

THE FORGERS.



“LET us sit down on this stone seat,” said my aged friend, the pastor, “and I will tell you a tale of tears, concerning the last inhabitants of yonder solitary house, just visible on the hill-side, through the gloom of those melancholy pines. Ten years have passed away since the terrible catastrophe of which I am about to speak ; and I know not how it is, but methinks, whenever I come into this glen, there is something rueful in its silence, while the common sounds of nature seem to my mind dirge-like and forlorn. Was not this very day bright and musical as we walked across all the other hills and valleys ; but now a dim mist overspreads the sky, and, beautiful as this lonely place must in truth be, there is a want of life in the verdure and the flowers, as if they grew beneath the darkness of perpetual shadows.”

As the old man was speaking, a female figure, bent with age and infirmity, came slowly up the bank below us with a pitcher in her hand, and when she reached a little well, dug out of a low rock all covered

with moss and lichens, she seemed to fix her eyes upon it as in a dream, and gave a long, deep, broken sigh.

“The names of her husband and her only son, both dead, are chiselled by their own hands on a smooth stone within the arch of that fountain, and the childless widow at this moment sees nothing on the face of the earth but a few letters not yet overgrown with the creeping time-stains. See! her pale lips are moving in prayer, and, old as she is, and long resigned in her utter hopelessness, the tears are not yet all shed or dried up within her broken heart,—a few big drops are on her withered cheeks, but she feels them not, and is unconsciously weeping with eyes that old age has of itself enough bedimmed.”

The figure remained motionless beside the well; and, though I knew not the history of the griefs that stood all embodied so mournfully before me, I felt that they must have been gathering together for many long years, and that such sighs as I had now heard came from the uttermost desolation of the human heart. At last she dipped her pitcher in the water, lifted her eyes to Heaven, and, distinctly saying, “O Jesus, Son of God! whose blood was shed for sinners, be merciful to their souls!” she turned away from the scene of her sorrow, and, like one seen in a vision, disappeared.

“I have beheld the childless widow happy,” said the pastor, “even her who sat alone, with none to comfort her, on a floor swept by the hand of death of all

its blossoms. But her whom we have now seen I dare not call happy, even though she puts her trust in God and her Saviour. Her's is an affliction which faith itself cannot assuage. Yet religion may have softened even sighs like those, and, as you shall hear, it was religion that set her free from the horrid dreams of madness, and restored her to that comfort which is always found in the possession of a reasonable soul."

There was not a bee roaming near us, nor a bird singing in the solitary glen, when the old Man gave me these hints of a melancholy tale. The sky was black and lowering, as it lay on the silent hills, and enclosed us from the far-off world, in a sullen spot that was felt to be sacred unto sorrow. The figure which had come and gone with a sigh was the only dweller here; and I was prepared to hear a doleful history of one left alone to commune with a broken heart in the cheerless solitude of nature.

"That house, from whose chimnies no smoke has ascended for ten long years," continued my friend, "once showed its windows bright with cheerful fires; and her whom we now saw so woe-begone, I remember brought home a youthful bride, in all the beauty of her joy and innocence. Twenty years beheld her a wife and a mother, with all their most perfect happiness, and with some, too, of their inevitable griefs. Death passed not by her door without his victims, and, of five children, all but one died, in infancy, childhood, or blooming youth. But they died in na-

ture's common decay,—peaceful prayers were said around the bed of peace ; and when the flowers grew upon their graves, the mother's eyes could bear to look on them, as she passed on with an unaching heart into the house of God. All but one died,—and better had it been if that one had never been born.

“ Father, mother, and son now come to man's estate, survived, and in the house there was peace. But suddenly poverty fell upon them. The dishonesty of a kinsman, of which I need not state the particulars, robbed them of their few hereditary fields, which now passed into the possession of a stranger. They, however, remained as tenants in the house, which had been their own ; and for a while, father and son bore the change of fortune seemingly undismayed, and toiled as common labourers on the soil still dearly beloved. At the dawn of light they went out together, and at twilight they returned. But it seemed as if their industry was in vain. Year after year the old Man's face became more deeply furrowed, and more seldom was he seen to smile ; and his son's countenance, once bold and open, was now darkened with anger and dissatisfaction. They did not attend public worship so regularly as they used to do ; when I met them in the fields, or visited them in their dwelling, they looked on me coldly, and with altered eyes ; and I grieved to think how soon they both seemed to have forgotten the blessings Providence had so long permitted them to enjoy, and how sullenly they now

struggled with its decrees. But something worse than poverty was now disturbing both their hearts.

“ The unhappy old Man had a brother who at this time died, leaving an only son, who had for many years abandoned his father’s house, and of whom all tidings had long been lost. It was thought by many that he had died beyond seas ; and none doubted, that, living or dead, he had been disinherited by his stern and unrelenting parent. On the day after the funeral, the old Man produced his brother’s will, by which he became heir to all his property, except an annuity to be paid to the natural heir, should he ever return. Some pitied the prodigal son, who had been disinherited—some blamed the father—some envied the good fortune of those who had so ill borne adversity. But in a short time the death, the will, and the disinherited, were all forgotten, and the lost lands being redeemed, peace, comfort, and happiness were supposed again to be restored to the dwelling from which they had so long been banished.

“ But it was not so. If the furrows on the old Man’s face were deep before, when he had to toil from morning to night, they seemed to have sunk into more ghastly trenches, now that the goodness of Providence had restored a gentle shelter to his declining years. When seen wandering through his fields at even-tide, he looked not like the Patriarch musing tranquilly on the works and ways of God ; and when my eyes met his during divine service, which he now

again attended with scrupulous regularity, I sometimes thought they were suddenly averted in conscious guilt; or closed in hypocritical devotion. I scarcely know if I had any suspicions against him in my mind or not; but his high bald head, thin silver hair, and countenance with its fine features so intelligent, had no longer the same solemn expression which they once possessed, and something dark and hidden seemed now to belong to them, which withstood his forced and unnatural smile. The son, who, in the days of their former prosperity, had been stained by no vice, and who, during their harder lot, had kept himself aloof from all his former companions, now became dissolute and profligate, nor did he meet with any reproof from a father whose heart would once have burst asunder at one act of wickedness in his beloved child.

“About three years after the death of his father, the disinherited son returned to his native parish. He had been a sailor on board various ships on foreign stations—but hearing by chance of his father’s death, he came to claim his inheritance. Having heard, on his arrival, that his uncle had succeeded to the property, he came to me and told me, that the night before he left his home, his father stood by his bed-side, kissed him, and said, that never more would he own such an undutiful son—but that he forgave him all his sins—at death would not defraud him of the pleasant fields that had so long belonged to his humble an-

cestors—and hoped to meet reconciled in Heaven. “My uncle is a villain,” said he, fiercely, “and I will cast anchor on the green bank where I played when a boy, even if I must first bring his grey head to the scaffold!”

“I accompanied him to the house of his uncle. It was a dreadful visit. The family had just sat down to their frugal mid-day meal; and the old man, though for some years he could have had little heart to pray, had just lifted up his hand to ask a blessing. Our shadows, as we entered the door, fell upon the table—and turning his eyes, he beheld before him on the floor the man whom he fearfully hoped had been buried in the sea. His face was indeed, at that moment, most unlike that of prayer, but he still held up his lean, shrivelled, trembling hand. “Accursed hypocrite,” cried the fierce mariner, “dost thou call down the blessing of God on a meal won basely from the orphan? But, lo! God, whom thou hast blasphemed, has sent me from the distant isles of the ocean, to bring thy white head into the hangman’s hands!”

“For a moment all was silent—then a loud stifled gasping was heard, and she whom you saw a little while ago, rose shrieking from her seat, and fell down on her knees at the sailor’s feet. The terror of that unforgiven crime, now first revealed to her knowledge, struck her down to the floor. She fixed her bloodless face on his before whom she knelt—but she spoke not a single word. There was a sound in her

convulsed throat like the death-rattle. "I forged the will," said the son, advancing towards his cousin with a firm step, "my father could not—I alone am guilty—I alone must die." The wife soon recovered the power of speech, but it was so unlike her usual voice, that I scarcely thought, at first, the sound proceeded from her white quivering lips. "As you hope for mercy at the great judgment day, let the old man make his escape—hush, hush, hush—till in a few days he has sailed away in the hold of some ship to America. You surely will not hang an old grey-headed man of threescore and ten years!"

"The sailor stood silent and frowning. There seemed neither pity nor cruelty in his face; he felt himself injured; and looked resolved to right himself, happen what would. "I say he has forged my father's will. As to escaping, let him escape if he can. I do not wish to hang him; though I have seen better men run up to the fore-yard arm before now, for only asking their own. But no more kneeling, woman—Holla! where is the old man gone?"

"We all looked ghastly around, and the wretched wife and mother, springing to her feet, rushed out of the house. We followed, one and all. The door of the stable was open, and, the mother and son entering, loud shrieks were heard. The miserable old man had slunk out of the room unobserved during the passion that had struck all our souls, and had endeavoured to commit suicide. His own son cut him down, as he

hung suspended from a rafter in that squalid place, and, carrying him in his arms, laid him down upon the green bank in front of the house. There he lay with his livid face, and blood-shot protruded eyes, till, in a few minutes, he raised himself up, and fixed them upon his wife, who, soon recovering from a fainting fit, came shrieking from the mire in which she had fallen down. "Poor people!" said the sailor with a gasping voice, "you have suffered enough for your crime. Fear nothing; the worst is now past: and rather would I sail the seas twenty years longer, than add another pang to that old man's heart. Let us be kind to the old man."

"But it seemed as if a raven had croaked the direful secret all over the remotest places among the hills; for, in an hour, people came flocking in from all quarters, and it was seen, that concealment or escape was no longer possible, and that father and son were destined to die together a felon's death."

Here the pastor's voice ceased; and I had heard enough to understand the long deep sigh that had come moaning from that bowed-down figure beside the solitary well. "That was the last work done by the father and son, and finished the day before the fatal discovery of their guilt. It had probably been engaged in as a sort of amusement to beguile their unhappy minds of ever-anxious thoughts, or perhaps as a solitary occupation, at which they could unburthen their guilt to one another undisturbed. Here, no

doubt, in the silence and solitude, they often felt remorse, perhaps penitence. They chiselled out their names on that slab, as you perceive ; and hither, as duly as the morning and evening shadows, comes the ghost whom we beheld, and, after a prayer for the souls of them so tenderly beloved in their innocence, and doubtless even more tenderly beloved in their guilt and in their graves, she carries to her lonely hut the water that helps to preserve her hopeless life, from the well dug by dearest hands, now mouldered away, both flesh and bone, into the dust."

After a moment's silence the old man continued,—for he saw that I longed to hear the details of that dreadful catastrophe, and his own soul seemed likewise desirous of renewing its grief,—“The prisoners were condemned. Hope there was none. It was known, from the moment of the verdict—guilty,—that they would be executed. Petitions were, indeed, signed by many many thousands ; but it was all in vain,—and the father and the son had to prepare themselves for death.

“About a week after condemnation I visited them in their cell. God forbid, I should say that they were resigned. Human nature could not resign itself to such a doom ; and I found the old man pacing up and down the stone-floor, in his clanking chains, with hurried steps, and a countenance of unspeakable horror. The son was lying on his face upon his bed of straw, and had not lifted up his head, as the massy bolts

were withdrawn, and the door creaked sullenly on its hinges. The father fixed his eyes upon me for some time, as if I had been a stranger intruding upon his misery; and, as soon as he knew me, shut them with a deep groan, and pointed to his son. "I have murdered William—I have brought my only son to the scaffold, and I am doomed to hell!" I gently called on the youth by name, but he was insensible—he was lying in a fit. "I fear he will awake out of that fit," cried the old man with a broken voice. "They have come upon him every day since our condemnation, and sometimes during the night. It is not fear for himself that brings them on—for my boy, though guilty, is brave—but he continues looking on my face for hours, till at last he seems to lose all sense, and falls down in strong convulsions, often upon the stone floor, till he is all covered with blood." The old man then went up to his son, knelt down, and, putting aside the thick clustering hair from his forehead, continued kissing him for some minutes, with deep sobs, but eyes dry as dust.

"But why should I recal to my remembrance, or describe to you, every hour of anguish that I witnessed in that cell? For several weeks it was all agony and despair—the Bible lay unheeded before their ghastly eyes—and for them there was no consolation. The old man's soul was filled but with one thought—that he had deluded his son into sin, death, and eternal punishment. He never slept; but visions, terrible as

those of sleep, seemed often to pass before him, till I have seen the grey hairs bristle horribly over his temples, and big drops of sweat plash down upon the floor. I sometimes thought, that they would both die before the day of execution; but their mortal sorrows, though they sadly changed both face and frame, seemed at last to give a horrible energy to life, and every morning that I visited them, they were stronger, and more broadly awake in the chill silence of their lonesome prison-house.

“ I know not how a deep change was at last wrought upon their souls, but two days before that of execution, on entering their cell, I found them sitting calm and composed by each other’s side, with the Bible open before them. Their faces, though pale and haggard, had lost that glare of misery, that so long had shone about their restless and wandering eyes, and they looked like men recovering from a long and painful sickness. I almost thought I saw something like a faint smile of hope. “ God has been merciful unto us,” said the father, with a calm voice.—“ I must not think that he has forgiven my sins, but he has enabled me to look on my poor son’s face—to kiss him—to fold him in my arms—to pray for him—to fall asleep with him in my bosom, as I used often to do in the days of his boyhood, when, during the heat of mid-day, I rested from labour below the trees of my own farm. We have found resignation at last, and are prepared to die.”

“ There were no transports of deluded enthusiasm

in the souls of these unhappy men. They had never doubted the truth of revealed religion, although they had fatally disregarded its precepts ; and now that remorse had given way to penitence, and nature had become reconciled to the thought of inevitable death, the light that had been darkened, but never extinguished in their hearts, rose up anew ; and knowing that their souls were immortal, they humbly put their faith in the mercy of their Creator and their Redeemer.

“ It was during that resigned and serene hour, that the old Man ventured to ask for the mother of his poor unhappy boy. I told him the truth calmly, and calmly he heard it all. On the day of his condemnation, she had been deprived of her reason, and, in the house of a kind friend, whose name he blessed, now remained in merciful ignorance of all that had befallen, believing herself, indeed, to be a motherless widow, but one who had long ago lost her husband, and all her children, in the ordinary course of nature. At this recital his soul was satisfied. The son said nothing, but wept long and bitterly.

“ The day of execution came at last. The great city lay still as on the morning of the Sabbath-day ; and all the ordinary business of life seemed, by one consent of the many thousand hearts beating there, to be suspended. But as the hours advanced, the frequent tread of feet was heard in every avenue ; the streets began to fill with pale, anxious, and impatient faces ; and many eyes were turned to the dials on the

steeple, watching the silent progress of the finger of time, till it should reach the point at which the curtain was to be drawn up from before a most mournful tragedy.

“ The hour was faintly heard through the thick prison walls by us, who were together for the last time in the condemned cell. I had administered to them the most awful rite of our religion, and father and son sat together as silent as death. The door of the dungeon opened, and several persons came in. One of them, who had a shrivelled bloodless face, and small red fiery eyes, an old man, feeble and tottering, but cruel in his decrepitude, laid hold of the son with his palsied fingers, and began to pinion his arms with a cord. No resistance was offered ; but, straight and untrembling, stood that tall and beautiful youth, while the fiend bound him for execution. At this mournful sight, how could I bear to look on his father’s face ? Yet thither were mine eyes impelled by the agony that afflicted my commiserating soul. During that hideous gaze, he was insensible of the executioner’s approach towards himself ; and all the time that the cords were encircling his own arms, he felt them not, — he saw nothing but his son standing at last before him, ready for the scaffold.

“ I dimly recollect a long dark vaulted passage, and the echoing tread of footsteps, till all at once we stood in a crowded hall, with a thousand eyes fixed on these two miserable men. How unlike were they to all be-

side ! They sat down together within the shadow of death. Prayers were said, and a psalm was sung, in which their voices were heard to join, with tones that wrung out tears from the hardest or the most careless heart. Often had I heard those voices singing in my own peaceful church, before evil had disturbed, or misery broken them ;—but the last word of the psalm was sung, and the hour of their departure was come.

“ They stood at last upon the scaffold. That long street, that seemed to stretch away interminably from the old Prison-house, was paved with uncovered heads, for the moment these ghosts appeared, that mighty crowd felt reverence for human nature so terribly tried, and prayers and blessings, passionately ejaculated, or convulsively stifled, went hovering over all the multitude, as if they feared some great calamity to themselves, and felt standing on the first tremor of an earthquake.

“ It was a most beautiful summer’s day on which they were led out to die ; and as the old man raised his eyes, for the last time, to the sky, the clouds lay motionless on that blue translucent arch, and the sun shone joyously over the magnificent heavens. It seemed a day made for happiness or for mercy. But no pardon dropt down from these smiling skies, and the vast multitude were not to be denied the troubled feast of death. Many who now stood there wished they had been in the heart of some far-off wood or glen ; there was shrieking and fainting, not only among

maids, and wives, and matrons, who had come there in the mystery of their hearts, but men fell down in their strength,—for it was an overwhelming thing to behold a father and his only son now haltered for a shameful death. “Is my father with me on the scaffold?—give me his hand, for I see him not.” I joined their hands together, and at that moment the great bell in the Cathedral tolled, but I am convinced neither of them heard the sound.—For a moment there seemed to be no such thing as sound in the world;—and then all at once the multitude heaved like the sea, and uttered a wild yelling shriek.—Their souls were in eternity—and I fear not to say, not an eternity of grief.”