

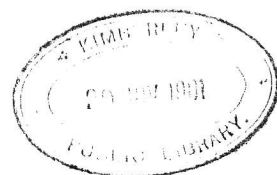
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"HERE ARE THE VICTORS LAID."

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The Red Marble Tank.

By Miss R. A. BLENNERHASSETT.

HE was standing before the easel, so lost in contemplation of the picture it supported that he neither heard the opening and shutting of the door, nor the frou-frou of my trailing skirts as I advanced up the long room towards him.

I had bought that picture the day before only; it was exposed in the window of a small curiosity shop, where bits of old silver, odds and ends of lace, and now and then a picture worth having might be found, and the curious canvas had taken my fancy. On it was depicted an enormous oblong tank of red marble, walled in by tall, dark, closely-growing cypress trees. In the foreground, two red marble sphinxes guarded the pool, and at the opposite end a flight of broad, shallow red marble steps led to a curiously carved bench of the same material. Behind the bench, an opening in the wall of foliage disclosed a cypress avenue; whilst afar, in excellent perspective, and with its terraced gardens bathed in sunlight, one caught a glimpse of a fine Italian villa.

All round the tank the most intense gloom prevailed, and on the dark water, which reflected only the still darker shadows of those funereal trees, floated a rose and a woman's glove.

The contrast between this cool, dim, shadowy place and the sunlit world beyond was admirably expressed.

According as imagination prompted, one might associate the spot with crime and mystery, or think of it as a delightful refuge from the noonday glare, or as a poetical trysting-place for lovers.

But it was incredible that such a picture should interest Harry Molyneux, whose hounds and horses were his first thought, and who didn't know what imagination meant. At least so I judged him.

Not a sign of knowledge of my presence did Harry give, though I stood close behind him. At last, tired of his persistent abstraction, I touched his arm. Then he turned, and, falling into the nearest chair, covered his face, which had grown quite pale, with his hands, muttering, "Bevilacqua's villa! My God! Bevilacqua's villa!"

Tea was on the table, so also were claret cup and spirits for those who might prefer these refreshments, so that to pour brandy into a glass, bring it to him, and force him to drink it was the work of a moment. Slowly the blood flowed back to his face, and setting down the glass with a long shuddering sigh, he begged me to forgive the fright he had given me, and then was silent, plunged in gloomy thought.

Harry and I had been friends from childhood; I thought I knew him as well as I knew my brother, and yet there was evidently some sorrow, some tragedy in that apparently commonplace life, at the existence of which no one had ever guessed.

Giving orders that I was not to be disturbed on any account, I determined to obtain Harry's confidence, knowing well that to share a sorrow with a true and sympathising friend is to obtain consolation and relief to a certain extent.

It was long before he would speak. At first he assured me his tale was incredible, and I should simply laugh at him and despise him if he told it. At last, however, assured of my interest and sympathy, he drew a slender gold chain from his neck, and opening the locket suspended from it, handed it to me. I looked, and saw a finely-painted miniature representing a young girl, pretty

with the prettiness of earliest youth. A face all smiles and dimples, lit by great brown eyes sparkling with fun and mischief.

"She was my wife," said he, laying a stress upon the past tense.

His wife!—Harry Molyneux, confirmed bachelor, absolutely indifferent to feminine charm, had loved, married, and lost, yet not a soul of us, his oldest friends, who had known and cared for him since his school days, had ever heard a hint of these events! I could not believe it! What sorrow could be connected with the owner of that bright, guileless young face? What mystery surround a child apparently made for innocent happiness? What could have befallen my poor Harry?

Slowly, haltingly, with many pauses, he told me all.

She was the daughter of an old professor, a spoilt and adored child. Harry had met her at Geneva, and, after a brief courtship, they were married. He was twenty-two, she sixteen. Together they wandered into Italy, and day after day he put off writing to his people, dreading the fuss, the letters, the congratulations. They were perfectly happy—a pair of children scampering across Italy, without a care or an anxiety.

At last, near Verona, they saw the once splendid villa of the Marchese Bevilacqua. It was unoccupied, slowly falling into ruin, yet beautiful in its decay.

Lady Molyneux fell in love with the place, and proposed that they should hire it for the few weeks of spring weather that yet remained before the heat would drive them to England. An old steward and his wife lived in a cottage just outside the villa, for the care of which they were to a certain extent responsible, and no doubt the old couple would see to the wants of any tenants of the Marchese.

But here a difficulty arose; no one would consent to sleep in the house or enter the grounds after dark. The place was said to be haunted.

Naturally Molyneux laughed at the notion, and the idea of beautiful mediæval Italian ladies paying her ghostly visitations delighted his wife. So they hired the villa, and obtaining the services of a couple of German servants from Verona, who declared they would face the Evil One himself if sufficiently well paid, the young couple encamped gaily in their new quarters.

The ghostly legend of Bevilacqua's house attached chiefly to the red marble tank under the cypress trees. It appeared that the villa had been built on the site of an old Roman house, and the tank dated from those distant times. The Roman lord kept his lampreys in it, feeding them from time to time on refractory slaves, who were thrown in alive, and whose death struggles with the ferocious eel-like monsters diverted the master and his guests, for whom the marble bench had been provided. An underground waterway, leading from the little ornamental lake in front of the villa, fed the tank, and the overplus of water escaped in the same fashion.

Now it happened that a Marchese Bevilacqua of the fifteenth century elected to reside at the villa, and, finding that there were still fine lampreys in the lake and in the tank, he caused them to be fed on sheep and goats, and would amuse himself by feeding them, and looking on whilst they were caught for the table.

Like so many Italian nobles of that day, who, when they had the power to do so, would often torture their enemies to death

with frightfully ingenious cruelty, as the dark annals of Visconti, Malatesta, and many another tyrant recount, Bevilacqua was a cruel, violent and treacherous man. He had married Camilla la Scala, a beautiful, gentle young girl of noble birth but little fortune, and was, at one and the same time, tired of her and jealous.

His mother, who had schemed for a wealthy alliance, hated Camilla, persuaded the Marchese that his jealousy was well founded; and, one day, in a fit of uncontrolled rage, he drew his sword on his wife, and pursued her down the cypress avenue, along which she fled, frantic with terror, till, stumbling on the edge of the tank, she fell into the water.

Immediately the hideous snake-like lampreys attacked her, and a terrible struggle began between the ferocious creatures and the unfortunate young woman. Every time she tried to climb the edge of the tank, or to escape up the steps, her husband's sword drove her back. She was only clad in a light wrapper, having but just left the bath when Bevilacqua, sword in hand, had set upon her, so that her clothing was of no protection.

The fierce inmates of the tank crowded round her, tearing at her feet, and lacerating her hands when she sought to beat them off, until finally covered with wounds, exhausted by loss of blood and terror of this horrible death, she cursed her husband, the villa, and all who should inhabit it, and fell senseless beneath the water.

It was believed that her spirit haunted the place, and had driven the cruel Marchese and his mother mad, so that they had perished miserably by their own hands.

The legend was gruesome enough to satisfy any searcher into the "night side of nature," but it did not affect the health or spirits of the Molyneux couple, who spent a month there joyously, exploring the neighbourhood, entertaining friends passing through Verona, and waking the echoes of the great, stately, gorgeous rooms with laughter and noise.

They were particularly fond of the vicinity of the red marble tank, and would often lunch there, sitting on the steps and making a table of the bench.

Surely nothing ghostly or weird could possibly exist in the neighbourhood of these gay young people, who thought only of amusement—healthy, out-of-door, harmless amusement—and who neither of them knew what depression or nerves meant.

One evening Lady Molyneux, tired out by an unusually long ride, went to bed early; and her husband, smoking a last cigar, strolled about the garden, finally pausing beside the tank, across which the low moon flung bars of pale light that made the adjoining shadows look yet more black and weird.

As he turned to go towards the house, a commotion in the cypress avenue attracted his attention, and he stood as if petrified whilst a white figure—surely his wife—rushed towards him, uttering terrified screams.

But what was it—that awful Thing which followed her? It seemed a moving shadow, a woman's form built out of grey mist and moonbeam—a woman with a face of anguish unspeakable, round whom clung loathsome creatures with monstrous snake-like forms. From her thousand wounds blood seemed to drip, and her mouth hung open as if uttering a cry, the more terrible from being voiceless.

So appeared the spectre, and yet it was so light, so impalpable, at times so blended with shadow, that it might have been the mere outcome of imagination, but for the feeling of

intense freezing terror which preceded and surrounded it.

All this takes long to describe, but it happened in a flash, as it were, of time and thought.

In another moment Lady Molyneux reached the tank, struck her foot against the ledge, and fell into the water.

The sound of the splash roused him, he was himself again in a moment, and drew her out. Then he looked round. He and his wife were alone; not a creature, spectral or otherwise, disturbed the absolute solitude.

He carried her to the house, but in falling she had struck her head violently against the stonework. At first her husband thought that she was only stunned, but when all efforts to arouse her had failed, the terrible truth slowly dawned upon him. She was dead.

For six months life was a blank to Harry Molyneux; he had an attack of brain fever, and knew of nothing but the phantoms that haunted his delirium. He was tended in a neighbouring monastery, and when restored

to health travelled from country to country, haunted continually in his sleep by the horrible vision he believed he had seen.

Then, after two years of wandering, he came back to England, and took up that life of incessant out-door action which he had led for sixteen years before his visit to me, when the chance of seeing that unlucky picture revived these old and painful associations which had faded into a shadowy memory.

My words can give but a faint idea of the story as he told it, with despair in his haggard face, and all the terrors and regrets of the past living realities to him.

Of course I sought to account for the affair by telling him that the shock of his wife's untimely death, which for a time deprived him of reason, must have caused him to connect that event with the wanderings of those delirious fancies that must very naturally have associated themselves with the gruesome legend attached to the villa.

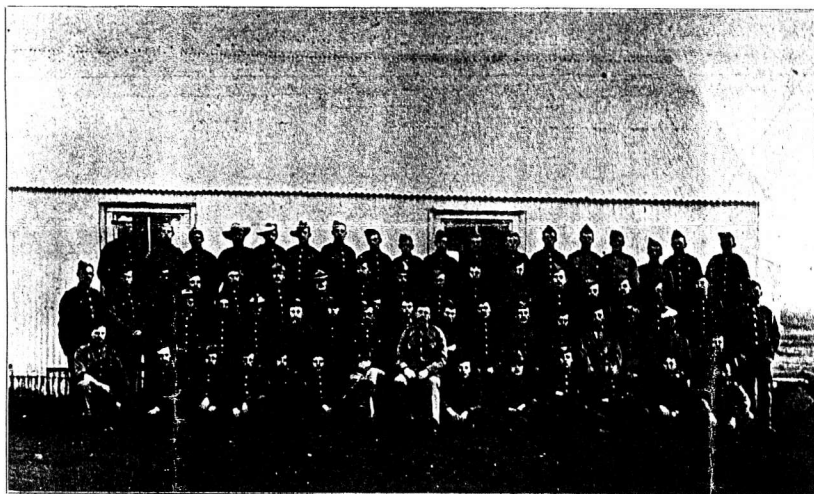
But in answer to this he told me that not only the cruel old Marchese and his mother

had perished in the same fashion as his wife, but that a similar story was attached to several other inhabitants of the villa; notably a widowed Marchesa Bevilacqua, who, twenty-five years before Lady Molyneux's unhappy end, had been found lying beside the tank, and who recovered consciousness only to describe the spectre that had pursued her, and to die.

This the Abbot of the monastery where he was ill told him. And the apparition described by the Marchesa was what he himself had seen.

However that may be, I am inclined to adopt my own explanation of the affair—when I am in my normal frame of mind.

At other times I seem to believe that the ghostly experience was a real one; and then I am seized with a shuddering dread of that mysterious invisible world that surrounds us, and of its fearful inhabitants, with one of whom we may any moment come into touch, as did poor Harry Molyneux and his wife to their own sorrow and undoing.



MAJOR H. CARR AND STAFF F NO. 11 GENERAL HOSPITAL, KIMBERLEY.



Photo by F. H. Hancox.

GENERAL VIEW OF THE VETERINARY HOSPITAL, KIMBERLEY.

Thousands of war-weary and wounded horses have been patched up at this beneficent institution.