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From the Book of Beauty.

A SIMPLE TALE.

BY BARRY CORNWALL.

"We live in a world of busy passions. Love and hate, sorrow and joy, in a thousand shapes, are for ever near us. Death is at our threshold. Life springs up almost at our feet. Our neighbours are 'Exultations, Agonies!' And yet we seem to live on, ignorant of all. Could we but unroof (Asmodeus-like) the houses which, day after day, present towards us so insensible an aspect, what marvels might we not disclose! What fruitful thoughts, what radiant visions, would throng into our brain! The mystery of human conduct would be unveiled. We should see and know all men truly. We should see the miser, the spendthrift, the scholar, the toiling artisan, the happy bride, and the girl deserted (like the people in the palace of Truth,) all contributing their share to the unknown romance which Time is for ever weaving round us. As it is, each of them spins out his little thread, and dies, almost unknown, and soon forgotten; unless some curious accident should arise, to extend his influence into another region, or to hold his 'fame' in suspension, twenty years after his coffin has been lowered into the dust. It was some such chance as I have just adverted to, that threw into our knowledge certain facts regarding a neighbouring family, which else had probably slipped very quietly into oblivion. You will observe, that what I am now about to relate is, almost literally, a fact. Some years ago, we lived, as you know, in — Square. The room in which we usually dwelt was at the back of the house. It was spacious, and not without some pretensions to the graceful; the marble chimney-piece being distinguished by a painting by Cipriani, whilst on the ceiling were scattered some of the conventional elegancies of Angelica Kauffman. From the windows, which occupied the northern extremity of the room, we looked (to the left of a large oriental plane) upon the back of a crescent of houses,—the points of the arc receding from us. [I mention these things, merely to recall to your mind our precise position.] In the centre of this crescent, was a house which had for a long time been untenanted. Whilst its neighbour dwellings were all busy with life and motion, this only was, for some reason, deserted. We were beginning to speculate on the causes of this accident, and to pity the unhappy landlord, whose pockets were lamenting the lack of rent, when suddenly—it was on an April morning—we perceived, for the first time, signs of change. The windows of the deserted mansion were opened, and workmen were seen bustling about its different rooms. There was an air of preparation, evidently, which announced an incoming tenant. 'Well,' said —, 'at last that unhappy man has discovered some one bold enough to take his haunted house; or, perhaps, after all, he is merely endeavouring to decoy the unwary passenger. We shall see.' A few weeks determined the question: for, after the house had been duly cleansed and beautified, and the odour of the paint suffered to fade away, various articles of furniture were brought into the rooms. These were of moderate price, and explained to us that the new tenant was a person of respectable station, but not rich. We began to feel a wish to know 'what manner of man' he was. Our interest in the once empty house had received a new impulse; and we looked out, day after day, for the stranger's arrival. At last, a young man, of lively and agreeable presence, was one morning seen giving directions to a female servant, about the disposition of the furniture. This was evidently the master of the mansion. He strayed for half an hour, then departed; and he repeated his short visit daily. He was probably a clerk in some public office,—a merchant or professional man,—whose time was required elsewhere. But, why did he not reside there? That was a problem that we strove to solve in vain. In the end, he went away altogether.

"Each morn we missed him in th' accustomed room"—
And now no one, except the solitary maid, was seen. Throwing open the windows at morning, to let in the vernal May; closing them at night; rubbing, with a delicate hand, the new furniture; gazing at the unknown neighbourhood; or sitting listlessly in the afternoon, 'imparadised' in rustic dreams, she appeared to be the sole spirit of the spot. It was not the 'genius loci' which we had reckoned upon. Our imaginations were not satisfied; and we looked forward confidently to another corner. We were not disappointed. After the lapse of a fortnight from the young man's departure, our inquisitive eyes discovered him again. He was sitting at breakfast, with a lady by his side. Pretty, young, neat, and attired from head to foot in white, she

was evidently a bride. We rushed at once upon this conjecture; and certain tender manifestations, on the husband's leaving-taking, confirmed us in our opinion. He went away; and she, left to herself, explored, as far as we could observe, all the rooms of the house. Every thing was surveyed with a patient admiration; every drawer opened; the little bookcase contemplated, and its slender rows of books all, one by one, examined. Finally, the maid was called up, some inquiries made, and the survey recommenced. The lady had now some one to encourage her open expressions of delight. We could almost fancy that we heard her words—'How beautiful this is! What a comfortable sofa! What a charming screen! How kind, how good, how considerate of —!' It was altogether a pretty scene. Let us pass over the autumn and winter months. During a portion of this time, we ourselves were absent in the country; and, when at home, we remember but little of what happened. There was little or no variety to remark upon; or, possibly, our curiosity had become abated. As last, spring came, and with it came a thousand signs of cheerfulness and life. The plane put forth its tender leaves; the sky grew blue overhead (even in London); and the windows of the once melancholy house shone blushing with many flowers. So May passed; and June came on, with its air all rich with roses. But the lady? Ah! her cheek now waxed pale, and her step grew weak and faltering. Sometimes she ventured into her small garden (when the sun was full upon it): at other times, she might be seen, wearied with needle-work, or sitting languidly alone; or, when her husband was at home (before and after his hours of business), she walked a little, leaning on him for support. His devotion increased with her infirmity. It was curious to observe how love had tamed the high and frolicsome spirit of the man. A joyous and, perhaps, common manner, became serious and refined. The weight of thought lay on him—the responsibility of love. It is thus that, in some natures, love is wanting to their full development. It raises, and refines, and magnifies the intellect which else would remain trivial and prostrate. From a seeming barrenness, the human mind springs at once into fertility—from vagueness into character—from dulness, into vigour and beauty, under the 'charming wand of love.' But let us proceed:—On a glittering night in August, we saw lights flashing about the house, and people hurrying up and down, as on some urgent occasion. By degrees the tumult subsided; the passages backwards and forwards became less frequent; and at last tranquillity was restored. A single light, burning in an upper window, alone told that some one kept watch throughout the night. The next morning the knocker of the house was (we were told) shrouded in white leather; and the lady had brought her husband a child. We drank to its health in wine. For a few days, quiet hung upon the house. But it was doomed speedily to depart. Hurry and alarm came again. Lights were seen once more flickering to and fro. The physician's carriage was heard. It came,—and departed. The maid now held her apron to her eyes. The husband, burying his face in his hands, strove (how vainly) to hide a world of grief. Ere long, the bed-room window was thrown open—the shutters of the house were closed; and in a week, a hearse was at the door. The mystery was clear—she was dead!—She died! No post ever wove around her the gaudy tissue of his verse. The grave she sleeps in is probably nothing more than the common mould. Her name even is unknown. But what of this? She lived, and died, and was lamented. The proudest can boast of little more. She made the light and happiness of one mortal creature, fond and fragile as herself. And for a name—a tomb—alas! for all the purposes of love, nothing is wanted save a little earth—nothing but to know the spot where the beloved one rests for ever. We fear, indeed, to give the creature whom we have boarded in our hearts, to the deep and ever shifting waters—to the oblivion of the sea! We desire to know where it is that we have laid our fading treasure. Otherwise, the pilgrimage is as easy (and as painful) to the simple churchyard hillock, as to the vault in which a king reposes. The gloomy arches of stately tombs—what are they to the grandeur of the overhanging heavens? and the cold and ghastly marble, how poor and hideous it is, in comparison with the turf whereon many a daisy grows! The child survived. The cares lately exhausted on another were now concentrated on a little child. The solemn doctors came, and prescribed for it, and took their golden fees. The nurse transferred to it her ready smiles. The services which the mother purchased were now the property of another claimant. Even the father turned towards it all of his heart which was not in the grave. It was part of her who had strewn sunshine in his path; and he valted it accordingly. But

all would not do. A month,—'a little month,'—and the shutters were again closed. Another funeral followed swiftly upon the last. The mother and her child were again together. From this period, a marked change arose in the man's character. The grief which had bowed him down at his wife's death (relieved a little by the care which he bestowed upon her child), now changed to a sullen, or reckless indifference. In the morning he was clouded and oppressed; but at night a mad and dissonant jollity (the madness of wine) usurped the place of his early sorrow. His orgies were often carried into the morning. Sometimes he drank with wild companions; sometimes he was seen alone, staggering towards the window, stupid and bloated, ere the last light of the autumn sunset concealed him from our sight. There were steadier intervals, indeed, when reflection would come upon him,—perhaps remorse; when he would gaze with a grave (or oftener a sad) look upon the few withered flowers that had once flourished in his gay window. What was he then thinking of?—Of vanished hopes and happy hours? Of her? her patience, her gentleness, her deep, untrusting love? Why did he not summon up more cheerful visions? Where was his old vivacity, his young and manly spirit? The world offered the same allurements as before, with the exception only of one single joy. Ah! but that was all. That was the one hope, the one thought, that had grown vast and absorbed all others. That was the mirror which had reflected happiness a thousand ways. Under that influence, the present—the past—the bright to come—all had seemed to cast back upon him the picture of innumerable blessings. He had trod 'even in dreams upon a sunny shore.' And now —! But why prolong the pain and disgrace of the story? He fell, from step to step. Sickness was on his body: despair was in his mind. He shrank and wasted away, 'old before his time'; and might have subsided into a paralysed cripple or moody idiot, had not death (for once a friend) come suddenly to him, and rescued him from further misery. He died, as his wife and child had died before him. The same signs were there—the unnatural quiet—the closed shutters—and the funeral train. But all in their time disappeared. And in a few weeks, workmen came thronging again to the empty house—the rooms were again scoured—the walls beautified. The same board, which two years before had been nailed to the wall, with the significant words, 'To Let' upon it, was again fixed there. It seemed almost as though the old time had returned again; and that the interval was nothing but a dream. And is this all!—Yes; this is all. I wish that I could have crowned my little tale with a brighter ending. But it was not to be. I wish even that I could have it more heroic, or have developed some grand moral for your use. As it is, it contains little beyond the common threadbare story of human life—first hope, and then enjoyment, and then sorrow, all ending quietly in the grave. It is an ancient tale. The vein runs through man's many histories. Some of them may present seeming varieties—a life without hope or joy—or a career beginning gaily, and running merrily to its close. But this is because we do not read the inner secrets of the soul—the thousand thousand small pulsations, which yield pain or pleasure to the human mind. Be assured, that there is no more an equality in the heart than in the ever-moving ocean. You will ask me to point out something from which you may derive a profitable lesson. Are you to learn how to regulate your passions? to arm your heart with iron precepts? to let in neither too much love nor sorrow? and to shut out all despair? Some wise friend will tell you that you may learn never to lean too much on others; for that thereby you lose your independent mind. To be the toy of a woman—to rest your happiness on the existence of a fragile girl, whom the breath of the east wind may blow into the dust, is any thing but the act of a wise man. And to grieve for her when dead—to sigh for what is irrecoverable! What can be more useless? All this can be proved by every rule of logic. For my part I can derive nothing for you from my story, to sympathize with your kind. And this, methinks, is better, and possibly quite as necessary, as any high wrought or stern example, which shuts the heart up, instead of persuading it to expand; which teaches prudence instead of love; and reduces the aim of a good man's life to a low and sordid mark, which all are able, and most of us too well contented, to reach. We should not commit ourselves to the fields, and inhale the fresh breath of the spring, merely to gain strength to resume our dry calculations, or to inflict hard names upon simple flowers. We should not read the sadness of domestic history, merely to extract some prudent lesson for our-