

## THE MEN OF PHYSIC :

AN EASTERN TALE.

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*By the Author of "Glances from the Moon."*

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It happened that a certain absolute and capricious despot of an eastern province, on perceiving, after a few years' domination, that the number of his subjects had considerably decreased, instead of instituting a cautious inquiry into the possible causes of this lowered population, determined to lay the whole charge, the wonder, and the mischief, on the professed practisers of what was there termed the healing art, but, according to his princely suspicion, the art of poisoning and destroying. Long did he cherish, whether warranted or otherwise doth not clearly appear, this peculiar sentiment, strengthened by progressive observation, and now matured into immoveable conviction : and, indeed, as his province had neither been

lately desolated by war, visited by pestilence, nor reduced by famine, it becomes possible—just possible I mean—that the notion which this prince had conceived of the blundering ways and means exercised by the *men of physic*, might not have proved so fallacious or unjust, as, on first hearing, it should seem to threaten: the less so, because the class of these physicians, or leeches, was the only one which had escaped the late examples of extraordinary fatality; a phenomenon which was referred, for its solution, to the commonly believed fact, that the physician exerciseth not his art upon himself.—But, let that pass.

And now, whether sanctioned by a rational probability of a successful result, or not—whether right or wrong—he determined to put the matter at issue to one grand and decisive experiment. He published an edict, ordering every practitioner of the medical craft, of whatever degree, to quit the province in the course of ten days. Remonstrance had been vain: it was the mandate of despotic authority: no appeal remained; obedience was prompt and universal; not one pro-

fessor, not a single minister of physic, dared to hold back and linger within the lines of demarcation after the expiration of the period limited by the edict.

Now, when the news of this extraordinary decree had reached and crept into the ear of Death, his jaws were presently screwed into a contemptuous grin, while meditating his purpose. "Opposition to my power," he said, "has always proved vain in the result, though whilom ridiculously obstinate and contentious. This prince shall quickly understand how unequal is the contest which he appears rash enough and weak enough to wage with a power, known by universal experience to be paramount and irresistible."

Thus muttered the Destroyer.

Hence we pass on to the expiration of that measure of time sufficient for the ascertaining whether the expectations of the prince were founded and supported.



Twelve months had now elapsed, when, on a numerical comparison of deaths with those of the preceding year, they were found in a ratio greatly diminished, calculating for the lessened number of souls occasioned by the absence of the leeches. The discontent of the people against their prince, and their alarm for themselves, changed into reverence and composure. His pride and self-gratulation rose in proportion—perhaps something out of proportion, a mistake committed occasionally even by sovereigns—to flattery and applause: but this prince had never enjoyed the privilege of reading the poetic works of Robert Burns, where, amidst numerous pithy hints for the correction of self-misunderstanding, he might have dropped upon, and profited by, the following stanza:—

“ Oh, would some power the gifty gee us,  
To see ourselves as others see us;  
It wad frae many a blunder free us,  
And silly notion;  
And airs in gait and dress would lea’ us,  
And, e’en, devotion.”

But, so it was; time was moving on smoothly and kindly between prince and subject; each conci-

liated more to each, and all partaking of that increase of pleasurable feelings which is wont to accompany and improve a condition of bodily and mental health.

Thus might this happy province—happy in its delivery from the leeches—have become the asylum of health, and the promise of longevity; but—give me *buts* and *ifs*, as a bold man was wont to say, and I'll fight the D—; but,—that the dark malignant spirit of the man whose “bones are marrowless,” urged at length by the bitterness of disappointment into deadly wrath at the decrease of funerals and of mourners, where his depredations had long proved so extensive and so frequent, determined to bestir himself for the recovery of his business.

“I have,” muttered Death, as he stalked the ground, which shrank and blackened at his tread, “two considerations to resolve: first, what promises to furnish the surest plan for the restoration of the wonted, full, and gloomy callings of my office; secondly, by what measures I shall most

easily and speedily succeed in it. Touching the first consideration," said Death, "I perceive it admits of instant decision. The effects of the decree, by which I find that the leeches were my supporters, my most effective friends, serve to teach me that the decree must be unconditionally reversed; the men of physic must be recalled; they must be reinstated in all their privileges and immunities, and be let loose as heretofore upon the inhabitants of the province—of the *capital*, more especially—in the unbridled exercise of their accustomed practices. The man of dry and naked bones received that sensation of sullen gratification, when reflecting upon his plan, which no other man could feel. A half-formed smile would have passed over his ghastly countenance, significant of anticipated success, but it was repulsed and chased away from a visage so hostile to its character, by a withering and rigid grin which admitted not a glimpse of relaxation.

Still this resolution extended and embraced the first and easiest division, only, of what he intended to perform: the object of his more ardu-



ous consideration remained behind, viz.: the adoption of means sure and effectual for the execution of this purpose. It was not till after a long-protracted interval that thus the Destroyer counselled with himself.

“ I have held a long and vast communion with the sons of men who walk this earth, and all who have disappeared from it were removed by me. This is not all: known it is to me, by ages of experience and the use of observation, that the passion of fear is among the strongest felt by mortals, and that of nothing are they so *horribly* afraid as of my threatenings and my power to enforce them. How is this? that the man who has courage to contemn and to oppose the requisitions of justice; to admit and to encourage the foulest offences against the charities of humanity and the consciousness of moral obligation; to cherish the corruption of, and to perpetrate the blackest crimes against, the fellowship of men! that the same identical man of flesh and blood, on whom the fear of me is so deeply impressed, should ever fail to tremble while thinking upon the crimes, the

outrages, the murders he may have committed? All this must be left to the discussion of wiser skulls than mine.

“By my life,” said Death, “it is most worthy of marvel and recordance, that one and the same man shall dare to commit and brave the most atrocious wickedness, no less in the face of all the world than in the secret chambers, and yet shake with horror at an accidental change of feeling in his mortal frame, not occasioned by any guilty deed that he hath done, but resulting inevitably from the established laws and conditions of that animal economy, ordained to experience the enjoyments of health and the inflictions of disease; to live, and think, and act, while the movements of the nice and wonderful machine are in perfect harmony and correctness; to languish, and finally to decay, when these are interrupted and gradually stopped.

“Yes, the solution of a mystery like this must be submitted to the philosophers; enough for me, that the dread of my approach is uppermost amidst mortal fears, and that few would be found,



who, when the hour of decision should arrive, would refuse to compromise, on any terms, for a longer beholding the light of the sun and of all the natural objects which it illumines and presents: yet to what do these amount, in comparison with the animated and social nature, with the world of kindred, of relatives, and friends?

“Fortunate for my commanding thralldom, mankind are not conscious that the ‘fear of death,’ abstractedly considered, ‘is most in apprehension;’ or that, ‘imagination’s fool and error’s wretch, man makes a death which nature never made, then on the point of his own fancy falls, and feels a thousand deaths in fearing one.’ No, no—the Prince, nursed and wrapped in the splendour and luxuries of a gay and rich metropolis, has not been conversant with disquisitions of this sort; if he ever thinks upon, he also shudders at the contemplation of my blow.” Death paused.—This was the time for taking up what he had proposed for the second consideration of his subject, viz.: the mode to be adopted for securing the completion of his plan. It required not a protracted ru-

mination. Death knew the certainty of his power, and he resolved on its early application.

It was amidst the lone "and witching time of night, when church-yards yawn," that, personified, "*ut ejus est mos*," in the attire of a human skeleton, he made his way to the palace and the dormitory of his royal enemy, as he does to the cot and pallet of the poor. He beheld the prince stretched in the blandishments and the wonted security of sleep; in "the perfumed chamber," "beneath the canopy of costly state." Directly he stalked up; the hard and bony tread awaked the sleeping prince, and he beheld the horrid figure placed before him, holding a dimly-burning taper in his left hand, while in his right, elevated as if to strike, was poised the shaft which never fails, and which now threatened the execution of a fatal purpose.

Confounded by the spectacle, he made an effort to spring up; but the first effect of fear is debility: he fell backward, yet with outstretched arms and clasped hands, shrinking from the dreadful ob-

ject of his vision—"I come," said the horrible appearance—fixing upon his victim the dismal cavities where eyes had been—"I come, armed as at all times, to strike and to destroy. But even beneath the shaft, and within the grasp of Death, conditions of mercy may exist. Mark!—I come unto the despot, who, with violence and injustice, has expelled from their establishments and their homes, the *men of physic*, my ministers and agents, and to offer him one or the other of two things: will he consent to recall and to reinstate the said men of physic or leeches, never again to be by him disturbed, or forbidden to cultivate and to use their arts; or will he prefer that this uplifted hand discharge the arrow which he beholds, thus winged for its deadly mission, and ready to fulfil it? Your resolve!—speak!—answer, even now—or—" The prince observed the arm rising higher, and drawing a little backward: a moment, and it might be too late; in agony of haste he called out,—“Hold! spare me, spare me! I will execute thy commands: I will instantly recall the leeches; I will do whatever thou demandest: I will do it now, even now.” Death lowered his arm, and pro-



ceeded:—"Promises, at a moment like this, have often been found faithless, and have dissolved 'into thin air;' therefore," giving to the prince a scroll—"look upon that; unfold and read: be instant—bind thy soul, as the words therein point out, to the prompt execution of my pleasure." Here he began to raise his hand of bone, still armed with the deadly missile:—"Hold! hold!" the prince ejaculated; "I swear as this scroll requires." What was written therein has never been divulged. Death well knew that flesh and blood dared not to violate the oath. He was accordingly satisfied; and now, under the guise in which he had stalked into the royal chamber, he abandoned it, in malignant triumph that his purpose had succeeded, and that the recommencement and augmentation of his harvest awaited only the return of the doctors; more especially of those who should occupy their stations and exercise their crafts in the METROPOLIS. It is there he stands in gloomy watch, or stalks about in cynic grin, delighted with the hurry, dexterity, and slight-of-hand visits paid by the doctor to his catalogue of patients, agreeably

to the situations of their residences; many of whom, after hours of languor, distress, and pain, are now startled into being from their pittance of merciful unconsciousness, by the outrageous but fashionable violence, the *storm* of *knocking* raised at the door of the wretched patient's residence, by one of Death's subordinate agents, who drops from the fore or aft of the doctor's chariot, and having done all this wanton and inhuman mischief, throws open the door for the descent, and then the introduction of *that* which is to follow. Thus it is manifest that Death may be detected in the personification of an outside or an inside passenger; on the box or in the chariot.

The question may be asked,—what place does not Death occupy,—what person of the drama can he not assume and fill? We have seen him blinding the eyes of physicians and their patients, and converting medicines into poisons. We may also trace this sly and rapacious fellow more insidiously introducing poisons into the wholesome nutriment of life, into our viands and our drinks. For the former, gaze upon that alarming row of

red and fiery-looking metal, with which our shelves, whether in kitchen or elsewhere, are so frightfully supplied! The metal is copper, poisonous and deadly, as many wise housekeepers and cooks are at length beginning to believe; but which, still, in defiance of the sun, or by taking advantage of the tenderer light of moon or taper, they continue to use, because peculiarly conducive, in their opinions, to the good colouring and preservation of pickles and of conserves. For the latter, namely, our drinks, behold and examine the professed malt and hop decoctions of our public breweries—malt and hops! pshaw!—vinegar and bullock's blood. Once more, look, and look closely when you are about it, to your cider and perry mills, lest you should purchase your hogshead of either of these liquors from a mill, in the construction of which the metal of lead, another of Death's ministers, has been largely employed, and which, when acted upon by the juices of the fruits, communicates to the liquor a poisonous quality. The effects of this carelessness, or obstinacy, have been long and seriously felt in cider counties; in the county of Devonshire more parti-



cularly, producing therein that painful disease, known by the appropriate term, *Devonshire Colic*, terminating in *Palsy*. But the time would fail, were we to attempt to show this Man of Bones in all his asserted places of domination, or to bolt him from his secret lurking-holes. We will leave him, for the time being, in his awful and favourite retreat, an *English wine-vault*, the depôt of *foreign wines*. There he sits, enthroned upon a cask of *fiery sherry*, which, among other pernicious combinations, he dispenses far and wide, administering all of them more or less largely as his caprice may choose to delight itself in a larger or scantier accumulation of victims. We will proceed no further in the pursuit of a topic and a theme which would remain interminable; neither would it prove fair nor charitable to cast the Bony Man in no other character than that which, to the bulk of mankind, represents him most unwelcome, cruel, and severe. By certain of the sons of men he has been received not only with resignation and composure, but his approach has been hailed as a boon and a deliverance. Besides, he possesses such traits, or perhaps faculties, in his com-

position, as might challenge our approbation and our reverence. In the class of these we desire to rescue from oblivion his acknowledged impartiality; his frequent prevention of greater evil than he brings; his endurance of perpetual labour; his just claim to universality; his courage; snatching away the monarch, surrounded by his life guards, just as a Bengal tiger springs into a little company of men seated at their social meal upon the turf, and, seizing on his victim, drags him to the jungle.

We must recount, because it evinces an honourable and lofty sentiment, that, as he stalked away after his midnight visit to the prince whom he had terrified into an instant and shaking submission, a voice was heard through the palace, and by the sentinels, as, invisibly, he moved along:—"Coward and slave, who hast consented to sell thy people's pleasant health, the term of their life, with all its consolations and enjoyments; their title, it might have been, to longevity;—that thou thyself mightst be suffered to crawl, in infamy and abhorrence, a little longer between heaven and earth!!!—It well nigh grieves me that I permitted

the wretch to outlive his meanness and his baseness.

“ But wherefore—I desire to ask and to be answered—wherefore are the sons of men so hostile to my charter, and so fearful of its exercise?—A charter, too, of which I myself foresee and dread the expiration ?”

Can none develop and explain this mystery ?



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