

"Extracts from Gosschen's Diary. No. I"

This Gothic tale was published anonymously in the August 1818 issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. According to *Tales of Terror from Blackwood's Magazine*, edited by Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), this tale was written by John Wilson, an influential editor and writer of the time who published much of his work under the pseudonym "Christopher North."

Text: from *Blackwood's*, volume 3, August 1818: 596-598. Punctuation, case, and spelling are reproduced exactly as in the original, with the exception of an added blank line between paragraphs.

[The following striking narrative is translated from the MS. Memoirs of the late Rev. Dr Gottlieb Michael Gosschen, a Catholic clergyman of great eminence in the city of Ratisbonne. It was the custom of this divine to preserve, in the shape of a diary, a regular account of all the interesting particulars which fell in his way, during the exercise of his sacred profession. Two thick small quartos, filled with these strange materials, have been put into our hands by the kindness of Count Frederick von Lindénbäumenberg, to whom the worthy father bequeathed them. Many a dark story, well fitted to be the groundwork of a romance,—many a tale of guilty love and repentance,—many a fearful monument of remorse and horror, might we extract from this record of dungeons and confessionals. We shall from time to time do so, but sparingly, and what is still more necessary, with selection.] EDITOR.

NEVER had a murder so agitated the inhabitants of this city as that of Maria von Richterstein. No heart could be pacified till the murderer was condemned. But no sooner was his doom sealed, and the day fixed for his execution, than a great change took place in the public feeling. The evidence, though conclusive, had been wholly circumstantial. And people who, before his condemnation, were as assured of the murderer's guilt as if they had seen him with red hands, began now to conjure up the most contradictory and absurd reasons for believing in the possibility of his innocence. His own dark and sullen silence seemed to some, an indignant expression of that innocence which he was too proud to avow,—some thought they saw in his imperturbable demeanour, a resolution to court death, because his life was miserable, and his reputation blasted, —and others, the most numerous, without reason or reflection, felt such sympathy with the criminal, as almost amounted to a negation of his crime. The man under sentence of death was, in all the beauty of youth, distinguished above his fellows for graceful accomplishments, and the last of a noble family. He had lain a month in his dungeon, heavily laden with irons. Only the first week he had been visited by several religionists, but he then fiercely ordered the jailor to admit no more "men of God,"—and till the eve of his execution, he had lain in dark solitude, abandoned to his own soul.

It was near midnight when a message was sent to me by a magistrate, that the murderer was desirous of seeing me. I had been with many men in his unhappy situation, and in no case had I failed to calm the agonies of grief, and the fears of the world to come. But I had known this youth—had sat with him at his father's table—I knew also that there was in him a strange and fearful mixture of good and evil—I was aware that there were circumstances in the history of his progenitors not generally known—nay, in his own life—that made him an object of awful commiseration—and I went to his cell with an agitating sense of the enormity of his guilt, but a still more agitating one of the depth of his misery, and the wildness of his misfortunes.

I entered his cell, and the phantom struck me with terror. He stood erect in his irons, like a corpse that had risen from the grave. His face, once so beautiful, was pale as a shroud, and drawn into ghastly wrinkles. His black-matted hair hung over it with a terrible expression of wrathful and savage misery. And his large eyes, which once were black, glared with a light in which all colour was lost, and

seemed to fill the whole dungeon with their flashings. I saw his guilt—I saw what was more terrible than his guilt—his insanity—not in emaciation only—not in that more than death-like whiteness of his face—but in *all* that stood before me—the *figure*, round which was gathered the agonies of so many long days and nights of remorse and phrenzy—and of a despair that had no fears of this world or its terrors, but that was plunged in the abyss of eternity.

For a while the figure said nothing. He then waved his arm, that made his irons clank, motioning me to sit down on the iron frame-work of his bed; and when I did so, the murderer took his place by my side.

A lamp burned on a table before us—and on that table there had been drawn by the maniac—for I must indeed so call him—a decapitated human body—the neck as if streaming with gore—and the face writhed into horrible convulsions, but bearing a resemblance not to be mistaken to that of him who had traced the horrid picture. He saw that my eyes rested on this fearful mockery—and, with a recklessness fighting with despair, he burst out into a broken peal of laughter, and said, "to-morrow will you see that picture drawn in blood!"

He then grasped me violently by the arm, and told me to listen to his confession,— and then to say what I thought of God and his eternal Providence.

"I have been assailed by idiots, fools, and drivellers, who could understand nothing of me nor of my crime,—men who came not here that I might confess before God, but reveal myself to them,—and I drove the tamperers with misery and guilt out of a cell sacred to insanity. But my hands have played in infancy, long before I was a murderer, with thy gray hairs, and now, even that I am a murderer, I can still touch them with love and with reverence. Therefore my lips, shut to all beside, shall be opened unto thee.

"I murdered her. Who else loved her so well as to shed her innocent blood? It was I that enjoyed her beauty—a beauty surpassing that of the daughters of men,—it was I that filled her soul with bliss, and with trouble,—it was I alone that was privileged to take her life. I brought her into sin—I kept her in sin—and when she would have left her sin, it was fitting that I, to whom her heart, her body, and her soul belonged, should suffer no divorcement of them from my bosom, as long as there was blood in her's,—and when I saw that the poor infatuated wretch was resolved—I slew her;—yes, with this blessed hand I stabbed her to the heart.

"Do you think there was no pleasure in murdering her? I grasped her by that radiant, that golden hair,—I bared those snow-white breasts—I dragged her sweet body towards me, and, as God is my witness, I stabbed, and stabbed her with this very dagger, ten, twenty, forty times, through and through her heart. She never so much as gave one shriek, for she was dead in a moment,—but she would not have shrieked had she endured pang after pang, for she saw my face of wrath turned upon her,—she knew that my wrath was just, and that I did right to murder her who would have forsaken her lover in his insanity.

"I laid her down upon a bank of flowers,—that were soon stained with her blood. I saw the dim blue eyes beneath the half-closed lids,—that face so changeful in its living beauty was now fixed as ice, and the balmy breath came from her sweet lips no more. My joy, my happiness, was perfect. I took her into my arms—madly as I did on that night when first I robbed her of what fools called her innocence—but her innocence has gone with her to heaven—and there I lay with her bleeding breasts prest to my heart, and many were the thousand kisses that I gave those breasts, cold and bloody as they were, which I had many million times kissed in all the warmth of their loving loveliness, and which none were ever to kiss again but the husband who had murdered her.

"I looked up to the sky. There shone the moon and all her stars. Tranquillity, order, harmony, and peace, glittered throughout the whole universe of God. 'Look up, Maria, your favourite star has risen.' I gazed upon her, and death had begun to change her into something that was most terrible. Her features were hardened and sharp,—her body stiff as a lump of frozen clay,—her fingers rigid and clenched,—and

the blood that was once so beautiful in her thin blue veins was now hideously coagulated all over her corpse. I gazed on her one moment longer, and, all at once, I recollected that we were a family of madmen. Did not my father perish by his own hand? Blood had before been shed in our house. Did not that warrior ancestor of ours die raving in chains? Were not those eyes of mine always unlike those of other men? Wilder—at times fiercer—and oh! father, saw you never there a melancholy, too woful for mortal man, a look sent up from the darkness of a soul that God never visited in his mercy?

"I knelt down beside my dead wife. But I knelt not down to pray. No: I cried unto God, if God there be— 'Thou madest me a madman! Thou madest me a murderer! Thou foredoomedst me to sin and to hell! Thou, thou, the gracious God whom we mortals worship. There is the sacrifice! I have done thy will,— I have slain the most blissful of all thy creatures;—am I a holy and commissioned priest, or am I an accursed and infidel murderer?'

"Father, you start at such words! You are not familiar with a madman's thoughts. Did I make this blood to boil so? Did I form this brain? Did I put that poison into my veins which flowed a hundred years since in the heart of that lunatic, my heroic ancestor? Had I not my being imposed, forced upon me, with all its red-rolling sea of dreams; and will you, a right holy and pious man, curse me because my soul was carried away by them as a ship is driven through the raging darkness of a storm? A thousand times, even when she lay in resigned love in my bosom, something whispered to me, 'Murder her!' It may have been the voice of Satan—it may have been the voice of God. For who can tell the voice of heaven from that of hell? Look on this blood-crust dagger—look on the hand that drove it to her heart, and then dare to judge of me and of my crimes, or comprehend God and all his terrible decrees!

"Look not away from me. Was I not once confined in a madhouse? Are these the first chains I ever wore? No. I remember things of old, that others may think I have forgotten. Dreams will disappear for a long, long time but they will return again. It may have been some one like me that I once saw sitting chained, in his black melancholy, in a madhouse. I may have been only a stranger passing through that wild world. I know not. The sound of chains brings with it a crowd of thoughts, that come rushing upon me from a dark and far-off world. But if it indeed be true, that in my boyhood I was not as other happy boys, and that even then the cloud of God's wrath hung around me,—that God may not suffer my soul everlastingly to perish.

"I started up. I covered the dead body with bloody leaves, and tufts of grass, and flowers. I washed my hands from blood—I went to sleep—I slept— yes, I slept—for there is no hell like the hell of sleep, and into that hell God delivered me. I did not give myself up to judgment. I wished to walk about with the secret curse of the murder in my soul. What could men do to me so cruel as to let me live? How could God curse me more in black and fiery hell than on this green and flowery earth? And what right had such men as those dull heavy-eyed burghers to sit in judgment upon me, in whose face they were afraid to look for a moment, lest one gleam of it should frighten them into idiocy? What right have they, who are not as I am, to load me with their chains, or to let their villain executioner spill my blood? If I deserve punishment—it must rise up in a blacker cloud under the hand of God in my soul.

"I will not kneel—a madman has no need of sacraments. I do not wish the forgiveness nor the mercy of God. All that I wish is the forgiveness of her I slew; and well I know that death cannot so change the heart that once had life, as to obliterate from THINE the merciful love of me! Spirits may in heaven have beautiful bosoms no more; but thou, who art a spirit, wilt save him from eternal perdition, whom thou now knowest God created subject to a terrible disease. If there be mercy in heaven, it must be with thee. Thy path thither lay through blood: so will mine. Father! thinkst thou that we shall meet in heaven. Lay us at least in one grave on earth."

In a moment he was dead at my feet. The stroke of the dagger was like lightning, and— * * * *