The Adventure of My Aunt

(by Washington Irving)

My aunt was a big woman, very tall, with a strong mind and will. She was what you may call a very manly woman. My uncle was a thin, small man, very weak, with no will at all. He was no match for my aunt. From the day of their marriage he began to grow smaller and weaker. His wife's powerful mind was too much for him; it undermined his health, and very soon he fell ill.

My aunt took all possible care of him: half the doctors in town visited him and prescribed medicine for him enough to cure a whole hospital. She made him take all the medicines prescribed by the doctors, but all was in vain. My uncle grew worse and worse and one day she found him dead.

My aunt was very much upset by the death of her poor dear husband. Perhaps now she was sorry that she had made him take so much medicine and felt, perhaps, that he was the victim of her kindness. Anyhow, she did all that a widow could do to honour his memory. She spent very much money on her mourning dress, she wore a miniature of him about her neck as large as a small clock; and she had a full-length portrait of him always hanging in her bedroom. All the world praised her conduct. 'A woman who did so much to honour the memory of one husband, deserves soon to get another,' said my aunt's friends.

Some time passed, and my aunt decided to move to Derbyshire where she had a big country house. The house stood in a lonely, wild part of the country among the grey Derbyshire hills.

The servants, most of whom came with my aunt from town, did not like the sad-looking old place. They were afraid to walk alone about its half-empty black-looking rooms. My aunt herself seemed to be struck with the lonely appearance of her house. Before she went to bed, therefore, she herself examined the doors and the windows and locked them with her own hands. Then she carried the keys from the house, together with a little box of money and jewels, to her own room. She always saw to all things herself.

One evening, after she had sent away her maid, she sat by her toilet-table, arranging her hair. For, in spite of her sorrow for my uncle, she still cared very much about her appearance. She sat for a little while looking at her face in the glass first on one side, then on the other. As she looked, she thought of her old friend, a rich gentleman of the neighborhood, who had visited her that day, and whom she had known since her girlhood.

All of a sudden she thought she heard something move behind her. She looked round quickly, but there was nothing to be seen. Nothing but the painted portrait of her poor dear husband on the wall behind her. She gave a heavy sigh to his memory as she always did whenever she spoke of him in company, and went on arranging her hair. Her sigh was re-echoed. She looked round again, but no one was to be seen.
Oh, it is only the wind,’ she thought and went on putting her hair in papers, but her eyes were still fixed on her own reflection and the reflection of her husband's portrait in the looking glass. Suddenly it seemed to her that in the glass she saw one of the eyes of the portrait move. It gave her a shock.

‘I must make sure,’ she thought and moved the candle so that the light fell on the eye in the glass. Now she was sure that it moved. But not only that, it seemed to give her a wink exactly as her husband used to do when he was living. Now my aunt got really frightened... Her heart began to beat fast. She suddenly remembered all the frightful stories about ghosts and criminals that she had heard.

But her fear soon was over. Next moment, my aunt who, as I have said, had a remarkably strong will, became calm. She went on arranging her hair. She even sang her favourite song in a low voice and did not make a single false note. She again moved the candle and while moving it she overturned her work-box. Then she took the candle and began without any hurry to pick up the articles one by one from the floor. She picked up something near the door, then opened the door, looked for a moment into the corridor as if in doubt whether to go and then walked quietly out.

She hurried down the stairs and ordered the servants to arm themselves with anything they could find. She herself caught up a red-hot poker and, followed by her frightened servants, returned almost at once. They entered the room. All was still and exactly in the same order as when she had left it. They approached the portrait of my uncle. ‘Pull down that picture,’ ordered my aunt. A heavy sigh was heard from the portrait. The servants stepped back in fear. ‘Pull it down at once,’ cried my aunt impatiently. The picture was pulled down and from a hiding-place behind it, they dragged out a big, black-bearded fellow with a knife as long as my arm, but trembling with fear from head to foot. He confessed that he had stolen into my aunt's room to get her box of money and jewels, when all the house was asleep. He had once been a servant in the house and before my aunt's arrival had helped to put the house in order. He had noticed the hiding-place when the portrait had been put up. In order to see what was going on in the room he had made a hole in one of the eyes of the portrait.

My aunt did not send for the police. She could do very well without them: she liked to take the law into her own hands. She had her own ideas of cleanliness also. She ordered the servants to draw the man through the horsepond in order to wash away his crimes, and then to dry him well with a wooden 'towel'.

But though my aunt was a very brave woman, this adventure was too much even for her. She often used to say, 'It is most unpleasant for a woman to live alone in the country.' Soon after she gave her hand to the rich gentleman of the neighborhood.