

A GHOSTLY FESTIVAL.

I.

IN a neat but picturesque room of a small house—it was little more than a cottage—on the skirts of the New Forest, sat two persons. The one was a handsome man, still young, but bearing on his face the traces of sorrow and care, and an air of deep, but not ungraceful, melancholy. On his knees lay an open letter, which had evidently produced a painful impression on his mind; for his eyes, raised to the ceiling, had a look of heavy trouble. By his side, on a chair drawn closely up to his, was a lovely woman, whose charms were enhanced rather than diminished by a mien which approached, without reaching, the matronly. She had laid her hand gently and fondly on his shoulder; and she gazed on him with evident uneasiness.

"Urban dear," she said, after a long pause, "come to yourself! Surely there is nothing in this letter which can tend to increase your sorrow."

"Nothing!" exclaimed the man, with much bitterness, and without lowering his eyes to the fond being nestling by his side. "Nothing! Cannot you divine what the world will say? Have I not been accused of the murder of my cousin Emeric, for the purpose of clearing off one obstacle in the way of my accession to the Ashford title and estates? And now the old steward writes to me that Sir Randolph's only son is dead! What will the world say? I ask. Malice and foul scandal will declare that I have contrived to get rid of the boy in order to remove the last bar to my inheritance on my cousin's death. When I assert my innocence, shall I be believed any more than I was when Emeric was so foully assassinated? No! the damning stigma will cling more closely to me still. What will avail that seclusion to which I have doomed myself? Will my retirement from the accursed world of calumny and falsehood afford me any justification? No! the lying hounds will point the finger of scorn at me more surely than ever! They will howl against Urban Ashford, the murderer, with still louder denunciation; and you can ask how this letter adds to the bitterness of my lot, you—you Muriel, my wife!"

"I am sorry to have distressed you, Urban," said Muriel Ashford, fondly, as she drew away her chair, and rose. "I only thought to comfort you. But I was wrong—I was foolish—forgive me!"

"Forgive me! Muriel!" said the husband, springing up. "I did not wish to speak harshly to you—you, who have taken the miserable misanthrope to be your husband—you, who have loved him so affectionately—you, who have so often chased the dark cloud from his mind, as David soothed the soul of Saul." And he took her in his arms and embraced her fondly. Then, turning away, he exclaimed, bitterly, "Perish the inheritance of Ashford! Perish the very name!"

As he spoke a little girl, of about nine years of age, entered the room with an old, curiously-bound volume in her hand. She was a strange-looking child, but very beautiful, with that air of fresh innocence on her face,

and that sweet smile on her lips! There was a peculiarly wild look about her large dark grey eyes, and a general aspect of weirdness about her whole person, which was heightened by the long fair hair that swept down her back and floated lightly in the air as she ran into the room.

"Why, mamma, you have been crying," said the child, checking her first impulse. Muriel Ashford shook her head, smiling. "And you, too, papa, are looking so strangely—why did you say 'Perish Ashford,' when it is our name?" Urban did not answer. "'Tis very odd," continued the little girl, dreamily, "very curious."

"What is curious, Edna?" said her father.

"Why! I was in your little study, papa; and somehow—I don't know how it was, I was all alone in the room—a hand I could not see seemed to lead me to one shelf, where was this old volume. I took it down and opened it. It was all about our family. So I read with curiosity; and presently I found these strange lines." The child placed the book open on a table, and read with peculiar emphasis:

If Ashford stain proud Ashford's name,
Must Ashford sit in Judgment Hall,
From Ashford dead the doom of shame
On Ashford dead shall surely fall?

"What does it all mean, papa? You know I am a big girl now; and I can understand most things; but I can't understand this."

Urban Ashford started, as if some long forgotten dream had suddenly flashed over his brain.

"It is only an old family song," he said. "It means nothing; it is mere nonsense—a thing to laugh at!"

"No, papa, that cannot be," was Edna's decided reply. "It has to do with our name; and it is printed in a book."

The father smiled.

"I might have told you jestingly, Edna, that all which is printed in a book is not worth heeding. But I will explain to you that this strange distich, which had long since gone out of my mind, refers to a family legend of the Ashfords. It is said that when any one of the family has misbehaved himself, the dead ancestors all appear in the great hall of the mansion on some holy eve, and acquit or condemn the person accused of misdeed; and thus the place of meeting is generally called the Judgment Hall. But, of course, my dear child, you know that this is but a foolish fable—an old tale, not fit even to frighten children. There are no such things as ghosts."

"Why do you say so, papa?" cried the child, with an air of the most solemn conviction. "I see them very often. They come round my bed at night and look at me so pleasantly and sing me the sweetest lullabies. But they don't frighten me. They always seem to me like kind, good friends."

The father and mother darted glances of anxiety at one another. But neither of them ventured to controvert the strange assertion of their child.

Edna returned again to the book, and seemed to be absorbed in the legend.