

**ERNESTINE DE LACY;
OR, THE ROBBERS' FOUNDLING.
CHAPTER I.**

"Clouds burst, skies flash, oh, dreadful hour!
More fiercely pours the storm!
Yet, here one thought has still the power
To keep my bosom warm." **BYRON.**

THE fierce wind howled in hollow gusts; the thunder rolled in tremendous peals; the red lightning glared in the dark vault of heaven, and the rain, in fierce torrents, descended upon the earth. The midnight hour had long since pealed, and the time, and all around, bespoke horror and gloom. Accompanied by his faithful servant, Hugo, a gentleman, was at this dreadful hour riding through an extensive wood, whose closely clustered trees rendered it almost impenetrable, and the thickly spread foliage made it nearly impervious to the light of heaven, although it could not now keep out the fury of the elements, or resist the heavy shower of rain which forced its way through the leaves, and between the intervening branches, and drenched the travellers to the skin.

The gentleman was a tall, powerful, and fine-looking man; and his countenance might have been considered handsome, were it not for a certain expression of haughtiness and sternness which gave a forbidding cast to his features, and the contraction of his long, dark brows, which impressed the beholder with the idea, that malevolence, revenge, and treachery, held a predominant sway over his mind. His complexion was pale, and it required no very keen perception to discover, that his breast was the abode of care, mingled with other passions, sufficient to excite him to any deed of desperation. Ever and anon, as the lightning darted across his face, there was a smile of contempt upon it, which was particularly repulsive; and he seemed to mark the raging of the tempest, with the utmost indifference.

"Rage, on ye furious elements," he soliloquized, unheedful of the proximity of his domestic, "exhaust your wrath on me; I mind ye not. Ye cannot equal the tempest of my soul. Howl, ye winds; roar, ye thunders, more deafening than the yells and cries of a forest of wolves; flash on, ye forked lightnings; descend ye overwhelming torrents; I mock, defy your utmost wrath; my heart is adamant, and my mind callous of danger! Black-visaged fate hath swept away every sentiment of feeling it once contained; treachery hath made it torpid; I have no feeling now; I have no care; I have done with the world, and mind not how soon I am rid of it. But no,—there is one thought—one wish, which makes me cling to life; that thought is vengeance. Yes, vengeance, not on those who have assisted to plunder me of my property, for that was occasioned by my own folly and mad infatuation; but upon him who has made a desert of my heart; he who has robbed me of that which my soul more prized than all the riches the world could bestow. It is for that alone I wish not yet to die; the time may come—it shall come!"

"It is a pity we left the inn at which we stopped in the evening, my lord," said Hugo, riding up to his master, and venturing to interrupt him in his meditations: "the sky then looked lowry, and I thought we should have a rough night of it. By the mass, an' we are in a pretty situation; benighted in this dismal wood, where doubtless gentlemen of no very reputable description take up their abode, and may pounce upon us with a supper of cold steel, before we are aware of them; and with not the least signs of a house or shelter of any description."

"My faithful Hugo," said his master, somewhat relaxing the usual sternness of his looks, as he spoke,—"My faithful Hugo, it was folly in thee to persist in following the broken fortunes of thy master, and thus expose thyself to all the miseries that may attend him. Thou knowest full well that I am now a ruined man, and know not whither I am bound, or upon what purpose I am going; prith'ee turn thee back, and take with thee the gratitude of one whom paltry title now only distinguishes from the lowly station in which thou movest."

"Never, my lord," exclaimed Hugo, emphatically, "thou hast been a kind master to me; I have lived with thee from childhood, my father, and my father's father grew grey in the service of thy family, and never, never, while I have life, will I desert thee."

"Good, faithful fellow," ejaculated the other, as he pressed the hand of Hugo fervently, and seemed much moved by his manner; "be it even as thou wilt; henceforth we are friends and equals; forsooth, what do I now possess, that I should lord it over my fellows? The haughty peer deprived of that which brings him adulation, is but a man after all, and oh, how much less than that man who has never mingled in the ostentatious world of pomp and vanity, and knows no luxury beyond those frugal necessities, which his own honest labour produces him, and renders doubly sweet."

"Nay, my lord, I do beseech thee give not way to these melancholy thoughts," said his domestic, "what if Fortune frowns to day, to-morrow she may once more beam upon thee her most radiant smiles."

The gentleman shook his head, and relapsed into his former state of apathy.

Still did the furious tempest continue its fierce bantling, and its violence seemed rather to increase than abate. Ever and anon, trees that had stood the power of the elements for centuries, were torn up by the roots, or split in twain by the lightning; the wind had risen

to a perfect hurricane, and swept the rain in the faces of the travellers in a cloud, which completely blinded them. Altogether the scene was one of the most awful that the imagination could conceive. Still did the travellers pursue their way as well as they could, but, instead of finding out a path, they appeared to become more and more entangled in the wood's intricate mazes.

"The blessed Virgin protect us; it is a terrible night," exclaimed Hugo, but he had scarcely given utterance to the words, when a terrific flash of lightning caught the tree near which he was, and split it to the root, striking him at the same time from his horse.

After recovering a little from the shock which this circumstance had given him, the gentleman went to the spot where Hugo had fallen, to see whether he was hurt. He called to him, he shook him, but all to no purpose, and the next moment another flash of lightning revealed to him that the poor fellow was a blackened corpse, and by his side was the body of his horse, which the electric fluid had also killed.

"Poor fellow!" said his master, as he stooped over the disfigured body of his devoted vassal, "this, this is the reward thou meetest for following the fortunes of the abandoned of mankind. Thus hath perished my only remaining friend."

He stood for a second or two in melancholy contemplation of the sad spectacle; then, remounting his jaded horse he once more proceeded, as well as he was able. At length he broke through the more intricate portion of the wood, and was enabled to travel without so much difficulty. The storm also abated some of its violence, and the rain almost entirely subsided. By degrees the thunder ceased to roar, the lightning no longer darted along the sky, and the wind seemed to have exhausted nearly all its violence, and only whistled in fitful gusts among the dark and heavy laden foliage.

The traveller spurred on his horse, and endeavoured to find out a path, but all traces, if there had ever been one, were entirely obliterated. Shortly afterwards, however, he thought he beheld a large dark object before him, which struck him as being a building of some description. Completely exhausted with fatigue, he urged on his tired steed hoping his ideas would be realized, and that he might be able to obtain rest and shelter for a few hours.

He had not proceeded far when he beheld a light glimmering at a short distance from him, and which appeared to issue from a casement, he, therefore, felt certain that his first conjectures were true. The light, however, very shortly disappeared, but the traveller pursued his way in the direction in which he had seen it, and soon afterwards stopped at an ancient looking castle surrounded with a moat, and which had doubtless, formerly been nearly impregnable, but time had made sad ravages with it in many places; one wing was entirely in ruins, and the other part considerably delapidated. The drawbridge was down, and in all other respects it had the appearance of not being inhabited, yet was the traveller confident that the light he had observed had proceeded from one of its casements.

"Perhaps robbers have made it their retreat," he reflected, "for who else would think of taking up their residence in such a gloomy ruinous place? But, no matter," he added, "I have nothing that I care about losing—no, not even my life."

Having thus expressed himself, he tied his horse to a tree, and crossed the drawbridge. He was astonished to find the castle-gate standing wide open, and there was nothing whatever to obstruct his entrance. Reckless of danger, he did not hesitate a moment, but entered the silent court, which he crossed as well as he was able, his feet often coming in contact with the fragments of broken stone that had fallen from the building. As he advanced and looked up towards the casement he once more perceived the light, and was now, therefore, positive that his surmises as to the castle being inhabited were correct; and he therefore hastened to the door which he saw opposite to him, which immediately yielded to his touch, and he entered the building. The owl screeched dismally as he did so, and the bat flitted past him, as though warning him from the place as an intruder upon their territories, but nothing daunted, he scrambled his way along, for it was pitch dark, and the floor was covered like the court-yard, with broken fragments of masonry. Once he paused, as he thought he heard a distant sound, as of loud laughter, but all being still, he once more groped his way, until his hand came in contact with the handle of a door, which was also ajar, and pulling it open, he found himself at the foot of a flight of stairs. These he ascended, and when he had arrived at the top, he once more heard the sounds that had before vibrated on his ears, and which he was now certain was loud laughter in the voices of several men, and which strengthened his first idea, namely, that the old castle was the haunt of robbers.

Still nothing daunted, he hastened along a gallery to which the stairs had conducted him, until he stopped at a door at the further end, from the interstices of which a glaring light streamed, and from the room to which it opened, he had no doubt the sounds proceeded which he had heard. This supposition was speedily confirmed, for just as the traveller arrived at the door, he heard the following chorus, sung, apparently with much glee, by a number of voices:—

Round, merrily round push the flask,
Bacchus, a God, is all own divine;

Drink, drink, we in pleasure will bask,
The care of the robbers e'er drowned in wine!

SOLO.

Crusty old fools to our joys may be cold,
Let them preach while we handle their bright yellow gold;

Those who are honest, may meet fortunes frown,
Here we've a world and a mine of our own!

CHORUS—Then, round, &c.

The voices ceased, and in a moment afterwards, at some order which appeared to be given by one of the party, but which the traveller could not catch, there was a great clattering as of mail and swords, and before he had time to endeavour to screen himself from observation, if such had been his wish, the door was thrown back on its hinges, and revealed him to a number of ferocious looking men, all well armed, and who gazed upon the intruder with the most inexpressible astonishment.

"Ah! a spy! a spy!" shouted several voices, and the next instant a dozen swords were pointed at his breast, and he was completely surrounded.

"Hold!" cried a tall muscular man, (who appeared to be the captain of the gang,) and darting from the head of the table at which they had been carousing; "I command ye to fall back and harm him not; it is cowardly to murder one man in cold blood, and before ye are certain that he is what ye suspect him to be. If he be a spy, he will have to pay dearly for his temerity!"

In a moment the robbers returned their swords to their scabbards, and fell back at their captain's command, and the latter, after fixing a stern look upon the traveller, which he returned with equal firmness, said in a commanding tone:—

"Come forward, stranger!"

The traveller coolly folded his arms, and walking up to within a few paces of the captain, confronted him with a bold and steady look.

"Methinks thou dost carry a pretty brazen front, young man," said the captain, "a very brazen front, considering the perilous situation thou art placed in."

"I and peril have become familiar," replied the traveller firmly, "I know not why I should fear to meet it here."

"Humph!" said the robber, evidently astonished at the coolness of the individual he addressed, and whose tall and commanding figure, and the dignity of his whole demeanour, were sufficient to create admiration; "who and what art thou?"

"A man, as thou seest;" was the answer.

"What brought thee hither?"

"I was benighted in the wood, and sought rest and shelter;" answered the stranger.

"And knew ye not that this castle was the retreat of Black Ruthven and his brave and desperate associates?"

"I did not, and if I had I should not have hesitated to enter it, just the same."

"Why?"

"Because I have nothing to lose but my life, and of that I am weary, but for one thing."

"And what is that?"

"The hope of vengeance against mine enemies."

"Thy dress is rich, thy bearing noble; art thou not a gentleman?"

"I was what the world calls so, a short time since, but fortune and me have parted company for ever."

The captain eyed the traveller with more apparent interest than before; and the robbers seemed to look upon him no longer with feelings of suspicion, but of admiration.

"Thou seemest to speak with the candour of truth," observed the former. "wilt thou join us?"

"He must, or never more quit this place alive!" exclaimed one of the ruffians.

"Hold thy peace, Ulric," said the captain, "and leave it me, stranger," he continued, "thou sayest thou art unfortunate; that thou art reckless of danger; that the world hath wronged thee; then what sayest thou, wilt thou not retaliate upon the world, and join as brave and jovial a set of fellows as there is in existence?"

The traveller paused and reflected; traversed the apartment several times, and then turning to the captain, said:—

"I must have time to reflect on this proposition of thine; it has taken me by surprise, and —"

"Till the morning we will give thee," said the captain, "but remember that Ulric has spoken the truth; no person who by accident wanders to our retreat is ever suffered to leave it alive, and has no alternative but to join us, or to perish through his mad attachment to what canting priests and idiots call honesty. It is our rule, and we never on any account depart from it. Thou seemest weary, refresh thyself, and when thou hast done, Ulric will conduct thee to a chamber where thou mayest repose comfortably as ever thou didst in thine own castle."

Having thus spoken, Ruthven motioned the stranger to be seated, who readily complied, after having first informed them where he had left his horse, which was immediately taken possession of. Before the traveller had finished his meal, the captain and most of the gang retired, leaving him only in the company of Ulric and four others. When he had concluded his repast, the latter asked him whether he wished to retire, and having replied in the affirmative, the robber

took up a fresh trimmed lamp, after the traveller's sword had been taken from him, and beckoned him to follow. He led the way up two or three winding flights of stairs, and at last stopped before a ponderous iron door, which Ulric unlocked, and giving him the lamp, and pointing to a bed in one corner of the room departed: after having first secured the door on the outside, by lock, bolt, and bar.

The morning dawned, and at an early hour the traveller heard his door unfastened, and Ulric appeared to conduct him to the spacious apartment below, where he found the captain and the rest of the gang assembled, the former of whom having motioned him to the end of the board, whereon the mornings repast was spread, thus addressed him:—

"Stranger, hast thou reflected on the proposition I made thee last night?"

"I have," replied the traveller, laconically.

"And to what determination hast thou come?"

"I am a ruined man," answered the stranger, "the bugbear honesty and I have done with each other, and —"

"Thou dost consent to join us, then?"

"I do."

"And art ready to take the oath we always administer; to be faithful to his captain and his comrades?" demanded Ruthven.

"I am ready," replied the other.

In an instant he was surrounded by the gang, and being commanded to kneel, they crossed their swords over his head, while a goblet, containing a red looking liquid was placed in his hand, and Ruthven in a loud and solemn voice, exclaimed;—

"Thou swearest eternal fidelity to Black Ruthven and his comrades; to keep faithful to them in every emergency, unto the death; to perform the commands of the captain be it even the murder of thine own father, thy mother, or any of thy relations; and on the peril of their most deadly vengeance?"

"I swear," answered the stranger, in a firm voice.

"Thy name."

"That do I wish to keep secret;—thou mayest call me, however, OSMOND, THE AVENGER!"

"Be it so," said Ruthven, "Comrades, all hail to our new brother, Osmond, the Avenger!"

"All hail to our new brother, Osmond, the Avenger!" shook the vaulted roof, and the robbers brandished their glittering weapons above his head.

CHAPTER II.

"In truth she was a lovely babe,
The stamp of innocence upon
Her infant brow."

THE ORPHAN.

For many years the County of Northumberland had been infested with numerous bands of robbers, who bade defiance to the law, and in their intricate caverns and strong castellated fastnesses, repelled every force that was sent against them, and excited a universal panic in the minds of the inhabitants for miles around. Innumerable were the depredations they committed, and their crimes of bloodshed created a feeling of universal horror and consternation.

Of all these marauders, none bore a more desperate character than *Black Ruthven*, a name which he had acquired from the darkness of his complexion, and his always appearing in a sable dress, with a large black slouch hat, and waving feathers, that fell upon his shoulder.

This man, with his ferocious gang, had taken possession of Alwyn Castle, and defied every power to make him abandon it. For many years he had carried on triumphant career of villany, when he was at length slain in a desperate conflict with the retainers of a nobleman, on whom he had made an attack, and it was hoped, that the gang being thus deprived of their leader, would have dispersed, but this hope was soon found to be fallacious; he was succeeded by another equally as daring, although his nefarious deeds were not accompanied with that degree of savage cruelty which had characterised the actions of his predecessor. This was no other than the man we have introduced to the reader in the previous chapter, as *Osmond the Avenger*.

Many good traits, it was stated, accompanied the robber chief in his guilty practices; for instance, he never committed murder, but when it was unavoidable for the accomplishment of his wishes, and to the poor and the fair sex, he always proved a friend.

One night, as Osmond and a portion of his gang was returning from one of his lawless expeditions, when they had reached that part of the wood near which the Castle of Alwyn stood, he observed a bundle lying in his path, and picking it up, he unfolded the mantle in which it was enveloped, and to his utter astonishment, beheld one of the sweetest female infants his eyes had ever rested on.

"By the mass an' we have found a prize, Captain," exclaimed Arnold, the lieutenant of Osmond, as he knelt down and gazed in the little sleeping innocent's face, "an infant, and a beautiful one too; poor brat, thou hast fallen from bad hands into worse, I am fearful."

"How so?" answered Osmond, whose heart, as we have before mentioned, was susceptible to some of the gentler feelings of nature, and who could not, as he gazed upon the unconscious babe, help admiring its beauty;—"Thinkest thou I would harm this little innocent? No! A murrian light upon he who could;