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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Vinci
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Kant Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Plato Scott
Andersen Andersen Cervantes Burton Hesse Harte
London Descartes Wells Voltaire Cooke
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
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The Haunted Chamber A Novel

Duchess

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CHAPTER I.

The sun has "dropped down," and the "day is dead." The silence and calm of coming night are over everything. The shadowy twilight lies softly on sleeping flowers and swaying boughs, on quiet fountains—the marble basins of which gleam snow-white in the uncertain light—on the glimpse of the distant ocean seen through the giant elms. A floating mist hangs in the still warm air, making heaven and earth mingle in one sweet confusion.

The ivy creeping up the ancient walls of the castle is rustling and whispering as the evening breeze sweeps over it. High up the tendrils climb, past mullioned windows and quaint devices, until they reach even to the old tower, and twine lovingly round it, and push through the long apertures in the masonry of the walls of the haunted chamber.

It is here that the shadows cast their heaviest gloom. All this corner of the old tower is wrapped in darkness, as though to obscure the scene of terrible crimes of past centuries.

Ghosts of dead-and-gone lords and ladies seem to peer out mysteriously from the openings in this quaint chamber, wherein no servant, male or female, of the castle has ever yet been known to set foot. It is full of dire horrors to them, and replete with legends of by-gone days and grewsome sights ghastly enough to make the stoutest heart quail.

In the days of the Stuarts an old earl had hanged himself in that room, rather than face the world with dishonor attached to his name; and earlier still a beauteous dame, fair but frail, had been incarcerated there, and slowly starved to death by her relentless lord. There was even in the last century a baronet—the earldom had been lost to the Dynecourts during the Commonwealth—who, having quarreled with his friend over a reigning belle, had smitten him across the cheek with his glove, and then challenged him to mortal combat. The duel had been fought in the luckless chamber, and had only ended with the death of both combatants; the blood stains upon the flooring were large and deep, and to this day the boards bear silent witness to the sanguinary character of that secret fight.

Just now, standing outside the castle in the warmth and softness of the dying daylight, one can hardly think of by-gone horrors, or aught that is sad and sinful.

There is an air of bustle and expectancy within-doors that betokens coming guests; the servants are moving to and fro noiselessly but busily, and now and then the stately housekeeper passes from room to room uttering commands and injunctions to the maids as she goes. No less occupied and anxious is the butler, as he surveys the work of the footmen. It is so long since the old place has had a resident master, and so much longer still since guests have been invited to it, that the household are more than ordinarily excited at the change now about to take place.

Sir Adrian Dynecourt, after a prolonged tour on the Continent and lingering visits to the East, has at last come home with the avowed intention of becoming a staid country gentleman, and of settling down to the cultivation of turnips, the breeding of prize oxen, and the determination to be the M.F.H. when old Lord Dartree shall have fulfilled his declared intention of retiring in his favor. He is a tall young man, lithe and active. His skin, though naturally fair, is bronzed by foreign travel. His hair is a light brown, cut very close to his head. His eyes are large, clear, and honest, and of a peculiarly dark violet; they are beautiful eyes, winning and sweet, and steady in their glance. His mouth, shaded by a drooping fair mustache, is large and firm, yet very prone to laughter.

It is quite the end of the London season, and Sir Adrian has hurried down from town to give directions for the reception of some people whom he has invited to stay with him during the slaughter of the partridges.

Now all is complete, and the last train from London being due half an hour ago Sir Adrian is standing on the steps of his hall-door anxiously awaiting some of his guests.

There is even a touch of genuine impatience in his manner, which could hardly be attributed to the ordinary longing of a young man to see a few of his friends. Sir Adrian's anxiety is open and undisguised, and there is a little frown upon his brow. Presently his face brightens as he hears the roll of carriage-wheels. When the carriage turns the corner of the drive, and the horses are pulled up at the hall

door, Sir Adrian sees a fair face at the window that puts to flight all the fears he has been harboring for the last half hour.

"You have come?" he says delightedly, running down the steps and opening the carriage door himself. "I am so glad! I began to think the train had run away with you, or that the horses had bolted."

"Such a journey as it has been!" exclaims a voice not belonging to the face that had looked from the carriage at Sir Adrian. "It has been tiresome to the last degree. I really don't know when I felt so fatigued!"

A little woman, small and fair, steps languidly to the ground as she says this, and glances pathetically at her host. She is beautifully "got up," both in dress and complexion, and at a first glance appears almost girlish. Laying her hand in Sir Adrian's, she lets it rest there, as though glad to be at her journey's end, conveying at the same time by a gentle pressure of her taper fingers the fact that she is even more glad that the end of her journey has brought her to him. She looks up at him with her red lips drooping as if tired, and with a bewildered expression in her pretty blue eyes that adds to the charm of her face.

"It's an awful distance from town!" says Sir Adrian, as if apologizing for the spot on which his grand old castle has been built. "And it was more than good of you to come to me. I can only try to make up to you for the discomfort you have experienced to-day by throwing all possible chances of amusement in your way whilst you stay here."

By this time she has withdrawn her hand, and so he is free to go up to his other guest and bid her welcome. He says nothing to her, strange to say, but it is his hand that seeks to retain hers this time, and it is his eyes that look longingly into the face before him.

"You are tired, too?" he says at length. "Come into the house and rest awhile before dinner. You will like to go to your rooms at once, perhaps?" he adds, turning to his two visitors.

"Thank you—yes. If you will have our tea sent upstairs," replies Mrs. Talbot plaintively, "it will be such a comfort!" she always speaks in a somewhat pouting tone, and with heavy emphasis.

"Tea—nonsense!" responds Sir Adrian. "There's nothing like champagne as a pick-me-up. I'll send you tea also; but, take my advice, and try the champagne."

"Oh, thank you, I shall so much prefer my tea!" Mrs. Talbot declares, with a graceful little shrug of her shoulders, at which her friend Miss Delmaine laughs aloud.

"I accept your advice, Sir Adrian," she says, casting a mischievous glance at him from under her long lashes. "And—yes, Dora will take champagne too—when it comes."

"Naughty girl!" exclaims Mrs. Talbot, with a little flickering smile. Dora Talbot seldom smiles, having learned by experience that her delicate face looks prettier in repose. "Come, then, Sir Adrian," she adds, "let us enter your enchanted castle."

The servants by this time have taken in all their luggage—that is, as much as they have been able to bring in the carriage; and now the two ladies walk up the steps and enter the hall, their host beside them.

Mrs. Talbot, who has recovered her spirits a little, is chattering gayly, and monopolizing Sir Adrian to the best of her ability, whilst Miss Delmaine is strangely silent, and seems lost in a kind of pleased wonder as she gazes upon all her charming surroundings.

The last rays of light are streaming in through the stained-glass windows, rendering the old hall full of mysterious beauty. The grim warriors in their coats of mail seem, to the entranced gaze of Florence Delmaine, to be making ready to spring from the niches which hold them.

Waking from her dream as she reaches the foot of the stone staircase, she says abruptly, but with a lovely smile playing round her mouth—

"Surely, Sir Adrian, you have a ghost in this beautiful old place, or a secret staircase, or at least a bogey of some sort? Do not spoil the romantic look of it by telling me you have no tale of terror to impart, no history of a ghostly visitant who walks these halls at the dead of night."

"We have no ghost here, I am sorry to say," answers Sir Adrian, laughing. "For the first time I feel distressed and ashamed that it should be so. We can only boast a haunted chamber; but there are certain legends about it, I am proud to say, the bare narration of which would make even the stoutest quail."

"Good gracious—how distinctly unpleasant!" exclaims Mrs. Talbot, with a nervous and very effective shudder.

"How distinctly delicious, you mean!" puts in Miss Delmaine. "Sir Adrian, is this chamber anywhere near where I shall sleep?"

"Oh, no; you need not be afraid of that!" answers Dynecourt hastily.

"I am not afraid," declares the girl saucily. "I have all my life been seeking an adventure of some sort. I am tired of my prosaic existence. I want to know what dwellers in the shadowy realms of ghostland are like."

"Dear Sir Adrian, do urge her not to talk like that; it is positively wicked," pleads Dora Talbot, glancing at him beseechingly.

"Miss Delmaine, you will drive Mrs. Talbot from my house if you persist in your evil courses," says Sir Adrian, laughing again. "Desist, I pray you!"

"Are you afraid, Dora?" asks Florence merrily. "Then keep close to me. I can defy all evil spirits, I have spells and charms."

"You have indeed!" puts in Sir Adrian, in a tone so low that only she can hear it. "And, knowing this, you should be merciful."

Though she can not hear what he says, yet Mrs. Talbot can see he is addressing Florence, and marks with some uneasiness the glance that passes from his eyes to hers. Breaking quickly into the conversation, she says timidly, laying her hand on her host's arm—

"This shocking room you speak of will not be near mine?"

"In another wing altogether," Sir Adrian replies reassuringly. "Indeed it is so far from this part of the castle that one might be safely incarcerated there and slowly starved to death without any one of the household being a bit the wiser. It is in the north wing in the old

tower, a portion of the building that has not been in use for over fifty years."

"I breathe again," says Dora Talbot affectedly.

"I shall traverse every inch of that old tower—haunted room and all—before I am a week older," declares Florence defiantly. After which she smiles at Adrian again, and follows the maid up the broad staircase to her room.

By the end of the week many other visitors have been made welcome at the castle; but none perhaps give so much pleasure to the young baronet as Mrs. Talbot and her cousin.

Miss Delmaine, the only daughter and heiress of an Indian nabob, had taken London by storm this past season; and not only the modern Babylon, but the heart of Adrian Dynecourt as well. She had come home to England on the death of her father about two years ago; and, having no nearer relatives alive, had been kindly received by her cousin, the Hon. Mrs. Talbot, who was then living with her husband in a pretty house in Mayfair.

Six months after Florence Delmaine's arrival, George Talbot had succumbed to a virulent fever; and his widow, upon whom a handsome jointure had been settled, when the funeral and the necessary law worries had come to an end, had intimated to her young cousin that she intended to travel for a year upon the Continent, and that she would be glad, that is—with an elaborate sigh—she would be a degree less miserable, if she, Florence, would accompany her. This delighted Florence. She was wearied with attendance on the sick, having done most of the nursing of the Hon. George, while his wife lamented and slept; and, besides, she was still sore at heart for the loss of her father. The year abroad had passed swiftly; the end of it brought them to Paris once more, where, feeling that her time of mourning might be decently terminated, Mrs. Talbot had discarded her somber robes, and had put herself into the hands of the most fashionable dress-maker she could find.

Florence too discarded mourning for the first time, although her father had been almost two years in his quiet grave amongst the Hills; and, with her cousin, who was now indeed her only friend, if slightly uncongenial, decided to return to London forthwith.

It was early in May, and, with a sensation of extreme and most natural pleasure, the girl looked forward to a few months passed amongst the best of those whom she had learned under her cousin's auspices to regard as "society."

Dora Talbot herself was not by any means dead to the thought that it would be to her advantage to introduce into society a girl, well-born and possessed of an almost fabulous fortune. Stray crumbs must surely fall to her share in a connection of this kind, and such crumbs she was prepared to gather with a thankful heart.

But unhappily she set her affection upon Sir Adrian Dynecourt, with his grand old castle and his princely rent-roll—a "crumb" the magnitude and worth of which she was not slow to appreciate. At first she had not deemed it possible that Florence would seriously regard a mere baronet as a suitor, when her unbounded wealth would almost entitle her to a duke. But "love," as she discovered later, to her discomfiture, will always "find the way." And one day, quite unexpectedly, it dawned upon her that there might—if circumstances favored them—grow up a feeling between Florence and Sir Adrian that might lead to mutual devotion.

Yet, strong in the belief of her own charms, Mrs. Talbot accepted the invitation given by Sir Adrian, and at the close of the season she and Florence Delmaine find themselves the first of a batch of guests come to spend a month or two at the old castle at Dynecourt.

Mrs. Talbot is still young, and, in her style, very pretty; her eyes are languishing and blue as gentian, her hair a soft nut-brown; her lips perhaps are not altogether faultless, being too fine and too closely drawn, but then her mouth is small. She looks considerably younger than she really is, and does not forget to make the most of this comfortable fact. Indeed, to a casual observer, her cousin looks scarcely her junior.

Miss Delmaine is tall, slender, *posée* more or less, while Mrs. Talbot is prettily rounded, *petite* in every point, and nervously ambitious of winning the regard of the male sex.

During the past week private theatricals have been suggested. Every one is tired of dancing and music. The season has given them

more than a surfeit of both, and so they have fallen back upon theatricals.

The play on which they have decided is Goldsmith's famous production, "She Stoops to Conquer."

Miss Villiers, a pretty girl with yellow hair and charming eyes, is to be Constantia Neville; Miss Delmaine, Kate Hardcastle; Lady Gertrude Vining, though rather young for the part, has consented to play Mrs. Hardcastle, under the impression that she looks well in a cap and powdered hair. An impossible Tony Lumpkin has been discovered in a nervous young man with a hesitation in his speech and a difficulty about the letter "S"—a young man who wofully misunderstands Tony, and brings him out in a hitherto unknown character; a suitable Hastings has been found in the person of Captain Ringwood, a gallant young officer, and one of the "curled darlings" of society.

But who is to play Marlow? Who is to be the happy man, so blessed—even though in these fictitious circumstances—as to be allowed to make love to the reigning beauty of the past season? Nearly every man in the house has thrown out a hint as to his fitness for the part, but as yet no arrangement has been arrived at.

Sir Adrian of course is the one toward whom all eyes—and some very jealous ones—are directed. But his duties as host compel him, sorely against his will, to draw back a little from the proffered honor, and to consult the wishes of his guests rather than his own. Miss Delmaine herself has laughingly declined to make any choice of a stage lover, so that, up to the present moment, matters are still in such a state of confusion and uncertainty that they have been unable to name any date for the production of their play.

It is four o'clock, and they are all standing or sitting in the library, intent as usual in discussing the difficulty. They are all talking together, and, in the excitement that prevails, no one hears the door open, or the footman's calm, introduction of a gentleman, who now comes leisurely up to where Sir Adrian is standing, leaning over Florence Delmaine's chair.

He is a tall man of about thirty-five, with a dark face and dark eyes, and, withal, a slight resemblance to Sir Adrian.

"Ah, Arthur, is it you!" says Sir Adrian, in a surprised tone that has certainly no cordiality in it, but, just as certainly, the tone is not repellent.

"Yes," replies the stranger, with a languid smile, and without confusion. "Yesterday I suddenly recollected the general invitation you gave me a month ago to come to you at any time that suited me best. This time suits me, and so I have come."

He still smiles as he says this, and looks expectantly at Sir Adrian, who, as in duty bound, instantly tells him he is very glad to see him, and that he is a good fellow to have come without waiting for a more formal repetition of his invitation. Then he takes him over to old Lady FitzAlmont, the mother of Lady Gertrude Vining, and introduces him to her as "my cousin Mr. Dynecourt."

The same ceremony is gone through with some of the others, but, when he brings him to Mrs. Talbot, that pretty widow interrupts his mode of introduction.

"Mr. Dynecourt and I are old friends," she says, giving her hand to the new-comer. Then, turning to her cousin, she adds, "Florence, is it not a fatality our meeting him so often?"

"Have we met so often?" asks Florence quietly, but with a touch of *hauteur* and dislike in her tone. Then she too gives a cold little hand to Mr. Dynecourt, who lingers over it until she disdainfully draws it away, after which he turns from her abruptly and devotes himself to Dora Talbot.

The widow is glad of his attentions. He is handsome and well-bred, and for the last half hour she has been feeling slightly bored; so eager has been the discussion about the Marlow matter, that she has been little sought after by the opposite sex. And now, once again, the subject is being examined in all its bearings, and the discussion waxes fast and furious.

"What is it all about?" asks Arthur Dynecourt presently, glancing at the animated group in the middle of the room. And Sir Adrian, hearing his question, explains it to him.

"Ah, indeed!" he says. And then, after a scarcely perceptible pause—"Who is to be Kate Hardcastle?"

"Miss Delmaine," answers Sir Adrian, who is still leaning over that young lady's chair.

"In what does the difficulty consist?" inquires Arthur Dynecourt, with apparent indifference.

"Well," replies Sir Adrian, laughing; "I believe mere fear holds us back. Miss Delmaine, as we all know, is a finished actress, and we dread spoiling her performance by faults on our side. None of us have attempted the character before; this is why we hesitate."

"A very sensible hesitation, I think," says his cousin coolly. "You should thank me then for coming to your relief this afternoon; I have played the part several times, and shall be delighted to undertake it again, and help you out of your difficulty."

At this Miss Delmaine flushes angrily, and opens her lips as if she would say something, but, after a second's reflection, restrains herself. She sinks back into her chair with a proud languor, and closes her mouth resolutely.

Sir Adrian is confounded. All along he had secretly hoped that, in the end, this part would fall to his lot; but now – what is to be done? How can he refuse to let his cousin take his place, especially as he has declared himself familiar with the part.

Arthur, observing his cousin's hesitation, laughs aloud. His is not a pleasant laugh, but has rather a sneering ring in it, and at the present moment it jars upon the ears of the listeners.

"If I have been indiscreet," he says, with a slight glance at Florence's proud face, "pray pardon me. I only meant to render you a little assistance. I thought I understood from you that you were rather in a dilemma. Do not dwell upon my offer another moment. I am afraid I have made myself somewhat officious – unintentionally, believe me."

"My dear fellow, not at all," declares Sir Adrian hastily, shocked at his own apparent want of courtesy. "I assure you, you mistake. It is all so much to the contrary, that I gratefully accept your offer, and beg you will be Marlow."

"But really –" begins Arthur Dynecourt.

"Not a word!" interrupts Sir Adrian; and indeed by this time Arthur Dynecourt has brought his cousin to believe he is about to confer upon him a great favor. "Look here, you fellows," Sir Adrian goes on, walking toward the other men, who are still arguing and disputing over the vexed question, "I've settled it all for you. Here is my cousin; he will take the difficulty off your hands, and be a first-class Marlow at the same time."

A suppressed consternation follows this announcement. Many and dark are the glances cast upon the new-comer, who receives them all with his usual imperturbable smile. Rising, Arthur approaches one of the astonished group who is known to him, and says something upon the subject with a slight shrug of his shoulders. As he is Sir Adrian's cousin, every one feels that it will be impossible to offer any objection to his taking the much-coveted part.

"Well, I have sacrificed myself for you; I have renounced a very dear desire all to please you," says Sir Adrian softly, bending down to Florence. "Have I succeeded?"

"You have succeeded in displeasing me more than I can say," she returns coldly. Then, seeing his amazed expression, she goes on hastily, "Forgive me, but I had hoped for another Marlow."

She blushes prettily as she says this, and an expression arises in her dark eyes that moves him deeply. Stooping over her hand, he imprints a kiss upon it. Dora Talbot, whose head is turned aside, sees nothing of this, but Arthur Dynecourt has observed the silent caress, and a dark frown gathers on his brow.

CHAPTER II.

Every day and all day long there is nothing but rehearsing. In every corner two or more may be seen studying together the parts they have to play. Florence Delmaine alone refuses to rehearse her part except in full company, though Mr. Dynecourt has made many attempts to induce her to favor him with a private reading of those scenes in which he and she must act together. He has even appealed to Dora Talbot to help him in this matter, which she is only too willing to do, as she is secretly desirous of flinging the girl as much in his way as possible. Indeed anything that would keep Florence out of Sir Adrian's sight would be welcome to her; so that she listens kindly to Arthur Dynecourt when he solicits her assistance.

"She evidently shuns me," he says in an aggrieved tone to her one evening, sinking into the seat beside hers. "Except a devotion to her that is singularly sincere, I know of nothing about me that can be regarded by her as an offense. Yet it appears to me that she dislikes me."

"There I am sure you are wrong," declares the widow, tapping his arm lightly with her fan. "She is but a girl—she hardly knows her own mind."

"She seems to know it pretty well when Adrian addresses her," he says, with a sullen glance.

At this Mrs. Talbot can not repress a start; she grows a little pale, and then tries to hide her confusion by a smile. But the smile is forced, and Arthur Dynecourt, watching her, reads her heart as easily as if it were an open book.

"I don't suppose Adrian cares for her," he goes on quietly. "At least"—here he drops his eyes—"I believe, with a little judicious management, his thoughts might be easily diverted into another channel."

"You think so?" asks Mrs. Talbot faintly, trifling with her fan. "I can not say I have noticed that his attentions to her have been in any way particular."

"Not as yet," agrees Dynecourt, studying her attentively; "and if I might be open with you," he adds, breaking off abruptly and assuming an air of anxiety—"we might perhaps mutually help each other."

"Help each other?"

"Dear Mrs. Talbot," says Dynecourt softly, "has it never occurred to you how safe a thing it would be for my cousin Sir Adrian to marry a sensible woman—a woman who understands the world and its ways—a woman young and beautiful certainly, but yet conversant with the *convénances* of society? Such a woman would rescue Adrian from the shoals and quicksands that surround him in the form of mercenary friends and scheming mothers. Such a woman might surely be found. Nay, I think I myself could put my hand upon her, if I dared, at this moment."

Mrs. Talbot trembles slightly, and blushes a good deal, but says nothing.

"He is my nearest of kin," goes on Dynecourt, in the same low impassive voice. "Naturally I am interested in him, and my interest on this point is surely without motive; as, were he never to marry, were he to leave no heir, were he to die some sudden death"—here a remarkable change overspreads his features—"I should inherit all the land you see around you, and the title besides."

Mrs. Talbot is still silent. She merely bows her head in assent.

"Then, you see, I mean kindly toward him when I suggest that he should marry some one calculated to sustain his rank in the world," continues Dynecourt. "As I have said before, I know one who would fill the position charmingly, if she would deign to do so."

"And who?" falters Dora Talbot nervously.

"May I say to whom I allude?" he murmurs. "Mrs. Talbot, pardon me if I have been impertinent in thinking of you as that woman."

A little flickering smile adorns Dora's lips for a moment, then, suddenly remembering that smiles do not become her, she relapses into her former calm.

"You flatter me," she says sweetly.