

A DREAM BY THE FIRE.

It is impossible, as every one knows, to sit by the fire in winter time without gazing at it very earnestly; and the more you gaze, the more you see in it,—strange faces, and one of your love, perhaps, like a very "red, red nose"—a flamingo, or a whole flock of them,—Mount Vesuvius, with the neighbourhood overrun by the molten lava; a distant view of the Potteries, or the Carron Iron Works, by night, with the furnaces at full work; there is no end of the glowing objects you may see between or above the bars, if you have the least spark of imagination to cke them out with.

It is not a pleasure, however, without its price; in the course of time the eyes become parched by the heat, the eyelids grow heavy, and in a moment or two you will inevitably go to sleep; to avoid which I jumped up, though with some effort, and determined to look in at the Coal Hole—not the one in the cellar, but the one in the Strand. Still, from the name, the reader may run away with, or rather be run away with, the notion that the Coal Hole goes the whole coal, at some shed or dingy wharf down those dark arches or narrow lanes in the neighbourhood of the Adelphi—that it is a depository for Wallsend, Russell's Main, and Adair's; Hutton, Pontops, and Tanfield's, and all the other varieties of the black diamond. Whereas, if they take the right Rhodes, they will find a well-known house of entertainment in Fountain Court, celebrated for its good cheer and comic singing, to which a little deaf-and-dumb waiter,—call him page if you please,—played a mute accompaniment.

Well, I walked in, passing the bar on the right, to the large room, where some voice in three volumes was singing a glee, with as much goodwill as if it had been earning three suppers. O, what a rich, jolly triple chorus it was, singing of wine and Baccus, and Venus and myrtils,—while with every line some bright glorious image rose up in the mind's eye,—fauns skipping and nymphs dancing, grapes clustering, flowers springing, birds singing, and the sun shining from the clear blue sky with a fervour that made the blood bound through the heart, and run with a sensible thrill through every vein! And when the song ceased, the genial feeling did not cease with it, for though there was no sun there, or blue sky, or clustering vines, there was abundance of radiant lamps, and the fire glowed like a furnace, and the generous juice of the grape shone in amber and ruby through the crystal, and shed a light as from the painted windows of the Temple of Baccus on the snowy table-cloths. And then those social little nooks round the room! Mirth occupied one; you could hear him laughing till his sides shook and his voice quivered. Friendship had taken possession of the next one; and was giving out hearty toasts and sentiments, followed by hip, hip, hips! and loud hurrahs! Harmony sat in the third: he had joined in the *trio*, a capital *fourth*—and in the other boxes sat dozens of Sociables, and United Brethren, and Odd Fellows, enjoying themselves to their hearts' content, over the good things, solid and liquid, of this world. What comfortable steams rose

over the tops of the partitions; what savoury odours streamed around; what a cheerful clatter of knives and forks and plates; what a merry jingle of bottles and glasses as they kissed each other in their hospitable journeys—like gossips laden with drink; what a tinkling, as if of little bells, between the glass and the busy spoon! What fumes of gin, rum, and brandy mingling in the air, and making a sort of aromatic punch for the benefit of the nose! And what rattling peals of laughter that seemed to come from some fat fellow with two hearts—one mocking the other! And all the while the deaf-and-dumb page, inspired by the spirit of the place, grew more and more intelligent, till he seemed to hear with every feature but his ears, and to speak with every feature but his mouth.

And, better than all, in a corner box there was my very crony, my bosom friend, the friend of my soul, my other self, old Mann—or Old Humanity as we used to call him, sipping from a huge goblet to which he invited everybody who only looked at him—for he had a large heart and a liberal hand, loved everybody in the world but himself, and deserved to be as largely loved in return. Yes—there he was, smiling and looking like a father to every one in the room. It was impossible not to drink with him when he asked you, which he was as sure to do, if you were within hearing, as that Burton ale is not Burton's Melancholy. So to it we went, glass for glass, hob and nob, here's to thee, and fill again,—and the wife and children, down to the baby in arms, were pledged in humming ale. At least that was *his* liquor, as it was Adam's, though of a weaker sort, for before A. B. was invented, double X would have been an anachronism. However, strong ale was his drink, and of all songs he best loved that old one, which sings of "jolly good ale and odds." But every man else might call for what he liked and welcome,—even the stranger whose face he had never seen before was a brother by descent to old Mann, and treated accordingly. So to it, I say, we went, with a will as the sailors say, like the jovial toppers in Rabelais, taking great draughts of the stingo, and rare slices of the brawn, and huge trusses of the green salad, in which two or three lobsters had lost themselves, like tars in the country parts; and, meanwhile, the singing began again, first only one voice, then two, then three, then a fourth chimed in, and then more and more till the room rang again with the lusty chorus! Oh, 'twas a glorious place that Coal Hole!—warm, bright, joyous with song and laughter,—you quite forgot there was such a thing as care, dull care in the world!

Well, we drank on, old Mann and I, till my head became so heavy with the ale that had mounted into it, that I could not hold it up, but do what I would, it must needs drop first on my bosom, and then lower and lower till it bobbed on the table; and lo, when it bobbed up again I was all in the dark, pitch dark. Every lamp had gone out; and as to the fire, it had died of apoplexy, or something as sudden, for there was not a spark left of it. I never felt so cold and dreary in my life, for with the light and the warmth, the voices had died away too. Instead of the jovial chorus, the joyous jest, the many tongues, all