AN INCIDENT IN THE LIFE OF MADLLE CLAIRON.

THE occurrence related in the letter which we are about to quote, is a remarkable instance of those apparently supernatural visitations which it has been found so difficult (if not impossible) to explain and account for. It does not appear to have been known to Scott, Brewster, or any other English writer who has collected and endeavoured to expound those ghostly phenomena.

Clairon was the greatest tragedian that ever appeared on the French stage; holding on it a supremacy similar to that of Siddons on our own. She was a woman of powerful intellect, and had the merit of effecting a complete revolution in the French school of tragic acting; substituted an easy, varied, and natural delivery for the stilted and monotonous declamation which had till then prevailed, and being the first to consult classic taste and propriety of costume. Her mind was cultivated by habits of intimacy with the most distinguished men of her day; and she was one of the most brilliant ornaments of those literary circles which the contemporary Memoir writers describe in such glowing colours. In an age of corruption, unparalleled in modern times, Mademoiselle Clairon was not proof against the temptations to which her position exposed her. But a lofty spirit, and some religious principles, which she retained amidst a generation of infidels and scoffers, saved her from degrading vices, and enabled her to spend an old age protracted beyond the usual period of human life, in respectability and honour.

She died in 1803, at the age of eighty. She was nearly seventy when the following letter was written. It was addressed to M. Henri Meister, a man of some eminence among the literati of that period; the associate of Diderot, Grimm, D'Holbach, M. and Madame Necker, &c., and the collaborateur of Grimm in his famous 'Correspondence.' This gentleman was Clairon's literary executor; having been intrusted with her Memoirs, written by herself, and published after her death.

With this preface we give Mademoiselle Clairon's narrative, written in her old age, of an occurrence which had taken place half a century before.

In 1743, my youth, and my success on the stage, had drawn round me a good many admirers. M. de S——, the son of a merchant in Brittany, about thirty years old, handsome, and possessed of considerable talent, was one of those who were most strongly attached to me. His conversation and manners were those of a man of education and good society, and the reserve and timidity which distinguished his attention made a favourable impression on me. After a green-room acquaintance of sometime I permitted him to visit me at my house, but a better knowledge of his situation and character was not to his advantage. Ashamed of being only a bourgeoise, he was squandering his fortune at Paris under an assumed title. His temper was severe and gloomy: he knew mankind too well, he said, not to despise and avoid them. He wished to see no one but me, and desired from me, in return, a similar sacrifice of the world. I saw, from this time, the necessity, for his own sake as well as mine, of destroying his hopes by reducing our intercourse to terms of less intimacy. My behaviour brought upon him a violent illness, during which I showed him every mark of friendly interest, but firmly refused to deviate from the course I had adopted. My steadiness only deepened his wound; and unhappily, at this time, a treacherous relative, to whom he had intrusted the management of his affairs, took advantage of his helpless condition by robbing him, and leaving him so destitute that he was obliged to accept the little money I had, for his subsistence, and the attendance which his condition required. You must feel, my dear friend, the im-
importance of never revealing this secret. I respect his memory, and I would not expose him to the insulting pity of the world. Preserve, then, the religious silence which after many years I now break for the first time.

At length he recovered his property, but never his health; and thinking I was doing him a service by keeping him at a distance from me, I constantly refused to receive either his letters or his visits.

Two years and a half elapsed between this period and that of his death. He sent to beg me to see him once more in his last moments, but I thought it necessary not to comply with his wish. He died, having with him only his domestics, and an old lady, his sole companion for a long time. He lodged at that time on the Rempart, near the Chaussée d'Antin; I resided in the Rue de Bussy, near the Abbaye St. Germain. My mother lived with me; and that night we had a little party to supper. We were very gay, and I was singing a lively air, when the clock struck eleven, and the sound was succeeded by a long and piercing cry of unearthly horror. The company looked aghast; I fainted, and remained for a quarter of an hour totally insensible. We then began to reason about the nature of so frightful a sound, and it was agreed to set a watch in the street in case it were repeated.

It was repeated very often. All our servants, my friends, my neighbours, even the police, heard the same cry, always at the same hour, always proceeding from under my windows, and appearing to come from the empty air. I could not doubt that it was meant entirely for me. I rarely supped abroad; but the nights I did so, nothing was heard; and several times, when I came home, and was asking my mother and servants if they had heard anything, it suddenly burst forth, as if in the midst of us. One night, the President de B——, at whose house I had supped, desired to see me safe home. While he was bidding me "good night" at my door, the cry broke out seemingly from something be-
window was undamaged. We concluded that some one sought my life, and that it was necessary to take precautions against another attempt. The Intendant des Menus Plaisirs, who was present, flew to the house of his friend, M. de Marville, the Lieutenant of Police. The houses opposite mine were instantly searched, and for several days were guarded from top to bottom. My house was closely examined; the street was filled with spies in all possible disguises. But, notwithstanding all this vigilance, the same explosion was heard and seen for three whole months always at the same hour, and at the same window-pane, without any one being able to discover from whence it proceeded.

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This fact stands recorded in the registers of the police.

'Nothing was heard for some days; but, having been invited by Mademoiselle Dumesnil to join a little evening party at her house near the Barrière blanche, I got into a hackney-coach at eleven o'clock with my maid. It was clear moonlight as we passed along the Boulevards, which were then beginning to be studded with houses. While we were looking at the half-finished buildings, my maid said, "Was it not in this neighbourhood that M. de S—died?" "From what I have heard," I answered, "I think it should be there"—pointing with my finger to a house before us. From that house came the same gun-shot that I had heard before. It seemed to traverse our carriage, and the coachman set off at full speed, thinking we were attacked by robbers. We arrived at Mademoiselle Dumesnil's in a state of the utmost terror; a feeling I did not get rid of for a long time.'

* The celebrated tragedian.

[Mademoiselle Clairon gives some further details similar to the above, and adds that the noises finally ceased in about two years and a half. After this, intending to change her residence, she put up a bill on the house she was leaving; and many people made the pretext of looking at the apartments an excuse for gratifying their curiosity to see, in her every-day guise, the great tragedian of the Théâtre Français.]

'One day I was told that an old lady desired to see my rooms. Having always had a great respect for the aged, I went down to receive her. An unaccountable emotion seized me on seeing her, and I perceived that she was moved in a similar manner. I begged her to sit down, and we were both silent for some time. At length she spoke, and, after some preparation, came to the subject of her visit.

"I was, mademoiselle, the best friend of M. de S—, and the only friend whom he would see during the last year of his life. We spoke of you incessantly; I urging him to forget you,—he protesting that he would love you beyond the tomb. Your eyes which are full of tears allow me to ask you why you made him so wretched; and how, with such a mind and such feelings as yours, you could refuse him the consolation of once more seeing and speaking to you?"

"We cannot," I answered, "command our sentiments. M. de S— had merit and estimable qualities; but his gloomy, bitter, and overbearing temper made me equally afraid of his company, his friendship, and his love. To make him happy, I must have renounced all intercourse with society, and even the exercise of my talents. I was poor and proud; I desire, and hope I shall ever desire, to owe nothing to any one but myself. My friendship for him prompted me to use every endeavour to lead him to more just and reasonable sentiments: failing in this, and persuaded that his obstinacy proceeded less from the excess of his passion than from the violence of his character, I took the firm resolution to separate from him entirely. I refused to see him in his last moments, because the sight would have rent my heart; because I feared to appear too barbarous if I remained inflexible, and to make myself wretched if I yielded. Such, madame, are the motives of
my conduct,—motives for which, I think, no one can blame me."

"It would indeed," said the lady, "be unjust to condemn you. My poor friend himself in his reasonable moments acknowledged all that he owed you. But his passion and his malady overcame him, and your refusal to see him hastened his last moments. He was counting the minutes, when at half-past ten, his servant came to tell him that decidedly you would not come. After a moment's silence, he took me by the hand with a frightful expression of despair. 'Barbarous woman!' he cried; 'but she will gain nothing by her cruelty. As I have followed her in life, I shall follow her in death!' I endeavoured to calm him; he was dead."

'I need scarcely tell you, my dear friend, what effect these last words had upon me. Their analogy to all my apparitions filled me with terror, but time and reflection calmed my feelings. The consideration that I was neither the better nor the worse for all that had happened to me, have led me to ascribe it all to chance. I do not, indeed, know what chance is; but it cannot be denied that the something which goes by that name has a great influence on all that passes in the world.

'Such is my story; do with it what you will. If you intend to make it public, I beg you to suppress the initial letter of the name, and the name of the province.'

This last injunction was not, as we see, strictly complied with; but, at the distance of half a century, the suppression of a name was probably of little consequence.

There is no reason to doubt the entire truth of Mademoiselle Clairon's narrative. The incidents which she relates made such a deep and enduring impression on her mind, that it remained uneffaced during the whole course of her brilliant career, and, almost at the close of a long life spent in the bustle and business of the world, inspired her with solemn and religious thoughts. Those incidents can scarcely be ascribed to delusions of her imagination; for she had a strong and cultivated mind, not likely to be influenced by superstitious credulity; and besides, the mysterious sounds were heard by others as well as herself, and had become the subject of general conversation in Paris. The suspicion of a trick or conspiracy never seems to have occurred to her, though such a supposition is the only way in which the circumstances can be explained; and we are convinced that this explanation, though not quite satisfactory in every particular, is the real one. Several portentous occurrences, equally or more marvellous, have thus been accounted for.

Our readers remember the history of the Commissioners of the Roundhead Parliament for the sequestration of the royal domains, who were terrified to death, and at last fairly driven out of the Palace of Woodstock, by a series of diabolical sounds and sights, which were long afterwards discovered to be the work of one of their own servants, Joe Tomkins by name, a loyalist in the disguise of a puritan. The famous 'Cocklane Ghost,' which kept the town in agitation for months, and baffled the penetration of multitudes of the divines, philosophers, and literati of the day, was a young girl of some eleven or twelve years old, whose mysterious knockings were produced by such simple means, that their remaining so long undetected is the most marvellous part of the story. This child was the agent of a conspiracy formed by her father, with some confederates, to ruin the reputation of a gentleman by means of pretended revelations from the dead. For this conspiracy these persons were tried, and the father, the most guilty party, underwent the punishment of the pillory.

A more recent story is that of the 'Stockwell Ghost,' which forms the subject of a volume published in 1772, and is shortly told by Mr. Hone in the first volume of his 'Every Day Book.' Mrs. Golding, an elderly lady residing at
Stockwell, in Surrey, had her house disturbed by portents, which not only terrified her and her family, but spread alarm through the vicinity. Strange noises were heard proceeding from empty parts of the house, and heavy articles of furniture, glass and earthenware, were thrown down and broken in pieces before the eyes of the family and neighbours. Mrs. Golding, driven by terror from her own dwelling, took refuge, first in one neighbour’s house, and then in another, and thither the prodigies followed her. It was observed that her maid-servant, Ann Robinson, was always present when these things took place, either in Mrs. Golding’s own house, or in those of the neighbours. This girl, who had lived only about a week with her mistress, became the subject of mistrust and was dismissed, after which the disturbances entirely ceased. But the matter rested on mere suspicion. 'Scarcely any one,' says Mr. Hone, 'who lived at that time listened patiently to the presumption, or without attributing the whole to witchcraft.'

At length Mr. Hone himself obtained a solution of the mystery from a gentleman who had become acquainted with Ann Robinson many years after the affair happened, and to whom she had confessed that she alone had produced all these supernatural horrors, by fixing wires or horse-hairs to different articles, according as they were heavy or light, and thus throwing them down, with other devices equally simple, which the terror and confusion of the spectators prevented them from detecting. The girl began these tricks to forward some love affair, and continued them for amusement when she saw the effect they produced.

Remembering these cases, we can have little doubt that Mademoiselle Clairon’s maid was the author of the noises which threw her mistress and her friends into such consternation. Her own house was generally the place where these things happened; and on the most remarkable occasions where they happened elsewhere, it is expressly mentioned that the maid was present. At St. Cloud it was to the maid, who was her bed-fellow, that Clairon was congratulating herself on being out of the way of the cry, when it suddenly was heard in the very room. She had her maid in the carriage with her on the Boulevards, and it was immediately after the girl had asked her a question about the death of M. de S—— that the gun-shot was heard, which seemed to traverse the carriage. Had the maid a confederate—perhaps her fellow-servant on the box—to whom she might have given the signal? When Mademoiselle Clairon went a-shopping to the Rue St. Honoré, she probably had her maid with her, either in or outside the carriage; and, indeed, in every instance the noises took place when the maid would most probably have been present, or close at hand. In regard to the unearthly cry, she might easily have produced it herself without any great skill in ventriloquism, or the art of imitating sounds; a supposition which is rendered the more probable, as its realisation was rendered the more easy, by the fact of no words having been uttered—merely a wild cry. Most of the common itinerant ventriloquists on our public race-courses can utter speeches for an imaginary person without any perceptible motion of the lips; the utterance of a mere sound in this way would be infinitely less difficult.

The noises resembling the report of firearms (very likely to have been unconsciously, and in perfect good faith, exaggerated by the terror of the hearers) may have been produced by a confederate fellow-servant, or a lover. It is to be observed, that the first time this seeming report was heard, the houses opposite were guarded by the police, and spies were placed in the street, but Mademoiselle Clairon’s own house was merely 'examined.' It is evident that these precautions, however effectual against a plot conducted from without, could have no effect whatever against tricks played within her house by one or more of her own servants.

As to the maid-servant’s motives for engaging
in this series of deceptions, many may have existed and been sufficiently strong; the lightest, which we shall state last, would probably be the strongest. She may have been in communication with M. de S——’s relations for some hidden purpose which

never was effected. How far this circumstance may be connected with the date of the first portent, the very night of the young man’s death, or whether that coincidence was simply accidental, is matter for conjecture. The old lady, his relative, who afterwards visited Clairon, and told her a tale calculated to fill her with superstitious dread, may herself have been the maid-servant’s employer for some similar purpose; or (which is at least equally probable) the tale may have had nothing whatever to do with the sound, and may have been perfectly true. But all experience in such cases assures us that the love of mischief, or the love of power, and the desire of being important, would be sufficient motives to the maid for such a deception. The more frightened Clairon was, the more necessary and valuable her maid became to her, naturally. A thousand instances of long-continued deception on the part of young women, begun in mere folly, and continued for the reasons just mentioned, though continued at an immense cost of trouble, resolution, and self-denial in all other respects, are familiar to most readers of strange transactions, medical and otherwise. There seem to be strong grounds for the conclusion that the maid was the principal, if not the sole agent in this otherwise supernatural part of this remarkable story.
Article: ‘An Incident in the Life of Mademoiselle Clairon’ by George Hogarth

Journal: Household Words, Volume I, Magazine No. 1, 30 March 1850, Pages: 15-19

Author(s):
- George Hogarth


Hogarth became acquainted with Dickens in 1834, when Dickens began writing for the Morning Chronicle. He took a kindly interest in the young man, gave him introductions that were of value to him, and, in a Morning Chronicle review, praised Sketches by Boz. Dickens liked and respected Hogarth; he became a friend of the Hogarth family; in 1836 he married Hogarth's daughter Catherine. During the years immediately preceding Dickens's separation from his wife, Hogarth came in for a share of Dickens's increasing dislike of the Hogarths. Hogarth himself, however, "apparently never acted upon, or even shared, the acrimony of his wife and his daughter Helen toward Dickens", and Dickens seems to have retained no permanent rancour toward him (Adrian, Georgina Hogarth and the Dickens Circle, pp. 61-62, 130).

In his first journalistic association with Dickens, Hogarth was Dickens's superior on the two papers for which they both worked. Thereafter, the roles shifted. Dickens, as editor of Bentley's Miscellany, accepted contributions from Hogarth for that periodical; and, as editor of the Daily News, he engaged Hogarth for the staff.

Hogarth's duties in connection with H.W. are not entirely clear. Three weeks before the first number appeared, Dickens wrote to Wills concerning an article (subject not stated): "I should wish Hogarth to see that article before it is used. Will you see him, and set him to work on something else? He has nothing in hand now" (March 6 1850). Later, Dickens asked Wills to have Hogarth look over an article on the Erards—a subject, of course, specifically within Hogarth's province to see that it contained nothing "against his positive knowledge" (September 18 1855). Hogarth was paid for the articles that he wrote for H.W.; that fact indicates that he was not a salaried member of the editorial staff. His main work seems to have been the compiling of news summaries for the Household Narrative of Current Events, a supplementary publication brought out from 1850 to 1855, at first under the direction of Forster, later under that of Wills. Morley referred to "Poor nice old Hogarth", "the good old simple-minded man who ... compounds the news of household narrative out of the papers" (Solly, Life of Henry Morley, p. 200). Sala mentioned the "monthly compendium of news" (which he miscalled the Household Budget) as "edited by Mr. George Hogarth, Dickens's father-in-law" (Life and Adventures, p. 382).

Author: Anne Lohrli; © University of Toronto Press, 1971.
Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Genre(s):
- Prose: Autobiography; Biography; Memoirs; Obituary; Anecdotes
  Article falling within or between these four forms of life-writing, itself a term that clearly now reaches far beyond '(the writing of) biography' (OED), and which is notable for its 'generic instability and hybridity' (D. Amigoni, Life Writing and Victorian Culture, 2006).
- Prose: Letters; Correspondence
  Article largely consisting, or taking the form, of (extracts from) letters and correspondence between two or more people.

Subject(s):
- Death; Grief; Mourning; Mourning Customs in Literature; Funeral Rites and Ceremonies; Life Cycle, Human; Old Age; Mortality
- France—History
- France—Social Life and Customs
- Fraud; Forgery; Deception; Betrayal—Fiction
- Great Britain—History
- Health; Diseases; Personal Injuries; Hygiene; Cleanliness—Fiction
- Marriage; Courtship; Love; Sex
- Supernatural; Superstition; Spiritualism; Clairvoyance; Mesmerism; Ghosts; Fairies; Witches; Magic; Occultism
- Theatre; Performing Arts; Performing; Dance; Playwriting; Circus

Citation (MHRA): Hogarth, George, 'An Incident in the Life of Mademoiselle Clairon', Household Words, I, 30 March 1850, 15-19

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