

VII.

THE YOUNG SURGEON.

CHAPTER I.

It's no' in books, it's no' in lear,
To make us truly blest,
If Happiness has not her seat
And centre in the breast.

BURNS.

THERE is a little runnel in the neighborhood of the town of——, which, rising amid the swamps of a mossy hollow, pursues its downward way along the bottom of a deep-wooded ravine; and so winding and circuitous is the course which, in the lapse of ages, it has worn for itself through a subsoil of stiff diluvial clay, that, ere a late proprietor lined its sides with garden-flowers and pathways covered with gravel, and then willed that it should be named the “Ladies’ Walk,” it was known to the townspeople as the Crook Burn. It is a place of abrupt angles and sudden turns. We see that when the little stream first leaped from its urn it must have had many a difficulty to encounter, and many an obstacle to overcome; but they have all been long since surmounted; and when in the heat of summer we hear it tinkling through the pebbles, with a sound so feeble that it hardly provokes the chirp of the

robin, and see that, even where it spreads widest to the light, it presents a too narrow space for the gambols of the water-spider, we marvel how it could ever have scooped out for itself so capacious a bed. But what will not centuries of perseverance accomplish! The tallest trees that rise beside it — and there are few taller in the country — scarcely overtop its banks; and, as it approaches the parish burying-ground, — for it passes close beside the wall, — we may look down from the fields above on the topmost branches, and see the magpie sitting on her nest. This little stream, so attenuated and thread-like during the droughts of July and August, and which after every heavier shower comes brawling from its recesses, reddened by a few handfuls of clay, has swept to the sea, in the long unreckoned succession of ages, a mass mighty enough to have furnished the materials of an Egyptian pyramid.

In even the loneliest windings of the Crook Burn we find something to remind us of the world. Every smoother trunk bears its inscription of dates and initials; and to one who has resided in the neighboring town, and mingled freely with the inhabitants, there is scarcely a little cluster of characters he meets with that has not its story. Human nature is a wonderful thing, and interesting in even its humblest appearances to the creatures who partake of it; nor can the point from which one observes it be too near, or the observations themselves too minute. It is perhaps best, however, when we have collected our materials, to combine and arrange them at some little distance. We are always something more than mere observers, — we possess that which we contemplate, with all its predilections and all its antipathies, — and there is dimness or distortion in the mirror on which we catch the features of our neighbors, if the breath of passion has passed over it. Do we

not see that the little stream beside us gives us a faithful picture of what surrounds it only when it is at rest? And it is well, if we desire to think correctly, and in the spirit of charity, of our brother men, that we should be at rest too. For our own part, we love best to think of the dead when their graves are at our feet, and our feelings are chastened by the conviction that we ourselves are very soon to take our place beside them. We love to think of the living, not amid the hum and bustle of the world, when the thoughts are hurried, and perhaps the sterner passions aroused, but in the solitude of some green retreat, by the side of some unfrequented stream, when drinking largely of the beauty and splendor of external things, and feeling that we ourselves are man,— in nature and destiny the being whom we contemplate. There is nought of contempt in the smile to which we are provoked by the eccentricities of a creature so strange and wilful, nor of bitterness in the sorrow with which we regard his crimes.

In passing one of the trees, a smooth-rinded ash, we see a few characters engraved on it, which at the first glance we deem Hebrew, but which we find, on examination, to belong to some less known alphabet of the East. There hangs a story of these obscure characters, which, though little checkered by incident, has something very interesting in it. It is of no distant date;— the characters, in all their minuter strokes, are still unfilled; but the hand that traced them, and the eye that softened in expression as it marked the progress of the work,— for they record the name of a lady-love,— are now mingled with the clods of the valley.

Early in an autumn of the present century,— and we need not be more explicit, for names and dates are no way essential to what we have to relate,— a small tender entered the bay of——, and cast anchor in the roadstead,

where she remained for nearly two months. Our country had been at peace with all the world for years before, and the arts which accompany peace had extended their softening influence to our seamen, a class of men not much marked in the past, as a body at least, — though it had produced a Dampier and a Falconer, — for aught approaching to literary acquirement, or the refinement of their manners. And the officers of this little vessel were no unfavorable specimens of the more cultivated class. They were in general well read; and possessing, with the attainments, the manners of gentlemen, were soon on terms of intimacy with some of the more intelligent inhabitants of the place. There was one among them, however, whose society was little courted. He was a young and strikingly handsome man, with bright, speaking eyes, and a fine development of forehead; but the higher parts of his nature seemed more than balanced by the lower; and, though proud-spirited and honorable, he was evidently sinking into a hopeless degradation, — the slave of habits which strengthen with indulgence, and which already seemed too strong to be overcome.

He accompanied, on two or three occasions, some of his brother officers when engaged in calling on their several acquaintances of the place. The grosser traits of his character had become pretty generally known, and report had, as usual, rather aggravated than lessened them. There was something whispered of a low intrigue in which he was said to have been engaged; something, too, of those disreputable habits of solitary indulgence in which the stimulating agent is recklessly and despairingly employed to satisfy for the moment the ever-recurring cravings of a depraved appetite, and which are regarded as precluding the hope of reform; and he seemed as if shunned by every one. His high spirit, however, though it felt neglect, could

support him under it. He was a keen satirist, too, like almost all men of talent, who, thinking and feeling more correctly than they live, wreak on their neighbors the unhappiness of their own remorse; and he could thus neutralize the bitterness of his feelings by the bitterness of his thoughts. But with every such help one cannot wholly dispense with the respect of others, unless one be possessed of one's own; and when a lady of the place, who on one occasion saw and pitied his chagrin, invited him to pass an evening at her house with a small party of friends, the feeling awakened by her kindness served to convince him that he was less indifferent than he could have wished to the coldness of the others. His spirits rose in the company to which he was thus introduced; he exerted his powers of pleasing, — and they were of no ordinary description, for, to an imagination of much liveliness, he added warm feelings and an exquisite taste, — and, on rising to take his leave for the evening, his hostess, whose interest in him was heightened by pity, and whose years and character secured her from the fear of having her motives misconstrued, kindly urged him to repeat his visit every time he thought he could not better employ himself, or when he found it irksome or dangerous to be alone. And her invitation was accepted in the spirit in which it was given.

She soon became acquainted with his story. He had lost his mother when very young, and had been bred up under the care of an elder brother, with an eye to the church; but his inclinations interfering as he grew up, the destination was altered, and he applied himself to the study of medicine. He had passed through college in a way creditable to his talents, and on quitting it he seemed admirably fitted to rise in the profession which he had made choice of; for, to very superior acquirements, and

much readiness of resource, he added a pleasing address and a soft, winning manner. There seemed, however, to be something of a neutralizing quality in the moral constitution of the man. He was honest, and high-spirited, and ready to oblige; but there was a morbid restlessness in his feelings which, languishing after excitement as its proper element, rendered him too indifferent to those ordinary concerns of life which seem so tame and little when regarded singly, but which prove of such mighty importance in the aggregate. There was, besides, an unhappy egotism in the character, which led him to regard himself as *extraordinary*, the circumstances in which he was placed as *common* and therefore unsuited, and which, instead of exciting him to the course of legitimate exertion through which men of talent rise to their proper sphere, spent itself in making out ingenious cases of sorrow, and apologies for unhappiness, from very ordinary events, and a condition of life in which thousands attain to contentment. One might almost suppose that that sense of the ludicrous — bestowed on the species undoubtedly for wise ends — which finds its proper vocation in detecting and exposing incongruities of this kind, could not be better employed than in setting such a man right. It would have failed in its object, however; and certain it is, that geniuses of the very first order, who could have rendered us back our ridicule with fearful interest, have been of nearly the same disposition with the poor surgeon, — creatures made up of idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. A similar turn was attended with unhappiness in Byron and Rousseau; and such is the power of true genius over the public mind, however fantastic its vagaries, that they had all Europe to sympathize with them.

The poor surgeon experienced no such sympathy. The

circumstances, too, in which he had been reared were well-nigh as unfavorable as his disposition; nor had they at all improved as he grew up. The love of a mother might have nursed the feelings of so delicate a mind, and fitted them for the world; for, as in dispositions of a romantic cast the affections are apt to wander after the unreal and the illusive, and to become chilled and crippled in the pursuit, it is well that they should be prepared for resting on real objects by the thousand kindlinesses of this first felt and tenderest relation. But his mother he had lost in infancy. His brother, though substantially kind, had a way of saying bitter things, — not unprovoked, perhaps, — which, once heard, were never forgotten. He was now living among strangers, — who, to a man of his temper, were likely to remain such, — without friends or patron, and apparently out of the reach of promotion. And, to sum up the whole, he was a tender and elegant poet, for he had become skilful in the uncommunicable art, and had learned to give body to his emotions and color to his thoughts; but, though exquisitely alive to the sweets of fame, he was of all poets the most obscure and nameless. With a disposition so unfortunate in its peculiarities, with a groundwork, too, of strong animal passion in the character, he strove to escape from himself by means revolting to his better nature, and which ultimately more than doubled his unhappiness. To a too active dislike of his brother men, — for he was infinitely more successful in finding enemies than friends, — there was now added a sickening disgust of himself. Habit produced its usual effects; and he found he had raised to his assistance a demon which he could not lay, and which threatened to destroy him.

We insert a finished little poem, the composition of this stage, in which he portrays his feelings, and which may

serve to show, were any such proof needed, that gross habits and an elegant taste are by no means incompatible.

Fain would I seek in scenes more gay
That pleasure others find,
And strive to drown in revelry
The anguish of the mind.

But still, where'er I go, I bear
The marks of inward pain ;
The lines of misery and care
Are written in my brain.

I cannot raise the cheerful song,
Nor frolic with the free,
Nor mingle in the dance among
The sons of mirth and glee.

For there's a spell upon my soul,
A secret anguish there,
A grief which I cannot control,
A deep, corroding care.

And do not ask me why I sigh, —
Draw not the veil aside ;
Though dark, 'tis fairer to the eye
Than that which it would hide.

The downward progress of the young surgeon, ere it received the ultimate check which restored him to more than the vantage-ground of his earliest years, was partially arrested by a circumstance more efficient in suspending the influence of the grosser habits than any other which occurs in the ordinary course of things. When in some of the southern ports of England, he had formed an attachment for a young and beautiful lady, of great delicacy of sentiment and a highly cultivated mind, and succeeded in inspiring her with a corresponding regard. Who is not acquainted with Dryden's story of Cymon ? It may be a

harder matter, indeed, to unfix deeply-rooted habits than merely to polish the manners; but we are the creatures of motive; and there is no appetite, however unconquerable it may appear when opposed by only the dictates of judgment or conscience, but what yields to the influence of a passion more powerful than itself. To the young surgeon his attachment for this lady proved for a time the guiding motive and the governing passion; the effect was a temporary reform, a kind of minor conversion, which, though the work of no undying spirit, seemed to renovate his whole moral nature; and had he resided in the neighborhood of his lady-love, it is probable that, during at least the term of his courtship, all his grosser appetites would have slept. But absence, though it rather strengthens than diminishes a true attachment, frequently lessens its moral efficiency, by forming, as it were, a craving void in the heart which old habits are usually called upon to fill. The philosopher of Rosseau solaced himself with his bottle when absent from his mistress; the poor fellow whose story I attempt to relate returned in a similar way to most of his earlier indulgences when separated from his. And yet never was there lover more thoroughly attached, or whose affection had less of earth in it. His love seemed rather an abstraction of the poet than based on the passions of the man; and, colored by the taste and delicacy of his intellectual nature, it might be conceived of as a sort of religion exquisitely fervent in its worship, and abounding in gorgeous visions, the phantoms of a vigorous fancy, conjured up by a too credulous hope. Nor did it lack its dedicatory inscriptions or its hymns. Almost the only cheerful verses he ever wrote were his love ones; the others were filled with a kind of metaphysical grief—shall we call it?—common to our literature since the days of Byron and

Shelley, but which seems to have been unknown to either Burns or Shakspeare. The surgeon, however, was no mere imitator—no mere copyist of unfelt and impossible sorrow. His pieces, like all the productions of the school to which they belonged, included nearly the usual amount of false thought and sentiment; but the feeling which had dictated them was not a false one. Had he lived better, he would have written more cheerfully. It is with the mind often as with the body. It is not always in the main seat of disease that the symptoms proper to the disease are exhibited; nor does it need any very extensive acquaintance with our nature to know that real remorse often forms the groundwork of an apparently fictitious sorrow.

Another poem, of somewhat the same stamp as the former, we may insert here. It is in the handwriting of the young surgeon, among a collection of his pieces, but is marked "Anonymous." We have never met with it elsewhere; and as it bears upon it the impress of this singular young man's mind, and is powerfully expressive of the gloom in which he loved to enshroud himself, and of the deep bitterness which is the only legitimate fruit of a life of sinful pleasure, we may shrewdly guess that it can be the production of no one else. It is entitled

THE MOURNER.

I do not sigh
 That I catch not the glance of woman's eye:
 I am weary of woman. I know too well
 How the pleasant smiles of the love-merchant sell
 To waste one serious thought on her,
 Though I've been, like others, a worshipper.
 I do not sigh for the silken creature;
 The tinge of good in her milky blood
 Marks not her worth, but her feebler nature.

I do not pine
 That the treasures of India are not mine:
 I have feasted on all that gold could buy,
 I have drained the fount men call pleasure dry,
 And I feel the after scorch of pain
 On a lip that would not drink again.
 Oh! wealth on me were only wasted;
 I am far above the usurer's love.
 And all other love on earth I've tasted.

I do not weep
 That apart from the noble my walk I keep;
 That the name I bear shall never be set
 'Mid the gems of Fame's sparkling coronet;
 That I shall slink, with the meanest clay,
 To a hasty grave as mean as they.
 Oh! the choice of a sepulchre does not grieve me:
 I have that within a name might win
 And a tomb, if such things could deceive me.

I do not groan
 That I life's poison-plant have known;
 That in my spirit's drunkenness
 I ate of its fruit of bitterness,
 Nor knew, until it was too late,
 The ills that on such banquet wait.
 'Tis not for this I cherish sadness:
 I've taught my heart to endure the smart
 Produced by my youth's madness.

But I do sigh,
 And deeply, darkly pine, weep, groan, — and why?
 Because with unclouded eye I see
 Each turn in human destiny,
 The knowledge of which will not depart,
 But lingers and rankles in my heart;
 Because it is my chance to know
 That good and ill, that weal and woe,
 Are words that NOTHING mean below;
 Because all earth can't buy a morrow,
 Or draw from breath, or the vital breath,
 Aught but uncertainty and sorrow.

This strange poem he read to his elderly friend, with the evident purpose of eliciting some criticism. While admitting its power, she protested against its false philosophy, — the result of a distorted vision, in its turn the result of a perverted life. By way of attempting to strike out a healthier vein of sentiment, she begged him to furnish her with an answer. With this request he complied; but the production, although with glimpses of true poetry, and with the same power over rhythm, has, as might be expected, the air of something made to order. It is as follows: —

ANSWER TO THE MOURNER.

I daily sigh

That I meet not the glance of my lady's eye.
I am weary of absence: I know too well
How lonely and tiresome the dull hours tell
Not to wish every moment to be with her
Of whom I have long been the worshipper.
Oh, how I long for the lovely creature!
The olive-bud, at the general Flood,
To the patriarch sailor was not sweeter.

I often pine

That the gifts of fortune are not mine,
Yet covet not wealth from the wish to taste
The enervating sweets of thoughtless waste.
The slave of pleasure I scorn to be,
And the usurer's love has no charms for me.
I wish but an easy competence,
With a pound to lend to an needy friend,
But I care not for splendid affluence.

I sometimes weep

That I with the lowly my walk must keep:
I would that my humble name were set
In the centre of Fame's bright coronet;
That my tomb might be decked with a gorgeous stone,

And the tears of the virtuous shed thereon.
 Oh! the thoughts of death should never grieve me,
 Could I stamp my name with a spotless fame,
 And a garland of deathless roses weave me.

I deeply groan
 When I think on the follies my youth has known,—
 When the still small voice of conscience brings
 Before me the memory of bygone things,
 And its softest whisper appalls me more
 Than the earthquake's crash or the thunder's roar;
 And my sorrow is deeper, because I know
 That neither from chance nor from ignorance,
 But with open eyes, I have wandered so.

I murmur not
 That the volume of fate to man is shut,—
 That he is forbidden with daring eye
 Into its mysteries to pry.
 Content with the knowledge God has given,
 I seek not to fathom the plans of heaven;
 I believe that *good* may be found below,
 And that evil is tasted, alas! I know;
 Yet I trust there's a balm for every woe,—
 That the saddest night will have a morrow;
 And I hope through faith to live after death,
 In a world that knows nor sin nor sorrow.

The truest answer to the mourner was, however, yet to come.

It is not the least faulty among men that are most successful in interesting us in their welfare. A ruin often awakens deeper emotions than the edifice, however noble, could have elicited when entire; and there is something in a broken and ruined character, if we can trace in it the lineaments of original beauty and power, that inspires us with similar feelings. The friend of the young surgeon felt thus. He was in truth a goodly ruin, in which she saw

much to admire and much to regret ; and, impressed by a serious and long-cherished belief in the restorative efficacy of religion, her pity for him was not unmixed with hope. She had treated him on every occasion with the kindness of a mother ; and now, with the affection and freedom proper to the character, she pressed on his consideration the important truths which she knew concerned him most deeply. He listened with a submissive and respectful attention, — the effect, doubtless, of those feelings with which he must have regarded one so disinterestedly his friend ; for the subject could not have been introduced to his notice under circumstances more favorable. The sense of obligation had softened his heart ; the respectful deference which he naturally paid to the sex and character of his friend prepared him rather to receive than to challenge the truths which she urged on his acceptance ; the conviction that a heartfelt interest in his welfare furnished her only motive, checked that noiseless though fatal under-current of objection which can defeat in so many cases an end incontrovertibly good, by fixing on it the imputation of sinister design ; and, above all, there was a plain earnestness in her manner, the result of a deep-seated belief, which, disdaining the niceties of metaphysical speculation, spoke more powerfully to his conscience than it could have done had it armed itself with half the arguments of the schools. Rarely does mere argument bring conviction to an ingenious mind, fertile in doubts and objections. Conscience sleeps when the ratiocinative faculty contends for victory, — a thing it is seldom indifferent to ; and a few perhaps ingenious sophisms prove the only fruits of the contest.

The little vessel lay in —, as I have said, for about two months, when she received orders to sail for the south of England. A storm arose, and she was forced by stress of

weather into Aberdeen. From this place the surgeon first wrote to his friend. His epistolary style, like his poetry, was characterized by an easy elegance; and there was no incident which he related, however trifling in itself, which did not borrow some degree of interest from his pen. He relates, in one of his earlier letters, that, in a solitary ramble in the neighborhood of Aberdeen, he came to a picturesque little bridge on the river Don. He had rarely seen a prettier spot. There were rocks and trees, and a deep, dark stream; and he stood admiring it till there passed a poor old beggar, of whom he inquired the name of the bridge. "It is called," said the mendicant, "the brig of Don; but in my young days it was better known as the brig of Balgownie; and if you be a Scotchman perhaps you have heard of it, for there are many prophecies about it by Thomas the Rhymer." "Ah," exclaimed the surgeon, "'Balgownie brig's black wa!' And so I have been admiring, for its own sake, the far-famed scene of Byron's boyhood. I cannot tell you," he adds, "what I felt on the occasion. It was perhaps lucky for me that I had not much money in my pocket, but the little that I had made the old man happy."

Our story hastens abruptly to its conclusion. During the following winter and the early part of spring, the little tender was employed in cruising in the English Channel and the neighborhood of Jersey; and from the latter place most of the surgeon's letters to his friends were addressed. They relate the progress of an interesting and highly-important change in a mind of no ordinary character. There was an alteration effected in the very tone of his intellect; it seemed, if I may so express myself, as if strung less sharply than before, and more in accordance with the realities of life. Even his love appeared as if changed into a

less romantic but tenderer passion, that sought the welfare of its object even more than the object itself. But it was in his moral nature—in those sentiments of the man which look forward and upward—that the metamorphosis seemed most complete. When a powerful mind first becomes the subject of serious impressions, there is something in Christianity suited to take it by surprise. When viewed at a distance, and with that slight degree of attention which the great bulk of mankind are contented to bestow on that religion which God revealed, there seems a complex obscurity in its peculiar doctrines which contrasts strongly with the simplicity of its morals. It seems to lie as *unconformably* (if we may employ the metaphor) as some of the deductions of the higher sciences to what is termed the common sense of mankind. It seems at first sight, for instance, no very rational inference that the whiteness of light is the effect of a harmonious mixture of color, or that the earth is confined to its orbit by the operations of the same law which impels a falling pebble towards the ground. And to the careless, because uninterested observer, such doctrines as the doctrine of the fall and the atonement appear rational in as slight a degree. But when Deity himself interposes, when the heart is seriously affected, when the divine law holds up its mirror to the conscience, and we begin to examine the peculiar doctrines in a clearer light and from a nearer point of observation, they at once seem to change their character,—to assume so stupendous a massiveness of aspect, to discover a profundity so far beyond every depth of a merely human philosophy, to appear so wonderfully fitted to the nature and to the wants of man, that we are at once convinced their author can be no other than the adorable Being who gave light and gravitation to

the universe which he willed to exist. The young surgeon had a mind capacious enough to be impressed by this feeling of surprise. He began to see, and to wonder he had missed seeing it before, that Christianity is in keeping, if we may so speak, with the other productions of its Author; that to a creature solely influenced by motive, no moral code, however perfect, can be efficient in directing or restraining, except through its connection with some heart-influencing belief; that it is essential to his nature as man that he meet with a corresponding nature in Deity, a human nature like his own, and that he must be conscious of owing to Him more than either his first origin or his subsequent support, or any of the minor gifts which he shares in common with the inferior animals, and which cost the Giver a less price than was paid on Calvary. It is unnecessary to expatiate on the new or altered feelings which accompanied the change, or to record the process of a state of mind described by so many. The surgeon, in his last letter to his friend, dwelt on these with an earnest, yet half-bashful delight, that, while it showed how much they engrossed him, showed also how new it was to him either to experience or describe them.

The next she received regarding him recorded his death. It was written at his dying request by a clergyman of Jersey. He had passed a day, early in April, in the cabin of the little vessel, engaged with his books and his pen; towards evening he went on deck; and, stepping on the quay, missed his footing and fell backwards. The spine sustained a mortal injury in the fall. He was carried by the unskilful hands of sailors to lodgings in the town of St. Helier's, a distance of five miles. During this long and painful transport, he was, as he afterwards said, conscious although speechless, and aware that, if he had been placed

in an easier position, with his head better supported, he might have a chance of recovery. Yet he never gave expression to a single murmur. Besides the clergyman, he was fortunate enough to be assiduously attended by some excellent friends whom he had made on occasion of a former visit of his vessel to the same port. These he kept employed in reading the Scriptures aloud by night and by day. As he had formerly drunk deeply of the fount men call pleasure, he now drank insatiably at the pure Fount of Inspiration. "It is necessary to stop," one of his kind attendants would say; "your fever is rising." "It is only," he would reply with a smile, "the loss of a little blood after you leave." He lingered thus for about four weeks in hopeless suffering, but in the full possession of all his mental faculties, till death came to his relief, and he departed full of the hope of a happy immortality. The last tie that bound him to the world was his attachment to the lady whose name, so obscurely recorded, has introduced his story to the reader. But as death neared, and the world receded, he became reconciled to the necessity of parting from even her. His last request to the clergyman who attended him was, that, after his decease, he should write to his friend in —, and say, "that if, as he trusted, he entered, a sinner saved, into glory, he would have to bless her, as being, under God, the honored instrument of mercy."