

PARISH PERSONAGES.*

OUR BEADLE AND HIS FRIENDS.

BY ERASMUS OLDSTYLE, ESQUIRE.

CHAPTER VIII.

ALTHOUGH the gaze of our Beadle, like that of the overseer of pavements, was not directed towards the spot which indicated the silent resting place of poor Mary, yet the meek tenant of that grave was the occasion of restless motions and disquieting thoughts. He had taken every precaution to save the cold remains of the dead from violence, and exerted his utmost efforts, to shelter her name from the reproaches of those among whom it would speedily pass into a by-word. He had done what he considered his duty by the living; he now wished to do his duty to the dead. The Beadle was morally convinced that whatever of misfortune might have befallen the mysterious pauper, however much she may have been conversant with misery and familiar with sin, still he believed, and his belief amounted to conviction, that of all the lines which were mapped by care and sorrow upon her young and beautiful face, not one of them was graven by guilt, not one of them was carved by sin. No; he knew that the sad tracery which while it marred gave additional interest to her countenance, was the visible type of a heart, which has been deeply furrowed by the passing ploughshare of neglect or cruelty. He beheld as he supposed the victim of unkindness; he wished to discover the author.

Vagrants were less numerous, and paupers more scarce in England, in the days to which we refer, than they are now. Men avoided the workhouse, and refused Parochial aid as debasing and dishonourable; the recipients of Parish bounty were the sick and the infirm, and the inmates of the workhouse were chiefly the aged and the crippled. Youth avoided it, manhood shunned it. Indigence may have sought in it a temporary asylum, but old age or infirmity would only consent by the pressure of great want, to accept of its shelter as a permanent home. These circumstances conspired to add increased interest to Mary Hayworth's misfortunes, and additional energy to our Beadle, to investigate their inscrutable origin.

It was Christmas Eve, a night of joy to English hearts, of rejoicing to English homes,

Labour relinquished his child, and Toil, his slave. Grief seemed to postpone its weeping, and Care to forget its crosses, and men and women appeared in that busy city to taste by anticipation the rejoicings of the morrow, regardless of the actual sorrows which had bedewed the year that was now passing, and the probable trials which would have to be encountered during the year that was approaching; of the past all was forgetfulness, of the future all was hope—hope made luminous by the very tinsel with which it was gilded.

But Mr. Oily Crummy, who had ever been the foremost to enjoy the prologue to Christmas, and the pastimes by which it was characterised, now found himself incompetent to share its sports, and participate in its pleasures. The events of the day had wrought an impression upon his mind, which was alien to amusement; he could not be cheerful, and his inability to diffuse happiness around him, arose from the circumstance of his being unhappy himself.

"Why, dad, you're very grumpy this evening," exclaimed young George, his father's first-born; "its agin your natur to be so on a Christmas Eve; vot's the reason?"

"You're werry right George, in asking that question," interposed Mrs. Crummy; "your father isn't himself at all; and I'm consarned to know the cause of your melancholy appearance," she continued, addressing her husband.

"Vell, my dears, I confess I am rather flat this evening; the thought of them venturesome scoundrels, 'as violates graves, as' given me a orrid turn; they distracts the living as well as the dead."

"That needn't consarn you," returned George, "for Billikins is a going with the help of Mummerglum and Quaggy, to keep that young 'oman quiet, about whom you're distressing yourself so much."

"Vell, George, boy, it's a shocking thing that one so vell made, and vell born should die in a vurkus, unbeknown amongst strangers—its werry shocking."

"And so it is," returned Mrs. Crummy, "but birth and beauty don't go far with me. I perfer wirtue and modesty, 'handsome is as handsome does,' I say."

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