

Ellen Price Wood, "The Mysterious Visitor"

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ON Monday morning, the 11th of May, 1857 — the year, as the reader may remember, that England was destined to be shaken to its centre with the disastrous news of the rising in India¹ — there sat in one of the quiet rooms of Enton Parsonage a young and pretty woman, playing with her baby. It was Mrs. Ordie. The incumbent² of Enton was Dr. Ling, an honorary canon³ of the county cathedral. Mrs. Ling was from India: her family connections, uncles, brothers, and cousins, had been, or were, in the civil or military service of Bengal. Consequently, as the daughters of Dr. Ling had grown towards womanhood, they were severally shipped off, with high matrimonial views, according to a fashion that extensively prevails.

Miss Ling, Louisa, had gone out first, and had secured Captain Ordie. Constance went next, and espoused Lieutenant Main, to the indignation of all her relatives, both at home and out, for she was a handsome girl, and had been set down for nothing less than a major. The third daughter, Sarah Ann, very young and pretty she was, went out the following year, with a stern injunction not to do as Constance had done.

Before Sarah Ann could get there, Mrs. Ordie's health failed, and she was ordered immediately to her native climate. Upon landing, she proceeded to Enton. The voyage had been of much service to her, and her health was improved. And there we see her sitting, on the morning of the 11th of May, nearly twelve months after her arrival, playing with her infant, who was nine months old. In August she and the child were going back to India.

Mrs. Ordie was much attached to this child, very anxious and fidgety over it: her first child had died in India. She fancied, this morning, that it was not well, and had been sending in haste for Mrs. Beecher, who lived close by, just beyond the garden. The honorary canon and the rest of the family had gone to spend a week in the county town.

Mrs. Beecher came in without her bonnet. She had been governess to Louisa and Constance, had married the curate,⁴ and remained the deeply-attached friend and adviser of the Ling family. In any emergency Mrs. Beecher was appealed to.

"I am sure baby's ill" was Mrs. Ordie's salutation. "I have been doing all I can to excite her notice, but she will keep her head down. See how hot her cheeks are."

"I think she is sleepy," said Mrs. Beecher. "And perhaps a very little feverish."

"Do you think her feverish? What shall I do? Good mercy, if she should die as my other baby did!"

"Louisa," remonstrated Mrs. Beecher, "do not excite yourself causelessly. I thought you had left that habit off."

"Oh, but you don't know what it is to lose a child; you never had one," returned Mrs. Ordie, giving way to her excitement. "If she does, I can tell you I shall die with her."

"Hush," interrupted Mrs. Beecher. "I believe there is little, if anything, the matter with the child, excepting her teeth, which renders children somewhat feverish. But if she were dangerously ill, you have no right to say what you have just said."

"Oh yes, I have a right, for it is truth. I would rather lose everything I possess in the world, than my baby. What a long while Mr. Percival is!" she added, walking to the window and looking out.

"You surely have not sent for Mr. Percival?"

"I surely have. And if he does not soon make his appearance, I shall send again."

Mrs. Ordie had always been of most excitable temperament. As a girl, her imagination was so vivid, so prone to the marvellous, that story books and fairy tales were kept from her. She would get them unknown to her parents, and wake up in the night, shrieking with terror at what she had read. Hers was indeed a peculiarly active brain. It is necessary to mention this, as it may account, in some degree, for what follows.

There was really nothing the matter with the child, but Mrs. Ordie insisted that there was, and made herself miserable all the day. The surgeon, Mr. Percival, came: he saw little the matter with it either, but he ordered it a warm bath, and sent in some medicine—probably distilled water and sugar. Mrs. Beecher came in again in the evening. Mrs. Ordie hinted that she might as well remain for the night, to be on the spot should baby be taken worse.

¹ In March 1857 Indian troops began a year-long mutiny against the British; this "Sepoy Rebellion" is widely regarded as the first war of Indian independence (not finally achieved until 1948). The rebellion began when Indian soldiers ("sepoys"), who were mostly Hindu and Muslim, refused to use bullets which had been greased with cow or pig fat (which would have violated Hindu and Muslim beliefs). While this particular issue triggered the revolt, the rebellion also gave vent to widespread Indian dissatisfaction with many British policies regarding their Indian colony. As a result of this rebellion, the British East India Company, which had long been the British government's proxy power in India, was dissolved, and direct British government rule of India (the "Raj") began. The rebellion also helped initiate British disillusionment with India; many Victorian Brits felt that their intervention in India, which they regarded as benevolent and high-minded, had been repudiated by ingrates. The atrocities associated with this rebellion were widely hyped in the British press, and Wood makes powerful use of them in this story.

² incumbent: the person who holds the job of canon or parson at a particular parish; these jobs, or "livings" as they were known, were at the discretion of the local nobleman.

³ canon: a minor church official usually associated with the governance of a particular cathedral and the region it serves

⁴ curate: generally, a parson or other religious official charged with the "cure" of souls

The curate's wife laughed. "I think I can promise you that there will be no danger, Louisa. You may cease to torment yourself, and go to sleep in peace."

"If anything does happen, I shall send to call you up."

The Lings kept four servants. Two of these, a man and maid, were with their master and mistress; the other two were at home. And there was also the child's nurse. After Mrs. Beecher left, Mrs. Ordie crept along the corridor to the nurse's room, where the baby slept, and found the nurse undressing herself.

"What are you doing that for?" she indignantly exclaimed. "Of course you will sit up to-night, and watch by baby."

"Sit up for what, ma'am?" returned the nurse.

"I would not leave the child unwatched to-night for anything. My other baby died of convulsions; they may also attack this one. Convulsions are so uncertain: they come on in a moment. I have ordered Martha to sit up in the kitchen and keep hot water in readiness."

"Why, ma'am, there's no cause in the world for it," remonstrated the surprised nurse. "The baby is as well as well can be, and has never woke up since I laid her down at eight o'clock."

"She shall be watched this night," persisted Mrs. Ordie. "So dress yourself again."

"I must say it's a shame," grumbled the nurse, who had grown tired of her mistress's capricious ways, and had privately told the other servants that she did not care how soon she left the situation. "I'd remain up for a week, if there was need of it, but to be deprived of one's natural rest for nothing, ma'am, is too bad. I'll sit myself in the old rocking-chair, if I must stay up," added the servant, half to herself, half to her mistress, "and get a sleep that way."

Mrs. Ordie's eyes flashed anger. The fact was, the slavery of Eastern servants had a little spoiled her for the independence of European ones. She accused the girl of every crime that was unfeeling, short of child murder, and concluded by having the infant's crib carried down to her own room. She would sit up herself and watch it.

The child still slept calmly and quietly, and Mrs. Ordie sat quietly by it. But she began to find it rather dull, and she went to the book-shelves and took down a book. It was then striking eleven. Setting the lamp on a small table at her elbow, she began to read.

She had taken the "Vicar of Wakefield."⁵ She had not opened the book for years, and she read on with interest, all her old pleasure in the tale revived. Nearly half-an-hour had elapsed when she suddenly heard footsteps on the gravel-path outside, advancing towards the house: and she looked off and listened. The first thought that struck her was, that one of the servants had been out without permission, and was coming in at that late hour; which, as her watch, hanging opposite, told her, was twenty-five minutes past eleven. But she had not heard the bell ring. It must be explained that Enton Parsonage stood back from the high-road and was surrounded by trees. Two iron gates gave ingress to it from the road. They were far apart, for the house was low and long; the kitchens, forming a right angle with the house, projected out, their windows looking sideways on the broad half-circular gravel-path that led from one gate to the other. The entrance-porch was near the kitchens. At the back of the house stood the smaller house of the curate; a narrow pathway leading to it from the Parsonage. *That* house faced the side lane, into which lane its small iron gate opened. These gates, the Rector's two large ones and the curate's small one, were always locked at sunset, and the premises were then deemed secure. There was no other entrance to them whatever, and all three gates were lofty and spiked at the top, preventing the possibility of any marauder's climbing over. If any friends came to either of the two houses after the gates were locked, they had to ring for admittance.

Mrs. Ordie heard these footsteps in the stillness of the night, and her eyes instantly glanced at her watch. Twenty-five minutes after eleven. Who was it, at this late hour? But, even as the question passed through her mind, an expression of astonishment rose to her face; her eyes dilated, she drew in her breath and listened intently. If ever she heard the footsteps of her husband, she thought she heard them then.

Yes, yes! It was impossible to mistake his sharp, firm step, which she had never heard since she left him in Calcutta. It was very close now, nearly underneath her window. With a cry of joy she arose and opened it.

"George, dear George! I knew your step. What has brought you home?"

There was no answer. The footsteps were still advancing, and Mrs. Ordie leaned out. He had come in at the further gate, had passed along the front of the house, and was now underneath her window. She saw him distinctly in the light cast on the path from the kitchen. There was no mistaking him for any other than Captain Ordie, and he wore his regimentals.⁶ He lifted his face, she saw it clearly in the light, and looked at her. Then he went on and stepped inside the porch. She called to him again.

"George, you did not hear me. Don't knock, baby's ill. Wait a moment, and I will let you in."

Closing the window, she sprang to the door. Her lamp was not suitable for carrying, and she would not stay to light a taper: she knew every stair well. But she was awkward at the fastenings of the front-door, and found she could not undo them in the dark, so ran into the kitchen. The cook, sitting up in obedience to her orders, was lying back in a chair, her feet stretched out upon another. She was fast asleep and snoring. A large fire burnt in the grate, and two candles were alight on the ironing-board underneath the window.

"Martha! Martha!" she exclaimed, "rouse yourself. My husband's come."

"What!" cried the woman, starting up in affright, and evidently forgetting where she was. "Who's come, ma'am?"

"Come and open the hall-door. Captain Ordie is here."

She snatched one of the candles from the table, and went on to the door again. The servant followed, rubbing her eyes.

⁵ *The Vicar of Wakefield* is a 1766 novel by the Irish writer Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774); now one of the most popular and well-known "sentimental novels" of the 18th Century, the work attracted relatively little attention when first published. During the Victorian era, however, it acquired considerable respect and popularity, due largely to its starkly delineated moral struggles that ultimately constitute a celebration of goodness and the enduring fortitude of the human spirit. A very happy ending doesn't hurt either.

⁶ regimentals: the military uniform of his unit or regiment

The door was unlocked and thrown open, and Mrs. Ordie drew a little back to give space for him to enter. No one came in. Mrs. Ordie looked out then, holding the candle above her head. She could not see him anywhere.

"Take the light," she said to the maid, and stepped beyond the portico. "George!" she called out, "where are you? The door is open." But Captain Ordie neither appeared nor answered.

"Well, I never knew such an extraordinary thing!"

"Ma'am," said the servant, who began now to be pretty well awake, "I don't understand. Did you say anybody was come?"

"My husband is come. Captain Ordie."

"From Mrs. Beecher's?" asked the woman.

"Mrs. Beecher's, no! What should bring him at Mrs. Beecher's? He must have come direct from Portsmouth."⁷

"But he must have come to the door here from the Beechers'," continued the servant. "He couldn't have come any other way. The gates are locked, ma'am!"

In her wonder at his appearance, this fact had not struck Mrs. Ordie. "One of them must have been left unfastened," she said, after thinking. "That was very careless, Martha. It is your place to see to it, when Richard is out. Papa once turned a servant away for leaving the gates open at night."

"I locked both the gates at sundown," was the woman's reply. "And the key's hanging up in its place in the kitchen."

"Impossible," thought Mrs. Ordie. "Where's Susan?" —alluding to the other servant at home.

"Susan went to bed at ten o'clock, ma'am."

"It is not possible that the gates can have been locked, Martha. The captain came in by the upper one, the furthest from here. I heard him the minute he put his foot on the gravel, and knew his step. You must have thought you locked them. George!" added Mrs. Ordie, in a louder tone. "George!"

There was no answer. No sound whatever broke the stillness of the night.

"Captain Ordie!" she repeated. "Captain Ordie!"

The servant was laughing to herself, taking care that her young mistress did not see her. She believed that Mrs. Ordie had dropped asleep, and had *dreamt* she heard somebody on the gravel.

"I know what it is," cried Mrs. Ordie, briskly. "He has never been here before; and, finding the door was not immediately opened to him, has gone on to Mr. Beecher's, thinking this the wrong house."

She ran down the narrow path as she spoke, which branched off round by the kitchen-window; the maid followed her. It was a light night.

But nothing was to be seen of George Ordie. The curate's house, a small one, presented the appearance of a dwelling whose inmates are at rest; the blinds were drawn before the windows, and all was still. Mrs. Ordie ran over probabilities in her mind, and came to the conclusion that he could not have gone there. The Beechers were early people, and had no doubt been in bed an hour ago. Had her husband knocked there, he would be waiting at the door still, for they had not had time to come down and let him in.

"It could only have been fancy, ma'am," cried Martha.

"Silence," said Mrs. Ordie. "How can it have been fancy? I heard my husband, and saw him."

"Well, ma'am, I argue so from the gates being fast. He couldn't have got over 'em, because of the spikes."

"The gates cannot be fast," returned Mrs. Ordie, "and it is foolish of you to persist in saying so—only to screen your own carelessness."

"I wish you'd just please to look at the gates," retorted Martha.

"I will," said Mrs. Ordie, anxious to convict Martha to her face. "It is an utter impossibility that Captain Ordie can have come in at a high, locked gate, with spikes on the top; he would not attempt to do so. He would have rung the bell."

"That's what I say," answered Martha. "I dreamt t'other night," she muttered, as she followed her mistress, "that a man came down that there path with lovely gownd⁸ pieces to sell: I might just as well have riz⁹ up the house, and had *him* looked for."

They gained the broad walk, and proceeded round towards the further gate. It was locked. Martha sniffed.

"Why, it is like magic!" uttered Mrs. Ordie.

"I was certain about its being locked, ma'am. And that's why I say it must be fancy."

Mrs. Ordie was indignant. "Is this gate fancy?" she said, shaking it in her anger. "Don't tell me again that my husband is fancy. How could I have seen and heard him if he were not come? Captain Ordie!" she called out, once more. "George! where can you have gone to?"

"Come to the other gate, Martha."

They retraced their steps, Mrs. Ordie looking in all directions for a gleam of scarlet, and reached the other gate. It was locked. Mr. Beecher's gate was locked. Then she went about the garden, and looked and called: but there was no trace of Captain Ordie. The servant walked with her, half amused, half provoked.

"Can he have slipped indoors," murmured Mrs. Ordie, "while we went round to the Beechers?" And she went in to look, taking the opportunity to glance at her child. But Captain Ordie was nowhere to be seen, and she had never been so much perplexed and puzzled in all her life.

"Then he must have gone on, as I thought, to Mr. Beecher's," was her last solution of the enigma. "They were possibly up, and let him in directly. And they are keeping him there till morning, that he may not disturb us, knowing that baby is ill."

⁷ Portsmouth: a major seaport in the south of England

⁸ gownd: not a typo but an archaic word referring to pieces of fabric for making dresses

⁹ riz: roused up, awoken

"But about the gate," interrupted the servant, returning to her stumbling-block, "how could he have got through it?"

"I know he did get through it, and that's enough," responded Mrs. Ordie, disposing summarily of the difficulty. "Soldiers are venturesome and can do anything. I will go and fetch him. You stop here, Martha, and listen to baby."

Once more Mrs. Ordie sped to the curate's. She knocked at the door, and stood back to look up at the house. "They have put him into their spare bed," she soliloquized; "Mrs. Beecher has kept it made up this fortnight past, expecting their invalid from India. My goodness! I never thought of it: they have no doubt come together, in the same ship. George may have gone to Calcutta; and, finding James Beecher was coming, must have got leave, all in a hurry, and accompanied him."

Picking up some bits of gravel, she threw them at Mrs. Beecher's bedroom-window. This brought forth the curate in his night-cap, peeping through the curtains.

"It is I, Mr. Beecher. Have you got Captain Ordie here?"

"Make haste, Anne," cried the curate, turning his head round to speak to his wife. "It is Mrs. Ordie. Perhaps the child is in a fit."

"My husband," repeated Mrs. Ordie. "He is here, is he not?"

"Yes; directly," answered the curate, imperfectly understanding, but opening the casement about an inch to speak.

"Is she really worse, Louisa?" exclaimed Mrs. Beecher, who now appeared at the window. "I will soon be with you."

The curate, believing the matter to be settled, drew in his night-cap. But Mrs. Ordie's voice was again heard. "Mr. Beecher! I want you."

"Dress yourself, my dear," cried Mrs. Beecher to him, in a flurry. "I dare say they want you to go for Mr. Percival. If the baby is really worse, and it is not Louisa's fancy, I shall never more boast of knowing children. She is calling again."

Mr. Beecher reopened the casement. "I am putting on my clothes, Mrs. Ordie. I am coming."

"But you need not do that. Has your brother arrived?"

"Who?"

"Your brother: James Beecher."

"No. Not yet."

"Some ship is in: it has brought my husband. Tell him I am here."

"We'll be down in a minute," called out Mr. Beecher, and making desperate haste. "Anne, Captain Ordie's come."

"Captain Ordie!" exclaimed Mrs. Beecher.

"Mrs. Ordie says so."

"Then we shall have James here to-morrow. How very unexpected Captain Ordie's arrival must have been to his wife? And to find his child ill!"

Louisa Ordie waited. Mrs. Beecher came down first, in a large shawl, her bonnet tied over her night cap. They began to speak at cross-purposes.

"Is he coming? Have you told him?" impatiently asked Mrs. Ordie.

"My dear, yes. But he had gone upstairs in slippers, and his shoes were in the back-kitchen. Captain Ordie's arrival must have taken you by surprise."

"I never was so much surprised in my life," answered Mrs. Ordie, standing still, and not offering to stir. "I heard his footstep first, and knew it, even in the distance. I am so glad! He must have come with James Beecher."

"Ay, we shall have James here to-morrow. But, my dear, let us not lose time. Is the child very ill?"

"She is not worse; there is no hurry," answered Mrs. Ordie, planting her back against a tree, as deliberately as if she meant to make it her station for the night, and gazing up at the casement which she knew belonged to their spare bedroom. Mrs. Beecher looked at her in surprise.

"Will he be long?" she resumed. "There's no light."

"He will be here directly," said Mrs. Beecher; "he is finding his shoes. I suppose Kitty put them in some out-of-the-way place, ready for cleaning in the morning."

Another pause, and the curate appeared.

"Oh, Mr. Beecher, *you* need not have got up," was Mrs. Ordie's greeting. "I am sorry to give you all this trouble."

"It is no trouble. Do you want me to go for Mr. Percival?"

"You are very kind, but we shall not require the doctor to-night: at least I hope not. I have been watching her myself: I had her brought down to my own room. Nurse behaved shamefully over it, and I gave her warning."

"Pray let us go on and see how she is," said Mrs. Beecher, never supposing but they had been called up by the state of the child.

"When he comes. You say he will not be long. Had he undressed?"

"Had who undressed?"

"My husband."

Mrs. Beecher stared at her in amazement. "I do not understand you, Louisa. For whom are we waiting here?"

"For *my* husband, of course. You say he is finding his shoes."

Both Mr. and Mrs. Beecher thought her child's illness was turning her crazy. They looked at her, and at one another.

"My dear, you are mystifying us," spoke the wife, drawing her shawl tighter round her shoulders. "Is your husband coming out here, into the garden? Are we to wait here for him?"

"Why, you know he is coming out, and of course I shall wait for him. Only think, he wore his regimentals!"

"His regimentals!"

"Yes. Just as if he were on duty."

"Where is Captain Ordie?" interposed the curate.

"Well, that's a sensible question, from you," laughed Mrs. Ordie. "I suppose he is in your spare bedroom, though I see no light. Or else hunting for his shoes in your kitchen."

"Child," said Mrs. Beecher, taking hold of her tenderly, "you are not well. I told you to-day what it would be, if you excited yourself. Let us take you home."

"I will not go without my husband. There. And what makes him so long? I shall call to him. Why, you have locked the door!" she exclaimed. "You have locked him in."

"Locked who in, child?" said Mrs. Beecher. "There's no one in the house but Kitty."

"My husband is there. Did he not come to you?"

"No, certainly not. We have not seen him."

"Mr. Beecher," she impatiently uttered, "I asked you, at first, whether my husband had come here, and you said yes."

"My dear young lady, I must have misunderstood you. All I heard, with reference to Captain Ordie, was, that he had come: I supposed to your house. He has certainly not been to ours."

"Then what were you talking about?" she reproachfully asked of Mrs. Beecher. "It was shameful to deceive me so! You said he had gone upstairs in slippers, and was finding his shoes. You know you did."

"My dear child, I was speaking of Mr. Beecher. I did not know you thought your husband was here. Why did you think so?"

"If he is not here, where is he?" demanded Mrs. Ordie. "You need not look at me as though you thought I was out of my senses. Do you mean to say you have not seen Captain Ordie?"

"We have not, indeed. We went to bed at ten, and heard nothing, until you threw the gravel at the window."

"Where can he be? What can he have done with himself?"

"Did he leave you to come to us? When did he arrive?"

"It was at twenty-five minutes after eleven. I was sitting by baby, reading the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' All at once I heard footsteps approaching from the upper gate, and I knew they were my husband's. I looked out, and saw him, and called to him; he did not seem to hear me, but went in to the portico. I ran down to let him in, and to my surprise he was not there, and I thought he must have come on to you."

"Then you have not yet spoken with him?" exclaimed Mr. Beecher.

"Not yet."

"Are you sure it was Captain Ordie? Who opened the gate to him?"

"No one. The gate is locked. There is the strange part of the business."

"My dear Mrs. Ordie! I fear it must be all a mistake. Captain Ordie would not arrive here on foot, even if he landed unexpectedly; and he could not have got through a locked gate. Perhaps you were asleep."

"Nonsense," peevishly replied Mrs. Ordie; "I was as wide awake as I am now. I had come to that part where the fine ladies from town had gone in to neighbour Flamborough's and caught them all at hunt-the-slipper, Olivia in the middle, bawling for fair play. The ballad 'Edwin and Angelina'¹⁰ came in a few pages before, and that I skipped. I assure you I was perfectly awake."

"I do not think it possible to have been anything but a delusion," persisted Mr. Beecher.

"How a delusion?" angrily asked the young lady; "I do not know what you mean. If my hearing could play me false, my sight could not. I heard my husband, and saw him, and spoke to him. He was in his regimentals: were they a delusion?"

"This is very strange," said Mrs. Beecher. "He would not be likely to travel in regimentals."

"It is more than strange," was Louisa Ordie's answer, as she looked dreamily about. "He is in the grounds, somewhere, and why he does not come forward, I don't know."

The mystery was not cleared up that night. No Captain Ordie made his appearance. The next day Mrs. Ordie sent for her father, to impart to him the strange circumstance. He adopted his curate's view of the affair; and, indeed, the universal view. Mrs. Ordie was much annoyed at their disbelief; and she actually, in spite of her friends, had Captain Ordie advertised for, in the local papers: he *was* in England, she said, and it would be proved so.

When letters next arrived from India, there was one from Captain Ordie, which gave proof positive that he was not, and had not been in Europe. Mrs. Ordie was perplexed.

The weeks went on, and the time fixed for the departure of Mrs. Ordie and her child drew near. But meanwhile the disastrous news had arrived of the outbreak in India of that dreadful mutiny, and it was deemed advisable to postpone it.

She was sitting one day in a gloomy mood. She had not heard from her husband for some time (his last letter was dated April); and now, as she found, another mail was in, and had brought no news from him. The rising at Delhi, where Captain Ordie was quartered, was known to her, but not, as yet, the details of its more disastrous features. She did not fear his having fallen: had anything happened to him, Mr. Main, or one of her sisters, would have written. They were all at Delhi.

As she thus sat, Mrs. Beecher came in, looking very pale and sad. Dr. and Mrs. Ling had gone off in their pony-carriage to the county town, to pick up news. They were extremely uneasy.

"Another mail has been in these two days!" she exclaimed to Mrs. Beecher. "News travels slower to Enton than anywhere. Have you heard from James Beecher? You don't look well."

"James is come," replied the curate's wife. "He came overland."

"And you have been worrying yourselves that he is dead!" retorted Louisa. "How are things going on, over there?"

"Very badly. They cannot be worse."

¹⁰ "Edwin and Angelina" was one of three pieces of poetry included by Goldsmith in *The Vicar of Wakefield* (chapter 8)

“Does he know anything of George?” continued she. “I think he might spare just a minute from his fighting to write to me. What is the matter with you? You have not brought bad news for me?” she added, her fears touched, and rising in excitement. “Oh, surely not! Not FOR ME!”

“James’s news is altogether very dispiriting,” returned Mrs. Beecher, at a loss how to proceed with her task. “My husband is gone to bring Dr. and Mrs. Ling back. We thought you might like them to be at home.”

“Has George fallen in battle? Have those half-caste rebels shot him down? Oh——”

“Pray be calm, Louisa!” implored Mrs. Beecher; “if ever you had need of calmness in your life, you have need of it now.”

“Is he wounded? Is he dead?” interrupted Mrs. Ordie, with a bitter shriek. “Oh, George! dearest George! and I have been calling you hard names for not writing to me! What is it?”

“There is a great deal to be told, my child. James Beecher was at Delhi in the midst of it.”

Louisa suddenly rose and flew from the room. Mrs. Beecher, supposing she had gone to her chamber, went after her; but could not find her there. She had gone out of the house.

A thin man, looking fearfully ill, fair once, but browned by an Eastern sun, was lying on the sofa in the curate’s parlour when a young, excited woman came flying in.

“Mr. James Beecher,” she uttered, seizing his hands imploringly, “when did it happen? I am Mrs. Ordie.”

“Has my sister-in-law told you—anything?” he hesitated.

“Yes, yes. I know the worst. I want particulars.”

He had risen into an upright posture, though he could scarcely support himself, and she sat down beside him. He was a church missionary, a widower with children. “Are you sure that you can bear the details?” he asked, believing, from her words, that she knew the general facts.

“I am sure. Omit nothing. You were at Delhi.”

“I went there in the spring, to say farewell to some friends, ere I came home. At Delhi I was taken worse, and lay ill there.”

“But about the rising?”

“I am coming to it. On the second Monday in May, after breakfast, bad news came in. The 3rd Light Cavalry had dashed in from Meerut, fully armed, and were slaughtering the Europeans. Eighty-five of this regiment had been tried by court-martial at Meerut, for refusing to handle the greased cartridges, and sentenced to imprisonment. Their sentences were read out to them on parade on the previous Saturday, the 9th, and they were sent to gaol. On the 10th, Sunday, the regiment rose, released the Prisoners, massacred the European officers, their wives and children, and on the 11th came to Delhi, in open revolt. I struggled up, dressed myself, joined the friends I was staying with, and we waited further news. It came in too soon. The mutineers had gone towards Deriowgunge, shooting all the officers they encountered. The brigadier ordered out the 54th Native Infantry and two guns; and, I believe, a detachment of another regiment; but accounts varied. They met the rebels just outside the Cashmere gate, and it was all up, for the Sepoys deserted their officers, and shook hands with the Sowars.¹¹ Every officer was killed. Treacherous, cowardly wretches! they did not spare one.”

She was biting her lips, and striving for calmness, determined to hear all. “Did the officers make no resistance?”

“All that they could make, but they were unarmed,” he answered. “The next account that came in was, that the natives had risen and joined the insurrection, were firing the bungalows at Deriowgunge, and ransacking the European residences. The troopers were raging about, destroying life; and when their work was done, the Goojours,¹² who had collected in great numbers, as they were sure to do, followed in their wake, and pillaged everything, even to the matting. The bank was rifled.”

Mr. Beecher paused, wondering whether he ought to proceed, but her studied calmness deceived him.

“No one knew where to fly for refuge, or what to do: none knew where to put the officers’ wives and children. Many were taken to the Flagstaff Tower;¹³ but it was thought unsafe and had to be abandoned. Some escaped—many, I hope—in conveyances, or on horseback, or on foot. Some of the officers retreated to the cantonment¹⁴ outside the gates; but the troopers got there when night came, and killed them and their wives and children.”

“Were any of *my* family with them?” she asked, still with unnatural composure.

“No. I will tell you. Before mid-day, the ladies of our house, my host’s wife and her cousin, escaped to a close hut, or outhouse, and I managed to hobble there with them. I don’t know how I did it: but it is astonishing the artificial strength that fear brings out. Others also took refuge there, about half-a-dozen ladies, your two sisters being amongst them, three or four children, and a poor little ensign, as ill and weak as I was. We hoped we were in safety; that the rebels would not think of looking for us there; and some old matting, well wetted, was hung up across the entrance, as if to dry. A Sepoy, who was really faithful (and there were many such in the city), sat before it to guard it; many a one, raging after prey, did he turn aside with a well-assumed story that his old mother was in there, dying—let her die in peace.”

“Was my husband there?”

“Not then. No one came near us all that day: they dared not come, for our sakes; and we bore our suspense and apprehension as we best could, not knowing who was living or who dead, of those dearest to us. What a day that was! We had neither food nor drink; the heat of the weather was fearful; and so many of us stowed together, and closely shut up, rendered the air fetid. We thought it could not be less than a hundred and ten degrees. This was not the worst; there were the apprehensions of discovery. We men might brave it, at any rate to appearance, but the poor young women! I believe they would have been glad to die as they cowered

¹¹ Sowars: mounted soldiers; cavalry

¹² Goojours: “A race of peculiar caste, who congregate round Meerut and Delhi. They have been compared to our gipsy tribes, and live by plunder, even in times of peace. Some years ago a regiment was obliged to be raised especially to keep them under.” [Wood’s note]

¹³ Flagstaff Tower: a prominent building on a low ridge near Delhi, it commanded a clear view of the surrounding area.

¹⁴ cantonment: a semi-permanent or permanent camp for troops

there, rather than live to encounter an uncertain fate. I strove to speak comfort to them all, but it was difficult; one or two bore bravely up, and cheered the rest. Late at night, under cover of the darkness, Captain Ordie stole in."

She raised a faint cry at the name. "My husband!"

"He told us what he could of the progress of the day—it was horribly bad, yet I believe he softened it for their ears—and then he began to talk of our own situation. It would be impossible, he said, to keep in the same place of concealment another day, and that we had better join a party who were about to make their escape towards Kurnaul. All seized at the idea eagerly, and wished to start without the delay of an instant. Mrs. Holt, my friend's wife, inquired after her husband, whom she had not seen since morning.

"He is safe, and unharmed," replied Captain Ordie. "You will see him when we are fairly off; but it was not thought well for more than one of us to venture here."

"And my husband?" added Mrs. Main, who had done nothing but clasp her baby to her breast all day, and weep silently. "Is he safe?" Captain Ordie answered evasively," continued Mr. Beecher, "and I knew, by his words and by the turn of his face, that poor Main was gone."

"Go on," groaned Mrs. Ordie. "George's turn comes next."

Mr. Beecher hesitated. "I will finish later," he suggested.

"No, finish now. You cannot leave me in this suspense. It would be cruel."

"Captain Ordie spoke of the plan of departure. The officers had but three horses amongst them, and the ladies and invalids were to take it in turn to ride; two, with a child, on each horse. All the party were to keep together. At that moment arose a horrible yell, which we knew proceeded from a Sowar, and one of them appeared at the entrance, tearing down the matting. All the light we had was a night-wick in some oil, but we saw his dark face. The children shrieked; the ladies also, and huddled themselves together in a corner; and Captain Ordie advanced to the entrance, and dealt the man a blow on the temple with the butt-end of his pistol."

"I hope it killed him!" she uttered, her eyes sparkling.

"I think it did, for he lay motionless. Captain Ordie kicked him out of the way, and, throwing himself on his hands and knees, crawled out cautiously to reconnoitre. Alas! we soon heard a struggle out-side; two more were upon him."

"And he was struck down! I *know* you are going to tell me so," she uttered, in a low, passionate wailing.

Mr. Beecher sat silent, his countenance full of distress.

"Louisa, my darling, be composed," interrupted Mrs. Beecher, who had come in search of her. "You know the worst now."

"Yes, I know the worst," she moaned. "They killed him, there and then."

"They did," whispered Mr. Beecher. "It was instantaneous."

She turned sick, and shook violently. But, by strong control, spoke again. "Finish the history. What became of you, inside?"

"It was all commotion in a moment, dreadful commotion. The poor terrified women attempted to fly; some succeeded, and I hope escaped. Providentially there were only these two troopers; had more been upon us, none would have been left. The first thing I saw distinctly was, that one of them had caught Mrs. Main's infant, and was tossing it on the point of his bayonet. He next seized her."

"Constance?" panted Mrs. Ordie.

"Yes. And killed her. Killed her instantly. Be thankful."

Mrs. Ordie pressed down her eyelids, as if she would shut out some unwelcome sight. "Constance murdered," she moaned. "And you tell me to be thankful!"

"Be ever thankful," impressively spoke the missionary. "Others met with a worse fate."

"Sarah Ann?" she shivered. "What became of her?"

"I am unable to tell you. I trust she escaped. At the moment of Mrs. Main's death, I fainted on the floor where I was lying, and that must have saved my life. When I recovered, not a creature—living—was to be seen. The children were lying about; they had been put out of their misery; two of the ladies, and the ensign. Poor young fellow! he had told us, in the day, that he had no parents or near friends to mourn him, so the loss of a little griff,¹⁵ if they did kill him, would not count for much."

"Dead? All?"

"All. The two ladies were Mrs. Holt and Mrs. Main. Of the other ladies I saw no trace. I trust," he added, clasping his hands fervently, "that they escaped. We shall hear of many miraculous escapes: I pray that theirs may be of the number."

"Now, Louisa, let me take you home," urged Mrs. Beecher. "You do know the worst."

"I must hear all," was the answer, uttered in a tone of frenzy. "If I thought there was a word, a recital, left untold to me, I must get up in the middle of the night, and come and ask for it."

"You have heard all," said Mr. Beecher— "all that I know. My own escape I will not trouble you with. It was wonderful: and I lost no time in coming home overland."

She leaned back on the sofa and closed her eyes. Mrs. Beecher was thinking of her random words—that she would rather lose everything in the world than her child. But her thoughts had not grasped the dreadful possibility of losing her husband.

"When did this happen?" Mrs. Ordie suddenly asked. "What date?"

"I mentioned it," said Mr. Beecher. "Late on the night of the 11th of May."

She leaned forward breathless, her eyes staring. "How late? The exact hour? Speak!"

"It must have been near half-past eleven. When Captain Ordie came in, we asked him the time (for, strange to say, in our hurried flight, not one of us put a watch about us), and his watch said a quarter-past eleven; and we were talking, after that, perhaps ten minutes. It must have been about twenty-five minutes after eleven when he was killed."

"Listen to that!" shrieked Louisa Ordie, seizing Mrs. Beecher by the arm. "It was the very hour I saw and heard him. How was he dressed?" she rapidly asked.

¹⁵ griff: an Englishman (or other European) newly arrived in India and unfamiliar with its culture, customs etc.

“In full regimentals.”

“There! There! Do you believe me now, Mrs. Beecher? Ah! you all ridiculed me then; but you hear it! It was my husband that came down the path here — appearing to me in the moment of his death.”

The reader must judge of this mystery as he pleases.

It happened; at least, to the positive belief of the lady, here called Mrs. Ordie, as her friends can testify. They reason with her in vain. They point out that twenty-five minutes after eleven in Delhi would not be twenty-five minutes after eleven here: they believe that it was, and could have been, nothing but her own vivid imagination, that her thoughts were probably running on her husband through the “George” in the “Vicar of Wakefield.” But Louisa Ordie nevertheless believes, and will believe to the end of time, that it was her husband in the spirit who showed himself to her that unhappy night.