COLONIAL PEARL.

A VOLUME DEVOTED TO POLITE LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND RELIGION.

Published every Friday evening, at 17s. 6d. per Annum.

VOLUME THREE. FRIDAY EVENING, JULY 19, 1839. NUMBER TWENTY-NINE.

Bentley's Miscellany.

THE NIGHT-WATCH.

BY THOMAS HAYNES BAYLY.

Youth, thoughtless and inexperienced, sees in the oddities of a stranger nought but food for ridicule; but some little knowledge of the world and its vicissitudes teaches a man of feeling to regard with melancholy the eccentricities of old age. Sorrow often leaves fantastic traces of her fatal visits, and the peculiarities which excite mirth are frequently the indications of a bewildered mind, and of a broken heart, which has done with mirth for ever.

Having business to transact in the city, I once remained for a few days at the much-frequented hotel where the coach stopped which conveyed me to London. The old-fashioned coffee-room was still fitted up with those compartments or boxes, which, though expelled from hotels of more recent construction, secure to the traveller some little feeling of seclusion and independence; and I in mine, to the right of the fire-place, having finished my late dinner, sat endeavo. ; to take an interest in a newspaper, which I had already sifted to its last advertisement. On the opposite side of the fire, in the private box corresponding with mine, sat another solitary person. He was tall and meagre, his countenance pale, his hair thin, and perfectly grey; his age I should have guessed to be between sixty and seventy. My attention was attracted towards him by the wild and painful expression of his large clear light-blue eyes.

His movements were so quick and eccentric, that it was with difficulty I could conceal my risibility; to restrain it was beyond my power. I had not then been taught the forbearance which I would now suggest to others.

I still held my newspaper before me, pretending to be occupied with its columns; but all the time I cast furtive glances at my neighbour, unable to account for his extraordinary gestures. For some minutes he would clasp his forehead with both hands, then he would start as if struck with a sudden recollection, and look round anxiously from side to side, until with a deep sigh he relapsed into his former position, or leant his brow disconsolately on the table before him; again he would look up, and with a stare of vacancy fix his eyes on me. I pretended to be unconscious of his scrutiny. Indeed, though his glance rested on my person, I doubt whether he was aware of my presence. Then something like a glimmering of intelligence passed over his wan countenance, and, half conscious that his manner had attracted observation, he assumed an attitude and demeanour of composure. Thoughtless as I then was, the effort of an insane person to conceal his malady was inexpressibly affecting. I had laughed at his eccentricities,—I could have wept at his ineffectual endeavour to conceal them.

Suddenly he exclaimed, "Lost—lost!" and commenced an eager search for something. He looked anxiously round the box in which his table was placed, and then rose, and with hurried steps paced the room, peering into every corner where it was at all likely any any thing could be concealed. At length his attention was turned to me, and approaching me in haste, he said, "Sir, I beg your pardon—I have lost—*myself*. Have you seen *me* anywhere? I am anxious—miserable—" and then he darted abruptly from me, looked under the seats and behind the curtains, shook his head despondingly after each disappointment, and finally left the room.

The waiter informed me that, though occasionally subject to wanderings similar to that I had witnessed, the gentleman was generally perfectly tranquil and in his right mind. He knew little of him, except that he had been a lieutenant in the navy. I soon retired to my own room, and am not ashamed to confess that the recollection of the stranger kept me long from slumber, and haunted my pillow when at length I fell asleep.

It was late before I entered the coffee-room the next morning, and I was somewhat startled at seeing the lieutenant sitting quietly at his breakfast. He offered me the newspaper he had been reading; and, making some remark on the weather, inquired whether I had been a traveller during the night. I believe it was with some embarrassment that I replied, that I had arrived on the afternoon of the preceding day, and had spent the evening in the coffeee-room. His cheek became flushed, and he looked at me eagerly for a moment. He then seemed inclined to speak; but checking himself, he turned from me, and resumed his breakfast. Vexed with myself for the want of tact with which I had alluded to the preceding evening, I endeavoured to make amends by conversing on general subjects. His reserve gradually wore away, and we soon sat together talking more like old familiar friends, than strangers who had so recently met under circumstances so unpromising.

That night we were again the sole occupants of the coffee-room. Every trace of mental excitement had vanished from the countenance and deportment of the lieutenant; and, though still most melancholy, he evinced no disinclination to meet my social advances. On the contrary, we soon occupied the same box, sitting opposite to each other, and chatting with the frankness and familiarity of old companionship.

There are some men with whom on the instant we seem to get acquainted. An hour's accidental association in a stage coach, a steam-packet, or a hotel, does more towards banishing reserve and restraint than many months of daily communication with beings less congenial. They seem to suit us—we part from them with regret, and long afterwards, when their names are forgotten, we remember a pleasant fellow and a happy hour. It is not then that friendships can be made; but we may learn from this the advantage of unpretending good humour and frank benevolence.

I already felt deeply interested for my unhappy companion, and I every instant dreaded inadvertently touching some chord which might arouse the terrors of his now slumbering malady; still I was fascinated by his singular manner, and at all risks prolonged the conversation.

"You are in the navy, sir?" said I, inquiringly.

"I have been a sailor," he replied.

"Have been?"

"Yes," said he, with a deep sigh, "I have been a lieutenant not in the British service,—in a merchant ship, the China trade. I ought never to have been permitted to assume command of any kind. I was afflicted with a malady which ought to have prevented it."

At this allusion to a "malady" I looked down, and changed colour.

"The malady I speak of," he calmly continued, "is not that which I believe you last night witnessed; that is the dreadful result of my having been intrusted with power. The cause of all my misery,—the malady which ought to have precluded me from all such responsibilities,—was an absence of mind, to which from my very boyhood I have been subject."

I said nothing; but secretly I could not help surmising that the absence of mind which afflicted the boy, might have been the germ of that insanity which afterwards bowed down the spirit of the man.

"If you will have patience to listen to a sad story, I will tell you mine," said my companion.

"Do not agitate yourself unnecessarily," I replied, "by recalling the past."

"*Recalling* the past!" he mournfully exclaimed; what an unmeaning phrase that is! To me, and to all who have so suffered, the past is ever present? Listen.—I was a lieutenant when I became acquainted with a young widow, who with one child, then two years old, resided at Brompton. My old malady had increased upon me, and a consciousness of my failing frequently occasioned me deep depression of spirits. The widow was kind to me,—I loved her and her infant boy,—and before a year was gone she became my wife; and the child, who had never known his father, learned to call me by that endearing name. No father ever loved a child as I did that sweet boy Frank. Whenever I returned from my voyage he was my pet, my constant companion; and, never having been blessed with a child of my own, all my paternal affections were lavished upon him. As he grew bigger, he learned to watch me in my absent fits; and, dearly as my poor wife loved me, I do think that the boy's attachment to me was even greater.

"At length nothing would satisfy him but to be permitted to accompany me to sea. I heard the proposition with delight; and though his mother wept bitterly, she could not censure his very natural bias towards my profession. She gave her reluctant consent, and the boy went with me.

"Often when my malady oppressed me most heavily, his watchful care concealed my deficiencies from others; and that which I had neglected to do was done by him before the omission was detected. How I doted on that dear boy!—it is not to be told! You could scarcely credit it; yet, when you hear the sequel, you'll say I must have hated him.

"His dear mother's health declined; and latterly, at the close of every voyage, she came on deck when we lay in the river to welcome us both, and to embrace and bless her child. She loved me,—but she idolised that frank, spirited, amiable, beautiful boy!

"The last time we sailed away together, how wildly she clung to his neck at parting!—how earnestly she urged me to cherish and protect him! He was then sixteen years old,—a merry midshipman. There was not a handsomer fellow in the ship, nor a better heart in the world. My wife lay insensible when we were forced to leave her; the hope which on former occasions had sustained her seemed utterly to have forsaken her. Was it a misgiving?—did she suspect *me*? No—she would have roused herself to gaze once again on dear, dear Frank!

"The ship sailed, and we had a prosperous voyage. The captain, for reasons I forget, nor do they affect my story, was anxious at a particular period to make observations of the position of some island, respecting which, and indeed of its very existence, there was uncertainty.

"One bright and beautiful night the captain had gone to his rest, the watch was with me, and finding myself in the very latitude indicated by my orders, I gave directions for a boat to be manned, ordered Frank to take the command of her, and briefly intimated to him the observations which he was expected to make.

"Lightly he descended the ship's side, took his place in the boat, waved his hand to me, and away they went,—a merry boat's crew, commanded by a happy youth of sixteen.

"How beautifully calm was the sea! The huge vessel seemed to rest motionless on the tide, as if conscious that she was to await the return of that frail pinnance—a mother lingering for the coming of her infant! I never saw the deep blue sky so full of stars before! I gazed upwards, I know not how long, till a dreamy dizzy feeling oppressed my brain. I still leant over the side of the vessel, and my thoughts were of my wife, and the home where we had often been so happy!

"Another rose to take my place—my night's watch was over. I left my orders with my successor, and with my weary fellow watchers I descended to my rest.

"He who succeeded me had not long been on deck when a fresh and fair breeze arose. We had gone on sluggishly for many days, often quite becalmed; and now that the wished-for impetus was given, every white wing was quickly spread, and we flew over the foaming waters. The breeze increased almost to a gale, and for hours we had pursued our rapid course, when suddenly he who had the watch, the man who had taken my place, *missed the boat!*

"Inquiry instantly betrayed the truth! They came to me—to me!—the father of that boy—his sworn father—the man who loved him, and would have died for him—and they found me asleep! O the agony of returning recollection! In my brain's lethargy I had forgotten the departure of the boat! I had neglected to note it in the orders left to my successor. I heard the rushing of the wind, and the dash of the waves against the ship's side, and though with all speed she was put about, and we went in search of those we had abandoned, I had no hope—I felt that I was a murderer! I know not how long we cruised about—it was in vain—we never saw them more! Oh! what a dreadful death! Prepared but for an absence of an hour—without food—without water! O God! what must the poor boy have suffered!

"I remember nothing after that until we anchored in the river, and then my wife came on board. Then they could no longer restrain me. I rushed to her, pale, feeble, helpless as she was, and briefly as words could tell it, I shouted in her ears the fate of her loved boy. I told her of his death; but I had not time to tell of my remorse, for she fell dead at my feet.

"You will not wonder now at what you saw last night. I left the ship,—but where was I to go? I had lost my poor wife, and my boy, my merry boy,—and now at times I lose myself. No wonder. Can you tell me where I am, sir? My senses—my brain—where can I be?"

The poor lieutenant took a candle, and, after anxiously searching every part of the room, he left me, and I saw him no more.

Kind reader, this is a *true* story.

DUELLING.—Duelling, as a punishment, is absurd, because it is an equal chance whether the punishment fall upon the offender or the person offended. Nor is it much better as a reparation—it being difficult to explain in what the satisfaction consists, or how it tends to undo the injury, or to afford a compensation for the damage already sustained. The truth is, it is not considered as either. A law of honour having annexed the imputation of cowardice to patience under an affront, challenges are given and accepted with no other design than to prevent, or wipe off this suspicion—without malice to the adversary, generally without a wish to destroy him, or any other concern than to preserve the duellist's own reputation and reception in the world. The unreasonableness of this rule of manners is one consideration—the conduct of individuals, while such a rule exists, is another.