Death's Doings.

" Ay, ay! quo' he, an' shook his head,
It's e'en a lang, lang time indeed
Sin' I began to nick the thread,
An' choke the breath:
Folk maun do something for their bread,
An' so maun Death.
Sax thousand years are near hand fled
Sin I was to the butching bred,
An' mony a scheme in vain's been laid,
To stap or scar me."

Burns.

" DEATH came dryvyng after, and all to dust pushed
Kings and kaysers, knightes and popes;
Many a lovely lady, and lemman of knightes,
Swoned and swelted for sorrowe of Death's dyntes."

Vision of Pierce Plowman, 1350.

DEATH'S DOINGS.

INTRODUCTION.

It is difficult, if not impossible, in this our day of accumulated literature, to start any thing new; yet, rather than close their labours for "lack of argument," our literary adventurers ransack every corner for subject matter; and, to stimulate the public appetite, old viands are served up in new dishes, either of plate, china, or delf, as best may suit the taste or the means of the bookish epicure.

How far the subject now offered may be relished by the generality, remains to be tried. It will not want the seasoning of antiquity to recommend it, being nearly as old as the Creation; and, if a judgment may be formed from the number of works, both literary and graphic, which have ap-

peared in ancient and modern times, and the avidity with which they have been received, it may reasonably be expected, that the present attempt to serve up a sort of Graphic Olio, with suitable garnishes of prose and verse, may not be unacceptable to the general reader; and the more so, as the endeavour has been to give (if not altogether a new), at least a more appropriate reading to the old version of the DANCE OF DEATH.

There is little to apprehend in the way of objection, from any application of the designs contained in the work to individual concerns or pursuits, as—

"All men think all men mortal but themselves;"

and there will be no want of claimants to the heir-looms either of safety or of longevity. At any rate, the greater part of mankind will assume the privilege of exemption from such incidental casualties as are pointed out in the course of the illustrations here exhibited, and will find a clause in their own favour. Thus, for example, the sportsman will readily observe,—

"I have hunted, leapt gates, hedges, and ditches, and cleared all that came in my way; but, then, *my skill* and my horse brought me safe off. The foolish fellow that broke his neck the other day could expect nothing else; instead of minding what he was about in taking his leap, he was looking another way; and, then, the hack he rode!"

"That poor devil of an artist," observes one of the same profession, "laboured his pictures till he was nearly blind, toiling till nature became exhausted; he could hardly be said to breathe the vital air; the effluvia of his colours had entirely penetrated his system; and it is no wonder he fell a victim to his confinement and his exertions together."

"Ned ——— is gone at last," says a bon-vivant to his companion; "but it is not surprising,—he was a *careless* drinker; I told him his wine-merchant sold him poison."

In this, or in some such way, all will argue in favour of themselves; while the machine of life

drives on heedlessly and rapidly. It is true, the check-string may occasionally be drawn by the observing traveller, to point out to his fellow passengers some remarkable spot, stamped by some striking event connected with mortality; but the pause will be brief, and the vehicle will again be in motion with as little care as before it was stopped. And this, in some measure, must be the case while we continue to be creatures of this world: even the gloomy ascetic will sometimes steal a look from his cloisters or his cell upon the beauties of the creation, and become a momentary sceptic to his monastic notions, and pine at the vegetative character of his own existence.

With whatever success the labours of the moralist, the philosopher, or the preacher, may have been attended in bringing into view the skeleton remains of the human frame as an emblem of Death, to warn and awaken mankind to a sense of the condition to which they must come at last, the satirist has seldom failed of exciting attention to the characteristic structure of this human

machinery, stripped of those lineaments and fair proportions which in life were its charm and pride; but with this difference, that his views of the subject have ever tended to the ludicrous.

Such appears to have been the case even in those days of superstitious ignorance when the minds of men were subject to the domination of monkish power; for, as soon as the first impression of alarm made by the ghastly phantom, as exhibited in their churches, was over, and the object became familiar,—ridicule took place of fear; and farcical representations of Death on the stage and by the pencil succeeded, in numbers and extent, perhaps, beyond those of any other subject.

One of these farcical moralities is hinted at by our immortal bard, in his play of "Measure for Measure:"—

> "Merely thou art Death's fool:
> For him thou labourest, by thy flight, to shun,
> And yet runn'st toward him still."

This passage is explained in a note, thus:—

"In the simplicity of the ancient shows upon our stage, it was common to bring in two figures, one representing a fool, and the other, Death or Fate; the turn and contrivance of the piece was, to make the fool lay many stratagems to avoid Death, which yet brought him more immediately into the jaws of it."

It is more than probable that Shakspeare had seen and considered many of the paintings and designs on the subject of Death, and with his powerful touch concentrated the spirit of all that had been said or done in the various works then extant, still keeping up the character of the burlesque, united with the deepest pathos:—

"For within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king,
Keeps Death his court: and there the antic sits,
Mocking his state and grinning at his pomp;
Allowing him a breath, a little scene
To monarchize, be fear'd, and kill with looks;
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh, which walls about his life,
Were brass impregnable: and, humoured thus,
Comes at the last, and with a little pin
Bores through his castle walls, and—farewell king!"

The same play has the following monitory passage, equally expressive of the frailty and folly of man, who,—

> " Most ignorant of what he's most assured,—
> His glassy essence,"—

is apt to play the game of life with too much confidence.

Some there are who make Death the whole business of life: shutting their eyes on the fair face of nature, they think a snare is set in every beauteous object by which they are surrounded, and plunge at once into the gloom of solitude, lest the light of heaven should dazzle their sight and darken their understanding, and work them perdition by tempting to the indulgence of those feelings it was meant to inspire;—

> " And thus, in one continued strife,
> 'Twixt fear of Death and love of life,"

they pass their existence in a state of deadening apathy or of feverish self-denial; immolating the charities of life and the best affections of the heart at the shrine of superstition. True, the tenure of

our being cannot be beneficially held without occasionally adverting to the terms on which it has been granted; and it is sometimes necessary to call in aid the admonitions of the wise and the reflecting, to bring our truant thoughts to a proper estimate of life.

In this view, most of the designs of skeleton forms have been presented to the contemplation of the careless and unthinking; but, as has been before observed, few of them have been so managed as not to border on the ludicrous. Of their capability of and tendency to the caricature, a very recent instance appeared in some examples of death-like figures engaged in a variety of occupations, as gambling, dancing, boxing, &c. &c. These designs were chalked on a wall bordering the road from Turnham Green towards Kew Bridge; they were drawn of the natural size, and displayed, on the part of the unknown artist, no small skill in composition and character. Of the artist's intentions there can be no question: it was to exhibit forms the most strikingly grotesque. But they are now swept away, like many

other efforts of art, to give place to the names and nostrums of the charlatans of the day.

The subject of Death has continued to employ the pen and the pencil, with more or less of character, down to the present time; though the productions of recent date possess less point, and have, perhaps, more of the grotesque than works more remote, and do not, in their graphic form, exhibit the higher qualities of art, which are seen in the performances of the old masters; but are principally addressed to the eye and understanding of the many, rather than to those of the artist or amateur. It should appear, however, from the reception and extensive sale of some of these subjects, that they have been equally acceptable to the present as they were to past times. Among the most striking and popular designs of this class, are two which have long occupied a place in the print-shop in St. Paul's Church Yard; and in which the skeleton shape appears as one half of a gorgeously dressed human form. These prints represent a male and female thus powerfully contrasted, and, it must be confessed, hold out as

perfect an example as can well be imagined to show us what we are, and to warn us what we are to be.

Another specimen of the monitory kind is a representation of a heathen philosopher, contemplating the structure of a human skeleton, and thence inferring the existence of a Deity.

Of the more whimsical and pointed of these moral lessons, is one where a man is draining an enormous bowl, and Death stands ready to confirm the title of the print,—"The Last Drop."

There is also, among the varieties of this sort, an etching representing a gay couple visiting a tomb. It is called, "An Emblem of a Modern Marriage:" in the background of the piece is a view of a noble mansion, behind which appears a rising ground; beneath the print are the following lines:—

"No smiles for us the godhead wears,
His torch inverted, and his face in tears,"

answering to the figure of a Cupid in the act

of flight, which the artist has also introduced into his subject. This etching is the performance of a lady, Mrs. Hartley, the wife of D. Hartley, Esq., who constructed a building on Putney Common, which he rendered incombustible. The original was sketched with a diamond on a pane of glass, and the print published in 1775. There can be little doubt that this curious design had a reference to some individual of the time; but its application might be made to every unhappy and fatal marriage that has taken place, or may take place, any where and at any time.

These later productions (as was before observed) possess little of art in the composition, or skill in the execution, to recommend them, though some of them have probably outlived the expectations of the inventors. It was for the artists of an earlier period to combine in these subjects every quality of painting, whether of design, composition, character, or expression.

An example of excellence in this way, is a drawing from the collection of the late Paul

Sandby, R. A., where Death is exhibited as preaching from a charnel-house, amidst skulls and bones; another skeleton form is introduced as making a back on which to rest the book from which the phantom is discoursing; and, though highly ludicrous in point of character, the groups and composition are in the best style of art. The auditors of the grim preacher are of every age and class, and are happily contrasted: the peasant and the ruler, the matron and the gayly attired female, the cavalier and the person of low degree, all disposed with skill in their appropriate and varied postures of attraction. Part of a cathedral-like building forms the background, which, together with the picturesque costume of the period, composes a picture that would do credit to the pencil of the best artists of its time, Rubens and Vandyke. The drawing is attributed to Van Venne or Otho Vænius, the master of Rubens. Mr. Douce has a very beautiful and finished painting by the hand of this master, in which Death is intimating his approach to an old man by the tinkling of a musical instrument.

Mr. D'Israeli, in his "Theory of the Skeleton," has shown that a tendency similar to that which has just been noticed pervaded many of the writers on the subject of Death.

"When," observes this ingenious and intelligent author, "the artist succeeded in conveying to the eye the most ludicrous notions of Death, the poet also discovered in it a fertile source of the burlesque. The curious collector is acquainted with many volumes where the most extraordinary topics have been combined with this subject. They made the soul and body debate together, and ridiculed the complaints of a damned soul! The greater part of the poets of the time were always composing on the subject of Death in their humorous pieces.

"Of a work of this nature, a popular favourite was long the one entitled, 'Le Faut Mourir, et les Excuses Inutiles qu'on apporte à cette Necessité; a tout en vers burlesques, 1656.' Jaques Jaques, a canon of Aubrun, was the writer, who humorously says of himself, that he gives his

thoughts just as they lie on his heart, without dissimulation; 'for I have nothing double about me except my name. I tell some of the most important truths in laughing,—it is for thee *d'y penser tout à bon.*'"

Mr. D'Israeli goes on to remark,—"Our canon of Aubrun, in facetious rhymes, and with the naïveté of expression which belongs to his age, and an idiomatic turn fatal to a translator, excels in pleasantry; his haughty hero condescends to hold very amusing dialogues with all classes of society, and delights to confound their *excuses inutiles.* The most miserable of men,—the galley-slave, the mendicant, alike would escape when he appears to them. 'Were I not absolute over them,' Death exclaims, 'they would confound me with their long speeches; but I have business, and must gallop on!'"

Our monumental effigies, where the figure of Death is introduced, are not entirely free from a cast of the ludicrous, though, from the nature and character of sculpture, fewer offences this way

are exhibited. Like the muse of history, the dignity of sculpture would be lessened in the service of comedy: the temple and the tomb are its proper sphere; deities, heroes, statesmen, and poets, are the objects it contemplates; and the ideal perfection of grace and beauty is its principal aim.

Under the hand of sculpture, the familiar may, however, in some degree become exalted, and modern costume be made subservient to the purposes of fine art. But it requires the skill of a Roubiliac, a Chantrey, or a Baily, to mould folds and cast form into that character which judgment and taste can sanction or approve.

Of the power to mould and fashion form and costume into the character of grandeur, Roubiliac's figure of Handel, in Westminster Abbey, is a striking example; and, while contemplating the dignified attitude of the portrait, the arrangement of the accessories, and its composition throughout, it is impossible to imagine it could be improved, even by the introduction of what is termed the

classic in art,—the costume of Greece and Rome.

In this artist's monument of Lady Nightingale, he has necessarily employed a drapery suitable to the introduction of an ideal character,—that of Death; and has, in his personification of the phantom, enveloped the figure with a loosened drapery, in order, it may be readily conceived, as much as possible to avoid the skeleton shape.

The same artist has introduced, in the monument of William Hargrave, one of the finest allegorical representations that has ever been imagined,—that of Time's victory over Death: yet, here the skill with which the bony structure of the struggling skeleton is executed, is apt to attract the regard of the vulgar (like the deceptive in painting), rather than the sublimity and character of the composition, and its reference to the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body.

While thus treating of subjects connected with

the Abbey of Westminster, it is impossible not greatly to regret, that from the inspection of these monumental remains—these efforts of sculptured art, past and present, the public should be barred, without the payment of an admission-fee; a regulation which, while it debases the character of a national exhibition, excludes the generality of the people, and defeats every legitimate purpose for which these memorials of the great and good were erected. An additional evil is, that the visitor is hurried over a space and spectacle whose very essence is destroyed if not traversed and seen with freedom, quiet, and calm contemplation. Under the present regulations of abbey economy, the charm is almost dissolved which would otherwise preserve the memory of those heroic achievements of our fleets and armies,—those labours of the statesman and the legislator, of the man of science and the poet, all of rank and of literature, to which these testimonials of a nation's gratitude have been raised, by public or private expense. It is not only interring the body, but burying the monument too; and the lament has been hardly more for the departed, than for the labours of art,

the value of which is so much depreciated by this miserable expedient to obtain money. It is humiliating to reflect on the debasing character which the mischievous atrocities of a few ignorant or unthinking individuals have, in some degree, brought upon the nation at large, and which, it is said, have led to these obnoxious regulations, and given us, in the eyes of foreigners, at once the stamp of a mercenary and a barbarous people; but it is, however, to be hoped that, with an increasing knowledge of the fine arts, the progress of instruction, and the consequent prevalence of good sense, a way may be found to protect these records of our country's glory and talent, without imposing a tax upon those who might benefit by such examples in the endeavour to imitate them.

From the tombs and monuments within, is but a step to those without; from the church to the churchyard—whence, as the poet says,—"The voice of nature cries." But, like many other poetical assertions, this is somewhat equivocal, for little dependence can be placed on these "frail

memorials," many of which, like the old moralities, are calculated to excite a laugh rather than serious or sober reflections. In some places, indeed, scarce a stone is raised but a jest is raised with it.

It is hardly possible to touch on the subject of epitaphs, but a train of uncouth rhymes follow, in the shape of serious foolery or ignorant burlesque. Nor is this folly confined to the obscure village dormitory, or to times long past: there is scarcely a churchyard within the metropolis or its suburbs, but will afford some modern examples of gross ignorance or inflated nonsense; such as,—" God has chosen her as a pattern for the other angels."

This exquisite piece of extravagance, to say no more of it, was intended doubtless to convey an exalted idea of the departed; no reflection whatever being made on the absurdity of the hyperbole.

It is somewhat remarkable, that men should be

so very anxious in life that their remains should not be disturbed after death, and yet take no heed of what may be said upon their tombs; men write their auto-biographies, and why not their own epitaphs?—Virgil did. Or why not have recourse to the Vicar of Wakefield's plan, who wrote his wife's epitaph when living, commending in it the virtues he wished her to practise? At all events, it might be imagined that either the pulpit or the press would have come in aid to check this prevalent absurdity; that, if men chose to make "life a jest," they should not be permitted to carry one on in their tombs.

But, not to dwell longer on churchyard regulations, let us take a brief view of mortality as exhibited under the refined sentiment of the Greek mythology and of Grecian art.

"The ancients contemplated death without terror, and met it with indifference. It was the only divinity to which they never sacrificed, convinced that no human being could turn aside its stroke. They raised altars to Favour, to Mis-

fortune, to all the evils of life; for these might change. But, though they did not court the presence of Death in any shape, they acknowledged its tranquillity in the beautiful fables of their allegorical religion. Death was the daughter of Night and the sister of Sleep, and ever the friend of the unhappy.

"If the full light of revelation had not yet broken on them, it can hardly be denied that they had some glimpse and a dawn of the life to come, from the many allegorical inventions which describe the transmigration of the soul:—a butterfly on the extremity of a lamp,—Love with a melancholy air, leaning on an inverted torch, elegantly denoted the cessation of life." *

It was in contemplating this touching and appropriate representation, as it appears in an engraved gem, that Mr. Croly produced those beautiful lines in his Illustrations of Antique Gems:—

* J. D'Israeli's Curiosities of Literature, Second Series, vol. 2.

"Spirit of the drooping wing,
And the ever-weeping eye,
Thou of all earth's kings art king:
Empires at thy footstool lie.
Beneath thee strew'd,
Their multitude
Sink like waves upon the shore,—
Storms shall never rouse them more.

"What's the grandeur of the earth
To the grandeur of thy throne?
Riches, glory, beauty, birth,
To thy kingdom all have gone.
Before thee stand
The wond'rous band,—
Bards, heroes, side by side,
Who darken'd nations when they died!

"Earth has hosts, but thou canst show
Many a million for her one:
Through thy gate the mortal flow
Has for countless years roll'd on.
Back from the tomb
No step has come;
There fix'd, till the last thunder's sound
Shall bid thy prisoners be unbound."

Beautiful as the emblem of Mortality in the weeping infant, with the inverted torch, certainly is, that of the butterfly is no less apt in representing the soul. The purity and lightness of its nature, its ambrosial food, the gayety and splendour

of its colours,—above all, its winged liberty when bursting from its tomblike confinement, in which it appeared to sleep the sleep of Death, afford so powerful a contrast exhibited in the same creature, that it could not fail to strike the intelligent among the heathen world as a fit symbol of Immortality.

It is no very extravagant stretch of fancy, to imagine the souls of some gifted individuals embodied agreeably to their intellectual endowments. What a contrast might then be seen to the low, grublike, insignificant forms under which many a genius has been cloaked, in the exalted, noble, and imposing shapes which they would then assume; while others, whose vacant minds have been hid beneath a fair exterior, would sink in the scale, and become in appearance the insects or reptiles best suited to their real character.

Neither is this "considering the matter too curiously;" for it is in perfect accordance with the apostle's views of the resurrection.

"But some men will say,—how are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?

"Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened except it die."

And then he thus goes on,—

"There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory.

"So also is the resurrection of the body: it is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power."