

A Tale for a Chimney Corner

By Leigh Hunt

A man who does not contribute his quota of grim story nowadays, seems hardly to be free of the republic of letters. He is bound to wear a death's head as part of his insignia. If he does not frighten everybody, he is nobody. If he does not shock the ladies, what can be expected of him?

We confess we think very cheaply of these stories in general. A story, merely horrible or even awful, which contains no sentiment elevating to the human heart and its hopes, is a mere appeal to the least judicious, least healthy, and least masculine of our passions—fear. They whose attention can be gravely arrested by it, are in a fit state to receive any absurdity with respect; and, this is the reason why less talents are required to enforce it, than in any other species of composition. With this opinion of such things, we may be allowed to say, that we would undertake to write a dozen horrible stories in a day, all of which should make the common worshippers of power, who were not in the very healthiest condition, turn pale. We would tell of Haunting Old Women, and Knocking Ghosts, and Solitary Lean Hands, and Empusas on One Leg, and Ladies growing Longer and Longer, and Horrid Eyes meeting us through Keyholes, and Plaintive Heads, and Shrieking Statues, and shocking Anomalies of Shape, and Things which when seen drove people mad; and Indigestion knows what besides. But who would measure talents with a leg of veal or a German sausage?

Mere grimness is as easy as grinning; but it requires something to put a handsome face on a story. Narratives become of suspicious merit in proportion as they lean to Newgate-like offences, particularly of blood and wounds. A child has a reasonable respect for a Raw-head-and-bloody-bones, because all images whatsoever of pain and terror are new and fearful to his inexperienced age; but sufferings merely physical (unless sublimated like those of Philoctetes) are commonplace to a grown man. Images, to become awful to him, must be removed from the grossness of the shambles. A death's head was a respectable thing in the hands of a poring monk, or of a nun compelled to avoid the idea of life and society, or of a hermit already buried in the desert. Holbein's Dance of Death, in which every grinning skeleton leads along a man of rank, from the Pope to the gentleman, is a good Memento Mori; but there the skeletons have an air of the ludicrous and satirical. If we were threatened with them in a grave way, as spectres, we should have a right to ask how they could walk about without muscles. Thus many of the tales written by such authors as the late Mr Lewis, who wanted sentiment to give him the heart of truth, are quite puerile. When his spectral nuns go about bleeding, we think they ought in decency to have applied to some ghost of a surgeon. His little Grey Men, who sit munching hearts, are of a piece with fellows that eat cats for a wager.

Stories that give mental pain to no purpose, or to very little purpose compared with the unpleasant ideas they excite of human nature, are as gross mistakes, in their way, as these, and twenty times as pernicious; for the latter becomes ludicrous to grown people. They originate also in the same extremes, of callousness, or of morbid want of excitement, as the others. But more of these hereafter. Our business at present is with things ghastly and ghostly.

A ghost story, to be a good one, should unite, as much as possible, objects such as they are in life with a preternatural spirit. And to be a perfect one,—at least, to add to the other utility of excitement a moral utility,—they should imply some great sentiment,—something that comes out of the next world to remind us of our duties in this; or something that helps to carry on the

idea of our humanity into afterlife, even when we least think we shall take it with us. When ‘the buried majesty of Denmark’ revisits earth to speak to his son Hamlet, he comes armed, as he used to be, in his complete steel. His visor is raised; and the same fine face is there; only, in spite of his punishing errand and his own sufferings, with

A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

When Donne the poet, in his thoughtful eagerness to reconcile life and death, had a figure of himself painted in a shroud, and laid by his bedside in a coffin, he did a higher thing than the monks and hermits with their skulls. It was taking his humanity with him into the other world, not affecting to lower the sense of it by regarding it piecemeal or in the framework. Burns, in his ‘Tam O’Shanter,’ shows the dead in their coffins after the same fashion. He does not lay bare to us their skeletons or refuse, things with which we can connect no sympathy or spiritual wonder. They still are flesh and body to retain the one; yet so look and behave, inconsistent in their very consistency, as to excite the other.

Coffins stood round like open presses,
Which showed the dead in their last dresses:
And by some devilish cantrip sleight,
Each, in his cauld hand, held a light.

Reanimation is perhaps the most ghastly of all ghastly things, uniting as it does an appearance of natural interdiction from the next world, with a supernatural experience of it. Our human consciousness is jarred out of its self-possession. The extremes of habit and newness, of commonplace and astonishment, meet suddenly, without the kindly introduction of death and change; and the stranger appals us in proportion. When the account appeared the other day in the newspapers of the galvanized dead body, whose features as well as limbs underwent such contortions, that it seemed as if it were about to rise up, one almost expected to hear, for the first time, news of the other world. Perhaps the most appalling figure in Spenser is that of Maleger (‘Faerie Queene,’ b. ii. c. ii):

Upon a tygre swift and fierce he rode,
That as the winde ran underneathe his lode,
Whiles his long legs nigh raught unto the ground:
Full large he was of limbe, and shoulders brode,
But of such subtile substance and unsound,
That like a ghost he seemed, whose grave-clothes were unbound.

Mr Coleridge, in that voyage of his to the brink of all unutterable things, the ‘Ancient Mariner’ (which works out, however, a fine sentiment), does not set mere ghosts or hobgoblins to man the ship again, when its crew are dead; but reanimates, for awhile, the crew themselves. There is a striking fiction of this sort in Sale’s *Notes upon the Koran*. Solomon dies during the building of the temple, but his body remains leaning on a staff and overlooking the workmen, as if it were alive; till a worm gnawing through the prop, he falls down.—The contrast of the appearance of humanity with something mortal or supernatural, is always the more terrible in proportion as it is complete. In the pictures of the temptations of saints and hermits, where the holy person is

surrounded, teased, and enticed, with devils and fantastic shapes, the most shocking phantasm is that of the beautiful woman. To return also to the poem above-mentioned. The most appalling personage in Mr Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' is the Spectre-woman, who is called Life-in-Death. He renders the most hideous abstraction more terrible than it could otherwise have been, by embodying it in its own reverse. 'Death' not only 'lives' in it, but the 'unutterable' becomes uttered. To see such an unearthly passage end in such earthliness, seems to turn commonplace itself into a sort of spectral doubt. The Mariner, after describing the horrible calm, and the rotting sea in which the ship was stuck, is speaking of a strange sail which he descried in the distance:

The western wave was all a-flame,
The day was well nigh done!
Almost upon the western wave
Rested the broad bright sun;

When that strange ship drove suddenly
Betwixt us and the sun.
And straight the sun was flecked with bars,
(Heaven's Mother send us grace!)
As if through a dungeon-grate he peer'd,
With broad and burning face.

Alas! (thought I, and my heart beat loud)
How fast she neers and neers!
Are those *her* sails that glance in the sun
Like restless gossamers?

Are those *her* ribs, through which the sun
Did peer as through a grate?
And is that Woman all her crew?
Is that a death? and are there two?
Is Death that Woman's mate?

Her lips were red, her looks were free,
Her locks were yellow as gold,
Her skin was as white as leprosy,
The Night-Mare Life-in-Death was she,
Who thicks man's blood with cold.

But we must come to Mr Coleridge's story with our subtlest imaginations upon us. Now let us put our knees a little nearer the fire, and tell a homelier one about Life in Death, the ground work of it is in Sandy's *Commentary upon Ovid*, and quoted from Sabinus.¹

A gentleman of Bavaria, of a noble family, was so afflicted at the death of his wife, that, unable to bear the company of any other person, gave himself up to a solitary way of living. This was

¹ The Saxon Latin poet, we presume, professor of *belles-lettres* at Frankfurt. We know nothing of him, except from a biographical dictionary.

the more remarkable in him, as he had been a man of jovial habits, fond of his wine and visitors, and impatient of having his numerous indulgences contradicted. But in the same temper, perhaps, might be found the cause of his sorrow; for though he would be impatient with his wife, as with others, yet his love for her was one of the gentlest wills he had; and the sweet and unaffected face which she always turned upon his anger, might have been a thing more easy for him to trespass upon, while living, than to forget when dead and gone. His very angry towards her, compared with that towards others, was a relief to him. It was rather a wish to refresh himself in the balmy feeling of her patience, than to make her unhappy herself, or to punish her, as some would have done, for that virtuous contrast to his own vice.

But whether he bethought himself, after her death, that this was a very selfish mode of loving; or whether, as some thought, he had wearied out her life with habits so contrary to her own; or whether, as others reported, he had put it to a fatal risk by some lordly piece of selfwill, in consequence of which she had caught a fever on the cold river during a night of festivity; he surprised even those who thought that he loved her by the extreme bitterness of his grief. The very mention of festivity, though he was patient for the first day or two, afterwards threw him into a passion or rage; but by degrees even his rage followed his other old habits. He was gentle, but ever silent. He ate and drank but sufficient to keep him alive; and used to spend the greater part of the day in the spot where his wife was buried.

He was going there one evening, in a very melancholy manner, with his eyes turned towards the earth, and had just entered the rails of the burial-ground, when he was accosted by the mild voice of somebody coming to meet him. 'It is a blessed evening, sir,' said the voice. The gentleman looked up. Nobody but himself was allowed to be in the place at that hour, and yet he saw with astonishment a young chorister approached him. He was going to express some wonder, when, he said, the modest though assured look of the boy, and the extreme beauty of his countenance, which glowed in the setting sun before him, made an irresistible addition to the singular sweetness of his voice; and he asked him with an involuntary calmness, and a gesture of respect, not what he did there, but what he wished. 'Only to wish you all good things,' answered the stranger, who had now come up, 'and to give you this letter.' The gentleman took the letter, and saw upon it, with a beating yet scarcely bewildered heart, the handwriting of his wife. He raised his eyes again to speak to the boy, but he was gone. He cast them far and near round the place, but there were no traces of a passenger. He then opened the letter, and by the divine light of the setting sun, read these words:

'To my dear husband, who sorrows for his wife—

'Otto, my husband, the soul you regret so is returned. You will know the truth of this, and be prepared with calmness to see it, by the divineness of the messenger who has passed you. You will find me sitting in the public walk, praying for you, praying that you may never more give way to those gusts of passion and those curses against others, which divided us.

'This, with a warm hand, from the living Bertha.'

Otto (for such, it seems, was the gentleman's name) went instantly, calmly, quickly, yet with a sort of benumbed being, to the public walk. He felt, but with only a half-consciousness, as if he glided without a body, but all his spirit was awake, eager, intensely conscious. It seemed to him as if there had been but two things in the world—Life and Death; and that Death was dead. All else appeared to have been a dream. He had awaked from a waking state, and found himself all eye, and spirit, and locomotion. He said to himself, once, as he went: 'This is not a dream. I will ask my great ancestors tomorrow to my new bridal feast, for they are alive.' Otto had been calm at first, but something of old and triumphant feelings seemed again to come over him. Was he

again too proud and confident? Did his earthly humours prevail again, when he thought them least upon him? We shall see.

The Bavarian arrived at the public walk. It was full of people with their wives and children, enjoying the beauty of the evening. Something like common fear came over him as he went in and out among them, looking at the beaches on each side. It happened that there was only one person, a lady, sitting upon them. She had her veil down, and his being underwent a fierce but short convulsion as he went near her. Something had a little baffled the calmer inspiration of the angel that had accosted him, for fear prevailed at the instant, and Otto passed on. He returned before he had reached the end of the walk, and approached the lady again. She was still sitting in the same quiet posture, only he thought she looked at him. Again he passed her. On his second return, a grave and sweet courage came upon him, and in a quiet but firm tone of inquiry, he said, 'Bertha?' — 'I thought you had forgotten me,' said that well-known and mellow voice, which he had seemed as far from ever hearing again as earth is from heaven. He took her hand, which grasped his in turn; and they walked home in silence together, the arm, which was wound within his, giving warmth for warmth.

The neighbours seemed to have a miraculous want of wonder at the lady's reappearance. Something was said about a mock funeral, and her having withdrawn from his company for awhile; but visitors came as before, and his wife returned to her household affairs. It was only remarked that she always looked pale and pensive. But she was more kind to all, even than before; and her pensiveness seemed rather the result of some great internal thought, than of unhappiness.

For a year or two the Bavarian retained the better temper which he acquired. His fortunes flourished beyond his earliest ambition; the most amiable as well as noble persons of the district were frequent visitors; and people said that to be at Otto's house must be the next thing to being in heaven. But by degrees his selfwill returned with his prosperity. He never vented impatience on his wife, but he again began to show that the disquietude it gave her to see it vented on others was a secondary thing, in his mind, to the indulgence of it. Whether it was that his grief for her loss had been rather remorse than affection, and so he held himself secure if he treated her well, or whether he was at all times rather proud of her than fond, or whatever was the cause which again set his antipathies above his sympathies, certain it was that his old habits returned upon him; not so often, indeed, but with greater violence and pride when they did. These were the only times at which his wife was observed to show any ordinary symptoms of uneasiness.

At length, one day, some strong rebuff which he had received from an alienated neighbour threw him into such a transport of rage that he gave way to the most bitter imprecations, crying with a loud voice, 'This treatment to *me* too! To *me*! To me, who if the world knew all'—At these words, his wife, who had in vain laid her hand upon his, and looked him with dreary earnestness in the face, suddenly glided from the room. He and two or three who were present were struck with a dumb horror. They said she did not walk out, nor vanish suddenly, but glided as one who could dispense with the use of feet. After a moment's pause, the others proposed to him to follow her. He made a movement of despair, but they went. There was a short passage which turned to the right into her favourite room. They knocked at the door twice or three times, and received no answer. At last one of them gently opened it, and, looking in, they saw her, as they thought, standing before a fire, which was the only light in the room. Yet she stood so far from it as rather to be in the middle of the room; only the face was towards the fire, and she seemed looking upon it. They addressed her, but received no answer. They stepped gently towards her, and still received none. The figure stood dumb and unmoved. At last, one of them

went round in front, and instantly fell on the floor. The figure was without body. A hollow hood was left instead of a face. The clothes were standing upright by themselves.

That room was blocked up for ever, for the clothes, if it might be so, to moulder away. It was called the Room of the Lady's Figure. The house after the gentleman's death was long uninhabited, and at length burnt by the peasants in an insurrection. As for himself, he died about nine months after, a gentle and childlike penitent. He had never stirred from the house since, and nobody would venture to go near him but a man who had the reputation of being a reprobate. It was from this man that the particulars of the story came first. He would distribute the gentleman's alms in great abundance to any poor stranger who would accept them, for most of the neighbours held them in horror. He tried all he could to get the parents among them to let some of their little children, or a single one of them, go to see his employer. They said he even asked it one day with tears in his eyes. But they shuddered to think of it; and the matter was not mended when this profane person, in a fit of impatience, said one day that he would have a child of his own on purpose. His employer, however, died in a day or two. They did not believe a word he told them of all the Bavarian's gentleness, looking upon the latter as a sort of ogre, and upon his agent as little better, though a good-natured-looking, earnest kind of person. It was said many years after, that this man had been a friend of the Bavarian's when young, and had been deserted by him. And the young believed it, whatever the old might do.