

The Astrologer's Prediction *or* The Maniac's Fate

By Anonymous

Reginald, sole heir of the illustrious family of Di Venoni, was remarkable, from his earliest infancy, for a wild enthusiastic disposition. His father, it was currently reported, had died of an hereditary insanity; and his friends, when they marked the wild mysterious intelligence of his eye, and the determined energy of his aspect, would often assert that the dreadful malady still lingered in the veins of young Reginald. Whether such was the case or not, certain it is, that his mode of existence was but ill calculated to eradicate any symptoms of insanity. Left at an early age to the guidance of his mother, who since the death of her husband had lived in the strictest seclusion, he experienced but little variety to divert or enliven his attention. The gloomy château in which he resided was situated in Swabia on the borders of the Black Forest. It was a wild isolated mansion, built after the fashion of the day in the gloomiest style of Gothic architecture. At a distance rose the ruins of the once celebrated Castle of Rudstein, of which at present but a mouldering tower remained; and, beyond, the landscape was terminated by the deep shades and impenetrable recesses of the Black Forest.

Such was the spot in which the youth of Reginald was immured. But his solitude was soon to be relieved by the arrival of an unexpected resident. On the anniversary of his eighteenth year, an old man, apparently worn down with age and infirmity, took up his abode at the ruined tower of Rudstein. He seldom stirred out during the day; and from the singular circumstance of his perpetually burning a lamp in the tower, the villagers naturally enough concluded that he was an emissary of the devil. This report soon acquired considerable notoriety; and having at last reached the ears of Reginald through the medium of a gossiping gardener, his curiosity was awakened, and he resolved to introduce himself into the presence of the sage, and ascertain the motives of his singular seclusion. Impressed with this resolution he abruptly (quitted the château of his mother, and bent his steps towards the ruined tower, which was situated at a trifling distance from his estate. It was a gloomy night, and the spirit of the storm seemed abroad on the wings of the wind. As the clock from the village church struck twelve, he gained the ruin; and ascending the time-worn staircase, that tottered at each step he took, reached with some labour the apartment of the philosopher. The door was thrown open, and the old man was seated by the grated casement. His appearance was awfully impressive. A long white beard depended from his chin, and his feeble frame with difficulty sustained a horoscope that was directed to the heavens. Books, written in unknown characters of cabalism, were promiscuously strewed about the floor; and an alabaster vase, engraved with the sign of the Zodiac, and circled by mysterious letters, was stationed on the table. The appearance of the Astrologer himself was equally impressive. He was habited in a suit of black velvet, fancifully embroidered with gold, and belted with a band of silver. His thin locks hung streaming in the wind, and his right hand grasped a wand of ebony. On the entrance of a stranger he rose from his seat, and bent a scrutinizing glance on the anxious countenance of Reginald.

‘Child of ill-starred fortunes!’ he exclaimed in a hollow tone, ‘dost thou come to pry into the secrets of futurity? Avoid me, for thy life, or, what is dearer still, thine eternal happiness! for I say unto thee, Reginald Di Venoni, it is better that thou hadst never been born, than permitted to seal thy ruin in a spot which, in after years, shall be the witness of thy fall.’

The countenance of the Astrologer as he uttered these words was singularly terrific, and rung

in the ears of Reginald like his death-knell. 'I am innocent, father!' he falteringly replied, 'nor will my disposition suffer me to perpetrate the sins you speak of.'—'Hah!' resumed the prophet, 'man is indeed innocent, till the express moment of his damnation; but the star of thy destiny already wanes in the heaven, and the fortunes of the proud family of Venoni must decline with it. Look to the west! Yon planet that shines so brightly in the night-sky, is the star of thy nativity. When next thou shalt behold it, shooting downward like a meteor through the hemisphere, think on the words of the prophet and tremble. A deed of blood will be done, and thou art he that shall perpetrate it!'

At this instant the moon peeped forth from the dun clouds that lagged slowly in the firmament, and shed a mild radiance upon the earth. To the west, a single bright star was visible. It was the star of Reginald's nativity. He gazed with eyes fixed in the breathless intensity of expectation, and watched it till the passing clouds concealed its radiance from his view. The Astrologer, in the meantime, had resumed his station at the window. He raised the horoscope to heaven. His frame seemed trembling with convulsion. Twice he passed his hand across his brow, and shuddered as he beheld the aspect of the heavens. 'But a few days,' he said, 'are yet left me on earth, and then shall my spirit know the eternal repose of the grave. The star of my nativity is dim and pale. It will never be bright again, and the aged one will never know comfort more. Away!' he continued, motioning Reginald from his sight, 'disturb not the last moments of a dying man; in three days return, and under the base of this ruin inter the corpse that you will find mouldering within. Away!'

Impressed with a strange awe, Reginald could make no reply. He remained as it were entranced; and after the lapse of a few minutes rushed from the tower, and returned in a state of disquietude to the gloomy *château* of his mother.

The three days had now elapsed, and, faithful to his promise, Reginald pursued his route back to the tower. He reached it at nightfall, and tremblingly entered the fatal apartment. All within was silent, but his steps returned a hollow echo as he passed. The wind sighed around the ruin, and the raven from the roofless turrets had already commenced his death-song. He entered. The Astrologer, as before, was seated by the window, apparently in profound abstraction, and the horoscope was placed by his side. Fearful of disturbing his repose, Reginald approached with caution. The old man stirred not. Emboldened by so unexpected a silence, he advanced and looked at the face of the Astrologer. It was a corpse he gazed on,—the relic of what had once been life. Petrified with horror at the sight, the memory of his former promise escaped him, and he rushed in agony from the apartment.

For many days the fever of his mind continued unabated. He frequently became delirious, and in the hour of his lunacy was accustomed to talk of an evil spirit that had visited him in his slumbers. His mother was shocked at such evident symptoms of derangement. She remembered the fate of her husband; and implored Reginald, as he valued her affection, to recruit the agitation of his spirits by travel. With some difficulty he was induced to quit the home of his infancy. The expostulations of the countess at last prevailed, and he left the *Château Di Venoni* for the sunny climes of Italy.

Time rolled on; and a constant succession of novelty had produced so beneficial an effect, that scarcely any traces remained of the once mysterious and enthusiastic Venoni. Occasionally his mind was disturbed and gloomy, but a perpetual recurrence of amusement diverted the influence of past recollection, and rendered him at least as tranquil as it was in the power of his nature to permit. He continued for years abroad, during which time he wrote frequently to his mother, who still continued at the *Château Di Venoni*, and at last announced his intention of settling finally at

Venice. He had remained but a few months in the city, when, at the gay period of the Carnival, he was introduced, as a foreign nobleman, to the beautiful daughter of the Doge. She was amiable, accomplished, and endowed with every requisite to ensure permanent felicity. Reginald was charmed with her beauty, and infatuated with the excelling qualities of her mind. He confessed his attachment, and was informed with a blush that the affection was mutual. Nothing, therefore, remained but application to the Doge; who was instantly addressed on the subject, and implored to consummate the felicity of the young couple. The request was attended with success, and the happiness of the lovers was complete.

On the day fixed for the wedding, a brilliant assemblage of beauty thronged the ducal palace of St Mark. All Venice crowded to the festival; and, in the presence of the gayest noblemen of Italy, Reginald Count Di Venoni received the hand of Marcelia, the envied daughter of the Doge. In the evening, a masqued festival was given at the palace; but the young couple, anxious to be alone, escaped the scene of revelry, and hurried in their gondola to the château that was prepared for their reception.

It was a fine moonlight night. The mild beams of the planets sparkled on the silver bosom of the Adriatic, and the light tones of music, 'by distance made more sweet', came wafted on the western gale. A thousand lamps, from the illuminated squares of the city, reflected their burnished hues along the wave, and the mellow chaunt of the gondoliers kept time to the gentle splashing of their oars. The hearts of the lovers were full, and the witching spirit of the hour passed with all its loveliness into their souls. On a sudden a deep groan escaped the overcharged heart of Reginald. He had looked to the western hemisphere, and the star which, at that moment, flashed brightly in the horizon, reminded him of the awful scene which he had witnessed at the tower of Rudstein. His eye sparkled with delirious brilliancy; and had not a shower of tears come opportunely to his relief, the consequence might have been fatal. But the affectionate caresses of his young bride sticceeded for the present in soothing his agitation, and restoring his mind to its former tranquil temperament.

A few months had now elapsed from the period of his marriage, and the heart of Reginald was happy. He loved Marcelia, and was tenderly beloved in return. Nothing, therefore, remained to complete his felicity but the presence of his mother, the Countess. He wrote accordingly to intreat that she would come and reside with him at Venice, but was informed by her confessor in reply, that she was dangerously ill, and requested the immediate attendance of her son. On the receipt of this afflicting intelligence he hurried with Marcelia to the Château Di Venoni. The countess was still alive when he entered, and received him with an affectionate embrace. But the exertion of so unexpected an interview with her son, was too great for the agitated spirits of the parent, and she expired in the act of folding him to her arms.

From this moment the mind of Reginald assumed a tone of the most confirmed dejection. He followed his mother to the grave, and was observed to smile with unutterable meaning as he returned home from the funeral. The Château Di Venoni increased the native depression of his spirits, and the appearance of the ruined tower never failed to imprint a dark frown upon his brow. He would wander for days from his home, and when he returned, the moody expression of his countenance alarmed the affection of his wife. She did all in her power to assuage his anguish, but his melancholy remained unabated. Sometimes, when the fit was on him, he would repulse her with fury; but, in his gentler moments, would gaze on her as on a sweet vision of vanished happiness.

He was one evening wandering with her through the village, when his conversation assumed a more dejected tone than usual. The sun was slowly setting, and their route back to the château

lay through the churchyard where the ashes of the countess reposed. Reginald seated himself with Marcelia by the grave, and plucking a few wild flowers from the turf, exclaimed, 'Are you not anxious to join my mother, sweet girl? She has gone to the land of the blest—to the land of love and sunshine! If we are happy in this world, what will be our state of happiness in the next? Let us fly to unite our bliss with hers, and the measure of our joy will be full.' As he tittered these words his eye glared with delirium, and his hand seemed searching for a weapon. Marcelia, alarmed at his appearance, hurried him from the spot, and clasping his hand in hers, drew him gently onward.

The sun in the meantime had sunk, and the stars of evening came out in their glory. Brilliant above all shone the fatal western planet, the star of Reginald's nativity. He observed it with horror, and pointed it out to the notice of Marcelia. 'The hand of heaven is in it!' he mentally exclaimed, 'and the proud fortunes of Venoni hasten to a close.' At this instant the ruined tower of Rudstein appeared in sight, with the moon shining full upon it. 'It is the place,' resumed the maniac, 'where a deed of blood must be done, and I am he that must perpetrate it! But fear not, my poor girl,' he added, in a milder tone, while the tears sprang to his eyes, 'thy Reginald cannot harm thee; he may be wretched, but he never shall be guilty!' With these words he reached the château, and threw himself on his couch in restless anxiety of mind.

Night waned, morning dawned on the upland hills of the scenery, and with it came a renewal of Reginald's disorder. The day was stormy, and in unison with the troubled feeling of his spirit. He had been absent from Marcelia since day break, and had given her no promise of return. But as she was seated at twilight near the lattice, playing on her harp a favourite Venetian canzonet, the folding doors flew open, and Reginald made his appearance. His eye was red, with the deepest—the deadliest madness, and his whole frame seemed unusually convulsed. 'Twas not a dream,' he exclaimed, 'I have seen her and she has beckoned us to follow.' 'Seen her, seen who?' said Marcelia, alarmed at his phrenzy. 'My mother,' replied the maniac. 'Listen while I repeat the horrid narrative. Methought as I was wandering in the forest, a sylph of heaven approached, and revealed the countenance of my mother, I flew to join her but was withheld by a sage who pointed to the western star. On a sudden loud shrieks were heard, and the sylph assumed the guise of a demon. Her figure towered to an awful height, and she pointed in scornful derision to thee; yes, to thee, my Marcelia. With rage she drew thee towards me. I seized—I murdered thee; and hollow groans broke on the midnight gale. The voice of the fiendish Astrologer was heard shouting as from a charnel house, "The destiny is accomplished, and the victim may retire with honour." Then; methought, the fair front of heaven was obscured, and thick gouts of clotted, clammy blood showered down in torrents from the blackened clouds of the west. The star shot through the air, and—the phantom of my mother again beckoned me to follow.'

The maniac ceased, and rushed in agony from the apartment. Marcelia followed and discovered him leaning in a trance against the wainscot of the library. With gentlest motion she drew his hand in hers, and led him into the open air. They rambled on, heedless of the gathering storm, until they discovered themselves at the base of the tower of Rudstein. Suddenly the maniac paused. A horrid thought seemed flashing across his brain, as with giant grasp he seized Marcelia in his arms, and bore her to the fatal apartment. In vain she shrieked for help, for pity. 'Dear Reginald, it is Marcelia who speaks, you cannot surely harm her.' He heard—he heeded not, nor once staid his steps, till he reached the room of death. On a sudden his countenance lost its wildness, and assumed a more fearful, but composed look of determined madness. He advanced to the window, and gazed on the stormy face of heaven. Dark clouds flitted across the

horizon, and hollow thunder echoed awfully in the distance. To the west the fatal star was still visible, but shone with sickly lustre. At this instant a flash of lightning re-illuminated the whole apartment, and threw a broad red glare upon a skeleton, that mouldered upon the floor. Reginald observed it with affright, and remembered the unburied Astrologer. He advanced to Marcelia, and pointing to the rising moon, 'A dark cloud is sailing by,' he shudderingly exclaimed, 'but ere the full orb again shines forth, thou shalt die, I will accompany thee in death, and hand in hand will we pass into the presence of our mother.' The poor girl shrieked for pity, but her voice was lost in the angry ravings of the storm. The cloud in the meantime sailed on, —it approached—the moon was dimmed, darkened, and finally buried in its gloom. The maniac marked the hour, and rushed with a fearful cry towards his victim. With murderous resolution he grasped her throat, while the helpless hand and half strangled articulation, implored his compassion. After one final struggle the hollow death rattle announced that life was extinct, and that the murderer held a corpse in his arms. An interval of reason now occurred, and on the partial restoration of his mind, Reginald discovered himself the unconscious murderer of Marcelia. Madness—deepest madness again took possession of his faculties. He laughed—he shouted aloud with the unearthly yellings of a fiend, and in the raging violence of his delirium, hurled himself headlong from the summit of the tower.

In the morning the bodies of the young couple were discovered, and buried in the same tomb. The fatal ruin of Rudstein still exists; but is now commonly avoided as the residence of the spirits of the departed. Day by day it slowly crumbles to earth, and affords a shelter for the night raven, or the wild beasts of the forests. Superstition has consecrated it to herself, and the tradition of the country has invested it with all the awful appendages of a charnel house. The wanderer who passes at night-fall, shudders while he surveys its utter desolation, and exclaims as he journies on, 'Surely this is a spot where guilt may thrive in safety, or bigotry weave a spell to enthrall her misguided votaries.'