

Poets' Corner.

HOURS.

In the morning of life with what pleasure we gaze
On the prospect which opens itself to our view,
In the evening we look back with fear and amaze
At the hours which we lost while the day quickly flew.

But, the night cold and drear which succeeds to the eve,
Shall approach without warning—in vain shall we try
The dark figure which comes with it then, to deceive,
Or, to shun the lot fated to mortals—to die.

Oh! gladly we'll greet that night tho' it be dreary,
Oh! gladly we'll enter upon that vague shore,
Where the poor travellers never again shall be weary,
And sorrow and care shall be for him no more.

O'B.

THE DARK LADY OF SUNNINGDALE.

A LEGEND OF READING ABBEY.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"THE steward escaped, Master Mayor!" exclaimed the monk. "That is an unlucky chance, for surely if this woman is guilty, he was her aider and abettor."

Lettice smiled, as she was led from the chamber, and muttered to herself, "a lucky chance rather, my pious Father Hugh, for if he has escaped he has gone to summon help for me."

The awful investigation at Sunningdale was over. A skilled mediciner from London had been summoned to assist Master Wilson. The result of the inquiry was that large quantities of arsenic had been found in the body.

It must have been administered for a long time, and in infinitesimal doses; for it had pervaded every tissue.

The murderers had, however, been too impatient at the last. The strength of the last doses had caused death to supervene so suddenly that suspicion was converted into certainty. Both suspicion and certainty culminated on the head of Lettice Miller.

The ungrateful dependent whom Lady Gabrielle had cherished to her own undoing; who had stolen the affections of the husband who, despite her beauty and goodness, had doubtless wedded her only for her wealth.

It was, indeed, much suspected that the lord of Sunningdale was a sharer in the crime which left him sole possessor of the splendid property of his murdered wife.

He was, however, absent in Calais when the inquiry respecting his wife's death took place, nor did he return to England either to be present at her funeral or for a period long subsequent.

Humphry Miller, too, had escaped. The miserable Lettice alone was called upon to pay the dreadful penalty for the crime in which, it could not be doubted, there were some participators.

The guilt of Lettice was proved before the coroner, inasmuch as a quantity of the noxious drug which had been administered to the Lady Gabrielle, was found, not only in the cabinet in the lady's own chamber, which the mayor had prevented her from examining, but also in a small silken bag sewn into the bosom of her corset.

The coroner's jury hesitated not a moment, and ere the leaves which were beginning to sear when the lady of Sunningdale died, had ceased falling, Lettice Miller was lying in Reading Gaol, awaiting her trial for wilful murder.

It was a gloomy and chill evening, all unlike the glorious closing of that summer day on which Father Hugh had been summoned by the little handmaiden Gillian to Sunningdale. The skies close darkly overhead; the rain is beginning to patter down; and the wind rushes with a hollow moaning sound through the streets of the ancient town of Reading.

Those streets, despite the unpleasant weather, have been busy throughout the day; for on the morrow is the first day's sitting of the autumn assizes.

Now, however, they are comparatively deserted; the evening is closing in; the burgesses and craftsmen are, as usual, in their comfortable dwellings; the strangers betake themselves to the various hostelries, in the casement windows of which the ruddy light of fire and lamp glows, and flickers, and leaps out into the street, and with its cheering radiance seems inviting the wayfarer to enter.

The trial of Mistress Lettice Miller for poisoning her mistress is the first on the rolls.

There is much gossip about her in the various hostelries that night, and even at the domestic fireside.

No one doubts her guilt. Heaven help her, if she is innocent, for she has been prejudged.

"Heaven help her,—heaven pardon her! unhappy woman as she is—Innocent, I dare not hope—yet grace may have been vouchsafed her to confess, else why has she sent this summons to me?"

Thus soliloquised Father Hugh Farringdon, as drawing his habit close about him, he hurried through the dim twilight to the county gaol, where Lettice Miller was a prisoner.

It was almost dark when he reached the building. He was received by the head jailor, and immediately ushered into the cell occupied by Lettice.

"Kindle the lamps!" said a hollow voice as the monk entered. The turnkey set that which he held on a small stone table, which, with a bench morticed to the floor, and a straw pallet, was the sole furniture of the place.

Beside the table, with her head leaning on her arms, sat Lettice.

"You have come, then!" she exclaimed, looking up; and the compassionate, though firm, heart of Father Hugh was shocked at the change in her appearance.

Was that the audacious woman—defiant in her guilt, queen-like in her beauty, gorgeous in her attire—whom he had cited to the bar of justice at the deathbed of the Lady of Sunningdale scarce two months before?

This gaunt, wasted, hollow-eyed creature; the brilliant complexion faded to a sallow, sickly tint; the eyes sunk deep in the sockets, full of a sullen, smouldering fire; the hair no longer decked with diamonds, but sweeping over her shoulders and coarse woollen robe, that had displaced the gorgeous velvet, and its silken ebony blackness thickly stripped with grey.

The monk was appalled. Was it remorse for committed crime, or the rebellious anguish of insulted innocence, that had thus changed this woman?

Lettice fixed her eyes on him, and the sullen fire in the sunken orbits seemed to condense.

"I have sent for thee!" she said, in the same cavernous, far-off voice in which she had first spoken. "Art thou content?" "Content?" reiterated Father Hugh. "Little measure of contentment has there yet been in aught concerning thee! Dost thou own thy guilt, or still maintain thy innocence? Oh, Lettice, the evidence stands fearfully arrayed against thee; and yet thou mayst be innocent; may our Lady's grace be showered down upon thee, and prove it, if thou art so!"

"Go to!" exclaimed Lettice, scornfully, "I asked wast thou content! feign not to mis-read my meaning. Art thou content to see me here? Guilty or innocent, here I should not have been but for thee. To thee I owe all my misery;—this silvered hair, this haggard face, these wasted limbs! Aye, to thee I shall owe the dreadful death, the shadow of which loom over me!"

"To thine own evil deeds, woman, thou dost owe thy sorrowful plight, and not to me!" answered Hugh Farringdon. "To thee, and thee only!" replied Lettice. "Sir Priest, I did not pray this visit from thee to fall upon my knees, and cant, and whine, and beseech a cast of thine office. I do not confess; I acknowledge that my hand mixed the potions which cut short the life of the Lady Gabrielle. I was her friend, and not her foe, in that."

"Poisoner!" ejaculated Father Hugh, in an accent of horror, "dost thou vaunt thee of thy horrid deed?"

"I was her friend, and not her foe!" pursued Lettice, "Her life was very miserable; sickness and sorrow were her doleful companions. Poor woman, she tenderly loved her husband, and he had transferred his affections to me. She had been my munificent benefactress, and I betrayed her. Yet such was the tenderness of her heart, that she sought no revenge. She wept and submitted, she was dying of her wounded affections, and that death would have been one of such slow and agonising torture, that I converted myself from her betrayer into her benefactress, when I shortened it. She, doubtless, is in heaven, and I doomed to regions of eternal bale, have been defrauded by thee of this world's brief recompense for my sin."

"Wretched woman!" exclaimed the monk, in an accent of pity, "the more guilty, that thy powerful, but perverted, mind so clearly estimates the horrible hereafter that awaits thee, by what hallucination thou dost persuade thyself that I am the person to whom is owing the failure of your schemes; I am at a loss to understand."

"To thee I owe it all!" cried Lettice, fiercely. "The failure, the prison, the death at the hangman's hands. Know, then, that we had sent for a mediciner from London, skilled practitioner, who had studded long in Italy. He would have made deposition as to the causes of the lady's death, which he would have reported natural. Thou didst bring the man Wilson to her bedside. But he is a coward, a pitiful fool, and I might have baffled him, had he not been supported by thy keenness and determination. Ah, me! ah, me!" and here the wretched creature faltered, her voice choked with tears as she smote her breast. "Ah, me! how different would all have been but for thee, I should have been the Lady of Sunningdale—His wife! What am I now?"

"A guilty and most unhappy woman!" said the monk. "Nevertheless, all late as it is, yet there remains for thee time to repent. Bethink thee—poor, distressed, and sinful woman—that thou art disappointed of the promised reward of the sin, is a token that a ray from the mercy-seat shines on the still! Down then on thy knees; give thanks to God; and offer the bitter trial of thy passage from this world, as some atonement for thy crime."

Lettice burst into a scornful laugh. "Monk, thou dost mistake my character!" she said, "I sent for thee, not to cringe in penitence before, but to speak my hate. Oh, thou marplot! I shall be pronounced a murderess to-morrow, and then in a little space led forth to die. I am, I know, as well as thou canst tell me, a lost and guilty wretch! But there is a faith that tends on wickedness no less than virtue. I shall escape the death—I know I shall. When thou dost hear of my escape, Hugh Farringdon, beware!"

Further, by the dark spirit of prophesy, descending on me at this hour, I foretell the time when thou shalt be the doomed prisoner, and I, even I, the accuser that brings thee to thy doom!"

CHAPTER IV.

AFTER MANY YEARS.

After many years! In what state or condition of this frail life, shall we not find great changes, after many years! The changes in England were terrible and great indeed, between that autumn night when the prisoner, Lettice Miller, awaiting her trial for poisoning her mistress, in the impotent fury and malice of her despair bade the monk, Hugh Farringdon, beware, when he should be a helpless captive.

To be continued.