

THE MONOSYLLABLE TRAVELLER.

I AM yet a young man, but I have led a wandering life so long (my friends call me *der Wandernde Vogel*—but that's a secret), and have seen so many unco sights, and undergone so many queer adventures, and met so many unaccountable people, that I sometimes fancy myself quite an octogenarian; and, truly, I have had more rough experience of life than usually falls to the lot of the 'most potent, grave, and reverend seniors.' But don't be alarmed by this bit of a preface, as I am not about to inflict a garrulous egotistical gossip, for the Editor himself knows me personally, and will bear ready witness that I am not the 'Monosyllable Traveller.' Nevertheless, 'the tale that I am going to tell is just as true as——' most tales told by the philosophical vagabonds, of whom I am a fair type.

On the evening of the 20th day of December, 1851 (you see the epoch of this veritable story is so very recent, that ladies and gentlemen can easily satisfy themselves of its perfect truth in these days of electric telegraphs), I was wandering in my usual aimless harebrained fashion in a wild district of the North Riding of Yorkshire. It was cold, oh! bitter cold! and the fierce wind blew the snow cuttingly in my face. But I am a case-hardened fellow, and I didn't care a pinch of snuff for the weather. I only settled my old gold-banded Danish cap firmer on my head, and 'drew my auld cloak about me,' and sucked the tip of my frozen moustache, and hummed *Den tappre Landsoldat*, and strode onward as careless and happy as a wood-sawyer's clerk. But whither was I going? Ay, that's what I didn't know myself. I had somehow lost the course I had been directed to steer at the village I passed, and as I knew nothing of the latitude and longitude of the country, and it was too cloudily overhead to admit of any celestial observation, I e'en sailed hap-hazard. But I thought to myself that I must surely stumble on a town, or a village, or an odd house sooner or later, and the worse come that night, I could lie down on the lee-side of a hedge or a tree, and take out my allowance of sleep in my dear old sea-clock, as I had done many times before.

Well, about four bells of the first watch, as we used to say at sea (10 P.M.), I descried a twinkling light ahead, and, making all sail, I came alongside of it, and found it to proceed from the porch of a very ancient solitary road-side inn, bearing the singular sign of the Mermaid. I shook off the snow from my cloak in the porch, and in a minute I was in the comfortable parlour of the inn. There was only one guest seated there, and him I cheerfully saluted with—'Good evening, sir!'

He stared vacantly at me a moment, but never opened his lips.

'Good evening!' I repeated.

This time he evinced a sort of consciousness, by emitting a low unintelligible growl, which I fancied at the time sounded like 'yah!'

I looked more particularly at him, and, perceiving that he wore beard and moustaches, and clothes of a fashion I had often seen in Scandinavia, it struck me that he must be a native of that region, and probably unacquainted with the English language. So I addressed him in Danish.—

'*Hvorledes befinder Dem? Taler de Dansk?*' He shook his head slowly from side to side.

'Do you speak English, sir?' continued I, rather vexed at his taciturnity.

'Yes.'

'Oh, I'm glad of that. I beg pardon, but I thought you were a foreigner.'

'No.'

'Stormy night, sir!'

'Eh?'

'Cold—windy—snowy—real wintry weather.'

'Ah!'

'Have you ever travelled this road before, sir?'

'Yes.'

'Lonely road, it seems—desolate country by daylight, I suppose?'

'Hum!'

'I was glad to stumble on this inn—queer place for one. Fancy it is never overcrowded with customers?'

'No.'

'Any news in this part of the world—anything stirring?'

'Oh.'

'I asked you, sir,' repeated I with some asperity (for my best friends never reckoned me a Job), 'if there's any news?'

'Ay.'

'Well, what is it?'

'No.'

'Ay and No! What do you mean, sir?' and I stared in turn at the man, beginning to fancy him an escaped lunatic.

'Yes,' he mumbled.

'Sir!' exclaimed I, my hand involuntarily moving towards the poker (for I'm rather peppery—at least people say so), 'do you understand me?'

'No.'

'I thought not.'

'Yes,' drawled he.

I was now absolutely dumfounded, and said not another word. The landlord entered at the moment with a supper I had ordered, and, as he set a smoking stew before me, I jerked my thumb at the Monosyllable Traveller, and whispered, 'Who is he?'

The landlord contented himself with giving a short nod, a dry cough, and a droll wink. After this, I ate my supper in perfect silence; the ticking of the clock and an occasional sigh and groan from the stranger excepted. I actually began to think I had made a worse mistake than Goldsmith did when he entered a gentleman's house for an inn, for I fancied I must have taken up my quarters in an asylum, and the recollection I involuntarily conjured of the singular revelations which recently appeared in the papers about Hanwell Asylum, by no means tended to re-assure me. I am not a nervous man—far from it, but I am not ashamed to say that I very hastily swallowed my pint of sherry to strengthen my heart and clear my brain by the same operation. I also took the precaution to rear my blackthorn stick between my knees; for who can tell what freak a madman may take in his head at any moment? It is true that my monosyllable companion sat very quietly on one side of the fire, with a half-drained glass of liquor on a little round table before him, and his eyes calmly fixed on the blazing sea-coal, but how could I tell how soon he might wildly grasp the tongs,