

# The Midnight Embrace

By Matthew Lewis

Albert, lord of the ancient castle of Werdendorff, on the borders of the Black Forest, was a nobleman of elegant person, and fascinating manners; but his heart was prone to deceit. He was well versed in all the wily arts of seduction, and he paid slight attention to the fulfilling of either religious or moral duties, when opposed as a bar to his pleasures.

At the distance of half a league from his stately abode, resided the fair Josephine in an humble cottage, happy, virtuous, and respected. Beauty and innocence were the only dower she possessed. Her father had been a subaltern officer in the emperor's service. Her mother was the only child of a very poor, but very respectable pastor. Francisco, her father, had fallen in the field of battle when she had attained her fifth year. His disconsolate widow retired with her trifling pension from Vienna, where she had hitherto resided, to the vicinity of Werdendorff, where she lived with her darling child in a peaceful and retired seclusion now so congenial to their feelings. The education of Josephine she attended to with the most sedulous care, and was amply repaid by the docility of her pupil. At the age of sixteen, Josephine lost her parent, who, previous to her dissolution, gave every advice that a virtuous mind could dictate, with regard to the subsequent conduct of her daughter. Josephine listened to her virtuous counsels with attention, and while the pearly drops chased each other down her pallid cheeks, promised a strict adherence to the wishes of her dying parent. Alas! how little to be depended upon are the promises and resolutions of mortals!

The remains of the mother of Josephine being decently interred, the sorrowing girl soon felt herself obliged to grant less indulgence to heartfelt grief, that she might toil for each day's bread. Her parent's pension expired with her; and our fair maid, to pay the rent of her cottage, and defray her necessary expenditures, was obliged to leave her humble pallet with the first salute of the lark, and ply her needle with assiduous and unremitting industry. Her labour was crowned with success. She lived happy, virtuous, and respected, for the first three years after her mother's decease. She was then predestined to experience a fatal reverse: the veil of innocent simplicity was to be torn from her mind, and the vacancy filled up by the dark cloud of guilt.

Albert of Werdendorff beheld the maid in all her native pride of beauty, softened by angelic modesty, and her unconsciousness of the superlative charms she possessed. Albert longed to call this fair floweret his own; not as a tender admirer, to protect her honourably from all the storms of fate, but as a rude spoiler, that wantonly plucks the rose from its native branch, and then, regardless of its beauties, casts it to wither on the ground.

It is needless to describe minutely the various arts that Lord Albert descended to, in order to seduce the unsuspecting victim of his deceptions. His superior rank, fortune, and connections, were so many circumstances to furnish him with favourable pretexts to forward his designs.

Though Albert was lord of the castle of Werdendorff, and had there a splendid establishment, yet he depended on his father, for a princely addition to his possessions. He made Josephine to believe, that it was impossible for him to espouse her during his father's life; but called on heaven, and every saint, to witness the inviolable faith and constancy he would always maintain towards her: that he should always regard her as his wife; and, as soon as he should be free to offer his hand, their marriage should be legally solemnized. Josephine had many virtuous sentiments; but Albert, by sophistry, overcame those scruples; and the unfortunate maiden added

one more to the many that suffer their credulous hearts to be seduced by the wily serpent, like objects of their tender and faithful love.

Josephine's breast was no longer the abode of serenity. In Albert's presence her spirits were elated; she listened with delight to the repetition of his vows, and, blinded by delusive passion, esteemed herself one of the happiest of the happy. But in the lone hours of solitude, she was oft times miserable. Regret, remorse, and apprehension, would enter, though obtrusive guests. From the casement of her cottage, Josephine could behold the stately castle of Werdendorff, and discern its portals opened for the reception of guests invited to the noble banquets and festive balls, which often made its lofty roofs resound with their mirth. On these occasions Josephine would sigh, and ponder on the wide difference between herself and Lord Albert in their stations, and wonder if her fond hopes would ever be realized.

At midnight, when all the inhabitants of the castle were wrapt in repose, was the time that Lord Albert paid his visits to Josephine's cottage, which hour was mutually chosen by the lovers for their interviews, that they might elude the observation of those around them. And when the moon gave no ray of light to Lord Albert in his progress over the dark and fenny moor, Josephine would place a lighted taper at her casement, to guide him to her humble abode.

Ah! ill-fated maid! thou didst soon experience the dire truth, that men betray, and that vows can be broken; and that illicit love, though at first ardent, will soon decay, and leave nought but wretchedness behind.

Albert had been Josephine's favoured lover about six months, when, one hapless night, Josephine had placed the taper in her window as usual; and sat wishing the arrival of Albert in anxious expectation. More than once she conjectured she heard his well-known footsteps approach the door. She flew to open it, and her eye fixed on vacancy alone, while she shed bitter tears at the disappointment. Another, and another night elapsed; Albert came not; and Josephine's anguish and suspense became insupportable.

On the fourth morning of Albert's unusual absence, Josephine arose from her pallet after a few hours of restless and perturbed sleep; she approached the window, and her eyes taking their usual direction across the moor to the castle of Werdendorff, she beheld its gay banners streaming on the walls.

Anxious to learn the cause of this rejoicing, Josephine mingled with a groupe of rustic maidens who were repairing to the castle. She asked them, in tremulous accents, what propitious event they were celebrating at the Chateau; but the villagers were as ignorant as herself. When they came to the outer portal of the edifice, they beheld a gay procession passing from the hail to the chapel.

The sentinel, in reply to Josephine's interrogatories, informed her, that Lord Albert was then gone to the chapel to seal his nuptial vows with Lady Guimilda, the proud daughter of a neighbouring baron, whose possessions were immense, and she the sole heiress.

Josephine replied not; her heart was full, even to bursting. She retreated from her companions, and seeking the covert of a friendly wood, gave way to all her frantic ravings of despair, which was still aggravated by every passing gale, bearing along the echoes of the loud shouts of revelry that pervaded the castle, and proclaimed Albert's perjury and her ruin.

As soon as the first violence of her grief was abated, she began to cherish delusive ideas. She thought the sentinel might have deceived her; or, at least, he might have been in an error himself, in supposing Lord Albert the bridegroom of the proud Guimilda; and she thought it more probable, that it was Some friend of his, who had solemnized his marriage at Werdendorff castle.

Cherishing this weak hope, she returned to her cottage; and partially disguising herself in a long mantle, and a thick white veil, she repaired at twilight to the castle, and, unobserved, mingled in the revelling crowd. But alas! the sentinel's intelligence she soon found to be too true; and the gayest among the gay throng was the false Albert and his bride Guimilda.

Once convinced, Josephine tarried no longer in the castle-hall. With torturing sensations, and faltering steps, she left the abode of her haughty rival, and once more sought her lonely dwelling. The night was dark, and the wind shook the rushes, and all around, like her own heart, was drear and forlorn. With folded arms, and her whole person like the statue of despair, sat Josephine by the casement. Fond recollections caused her tears to flow, when she called to mind how oft in that window she had placed the taper to light her then ardent lover over the moor.

While she was thus reflecting, she heard footsteps approach her cottage door; and presently she heard her own name softly pronounced. She instantly recognized Lord Albert's voice; and opening the casement, she cried indignantly, "Away to Guimilda! Away to the pleasures that reign in Werdendorff castle. Why leave you my rival's bed, to add another insult to the woes you have caused me?"

Lord Albert renewed his entreaties for admission; and Josephine, at length, imprudently yielded to his request.

Albert exerted all his eloquence to convince the fair one, that his heart had no share in the nuptial contract with Guimilda; that there Josephine's image reigned triumphant, while her rival could claim nought but his hand. By the stern command of his father, he protested he had joined his fate to Guimilda's, who would only leave him his fortune on that condition: but that his love to Josephine should never be diminished by that circumstance; but that he would transplant her to a more pleasing abode, where she might reside in elegant retirement, and appear in a situation more congenial to his wishes than her present dwelling would allow, or, indeed, her near vicinity to the castle render prudent.

The soft blandishments of her deceiver again lured her to guile; and her anger was completely vanquished by love.

Again was the board spread with the choice delicacies, and delicious wines, that Lord Albert had brought with him from the castle; the flower-footed hours winged away with rapturous delight, and again the soft smile beamed on the lovely countenance of Josephine.

"Adieu, my beloved," said Lord Albert; "the first blush of morn empurples the east, and warns me from thy arms."

Josephine enquired affectionately when she was next to expect her loved lord. He replied, that he would return at the dark hour of midnight, and again clasp her in his arms.

Lord Albert's bosom beat high as he sped homewards across the moor. The horrid deed he had committed, did not at that moment appal him. He congratulated himself on being freed from a mistress, whom satiety had for some time past made him detest.

In relating to Josephine the cause of his marriage with the Lady Guimilda, he had been guilty of a great falsehood. The known wealth of the heiress, at first, induced Lord Albert to visit at her father's villa; for avarice was a ruling passion with the youth. But when he beheld the haughty fair one, he instantly became a captive to her beauty, and loathed Josephine.

His nightly visits to Josephine, though conducted with much cautious secrecy, had by some means reached the ears of the proud Guimilda. No pity for the poor maiden filled her breast; she hated her fair rival, for having a prior claim to Lord Albert's heart. Her revengeful temper made her feel that she should never enjoy perfect happiness while Josephine existed. She thought that there was more than a probability, that, for all Albert's declarations to the contrary, when she

conversed with him on the subject, that, after a short time would elapse, his heart might grow cold towards the legal partner of his fortune, and return with redoubled ardour to his deserted mistress. She knew the infirmities of her own temper; and the angelic sweetness of disposition which her informants had represented Josephine to possess, contrasted with her own hauteur, Caprice, and tyranny, made the confirmation of her fears appear as strong as proofs of holy writ.

To glut her revenge, and leave no room for apprehension, she formed the horrid project of demanding the following sacrifice at the hands of Lord Albert.

This was the removal of Josephine by a poison which should take a quick effect, and cause her to breathe her last ere she should have time to reveal the name of her murderer. The time fixed on by Guimilda for the perpetration of this horrid deed, was their wedding night. Albert was to make some plausible excuse to his guests, to account for his absenting himself at that time, and then to repair to Josephine's cottage; and, as he always, on those occasions, condescended to convey with his own hands, some refreshments, it would be an easy matter for him to infuse into the goblet of wine that he should present to his fair victim, a deadly but tasteless drug that Guimilda prepared for that fatal purpose. The proud Guimilda made a solemn vow, never to admit Lord Albert to her bed, till her horrific demand was complied with.

Alas! her destined husband was too pliantly moulded to her purpose; he made not half the resistance she expected to encounter; but, after a very few scruples, signified his perfect acquiescence with the will of this fiend in female form.

How Lord Albert effected his purpose has been previously described. He had nearly gained the castle on his return, when his own words recurred to his memory: at the dark hour of midnight he would again return, and clasp her in his arms. "Ill-fated Josephine!" exclaimed he, mentally, "ere that hour arrives, thy fluttering breath will flee amid agonizing pain; and thou, late so beauteous, wilt be a lifeless corpse." The first light of morning cheerfully illumined the dell; but Albert's heart was not gladdened by the scene.

The beams of the sun began to gild the turrets of Werdendorff, yet the bridal ball was not concluded. In vain the blaze of beauty met Lord Albert's eyes; he sighed amid surrounding splendour; for conscience had strongly entwined her chains around his heart. Guimilda was impatient to know if her lord had accomplished the dire deed; and, on his answering in the affirmative, she experienced the most extravagant and unnatural transports. But Albert was clouded with horror; and he kept constantly repeating the words, "At midnight's dark hour thou shalt embrace me again."

On the next evening the guests again assembled in the halls of Werdendorff, again the musicians tuned their instruments to notes of joy; and again the gay knights and their fair partners joined in the mazy dance. Lord Albert alone seemed abstracted; and his woe-expressive countenance gave rise to a variety of conjectures, all very remote from the truth. Guimilda perceived the agony of his mind (which her hardened heart considered as a weakness) with extreme displeasure; nor was she slow in whispering to him the most keen reproaches for the pusillanimity of his conduct, in appearing in this manner before their guests.

But in vain Lord Albert endeavoured to arouse himself, and put on a gay unembarrassed air. His mind, in a few hours, had undergone a total revolution. He now regarded Guimilda as an agent of infernal malice, sent to plunge his soul into an irremediable abyss of guilt. The artless behaviour of his murdered love was the contrast; her gentle unupbraiding manners, the affectionate looks with which she would hang enraptured over him, and listen to the tender oaths he had so basely violated, was in these thoughts; yet they every moment rushed unbidden on his brain.

As midnight's dark hour was proclaimed by the turret bell, Albert's limbs shook with fear. "I hear," said he, aloud, "the fatal summons that calls me hence. Guimilda, farewell forever! this is thy work."

Guimilda was going to make some reply, when a tremendous storm suddenly shook the battlements of the castle: the thunder's loud peals burst on the ancient walls, while the lightning's pointed glare flashed with appalling repetition through the painted casements. Dim burnt the numberless tapers, when Josephine's death-like form glided from the portal, and, with solemn pace, proceeded along the hall to the spot where Lord Albert stood. Pale was her face, and her features seemed to retain the convulsive marks of the horrid death to which Guimilda had revengefully consigned her. Clad in the habiliments of the grave, her appearance was awe-inspiring. In a hollow, deep-toned voice, she addressed her perjured lover:—

"Thou false one! Base assassin of her whom thou lured'st from the flowery paths of virtue; her whom thou had'st sworn to cherish and protect while life was left thee. Thou hast cut short the thread of my existence: but think not to escape the punishment due to thy crimes. 'Tis midnight's dark hour; the hour by thyself appointed: delay not, therefore, thy promised embrace."

With these words Josephine wound her arms around his trembling form. "I am come from the confines of the dead," said she, "to make thee fulfil thy parting promise." She dragged him by a force he could not resist to her breast: she pressed her clammy lips to his; and held him fast in her noisome icy embrace.

At length the horrific spectre released him from her grasp. He started back in breathless agony, and sank senseless on the floor. Thrice he raised his frenzied eye to gaze on his supernatural visitant; thrice he raised his hands, as if to implore the mercy of offended heaven; and then expired with a heavy groan.

Again loud thunder shook the castle to its very foundation. The affrighted guests, rushed from the hail, rather choosing to brave the fury of the elements, than remain spectators of the horrid scene within its walls. Even the proud Guimilda fled with terror and dismay. She sought refuge in a convent that stood about a league's distance from the castle; here she remained till death put a period to her mental sufferings, which far exceeded her corporeal ones; though they were many, and severe; for she exhausted her frame by the variety and frequencies of the vigorous penance she imposed on herself, as a chastisement for her heinous, regretted crime.

As soon as Lord Albert's body was interred, the domestics hastily left the horrid castle. The edifice, being greatly damaged by the storm, soon fell to decay. Its dismantled ramparts were skirted with thorns; and the proud turrets of Werdendorff lay scattered on the plain.

Full oft, when the traveller wanders among the time-stricken ruins, a peasant will lead him to his cot, and relate the sad story of Albert and Josephine, and warn the stranger not to rove among the avenues of the castle, lest he should be assailed by the grim spectres, who always punish the temerity of those who intrude with unhallowed steps in the mansion where they keep their mysterious orgies. The hail of the castle still remains entire amid the Gothic ruins. On the anniversary of that fatal night when Josephine's spectre gave the midnight embrace to the false Albert, the same scene is again acted by supernatural beings. Guimilda, her husband, and his murdered love, traverse the haunted hail, which is then illumined with a more than mortal light: and the groans of the spectre lord can be heard afar, while he is clasped in the arms of Josephine's implacable ghost.

Oft will the village maidens, at the sober gloom of evening, review the isolated scene, and relate to those of their juvenile companions, yet unacquainted with the tragic tale, all the particulars of that wonderous legend; while they shuddering pass the mouldering tomb that

covers the libertine's remains, to weep over the lowly violet-covered grave of the fair, but frail Josephine.