same, my friend, the same,' he replied; 'though action has anticipated on his features the characters of age. You behold, Courtenay, the most unfortunate, the most miserable of men—but let me not pain my sweet Caroline by the recital of facts which have already wounded almost to dissolution her tender heart—we will walk, my friend, into the Abbey; its awful gloom will better suit the dreadful tale I have to unfold.' Saying this, and promising his sister to return in a few minutes, they descended into the cloisters, and from thence through the choir into the body of the church.

The tranquility of the night, and the light and refreshing breeze that yet lingered amid the ruin, and swept through its long withdrawing aisles, were unavailing to mitigate the agitation of Clifford, as with trembling footsteps he passed along the choir. 'Oh, my friend,' he exclaimed, 'the spirits of those I have injured hover near us! Beneath that marble slab, my Courtenay, on which you saw me kneel with so much horror and remorse, repose the relics of a beloved wife, of the most amiable of her sex, and who owes her death (God of mercy register not the deed!) to the wild suggestions of my jealous frenzy.' Whilst thus speaking, they hurried rapidly forwards towards the western part of the Abbey; and here Clifford, resuming more composure, proceeded in his narrative. 'You may probably recollect about a twelve-month ago my obtaining leave of

the Earl of Leicester to visit England; I came, my friend, upon a fatal errand. I had learnt, through the medium of an officious relation, that my wife, my beloved Matilda, of whose affection and accomplishments you have frequently heard me speak with rapture, had attached herself to a young man who had visited in the neighbourhood of my estate at C—n, but that she had lately removed for the summer months to a small house and farm I possess within a mile or two of this Abbey, and that here likewise she continued to receive the attentions of the young stranger. Fired by representations such as these, and racked with cureless jealousy, I returned to England in disguise, and found the report of my relation the theme of common conversation in the county. It was on the evening of a fine summer's day that I reached the hamlet of G—, and with a trembling hand and palpitating heart knocked at my own door. The servant informed me that Matilda had walked towards the Abbey. I immediately took the same route: the sun had set; and the grey tinting of evening had wrapt every object in uniform repose; the moon however was rising, and in a short time silvered parts of the ruin and its neighbouring trees. I placed myself in the shadow of one of the buttresses, and had not waited long ere Matilda, my beautiful Matilda, appeared, leaning on the arm of the stranger. You may conceive the extreme agitation of my soul at a spectacle like this; unhappily, revenge was, at the instant, the predominating emotion, and rushing forward with my sword, I called upon the villain, as I then thought him, to defend himself.—Shocked by the suddenness of the attack, and the wild impetuosity of my manner, Matilda fell insensible on the earth, and only recovered recollection at the moment when my sword had pierced the bosom of the stranger, though whose guard I had broken in the first fury of the assault. With shrieks of agony and despair she sprang towards the murdered youth, and falling on his body exclaimed, “My brother, my dear, dear brother!”

‘Had all nature fallen in dissolution around me, my astonishment and horror could not have been greater than what I felt from these words. The very marrow froze in my bones, and I stood fixed to the ground an image of despair and guilt. Meantime the life-blood of the unhappy Walsingham ebbed fast away, and he expired at my feet, and in the arms of his beloved sister, who, at this event, perhaps fortunately for us both, relapsed into a state of insensibility. My own emotions, on recovering from the stupor into which I had been thrown, were those I believe of frenzy, nor can I now dwell upon them with safety, nor without a partial dereliction of intellect. Suffice it to say, that I had sufficient presence of mind left to apply for assistance at the nearest cottage, and that the hapless victims of my folly were at length conveyed to the habitation of Matilda. Another dreadful scene awaited her, the recognition of her husband as the murderer of her brother—this, through the attention of my friends, for I myself was incapable of acting with rationality, was for some time postponed; it came at length, however, through the agonies of my remorse and contrition, to her knowledge, and two months have scarce elapsed since I placed her by the side of her poor brother, who, at the fatal moment of our rencounter, had not been many months returned from the Indies, and was in person a perfect stranger to your friend. Beneath that marble slab they rest, my Courtenay, and ere this, I believe, and through the medium of my own lawless hand, I should have partaken of their grave, had not my beloved sister, my amiable and gentle Caroline, stepped in, like an angel, between her brother and destruction.

‘Singular as it may appear, the greatest satisfaction I now receive, is from frequent visits to the tomb of Matilda and her brother; there, over the relics of those I have injured, to implore the mercy of an offended Deity; such, however, are the agonies I suffer from the recollection of my crime, that even this resource would be denied me were it not for the intervention of the powers of music; partial I have ever been to this enchanting art, and I am indebted to it for the mitigation and repression of feelings that would otherwise exhaust my shattered frame. You have witnessed

the severe struggles of remorse which at times agitate this afflicted heart, you have likewise seen the soothing and salutary effects of harmony. My Caroline's voice and harp have thus repeatedly lulled to repose the fever of a wounded spirit, the workings nearly of despair. A state of mind friendly to devotion, and no longer at war with itself, is usually the effect of her sweet and pathetic strains; it is then I think myself forgiven; it is then I seem to hear the gentle accents of my Matilda in concert with the heavenly tones; they whisper of eternal peace, and sensations of unutterable pleasure steal through every nerve.

'When such is the result, when peace and piety are the offspring of the act, you will not wonder at my visits to this melancholy ruin; soon as the shades of evening have spread their friendly covert, twice a-week we hasten hither from our cottage; a scene, similar to what you have been a spectator of tonight, takes place, and we retire to rest in the little rooms which we have rendered habitable in the dormitory. In the morning very early we quit the house of penitence and prayer; and such is the dread which the occasional glimmering of lights and the sounds of distant music have given birth to in the country, that none but our servant, who is faithful to the secret, dare approach near the place; we have consequently hitherto, save by yourself, remained undiscovered, and even unsuspected.

'Such, my friend, is the history of my crimes and sufferings, and such the causes of the phenomena you have beheld tonight,—but see, Courtenay, my lovely Caroline, she to whom under heaven I am indebted for any portion of tranquillity I yet enjoy, is approaching to meet us. I can discern her by the whiteness of her robes gliding down yon distant aisle.'

Caroline had become apprehensive for her brother, and had stolen from the dormitory with the view of checking a conversation which she was afraid would prove too affecting for his spirits. Edward beheld her, as she drew near, rather as a being from the regions of the blest, the messenger of peace and virtue, than as partaking of the frailties of humanity. If the beauties of her person had before interested him in her favour, her conduct towards the unhappy Clifford had given him the fullest conviction of the purity and goodness of her heart, of the strength and energy of her mind; and from this moment he determined, if possible, to secure an interest in a bosom so fraught with all that could exalt and decorate the lot of life.

He was now compelled, however, though greatly reluctant, to take leave of his friends for the night, and hasten to remove the extreme alarm into which his servants had been thrown by his unexpected detention. They had approached, as near as their fears would permit them, to the Abbey, for to enter its precincts was a deed they thought too daring for man, and had there exerted all their strength, though in vain, in repeatedly calling him by his name. It was therefore with a joy little short of madness they again beheld their master, who, as soon as these symptoms of rapture had subsided, had great difficulty in repressing their curiosity, which was on full stretch for information from another world.

It may here perhaps be necessary to add, that time, and the soothing attentions of his beloved sister, restored at length to perfect peace, and to the almost certain hope of pardon from the Deity, the hitherto agitated mind of Clifford.—I can also add, that time saw the union of Caroline and Edward, and that with them, at the hospitable mansion of the Courtenays, Clifford passed the remainder of his days.