

Poets' Corner.

T I M E.

Pale death with equal foot strikes wide the door
Of royal halls and hovels of the poor.

Like crowded forest trees we stand,
And some are marked to fall;
The axe will smite at God's command,
And soon shall smite us all.

Green as the bay-tree ever-green,
With its new foliage on,
The gay, the thoughtless I have seen;
I passed, and they were gone.

Read, yet that urn, the solemn truth,
With which I charge my page;
A worm is in the bud of youth,
And at the root of age.

No present health can health ensure
For yet an hour to come,
No medicine, though it often cure,
Can always balk the tomb.

He lives, who lives to God alone,
And all are dead beside;
For other source than God is none,
Whence life can be supplied.

To live to God is to requite
His love as best we may;
To make His precepts our delight,
His promises our stay.

COWPER.

THE DARK LADY OF SUNNINGDALE.

A LEGEND OF READING ABBEY.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

THROUGH the stately hall, where the shafts of the sunbeams laid the marble floor with alternate bars of light and shade, and glinted on the trophies of the chase, and the figures of knights armed cap-à-pie, worthies of the house of Sunningdale, who were ranged in their iron panoply as if they lived, on either side the hall.

Up the broad oaken staircase, and through the long gallery, where the sunbeams fell with a fainter radiance through the em-
purpled panes.

At the end of the corridor was the lady's bedchamber.

The richness of mediæval furniture and decoration had reached its climax in the days of the Tudors.

A modern princess is scarce so richly lodged as was the lady of Sunningdale.

Not only were the draperies of her bed of no worse material than purple satin wrought with palm branches of gold, but her toilette table, in addition to a Venice looking-glass in a silver frame elaborately chased, was crowded with vases of Chinese porcelain, for holding flowers, filigree boxes of silver and gold for holding pastes and perfumes, and other accessories employed by fair ladies in the ancient time as well as the modern, to enhance their beauty.

A covering of purple satin like the bed curtains was spread on this table, and that again was overlaid by costly point lace.

Carpets, too, were in general use among the wealthy classes at this period, and a rich carpet of Turkey work, for the most part covered the polished oak floor in the lady of Sunningdale's chamber.

The air of the room was, however, close; and a vase of burning spices, instead of purifying, only made it faint and sickly.

With a face whiter than the sheets of Rennes, and motionless as though she were already dead, lay the owner of all this magnificence. The lady of Sunningdale was an heiress, and her husband, the cadet of a noble family, owed his title, lands, and lofty position, wholly to her love.

The gorgeous curtains were thrown back at the foot of the bed, and the monk and the physician exchanged glances the moment they entered the chamber.

The experienced eyes of both told them, too surely, that the unfortunate lady was past all human aid, too probably now in a state incapable of spiritual consolation.

Near to the right of the bed reclined, in a huge cushioned chair, a beautiful and gorgeously attired woman.

She rose as the monk and the mediciner entered, her black eyes glaring fiercely, and the color on her cheeks, always too highly tinted, deepening to absolute crimson, and surging over her brow to the very roots of her hair, which she, the waiting woman, wore bound back with a fillet of pearls.

"Who sent for you?" she exclaimed, sweeping forward in her robes of purple velvet, in such a manner that her majestic figure screened the form of the dying lady; "your attendance is not required here!"

"Of that, we are ourselves the best judges," said Father Hugh, sternly. "Stand aside, Lettice Miller, thou art not yet mistress here."

The woman hesitated, but her bold, defiant glance sank under the calm, stern gaze of the monk, and she drew aside, sullenly muttering however.

The monk caught her words.

"How say you?" he exclaimed, "that you have nought to fear; that what you have done you would do again? I doubt it

not, Lettice; but if justice yet has sway in this realm of England, thou shalt not have the chance to do again what thou hast done."

While the monk thus spoke, the apothecary had approached the bed, and lifting the head of the unfortunate lady succeeded in forcing down her throat a few drops of some powerful medicine.

Alas! the resources of science, when brought too late, prolong life only for a brief space to produce torture.

The poor lady, who had laid white and still as though she were already dead, when forced to swallow the potent liquid, threw up her hands, while her already glazing eyes glared wide open, and fastened with a piteous expression on the face of the apothecary.

She strove to speak; but her broken accents were inaudible. Then the heavy lids fell over the fixed orbs, a dark violet tint crept up into the face, a fearful convulsion distorted the features and shook the delicate frame.

In a few minutes it passed away, and motionless in the rigidity of death, but with the horrible blackness deepening on her face, lay the helpless lady of Sunningdale.

"Murdered! Poisoned! poisoned!" exclaimed the mediciner, as he let fall the stiffening hand; and dropping on his knees beside the bed, wept over the corpse of her who had been to him, as to all who came within the sphere of her gentle influence, a benefactress and a friend!

CHAPTER III.

THE DARK LADY LETTICE.

"And who should have poisoned her?" exclaimed a hard defiant voice, and Mistress Lettice stepped forward, and laying her white, but firm and strong, hand on the apothecary's shoulder, shook him roughly.

He did not look up, but with his face buried in his hands still wept. "Dost hear?" cried the fierce woman, stamping her foot. If she has been poisoned, she has had a poisoner. Whom, in thy wisdom, thou dealer in drugs, dost thou accuse of so foul a deed? Has she not been sickly—ailing for weeks and months? Has she not been kind and good to all who knew her? Who then would have practised the poisoner's fell art upon her? Come! speak man, speak. I would fain know whom thy slanderous and wicked fancy would accuse."

Master Wilson, a good, but timid man, rose up. He almost cowered before the fierce woman as he answered gravely—

"Mistress Lettice, I accuse none. But I will swear this lady has been poisoned!"

"Lettice Miller," said the monk, stepping forward. "In a house where the foul designs of a poisoner have been, if none can be accused all are under suspicion. In the absence of this dead lady's husband, I, as her spiritual director, take upon me the responsibility of laying under arrest all who have been immediately about her person!—What, no! without there!"

A shriek of terror burst from the lips of Mistress Lettice, bold as she was, when, on the summons of Father Hugh, the door of the chamber was thrown wide, and the Mayor of Reading, with his clerk and three apparitors, entered.

The mayor glanced at the blackening features of the departed lady.

"A bad matter this!" he exclaimed, "a bitter business!"

Then he turned to the monk. "Good reverend father," he said, "it seemeth thou didst act with thy usual wisdom in bidding me hasten here after thee with my officers. What says Master Wilson?"

"That my patient has been poisoned," answered the apothecary, "as I shall prove by opening the body!"

"And, in the meantime, the whole household do I place under arrest," said the mayor.

"Nay, Mistress Lettice, thou art included with the rest. Officers, detain yon woman. Upon her does suspicion mostly fall, in that she has been most about the person of the Lady Gabrielle."

Lettice, who had sunk upon a chair on the mayor's entrance, had risen at his last words, and was about to retreat to an inner chamber. As the chief apparitor stepped forward, however, she paused, and turning disdainfully to the mayor, she exclaimed—

"Be not afraid, my worshipful master! I was not about to evade thee but to get some money of mine own from a cabinet in the next chamber, for well I wot, that needful commodity for all the world is most needful to a poor prisoner. For the rest, it is a foul slander to charge me with aught of ill towards the Lady Gabrielle. Was she not my bountiful benefactress?"

"Aye! and thou the serpent which hath stung her!" said Father Hugh. "Good Master Mayor," he continued, addressing that functionary, "let this woman be secured. The Church hath first her charitable office about the corpse of this poor lady, who has died unshriven, unanointed, unanointed, through the crime or the carelessness of her attendants. Then there must be the investigation of Master Wilson, and the decent cares of Dame Hildred and her handmaids for this lifeless form."

"She is prepared thereto, reverend father," answered the mayor. "Dame Hildred and her maidens wait in the gallery to tend the remains of their mistress."

"And why they more than I," insolently demanded Lettice. "Didst thou not say, Master Mayor, that all in the house were under a like suspicion?"

"Surely so," replied the mayor; "therefore, in company with mine officers, have I brought here this good woman of Reading, who will at once assist Dame Hildred in her offices about the dead, and vouch for her integrity in performing them. For the rest, Mistress Lettice, thy presence can be spared. I have summoned the coroner, and thou wilt be examined anon. But it looks ill for thee that thy minion the steward, on the arrival here of Father Hugh, should have stolen suddenly away."

"How say you, Humphry gone?" said Lettice eagerly.

To be continued.