

## THE MURDER-HOLE.

AN ANCIENT LEGEND.

—  
Ah, frantic fear !

I see, I see thee near ;

I know thy hurried step, thy haggard eye !

Like thee I start, like thee disordered fly !

Collins.

In a remote district of country belonging to Lord Cassillis, between Ayrshire and Galloway, about three hundred years ago, a moor of apparently boundless extent stretched several miles along the road, and wearied the eye of the traveller by the sameness and desolation of its appearance; not a tree varied the prospect—not a shrub enlivened the eye by its freshness—not a native flower bloomed to adorn this ungenial soil. One "lonesome desert" reached the horizon on every side, with nothing to mark that any mortal had ever visited the scene before, except a few rude huts that were scattered near its centre; and a road, or rather pathway, for those whom business or necessity obliged to pass in that direction. At length, deserted as this wild region had always been, it became still more gloomy. Strange rumours arose, that the path of unwary travellers had been beset on this "blasted heath," and that treachery and murder had intercepted the solitary stranger as he traversed its dreary extent. When several persons, who were known to have passed that way, mysteriously disappeared, the inquiries of their relatives led to a strict and anxious investigation: but though the officers of justice were sent to scour the country, and examine the inhabitants, not a trace could be obtained of the persons in question, nor of any place of concealment which could be a refuge for the lawless and desperate to horde in. Yet, as inquiry became stricter, and the disappearance of individuals more frequent, the simple inhabitants of the neighboring hamlets were agitated by the most fearful apprehensions. Some declared that the deathlike stillness of the night was often interrupted by sudden and preternatural cries of more than mortal anguish, which seemed to arise in the distance; and a shepherd one evening who had lost his way on the moor, declared he had approached three mysterious figures, who seemed struggling against each other with supernatural energy, till at length one of them with a frightful scream, suddenly sunk into the earth.

Gradually the inhabitants deserted their dwellings on the heath, and settled in distant quarters, till at length but one of the cottages continued to be inhabited by an old woman and her two sons, who loudly lamented that poverty

chained them to this solitary and mysterious spot. Travellers who frequented this road now did so in groups to protect each other; and if night overtook them, they usually stopped at the humble cottage of the old woman and her sons, where cleanliness compensated for the want of luxury, and where, over a blazing fire of peat, the bolder spirits smiled at the imaginary terrors of the road, and the more timid trembled as they listened to the tales of terror and affright with which their hosts entertained them.

One gloomy and tempestuous night in November, a pedlar-boy hastily traversed the moor. Terrified to find himself involved in darkness amidst its boundless wastes, a thousand frightful traditions, connected with this dreary scene, darted across his mind—every blast, as it swept in hollow gusts over the heath, seemed to teem with the sighs of departed spirits—and the birds as they winged their way above his head, appeared to warn him of approaching danger. The whistle with which he usually beguiled his weary pilgrimage, died away into silence, and he groped along with trembling and uncertain steps, which sounded too loudly in his ears. The promise of Scripture occurred to his memory, and revived his courage, "I will be unto thee as a rock in the desert, and as an hiding-place in the storm." "Surely," thought he, "*though alone, I am not forsaken*;" and a prayer for assistance hovered on his lips.

A light now glimmered in the distance, which would lead him, he conjectured, to the cottage of the old woman; and towards that he eagerly bent his way, remembering as he hastened along, that when he had visited it the year before, it was in company with a large party of travellers, who had beguiled the evening with those tales of mystery which had so lately filled his brain with images of terror. He recollected, too, how anxiously the old woman and her two sons had endeavoured to detain him when the other travellers were departing, and now, therefore, he confidently anticipated a cordial and cheering reception. His first call for admission obtained no visible marks of attention; but instantly the greatest noise and confusion prevailed within the cottage. They think it is one of the supernatural visitants, of whom the old lady talks so much; thought the boy, approaching a window, where the light within showed him all the inhabitants at their several occupations; the old woman was hastily scrubbing the stone floor, and strawing it thickly over with sand, while her two sons seemed with equal haste to be thrusting something large and heavy into an immense chest, which they carefully locked. The boy in a frolicsome mood thoughtlessly tapped at the window, when they all instantly started up