

The Murder Hole

Catherine Sinclair

"Ah, frantic Fear!
I see, I see thee near;
I know thy hurried step, thy haggard eye!
Like thee I start, like thee disordered fly!"

Collins

In a remote district of country belonging to Lord Cassilis, between Ayrshire and Galloway, about three hundred years ago, a moor of apparently boundless extent stretched several miles along the road, and wearied the eye of the traveller by the sameness and desolation of its appearance: not a tree varied the prospect—not a shrub enlivened the eye by its freshness—not a native flower bloomed to adorn this ungenial soil. One "lonesome desert" reached the horizon on every side, with nothing to mark that any mortal had ever visited the scene before, except a few rude huts that were scattered near its centre; and a road, or rather pathway, for those whom business or necessity obliged to pass in that direction. At length, deserted as this wild region had always been, it became still more gloomy. Strange rumours arose that the path of unwearied travellers had been beset on this "blasted heath," and that treachery and murder had intercepted the solitary stranger as he traversed its dreary extent. When several persons, who were known to have passed that way, mysteriously disappeared, the inquiries of their relatives led to a strict and anxious investigation; but though the officers of justice were sent to scour the country, and examine the inhabitants, not a trace could be obtained of the persons in question, nor of any place of concealment which could be a refuge for the lawless or desperate to horde in. Yet as inquiry became stricter, and the disappearance of individuals more frequent, the simple inhabitants of the neighbouring hamlet were agitated by the most fearful apprehensions. Some declared that the death-like stillness of the night was often interrupted by sudden and preternatural cries of more than mortal anguish, which seemed to arise in the distance; and a shepherd one evening, who had lost his way on the moor, declared he had approached three mysterious figures, who seemed struggling against each other with supernatural energy, till at length one of them, with a frightful scream,

suddenly sunk into the earth.

Gradually the inhabitants deserted their dwellings on the heath, and settled in distant quarters, till at length but one of the cottages continued to be inhabited by an old woman and her two sons, who loudly lamented that poverty chained them to this solitary and mysterious spot. Travellers who frequented this road now generally did so in groups to protect each other; and if night overtook them, they usually stopped at the humble cottage of the old woman and her sons, where cleanliness compensated for the want of luxury, and where, over a blazing fire of peat, the bolder spirits smiled at the imaginary dangers of the road, and the more timid trembled as they listened to the tales of terror and affright with which their hosts entertained them.

One gloomy and tempestuous night in November, a pedlar-boy hastily traversed the moor. Terrified to find himself involved in darkness amidst its boundless wastes, a thousand frightful traditions, connected with this dreary scene, darted across his mind: every blast, as it swept in hollow gusts over the heath, seemed to teem with the sighs of departed spirits; and the birds, as they winged their way above his head, appeared, with loud and shrill cries, to warn him of approaching danger. The whistle, with which he usually beguiled his weary pilgrimage, died away into silence, and he groped along with trembling and uncertain steps, which sounded too loudly in his ears. The promise of Scripture occurred to his memory, and revived his courage: "I will be unto thee as a rock in the desert, and as a hiding-place in the storm." "Surely," thought he, "though alone, I am not forsaken;" and a prayer for assistance hovered, on his lips.

A light now glimmered in the distance which would lead him, he conjectured, to the cottage of the old woman; and towards that he eagerly bent his way, remembering, as he hastened along, that when he had visited it the year before, it was in company of a large party of travellers, who had beguiled the evening with those tales of mystery which had so lately filled his brain with images of terror. He recollected, too, how anxiously the old woman and her sons had endeavoured to detain him when the other travellers were departing; and now, therefore, he confidently anticipated a cordial and cheering reception. His first call for admission obtained no visible marks of attention, but instantly the greatest noise and confusion prevailed within the cottage. "They think it is one of the supernatural visitants of whom the old lady talks so much," thought the boy, approaching a

window, where the light within showed him all the inhabitants at their several occupations; the old woman was hastily scrubbing the stone floor, and strewing it thickly with sand, while her two sons seemed, with equal haste, to be thrusting something large and heavy into an immense chest, which they carefully locked.

The boy, in a frolicsome mood, thoughtlessly tapped at the window, when they all instantly started up with consternation so strongly depicted on their countenances, that he shrank back involuntarily with an undefined feeling of apprehension; but before he had time to reflect a moment longer, one of the men suddenly darted out at the door, and seizing the boy roughly by the shoulder, dragged him violently into the cottage.

"I am not what you take me for," said the boy, attempting to laugh; "but only the poor pedlar who visited you last year."

"Are you alone?" inquired the old woman, in a harsh, deep tone, which made his heart thrill with apprehension.

"Yes," said the boy, "I am alone here; and alas!" he added with a burst of uncontrollable feeling, "I am alone in the wide world also ! Not a person exists who would assist me in distress, or shed a single tear if I died this very night."

"Then you are welcome!" said one of the men with a sneer, while he cast a glance of peculiar expression at the other inhabitants of the cottage.

It was with a shiver of apprehension, rather than of cold, that the boy drew towards the fire, and the looks which the old woman and her sons exchanged made him wish that he had preferred the shelter of any one of the roofless cottages which were scattered near, rather than thrust himself among persons of such dubious aspect. Dreadful surmises flitted across his brain; and terrors which he could neither combat nor examine imperceptibly stole into his mind; but alone, and beyond the reach of assistance, he resolved to smother his suspicions, or at least not increase the danger by revealing them. The room to which he retired for the night had a confused and desolate aspect: the curtains seemed to have been violently torn down from the bed, and still hung in tatters around it; the table seemed to have been broken by some violent concussion, and the fragments of various pieces of furniture lay scattered upon the floor. The boy begged that a light might burn in his apartment till he was asleep, and anxiously examined the

fastenings of the door; but they seemed to have been wrenched asunder on a former occasion, and were still left rusty and broken.

It was long ere the pedlar attempted to compose his agitated nerves to rest, but at length his senses began to "steep themselves in forgetfulness," though his imagination remained painfully active, and presented new scenes of terror to his mind, with all the vividness of reality. He fancied himself again wandering on the heath, which appeared to be peopled with spectres, who all beckoned to him not to enter the cottage, and as he approached it, they vanished with a hollow and despairing cry. The scene then changed, and he found himself again seated by the fire, where the countenances of the men scowled upon him with the most terrifying malignity, and he thought the old woman suddenly seized him by the arms, and pinioned them to his side.

Suddenly the boy was startled from these agitated slumbers, by what sounded to him like a cry of distress; he was broad awake in a moment, and sat up in bed; but the noise was not repeated, and he endeavoured to persuade himself it had only been a continuation of the fearful images which had disturbed his rest, when, on glancing at the door, he observed underneath it a broad red stream of blood silently stealing its course along the floor. Frantic with alarm, it was but the work of a moment to spring from his bed, and rush to the door, through a chink of which, his eye nearly dimmed with affright, he could watch unsuspected whatever might be done in the adjoining room.

His fear vanished instantly when he perceived that it was only a goat that they had been slaughtering; and he was about to steal into his bed again, ashamed of his groundless apprehensions, when his ear was arrested by a conversation which transfixed him aghast with terror to the spot.

"This is an easier job than you had yesterday," said the man who held the goat. "I wish all the throats we've cut were as easily and quietly done. Did you ever hear such a noise as the old gentleman made last night? It was well we had no neighbours within a dozen miles, or they must have heard his cries for help and mercy."

"Don't speak of it," replied the other; "I was never fond of bloodshed."

"Ha! ha! " said the other, with a sneer, "you say so, do you?"

"I do," answered the first, gloomily; "the Murder Hole is the thing for me - that tells no tales; a single scuffle,— a single plunge,—and the fellow's dead and buried to your hand in a moment. I would defy all the officers in Christendom to discover any mischief there.

"Ay, Nature did us a good turn when she contrived such a place as that. Who that saw a hole in the heath, filled with clear water, and so small that the long grass meets over the top of it, would suppose that the depth is unfathomable, and that it conceals more than forty people, who have met their deaths there? It sucks them in like a leech!"

"How do you mean to despatch the lad in the next room?" asked the old woman in an undertone. The elder son made her a sign to be silent, and pointed towards the door where their trembling auditor was concealed; while the other, with an expression of brutal ferocity, passed his bloody knife across his throat.

The pedlar boy possessed a bold and daring spirit, which was now roused to desperation; but in any open resistance the odds were so completely against him that flight seemed his best resource. He gently stole to the window, and having forced back the rusty bolt by which the casement had been fastened, he let himself down without noise or difficulty. "This betokens good," thought he, pausing an instant, in dreadful hesitation what direction to take. This momentary deliberation was fearfully interrupted by the hoarse voice of the men calling aloud, "*The boy has fled—Let loose the bloodhound!*" These words sunk like a death-knell on his heart, for escape appeared now impossible, and his nerves seemed to melt away like wax in a furnace. "Shall I perish without a struggle?" thought he, rousing himself to exertion, and, helpless and terrified as a hare, pursued by its ruthless hunters, he fled across the heath. Soon the baying of the bloodhound broke the stillness of the night, and the voice of its masters sounded through the moor, as they endeavoured to accelerate its speed. Panting and breathless, the boy pursued his hopeless career, but every moment his pursuers seemed to gain upon his failing steps. The hound was unimpeded by the darkness which was to him so impenetrable, and its noise rung louder and deeper on his ear, while the lanterns which were carried by the men gleamed near and distinct upon his vision.

At his fullest speed the terrified boy fell with violence over a heap of stones, and having nothing on but his shirt, he was severely cut in every limb. With one

wild cry to Heaven for assistance, he continued prostrate on the earth, bleeding and nearly insensible. The hoarse voices of the men, and the still louder baying of the dog, were now so near, that instant destruction seemed inevitable; already he felt himself in their fangs, and the bloody knife of the assassin appeared to gleam before his eyes. Despair renewed his energy, and once more, in an agony of affright that seemed verging towards madness, he rushed forward so rapidly that terror seemed to have given wings to his feet. A loud cry near the spot he had left arose in his ears without suspending his flight. The hound had stopped at the place where the pedlar's wounds bled so profusely, and deeming the chase now over, it lay down there, and could not be induced to proceed. In vain the men beat it with frantic violence, and cried again to put the hound on the scent,— the sight of blood satisfied the animal that its work was done, and it obstinately resisted every inducement to pursue the same scent a second time.

The pedlar boy in the meantime paused not in his flight till morning dawned; and still as he fled, the noise of steps seemed to pursue him, and the cry of his would-be assassins sounded in the distance. He at length reached a village, and spread instant alarm throughout the neighbourhood; the inhabitants were aroused with one accord into a tumult of indignation - several of them had lost sons, brothers, or friends on the heath, and all united in proceeding immediately to seize the old woman and her sons, who were nearly torn to pieces in their furious wrath. Three gibbets were at once raised on the moor, and the wretched culprits confessed before their execution to the destruction of nearly fifty victims in the Murder Hole, which they pointed out, and near which they suffered the penalty of their crimes. The bones of several murdered persons were with difficulty brought up from the abyss into which they had been thrust; but so narrow is the aperture, and so extraordinary the depth, that all who see it are inclined to coincide in the tradition of the country people, that it is unfathomable.

The scene of these events still continues nearly as it was three hundred years ago: the remains of the old cottage, with its blackened walls (haunted, of course, by a thousand evil spirits), and the extensive moor, on which a more modern inn (if it can be dignified with such an epithet) resembles its predecessor in everything but the character of its inhabitants. The landlord is deformed, but possesses extraordinary genius; he has himself manufactured a violin, on which he plays with untaught skill,— and if any discord be heard in the house, or any murder

committed in it, this is his only instrument. His daughter (who has never travelled beyond the heath); has inherited her father's talent, and learned all his tales of terror and superstition, which she relates with infinite spirit; but when you are led by her across the heath to drop a stone into that deep and narrow gulf to which our story relates,—when you stand on its slippery edge, and, parting the long grass with which it is covered, gaze into its mysterious depths, - when she describes, with all the animation of an eye-witness, the struggle of the victims clutching the grass as a last hope of preservation, and trying to drag in their assassin as an expiring effort of vengeance,—when you are told that for three hundred years the clear waters in this diamond of the desert have remained untasted by mortal lips, and that the solitary traveller is still pursued at night by the howling of the bloodhound,—it is then only that it is possible fully to appreciate the terrors of "The Murder Hole."