

ALCHYMY.

“ To solemnize this day, the glorious Sun
 Stays in his course, and plays the Alchymist,
 Turning with splendour of his precious eye
 The meagre cloddy earth to glitt’ring gold.”

SHAKESPEARE.

“ [*An explosion within.*]

“ *Subtle.*—God, and all Saints, be good to us! What’s that?

Face.—O, Sir, we are defeated! All the works
 Are flown *in fumo*: ev’ry glass is burst—
 Furnace and all, rent down!—As if a bolt
 Had thunder’d thro’ the house.
Retorts, receivers, pellicans, bolt-heads,
 All struck in shivers!

[*Subtle falls down.*]

Help, good Sir! Alas,

Coldness and *Death* invade him!”

BEN JONSON’S ALCHYMYST.

ALCHYMY, the pretended art of prolonging life by a panacea, of transmuting the baser metals into gold and other wonders, affects also the highest antiquity; it is however probably the fruit of ignorance, grafted upon the remains of

ancient chymistry about the time of the revival of learning in Europe. Its evil was in giving birth to some of those bubbles by which knavery is ever preying upon folly and avidity: its good has been the fortuitous discoveries to which we owe the progress of medicine, chymistry, and the arts—a Lavoisier, a Cavendish, and a Davy!

If still there is any one who aims at the *alkahest*, universal solvent, or elixir of life,—if he would obtain the *philosopher's stone* which transmutes the metals, or if he would discover the elements of matter, let him not apply to Sir Humphrey for his electro-chymical apparatus which severed the alkalis,—nor seek, with safety in the midst of danger, the explosive mines of the earth by the light of his *Davy*,—nor tempt the ocean in search of these wonders sheathed and shielded by his *Protectors*:—let him not trouble himself with the *salt, sulphur, and mercury* of the *Adepti*.*

* The Alchemists have a tradition, that there are always twelve *Adepti*, or possessors of the philosopher's stone, panacea, &c.; and that, as frequently as they are exploded by Death, their places are supplied by new *Adepti*.

Above all, let him not seek the aid of *Aureolus Philippus Paracelsus Theophrastus Bombastus de Hoenheim*,* for they will all equally fail him; while there is one so rich and knowing in hermetic art, that the elements, the philosopher's stone, and the alkahest, are all at his finger's ends,—one (the sole hope of the alchemist) who can analyze all, transmute all, and dissolve all!—The greatest of chymists!—the Davy of Davys!

OLD DAVY!!

Accordingly, in the design before us, the artist

* *Paracelsus* boasted of being able, by his *elixir proprietatis*, to prolong the life of man to the age of Methusalah,—nor is this wonderful in one who declared he held conversation with *Galen* and *Avicenna* at the gates of Hell, and obtained secrets in physic from the Devil himself.—Nevertheless, Death, envious of his power, *overturned his elixir*, and took him off in revenge, at little more than 40 years of age, that he might not depopulate by his art the grim empire of the King of Terrors.

His followers believe, however, “that he is not dead, but still lives in his tomb, whither he retired,” (like Johanna Southcot, and like her too,) “weary of the vices and follies of mankind!” Notwithstanding all the extravagances of *Paracelsus*, the world is indebted to him for many useful discoveries; and it is still a question whether himself or *Carpue*, a name again to be associated with a *Harvey*, an *Abernethy*, and a *Hunter*, first introduced mercury into medicine!

has introduced the *Alchymist* at his furnace, anxiously watching his crucible, while the *elixir of life* is running out, and *Death*, unperceived, is blowing the coals, holding in his hand the *powder of projection* which is about to consummate by an explosion the deluded Alchymist and his vain endeavours.

But who, let us seriously inquire, and what, is this all-potent Alchymist, Death?

“Death is Life, and Life is Death,” said *Euripides*; and so said *Plato*, and so said the *Eastern Sages*. If then Death be Life, as the wise and virtuous of all ages have believed, the question recurs, what is Life?

Life, says the Beauty, is admiration and gay attire;—it is dice and dash, says the Spendthrift;—it is gain, says the Merchant and the Miser; it is power, says the Prince. Yet the Alchymist looks for it in an elixir. But Death dethrones the Prince—breaks the Merchant and Miser—out-dashes the Spendthrift and the Belle, and spills the elixir of Life.

Life is action, says the Cricketer ;—it is a feast, says the Glutton ;—it is a bubble, says the Philosopher : but Death bursts the Philosopher's bubble, gormandizes the Glutton, and bowls out the Cricketer.

It is fees, says the Physician ;—it is judgment and execution, says the Judge ;—it is all vanity, says the Parson : but Death humbles the Parson's vanity, executes the Judge and his judgments, and takes fee of the Physician and his Patients too !

Thou art then a very Proteus, Death, at once a Miser, a Merchant, and a Prince,—thou art a Game, a Glutton, and a Bubble,—thou art Justice to the injured, a Physician to the sick, and a humbler of Vanity,—thou art Master of the Ceremonies of *Life*, sporting with it in every form, and we have sported with thee !

Thus, view them however we may, *Life* and *Death* are endless paradoxes ; the love of the one, and the fear of the other, are unquestionably imprinted in our nature for wise purposes—they

gain and lose strength,—they rise and fall—and in all their movements they *dance together*.

That these passions, however useful and necessary, relatively to our natural state, are equally vain and fallacious in an absolute and moral sense, has long been admitted by the philosopher; and that they may be so to common sense, we have only to consider that it is as natural to die as to be born—that Death and Life are merely figurative of the two general relations, being and cessation; and that Death, in particular, the grim King of Terrors, is only a personification—the Pluto of the Poets—an animated skeleton, or *anatomie vivante* of the imagination; so that, as we cannot paint white without black, we cannot represent Death without Life.

If however these passions are ever so vain and illusive, their effects are no less actual and certain, and of difficult mastery: it eminently deserves our concern, therefore, that we should so cultivate and control them, that we may continue life with enjoyment, and quit it without regret;

and since it is a fact, that man loves and desires only *good*, and fears only *ill*,—so long as life is a good he loves it, and when it becomes an evil he loathes it. The sum of our aim then is, that as evil is but the consequence of ill action, and we dread not Death nor desire Life for themselves, we have only to act well, that we may live without fear, and die without despair.

These impressions are accordingly strongest in early life, and, when our course is right, they appear to decline as we advance, and to become ultimately feeble and extinct; so that by degrees, beautifully suited to a virtuous progress, Heaven disengages us altogether from the love of Life and the fear of Death.

Having disposed of the great Transmuter and his elder children, let us turn our eye, ere we close, to the more recent offspring of the Plutonic family, many of whom are no less worthy of celebrity than their elder brethren, and of whom, particularly deserving of record, are *Goldman*, formerly of the King's Mews,—*Peter Woulfe*,

of Barnard's Inn, and the renowned *Sigismund Bæstrom*, (with whose prefixes and affixes we are not acquainted, but) whose father was (as he averred) physician to Frederic the Great. There are yet living those who mourn the memory of Bæstrom, who, alas! having consumed all the gold he could lay his hands on in search of the philosopher's stone,—*finished his projection* a debtor in the King's Bench.

As to ————, he CONSUMED *his coals* at an apartment in the Mews, which he enjoyed through royal bounty, and where, deeply engaged one night amid his retorts and athanors by the glimmer of a small lamp, a luckless wight of a chimney-sweeper, or as some say a stoaker, crept in unperceived, and peeped over the old man's shoulder, who, happening to turn round, and seeing, as he imagined, the Devil at his elbow, became so alarmed, that he never recovered the shock, but died—and with him, perhaps, one of the last of the Adepti.

We say perhaps? For the ashes of Alchymy

are still hot. That it should yet occupy ardent imaginations amid the gloom, poverty, and oppression of the forests of Germany, is not so astonishing, as that it should still have votaries in the metropolis of Britain, where the light shines upon the free, and so many easier ways of making gold are known, and that there should be still found persons of reputed understanding who are willing to be *deluded by men, wretchedly poor, who profess the art of making gold!*

But imagination has ever been the tyrant of the mind, exciting enthusiasm, of which knavery takes advantage, and folly is the food it feeds on.

* * * Those who would enter further into the history of Alchemy, may consult Boerhaave; and for later information, "A Sketch of the History of Alchemy," by Mr. Brande, in the New Annual Register for 1819.

G. F.

it
e-
the
on
d
g
w

of
n.
the