



LITERATURE.

MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT.

Music at midnight so solemn and deep,
It stole o'er my senses, and woo'd me to sleep;
Sweetly each strain was borne on the breeze,
Now swelling in cadence, now soft by degrees:
Now plaintive its tones, now cheerful and gay,
It varied a moment, and melted away.
Softly and sweetly its harmony fell,
It came like a dream—it soothed like a spell;
There stir'd not a leaf, there breath'd not a sigh,
As the strain of the minstrel swept soothingly by.
Softly the strains came, sweetly and free,
O'er the still waters, and far o'er the sea.
Softly and sweetly those notes were borne,
As the lark when it carols to Heaven at morn,
Titters forth thro' the air its beautiful song,
With heart beating high
As it soars to the sky,
Flings abroad its sweet music, and travels along.
I heard the last lay as it melted away,
Far, far in the distance it died;
Sweetly and gently the minstrels did play,
While echoes more softly replied.
They are gone, those sweet sounds I heard them depart,
But they left a sweet feeling that stole o'er my heart.

THE PEASANT'S HUT;

OR, THE ANTIQUE POIGNARD.

"Sweet the delight, when the gull'd heart,
Feels consolation's lenient hand,
Bind up the wound from fortune's dart,
With friendship's life-supporting hand."—HAYLEY.

CHAPTER I.

In that part of Italy, the most southerly and the least sheltered from the burning sun, within a few leagues of Barietta, and in the midst of an immense plain, dry and desolate, arose five or six years ago, one of those miserable cabins that the Neapolitan peasant calls a *pagliaro*.—Four large and worm-eaten pillars, planted vertically in the soil, covered in by a barrier of planks and faggots to the height of the pillars, with a roof of dried leaves and straw, composed these savage huts, which animals themselves would not even select as a fitting den.

It was the latter end of July, at which period the heat had attained its highest power, and became insupportable to man. For the three preceding months, not a drop of rain had fallen in the environs; the earth was blanched, dried up, burned and cracked like soft stone; the trees without verdure or foliage, their branches crackling in the sun, as one would hear at the approach of a wood fire, and appeared to be about bursting forth in flames every moment; the bed was completely dried up at the bottom of the torrents; the lizard, sun-stricken in the midst of its route, had not the strength to drag itself for shelter into the hedges; and the rocks, themselves, burst asunder under the terrible action of this concentrated fire. It was noon. A silence death-like, solemn, and fearful, reigned in this vast desert, as if stricken by the hand of God. The sun darted its rays upon the poor cabin with pitiless violence, and one would have said that the sovereign star had received the divine command to burn in their hovels the wretched beings who vainly endeavoured to shield themselves from the divine vengeance. Under this frail fabric, cowered and suffered three poor innocent creatures—a mother and her two little children, plunged into the most horrible and devastating misery. In cold countries, one cannot imagine anything more dreadful than the poor without food, shivering, chilled, and livid, extended upon the floor of wretchedness, no shield to protect them from the adverse winds, a damp and rotten palliase serving at the same time for bed and covering, with some frozen water in a broken jar; this is the most dismal picture that can be drawn of the sufferings of the poor under these circumstances. But dreadful and miserable as the picture is, there is still one more dreadful and horrible. The cold can be alleviated in some degree by groups pressing closely to one another—by walking with rapidity to and fro, or warming with the breath the frozen extremities. But what remedy can the poor oppose to that rain of fire, which scorches the skin, burns up the tongue, and calcines the blood? How allay these tortures, when God has withdrawn in his anger the shade from the fields and the water from the fountains? Let us penetrate into this sorrowful abode. One would scarcely perceive any change of temperature therein, although the wretched mother had stopped up as well as she could the numerous apertures through which the sun blazed forth. This unhappy woman, although only five and twenty years of age, was already old and broken down. Her features, altered as they were by grief, want, and burning fever, still preserved their regularity, and bespoke sweetness and resignation. In a corner, the least burning of the hut, upon a wretched bed of chaff, slept, with a loud and painful sleep, a very little girl, whose robust constitution appeared to defy pri-

ventions the most stern, and sufferings the most cruel.—Her cheeks were blooming with the hectic flush of fever; her lips were parched and bloodless, and her hair, which was of an incredible fineness, fell about her face and neck, in glowing curls of glossy gold. By the side of this poor sleeping angel, watched an elder sister, with a solicitude almost maternal. The child, although but seven years old, was already grave and thoughtful, she was endeavouring to cool her hands by spreading them on the earth, hoping thus to refresh her exhausted strength. She was silently kneeling beside her sleeping sister, waving the faded branch of a tree occasionally to and fro, in order to scare away the insects from disturbing her. But notwithstanding her admirable devotion and vigilant tenderness, the child suddenly awoke, and rising up exclaimed in an agonizing tone, "A drink—a drink—my tongue is parched."

"And I am hungry," added the elder sister, turning with a supplicating look towards their mother.

"Patience, my children," replied the agonized parent, caressing her cherished offspring; "your father will soon return. He is gone to the village, to our good curate, and will bring us water and perhaps a little bread. In the meanwhile, my poor cherubs, let us offer up our sufferings to the good God; he will have pity on us, and relieve us in our necessities." After this expression of fervent piety, the child, unmindful but of its wants, burst into tears, exclaiming, "Water—water—I die with thirst."

"Shall I seek some forgotten fruit upon the trees?" demanded the elder child of its mother. "No—no" replied the mother; "fruit at this season gives the fever; and then, my poor child, to go out at this time of day in the fields, with your head uncovered, you would be certain of a sun stroke, and then you would die." "And what would it matter," replied the child, with the horrid recklessness of despair; to die here is just as bad." "Silence!" cried the mother, "do you not hear the sound of steps approaching?"

"It is some poor dog who is seeking for water around our poor cabin," said the elder child. "No, I cannot be deceived," said the mother; "it is him—it is your father."

"Papa!" repeated the two children, with a cry of joy, brief, rapid, and penetrating; and they flew with a single bound towards the door of the hovel, which, pushed by a vigorous hand, had opened hastily. A man about thirty years of age appeared on the threshold. His brow was bronzed by the summer sun, his hair was curled on his temples, and wet with perspiration. His breathless and oppressed chest prevented immediate utterance. He extended quickly towards his family a jar of muddy and discoloured water, and then fell overpowered by fatigue, in a corner of the cabin. The mother and her two children, without offering thanks or greeting, darted towards the water, and one after another drank long and greedily of the cherished draught, then dipping their hands in the little that remained they bathed their temples, their eyes, and throwing the remains upon the hard and burning earth, they breathed freely, and smiled with happiness.

Seated in a corner, with his back leaning against an angle of the cabin, the father contemplated this picture with a wild and saddened look. Her burning thirst being somewhat abated, the wife turned to her husband, and said to him, in a voice choked by emotion, "Forgive me, Beppo, I have been selfish, and only thought of my own wants, but I have been parched with thirst since morning. Thanks to you, my beloved, you have saved both me and your children—thanks, dearest. Come, my children, embrace your father for his tender care." "True, father, we have been very ungrateful," cried the children, covering his hands and cheeks with kisses. "But let us see what you have brought us for our dinner, for we are very hungry." "Nothing!" replied the poor peasant, in a voice of agony. "How nothing!" said the eldest child in a tone of surprise and doubt. "But we had no supper yesterday, and it cannot be true that you have brought us no bread. Ah!" she added with a smile, "you have hidden the bread in your pockets, but we shall find it; come, my sister, and help me to search." And the two children, with infantine joy, commenced the search, which nearly drove the unhappy father mad. "I have nothing," he repeated, in an accent of despair. "Oh, my God!" cried the mother in her turn, "have you not then seen our good curate? or did you go to the Castle? or have you not encountered one compassionate human being? My poor children, what is to become of us? Is it possible," she said again rousing herself, "that you could not procure a little bread, or work, or even a passing charity?"

"Nothing!" screamed the father in agony. A moment of unspeakable anguish followed this last cry of the peasant. He held his face in his hands, and sobbed aloud. The two little girls, surprised and frightened by the manner of their father, whom they had never seen so completely overcome by despair, drew away from him, their eyes overflowing with tears, but fearing to speak or to weep. The mother alone was able to control her emotion. Reflecting for a moment upon her faith, her religion, and her love, she became strengthened and imbued with an admirable and sublime courage. Then approaching her husband with the deepest affection, she caressed and comforted him, calling him by the sweetest and most endearing names, and by the force of her devotion, her persuasive softness, and affectionate tenderness she succeeded in calming the first transports of his wild grief. "Look, dearest," she said, "all hope is not lost—I now feel strong and capable of exertion; that water you brought has quite refreshed us. I shall go out myself.—A woman can speak better, and people have compassion because of her weakness. As soon as the sun begins to set, I shall commence my search, and my heart tells me that God will not abandon us." "God!" cried the peasant with a trembling nervousness, and he passed his hand across his brow, as if to chase away an impious or doubtful thought. "Oh, Beppo, you would not doubt the goodness of God?" said his wife. "No—no, dearest, I will not," quickly replied the peasant. "But where will you go, my cherished Marietta? I have been everywhere.—It is useless any longer to build airy fabrics, we have nothing to hope from man or from —"

The fond wife again interrupted her husband, fearful that he was about uttering some impiety.

"God is every where," replied the wife, with pious exaltation, "and I fear not. I shall throw myself at the feet of our good curate, and before the evening falls, our children shall have bread. Remember! I have said it Beppo." The peasant shrugged his shoulders, and casting upon his wife a look of affectionate pity, calmly replied, "If you will let me speak, I shall show you the folly of such hopes and projects." "Well, speak, dearest, I shall listen." "As to our good curate, if you were to see the holy man, as I saw him this morning, you would see that he was scarcely better off than we are ourselves. By constantly giving to others, he has nothing left now for himself, but a crust of dry bread, and even a scanty supply of that. As to wine he has not left himself the means of purchasing it." "And did the curate see you?" demanded Marietta. "He did, and bowed his head in token of recognition, and for the purpose of giving me courage, but he looked so pale, so weak, and so suffering, that upon the faith of a poor man, if I had any means, I should have freely given it to him to procure for himself some strengthening nourishment, which he evidently stood so much in need of." "The poor curate," sighed the good woman. "Look at the example he gives us. His reward will be great, indeed, for thus impoverishing himself, in order to supply the poor with common necessities."

"Well, then," resumed Beppo, you see there is nothing to hope for there." "But the Castle, have you tried there?" "The Castle!" repeated Beppo, with a fierce expression of countenance. "I did solicit alms there, and was brutally told to go and work for food." "Work?" said Marietta, bursting into tears, "why will they not give us work?" "Oh! the rich, the rich," cried Beppo, clenching his teeth, and tightly closing his hands. "Ah! they know not what we suffer," said the afflicted Marietta.

"Then we must teach them," coolly replied Beppo. "What say you?" cried the wife with terror. "Beppo, my husband, my beloved, recall your wandering thoughts. I have never seen you with so subdued and sorrowful a manner. It is misfortune that has thus changed you.—Dispel those wicked notions from your mind."

"There are bounds even to endurance," cried Beppo, suddenly. "I have all my life been an honest and an upward man, but now misery is too strong for me, and poverty has subdued me. This day Giuliano said —"

"Giuliano!" screamed the wife; "a bandit, a robber." "Bandit, call him if you will; said Beppo.—

"But he eats and drinks too. He sees not his children and his wife sinking hourly before his eyes with misery and hunger. He hears not the shrill scream of famine escape from the lips of those dearer to him than life itself."

"He walks unmolested through the village, and even the grand people at the Castle salute him as he passes, with seeming respect." "But religion, conscience, honour, a prison, the scaffold, and eternal death," said the agonized wife. "Well, and what of it?" cried the unhappy man, blinded by the horrors of despair. Then crossing his arms with an air of fearful determination, he advanced towards his wife, and said in a low but emphatic voice,

"If I had not brought you that jar of water this morning, what would have become of you—answer?" "Alas! we might have been dead perhaps." "Well, then," replied Beppo, with bitterness, "That water I have stolen; do you hear me? I took it by force from a well that was nearly dried up. Two soldiers were placed at the cistern to guard the water. They measured it out with avarice, and sold it at so much the barrel. All the village was there with their vessels, some large and others small. I rushed through the crowd, and demanded my share in a menacing voice; 'Wait for your turn,' they said; 'where is your money?' I had no money, but I had burning thirst, and I wished to drink. With a single bound I grasped the throat of the sentinel—filled my jar, and carried it away; and so desperate did I appear, that no one dared to follow me." "But that was not stealing, Beppo," said the fond wife, unwilling to accuse her husband. "Water is given to all the world." "And bread, likewise," said the peasant, carried away by his terrible logic. "Are my children to die like dogs for want of bread? They shall not; and I swear by the God that created them, they shall have it before the setting of the evening's sun."

Marietta was about replying, but Beppo awaited not her answer, but darting rudely past her, left the hut and rushed into the midst of the burning desert. The little children, who had remained petrified with fear, now ran towards their mother, and burst into a flood of tears. But the noble and courageous woman, taking one by each hand threw herself upon her knees before an image of the crucifixion, and making the children kneel at each side of her said:—"Quick, my children, we have not time to weep. Let us pray to God to perform a miracle in our favour. Repeat after me these words: 'O Lord, our good God, grant that our father may not become a robber.'"

And the two poor innocents cheered up in a moment, their eyes still sparkling with tears, their cheeks glowing with increased beauty, and their little hands fervently joined, repeated in a sweet and touching voice, "Oh, Lord, our good God, grant that our father may not become a robber."

CHAPTER II.

THE ANTIQUARIAN.

Beppo rushed frantically forward, chance leading the way. A thousand tumultuous thoughts filled his burning brain in which hatred, anger and vengeance, were the most prominent. He stopped to recover his breath, when the distant sound of horses' hoofs withdrew him from his gloomy reverie. The sun was rapidly declining, the air was cooler and more refreshing. Attentively looking in the direction from whence the sound proceeded, Beppo became assured that the traveller had all the appearances of a man rich and easy in circumstances.

"Now," said the peasant, "now is the moment to procure bread for my famishing children. But unnamed as I am, what can I do?"

Beppo trembled. Thirty years of irreproachable life presented themselves to his mind, and touched his heart with a profound sadness. Was he then, about becoming a robber upon the public highway?