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“Nous nous moquons des Paladins! quand ces maximes
romanesques commencerent à devenir ridicules,
ce changement fut moins l’ouvrage de la raison
que celui des mauvaises mœurs.”—ROUSSEAU.

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CHAPTER I.
ANTHELIA.¹

ANTHELIA MELINCOURT, at the age of twenty-one, was mistress of herself and of ten thousand a year, and of a very ancient and venerable castle in one of the wildest valleys in Westmoreland.² It follows of course, without reference to her personal qualifications, that she had a very numerous list of admirers, and equally of course that there were both Irishmen and clergymen³ among them. The young lady nevertheless possessed sufficient attractions to kindle the flames of disinterested passion;⁴ and accordingly we shall venture to suppose, that there was at least one in the number of her sighing swains with whom her rent-roll and her old castle were secondary considerations; and if the candid reader should esteem this supposition too violent for the probabilities of daily experience in this calculating age,⁵ he will at least concede it to that degree of poetical license which is invariably accorded to a tale founded on facts.

Melincourt Castle⁶ had been a place of considerable strength in those golden days of feudal and royal prerogative, when no man was safe in his own house unless he adopted every possible precaution for shutting out all his neighbours. It is, therefore, not surprising, that a rock, of which three sides were perpendicular, and which was only accessible on the fourth by a narrow ledge,⁷ forming a natural bridge over a tremendous chasm, was considered a very enviable situation for a gentleman to build on. An impetuous torrent boiled through the depth of the chasm, and after eddying round the base of the castle-rock, which it almost insulated, disappeared in the obscurity of a woody glen, whose mysterious recesses, by popular superstition formerly consecrated to the devil, are now fearlessly explored by the solitary angler, or laid open to

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view by the more profane hand of the picturesque tourist,⁸ who contrives, by the magic of his pencil, to transport their romantic terrors from the depths of mountain-solitude to the gay and crowded, though not very wholesome atmosphere of a metropolitan exhibition.

The narrow ledge, which formed the only natural access to the castle-rock, had been guarded by every impediment which the genius of fortification could oppose to the progress of the hungry Scot, who might be disposed, in his neighbourly way, to drop in without invitation and carouse at the expense of the owner, rewarding him, as usual, for his extorted hospitality, by cutting his throat and setting fire to his house. A drawbridge over the chasm, backed by a double portcullis, presented the only mode of admission. In this secure retreat, thus strongly guarded both by nature and art, and always plentifully victualled for a siege, lived the lords of Melincourt in all the luxury of rural seclusion, throwing open their gates on occasional halcyon days to regale all the peasants and mountaineers of the vicinity with roasted oxen and vats of October.⁹

When these times of danger and turbulence had passed, Melincourt Castle was not, as most of its brother edifices were, utterly deserted. The drawbridge, indeed, became gradually divorced from its chains; the double portcullis disappeared; the turrets and battlements were abandoned to the owl and the ivy; and a very spacious wing was left free to the settlement of a colony of ghosts, which, according to the report of the peasantry and the domestics, very soon took possession, and retained it most pertinaciously, notwithstanding the pious incantations of the neighbouring vicar, the Reverend Mr. Portpipe,¹⁰ who often passed the night in one of the dreaded apartments over a blazing fire with the same invariable exorcising apparatus of a large venison pasty, a little prayer-book, and three bottles of Madeira:¹¹ for the reverend

gentleman sagaciously observed, that as he had always found the latter an infallible charm against blue devils, he had no doubt of its proving equally efficacious against black, white, and grey.¹² In this opinion experience seemed to confirm him; for though he always maintained a becoming silence as to the mysteries of which he was a witness during his spectral vigils, yet a very correct inference might be drawn from the fact, that he was always found in the morning comfortably asleep in his large arm-chair, with the dish scraped clean, the three bottles empty, and the prayer-book clasped and folded precisely in the same state and place in which it had lain the preceding night.

But the larger and more commodious part of the castle continued still to be inhabited; and while one half of the edifice was fast improving into a picturesque ruin, the other was as rapidly degenerating, in its interior at least, into a comfortable modern dwelling.

In this romantic seclusion Anthelia was born. Her mother died in giving her birth. Her father, Sir Henry Melincourt, a man of great acquirements, and of a retired disposition, devoted himself in solitude to the cultivation of his daughter's understanding; for he was one of those who maintained the heretical notion that women are, or at least may be, rational beings;¹³ though, from the great pains usually taken in what is called education to make them otherwise, there are unfortunately very few examples to warrant the truth of the theory.

The majestic forms and wild energies of Nature¹⁴ that surrounded her from her infancy, impressed their character on her mind, communicating to it all their own wildness, and more than their own beauty. Far removed from the pageantry of courts and cities, her infant attention was awakened to spectacles more interesting and more impressive: the misty mountain-top, the ash-fringed precipice, the gleaming cataract, the deep and shadowy glen, and the fantastic magnificence

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of the mountain clouds. The murmur of the woods, the rush of the winds, and the tumultuous dashing of the torrents, were the first music of her childhood. A fearless wanderer among these romantic solitudes, the spirit of mountain liberty diffused itself through the whole tenour of her feelings, modelled the symmetry of her form, and illumined the expressive but feminine brilliancy of her features: and when she had attained the age at which the mind expands itself to the fascinations of poetry, the muses of Italy¹⁵ became the chosen companions of her wanderings, and nourished a naturally susceptible imagination by conjuring up the splendid visions of chivalry and enchantment in scenes so congenial to their developement.

It was seldom that the presence of a visitor dispelled the solitude of Melincourt; and the few specimens of the living world with whom its inmates held occasional intercourse, were of the usual character of country acquaintance, not calculated to leave behind them any very lively regret, except for the loss of time during the period of their stay. One of these was the Reverend Mr. Portpipe, whom we have already celebrated for his proficiency in the art of exorcising goblins by dint of venison and Madeira. His business in the ghost line had, indeed, declined with the progress of the human understanding, and no part of his vocation was in very high favour with Sir Henry, who, though an unexceptionable moral character, was unhappily not one of the children of grace, in the theological sense of the word: but the vicar, adopting St. Paul's precept of being all things to all men,¹⁶ found it on this occasion his interest to be liberal; and observing that no man could coerce his opinions, repeated with great complacency the line of Virgil:

Tros Tyriusque mihi nullo discrimine agetur,¹⁷

though he took especial care that this heterodox concession should not reach the ears of his bishop, who would infallibly

have unfrocked him for promulgating a doctrine so subversive of the main pillar of all orthodox establishments.

When Anthelia had attained her sixteenth year, her father deemed it necessary to introduce her to that human world of which she had hitherto seen so little, and for this purpose took a journey to London, where he was received by the surviving portion of his old acquaintance as a ghost returned from Acheron.¹⁸ The impression which the gay scenes of the metropolis made on the mind of Anthelia—to what illustrious characters she was introduced—“and all she thought of all she saw,”¹⁹—it would be foreign to our present purpose to detail: suffice it to say, that from this period Sir Henry regularly passed the winter in London and the summer in Westmoreland, till his daughter attained the age of twenty, about which period he died.

Anthelia passed twelve months from this time in total seclusion at Melincourt, notwithstanding many pressing invitations from various match-making dowagers in London, who were solicitous to dispose of her according to their views of her advantage; in which how far their own was lost sight of, it may not be difficult to determine.

Among the numerous lovers who had hitherto sighed at her shrine, not one had succeeded in making the slightest impression on her heart; and during the twelve months of seclusion which elapsed from the death of her father to the commencement of this authentic history, they had all completely vanished from the tablet of her memory.²⁰ Her knowledge of love was altogether theoretical; and her theory, being formed by the study of Italian poetry in the bosom of mountain solitude, naturally and necessarily pointed to a visionary model of excellence which it was very little likely the modern world could realize.

The dowagers at length despairing of drawing her from her retirement, respectively came to various resolutions for the

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accomplishment of their ends; some resolving to go in person to Melincourt, and exert all their powers of oratory to mould her to their wishes, and others instigating their several *protégés* to set boldly forward in search of fortune, and lay siege to the castle and its mistress together.