

The Skeleton in the Well.

It was during the year 1851, in the thriving little town of Argentiere, near the foot of the Cevennes Mountains in France. The day was charming. Many of the inhabitants were traversing the highways, enjoying the agreeable weather. Among the number there was a tall young man, apparently not more than twenty-five years of age. In his right hand he carried a cane, and in his left a small carpet bag. His gait was quick, and from his expression he appeared to be bent on some important errand. In this manner he went along, occasionally glancing around to view the surrounding objects. He had hardly gone a quarter of a mile, when he came to a street which was in the suburbs of the town. He turned and proceeded up this. Presently, after walking but a short distance, he arrived at an inn. Here he hesitated, and after viewing the exterior, he muttered to himself the following words:

“It is very strange that this is the first inn I have seen throughout my route. However, I will put up here.”

So saying he entered the inn, and having registered his name was shown to a room. After ordering his dinner, he went into his apartment to rest himself. His order was immediately responded to, and after eating he prepared to retire, intending to take a long sleep, so that early the next morning he might visit the various merchants of the town. He accordingly went to bed, and was soon asleep. While thus sleeping he had a dream that made a very strong impression upon him.

“I thought that I had arrived at the same town, but in the middle of the evening, which was really the case; that I had put up at the same inn, and gone as a stranger would do, to see whatever was worthy of observation in the place. I walked down the main street into another street, apparently leading into the country. I had gone no great distance when I came to a church, which I stopped to examine. After satisfying my curiosity, I went forward to a by-path which branched off from the main street. Obeying an impulse which I could neither account for nor control, I struck into this path, though winding, rough, and unfrequented, and presently reached a miserable cottage, in front of which was a garden covered with weeds. I had no great difficulty in getting into the garden, for the hedge had several wide gaps in it. I approached an old well that was there, solitary and gloomy, in a distant corner, and looking down into it, beheld, without any possibility of a mistake, a corpse, which had been stabbed in several places. I counted the deep wounds and wide gashes. There were six.”

At this moment he awoke, with his hair on end, trembling in every limb, and cold drops of perspiration bedewing his forehead—awoke to find himself comfortably in bed, his carpet bag lying near him, and the morning sun beaming through his curtains. What a difference! He sprang from his bed, dressed himself, and as it was early, sought an appetite for breakfast by a morning walk. He went accordingly into the street, and strolled along. The farther he went the stronger became the confused recollection of the objects that presented themselves to his view.

“It is a very strange,” said he to himself, “I have never been in this place before, and I could swear that I have seen this house and the next, and that other on the left.”

On he went, till he came to a corner of a street crossing the one down which he had come. Before long he arrived at the church with the architectural features that had attracted his notice in his dream; and then the highroad along which he had pursued his way, coming at length to the same by-path that had presented itself to his imagination a few hours before; there was no possibility of doubt or mistake. Every tree and every turn was familiar to him. He hurried forward, no longer doubting that the next moment would bring him to the cottage—and it really did. In all its exterior appearances it corresponded with what he had seen in his dream. Who then could wonder that he determined to ascertain whether the coincidence would hold good in every point. He entered the garden and went directly to the spot where he had seen the well, but here the resemblance failed; there was none. He looked in every direction, examined the whole garden, and even went round the cottage, which seemed to be inhabited; but no where could he find any signs of a well. He then hastened back to the inn, in a state of excitement hard to describe. He could not make up his mind to allow such extraordinary coincidences to pass unnoticed. But how was he to obtain a clue to the awful mystery? He went to the landlord, and asked him directly to whom the cottage belonged that was on the by road near to him.

“I wonder, sir,” said the landlord, “what causes you to take such particular notice of that wretched little hovel? It is inhabited by an old man and his wife, who have the character of being very unsocial. They scarcely ever leave the house, see nobody, and nobody goes to see them. Of late their very existence appears to have been forgotten, and I believe you are the first who, for years, has turned your steps to the lonely spot.”

These details, instead of satisfying his curiosity, only roused it the more. Breakfast was served, but he could eat none; and he felt that if he presented himself to the merchants in such a state of excitement, they might think him mad. He walked up and down the room, and looked out of the window, endeavoring to interest himself in a quarrel between two men in the street. But the garden and cottage preoccupied his mind, and at last, snatching up his hat, he made his way to the street. Hastening to the nearest magistrate, he related the whole circumstance.

“It is very strange,” said the officer, “and after what has happened, I don’t think it would be right to leave the matter without further investigation. I will place two of the police at your command; you can then go once more to the hovel, and search every part of it. You may, perhaps make some important discovery.”

He allowed but a few minutes to elapse before he was on his way, accompanied by the two officers. After knocking at the door and waiting for some time, the old man opened the door. He received them somewhat uncivilly, but showed no mark of suspicion when they told him they wished to search the house.

“Very well, as soon and as fast as you please,” was the reply.

“Have you a well here?”

“No, sir; we are obliged to get our water from a spring about a quarter of a mile distant.”

They searched the house, but discovered nothing of any consequence. The old man gazed upon them with a vacant look, as if he could not understand why they were intruding on his property. Finally they forsook the cottage without finding anything to corroborate their suspicions. They however resolved to inspect the garden. By this time a number of persons had collected together outside, having been drawn to the spot by the sight of a stranger with two policemen. They were asked if they knew of well in those parts. They replied they did not; the idea seemed to perplex them. At length an old woman came forward leaning on a crutch.

“A well?” said she, “is it a well you are looking for? That has been gone this thirty years. I remember it as if it were yesterday, how I used to throw stones into it, just to hear the splash in the water.”

“Do you remember where that well used to be?” asked the gentleman.

“As near as I can recollect,” said the woman, “it is on the very spot where you now stand.”

He suddenly started, as if he had trodden upon a serpent. They at once commenced digging upon the ground. At about twenty inches deep they came to a layer of bricks, which being broken up revealed some rotten boards. These were easily removed, when they beheld the mouth of the well.

“I was quite certain that was the spot,” said the old woman. “What a fool you were to stop it up, and then to travel so far for water.”

A sounding line furnished with hooks was let down into the well; the crowd hard pressing around them, breathless, bending over the black and foetid hole, the secrets of which seemed hidden in impenetrable obscurity. This was repeated several times, without any result. At length, penetrating below the mud, the hook caught in something of considerable weight, and after much time and effort they succeeded in raising it from the obscure hole. It was an old chest. Within it they found, what they were sure they would find, and which filled the spectators with horror—the remains of a human body. The police officers now rushed into the house and secured the old man. The wife could not at first be found; but after a fatiguing search, she was discovered beneath a pile of wood, being much bruised by the heavy logs above her. By this time nearly the whole population of the town had gathered around the spot.

The old couple were brought before the proper authorities and separately examined. The man persisted in his denial most obstinately, but his wife at once confessed that she and her husband, a long time ago, had murdered a peddler who possessed a large sum of money. He had passed the night at their house, and they, taking advantage of the heavy sleep that encumbered him, had strangled him, after which they had placed his body in a chest. The chest was then thrown into the well, and the well stopped up. The two criminals had reasons to believe themselves free from detection, as there were no witnesses of the crime, and its traces had been carefully concealed. Nevertheless they had not been able to hush the voice of conscience. They fled from their acquaintances; they were frightened at the slightest noise, and silence thrilled them with fear. They had often thought of feeling to some distant land; but some unknown influence kept them

near the remains of their victim. Terrified at the disclosures of his wife, the old man at length made a similar confession, and six weeks after the guilty couple expired on the scaffold.

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