

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

FROM AN UNPUBLISHED NOVEL

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'A fearful night!
There is no stir, nor walking in the streets;
And the complexion of the element
Is favored like the work we have in hand.' SHAKESPEARE¹.

THE rain poured in torrents from the darkened heavens, the thunder roared, the lightning flashed, and it almost seemed as if the fate of Gomorrah² hung over the city, so fearful was the strife, so endless the war of the angry elements. The deluged streets were perfectly deserted; apparently, no human being dared to venture forth. The hour of midnight had already sounded from the different clocks in the town, and all animate nature seemed awed into silence; when suddenly, by the occasional flashes, a carriage was seen to dash through the streets with a rapidity scarcely equalled by the lightning itself; it might have been the chariot of some Spirit of the Tempest³ flying from the pursuit of a victorious enemy, so recklessly did it rush through the thick darkness which enveloped all around.

It stopped before the door of a small, obscurely-situated house, when a tall figure, closely wrapped in a cloak, sprang from the box where, apparently regardless of all risk, he had sat enacting the part of coachman; and pulling the bell with a violence which threatened its destruction, he at length succeeded in rousing on of the inmates of the dwelling.

¹ From Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene iii, Lines 127-130. The next line goes on to describe the storm "Most bloody, fiery, and most terrible." "Element" refers to the sky, as the setting is a stormy night early in the play when the conspirators are plotting against Caesar and commenting on the portentous atmosphere (Shakespeare).

² Biblical city, one of the "five cities of the plain" South of the Dead Sea ("Sodom and Gomorrah"). In the book of Genesis, God destroys Sodom and Gomorrah with a rain of fire as a response to the cities' irredeemable corruption (Genesis 19).

³ Possibly a reference to the spirit Ariel from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Introduced in Act I, Scene ii with "Hast thou, spirit, / Perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee," Ariel uses his magical abilities to cause the great storm on which the conflict of the play is built (Shakespeare).

So strangely-timed a visit probably excited the apprehension of the individual thus imperatively summoned ; for instead of opening the door, a female voice was heard to demand from a window above, the name and purpose of the impatient visitor.

'In the name of all that is good, for the love of heaven, and the fear of hell, come down instantly, and do not stop to ask any more questions, or you may have the life of a fellow creature to answer for!' was the hurried reply.

The woman seemed less surprised than might have been expected from the impetuous manner of the strange visitor. She was evidently one accustomed to witness the agitated and anxious sympathy they generally betray who watch the agonizing throes of her whose appointed task it is, through groans and suffering, to bring into the world an accountable being. It was her business to usher into life these little heirs of immortality ; and she knew that the joys of parents are often purchased by some hours of anxiety to the one, and no slight meed⁴ of previous bodily suffering to the other ; she therefore did not much wonder at the excited manner of the individual who had called upon her at such an unseasonable hour ; but supposing it might be some case of peculiar urgency, for which he thus hurried her to the exertion of her skill, she hastily provided herself, as she best could, with protection against the storm which still raged with unabated fury, and ran down stairs without farther questioning.

But what was her horror on descending, to perceive that not only was his figure completely muffled in a cloak, but that his face was entirely concealed by a mask! She was about to rush back up stairs, when he seized her with a grasp which set all resistance at defiance, and proceeded to bandage her eyes with his handkerchief. As was to be expected, she struggled violently, and reiterated the question as to who he was, and what was his plea for such unwarrantable usage. He replied by drawing from beneath his cloak a pistol, which instantly silenced the frightened woman.

'Be still,' he said, 'and I pledge you my honor as a gentleman that you shall receive no injury; but give vent to one scream, call once for assistance, and you shall never utter sound again, until the last dread trump wakens the dead!⁵ It is for the good of others, and not for any harm to yourself, that I call upon you to submit to all that I shall see fit to do. You are wanted for one to whom your assistance is imperiously and immediately necessary, and you *must* accompany me, and do your duty without inquiry and without remonstrance. I repeat, any struggle for assistance or escape will be fatal to you. I never threaten twice!'

All this was said rapidly, and although with dreadful energy and emphasis, in a suppressed tone of voice, the mysterious stranger having closed the street door as soon as the female admitted him. He now again opened it, and beckoning the footman who, masked like his master, stood ready with his hand on the carriage door; the steps were instantly let down, and the woman, reflecting that not only might any objection on her part occasion instant death, but that it might also deprive a fellow creature of the aid which, from what had taken place, must have been considered imperatively necessary, she suffered herself to be thrust into the carriage, the door was immediately closed, and uttering the single word ' Beware !' the disguised stranger again mounted the coach-box,

⁴ Archaic and literary word meaning "a person's deserved share" ("meed").

⁵ Reference to Robert Blair's 1743 poem "the Grave," later illustrated by William Blake. Imagining the souls' entrance to eternity, the poem says that "when the dread trumpet sounds, the slumb'ring dust, / Not unattentive to the call, shall wake" (Blair, 750-751)

and urging the horses to their utmost speed, they were soon flying through the storm with the same mysterious swiftness as before.

More than once was the woman tempted to burst the door open, and by springing into the street, endeavor to make her escape; but the risk of being arrested, and the benevolent anxiety already alluded to, withheld her, and in almost breathless silence she kept her seat. Every precaution had been taken to prevent her discovering the course of the vehicle, for not trusting to the darkness of the night, the blinds were so securely fastened that it was impossible for her to let them down for an instant, and she could by no means catch a glimpse of the streets through which they passed. It seemed evident to her, however, that instead of pursuing a direct course, the carriage went more than once round the same square, and backward and forward through the same street: at last it stopped suddenly; the door was immediately opened; she was almost dragged out; the same strange hoarse voice muttered 'Come!' and without being allowed an instant to take breath, she was hurried through what seemed a long passage, and up a flight of stairs; a door evidently opened, she was led in, and it was again closed; then, and not till then, was the bandage withdrawn from her eyes.

Having regained the use of her sight, she began to look eagerly around her; but the stranger, without taking off his mask, drew her quickly to the bedside, and pointing to a female who lay thereon, bade her render her the necessary assistance. This unfortunate being was evidently in a state of extreme suffering. "The hour of Nature's sorrow"⁶ pressed heavily upon her, and she lay on her side and groaned piteously: no human being stood near to alleviate the pangs she endured; and as if to add as much as possible to their poignancy, a mask closely covered her face, and thus as it were threw back upon her the burthen⁷ of the long deep groans, which seemed to be forced upon her in spite of her evident efforts to restrain them.

The woman's first idea was, it appeared, to relieve her patient from this extraordinary and cruel encumbrance; but the man, as soon as he perceived her benevolent intention, grasped her hand, and muttered in a low but stern voice, 'It *must* not be removed.' She felt that no remonstrance would avail with the awful and mysterious being into whose power she had been strangely thrown, and proceeded to do what she could for the relief of the poor creature who lay prostrate before her, insensible apparently to every thing but the agony she endured.

Nature struggled long; it seemed as if the infant, thus about to be smuggled into life, dreaded to enter a world where so strange, so stern a reception awaited it; until at length the delicate frame of the future mother could no longer endure the mortal anguish, and she fainted.

Instinctively, and if not forgetful, at least heedless of the imperative commands of the stranger, the woman, without stopping to consider the risk she might incur by thus braving him, tore the mask from the face of the insensible sufferer, and disclosed to her astonished gaze one of the loveliest faces she had ever beheld..

'Woman!' exclaimed the man, in a tone of suppressed rage, 'did I not command you?'

⁶ Expression referring to childbirth (*The Eclectic Review*). The phrase originates from the biblical story of Adam and Eve, wherein Eve's punishment for original sin is that "in sorrow [women] shalt bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16 KJV).

⁷ Archaic form of "burden" which mostly fell out of usage by 1900 ("Burthen").

' Brute !' retorted she, 'would you destroy two at once ? — - would you murder both mother and child ? See, her strength has failed ; her pulse is gone; she may be dead in five minutes, if she is stifled by this horrid mask.'

' Dead !' muttered the man, in a low deep voice of uncontrollable anguish ; 'dead ! oh, no! any thing but that!'

The woman was too much engrossed by her needful care of her patient, to heed his words; and he, perceiving that she had succeeded in restoring the fainting form to animation, returned to the occupation which seemed to have shared his attention with the business of keeping a watchful eye upon the proceedings of the woman, viz., that of heaping log after log upon an already blazing fire in an adjoining room. This seemed the more extraordinary as the Spring was far advanced, and the tightly-closed doors and windows rendered the atmosphere of the room more than sufficiently warm without such unseasonable aid. The door between the two rooms opened just opposite the bed; and as he paced up and down between it and the fire-place, he at each turn added to the immense pile, spite of the woman's more than once venturing to suggest to him that the room was already oppressively hot.

At length the struggle ceased, and the voice of a living child greeted the newly-made mother's ear; but no muttered sound of thanksgiving breathed in joyful contrast to the feeble wail of the infant ; no beloved voice bade her ' remember no more her anguish, for joy that a man was born into the world.'⁸ The strange being did indeed spring forward as the woman announced to him (hoping thereby perhaps to soften the asperity of his apparently demoniacal temperament) that a noble boy, straight in limb and perfect in proportion, lived to bless his parents; but it was not to bestow a father's blessing on his first-born; it was not to imprint a father's kiss upon the miniature features: no, it was not the warm pressure of parental affection ; but rather the savage grasp of a fiend, with which he seized the new-born infant, even before the woman had time to cover the little quivering frame with a single garment, and with rapid strides advanced with it to the fire, which has been already alluded to. The unfortunate mother seemed partly aware of the man's horrid purpose, even before her attendant, engrossed with the necessary cares for her restoration, had perceived his approach, and in the most piteous accents besought him to replace the child beside her; a name evidently trembled on her lips; but even in that awful moment, caution prevailed, and no word which could betray him escaped her. She pleaded however in vain ; the mysterious wretch, for such he truly seemed, stopped indeed, apparently in spite of himself, at every new entreaty, but his purpose, as it appeared, remained unaltered, for he replied in the same hoarse voice: 'It must be done—you *know* it must be done!'

'Gracious Heaven! and by your hands!'

'Are they not fittest for such a deed ?' replied he, in a tone of intense bitterness.

' No! no! no!' almost screamed the miserable mother; 'it shall not be; Heaven and Earth alike forbid it. Oh! do you take it from him!' continued she, addressing the woman; 'you who have been rudely dragged to this house of guilt and misery ; forgive me,' (and here her eye turned to the masked figure, while as before a name trembled on her lips, though still she did not utter it,) ' I know it was for my sake : but even this woman, who has no reason to feel grateful to either of us, she I am sure will add her prayer to mine.'

⁸ From John 16:21, that "A woman when she is in travail hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world" (KJV).

'Take it then !' said the man, almost flinging the infant into the woman's arms, without giving her time to recover her powers of speech, benumbed as she was with horror, sufficiently to make any answer, 'and let it be done quickly.'

'What?' demanded she.

'Destroy it, and that instantly, in that fire; and let not a trace of it remain !'

A faint scream of deep agony broke from the enfeebled mother, while the woman exclaimed: 'Wretch! do you think any thing could tempt me to such a deed ?'

'Then give it to me!' He was about to snatch the infant from her arms, but the mother, turning on her a look of mingled despair and entreaty, besought her not to suffer him to take it from her. The woman, apparently struck with compassion at the piteous words, which indeed seemed the last the poor sufferer might ever utter, seeing that she now sank back upon her pillow, with but little sign of life, retreated before his approach, pressing her burden more tightly in her arms.

'Then,' said he, '*you* must do the deed; for I swear to you it *shall* be done, and that instantly !'

Without farther remonstrance, the woman now wrapped the little trembling, wailing infant in her cloak, which she threw hastily around her, and with an air of desperate resolution walked toward the door, saying:

'If I am to execute your horrid purpose, you must remain by the bedside of that poor victim of your's; she must not be left an instant in her present state; you must also suffer me to close the door, that the screams of the poor baby may not quite pierce its mother's ears; and give her this,' she added, pouring something from a vial ; 'it may dull the consciousness of her misery, at least for a while.'

The man acquiesced without making any answer; administered the draught ; and sternly folding his arms, took his place by the side of the unhappy sufferer, who, completely exhausted by the efforts she had just made, still lay' almost insensible, only giving evidence of life by the labored heaving of the snow-white chest, which had been completely bared to prevent her from sinking under the excessive heat; and an intense stare, which showed but too plainly that consciousness had survived her strength.

Almost immediately after the woman had shut the door, the screams of the infant became fearfully audible ; the man struck his closed fist rudely against his breast, as if to lay prostrate any feeling of compassion that might lurk there ; and planting his foot firmly on the floor, seemed determined to continue resolutely insensible to the pleadings of nature.

After a momentary struggle, he turned his eye toward the female, and perceiving that she was now sinking into a stupor, to which the charitable draught had probably contributed as much as her previous exhaustion, he drew a long breath, and muttering ' It is well !' advanced some steps toward the door; but remembering the woman's charge, he returned to the bed-side. By this time, the cries became much fainter; a few minutes more, and they ceased entirely; and shortly after, the woman entered the room, her cloak closely wrapped around her, as if ready to depart.

The man approached her. 'Is all over ?' muttered he.

' Yes,' she replied, in the same low tone, but casting a look of extreme horror at him; ' the poor innocent shall never trouble you again.' And then, as if to cut short any farther communication with such a wretch, she proceeded to give directions as to the farther treatment of her patient; and was hurrying from the room, when the man stepped before her and put into her hands a purse filled with gold-pieces. The woman instantly dashed it to the floor, and in the most indignant tone exclaimed : 'Do you think I will

receive from you the price of blood ? 'Take it back, monster that you are ! and may your money perish with you !'

'As you like,' he coldly replied, but not without shuddering slightly at the woman's words: '*this* however you must submit to ;' and he again drew forth a handkerchief and advanced toward her. She shrank from his touch, but made no resistance, and in silence permitted him to blind-fold her as before. He then led her down the same flight of stairs, and through the same passage ; repeatedly charging her to beware how she made any effort to discover either his name or the house to which she had been brought, which must, he warned her, bring upon her immediate destruction.

The house-door closed upon them, the carriage-door opened, she was assisted in, and carried home by the same apparently unnecessarily circuitous route ; the strange being helped her out; and not until her own door closed upon them, did he remove the bandage from her eyes. This done, he repeated his charge in still more emphatic words, and vanished from her sight; and here we will leave the bewildered woman to recover as she best may her scattered senses.

By this time the storm had passed away; the rays of early morning were beginning to streak the east; and Nature, as if refreshed rather than wearied by the recent conflict in which she had been engaged, was fast putting off the dull weeds of night, to array herself in the gorgeous robes of a southern spring day.

Ah! could the storms which rage in the human bosom be as easily dispelled ; could the dark passions which devastate the heart of man thus retreat before the sunshine of peace, this world would not be the scene of misery it now is. The fair gardens which decorate the face of our mother [sic] Earth may for awhile be shorn of their beauty by the raging of the pitiless storm ; but they will bloom again, and with renovated vigor and added beauty, when the refreshing alternations of dew and sunshine restore them to life. Alas ! is it thus with that source and spring of evil, the human heart ? Can peace again take up its abode there, when once it has been rudely thrust out by these monopolizing guests which rage with more wildness than any outward storm of the elements ? Alas, no! We have been told, and every day's experience shows us, that 'with *man* this is impossible.'⁹

*IF our readers would learn somewhat more of the work from which this 'Night of Terror' is taken, and something further of the ultimate bearing of the scene itself, they are respectfully referred to the 'Editor's Table' of the present number.

ED. KNICKERBOCKER¹⁰



⁹ From Mark 10:27 and Matthew 19:26 "But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (KJV). Note that unoriginal emphasis is given to the word "man," perhaps alluding to the possibility that, while recovery is impossible for man, it may be possible for woman, or, in the larger sense, emphasizing the possibility of recovery through divine intervention.

¹⁰ Refers to the "Editor's Table" section of the issue, wherein the title of the manuscript is revealed to be *The Letter, or Two Birthdays*. The editors relate that the unnamed author claims that the events of the story "actually took place in the last century" and that a New York physician corroborates the claim that a "similar scene . . . occurred many years ago in his metropolitan practice." A database search of American periodicals and newspapers of the time has not yet produced sufficient evidence to verify these stories, but neither can they be ruled out. (*cont.*)

EDITOR'S NOTE

Taken from the apparently never-published manuscript of *The Letter, or Two Birthdays*, the 1844 excerpt “A Night of Terror” follows many conventions of gothic literature—a stormy night heralding the arrival of a masked stranger, a feeling of dread permeating the narrative, and an ultimate question of the extent of human darkness. During a period when the likes of Dickens’s *Bleak House* and Reynolds’s *The Mysteries of London* were bringing the Gothic out of the remote castle and into the corrupt metropolis, “A Night of Terror” was well-situated to become a part of the rising “Urban Gothic” (Mighall). Yet the anxieties underlying the piece seem to go beyond the “usual” concerns with class and isolation, perhaps to an even deeper place within the human psyche, as the focal point of the piece, and its most disturbing aspect, is the traumatic birth and immediate murder of an innocent baby. The horror of the atrocity lies not just in the idea of a newborn baby, the paragon of innocence, becoming a victim so soon upon entering the world, but also in the depiction of the terrifying circumstance of his birth, as well as in the perceived incongruity of a female perpetrator who is meant to foster rather than extinguish life.

Modern readers may have particular interest in the tensions surrounding feminine identity in the piece, specifically in the treatment of childbirth and in the inclusion of a female hero presented as a figure of both ultimate benevolence and ultimate destruction. Childbirth has often been a subject of literary criticism, from Freud’s ideas about the uncanniness of female sexuality, to Foucault’s thoughts on the female body as a means for the quite literal production of labor. In “A Night of Terror,” the mother’s “hour of Nature’s sorrow” is presented as agonizing and near-unendurable, exemplifying Freud’s perception that a woman’s ability to create life is almost supernatural, beyond the understanding of men and horrifying on its own. Likewise the efforts of the masked man to control the delivery and ultimate fate of the child may be read from a Foucauldian perspective as a biopolitical power struggle between the genders, culminating in the male attempt to control the female reproductive system. The unfortunate mother is not the only woman in the piece however, and readers will likely also find significance in the gendered portrayal of the nurse maid. The nurse’s openness and “benevolent intention” are alluded to repeatedly in the piece, and are juxtaposed with the coldness and distance of the masked man, who is constantly described in terms of his obscurity. Yet contrary to our expectation, the atrocity is not ultimately committed by the impassive masculine figure, but rather by the benevolent delivery nurse, the last person one would expect to take the life of a child.

The perversity of a delivery nurse killing an infant is turned on its head however, when, upon referring to the “Editor’s Table” mentioned in the editor’s note attached to the piece, we learn that the “unpublished manuscript” from which the excerpt is taken

(cont.) The ending of the manuscript is included in “The Editor’s Table” as well, and we learn that the delivery nurse, named Mrs. Jedby, actually smuggled the newborn to safety, as she reveals to the unfortunate mother, named Mary, years later. The name of the author is never mentioned, and despite the *Knickerbocker* editors’ claim that the piece would surely “create a sensation and *command* success,” a search of literary and periodical databases has not yielded any evidence that the manuscript was ever published (“Review 2”).

concludes much differently. Included in the “Editor’s Table” are a few paragraphs taken from the end of story, where the unfortunate mother eventually learns that the nurse did not kill the child after all, but instead smuggled him out in her clothes. This revelation completely changes the emotional impact of the story, and will likely cause most readers to breathe a sigh of relief, but it seems significant that the ending would need to be included with the excerpt in the first place. Might the editors have worried that readers would be too offended by the implication of actual infanticide? May those same worries have in part prevented *The Letter, or Two Birthdays* from ever being published? It is difficult to confirm or deny such speculation given the lack of traces of the original manuscript outside of *The Knickerbocker*, but that we can even ask such questions demonstrates that the piece, though mostly lost to history, is impactful on a deeply psychological level, even today.

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