

THE OLD OWL.



WHEN I was living in my native village, about twenty years ago, I made the acquaintance of an owl, who was a personage of mature years, and first attracted me by the singular similarity of his tastes and opinions with mine. Our first meeting took place under rather peculiar circumstances. One evening I had sat by an ancient round tower near a forest to rest, but had hardly drawn one long breath when there came a flapping of wings about my head, and, raising my eyes, I beheld—*monstrum horrendum*—an owl. Superstitious as an ancient, I turned instinctively that he might be on my right hand, so dreadful seemed the omen; but he replied to the insult only with a disdainful laugh, and, perching himself on the top of the tower, glared at me out of his red eyes with an expression of profound pity. So I said to the owl:

"Pray pardon my silly rudeness; I merely obeyed an instinctive feeling without the least intention of annoying you."

"Where's the good of excuses," said he, shaking his head; "if you really wish to serve me, take yourself off and leave me in peace."

"I cannot go," said I, "until you pardon my offence."

"Begone! you are a miscreant like the rest of your kind."

"You are a miscreant yourself," retorted I, "and very unjust and distrustful to boot. I never injured the smallest creature. I have been the unfailing defender of birds' nests against children and fowlers. At least I ought to be treated with common civility by those whom I have loved and protected."

"Oh, well! well! well!" said he, "don't say any more about it. You are young and well meaning enough. I will trust you and rue the indiscretion at my leisure."

And from that hour the anchorite and I were bound together by the strongest

friendship. He told me that from the first he had felt drawn to me by a singular sympathy, but had vigorously resisted the attraction for fear of fresh disappointment. His words shocked me by their harshness, but our disputes were always friendly and his rebukes were administered with a fatherly tenderness which touched me extremely.

"But," said I one evening, "what would become of society if we adopted your maxims? The noblest friendship, the most heroic devotion would be but deceitful snares. And at this moment you are not in harmony with your theories, for you are confiding in me without dreaming that while I am speaking to you I may be planning your ruin and destruction."

He smiled, and I believed him convinced, but a moment after the doleful theme was resumed, and he was preaching lamentable doctrines as if I had not interrupted him.

"You are sincere and perhaps even virtuous now," he said. "But that is no more than your duty, so you deserve no credit. 'This is the fruit of my experience which I will give you, and you can digest it at your leisure. Have no friends—live by yourself—never marry—live in a village rather than a city, and in a forest rather than in either.'"

So spake the misanthrope, and I replied: "We must take men as they are and life as we find it; God made us to live with our fellow creatures, and if each person followed out your dismal precepts the world would become a vast solitude—a living tomb to engulf humanity."

"Alas! young man!" was his mournful reply.

One beautiful evening he told me his mournful story.

"I was born," said he, "in the very place where I live to-day. My two brothers came into the world with me."

"We were the pride of our parents' hearts, and as we grew from day to day our mother gloried in our size and beauty—our father in the fancied promise we