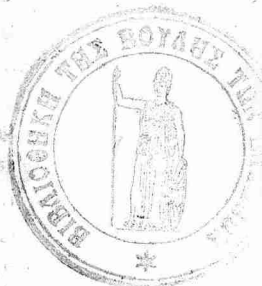


THE BELLS OF ABERFANE.

« *I'll cross it though it blast me!* »



I NEVER yet met with a person of education who, in the beginning of a conversation, would admit that he or she believed in the possibility of the spirits of the dead returning in a visible form to the abode of their fellow mortals; or, in the common phrase, believed in the existence of ghosts; — but it never occurred to me to be present at any discussion on the subject, of a quarter of an hour's duration, in the course of which some one did not remember to observe that « Sir Walter Scott certainly did admit this article of the vulgar creed; » and often, very often more than one of the stoutest philosophers of the party, have ended by allowing and apparently being glad to allow, that « As Scott by some of his letters on Demonology had shewn that he was fully aware of the many ways in which the imagination may be induced to mislead the judgement, and as he had given as many proofs of acuteness of discernment as of presence of mind in investigating such startling, if not supernatural, appearances, as he had either met with or heard of; — moreover, as, after all he had written, the impression left on the minds of most of his readers is that Scott himself seemed to *feel* if not to *say* that such things might be; perhaps no less gifted mortal is likely to arrive at any conclusion

“ nearer the truth than the old corollary — that what
 “ is supernatural is not necessarily impossible.

I cannot be sure that my readers will, from any instances which I can adduce, suffer damage in what I dare say they all call the unshaken firmness of their disbelief in such silly things as ghost-stories; but the following is a true, - strictly true, history. It is not only what is denominated perfectly well authenticated: - unluckily for the subsequent strength of my nerves, I suffered all its horror in *my own person*.

In the year - hem! - I will not say how long ago, - but when I was about eighteen, it pleased heaven, I suppose in order to keep me out of mischief, to put it into the head of a friend of my mother's to ask for the pleasure of my society during some months of the winter which she had determined to pass at the principal mansion of her family in a remote part of North Wales, rather than in the more cheerful spot in which she had established herself at the marriage of her son; that epoch at which many a dowager retreats, with what dignity she may, from the splendour and cares of perhaps half a dozen establishments, to the diminished glories of a comfortable jointure, and the satisfaction of fixing her abode where it may suit her own taste, instead of continuing to live in that which was chosen by the probably no taste at all of her husband's forefathers.

The sociable disposition of M.^{rs} Ap Rhys, who had for some years had, and verily enjoyed, uncontrolled intercourse with a very gay neighbourhood, led her to consider that she made a real sacrifice to a sense of duty, and to her affection for her son, (who by the bye had,

some few years before, more than half offended her by condescending to accept a baronetcy) in complying with his request, on the death of his young wife, that she would, for a time at least, return to Aberfane to console him in his affliction, and to assist awhile in superintending the tolerably well filled nursery which had been left him.

In truth, to a gay and not young widow, winters in prospect are perhaps rather too precarious a stock of happiness to be lightly thrown away on a sorrowing son and motherless grand children. By the time M.^{rs} Ap Rhys had made her decision, had made also about fifty visits in deep mourning to her various friends that her pious appropriation of this precious season might be fully known and duly appreciated, had sent for me, and had transported herself and her « excellent young friend » to Aberfane, Sir Robert Ap Rhys had begun to console himself. He was out hunting when we reached the outer gates, and while his mother was directing her coachman to drive slowly up to the house that the news of her approach might not reach « poor Ap Rhys too suddenly, and while she was really working up her sympathies into something very much like a fit of hysterics, « poor Ap Rhys » and a large party, in high spirits and full of the excitement of a capital day's sport, galloped past the carriage.

My friend was shocked, but said nothing: she and her son met in all the decorum of woe in the great drawing room when they had had time to settle their faces; and she contrived in the course of the first evening to intimate to him that, since she had arrived to share his griefs, perhaps his out of door amusements might as well be suspended a little longer.

Sir Robert was a dutiful son. He accordingly did not hunt during the next day, or the next week; but his mother soon suspecting that, if he did not, it was because he had found more attractive metal in her « excellent young friend, » and by no means liking the possibility of her son's doing so irregular a thing as taking a second wife with a smaller fortune than that brought him by his first, she suddenly discovered that the dear children required very close attention, and that the nurses neglected them sadly unless they were in constant expectation of her going amongst them. She accordingly spent most of her time in some of the apartments of the Lady Ap Rhys which were in the neighbourhood of those of the children; justly calculating that, without the presence of another lady, I should not remain long behind her in the breakfast or drawing room. Sir Robert, after two day's experience of the ennui of remaining shut up with the men whom he had gathered round him for the sake of their company as sportsmen without any view to their companionship within doors, relinquished the appearance of a seclusion which he had only consented to adopt in the expectation of being assisted in the endurance of it by the society of his mother and her younger and perhaps livelier friend. He returned to his field sports, and M.^{rs} Ap Rhys was left to the enjoyment of a long winter in the country, and to her daily repentance of her rashness in having so publicly announced that it was to be devoted to retirement.

But I am deviating into gossip which has little to do with my story; for perhaps not many of my readers will give credit to my assertion that it was for this object that I devoted every hour that I could spare from

the time demanded by M.^{rs} Ap Rhys to the improvement of my own mind. She, I believe, was, in her way, fond of me. - I was obliged by her to take exercise on horseback, which preserved my health and spirits, I read eagerly, and, for the first time for some years, a good many books found their way from the library to the room in which the late Lady Ap Rhys had slept, now occupied by me.

Her Mother in law one day observed to me that if ever the spirit of poor Amelia could return to visit Aberfane, she would hardly recognise her room with a table full of books and papers occupying the centre of it. An old abigail, who had been the favourite attendant of the late mistress, happened to be employed in the room at this moment. - Now M.^{rs} Ursula Curl little admired any one who was so devoid of taste as to think it possible to *dress herself*, and who had moreover removed a large minor to make room for a drawing table. She could not resist the opportunity of shewing her disapprobation of me, and, with a malicious look over her shoulder at my offending books, and one of much importance towards the door of a dressing room which was opposite to us, she exclaimed, « No indeed Ma'am. - « that she would'nt', and what is more, poor Lady, « she would'nt' much like to see her own room so « transmogrified! - her dressing room indeed might be « worth her looking at again. She did love it dearly; « and, as the wardrobes are all locked, there she might « be sure of finding things as she liked to have them! -

This was not quite so certain; for the keys had been some time in M.^{rs} Curl's keeping before they had been handed over to M.^{rs} Ap Rhys soon after her arrival. The dressing room was entirely surrounded with presses

which Lady Ap Rhys had filled which the finest which she loved better than any thing else on earth, and it had, to me, a cheerless aspect. I considered it more as a magazine than a dressing room, and my own room being large and brightlooking, I never used the other, and indeed had never looked into it but once.

I had heard from M.^{rs} Ap Rhys many instances of the folly and weakness of the « poor dear daughter in law » whom she had never, from the first, thoroughly liked; principally in good truth from her unwillingness to cede to her the little she had so long rejoiced in when the newspaper accounts of the numerous festive meetings at Aberfane designated her as « the lovely president of the usual brilliant assembly of beauty and wit at Aberfane; or more simply, as the « charming mistress » of Aberfane aforesaid.

On this occasion, as I pursued the walk for which I had been preparing, when M.^{rs} Curl alluded to the ruling passion of her late mistress I insensibly fell into a train of meditation on the subject. I recollected having often been told that the immediate cause of the death of the last inhabitant of those apartments was her having risen from the bed to which she had been confined by severe indisposition, and having gone to a ball, unable to withstand the temptation of an opportunity of appearing in a new consignment from her Dressmaker, although, until its arrival, she had given up all idea of leaving her room, in consequence of the really dangerous attacks from which she was suffering. The young, the beautiful and the brilliantly adorned victim of the evil genii who sometimes take the place of the sylphs at the toilette, after shewing herself one little hour in public that fatal night, was brought home a dying woman; and, amongst

the ornaments that she loved better than Husband or Children, she expired.

« Yes', » thought I, as I figured to myself the lamentable scene, « if one did not firmly believe that the chastisement of departed fools would be carried on in methods that could not disturb the comfort of the living, one might suppose that a very sufficiently irksome and grievous penance to that weak spirit might consist in watching the wardrobes whose contents are not likely ever to glitter before the eye of mortal again till the wife of some perhaps unborn heir of Aberfane, in some general refitting and refurnishing, shall order an unceremonious dispersal of the whole, under the name of old-fashioned rubbish! »

This evening a larger party of gentlemen than usual assembled at dinner at Aberfane. M.^{rs} Ap Rhys and I had left the dining room, and, by some accident, an unusual one of course, there was a pause in the conversation of the mankind, during which a disagreeable movement of feet and much whispering was heard in the hall. Sir Robert turned, listened, and rang. - « What is the matter? » he enquired, as the butler instantly appeared. « Nothing Sir. » - replied the man with a hesitating air. « Then let the hall be kept quiet, » - said his master, as he pushed the wine, and the door was closed. Soon however a repetition of the same sounds drew forth another and a more angry summons of the Butler, who this time entered as quickly as if he had hold of the lock of the door. He threw it wide open, and shewed the hall filled with nearly all the servants of the establishment, and then with many apologies and a face of shame at first, which as he spoke became one of terror, declared that it was impossible to remain in the servant's' apartments, while the whole of the rest



of that wing was evidently haunted. « Last night Sir » continued the man, « some bell was rung many times, and « I am now sure it was by no living hand. - You « may remember Sir, my coming to you one time, and « John another time, and David another, to know if « you were in want of any thing, and you always said « you had not rung: The Ladies had not rung, - the « Nurses had not rung, - the children were in bed, - « we did not know what to think of it. - To day, Sir, « we all have heard more ringing than we liked to take « notice of, so perhaps some of it may have been from « the rooms of the family; - but to night, Sir, I am afraid « there is no mistaking it. That dreadful bell rings every « minute almost. Last night I am sure that not a servant « in the house slept alone; - and to night Sir, - I am « sorry to say, Sir, - they are all come in a body to say, « Sir, that they can't think of sleeping in it *at all*.

Sir Robert, too much annoyed to laugh at the fears of the congregation of pale faces which had gathered round the dining room door, expressed his determination of instantly examining the whole house himself, inwardly devoting to the severest punishment he could inflict the author of the trick which he believed must have been played by some one of his servants on the credulity and superstition of the rest. Sending therefore for the keys of the apartments which occupied the first and upper floors of the north wing of the house, (of which the lower rooms were appropriated to the use of the domestics) he passed into the drawing room, stated to M.^{rs} Ap Rhys the object of the game of « follow the leader » which he was about to commence, and then, accompanied by the gentlemen from the dining room, and the flock of geese from the hall, he proceeded to the nearest door in the suspected quarter,

from which as he approached it, the redoubtable bell sounded at irregular intervals.

When we were left to ourselves, M.^{rs} Ap Rhys expressed some vexation at the prospect of the examination of the nursery (with its attendant bustle, and at the possibility of the terrified remarks and perhaps clamour of the nurses having an injurious effect on the health and probably even on the minds of the little ones, who must infallibly be awakened by the confusion in their neighbourhood, if Sir Robert, finding nothing in the uninhabited northern rooms to account for the sounds which had so alarmed the domestics, should, as he had declared he would, examine every other room under the roof. I offered to go to the nursery and do my best to keep order there and preserve the sleep of the children undisturbed. As I rose to do so, a loud peal of the bell reached us through the now many opened doors of this large house. (It was indeed so large that the rooms which fronted the north, the house being built round 3 sides of a quadrangle, were, as has been said, principally uninhabited, and were generally kept locked up). We both started a little. « I think », said M.^{rs} Ap Rhys, « I rather think, - I believe I had better go up to the nursery with you ». « Will it not », I replied, « have a bad effect if the women take it into their heads that we too are afraid to remain alone? I will not even take a light with me if you will stay here. » So saying I laid aside the taper I had just taken, and, running up a private stair case that communicated only with a corridor into which my apartments opened, I passed, through it and my bedroom, to where the children slept.

Here I found the women in considerable alarm, but I had nearly succeeded in pacifying them when M.^{rs} Curl flew into the room and sunk on the nearest chair, out of breath from the speed with which she had made

her escape from the neighbourhood of the haunted rooms, and declaring that nothing should ever induce her to approach them more; - that she was certain the bell was no other than that of her late Mistress. - that she, better than any one else, must know the sound of it; that it was one that her Lady had had fixed with the rope hanging close to a sofa in her dressing room, especially to summon her, the bell itself being a long way off, but in a passage nearly over the servant's rooms. She concluded by repeating her conviction that it was no living hand that pulled that bell that night; - but that it was rung by that of her departed mistress.

« But M.^{rs} Curl, » said I, « if I go with you into the dressing room, will you use your own eyes and be convinced that there is no one thing there more than usual? »

« Me Maam ! No indeed ! I could not answer the bell to a spirit ! »

« Nonsense Curl ! I will go into that room, cut off the handle of the bell rope, and bring it here myself » and hoping thus to quiet the woman I took a candle from the table, and snatching a pair of scissars from a work-basket, I hastened through my own room, and, setting the light on a table as I passed, I entered the dressing room, and approached the bell rope. It was violently shaken while I stood and looked at it. A peal at the same moment rung as violently at the other end of the dwelling. I was about to lay hold of the rope to verify its correspondence with the cause of the alarm, but a choking cry for help reached my ears from the old lady whom I had left in the drawing room in not a very stout frame of mind, and who had now fallen into Hysterics, between fear, and the shame of being afraid,

« I am coming to you my dear M.^{rs} Ap Rhys! »
 I cried, running into the corridor that led to the little staircase by which I had ascended - As I turned from the dressing room door, a female figure, tall and silent stood before me at the distance of a few paces. « This » then I exclaimed « is the author of the silly trick which is distracting the wits of the whole house! - Who are you? »

The figure made a slight movement, and drew itself up to a greater height; but I heard no reply.

« Speak! » I cried, « shame on you fool! do you not hear the screams of the creature that you have terrified into fits! Speak, I say? » - The figure assumed if possible a more dignified air, and the tall dark plumes that waved as its head slightly bowed, again settled into perfect stillness. I advanced. It made a hesitating motion. It was near the top of the narrow staircase. I sprang forward. - It shifted its place to a strip of flooring between the long opening for the stairs and the wall; and there, on that mere moulding, which could not have supported the foot of mortal woman, it seemed to take its stand. Never shall I forget the agony I endured at that moment! the pain of mere fear which was tormenting so many people in the other parts of the house, was nothing compared with it - I knew that I was *not* a coward. - I knew that I saw this evidently incorporeal figure silently bowing before me. - I knew that, if it should disappear before my mind was satisfied as to its nature, I should inevitably become a fearful a wretched creature for life. I stretched forth my arms to seize it. - My hands passed through the shape and struck violently against the wall. Supporting myself thus

with one hand as I bent forward across the opening in the floor, I dashed the other with despairing force at the breast of my enemy, and again I felt no opposing substance till I met the cold hard wall.

She appeared about to sink through the opening. - « Stop! » I exclaimed. « You shall not escape me! by all that is sacred I adjure you to answer me! stay but one instant! I do not fear you, but answer me, or I shall go mad! » - and flinging myself on my knees I caught at the sable plumes, now nearly all of this fearful object that remained visible. - They too eluded my grasp! my sight failed, and I fell senseless. - Fortunately for me, as I did so, some involuntary effort at self-preservation prevented my being precipitated down the steep, dark stair.

How long or how short a time I lay there I never knew, but the first sounds that met my ears, as the power of hearing returned, were those of, as it appeared to me, the laughter of friends, - And it was that of Sir Robert Ap Rhys and the party who were rushing into the drawing room, crying « We have detected the ghost of the north wing! - here he is! - a poor devil of a Rat that had entangled his head for the last thirty hours in the crank of a bell wire!

I ventured to open my eyes, and they were met by a ray of moonlight from a part of the ceiling in which I had never before observed a small window. A shutter which covered it had been removed that day, and in the rays which it admitted I had seen without recognising it in the unphilosophical excitement of the moment - my own shadow and that of my new cap and feathers! -