

LITERATURE.

THE MISER'S DEATH.

BY W. C. CUTLER.

An old man sat by a fireless hearth,
Tho' the night was dark and chill,
And mournfully over the frozen earth,
The wind sobbed lone and shrill.
His locks were white, and his eyes were grey
And dim, but not with tears,
And his skeleton form was wasted away
With penury more than years.

A rush-light was casting its fitful glare,
O'er its damp and dingy walls,
Where the lizard had made his slimy lair,
And the venomous spider crawls.
But the meanest thing in this loathsome room
Was the miser all worn and bare;
Where he sat like a ghost in an empty tomb,
On his broken and only chair.

He had bolted the window and bar'd the door,
And every nook he had scan'd,
And felt that fastening o'er and o'er
With his cold and skinny hand;
And yet he sat gazing intently around,
And trembled with silent fear,
And started and shuddered at every sound,
That fell on his coward ear.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the miser—"I'm safe at last
From this night so cold and drear,
From the drenching rain and the driving blast,
With my gold and my treasure here.
I am cold and wet with the icy rain,
And my health is bad, 'tis true,
Yet if I should light that fire again,
'Twould cost me a penny or two.

"But I'll take a sip of this precious wine,
It will banish my cold and fears;
It was given long since by a friend of mine,
I have kept it for many years."
So he drew a flask from a mouldy nook,
And drank of its rudy tide,
And his eyes grew bright with each draught he
took,
And his bosom swelled with pride.

"Let me see—let me see," said the miser then,
"Tis some sixty years or more,
Since the happy hour when I began
To heap up my glittering store;
And well have I sped in my anxious toil,
As my crowded chests will show,
I have more than would ransom a kingdom's spoil,
Or an emperor could bestow.

"From the orient realms I have rubies bright,
And gold from the famed Peru;
I've diamonds would shame the stars of night,
And pearls like the morning dew.
And more I'll have, ere the morrow's sun
His rays from the west shall fling;
That widow, to free her prisoned son,
Shall bring me her bridal ring."

He turned to an old worm-eaten chest,
And cautiously raised the lid,
And then it shone like the clouds of the west
With the sun in their splendour hid;
And gem after gem of its precious store,
He raised with exulting smile,
And counted, recounted them o'er and o'er,
In many a glittering pile.

Why comes that flush to his pallid brow,
While his eyes like his diamonds shine?
Why writhes he thus in such torture now?
What was there in the wine?
His lonely seat he strove to regain—
To crawl to his nest he tried;
But finding those efforts were all in vain,
He clasp'd his gold and died.

THOMAS HOOD.

BY GEORGE GILFILLAN, AUTHOR OF A "GALLERY OF LITERARY PORTRAITS."

(Concluded from last week's No.)

The genial kind-heartedness which distinguishes Thomas Hood did not stop with himself. He silently and sensibly drew around him a little cluster of kindred spirits, who without the name, have obtained the character and influence of a school, which may be called, indifferently, the Latter Cockney, or the Punch School. Who the parent of this school, properly speaking, was, whether Leigh Hunt or Hood, we will not stop to inquire. Perhaps, we may rather compare its members to a cluster of bees setting and singing together, without thought of precedence or feeling of inferiority, upon one flower. Leigh Hunt and Hood, indeed, have far higher qualities of imagination than the others, but they possess some properties in common with them. All this

school have warm sympathies, both with man as an individual, and with the ongoings of society at large. All have a quiet but burning sense of the evil, the cant, the injustice, the inconsistency, the oppression, and the falsehood, that are in the world. All are aware that fierce invective, furious recalcitration, and howling despair, can never heal nor mitigate these calamities. All are believers in their future and permanent mitigation; and are convinced that literature—prosecuted in a proper spirit, and combined with political and moral progress—will marvellously tend to this result. All have had, or have too much real or solid sorrow to make of it a matter of parade, or to find or seek in it a frequent source of inspiration. All fully, would rather laugh than weep men out of their follies, and ministries out of their mistakes. And in an age which has seen the steam of a tea kettle applied to change the physical aspect of the earth—all have unbounded faith in the mightier miracles of moral and political revolutions which the *mirth of an English fireside*, is yet to effect when properly condensed and pointed. We rather honour the motives than share in the anticipations of this witty and brilliant band, with which Dickens must unquestionably rank. Much good they have done and are doing; but the full case, we fear, is beyond them. It is in mechanism after all, not in magic, that they trust. We, on the other hand, think that our help lies in the double divine charm which Genius and Religion, fully wedded together, are yet to wield; when, in a high sense, the words of the poets shall be accomplished—

"Love and song, song and love, intertwined evermore,
Weary earth to the sons of its youth shall restore."

Mirth like that of Punch and Hood can relieve many a fog upon individual minds, but is powerless to remove the great clouds which hang over the general history of humanity, and around even political abuses it often plays harmless as the summer evening's lightning, or, at most, only loosens without smiting them down. Voltaire's smile showed the Bastille in a ludicrous light, it fantastically fell upon it; but Rousseau's earnestness struck its pinnacle, and Mirabeau's eloquence overturned it from its base. There is a call, in our case, for a holier earnestness, and a purer, nobler oratory. From the variety of styles which Hood has attempted in his poems, we select the two in which we think him most successful—the homely tragic narrative, and the grave pathetic lyric. We find a specimen of the former in his Eugene Aram's dream. This may be called a tale of the Confessional; but how much new interest does it acquire from the circumstances, the scene, and the person to whom the confession is made. Eugene Aram tells his story under the similitude of a dream, in the interval of the school toil, in a shady nook of the play-ground, and to a little boy. What a ghastly contrast do all these peaceful images present to the tale he tells, in its mixture of homely horror and shadowy dread! What an ear this in which to inject the fell revelation! In what a plain, yet powerful setting, is the awful picture thus inserted! And how perfect, at once the keeping and the contrast between youthful innocence and guilt, grey-haired between the eager, unsuspecting curiosity of the listener, and the slow and difficult throes, by which the narrator relieves himself of his burden of years!—between the sympathetic, half-pleasant, half-painful shudder of the boy, and the strong convulsion of the man! The Giaour, emptying his polluted soul in the gloom of the convent aisle, and to the father trembling instead of his penitent, as the broken and frightful tale gasps on, is not equal in interest nor awe to Eugene Aram recounting his dream to the child; till you as well as he wish, and are tempted to shriek out, that he may awake, and find it indeed a dream. Eugene Aram is not like Bulwer's hero—a sublime demon in love; he is a merman in misery, and the poet seeks you to think—and you can think, of nothing about him, no more than himself can, except the one fatal stain, which has made him what he is, and which he long has identified with himself. Hood, with the instinct and art of a great painter, seizes on that moment in Aram's history, which formed the hinge of its interest—not the moment of the murder, nor the long, silent, devouring remorse that followed, nor the hour of the defence, nor the execution—but that when the dark secret leapt into light and punishment: this thrilling curdling instant, predicted from the past, and pregnant with the future, is here seized, and startlingly shown. All that went before was merely horrible, all that followed is horrible and vulgar: the poetic moment in the story is intensely one. And how inferior the laboured power and pathos of the last volume of Bulwer's novel to these lines?

"That very night, while gentle sleep
The urchin eyelids kissed.
Two stern-faced men set out from Lynn
Through the cold and heavy mist:
And Eugene Aram walked between
With gyves upon his wrist."

And here, how much of the horror is breathed upon us from the calm bed of the sleeping boy!

The two best of his grave, pathetic lyrics are the 'Song of the Shirt' and the 'Bridge of Sighs.' The first was certainly Hood's great hit, although we were as much ashamed as rejoiced at its success. We blushed when we thought that at that stage of his life he needed such an introduction to the public, and that thousands and tens of thousands were now for the first time, induced to ask 'Who's Thomas Hood?' The majority of even

the readers of the age had never heard of his name till they saw it in *Punch*, and connected with a song—first-rate, certainly—but not better than many of his former poems! It cast, to us, a strange light upon the chance medleys of fame; and, on the lines of Shakspeare,

"There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

Alas! in Hood's instance, to fortune it did not lead, and the fame was brief lightning before darkness.

And what is the song which made Hood awake one morning and find himself famous? Its great merit is its truth. Hood sits down beside the poor seamstress as beside a sister, counts her tears, her stitches, her bones—too transparent by far through the sallow skin—sees that though degraded she is a woman still; and rising up, swears, by Him that liveth for ever and ever that he will make her wrongs and wretchedness known to the limits of the country and of the race. And hark! how to that cracked, tuneless voice, trembling under its burden of sorrow, now shrunk down into the whispers of weakness, and now shuddering up into the laughter of despair, all Britain listens for a moment—and for no longer—listens, meets, talks, and does little or nothing. It was much that one shrill shriek should rise and reverberate above that world of wild confused wailings, which are the true 'cries of London;' but, alas! that it has gone down again into the abyss, and that we are now employed in criticising its artistic quality instead of recording its moral effect. Not altogether in vain, indeed, has it sounded, if it have comforted one lonely heart, if it have bedewed with tears one arid eye, and saved even one sufferer a pang of a kind which Shakspeare only saw in part, when he spoke of the 'proud man's contumely'—the contumely of a proud, imperious, fashionable, hard-hearted woman—"one that was a woman, but, rest her soul, she's dead."

Not the least striking nor impressive thing in this "Song of the Shirt" is its half-jesting tone, and light, easy gallop. What sound in the street so lamentable as the laughter of a lost female! It is like a dimple on the red waves of hell. It is more melancholy than even the death-cough shrieking up through her shattered frame, for it speaks of rest, death, the grave, forgetfulness, perhaps forgiveness. So Hood into the centre of this true tragedy has, with a skilful and sparing hand, dropt a pun or two, a conceit or two; and these quibbles are precisely what make you quake. "Every tear hinders needle and thread," reminds us distinctly of these words, occurring in the very centre of the Lear agony, "Nuncle, it is a naughty night to swim in." Hood, as well as Shakspeare, knew that to deepen the deepest woe of humanity it is the best way to show it in the lurid light of mirth; that there is a sorrow too deep for tears, too deep for sighs, but none too deep for smiles; and that the *aside* and the laughter of an idiot might accompany and serve to aggravate the anguish of a god. And what tragedy in that swallow's back which 'twits with the spring; this captive without crime, this suicide without intention, this martyr without the prospect of a fiery chariot!

The 'Bridge of Sighs' breathes of the same spirit. The Poet is arrested by a crowd in the street; he pauses, and finds that it is a female suicide whom they have clucked dead from the waters. His heart holds its own coroner's inquest upon her, and the poem is the verdict. Such verdicts are not common in the courts of clay. It sounds like a voice from a loftier climate, like the cry which closes the Faust, 'She is pardoned.' He knows not what the jury will know in an hour—the cause of her crime. He wishes not to know it. He cannot determine what proportions of guilt, misery, and madness have mingled with her 'mutiny.' He knows only she was miserable, and she is dead—dead, and therefore away to a higher tribunal. He knows only that whatever her guilt, she never ceased to be a woman, to be a sister, and that death for him hushing 'all questions, hiding all faults, has left on her only the beautiful.' What can he do? He forgives her in the name of humanity; every heart says amen, and his verdict, thus repeated and confirmed may go down to eternity.

Here, too, as in the 'Song of the Shirt,' the effect is trebled by the out-ward levity of the strain. Light and gay, the masquerade his grieved heart puts on, but its every flower, feather, and fringe shakes in the internal anguish as in a tempest. This one stanza (coldly praised by a recent writer in the *Edinburgh Review*, whose heart and intellect seem to be dead, but to us how unspcakably dear!) might perpetuate the name of Hood:

"The bleak wind of March
Made her tremble and shiver,
But not the dark arch
Nor the black flowing river;
Mad from life's history—
Glad to death's mystery,
Swift to be hurled,
Anywhere, anywhere
Out of the world!"

After all this, we have not the heart, as Lord Jeffrey would say, to turn to his 'Whims and oddities,' &c. at large. 'Here lies one who spat more blood and made more puns than any man living,' was his self-proposed epitaph. Whether punning was natural to him or not, we cannot tell. We fear that with him, as with most people, it was a bad habit, cherished into a necessity and a disease. Nothing could be more easily acquired than the power of punning, if, as Dr. Johnson was wont to say, one's mind were but to abandon itself to it.